

# The UNDERPIN Study

---

UNDERstanding  
the experiences of  
Physically INactive  
people in mid-life:  
qualitative research

Dr Nick Cavill  
Dr Gill Cowburn  
Professor Charlie Foster OBE  
September 2021

in partnership with:

# About us

---

## **Centre for Ageing Better**

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

# Acknowledgements

This review was commissioned by the Centre for Ageing Better, as part of a programme of work on physical activity in mid-life.

## Report authors

**Dr Nick Cavill.** Senior Research Fellow, School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol

**Dr Gill Cowburn.** Researcher, School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol

**Professor Charlie Foster OBE,** Head of the Centre for Exercise, Nutrition and Health Sciences, University of Bristol

## Research partners

We were delighted to work closely with research partners Qa Research, who conducted the recruitment and the majority of the interviews.

**Richard Bryan,** Managing Director

**Kay Silversides,** Research Manager

**Georgina Culliford,** Senior Research Executive

## Report commissioned by:

Centre for Ageing Better

## We are grateful for helpful comments received from our advisory group:

**Dr Afroditi Stathi,** Associate Professor in Active Ageing and Health & Head of Equality and Diversity, School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Birmingham.

**Professor Brett Smith.** Professor of Disability and Physical Activity & Director of Research, Department of Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Durham.

**Dr Prachi Bhatnagar.** Researcher, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford.

**Dr Cassandra Phoenix.** Associate Professor in Physical Activity and Health, Department of Sport & Exercise Sciences, University of Durham.

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Method</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Characteristics of the sample</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Thematic analysis</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Definitions of physical activity</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The importance of being active</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The importance of health</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Priorities</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>‘I am an active type’: the role of physical activity     in shaping identity</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Social norms around activity</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Practical issues</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Home and caring for others</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Physical activity through the lifecycle</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>The role of work</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Retirement</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Ageing</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Motivators for physical activity</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Fitness</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>What would help other people be active?</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Barriers to physical activity</b>	<b>71</b>

<b>Discussion</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Research questions</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>How do these findings add to the literature on attitudes to physical activity in mid-life?</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Research gaps</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Appendix one – Case studies</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Appendix two – Discussion guide</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Appendix three – Participant Information</b>	<b>115</b>

# Executive summary

---

## Overview

This study aimed to explore the experiences of physically inactive people in mid-life in England, by conducting in-depth discussions with people aged 50-70. Fifty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted during 2020/21. These were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for key themes.

---

## Brief summary of observations from participants in this study:

- There was an almost universal understanding that physical activity is a 'good thing'. But the 'intention-behaviour gap' means that this is not automatically translated into activity.
- Health is a strong motivator for this age group – including avoiding health problems.
- This can extend to the idea of 'negative role models' (i.e. not wanting to end up like X). This may be more relevant to people 50+ compared to younger people.
- There are many complex, overlapping factors that prevent people from being active. But many active people are able to overcome these barriers.
- Participants identifying as 'active people' tended to prioritise being active: that's how they enjoy using their limited time.
- Participants who think of themselves as 'inactive people' tend to prefer and enjoy being inactive in their spare time.
- The notion of being an 'active person' is well accepted (including among inactive people). But this may well not be translated into active behaviours.
- Participants wanted different things – especially when it came to facilities or exercise classes. Some prefer walking; most like sociable activity. Competition is less of a driver.
- Definitions of physical activity were highly variable. There was little understanding of the need for any specific intensity of activity.
- When assessing how active (and fit) they are, participants compared themselves to others of the same age; compared themselves to their fitter former self; or assessed their ability to do certain everyday tasks or activities.

- Participants reported that support from family and friends was very important, but this could lead to sedentary as well as active lifestyles (if family and friends preferred to be sedentary).
- Life events got in the way of being active – especially caring and illness.
- Participants faced and discussed already known barriers to activity.
- Falls were not important in this sample. Their focus was on: feeling fit; mobility; strength; independence; feeling young.
- Similarly, they rarely mentioned the importance of strength or balance training for older people
- Retirement is a critical life change, offering opportunities to plan and have an active retirement. But many participants faced challenges in doing this, or drifted into retirement with no plan.
- Health professionals' advice to be active was rarely mentioned. And when it was, it could lead to confusion.

Overall, physical activity is an unstable behaviour and most participants' lifecycles showed periods of inactivity and change.

# Introduction

---

## Context and background to research

Physical inactivity is one of the top risk factors for developing conditions that lead to preventable disability in later life.<sup>1</sup> Being regularly active can help to prevent and delay many age-related conditions and diseases, and can help people to maintain their functional ability, independence and quality of life as they grow older. However, the proportion of people who are physically inactive generally increases with age, so people are at increased risk of poor health outcomes connected to sedentary lifestyles in later life.

The Centre for Ageing Better's vision is a society where everyone enjoys their later life. Ageing Better has developed a programme of work that focuses on people in mid-life (approximately 50-70 years old). They are exploring actions that could be taken to improve the health, social connections, homes and work circumstances of people in mid-life, in order to effect real change for people in their later lives.

This report builds on a **review of qualitative research** among people in mid-life in England by conducting primary research among people aged 50-70.

---

## Study aims

This study aimed to explore the experiences of physically inactive people in mid-life in England, by conducting in-depth discussions with people aged 50-70.

---

## Study research questions

- 1 Considering adults who are inactive in mid-life, what are their attitudes towards; preferences for; knowledge and past experiences of physical activity?
  - What do people in this group perceive as physical activity? Do they see physical activity as a specific, planned event or as an accumulation of movement throughout the day?
  - How do they perceive their past experiences with physical activity, and how do they believe it has influenced their current participation in, and attitude to physical activity?

---

1 UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines. 2019

- 2 What challenges do inactive adults face in becoming physically active?
  - What motivators exist to enable them to become active? Are these internal or external motivators? What motivators exist outside of health and fitness? E.g. competition, enjoyment of sport
  - What barriers and perceived barriers exist which prevent them becoming active? Are these individual or system level barriers?
- 3 What do we know about adults who were active or fairly active and then became inactive? What, if anything, could enable them to become more active again or stop them from becoming inactive in the first place?
  - What, if any, impact did going from active to inactive have for them?
  - Was the change gradual or sudden?
  - Are there trigger points which precipitate moving from active to inactive? How are these trigger points different for different people?

# Method

---

## Sample

We set out to conduct up to 60 interviews with adults in England, aged 50-70 years, using a range of characteristics agreed with Ageing Better:

- physical activity history
- gender
- urban/rural dwelling
- employment status
- socioeconomic status
- ethnicity

A sample frame was used for recruitment to enable us to investigate some of the key issues that have been shown to influence physical activity participation and which aimed to capture both diverse and common perspectives. This was based on some key principles:

- a focus on inactive people (as this is the main focus of the research)
- good coverage of people who had recently changed their activity levels (to address the relevant research question)
- more women than men (as women are less active than men in the UK)
- a focus on urban areas (as there are specific barriers to some types of activity in rural areas)
- a good mix of working, not working and retired people
- a bias towards lower socio-economic status (as this is associated with inactivity)<sup>2</sup>
- over-sampling people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities (with sub-quotas to ensure a range)<sup>3</sup>
- inclusion of people with a long-term health condition (to explore the influence of these on physical activity)

---

2 49% of the 50-70 year old population of England were social grade C2DE as calculated from 2011 Census data (ONS)

3 8% of the 50-70 year old population of England were BAME as calculated from 2011 Census data (ONS)

---

## Recruitment

Our research partner Qa Research identified, screened and recruited participants from databases held by its national panel of social research recruitment specialists. The screening process took place by telephone and suitable candidates provided informed consent prior to inclusion.

We recruited 5 participants, as a pilot, to check our procedures, followed by three waves of recruitment. Data from the pilot participants were included in the analysis.

Recruitment questions/classifications were standard as used in a wide variety of studies conducted by Qa research. The exception was the physical activity classification question, which was designed specifically for this study. This question aimed to classify people by their current and past physical activity patterns, based on four categories (see table 1).

The table below shows the final achieved sample, along with the intended quotas. 58 interviews were conducted in total: initial in-depth interviews with 54 people, of whom four then consented to a 'deep-dive' interview. This shows that the final sample was close to the quotas set at the start.

**Table 1. Number of interviews achieved by demographic characteristics, including deep dives.**  
(Figures in brackets show the approximate target quota for each group.)

Physical activity history	<b>Inactive always:</b> I'm not very physically active at all. I might do some activity but only once a week or so.	<b>20</b> (quota:22)	<b>Inactive recently:</b> I'm not very physically active at the moment but that's a recent thing: in the last few years I've become less active than I used to be.	<b>20</b> (quota:22)
	<b>Active recently:</b> I'm not usually very physically active but recently have started trying to do more.	<b>10</b> (quota:10)	<b>Active always:</b> I love being physically active and really I've been like that all my life.	<b>8</b> (quota:6)
Gender	Female	<b>35</b> (quota: 36)	Male	<b>23</b> (quota: 24)
Area	Urban	<b>40</b> (quota: 40)	Semi-rural or Rural	<b>18</b> (quota: 20)
Employment status	Working	<b>32</b> (quota: 36)	Retired (min. 10) OR Unemployed or Other not working (min. 6)	<b>20</b> (quota:22)
Socio-economic status	ABC1	<b>25</b> (quota<24)	C2DE	<b>33</b> (quota>36)
Ethnicity	White	<b>31</b> (quota<40)	BAME – range across minority ethnic backgrounds (max. 5 from Indian/ Pakistani background)	<b>27</b> (quota>20)
Long-term Health Condition	No long-term health condition	<b>38</b> (quota<48)	Long-term health condition	<b>20</b> (quota>12)
Location	London: <b>11</b> , Midlands: <b>9</b> , South East: <b>10</b> , South West: <b>9</b> , Yorkshire: <b>11</b> , Eastern: <b>8</b> (Regional quotas were not set)			
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b> interviews among <b>54</b> people			

---

## Interviews

Recruited participants were asked to take part in a semi-structured in-depth interview of up to 1 hour duration (guided by a pre-agreed discussion guide) with an experienced researcher from the Qa Research or the University of Bristol team. Interviews took place using the Zoom video meeting platform or by telephone, based on participant preference, and were digitally recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees received a payment of £30 per interview, in token acknowledgement of their time commitment.

Interviews focused on participants' experiences of physical activity or inactivity and explored their attitudes towards physical activity and exercise. Discussions included sharing views on barriers and enablers of physical activity and exercise, lifelong experience of physical activity and factors that have contributed to their current (and past) levels of exercise. A discussion guide is in Appendix 2.

---

## Deep dives

Based on our initial analysis of important themes, six participants recruited in the final wave were asked to complete a photographic/written diary for three days (including a weekend day) and to take part in an additional interview of maximum 1 hour duration (guided by a pre-agreed topic guide) to discuss their experiences of physical activity and exercise, as recorded in their diary.

