



# Football's Disability Blind Spot:

*A Report on Disabled People's Lived  
Experience of Working in Managerial,  
Leadership and Governance Positions  
in English Football*

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*Foreword by*

# Joyce Cook

## CBE OBE



**Looking back at my own career after almost 30 years within the sports sector. I've worked hard, learnt from my mistakes as well as my successes, persevered, put myself out there, and grabbed my chances. But most of all, I've been fortunate to meet good people along the way. A handful of leaders who recognised my talents, valued my experiences, and believed in me. They were prepared to open doors. And family, friends and colleagues who stepped in when access was almost impossible, so that I could succeed. Thank you to those champions who saw me!**

Having turned each page of this report with a knowing nod, before you read on, please allow me to share a few stories from my own journey that might resonate or at least raise a wry smile.

In 2012, whilst travelling to a UEFA meeting, I very nearly missed my flight as the mobility assistance was late. Those of you that travel as or with a disabled person will know precisely how I felt. Stressed, helpless and angry, and I shared my frustrations with the mobility assistant who'd arrived just before the gate closed. What took my breath away was his response (with London 2012 in full swing). "If you were more like a Paralympian, you'd have got yourself on the flight". My retort. "If you were more like an Olympian, you wouldn't have been late." It made me feel a bit better at the time, but it wasn't really the point. What stayed with me was the lack of understanding, and the stereotyping. I have total respect for Paralympians and their amazing achievements, and I know that they feel precisely the same about those of us that excel elsewhere.

In October 2016, I was appointed to one of the most senior leadership roles in world football. A privilege and one of the most amazing challenges of my career. As an evidently disabled woman, and an openly gay woman too, some would say, it was a bold decision by the new FIFA leadership. The press release read: "A passionate advocate of equality and inclusion in sports, Joyce Cook will take up the role of FIFA Chief Member Associations Officer on 1 November 2016 .... The Englishwoman will report directly to FIFA Deputy Secretary General (Football), and she will be part of the FIFA Management

“*Diversity and inclusion really matter. We are NEVER only one thing.*”

Board.” .... “Joyce has a proven record of developing and delivering far-reaching and sustainable diversity and inclusion projects at both national and international levels, with a broad knowledge of football structures and governance.”

I didn't apply for this role, I was headhunted. Following an interview process, I was offered the job. And moved to Zurich with my wife. What was clear to me was that the new FIFA Leadership not only recognised my expertise, and my wealth of experience after more than 20 years working in football and other sports but also understood the rich diversity I would bring to the role.

However, there were some in the sector who questioned my senior appointment at FIFA. How will she manage! It's such a big job! How will she cope with all the travel! Quite remarkable, since I'd already been travelling extensively for more than a decade in my previous roles. I had also learnt to be resilient (some might say stubborn), empathetic, tolerant, a creative thinker, and I cared deeply about people, fairness, equality, and inclusion. Solution driven. I was very, very capable!

Soon after arriving in Zurich, I was invited to a meeting by the director of a local disability organisation. He had assumed that FIFA had hired me as an accessibility manager. He was astounded to learn of my actual role.

So, what have I learnt over the last 30 years. Diversity and inclusion really matter. We are NEVER only one thing. I have been fortunate to travel the world and to meet extraordinary people in every corner of the globe. Just being in the room has so often made a difference.

Visibility, recognition, opportunity, empathy and respect count. We need purposeful pathways for disabled people and leadership programmes that are truly accessible (please check out the brilliant Football for All Leadership programme), reasonable adjustments where needed, and we need to set representative quotas at every level.

Believe me. Our game will be so much richer for it.

I hope you enjoy this critically important report, and like me, you take the time to reflect on its findings, and its recommendations. And I also very much hope that it inspires action, mindful leadership, and lasting change.

**Joyce Cook CBE OBE**  
25 March 2025

# *Foreword by* **Martin Sinclair**



*Football has  
an incredible  
ability to unite  
communities  
and inspire  
individuals.”*

**As someone who has had the privilege of representing my country in football and experienced firsthand the power of sport to change lives, I am proud to introduce a report on Disabled People’s Lived Experience of Working in Managerial, Leadership, and Governance Positions in English Football. This research shines a much-needed light on an area of our game that has, for too long, been overlooked.**

Football has an incredible ability to unite communities and inspire individuals, but true inclusion means ensuring that disabled people have the same opportunities to excel—not just on the pitch, but also in the boardrooms, leadership positions, and governance structures that shape the future of the sport. The voices captured in this report offer a candid and often challenging reflection on the realities faced by disabled people seeking to progress into these influential roles.

The insights gathered here highlight both the barriers that persist and the

resilience of those striving to break them down. Their stories are a powerful reminder that while progress has been made, much more needs to be done to create an environment where disabled people can lead, influence, and thrive at the highest levels of the game.

This report is not just a record of experiences—it is a call to action. It provides a roadmap for how English football can build a more inclusive culture, where diversity is not only welcomed but embedded in every aspect of decision-making.

I hope this work sparks meaningful change and inspires all of us across the football community to challenge outdated perceptions, dismantle barriers, and create pathways that allow disabled people to realise their full potential in every facet of the sport.

