

# VOICES FOR CHANGE

Increasing Access to Sports  
for Disabled and Disadvantaged Children and Young People



Research Report December 2024

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# Increasing Access to Sports for Disabled & Disadvantaged Children & Young People

This research report examines the current state of access to sports for children with disabilities living in poverty in the United Kingdom.

In addition to providing a platform for our young people to share their experiences and challenges in accessing sports, the report provides an overview of existing initiatives, policies, and organisations working to improve access, as well as recommendations for future action.

## Key findings include:

- **77% of families & young people surveyed rated disability sports equipment as “very difficult” to afford without support. Children with disabilities from low-income families face multiple barriers to sports participation, including financial constraints, lack of accessible facilities, and limited specialised equipment.**
  - **£5,500 is the median cost of adaptive sports wheelchairs. This is prohibitively high for families living in poverty, further limiting participation opportunities.**
  - **Over half (54%) of our survey participants rated transport issues as a significant barrier to sports participation**
  - **Just under half (46%) cited a lack of accessible / specialised facilities as a barrier.**
  - **100% of survey participants reported improved confidence from sports participation**
  - **85% reported increased independence**
  - **While various organisations and government initiatives exist to support access to sports for disabled children, there are still significant gaps in provision, particularly for those children and young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.**
  - **Improved funding, awareness, and collaboration between stakeholders are needed to enhance access and participation rates.**
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# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	01
<b>2. Background: Disability, Poverty, and Sports in the UK</b>	02
2.1 The Disability-Poverty Nexus	02
2.2 Impact on Sports Participation	03
2.3 Policy Context	04
<b>3. Access to Sports - Research with Variety's Young People</b>	05
3.1a Survey Methods and Procedure	05
3.2a Design and Scales	05
3.3a Procedure	06
3.4a Sample	06
3.5a Data Analysis	06
3.6a Survey limitations	06
3.7a Survey Results and Discussion	06
Financial Barriers	06
Sports Participation	07
Support Systems	07
Social and Emotional Impact	08
Key Barriers and Concluding Remarks	08
3.1b Interview Methods and Procedure	09
3.2b Design and Themes	09
3.3b Procedure	09
3.4b Sample	10
3.5b Data Analysis	10
3.6b Interview Limitations	10
3.7b Interview Results and Discussion	10
Personal Background and Experience with Adaptive Equipment	10
Community and Social Connection	12
Personal Growth and Identity	13
Barriers for Participation and Accessibility	14
3.8b Conclusion	16

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# Table of Contents

<b>4. Barriers to Sports Participation</b> .....	18
4.1 Physical and Health-Related Barriers .....	18
4.2 Psychological and Social Barriers .....	20
4.3 Environmental and Accessibility Barriers .....	20
4.4 Financial Barriers .....	20
4.5 Workforce and Support Barriers .....	20
4.6 Information and Communication Barriers .....	21
4.7 Policy and Systemic Barriers .....	21
<b>5. Availability and Cost of Adaptive Sports Equipment</b> .....	22
5.1 Types of Adaptive Sports Equipment .....	22
5.2 Cost Analysis .....	22
5.3 Availability and Access .....	23
5.4 Impact on Sports Participation .....	23
5.5 Current Initiatives and Support Systems .....	23
5.6 Innovative Approaches .....	24
5.7 Policy Implications .....	24
<b>6. Current Initiatives and Support Systems</b> .....	25
<b>7. Case Studies</b> .....	26
7.1 Case Study: Emma's Wheelchair Basketball Journey .....	26
7.2 Case Study: Inclusive Swimming Programme in Birmingham .....	26
7.3 Case Study: Ryan's Journey with Autism and Athletics .....	27
7.4 Case Study: Adaptive Cycling Initiative in Scotland .....	27
7.5 Case Study: Virtual Reality Sports for Children with Limited Mobility .....	28
<b>8. Recommendations</b> .....	29
<b>9. Conclusion</b> .....	30
Key findings from our limited secondary research .....	30
Key findings from our primary research .....	30
<b>10. References</b> .....	33

# 1. Introduction



Physical activity and sports participation are crucial for the physical, mental, and social development of all children. Physical activities can enhance the quality of life and mental well-being of children with disabilities by providing opportunities for independent movement, fostering cooperation and social interaction with others, and helping them gain better control and awareness of their own bodies. This supports long-term goals such as fostering a positive self-image, enhancing social competence, improving motor skills and physical fitness, developing leisure and game skills, encouraging creative expression, and reducing anxiety. However, children with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty, often face significant barriers to accessing sports opportunities (Kizar et al., 2015; Klapwijk, 1987).

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of inclusive sports and the need to celebrate the achievements of disabled athletes. The Variety Disability Sports Awards, launched by Variety in 2023, exemplifies this shift in awareness and appreciation. This annual event celebrates, and champions disabled sportspeople and their achievements across many levels, roles, locations, and sports.

The awards cover various categories, including Rising Star, Innovation, Unsung Hero, and

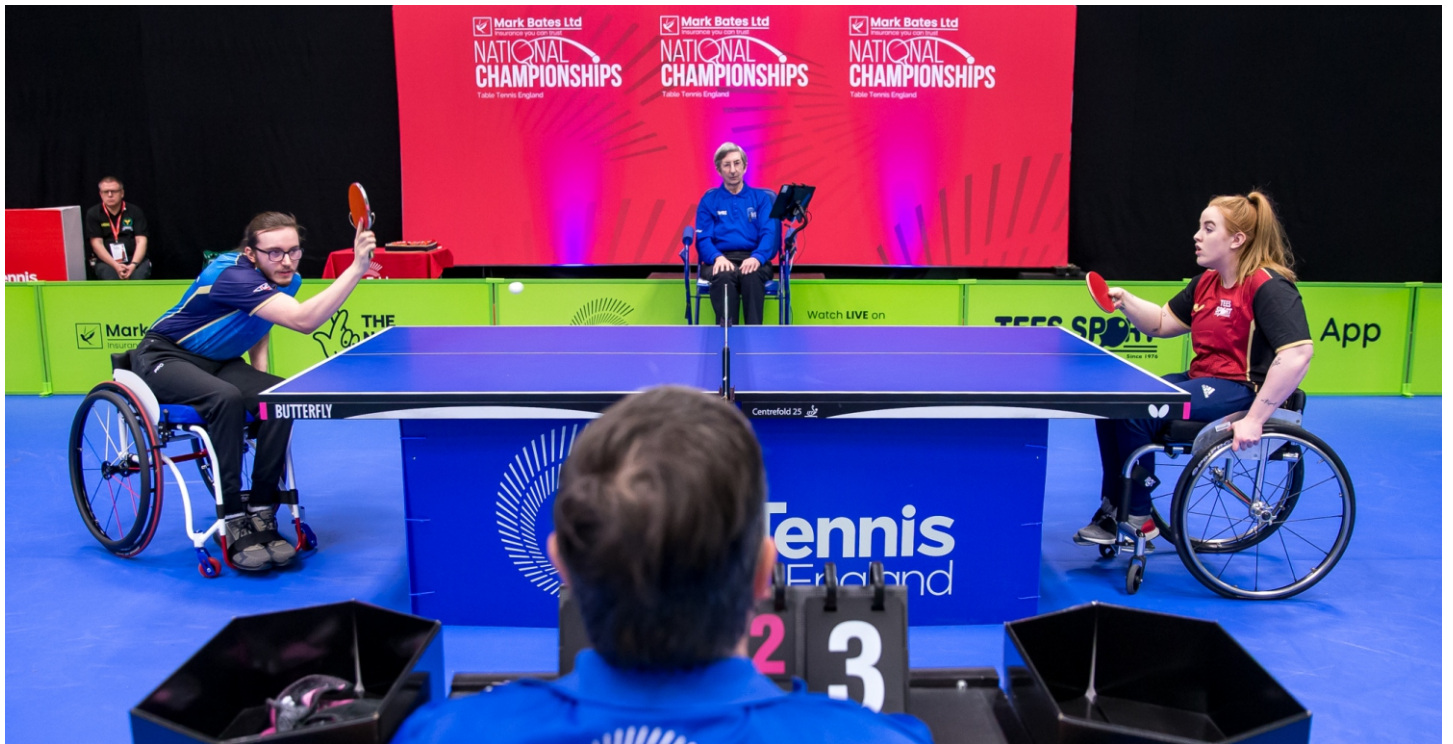
Outstanding Individual Achievement, among others. By highlighting these accomplishments, the Variety Disability Sports Awards play a crucial role in raising awareness and inspiring our disabled children and young people to participate in sports.

These awards provide the motive force for Variety's "Voices for Change" campaign, which aims to increase access to sports for children with disabilities living in poverty in the UK. This initiative focuses on publicising the critical importance of affording extra funding to increase and improve access to sports among young, disabled, and disadvantaged people. The campaign recognises that financial barriers often prevent many disabled children from participating in sports and physical activities and works to address these challenges.

Variety's commitment to supporting disabled children in sports is further demonstrated through our practical assistance programs. Over the past five years, Variety has ensured that over 300,000 disabled children have been able to access sports and physical recreation through the provision of Variety's Sunshine Coaches. Additionally, through our direct grants over the last three years Variety has provided 260 wheelchairs across the UK, including 50 sports wheelchairs, 60 powered wheelchairs, and 20 all-terrain wheelchairs. These specialised equipment grants make a significant difference in enabling children with disabilities to participate in sports and physical activities.

This report examines various aspects of sports access for disabled children living in poverty, highlighting the current barriers, initiatives, and potential solutions. By understanding the challenges and opportunities in this area, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and accessible sporting environment for all children, regardless of their abilities or economic circumstances.