---

## Ethical approval

The University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee approved the project (SPSREC/20-21/139).

---

## Analysis

All interview transcripts were loaded into NVIVO 12 for analysis. We adopted a thematic analysis approach, using an inductive, interpretive and reflexive attitude and constant comparison<sup>4</sup> to check for similarities and differences in experiences. Each transcript was read in full by GC and NC, coded for descriptive and conceptual codes, and then categorized into themes.

---

## Timing of the interviews

All interviews took place during the national 'lockdown' associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that took place in 2020. While we tried to focus on 'normal times', the timing of the interviews will undoubtedly have had an

---

4 Glaser BG (1965). "The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis." *Social Problems* 12(4): 436-445.

## Method

influence on research participants' responses; for example, all swimming pools and gyms were closed when we conducted fieldwork. This needs to be considered when interpreting this research.

# Findings

## Characteristics of the sample

By using quotas for key demographic characteristics, we ensured that we interviewed a range of people with varying backgrounds and experiences. The sample included men and women from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds; working (defined as paid work), non-working and retired people; those living in urban and semi-urban/ rural areas; and people from across most of England. We also ensured that some of the sample reported a long-term health condition (as this is likely to influence their activity levels).

We set out to interview people with diverse experiences of physical activity. Practical limitations on the recruitment meant that we were only able to assess physical activity with a single question. This is notoriously challenging<sup>5</sup> and even more so when we tried to assess both current and past physical activity. As a consequence, the classifications used beneath the quotes below should be treated with care: they show how people responded to the recruitment question.

To investigate this further we analysed the interview transcripts to look in more detail at the participants' activity histories:

- **Inactive** throughout most of their lives: 5 participants
- **Inactive** now, but described being active or moderately active previously: 32 participants
- **Active** now, but described being inactive previously: 4 participants
- **Active** throughout most of their lives: 13 participants

The research approach we used does not set out to be representative of the general population, so the numbers of participants cited above should not be used to represent the experiences of 50-70-year-olds outside of our sample. But this brief exploration of the sample does start to illustrate the diverse activity histories that the participants had, with different pathways through periods of activity and inactivity. Subsequent analysis will tend to present primarily the voices of inactive people.

In Appendix 1 we have included four case studies of people with diverse 'activity pathways', to illustrate this point. These take the form of extracts of

---

5 Dowd, K.P., Szeklicki, R., Minetto, M.A. et al. A systematic literature review of reviews on techniques for physical activity measurement in adults: a DEDIPAC study. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 15, 15 (2018).

## Findings

largely unaltered verbatim transcripts, edited to remove identification and repetition.

In the presentation and discussion of the main themes in the data, we present verbatim quotes from participants to illustrate an issue, shown in **purple bold**. In some cases the quotes have been shortened slightly using an ellipsis (three dots...) but this has been done sparingly to focus the meaning of the quote. We chose to leave in figures of speech ('you know... etc') to help the reader hear the participants' voices.

# Thematic analysis

---

## Definitions of physical activity

We explored in some depth what participants understood by the term 'physical activity': what it meant; what types of activity were included; what 'counted' as activity or exercise and what types of activities they thought were good for health.

### Type of activity

It was clear that there is no universal definition of physical activity among this age group; there was an extremely diverse range of ways that participants defined physical activity or an active lifestyle. This mainly tended to stem from the participants' usual patterns of activity: for those who like walking, they referred to walking; those more interested in sport would talk about sport. It was noticeable however that despite explaining at the start of all interviews that we were taking a broad definition of physical activity, many participants talked initially about sport and exercise, especially when referring to the past:

---

**I was fairly active. Yeah, yeah. I used to run. ... I was in the running team, I played netball, I played rounders, played football. Having a household full of boys, I would say, I used to be climbing trees and football or whatever they were into, because obviously, they were my role model. So yeah, I like physical.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

Participants discussed the full range of physical activities, including high-intensity sports and exercise; gym workouts; walking and cycling; housework and gardening. However, it was quite common for participants to say initially that they thought housework and gardening did not 'count' as physical activity:

---

**A brisk walk with the dog and that but...I don't class, like cleaning me windows or like doing all the housework or like cutting a few bushes back in the garden. I don't class that as being active. I really don't.**

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

However, when prompted to include all types of movement in the definition, many participants were pleased to include all sorts of examples of ways they were active, including walking or working around the house, or shopping:

---

**Yes, at the weekend, you just, you'd go shopping as well. Because just pulling a trolley around the supermarket is exercise, quite honestly. And then when you get home, bringing the shopping up.**

Female, 56, working, active recently, Black African ethnicity

---

Walking was often something that was not included in people's initial definitions of activity – either because they did not think it was intense enough, or because they just saw it as a way of getting about. One participant said:

---

**I'm not physically active. So I don't really know. I don't do any activity like I used to. I'm getting old now.**

Female, 57, not working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

However on further probing it turned out she walked her dog every day, sometimes for several hours.

### **Intensity**

The intensity of activity was frequently referred to when attempting to define activity – especially when discussing what type of activity was good for health. Some participants talked of working up a sweat, but it was more common to think in terms of getting out of breath or having an elevated heart rate. This was often associated with notions of 'proper' exercise: this often defined the type of activity that was seen to be beneficial for health:

---

**But an hour, I suppose an hour, would be ideal of what I call proper, proper exercise, not just a casual walk somewhere. I think you know, any exercise daily that gets your heart rate up is supposed to be good for you.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

### **Frequency**

A minority of participants described a clear activity schedule that they tried to stick to, with an activity planned every day or every other day. Some people described the need to do something daily – in many cases to get out of the house – but most had a more informal approach, saying they felt the need to do something every so often:

---

**But there will be there will be times when I think no, come on. Just you haven't, you know, had fresh air for a few days. Come on, go and get out.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

### Official recommendations

It was notable that there was not a single reference from any participants to the official UK guidelines on physical activity: no-one referred to '150 minutes'; 'half an hour a day' or any other variation. When participants described how much activity they 'ought' to be doing they generally used an out-of-date or incorrect definition (such as three times a week). Any references to official recommendations tended to point out that they were confusing and unclear. If people were motivated by an activity regimen or routine, it tended to be one they made up themselves:

---

**I've sort of got into a bit of a routine where I'll do that and then I'll go and have a swim, I'll get up early and take my wife to work, come back, go swimming and then come back and then do my other bits and pieces during the day.**

Male, 66, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

### The role of health professionals

Participants rarely mentioned the impact of health professional advice on their activity levels. When they did, they referred to the advice they had received as confusing or unrealistic.

---

**I still find it confusing. And I have tried to like, you know, I'm scared to maybe do too intense training because my blood pressure is gonna go higher. So it's yeah, it's just, I just want reassurance and that what if I do this, am I okay to do it? Even if I had to do it for 20 minutes, intense and then do some that kind of moderate afterwards. But it's how long can I do this for blah, blah, blah. But as I said, it's really hard to get any definitive answers at the moment.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---



---

**So you do get a lot of that at these sort of sessions... You know, right well, don't get up so early. Or another one, so you'll get up at six in the morning and get yourself going. And you think to yourself hold on what would I want to get up at six o'clock for if I've had a bad night's sleep anyway, you know. So you have to again, you're on your own, really?**

Male, 70, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

## The importance of being active

The overwhelming majority of participants said that they felt it was important to be active. They referred to it as ‘common sense’ or general knowledge – something that was an accepted part of life. Interestingly, this belief was also stated quite strongly by people who did very little or no activity:

---

**It's common sense, if you don't use your body in some way, you're gonna stiffen up.**

Female, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

**It is important. It's very important to be active, I think.**

Male, 63, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

This belief in the importance of being active was almost cast as a universal truth or fact of life, that could not be disputed. The strength of feeling around this topic appears to relate closely to the specific benefits participants thought activity could bring, from general health through to specific health or other benefits.

## Health – general

For many participants, it was enough to talk about physical activity being good for health in the broadest sense. They would refer to ‘keeping going’; keeping fit’ ‘staying healthy; or a range of general benefits:

---

**General health I think, breathing, obesity, not having heart problems, or whatever else there is.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

Physical and mental health benefits were often combined, with notions of ‘healthy mind, healthy body’. Participants often talked about keeping the mind active and the relaxing and therapeutic effects of physical activity, especially outdoors:

---

**I just think it's like really good for your wellbeing, your mind, mental state, I just think it's like really good to be active.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

## Avoiding illness

When discussing the importance of physical activity, participants often focused on avoiding illness, rather than more positive factors (such as

feeling fitter). This might be different when people are considering the motivators for activity, which will be explored later:

---

**It's incredibly important when you get to your middle ages, of course it is, for all the reasons we all know, that you, your resilience to illness, to all those things, is less strong when you reach your middle ages, we all know this, we're all aware of this. So it's for all of those reasons it's incredibly important to do that.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

Specific health conditions referred to included:

- Obesity/being overweight
- Heart conditions
- Diabetes
- Preservation of muscular strength
- Blood pressure
- Cancer
- Kidney conditions
- COVID-19
- Blindness/bad eyesight

---

**My heart's 55 years old. My kidneys are 55 years old. And I'm not going to go back to 25. But yeah, it is important to just keep yourself physically fit.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

There were many examples where participants referred to examples of other people who had a health condition that they thought either was exacerbated by lack of physical activity, or might have been prevented or mitigated by being more active:

---

**I've worked in the care industry, and I can kind of see what happens when people get old. And to be honest it frightens me. And I've actually worked with a couple of people, one man who had a brain injury, and he was ever so fit, and he made a really good recovery. And [they do] medical experts do reckon that had a lot to do with it that, you know, because he was so fit.**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

In many cases participants used these examples to spur them on, referring to them as motivations for their own activity. There were numerous examples of both negative and positive comparisons with others:

## Positive

---

I want to be still playing sport if I can, when I'm in, in my 70s. Some of my friends I play golf with are in their 80s. And that's, that's my intention. Obviously, they're not running around the golf course, like they used to and they're not hitting the ball as far, but they enjoy as much now as they did when they're in their 50s and 60s and that. I'm hoping to do the same.  
Male, 68, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Yeah, I want to keep my mobility up, and I want to keep my brain functioning, try to keep my body, you know, moving as much as I can.  
Male, 70, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

## Negative

---

I see older 60s and their 70s, people who can't physically walk or they're in the scooters, or whatever not because in other medical conditions, because they've let their legs get weak and not strong enough to be able to carry their weight and just do normal activities. Some of them have other, you know, medical conditions as well, that makes it make them not able to do so. But I think certainly thinking of myself, I'm thinking, yeah, it's really important to be physically active so that I don't end up an old lady who can't walk very much.  
Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Pakistani ethnicity

---

Because I've got some friends and I see them with a stick, younger than me. And I think why, why have they got a stick, you know. I don't really question people but you're not supposed to be like that, you know what I mean?  
Female, 63, working, inactive always, Black British ethnicity

---

Very few participants referred to 'living longer' as a factor related to the importance of exercise. Comments were much more likely to be focused on quality of life and independent living rather than living for more years.