**Martin Sinclair**

Former England and Paralympics GB  
Footballer

# Contents

## *Foreword*

<b>Joyce Cook CBE OBE.....</b>	<b>2</b>
--------------------------------	----------

## *Foreword*

<b>Martin Sinclair.....</b>	<b>4</b>
-----------------------------	----------

## *One:*

<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>6</b>
-------------------------------	----------

## *Two:*

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
--------------------------	----------

## *Three:*

<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>12</b>
-------------------------	-----------

## *Four:*

<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>14</b>
----------------------	-----------

## *Five:*

<b>Conclusions and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>26</b>
---	-----------

*One:*

# Executive Summary

**This report highlights the significant lack of momentum in disability, managerial and senior leadership inclusion, across the football industry, compared to race and gender diversity targets.**

Findings reaffirm that football's workforce and governance cultures remain rooted in non-disabled norms, systematically disadvantaging disabled professionals. A segregationist approach persists, where disabled individuals are often steered towards para and disability football, or inclusion and community roles, rather than mainstream football roles.

Those seeking managerial or leadership positions in mainstream football face structural and cultural barriers, with an expectation to conform to non-disabled standards of professionalism. While overt exclusionary practices may have diminished (but not disappeared), football governance cultures have evolved rather than truly embraced inclusion beyond optics and compliance, maintaining dominant norms that centre white, male, non-disabled, heterosexual perspectives. As a result, inclusion efforts often favour a liberalised version of diversity that does not equate to equity or genuine inclusion. Slow recruitment and hiring rates and the absence of specific disability hiring targets mean progress will remain incremental at best unless active strategies are implemented.

## *Evidence*

Our findings are derived from:

Secondary  
analysis of  
published data

An extensive review  
of the literature that  
identified more than  
146 publications

One-to-one  
interviews with 13  
football leaders

## Summary of Key Insights

- 1** Leadership pathways in football governance remain exclusionary to disabled individuals due to structural ableism, such as inaccessible hiring processes, inflexible working conditions, and entrenched biases that favour non-disabled leadership traits (e.g., valuing long working hours).
- 2** Emotional labour, recruitment biases, and organisational cultures act as key barriers.
- 3** The lack of specific hiring targets for disabled people, unlike for other groups, indicates a lack of commitment to workforce change in senior leadership.
- 4** Resistance and adaptation strategies employed by disabled leaders highlight both the agency and the limitations imposed by systemic barriers.
- 5** Advocacy groups and inclusive policies are potential pathways to change.
- 6** Advocacy and policy reform are needed to bridge the gap between representation and actual inclusion.
- 7** Intersectionality is key; gender, race, and sexuality compound experiences of ableism.
- 8** This research takes a broad-brush approach to disability, given the lack of research in this space to date and would benefit from further supplementary research into more specific forms of disability and associated intersectional features of identity.

## Recommendations

A fundamental shift in workplace culture is required to move beyond token hiring and create an environment where disabled professionals can thrive. Organisations must normalise flexible working arrangements and integrate whole-person HR policies that acknowledge the diverse needs of employees. These policies then need to be enacted in everyday practices to ensure that disability inclusion is embedded into the organisation rather than treated as an afterthought. Without targeted reforms, proactive recruitment, and cultural shifts, disabled professionals will continue to be excluded from decision-making roles, reinforcing systemic inequalities.

# Introduction

## 2.1 Rationale

**Data from *Football Without Limits: The FA Disability Football Strategy 2024-2028*<sup>1</sup> indicates that 9.8 million people in England (17.7% of the population) self-report having an apparent or non-apparent disability.**

However, disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive compared to their non-disabled counterparts (40.8% vs. 20.7%). Against this backdrop there has been an acknowledgement that such issues will remain unless senior leadership structures are more representative of the communities that they serve. *The Football Diversity Leadership Code (FDLC) 2023*<sup>2</sup>, which is itself a reaction to this emerging awareness, highlights that only 7.8% of the football workforce self-identifies as disabled, an underperformance of 5.3 percentage points compared to the broader sports workforce average of 13%<sup>3</sup>. Both football and the wider sports sector significantly lag the disability representation reported for working-age adults, which stands at 23%<sup>4</sup>.

The failure of both football and the broader sports industry to meet national disability representation standards, in its workforce, underscores persistent and systemic exclusion. This is despite policy interventions from the 1990s and early 2000s, when Sport

England linked funding to the development and enforcement of legal equity and anti-discrimination measures. While many National Governing Bodies (NGBs) have complied with these requirements, the commitment to and implementation of equality measures – as well as their effectiveness – vary significantly both across and within sports.

Given these ongoing shortcomings in workforce recruitment and inclusion, it is unsurprising that football's disability blind spot remains a stubborn governance issue, with disabled individuals severely underrepresented in senior leadership roles – though data remain scarce – where one-third of FDLC signatories do not track disability data at this level of their organisation. Where data do exist<sup>5</sup>, just 16–17% of board members across surveyed sports organisations identify as disabled or consider themselves to have a disability.

That is difficult to set against UK averages of only 22% of FTSE 100 companies even disclose their disability workforce data publicly<sup>6</sup>, and there are no CEOs who have declared a disability. That does, however, point to continued barriers to meaningful representation at the highest levels of the industry.

