



SPÓRT ÉIREANN  
SPORT IRELAND

## IRISH SPORTS MONITOR ANNUAL REPORT 2022





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## Foreword

On behalf of Sport Ireland, I welcome the publication of the 2022 Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) Report. This latest wave of the ISM provides us with the first clear picture of the Irish sporting landscape as it emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. As we saw from the 2021 ISM report, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns had a profound impact on Irish sport. Most organised sport and much of the sporting infrastructure around the country was closed for extended periods, with reductions in participation, volunteering, and club membership across all sectors of society. However, Ireland's dedication to sport and physical activity saw people adapt their behaviours, while complying with COVID protocols, as rates of running, cycling and recreational walking increased greatly.

I believe the 2022 ISM highlights the fantastic work that has been done across the country to return Irish sport to the healthy state we remember from before the pandemic. The results show a remarkable recovery across many sectors of sporting society, but also highlight the need for further efforts in key areas such as volunteering, club membership, disability inclusion and gender equity as we continue to work towards meeting the objectives of the National Sport Policy.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the many thousands of people across the country who resumed their membership and volunteering duties within their local clubs and sports communities. Without these local efforts, our national recovery from the pandemic would not have been as successful. While it is positive to see the huge increase in social engagement in sport throughout 2022, I must also acknowledge the considerable challenges that remain if we are to return to or even surpass pre-pandemic levels of participation and ensure that the wide-ranging benefits of sport are shared equitably throughout our society.

We will continue to monitor progress throughout 2023 with an additional full year ISM report. Further ISMs are also scheduled for 2024 and beyond, making it possible to track and understand the longer-term impacts of the pandemic and to continue tracking our progress towards meeting the objectives of the National Sports Policy.

I thank Kieran O'Leary, Jessica Hearne and the team at Ipsos as well as Benny Cullen, Neil Fleming and the research team at Sport Ireland for their work over the past number of years on the ISM and for developing this insightful 2022 report.

**Dr Una May, Sport Ireland CEO**

## Introduction

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## Introduction

The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) is a long-established survey providing an ongoing measurement of sports participation in Ireland. The ISM measures both recreational and competitive sport as defined in the National Sports Policy.

*“recreational sport means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or regular participation, aim at – (a) expressing or improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, and (b) forming social relationships”*

*“competitive sport means all forms of physical activity which, through organised participation, aim at – (a) expressing or improving physical fitness, and (b) obtaining improved results in competition at all levels”.*

Further, the 2022 ISM measures multiple domains of sport focusing on active sports participation but also social participation in sport which includes club membership, volunteering, event attendance and for the first time in 2022, the ISM measured National Governing Body (NGB) membership. Finally, the ISM also includes questions to measure recreational walking, as well as walking and cycling for transport.

With data collected since 2007 ISM provides a valuable series of cross sectional studies to understand how Irish sport has developed over 15 years.

ISM is able to provide this robust and continuous measurement of sports participation by using a consistent definition and measurement of active and social participation in sport. Interview respondents are asked a series of questions about all forms of active participation in sport, recreational walking, volunteering and attendance at sports events during the 7 day period before the individual was surveyed. It also measures current club membership and regular walks or cycles for transport.

The ISM reports provide stakeholders across the sports ecosystem, at local and national levels, with valuable insights that inform the development of sport policy, strategy and the resources, finance and infrastructure that are necessary to support it.

A large sample size of 8,500 respondents per annum means that in-depth analysis can be conducted across population cohorts. Survey interviewing is spread over the course of the year to allow for and measure any seasonality effects on participation data. The 2022 ISM report has a slightly different structure to previous ISM reports. The first three core chapters on active sports participation, social sports participation and broader physical activity remain. However in 2022 subsequent chapters focus on some of the demographic groups which have been identified as key target groups in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 and the Sports Action Plan 2021-2023. Accordingly, the subsequent chapters explore how age, gender, socio-economic status, disability, ethnicity and rural vs urban locations relate to participation in sport and physical activity

In addition to the continuous measurements of sports participation, the ISM includes a number of special modules at various points throughout the year. During 2022 these included measurements on safety when participating in sport, membership of NGBs, spending on sport and the impact of inflation. These individual measurements add significant value to understanding particular dynamics that may be impacting on participation levels.

This report follows from the 2021 annual report which identified a decline in sports participation during the period of restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While this period was marked by changing physical activity behaviours, the overall effect was a decline in sports participation and widening gradients across gender and social groups.

Results from the 2022 study identify that while there has been a recovery in participation levels, and a return to pre-pandemic behaviours in many respects, there remains further ground to be regained in maximising participation levels and eliminating the various gaps in participation across different population groups.

Fieldwork is currently underway on the 2023 study with interim reporting on initial trends scheduled to be released later in 2023.





## Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

### Participation in sport

- Participation in sport increased by 3 percentage points since 2021, with 43% of the adult population participating regularly in sport in 2022. This equates to approximately 1.75 million adults who participated in sport and 170,000 adults who either resumed or begun participating in sport since 2021.
- Although the levels of sport participation have not yet returned to those measured in 2019 (46%), due to population growth the number of adults participating in sport in 2022 is only just behind the 1.77 million who were participating in 2019.
- Personal exercise remained the most popular activity, with over twice as many participants as the second most popular activity, swimming. Running, cycling, and weights made up the remainder of the five most popular sports in 2022.
- A readjustment was seen in the locations people participated in sport. The proportion participating in sport in public places and at home decreased, while the proportion using gyms, sports centres, and sports clubs all increased which mirrors location preferences prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 29% of people reported that they would be interested in taking up a new sport. Tennis (11%), rugby (11%), and swimming (9%) were the most popular sports people would like to take up.

### Social participation

- In 2022, 34% of the population were involved in a social form of sports participation (club membership, volunteering or attending sporting events), an increase since 2021 (32%) but still far behind social participation levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which were at 47% in 2019.
- 31% reported being a club member, compared to 36% in 2019. This means that approximately 125,000 who ceased a club membership during 2020 and 2021 did not restart their memberships.
- 15% of adults reported being a member of a National Governing Body (NGB), while just over a third (36%) of club members were members of their NGB.
- Overall volunteering rates were at 9% representing 370,000 people. Volunteering rates remain well behind pre-pandemic levels in 2019 when 12% of the population volunteered in sport.
- Event attendance has increased significantly in 2022 (17%) compared to levels seen during the pandemic (9%) and has nearly returned to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019 (19%).
- Sports participants reported spending €286 on sports equipment, coaching, health services and facility access over the past three months, equating to €95 per month or €1,144 per year. In addition sports participants reported spending an average of €373 on club membership fees a year.

## Broader physical activity

- The ISM classified 37% of the population as being highly active in 2022, meaning that approximately 1.5 million adults met the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking.
- Although the proportion classified as highly active reduced since 2021, this figure is higher than any seen prior to 2021 (2019: 34%).
- Recreational walking declined from 74% in 2021 to 68% in 2022. Despite this decline, the level of recreational walking recorded in 2022 was still higher than any recorded prior to 2021 (2019: 66%).
- An adjustment was seen in the types of physical activity people engaged in, although recreational walking declined, walking for transport increased to 54% (2021: 48%).
- 11% cycled regularly for transport, a level which has been broadly consistent throughout the previous waves of the ISM.

## Spotlight on age

- The age gradient in sport participation continued to be evident with sport participation declining throughout the life course. The age gap was 25 percentage points between those aged under 35 (60%) and aged 35 and over (35%), compared to 26 percentage points in 2021 (58% and 32% respectively).
- An age gap was evident in overall social participation, 42% of under-35-year-olds and 30% of those aged 35 and over socially participated in sport. However, for volunteering and event attendance participation was higher among those aged 35 and over
- In contrast to sport where participation declines with age, recreational walking levels increase with age up until the age of 65 where there is a slight drop in participation.
- Higher rates of walking for transport were particularly evident among younger age groups, three-quarters of 16-24-year-olds walked for transport regularly compared to 64% in the same age group in 2021. Cycling for transport is also higher among younger age groups, 16% of under-35-year-olds cycled regularly for transport compared to 9% of those aged 35 and over.
- Among under-35-year-olds, men (44%) were more likely than women (39%) to be highly active, however a decline in activity among men aged 35 and over, means that this gender gap in activity levels was reversed after age 35 (men 31%; women 38%).

## Spotlight on gender

- Sport participation increased by 2 percentage points among both men (45%) and women (40%) since 2021. The gender gap remained unchanged at 5 percentage points since 2021, and as in previous years is eliminated after the age of 45. In both cases, participation levels remained below those measured in 2019 (men 48%, women 45%) where the gender gap stood at 3 percentage points.
- Personal exercise was the most popular sport among men (16%) and women (15%), followed by running (7%) and cycling (7%) for men, and swimming (8%) and running (5%) for women.

- The gender gap in overall social participation has continued to narrow in 2022, to 10 percentage points, compared to 13 percentage points in 2019. This was due to a slight narrowing of the gender gap in club membership and event attendance, to 10 percentage points and 1 percentage point respectively.
- An 8 percentage point gap in recreational walking existed between men and women, with women more likely to walk for recreation. The gap remained the same as in 2019 after narrowing from a 12 point gap in 2015.
- Women (38%) were more likely than men (35%) to be classified as highly active – the same gender gap existed in 2019.
- Men are more likely to participate socially in sport however the gender gap in social participation narrowed to 10 percentage points in 2022, compared to 13 points in 2019. This is due to a slight narrowing of the gender gap in club membership and event attendance, to 10 points and 2 points respectively.
- Women (26%) were more likely than men (21%) to report having experienced some form of verbal or physical harassment from someone else when exercising. Among those who experienced harassment during sport, exercise, or walking, 39% of women reported making some changes to their activity such as when or where they participated. In contrast, only 17% of men reported the same.

### Spotlight on socio-economic status

- The social gradient in sports participation widened in 2022 to 23 percentage points, compared to 22 percentage points in 2021 and 19 percentage points in 2019. Sports participation among the ABC1 social group has increased from 51% to 55% since 2019, while it has declined by 7 percentage points within the C2DE group to 32%.
- Overall, a greater level of social participation remained among those from a higher socio-economic background (ABC1 44%, C2DE 23%). This gap was consistent across club membership (ABC1 42%, C2DE 21%), volunteering (ABC1 11%, C2DE 5%) and event attendance (ABC1 19%, C2DE 14%).
- A social gradient also existed in the proportion of people meeting National Physical Activity Guidelines, with a difference of 12 percentage points between ABC1s and C2DEs. This gradient widened by 1 percentage point since 2021 (11 percentage point gap).
- 41% of the C2DE group said the recent increase in the cost of living has made it a lot more difficult to manage financially, compared to 23% of ABC1s saying the same. Just under a fifth (19%) of both ABC1s and C2DEs made cutbacks to their spending on sport, most commonly to event attendance and club memberships.

### Spotlight on disability

- 28% of those with a long-term illness or disability played sport on a regular basis. This compares to 48% among people without a long-term illness or disability. The level of sport participation among people with a long-term illness or disability increased from 26% in 2021 but remained below levels seen in 2019 (33%).

- 22% of those with a disability had a regular social participation in sport. This compares to 38% among people without a disability (16 percentage point gap). The disability gap has remained relatively stable since 2019 (15 percentage point gap), though social participation was lower than in 2019 for both groups (35% and 50% respectively)
- 27% of people with a disability were classified as highly active, while 40% of people without a disability were highly active. Inactivity was higher among people with a disability (20%) and has increased by 1 percentage point since 2019 (19%). This compares to just under a tenth of people without a disability classified as inactive (9%), the same proportion as seen in 2019.
- Around one-fifth (22%) of those with a disability have a sport that they have never played that they would like to consider trying, while 32% of people without a disability say the same.

### Spotlight on ethnicity

- Sport participation increased in each ethnic group since 2021, though participation remained highest among White Irish (56%). This compares to 53% and 51% respectively among those from Black, Asian, or other background and Other White background respectively.
- Overall social participation was highest among White Irish (45%), but below 2019 levels (56%). Social participation levels among other White backgrounds (24%) and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (28%) also remained lower than in 2019 (Other White 36%; Black, Asian, or other backgrounds 43%).
- The proportion of people meeting National Physical Activity Guidelines and classified as highly active was highest among White Irish (42%), followed by people from other White backgrounds (35%), and Black, Asian, and other backgrounds (32%).

### Spotlight on urban and rural

- Sports participation has increased in both urban (46%) and rural (39%) areas since 2021 (42% and 37% respectively). The gap in participation between urban and rural areas stands at 7 percentage points, increasing from a 4 percentage point gap in 2019.
- Exercise, swimming and running were the most popular activities in both areas, although personal exercise was more popular in urban areas than rural areas (17% and 12% respectively).
- Social participation in urban areas (34%) has increased since 2021 (31%). Bringing it in line with participation levels in rural areas (34%). However, social participation remained lower than in 2019 (urban: 44%, rural: 50%), as both areas are slow to recover.
- Gym memberships were more common in urban than rural areas (14% and 8% respectively). In rural areas 14% were members of a Gaelic Games club compared to 7% of those living in urban areas.
- Volunteering was more common in rural than urban areas (11% and 7% respectively).





## 1. Participation in Sport

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## Participation in Sport

- Participation in sport increased by 3 percentage points since 2021, with 43% of the adult population participating regularly in sport in 2022. This equates to approximately 1.75 million adults who participated in sport and 170,000 adults who have either resumed or begun participating in sport since 2021.
- Although the levels of sport participation have not yet returned to those measured in 2019 (46%), due to population growth the number of adults participating in sport in 2022 is only just behind the 1.77 million who were participating in 2019.
- Personal exercise remained the most popular activity, with over twice as many participants as the second most popular activity, swimming. Running, cycling, and weights made up the remainder of the five most popular sports in 2022.
- A readjustment was seen in the locations people participated in sport. The proportion participating in sport in public places and at home has decreased, while the proportion using gyms, sports centres, and sports clubs all increased which mirrors location preferences prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 29% of people reported that they would be interested in taking up a new sport. Tennis (11%), rugby (11%), and swimming (9%) were the most popular sports that people would like to take up.

## Introduction

A primary objective of the ISM is to monitor sports participation at a population level and across various key demographics including gender, age, disability, and socio-economic status. The ISM provides a robust measurement of sport participation by asking all respondents about their participation in any sporting activities in the previous seven days. Recreational walking, walking for transport and cycling for transport in the last seven days are measured in separate sections of the survey. Physical activity related to work or domestic responsibilities is not measured in the ISM.

The ISM is used to track progress toward achieving the goals set in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 with data from this survey used to monitor the development of sports participation over time. High level goals relating to increased sport participation include increasing the number of adults regularly playing sport and the elimination of the sports participation gender gap.

This wave of the ISM tracks the changing sport and physical activity behaviours of the population as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sport dissipates. This section provides an overview of overall sport participation within the population and provides comparisons to previous ISM waves in 2019 and 2021.

## Overall participation in sport

This wave of the ISM identifies that 43% of the adult population regularly participated in sport during 2022. This means that 1.75 million people participate regularly in sport. Regular sport participation is linked to improved health and wellbeing, lower mortality rates, and positive impacts on mental health.

The prevalence of sport participation increased in 2022 compared to 2021, with participation rates returning to levels seen in 2015 and 2017. However, participation rates remain behind those measured in 2019 (46%) when sports participation peaked before the impact of pandemic restrictions caused a decline in participation in 2021 (40%). This 3 percentage point increase in sport participation in 2022 is positive, and represents an additional 170,000 adults who have either resumed or begun participating in sport since 2021.



**Figure 1.1 Overall Participation in Sport 2019-2022 (%)**



*Note: The margin of error for 2022 data is shown in parentheses.*

While participation levels for 2022 were lower than pre-pandemic levels, analysis of quarterly data during the year indicates that sports participation increased steadily throughout the year before declining in the fourth quarter.

During the first quarter of 2022 between January and March, 40% of the population regularly participated in sport, however this rose to 45% during the third quarter between July and September. While participation levels were slightly lower during the final quarter (42%) this may be reflective of seasonality effects and still remains ahead of those measured at the start of the year.

Overall, the results of ISM 2022 paint a positive picture in respect of the return to sport participation, and interim data for the first 6-months of 2023 indicate that this positive trend is continuing.

### **Most popular sports and physical activities in 2022**

Despite considerable changes in sports participation during the pandemic, the ranking of the most popular sports remained broadly unchanged. During this period, access to organised sport and sporting facilities was limited meaning that while some individuals switched to an alternative activity, others stopped playing altogether. The 2022 ISM results, however, indicate that these changes are being reversed post pandemic. As with overall participation levels – both the order of popularity and participation rates in most sports have returned to where they were in 2017 as indoor sport facilities and team sports return to full operation.

Sports typically played in indoor leisure facilities such as personal exercise and swimming have seen increases in participation since 2021. This is likely an outcome of increased accessibility to gyms and fitness classes, which fall under the personal exercise category, as well as the reopening of indoor swimming pools to the public.

In contrast, activities such as weights and yoga which saw increased activity levels during the pandemic – most likely as a result of home-based activity, perhaps guided through online content – have declined during 2022. Many of these individuals may have returned to the sports they participated in prior to the pandemic.

A further dynamic seen during the pandemic restrictions was a decline in team-based sports as these sports were not permitted under government guidelines to contain the spread of COVID-19. This dynamic has now been reversed, with participation in team-based sports rising to 18% of sports participants, compared with 14% in 2021 and 17% in 2019.

**Figure 1.2 Sports Participation among the most popular sports 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error for 2022 data is at most  $\pm 0.8\%$ .

Personal exercise remained the most popular activity, with over twice as many participants as swimming, the second most popular activity. Furthermore, as is the case with most of the more popular sports, it has regained many of the participants lost during the period of pandemic restrictions.

Participation levels in swimming declined significantly between 2019 and 2021, likely due to the closure of swimming pools for much of that period. This meant that swimming became the fourth most popular sport after running and cycling, however the reopening of pools has seen it reinstated as the second most popular activity in 2022.

During 2022 a special module was included on the ISM focussing on participation in swimming. This explored a number of aspects in order to provide greater understanding of swimming beyond regular participation in the sport. It identified that, overall, almost three-quarters (72%) of adults can swim.

### Participation in multiple sports

The ISM permits respondents to provide details on up to three activities participated in during the previous 7 days. Three out of every ten people participate in one activity (30%), while one in ten people participate in two activities (10%), and just 3% participate in three different activities per week.

Overall, 13% of adults participated in multiple sports each week. Notably, this figure is broadly unchanged over the past number of years, including during 2021 when 13% of adults participated in multiple sports. This suggests that individuals who are engaged in multiple sports may have been less likely to reduce their sport participation throughout the COVID-19 restrictions, with the decline coming through those participating in just one sport. At a population level 30% participated in just one sport, lower than the proportion seen in 2019 (32%) but higher than 2021 (27%).

Personal exercise, the most popular sport in 2022, was also the sport most likely combined with other sports. Over a quarter of those playing Gaelic Football (26%) also participate in personal exercise, as do roughly a fifth of runners (22%). In these instances, personal exercise is most likely used as a form of supplementary strength and conditioning training.

The most common combinations of sport participation are seen within the Gaelic Games. People who play Gaelic Games including hurling, camogie or Gaelic football were highly likely to play a second Gaelic Game. 26% of hurlers and 29% of camogie players also reported playing Gaelic football. Looking at soccer, 4% of soccer players reported playing Gaelic football too while 5% of Gaelic football players reported playing soccer.

### ***Special Module - Sports People Would Like to Take Up***

At the start of 2022, 29% of people reported that there was a sport they had never played that they would like to consider trying. Among those who would like to take up a new sport, tennis (11%), rugby (11%), and swimming (9%) are the most popular sports that people have never played and would like to take up. Notably out of the three sports people would most like to take up, swimming is the only sport that also appears in the most popular sports in 2022. A similar question about wanting to take up more sport was asked later in the year, with a similar proportion of people showing an interest in doing more sport than they do currently.

Health is the main motivation behind people wanting to try a new sport. Almost one fifth report that they want to try a new sport to improve their fitness (19%), 14% want to improve their physical health and 6% want to improve their mental health. When asked where they would be most likely to start playing a new sport almost half (48%) said they would start playing in a club, while a further 20% would start at a gym or leisure centre.

This module also assessed transitions out of sport in the previous 12 months. One in five (19%) people said there was a sport that they used to play on a regular basis and stopped playing in the previous 12 months. Among those who had dropped out of a sport, 19% had stopped playing soccer, 13% stopped playing GAA football and 10% stopped swimming.

### **Location**

A readjustment can be seen in the locations people are choosing to participate in sport. ISM 2021 identified an increase in the proportions playing sport at home and in public places as many sports facilities were closed. The proportion of people participating in sport in both public places and at home have declined since 2021, although the proportion participating in sport at home in 2022 (19%) remained higher than it was in 2019 (11%). This continuity of home-based sports participation may be a result of investments in home gym and sport equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased availability of online training and exercise resources.

Many participants however have migrated back to sports infrastructure throughout 2022, with the proportion of sports participants using gyms, sports centres, and sports clubs all seeing increased activity levels, despite many sports facilities only open for a portion of 2022. Gyms and sports centres are again the most popular location for sports participation, with 28% participating there.

