

Findings from Ipsos MORI and Centre for Ageing Better deliberative workshops with people aged 45 and over

Topic: I keep physically and mentally healthy
and active

About the workshops

In January and February 2016, Ipsos MORI and the Centre for Ageing Better conducted two day-long deliberative workshops with people aged 45 and over, one in London and one in Birmingham.

The workshops were the final phase of a programme of work conducted by Ipsos MORI for the Centre for Ageing Better, looking at how different groups of people in England are currently experiencing and thinking about later life. The report and related materials from the earlier phases of this research can be found [here](#). Part of this work involved analysing data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing to develop six segments of the 50 and over population who are experiencing later life in markedly different ways, in terms of issues such as their health, financial security, social connections and overall wellbeing. These segments were:

- Thriving boomers
- Downbeat boomers
- Can do and connected
- Squeezed middle aged
- Worried and disconnected
- Struggling and alone

More information on the segments is available [here](#). The workshops brought together people from all six of these segments to spend time discussing and reflecting on a set of topics that the Centre for Ageing Better has identified as priority areas in achieving a good later life. The topics were:

- I live in a home and neighbourhood suited to me
- I am in work
- I feel confident to manage major life changes
- I am making a valued contribution to my community
- I keep physically and mentally healthy and active

Participants explored what each topic meant to them, and then developed and debated their own ideas for what actions or changes could help more people enjoy this aspect of a good later life.

The data generated from the discussions were analysed using a thematic approach, where the individual ideas and suggestions made within each of the topic areas discussed were categorised into similar themes.

This short briefing summarises the main findings from the workshops on the topic '**I keep physically and mentally healthy and active**'. Further briefings are available on each of the other topics.

What does the topic 'I keep physically and mentally healthy and active' mean to people, and why does it matter?

Participants highlighted physical health as the foundation for being able to maintain mobility and independence for as long as possible. They were keen to get the most from later life – being able to carry on with activities they had always undertaken as well as pursuing new opportunities – and so managing their physical health was considered very important.



It means you can carry on with your life independently."

Squeezed middle, Birmingham

Some groups, such as the Squeezed Middle Aged, also noted the connection between mental and physical health. Poor physical health was understood as contributing to poor mental health insofar as pain or the physical inability to do certain things can affect mental wellbeing and how someone feels about themselves. In addition poor mental health was understood to contribute to poor physical health since issues such as anxiety and depression may mean someone is less motivated to look after their diet or participate in exercise.

How can people keep physically and mentally healthy and active?

In terms of taking steps to keep healthy and active in later life, participants acknowledged that there will be limitations on the level of activity possible as age advances, and that ability will vary considerably between individuals. Nevertheless participants were able to identify factors that can help encourage and facilitate healthy activities. Some of these were thought to be very simple, particularly in relation to maintaining physical health. For instance, participants noted the importance of eating a varied and balanced diet, although some commented on the volume and variety of messages about healthy eating that they are exposed to.

“ Diet is very important but there’s so much information about diets on TV that you’re bombarded by it.

Downbeat Boomer, Birmingham

Aside from this, participants highlighted a number of other steps they could take in order to keep healthy and active, and these are illustrated below.

Keeping active through social participation

Being isolated or alone was noted as being a key barrier that prevented or discouraged people from looking after their physical health. For example, some participants described feeling less motivated to cook nutritious food for just them alone. This was noted particularly

in those segments that were more vulnerable to being isolated – such as the Struggling and Alone, and the Worried and Disconnected.

This also applied to getting physical exercise. Most participants felt that the social aspect of exercise was an important enabler and across the segments there was a consensus that people are more likely to both participate in and enjoy physical activity when it is done as a group, rather than as an individual.

“ I’m very naughty and I don’t keep as physically healthy as I should. Some of that comes from being depressed and isolated so I have no one to encourage me.

Struggling and Alone/Worried and Disconnected, Birmingham

“ It’s companionship as well. If someone else is going with you then you’ll make more of an effort to go.”

Squeezed Middle Aged, Birmingham

In line with this, the types of interventions suggested to enable people to better maintain their health focused on bringing people together. Further, some suggested it might be helpful, and certainly less intimidating to those not used to exercise, for such groups not to have health as the main focus. Instead, people with shared interests that have a physical

component – like gardening or dog walking – could be brought together. This would have the added benefit of strengthening social connections, thereby promoting good mental health.

The boxes below indicate some participants' suggestions for social activities with a physical component:

"Activity groups for seniors including gardening"- to get people involved in a social hobby that keeps them active

"Find something active you enjoy – walking with friends"- to get people involved in a social hobby that keeps them active

"Dog walking"- as part of a formal or informal group, to help people meets others while keeping active

Some participants also suggested that where groups were more directly orientated towards health, they could be targeted at particular age groups as people could feel intimidated exercising alongside others who they perceived to be younger and fitter than them.

Some participants' suggestions are indicated in the boxes below:

"Community/local walking/running/cycling groups – banded by age range"- for those who may feel self-conscious exercising amongst other age groups

"Catering for age relevant exercise classes" – for those who may feel self-conscious exercising amongst other age groups who may have varying abilities

Participants suggested that these kinds of groups could be organized within the community, perhaps by local charities or by individuals supported by the local authority.



I like the clubs because you are more motivated to go if you are with your friends."

Struggling and Alone/Worried and Disconnected, Birmingham

Tackling social isolation was identified as an essential component in helping people to maintain both their physical and mental health. Some suggested a role for community leaders here in both identifying and then encouraging those who were more isolated to participate in organised events that promoted health and wellbeing.



If they're not motivated then nothing will encourage them. A charity needs to find a way to access people in their own homes."

Squeezed Middle, Birmingham

Starting early

Participants noted that as you get older, physical activity becomes more difficult and, believed that people are less likely to start something new later in life especially if it is perceived to be strenuous. They therefore considered it important to embed physical activities and healthy eating into a life routine before people get to an age at which habits are hard to break. For this reason, a number of suggested interventions were based on

encouraging healthy behaviours in people earlier in life.

However, participants also recognized that people in midlife were often pressed for both time and financial resources. To overcome this, participants suggested that employers have a role here in ensuring that their employees have adequate breaks and are able to work flexibly so as not to prohibit opportunities for exercise. Participants also suggested that either employers or government could implement schemes to give discounts for gym or sports memberships.

The boxes below indicate some of participants' suggestions for encouraging people to start looking after their health earlier on:

"Provision of facilities at reasonable cost" – so that people are able to afford them

"Cheaper facilities for 50s" - as an age targeted financial incentive

"Workplace discounts for local fitness centres/gyms" – as a financial incentive

"Lunchtime yoga" - to enable people to fit exercise around a busy schedule

Next steps

The Centre for Ageing Better is extremely grateful to the participants for their time and energy taking part in the workshops. We are using the insights and ideas that people generated to feed into our work programme. The findings from the deliberative workshop align with the growing and compelling research literature in this area which finds that physical activity is central to reducing long-term conditions, disability, mortality, and improving emotional well-being and cognitive function. Unfortunately, we know that activity rates decline significantly over the life course. Given this trend and overwhelming evidence Ageing Better is interested in **'how we improve levels of physical activity for more people in mid to later life'**. Over the next few months – thanks to the findings from the deliberative workshop and a roundtable we hosted on the 11th April with policymakers, academics, and practitioners - we will now look to explore and develop a programme of work which seeks to increase physical activity levels.
