

Hearts & Minds Insight on Inactivity Among UK Adults:

Introduction

Tackling inactivity is a major priority for **Sport England** and its strategy “Towards an Active Nation” looks beyond participation to understand how sport can be a force for good amongst this target audience. A 12-year research programme at Cambridge University with 300,000 participants showed that a lack of exercise could be killing twice as many people in Europe than obesity.

We are aiming to build on the insight and contribute to the debate on inactivity via our tracking survey Hearts & Minds. We are publishing a series of short articles in which we address the following:

- **Who is inactive and which groups are most prone to low levels of activity**
- **Are inactive people aware of their behaviour**
- **What are the root causes of inactivity and how can we tackle them**
- **Which people are open to becoming more active**
- **The link between inactivity and education**

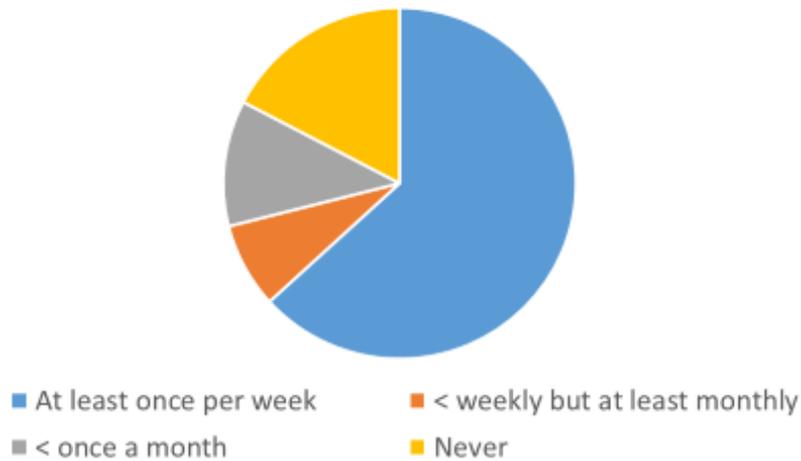
We have further insight on what inactive (and active) people are doing, why and what activities are of interest to them, so this article is a taster on what we can do to increase understanding within the sports participation market. If you have any questions or feedback on this article please contact Jack Murray jack@sportmr.co.uk.

Infrequent exercise starts earlier than you may think

Hearts & Minds from Sport MR and MyCustomerLens today reveals that among UK adults:

- 63% exercise at least once per week (regular)
- 8% do so less than weekly but at least once per month (occasional)
- 29% are less frequent including 17% who never take exercise

Frequency of Exercise

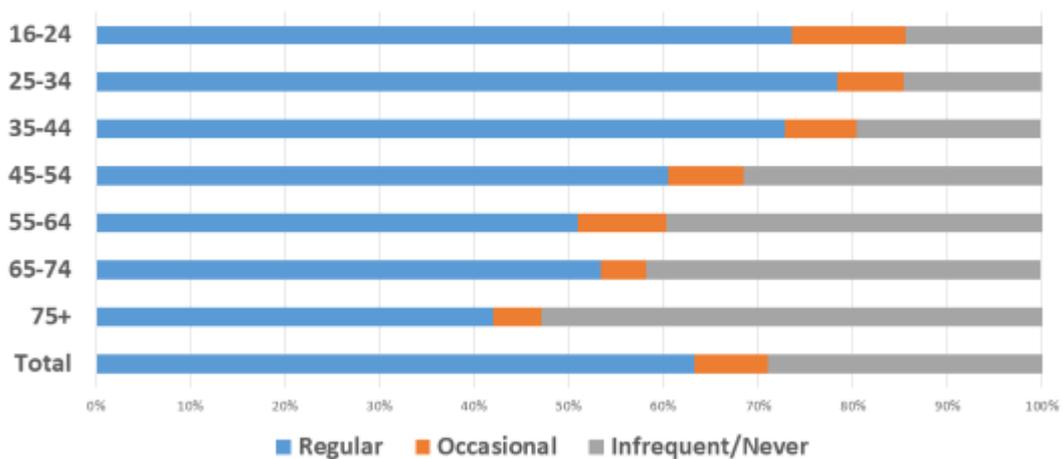


© Sport MR

According to a recent [World Health Organisation report](#), 28% of adults are physically inactive. So, the UK is close to the global average for inactivity, but below average for developed economies which at 37% is significantly higher than for developing countries. In high income countries people tend to have more sedentary jobs and consume more calories so being active takes on more importance for health reasons.