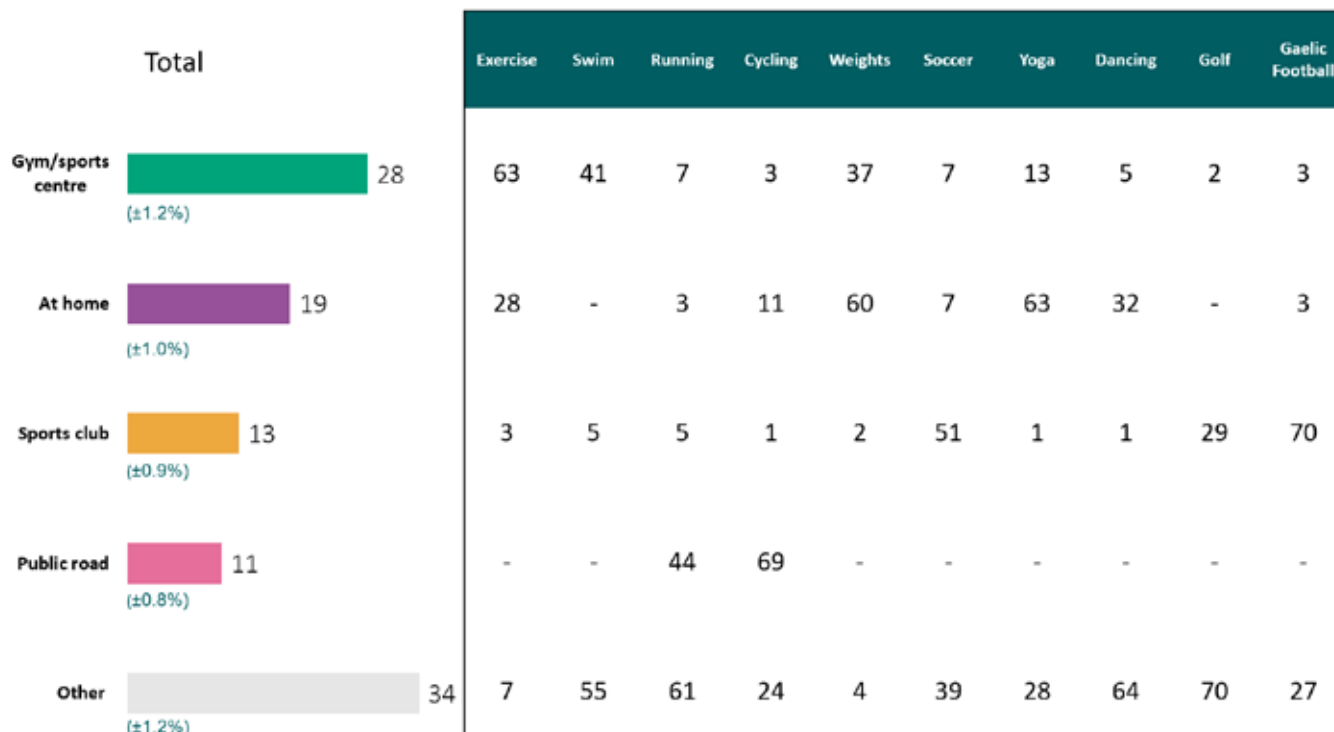
**Figure 1.3 Location for sports participation – most common location (% Sport Participants)**

	2019	2021	2022
Gym/sports centre	33	15	28 (±1.2%)
At home	11	32	19 (±1.0%)
Sports club	17	11	13 (±0.9%)
Public place (TOTAL)	23	35	23 (±1.2%)
- Road	-	19	11 (±0.8%)
- Park	-	6	5 (±0.6%)
- Beach/seaside	-	5	4 (±0.5%)
- Footpath	-	4	2 (±0.8%)
- Public green	-	2	1 (±0.2%)

Note: The margins of error for 2022 data are shown in parentheses.

The increase in the number of people participating in personal exercise is likely reflected in the larger proportion of people using gyms and sports centres, however it is notable that 28% of people participating in personal exercise also continue to do so from home.

**Figure 1.4 Location for sport participation by sport 2022 (% Sport participants)**



Most of the top ten most popular sports also take place in the most popular sport locations. Exercise (63%), swimming (41%), and weights (37%) largely take place in gyms and sport centres. While running (44%) and cycling (69%) mostly take place on public roads. Swimming and golf are exceptions, as an additional 23% of swimming takes place on the beach or seaside and 22% in a swimming pool, and the majority on golf takes place on a golf course (67%) or sports club (29%).

### Special Module - The Sport Ireland Campus

The development of the Sport Ireland Campus provides sports participants with a unique location in which to participate in sport. Its mission is to be the home of Irish sport offering a diverse range of facilities to create an environment where “performance, participation, and recreational sport live side by side”. During November and December, the ISM explored public awareness and visits to the Sport Ireland Campus.

Just under 1 in 10 respondents (7%) reported having visited the campus, although geographical proximity is key in this respect with this rising to 13% of those living in Dublin. In contrast, only 3% of those living outside of Leinster have visited the campus.

A similar proportion (9%) intended to visit the campus over the next 12 months. Geographic proximity is again a significant factor with 12% of Dublin residents planning a visit compared with 6% of those living outside of Leinster.

### Format of sports participation

As more sports participants gravitated back toward sports clubs, gyms, and sports centres they also returned toward participating in sport in a social context. With fewer people participating in sport on their own and more people engaging in organised training.

When considering the format of sport over the course of 2022, it appears that there was a significant impact as a result of the emergence from social restrictions in the early part of 2022. For example, remote organised training peaked at 6% in January and declined throughout the remainder of 2022, while in-person organised training increased throughout the year peaking at 34% in October.

The proportion of people participating in sport on their own has declined since 2021 (56%) by 7 percentage points to 49%. However, this proportion is still higher than any recorded between 2015 and 2019 and remains the most common format of sport participation.

**Figure 1.5 Format of sports participation 2019-2022 (% of sports participants)**

	2019	2021	2022
On own	43	56	49 (±1.3%)
Casually with friends/ family	25	25	24 (±1.1%)
Organised training (TOTAL)	34	22	29 (±1.2%)
- In person	-	16	26 (±1.1%)
- Remote	-	6	3 (±0.4%)
Organised competition	7	3	5 (±0.6%)
Some other way	1	1	2 (±0.4%)

Note: The margins of error for 2022 data are shown in parentheses.

### Special Module - Competitive Sport

Although organised training overall has seen an increase in participation, especially in-person training, the proportion of people engaging in organised competition has been slow to increase since 2021, increasing by only 2 percentage points in 2022. During 2022, 5% of sports participants took part in organised competition. This figure is still below competitive participation rates between 2015 and 2019, when between 7% and 8% were participating competitively.

The slower return to competitive sport was the focus of a special module run during the course of ISM 2022 fieldwork. For this measurement competitive sport was defined as any form of organised sport at any level where the focus is on results in a competition - including races, matches, leagues or other types of competitions. Respondents were asked if they had ever played competitive sport as an adult, as opposed to the main ISM questionnaire which asks about participation in organised sport within the past seven days. Due to the longer recall timeframe, the proportion of adults who reported having participated in some form of competitive sport differs to that as reflected in the main ISM figures above.

Based on this definition, 37% of adults said they had participated in competitive sport at some point beyond the age of 16, with men (46%) more likely than women (28%) to have participated competitively. Gaelic football (27%), soccer (25%), and hurling/camogie (10%) were the most popular competitive sports overall in adulthood – with all of these significantly more popular among men (31%, 37%, and 15% respectively).

Among women, Gaelic football (20%), running (12%), and basketball (12%) have the highest rates of competitive participation in adulthood. Overwhelmingly, playing on a club team against other clubs (84%) is the most popular context for adult competitive sport participation. This is followed by competing alone in club competitions (24%).

This module also explored factors leading to the cessation of competitive sport in adulthood. It found that competitive sport was most likely to cease between the ages of 25 to 34 (39%). The most common reasons for ceasing competitive participation in adulthood are getting too old (29%), picking up injuries (16%), and no longer having the time due to work (16%).

### Frequency, duration and intensity

On average, sports participants take part in activities 2.6 days a week – a slight decline in frequency since 2021 (2.8 days). Participants, however, are active on a more frequent basis than they were in 2019 (2.5 days a week). This may suggest an eagerness among the population to maintain an active lifestyle while possibly adjusting to different ways of life with increased levels of working from home and flexible working arrangements.

**Figure 1.6 Average frequency and duration of sports activities 2019-2022**

	2019	2021	2022
Average frequency (sessions per week)	2.5	2.8	2.6
Average duration (minutes per session)	69.2	68.0	69.4

In total, sports participants spend an average of almost 3.75 hours per week playing sport. Note that this is longer than reported in previous ISMs due to a change in the method of calculation which takes into account both duration of individual sessions and frequency of sessions across the week.

The time spent playing sport differs widely across individuals, reflecting the variety that exists across sport – both in terms of the time involved in individual sessions, as well as the frequency by which they are played. One in five (20%) of all sports participants play up to an hour of sports each week, with a similar proportion (21%) playing more than 5 hours per week. The median amount of time spent playing sports reported by participants was 2.8 hours.

**Figure 1.7 Time spent participating in sport per week (% sports participants)**

Time spent participating	%
Up to 30 minutes	5
31 to 60 minutes	15
More than 1 up to 1.5 hours	10
More than 1.5 up to 2 hours	12
More than 2 up to 3 hours	17
More than 3 up to 5 hours	19
More than 5 up to 8 hours	13
More than 8 hours	8
Average	3.7 hours

Intensity is measured in the ISM by asking sports participants if the activity was enough to raise your breathing rate (moderate) and enough for you to be out of breath (vigorous). Through this, sport participants have been categorised by their peak level of intensity. In 2022, 75% of sport participants were found to play sport at a vigorous level of intensity, while 16% played only to a moderate level of intensity. This indicates a change of 1 percentage point since 2019 and 2021, in both years 74% of sport participants participated to a vigorous level of intensity while 16% participated at a moderate level of intensity and 9% played at a low level of intensity.

### **Special Module - Local Sports Partnerships**

Sport Ireland’s network of 29 Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) aims to get people active and remove barriers to participate in sport and physical activity. The main objective of the LSP network is to enable the ongoing development of quality sport and physical activity opportunities throughout the country, in an environment that promotes healthy lifestyles, maximum participation and is inclusive and welcoming for all.

The LSP network facilitates sport and physical activity at a local level through working with clubs, coaches, and volunteers, and supporting partnerships with other organisations and community groups. They create opportunities for access to training and education in relation to sport and physical activity provision, and provide targeted programmes, events, and initiatives to increase sport and physical activity participation.

They are the local source of information about sport and physical activity, creating awareness and access to opportunities. LSPs have the unique ability to reach all people in their communities and embed sport and physical activity opportunities within their counties.

LSPs are uniquely positioned to promote participation and inclusivity in sport and physical activity. 31% of people stated they were aware of LSPs during the special module run at the end of 2022. Awareness of LSPs increases with age with 40% per cent of those aged between 55 and 64 being aware of their LSP.

Strong regional differences are also observed with awareness higher outside of Dublin than it is in the capital (34% and 23% respectively).





## 2. Social Participation in Sport

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## Social Participation

- In 2022, 34% of the population were involved in a social form of sports participation (club membership, volunteering or attending sporting events), an increase since 2021 (32%) but still far behind social participation levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which were at 47% in 2019.
- 31% reported being a club member, compared to 36% in 2019. This potentially means that roughly 125,000 who ceased a club membership during 2020 and 2021 did not restart their memberships.
- 15% of adults reported being a member of a NGB, while just over a third (36%) of club members were members of their NGB.
- Overall volunteering rates were at 9%, representing 370,000 people. Volunteering rates remain well behind pre-pandemic levels in 2019 when 12% of the population volunteered in sport.
- Event attendance has increased significantly in 2022 (17%) compared to levels seen during the pandemic (9%) and has nearly returned to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019 (19%).
- Sports participants reported spending €286 on sports equipment, coaching, health services and facility access over the past three months, equating to €95 per month or €1,144 per year. In addition sports participants reported spending an average of €373 on club membership fees a year.

## Introduction

The ISM tracks three levels of social participation in sport: club membership, volunteering, and attendance at sporting events. All three forms of social participation are vital to the effective functioning of sport in Ireland at different levels.

Sports clubs provide sporting infrastructure, through facilities, coaching, development pathways, and community. Volunteers ensure that sport functions by providing coaching, financial and administrative assistance, and organising training and events. Finally, event attendance contributes to the financial capital that sport generates and creates social bonds within sport.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted all three forms of social participation in sport, with restrictions bringing most activity to a halt. There were significant declines across all three forms of social participation as pandemic restrictions meant that many organised and group activities were not possible.

For the first time ISM 2022 also measured membership of a NGB. NGBs lead and administer most of the organised sport in Ireland; they train and deploy coaches, they support clubs and volunteers, they organise leagues and competitions and they provide sporting opportunities and pathways leading from local sport opportunities to national and international competition.

## Overall Social Participation in Sport

Overall social participation was at 34% in 2022 – a slight increase on the levels seen in 2021, but still well behind the 47% participation rate measured in 2019. This represents a decline of approximately 400,000 people meaning that roughly 1.38 million people participated socially in sport on a regular basis in 2022. Unlike active participation in sport the overall rate of social participation did not increase as the year progressed.

**Figure 2.1 Social Participation in Sport 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is shown in parentheses for 2022 data.

A significant proportion of the population participate in sport socially even though they do not play sport themselves, a consistent finding throughout the ISM series. In 2022, 32% of social participants had not played sport in the previous seven days. Non-participation in sport was highest among those attending events 46%, compared to 38% of volunteers, and 30% of club members.

This is an important consideration as it suggests that there are a large number of people – 320,000 event attendees, 130,000 volunteers and 375,000 club members - who engage socially in sport but do not play sport on a weekly basis. Given the nature of their current engagement with sport there is the potential to increase sports participation rates among this group through a deeper understanding of their barriers to participation.

### Club membership

There was a 6 percentage point decline in club membership levels between 2019 and 2021, from 36% to 30%. In 2022, 31% (roughly 1.26 million people) reported being a member of a club meaning that approximately 200,000 people who ceased their club membership during 2020/2021 had not yet restarted their membership in 2022. Furthermore, there was no clear uplift in club membership levels over the course of 2022, with the same proportion identifying as a club member in the final quarter as in the first quarter of the year.

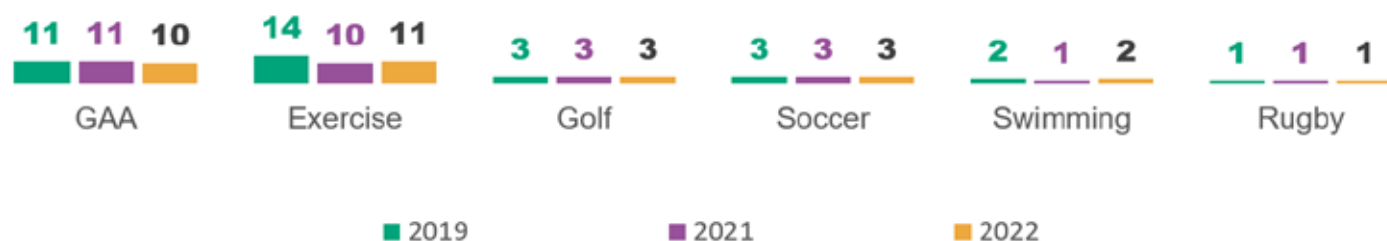
**Figure 2.2 Club membership rates 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is shown in parentheses for 2022 data.

When taking a closer look at the types of club membership it is clear that the decline in membership levels was largely due to people giving up gym memberships during the pandemic (when these facilities were closed) and not subsequently re-joining a gym. Membership of gyms declined from 14% in 2019 to 10% in 2021 and have remained at broadly that level with 11% in 2022 reporting that they were a member of a gym.

**Figure 2.3 Club membership rates by sport 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error for 2022 data is at most  $\pm 0.7\%$ .

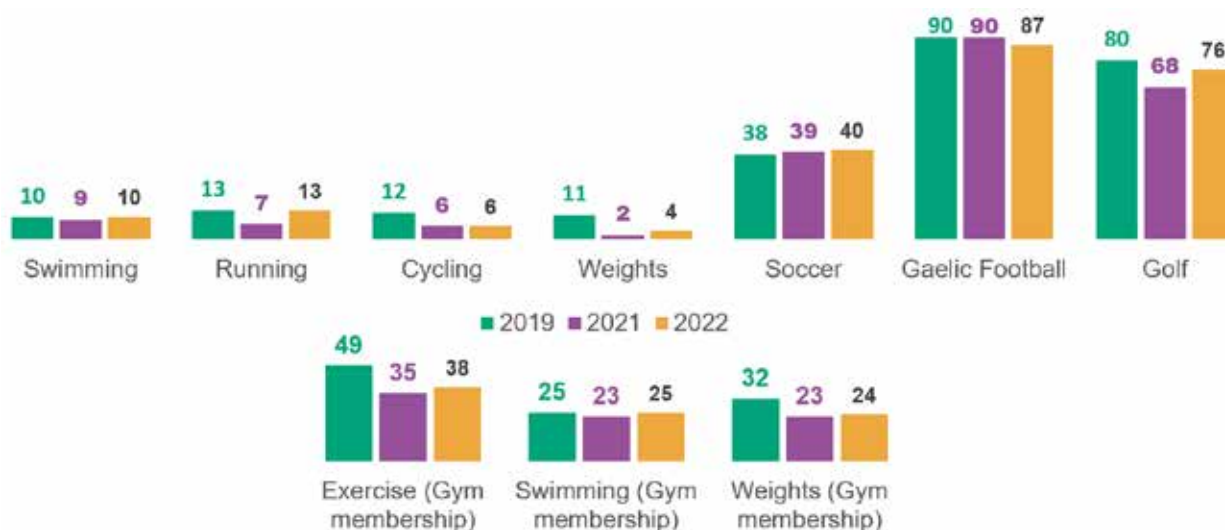
One-quarter (25%) of club members were members of multiple sports clubs. This is at the same level as in both 2019 and 2021, and broadly similar to that measured in 2015 (28%). However, in real terms the number of people that are a member of multiple clubs has declined due to the overall decline in club membership.

The 2021 ISM report noted that there had been an increase in the proportion playing sport who were not a member of a sports club, from 44% in 2019 to 51% in 2021. This was likely as a result of the changing nature of participation due to the pandemic with most sport taking place outside of club environments. In 2022, the proportion of sports participants who are not club members has declined slightly to 48%.

Notably, for 4 of the top 5 most played sports a very low proportion were members of a sports club directly related to that sport. Only 6% of cyclists are members of a cycling club, and 13% of runners are members of a running club. A similar pattern was observed in terms of weights and swimming (4% and 10% respectively), although the proportion of club members increased when gym membership was considered for these participants (24% and 25% respectively). Sports club membership was highest among those playing Gaelic football and golf (88% and 76% respectively).

The decline in gym membership was also reflected in lower proportions of those engaging in personal exercise who are members of a gym (38%, an 11 point drop since 2019). This same dynamic was seen among those lifting weights (24%, an 8 point drop since 2019).

**Figure 2.4 Proportion of participants by sport that have a club membership (%)**



Note: The margin of error for 2022 data is  $\pm 5.9\%$ .

### Special Module - National Governing Bodies

During 2022 a special module was included for part of the year relating to membership of NGBs. These are national membership organisations and representative bodies of specific sports. The GAA, FAI and IRFU would be well known examples however almost all sports in Ireland have a NGB with a membership offering. While many club members may be members of a NGB this module sought to explore awareness of NGB membership and its perceived benefits – both among adults and children’s parents/guardians.

Overall, 15% of adults in Ireland reported that they are currently a member of a NGB with an additional 16% having been a member at some point in the past. There were no strong differences by gender or age in this regard. Just over a third (36%) of club members reported that they are members of a NGB (with 5% of non-club members reporting the same). Roughly 1 in 5 (22%) sports participants said they are members of a NGB, with the majority (55%) of volunteers reporting the same.

Those who reported that they were members of a NGB were asked about the main benefits of membership. The most commonly cited benefit was being part of a community (46%) followed by access to competition (17%) and access to facilities such as gyms and room hire (16%). Men were twice as likely as women to identify access to competition as a key benefit (22% and 10% respectively). Those who were previously members of a NGB are most likely to have ceased their membership because they stopped playing the sport (61%).

Parents of children aged under 18 were asked if any of their children were a member of a NGB, with almost 2 out of 5 parents (39%) reporting that they had at least one child who was currently a member. The benefits of membership reported for children are broadly aligned with the those reported for adults.

## Volunteering

The previous ISM report outlined the impact of the pandemic on volunteering as the cancellation of most organised sport meant that many volunteering activities also ceased. However, the gradual reopening of society and recommencement of sport led to a gradual increase in volunteering, with an overall volunteering rate of 9% for 2022 as a whole – representing approximately 350,000 people. Notably, volunteering rates remain well behind pre-pandemic levels seen in 2019 (12%). This means that approximately a quarter of previous volunteers have not returned to their roles.

**Figure 2.5 Volunteering rates by year 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is shown in parentheses for 2022 data.

Most (82%) volunteers volunteered for just one sport, however a notable minority (18%) identified that they volunteered for multiple different sports. The numbers volunteering for multiple sports was consistent with that measured in 2021 (17%), however has increased from pre-pandemic levels (2019: 13%). This equates to roughly 2% of the population overall, with incidence of volunteering for multiple sports highest among those aged between 45 and 54, 26% of volunteers in this age group are involved in multiple sports, accounting for 4% of all in this age group.

Both the types of sport volunteered in and the roles played are broadly similar to 2019. Gaelic games and soccer remained the most popular sports for volunteering, with 4% of the adult population playing a regular voluntary role in the Gaelic Games, through either football, hurling or camogie.

Two out of every five volunteers are involved in coaching (40%), with provision of transport (19%) the next most common voluntary role. These suggest that the nature of volunteering has reverted to what it was before the pandemic following a slight decline in coaching during 2021.

**Figure 2.6 Nature of volunteering by year 2019-2022 (% of all volunteers)**



Note: The margins of error for 2022 data are at most ±3.3%.

Most volunteers are involved in just one volunteering role (69%), while 29% of volunteers are involved in multiple volunteering roles. On average, volunteers invested 4.5 hours per week into the sport that they volunteered for. This is slightly less than the average amount of time in both 2021 (5.2 hours) and 2019 (5.4 hours).



Much of this decline is focused on the key volunteer groups of men and those aged between 45 and 54, with the average amount of time spent volunteering each week declining by roughly an hour in both cases (to 4.8 hours and 4.3 hours respectively).

Among volunteers there was a broad range of times invested into the role with 23% of volunteers reporting that they volunteered for an hour each week, and 30% reporting that they volunteered for 5 or more hours per week. In terms of seasonality, volunteering hours peaked between April and June at an average of 4.9 hours per week and declined to an average of 3.9 hours per week between October to December.

Volunteering has consistently been more prevalent among club members than non-club members, with 20% and 4% respectively volunteering in 2022. The increase in club membership rates in 2022 was reflected in the increase in volunteering rates among club members, increasing by 5 percentage points. This indicates that clubs are vital to increasing and facilitating volunteer participation, as volunteering among non-club members increased by only 1 percentage point since last year.

## Event Attendance

The proportion of people attending sports events has almost returned to pre-pandemic levels with 17% (almost 700,000 people) having spectated at an event during the previous seven days during 2022. This represents a return close to previous levels of spectating which declined from 19% in 2019 to 9% in 2021.

**Figure 2.7 Attendance at sporting events by year 2019-2022 (%)**

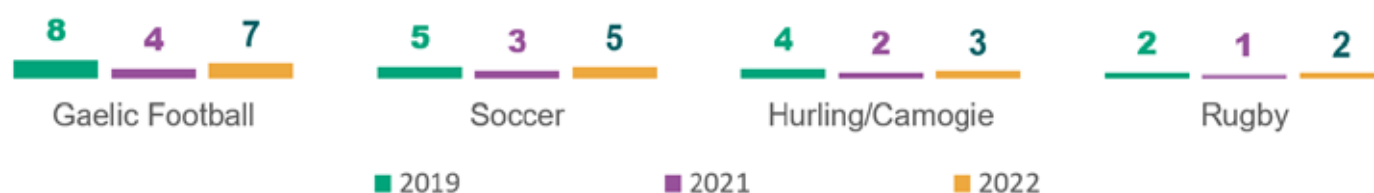


*Note: Margins of error for 2022 data are shown in parentheses.*

The proportion of people spectating at a sports event rose gradually over the course of 2021, and this increase continued into 2022 with 12% spectating during the first quarter of the year. This rose to 19% in the second quarter and remained at that level for the remainder of 2022. While the increase in spectating between the first and second quarters of the year reflects the typical seasonal pattern seen on the ISM, there is normally a drop-off in attendance in the final quarter of the year. That this did not happen in 2022 is encouraging in terms of the National Sport Policy's objective to increase social participation in sport. This will be further monitored over the course of 2023.

