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# Navigating a sighted world: visually impaired runners' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

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# Navigating a sighted world: visually impaired runners' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

During lockdown in March 2020, daily outdoor exercise was encouraged but little consideration was given to the feasibility of this for visually impaired (VI) people, for whom social distancing measures presented significant challenges. Drawing upon the concepts of ableism and ocularcentrism, this article explores VI peoples' lived experiences of outdoor running (or not) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight VI runners participated in two semi-structured interviews during the pandemic. This longitudinal approach captured the impact of changing restrictions, personal circumstances, and seasons. Their running practices were shaped in complex and varied ways depending on impairment and impairment effects, local running environment, and support networks. Despite some commonalities, each personal story during this time was unique. Participants described empowering moments, juxtaposed with marginalising and oppressive situations. The UK Government's encouragement of outdoor exercise was laden with ableist assumptions, and VI runners were significantly affected by the ocularcentric world they inhabit.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Visual impairment; running; COVID-19 pandemic; ableism; ocularcentrism

## Points of interest

- This article reports on a study exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on VI people who participate in outdoor running.
- The lives of VI people were significantly impacted by social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We interviewed eight VI people at two different points during the pandemic to understand how changing restrictions, personal circumstances and seasons impacted their running practices.
- Impairment and diverse impairment effects, local running environments and support networks were the key factors that influenced how

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and whether VI runners could run outdoors throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Further research is needed to get a better understanding of how we can support more VI people to have meaningful sport and physical activity experiences.

## Introduction

When the UK Government published their *Staying at home and away from others (social distancing) guidance* on 23rd March 2020, one of the ‘very limited purposes’ to leave home was to engage in one form of exercise a day – either alone or with members of your household (UK Government 2020). During a Downing Street press conference, Dr Jenny Harries, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England, claimed that the coronavirus lockdown provided the public with an opportunity to get ‘super fit’ (Cowburn 2020). Outdoor running was endorsed, with Harries declaring that ‘Even though you may not have wished to jog along the street before, doing so now might be quite a relief and a positive thing for us all to do’ (Harries quoted in Cowburn 2020). Indeed, reports emerged of more people taking up running, increasing their frequency and reporting the benefits to their mental health during the pandemic (DeJong, Fish, and Hertel 2021; Kollat 2020; Ronto 2020). However, the suggestion that outdoor running is an activity we could all do was laden with ableist assumptions and did not represent the realities of many disabled people facing new barriers to being physically active (Activity Alliance 2021a, 2021b).

For visually impaired (VI) runners, the focus of this article, the highly visual (oculocentric) nature of social distancing led to significant challenges (Halpern et al. 2023), particularly when adhering to advice regarding safe running practices and the risks of proximity to others exercising outdoors (Blocken et al. 2020; Makruf and Ramdhan 2021; Stamatakis 2020). In addition, because of social distancing measures, VI runners who ran with guides from other households were not permitted to do so. As already one of the most inactive minority groups (Activity Alliance 2022; Sweeting et al. 2020), the pandemic also exacerbated wider health-related inequalities for VI people. In May 2020, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) reported that VI people were: concerned about getting access to food; feeling less independent; unable to go out with a guide from another household; going out less (RNIB 2020a). This left many VI people fearful to go out alone whilst social distancing measures were in force (Alexiou 2020; Kavanagh 2020; Ting et al. 2021). Consequently, there were reports of negative impacts on the participation and well-being of VI people in the UK (Halpern et al. 2023) and other countries (see Gombas and Csakvari 2022; Senjam 2020; Shalaby et al. 2021; Suraweera, Jayathilaka, and Thelijjagoda 2021).

In their commentary on the potential impact of COVID-19 imposed isolation on the mental and physical health of VI people, Allen and Smith (2020) proposed five recommendations for policy and stakeholders. One of these endorsed tailored home-based physical activity and exercise, something British Blind Sport hoped to promote when they adopted Sport England's #StayInWorkOut campaign in the initial weeks of the pandemic. This involved the provision of accessible online resources to help VI people stay active at home, and the creation of an online community to tackle social isolation and loneliness (British Blind Sport 2020a). Such provision was a common response for organisations serving the physical activity needs of disabled people (Olsen et al. 2023), many of whom were faced with temporary exclusion from the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor and 'green' exercise (Barton et al. 2016).

Whilst research on the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on disabled peoples' physical activity has emerged (Activity Alliance 2021a, 2021b; Fitzgerald, Stride, and Drury 2022; Hayton 2022; Hu et al. 2021; Kamyuka et al. 2020; Olsen et al. 2023; Rogers et al. 2020; Urbanski, Szeliga, and Tasiemski 2021) the specific experiences of VI people were not represented. Only two UK-based studies focus exclusively on the physical activity of VI people during COVID-19 (Richardson, Petrini, and Proulx 2023; Strongman et al. 2022). Utilising an online survey, Strongman et al. (2022) revealed that many VI people experienced a decrease in physical activity and a shift to exercising alone in private indoor spaces. In addition, the physical activity of VI women and single people were most negatively affected by the COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures (Strongman et al. 2022). Richardson, Petrini, and Proulx's (2023) mixed-methods research on access to exercise offers further insight, reporting that VI people in the UK were severely impacted by the stay-at-home order and social distancing guidance, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. Challenges associated with social distancing and not being able to access support from others constituted the most significant barriers to exercise. The study also suggests that perceived barriers to exercise actually decreased to lower than pre-pandemic levels during late lockdowns as VI people 'established new methods to exercise at home and outdoors, which combined with their existing pre-pandemic methods once facilities began to reopen' (Richardson, Petrini, and Proulx 2023, 11). Whilst there is merit in the longitudinal approach, there was not a consistent sample across phases of data collection, making such comparisons problematic. There is also a lack of debate on the impact that changing restrictions had on VI peoples' experiences of outdoor exercise during COVID-19.