Not surprisingly, infrequent exercise (less than once per month or never) is more prevalent among the older age groups but what may be unexpected is that it **overtakes the national average at age 45-54**.

Frequency of Exercise by Age Group



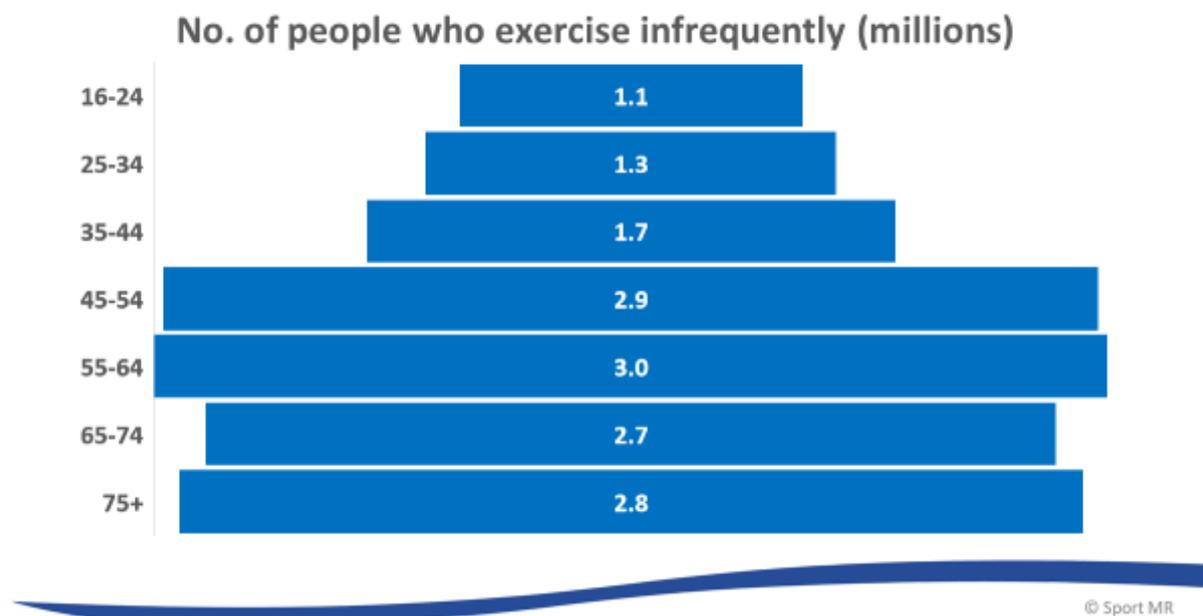
© Sport MR

The age group with the highest level of physical activity is 25-34. As the age groups advance, infrequent exercise tends to replace frequent exercise, with those undertaking occasional activity (at least once per month) remaining a relatively small proportion of each age group. This suggests that we tend to

go from doing something regularly to doing very little as we get older, rather than gradually reducing activity levels over time.

As a hypothesis we propose that people are more likely to stop doing physical activity rather than do what they have always done less frequently or replace it with other forms of exercise.

If we overlay infrequent exercise onto the national population it reveals another interesting fact



The number of people who exercise infrequently in the UK is c15.4 million. Up to the age of 44 inactivity is at a relatively low level. There is a substantial jump in the numbers of infrequent exercisers when you reach the 45-54 age group.