## 2. Background: Disability, Poverty, and Sports in the UK



According to the Department for Work and Pensions (2024), there are approximately 1.8 million children with disabilities in the UK. The Equality Act 2010 defines a disabled person as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities.

Recent data shows that 4.3 million children in the UK live in poverty, with 600,000 of those being disabled (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). This stark statistic highlights the significant overlap between disability and poverty among children in the UK. The intersection of disability and poverty creates compounded challenges for children's participation in sports and physical activities.

### 2.1: The Disability-Poverty Nexus

The relationship between disability and poverty is complex and multifaceted:

**Increased costs:** Families with disabled children often face significantly higher living costs due to disability-related expenses. According to

research cited in the ESSS Outline on Disability and Extra Living Costs (Sanders, 2022), it is estimated to cost up to three times as much to raise a disabled child compared to a child without a disability.

On average, parents with disabled children face extra costs of £581 a month, and for almost a quarter of parents, these costs amount to over £1,000 a month. These figures are after accounting for welfare payments designed to help meet these costs. The extra costs faced by families with disabled children are equivalent to almost half of their income.

For example, a father of 3 disabled children and one abled child, recalls paying £90 for a normal bike and £600 for an adaptive bike (John, 2019).

Key areas of extra costs include (Extra Costs Commission, 2015):

- **Transport:** Including car travel, parking for frequent hospital visits, specialist equipment for travelling with a disabled child, and longer journeys to reach accessible recreation and leisure activities. In our survey, respondents

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stated that their child “has to travel 270 miles to Sheffield (5.5-hour drive) with a caterer for 5 days at a time,” and “everything is self-funded, to access coaches is difficult and expensive due to significant travel distances and travel cost and accommodation.” These statements highlight how transportation to accessible facilities or willing coaches takes a significant toll on a family's finances.

- Toys: More expensive specialist toys and play equipment, such as sensory toys.
- Clothing: Suitable clothing for disabled children is usually more expensive and needs to be replaced more frequently due to wear and tear.
- Energy: Increased heating in the home, and frequent cleaning of bedding and clothes.
- Therapies: Privately purchased therapy for both children (e.g., physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, speech and language therapy) and their parents (e.g., counselling and emotional support).
- Home adaptations: Changes to living spaces to make them safer and more accessible for disabled children.

These additional expenses can significantly impact a family's ability to afford participation in sports and recreational activities, further exacerbating the barriers to access for children with disabilities living in poverty.

#### **Further barriers to sports access include:**

- Reduced income potential: Parents or guardians of disabled children may need to reduce work hours or leave employment to provide care, leading to decreased household income.
- Benefit system challenges: While various benefits are available, navigating the system can be complex, and recent welfare reforms have impacted some families negatively (Disability Rights UK, 2022). Interviewees from our research stated that the limitation of NHS wheelchairs use during sports. For example, the coaches have mentioned to Gary and Thomas that “if you are

going to progress, you know you need a sports wheelchair, because he's got a big, heavy NHS wheelchair that is, well, you can wheel forward and back within it, but you can't maneuverer.”

- Educational barriers: Disabled children may face challenges in education, potentially impacting future employment prospects and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Therefore, the relationship between disability and poverty is complex, with families of disabled children facing significantly higher living costs. Key expenses include transport, specialised toys, clothing, energy, therapies, and home adaptations. These costs often consume almost half of a family's income, limiting access to sports and recreational activities. Reduced earning potential due to caregiving responsibilities, challenges in navigating the benefits system, and educational barriers further contribute to the cycle of poverty for families with disabled children.

#### **2.2: Impact on Sports Participation**

Some barriers to active participation of disabled children in poverty includes:

1. Financial constraints: The cost of specialised equipment, club memberships, and transportation can be prohibitive for families already struggling with the additional costs of disability.
2. Time poverty: Parents juggling care responsibilities, work, and managing tight budgets may have limited time to facilitate their children's sports participation.
3. Health disparities: Children with disabilities living in poverty may have poorer overall health outcomes, further limiting their ability to engage in physical activities.
4. Reduced access to information: Families may have limited access to information about available sports programs and support services.
5. Social exclusion: The compounded effects of disability stigma and poverty can lead to social

isolation, reducing opportunities for sports engagement.

Thus, the combination of disability and poverty significantly limits children's participation in sports. Financial constraints, time pressures on parents, a child's functional limitations, limited access to information, and social exclusion all contribute to reduced opportunities for children with disabilities to engage in physical activities.

### 2.3: Policy Context

The UK government has implemented various policies aimed at supporting disabled children and reducing child poverty, including:

1. Disability Living Allowance for children - a tax-free benefit to subsidise care and mobility needs of disabled children under 16 years old
2. Carer's Allowance - a flat allowance for someone who cares for at least 35 hours per week
3. Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) support in schools - extra support in school such as speech therapy to help with children's ability to learn

More recently, the government has implemented initiatives to increase access to sports for disabled children and children in poverty. For example, Department of Education funded a programme called "Inclusion 2024", which aims to increase quality of schools' physical education and sports division to increase participation for disabled children and children with SEND in physical activities (Youth Sports Trust, n.d.). However, participation for inclusivity sports programmes is still limited throughout the UK, as Inclusion 2024 is only delivered through 52 Lead Inclusion Schools.

Understanding this backdrop is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by disabled children from low-income families in accessing sports opportunities. The following chapters will explore these challenges in more detail, particularly by giving voice to young people supported by Variety who have faced significant challenges and barriers in accessing sports. Secondary research also focuses on understanding the specific barriers, availability and cost of equipment, as well as current initiatives aimed at improving access.





## 3. Access to Sports – Research with Variety's Young People



### 3.1a: Survey Methods and Procedure

This survey evaluates the impact of adaptive sports equipment provided by Variety, The Children's Charity, with the hope that any insights will lead to a better understanding of the positive impact of sport and how to improve access to sport for disabled children. Additionally, we hope the survey sheds light on any barriers that disabled children, and their families face when accessing sport, even after receiving the necessary equipment.

A short online survey (~20 questions) was administered to approx. 130 Variety beneficiaries to gather quantitative data, complementing the additional insights and depth of answers provided by the separate, semi-structured interviews. This survey format allowed the participants to provide more standardized and detailed responses, especially regarding demographics and financial information.

### 3.2a: Design and Scales

The survey consisted of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The content was

subdivided into five main sections as follows: demographics, financial barriers, sports participation, support systems, & social and emotional impact.

- 1. Demographics:** Gathered information about the child's age at the time of receiving their adaptive equipment and their current age. Optionally, participants could disclose their family income bracket and population density of residence (urban, rural, suburban, or other) to contextualise responses.
- 2. Financial Barriers:** Respondents rated the difficulty of affording the adaptive sports equipment prior to receiving their grant/equipment from Variety on a 4-point scale (Scale: 1 = Not difficult, 2= Slightly difficult, 3= Difficult, 4= Very difficult). This section further asked about the approximate cost of the equipment and if the equipment has led to ongoing expenses.
- 3. Sports Participation:** Respondents rated the accessibility of their local sports facilities on a 4-point scale (Scale: 1 = Not accessible, 2= Slightly accessible 3= Accessible, 4= Very accessible). Further, they provided details on how frequently their child participates in sports per week, if their sports participation is school-based or extracurricular, and any specific accessibility barriers they have encountered.
- 4. Support Systems:** Respondents rated their satisfaction with the support their child receives from coaches or teachers while using adaptive equipment on a 5-point scale (1= Dissatisfied, 2= Slightly dissatisfied, 3= Satisfied, 4= Slightly satisfied, 5= Very satisfied). Additionally, respondents were asked whether the child or their coaches have received formal training with adaptive equipment use.
- 5. Social and Emotional Impact:** Respondents rated the positive or negative changes, if at

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all, in their child's social interaction with peers since receiving the equipment on a 5-point scale (1= Much worse, 2= Worse, 3= No change, 4= Better, 5= Much better). Further questions detailed whether their child's confidence or independence has changed after receiving equipment.

### **3.3a: Procedure**

The online survey was constructed by the researcher using the software "Google Forms", and the participation link was disseminated via email by Variety employees to parents of previous recipients of Variety's adaptive equipment grants. This survey stayed open for two weeks allowing for data collection. Participants were asked for consent to participate, which could be withdrawn at any time before their final survey submission. Respondents were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and secure. Yet as a participation incentive, respondents had the option to provide their contact information for a small prize drawing. Any emails provided were detached from responses before commencing the results analysis.

### **3.4a: Sample**

A total of 130 responses were collected. Participants' whose children were equipment grant recipients range in age from 15 to 20 years old, with varying levels of engagement in adaptive sports programs. Respondents were from various regions and family income brackets. Still, the demographic make-up was predominately suburban (61.5%) and most had a total family income between £20,000-£40,000 per annum (61.5%). Nearly a quarter (23.1%) had a family income of £20,000 or less.

### **3.5a: Data Analysis**

Quantitative responses were analysed to determine the frequency and proportion of each rating or answer choice, while the open-ended responses were reviewed to identify recurring themes. This structured approach enabled the survey results to give a clear insight into the most

common barriers and benefits of adaptive sports equipment and sports participation on disabled children and their families.

### **3.6a: Survey limitations**

Non-random sampling was utilized, specifically targeting families who have previously received equipment from Variety. We acknowledge that more detailed demographic information, such as the type and severity of athletes' disabilities, could impact the specific needs and experiences of adaptive athletes. By not collecting this information, this survey is not able to capture a more nuanced interpretation of experiences and support needs. Further, online surveys which are self-reported may pose the risk of desirability bias or recall bias in some participants- whether intentional or subconscious. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this survey do not claim to be representative of the experiences of all UK families of disabled athletes who use adaptive sports equipment. Yet, we assert that the survey can provide insights that still make a valuable contribution to the literature. Most importantly, we hope it elevates the voices of disabled athletes and their families to a wider audience.

