



Visibility for Women in Sport

Vision Sports Ireland

Foreword

In 2021, Vision Sports Ireland began a journey to address the under representation of people who are blind or vision impaired in sport.

Studies have shown that up to 90% of learning during early stages of development is incidental through visual pathways, and as a result, it is no surprise that for children who are blind or vision impaired, when no interventions are made, delays in physical, emotional and social development may be observed (RCO, 2012). As children enter adulthood, in combination with increased likelihood of depression and poorer health outcomes at 3 – 5 times the rate of the general public (Douglas et al, 2006), people who are blind or vision impaired are 10 times more likely to experience isolation (Evans et al, 2002), are twice as likely to use health services, and show admission into nursing homes up to three years earlier.

With sport and physical activity strongly linked with positive health outcomes and wellbeing, continued engagement in sport throughout the lifecycle is vital.

With teenage girls well reported to experience the highest dropout rates within sport (Sport Ireland, 2021), with support from Sport Ireland's Women in Sport Grant, Vision Sports has embarked on a research project, in partnership with NCBI, to analyse the exercise habits and participation levels, and barriers and promoters for girls and women who are blind or vision impaired.

With minimal research available globally, Vision Sports seek to derive evidence-based data to allow informed decisions and design of programmes and initiatives to best meet the needs of our members, working to counter the poorer health outcomes that have traditionally been associated with vision impairment.

As the first step in the journey, welcome to **Visibility for Women in Sport**



Stage 1:



Stage 1 of the research project aims to investigate baseline physical literacy and fundamental movement skills in teenage girls aged 10-17.

As a part of a larger study, DCU in partnership with Vision Sports Ireland and NCBI investigated core competency of fundamental movement skills in children aged 10 – 17 (DCU [Unpublished], 2023).

Competency in fundamental movement skills act as key predictors to physical literacy, underpinning movement competence, confidence and as a result, participation and engagement in physical activity throughout the lifecycle (Whitehead, 2016).

Analysis across eight key skills – running, catching, bouncing a ball, skipping, hopping, horizontal jump, two-handed strike, kicking and throwing a ball, in a modified method as described by were as per protocol outlined (Brian et al., 2021; DCU [Unpublished], 2023)

Data was collected from 24 girls aged between 10 – 17 in May and June 2022. Girls were selected via self nomination, with the mean age of participation at 11.7, with vision ranging from B1 (no vision) to B5 (VA < 6/18).

Key Findings

Preliminary findings from this research showed that girls compared to their male vision impaired counterparts (n=35, mean age = 12.7) showed:

- Significantly weaker grip strength,
- Using VO₂ max as a measure of cardiovascular fitness, only 1 in 2 were categorised as having a healthy VO₂ score

with more than double the number of females categorised as "at a health risk" for cardiorespiratory endurance, compared to males (22%, 9%).

Girls additionally showed significantly poorer mastery (by percentage, % achieving mastery/near-mastery) compared to their male counter in skills - **two-hand strike** (43% vs 12.5%), **throw** (34% vs 4%), **kick** (43% vs 12.5%).

When compared to the general population of children, girls who are blind or vision impaired (% achieving mastery or near mastery) was significantly lower for hopping (small effect), two-hand strike (small effect), and kick (medium effect).

Where significant differences are evident between girls with a vision impairment vs their male counterparts, as well as vs the general populations, specific interventions should be considered to ensure that girls with a vision impairment are provided with additional interventions to counter the impact of their vision, and develop to their full potential.



Stage 2

Where strong fundamental movement skills have a positive influence on longevity of engagement sport and physically active lifecycle, (Bremer and Cairney, 2018), preliminary results from Stage 1 suggest girls who are blind or vision impaired may already be at a disadvantage to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, due to reduced confidence and participation in sport and physical activity.

Stage 2 of the research focused on current physical activity levels across the lifecycle, gaps to access and barriers to physical activity. Seeking further insight into the physical activity levels of females, nine in depth interviews were completed with girls and women cross the lifecycle about their engagement in exercise and physical activity.