This article responds to the dearth of qualitatively rich accounts of the pandemic and, by focusing on a specific group of VI runners, provides a novel understanding of the lived experiences of physically active VI people. We conducted this research for numerous reasons. First, outdoor running

was one of the physical activities most explicitly endorsed by the UK Government and their advisors. However, as this article will go on to demonstrate, the encouragement of running reveals ocularcentric and ableist assumptions. Second, outdoor running requires the negotiation of public space (Cook, Shaw, and Simpson 2016a) in a time when social distancing guidance presented significant challenges for VI people. Third, as runners ourselves (although not VI) we were negotiating changes to our own running practices and experiences. Yet from our previous research with VI athletes (Macbeth 2009; Powis 2020; Powis and Macbeth 2020), we were acutely aware that VI runners' experiences, whether they run with a guide or not, would be more significantly impacted by social distancing measures. Finally, drawing upon Heidi Louren's powerful autoethnographic account of being VI during the pandemic, this research is our attempt to listen 'in an open way, to the authentic and real experiences of disabled persons' to 'provide a containing and validating space for their bodies' (Lourens and Watermeyer 2023, 11). In the next section, we outline our research process, including establishing the study's theoretical framework and methodological design. We then present our empirical findings in the discussion section, which is organised into two overarching themes: *Local running environment* and *Support network*. To conclude, we consider the value of our findings in a post-pandemic landscape and propose considerations to help facilitate outdoor exercise for VI people.

## Research process

### Conceptual tools

Our study – including scope, methods, and analysis – is underpinned by two theoretical concepts: *ableism* and *ocularcentrism*. Through the scholarship of Campbell (2009), Wolbring (2008, 2012), Goodley (2014) and others, ableism has become a defining concept of critical disability studies. However, as argued by Campbell (2009), it is applied fleetingly and often without theoretical grounding. Frequently conflated with *disablism*, ableism is the ideological system which breeds disablism and other forms of discrimination (Goodley 2014). In this article, we draw upon Wolbring's (2008, 252) definition of ableism as:

a set of beliefs, processes and practices that produce – based on abilities one exhibits or values – a particular understanding of oneself, one's body and one's relationship with others of humanity, other species and the environment, and includes how one is judged by others.

In the context of sport and physical activity, normative ideals of ability and the coveting of certain bodies is pervasive (Howe and Silva 2021;

Powis 2020). For disabled participants, the *compulsory able-bodiedness* (McRuer 2006) of neoliberal sport and physical activity requires an emulation of the 'normate' (Garland-Thomson 1997) sporting body. It also serves to reinforce an able-bodied/disabled binary. While the concept of ableism has been employed in sport and physical activity research (Brittain, Biscaia, and Gérard 2020; Ives et al. 2021; Kitchin et al. 2021; Silva 2023; Silva and Howe 2019), our study is the first to use ableism to analyse disabled peoples' lived experiences of sport and physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. As established in the introduction, the dual impact of ableist government discourse and ableist lockdown measures has created a novel setting for our research.

Our second conceptual tool is ocularcentrism (Bolt 2013; Jay 1994; Jenks 1995). This concept, which we employ in conjunction with ableism, provides a distinct approach to understand the privileging of vision during the pandemic. It also interrogates the relationship between vision and power in Western culture, in which sight is the dominant way of knowing and visual ability is conflated with cognition (Jenks 1995). Consequently, this ocularnormative binary (Bolt 2013) equates blindness with ignorance and positions VI people as Other. Like ableism, ocularcentrism informs normative understandings of the sporting body with athletes' vision being synonymous with high-level performance, often at the expense of other sensory modes (Powis 2018). For the VI runners in this study, their experiences of running during lockdown were significantly affected by the ocularcentric world they inhabit. Maintaining social distance while running and participating in everyday life is rooted in a visual comprehension of space – one which many VI people do not possess.

### ***Recruitment and participants***

This study's sample were purposively recruited using social media. An accessible Microsoft Sway page, which outlined the study's aims and participant criteria, was shared *via* Twitter by both authors and key stakeholders, including British Blind Sport. In addition, we also used snowballing techniques to reach a wider audience, such as sharing our advert on relevant webpages (e.g. Metro Blind Sport) and community Facebook groups (e.g. RNIB Connect). To take part in the study, potential participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) be a resident in the United Kingdom, 2) be aged 18 years or older, 3) have a visual impairment, 4) regularly participate in outdoor running as exercise or have taken up outdoor running as exercise during lockdown. Through the criteria, we aimed to recruit participants with varied experiences of running, including those who were new to this activity. Prior to the recruitment process, the study received ethical approval from the authors' institutions.

Eight VI participants (aged 31-64, six women and two men) took part in the study. The sample is geographically spread: seven participants are based in England (from Brighton to Liverpool) and one participant is based in Wales. The sample includes people with a range of visual impairments, some of whom use a long cane and/or a guide dog in their everyday lives. In the context of running, all participants are recreational runners who run in a variety of urban and rural environments. Furthermore, all but one of the participants usually run with a guide. [Table 1](#) provides further participant information, including personal descriptions of visual impairment and running experiences prior to COVID-19.

