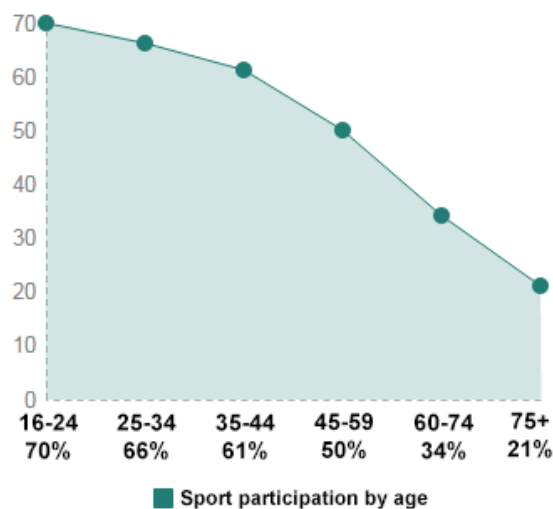


Older people and sport

What are the important issues?

In adults, the 16 to 24 year old age group reports higher levels of sports participation (excluding walking) than other age groups. There is a clear drop off among those aged 45 and over, with rates of sports participation over the past four weeks in 2014 falling for these age groups.



However, there is evidence that physical activity (broader than sport) among those aged 65 and over is increasing each year. There is also evidence that older adults (up to the age of 74) are almost as likely as young people to walk for recreation¹.

It is also important to be aware of trends by ethnic origin and gender. Recent research² shows that while most ethnic groups in Scotland report better health than the 'white Scottish' ethnic group, older Pakistani women reported poor health, considerably worse than the older men within these groups. Pakistani adults are least likely to participate in sport (30% compared to an average of 49%)³.

¹ Active Scotland Outcomes: Indicator Equality Analysis, Scottish Government, 2015

² Which ethnic groups have the poorest health? Scottish Government, 2015

³ Active Scotland Outcomes: Indicator Equality Analysis, Scottish Government, 2015

What do we know about the problem?

Barriers

Research⁴ has revealed that there are complex individual, social and environmental barriers faced by older people who wish to participate more with sport and activity.

- Older people are more likely to have a limiting condition or disability. This means that many older people can face the same barriers as disabled people in sports participation. For more detail, see the separate learning note on disability and sport, produced within this series.
- Older people can have concerns about the safety of participation in sport, and the chances of being injured. Older people may have lost confidence in their ability to participate, and may require additional support to overcome this.
- Social support also plays an important motivational role in physical activity participation and can be influenced by friends, family, carers, health practitioners, and activity instructors. Trust, shared values and solidarity among neighbours is associated with higher levels of physical activity. Research⁵ shows that older people who live alone have lower physical activity levels than individuals who are married.
- There can also be wider barriers around transport and fear of crime which may discourage older people from travelling to access exercise facilities.

Our research found that some older people felt less happy with the competitive element of sport as they aged. Some said that they only felt comfortable participating in sport for leisure purposes. Older people found they were looking for companionship and opportunities to socialise, rather than opportunities to play at a competitive level.

Our research also found that some older people found the cost of activities off putting and led to them reducing or stopping their sports activity.

“Sports clubs and groups can be very restrictive in terms of cost.”

(Older person, telephone interview)

However, compared with some other protected characteristics, there is comparatively little research into experiences of sport participation for older people in Scotland.

⁴ www.bhfactive.org.uk/files/502/49834_Evidence_Briefing_Adults_4.pdf

⁵ www.bhfactive.org.uk/files/502/49834_Evidence_Briefing_Adults_4.pdf

Sporting system issues

There is very little evidence about the age profile of those working, taking decisions, coaching or officiating in sport.

Evidence suggests that volunteering in the fields of activity and sport declines with age in Scotland. Among only those adults who do volunteer, 22 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds volunteer with sport or exercise (coaching or organising), falling to 16 per cent for those aged 60 plus⁶.

