
Getting the inactive active

*Evidence review analysing
existent cultural, social and
economic barriers to physical
inactivity and their potential
policy solutions.*



Introduction

The aim of this review was to explore what can be done differently to address existing structural disadvantage and increase levels of participation in Physical Activity (PA). The research sought to realise this aim through the following objectives:

- (1) Critically explore the current social, political, cultural, and economic barriers that limit engagement in sport and PA*
- (2) Provide informed recommendations for future policy.*

The review was informed by past and present PA policies within Scotland, recent reports that have addressed specific issues within sport and PA participation in Scotland including poverty, disability and recovery from Covid 19, and current academic literature.

The review explored issues around poverty; health and economic inequalities; equality, diversity and inclusion; gender disparities; geographical variations; age; demographics; disability and the economic impact of inactivity.

Rationale

In building upon our understanding of the PA and sport participation landscape, the rationale for our review was to present what we currently know about PA in Scotland and to determine what we need to know to address concerns around levels of inactivity. This position was based on the understanding that:

- Universal access to sport and PA in Scotland remains a work in progress, with issues of social class, poverty, gender, and geography remaining significant barriers to sport and PA participation (Jarvie, 2019).
- Inequalities in PA and sport participation levels remain stubbornly present regarding disparities in age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Structural inequalities in participation by social class, income, and neighbourhood remain entrenched at a young age and persistent into adulthood (Rowe, 2019; Rowe & Brown, 2023).
- Ultimately, there are significant disparities in how people of diverse backgrounds and demographics engage with sport and PA (Dellacasa & Oliver, 2023).

Sources of Evidence

Alongside the academic literature our analysis of PA policy and its impact was informed through a series of reports that explored the current state of play across Scottish sport and PA. These reports cover a wide variety of contexts and provide a strong evidence base for exploring current issues, concerns and areas of best practice.

For example:

1. Finch, Wilson & Bibby (2023) exploration of the impact of health inequalities;
2. Murray et al (2024) exploration of the impact of Covid 19 on children's sport;
3. Davison et al (2023) analysis of participation for people with a disability;
4. Kay (2020) critical exploration of the impact of poverty and inequality on participation, and
5. The Health, Social Care & Sport Committee report into Female Participation in Sport and Physical Activity (HSCSC, 2023)

Findings: What we know

The following
points present
what we know

Poverty and material deprivation are experienced widely but unevenly across Scotland. People living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are much less likely to participate in sport. Ultimately, where we live shapes our health and our sport and PA opportunities.

about the
successes and
challenges of

Scotland has disproportionately poor health outcomes compared to countries of similar political and economic status. Health inequalities are concentrated in particular areas and have been sustained over an extended period.

raising
participation in
sport and PA in

People facing deprivation experience greater benefit from taking part in sport and PA than those from less disadvantaged circumstances. Targeted and specific provision would increase sporting opportunities for people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (HSCSC, 2023).

Scotland:

Findings: What we know

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- Despite policy intentions rates of participation in sport and PA have remained relatively static alongside diversifying patterns of participation including the increase in fitness related activities and the growth of an active class (Rowe, 2019).
 - There is a growing disparity between children and young people who are physically active and those who are not (Scot Gov, 2022). Pupils living in the most deprived 20% areas in Scotland are most likely to be inactive - 35% of this group overall, compared to 23% for those in the 20% least deprived areas (Kay, 2020).
 - For many young females, sport is a social activity which is about fun, friendship, family and foster social relationships.
 - There are considerable variations in participation across different local authorities in Scotland. Children from urban environments are often less active than children from rural communities (McCorie et al., 2020).