<sup>1</sup> **The Football Association.** (2024). *Football without limits: The FA disability football strategy 2024-2028 – Driving positive change in para and disability football*. The Football Association. <https://www.thefa.com/-/media/thefacom-new/files/about-the-fa/2024/fa-disability-football-strategy-2024-28.ashx>

<sup>2</sup> **The Football Association.** (2023). *The Football Diversity Leadership Code: Year three report (2022-23)*. The Football Association. <https://www.thefa.com/-/media/thefacom-new/files/rules-and-regulations/football-leadership-diversity-code/the-fa-fldc-support-report-2022-23.ashx>

<sup>3</sup> **Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA).** (2023). *Workforce insight report 2023*. CIMSPA. <https://www.cimspa.co.uk/globalassets/document-downloads-library-all/insight/cimspa-workforce-insight-report-2023.pdf>





*...disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive compared to their non-disabled counterparts...*

## 2.2 Socio-Historical Context and Evolution of Disability and Football

**Sport has long been positioned as a vehicle for social inclusion, with football frequently framed as a key driver of this agenda, such as *Action Through Football*.**

However, disability inclusion in football policy has largely been confined to fandom and participation in parasports. Moreover, where research exists at the intersection of disability, football, and inclusion, it predominantly focuses on policies related to spectating and playing. Nonetheless, this does provide context that is crucial before shifting the focus to workforce and senior leadership within the sport.

The historical development of disability football is difficult to trace due to limited documentation and the broad range of disability football formats. Before World War II, there were no formalised efforts to promote disability football, reflecting broader societal perceptions of disabled individuals as physically incapable of participating in competitive sport. In England, disability

4 Kirk-Wade, E., Stiebahl, S., & Wong, H. (2024). *UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences* (Research Briefing No. 09602). House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9602/CBP-9602.pdf>

5 Sport England & UK Sport. (2024). *The Diversity in Sport Governance Annual Survey (2024)*. Perrett Laver. <https://www.uk-sport.gov.uk/-/media/files/our-work/equality-diversity-inclusion/diversity-in-sport-governance---sport-england-and-uk-sport---november-2024.ashx>

6 Valuable 500. (2023). *The Valuable 500 global trends report: Disability inclusion and ESG* (Issue 10). <https://www.thevaluable500.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-Valuable-500-Global-Trends-Report-Issue-10.pdf>



embedded in FA strategies, including the *National Game Strategy (2008-2012)* and the *FA Disability Workforce Fund (2016-2019)*, which invested £1.5 million in grassroots disability football development.

While provision and policy has slowly been improving for para and disability football, the professional and mainstream forms of the game have mainly and rather narrowly engaged with disability through football fans, predominantly through community arms of those businesses, yet significant barriers remain. Limited physical access, lack of an inclusive club culture, and an overly romanticised perception of fandom hinder full integration. For example, many Disabled Supporters' Associations (DSAs) still frame disability narrowly, often focusing on wheelchair accessibility while overlooking intersectional factors such as race and gender or hidden disabilities.

Despite some advancements, barriers persist, particularly in visibility, exclusionary competition structures, and limited opportunities for disabled women in football. Of the seven senior England Teams funded by the FA – Blind (men and women), Partially-sighted (men), Powerchair (mixed gender), Cerebral Palsy (men), Deaf (men and women) – only two have female squads.

Additionally, the talent development framework has raised concerns that fast-tracking elite disabled players may erode the identity of grassroots disability football. The Football Association (FA) has introduced various policies to enhance disability inclusion across playing, spectating, coach education, coach development, and management. However, little rigorous evaluation has been conducted on their effectiveness.

football emerged across impairment-specific clubs, schools, and rehabilitation centres, but prior to 1999, FA support was minimal.

A turning point came with the establishment of the *Activity Alliance* and the *FA Football Development Department*, in the late 1990s, which led to the launch of *Ability Counts*, the first national disability football programme. This was eventually followed by the FA's first Disability Football Strategy (2004-2006), which sought to integrate disability football into mainstream football structures. Over time, disability football has become

## 2.3 Disability and Leadership in Football

**Despite legislative advancements and inclusion policies, disabled workers are significantly underrepresented in managerial and professional roles across the labour market compared to their non-disabled counterparts<sup>7</sup>.**

Disability is also largely overlooked in broader academic leadership literature, with discussions often framing disabled

leaders as unremarkable or ‘superhuman’ as opposed to adopting a more balanced tone which addresses the structural barriers that prohibit greater inclusivity.

It is perhaps unsurprising then disabled individuals remain significantly underrepresented specially in senior leadership roles within football governance. Existing research where it exists suggests disabled professionals across sport, football and leadership roles more broadly face barriers at three levels:

- 1 Individual Barriers** – Disabled individuals frequently encounter limited social networks, restricting professional advancement. Many avoid requesting workplace accommodations due to stigma, discrimination, or fear of employer bias.
- 2 Organisational Barriers** – Employers often perceive disabled individuals as lacking key skills or view workplace adjustments as too costly. Additionally, many work environments remain inaccessible, with rigid work schedules and exclusionary hiring practices further limiting opportunities.
- 3 Institutional Barriers** – Ableism remains a structural and systemic issue, with policies and workplace cultures that favour non-disabled individuals. Similar patterns have been identified in financial services and academia, where disabled professionals struggle to access leadership pathways and face a lack of role models.