### **Data collection**

Each participant took part in two semi-structured qualitative interviews. The first interviews occurred between July and October 2020 (ranging from 45 min to one hour 15 min in length) and the second interviews in April 2021 (ranging from 23 min to 40 min in length). In comparison to the existing 'snapshot' research cited earlier, our longitudinal approach meant we could analyse how the participants' experiences altered over the course of the pandemic, including the impact of changing restrictions and seasons. At the beginning of the second interviews, we started with a brief verbal summary of our previous discussion and invite the participant to reflect upon what had transpired in the intervening months, which served as informal member checking. All interviews were jointly conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Our *two-to-one* interview strategy (Monforte and Úbeda-Colomer [2021](#)) provided a collaborative space to develop rapport with the participants and allow them to share their stories in a conversational way. As sighted, non-disabled researchers, we could not draw upon any lived experience of being VI. However, our expertise in sport and physical activity for VI people and lived experiences of running during the pandemic informed the questions that we asked, which resulted in a series of rich, in-depth participant responses. For further reflection upon our positionality as non-disabled academics in disability research, see Macbeth and Powis ([2023](#)). All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms have been used.

### **Analysis**

Like the interview process, we collaboratively analysed the interview transcripts using a relativist form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke [2021](#)). Once familiar with all relevant COVID-19 specific data, we proceeded to inductively organise the data into five codes: *Routine, Community, Health (physical/mental), Public attitudes, Guide running guidance*. These

**Table 1.** Participant information.

| Pseudonym | Identifies as | Age | Visual impairment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Years of running and experience                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Independent or guide                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------|---------------|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| James     | Male          | 37  | <p>'...my condition is called Ushers syndrome, which actually effects the eyes and the ears. In terms of my visual impairment, I've got RP... So, I suffer from night blindness, I have no peripheral vision, I've only got central vision'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision affected from approximately 17 years old</li> <li>• Degenerative</li> <li>• Outdoor conditions impact vision</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 17 to 18 years</li> <li>• 1 to 2 runs per week</li> <li>• Completed a marathon</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runs independently</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                       |
| Laura     | Female        | 43  | <p>'...so, I was born blind... I've got no sight at all in my right eye, like not even light or dark or anything and in my left eye I've got about, I don't know, probably about 2% vision... it's always been the same, so that's fine because I don't know any different'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a long cane</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 3 years</li> <li>• Up to 5 runs per week</li> <li>• Completed parkruns, 10 ks, half marathons, marathon</li> </ul>                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has one main guide but uses others</li> <li>• Holds guide's arm, no tether</li> </ul>                                                                                               |
| Aisha     | Female        | 38  | <p>'...so, it's a hereditary condition... and it is degenerative so it's progressively getting worse. So, it's a lot worse now than when I was a child. Retinitis pigmentosa it is called, a condition is due to the back of the eye'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a long cane (last 2 years)</li> <li>• Outdoor conditions impact vision</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 6 years</li> <li>• 4 to 5 runs per week</li> <li>• Completed parkruns, half marathons.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses multiple guides</li> <li>• Runs alongside guide, no tether</li> <li>• Wears VI vest or bib</li> <li>• Doesn't run in the dark</li> <li>• Wears peaked cap to run in</li> </ul> |
| Jane      | Female        | 31  | <p>'I've now got proliferative diabetic retinopathy... had cataract surgery in my right eye, which still gives me a bit of trouble, but my right eye is my better eye. My left eye, I don't really have any usable vision... the vision that I do have is patchy so it's a little bit like a jigsaw puzzle and it's got bits missing and also some bits are kind of mixed up, so I've got double vision, 'cause my eyes no longer work together'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sudden deterioration from approximately 24 years old</li> <li>• Surgeries and complications</li> <li>• Degenerative</li> <li>• Guide dog for last 4 years</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ran prior to sight loss but then didn't run for approximately 4 to 5 years</li> <li>• VI runner for approximately 2 to 3 years</li> <li>• 2 to 3 runs per week</li> <li>• Completed parkruns, 5 ks, 10 ks, half marathons, marathon.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has one main guide but uses others</li> <li>• Uses tether</li> </ul>                                                                                                                |
| Claire    | Female        | 36  | <p>'...so totally blind. I've got retinopathy of prematurity, shortened to ROP. Basically, was two and a half months premature and lucky to survive in those days. So, don't have any kind of vision... can't see any light'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a long cane</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 12 years</li> <li>• Only runs events, approximately 2 per week</li> <li>• Completed multiple parkruns, 10 ks, half marathons, marathons, trail, and ultra events.</li> </ul>                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has multiple guides</li> <li>• Holds guide's arm, no tether</li> </ul>                                                                                                              |

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** Continued.