The most popular spectator sports remain the same as in previous years, with 7% attending a Gaelic football match and 5% attending a soccer match in the previous seven days. Hurling/camogie and rugby are the other two most popular sports events.

**Figure 2.8 Attendance at sporting events by sport 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margins of error for 2022 data are at most  $\pm 0.5\%$ .

Almost a third (32%) of those going to events attended multiple events – a slight increase on the 2019 level (28%), and means that overall, the same proportion (5%) of the population attended multiple sports events in the one week. This is notably higher in certain age groups, most notably those aged between 35 and 54, 9% of whom attend multiple events in the previous seven days.

There is a strong - and persistent - overlap between spectating at events and other forms of sports participation. The majority of those attending sports events play sports and are members of a sports club (54% in both cases). Furthermore, roughly a quarter of spectators (26%) volunteered for sports. These are at broadly the same level as previous ISM waves, with little change in this respect over the period of pandemic restrictions.

### Special Module - Expenditure on Sport

One of the special modules included on this year’s ISM assessed the level of expenditure on sports. Those participating in sport during the past 7 days were asked about expenditure on that sport over the past three months across four contexts – clothing/footwear/equipment, coaching, health services and cost of accessing facilities (apart from membership fees). Parents were also asked about expenditure on sports for their children across these same categories. Additionally, those who are members of a club were also asked about the cost of membership fees.

The average spend over the past three months was €286, equating to €95 per month or €1,144 per year assuming that the reference period asked about in the survey (roughly equating to the period between March/April and May/June) is considered to be representative of their typical spend.

Sports clothing, footwear and other equipment was the largest component of this expenditure, accounting for 62% (€178) of the total expenditure. On average, participants spend €51 over a three month period on coaching, €30 on health services such as physio, and €26 on accessing facilities apart from membership fees.



**Figure 1.3 Mean spend in the previous three months on sports among participants.**

Source of Cost	Mean Spend €
Sport clothing, footwear, or other equipment	178
Coaching lessons or classes	51
Health services such as physio	30
The cost of accessing facilities apart from membership fees	26

Differences in expenditure can be seen by gender, with higher average spending reported by men (men: €300, women: €270). However, there are no notable differences across age or socio-economic groups. In respect of region, those living in Munster reported the highest average spend (€307), compared with €281 in Dublin and €266 in the rest of Leinster.

The same questions were asked of all parents in relation to the money spent on children's sports over the previous three months. The average reported spend on children's sports is typically higher (€320), although many respondents would have been reporting expenditure for multiple children comparisons need to be considered in this respect.

**Figure 1.4 Mean spend in the previous three months on children's sports.**

Source of Cost	Mean Spend €
Sport clothing, footwear, or other equipment	197
Coaching lessons or classes	84
Health services such as physio	20
The cost of accessing facilities apart from membership fees	25

Notably, however, fathers reported a higher average expenditure than mothers (€382 and €261 respectively).

In terms of membership fees, the average spend per year is €373 among all club members, with a mean of 2.3 people included per membership. For children's sport club memberships exclusively, the mean spend by parents or guardians is €179.

### **Special Module - Impact of Cost of Living Increases**

This year's ISM included a special module looking at the impact of affordability as a barrier to sports participation. This was included on the ISM during November and December – a period marked by a rapidly rising inflation rate and increased concerns around cost of living.

The results mirrored the wider concerns around cost of living with almost 4 out of 5 people (79%) reporting that the increasing cost of living had made managing financially at least a little more difficult, with 32% saying it had made life a lot more difficult.

Overall, 18% of all respondents, and 21% of sports participants, stated they have made cutbacks to their spending on sport. Further, one in five of all respondents (20%), and one in four (24%) of sports participants reported that they expect to make cutbacks to their spending on sport over the next 6 months, to the end of May/June 2023.

Event attendance was expected to face the biggest cutbacks, with 9% of all respondents saying they expected to attend fewer events. The next most common cutback that people expected to make was the cancellation of memberships, with 4% expecting to make this cutback (7% of current club members). This suggests that cutbacks in sports participation as a result of the rising cost of living are more likely to be focussed on the social aspects of participation rather than physical participation.



### 3. Broader Physical Activity

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## Broader Physical Activity

- The ISM classified 37% of the population as being highly active in 2022, meaning that approximately 1.5 million adults met the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking.
- Although the proportion classified as highly active reduced since 2021, this figure is higher than any seen prior to 2021 (2019: 34%).
- Recreational walking declined from 74% in 2021 to 68% in 2022. Despite this decline, the level of recreational walking recorded in 2022 was still higher than any recorded prior to 2021 (2019: 66%).
- An adjustment was seen in the types of physical activity people engaged in, although recreational walking declined, walking for transport increased to 54% (2021: 48%).
- 11% cycled regularly for transport, a level which has been broadly consistent throughout the previous waves of the ISM.

### Introduction

Recreational walking, walking for transport, and cycling for transport are important forms of physical activity that are tracked by the ISM in addition to sport participation. These measures of recreational walking and active transport allow for a broader understanding of overall physical activity within the population, outside of sport participation.

When these activities are combined with sport participation, it allows us to monitor the overall proportion of the population who are meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines and also monitor the levels of sedentarism (physical inactivity) within the population.

### Recreational walking

Recreational walking is the most popular form of physical activity. In 2022, 68% reported that they walked for recreation in the last seven days, equating to 2.77 million people. While this represents a 6 percentage point decrease in recreational walking since 2021, it remained higher than 2019 and all other previous years.

**Figure 3.1 Participation in recreational walking 2019-2022 (%)**

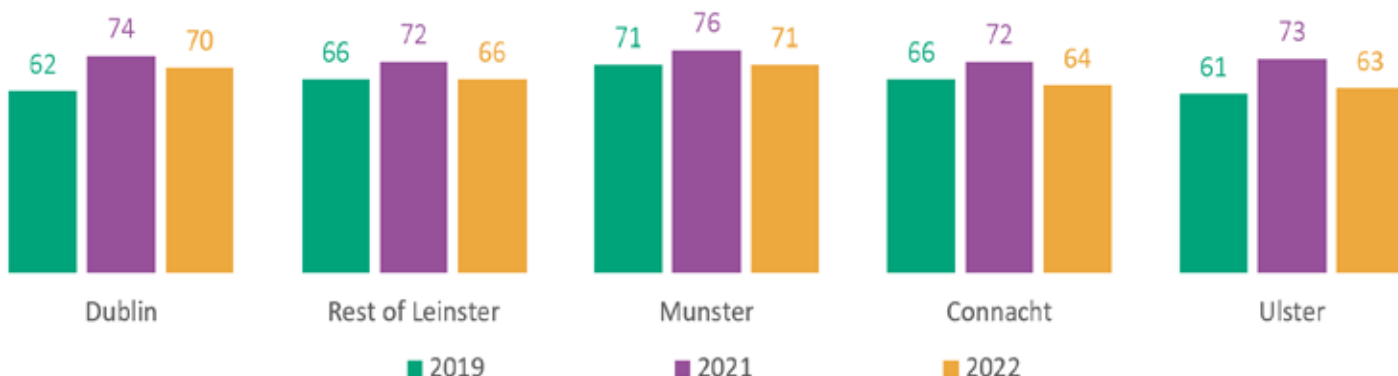


*Note: The margin of error is shown in parenthesis for 2022 data.*

Recreational walking peaked in 2021, likely as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions leading to increased free time with more limited leisure activities and restricted access to sport. Additionally, walking provided an opportunity to meet with other people in a safe environment that limited the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Recreational walking is highest in Munster at 71%, followed by Dublin at 70%. Despite a decline in recreational walking in all regions, the extent of recreational walking was still higher than pre-pandemic levels in both Ulster and Dublin, and in line with previous levels in Munster and the Rest of Leinster (i.e. Leinster, excluding Dublin).

**Figure 3.2 Participation in recreational walking by region 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is at most  $\pm 5.8\%$  for 2022 data.

In 2022, recreational walkers walked on average 4.7 times per week, with an average duration of 50.7 minutes per walk. This is lower than was measured in 2021 and similar to figures seen in pre-pandemic years.

**Figure 3.3 Average frequency and duration of recreational walking per week 2019-2022**

	2019	2021	2022
Average frequency (per week)	4.4	5.0	4.7
Average duration (in mins per walk)	50.3	57.5	50.7
Average walking minutes per week	221.3	287.5	238.3

## Active transport

### Walking for transport

Walking for transport is defined as taking walks at least once a week of over 15 minutes for transport, for example, to work, to school, or to the shops.

As participation in sport and recreational walking declined between 2021 and 2022, walking for transport increased during the same period as the majority of adults in Ireland said that they walk regularly for transport (54%). This is a particularly encouraging increase given that the levels of walking for transport had remained broadly unchanged in the years prior to 2021. Walking for transport also provides a variety of benefits through increasing physical activity within the population and being a sustainable form of transport.

The reasons behind the increased levels of walking for transport in 2022 are unclear, however a number of factors likely influenced this change. Behavioural change as a result of increased levels of recreational walking during the pandemic may have encouraged more people to incorporate walking into their daily transport routine. Also, it may be the case that some individuals have decided not to use shared forms of transport in order to minimise their COVID-19 risk and instead walk during shorter journeys. Regardless of the reason, the increase is encouraging, and it will be particularly interesting to observe whether or not it is a short-lived phenomenon or is sustained as normal behaviours resume.

**Figure 3.4 Participation in walking for transport 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is shown in parentheses for 2022 data.

As with previous waves of the ISM, walking for transport was more common in Dublin. While all regions see an increase in the proportion walking for transport, the proportion doing so in Dublin was much higher than elsewhere, with 70% in Dublin walking in the previous seven days for transport, compared with less than half (47%) of the population outside of Dublin. Similarly, those who live in cities (69%) and towns (62%) are more likely to walk for transport, most likely due to proximity of destinations, higher quality travel infrastructure and the convenience of walking to shops, and to entertainment and recreational facilities.

**Figure 3.5 Participation in walking for transport by location 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error for regions is at most ±4.4% and for location at most ±2.5% for 2022 data.

### Cycling for transport

Cycling for transport is defined as cycling at least once a week for the purpose of transport. In 2022, 11% of adults in Ireland cycled for transport in the previous seven days – a level that has remained broadly unchanged over the past number of waves of the ISM.

**Figure 3.6 Participation in cycling for transport 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error is shown in parentheses for 2022 data.

Despite the lack of increase in overall participation in cycling for transport, the proportion of people cycling for transport in cities has increased, reaching a peak of 17%. This compares to 16% in 2019. Investments in cycling infrastructure have been largely centralised on city locations, which may be contributing to the uptake in cycling for transport in these locations. Towns (11%) and villages (10%) have also seen an increase in cycling for transport that exceed levels seen in 2019 (9% and 8% respectively). While the proportion cycling for transport in isolated areas remained unchanged since 2019 (7%).

**Figure 3.7 Participation in cycling for transport by location 2019-2022 (%)**



Note: The margin of error for regions is at most ±4.4% and for location at most ±2.5% for 2022 data.

### Physical Activity Categories

The ISM can determine the proportion of the population who meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking<sup>1</sup>. Over the course of ISM waves, respondents have been classified as either highly active, fairly<sup>2</sup>/just active<sup>3</sup>, or inactive<sup>4</sup> based on the frequency, duration, and intensity of their activity.

<sup>1</sup> Within this analysis only participation in sport and recreational walking are used to categorise an individual as highly active (meeting National Physical Activity Guidelines). As such the percentage classified as highly active does not account for those who undertake their activity through active travel/commuting, work or domestic activity.

<sup>2</sup> Participated in a sporting activity or recreational walking for 20 minutes at least once during the previous seven days, or regularly walks/cycles for transport (at least once a week)

<sup>3</sup> Participated in 30 minutes of physical activity at least twice during the previous seven days (Sport participation and/or recreational walking).

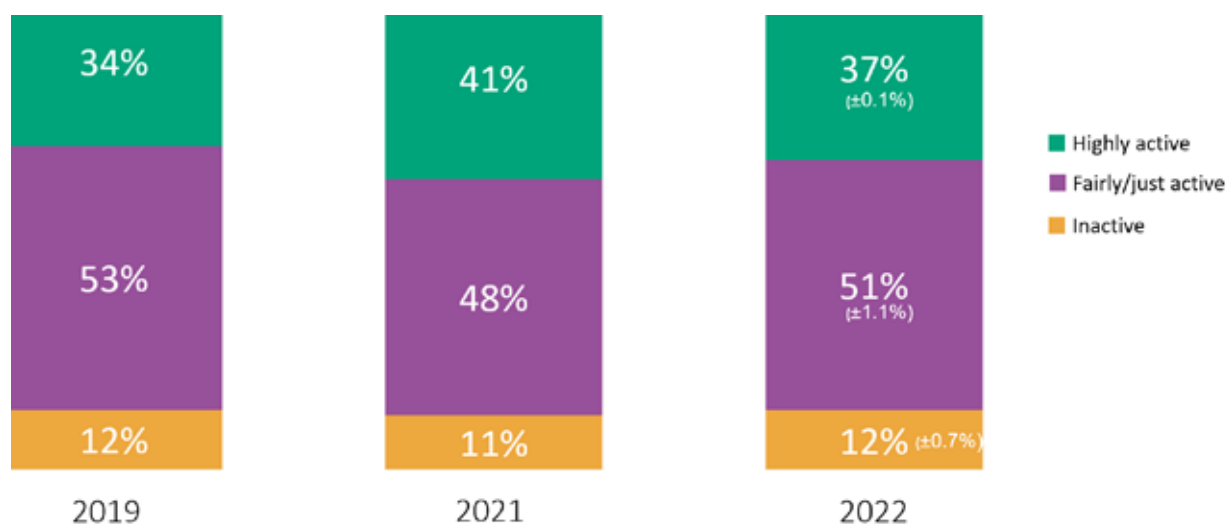
<sup>4</sup> Inactivity is defined as not participating in any activity during the past 7 days.

Using this method of assessment two groups of interest are identified; those who are highly active and meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines and those who are inactive. Those who are highly active are those who have participated in at least 30 minutes of physical activity at least 5 times in the last 7 days through a combination of sport participation and recreational walking. Conversely, those who are inactive are those that have not participated in any sport, recreational walking, or active travel in the past 7 days.

Policymaking in this area aims to both increase the proportion of the population that is highly active and reduce the proportion that is inactive.

ISM 2022 found that 37% of the population were classified as highly active and therefore meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines. While this represents a decline of 4 percentage points since 2021, a period which saw increased levels of activity generally, the proportion who are highly active remained higher than recorded before 2021 (2019: 34%). The decline in highly active people within the population may be a result of the decrease in recreational walking. The proportion that are inactive has increased by 1 percentage point since 2021, returning to the level of inactivity seen in 2019.

**Figure 3.8 Hierarchy of activity 2019-2022 (%)**



*Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses for 2022 data.*



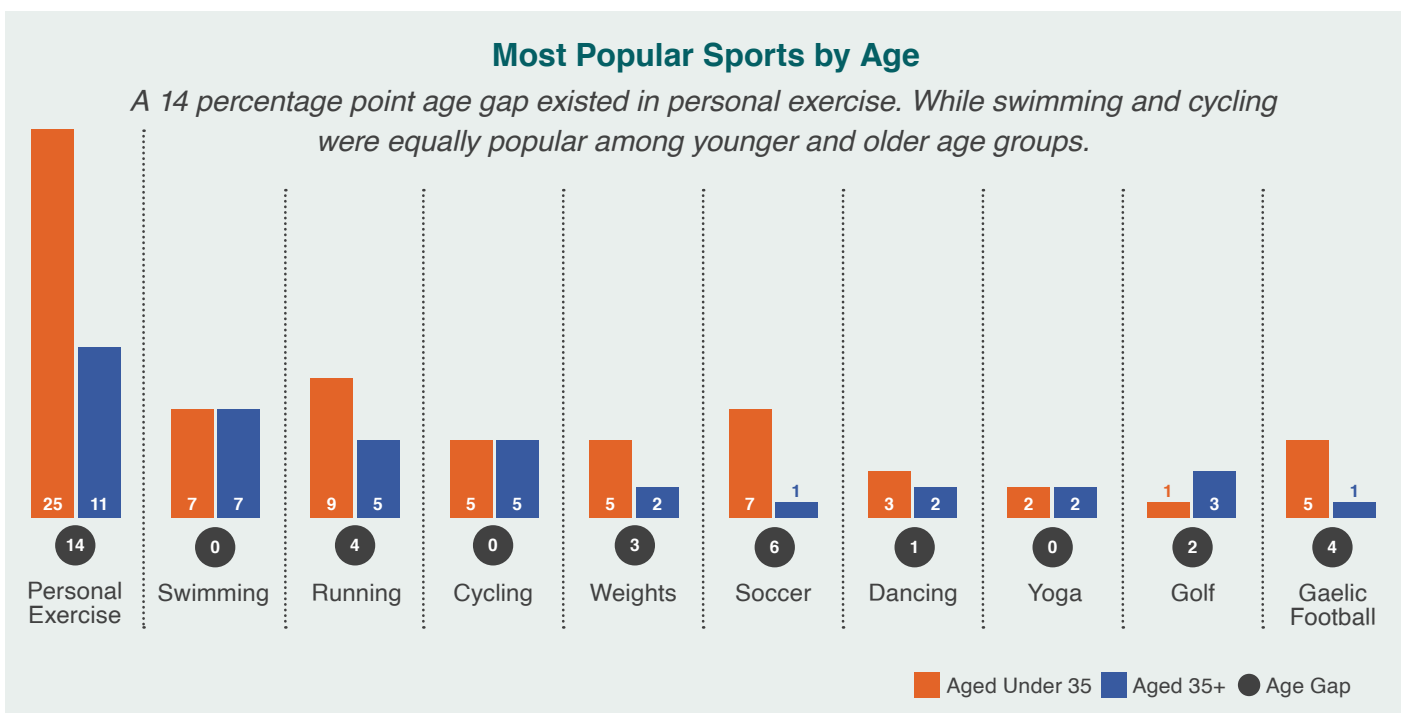
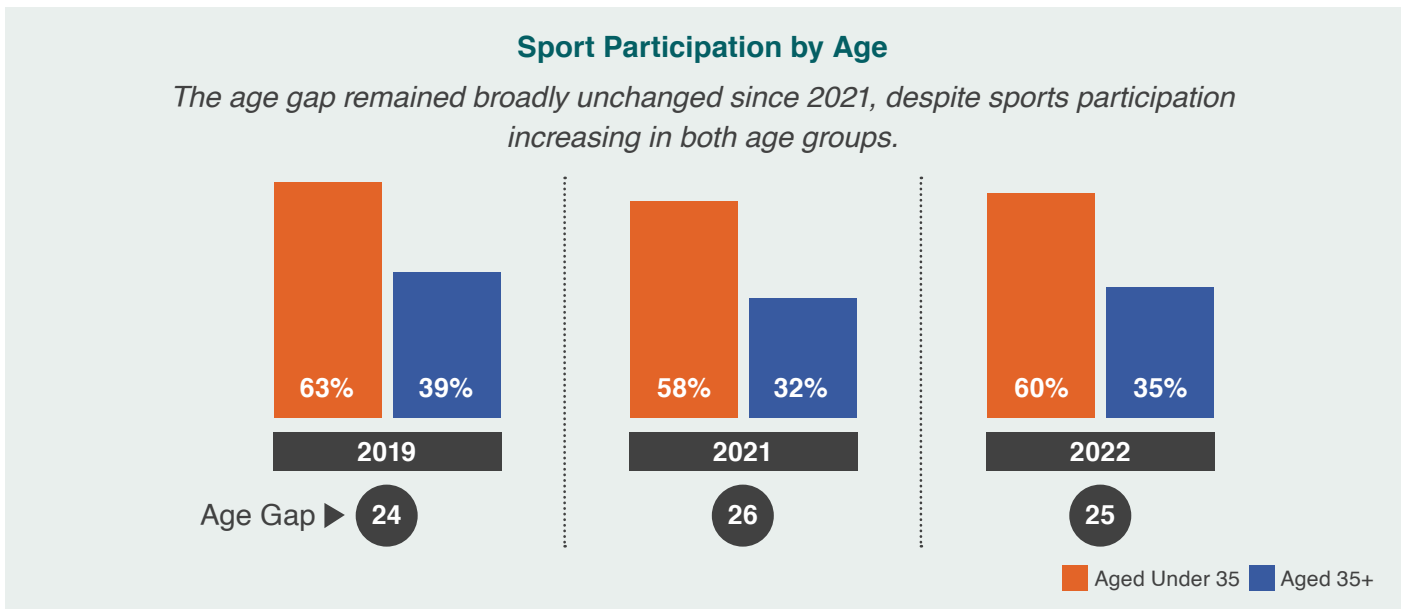


## 4. Spotlight on Age

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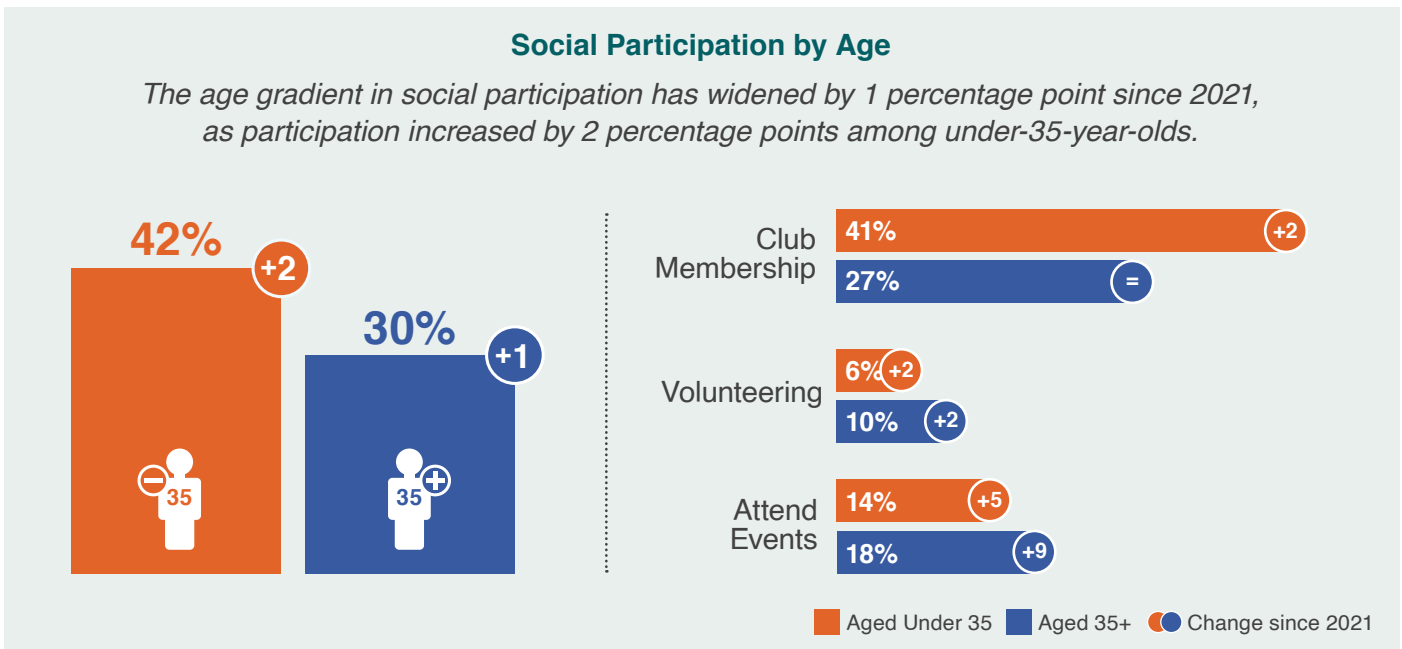
### Spotlight on Age - Sports Participation

- The age gradient in sport participation continues to be evident with sport participation declining throughout the life course. The age gap was 25 percentage points between under-35-year-olds (60%) and those aged 35 and over (35%), compared to 26 percentage points in 2021 (58% and 32% respectively).
- Personal exercise was the most popular sport among under-35-year-olds (25%) and among those aged 35 and over (11%). Running, soccer, weights, and Gaelic football were more popular among under-35-year-olds, while golf was more popular among those aged 35 and over.
- Among men aged 35 and over exercise (10%), cycling (7%), and swimming (6%) were the most popular sports. Among women aged 35 and over exercise (11%), swimming (8%) and yoga (4%) were the most popular sports.