## Managing weight

The topic of the role of physical activity in helping to manage or lose weight was raised – unprompted – by the majority of participants. This will be explored in more detail in the section on motivations for activity, but for many participants, this issue underlined the importance of physical activity. Participants referred to other people who used physical activity successfully to maintain their weight, or to people who had put on weight when reducing or stopping activity. And for many participants they related their need for exercise to their own body weight.

---

**Well it's good for my health to get out and walk? Right. Okay. This lockdown we've been putting on weight so that motivates me a bit to go out walking.**  
Female, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity.

---

When weight was discussed, it was virtually always linked to diet as well as physical activity, with a good general understanding of the interaction between energy in and energy out, and in turn the links to positive physical health:

---

**You have to eat well, you can't be filling your body with a load of rubbish and then expect your body to perform optimally. I think you just have to eat healthy and maintain a good body weight. And you do that as well with exercise. It's good for the heart.**  
Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**Well yeah I'd love to lose weight but the problem is I love food and I hate exercise so unless someone brainwashes me to make it the other way around, I don't think I'm going to get very far.**  
Female, 54, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

## **Guilt**

Discussions about the importance of physical activity, and its role in improving health and quality of life were often peppered with expressions of guilt or regret. As noted above, the majority of participants said that they think physical activity is important, so when they don't manage to do as much as they would like they expressed guilt:

---

**I suppose it is important is just that I'm in a little bit of a rut really...well I mean I haven't done much over the last of the five years but it probably made it even worse over the last 12 months you know.**  
Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

These feelings of dissatisfaction came from either comparing with the past; with other people; or with some supposed norm or standard. For some participants, the reason for this is quite simple: laziness. While they might baulk at referring to others as lazy, they often describe themselves in this way:

---

**So I think I was lazy. I think it's just laziness crept in. Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. I think it's just laziness crept in.**  
Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**No, in my case it's just idleness...yeah I can't blame anyone else or any of the outside influence that without, it's me myself really.**  
Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

## The importance of health

Being active as part of a healthy lifestyle and to prevent illness was a strong thread throughout discussions with most participants. As previously discussed, many were aware that being active was good for health, in terms of physical and mental health, several related being active to their weight management efforts and others talked about using activity to offset other unhealthy lifestyle behaviours.

---

**I think it's very important for health reasons. I don't think our bodies were meant not to exercise. They weren't designed not to exercise and suddenly people are having like, diabetes, strokes. I'm not saying that if you exercise, you won't get it, but it does help. Especially if your diet isn't fantastic, I do think it's really important.**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**You're seeing different things and thinking about things differently... Mental benefits have got to be kind of number one, really, you know, you're outside, you're out in fresh air.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

---

**You've got to think of your own wellbeing as well. And, you know, if you don't move about and do things as well, you know, what it's going to be like, you know, you're just going to put loads of weight on, you're going to be unhealthy, as well. And, you know, because even diabetes and whatever, runs in my family as well. So I've got to be careful as well. So all that as well for people, if they don't look after themselves, all these things, things that can be avoided, as well. So doing exercise and that helps as well and just maintaining what you eat and whatever. And not just be careful what you eat, you've got to do the exercise to go with it as well.**

Female, 52, not working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

**We still eat nice food at home, and we drink nice wines and spirits and things at home. So doing a bit of exercise allows me to, hopefully allows me to continue doing that. Now I'm conscious, I don't do enough to do that, I need to do more, to be honest, to counteract the damage to my health over the years. And to allow me to continue doing and having the good lifestyle as well.**

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

In particular, several participants were concerned about becoming a burden to their family, particularly if they lost their mobility and independence:

---

**It's my opinion... that everybody should look after their body because you only get it once. And you should look after it mentally and physically because you're either looking after somebody who can't look after themselves, or they end up looking after you and then being a burden on them. That's how I feel about myself because I don't want to make myself you know, unhealthy because I think what if something happens to me, then I won't be able to walk in the long run. I don't want my kids to have to look after me I'd rather look after myself and not be a burden on them.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

**I think it's, it's very good to be independent. And so and to me, independence means being mobile. So as I said, I really wouldn't want to get into the situation where I was, had the mobility issue if I could possibly avoid it. So but that's, I suppose part of the motivation for walking around. Not something that's necessarily pleasurable in itself, but necessary to just promote general health and hopefully stave off any longer-term problems.**

Male, 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Although some participants were keen to try to be more active, understanding the health benefits of activity was often insufficient motivation to initiate or maintain activity. A few participants also reported being concerned about appropriate levels of activity, particularly if they had an on-going health concern.

---

**It's just having that motivation as well, and just lacking motivation, obviously. I need something to tell me to want to do it, even though they say about my health so I should want to do it. But it's just kind of getting over that last hurdle, that getting over that last hurdle, thinking, yeah, I need to change the way I think about this.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**I think they would like me to do a bit more, but I think sometimes you get I'm not sure how scared because obviously the heart's beating and doing a lot of work so yeah. On one hand they say to be more physical and on the other hand, they say to do more, like yoga and Pilates. So it's like, which one is best for me? ... Do I need to do high intensity? Or do I need to do more moderate or much more? ... Yeah, so where's that balance...I have no idea.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

Some participants discussed their understanding of the concept of fitness, with several talking of their enjoyment of getting and staying fit:

---

To keep fit and also to keep my body as supple it can be so I'm all about keeping young, so I can be as active as long as possible, so my body doesn't just seize up. Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

Really, I just want to keep myself fit. I don't want to sit about you know, watching the television all day. So I can't do that, it drives me around the bend, you know, and so, yeah, it's purely for my own health. Like we say, if you don't use it, you lose it, basically.

Male, 68, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

---

When I was a lot younger, I was always playing football and everything else, as I've gotten older, not too great at running around, you know, get out of breath pretty quick now, but I still, you know, play football with my boy and everything else, you know, things like that. I like, I've got my mountain bike I normally ride around on as well for a bit of exercise and stuff like that.

Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

Commonly, participants spoke of setbacks they had experienced, typically because of illness or the development of pain, other symptoms or an injury which had caused them to change or reduce their activity:

---

I just liked being fit. I enjoy, I enjoy being fit. I enjoy being slim. I used to enjoy swimming and surfing going in the sea. And you just, you just feel good about yourself. You know, you have, like, inner confidence. My confidence has all but gone now, with this stroke and heart, the heart attack.

Male, 68, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

I can't do running everyday because of my knee but I know I've damaged the knee myself because I overplayed tennis. And my GP years ago said you've done this to yourself because it's a cruciate knee ligament and it's basically a footballer's injury. So there's nothing really you can do about it, tendons, it's not bones, it's not, so just strap it up.

Female, 61, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

---

I'm okay walking about but I don't deal with hills very well. And steps, I'm okay going down steps but not so good coming up... I think the fact that I live at the top of the hill is standing in the way. They call it cardiac hill. Why they put sheltered housing at the top of the hill like this I don't know. But yeah, that has stop me you know, I get out of breath going up hills.

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

**When you're younger, if you're injured, you tend to sort of brush it off and on to the next activity, so to speak. When you're older, you tend to procrastinate a bit more. And you probably talk about it a lot more, you begin to feel sorry for yourself.**

Male, 65, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

Some participants recognized that the type of activity they enjoyed would have to be adapted as they aged:

---

**I'm not gonna be able to run the distance, say I run now. But then I'll probably walk much more than I do, and kind of take it as a social aspect for social walks, and, you know, discovering the country more. So I can imagine me doing that... And I might take up Tai Chi or something like that. I imagine myself being just as engaged with activity, but not necessarily at the, at the same level, but obviously not at the same level.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

## **Priorities**

Only a few participants talked about activity being a top priority in their lives. These were typically participants who spoke about their enjoyment of being active or who liked the discipline involved with regular activity.

---

**Yeah, but you don't even think about it because if you enjoy something you don't think you're doing it for (xxx). I just did it because I liked it.**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

One participant described his commitment in terms of a contract with himself:

---

**It has to be at some level where there's this kind of inner dialogue with yourself or this kind of inner contract with yourself, where actually this is going to be something that I'm going to do and engage in and kind of enjoy it for whatever reason.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

For most participants, being active had to fit in alongside other responsibilities and pursuits, although dog owners frequently mentioned the priority that dog walking was given amongst their other commitments.

---

**Yeah, because that's what you have to do. So, you know, you have to take the dog out whether it's raining, snowing, sunny, you know they need doing so you just get on to do it. You can't be a fair weather walker...you've got to get out there and do it anyway.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

Apart from dog-ownership, other commitments regularly resulted in limited time and energy being available for activity. Participants talked of giving priority to work, family life and time for themselves or, for one participant, house renovations.

---

**Probably what gets in the way is probably my wife's work pattern, because it's very haphazard. I might plan to do something and they change her change shifts or something. So I have to go pick her up earlier or later so then I have to cancel, things like that.**

Male, 66 retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**Some people you know, have busy lives, you know, you have busy lives they have children, husbands, and wives, and they just don't get around to it they just don't. And sometimes they don't make it a choice to get round to it because you know, you're helping with the children with homework or what have you or you're looking after elderly parents, maybe you're going to put yourself back. You're not going to look after yourself first.**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**Well, you're relaxed aren't you, especially after you finish work. When I used to go out there and come home. I'm like, okay, this is my time. So you tend to just relax and eat sometimes, you know, even though I love going to the gym and stuff, I'll say, okay, sometimes I think, okay, I don't want to go today, I'll go tomorrow.**

Female, 52, not working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

**No, I just, yeah, it's an excuse. Of course it is. But just time, you know, it's not a priority for us. We've got to get this house finished before it drives as mad. So our focus has been, you know, working on the house and to say right to the husband, right, you get on with that painting.**

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

Participants did describe pursuing active hobbies – including cricket, dancing, fishing, football, gardening, golf, running, tennis, walking and yoga. One participant described their excitement about recently purchasing a second-hand bicycle and starting to cycle regularly.

---

**We all do the gym as well, and go for walks and stuff. But there's a lot of dancing in, you know, in our culture, a lot of dancing.**

Female, 52, not working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

She buys a load of flippin' plants all the time. Wants to move little shrubs. So yeah, put them somewhere else. And we got a quite a nice garden is quite big. So we're in the grass growing season now. So I'll be doing that.

Male, 68, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

Well, because I hadn't ridden a bike for 30 odd years, but it was something I wanted to do. I started up probably, I don't know a mile? Because I was wobbly and everything. But now I'm up to probably, three to five miles on a ride, which is quite good. Getting the legs pumping. First of all the legs, my legs, were killing me. But now, you sort of build up to that. Daughter came down, she lives up in the Peak District, she came down. And she was like "Oh, you bought a bike at last" So, I said to her, she said, "Yeah, I'll bring my bike down" for the, when she came down, bring me bike and we could go out for a bike ride. So that was really nice to be able to do that.

