



The use of public sports facilities by the disabled in England



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ABSTRACT

Disabled sports participants are a small proportion of sports participants at English public sports centres; but they are important to the social inclusion agenda. This paper aims to provide a detailed insight into the preferences and behaviour of disabled sports participants.

It investigated whether there were statistical differences: first, between the disabled sports participants and the non-disabled sports participants in terms of (1) social demographics, (2) patterns of participation, (3) travel, (4) sports activities and (5) customer satisfaction; and second, between age, ethnic, socio-economic and gender groups of their subsamples, on (2), (4) and (5) again. Disability is defined as having any long term illness or health problem which limits a person's daily activities or the work that a person can do. The data collected through the National Benchmarking Service, for 458 sports centres from 2005 to 2011, revealed that about 9% of over 150,000 sports participants were disabled. Swimming, using fitness equipment and keep fit related exercises were the top three most frequently stated main sports activities by the disabled. It was also more likely for the disabled to participate in organised activities, own a leisure card and participate regularly when compared with the non-disabled participants. In addition, the disabled were also more likely than the non-disabled to travel to the centre by public transport, from home and travel a longer journey time. The industry weaknesses as identified by the disabled relate to physical evidence of the sports centres, particularly cleanliness attributes. Measures that can be taken to increase sports participation by the disabled include competent support at sports centres, promotions through discount schemes or leisure cards, and free transportation to sport centres in catchment areas with high proportions of disabled in their population.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a detailed insight into the participation patterns and satisfaction of disabled sports participants by (a) testing whether there are statistical differences in terms of customer demographics, participation patterns, travel and sports activities for the disabled and the non-disabled, (b) assessing patterns of participation by their demographic profiles, and (c) identifying what may have affected disabled visits to the sport centres from the perspective of various service attributes at the sport centres, by identifying areas of dissatisfaction.

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2. Context and rationale

Visits by the disabled are important to the social inclusion policy agenda for English sports facilities as indicated by Sport England, the main government agency for sport in England, which set out guidance notes for the design, operation and maintenance of sports facilities to allow access for all disabled people to facilities and programmes that meet the needs of disabled people (Sport England, 2010a). Sport England is currently investing £2.6 million in disability sport and has awarded £1.5 million to the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) over a three-year period to accelerate strategies in order to increase the number of disabled people playing sport and make grassroots sport more inclusive (Sport England, 2011). In addition, Sport England has increased the Inclusive Sport fund, as part of the Places People Play initiative, from £8 million to £10.2 million in order to achieve a growth in sport participation by the disabled (an outcome sought by Sport England Strategy 2013–17) by providing more sporting opportunities to disabled people across England and helping to overcome some of the barriers that may have hindered their sport participation (EFDS, 2012a, 2012c; Sport England, n.d.). Participation in sports has been linked to a range of physical, social and mental health benefits which are beneficial to people who are disabled physically or intellectually, as it has the potential to promote the social inclusion of disabled people and increase their self-esteem (EFDS, n.d.c; Liu, 2009; Rankin, 2004; Robertson & Emerson, 2010; Sport England, 2005; Yazicioglu, Yavuz, Goktepe, & Tan, 2012). Participation can provide the context within which people exceed the expectations associated with their disability through demonstrations of physical skills or fitness, so emphasising an alternative, more positive, picture of the body and the self (Sport England, 2001).

The main provision for sport in England is public sport facilities. Hence this paper utilises data on over 150,000 sport participants at 458 sports centres over a 6-year period from 2005 to 2011 to examine the sport participation of the disabled in these public sector facilities. These data were collected as part of Sport England's National Benchmarking Service (NBS) and did not identify exclusive disabled sports or centres which have been adapted for use by the disabled. NBS is a service commissioned by Sport England that offers sports facilities an opportunity for a health check of their service delivery in terms of a range of key performance dimensions including: access (use by specific market segments), finance, utilisation (overall throughput) and customer satisfaction. Whilst the NBS has been widely used as the basis for examining a range of performance management issues around public sector sports facility provision, the considerations of sport participation and customer perceptions of the disabled have been largely focussed on an aggregate level. In several studies using the NBS data (e.g., Liu, 2009; Taylor, Panagouleas, & Kung, 2011), disabled participants were studied as part of user sub-groups, including disadvantaged leisure card holders, disabled under 60 years old and disabled 60 years and above. One of the objectives of this paper is to share some insights into the patterns of participation and demographic profiles of disabled sport participants, as well as the levels of satisfaction associated with their experiences at public sport centres.

2.1. Sport participation by the disabled

Different literatures may define disability in slightly different ways. Some researchers (e.g., Morris, 1993b and French, 1993, as cited in Kolkka & William, 1997, p. 10) claimed that to experience illness, pain and the frailty of the human body is to experience disability in everyday life. The Active People Survey (APS) defines disabled people based on the social model of disability. This includes people with a long standing illness, disability or infirmity which affects their ability to go about daily activities (EFDS, n.d.c). This is identical to the definition used in the NBS. Disability is defined in the NBS user survey and this research paper as having any long term illness or health problem which limits a person's daily activities or the work that a person can do.

There were almost 11 million disabled people in the UK and around 9 million in England (Office for Disability Issues updated Department for Work and Pensions estimates based on Family Resources survey 2009/10 as quoted on EFDS (n.d.b)). According to EFDS (2012c), 18 per cent of disabled adults aged 16 and over played sport once a week for 30 minutes. Sport England's Active People Survey 5 in 2010/11 revealed that 7% (640,600) of the disabled adults (aged 16 and over) participated in a sport regularly (i.e., at least three times a week for 30 min at moderate intensity generally). This represented a significant 0.3% increase on Active People Survey 2 and a significant 0.5% increase on Active People Survey 4 (EFDS, n.d.a). Similarly there was a significant 1.5% increase in the once a week sport participation for 30 min by disabled people in Active People Survey 5 compared with Active People Survey 4. The rate of non-participation in sport at least once in the last month for the disabled (77%) was much higher than the non-disabled (54%) in Active People Survey 5, although there were significant decreases (1.6% and 2.5% respectively) compared with Active People Survey 2 and Active People Survey 4. Sport centre usage by disabled under 60 year olds, irrespective of whether they were sport participants or not, declined slightly between 1997 and 2006 according to a study on key access groups by Taylor et al. (2011). The proportion of visits to sport centres by the disabled has always been under-represented in comparison to their proportion in the catchment area population – Taylor and Kung (2010) revealed that the median representativeness scores for disabled aged under 60 years old and disabled aged 60 years old and above, for the 4 year period from 2005 to 2009, were only 0.71 and 0.30 respectively (a score of 1 is representative).

A downward trend for the regular participation in sport has been observed as age increases, disregarding participants' abilities (EFDS, n.d.c). Collins (2003) claimed that exclusion among older people came from poor health, poverty and disability, all of which might be compounded by isolation and poor mobility. Regular participation in sport by the disabled is lower across all age groups than participation by the non-disabled, and participation by disabled females is lower than that of disabled males amongst all age groups, particularly for young adults aged 16–19 years (EFDS, n.d.a; EFDS, n.d.c). Thierfeld

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