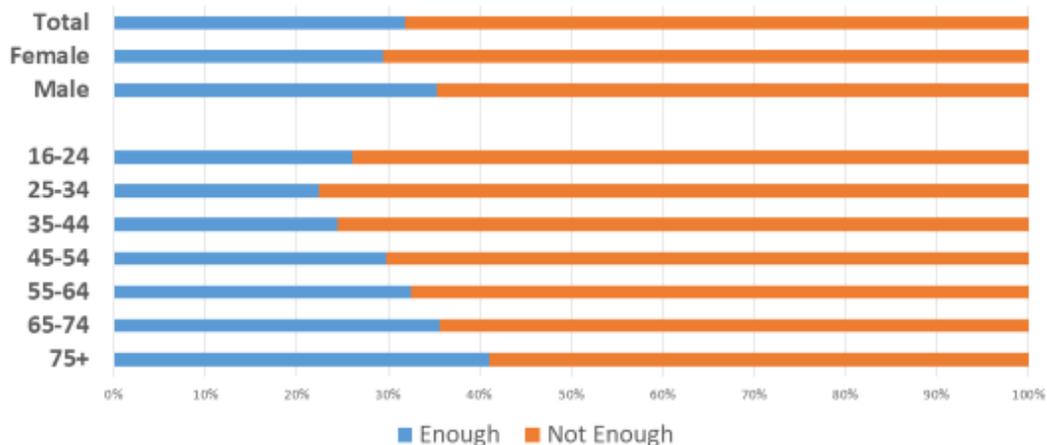
Due to the age structure of the population, **the age group with the largest number of infrequent exercisers is 55-64**. Ages 45-64 combined has more low active people than we do in the two oldest age groups (even though the % of low active people is highest amongst 65+). Therefore, from an age perspective, the challenge to get people more active needs to start at 45 not 65.

Physical inactivity is a major threat to the future health of the UK population, and a major focus of public sector bodies like **Sport England**. If we look in more detail at those who exercise infrequently, we gain further insight into where the challenges lie.

Recognition of infrequent activity declines with age

There is a clear link between age and people's propensity to think they are taking enough exercise. The chart below shows whether people who exercise less than once per month think they are doing enough.

Infrequent and Think It's Enough?



© Sport MR

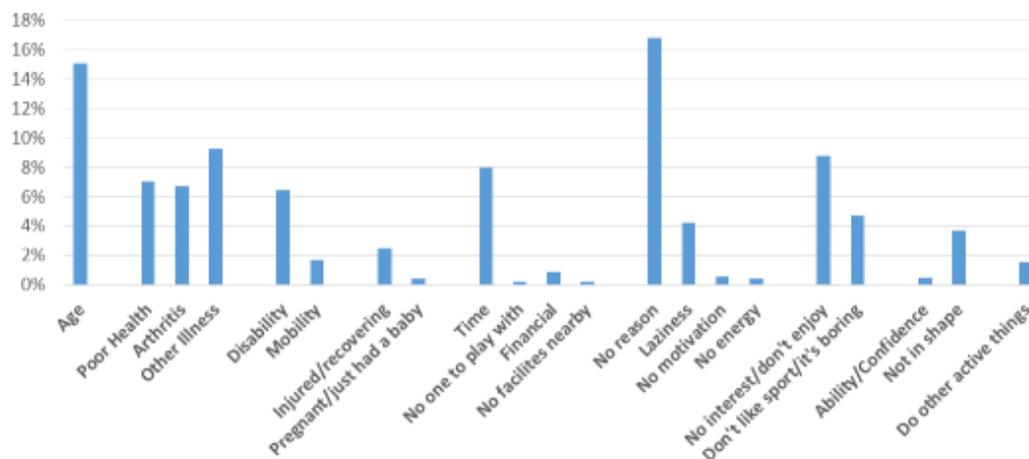
Almost one third of people who exercise infrequently think they are doing enough. Awareness that it is not enough is higher amongst less active females (71%) than males (65%). Men are less likely to recognise (or admit) that they are not doing enough.