### **3.7a: Survey Results and Discussion**

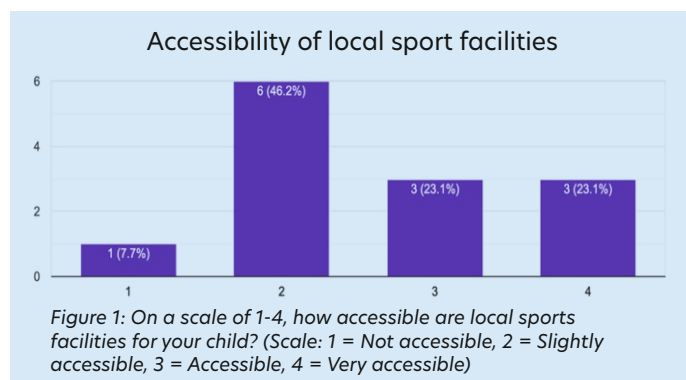
#### **Financial Barriers**

Survey responses indicate that adaptive sports equipment poses a substantial financial burden for families. In terms of affordability, 76.9% of respondents indicated that it was "very difficult" (the highest level on the 4-point scale) to afford the adaptive sports equipment prior to receiving their grant from Variety. The equipment costs reported ranged from £4,000 to £11,000, with the median cost coming to £5,500. Several respondents emphasised that "without help from Variety", purchasing the equipment would have been unattainable or required significant sacrifices such as acquiring "a bank loan" or using up "all of our savings... which we need for a car to transport our children". When considering whether the equipment has led them to have any additional financial costs, there were mixed

results. Nearly half said there have been no additional costs (46.1%), while an equal number of participants indicated they have incurred or anticipate incurring additional costs (46.1%). Some parents elaborated that the expense of the adaptive sports equipment extends beyond the initial purchase, such as “low-cost maintenance, such as replacing tyres” or the cost of “transportation to games”.

### Sports Participation

Encouragingly, the results indicate that equipment recipients frequently engage with sport and physical activity. 61.5% of respondents say their children engage in sport or physical activity 3-4 times per week, while 15.4% participate over 5 times per week. Yet, all this participation seems to be extracurricular, as an astonishing 100% of respondents said that their child does not participate in any school-based sports programs. One respondent said that “School is awful for inclusion- as a wheelchair user, given a stopwatch to time everyone else”. Accessibility within local sports facilities seems to be a notable problem for almost half of the families surveyed (46.2%) who rated their local facilities as only “slightly accessible” (see Figure 1). Yet there is still variation in experiences, as an equal number of respondents indicate their facilities are “accessible” or “very accessible”.

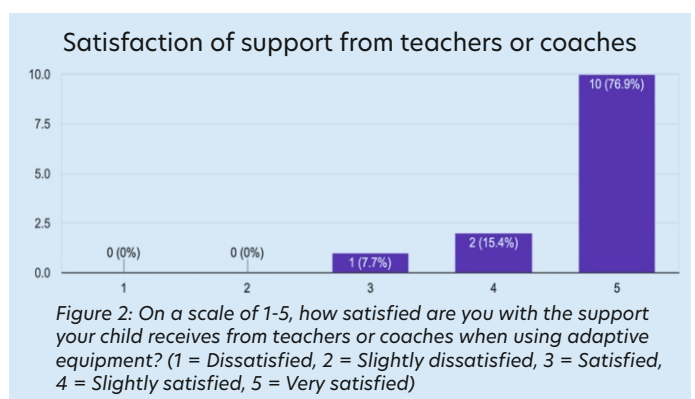


The parents surveyed offered detailed thoughts on this issue. A respondent said they believe that “there is a general lack of accessible sporting facilities/assistance for the physically disabled”. Others offered suggestions to meet these needs by improving “funding to make facilities truly

accessible” or by providing “accessible equipment and adaption would be beneficial for my son to access local gyms”. Another specific suggestion was to allocate funding for “new centres in areas where people have disabilities, but do not already have disability sport centres locally”.

### Support Systems

Support from coaches and teachers also emerged as an area with mixed experiences. Although all respondents expressed satisfaction with the support their child receives (see Figure 2), there was a significant proportion who observed an inadequate number of adaptive coaches nationally or a lack of able-bodied sports coaches willing to work with adaptive players. Speaking about able-bodied coaches' hesitation, a respondent said that “We find able bodied coaches back away from disability sport, mainly down to a lack of awareness”. Other respondents offered suggestions to address this barrier, saying that there should be “better education within the coaching community” or “more support for coaches within clubs and schools”.



The inadequate number of adaptive coaches was described in detail by one respondent who said that there is “no coaching for para-athletes locally” so their child, “has to travel 270 miles to Sheffield (5.5-hour drive) ... with a carer for 5 days at a time”. Further, this means both the child and their parents must frequently “take leave from work” to enable continued sports participation. They noted that this increases the financial burden of sports participation for their family as,

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“everything is self-funded, to access coaches is difficult and expensive due to significant travel distances and travel cost and accommodation”. Another respondent described how their family took matters into their own hands, noting that their child is “able to access her sport locally due to parents running a totally accessible sports group”.

Thus, the coaching and training aspect of sports accessibility can limit the consistency and independence of disabled athlete's training while putting a further burden on parents and caregivers. Although it is often cumbersome to find and travel to willing coaches, it seems that the quality of coaching the children receive is a generally positive experience and satisfactory for the parents. It was also encouraging that one respondent noted that “my young person now coaches adaptive sport”.

### **Takeaway One: Social & Emotional Impact**

Overall, respondents believe their children have reaped positive socioemotional benefits after receiving their equipment from Variety.

Almost every respondent reported “much better” social interaction with peers (76.9%). Since accessing the adaptive equipment, all respondents believe that their child's confidence has improved and 84.6% believe that their child's independence has improved. A few participants provided details about these changes. Regarding increased independence, one said that “without the correct equipment my young person's life would be very limited”. Another parent reflected on the positive social and emotional impact of sports participation for his child saying that their “...social life, and independence & confidence has improved not as a direct result of the equipment but as being part of a club, playing sport and mixing with people that have the same or similar disabilities has helped him achieve this”.

### **Key Barriers**

Finally, participants were given the opportunity reflect on the various barriers to their child's

participation in sports and asked to share any further remarks that they had not already had the opportunity to express during the survey. When asked about the most significant barriers to their child's sport participation, 76.9% respondents chose “financial costs” - making it the most frequent, key barrier cited by respondents. The remaining top issues among respondents included transportation issues (53.8%), lack of accessible/specialised facilities (46.2%), availability and access of equipment (38.5%), and lack of adaptive trained coaches/support staff (30.8%). They were various other barriers mentioned less frequently which are still notable: social barriers, information & awareness, limited specialised programmes and policy & systemic issues. In the concluding remarks, several parents offered take home messages. One emphasised the need for adaptive sport to be more well integrated to the year-round sports landscape, noting that “...access to sport for disabled people is very difficult, and for the other 3 years of the 4-year paralympic cycle, it is totally forgotten.” Another praised the progression and achievements their child has seen in sport, and wanted to remind readers that “without funding, this opportunity would never have happened.”

In reflecting on these findings, respondents voiced that while adaptive sports equipment has had a meaningful impact on their child's ability to access sport, they have further highlighted the need for systemic changes to create a fully accessible and inclusive environment for disabled athletes. While the survey included both structured and open-ended short answer questions, we recognise that it is not able to capture the full depth of each respondent's experience. More complex issues such as emotional impact, personal anecdotes, and individually unique barriers may not be fully explored in the structured survey format. To combat this limitation, the following section will present the semi-structured interview findings. These interview findings will enable an understanding of the full extent of

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both the opportunities and barriers they face in sport. The discussions demonstrated many real-life stories that contextualise the survey results, allowing us to better hear the voices of disabled athletes and their families.

### 3.1b: Interview Methods and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and successes of disabled athletes and their families who have received adaptive sports equipment through Variety UK Children's Charity. These interviews aim to complement and expand on the initial survey findings by capturing richer, qualitative insights from participants. With a more personal lens, the interviews highlight individual stories which underscore the impact of adaptive sport on athletes and their families while also identifying areas where additional support and resources are needed.

### 3.2b: Design and Themes

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for both consistency across key topics while leaving the space for participants to share their own stories and the flexibility for the conversation to be steered in new directions. An interview guide was used by the researcher, and the questions were organized around the following themes:

1. **Background and Context:** Each interview began with questions that established context for understanding each participant's journey in adaptive sports. These questions centred around the athlete's background, including information about the age at which they received the adaptive equipment, and which sports they participate in. Each athlete was also asked to share a favourite memory or story that comes to mind when thinking of their sport experience.
2. **Accessibility and Participation in Sports:** Every participant was explicitly asked, "What do you believe are the biggest

challenges that face children with disabilities compared to non-disabled children in accessing sport?". The conversation continued from that point based on each response.

3. **Financial and Logistical Challenges:** These questions explored the financial costs and logistical challenges involved with obtaining their adaptive sports equipment and inquired about at what point in their sports journey that they realised they had a need for specialised equipment. They were also asked about their experiences with the accessibility of sports facilities.
4. **Support Systems and Training:** Participants were asked about the support, or lack thereof, that they receive from teachers, coaches, teammates, schools and the broader sports community. Further questions sought information about the influence of coaching training & quality as well as support system strength on their overall sports experience.
5. **Social and Emotional Impact:** In an attempt to understand the more personal effects of adaptive sport engagement, participants were asked to discuss any stories related to the social benefits of adaptive sport and any ongoing challenges they have had with social inclusion.

