

Older People's participation in sport in Wales

What do we know about older people in Wales?

In 2016, 20% of people in Wales (634,637) were aged 65 and over. This figure is higher than the UK average which is 18% and is expected to increase to around 25% of the population over the next 20 years (Welsh Government 2017a; ONS 2016). The increase in the proportion of the population over 65 will have a profound impact on Wales. As this age group grows in numbers there is expected to be a marked increase in the number of people suffering with long-term conditions linked to the ageing process such as Alzheimer's disease, deafness and hearing loss. By 2025 there is estimated to be 50,000 people aged 65 or over living with neurological conditions in Wales and nearly a quarter of these will be aged 90 or over (Welsh Government 2017a). This, combined with an increase in other public health issues and growing patient expectations is likely to exacerbate the demand which is being placed on a financially constrained health service (Bevan Commission 2013).

Some areas of Wales are home to older people than others. For example, 8% (50,327) of older people live in Cardiff, while only 2% (10,940) live in Merthyr Tydfil. That said, Cardiff has the lowest *proportion* of people aged over 65 (14%) while Conwy has the highest proportion (27%).

The number of older people living in poverty in Wales stands at a historic low of 14%. Despite the decrease over the past 15 years there are still a significant number of older people living in severe and long-term poverty, particularly single women over 80 years old (National Assembly for Wales 2015).

Interestingly, those aged 65 and over are the age group that are least likely to feel lonely in Wales, and those aged 75 and over have, on average, the lowest levels of anxiety (Welsh Government 2017b).

What do we know about older people's participation in sport in Wales?

In 2016/17 14% of those aged 65 and over participated in sport three or more times per week. This is well below the Welsh average which was 29%. In fact, participation consistently decreases over the life course with only 10% of those aged 75 and over participating three or more times a week.

Inequalities in the participation of older adults don't just exist by age. 18% of older males participate three or more times a week compared to just 11% of older females. Similarly, only 5% of older people living in material deprivation participate three or more times a week compared to 14% who are not living in poverty.

What do we know about why older people's participation levels in sport vary?

Sport Wales has undertaken and commissioned a wide range of research to advance our understanding of why engagement in sport continues to vary so significantly across our population.

Five themes consistently come up. We call these five themes the ‘Elements of Engagement’. The five Elements of Engagement are 1) Motivation, 2) Confidence, 3) Awareness, 4) Opportunity and Resources, and 5) The Experience. Each of these themes are unpicked in the context of older people’s participation below.

What do we know about older people’s motivation to take part in sport?

50% would like to do more sport, while only 13% feel that it is important that they take part. Swimming (16%), bowls (9%) and fitness classes (7%) are the most demanded sport for this group. Their top motives for taking part are keeping fit (16%) and staying healthy (11%). This is consistent with other research which found that issues of weight loss and management were important motivating factors for older people (Kelley et al. 2014).

One of the most frequent environmental motivators for sport participation amongst older adults is marketing material. Successful marketing messages for older adults tend to be those that focus on personal benefits such as feeling better, social opportunity, and enjoyability (Biedenweg et al 2014). Interestingly however, knowledge of PA guidelines and the benefits of being physically active did not predict or impact activity levels in a range of studies with older people (e.g. Ross & Meltzer, 2016). This evidence suggests that educational initiatives and public health campaigns that are solely informational in nature are unlikely to be effective in changing physical activity behaviour.

This segment of the population tend to be attracted by special offers and feel that paying extra to get a quality service is worthwhile.

What do we know about older people’s confidence to take part in sport?

37% of all over 65s in Wales said that they would do more sport if they were fitter. This concern is consistent with other research that has shown misunderstandings about the value of exercise in later life, particularly for those with ongoing healthcare problems. These individuals may not take part as they fear that doing so may exacerbate pre-existing health conditions or result in physical harm (Chaudhury & Shelton, 2010; Evans & Sleaf, 2012, Horne et al 2013). This barrier is particularly prominent among older women (Carmichael, Duberley, & Szmigin, 2015) and may be exacerbated by age-related stereotypes and cultural norms which suggest that sport and rigorous exercise are only for the young (cf. Sims-Gould et al., 2012 Lenneis & Pfister, 2017).

Other concerns may be more acute for those living in neighbourhoods of high socio-economic deprivation. Fears over safety, for example, may prevent some older adults from taking up sports offers in their community (Annear et al. 2009).

Support from friends may help alleviate these fears with research showing that these types of social bonds are a particularly important factor in increasing participation among older adults (Sasidharan, Payne, Orsega-Smith, and Godbey’s 2006).

Sport Wales’ latest segmentation data suggests that this section of the population is most comfortable dealing with someone face-to-face and consequently are the type least likely to make any kind of remote purchase. They also like expert reassurance and prefer dealing with cash rather than any form of credit or debit card.

What do we know about older people’s awareness of sporting opportunities?

Research suggests that there is inadequate distribution of information on available and appropriate sport options for older people. This age group need more guidance on what is available, how to access the offer and what is appropriate for them (Bethancourt et al., 2014). This is likely to be particularly the case for those with long-term conditions such as hearing loss and deafness which are more prevalent amongst this age group (Action on Hearing Loss 2013).

Sport Wales’ segmentation data suggests that this is predominantly an offline section of the community and they are therefore less likely to use digital or social media. This section of the community is likely to be most responsive to direct mail and mid-market newspaper advertising.

What do we know about older people’s opportunities and resources to engage in sport?

In 2016/17, 6% of those aged 65 and over said that they would do more sport if it cost less, and 12% said that they would do more if there were more facilities or clubs in their area. This is consistent with other research which has shown that a lack of proximity to facilities is barrier to physical activity for older adults (Annear et al., 2009). Providing transportation for older adults to access activities may be one effective way of overcoming this barrier (Boyes, 2013).

For those older adults living in neighbourhoods of high socio-economic deprivation cost has been found to be a particularly important issue and may be the main reason why the adults take part in lower levels of neighbourhood based leisure time physical activity (Annear et al 2009).

What do we know about older people’s experience of taking part in sport?

Providing adequate facilities is a prerequisite for sport participation but this factor alone is not enough to ensure greater levels of engagement among older adults (Hickerson et al. 2008). In order to achieve a more active older generation, participants must have quality experiences of sport. Research suggests that there are several ways of achieving this:

- While most studies advocate informal and non-competitive forms of sport for older adults, for some setting personal targets and striving to beat previous records can be an effective way of increasing and sustaining the motivation required to participate (Kelley et al 2014, Berlin & Klenosky, 2014; Pfister, 2012).
- Sporting experiences that develop personal capital and empower participants have been shown to have a positive influence on motivation. This can be achieved by focusing on exercises and activities that are useful beyond the sporting context (Kohn, Belza, Petrescu-Prahova, & Miyawaki, 2016).
- Social aspects of participation such as peer recognition and social support tend to be highly valued by older people. Indeed, research has been consistent in demonstrating the positive impact of shared leisure experiences on quality of life among the elderly. Social networks that include family and friends should therefore be harnessed where possible (Kelley et al. 2014).

What next?

- We know that swimming, bowls and fitness classes are the most demanded sports among older adults. Should we be providing more accessible opportunities for older people to take part in these activities or improving our marketing and communication of other sporting activities?
- How can we make sporting opportunities more sociable and empowering for older people?
- Safety and cost are more prominent barriers for older people living in areas of high socio-economic deprivation. How could these challenges be overcome?
- Participation consistently declines throughout the life course and one in four people are expected to be aged 65 and over by 2037. Should participation initiatives among older people be a strategic priority in Wales?

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