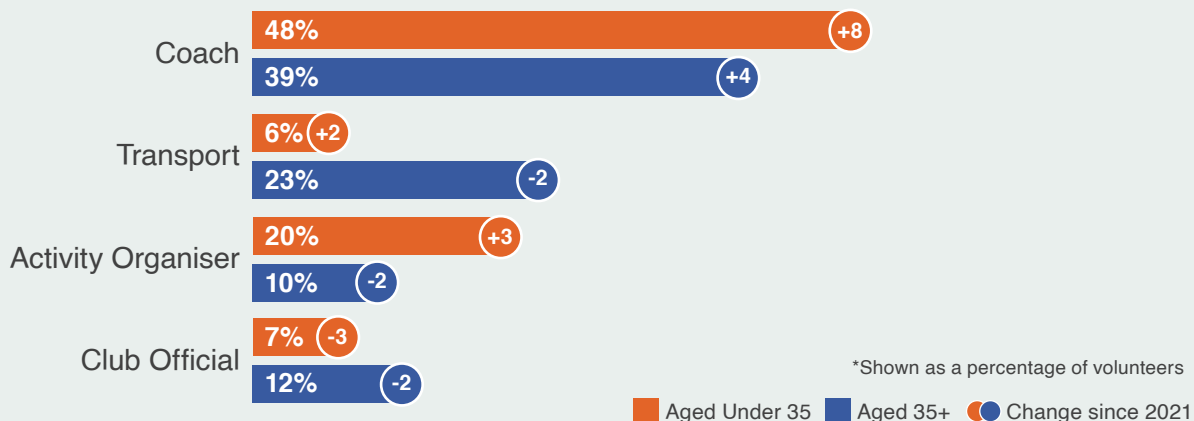
### Spotlight on Age - Social Participation

- An age gap was evident in overall social participation, 42% of under-35-year-olds and 30% of those aged 35 and over socially participated in sport. However, volunteering and event attendance was higher among those aged 35 and over.
- Overall social participation for both genders was highest among 16–19-year-olds (men 63%; women 51%), an increase of 1 percentage point among men and 6 percentage points among women in this age group since 2021 (62% and 45% respectively).
- Social participation has continued to decline to 43% among men aged under 45 (2021 44%). Social participation has been on a continuous decline within this group since 2015, when over three in five men (61%) aged under 45 were social participants.
- Event attendance (23%) and volunteering (14%) rates peaked between ages 35-54 and were lowest between ages 25-34 with 12% of this age group attending events and 4% volunteering.
- The incidence for volunteering for multiple sports was highest among 45-54-year-olds, with 26% of volunteers in this age group involved in volunteering for multiple sports.
- Volunteering was highest among the 45–54-year-old age group among men (17%) and women (15%), a 4 percentage point and 5 percentage point increase respectively since 2021 for both groups. The 20–24-year-old age group had low rates of volunteering among men and women (both 4%), remaining unchanged since 2021 and remaining below 2019 levels when volunteering was 6% among men and 8% among women for 20–24-year-olds.



### Volunteering Role\* by Age

Coaching roles were more common among volunteers aged under 35 years of age



### Volunteering by gender and age 2019-2022 (%)



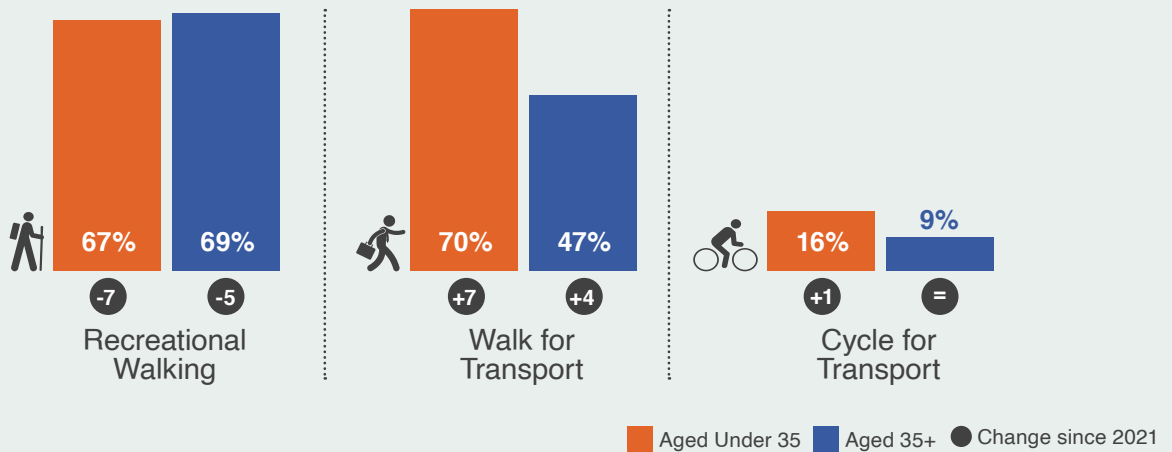
### Spotlight on Age - Broader Physical Activity

- In contrast to sport where participation declines with age, recreational walking levels increase with age up until the age of 65 where there is a slight drop in participation.
- Recreational walking was highest among 45–54-year-olds (72%) and lowest among people aged 65 and over (64%).
- Higher rates of walking for transport are particularly evident among younger age groups, three-quarters of 16–24-year-olds walked regularly for transport compared to 64% in the same age group in 2021.
- Cycling for transport was also higher among younger age groups: 16% of under-35-year-olds cycled regularly for transport compared to 9% of those aged 35 and over.
- The younger population (aged under 35) were more likely to meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines as 42% of this age group were highly active (35% of people aged 35 and over).

- Among under-35-year-olds, men (44%) are more likely than women (39%) to be highly active, however a decline in activity among men aged 35 and over, means that this gender gap in activity levels is reversed after age 35 (men 31%; women 38%).
- Inactivity increases with age (5% of under-35-year-olds and 15% of people aged 35 and over).
- Levels of inactivity remained the same since 2021 among under-35-year-old men (6%), while inactivity among under-35-year-old women reduced by one percentage point to 5% (2021: 6%). Notably, inactivity among women aged 16-19 has reduced to just 1% from 5% in 2021, while inactivity was at 3% for both years among men aged 16-19.

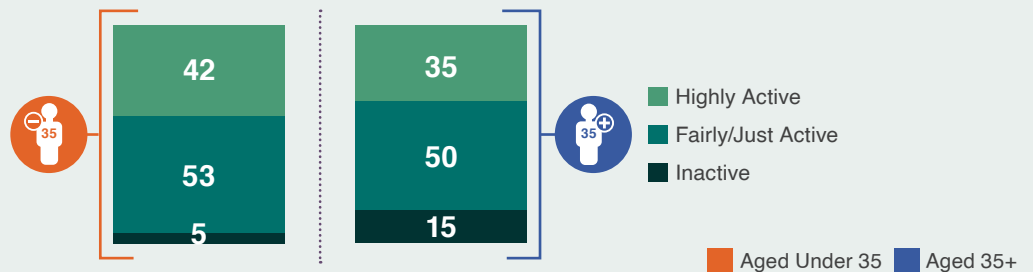
### Broader Physical Activity

Recreational walking has declined by 7 percentage points among under 35s and by 5 percentage points among those aged 35 years and over since 2021.

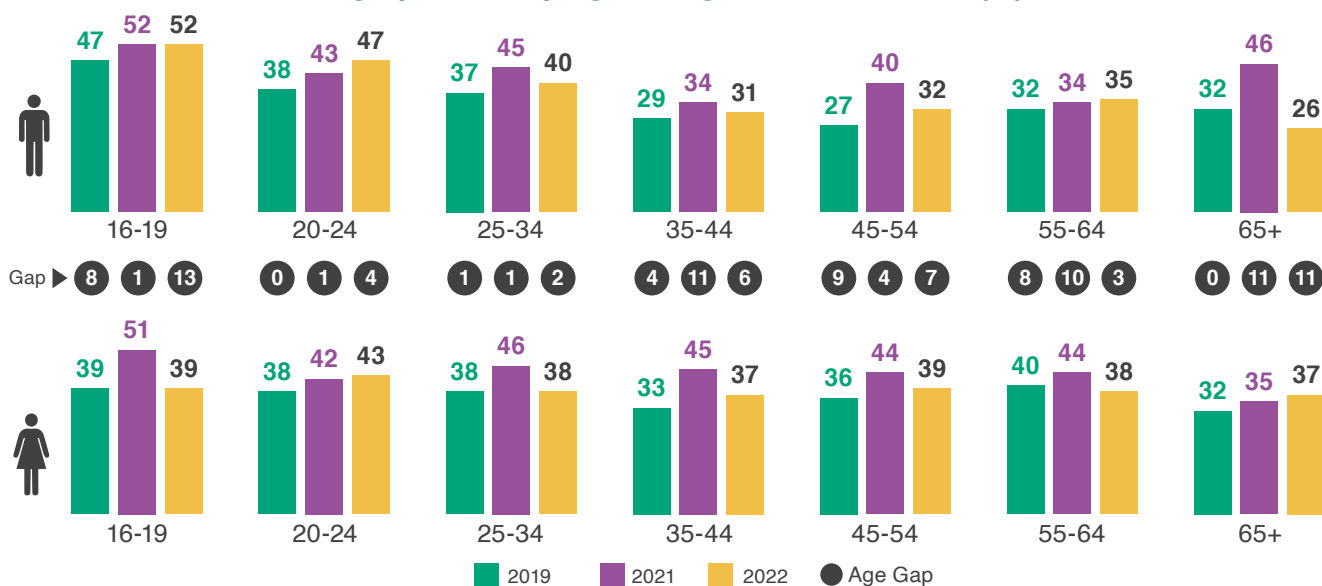


### Level of Activity by Age

Inactivity increased by 2 percentage points among those aged 35 and over since 2021 . Inactivity continues to increase with age.



### Highly active by age and gender 2019-2022 (%)



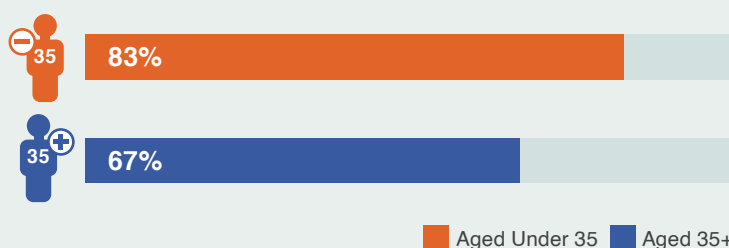
### Spotlight on Age - Special Module

- A special module focussing on swimming identified that there was an age gradient in swimming ability. 87% of 16-24-year-olds reported being able to swim, compared to just under half (49%) of adults aged 65 and over.
- Another special module assessed transitions in sport. The module found that 19% of people had stopped playing a sport they used to play regularly within the last 12 months. Transitions out of sport in the last 12 months were most common among under-35-year-olds (34%), compared to 13% of those aged 35 and over.
- Under-35-year-olds were also the age group most likely to have a new sport they would like to consider trying (47%), while 22% of people aged 35 and over had a new sport they would like to try.

### Swimming by Age

The majority of people who can swim learned how to before the age of 16.

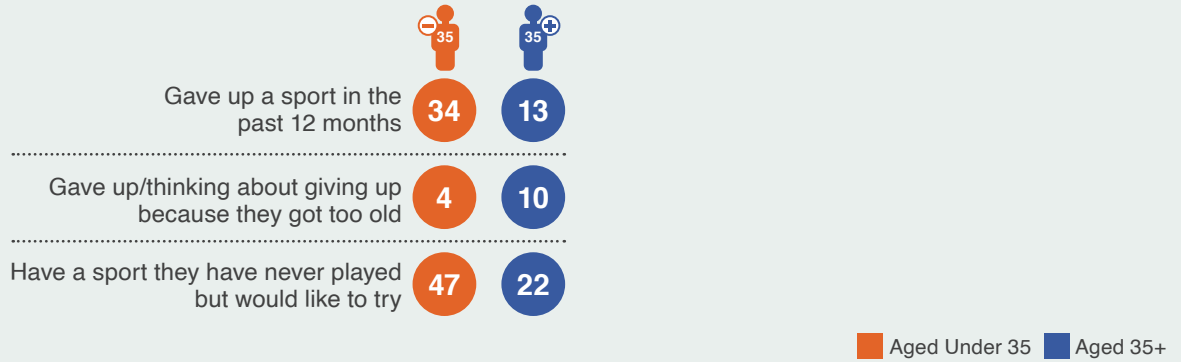
Can Swim



Learned how to swim before the age of 16

### Transitions in Sport by Age

*Transitions out of sport were more likely among under 35-year-olds, but over 35-year-olds were more likely to give up a sport due to getting old.*



The relationship between age and other demographic factors such as gender, socio-economic status and disability is reported in subsequent chapters where significant relationships have been identified.







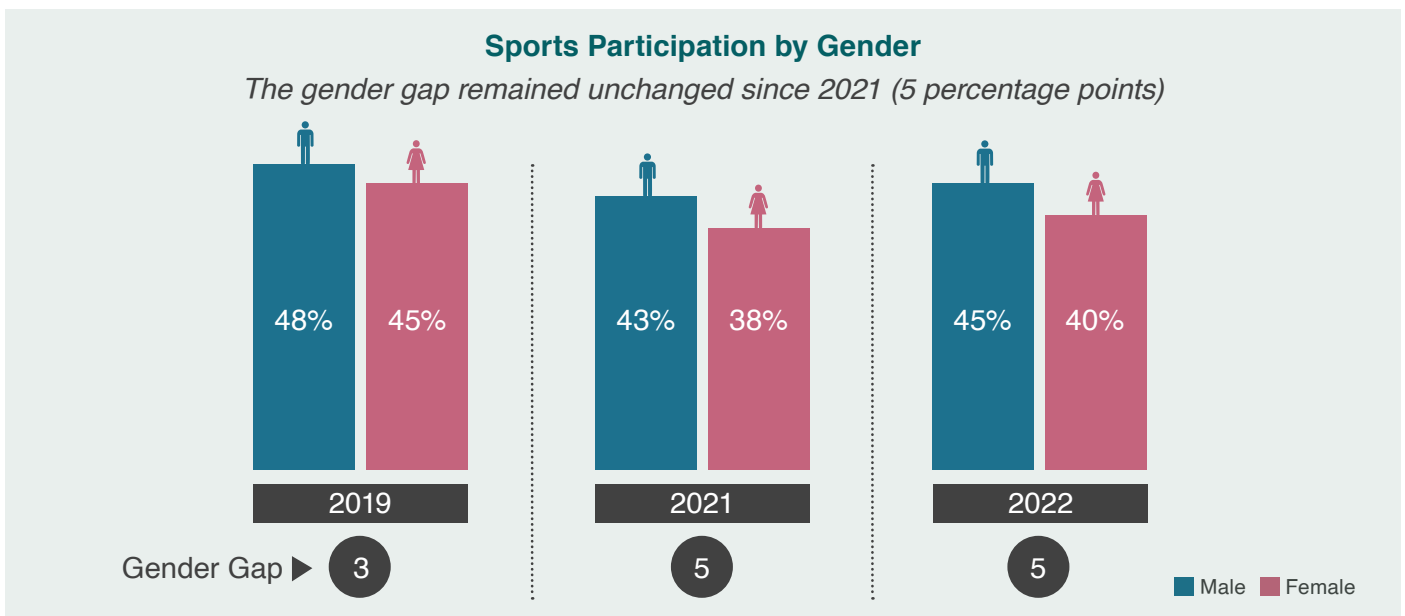
## 5. Spotlight on Gender

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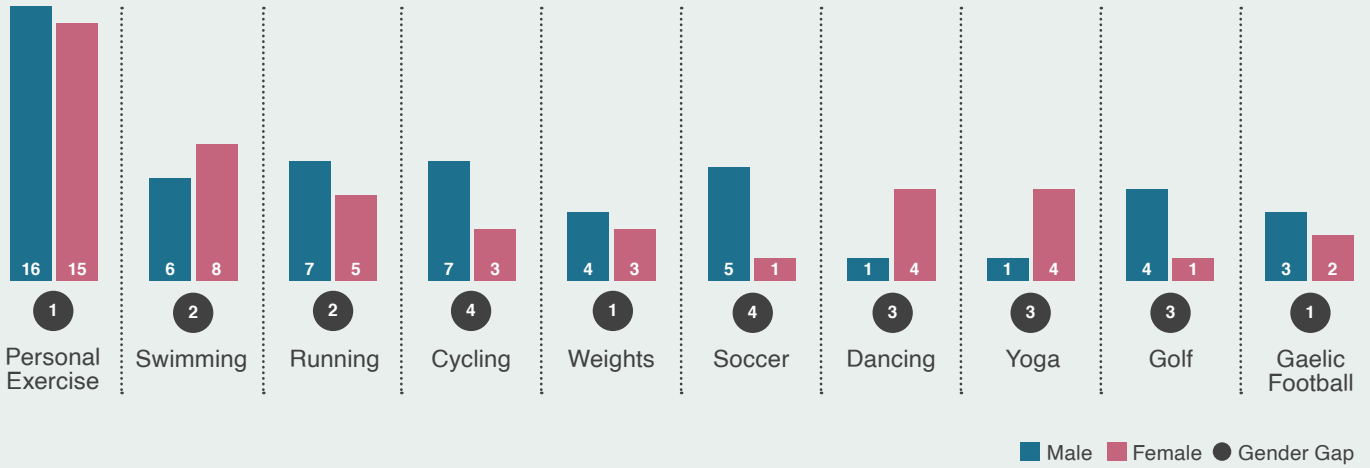
### Spotlight on Gender - Sports Participation

- Sport participation has increased by 2 percentage points among both men (45%) and women (40%) since 2021. The gender gap remained unchanged at 5 percentage points since 2021. In both cases, participation levels remained below those measured in 2019 (men 48%, women 45%) where the gender gap stood at 3 percentage points.
- The gender gap in sport participation narrows with age. As in previous waves the gender gap was eliminated after the age of 45, in the 45–54-year-old age group men and women were equally likely to participate in sport (41%).
- Personal exercise was the most popular sport among men (16%) and women (15%), followed by running (7%) and cycling (7%) for men, and swimming (8%) and running (5%) for women.
- Men (34%) were more likely than women (30%) to participate in sport at a vigorous level of intensity (defined as an effort of activity enough to make you out of breath).
- Gyms and sports centres were the most popular location for men (28%) and women (29%). Women were more likely than men to participate at home (22% and 16% respectively), while men (16%) were more likely to participate in sports clubs than women (9%).
- Men (7%) were more likely than women (3%) to have taken part in organised competition in the last seven days, and to have participated in competitive sport at some point after turning 16-years-old, 46% and 28% respectively.

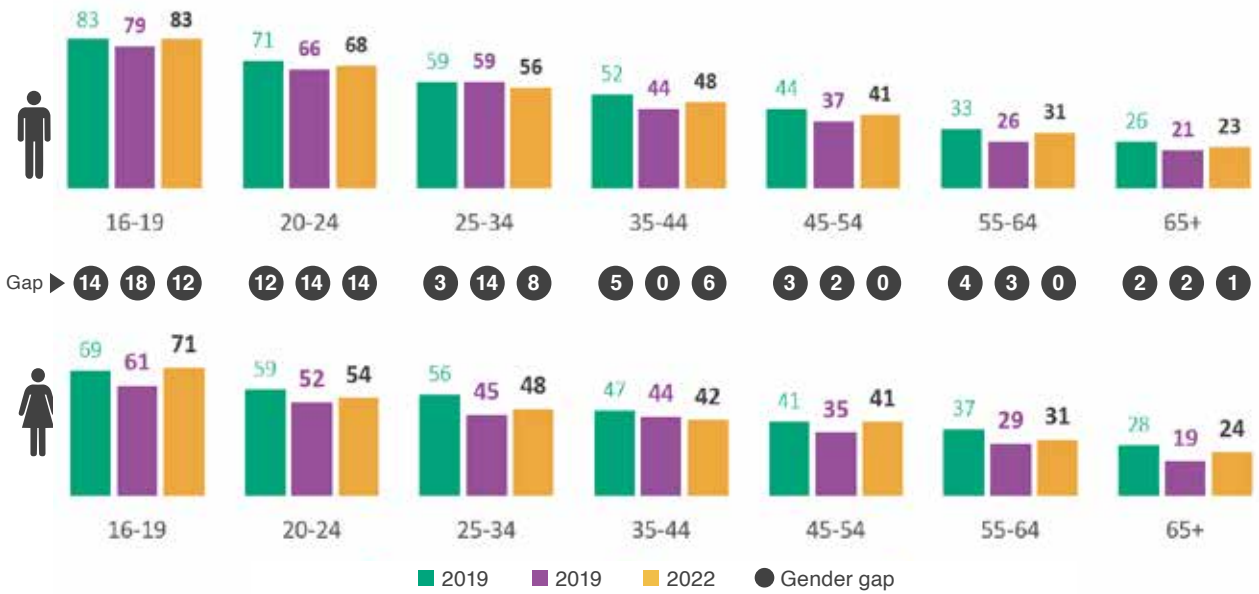


### Most Popular Sports by Gender

The widest gender gap existed in cycling and soccer at 4 percentage points.