However, **amongst a large section of the over 75s (41%), there is a perception that they are doing enough** despite exercise activity levels of less than once per month. This propensity to be inactive cannot be resolved by campaigns promoting the health benefits of more frequent exercise. Instead the challenge is to educate and appeal to the over 75s with activities that are relevant and that they would feel comfortable doing.

Key barriers to increasing activity amongst infrequent participants

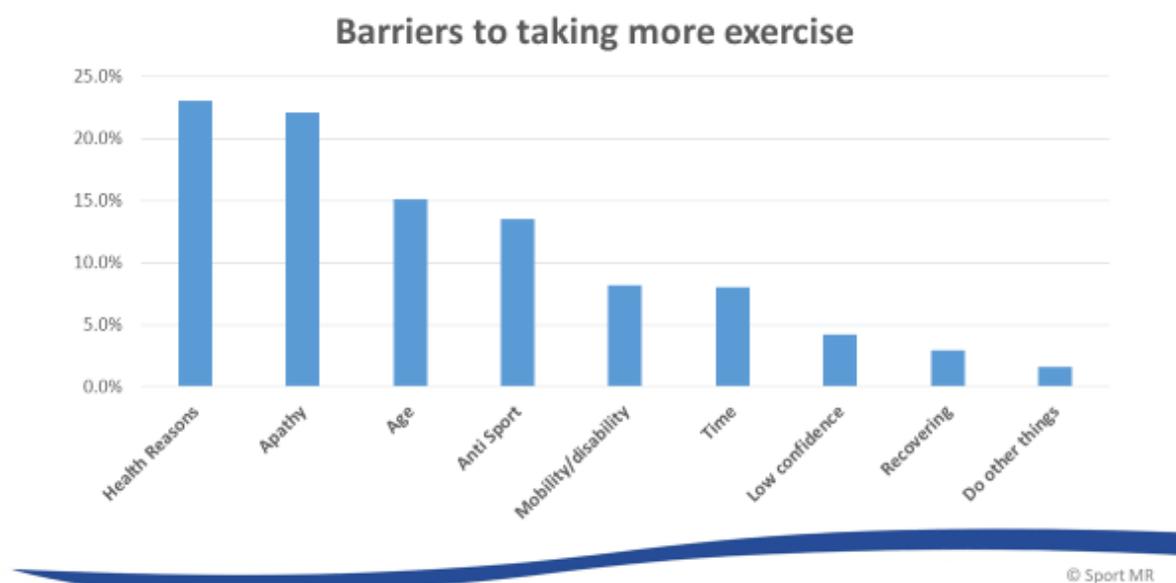
Detailed analysis of what people who exercise infrequently said when we asked what was stopping them doing more exercise, showed that **the most common response was that there is nothing preventing them from doing so, though something clearly is**. The next most frequent response was that low levels activity were down to age.

Reason not taking more exercise



© Sport MR

If we boil these responses down into broader groups, the picture is as follows:



When responses are grouped under broad headings, health issues become the number one barrier, but we also have a high association of inactivity with apathy, age and a strong anti-sport element to contend with.

Apathy is the big concern and there is a sizeable group of over **3 million adults who do not exercise and see no reason why they don't do so**. Here we are faced with trying to change behaviour. They are not prevented by something, they just don't feel compelled to do something. Motivation is one way to overcome apathy but in common with other barriers, it is about offering people something which is accessible and relevant to their needs. This is a significant challenge to the industry; stop just focusing on barriers and **create experiences people actually want to do**. We need to focus on the benefits individuals would like to see or achieve in order to have a chance of changing their behaviour. Then we need to offer them what they want and communicate how they can get it.

What about the older age groups?

The key barrier to exercise for the 65+ age groups is the perception that they are “too old”, or not in good enough health or not in shape to do exercise. The fact that this perception is present amongst 65-74 year olds may surprise some, as many can expect to live into their 90s. Age was often mentioned alongside other barriers.