| Pseudonym | Identifies as | Age | Visual impairment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Years of running and experience                                                                                                                                                           | Independent or guide                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------|---------------|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Monica    | Female        | 33  | 'So, it is from birth and it's optic nerve atrophy in both eyes... that's never changed... I can see outlines of things, and especially when it's like high contrast, but I could never recognize a person or an object. It's always outlines, always shapes, some colours' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a long cane</li> <li>• Recently applied for a guide dog</li> <li>• Outdoor conditions impact vision, especially brightness and darkness</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 6 years</li> <li>• 2 to 3 runs per week</li> <li>• Completed parkruns, 5 ks, 10 ks, half marathons.</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does some independent running but also uses multiple guides</li> <li>• Uses a tether</li> <li>• Wears 'blind runner's bib'</li> </ul> |
| Simon     | Male          | 64  | '...I've got nystagmus, a gentle nystagmus, so I've had it since birth. It's generally not a condition which changes, and it certainly hasn't changed for me... I've got used to what I can see and what I can't see. My acuity is 6/60, in other words I can only see the top row of the sight chart, but I've got a reasonable field of vision and my vision is quite clear for getting around' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outdoor conditions impact vision</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running for 3 years</li> <li>• Weekly parkruns</li> <li>• Completed parkruns, 5 ks, 10 ks.</li> </ul>                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does some independent running</li> <li>• Two main guides but uses others</li> <li>• Runs alongside guides, no tether</li> </ul>       |
| Sarah     | Female        | 39  | 'I'm totally blind... Since I was three or four, that sort of age. Before school anyway' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses a long cane</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a runner pre Covid-19</li> <li>• Began running in June 2020</li> <li>• 2 to 3 runs per week</li> <li>• No events, usually runs 5k</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has one guide</li> <li>• Uses a tether</li> </ul>                                                                                     |

initial codes represented the key changes in, and impacts on, our participants' running practices and experiences. We then developed three initial candidate themes to better capture timeframes during our longitudinal approach: *First lockdown, Easing of restrictions and The Future*. While a chronological framing of our data was useful in understanding how participants' running experiences changed during the pandemic, it also inadvertently limited the generalisability of our findings beyond a COVID-19 context. We then collaboratively reviewed and refined our initial analysis to generate three overarching themes: *Diversity of visual impairment, Local running environment and Support network*. These themes represent the factors that had the most significant influence on our participants' lived experiences of outdoor running throughout the pandemic but are also salient beyond a COVID-19 context. For the purpose of this article, data from the first theme – Diversity of visual impairment – is presented as introductory context to the discussion section.

## Discussion

Prior to discussing this study's primary themes, it is important to establish how *impairment effects* – 'the direct and unavoidable impacts that "impairments" (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world' (Thomas 2012, 211) – underpin our participants' experiences of outdoor running. As Thomas argues, impairment and impairment effects are bio-social and culturally constructed, which was strikingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown and associated social distancing measures impacted our participants' running practices in multifaceted ways. They all experienced some disruption to their pre-pandemic running practices, however each personal story of outdoor running (or not) during this time was unique.

While the UK government portrayed exercise as an individual responsibility and moral obligation, the social structures and inequities that prevent access to physical activity were overlooked (Coen, Cook, and Hayes 2021). The normalisation of outdoor running, which was laden with ocularcentric and ableist assumptions, exposed such inequities:

...everybody could go out once a day and even people that had never, ever run in their life seemed to have taken up running, so it was all a little bit... in the blind community like, "well, how unfair is this?" You know? Normally we run and we can't and now there are people that have never run in their life but they're running now because they can go out, you know, they're being told by the government, "look, get out, once a day and go for a run, go for a jog"... it was maybe a little bit frustrating for us VIs that just couldn't do anything because we weren't allowed to be guided. (Jane)

In line with lockdown and social distancing measures introduced in March 2020, licensed guide running ceased when England Athletics fully suspended all face-to-face activity (England Athletics 2020). As detailed in Table 1, there is diversity in VI within our sample (for example, diagnosis, severity, congenital/acquired, stable/degenerative) which influences the need or preference for running with a guide or independently. For those who usually ran with a guide from another household prior to the pandemic – Laura, Simon, Claire, Jane, Monica, Aisha – their participation ended abruptly.

In response to the easing of restrictions in August 2020, British Blind Sport and England Athletics issued a joint statement explaining that 'guide running can once again begin to take place as long as both guide and visually impaired runner fully understand the increased risk associated with the activity' (British Blind Sport 2020b). Mitigations in the updated guidance included: running side by side, outdoors only, maintaining social distancing, handwashing before and after activity, thorough cleaning of running tethers, using a guide within your household or support bubble (if possible), exclusive VI runner and guide partnerships, and sharing contact details for track and trace

purposes (British Blind Sport 2020b). As discussed in more detail later in the article, these mitigations meant that re-establishing relationships with guides required delicate negotiation.

Alongside fluctuating restrictions, COVID-19 also exacerbated the impact that seasonal changes have on some participants' experiences of outdoor running. Whilst seasonal changes affect some VI runners regardless of COVID-19, at the start of the pandemic Aisha and James purposely ran early in the morning while routes were quieter, so they could more confidently manage social distancing. However, the darker mornings and lower light intensity of autumn and winter reduced their window of opportunity for outdoor running, and they were unable to sustain the level of independent running achieved during the first six months of the pandemic. As James explains, 'the autumn was always going to be a difficult time because of... less daylight hours and I suffer with night blindness so when it is gloomy outside, I struggle to see'. Consequently, his outdoor running was restricted to daytime hours at the weekend. For Aisha, the implications were more significant as she dealt with uncertainty around her sight:

... I wasn't sure if it was in my head or like was my sight getting worse? I couldn't tell because I found it really difficult to adapt to the light when I was running as well so it is a different kind of brightness... so I just yes couldn't continue like I was.

As we move our focus onto the study's primary themes, this introductory context has established how impairment and impairments effects, as Aisha illustrates above, shape our participants' running needs, preferences and lived experience of socially imposed restrictions. However, while impairment is central to our participants' stories, their unique experiences of outdoor running during the pandemic are considerably more than a discussion of sight conditions. In the following sections – *Local running environment* and *Support network* – we seek to demonstrate the significant diversity of the VI runners' experiences beyond impairment alone.