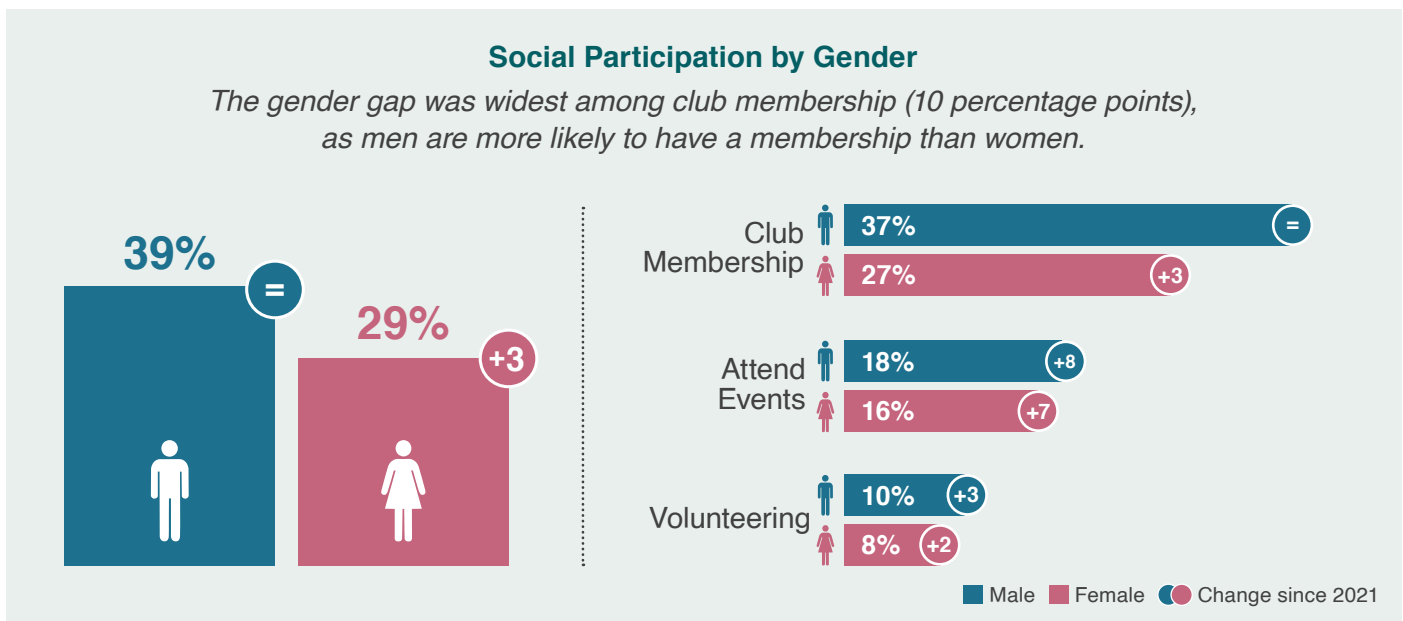


### Sport Participation by Age and Gender 2019-2022 (%)



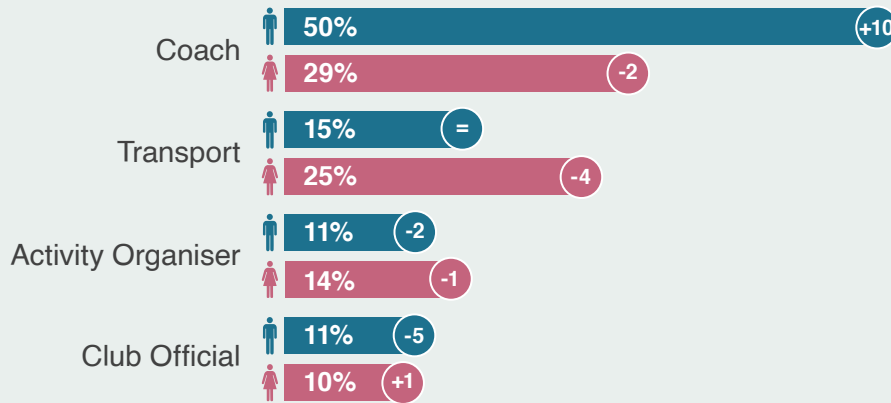
### Spotlight on Gender - Social Participation

- Men are more likely to participate socially in sport however, the gender gap in overall social participation has continued to narrow in 2022, to 10 percentage points, compared to 13 percentage points in 2019. This was due to a slight narrowing of the gender gap in club membership and event attendance, to 10 percentage points and 1 percentage point respectively.
- A broadly equal rise in volunteering levels among men and women means the gender gap in 2022 remained at 2 percentage points (men 10%, women 8%), after narrowing from 4 percentage points in 2019 to 2 percentage points in 2021.
- Men (50%) were more likely to volunteer in coaching roles than women (29%), while women (25%) were more likely than men (15%) to volunteer in transport roles.
- Club membership levels increased among women for each age group excluding 35-44-year-olds and 55–64-year-olds, both of which declined by just 1 percentage point since 2021. Compared to men, women saw a faster return to pre-pandemic membership levels.
- Event attendance remained behind pre-pandemic levels in all age groups for men. Among women event attendance has broadly returned to pre-pandemic levels as seen in 2019, the most notable increase was among younger women. Among 20–24-year-old women 16% had attended a sporting event in the previous seven days, a 10 percentage point increase since 2021 (6%), and the highest rate of event attendance on record for this age group (2019, 10%).



### Volunteering by Role\* by Gender

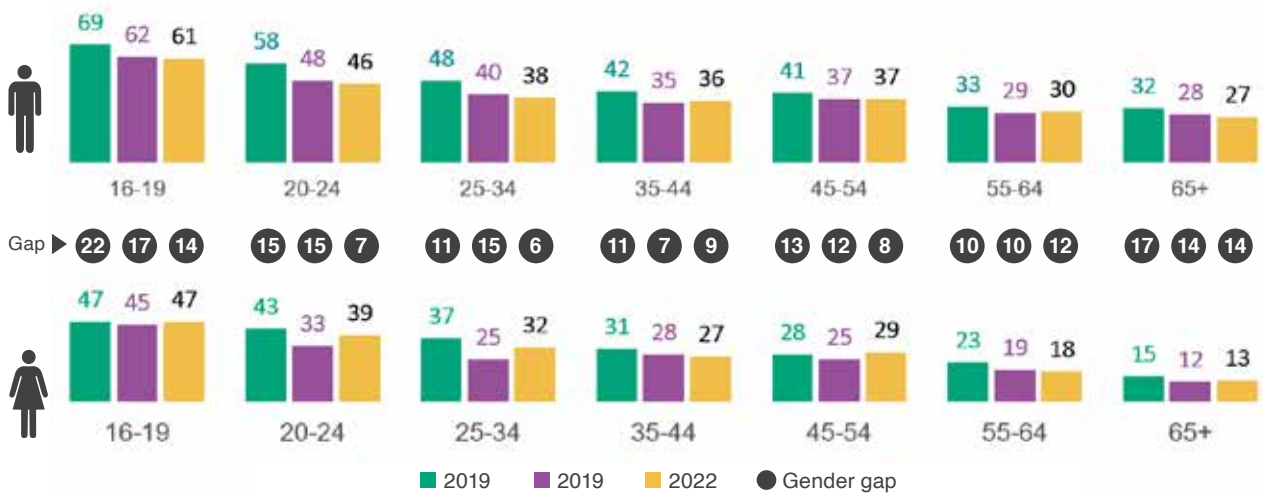
Men were more likely to coach than women, this gap in coaching was at its widest (21 percentage points) since 2015 (24 percentage points)



\*Shown as a percentage of volunteers

■ Male ■ Female ● Change since 2021

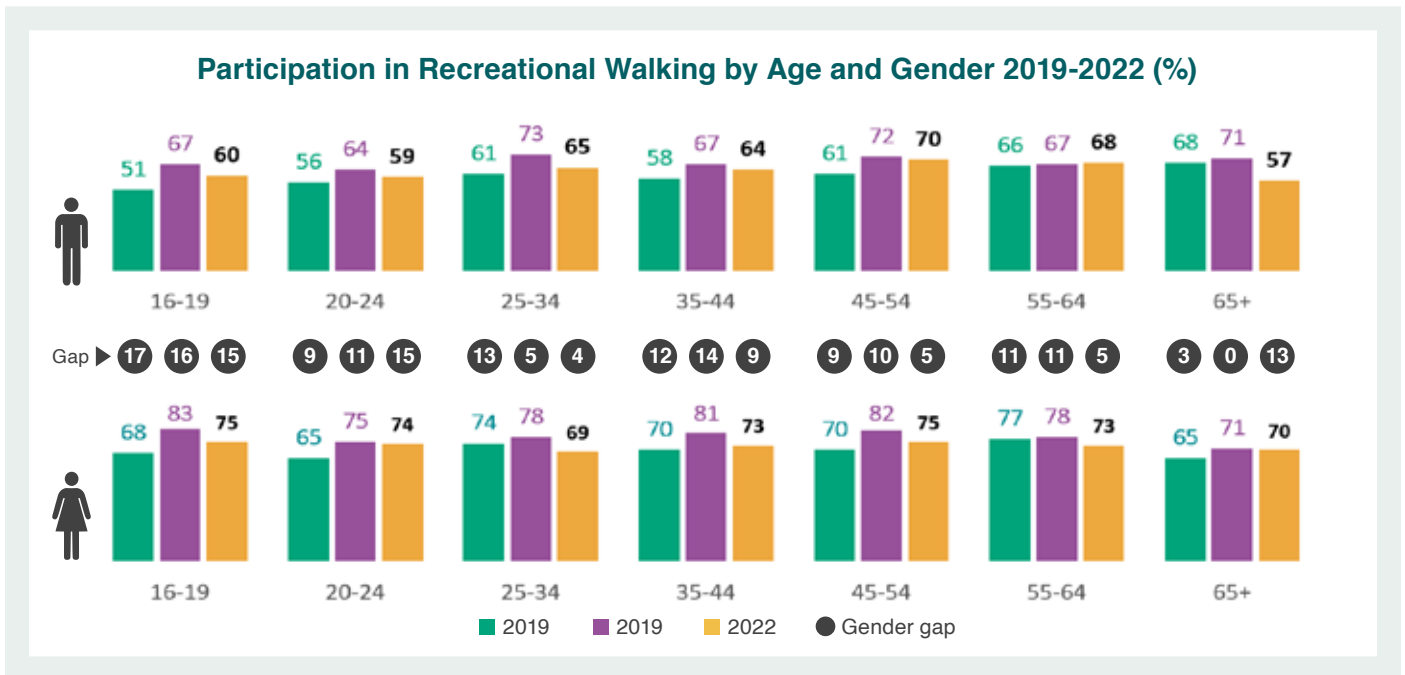
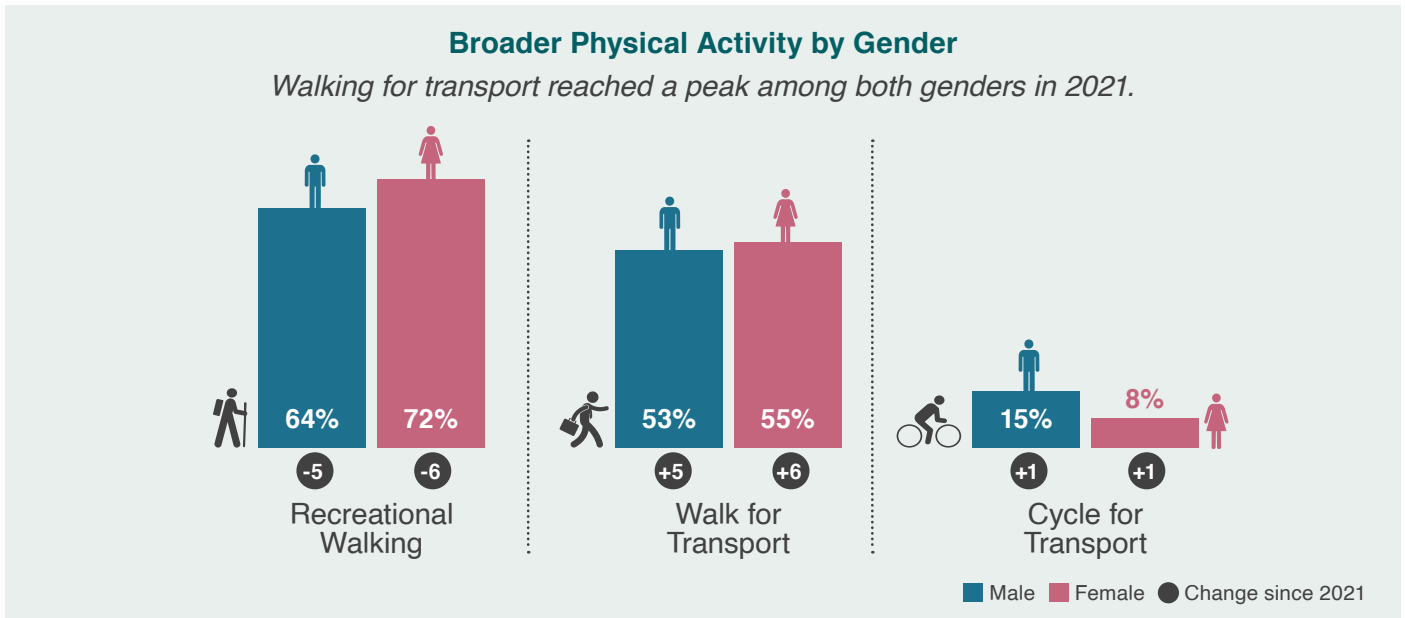
### Club membership by gender and age 2019-2022(%)



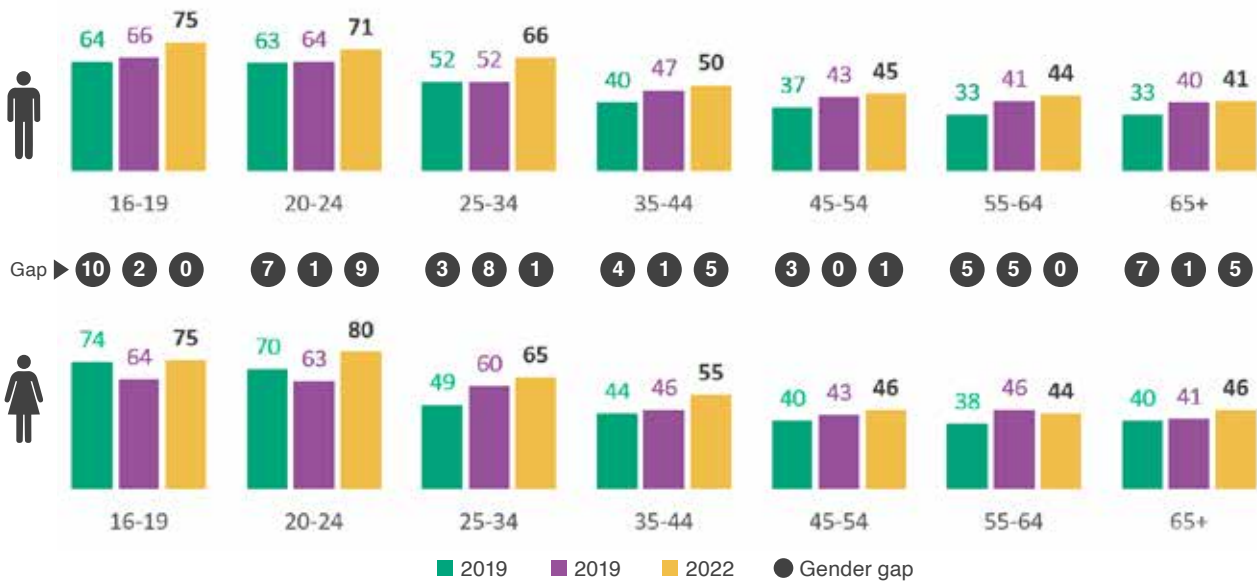
### Spotlight on Gender - Broader Physical Activity

- Recreational walking has declined among both men (64%) and women (72%), by 5 percentage points and 6 percentage points respectively since 2021.
- An 8 percentage point gap in recreational walking existed between men and women, with women more likely to walk for recreation. The gap remained broadly the same as in 2019 after narrowing from a 12 percentage point gap in 2015.
- Three quarters of women in both the 16–19-year-old age group and the 45–54-year-old age group walked for recreation regularly. The highest prevalence of recreational walking for men was also among 45–54-year-olds (70%), while just 60% of 16-19-year-old men walked for recreation

- In contrast to the decline in recreational walking, walking for transport increased among women (55%) and men (53%), reaching its highest level for both genders (2019 women 46%, men 43%).

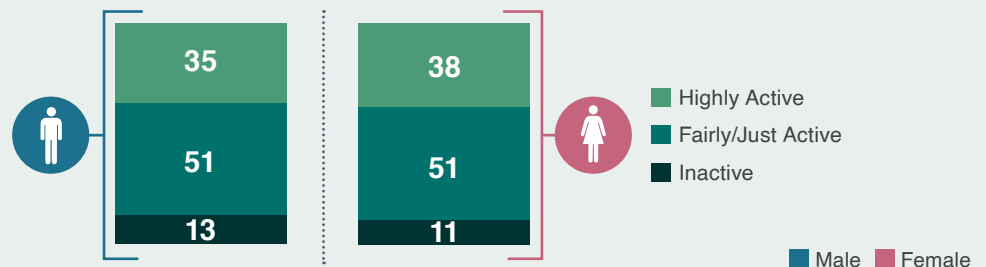


### Participation in Walking for Transport by Age and Gender 2019-2022 (%)



### Level of Activity by Gender

More women were highly active than men, as women were more active in older age groups



### Spotlight on Gender - Special Module

The safety of sports participants when out exercising, especially women, is a growing policy concern. To provide an evidence base for policy response the 2022 ISM conducted a special module on people's experiences of, and response to, verbal or physical harassment when taking part in sport.

- Women (26%) were more likely than men (21%) to say they have experienced some form of verbal or physical harassment from someone else when playing sport, exercising or out walking.
- Among those who experienced harassment during sport, exercise, or walking, 39% of women reported making some changes to their activity such as when or where they participated. In contrast, only 17% of men reported the same. One in ten of both men and women stopped participating in sport altogether after these negative experiences.

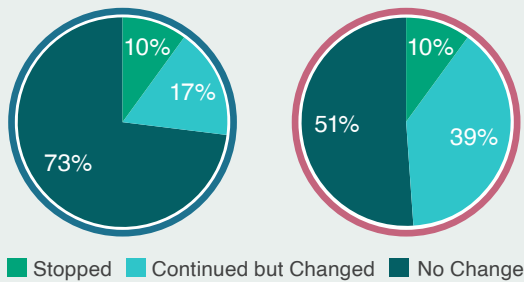
## Safety when Playing Sport, Exercising or Walking by Gender

One in ten women stopped participating in sport after experiencing verbal or physical harassment, while 39% make changes such as when and where they participate

Proportion experiencing verbal or physical harassment while exercising



Action taken as a result of harassment



Before going for a walk or jog I...







## 6. Spotlight on Socio-economic Status

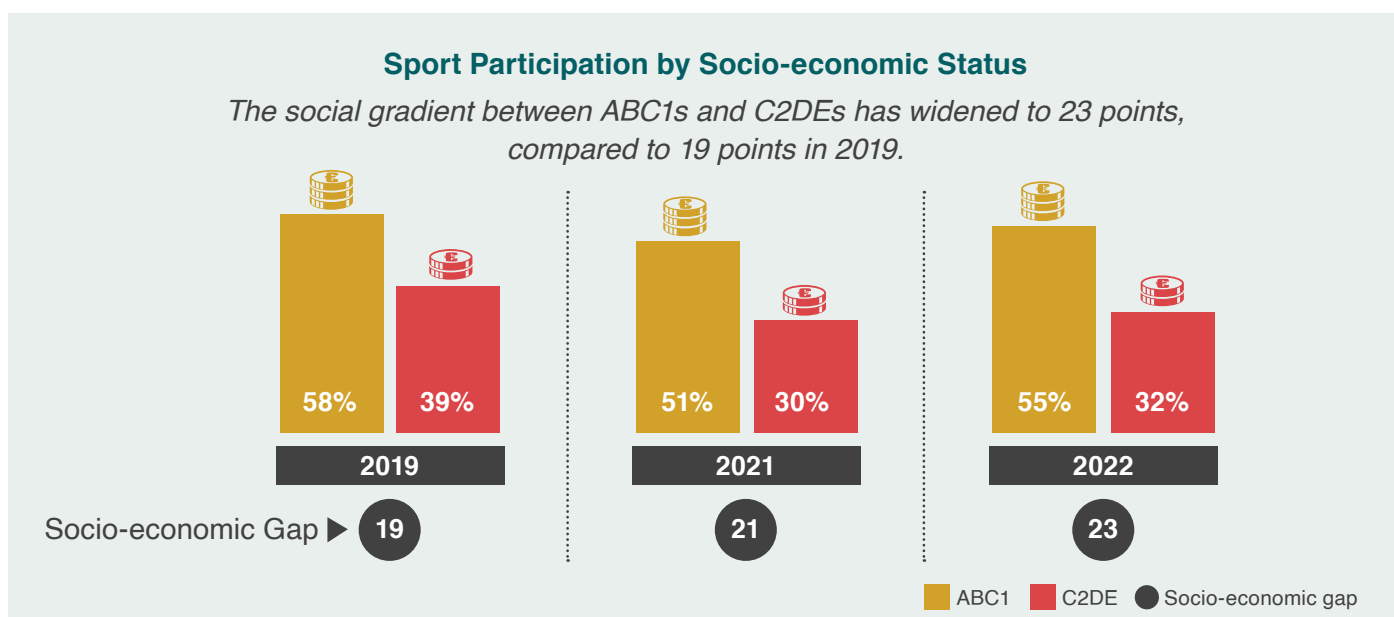
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The National Readership Survey (NRS) Social Grade System was used in the 2022 ISM to classify respondents by socio-economic status. This is a standard approach across survey research and is based on the occupation of the Chief Income Earner in the respondent's household. Respondents were grouped in two socio-economic categories, ABC1 and C2DE, for reporting purposes. Those in ABC1 are typically in more affluent households than those in C2DE.