Male, 63, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

However, other participants chose to spend their leisure time on less active hobbies – cooking, crafting, DIY, on-line gambling, gaming, listening to music or podcasts, puzzles, reading, on-line trading, watching TV, writing, going to the cinema and eating out.

---

I like, well, I like a bit of cooking in the kitchen, I'm not a great fan. But I do sometimes, you know, when you watch a video or something, you want to try it? Without burning it. So you know? Yeah, I like some, like makeup like, you know, like, videos and stuff like watching them. And trying new makeup out and hairstyles.

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

I suppose you've got a range of choices and options. And I've sort of not gone for those, the more physical side of things longer walks the gym, etc. I've just chosen to pursue other paths. I enjoy other things more.

Male, 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

### **'I am an active type': the role of physical activity in shaping identity**

We explored the extent to which people felt that physical activity and sport was part of how participants saw themselves; whether being an 'active type' or a 'sporty person' was important to them.

It was clear that the concept of being an 'active type' resonated with both active and inactive people. Many active people felt being active was an important part of what defines them:

---

**People do think I'm active. And my parents do. They don't understand why I go to the gym. They're like, gosh, it's a waste of money. But I like it. And that's kind of like my treat.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**I will generally say yes. If somebody asked me to describe myself, being active would be part of that description.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Active participants described themselves as 'active types' in various ways: more active than friends or family; 'hyper' or 'fidgety'; 'always on the go' or simply saying that they have always enjoyed being active:

---

**I have always been active. Yes...it may not be the gym, but I've always done something.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

In a few cases, people discussed how they used to be seen as the sporty or active type but this had changed as they got older. This issue will be revisited in the section on lifecourse.

### **The sporty type**

This concept was expanded when discussing sport, particularly competitive sports. Here, being a 'sporty type' was seen as something to aspire to, or for many, something out of reach:

---

**I won't say I'm a sports person. So I probably wouldn't put that label on myself.... I don't think I'm fit enough to be a sports person.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**I wouldn't describe myself as really sporty, but I am...I do like sport.**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

**No, I tried it when I was younger but I've never been like I said never been really sportified or that sort of thing. It's never been a priority to me.**

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

There were also a few examples of the concept being turned around, with people being branded the inactive type (and in this case, the opposite of 'fitness friends'):

---

**The actual walking itself? No. If I could stand on a hoverboard and get from place to place I would.**

Female, 54, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity.

---

**I've got fitness friends; I've got friends that I will go on holiday and stuff with; I've got friends that I have at work. I've got friends we used to work together years ago. So we'll meet up and have meal, chat, that kind of thing. They never do any exercise, they like wine and cheese...No, they're not normal to be active. They're normal to their wine and cheese. Not necessarily the cheese.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

### **Negative perceptions of being the active or sporty type**

These concepts were often referred to in pejorative terms, especially by less active people, who used it to talk about other people who were more active than them. For the more negative inactive participants, 'active types' were always on the go, always looking for something, perhaps unsatisfied:

---

**Not me. I know some people...have to constantly being doing something all the time. Which to me feels as if there's something else missing from their life. Each to their own, you know, everybody's different, some people constantly have to be doing things and proving that they're better than everybody else. That's just not me.**

Female, 51, unemployed, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

In many cases, this characterisation of active types was used by less active people to define what they did not want to be, something that they did not aspire to:

---

**No, it isn't part of my identity. Because, yeah, in an ideal world, I'd probably prefer to sit on the lounge, sit on the settee watching telly, going out drinking, going out eating.**

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

However, it was interesting to note that this concept also led to guilty feelings among some participants who wished they were the 'active type' but did not think they achieved this:

---

**No, no, I'd like to say that. I'd like to say that. But if I said that I'd be lying.**

Female, 54, not working, inactive recently, Greek Cypriot ethnicity

---

**Being active should be part of who I am. But it's not fundamental, fundamentally, the major part of my identity.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

## Social norms around activity

We explored the extent to which it was considered 'normal' to be active, particularly within the context of participants' family and friends; their immediate community; or more generally by wider society.

### Family and friends

When discussing the extent to which it was normal to be active, the most prevalent response from participants was grounded in references to their immediate family and friends. Many participants clearly compared themselves and their activity levels or patterns with their immediate contacts. In many cases they were quite focused on direct comparisons – explaining how they were more or less active than their family and friends:

---

**I've got friends who are into cycling they will cycle long distances... some people to go to the gym. But, but that's sort of one aspect of what they are. But it's not something that they're saying, 'oh, yes, you must do this'. And I'm not saying that they should stop. It's just an acceptance that we're into different things and yeah, our paths cross elsewhere. They are more physically active than me, but I'm...no, I don't aspire to do that.**

Male, 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

**Well, yeah, if I think about my friends who are very active, yeah, that's them. You know, I associate them with like, doing marathons. And I associate other friends with not being sporty, but you know, we'll, we'll do bingo, you know, we get fun out of it. So why not?**

Female, 60, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Several participants spoke of the value they placed on having role models in their family. One participant talked of occasions when active choices had been used to resolve family conflicts.

---

**He's [father] always been a very healthy eater... and that's how I was brought up, healthy eating and exercise [and your mother?] She used to walk but she wouldn't like go for a walk, but my mum's always been very hard working physically, you know, house, you do everything by herself. And I remember when we were young, like she never drove, but she would like, you know, she would go to the market and walk home with heavy bags or shopping... I think I'm the only one who runs and swims, and yeah, we all walk a lot.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

---

**Sometimes we'd have a fall out with my mum, there's five sisters and two brothers. We used to just say to each other shall we go to the park today.**

---

**We'd talk about what you know what we're happy with what we're not happy with things like that have a chat outside the house. We used to walk around the whole park for a few hours.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

### **People of a similar age**

Comparisons were nearly always made with people of a similar age – either to say that they are of a similar activity level, or to refer to people who bucked the trend and were ‘good for their age’.

---

**I mean, one of my friends, she's a bit older than me, she's approaching 60 and the last five years from going from no exercise I've seen her starting doing quite a lot. She joined the gym, she would go for her Zumba class and spinning class. And you know, and I think she realised getting to that age, she needed to do something.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

One participant thought she was ‘not normal’ as she had a long-term condition:

---

**I think definitely people my age that are normal are a lot more active than me.**

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

### **Community**

Beyond this, the wider community was important to many participants. However, the term community is complex. Some see it as a particular group of people who share some similar characteristics:

---

**I think in the Indian community, I think maybe it's getting better now. I don't know. But generally, people have a very sedentary life, you know...it has been a bit of an issue at the temple but I think as I said, they're recognising more and more as people are starting to have health issues.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

**I think it's normal to be active. I mean, I've always been pretty active. As I've got older, it's, well, here, in my experience in my community, there's, there's a couple of people I know do exercise regularly. There's one lady we know, there's that she goes running I'd say virtually, every other day. She's younger than me, but that's no excuse. But a lot of the other people probably no, I don't see, no they probably don't do enough exercise, in my honest opinion, I would say.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, Greek ethnicity

---

However, for many participants, community means the local area:

---

**We all do something walking wise, all of our neighbours go out walking. We're very close to the fields around here. There's lots of footpaths. I think all our neighbours are really active in some way or other...some of them have got dogs so they might be dog walking, or cycling. We've got neighbours either side that do quite a lot of cycling. So I think, I think they're all quite active in their own way.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

While the visibility of local people exercising may seem positive – encouraging a social norm around physical activity, for a few people it was a wholly negative experience:

---

**I went out we went for a walk the other day, I think it was Sunday I was in the car I wasn't walking and it was just ram packed, it was just jammed, people just running all over the place...[the park was] chockablock, it's horrendous.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**I see people out jogging, yes. And you see people, particularly at weekends, who will look like they're cycling for exercise or sport as opposed to getting from A to B. Similarly to how I was describing, friends, that's fine, but it's, it's not inspiring me to take up jogging or cycling.**

Male 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

## **Social support**

Participants spoke of the importance of social networks in influencing their physical activity efforts - reflecting our findings in the literature review. We identified a range of themes relating to the role of others in initiating and/or supporting the physical activity behaviour of participants. For some, the advantages of being active alone (the convenience of home-based activity, feeling self-motivated, enjoying time for themselves and reducing the burden of forward planning) were valued.

---

**After a long day, just being in my own space, the fresh air and I always find that my stiffness goes away... I feel that's why I think now I just have to do it every day. And I don't find it hard to do.**

Female, 56, working, active recently, Black African ethnicity

---

---

**A lot of my friends like me work at different times and what have you. So getting to go with somebody with, you know, you're reliant on when they can do it as well. Whereas I was always a bit of a spontaneous, I'm a very**

**spontaneous person. I won't be like, right on Wednesday I'll go for a walk, I'll go for a walk when I feel like.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Having no-one to be active with was seen as a barrier to getting started, with several participants saying they were more likely to join in with activities if they could do so with other people. Other participants reported that they lacked confidence or found it difficult or boring to motivate themselves and so preferred to be active with others. Some participants described feeling a sense of obligation and commitment if they had made plans to be active with other people. Others valued being active as an opportunity to socialise or were keen to combine being active with other social activities.

---

**I do have a bike and I'm rarely out on it because I don't have anybody to cycle with. I could go out on my own, but it's not something I enjoy doing on my own.**

Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**If I go for a walk on my own, I don't think that's much fun.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Pakistani ethnicity

---

**If you've got somebody to do something with, it makes you more likely to do it, rather than thinking it's not quite as nice today, well, I won't bother.**

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

**I think if I have somebody to do it with on a regular basis... and having the social side of it as well. That gives you motivation doesn't it? ... when it comes to like motivating myself to exercise, yeah, I need somebody else to give me a kick up the backside basically. And I think if I was to do it on my own I'd find it boring as well now... also, I wouldn't mind, you know, joining a gym that had a swimming pool, you know, perhaps a sauna or something like that, and a nice coffee shop afterwards. But it's then would be more of like a day out.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Friends and family played a mixed role in enabling participants to be active. Several participants felt they were more likely to be active for longer if they were active with their friends.

---

**I used to go on, I don't know, longer walks because I would go with friends. Yeah. I think when you're talking you walk further.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

A few participants valued challenging their friends, some used opportunities to be active to make new friends and one participant was keen to hand over responsibility to someone else.

---

**There's also the social aspect when I'm running with my friends and then we kind of engage with each other. And then we'll, we'll laugh and have a joke afterwards or be challenging each other.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

**Well, I'm a very sociable person. So for me, when I go to the gym, I don't just go and get in the gym and exercise by myself. I like being in the classes. You know, I make friends quickly, with everybody.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**Having somebody to knock on the door and say, yeah, we're going we're doing this we're doing that whereas I've, all my life I've been the motivator regarding family, friends, not necessarily with exercise but just generally getting together and you know, going away for the day or something like that I seemed to be the one. Yeah, perhaps a bit fed up with it. I want somebody to come and organise me now.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

For some, friends and family acted as powerful role models helping to demonstrate the benefits of active lifestyle choices. Participants often described the enjoyment of being active with their friends and family and the value they placed on building shared memories. Some participants felt that friends and family helped to develop their sense of confidence around activity and others spoke of engaging in rivalry and competition which helped to strengthen their friendship.

