

Sported – Report into implications of Covid-19 lockdown on long term recovery of Sported members who deliver activities for young disabled people in England.

Sported currently have over 600 members throughout England who have indicated they provide some form of sport or physical activity for disabled participants through their organisation. This constitutes c. 30% of the 2,076 groups we currently support in England.

We have been contacting many of our members during this time to understand their worries, issues and needs, both urgent and long term, during this global crisis.

This includes asking members to complete a 'Community Pulse' online survey to understand how they are faring currently. As of 29th April, 464 England members had responded to the survey, with 142 groups listed as those who deliver to disabled participants (which is c.30% of the total, in line with the overall membership).

The results of this can be found on the attached Community Pulse Survey Summary.

Alongside this, we asked such disability groups to provide more in-depth feedback on their worries or concerns, particularly post-lockdown and the resumption of activities, which will, clearly, not be delivered or organised in the same way as they were prior to the virus outbreak.

A total of 16 groups provided further feedback in this way, either directly replying to requests for such information via email, or through conversations with their Sported Regional Manager.

Using the survey data and anecdotal evidence we can summarise that members primary concerns can broadly be classified in seven different areas, which are as follows:

1) Supporting participants with online class activity to maintain fitness, motivation and good mental health

Members are trying to continue with some form of delivery online in many cases, to ensure that the social interaction remains and they remain involved so that return to activity will not seem so intimidating and scary.

This can, obviously, be trickier for those disabled young people to get involved because they sometimes struggle to understand the current situation and the new way of interacting, which is replacing their regular, trusted activity.

Alongside this, groups are unsure where to go to access content that is accessible for their service users, whilst there is a proliferation of excellent activity online at the moment, very little appears to be accessible for those with a disability.

This concern is reflected in the Pulse survey results. Disability focused members (65%) were more likely than other members (51%) to be challenged to maintain the wellbeing of their participants.

'We want to keep the people more active and lift their spirits with dance and music, but our main barrier is access online for many of our adults with additional needs'.

'They have struggled to find online activities/exercises which support people with learning difficulties. There is a real lack of online content available to be able to share with participants to do safely at home'.

2) Participants re-engaging with activity after lockdown restrictions are eased

A huge concern is how likely participants will re-engage with their previous activities once restrictions are eased to allow them to open classes and activities again.

Many groups are worried that the lockdown has changed habits and the young people will not want to or feel confident to be able to participate in the activities they previously enjoyed.

The lockdown will have a wide ranging impact on disabled participants, including fear of being in close contact with others again (as they have now been taught to stay away from others), anxiety about leaving the house again, athletes giving up competing at the top level in disability sports, higher risk of injury as they haven't maintained activity and confusion as their routines are being changed again.

Respondents to the Pulse survey from disability organisations (7.0 out of 10) reported that they were more anxious about their participants welfare than non-disabled groups (6.4 out of 10) at this time.

'[Participants] will need more support to return to football. A few have lost confidence, have now adjusted to a routine where they stay indoors all the time and this has had a negative impact on their mental and physical health, particularly participants with Downs Syndrome who gain weight more easily.'

3) Social distancing at venues for disabled participants

The practicalities of restarting activity, whilst maintaining the social distancing rules that will, undoubtedly, remain in place for the time being is also a big concern for members. This is particularly an issue for those with disabled participants, some of whom cannot participate without support and close contact from volunteers/coaches, as well as some participants not being able to understand social distancing rules and will be used to hugging or close contact with their trusted coaches/volunteers.

Some are worried that with additional staff/volunteers needed to run the sessions safely means hosting activity is just not viable at all, with only a few participants able to be in the venue amongst the required support staff taking up many of the room/venue limits.

Furthermore, some are worried that such restrictions will mean schools and others who bring their disabled students to group activities may cancel or postpone for the time being as they cannot ensure the safety and social distancing of those participating.

'Blind/VI people will need guiding to the washroom (to wash hands regularly). It is difficult to guide someone whilst maintaining social distancing.'

'[Participants] need hands on support sometimes even just to bounce but definitely for new moves.'

'The return to business, however, is not going to be easy. The social distancing rules will make sessions unviable so are not workable long term.'

4) More equipment/PPE needed to run sessions safely

Additional resources will be needed to run activities safely. Both additional standard equipment to cover the extra activities they may need to run (due to social distancing rules) but also PPE and cleaning material so that organisations reduce the risk of infection as much as possible.