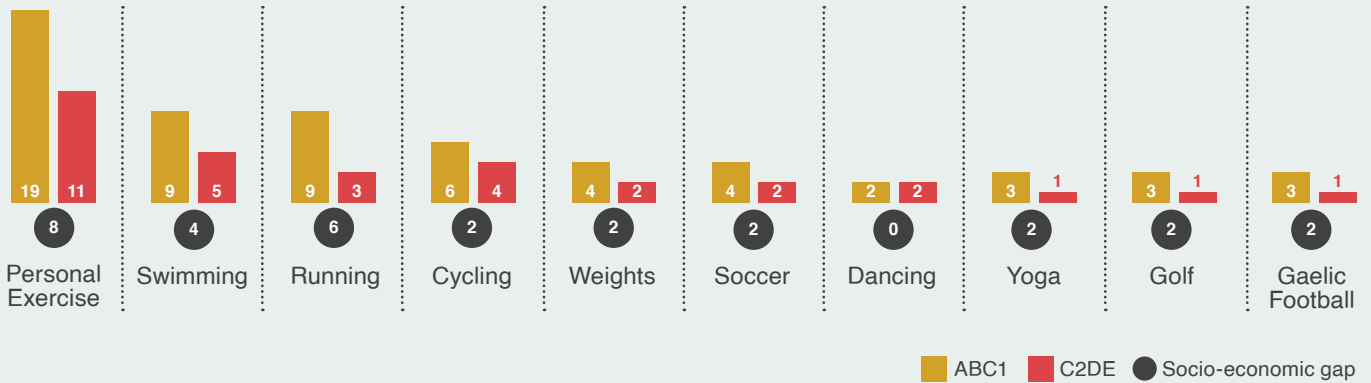
### Spotlight on Socio-economic Status - Sport Participation

- Sports participation levels have increased among the ABC1 group from 51% in 2021 to 55% in 2022 but have not returned to the proportion seen in 2019 (58%). Within the C2DE socio-economic group 32% participated in sport, a decline of 7 percentage points from 39% in 2019. The C2DE group experienced the greatest decline in participation in 2021 to 30% and subsequently is struggled the most to regain high levels of sport participation in 2022.
- The social gradient in sports participation has widened in 2022 to 23 percentage points, this compares to 19 percentage points in 2019.
- Exercise, swimming, and running were the most popular sports among all socio-economic groups. However, social gradients existed in participation rates for each of these sports. The widest participation gap was seen in personal exercise, with 19% of the ABC1 group and 11% of the C2DE group participating in this sport.



### Most Popular Sports by Socio-economic Status

The widest participation gap existed in personal exercise, the most popular sport, as 19% of the ABC1 group and 11% of the C2DE group participated.

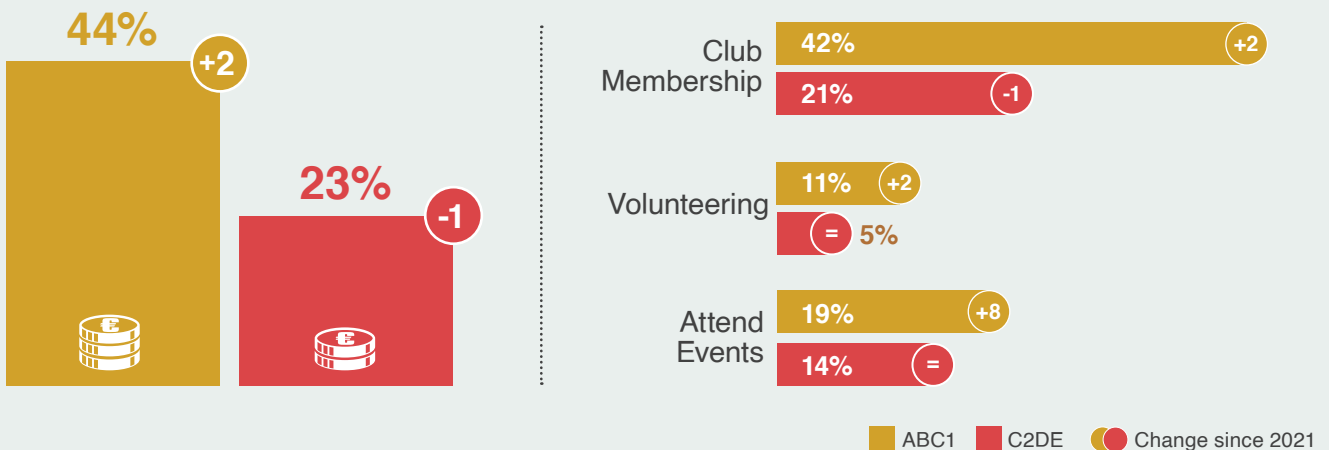


### Spotlight on Socio-economic Status - Social Participation

- Overall social participation was greater among those from a higher socio-economic background (ABC1 44%; C2DE 23%). This gap was consistent across club membership (ABC1 42%; C2DE 21%), volunteering (ABC1 11%; C2DE 5%) and event attendance (ABC1 19%; C2DE 14%).
- Among those who volunteered the higher socio-economic group ABC1 were more likely to volunteer as coaches (44%) than C2DE (36%). While the C2DE group were more likely to volunteer to provide transport (24%) than the ABC1 group (19%).

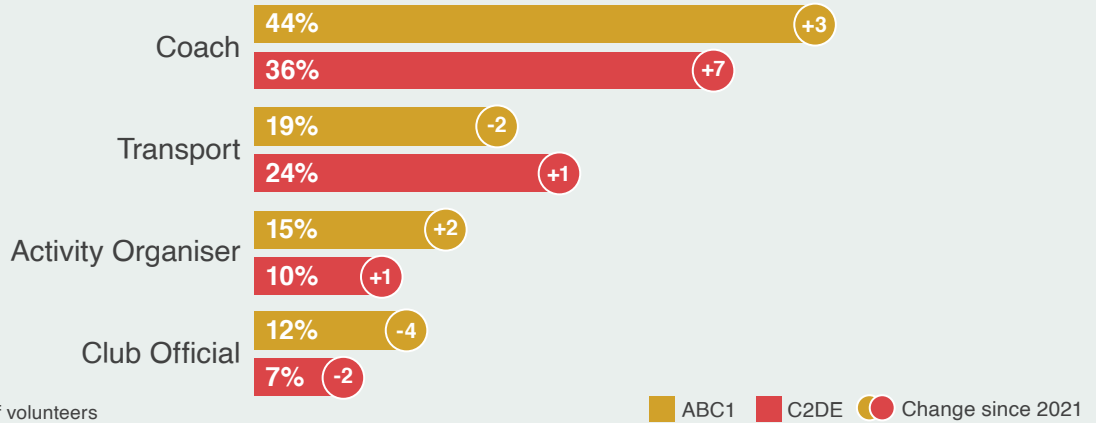
### Social Participation by Socio-economic Status

Social participation was higher among people from higher socio-economic backgrounds (ABC1 44%, C2DE 23%)



### Volunteering Role\* by Socio-economic Status

People from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to volunteer as coaches (44%) than people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (36%).

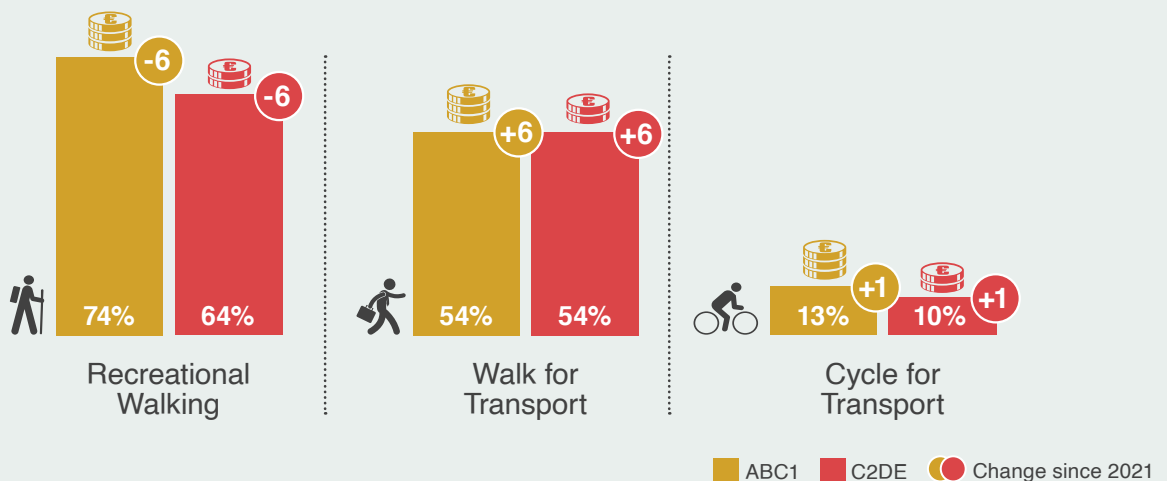


### Spotlight on Socio-economic Status - Broader Physical Activity

- People in the ABC1 group were most likely to walk for recreation (ABC1: 74%, C2DE: 64%). Both groups were equally likely to walk for transport (54%).
- The gap in recreational walking between those who are employed (71%) and those who are unemployed (65%) has persisted, after emerging in 2021 (77% and 69% respectively).
- A social gradient existed in the proportion of people meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines, a difference of 12 percentage points between ABC1s and C2DEs. This gradient has widened by 1 percentage point since 2021 (11 percentage points).
- The higher socio-economic group ABC1 (43%) are more likely to be highly active than the C2DE group (31%). While inactivity was more likely within the C2DE group (15%) than the ABC1 group (8%).

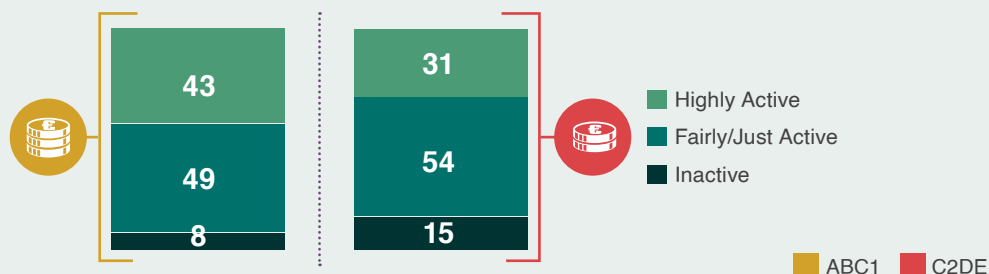
### Broader Physical Activity by Socio-economic Status

The social gradient in recreational walking persisted in 2022, however it has not widened since 2021.



### Level of Activity by Socio-economic Status

A 12 percentage point social gradient existed among the proportion of people meeting National Physical Activity guidelines. This gradient has widened by 1 percentage point since 2021 (11 percentage points).



### Spotlight on Socio-economic Status - Special Module

- Just under a fifth (19%) of both ABC1s and C2DEs have made cutbacks to their spending on sport, most commonly to event attendance and club memberships. However, C2DEs (22%) were more likely to say they now go to exercise classes less often than ABC1s (12%).
- The lower socio-economic group C2DE were less likely to have stopped playing a regular sport over the previous 12 months (17%) than the ABC1 group (22%).

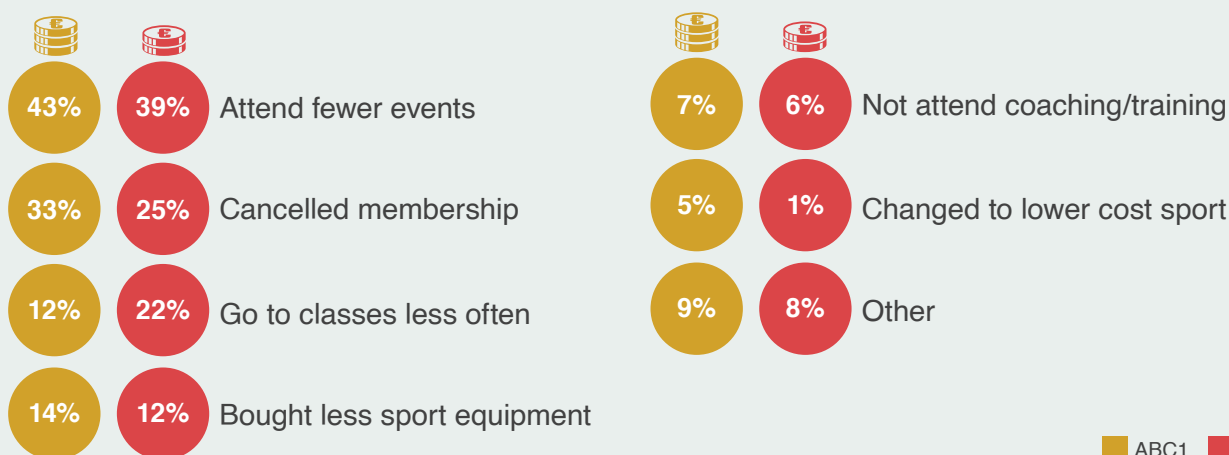
### Special Module - Cutbacks to Spending on Sport by Socio-economic Status

Attending fewer events and canceling memberships are the most common cutbacks in both socio-economic groups. However, the C2DE group (22%) are more likely to cut back on classes than the ABC1 group (12%).

Made a cutback to spending on sport?



What types of cutbacks have you made to spending on sport?







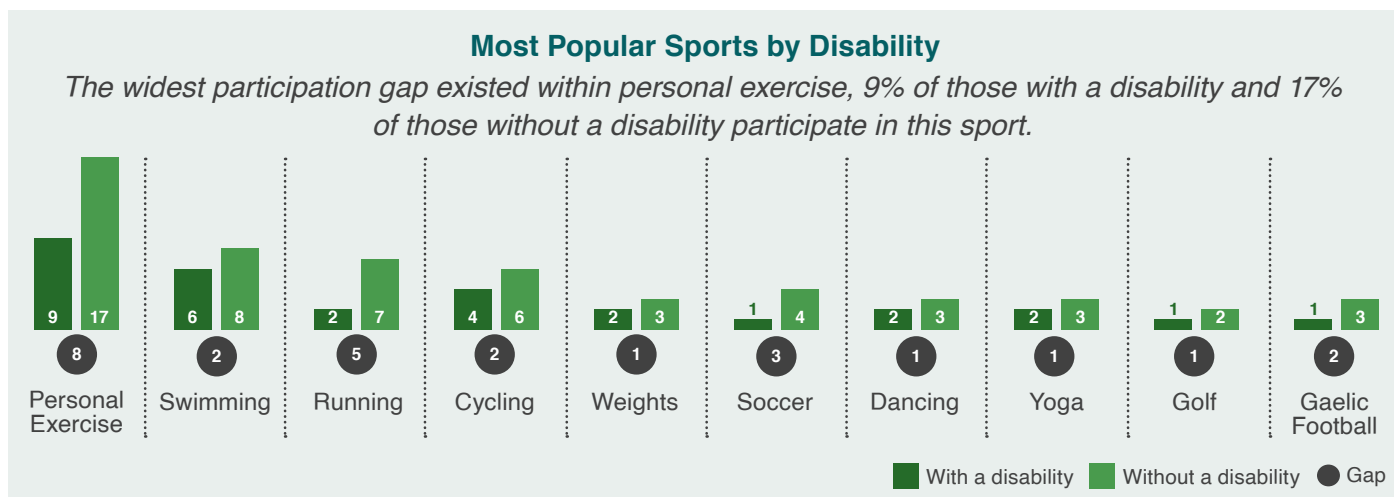
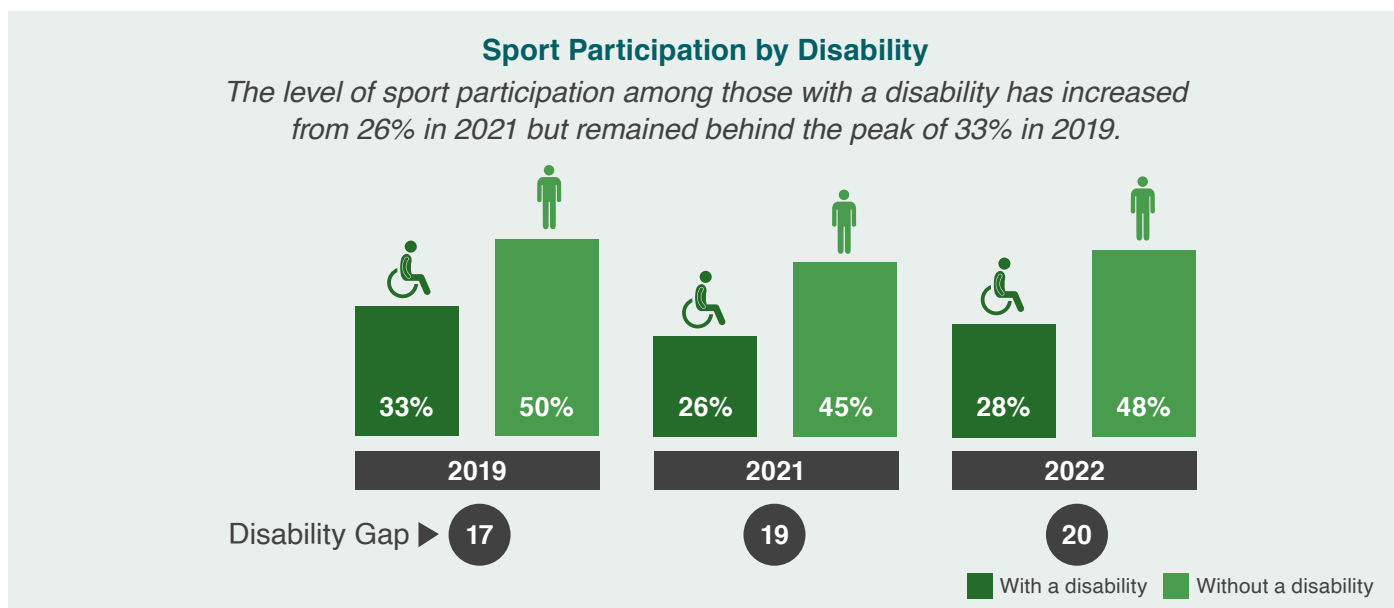
## 7. Spotlight on Disability

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Disability is identified by asking all respondents whether they have a long-term illness, health problem or disability that limits your daily activities. The average age of respondents with a disability was 54-years-old compared to the average age of respondents without a disability which was 43-years-old. It is important to note that age differences among people with a disability are not controlled for in the analysis

### Spotlight on Disability - Sports Participation

- 28% of those with a long-term illness or disability played sport on a regular basis. This compares to 48% among people without a long-term illness or disability. The level of sport participation among people with a long-term illness or disability has increased from 26% in 2021 but remained below levels seen in 2019 (33%).
- The disability gap has widened to 20 percentage points from 17 percentage points in 2019 and from 19 percentage points in 2021. This was the widest the gap in the ISM series.
- Personal exercise (9%), swimming (6%) and cycling (4%) were the most popular sports among those with a disability.
- Those with a disability were most likely to play sport at home (26%), followed by gyms/sports centres (25%). This compares to 18% and 29% respectively among those without a disability.



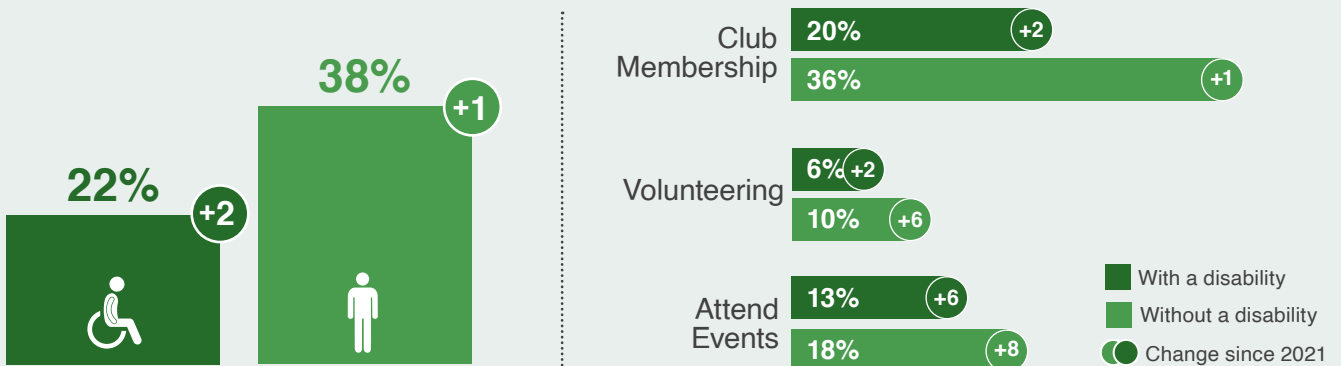


### Spotlight on Disability - Social Participation

- 22% of those with a disability had regular social participation in sport. This compares to 38% among people without a disability (16 percentage point gap). The disability gap remained relatively stable since 2019 (15 percentage point gap), though social participation was lower than in 2019 for both groups (35% and 50% respectively).
- A disability gap was evident in club membership rates at 16 percentage points, volunteering at 2 percentage points, and event attendance at 5 percentage points. The disability gap in volunteering and event attendance has narrowed since 2019 (by 4 and 7 percentage points respectively), while the gap in club membership was broadly unchanged.
- Gaelic football was the most popular sport for volunteering among people with a disability (2%) and without a disability (3%). Coaching was an equally popular volunteer role among people with (41%) and without a disability (40%).
- Gym memberships were the most popular type of club membership among people with a disability (6%) and people without a disability, although people without a disability were more likely to have a gym membership (13%).

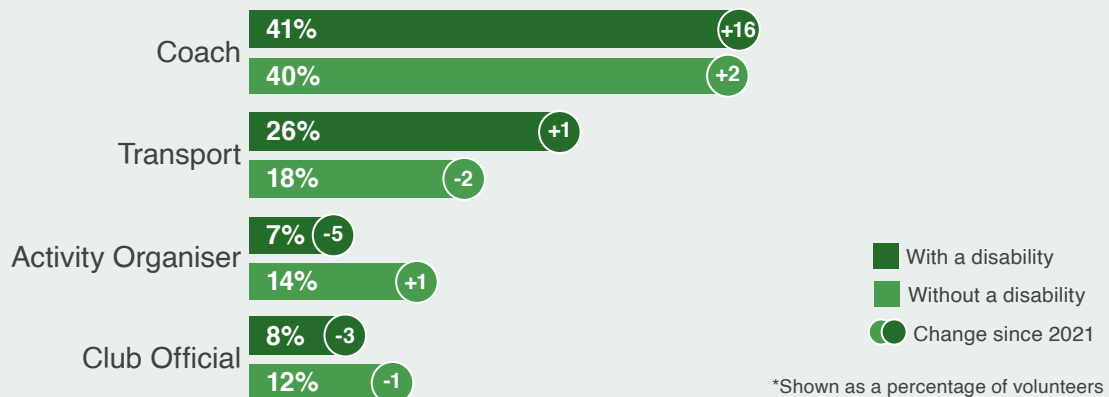
#### Social Participation by Disability

A 16 percentage point disability gap existed in overall social participation, though this has narrowed from a gap of 17 percentage points in 2019.



