

IS THE TIDE TURNING?



SPORT ENGLAND ACTIVE LIVES SURVEY

BY ANNA LUNN, RESEARCH CONSULTANT

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Results

Sport England has recently published the latest Active Lives Survey, providing a snapshot of adult (16+) sport and physical activity levels in England from November 2017 to November 2018.

In the twelve month period, the number of adults who are now meeting the guidelines of at least 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity activity (in bouts of 10 minutes or more) has increased by almost half a million, whilst the levels of inactivity (less than 30 minutes a week) has fallen by 185,000. A sum of 62.6% (28.2 million) of the adult population are now classified as 'active'. This significant progress has been driven by increasing participation figures in women, disabled people, those with long-term health conditions and older adults (55+).

The main type of activities behind this increase is walking for leisure and travel (896,000 increase, totaling 34 million) and adventure sports, which includes hill and mountain walking, climbing and orienteering (455,000 increase, totaling 3 million). Fitness activities, particularly gym sessions, remain the second largest contributor.

Nonetheless, a quarter of the adult population (25.1%) are still inactive and persistent inequalities are evident across several demographic groups. Figures remain unchanged or static for low-income families and people from black or South Asian backgrounds, and significant differences continue for disabled adults, those with long-term health conditions (particularly those with three or more impairments) and gender.

Sport England Chief Executive, Tim Hollingsworth, notes:

“Things are moving in the right direction, however, stubborn inequalities remain which show that sport and physical activity still isn’t appealing to everyone.”

Discussion

The overall picture, on the face of it, is positive and encouraging. The results clearly suggest that the adult population are now understanding the benefits of being more active for mental and physical wellbeing. The growth in participation from traditionally under-represented groups demonstrates how the sport and physical activity sector is beginning to recognise the importance of including everyone in society in order to have the most widespread and long-term impact.

It is interesting to note that the behaviour of the adult population is changing, with the majority choosing walking as their preferred activity. This reflects the demands of busy, modern life, where many people have less time and resources to dedicate to keeping fit and active. Walking is a cheap, enjoyable, convenient and accessible activity for people of all backgrounds. This is noteworthy as people are now opting to achieve their ‘active life’ beyond the four walls of a leisure centre or gym. There is considerable opportunity for local authorities and leisure operators to move away from primarily an asset-based focus and better utilise natural assets (parks and open spaces – ‘the active environment’) and engage in targeted outreach work. Equally, the rise in adventure sports participation compared with the lack of growth in ‘traditional sports’ (e.g. swimming and racket sports) highlights the shift in behaviour and trend towards the outdoors.

Despite the progress, equality remains a key priority. Sport and physical activity levels should not be pre-determined based on one’s wealth, gender, age, ability and/or ethnicity. Yet, barriers (whether perceived or actual) remain for a number of demographic groups and it is imperative that local authorities and leisure providers continue to focus their efforts on facilitating genuine inclusion.



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This raises the 'equality' versus 'equity' debate, where, in order to achieve equality (treating everyone the same) leisure providers must provide fair, equitable opportunities to those under-represented groups. 'Equality' has been the predominant focus in recent years, yet it fails to recognise that each person does not begin from a uniform starting point or requires the same amount of assistance or support.

The difficulty in achieving this balance is championed by Martyn Allison, arguably the Leisure sector's key influencer in the last 15 years, who suggests that:

"An 'empathy gap' [exists] between those that supervise, manage, govern and therefore lead the sector, and the people who have been consistently excluded from the services we provide."
(The Leisure Review, September 2018)

This begs the question that if we cannot compassionately put ourselves in the shoes of say a disabled, black person on a low-income, how can we truly understand what equitable opportunities are needed to allow these people to lead an active life?

Summary

In summary, the Active Lives Survey certainly paints an optimistic picture, reporting record numbers of adults now physically active. Beneath the surface, however, a much more complex image is revealed, with shifting trends in activity preference and entrenched inequalities for under-represented groups.

Is the tide really turning? To a degree, yes, but not to the extent where we can claim a real breakthrough. Far more work is required from the sector to bridge the 'empathy gap' and reach all corners of the community.



Key Challenges

- **What value do 'traditional sports' have in the future to community health and wellbeing?**
- **What more can be done to target inactivity inequalities through existing infrastructure and services?**
- **How can local authorities and their operational partners specify and embed equity within services and facilities?**