Interviewees:

- Average age – 45 years old,
- Vision ranging from B1 (no vision) through to B5 (VA < 6/18),
- Representing a variety of vision impairments, with an equal 33% split between congenital, acquired and progressive conditions.



Stage 2: Results

22%

22% met the National Physical Activity Guidelines for adults, compared to the national average of 41% (ISM, 2022)

Types of Exercise

#1

When asked about types of physical activity, all nine participants reported **walking** as their main form of exercise.

88%

A total of 88% of interview participants had engaged in a recreational walk in the past week, compared to a national average of 66% (Irish Sports Monitor, 2022).

"I walk and run because that is what I am most comfortable engaging in."

Benefits of Physical Activity

Speaking to the benefits of physical activity,

88%

88% of respondents reported exercising for **mental health** and the notable "positive impact" exercise had on their body, with other popular responses including socialising (44%, 4/9), and being involved within the community (33%, 3/9)

"It gives me a bubble of happiness after when I have done exercise"

"Clears my mind and allows me to think. It really lets me engage with my surroundings"

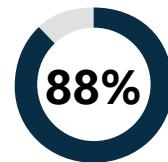


Barriers to Participation

In addition to barriers to engagement for teenage girls as described by Sport Ireland's Adolescent Girls Get Active research report - Capability, Motivation and Opportunity (Sport Ireland, 2021), additional barriers to accessing sport and physical activity are also present for people who are blind or vision impaired.

The impact of vision impairment on lifestyle is well described in literature, including increased cost of living (MESL Report, 2016), access to transport, and inaccessibility of venues (El-Taher et al, 2023). This report aims to further identify these barriers, specifically with respect to women in society, and provide Vision Sports Ireland with specific areas to action change in programme design and provision.

Transport



88% respondents listed **transport** as a their number one barrier to participation.

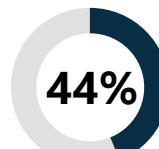
"I live in rural Ireland, with no public transport it is basically impossible for me to access physical activity unless I have somebody to bring me"

"Having to get a lift puts me off going because I don't like asking people"

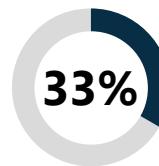
Vision Sports recognises the importance of accessibility of venues via public transport, or where transport is not available, Vision Sports endeavors to support transport links. In turn, a focus has also been placed on offering and supporting a broad range of opportunities online, and engaging in exercise at home or within local regional communities.



Safety and Accessibility



44% of respondents additionally listed **inaccessibility of facilities** and danger associated with poor access as barriers to engagement.



33% of respondents stated that they **chose not to participate** due to safety concerns.

"Footpaths can be really difficult to navigate, with my vision I struggle with the dark, the sunlight and the colour contrast."

"They closed the pool that I used to attend, I tried to find another one, but they are all very poor quality and largely, accessibility standards aren't met. I don't really feel safe."

Vision Sports promotes both accessible practices in sport and accessibility of the built environment.

In addition to guidance and training on accessible print and media, Vision Sports' Awareness Training supports coaches, teams, clubs and businesses with helpful, cost effective adaptations to make their sport more accessible.

Through partnership with the Possibility Lab, Vision Sports additionally works with sporting facilitates, clubs and communities to improve accessibility of the built environment. Through in depth access appraisals and audits, modifications to the built environment can be made in line with the United Nations Convention on Rights with Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and building codes EN17210:2020, TGD M (2010), and ISO 21542 (2020) to promote accessibility in sporting facilities. Simple lighting changes, addition of contrast in areas, and training of staff can make engaging in sport an enjoyable, rather than unsafe experience.

In addition, Vision Sports' partnership with NCBI enables all members to access Orientation and Mobility route training to support engagement in local communities.



Lack of Education

33%

33% of respondents reported a **lack of education** around blindness and vision impairment within the community limited their engagement.