---

**My mother, she used to love going to the swimming baths, right up until she was in her 80s. And I used to go along with her, you know, and we'd do the aqua aerobics together. You know, things like that. It was, it was just fun.**

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**Yeah, I did try and do it at home, but it wasn't as good. And I think it motivates you to get out and do it and be with other people. And you feel better for it. Doing, trying to do exercises at home. It's alright for the first week or so. But in the end, sometimes you say oh, I can't be bothered to do that. And then you don't. I think it just makes you, right every Tuesday I go and pick [name of friend] up, my friend and then we toddle off to Pilates. And you feel better after.**

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

I said "Make sure they bring their bikes!"... I'm not gonna have them up here and sitting on a PlayStation... Yeah, yeah, I mean, I remember things I did with my grandparents. And I think that sticks more than an afternoon sitting, sitting on a PlayStation... I think getting out, exercise, fresh air. Last time I had them up, I walked their socks off.

Male, 63, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

And I like the fact that I also like the fact I know, big head that I am, that when I do go anywhere, if I go on a trip, or anywhere with my friends, I can always be the one to outrun them... even if they're younger than me.

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Some family members provided encouragement to participants to consider making healthy choices and friends provided a vital support network to help one participant to manage living with a long-term condition.

---

He'll say to me, Mum, you need to be more active, you need to watch what you eat. He'll say to me, Mum, I don't want you to be like my grandma... Because he's looking at, you know, along the line, where I'm going to have to look after my mum when she gets to that age and I want her to be able to... I mean my mum I can't move her because I'm on my own so I'm gonna have to do everything for her to look after her.

Female, 52, not working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

You've got to have some sort of social life, whether it be at home, whether it be going out or whatever. And I definitely think it's having the right support network, and having people around you that will give you the kick up the backside when you need it, because it's very easy to, you know, allowing that wallowing to slip into depression. And that goes hand in hand.

Depression goes hand in hand with sort of like pain management, mobility.

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

However, not all involvement with friends and family was positive. Several participants had grown up without active role models, one participant described feeling put off by more active friends and another participant thought that his active friends had no influence on his lack of desire to be active.

---

We weren't a sporty family. My dad liked the sports on the television, but that was about it. [So it wasn't something you did together as a family?] No, no, not sporty things, no... I used to go swimming and things when I was a kid... My mum and dad never went swimming, it was just me, or with my friends after school.

Male, 64, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**I have a friend who's, her job, she does exercise classes. She's been asking who wants to go on a zoom exercise thing and obviously I definitely don't do it. Her exercises are too hard for me. It's too physical. So you know, all the exercises I've done in the past over the years, the last few years, I can't do the ones with too much jumping up and down. You know, I don't mind doing stretching things. That's why I always did yoga, you see, leg exercises arm ones, but when you have to jog on the spot for 20 minutes, I just, I just don't have the stamina.**

Female, 54, not working, inactive recently, Greek Cypriot ethnicity

---

**We're friends, but we have, we have different attitudes and outlooks. And if they're into cycling, or going to the gym or whatever, then that's fine for them. But it wouldn't particularly attract me doing that... That's part of the friendship, if you like... we're not friends because I want to convert them into being less sedentary and they want to convert into being more active... We're still friends.**

Male, 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Similarly, partners were found to be a mixed influence on the activity levels of participants. Several participants discussed the importance they placed on being active with their partner, as a time to be active and also to spend shared time together. Other participants talked about the impact of holding differing views to their partners about the value of activity. For some participants, this had little effect but for others it resulted in a focus on less active pursuits.

Another participant felt that he was likely to be more active when he was in a relationship, rather than being single, because there were more opportunities to do things together.

---

**Probably just kind of getting out the house really, and doing something a bit different and seeing the different, seeing something a bit different. And, you know, perhaps me and my husband too spending a bit of time together really.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

**He's never had to worry about exercise. He's always been very slim. So he's never given it a thought really, to be honest with you. I mean, I've always been very slim as well but I do like exercise. I suppose. That's the difference. I don't mind it. Whereas he just sees it well, okay. I'm going to walk up the road. I'll walk up the road. I don't need to walk up the road. I've got a car. I'm jumping into the car.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Participants frequently cited examples of trying to encourage their partners to be more active, with varying levels of success.

---

**It's very hard, because using my husband as an example, he should be going for walks. And we have those conversations. So you try all the different tactics, and I've tried so many to point I've given up... I've tried the hard tactics, the soft tactics and at the moment, I'm like, I don't care tactic. Do what you want! ... You can go on about how the benefits or they can see that I'm sure he can see the benefits for myself, but you know, but he's always got some excuse.**

Female, 56, working, active recently, Black African ethnicity

---

Similarly, participants talked about ways in which their own partners attempted to encourage them to be more active.

---

**If he's like oh, just going to the post office do you fancy a walk? And I would do that because it's not a long walk but it is a case of oh I've got to put my make up on and straighten my hair and I've got to get changed into something presentable... Yeah it's a double effort. Not only have you got to do the walking, but you've got to get ready to do the walking.**

Female, 54, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---



---

**My wife likes to go for a walk and likes to do something, so she'll say we're going for a walk and I'll very rarely say no, because, again, it's if she hadn't said it, I probably wouldn't do it.**

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---



---

**And I went to the Lake District with him one year and, you know, I did enjoy most of the walk. But I think I probably did it just because he kept asking me 'oh you have to come you'll really enjoy it' so I just did it for him more, not for me. Um, doesn't make anything, you know, it didn't give me any pleasure to be on a top of the mountain, didn't feel like I achieved something in my life. Now I can tick a box. But I think I ticked the box about 'oh, I did that so he can kind of stop having a go at me about it'.**

Female, 58, working, inactive recently, Iranian ethnicity

---

## **Practical issues**

### **Money**

Making active choices was comfortably within the means of some participants and a few other participants spoke about choosing activities that were relatively affordable.

---

**My main activities, relatively resource free, you know, a good pair of trainers and a road to run on. So it is not committed to actually go into a club, like a tennis club and booking, booking a court or having to, or playing golf and paying, find the golf course and paying exorbitant amounts of money.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

However, for other participants, financial resources were limited. This was especially so for some of those who had retired but working participants also described having a range of financial commitments, which impacted on their lives and the choices they were able to make.

---

**I just try to do a bit more gardening now... I go around every now and again, I have a blitz and I move the pots around... Fill up some flowerpots, might go to a garden centre, buy a few plants. I don't like to spend too much money because I haven't got too much money, you know. So therefore, as much as you want to do things, you have to try and do things that don't cost too much money.**

Female, 66, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**I even do overtime, when it's available as well, you know, I put money away for my boy and my other boy and everything else, you know, I don't want them to be lumbered with, you know, student loans and everything else, you know, all that kind of stuff. I know it's a struggle in life, you know, and you need money behind you. Not that I've got any, but you know, I'm trying to put bits away for my boys and everything else.**

Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

Some participants felt that a lack of money prevented them from accessing activities that they may have been interested in trying out. Others were concerned about the need for and expense of transport.

---

**But classes like that tend to be very expensive, very expensive. They seem to be they, you know, for a particular section of the community, you know, as opposed to for everyone.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**Depends on where, you know, where the activity will be? You know, I could get on a bus. The... yeah, it is a bit of a barrier... Well it's that hill... that puts me off, you know. I'd just get a taxi. Yeah, but you know, there's costs involved ...**

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Participants could also remember accessing local facilities - swimming pools and leisure centres - that had subsequently closed down, typically

due to lack of maintenance funding, which had reduced their options to make active choices. Several participants expressed a wish for discounted activity opportunities, either for themselves or for other family members so that they could use the facilities together.

---

**Maybe, you know, I think sports centres like local council centres should offer more, you know, in helping people get back I think they do, but you've got to be over a certain age, and maybe they need to lower that age... You know, maybe when you're 60, you're still young. Or even 55. My age is like, you can have a concession on what you pay. They're asking you to pay, you know, maybe take a couple of pounds off or a couple of classes, when we can't do that a lot, exceptionally. They're not full, on peak time. So offer subsidised classes, offer a bit more.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

### **Facilities**

A few participants were (or had been) gym members and reported finding the routine, discipline and atmosphere engaging and enjoyable. Combining gym work with swimming was popular with several participants and others talked about socialising with their friends and attending their favourite classes.

---

**It was for a couple years when I used to do all the swimming. You know I had an active membership with the, I can't remember what the scheme is called now but it was at [name of leisure centre] and you know, I'd go and do an hour in gym and then go for a swim.**

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**Yeah, there were certain classes that we'd always try and get on. There was like a boxing class. So we'd always try and get on it. And it was limited spaces before COVID 30 people would go in the class. And sometimes you couldn't get on a class, even with 30. Then when COVID, when the gyms were open, only 10 of you could go. So if you couldn't get booked on, you were lucky if you could just turn up and get on.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

However, most participants described the idea or experience of gym-based activity to be off-putting or boring. Several participants talked about feeling out of place, unconfident in their use of equipment or suggesting that gyms were places for people to 'show off'.

---

**You know what it was really, it was in the kind of, you know you get these shops where you feel you don't belong, like a you know, high end or a young hip kind of shop and you can go in and it's like, it was it felt a bit like that. I**

feel like it was made for younger active people rather than someone like me, you know, middle aged, trying to do some exercise. I did feel out of place.  
Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Pakistani ethnicity

---

I don't think I could ever go to a gym I just find it so boring just standing in one place and doing something that's just me. Like running you know, you've got the nature you've got the view. You've got a change of view. But I think me going to the gym. I don't think I could hack it.  
Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

I don't see myself having to go to gym when most, but most of the weight, weight bearing weight loading exercises I can do at home... It's more comfortable, less self conscious is basically what I'm saying.  
Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Some female participants discussed their preference for segregated facilities.

---

In the gym, in the weights area, sometimes it's a lot of big burly guys, you don't always want to be with them. Like I used to belong, like the first gym I belonged to, it was split in two. So upstairs was for the ladies and downstairs was for the men. And the ladies, you could go in the men as long as you was serious and you were doing- you're not gonna be down there just checking out the guys, you were seriously working out. And I really liked that. I really liked that it was separate. That you wasn't having to like mop up some guy's sweat before you could use the equipment.  
Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Other participants could recall when facilities offered a wider range of options, with one participant describing how much he'd enjoyed playing a mix of sports and other activities at his local leisure centre.