Findings: What we know

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- Poverty and deprivation negatively impact participation in sport by people with disabilities. Significant levels of sedentary behaviour amongst people with a disability, which negatively impacts general health (Davison et al, 2023).
 - Scotland's older population (65+ year-olds as a proportion of the total population) is estimated to grow from 19.4% to 25.5% by 2045 (Public Health Scotland, 2024).
 - 55% of 65–74-year-olds meet the recommendations for PA with 29% having very low activity (SHS, 2022).
 - The cost of physical inactivity to the NHS in Scotland is more than £77 million per year or around £14.60 per person living in the country (Todd, 2023).

Findings: What we need to know

Whilst we know a great deal about the current circumstances of participation and inactivity, there are also significant gaps in our knowledge. Significant gaps in our knowledge and understanding include but are not limited to:

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- Why rates of participation in sport are stagnating considering the levels of investments and policy development.
 - We have no current understanding of the impact of investment in the school estate on participation and engagement in sport and PA.
 - Whilst participation trends within minority ethnic groups are equal to that of the overall population it is likely that the real picture is more nuanced than this.
 - We do not have a clear picture on the relationship between gender and competitive/non-competitive sport in Scotland due to a lack of data (Davison & Cowan, 2020).

Findings: What we need to know

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- There is a lack of understanding and education about the impacts of pregnancy, periods, menopause, and other women's health conditions on participation in sport and PA.
 - Due to limited engagement with older adults in policy documents in Scotland we are limited in our understanding of how to increase activity with this age group (Davison & Cowan, 2020).
 - Relatively little research has been commissioned by the Scottish Government and Sportscotland in the last 20 years, and so Scotland now lags its European neighbours in its commitment to and co-ordination of research, and available data and insight (Rowe & Brown, 2023).
 - There is no current data capture process to measure current rates of participation in sport and PA, broken down by age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, disability, sexuality, ethnic and religious background, and other inequalities (HSCSC, 2023).
 - We have limited understanding of the impact of Active Schools in engaging those who are currently inactive (Meir et al, 2023).

Conclusion

Structural inequalities such as gender and class in sports participation appear to be entrenched in Scottish society despite public policy priorities targeting these groups (Rowe, 2019). The causes of inequalities are deep rooted and structural. To address these inequalities requires:

- (1) Holistic and sustained approach to understanding the physical, social, structural, and environmental landscape;
- (2) Cross governmental commitment to the realisation of a systems-based approach (Scottish Government, 2024) and,
- (3) Social inequality and material deprivation being treated as a priority at national policy level (Kay, 2020; Carlin, McPherson & Davison, 2023; Finch, Wilson & Bibby, 2023).

Recommendations

There remains a significant opportunity for sport and PA to be more collaborative and effective through a clear common agreed purpose across the Scottish Sporting Landscape and all levels of government (Jarvie, 2019). To realise this opportunity requires initial engagement with the new PA and Health Framework from local authorities followed by a renewed policy focus.

In concurrence with Kay (2020), we believe that to deliver a successful new national strategy for sport & PA requires policymakers to be more informed of how participation in Scotland varies significantly according to deprivation if they are to develop and deliver approaches that help to raise participation among those who require it most.

The last point to address is that of the limited evidence base and the subsequent difficulty in presenting a full evidence review. We simply do not have a full picture, and this will have considerable impact on the development of informed policy development. In addressing this concern, we concur with Rowe & Brown (2023) who have called for a National Sport Research Strategy to be underpinned by a secure funding commitment for at least five years.

Final Report: Key areas of analysis

Policy Enactment

1. Challenges of policy enactment
2. Capacity for transition to longer term funding models
3. Early intervention & social prescribing
4. Whole school approaches to physical activity (curriculum review)
5. Determining priority inequalities and building understanding of intersectionality
6. Exploring challenges and opportunities of the systems-based approach of the Physical Activity & Health Framework

Policy Development

1. Clarification on the roles of PA & sport
2. Exploring why there is a policy vacuum in sport
3. Policy perspectives of intersectionality
4. Universalism & targeted provision
5. Connecting the national to the local
6. Primary PE provision
7. Utilising the school estate
8. Supporting volunteers
9. Building the evidence base: What, why & how?