100%

100% of respondents had engaged in self-advocacy in the past.

"I contacted my local cycling club a few times to see would they be open to me engaging but I didn't get any response."

"I try not to tell anyone, people tend to be fearful. Insurance, danger... I get it, but, I am no different. I just might require a bit more instruction initially."

Vision Sports recognises the importance of increasing understanding through confidence building training with sporting clubs, management, teams and staff, to ensure safety for the participant and all other club members, and bringing the enjoyment back into sport.

Through strong self-advocacy, alongside supports and training delivered, Vision Sports aims to continue to reduce barriers to entry associated with a lack of education within the community, and is working towards being the expert source for supports in sport and access to physical activity for people who are blind or vision impaired.

In response to feedback, in 2023, Vision Sports has scheduled a further 12 Awareness Training courses, and is further investing in one-to-one support networks to ensure every person in Ireland who is blind or vision impaired has the support required to access physical activity and recreation.



Confidence

44%

44% additionally listed **confidence** as a major barrier to participation, particularly where a decline in vision had occurred.

Acquiring vision loss or a decline in vision can be a significant contributing factor to people dropping out of sport or reducing their physical activity levels.

Of the women interviewed who acquired a vision impairment,

100%

100% reported they had **stopped** doing at least one sport as a result of their decline in vision.

"I need to work on my confidence in myself, it's not that I can't... rather I must do it in a different way... It all boils down to self-belief and confidence but it's not easy"

"I used to run 22 miles a week, swim 40 laps a day, hike and cycle, and now... I don't, because I feel I can't."

The impact of confidence as a major barrier to participation is an important factor for Vision Sports Ireland to consider in the planning and roll out of programmes.

In line with Sport Ireland's findings of girls and women experiencing a 'capability barrier' to both psychologically and physically to participate in sport and exercise, nearly 1 in 2 respondents expressing confidence as a major barrier to participation, focus must be placed on the importance of entry level programmes, opportunities for return to physical activity, within a safe environment.

Opportunities are present for these programmes to focus on the social benefits of sport, rather than skill and competition, where physical activity and health outcomes will become an incidental benefit of the community.



Event Profile

Taking a focus on cues to engagement, participants were asked about their preferences to participation in sport.

33%

33% of respondents showed interest in engaging in events specifically tailored towards people who are **blind or vision impaired**.

"I do running in my local community. I tell my coaches I have a vision impairment and they are okay with it, we make the adaptations necessary to make my running sessions inclusive"

The two youngest respondents (15, 16 years) reported difficulties with maintaining intensity of youth competitive sport as a result of their vision impairment.

"I had to give up swimming because my vision was making it very hard to keep up"

"I still wanted to, it just got too fast, and it wasn't enjoyable anymore."

33%

33% of respondents showed interest in engaging in **female only** events.

"For some sports, I like it better when it is just females, like swimming. I prefer the environment."

"I don't mind mixed if I trust the people, but sometimes it is nice to just be women. Particularly for swimming."

Vision Sports recognises the importance of specific tailored sporting events for vision impairment, but also the opportunity for female-only events, particularly in watersports. Responses additionally included interest in trying new activities, the importance of trust within the group and the social side to sports groups and peer support networks that arise within the sporting environment.