### ***Local running environment***

In the context of sport and physical activity for VI people, sporting spaces are hugely diverse (Powis 2020). From the controlled space of a goalball court to the open expanse of a VI cricket pitch, each activity poses unique challenges. Outdoor running, more so than any other activity, is often performed in unstructured and unpredictable spaces with participants having to continually evaluate their spatial orientation. As discussed above, impairment and impairment effects underpin how VI runners experience outdoor running, yet the impact of the pandemic upon the route itself is of equal importance. In this section, we explore how participants' local running environments altered in lockdown, including the physical, social, and psychological barriers they

experienced, and the strategies they employed to negotiate their radically changed sporting spaces.

Because of the geographical spread of our sample, participants had vastly different running environments: residential streets, parks, countryside, sea-front promenades and private gardens. During the pandemic, the importance of local outdoor space was heightened with government restrictions enforcing the need for close-to-home physical activity (Coen, Cook, and Hayes 2021). Yet, as the authors note, access to good quality public and private green space is deeply inequitable and dictated by, amongst other factors, socio-economic status and ethnicity. Beyond location, the local running environments cited above reflect the participants' diverse backgrounds and, to an extent, the high-status and middle-class demographic of both road and rural running (Baxter 2021). Significantly, as the VI runners' stories demonstrate, accessing and participating in these spaces is also underpinned by ocularcentric and ableist assumptions that, in light of COVID-19, became inescapable.

For those participants who ran regularly (both guided and independently), they had established routines with regular days, timings, and routes so familiar that, according to James, he could 'subconsciously tell you where every crack on the pavement is.' While in-depth, sensuous knowledge of running routes is routine (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2011, 2015; Hockey 2006), being able to negotiate such spaces – especially when encountering physical hazards – often requires what Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2015) conceptualise as *runners' vision*, a subcultural way of seeing. And, although our VI runners did have learnt knowledge of their routes, the unexpected hazards introduced during the pandemic meant that, for some, their local environment became inaccessible: pop-up cafes and outdoor furniture on the high street (Laura); increase in dog walkers in the local park (Simon); gas and telephone engineering works on pavements (James). Of course, many of these barriers emerged near the end of the initial lockdown. As James recognises, the beginning of the pandemic and the strict two-metre distancing made it easier to navigate his running route:

Because people were more conscious of that two-metre rule, they were more aware of what was around them. Whereas sometimes they won't be too aware of what's around them because they're not bothered. But they seem to be more observant with the rules in place.

As an independent runner, James is constantly scanning his route for hazards, a process which he describes as physically and mentally taxing, yet the restrictions inadvertently gave him additional time and space to exercise safely. Due to reduction in traffic, he was also able to expand his running environment beyond the park and run on the streets around his neighbourhood. However, as restrictions eased and the number of people outside increased, his brief experience of accessibility dissipated. Amongst the VI

runners interviewed, this rise in footfall on their established routes was the most cited barrier to participation. For Monica, who did not leave the house for the first four months of lockdown, her first guided run was a shock:

Unfortunately, my favourite path seems to have become extremely popular with kids and for people to go for walks on. It became really frustrating, so we had to look for a new route... (It's) inconvenient just having to go left, go right, stop for a minute, you just get a pace and then you're suddenly told "oh you have got to stop, there is a family with two buggies and three kids and four dogs" and whatever, a bit of an exaggeration but that is what it felt like.

Monica's experience epitomises the mobile politics of running in shared spaces. To negotiate such fleeting encounters, runners are required to make a series of judgements and use their body movements to signal their intentions, such as choosing a side of the path, stepping down from the kerb or slalomming (Cook, Shaw, and Simpson 2016a). These spatial tactics are profoundly ocularcentric: the onus is on the runner to visually manage the space and, if they cannot, the route becomes inaccessible. Even with the support of a sighted guide, this process is problematic. The pandemic also induced health-related anxieties when negotiating local environments. Laura recounts her one and only experience of guided running during the initial lockdown:

Every time there was anyone on the pavement, he (the guide) was like zigzagging over the road to avoid the person, so I just got really disorientated and felt like I couldn't breathe... he was quite worried about it all and he zigzagged out of the way of people too much and, in my head, it all felt like some kind of weird zombie movie. I was just dead scared; I couldn't wait to get home.

For Laura, the dynamism of running heightened this traumatic experience: her familiar route was unrecognisable. Her vivid account of stepping out into the world captures what Lourens terms *running the gauntlet* (Lourens and Watermeyer 2023). In her reflections on the pandemic, Lourens explains how 'as a visually impaired person, the world beyond the borders of my home is saturated with multiple anxieties—anxieties that take shape when my body bumps up against the outside world.' (Lourens and Watermeyer 2023, 4). Laura's anxieties were exacerbated by outdoor running and her guide's attempts to avoid pedestrians and fellow runners. Consequently, she did not leave the house to exercise for the following three months. Strikingly, the COVID-19 running boom only served to reiterate the structural ableism present in our public spaces. As Cook, Shaw, and Simpson (2016b, 158) argue, 'the struggle for urban runners is finding and belonging in space'; for the majority of our VI participants, they were either pushed to the margins of their local running environments or forced to stay indoors.