This equipment will need to be purchased and stored somewhere suitable, which is not always practical for organisations, particularly if they use multiple venues without having their own venue to store this in.

‘We will have to disinfect equipment to help ensure safety after every session, so we will have to regularly replace grips for the tennis rackets and change balls more often. We will also have to purchase hand gels to ensure safety. This will add to the costs.’

‘I believe we will have to purchase additional equipment so that each member has their own equipment and therefore no equipment is shared’.

5) Need for additional support staff/volunteers/coaches

As social distancing rules mean restrictions on the number of participants taking part, this will lead to additional issues around staffing and volunteering levels. If numbers are halved then additional sessions could be set up to ensure all participants can take part, but this will double the amount of volunteer time or even coach/staff time, which may not be realistic and could cost more than organisations have available.

They may need to expend resources on encouraging the young people to return to activities, perhaps a series of 1-2-1 sessions for example to coax back their confidence for the larger group work. This will obviously have an impact on staff/volunteer time.

Disabled participants will, in some cases, require more specialist care and this means more training will be needed for the additional volunteers/coaches that have been identified.

However, according to the Pulse survey, members delivering disability activities have less concern retaining their volunteers (14%) compared to other members (18%) suggesting they have stronger links with their volunteers, particularly as many such roles will have more specialism to them, are supported by parents/carers and additional close bonds are forged when working in, often, smaller groups that facilitate retaining of volunteers.

‘They will have to probably do quite a lot of one to one engagement individually with the YP in their homes (taking them to the park, encouraging them to go outside again) in order for them to get back into their old routine. This could obviously cost money and resources the group don’t have.’

‘For weekends and after school, many clubs and groups will struggle to run if there are lower numbers than previously. We will look to access the external funding so we can keep running. We are considering running two sessions back to back so we can split numbers to try to support social distancing during activities. However, this means double our costs for the coach and expenses.’

6) Travelling to venues

This is a practical consideration which may prove a huge barrier for returning to activity. Those who rely on using public transport put themselves at risk when attending activities, particularly if they are in the more vulnerable category. Alongside that, use of private transport, such as adaptable minibuses, may not be able to take as many participants to the venue as previously possible, thus adding extra time to the entirety of the activity (including travel to and from venue) and making it impractical for many, not to mention additional costs for hiring further transport.

‘Maintaining social distancing on a busy tube or London bus will be a challenge for those with sight loss and may, understandably, leave our members thinking whether they want to risk travelling to activities. Routes that have been learnt may have changed, with barrier systems in place that will be unknown to people with sight loss.’

7) Financial problems

All the above could lead to additional financial implications that are, whilst widespread across the sport and physical activity sector, magnified for many disability organisations. Our Pulse survey had some revealing insight into this. 1 in 3 members with disabled participants were not sure they would still exist in 6 months’ time, as opposed to 1 in 4 for the wider membership base. Furthermore, 67% of members with disabled participants had immediate support needs for emergency funding and fundraising compared with 61% of the wider membership.

The combination of additional resources required to deliver safe activities in line with new Government guidelines, alongside reduced income from smaller activity sizes, will have a huge impact on organisations ability to deliver activities at a similar level to pre-lockdown, making their long term viability at risk.

‘We will have to exercise more control in limiting numbers of participants at any one time. We have been known to see over 600 people in one day!! This will definitely not be socially acceptable for a very long time. However, our costs will remain the same however many people we can ‘allow’ to attend in one session. Track hire fees, equipment maintenance, staffing costs, insurance etc. This could prove to be financially non-viable for a small charity operating solely on attendance fees.’

This report is intended to simply document some of the many concerns our members with disabled participants are currently experiencing and help guide the conversations and possible solutions to these challenges in the disability sports and physical activity sector.

Across the sector, and the wider community, there are many challenges at this particular time. But those delivering disability sport and physical activity face a great many issues to re-engaging with their participants and restarting activity again. This can involve complex logistical challenges, additional barriers to access and participation and huge additional resources required to deliver safe, enjoyable activities.

No-one has the answers to these challenges yet, but at Sported we do know how to support these groups, have trusted relationships with all those who responded, and more, across the country and continue to provide numerous benefits and services that, over time, we know make a genuine improvement for the long term sustainability for these vital organisations.

Sported will continue to support our members, and any new groups wishing to join, during this time and would welcome the opportunity to discuss with partners and other stakeholders about how to support these organisations to overcome these unprecedented challenges.

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