- “I'm too old and out of shape” Female aged 65-74
- “My age plus being in poor health” Female aged 65-74
- “Age plus not that interested in sport” Male aged 65-74
- “Mobility/age issues” Male aged 65-74

Encouraging people in this age group to recognise that they are not too old is only part of the solution. Some may have recently retired and are faced with new lifestyle choices. It is important to make sure that some form of exercise is part of that agenda. The key is offering people activities which they think they can do to and for it to be available within their locality. Emphasising the social component will also help as retirees look to replace their work colleagues with a new network.

Age on its own was more of an issue for people aged 75+ including those who were active but have given up.

“I have always hated sport, but I used to do a lot of walking. Now I am an old woman and I suffer from arthritis, so cannot do this anymore” Female aged 75+
“Not physically fit enough to do this” Male aged 75+
“Age... at 81... I've given up on any sporting activity!!” Male

There were numerous mentions of specific infirmities (arthritis was the most common, followed by cancer and COPD) and disabilities which prevent people from taking exercise.

“Out of breath, Suffering from COPD” Male aged 65-74
“Have bad balance and waddle from hip operation going wrong” Female 75+
“Yes. I am an insulin dependent Type 2 diabetic and I regularly go into a hypoglycaemic coma” Male 75+

This highlights the need to develop and **promote exercise programmes which are relevant to specific illnesses or disabilities**, to prevent people from opting out of exercise and to tempt them back into doing something active again. Trial sessions may help people with illnesses overcome the belief that they cannot take part in physical activity.

Linked to this, campaigns to raise the profile of exercise amongst the over 65s can undoubtedly have an impact. We would consider that case studies showing how older people with health problems overcome the barriers faced to lead a more active lifestyle would be a useful call to action.

Reassuringly, some people are trying to be more active in the face of adversity.

“Yes I am disabled and it is so hard trying to walk, so I do some activities on the chair that is good for my COPD and make me feel like I am doing something” Female aged 55-64.

“I have cerebral palsy and arachnoiditis which severely limit my sports participation. I get great satisfaction from just participating in Boccia, horse riding and swimming” Male aged 55-64

What about the young?

Younger people who exercise infrequently are more likely to recognize that they should be doing more. When asked “Is there anything that stops you playing sport/physical activity?” 16-24 year olds are most likely to admit **there is no reason or put it down to laziness**.

The other barriers are

- lack of interest “it’s boring”
- not enough time

Interestingly, awareness that they exercise infrequently is lower amongst 16-24 year olds than 25-34 year olds, which suggests some work needs to happen to raise the profile of the importance of exercise with this youngest age group. Preaching to them will have no impact. We need to ensure that things available are relevant to the needs of these 16-24 year olds who have opted out of sport, particularly those for whom sport at school is not a happy memory.

Amongst 25-34 year olds unaware that they are not doing enough exercise, 80% are female. This is an astounding skew. As with the younger age group, some recognize that there is no reason or barrier, but we are now more likely to come up against women who don’t like sport, are anxious/self-conscious about their weight or appearance, fitness or ability and cite a lack of time as the key barriers. To address people who don’t like sport we would suggest not calling it a sporting activity and emphasise the fun, support network and social element of activities. For those who have anxiety about getting involved in physical activities, understanding what triggers their anxieties,

recognizing them and reassurance that they will meet other similar people and will have support when they need it is key.