However, there were several examples of adaptation and innovation. Like many disabled people during the pandemic (Kamyuka et al. 2020), our participants demonstrated creativity in remaining physically active. Sarah, who

had joined the gym only two months before lockdown, resorted to running around her back garden. Using *Aptiv*, an audio-focused exercise app, she followed a regular workout programme in the 16×5 metre space. Sarah was adamant that her passion for exercise would not diminish and, despite bumps and bruises from running into fences and even the house, she continued for two months until able to run outdoors with a guide. James, Monica, and Aisha all started either running early in the morning or in the evening to avoid the busiest times on their local routes, which was a common adaption also used by sighted runners (Fontefrancesco 2021). Although, as discussed in the previous section, the reduced hours and quality of daylight in autumn and winter made this challenging in subsequent lockdowns. Most notably, Aisha's innovation was not just limited to changing her schedule; she also ran independently for the first time. During our interview, she explains the process of negotiating her local park:

I've worked out a route which is around 8K that I can do myself and I don't vary that route. Initially, I'd get lost a few times and I'd ask people in the park, you know, which direction to go in, whatever, at the beginning of lockdown. But, like I said, now I've got that route in my head, so I can do that route on my own if I have to.

In addition to verbal directions, Aisha discusses the significance of multi-sensory markers – including the feel of different terrain and sounds of the environment (crickets, a flowing river, traffic) – when learning the route. Through repetition and sense-making strategies, the park was no longer an amorphous green space: Aisha crafted an alternative way of structuring her running environment. She also employed other strategies when running independently. To follow, in her words, 'the unsaid rules of the park', Aisha stayed on the 'correct' side of the path. She also wears a bright yellow vest with *blind runner* written on the front and back. Finally, in response to a disturbing incident in which Aisha's cane was stolen from behind a tree while she was running, she carries a personal alarm. Considering the widespread abuse and harassment that female runners experience on the streets (Baxter 2021; Brockschmidt and Wadey 2022; Morris 2021), Aisha's experiences as a blind Muslim woman reinforces the substantial risks taken to exercise during the pandemic. Other participants also encountered the riskiness of running independently. Jane ran multiple times with her cane in March 2021 but found it challenging – both in the concentration required and moving the cane at a faster speed (than walking) over uneven pavements, issues also reported in Saulynas et al. (2022) study of VI runners. Simon attempted to run around his local park, albeit less successfully than Aisha, and explained that 'I was just too afraid of what was around me in terms of risks of falls and that sort of thing', resulting in an interruption to his outdoor running.

Indeed, due the multiple challenges and risks cited above, many VI runners moved their running environment indoors. Following the end of the

initial lockdown, James, Aisha, Laura, and Claire all purchased treadmills to use at home – either to replace their outdoor runs or as an addition to their existing running routine. Despite reservations about using treadmills (Saulynas et al. 2022), both James and Laura explain how indoor running provided a safe and freeing experience compared to outdoor running. Similar to previous studies that explore the use of treadmills by VI people (Holland, Haegele, and Zhu 2020; Lieberman et al. 2019), participants had control of both their schedule and their environment: ‘You certainly don’t have to worry about too much about cars, people, furniture, so you can concentrate more on the running... I have more confidence on the treadmill’ (James). Laura, who started each day with a ten-kilometre run, enjoyed the independence of the treadmill and was even able to listen to audiobooks while running. She also discussed how she could set target distance, pace and calories burned all at the touch of a button. However, Laura acknowledges that her focus upon fitness fundamentally changed her relationship with running: ‘it probably has just shifted in my brain a bit. Because it couldn’t be about the social thing anymore, now it has become about something else.’ As we will explore further in our final section, despite running communities adapting during the pandemic, VI runners were frequently neglected and abandoned by their existing support networks. For many participants, running was no longer a social activity but an isolated pursuit.

### **Support network**

In this final empirical section, we focus on our VI runners’ key sources of support during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we have organised into three sub-themes: *Guide Runners*; *Family and Personal Assistants*; and *Running Communities*. We begin with *Guide Runners*, who arguably play the most important support role for the majority of our participants. This section reveals the precarity of VI runner-guide relationships and how they were negotiated throughout the pandemic.

#### **Guide runners**

As discussed earlier, all but one of our participants who ran prior to the pandemic either needed or preferred to run with guides. Some had a main guide, but they all used more than one for a range of reasons, including: not relying too heavily on one guide; the social aspect of running with other people; the challenge of synchronising schedules (also recognised by Lieberman et al. 2019 and Ball et al. 2022); requiring guides for specific events. Social distancing measures introduced in March 2020 and associated British Blind Sport and England Athletics guidance on guide running effectively prevented running outdoors. Throughout the initial months of the pandemic, there was a lack of clarity about sighted guiding more generally,

prompting the RNIB's 'World Upside Down' campaign, which lobbied for tailored guiding advice for blind and partially sighted people (RNIB 2020b). Our participants were similarly frustrated by this lack of clarity and aggrieved that no exemptions were being made for them to partake in the one form of outdoor exercise encouraged by the Government. This injustice was not lost on Laura who argued:

If sighted people were suddenly told "oh you can't run", like there'd be uproar about it... I do think it's been really, really disgusting that there's not been some kind of, you know, work around for people who are visually impaired. Even, not just running, but I mean, even people getting out walking or getting to the shops, you know, they haven't been able to do it.

When guide running was permitted again, the mitigations outlined by British Blind Sport and England Athletics, and personal circumstances of both VI runners and their guides, meant this was a gradual and cautious process for most. As Claire explains:

Obviously, it's a delicate subject because, again, when you're relying on somebody, you don't want to break that, you know, relationship down... I understand peoples' cautiousness because, at the end of the day, it still hasn't gone away, you know?