#### Volunteering Role\* by Disability

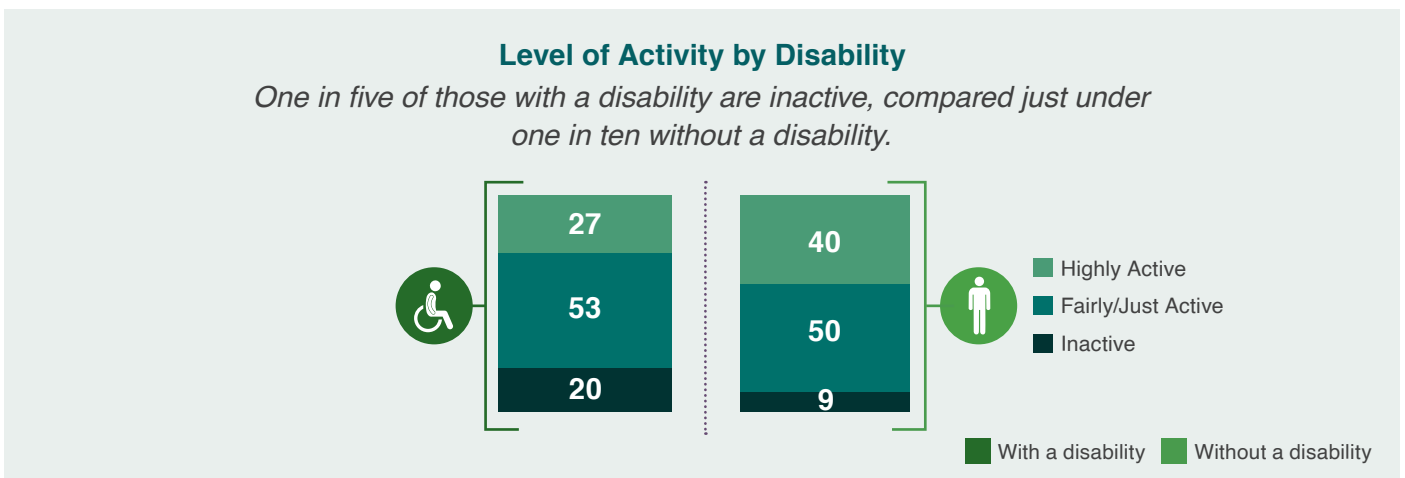
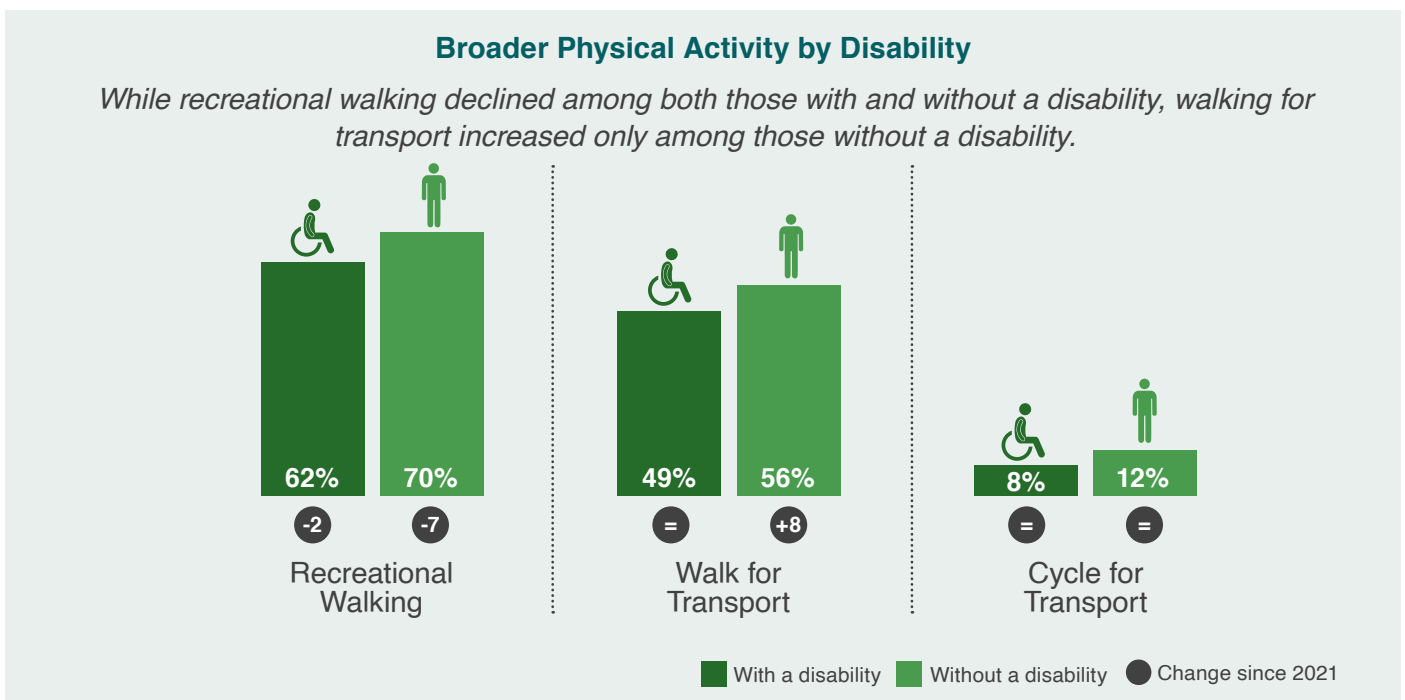
Coaching was the most popular role among volunteers, with equal proportions of those with and without a disability volunteering in this role.



\*Shown as a percentage of volunteers

### Spotlight on Disability - Broader Physical Activity

- There was an 8 percentage point disability gap in recreational walking, 62% of people with a disability walked recreationally, compared to 70% of people without a disability.
- 27% of people with a disability were classified as highly active, while 40% of people without a disability were highly active.
- Inactivity was higher among people with a disability (20%), this compares to just under a tenth of people without a disability classified as inactive (9%). Both are broadly unchanged since 2019, at 19% and 9% respectively.



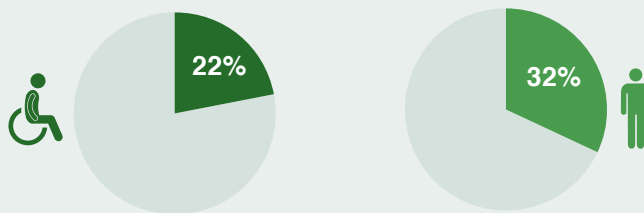
### Spotlight on Disability - Special Module

- Just over a third (35%) of people with a disability reported that they had felt motivated to participate in sport or other physical activity over the past month, compared to 50% of people without a disability.
- Around one-fifth (22%) of people with a disability identified a sport that they have never played that they would like to consider trying, compared to 32% of those without a disability who reported the same. Tennis (12%), rowing (11%), and golf (9%) were the most popular new sports people with a disability would like to try. While rugby (12%), tennis (11%), and swimming (9%) were the top sports people without a disability would like to try.

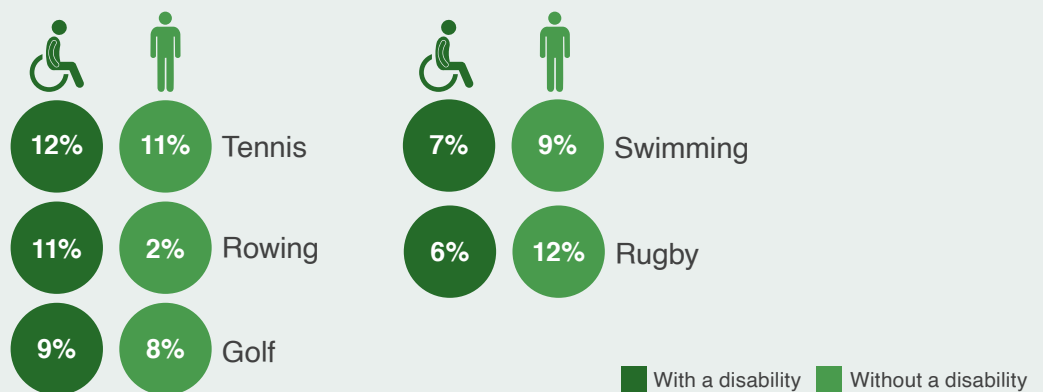
### Transitions in Sport - Taking up New Sports by Disability

Over one in five people with a disability have a sport they would like to consider trying. Tennis (12%), rowing (11%), and golf (9%) were the top three sports they would like to try.

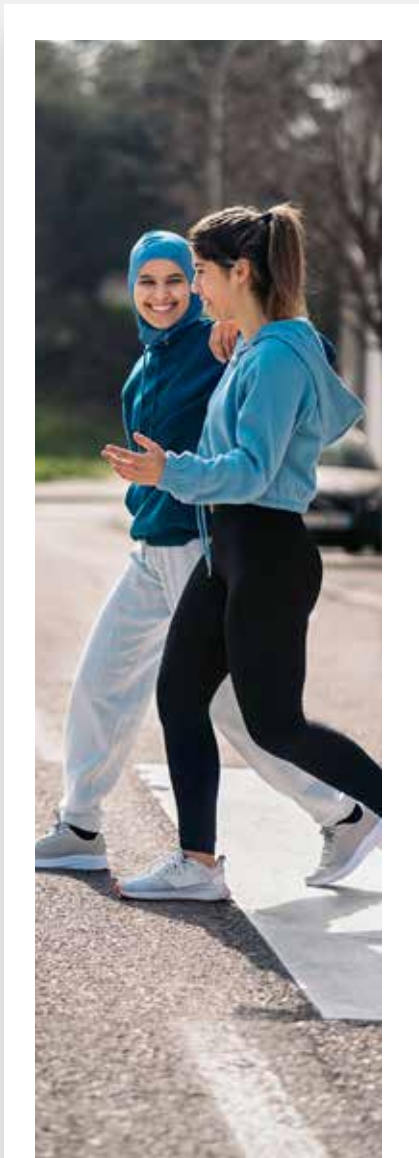
Have a sport they would like to consider trying..



What types of sport would they like to try?







## 8. Spotlight on Ethnicity

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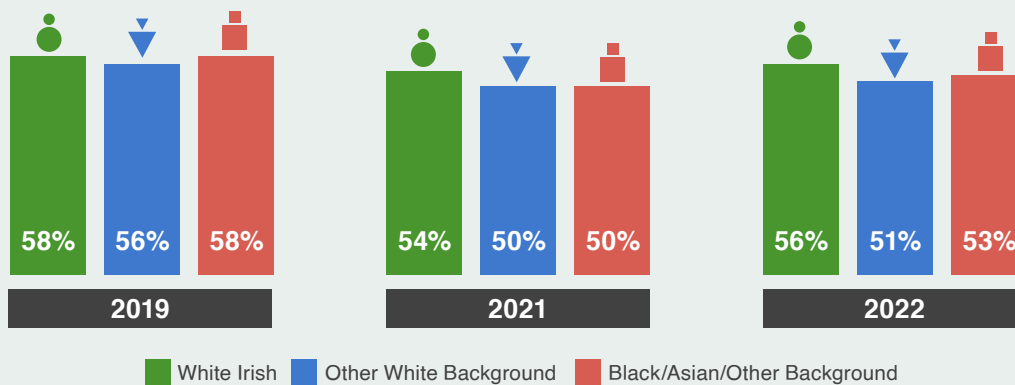
## Spotlight on Ethnicity - Sport Participation

In 2022, the ISM asked people about their ethnicity using the ethnic categories of the 2022 census. For analysis and reporting three broad ethnic groups were used; White Irish, Other White Background and Black, Asian, other. Due to limited sample sizes the White Irish category includes those who identify as a Traveller, and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds have been combined into one group. To equalise the average age across the ethnic groups, results for ethnicity categories are based only on respondents aged under 45 years.

- Sport participation increased in each ethnic group since 2021, though participation remained highest among White Irish (56%). This compares to 53% and 51% respectively among those from Black, Asian or other backgrounds and Other White backgrounds respectively.
- Exercise remained the most popular sport across all ethnic groups. Exercise was most popular among people from other White backgrounds (24%), followed by White Irish (22%), and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (20%).
- Participation in swimming was lower among people from Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (4%), than among White Irish backgrounds (9%).

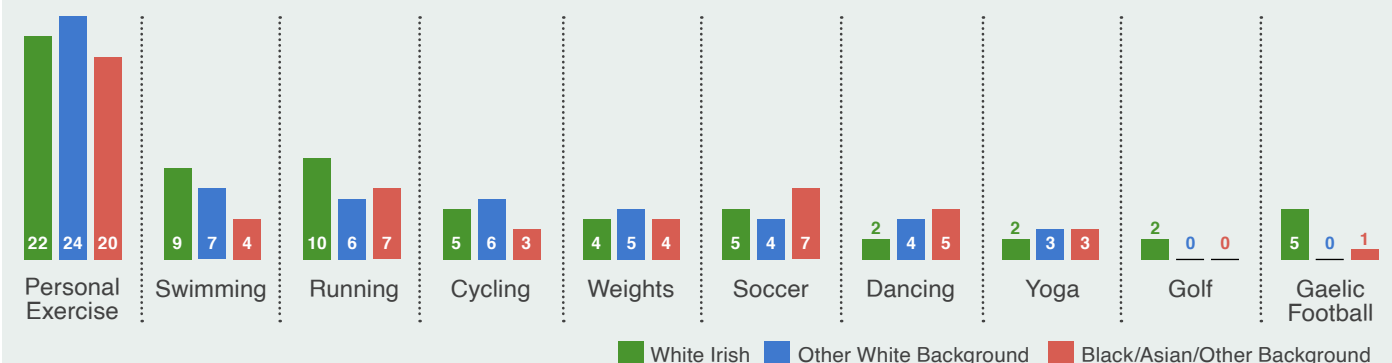
### Sport Participation by Ethnicity

*Sport participation has increased for each ethnic group since 2021, but all remained lower than 2019.*



### Most Popular Sports by Ethnicity

*Exercise remained the most popular sport across each ethnic group, and was most popular among people from other white backgrounds (24%).*

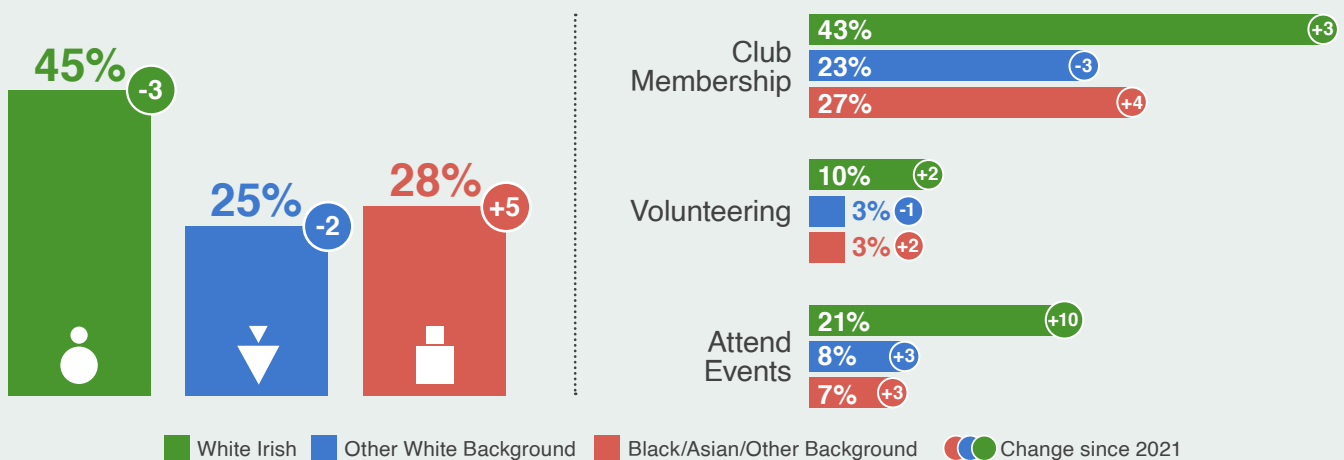


### Spotlight on Ethnicity - Social Participation

- Overall social participation was highest among White Irish (45%), but below 2019 levels (56%). Social participation levels among other White backgrounds (24%) and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (28%) also remained lower than in 2019 (Other White 36%; Black, Asian, or other backgrounds 43%).
- Those with a White Irish background were most likely to volunteer (10%), compared to 3% among both Other White backgrounds and Black, Asian or Other backgrounds. Volunteering within each group remained lower than in 2019 when 13% of White Irish, 5% of people from Other White backgrounds, and 6% of people from Black, Asian or Other backgrounds were volunteers.
- Club membership was highest among White Irish (43%) but remained below what was measured in 2019 (46%). Membership rates also remained below the proportion seen in 2019 for people from Other White backgrounds (2022 23%; 2019 29%) and Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (2022 27%; 2019 38%).
- Gym memberships were the most popular type of club membership for each ethnicity group as 18% of White Irish, 15% of Black, Asian, or other backgrounds, and 12% of people from other White backgrounds had a gym membership.
- Event attendance was highest among White Irish (21%), followed by Other White backgrounds (8%), and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (7%).
- Gaelic football was the most popular attendance event among White Irish (15%), while soccer was the most popular event to attend among Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (4%) as well as people from other White backgrounds (2%).

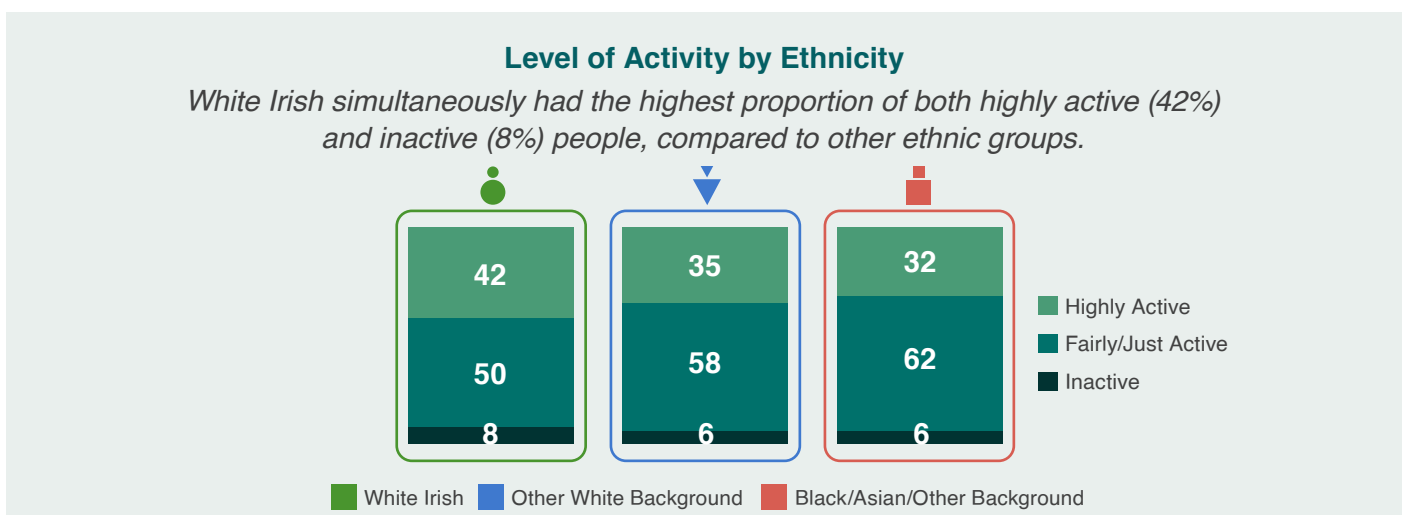
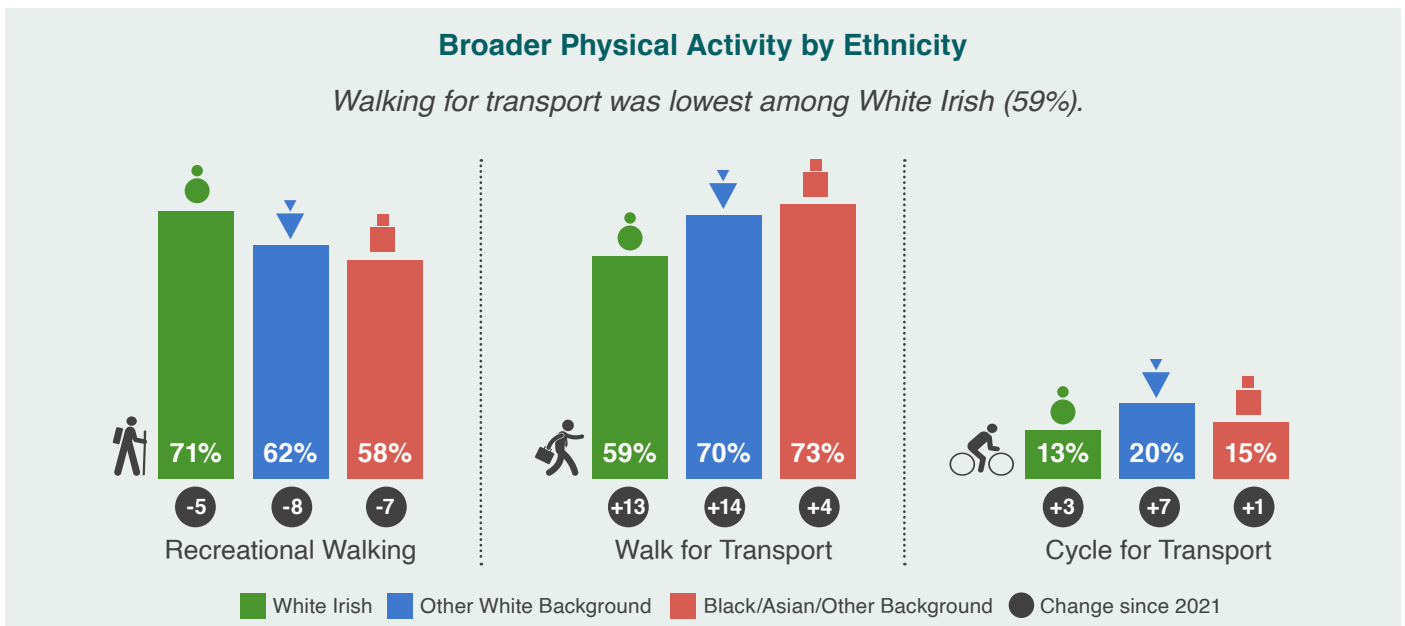
#### Social Participation by Ethnicity

Attendance at sports events has increased by 10 percentage points among White Irish since 2021, compared to just 3 points among Other White backgrounds and Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds.