---

It was a Sports Centre, used to always play table tennis, badminton, and all that kind of stuff. There are many things to do there. Just go I mean, yeah. So yeah, all kinds of stuff and it'd be, you know, weekends where, you know, women's football tournament, 5 aside and all that kind of stuff. So there was so much activities to do. But unfortunately, now, these kind of places they not really around now, you know, like all these sports centres and that, you know, it's just really sort of gyms, you know... But you know, if there was, I would, I would definitely join up and start playing a bit of badminton, table tennis and things like that, you know, but there's nothing local like that near me.  
Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

## Home and caring for others

All of the participants provided a detailed insight into their day-to-day lives, demonstrating a broad range of home and family circumstances. Some participants talked of an engaged and happy home life, others were estranged from family or lived alone, several reported feeling lonely and a few were managing with long term conditions which limited their ability to be fully active.

Most described having some form of caring responsibilities - for children, grandchildren, parents, partners or neighbours - and these commitments had a range of impacts on physical activity opportunities. Participants who were inactive were more likely to talk about this issue than more active participants.

Some participants had found ways to juggle childcare responsibilities with being active, by making specific time for their activity, by sharing their responsibility, by building activity into their time with those they were caring for or by the nature of their daily activities.

---

**I found this jogging that so like in those days, my son was really... the kids were really little... I wouldn't even... I wouldn't I didn't even used to leave them at home on their own on their own and go jogging. So I would quickly fit in a run right before my husband went to work like that. That was a question of fitting it in. Now it's become like a habit.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---



---

**When I was a teenager I was very active. I would say when I had my children I wasn't that active, because I spent all my time with them... I suppose I was chasing them around. Yeah, I was still being active and I used to take them to the park and stuff like that and when they got older, I would leave them on the swings whilst I ran around the park... I think by the time my kids were, the eldest one was 10, I was definitely back to getting myself to be fully active again.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---



---

**Having two small children at the moment, can be a little bit challenging. Like I said, a three- year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. With me and my wife, we try to you know, balance the responsibility the best we can. That's again, work, and that's why as soon as I wake up in the morning and they're busy probably having, my wife is probably helping them to have a shower, bath, breakfast, all that type of stuff. It allows me to go out and do some exercises. Before I take over the responsibility and do my bit.**

Male, 50, working, active recently, Indian ethnicity

---

---

He is, he is, Nanny come and play with me, Nanny do this, Nanny do that. Yeah, we try to be active enough. We've got some toys at our place that we keep you know and he loves coming. And he loves keys and everything that keys. Nanny can I have your keys? Nanny can I do this? So yeah, he keeps us on our toes. And I think that helps us as well. You know, it takes our mind off of our troubles and pains.

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Have you got children? Don't have animals like I had. I had two boys. I have two sons... Yeah, nightmare. They were nightmare children, absolute nightmare. So it's hard work bringing up kids. It's not easy. But no, I didn't do much when they were little. I must admit there's a time factor when they're younger. But today's generation, your generation, you make more time for yourself. My generation didn't necessarily make so much time for themselves. We were busy running a home and our home was doing. Our exercise was perhaps housework... didn't necessarily do gardening but we did housework. And that was the level or we did walk to the shop maybe did we have a car or not? I don't know not that many people then had cars you know second cars. So you did walk.

Female, 66, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

For other participants, childcare commitments limited the time they had available for being active or made the decision-making around being active less attractive due to the need to organise childcare cover. Commonly, participants who were also parents described a changing role as their children aged, moving from being active with their children through play and other activities to facilitating their child's activity without being active themselves.

---

You know, it's just I mean, it's having that time, because obviously, with both my wife and I sort of, we were working shifts, and my wife is a nurse, and they've been, so we'd obviously cross over. So you know, with on our days off, both of us the these things we want to do is obviously sort of be together and obviously be with the kids. So if my wife was working, and I'll be at home with the kids, and likewise, if I was working, she would be at home with the kids. So that's how it sort of, so there wasn't that sort of free time really where, because you work in shifts as well, so you'd be doing early, lates or nights, was trying to sort of fit around that with the shift patterns and things like that. It kind of made it difficult to really continue doing, you know, those sort of sporty things.

Male, 58, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

I think I would like to go to the gym. Because every time I'm going out to the park, I see people trying, and they're actually doing something for

themselves. I've watched them I think I imagine that's me... I think to myself, I could be doing that...If they're, if they can go to work, and they've got time to do that then I can do it. I think because I'm a single parent, that's what it is as well... I've got to I've got a 14 year old at home and I've got to think who am I going to leave her with and all that kind of stuff as well.

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

Say for example, [name of daughter]'s a gymnast now and we will go away for weekends to gymnastic events... And we will tie that in with you stay in a hotel or going out for a meal nice meal or a few drinks somewhere, there'll be more involved with the social aspect of it rather than bringing activity into it. You know, we'll watch the gymnastics but we're not we're not involved with the activity at all.

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

A few participants described how their children leaving home had reduced the amount of activity they felt they routinely did.

---

And I think that was because I was out more with the children. I was being motivated, even though you know, they were older, I was being motivated by what they did to what I was doing. So whereas now I come home from work and make tea, I could sit down all night, you know, if I want to, whereas you can't, I couldn't ever do about three or four years ago? It's my children's fault, they left me!

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Participants who were carers - especially those who found themselves as part of the 'sandwich' generation, with caring responsibilities for children, grandchildren and elderly parents - had little time to prioritise being active, although some found taking back time for themselves was helpful.

---

Certainly no time for yourself. When I was caring for my mum I would take the children to school then the rest of the day would be spent sorting her out. Washing her, getting her dressed, appointments, making appointments, and then, then getting the children home from school then everybody for dinner, baths, everything. Yeah, that was always no time for yourself. I hadn't got a lot of time for myself.

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

To be honest, this is a full time job looking after mum. So I'm on my feet anyway. Also, I do go out for walks as well. Some days, I'll just think you know what, let me just go out for an hour or two, for a walk and that, not every day. Not every day. So I do that sometimes.

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

Obviously, you know, you love your children, everything else, and you always sort them out before, you know, you sort yourself out, so to speak a lot of time, you always put them first, but sometimes you need to sort of like, you know, take a step back and think of you, still do everything you can but sometimes you need to sort of take a bit more time for yourself, you know, and I don't think people do that quite often, you know, because they've got such busy lives and, you know, family to work around and everything else and jobs.

Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

I need to fit something into my life that is just for me. Unfortunately, part of my makeup is to look after people. And I tend to focus on that, you know, to make sure my husband is alright and everybody around me and at work... forgetting about me. So, you know, when I stopped work, it was quite hard for me to think about what, what's good for me, because I've never sort of taken the time out really to think about what is beneficial for me, because I'm always thinking about other people. So I quite enjoyed thinking what I liked and what I want to do.

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

## Physical activity through the lifecycle

We explored how participants had been physically active throughout their lives: the types of activities they engaged in at different life stages, and how that might have influenced their participation in mid-life.

### Fluctuating activity patterns

It was clear that among these participants (which deliberately focused on less active people) it was quite unusual to find people who said that they had always been active and had managed to remain active throughout the many different periods of their lives. Instead, participants were more likely to speak of fluctuating patterns of activity, reflecting their life stages and also their experiences of activity:

---

I've been through a couple of stages we I try to go every week. But you know, other things take over really. I've been- you know, when the girls were younger, I tried that, again to keep fit and stuff but I haven't been swimming for a long while.

Female, 51, not working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Yeah, there's stages whereby you have like mental blips, and you become a little bit lazy. ... I was in a relationship to somebody who wasn't active. They had kids from previous relationships and so the lifestyle maybe living with

**that person whereby you're just eating and housebound all the time. And I lost a bit of motivation, started putting on a lot of weight.**

Male, 50, working, active recently, Indian ethnicity

---

These fluctuations were linked to a range of different influences for participants which had changed their lives. These included likes and dislikes regarding physical activity; home and family circumstance; employment; relationships. These can be explored by looking into the varying influences across the decades.

### **Schooldays and teenage years**

Many participants talked fondly of their schooldays and how much they enjoyed physical activity – notably sports – when at school. During some interviews with more sedentary participants the conversation became more energised when they recalled their school days and enjoying activity (that by and large they have since stopped):

**Oh, most definitely. I mean, as a child, I used to run for [County name],[County name] and [County name]...and now a few decades later [it] I have the body of a 90-year-old.**

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Participants talked about a real enjoyment of sport and activity; of feeling that it was effortless as they were young and fit; and of loving the actual activity, and in many cases being proud of being competitive at a high level.

**...a lot of sport growing up, growing and going on to secondary school and the secondary school so we're talking like athletic football, basketball, cricket rugby, so sport massively. When I grew up. I was actually quite fit and active in a lot of sports throughout like school and, and football team as well for local church.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

However, it was not all about competitive sport. Some participants recalled days being out and about with freedom to play and be active:

**Yeah, it was good. Especially when it was summer, six weeks holidays, and we were always out. Walking on our bikes or exploring. Yeah, so it was it was fun. It was fun. It was fun.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**As a child, I probably was very active because I can always remember...the most thing I ever ever wanted as a child was a pair of roller skates. And I kid you not I wore these...rubber wheels on the roller skates. I wore that rubber**

**out! Every night I came home from school I couldn't wait to get my roller skates on. And I would roller skate all the way around the block.**

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

These positive memories of active sporty schooldays tended to outweigh the more negative recollections. However, there were several examples of participants who did not enjoy – or even ‘hated’ – sport at school.

---

**I had a bike and I used to ride that with my friends at the weekends but I was never... P.E was never, I would never... I bloody hated cross country but then I think every woman hates cross country. ...But yeah, sport was never something like ‘ooh we've got sport next’, it was like’ for Pete's sake it's P.E next’.**

Female, 54, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**Oh no, oh no, oh no. I was famous running up to the high jump and running underneath it. Oh, no, oh no. I didn't want to do it, it's horrible. Didn't like that. No, no, no, no, no. Once got out of gym by saying that I had a sprained big toe. That's a famous one. My mother bought me shoes and I couldn't fit them on my feet anymore and I sprained my big toe. Oh no, never did exercise.**

Female, 66, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Negative recollections included: being picked last; finishing last; wet and rainy sports (especially cross-country); injuries; showers; and health problems.