Initiatives are emerging to address the leadership gap in football and broader sports governance, but they remain and are often from outside mainstream institutions. For example, *European Association of Sport Employers (EASE)* produced the *Better Sport through Inclusion* report<sup>8</sup> examining employment strategies for disabled individuals across Europe, highlighting a need for better training, mentorship, and

career development support for disabled professionals. Thus, while disability football has seen progress at the grassroots level and across para and disability football, representation at leadership levels in mainstream football remains critically low. Despite FA investments in participation initiatives, systemic barriers persist in hiring, promotion, and governance structures.

<sup>7</sup> **Department for Work and Pensions.** (2024, November 20). *The employment of disabled people 2024*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024>

<sup>8</sup> **European Association of Sport Employers (EASE).** (2022). *Better sport through inclusion: European roundtable on the employment of people with disabilities in the sport sector*. <https://www.easesport.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/report-eu-roundtables-1.pdf>





*Three:*

# Methodology

## *3.1 Research Aims and Objectives*

**This study aims to explore the lived experiences of disabled individuals working at managerial, leadership, and governance levels within English football.** Specifically, it seeks to:

- 1** Examine the relationship between disability and a sense of belonging to football workforces, leadership roles & governance cultures
- 2** Assess the barriers to professional progression for disabled individuals in football
- 3** Explore the intersection of disability with other social identities in football
- 4** Provide evidence-based insights to inform diversity and inclusion strategies across football workforces plans and inclusive governance practices.

## *3.2 Research Design*

**A qualitative research approach was adopted to ensure a rich, in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of disabled professionals in football governance roles.**

The research methodology was designed to be flexible, inclusive, and participant-led. It comprises:

- A comprehensive literature review to contextualise the study within existing scholarship on disability, leadership, and football governance.
- Semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, allowing for an open yet guided discussion of key themes relevant to participants' experiences.

### 3.3 Sample

**The research sample comprised 13 leaders and managers from across disability and para and disability football, mainstream football governance, advocacy, and professional football organisations.**

Each participant held a significant role in shaping the landscape of football, sometime related to para and disability football and sometimes related to mainstream football, offering expert insights into the management and administration of football across the sector. The sample included 10 male and 3 female participants, all occupying managerial and/ or leadership positions. Their roles spanned senior management, football administration, policy development, and advocacy, reflecting a diverse sample.

Participants often did more than one role, thus the sample covers a range of leadership positions, including: disability managers, general managers, and football development officers; inclusion and advocacy leaders, comprising individuals leading para and disability football governing bodies, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) programmes, and disability advocacy groups; athlete-leaders (former Paralympians and international footballers who have transitioned into managerial and governance roles); legal and consultancy professionals – experts influencing



policy and governance in disability sport; and, commercial sports professionals (individuals from major sports organisations leading education and advocacy initiatives).

The sample was selected purposively to ensure a range of leadership positions within disability football, with all participants disclosing a disability. This representation covered a range of disabilities, including but not limited to Cerebral Palsy (CP), visual impairment, hearing loss, fibromyalgia, and amputation. Their lived experiences provided critical perspectives on managerial leadership pathways, accessibility barriers, and the dynamics and politics of decision-making across football.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

**To ensure accessibility and accommodate participants' needs, data collection was designed with flexibility in mind:**

- **Interviews:** One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, either remotely or in person, depending on participant preference and accessibility requirements. In this report all participants have been anonymised with the use of pseudonyms.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Informed consent was obtained from all

participants, with confidentiality and anonymity assured throughout the research process.

- **Thematic Analysis:** Data was analysed using a thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns, challenges, and success factors in participants' career journeys. Coding was conducted iteratively, ensuring themes emerged from participants' testimonies rather than being predetermined.

*Four:*

# Findings

The following engages with managers and leaders at various levels of the football ecosystem, and captures the realities of decision-making, strategic development, and advocacy within para and disability football and mainstream football. Their insights offer a valuable lens through which to view how leadership structures shape policy, participation, and professional opportunities for disabled individuals in football.

“... it really made me question, ‘Is this the right space for me?’...”



## 4.1 Belonging, Workplace Culture and Presumptions

The dominant theme across all testimonies related to feelings of belonging, not just within managerial and leadership cultures, but more fundamentally, within the football industry itself. The testimonies were laden with individuals' negotiations of where in football they felt most comfortable, valued, and accommodated. While belonging is inherently fluid and deeply personal, it was evident that regardless of how participants navigated their sense of belonging, whether in football, the workplace or leadership roles, to varying degrees their disability was always a factor in these negotiations.

This tension was perhaps most poignantly illustrated by Daniel, who shared his experience of reporting a discrimination case to the FA:

*"... it really made me question, 'Is this the right space for me?' Which is sad... because I know it is. But one idiot makes you question all of that... it was discrimination about my disability... mainstream setting... two incidents, same person, found guilty... [and he got a] ban. He deserved it. But the process... not a nice process... you don't want to feel like a victim, don't want to feel different... then you sit in a hearing... and he gets to question my integrity... after making comments about my disability... like I'm in the wrong? Looking back... if it happened again, I'd probably say nothing... it went on for months... the worry... do you know what I mean? But the right thing was to report it... because a young child with my disability might not be as strong... discrimination still happens...*

*people still just don't accept..."*

Daniel's experience echoes those of others, such as Kit, who also *"felt excluded in the mainstream environment"*, and Heston, who went as far as to suggest that *"[mainstream football is] happy doing what they're doing at the moment"* and that they *"don't... want to expand [disability provision]... because of the financial costs"*. For Heston, who has been advocating for disability rights in football for decades, accessibility adaptations are often perceived as costly 'accommodations' rather than fundamental necessities, meaning disabled professionals are confronted with a decision either to accept the status quo or fashion alternative spaces in the game from which to advocate.