### 3.3b: Procedure

The interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. All participants were a minimum of 18 years of age and were accompanied by at least one parent. In addition to the researcher, a representative from Variety was present in each interview to facilitate introductions, explain Variety's "Voices for Change" initiative, and outline the organisation's intentions to publicise and disseminate the report. Participants understood that their consent was freely given and allowed to be withdrawn at any point up until the finalisation of the report. Consent was

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obtained for participants' names and identities to be shared, and some participants also provided photographs to accompany their stories. This approach is intended to "put a face with the name," allowing readers to form a deeper connection with the athletes and their families and to appreciate their contributions as voices for change in adaptive sports.

### **3.4b: Sample**

Five families participated in the interviews, each featuring an adaptive sport athlete paired with their parent(s) or guardian(s). In total, 5 athletes and 6 parents were interviewed across a two-week time frame. All athletes ranged from 18 to 20 years old at the time of interviews, though they each received their equipment from Variety and began their athletic journeys at various ages. The athletes are involved in various sports (wheelchair basketball, tennis, table tennis, judo and rugby), representing a range of adaptive sports experiences.

### **3.5b: Data Analysis**

The interview recordings were initially transcribed using the Otter.ai software. Each interview transcript was then checked for accuracy compared to the recording and accordingly modified by the researcher. With the aid of NVivo 15 software, the interview transcripts were analysed by the researcher using text search queries, word frequency queries, coding, and thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns across the interview sample. Quotes and specific narrative examples were extracted to support the identified themes to be included in the results and discussion. The results and discussion section are organised thematically (rather than by chronological order or the semi-structured guide questions) as a means of elevating the interviewees narratives and experiences.

### **3.6b: Interview Limitations**

As with all qualitative research, the researcher's interpretation of participants' responses may introduce some subjectivity. Themes are

identified and analysed based on the researcher's perspective, which can affect the findings. Non-random sampling was utilised, specifically targeting families who have previously received equipment from Variety. Here, organisational affiliation may make these interviews susceptible to social desirability bias. As all participants have received previous support from Variety and an employee from Variety was present in each interview, this could influence the participant's responses as participants may consciously or unconsciously feel led to present themselves in a certain light. Finally, since each athlete was interviewed alongside a parent, the combined perspectives could influence or dilute the individual experience of each interviewee in the pair. The presence of their parent or their child might impact how freely the opposing party discusses sensitive topics.

Thus, the conclusions drawn from this survey do not claim to be representative of the experiences of all UK families of disabled athletes who use adaptive sports equipment. Yet, despite these limitations, we believe the interview results contribute valuable insights to the existing literature on adaptive sports. By providing a platform for athletes and their families to share their personal experiences, these interviews help to elevate voices for change that are often underrepresented. The narratives captured here offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and triumphs faced by disabled athletes, offering valuable context and depth that quantitative data alone cannot convey.

### **3.7b: Interview Results and Discussion**

#### **Personal Background and Experience with Adaptive Equipment**

Adaptive equipment plays a transformative role in enabling disabled athletes to participate in sport. Participant's highlighted equipment's role in enabling access and enhancing performance-transforming their opportunities to engage and grow as an athlete. For many participants, receiving their own adaptive equipment was a

pivotal moment that shifted their ability to engage in sports with greater freedom and confidence. While interviewees explained the process of transition out of their non-sport standardised wheelchairs, there were several descriptions of the heaviness and clunkiness of the standard NHS wheelchairs compared to the specialised sports wheelchairs. Thomas, a 20 year old para table tennis player who is now on the Pathways Team for UK Para Table Tennis, relayed the story of his transition from standard to specialised equipment. Thomas described the moment he realised that he needed to seek out a specialised sport wheelchair if he wanted to continue towards a semi-professional pathway with his sport:

*“So, I was getting to the point where the chair was starting to hold me back, because, I mean, the standard chairs will come with, like, a really high backrest. They’ll be quite heavy and robust, but that doesn’t allow you to move around the table quickly. Doesn’t allow you to, like, turn and move your arms. So yeah, we started to look into what can I do to help improve my game? And yeah, that’s when we contacted British Para Table Tennis.”*

Thomas's father, Gary, went on to draw contrasts between the standard NHS chair he was playing in compared to the new equipment he received from Variety. Gary explained that Thomas managed to progress to a decently high level in the sport without having the proper equipment that other players were using. Eventually, the coaches told Gary and Thomas that 'if you are going to progress, you know you need a sports wheelchair, because he's got a big, heavy NHS wheelchair that is, well, you can wheel forward and back within it, but you can't maneuverer.' Thomas gloated of the difference that his new equipment has made on his ability to play competitively, noting that "...it's so much lighter than the chair I was using before, it must be like close to, like a half or a third of the weight of it... So, I could actually, like pivot, rather than before I was, like, very stationary."

Ruben, an 18 year old wheelchair tennis player, experienced similar challenges before receiving his own sport chair. His mother, Lissa, recounted how Ruben's first borrowed sports chair was, "nice and snug with his body, but his legs were already too long" (see **Picture 1**).



Lissa said the need for real specialisation and fitting with wheelchairs allows her to understand why *“specialist equipment is so expensive, because there is no one-size-fits-all kind of frame”*. Still though, the borrowed chair was appreciated by both Ruben and his mother. They looked back fondly on Ruben's "first tiny chair" and recognised that it allowed him to begin his transformative journey with adaptive tennis at such a young age. Now, Ruben is a highly competitive, semi-professional wheelchair tennis player who is enthusiastic and dedicated to the sport.

Jacob, an 18 year old wheelchair rugby player, furthered this sentiment by saying that his "favourite thing" since he has gotten his new equipment is that he doesn't "have to ask for a club chair" anymore. Jacob also described that he used to have to worry about borrowing a chair for his practices and games and is now relieved that he no longer has "to worry about saying to

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my other club, "Oh, I'm going to this club on Thursday. Can I borrow this chair?"". Jacob's father, Phil, agreed and emphasised the limited sharing options for this type of adaptive gear saying that "they do need to be custom made, really. They have... different support and different needs. So yeah, since having our own chair it has been lot better and more comfortable".

When discussing the possibility of borrowing or renting sports wheelchairs without owning your own specialised sport chair, it became clear that it is often critically important that each player has a unique, custom chair to call their own. Izzy, an 18 year old judo player, explained that the need for a well fitted chair was not just a matter of sports prowess, but also for maintaining her health and safety day-to-day. Izzy explained that "people with my condition often suffer with shoulder issues" and her participation in judo can simultaneously "bring on more shoulder problems". So, Izzy's chair is used every day as an "active users chair", as it is very lightweight at only 3.8 kilograms. Izzy was passionate when describing how helpful her sports chair has been outside of sport, "So it's a lot easier on my shoulders, and it means that I can travel around the world, around the country. Without having to, like, drag something really heavy...". This helps protect her from injury in day-to-day life.

### **Community and Social Connection**

Beyond physical health and participation, adaptive sports seem to provide athletes with a strong sense of community, where they can find camaraderie, support, and understanding. These social and emotional benefits go beyond the sport itself, often becoming a 'second family' and source of support for disabled athletes and their families.

Lila, an 18 year old competitive women's wheelchair basketball player, expressed how her involvement with basketball has expanded her social network across the country: "But now, I've got friends that live in, like, Scotland. I've got friends in Wales. Because for a lot of the

basketball, we travel, so we go to Nottingham, Worcester, Loughborough, London- it's a lot of travel." In addition to the pride of having friends from her sport all around the country, Lila exhibited a sense of sincerity and admiration when speaking about how these friendship networks produce meaningful bonds and connection. Lila described her community of friends from sport as "really special". Holly, Lila's mother, spoke of how within wheelchair basketball you notice that the players represent a wide range of disabilities with varying levels of physical limitations, yet the environment means that no one is "the different person". Rather, the players are all "supporting each other... you all can just go and be young adults wanting to play sport".

Thomas has had growth in his friendships too. This became evident as he specifically described another para table tennis player living near him who gives him "a lot of support", leading them to develop a close personal relationship. This player is an elderly man who has sparked an unlikely age-gap friendship with Thomas through training together. They have bonded further over their shared experience of starting as able-bodied players before transitioning into para sport athletes. Thomas's father, Gary, agreed and reiterated that UK para table tennis "is really a close-knit community" where the older players are "a great encouragement to Tom".

These were common experiences shared between each of the families interviewed. Izzy described her judo club as a place where she is treated like any other athlete, explaining that "In 14 years, I've not once been asked by any of the people in my club why I'm in a wheelchair. Nobody notices the wheelchair". Her mother, Paula, said that this is a driving factor behind the community feeling they have among families within their club. This is perfectly captured by their judo club's motto- "Why is our club different? Because here, we're all the same". Jacob has expressed a similar sentiment about his two wheelchair rugby clubs by describing the rugby community as "my second family", because



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the “connections I have now are really helpful”. He believes that a significant part of this phenomenon is because they can “all relate with each other, because you have to be disabled to play”. Ruben also said that the people he meets at wheelchair tennis tournaments across Europe are “a friendly bunch”. Explaining further, Ruben feels that it is refreshing to be a part of a community where “you can all relate to each other... and we're just there to play and it's so normal”. Much like Izzy, Ruben says he appreciates the sports community especially because in other circumstances he “gets so tired of people asking me why I'm in a wheelchair”.

Thus, for all our interviewees, adaptive sports participation has provided them with a widened social circle. These social connections are often an essential support network, and the various benefits of these relationships were recurring topics of conversation within the interviews. Ultimately though, it demonstrates how sports communities offer a space that feels accepting and supportive, where players are able to bond with others who have faced similar life experiences.