There is a body of research and evidence around retirement ages for athletes and referees. For example, research exploring referee retirement ages found that organisations such as the SFA (Scottish Football Association) and FIFA used to have retirement ages for referees, but now use fitness tests to determine referee ability. European basketball and international ice hockey also use the fitness test approach to determine referee ability. However, the research suggested that some still have unwritten rules that referees should retire around the age of 50⁷.

What can we do about it?

More research is needed to explore why certain older people maintain a new exercise activity while other older people decide to drop out quickly⁸. However, there are some important lessons from existing research.

1. **Emphasise the social aspect**

Presenting sports activities as opportunities for having fun, socialising and reducing isolation can help to connect with older people and their priorities.

2. **Listen to older people**

Involve older people in planning and developing programmes, and tailor programmes to the needs and level of individual participants.

3. **Address practical barriers**

Think about the social and economic barriers that older people may face, such as costs, transport and access to facilities. Remember that safety, trust, social connections and confidence play an important role in encouraging participation.

⁶ Active Scotland Outcomes: Indicator Equality Analysis, Scottish Government, 2015

⁷ McArdle, D, Some Reflections on Age Discrimination, Referees' Retirement Ages and European Sports (Law), 2009

⁸ [http://www.journalofphysiotherapy.com/article/S1836-9553\(14\)00080-0/abstract](http://www.journalofphysiotherapy.com/article/S1836-9553(14)00080-0/abstract)

4. **Avoid stereotypes - Older people are all individuals, and have different interests and priorities**
It is important to develop innovative and creative programmes which avoid stereotyping older people and promote a positive image of older people⁹.

What is already happening?

There is some good work already happening. Here are just some examples.

Example

The 'Mentro Allan' action research programme in Wales involved 14 different approaches to help hard to reach groups become more physically active. One project targeted older people. Initial contact was made with a core group through a local sewing club, and wider community consultation also took place. The project gathered views about potential activities, and those of most interest were archery, walking and Tai Chi. Taster sessions were set up for all three, and a successful archery group developed. Some participants also maintained an interest in Nordic Walking. Critical to the success of the approach was that it was participant led, flexible, started from where people felt comfortable and valued the social aspect of activities.¹⁰

Example

Tennis is an adaptable sport, which enables people to play at a level appropriate to their age and fitness. Evidence from England shows that some clubs have marketed the social aspect of the sport to encourage older people to participate – including running club social nights, quiz nights and wine tasting. Many are using online information to promote the social aspects of the sport.¹¹

⁹ <http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/PromotingPhysicalActivityOlderPeople.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://sport.wales/media/965416/mallancs1e.pdf>

¹¹ Understanding variations in sports participation Case study in driving participation: LTA and tennis, Sport England, August 2010

Example

Edinburgh Leisure runs an Ageing Well programme for adults aged 50 and over. This programme caters for over 400 adults in community venues, and is supported by volunteers. Activities include swimming, chair based exercise, cycling, dancing, curling and walking – as well as gardening, photography, knitting and singing. There is a strong focus on a warm welcoming environment, with fun, chat and refreshments at the sessions. The costs are kept to a minimum, often a £1 voluntary contribution. The programme is funded by NHS Lothian and run by Edinburgh Leisure, in partnership with Pilmeny Development Project.¹²

Find out more...

Useful sources for finding out more include:

- **sportscotland** commissioned [a very detailed study on older people and sport](#) in 2004, which contains a detailed analysis of barriers and drivers for involvement¹³;
- the documents referenced throughout this Learning Note – as footnotes; and
- the full research report on equality in sport, produced for **sportscotland** in 2015.

¹² <http://about.edinburghleisure.co.uk/what-we-do/physical-activity-health/ageing-well/>

¹³ Older People, Sport and Physical Activity: A Review of Key Issues for sportscotland by Linda Nicholson The Research Shop, 2004