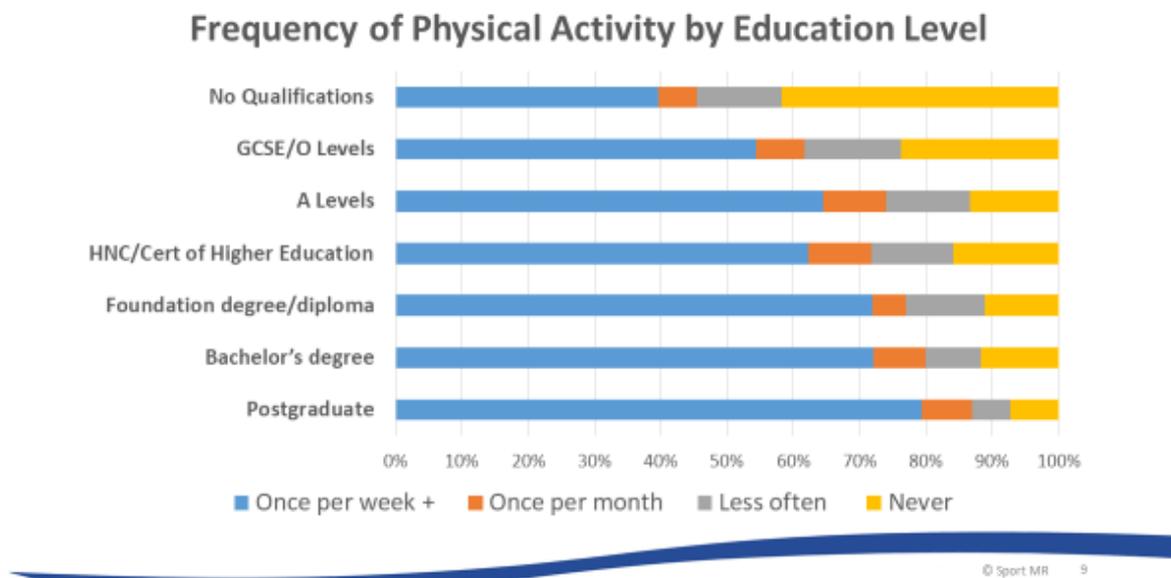
What about the 45-64 year olds?

As mentioned earlier, this is the largest group of infrequent exercisers. This group is more likely to say that **lack of time** is the main reason for low activity, but the most common response was that they had no interest or had no reason not to do more.

This age group tends to be forgotten when it comes to programmes aimed at encouraging physical activity. Given the large number of inactive people aged 45-64, this clearly needs to change, and the industry must focus on the needs of people who have busy lifestyles involving work, commuting, caring for family and running households but do not put exercise into their schedule. Academic studies have shown a link between lack of time or income on physical activity and the resulting impact on health of the inactivity. Many of these studies focus on younger age groups and talk about the time bomb we are facing. For 45-64 year olds, the time is now or will come sooner rather than later.

Level of activity is strongly linked with educational attainment

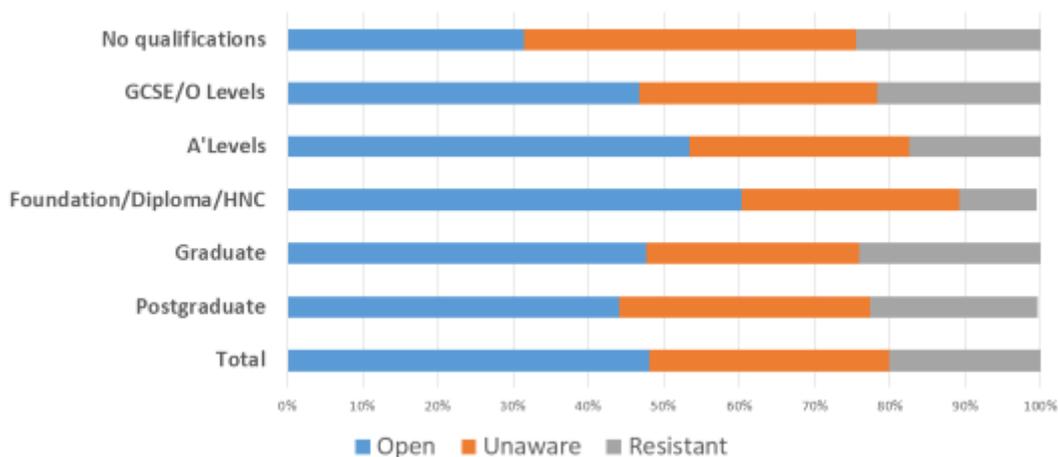
When we look at the level of physical activity by educational background the findings show a strong link between attainment and the propensity to exercise.



More than 70% of graduates and postgraduates of all ages exercise at least once per week. The equivalent figure amongst people with no qualifications is 40%. Over half of people in this group are inactive.