### **Personal Growth and Identity**

For many participants, adaptive sports have been pivotal in fostering self-identity, building independence, and achieving personal milestones. Adaptive sports have provided interviewees with a sense of accomplishment, helping them to realise their potential and experience great personal growth. Jacob shared how his participation in rugby has allowed him to fully realise his own capabilities: “I think having that now, it's not only allowed me to do what I love, it's allowed me to realize what I can actually do myself, rather than just seeing other people do stuff”. He and his father excitedly described their team rugby trips across Europe over the past few years and spoke excitedly about the future European tournaments in Denmark and Germany that they are already looking forward to in the 2025 season. Aside from the precious memories and cultural learning that comes with

travel, Jacob also joked about how he loves that rugby has given him the chance to “not be wrapped up in cotton wool”, where he is free to be as rough and tough as desired while on the pitch. Thomas had a similar experience when attempting to regain his independence and confidence after he had disabilities. Thomas said that he “wanted to gain something back” because he felt that he had “lost so much of my independence, there was just so much that I had lost and wanted to get back”. So, he says that turning to sports helped him to slowly “get more competitive” and “became more active”, and he is now living an even more active lifestyle than when he was an able-bodied player.

For many participants, adaptive sports have provided a new means of building independence and self-confidence as an individual. Izzy explained how her equipment's light frame and packable design means that it is “easier for her to lift in and out of the car”, allowing her to travel to sports training and competitions independently. So, after she passes her driving test, she is eager to officially be able to “head off to Judo competitions on her own”. Her mother, Paula, said that one of the main reasons that disabled sports access is so imperative and should be encouraged, is because if disabled young people “have got the right environment and the right equipment, then they can learn to be almost totally independent. So, this is imperative for young people and even older people like Izzy, to know that this is possible”.

Ruben found that participating in tennis has come to positively transform his mental health and self-perception. He said he “wasn't in a good place” at the time when he began playing tennis. Now, after years of involvement in wheelchair tennis, Ruben believes that because he “has his people around him” and “has got his team” that his mental state has “definitely gotten better over the years”. Jacob also described how sports has changed his self-perception and independence, acknowledging that “Disability doesn't define you. It doesn't make you any different, but it just makes you

have an extra challenge". Jacob went one step further by reflecting on the feeling that living with a condition like cerebral palsy "can sometimes be a downfall", yet he also stressed that he has come to often view his disability as an advantage:

*"There's a lot of positives out of it in some ways, having a condition like this. You can find that having it can sometimes be a downfall, but also it can be an advantage. There's loads of disability sport out there now, and there's loads of awareness for disabilities in general... which is what I like to see, really."*

Finally, all the interviewees have had memorable achievements in sports, producing a great sense of pride for the athletes and their families. Thomas looked back on his invitation to compete in the table tennis Senior National Championships. He said that this was a particular moment of excitement and achievement for him because this tournament "was for table tennis in general, the able-bodied table tennis league for the entire country... That was quite a big deal to me, because they were only inviting five or six wheelchair players". Izzy, a committed judo athlete, took pride in being part of the first all-disabled two-person team to compete and win at the Pan Disability European Championships in June 2024, at a level typically reserved for mixed-ability pairs. Izzy spoke about the excitement and surrealism of this experience: "So that was quite an experience to sit on the podium with your country's national anthem playing. That was one of those, like very overwhelming moments." Her pioneering role in adaptive judo as the first ever pair to bring home a Judo medal for Team GB was history making and has set an example for others to follow in her footsteps. Ruben also recently celebrated a remarkable achievement when he won the Junior Doubles title at Roland Garros with his LTA coach by his side (see **Picture 2**). This prestigious international accomplishment affirmed his skills and inspired him to aim for even greater heights in wheelchair tennis.



**Picture:** Ruben and his LTA coach at Roland Garros in 2024 after winning the Junior Doubles title. This is in his new, specialised sports chair that he received from Variety.

### Barriers for Participation and Accessibility

The barriers which were most frequently cited in the survey responses were also continually spotlighted by the interviewees. One of the most significant barriers for families is the financial cost associated with adaptive sports. This includes not only the initial expenses of specialized equipment but also the ongoing costs for maintenance, travel, and accommodations at competitions. Izzy's mother, Paula, said that funding adaptive sport costs a lot of money because, "anything with disability attached to its name- you can double the price"- only half-joking. Participants frequently discussed the high costs associated with adaptive sports and emphasized the need for increased funding to cover equipment, travel, and participation costs. Lila's mother, Holly, gave a recent example for their family. When Lila

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has the Junior League basketball tournament over the summer, Holly and her husband “couldn't afford to both go”. She reminded us that it's “not just the cost of the hotel, it's also all the food and drinks and travel”.

In addition to financial costs, many participants described accessibility issues in sports facilities that limit their participation. Many participants called for improvements in local accessibility, noting that the lack of nearby facilities or adaptive sports programs creates a significant barrier for disabled athletes. Lissa, Ruben's mother, expressed frustration with the inadequate facilities at his local tennis club, “They have got a lift. But in the six years we've been going there, it doesn't work... So, Ruben can't go on his own because he can't balance, lift the chair, get down onto the courts”. To make matters worse, this same facility also has no accessible toilets available despite hosting a monthly wheelchair tennis night. Ruben expressed his mixed feeling towards the local facility, noting that “You kind of appreciate the fact that they're trying .... to promote the wheelchair sport. But it makes you really cross that they can't make that extra little bit of effort and get their lift fixed or sort out access to a toilet.” These accessibility issues diminish the inclusivity of sports venues, restricting the independence of athletes who rely on such infrastructure. This is not an isolated incident, but rather a recurring theme.

Holly attended a basketball camp on a university campus. She arrived to find that the sports hall was “down five flights of stairs”, yet the organisers had failed to consider that the lifts had been locked for the summer holidays. She had to walk down the stairs, “which is obviously not safe” for her. Likewise, Jacob says that when attending events, he often locates that the toilets labelled “accessible” and stops to think “How in hell do they call that accessible?”. Izzy spoke about her inability to attend the gyms local to her home because they are “not the most inclusive places” and are “strict with what equipment I can use”. So, she has inventively

overcome this lack of accessible training facilities by building her own gym... in her front garden! Thomas also noted issues while playing table tennis in older sports halls, where “the floor is very slippery, or often the bigger problem is the floor is not actually flat”. Thus, the lack of adequate, accessible facilities remains a significant barrier for disabled athletes, with many venues failing to meet the basic accessibility standards that could allow them to participate fully and independently.

Several participants emphasized that a lack of public awareness and visibility of adaptive sports contributes to stereotypes and misconceptions about what disabled athletes can achieve. Izzy was adamant that the biggest challenge that children with disabilities face when accessing sport is “quite literally, people's attitudes”. She relayed countless stories where she has gone to a sporting event or training and is met by “the coaches or the volunteers who immediately ... go, “Sorry, we can't cater to you!””. Others have told her, “Do you mind sitting in the corner to watch and do your own thing?” without giving her the opportunity to demonstrate her abilities or express her adaptation needs. Ruben said he had similar negative attitudes from others, particularly at school where he was always “the water boy or one held the timer at the end of the finish line” when he only ever wanted to “go and play sport with his peers”. Ruben is hopeful that these attitudes and misconceptions can slowly change though, as he says he has a current sixth form teacher for sports who “always offers an adapted version of the practical elements for me to do” and makes the effort to “research the best adaptations to offer for each practical class session”.

Lila also addressed the impact of societal attitudes on disabled athletes, stating, “it is literally just people, people thinking “they can't do that”. Like if you use a wheelchair, then you can't walk properly, and so you can't do sports, and you can't be sporty.” As a university student who is an aspiring teacher, Lila has also had to

confront and challenge people's assumptions about her abilities as a wheelchair user in relation to her career aspirations. She says that when she tells fellow students that she hopes to specialize her teaching degree in Physical Education, that she can “see the clocks turn in their head thinking, “How are you going to do PE, when you use a wheelchair half the time?”” Her mother Holly also expressed frustration that Lila was told to be mindful when seeking a teaching placement that “we'll have to send you to a wheelchair accessible school, as if it was a big ordeal”. Holly thinks that this is due to people still “seeing [disabilities] as such a barrier” in a way that is unnecessary and stereotypical. For Lila, it is clear that her experience with adaptive sports have opened doors for her career aspirations in physical education. Her hope and determination reflect the transformative impact of adaptive sport (see **Picture 3 and Picture 4**), and the need for more adaptive athletes to continue challenging common misconceptions.



**Picture 3:** Teenage Lila being carried over the shoulder by her father while on vacation, after a long day of walking in her crutches. She was in the waiting period to receive her Variety wheelchair and would sometimes not be able to continue walking in her crutches after a full day of activity due to exhaustion.



**Picture:** A photo that Lila posted of herself on the first day after receiving her new sports chair from Variety, captioned “Here's to more adventures and better days”.

Lila's caption encapsulated the hope and excitement this change brought to her future. It also represents a great transformation from her predicament in Picture 3. This is a testament to her determination as an athlete and future educator, as well as her ability to continuing challenging other's misconceptions.

### 3.8b: Conclusion

The interviews with disabled athletes and their families reveal both the profound impact of adaptive sports and the persistent barriers that hinder full participation. Adaptive sports equipment, personalised training, and community support have enabled these athletes to engage in sports meaningfully, building self-confidence, independence, and a sense of identity beyond disability. However, the interviews also highlight systemic challenges that continue to restrict equal access and

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opportunity, underscoring the need for policy-driven solutions and cultural shifts to create a truly inclusive sports environment.

Participants shared that adaptive sports have been life-changing, providing them with social connections, emotional resilience, and a strong sense of community. Many athletes described their sports teams as a “second family,” where they experience acceptance and support, which bolsters their mental health and well-being.