The pressure to assimilate extends beyond simple decisions of whether to make concessions with mainstream football or avoid it; more fundamentally, for some within mainstream football, it has shaped the very essence of their professional identities and how they belong. While some downplayed their identity as disabled people to avoid drawing attention to themselves, others internalised ableist norms to the extent that they struggled to see their disability as relevant to their professional identity. Elliott's story is particularly illustrative of this point:

*"You know, I've never been the guy with a sticker and the sunflower badge going, you know, this is what I'm about, my disability. I think the easiest way to say it is, my commitment to my role, my experience, my knowledge, my*

*work ethic, that is what has defined me as an employee. I've never factored in my disability as something that defined me, so I can't say I've ever... I've not been a bastion of positivity. I've not championed anything. I think when I was, you know, I took the EDI [role] on... Did I want to do it? Yeah, probably. I did it more out of necessity because someone needed to do it, and you know, the fact I had a disability didn't really come into it. So I can't say, hand on heart, that anything I've done has positively changed or improved anything throughout my career, really."*

Having successfully navigated mainstream football, Elliott's reluctance to view his professional role through the lens of his disability suggests that, for him, the two could not comfortably coexist in equal measure. His reflections were not uncommon among the disabled leaders and professionals in mainstream football we spoke with; they are however emblematic of a deeper tension: whether to embrace disability as an intrinsic part of professional identity or suppress it to conform to an environment that tends to view it as an inconvenient complication, requiring costly adaptations.

Negotiating belonging and identity, of course, also inherently means aligning or partially aligning with football workplaces their cultural and operational norms and professional expectations. Football's preference for informal recruitment networks and in-person visibility means that disabled professionals

often find themselves excluded from key opportunities. Participants described an environment, not dissimilar to other sectors, where long, unpredictable hours, informal networking, demand for hyper-availability, and constant physical presence were seen as markers of professional dedication.

One such normative practice compounding this dynamic is the ingrained expectation of requiring prolonged standing at networking events and conferences for those occupying managerial and leadership roles. For some time, this unnerved Jamie who *"wanted a full-time job [but didn't know how his] body could take it if he] didn't do the daily physio and the daily rehab"*, while Thea recalled an all too common, awkward moment arriving in the networking space where the expectation is to stand and chat with colleagues:

*"I think unseen disabilities, it is difficult because you know, like, for example ... I'm standing in a networking meeting and after a few minutes, I'm like, I need to sit down. But then if I go and sit down, I look really unsociable because I'm not talking to anyone. So, I'm sitting in the corner because the only chairs are right in the corner"*.

Events such as after-hours networking sessions, standing receptions, and physically demanding travel schedules, all part of the normative culture create expectations, function as exclusionary mechanisms, which impact on disabled material ability to belong.



*I can't say, hand on heart, that anything I've done has positively changed or improved anything throughout my career*

## 4.2 Emotional Labour and (Self-)Advocacy

The testimonies of participants thus far illustrate the cost of compulsory assimilation. While non-disabled managers and leaders never have to wrestle with whether their lack of disability defines them, disabled professionals must remain hyper-aware of the potential consequences of both self-disclosure and non-self-disclosure. Non-self-disclosure of disability may mean fundamental necessities are not provided for the individual, but they are deemed less 'problematic', as in the case of Carry. On the other hand, self-disclosure means that she is often burdened with educating colleagues about disability rights and advocating for policy changes.

*I get asked quite a lot to educate other people around me. And it's effortful ... it's effortful to have to constantly say, I can't do this, or could you not do that because of this reason? Or I would prefer it if you ask me in this way, or I would*

*prefer to hold on to my calendar for this reason or that reason, and constantly be having that battle.*

Carry's account reflects the emotional labour of constantly being asked to educate others about disability, repeatedly advocating for their own access needs, and justifying personal accommodations. Thus, while some participants faced constant pressure to explain and justify their access needs, others reported having never been asked about their needs or their disability at all. Elliott explains:

*I've lived with a disability all my life ... I've worked in football since 2000. And this is the first conversation that anyone's had with me about disability [in the context of] me and football and my role.*

His experience reveals the opposite extreme, having worked in football for over two decades without anyone ever asking about



their disability or access needs. Together, these testimonies expose, a troubling dynamic of disparate practice across the industry, whereby some disabled individuals are overburdened with the duty of education, while others are met with silence, their needs going unacknowledged, unless they choose to take on a self-advocacy role. This contrast underscores a broader issue, inconsistency in disability inclusion, where responsibility often falls unfairly on individuals rather than being embedded in workplace culture and policy.

Separate disability-focused advocacy groups as a vehicle for collective representation were seen as useful to overcome this but are of limited value if not integrated into mainstream structures.