Several participants discussed being conscious of waiting until they and their guides had been vaccinated, especially for those (Jane) who used older guides who were classed at risk of getting seriously ill from COVID-19. In contrast, Monica and Simon experienced relatively easy negotiations to begin running again, something that came as a surprise to Monica considering previous challenges of finding guides:

Someone shared a post from British Blind Sport... So, I shared it in our VI Runners [place] posts and, amazingly enough, someone commented straight away and said I'm up for running with you.

As the pandemic progressed, some participants and their guides navigated the fluctuating restrictions increasingly on their own terms. Having not run for several months and witnessed other people she perceived to be violating social distancing measures, Aisha and a guide rationalised running together, albeit without contact or a tether:

... me and one of my guides decided that well we were going to run together anyway because we felt like it was social distanced, it was outside and for me I felt like it was almost like erm a caring responsibility because it was for my mental health... so yes, as of January I kind of just started running with her, whether it was a lockdown or not really.

Aisha's justification of running during lockdown aligns with the findings of Burton et al. (2023) who identified the need for emotional support and observations of other peoples' behaviour as two key factors contributing to

non-compliance with social distancing rules. Reflecting on her experiences through the pandemic, Aisha quipped that ‘if we have another lockdown, just marry your guide so that will make it easier’. However, as Laura’s experiences demonstrate, being able to run with a guide from the same household does not alleviate anxieties for both guide and VI runner when negotiating public spaces. In preparation for running again with guides from outside her household, Laura recognised the need to change her preferences. Despite previously describing using a tether as ‘like you’re just running on your own into the unknown’, during her second interview she revealed ‘if I am going to run with other people in the future I need to learn to run with a tether’ to enable greater distance between herself and guides.

### *Family and personal assistants*

Apart from Laura, none of the other participants had family members within their household who were able to act as guide runners. Jane’s mum, who used to guide her, had moved away and her husband was not a runner. Monica’s husband was shielding due to having cerebral palsy. Several participants discussed how they turned to alternative support networks for guiding, including: family outside their household, dog walkers and Personal Assistants. Aisha described how her teenage niece became a makeshift guide while she was home-schooling:

...she rides her bike behind me and I run, and then she’ll tell me if there’s something coming along or whatever, so that’s like an informal thing. She’s not, you know, she’s kind of like my guide runner as well in that sense, but she’s on her bike... She can’t keep up with me running, but she can keep up with me on a bike.

With family unable to provide support, both Jane and Sarah capitalised on other relationships to enable guided running. In April 2021, Jane went for her first guided run since the pandemic began with her guide dog walker who had become part of her support bubble. Although not an experienced or licenced guide runner, Jane regarded her as a safer option than one of her usual guides, due to the trust in their relationship and precautions taken as part of her role:

I know some of my friends who are, you know, have guide runners, they sort of just put a post out on Facebook and go with anyone that will sort of take them. I don’t feel like I am in a situation where that is safe enough for me to do. So, the lady that I run with, she has had one of her vaccines, I have had one of my vaccines, so I kind of feel like we’re in a similar boat. We have kind of got a little bit of protection. She gets tested twice a week for Covid because of her work, so I almost feel like she is the safest bet, if that makes sense. And I don’t feel like I want to sort of be mixing with too many of my guides at the moment.

Unfortunately, this arrangement offered only a temporary solution to Jane as her friend sustained an injury outside of their running, highlighting the

problem of having exclusive VI runner-guide relationships (Ball et al. 2022; Lieberman et al. 2019).

For Sarah, who took up running for the first time in May 2020 during the initial lockdown, it was her recently recruited Personal Assistant who introduced the idea of outdoor running. During our interview, she explains how being a guide runner became an extension of her PA's role:

...we started running then... just friends kind of running together... I'm not paying her to go running with me, we're just going running... I took the view that as I'm a vulnerable adult, I detest that phrase, but as I am, I might as well use it to my advantage... But as far as the government rules are concerned, I felt that we weren't breaking them... I just went for it because I just said, "well, I'm classed as a vulnerable adult. I need assistance to get out and do my exercise".

Sarah deemed it necessary to justify her use of a guide runner during the initial lockdown when guide running was not formally permitted and advice for guiding blind and partially sighted people from any of the home nation governments had not materialised (RNIB 2020c). Although the pandemic resulted in the positive outcome of starting to run, this occurred within the broader context of a disempowering shift in Sarah's autonomy. Having described herself as 'extremely independent' previously, she acknowledges that the pandemic has been 'the first time I've ever really experienced not being able to just go and like go out on my own'. By the time of her second interview, the guiding arrangement with her Personal Assistant had broken down and she was on the search for a new guide. As both Jane and Sarah's experiences demonstrate, maintaining exclusive VI runner-guide relationships, one of the mitigating factors detailed by British Blind Sport and England Athletics, can be challenging, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

### *Running communities*

As well as the support networks already discussed, several participants are also members of wider running communities. While not necessarily VI support networks, running clubs and local parkruns are frequently discussed during our interviews as supportive and welcoming spaces (Hall, Allen-Collinson, and Jackman 2023). During lockdowns, these communities moved online with platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp replacing the face-to-face interaction of running events. Runners also used virtual spaces to share their activities during lockdowns and organise socially distanced group runs as restrictions relaxed. For Jane and Laura, the constant reminder of other runners' activities was overwhelming. Jane, who was shielding during the initial lockdown, disengaged from her running club's Facebook group following feelings of jealousy towards those members who were running outdoors. Similarly, Laura left her running club's WhatsApp group citing the unfairness of sighted runners posting 'every two minutes' about their runs

while VI runners were unable to run with a guide outside of their household. She was particularly aggrieved by the content of the messages:

The world became so visual as well at that point because all people were doing was posting pictures of what they've seen on the run, all the rainbows they'd seen. And I was just like "this is just not a world I even belong to". So, I went from feeling really part of our community to just feeling literally on the outside of it. But I wouldn't expect them not to post those things, that's the sighted world, I get that.