Despite these positive outcomes, significant barriers remain. Financial strain from equipment and travel expenses, limited access to local adaptive sports programs, inadequate accessibility at facilities, and societal misconceptions about disability all create obstacles for disabled athletes. These systemic barriers point to the need for targeted policy changes, including increased funding for adaptive equipment, expanded local adaptive sports programs, and consistent accessibility standards at sports venues. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of public awareness and coaching education to dismantle stereotypes, showing that adaptive sports are a vital and legitimate athletic pursuit for disabled youth.

These findings underscore the importance of Variety’s “Voices for Change” initiative, which seeks to amplify the experiences of disabled athletes and advocate for a more inclusive, supportive sports landscape. By elevating these personal stories, the initiative brings attention to the immediate and long-term changes needed to support disabled athletes more comprehensively. Through their interviews, these athletes and their families have offered valuable insights into the unique challenges and joys of adaptive sports. As these stories reach broader audiences, it is our hope that they inspire both awareness and action—encouraging policymakers, sports organizations, and communities to work together toward a future where disabled athletes have equal opportunities to thrive.

As we turn to the next section, these first-hand accounts, supported by the survey findings and insights from relevant literature, form the foundation for a set of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the structural, financial, and cultural barriers outlined here. By weaving together research and personal narratives, this report advocates for policies that will support and empower disabled athletes, ensuring that the transformative potential of adaptive sports is accessible to all.



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## 4. Barriers to Sports Participation



Children with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty, face numerous barriers to participating in sports and physical activities. These barriers are complex and multifaceted, often intersecting and compounding each other. This chapter will explore these barriers in detail, drawing from recent research and surveys conducted with children, parents, and professionals in the field.

### 4.1: Physical and Health-Related Barriers

The nature and severity of a child's disability can significantly impact their ability to participate in sports and physical activities. These barriers are often the most visible and can be the most challenging to overcome without appropriate support and adaptations.

#### 1. Neurodevelopmental Conditions:

- *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):* Children with ASD may struggle with social interactions, communication, and sensory processing issues, making team sports or noisy environments challenging.

- *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):* Children with ADHD may find it difficult to focus on instructions or maintain attention during extended periods of physical activity.

- *Learning Disabilities:* These can affect a child's ability to understand and follow complex rules or strategies in sports.

#### 2. Physical Disabilities:

- *Mobility Impairments:* Children with conditions such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or muscular dystrophy may have limited mobility, affecting their ability to participate in conventional sports.

- *Visual Impairments:* Partially sighted or blind children face unique challenges in spatial awareness and navigating sports environments.

- *Hearing Impairments:* Deaf or hard-of-hearing children may struggle with communication during team sports or following verbal instructions.

### 3. Chronic Health Conditions:

- *Respiratory Issues:* Children with asthma or cystic fibrosis may have reduced stamina or experience breathing difficulties during physical exertion.
- *Cardiovascular Conditions:* Some heart conditions may limit a child's ability to engage in high-intensity activities.
- *Epilepsy:* Fear of seizures during physical activity can be a barrier for both children and their parents.

### 4. Coordination and Balance Issues:

- *Dyspraxia:* Children with this condition may struggle with motor planning and coordination, making many sports challenging.
- *Vestibular Disorders:* These can affect balance and spatial orientation, impacting participation in activities that require these skills.

### 5. Fatigue and Pain:

- *Chronic Fatigue Syndrome:* This condition can severely limit a child's energy levels and ability to participate in sustained physical activity.
- *Chronic Pain Conditions:* Conditions like juvenile arthritis can make physical activity painful and challenging.

### 6. Sensory Processing Issues:

- *Hypersensitivity:* Some children may be overly sensitive to touch, sound, or visual stimuli, making sports environments overwhelming.
- *Hyposensitivity:* Others may have reduced sensitivity, potentially increasing the risk of injury during physical activities.

### 7. Communication Difficulties:

- *Speech and Language Disorders:* These can affect a child's ability to communicate effectively with teammates or coaches.
- *Social Communication Disorders:* Difficulties in understanding social cues and nonverbal communication can impact team sports participation.

### 8. Medical Management:

- *Medication Side Effects:* Some medications may cause fatigue, dizziness, or other side effects that impact physical performance.
- *Medical Devices:* Children who use devices like insulin pumps or feeding tubes may face additional challenges in participating safely in contact sports.

These physical and health-related barriers often intersect with other types of barriers, such as environmental and social challenges. For instance, a child with a physical disability may also face accessibility issues at sports facilities, while a child with ASD might struggle with the social aspects of team sports in addition to sensory processing challenges.

It's crucial to note that these barriers are not insurmountable. With appropriate adaptations, support, and inclusive practices, many children with disabilities can participate in and benefit from sports and physical activities. The key lies in understanding each child's unique needs and abilities and tailoring the sports environment and activities accordingly.



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## 4.2: Psychological and Social Barriers

Research (Shields and Synnot, 2016) highlights several psychological and social barriers that prevent children with disabilities from participating in sports:

1. **Anxiety:** This was identified as the most significant barrier by children and parents. As children gets older, and sports gets more competitive or harder, the skill gap between typical children and disabled children gets wider. This leads to shaming and teasing between children which increases the lack of motivation to continue for disabled children.
2. **Fear of judgment:** Parents reported that their child felt frustrated or loss of confidence when compared to the skills of children of typical development. This can lead to children unwilling to continue with physical activities or sports.
3. **Lack of social support:** Many children reported not having anyone to do activities with, which can be a significant deterrent to participation. Attitudes of people close to children, such as families, teachers, and peers, significantly increased sports participation. Thus, the importance of peer support and friendship in encouraging sports participation cannot be overstated.
4. **Negative societal attitudes:** Many children with disabilities faced staff and physical education coaches lacked experience in integrating disabled children into sports, or did not adapt to sports more inclusive. Thus, inclusive policies, and well-trained staffed are key factors in facilitating inclusivity in sports.

## 4.3: Environmental and Accessibility Barriers

The physical environment and accessibility of sports facilities play a crucial role in enabling or hindering participation (Shields et al., 2016; Jaarsma et al., 2014). Key issues include:

1. **Lack of accessible facilities:** Many sports

facilities are not fully accessible or lack the necessary adaptations for children with various disabilities.

2. **Limited specialised programs:** There is often a shortage of sports programs specifically designed for children with various disabilities.
3. **Transportation issues:** Families struggling with poverty may find it difficult to afford or access suitable transportation to sports venues.

## 4.4: Financial Barriers

For children with disabilities living in poverty, financial constraints pose a significant barrier to sports participation. Issues include:

1. **Cost of equipment:** Specialised adaptive sports equipment can be prohibitively expensive. Adaptive sports equipment can cost up to 100 times more than standard equipment.
2. **Membership and participation fees:** Many families cannot afford sports club memberships or ongoing participation fees.
3. **Additional costs:** There are often hidden costs associated with sports participation, such as transportation, appropriate clothing, or fees for parents or siblings to accompany the child.

## 4.5: Workforce and Support Barriers

The Active Surrey research (2022) highlighted several barriers related to the sports workforce and support systems:

1. **Lack of trained coaches:** There is a shortage of coaches with expertise in adaptive sports and working with disabled children.
2. **Limited knowledge and experience:** Many sports professionals lack the necessary knowledge and experience to effectively include children with disabilities in their programs.



3. Insufficient support staff: Children often require additional 1:1 support to participate effectively, which is not always available.
4. Awareness issues: There is a general lack of awareness among sports providers about the needs and capabilities of children with disabilities.

#### 4.6: Information and Communication Barriers

Access to information about available sports opportunities is another significant barrier:

1. Limited awareness of opportunities: Many families are unaware of the sports programs and opportunities available for children with disabilities in their area.
2. Inadequate communication: Sports providers often fail to effectively communicate the nature of their programs, what to expect, and how they can accommodate children with various disabilities.
3. Lack of representation: Children with disabilities often do not see themselves represented in sports media or local sports programs, which can discourage participation (Activity Alliance, 2024).

#### 4.7: Policy and Systemic Barriers

At a broader level, there are policy and systemic barriers that impact sports participation:

1. Insufficient funding: There is often a lack of dedicated funding for adaptive sports programs and equipment.
2. Limited integration in school sports: Many schools struggle to fully integrate children with disabilities into their physical education and sports programs.
3. Lack of coordinated approach: There is often a lack of coordination between various stakeholders (schools, sports clubs, health professionals, etc.) in providing comprehensive sports opportunities for children with disabilities.

Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective strategies to increase sports participation among children with disabilities living in poverty. The following chapters will explore current initiatives and support systems, as well as recommendations for addressing these barriers and creating more inclusive sports environments.



## 5. Availability and Cost of Adaptive Sports Equipment

The availability and cost of adaptive sports equipment play a crucial role in determining access to sports for children with disabilities, particularly those living in poverty. This chapter explores the challenges associated with obtaining appropriate equipment, the financial implications for families, and the impact on sports participation.