According to Carry, it “*would be better if there was a [separate] organisation that is then backed by a governing body*” to “*spearhead*” inclusive governance. She believed advocacy organisations have “*done a lot with regards to sponsorship and partnerships ... but it’s the expertise that’s needed for [disability in governance] education*”. Ultimately, participants like Carry and Thea demonstrate the urgent need for football organisations to move beyond reliance on individual advocacy and toward an industry-wide cultural shift, where disability inclusion is not an optional discussion but an embedded, standardised practice across all levels of the game and in all organisations.

“*...urgent need for football organisations to move...toward an industry-wide cultural shift, where disability inclusion is not an optional discussion but an embedded, standardised practice...*”

### 4.3 Recruitment and the Exclusionary Filters

Despite football's increasing engagement with diversity rhetoric, the structural barriers to meaningful inclusion persist. The mainstream football industry remains, at best, unaware of the systemic exclusion of disabled professionals, and at worst, actively resistant to meaningful accommodation. Several participants shared experiences of failed attempts to secure full-time employment in football, revealing the industry's unspoken exclusionary mechanisms.

Heston recounted being informally advised by a National Governing Body that his association with a particular individual would jeopardise his job prospects, underscoring how personal networks can influence hiring decisions. Jamie, another participant, described years of unsuccessful applications before ultimately leaving the industry in search of greater job security and financial stability:

*"I gradually gave up on the idea of working in sport in an employed setting... [initially] decided to train as a personal trainer... because, again, self-employment seemed like the next best route. I could take time off when I needed... work exceptionally hard when I was fit to work... that was going to be my next route into sport. Then it got to a stage where I was moving away from sport... I even forgot I applied for a job at [a Non-Sporting Multinational Company] ... 12 months later, they offered me an interview. I planned to stick around for six months, just for experience... but the reality was, nobody else even looked like they would help*



*me make a success of a career... And now I realise... most sport jobs are a lot worse paid than what I do now... so in that sense, I'm probably more comfortable volunteering [my time on the board of a para and disability football NGB]... doing little tasks I'm genuinely interested in... than taking a job that pays less and offers none of the security I have now".*

Jamie's experience reflects a broader trend: disabled professionals often leave football workforces not due to a lack of passion but because the industry fails to support or accommodate them. The decision of where to build a career is not necessarily about preference but necessity, and about whether the industry is willing to make space for disabled professionals or whether they are forced to seek opportunity elsewhere. Carry captured the essence of this issue when she observed:

*"I've noticed in football that diversity is wanted, but when they have it, they don't know what to do with it... the lived realities of it are messy, difficult, and it would be easier not to have them."*

This reluctance to engage with the complexities of genuine inclusion results in a striking lack of disabled professionals in leadership positions. Elliott, reflecting on a 25-year career in football, noted the near-total absence of colleagues with apparent disabilities:

*"I've never worked with anyone in a wheelchair. I've never worked with anyone with sight or hearing impairments. It's OK for clubs to say they support inclusion, to wear a T-shirt on a campaign day, but actual recruitment of disabled professionals? I see very little evidence of it."*

The consequences of this exclusion are far-reaching. When disabled professionals are not visible within the industry, it reinforces a myth that there is no demand for inclusion or that disabled individuals are uninterested in football careers. As Liam noted:

*"[CEOs are] afraid of getting it wrong. But if you have a network of people with lived experience of disability working alongside you and helping you and consulting with you, then you can't really go wrong. But it's just that there's not enough senior-level executives pushing the button because they*

*don't think that there's enough of, you know, disabled people wanting to be a part of this industry because they're not seen."*

This lack of visibility fosters a segregationist mentality, where disabled professionals are assumed to belong exclusively in para-sports or disability-specific advocacy groups rather than in mainstream football in leadership roles. Many of the people interviewed were involved in para-football or disability advocacy organisations, not because they had specifically sought these roles, but because mainstream football had systematically excluded them from salaried managerial and leadership positions.

Beyond informal exclusion, several participants identified psychometric testing as a significant barrier for neurodivergent candidates in executive and senior leadership recruitment. This rigid and outdated reliance on psychometric profiling effectively filters out candidates whose disabilities may affect their test performance but not their professional capabilities. William highlighted the absurdity of such narrow candidate criteria,

*"I've noticed in football that diversity is wanted, but when they have it, they don't know what to do with it..."*



arguing that resilience and adaptability, often key strengths developed through lived experience of disability, are overlooked in favour of traditional hiring metrics:

Jamie provided a powerful example of how the restrictive nature of job descriptions serves as a gatekeeping mechanism disadvantaging disabled candidates:



*"... the job that really would have been my life's work would be in terms of [named para and disability football] head coach for England... It was written in such a way that you had to have a UEFA PRO license... me, as a disabled person who's never been able to access mainstream football, never been able to learn those things in there, I never would have stood a chance... You've asked for [non-disabled-focused] qualifications that are completely irrelevant. It's like telling me to get a qualification to be an electrician and then saying the job is a plumber!"*

These rigid expectations regarding necessary qualifications ensure that even roles specifically