Experiencing a *sighted world*, which is underpinned by ocularcentric and ableist ideology, is commonplace for VI people participating in sport and physical activity (Powis 2020). This sense of not belonging is akin to the psycho-emotional disablism experienced by VI runners (Allen-Collinson, Hall, and Jackman 2023; Hall, Allen-Collinson, and Jackman 2023), with Laura powerfully articulating the isolation and Othering of being part of a community that privileges vision. From photographs of rainbows to screenshots of running routes, interacting on a virtual platform requires visual knowledge, a form of knowledge which is assumed as the 'norm'. In her second interview, Laura reflected on her frustrations and explained that her attitude had now softened: 'You just get used to it...because it has gone on for so long, there is just nothing I can do about it.' At the time, she was also beginning to reengage with her running community and attend in-person running club sessions. The club were welcoming and, in response to the strict restrictions on group exercise, sought to include Laura by counting her and her guide as one person rather than two.

Claire, a prolific runner who has completed twenty marathons and countless other running events, did not experience such accommodations when outdoor activities restarted. Unlike Laura, organisers were reticent to allow Claire and her guide to compete in a six-hour timed event:

There are some events starting back and I did message an organiser, but he wasn't really happy for me to take part. Which is sort of understandable but then sort of not, because I don't see how he's going to regulate everyone else, but I didn't obviously want to argue anything like that, so I just left it at that. But that was a bit frustrating because I did find the guide who would've been willing to let me hold his arm. And I explained I had no symptoms at the time. I'd put a mask on if needs be and hand sanitiser and all that, but never mind, it's not to be.

As she goes on to explain, there was no justification from the organisers. No reference to England Athletics' guidance or social distancing measures; just, in her words, 'oh we can't accommodate you.' This decision is seemingly based on ableist assumptions about risk and vulnerability. Despite both Claire and her guide being consenting adults, the choice to participate it taken out of their hands – whether to protect them or their fellow runners, it is unclear. She also recognises that non-disabled participants would not experience similar scrutiny or exclusion when signing up for paid running events. As Ball

et al. (2022) note, encountering exclusionary practices and the need for self-advocacy remains an ongoing concern for many VI runners (Ball et al. 2022).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our qualitative longitudinal study offers the first in-depth exploration of VI peoples' lived experiences of sport and physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding qualitative richness to the work of Richardson, Petrini, and Proulx (2023) and Strongman et al. (2022). The experiences of our sample highlight the heterogeneity of VI and its complex interactions with socially imposed restrictions of activity. We have revealed how impairment and diverse impairment effects, local running environments and support networks had a significant bearing on how and whether VI runners could continue to run outdoors. For the most part, our participants' opportunities were severely constrained by COVID-related restrictions, particularly the highly visual nature of social distancing measures and the impact on guide running. And whilst there is evidence of VI peoples' agency and resilience, this should not gloss over the ocularcentric and ableist conditions from which it emerged. Although the worst of the pandemic is seemingly behind us, it is essential that VI peoples' needs are not neglected – as they were for at least the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic – should we experience anything similar in the future.

Beyond pandemic-specific findings, our study has also highlighted important considerations for VI running more generally. Our participants' engagement with recreational and event running has almost exclusively taken place in 'sighted' spaces and contexts in which ocularcentric practices prevail. Running has been empowering for all our participants, but they have also been on the receiving end of exclusionary messages and disabling interactions (Allen-Collinson, Hall, and Jackman 2023; Ball et al. 2022; Hall, Allen-Collinson, and Jackman 2023). Despite the launch of England Athletics' *Sight Loss Awareness and Guide Running* workshops in 2014, and the national *Find a Guide* database in 2016, securing guide runners to enable regular outdoor running is a key challenge in some areas. Similar problems in the US have led to researchers exploring the use of guide dogs trained for running, but these developments are in their infancy (Lieberman et al. 2019). We recommend an audit of the *Find a Guide* database and broader exploration of the VI running landscape to better understand local provision. In addition, recent initiatives such as the VI Runners Challenge at the start of Great Run series events (Great Run 2023) and the parkrun VI scheme have helped raise awareness of VI running, but VI runners' experiences of these warrants exploration in order to inform future initiatives.

In June 2022, Activity Alliance highlighted that, compared to other impairment groups, a greater percentage of VI people found returning to activity

after COVID-19 to be a positive experience (Activity Alliance 2022). However, this relative positivity needs to be understood in the context of VI peoples' marginalisation throughout the pandemic, which has been evidenced throughout this article. Given that VI people are twice as likely than other disabled people to exercise in a group (Activity Alliance 2022), it is crucial that their support networks – whether formal or informal – are local, reliable, and sustainable. Moving forward, we encourage further research that explores VI peoples' opportunities to engage in meaningful sport and physical activity and exposes ocularcentric and ableist practices that shape their lived experiences.

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