### 5.1: Types of Adaptive Sports Equipment

Adaptive sports equipment varies widely depending on the sport and the specific needs of the child. Some common types include:

- 1. Wheelchairs:**
  - Sports wheelchairs (e.g., for basketball, tennis, rugby)
  - Racing wheelchairs for track events
  - All-terrain wheelchairs for outdoor activities
- 2. Prosthetics:**
  - Running blades
  - Specialised prosthetics for swimming or cycling
- 3. Adaptive Bicycles:**
  - Hand-cycles
  - Tricycles
  - Tandem bicycles

- 4. Water Sports Equipment:**
  - Adapted kayaks or canoes
  - Specialised life jackets
  - Beach wheelchairs
- 5. Winter Sports Equipment:**
  - Sit-skis
  - Adapted snowboards
- 6. Sensory Equipment:**
  - Sound-emitting balls for visually impaired athletes
  - Tactile markers for track events
- 7. Communication Devices:**
  - Specialised communication boards for non-verbal athletes

### 5.2: Cost Analysis

The cost of adaptive sports equipment is often significantly higher than standard sports equipment, creating a substantial financial barrier for families living in poverty. For example,

- Sports wheelchairs can cost between £2,000 and £5,000
- Prosthetic running blades can range from £5,000 to £10,000
- Adaptive bicycles may cost between £800 and £5,000
- Sit-skis for winter sports can cost £3,000 to £8,000



RGK Club Sport Tennis Wheelchair  
**£1,548<sup>00</sup>**

Feeling inspired to take up a wheelchair sport but don't want to make a major commitment just yet?...



Wolturnus Fatbike Handbike  
**£8,320<sup>00</sup>**

With Fatbike, hand bike enthusiasts get completely new opportunities for unfolding on all kinds of ...



Matsunaga B-Max AJ Basketball Wheelchair  
**£3,995<sup>00</sup>**

The B-Max basketball wheelchair is available in 3 frame styles. The AJ model has full frame adjustme...



Matsunaga T-Max AJ Tennis Wheelchair  
**£4,395<sup>00</sup>**

The T-Max tennis wheelchair is available in two frame models, TK and AJ. Both are divided into upper...



Matsunaga U-Max Badminton Wheelchair  
**£3,995<sup>00</sup>**

The Matsunaga U-Max is a sports wheelchair designed specifically for badminton. It is equipped with ...

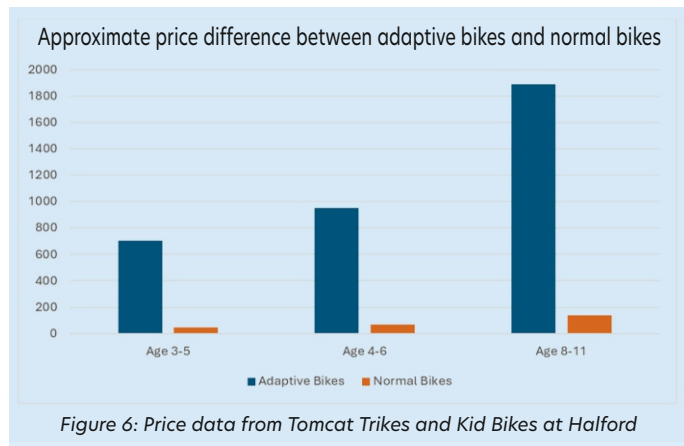


RGK GrandSlam Tennis Wheelchair  
**£3,609<sup>00</sup>**

The most advanced tennis wheelchair available, the GrandSlam is like fluid motion, a true sight to b...

To put these costs into perspective, consider the following examples:

1. A standard bicycle for a child might cost £100-£300, while an adaptive bicycle could cost 10-20 times more.



2. A basic wheelchair for everyday use might cost around £500, but a specialised sports wheelchair could cost 4-10 times that amount.
3. A pair of running shoes typically costs £50-£100, whereas a prosthetic running blade could cost 50-200 times more.

For example, Jac, a 13-year-old, who has spina bifida, enjoys playing wheelchair basketball, but faced difficulties trying to get a customised adaptive wheelchair which cost £6,000 (Tootill, 2023). These high costs are often due to the specialised materials, custom fittings, and limited production runs of adaptive equipment. For families living in poverty, where the average weekly income might be less than £400, these costs are often completely out of reach without significant financial assistance.

### 5.3: Availability and Access

Beyond cost, the availability of adaptive sports equipment presents another significant challenge. Issues include:

1. Limited local suppliers: Many areas, particularly rural regions, lack specialised suppliers of adaptive sports equipment.

2. Long waiting times: Custom-fitted equipment often requires lengthy waiting periods for assessment, fitting, and manufacture.
3. Rapid outgrowth: Children may quickly outgrow expensive equipment, necessitating frequent replacements.
4. Lack of rental options: Unlike standard sports equipment, adaptive equipment is rarely available for rent, forcing families to purchase outright.
5. Limited second-hand market: The specialised nature of the equipment means there's often a small second-hand market, reducing affordable options for families.

### 5.4: Impact on Sports Participation

The high cost and limited availability of adaptive sports equipment have a significant impact on sports participation among disabled children living in poverty:

1. Exclusion from specific sports: Children may be unable to participate in certain sports due to lack of appropriate equipment.
2. Limited practice opportunities: Even when equipment is available through schools or clubs, children often can't practise at home due to not owning personal equipment.
3. Reduced competitive opportunities: Without access to high-quality equipment, children may be at a disadvantage in competitive settings.
4. Narrowed sport choices: Families may opt for sports with lower equipment costs, potentially limiting a child's ability to pursue their preferred activities.

### 5.5: Current Initiatives and Support Systems

Several initiatives aim to address the equipment barrier:

1. Equipment Grants: Various charities such as Variety and other organisations provide direct grants for adaptive sports equipment.

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2. **Equipment Loan Schemes:** Some local authorities and charities operate equipment loan schemes, allowing families to borrow expensive items.
  3. **Crowdfunding Platforms:** Online platforms have emerged as a way for families to raise funds for adaptive equipment.
  4. **Community Partnerships:** Some sports clubs partner with equipment manufacturers to provide shared equipment for members.

For example, the "Wheels for All" initiative in the UK provides adapted cycles and inclusive cycling sessions at over 50 centres nationwide, allowing children to access equipment without personal ownership.

### 5.6: Innovative Approaches

Several innovative approaches are emerging to address the equipment challenge:

1. **3D Printing:** Some organisations are exploring the use of 3D printing to create custom, low-cost adaptive equipment.
2. **Modular Design:** Developing equipment with modular components that can be adjusted as a child grows, reducing the need for frequent replacements.
3. **Universal Design:** Creating sports equipment that can be used by both disabled and non-disabled athletes, potentially reducing production costs through increased scale.
4. **Inclusive School Investments:** Some schools are investing in adaptive equipment that can be shared among students, providing access during physical education classes and after-school activities.

Example: Pro Activ GmbH has developed a modular sports wheelchair, called BUDDY 4all, with a width that can be easily adjusted to fit as a child grows, potentially lasting for 5 years instead of requiring annual replacements.

### 5.7; Policy Implications

The high cost and limited availability of adaptive sports equipment highlight the need for policy interventions:

1. **Increased Funding:** Greater government funding for adaptive sports equipment grants and loan schemes.
2. **Tax Incentives:** Consideration of tax breaks or VAT exemptions on adaptive sports equipment to reduce costs for families and organisations.
3. **Research and Development Support:** Government incentives for companies developing innovative, cost-effective adaptive sports equipment solutions.
4. **Inclusive Education Policies:** Mandates for schools to provide a range of adaptive sports equipment for physical education classes and school sports teams.
5. **Healthcare Integration:** Exploration of including certain adaptive sports equipment under healthcare provision, recognising the health benefits of sports participation for disabled children.

For example, in Sweden, parents with disabled children can claim additional cost allowance, which helps parents cover the additional costs of buying adaptive sports equipment. This policy has been associated with higher rates of sports participation among disabled youth compared to many other European countries.

The availability and cost of adaptive sports equipment represent a significant barrier to sports participation for children with disabilities living in poverty in the UK. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted approach involving government policy, charitable initiatives, innovative design solutions, and community partnerships. By making adaptive sports equipment more affordable and accessible, we can take a crucial step towards ensuring that all children, regardless of disability or economic circumstances, have the

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## 6. Current Initiatives and Support Systems

opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sports participation.

Some examples of initiatives and organisations work to improve access to sports for disabled children in the UK:

1. **Activity Alliance:** Provides resources, training, and advocacy for inclusive sports.
2. **WheelPower:** Offers sports opportunities and equipment loans for wheelchair users.
3. **Special Olympics Great Britain:** Provides sports training and hosts events and programmes for people with intellectual disabilities.
4. **Everybody Moves:** A website developed by ParalympicsGB powered by Toyota to connect disabled people with inclusive sport and physical activity opportunities
5. **Equal Play:** a campaign launched by ParalympicsGB to advocate for equal access to sport and physical education for disabled children at school
6. **Get Kids Going!:** A charity providing sports wheelchairs and grants to young disabled athletes.
7. **Local Authority Short Break services:** Some local councils offer sports activities as part of their support for disabled children.
8. **School Sports Partnerships:** Work to increase sports participation in schools, including for disabled pupils.
9. **Variety's Grant Programme:** Variety makes grants to children and young people for sports wheelchairs and specialist equipment as well as providing adapted coaches to enable thousands of children and young people to participate in sports.

However, the main challenges for many of these initiatives to struggle are limited funding and resources, particularly for those in economically disadvantaged areas.



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## 7. Case Studies



To better illustrate the challenges and successes in providing sports access for children with disabilities living in poverty, we present the following case studies. These examples highlight various aspects of the issue, from equipment challenges to innovative programmes and personal triumphs.

### 7.1: Case Study: Emma's Story: Wheelchair Journey

Emma, a 14-year-old girl with spina bifida from a low-income family in Manchester, discovered her passion for wheelchair basketball through a school programme. However, her family couldn't afford the £3,000 sports wheelchair needed for her to play competitively.

#### Challenges:

- High cost of specialised equipment
- Limited financial resources of the family
- Lack of local rental options for sports wheelchairs

#### Solutions:

- Local sports charity provided a grant for a second-hand sports wheelchair
- School partnered with a nearby wheelchair basketball club to share equipment
- Community fundraising event helped cover remaining costs

#### Outcome:

Emma now plays for her local wheelchair basketball team and has been selected for a regional development squad. Her success has inspired her school to invest in two sports wheelchairs for future students.