*"If you said to me, you've got two people available, one is a white middle-class guy, life's been really easy, mum was an accountant. Dad was a lawyer. He's done a lot of work experience over the summer because he can. He doesn't have to get a job in a pub or, you know, work at B&Q Warehouse. Like I did all those things to make money. Then you've got this disabled person who's lived with a debilitating spinal injury since the age of five. And, you know, managed to play sport despite what they've done and managed to do this despite what they've had. There's something about that second person—their ability to overcome challenges, the resilience that they develop—which makes them a more fascinating candidate. And I think that's where all workplaces, sport included, I think, miss out on a lot of really incredible people."*

designed to support disabled athletes remain out of reach for disabled professionals. Where the parameters of the 'ideal candidate' were expanded to include disabled professionals, participants reported that tokenism often took precedence over genuine expertise. Some leaders were brought into organisations for diversity optics but faced resistance when advocating for meaningful policy change. Carry explained:

*"Things that move the dial forward are when there is a prominent individual on a board who has a disability. Things that move the dial backward are when that person with a disability is then expected to speak for all disabled people... Football is very guilty of this, of saying, 'this person has experience,' but not recognising that experience doesn't mean expertise."*

Football's recruitment and employment structures remain fundamentally exclusionary, shaped by outdated hiring practices, rigid qualification requirements, and performative diversity efforts. As William aptly summarised:

*"I think humans can be very lazy, and they see what they recognise, and they're drawn to what they recognise."*

Until these biases are actively dismantled, disabled professionals will continue to be sidelined; excluded not by lack of talent, but by an industry unwilling to adapt.

## 4.4 Intersectionality: Disability, Gender, Ethnicity, Sexuality

Participants were asked to reflect on their multiple identities, revealing the complex ways in which ableism intersects with other forms of discrimination, including sexism, homophobia, racism and classism. Their testimonies underscored how social identities are enmeshed and experienced simultaneously to shape experiences of exclusion within football's professional environments.

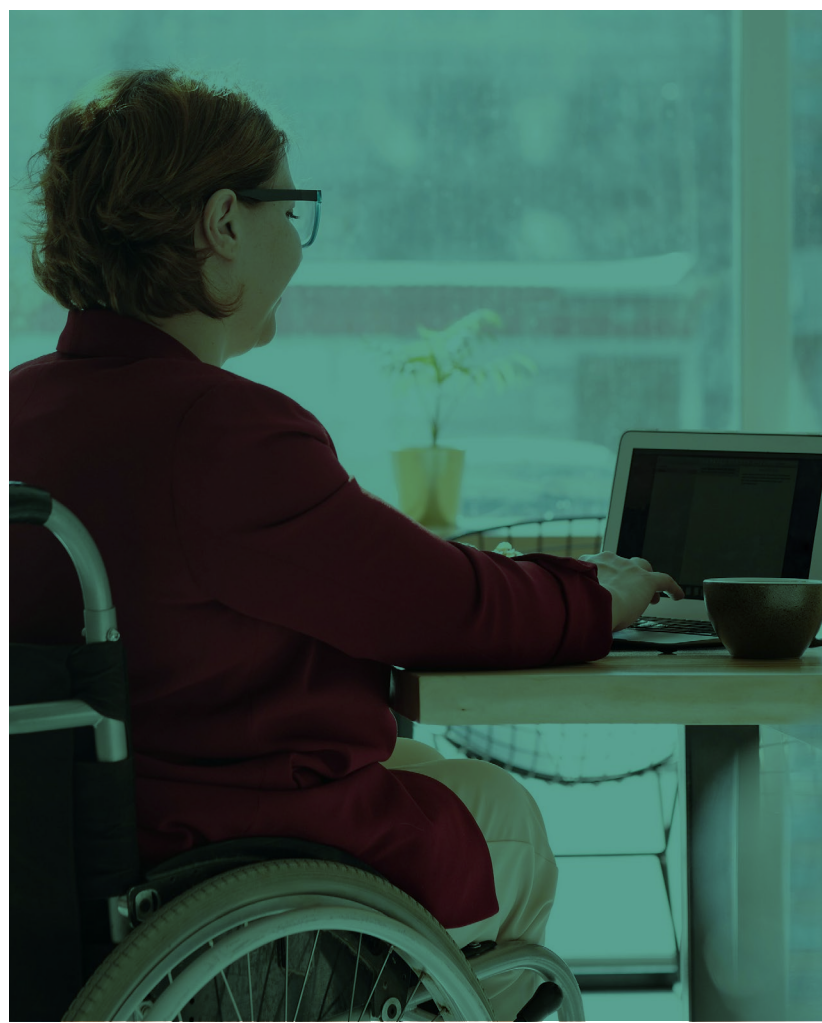
Steven, for example, highlighted the disparity in opportunities within women's football, questioning why progress in gender inclusion had not been matched by increased visibility and accessibility for disabled women:

*"The women's game has moved on leaps and bounds, but where are the opportunities for disabled females?"*

Similarly, Carry described the compounded barriers she faces as a disabled woman in a male-dominated industry, emphasising how out of all her intersecting identities *"that disability affects [her] the most"*.

In contrast, Simon, William, and Darren acknowledged that as white men, they

had not experienced barriers related to gender or ethnicity. However, both Jamie and William provided additional nuance, recognising that while their race and gender afforded them certain privileges, their experiences of disability and working-class backgrounds made navigating middle-class professional environments more challenging. William reflected on these intersecting dynamics:



*"Yeah, I think I'm very lucky to be a white man, and I say that not in a derogatory way toward people who are not white or who are not men. But life has always been a lot easier for white men in this country—it clearly has. In my early years, the only thing that made my life a bit more difficult was that I was working-class ... That was one of the challenges I had, particularly in that very elite environment I was in. But the privilege that I have from being a white male means I didn't have those other barriers to contend with. Yes, being working-class was difficult, but I didn't have the additional struggles that others might have faced."*

These narratives highlight the necessity of adopting an intersectional approach when examining inclusion and exclusion in football leadership. The intersection of disability with other social identities further compounds barriers to career progression, particularly within elite spaces where traditional networks and recruitment norms privilege those who fit a particular mould.