## **Twenties**

For many people this is a time of great change, and this was the same for our research participants, who talked of being at or finishing university or college; starting work; and enjoying a more active social life. Some participants said they kept their active lifestyles going, and enjoyed being young, fit and active, but more spoke of their struggles to balance work and a social life with activity:

---

**Because I was just working, working, working after that and then the lifestyle just changed. Go to work, go out with your friends come home, then work again, every single day.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

**Yeah, I was very active. Very sporty. Until my 20s, really. You know. When I started nursing and stuff...dancing and drinking. That's what you do when you're students so yeah, that was it.**

Female, 60, retired, active recently, White and Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

### Thirties

Here we saw increasing transition as participants reported marrying and settling down; having children; or focusing more on work. A few participants reported carrying on their active lifestyles, and enjoying being at peak fitness:

---

**I used to play tennis at county level when I was younger, and then carry on through my 20s and 30s.**

Female, 61, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

Some participants reported going out of their way to squeeze physical activity into their new lifestyle:

---

**Well, yeah, I suppose I was chasing them around. Yeah, I was still being active and I used to take them to the park and stuff like that and when they got older, I would leave them on the swings whilst I ran around the park.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

However, for most it seemed to be a period of increasing demands on time, with physical activity sometimes taking a back seat:

---

**No, I was in that job for about 14 years, from 19, to 33. So pretty much carried on. So then I changed...jobs and start doing some temporary work...it wasn't a large organisations there wasn't anything that you could sort of join in. I think that's a lot to do with it, that if something's already organised, or there's a lot of people who've got similar, similar interests as you, then that kind of tailed off. ...so that's probably since I was about thirty three, not really been involved in any team sport.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

### Forties and fifties

These decades appeared to be slightly conflicting for many participants. In many cases the decline in activity seemed to continue as childcare pressures mounted and other demands got in the way. But for others – perhaps because they had children early and were now seeing reduced demands on their time – this became a time when they could begin to be active again. In some cases this was prompted by feelings that in the forties it is not possible to continue relying on youthful fitness:

---

**I would say between my ages of...when you're starting your career, and...let's say 25 to about 45ish is when- is a stage where I didn't put too much benefit on exercising, because you know, your body still kind of looks OK. And then...it kind of eventually kind of creeps up on you after you've set into your lifestyle, and then you kind of realise 'Oh, my gosh, I've got to do something about this.'**

Male, 52, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**So it's probably in my mid 50s, 54-55, just...going to the gym to be conscious of being overweight and not doing much activity general.**

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

### **Active habits throughout life**

These fluctuating activity patterns were the key theme when looking into life stages. However, within this largely inactive sample, there were some participants who reported being able to keep active throughout their lives, getting over the barriers that life put in the way:

---

**The thing is, I have always done exercise. When I was at school, I was on the cross-country team. And I was in the gymnastics team, I was on the netball team. And when I left school, I just automatically started doing exercises, I'd go to a keep fit class and even when I had children, I used to sometimes have a sitter or family member or somebody sit with them whilst we go out.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

For some participants the key to this active lifestyle appeared to be developing an activity habit, or even a specific routine.

---

**Well, yoga I did at work. So as soon as my day finished, we would all meet up and just go and do that. And Pilates, another friend introduced me to that on a Saturday morning. So I was doing that and we've been doing it for years.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**So I go for a walk most days. I live on the edge of town. We've got a massive sort of 600 acres of protected heath land near us. So I tend to go up there most days...but I also go to the gym, we've got a leisure centre. And when the gyms are open, I'd go to the gym, and they've got a nice swimming pool there, so I do circuits.**

Female, 61, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

This issue of habit and routine will be explored more in a later section.

Overall, past experiences throughout life appeared to have a large influence on current attitudes to physical activity, with more active people more likely to be able to draw on positive past experiences or memories of an active childhood. But this is by no means universal: as the case studies illustrate (see Appendix 1) we found examples of people who either overcame previous resistance to physical activity to become active in mid-life, or vice-versa.

---

## The role of work

Many of the participants were still working, and the majority had been in employment at some time in their lives. We explored how their working life influenced their physical activity.

## Activity at work

Participants tended to emphasise how active they were through work (or had been, when they were working) rather than describe a sedentary occupation. Notably, a number of participants talked about being busy all day, or ‘being on my feet all day’:

---

**I do lots of walking with them and with the children I cared for...used to take them out to the park or, you know, go take them swimming or something so again I used to do lots of walking with the days I used to work or just take them to the park and play football with them.**

Female, 58, working, inactive recently, Iranian ethnicity

---



---

**I'm on my feet all day. And if I've been on my feet all day, like eight hours a day, I come home. And the last thing you want to do is exercise, I mean because although you've not been working your muscles, because I do stand static... I thought I did quite a lot but I was quite surprised. I used a step counter and found out I didn't really do many steps at all.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Pakistani ethnicity

---

Walking (or in some cases cycling) to and from work also played a significant role for some people:

---

**For that three years I was very active, you know, did lots of walking, you know, the days that between morning session and afternoon session I used just to leave my car there and walk back to [name of place] and just walk around and walk back again and walk to the school and, you know, so I sometimes I would do like 15,000 steps a day.**

Female, 58, working, inactive recently, Iranian ethnicity

---



---

**When I worked for a voluntary adoption agency, which is about four, four and a half miles away along the canal, [name of canal]. That was a great walk. Mainly because of when I started I didn't have a lot of money, so I didn't want to spend it on bus fare. So I'd walk along the canal. And so that was we're talking about 45 minutes, we're talking about an hour and a half a day in total there and back. So I did that quite often.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

However, it was notable how few participants described a truly active occupation. A small number talked about heavy lifting at work, or a 'physical job' but when this was looked at in detail, few could claim to be sufficiently active only through their work.

### **Work as a barrier to activity**

It was clear that for some participants, their employment was something of a barrier to their physical activity. In many cases this was due to being too tired after a long day at work (however physically demanding the job was), or due to physical constraints such as shift working:

---

**Because of work and the way work is I probably don't do as much exercise as I should, truth be known, because sometimes I'm knackered at the end of the day,**

Male, 63, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity.

---

---

**Just my job, you know, as well, as I said, my hours are really unsociable...I finish at seven in the morning, by the time I get in, it's almost eight o'clock..., if I could get my hours, sort of, you know, into changed over two days, you know, I'd have more time to do things.**

Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

## **Retirement**

The sample contained 18 participants who had retired. This included the majority who had taken a planned retirement, along with a few who had retired earlier than expected, mainly due to ill-health. This provided the opportunity to explore the influences on physical activity among retired participants, and attitudes towards retirement among participants approaching retirement age.

### **Physical activity and retirement: the benefits**

Participants often said that the main benefit of being retired was the time available and the freedom this brought. This meant they had more time for physical activity,

---

**Normally, well I walk three days per week... Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I do an hour's walk. Then I would come back on a Monday and do body pump and Pilates. Tuesday I do legs, bum and tum. Wednesday, I walk for an hour and I do boxercise. Thursday, I usually do, I think body balance and cycling. Cycling, you know, the, the the stationary one. ...Fridays I do I walk again and I have ...balance. Then on the weekends, I might do an hour's walk but I usually do other activities...or take a break sometime, one of the**

**days on the on the weekend.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**... we've always got stuff to do. I think, keep yourself busy as well. You know, like I said, I don't like sitting down. ...**

Male, 68, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

However, some participants said that the increase in time available might be spent on more sedentary pursuits:

---

**I just wake up. That's the beauty of it, living on my own. And, you know, I can watch what I want on the television, I can go to bed when I want. I can get up when I want. And I can eat when I want. Not when the clock tells me it's tea time, or, you know?**

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

In particular, participants focused on spending more time with family, notably looking after grandchildren; holidays and travel; hobbies (especially gardening); and volunteering.

### **Physical activity and retirement: the challenges**

Extra time available was seen as both a blessing and a curse. Some participants talked about retirement leading to them being quite bored, with a lack of purpose. In particular, participants noted the loss of structure to their day as a result of stopping work. Work previously provided some routine throughout the day or week, with everything else having to slot in around that.

---

**Because you don't have to do anything in particular, you don't have to do things that you were doing before at a set time. You know what I mean? You don't have to do that. You don't have to do that. You know? I mean, my brother in law, ... when he retired, for the first six months, he was still setting the alarm for that particular time every morning and getting up at the time he was going to work. He did that for the first six months.**

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

For some participants, physically active hobbies were able to fill this gap, and provide some sort of daily or weekly routine

---

**It gives you a bit more time and gives you structure to try and do things but you have to make your own structure when you're retired. And that I think for anybody that suddenly finds himself in retirement is a difficult one to cope with. You have to restructure your brain as well to try and get some physical activity where you want it.**

Female, 66, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

This finding is complicated somewhat by the fact that the fieldwork was conducted during the 2020 COVID-19 'lockdown', when gyms and leisure centres were closed. This meant that quite a few participants were missing out on the routine provided by visits to exercise classes, gyms or swimming pools. A number of participants referred to this and were looking forward to resuming – or starting – an active routine.

### **Planning for an active retirement**

We explored the extent to which participants had planned (or were planning) their retirement; and specifically the extent to which they imagined themselves being physically active when they retired. A small number of participants specifically referred to making a conscious plan to have a physically active retirement. One participant with an extremely precise weekly exercise regime (see quote above) said

---

**Well, it's something I've wanted to do all along and wasn't able to do it whilst I was working.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Similarly, a number of participants approaching retirement age said they had thought specifically about having a more active retirement

---

**Well, I'm not going to retire and just sit around. And yes, I've got to find different activities. I've got to find different interests. There are quite a few things that I have in mind.**

Male, 65, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**If I was retired, I'd want to be active, definitely...because I can't sit down and watch TV all day!**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Interestingly, we found a very small number of participants who expressly aimed to have a 'lazy' or inactive retirement.

---

### **Ageing**

Almost all participants were familiar with the concept of slowing down with age. Although a few participants rejected the notion, most discussed their experience as a loss of strength or generalised aches and pains. Others were concerned that they were more likely to suffer from an injury or felt that they faced unfavourable judgment as an older person.

---

**Although I'm chronologically 61, I actually feel more like a 45 because I'm not an old 61. I'm amazed everyday as I've got past 60 I'm not quite sure how that happened. Seems at that 60 is very old, and then you suddenly think, Crikey, I'm past that now.**

Female, 61, retired, active always, White British ethnicity

---

**I'm a bit older and everything creaks and groans and things.**

Female, 60, working, active recently, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

**I don't run anymore for the bus. I'll just wait for the next one, unless it's the last one. That's how you know when you're getting old.**

Male, 53, not working, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**As you get older, nothing gets better, it always gets worse.**

Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**Yeah, I think I should be doing more of just to keep my general body going and not seize up because that's something that you feel as you get older regardless that, you know, you're a bit stiffer when you sit down and get up and what have you, but you know, not as agile.**

Female, 59, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

**I'm 57 is like, how much can I push it type thing? You know, you can push it until you injure yourself...Yeah, I've got that thing, you know, I can't do as much because I'm older.**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**When you get older nobody takes no notice what you have achieved... all we get is oh look at that woman trying to hobble down the road or, or if we were at the gym, look at her, she's too old to be here and things like that. I think they feel after a certain should we should give up.**

**That's why I like my garden.**

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Most participants accepted that ageing was a major time for adjustment in their lives. Participants frequently made comparisons with how active they had previously been able to be, or with other people as part of their motivation to stay – or become – active.