### 7.2: Case Study: Inclusive Swimming Programme in Birmingham

A community leisure centre in a low-income area of Birmingham initiated an inclusive swimming programme for children with various disabilities.

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### Challenges:

- Limited staff experience with adaptive swimming techniques
- Lack of specialised pool equipment for children with physical disabilities
- Low initial participation due to families' concerns about accessibility and safety

### Solutions:

- Staff received training in adaptive aquatics from a national disability sports organisation
- Leisure centre invested in pool hoists, floating aids, and sensory equipment
- Partnered with local schools and disability groups to promote the programme
- Offered discounted family swim sessions to encourage participation

### Outcome:

The programme now serves over 50 children with disabilities weekly, with a waiting list for new participants. Several children have progressed to competing in regional para-swimming events.

### 7.3: Case Study: Ryan's Journey with Autism and Athletics

Ryan, a 10-year-old boy with autism from a single-parent household in rural Wales, struggled with traditional team sports due to social communication difficulties and sensory sensitivities.

### Challenges:

- Limited sports options in a rural area
- Difficulty integrating into mainstream sports programmes
- Financial constraints for specialised coaching or equipment

### Solutions:

- Local athletics club started a weekly inclusive running session with trained volunteers

- School provided a quiet space for Ryan to prepare before and after sports activities
- Community grant funded sensory-friendly athletics equipment (e.g., softer textured balls, lower-volume starting pistol)

### Outcome:

Ryan now participates in weekly athletics sessions and has competed in regional Special Olympics events. His improved physical activity has positively impacted his overall well-being and school performance.

### 7.4: Case Study: Adaptive Cycling Initiative in Scotland

A Scottish charity launched an adaptive cycling programme aimed at providing cycling opportunities for children with various disabilities in low-income areas across the country.

### Challenges:

- High cost of adaptive bicycles (ranging from £800 to £5,000)
- Diverse needs of children with different disabilities
- Geographical spread of potential participants across Scotland

### Solutions:

- Charity invested in a fleet of various adaptive cycles (trikes, hand-cycles, tandem bikes)
- Mobile unit created to transport bikes to different locations
- Trained volunteers to assist children and maintain equipment
- Partnered with schools and community centres to host regular "come and try" sessions

### Outcome:

The programme has reached over 500 children across Scotland in its first year. Several local

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councils have now committed to funding similar schemes in their areas.

### 7.5: Case Study: Virtual Reality Sports for Children with Limited Mobility

A technology start-up in London developed a virtual reality (VR) sports programme for children with severe physical disabilities from low-income backgrounds.

#### Challenges:

- Limited physical sports options for children with severe mobility impairments
- High cost of VR equipment
- Need for customised interfaces for children with different abilities

#### Solutions:

- Company secured grant funding to provide VR sets to special schools and hospitals
- Developed adaptive controllers to suit various physical abilities
- Created a range of virtual sports experiences, from football to skiing
- Partnered with physiotherapists to ensure activities provided therapeutic benefits

#### Outcome:

The programme is now used in 15 special schools and 3 children's hospitals across the UK. Participants report increased interest in sports, improved upper body strength, and better spatial awareness.

These case studies demonstrate both the challenges faced by children with disabilities living in poverty in accessing sports, and the innovative solutions that can arise when communities, organisations, and individuals work together. They highlight the importance of adaptive equipment, specialised programming, community support, and creative thinking in breaking down barriers to sports participation.





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## 8. Recommendations

1. Increase government funding for adaptive sports equipment grants and loan schemes.
2. Develop partnerships between schools, sports clubs, and charities to share resources and expertise.
3. Implement tax incentives for companies producing adaptive sports equipment to reduce costs.
4. Enhance training programs for coaches in adaptive sports and working with disabled children.
5. Improve accessibility of existing sports facilities through targeted funding and regulations.
6. Launch awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of sports participation for disabled children.
7. Establish a national database of available adaptive sports equipment for loan or low-cost purchase.
8. Integrate adaptive sports education into physical education teacher training programs.

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## 9. Conclusion

Access to sports for children with disabilities living in poverty in the UK remains a significant challenge. The intersection of disability and poverty creates compounded barriers that require multi-faceted solutions involving various stakeholders. As evidenced by the comprehensive analysis presented in this report.

In this context, initiatives like Variety's Disability Sports Awards and our "Voices for Change" campaign play a crucial role in addressing these challenges and promoting inclusivity in sports.

### Key findings from our secondary research:

1. **Prevalence of Disabilities:** *The most common conditions among children with disabilities include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and speech, language, and communication difficulties. This diversity of needs requires a range of adaptive approaches to sports participation.*
2. **Multiple Barriers:** *Children face numerous obstacles, including physical and health-related barriers, psychological and social challenges, environmental and accessibility issues, financial constraints, workforce and support limitations, information and communication gaps, and policy and systemic barriers.*
3. **Equipment Challenges:** *The high cost and limited availability of adaptive sports equipment represent a significant barrier. Sports wheelchairs, prosthetic running blades, and adaptive bicycles can cost many times more than standard equipment, putting them out of reach for many families living in poverty.*
4. **Psychological Factors:** *Anxiety and fear of judgment emerged as primary barriers to participation, highlighting the need for inclusive, supportive environments that build confidence and social connections.*

5. **Workforce Development:** *There is a clear need for better-trained coaches, teachers, and support staff who understand the unique needs of children with various disabilities and can create inclusive sports environments.*

### Key findings from our primary research

1. **Financial Barriers:** *The high costs of adaptive sports equipment are a substantial financial burden for families. Equipment prices range from £4,000 to £11,000, with 76.9% of survey respondents indicating affordability challenges. Costs extend beyond the initial purchase, encompassing ongoing expenses like maintenance, travel, and accommodation for competitions*
2. **Sports Accessibility:** *Adaptive equipment recipients actively participate in sports yet face accessibility challenges. Despite engaging in sports activities multiple times a week, all participation is extracurricular, as school programs often lack inclusivity for disabled athletes. Local facilities were rated only "slightly accessible" by nearly half of survey participants, highlighting a need for more accessible environments*
3. **Social and Emotional Benefits:** *Adaptive sports have positively impacted social interaction, confidence, and independence. Nearly all participants reported improved social connections and noted the supportive community that adaptive sports foster, often described as a "second family." This sense of belonging enhances well-being and mental health*
4. **Support Systems and Training:** *Satisfaction with coach and teacher support was mixed, revealing a lack of trained personnel to meet the needs of adaptive athletes. Survey responses indicated a shortage of adaptive-trained coaches, with parents emphasizing*

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*the importance of better training and support for inclusive coaching*

5. **Persistent Barriers:** Interviews highlighted additional obstacles, including societal misconceptions, inadequate facilities, and limited access to local adaptive sports programs. Many athletes experience stereotypes or dismissive attitudes, which limit opportunities and reinforce barriers to inclusion. Participants called for increased public awareness, improved accessibility, and policy changes to support adaptive sports more fully

Variety's Disability Sports Awards play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by celebrating and championing the achievements of disabled sportspeople across many levels, roles, locations, and sports. This annual event generates significant press coverage and excitement. It not only raises awareness about the capabilities of disabled athletes but also inspires future generations and challenges societal perceptions.

Moreover, Variety's "Voices for Change" campaign directly tackles one of the most pressing issues identified in this report: the financial barriers children and their families face to sports participation. By aiming to publicise the critical importance of affording extra travel and equipment costs for disability sports among young disabled and disadvantaged people, the campaign addresses a key obstacle faced by many families living in poverty. This initiative aligns closely with our findings on the need for greater support in accessing adaptive sports equipment and transportation to sporting venues.

The case studies presented in this report, from Emma's wheelchair basketball journey to the virtual reality sports programme for children with severe mobility impairments, illustrate both the challenges faced and the transformative impact that appropriate support and innovative solutions can have. These examples underscore

the importance of initiatives like Variety's, which provide practical support such as sports wheelchairs, powered wheelchairs, and all-terrain wheelchairs to children in need.

Moving forward, improving access to sports for children with disabilities living in poverty requires a collaborative approach involving:

1. **Government bodies:** To implement supportive policies and increase funding for inclusive sports initiatives.
2. **Schools:** To invest in adaptive equipment and provide inclusive physical education programmes.
3. **Sports organisations:** To develop more inclusive programming and train staff in working with disabled children.
4. **Technology companies:** To continue innovating in the field of adaptive sports equipment and virtual sports experiences.
5. **Community organisations:** To facilitate local initiatives and raise awareness about inclusive sports opportunities.
6. **Healthcare providers:** To recognise the health benefits of sports participation and potentially support equipment provision.
7. **Families and children:** To advocate for their needs and actively engage with available opportunities.

Variety's work exemplifies this collaborative approach, bringing together various stakeholders to create meaningful change. The Variety Disability Sports Awards attended by numerous sports stars and celebrities, helps to bridge the gap between the world of disability sports and mainstream recognition. Similarly, Variety's equipment provision programmes demonstrate the practical impact that targeted interventions can have on individual lives.

By addressing the barriers identified in this report and building on successful initiatives like

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those spearheaded by Variety, we can work towards a more inclusive sporting landscape in the UK. This approach not only benefits the children directly involved but also contributes to building a more inclusive and understanding society as a whole.

The path to full inclusion in sports for all children, regardless of disability or economic circumstances, is challenging. However, with continued effort, innovation, and collaboration across sectors, as demonstrated by Variety's impactful work, we can make significant strides in ensuring that every child has the opportunity to experience the physical, mental, and social benefits of sports participation.



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