Participants also noted a significant disparity in how visible and hidden disabilities are accommodated. Carry highlighted this while reciting the significant challenges disabled professionals face when navigating inaccessible venues, particularly in iconic football spaces like Old Trafford. Reflecting on a professional event she attended there, she described the logistical barriers that made it difficult for her to fulfil her role: *"The disability access there is awful. You have to take five or six different lifts"*. This created a

frustrating situation where, instead of being present to host and engage with a guest speaker, she was *"stuck at the other end of the corridor waiting for a lift."* Beyond the physical barriers, Carry also

*The women's game has moved on leaps and bounds, but where are the opportunities for disabled females?"*

pointed to the deeper issue of how disability is perceived, explaining that *"as long as you're hobbling, even if you don't need to hobble, then everyone forgives you and it's all fine."* Her words highlight the troubling reality that many disabled professionals feel their needs are only acknowledged when their impairments are visibly apparent.



Nigel, too, echoed this sentiment, emphasising how professional clubs often hold a narrow perception of disability, assuming that only individuals with visible impairments qualify as disabled:

*“One of the biggest challenges with [professional] clubs is that when you ask, ‘Who in your team is disabled?’ they automatically assume it has to be someone who is fully blind, wears a cochlear implant, or is in a wheelchair. My job is to change that perception.”*

This reliance on visual confirmation of disability extends into everyday workplace interactions. Participants described how using visible mobility aids, such as hearing aids or mobility supports, often determined the level of understanding and assistance they received. William reflected on his experience of adopting hearing aids and the shift in how people responded to him:

*“I’ve embraced my hearing aids and wear them a lot more. One, because they’re slightly louder. But two, because I quite like the fact that if I mishear someone, I can just point to my ear and say, ‘Oh yeah, sorry,’ and then they understand.”*

William’s testimony starkly contrasts his experiences before using hearing aids, when he often felt embarrassed to ask people to repeat themselves in meetings or during presentations. This highlights the additional labour that individuals with non-apparent disabilities must undertake to validate their needs in professional settings.

“*The mainstream football industry remains, at best, unaware of the systemic exclusion of disabled professionals, and at worst, actively resistant to meaningful accommodation.*”

*Five:*

# Conclusions and Recommendations

**Disability is the poor relation of football's diversity and inclusion strategies. Compared to efforts to promote 'race' and gender diversity, disability inclusion lacks momentum. Findings reaffirm that football governance cultures remain deeply rooted in non-disabled norms, systematically disadvantaging disabled professionals.**

There is an implicit expectation that individuals with disabilities should pursue careers in para or disability sport, a position that has been arrived at because of the difficulty in identifying those who fitted the inclusion criteria set by mainstream football and the professional game. This serves to reinforce a segregationist approach rather than encouraging genuine inclusion. Those seeking roles within mainstream football face structural and cultural barriers and are often pressured to conform to non-disabled standards of professionalism.

While exclusionary practices may have become less overt, our report suggests professional expectations—historically shaped by white, male, non-disabled, heterosexual norms—have not been dismantled entirely. Rather, they have instead evolved to function within a more



liberal policy landscape, predominately by leveraging diversity and visibility over more meaningful equity or inclusion actions. As a result, non-disabled perspectives continue to take precedence, leaving disabled professionals to navigate a system that was not designed with them in mind. With the current slow rate of hiring, meaningful progress will take years unless radical strategies are introduced. Urgent, proactive intervention is needed to address the underrepresentation of disabled individuals in football leadership and workforce structures.



## ***5.1 Recommendations***

### ***1. Compliance with Equality Act 2010 and beyond***

- Reasonable adjustment plans such as flexible working arrangements.
  - Embed whole-person approaches into HR policies.
  - Real change requires transforming organisational cultures, not just hiring a few more people with disabilities.
  - Ensure the experiences of disabled professionals in football (such as the testimonies featured in this report) are given a platform at an organisational level and through football governing bodies.
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### ***2. Normalising Whole-Person Approaches***

- Recognising mental health, disability, and intersectionality in workplace policies and operational plans.
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### ***3. Rethink Recruitment***

- Replace psychometric testing with accessible methods (e.g., work-based assessments or structured interviews) or apply them cautiously and critically where used.
  - Implement structured, bias-free hiring processes, including skills demonstrations and scenario-based evaluations.
  - Proactively seek recommendations about how the recruitment process can be more inclusive and accessible.
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### ***4. Policy Reform in Governance***

- Mandate disability representation at board level for organisations receiving public money.
  - Introduce inclusive leadership training.
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### ***5. Support Networks and Advocacy***

- Establish disability-focused leadership mentorship schemes.
- Formalise relationships with para and disability football organisations and football governing bodies.

# Football's Disability Blind Spot:

*A Report on Disabled People's Lived  
Experience of Working in Managerial,  
Leadership and Governance Positions  
in English Football*

April 2025

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