Put another way, **people with no academic qualifications or who left school after GCSE/O'Levels account for 35% of the population. They also make up 55% of those who have been inactive** in the last 12 months. In part, this may be a legacy of older people having less educational opportunities. It also, however, clearly points to the benefits that education can have on physical activity.

Inactive People's Attitude to Doing More Exercise



10

Only 30% of inactive people with no academic qualifications were open to doing more exercise, compared with the national average of 48%. Many were unaware that they need to be more active. Those educated to GCSE/O'level standard were better but still behind the national average.

Again, this is partly a legacy of older people with no academic qualifications, but it provides an even **stronger case for the value of educating students about the benefits of physical education** as part of the national curriculum. It is much easier to influence behaviour when children are growing up than to change behaviour at a later stage.

According to Public Health England levels of obesity are growing and currently one quarter of 2-10 year olds and one third of 11-15 year olds are obese or overweight. There are emotional and behavioural issues faced by obese children such as stigmatisation, bullying and low self-esteem, plus a range of medical consequences leading to ill health in adulthood and lower mortality. Schemes such as Healthy Active Schools System shows the impact of PE and sport in school. But given that the least fit child in a class of 30 in 1998 would now be one of the fittest in a class today, means that there is a lot of lost ground to make up.

We have further insight on what inactive (and active) people are doing, why and what activities are of interest to them, so this article is a taster on what we can do to increase understanding within the sports participation market.

Summary – Key Take Outs on Inactivity

- Tackling inactivity is a major battleground, given that physical activity contributes positively to both physical and mental health. In Europe, inactivity contributes to more deaths than obesity.
- There are over 15 million adults in the UK who exercise less than once per month. This is skewed towards the over 45s which is probably younger than many would expect.
- Around 10 million feel that they don't take enough exercise and are aware of it. The other 5 million do not believe that they need to take more. About 7 million would like to take more exercise in future.

- Of more concern is that means 8 million people are happy with doing very little or are not aware that they operate at a low level of activity. This group contains substantial subsets of 16-24, 35-44 and >75 year olds.
- The younger age groups admit there is no apparent reason why they should not be more active. We need to find ways and means to help younger inactive people to engage with sport
- The older have opted out of taking exercise for primarily health and mobility reasons coupled with ageing. Other research shows that age is not the reason but that inactive people above 75 are more prone to age related illnesses.
- As we get older we tend not to reduce our level of physical activity. Instead we just stop. Those who stop and don't replace it become inactive. We need to encourage people who do not want to continue with a particular activity to do something else instead.
- The 45-64 age group contains the largest number of inactive people (5.9 million). With sports organisations' campaigns tending to target the young and the older age groups, the 45-64 cohort is more likely to slip through the net. More effort is needed to engage with inactive people in this age group.
- Education has had a strong bearing on propensity to take part in physical exercise. We need to ensure that the benefits of physical exercise are at the forefront of the curriculum for all levels of education. School campaigns targeting the groups most prone to inactivity need to be given more support
- The main barriers to activity encountered are health, apathy, age and dislike of sport. Having said that reasons for inactivity can be a combination of circumstances meaning that a one size fits all approach will not work
- Many different types of people are inactive for a range of different reasons. We therefore need to develop treatment strategies to encourage activity amongst this diverse group of people.
- Focussing on a more bespoke experience, offering more choice to a wider range of inactive groups and highlighting the specific benefits to inactive individuals will have more resonance.
- Reducing inactivity will reduce the nation's healthcare spend. Further resources need to be reallocated to make this happen.

Hearts & Minds

'Hearts & Minds' is a syndicated study which has been developed by Sport MR and MyCustomerLens to meet the evolving insight needs of the sport and fitness industry. Research is conducted monthly among a nationally representative sample of the population. Hearts & Minds contains in depth data on sport and physical activity and the barriers to participation in the UK and offers a cost-effective multi-partner approach to data gathering and delivering insight.

For enquiries, please contact: Jack Murray jack@sportmr.co.uk Tel: 07796 356487.