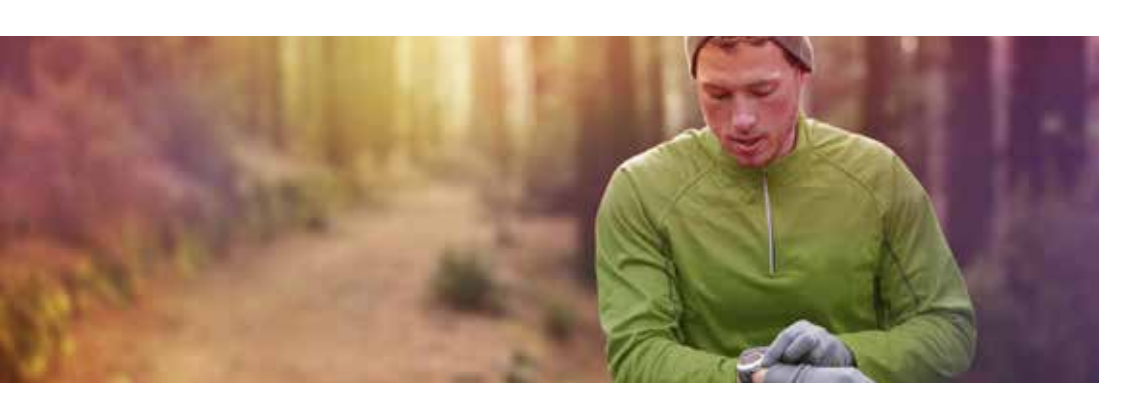


### Spotlight on Ethnicity - Broader Physical Activity

- Recreational walking was most common among White Irish (71%) compared to people from Other White backgrounds (62%) and people from Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (58%).
- Walking for transport was most common among Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (73%) followed by other White backgrounds (70%). Walking for transport was lowest among White Irish (59%).
- Cycling for transport was most prevalent among people from other White backgrounds (20%) and among people from Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (15%), while just 13% of White Irish cycled for transport.
- The proportion of people meeting National Physical Activity Guidelines and classified as highly active was highest among White Irish (42%), followed by people from other White backgrounds (35%), and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds (32%).
- Despite having the highest proportion of highly active people, White Irish also had the highest proportion of inactivity (8%). This compares to 6% for both people from Other White backgrounds and from Black, Asian, or other backgrounds.







## 9. Spotlight on Urban and Rural

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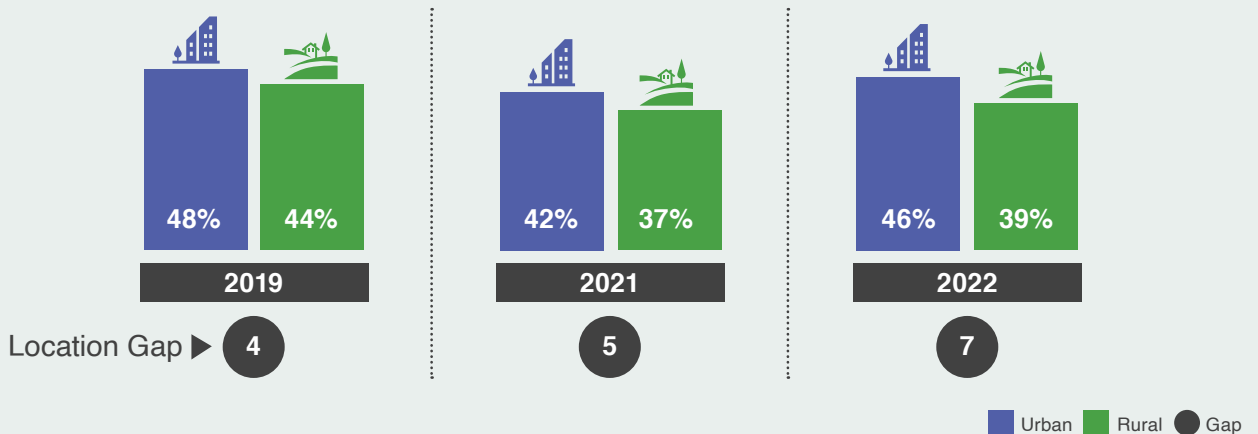
## Spotlight on Urban and Rural - Sport Participation

In 2022 ISM respondents were asked to identify whether they live in a city, town, village, or isolated location. Those who responded city or town were classified as living in an urban location while those who responded village or isolated location were classified as living in a rural location. This section considers differences between these two location categories.

- Participation has increased in both urban (46%) and rural (39%) areas since 2021 (42% and 37% respectively). The gap in participation between urban and rural areas stands at 7 percentage points, increasing from a 4 percentage point gap in 2019.
- Exercise, swimming, and running were the most popular sports in both urban and rural areas, although personal exercise was slightly more popular in urban areas (17%) than rural areas (12%).

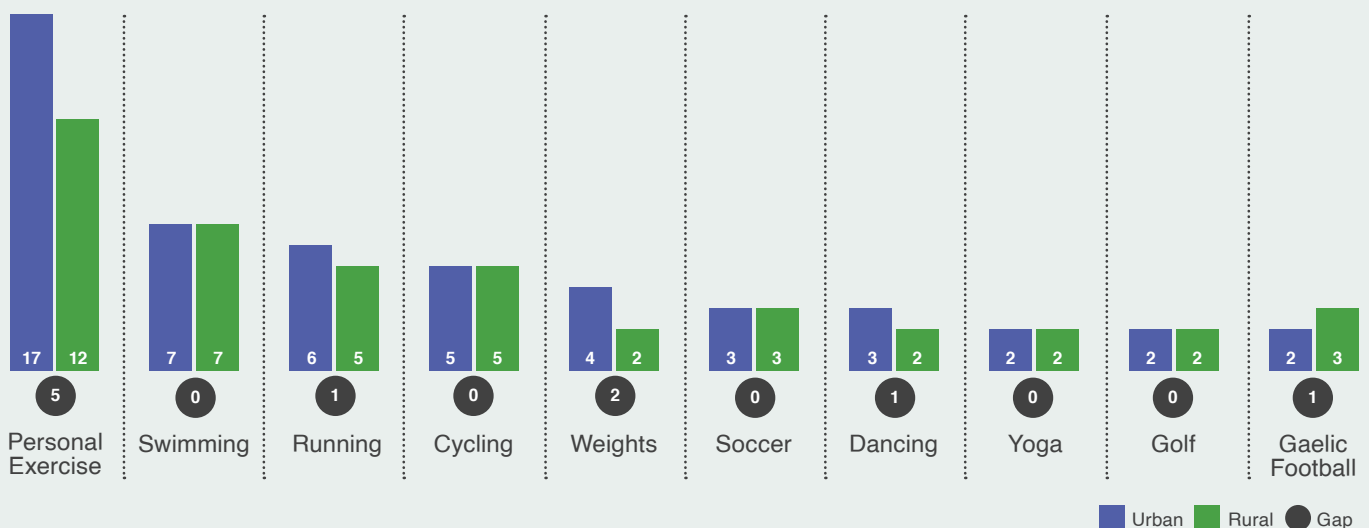
### Sports Participation by Urban and Rural

The gap in sport participation has widened to 7 percentage points between urban and rural locations from 4 percentage points in 2019.



### Most Popular Sports by Urban and Rural

Among the top five most popular sports exercise and weights were slightly more popular in urban rather than rural locations.

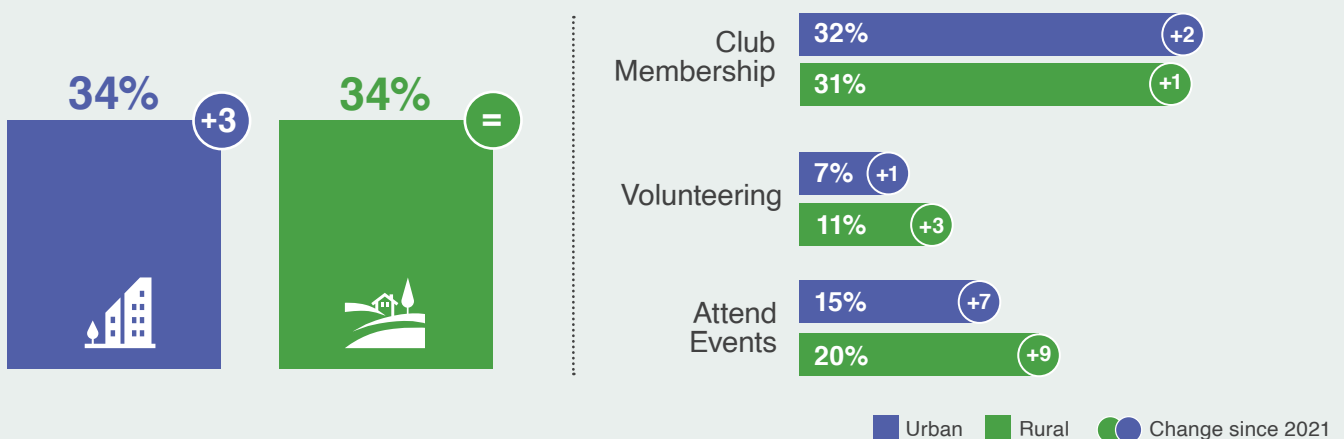


## Spotlight on Urban and Rural - Social Participation

- Social participation in urban areas (34%) has increased since 2021(31%), bringing it in line with social participation rates in rural areas (34%). However, social participation remained lower than in 2019 (44% urban and 50% rural respectively), as both areas are slow to recover.
- Volunteering was more common in rural than urban areas (11% and 7% respectively). Gaelic football was the most popular sport among volunteers although the proportion volunteering for this sport was higher in rural (4%) areas than urban areas (2%).
- The prevalence of club membership was broadly similar in both areas (urban: 32%, rural: 31%). This represents a decline since 2019 in both areas (rural: 38%, urban: 35%).
- Gym memberships were more common in urban than rural areas (14% and 8% respectively). In rural areas 14% were members of a GAA club compared to 7% of those living in urban areas.

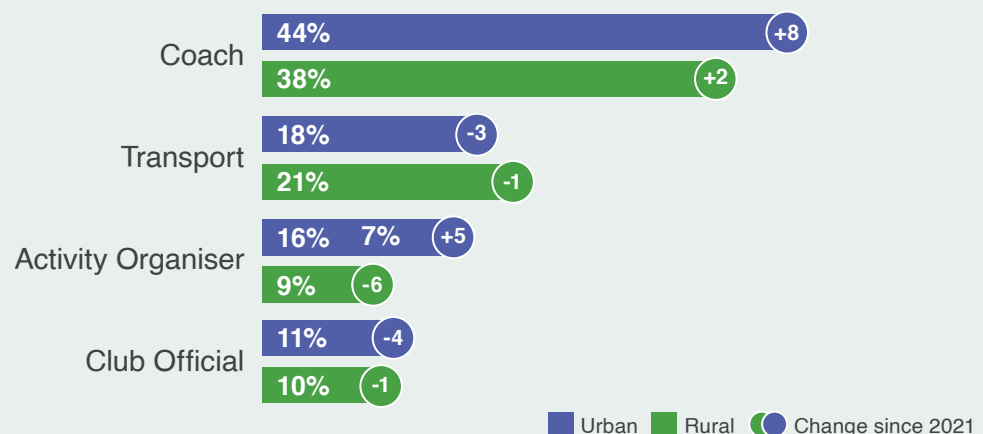
### Social Participation by Urban and Rural

Social participation in urban areas has increased since 2021, causing the participation gap to close



### Volunteering Role\* by Urban and Rural

The widest gap existed between volunteers for activity organisation and coaching with volunteers in urban areas more likely to volunteer in these roles than those in rural areas.

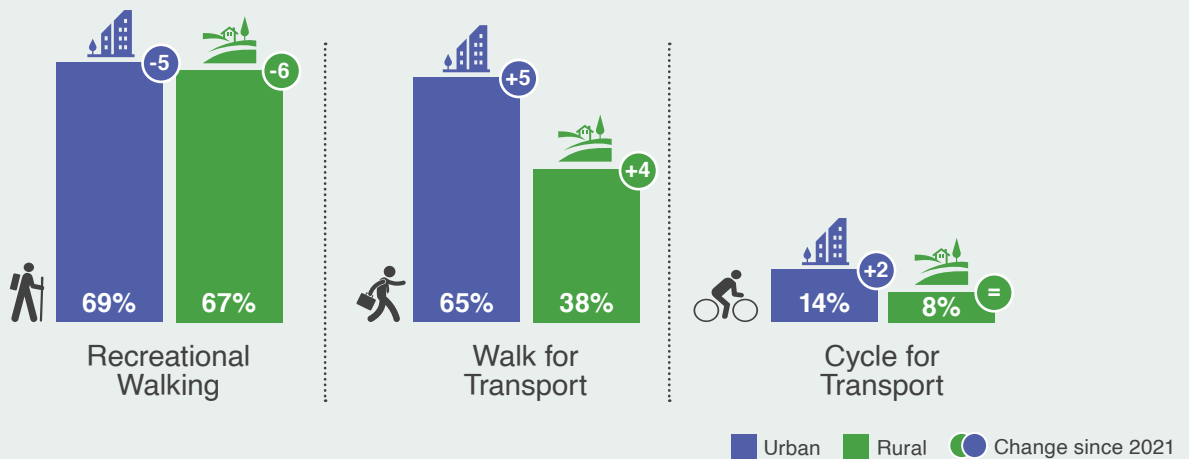


### Spotlight on Urban and Rural - Broader Physical Activity

- Recreational walking decreased in 2022 in both urban (69%) and rural locations (67%), by 5 and 6 percentage points respectively since 2021
- Walking for transport increased in 2022 in both urban (65%) and rural locations (38%), by 5 and 4 percentage points respectively since 2021.
- The proportion of people classified as highly active in urban locations (39%) has increased by 4 percentage points since 2019 (35%), while the proportion living in rural areas classified as highly active has remained broadly unchanged (2022: 34%, 2019: 33%).
- Inactivity in rural areas has increased to 17% in comparison to 2019 (14%), while levels of inactivity in urban areas (9%) remained broadly unchanged since 2019 (10%).

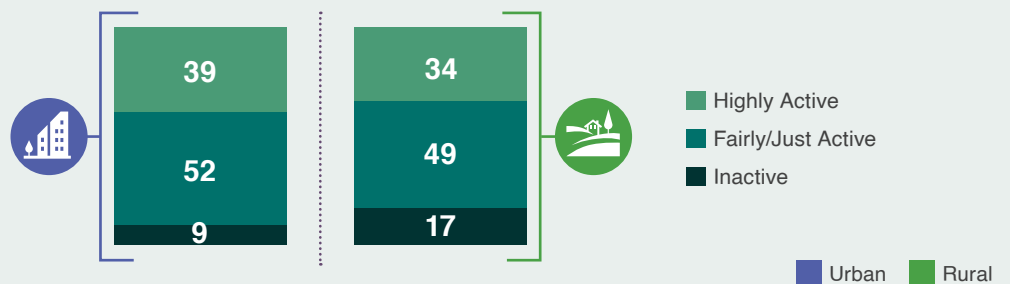
#### Broader Physical Activity by Urban and Rural

Recreational walking declined in both areas, while walking for transport increased by a similar margin.



#### Level of Activity by Urban and Rural

Inactivity is more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, with a difference of 8 percentage points.



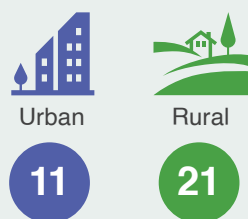
### Spotlight on Urban and Rural - Special Module

- Memberships to NGBs were also explored in a special module in 2022. People in rural areas were found to be more likely to report being members of an NGB (21%), while 11% of people in urban areas have an NGB membership.
- Just over a fifth (22%) of people in urban locations have stopped playing a regular sport in the last 12 months, compared to 16% of those who live in rural areas.

### NGB Membership by Urban and Rural

*Memberships with NGB's were more common among people in rural than urban locations*

#### Current NGB Membership



#### Current NGB Membership by Sport





## Key Considerations

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## **A return to normality - but not there yet, and not among all groups**

The 2021 ISM clearly illustrated the considerable disruption to sports participation that resulted from the social restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was evident across all forms of active and social participation with declines in the numbers playing most sports as well as the numbers of volunteers and people attending sports events. While many replaced organised sports that were unavailable to them with flexible individual sports such as running and cycling, others dropped out of sport entirely. Notably, however, there was a sizeable increase in the number of people walking and taking advantage of increased free time that became available to them.

A concern at the time was that many of these people may not return to sport and that broken habits over almost a two-year period would be hard to restart. Like many other parts of society and life generally, this period of restrictions posed a threat to sports participation – not just in Ireland, but globally.

The results from the 2022 ISM shows that these fears were - in most cases - unfounded. As society reopened over the course of 2022, people returned to sport - they went back into sports facilities, back to club training and started going to matches and events again. While participation levels are still behind where they were in 2019, much of the ground lost during the dark days of 2020 and 2021 has since been regained.

This is not just evident in the numbers of people playing sport and the types of sport they are playing, but also through the format of their participation: where they play and who they play with. The return to sport is also evident in club memberships, club activity, volunteering, and attendance at sports events.

Analysis of individual quarters during 2022 shows that this return to sport continued throughout the year, and early evidence from ISM 2023 suggests that sport is regaining many of its participants.

However, there are still some who have not yet returned to sport. Sports participation among women declined more severely during the pandemic than it did for men. While both genders have seen an increase in participation since 2021, the gender gap (which was narrowing in the years prior to the pandemic) has remained unchanged since 2021. A similar dynamic exists in respect of those from lower socio-economic groups. A sharper decline in participation among lower socio-economic groups during the pandemic has not been corrected to the same extent during 2022. Similarly, those aged between 25 and 44 have not returned to sport to the same extent as other age groups.

A further concern exists within the club environment. The number of club members and sports volunteers remains considerably behind where they were in 2019. Encouraging these individuals back into club environments is important for the variety of benefits it brings, to the individuals involved, sports clubs and local communities. With the number of volunteers having dropped by a quarter between 2019 and 2022, this poses a significant threat to the continuity of organised sport and sustainability of sporting infrastructures throughout the country.

## **Facilitating access to new sports**

The ISM includes a series of special modules run over the course of the year to provide a deeper understanding on specific issues relating to sport. One of those issues related to interest in participating in different types of sport. It found that almost 1 in 3 people (29%) identified a sport that they do not currently play but would like to take up. Of particular interest is that half of those interested in taking up a sport do not currently play sport on a regular basis. This illustrates the potential to encourage new people into sport and to grow the playing base.



There is keen interest among target groups such as women and people with disabilities to increase sports participation - interest levels are the same among both men and women, and over a fifth of those with a disability said there is a sport they would like to try.

It is particularly revealing that many of the most commonly mentioned sports that people would like to try are not among the top sports played currently. For example, the two most popular sports that people would like to try are tennis and rugby, with 1 in 10 of those wanting to try a new sport selecting one of these. Basketball and boxing also feature high up the list of sports that people would like to try, but neither feature in the top 10 sports currently played. Notably, interest in these sports are as high among non-sports participants as they are among those who currently play sport.

This suggests that there is a significant untapped opportunity to grow not just the number of sports participants overall, but also to encourage new people into sports that currently have a narrower playing base than others.

Unlocking this opportunity will require significant effort and resource in order to give people the chance to try these sports, and further consideration is needed to understand what exactly needs to be done in order to provide this opportunity. Clubs will likely play a key role in supporting these individuals (while potentially growing their membership base) as clubs are the most commonly mentioned location in which people would like to try a new sport.

However, in exploring this potential opportunity it is necessary to consider that the most commonly mentioned barrier to taking up more sport is a lack of free time, so flexibility around scheduling of “come and try” sessions or similar events is crucial.

### **Vulnerability of expenditure on sport during the cost-of-living crisis**

This year’s ISM included separate special modules on both expenditure on sport and likelihood to change spending behaviours in light of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The module on expenditure found that those playing sports spent a considerable amount of money on their participation.

Regular sports participants spend on average almost €100 per month on their participation, with much of this accounted for by clothing and other sports equipment. Additionally, there is the cost of club membership (on average €373 per club member annually) and spending on children’s sports (just over €100 per month). At the time of writing there is a key focus generally on making cutbacks to spending in light of a high inflation rate and ongoing rises in interest rates. There would be a fear that participation in sport could be considered as discretionary spending and particularly vulnerable when individuals seek to make cost savings.

Indeed, during November and December 2022 (a period marked by a rapidly rising inflation rate) roughly one in five sports participants said that they have made cutbacks to their spending on sports participation as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. Smaller proportions also indicated that they would cut back on their attendance at sports events or club membership for this reason.

While this suggests that the majority expect their spending on sport to be unaffected, it’s important to consider groups, such as people in lower socio-economic groups, that may be more vulnerable to disconnecting from sport for cost reasons. For example, people in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to make cutbacks to their spending by going to classes less often, compared to higher socio-economic groups.

These individuals – and families – will need to be supported to continue their involvement in sport to ensure that they can sustain their involvement into the future.

### **The importance of sport as a social bond**

The restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 meant that many had to change the way they participate in sport and physical activity. While some dropped out of sport entirely, others changed to sports typically played alone such as running and cycling. A particular challenge was that clubs and other community-based facilities were unavailable which meant that sport lost the social connectedness that it creates across communities in Ireland.

The 2022 ISM clearly illustrates a transition in sport from the individual back to the social, from the home and public roads back to clubs and sports centres. Participation levels in most team sports are back to where they were before the pandemic, sports participants across all sports are likely to be participating with others, and the numbers attending events are broadly in line with pre-pandemic volumes.

Sport plays a vital social role at both individual and community levels. It forges bonds between individuals, and many would say that activities are more enjoyable when done with friends and teammates.

The maintenance of sporting infrastructure is vital in encouraging improved national wellbeing. With many challenges facing the country and the world, it is important to recognise the role that sport plays in creating positive lifestyles, both physically and mentally.

### **Opportunity to deepen the role of National Governing Bodies**

The club is at the centre of most sport in Ireland. It facilitates not just the playing of sport itself, but also a wide array of social connections and the important role in fostering community spirit.

Most clubs are also part of broader national structures – NGBs – that provide structure for particular sports within Ireland and develop these sports at national and often international levels. The GAA, FAI and IRFU are likely some of the highest profile NGBs in Ireland.

However, most people that participate in sport are not members of a NGB with just over one-fifth of those regularly participating in sport identifying as being a member of a NGB. Furthermore, roughly two-thirds of club members said they are not members of a NGB, although many of these individuals would be members of a gym or similar for which there is no relevant NGB.

For those that are members of a NGB, it is the community aspect that is the most commonly mentioned benefit, with almost three times as many members identifying this benefit rather than it providing a route into competitive sport. This supports the broader role of NGBs and highlights their wider potential beyond association with competitive and elite level sport.

When looking at ways to broaden the role of NGBs within Irish sport it is important to consider this and highlight the benefits which members see, but non-members may not be fully aware of. In an environment where a considerable amount of sport takes place away from local club structures there is considerable opportunity for NGBs to foster this sense of community within sports with a potential for growth.





## Appendices

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Sport Ireland,  
The Courtyard,  
Sport Ireland Campus,  
Snugborough Road,  
Blanchardstown,  
Dublin 15,  
D15 PNON

 +353 1 8608800

 [www.sportireland.ie](http://www.sportireland.ie)

Ipsos  
Block 3,  
Blackrock Business Park,  
Blackrock, Co. Dublin  
A94 D5D7

 +353 1 4389000

 [www.ipsos.com/en-ie](http://www.ipsos.com/en-ie)