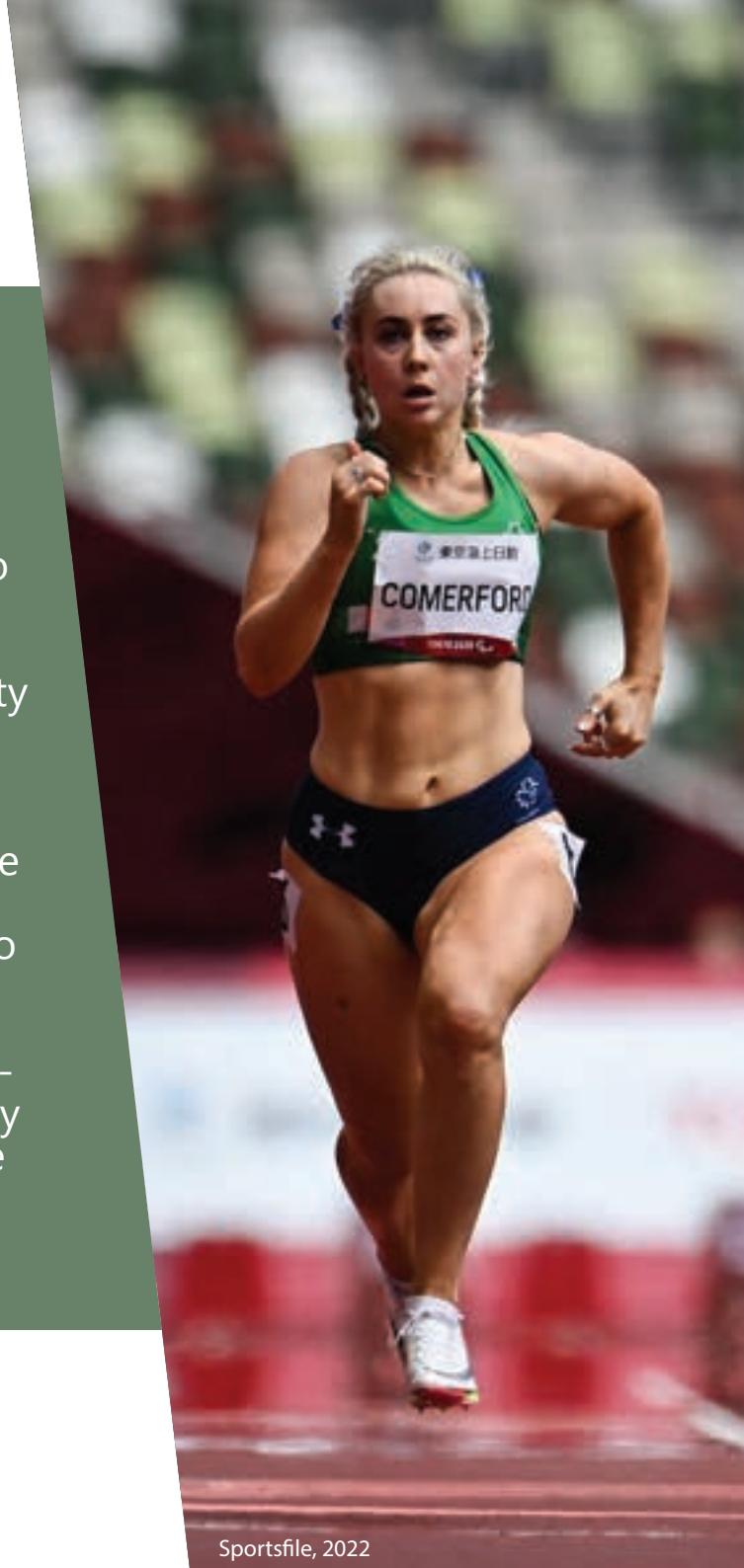


Recommendations

Research findings suggest the appetite for opportunities to engage in sport are present within the female population.

Key Recommendations:

- **Transport:** Vision Sports endeavors to provide public transport links to all events, and where transport is not available, to offer transport links from designated locations.
- **Safety and Accessibility:** Vision Sports aims to invest in an Accessibility Toolkit for clubs, sporting and leisure facilities to 'self check' their environment.
- **Lack of Education:** Vision Sports endeavours to continue to advocate and raise awareness around access to sporting opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired. One-to-one training for clubs and individuals wishing to engage, alongside training opportunities, aims to engage local communities to become champions of access.
- **Confidence:** To aid in confidence building and address recommendations made on event profile, and the penchant for female-only events, Vision Sports Ireland aims to launch a social physical activity group for women, creating a safe and inclusive space to connect, share experiences, and most importantly, get active.





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