---

Because you go along in your 40s, and your 50s, and everything seems a million miles away, and then all of a sudden, once you hit 60, you come to the realisation that, you know, this is, this is not gonna last forever. And, you know, I've seen a lot of friends, you know, become ill and become sort of depressed at my sort of age of it, it brings it home to you a little bit that you're not going to be able to do some of the things you used to do. And you've got to try and maybe replace them with something else or, or alter them in some way. So you can continue to do them to some extent, but it's just the sudden realisation that, you know, this, you can't do this no more. Yeah, it's not your life's over, but it's a totally different way of life.

Male, 66, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

I'm not, definitely not as strong as I was. Because I was one of those people that was always changing the rooms around and things... but I don't do any of that now. I don't feel able to because I'm worn out, I changed the bed yesterday I had to sit down for half an hour. Well, I kept coming in and sitting down between changing it.

Male, 64, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

One of my heroes, heroines is what is her name now, [name] Oh, but she's this woman who when she was like 56 decided that, you know, she wanted to get fit and oh my god, the woman just looks phenomenal. And I thought well, that's what I'm gonna look like when I'm 56 yeah, that's what I'm going to look like when I'm 60 let alone 56.

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

While a few participants were yet to be persuaded about the value of a healthy lifestyle, other participants aspired to become or remain active, despite the impact of increasing age and - in some cases - illness.

---

There are a lot of people that are very, very fit and active in the 60s. But I'm not one of them. I'm not going to be one of them. You know, I'd like to think I could be, but I think my desire to enjoy the nicer luxuries of life is a stronger impact at the moment than the desire to have a healthy healthier living.

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

I suppose you appreciate things differently. You'd kind of want to keep, keep going and keep active. And as you get older, kind of you lose family members that you know, so you want to keep yourself going, just keep yourself a bit healthier and a bit fitter. So you don't kind of perhaps have the same struggles as somebody else, maybe.

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

---

I can't do what I did even five years ago. So, I mean, I have to try and, you know, maintain and keep stretching and, you know, keep some level of strength and, you know, do some... I rode my bike last week, I hadn't done it for about three weeks, maybe a month, maybe longer. And the next day, my hip was just aching me so bad. And I was like, geez, do I really have to stop cycling? You know, I don't want to ever have to stop but, so maybe I have to start doing it every day, like I used to.

Male, 53, not working, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

So my intention is to be playing golf into my 70s and tennis into my 70s, if I can just, if I just get this stroke over and done with and not have another stroke, or any more seizures. And if I get this ankle of mine right, I think that I can, I can play golf and tennis into my 70s and 80s.

Male, 68, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

Participants described wanting to make active choices but frequently spoke of being unable to source age-appropriate opportunities, which were tailored to their specific needs and took into consideration issues around autonomy and body confidence.

---

Yeah, so this kind of organising, going for a walk with a group or that would be really nice actually... I'm too young for the older people but I can't do things for younger people either, I'm at that kind of stage.

Female, 56, working, active recently, Indian ethnicity

---

I should imagine there are a hell of a lot of people in my position, there must be loads, you know. And they go to old age clubs... It's not my cup of tea because I don't look as old as I am, and I haven't got that mental mind set like that. I once went once and I thought no, not for me. It's not that I'm against older people. They were all like old people. They were 70, 80 whatever, no, not for me.

Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

You know, somebody telling me, you've got to go do something. It's enough for me to turn around and say, No, I haven't got to do anything mate. I think you're at a stage of your life where you don't want to be dictated to.

Female, 51, not working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

But again, I think as I've got older, I think that's something that may be quite self-conscious of doing. You know, as you get older, your body's not quite in the same shape or format as it used to be. And I think that makes you makes you self-conscious.

Female, 51, not working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

## Motivators for physical activity

In previous sections we have explored the wide range of factors that influenced participants' physical activity levels. In this section we discuss the things that participants said specifically motivated them to be more active. This is quite a fine distinction, but it is best conceptualized as the things that someone might think about when they are considering whether to take part in an activity session, or take up a new activity. What is it that might 'persuade' them?

### Health benefits

The potential health benefits from taking part in physical activity were frequently mentioned by participants as reasons why they kept on being active. Specific aspects of health mentioned by participants included:

- Managing weight (and obesity specifically)
- 'having heart problems'; 'heart rate'
- Stroke
- Breathing
- Managing diabetes
- Kidneys
- Managing arthritis
- Bones
- Managing blood pressure
- Maintaining mobility
- Keeping supple
- Keeping the brain functioning
- Controlling cholesterol

However, it was striking to note that these were far more frequently framed as negative health conditions to avoid - rather than positives ways to improve health:

---

**You know, it's, as we get older, we're more prone to illness. Keeping fit is one of the main ways to be able to keep that at bay... I don't want this conversation to get morbid, but, you know, people begin to start dying around as they get older, and those things happen. And then you realise, well, I'm not too far away from these things myself.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**General health I think, breathing, obesity, not having heart problems, or whatever else there is.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

It seems likely that this is a finding that is particularly pertinent to this age group: young people are more likely to exercise for immediate gains (such as 'feeling good') whereas people in mid-life are also more likely to be considering the potential health problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle. One aspect of this was that participants often compared themselves to people their age (or older) and used those negative stories of other people's health problems as inspiration to be more active.

---

**Well, yeah, I've noticed that because my dad, he passed away and he wasn't eating the proper food he wasn't doing his exercises and you know, doing things that he needs to do, and then it just happened that he became really ill and he died of it then my mum now she's diabetic...,oh, my God, I don't want it to be you know, I can imagine what it is like for me mum, I don't want to be injected, you know, every day and you know, so I've got to look after myself.**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**A friend of mine, she's in early 70s. And she had a stroke about 10 years ago and wasn't left with any residual knock-on effects but she's just given up on life as such, and her weight has ballooned and now it's more that her weight is a problem. And I use that in the nicest possible way - I use her as inspiration of what I don't want to end up like.**

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

**I just want to make sure that because as I'm older, as a black woman, we're more susceptible to osteoporosis. And so it's like, thinking about my bones as I get older.**

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

There were some examples of participants referring to inspirational active older people, but these were rare: 'I don't want to end up like...' was much more common than 'I'd love to be like...'.

We could only find two examples of someone referring to longevity as a benefit of physical activity and in both cases it was mentioned almost in passing:

---

**Well, yeah, because you know, it's healthy isn't it? To keep the heart rate going, you know. Live longer, you know, eat healthy, keep fit. Do all of that.**

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

**I think once you start getting into your 50s maybe even early sort of 45-50 if you don't start doing it you get used to a more sedentary lifestyle. When I think about it, but I think you definitely have more chance to live longer or not getting anything serious or chronic illness.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

For these participants, the potential benefit was not living longer, but having fewer health problems and living a better quality life with better fitness – this will be explored below.

---

## **Fitness**

A closely associated issue was the extent to which participants referred to 'fitness' as a potential motivator to be more active:

---

**I thought I was getting lazy. Also, I felt I'm getting older and I don't wanna get too unfit. And you just start thinking you've gotta start looking after yourself a bit more.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, Greek ethnicity

---

The concept of fitness was quite broad across the sample: regularly active people might have quite a strict definition – such as running 10km in a specific time – whereas for most less active participants it referred more to general health and wellbeing; feeling that you were 'fit enough' for everyday activity:

---

**Fitness is not necessarily about being incredibly competitive. You don't necessarily need to go and run a marathon. Maybe sometimes when you're going to go to do your shopping, for example, leave the car, and then walk into town if you can, or whatever. Take and bus and then walk a bit more, and all those kind of things. And these small incremental steps will be beneficial.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

Participants tended to assess their fitness in a number of ways:

- Compared to others of the same age
- Compared to their past fitness
- Their ability to do certain tasks or activities:

---

**I'll give you an example. I put a new floor down in the shop. And I was like, you know, sawing and stuff like that. And I found I was bloody knackered.**

Male, 63, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

The concept of fitness also seemed to be used more positively than that of health – participants talked of improving their fitness or staying as fit as possible for as long as possible:

---

**To keep fit and also to keep my body as supple it can be so I'm all about keeping young, so I can be as active as long as possible.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

### **Body weight as a motivator**

Participants often referred to body weight as a tangible or visible aspect of fitness. and frequently talked about their weight when considering what made them want to be active.

---

**Well it's good for my health to get out and walk, right?.. This lockdown we've been putting on weight so that motivates me a bit to go out walking.**

Female, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity.

---



---

**I wanted to get fit...you get sedentary and you get kind of - I did wonder "where did all this weight come from?". And then you start doing something - and I used to be a relatively good runner.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

This was frequently put into the context of ageing and ‘middle-aged spread’:

---

**Obviously, body change wise, because obviously, middle aged spread, You do realise you're expanding... I would have loved to have lost weight.**

Female, 56, working, active recently, Black African ethnicity

---

As discussed in the section on body weight, participants did generally understand very well that weight control was about combining physical activity with healthy eating:

---

**I know it's about exercise for me. Exercise is what gets me the weight off. I'm not saying eating's not important but you don't eat as much when you're exercising as much, it comes in balance.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

Participants also talked about wanting to ‘look good’ – to some extent this was a metaphor for being the weight they wanted to be, but it did include other concepts, extending to feeling good about yourself:

---

It's a feel good about yourself thing, isn't it? Really, because they're saying 'Gosh, look at you!...what a difference! ...you're looking great!' And because you're active as well, you sort of glow a bit, don't you when you're active? You know, when you're lethargic, think you look lethargic.

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

### **People with long-term conditions**

We found mixed reports about being active amongst participants living with long-term conditions. Several talked about having to limit some of their activity because of physical limitations, pain or other symptoms. Other participants acknowledged the impact of their condition but reported being able to maintain some degree of activity, typically by managing their pain control. Frequently, participants spoke of monitoring their symptoms and adapting their physical activity based on how they were feeling.

---

I'm fine sitting, I can do lots of things sitting but as soon as I start standing, weight bearing after a while I get this pain come and I have to sit down and wait for it to go... I was very active, I loved my job. You know I used to walk for miles, we used to go shopping, I loved it and now I can't even like walk around the supermarket for very long and I miss walking my dog I really do... I have to hold on to like a shopping trolley... I haven't used the stick yet. I don't particularly want to use a stick or a Zimmer frame. And, yeah, we, I go places where I know where I can sit down.

Female, 59, not working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

The only time I'm really not able to do any activity is when I'm in a lot of pain... So I can't do any activities then, but you've obviously still got to move. So it hurts when you move, it hurts when you're just sat down and you just think, okay, I'll put my feet up, you know, a couple of hours or something like that. Then when it's time to get up I'm in so much pain as well. My knees get really stiff. So when you went to stand up sometimes as well so it's very very painful. So those are the times where I can't do much activity. I don't give up though because obviously you can't you know, looking after my mum as well as my own health as well, you know, you can't give up. So you have to keep going but it's a struggle sometimes.

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

It goes up and down literally daily. Yeah. I can be up in the morning, down in the afternoon, by the evening. I'm just struggling to walk around without excruciating pain. The next day, I can be great... And afraid, afraid of something happening. Like, I've had, like the hip joints they come out of

place. Now I've learned how to get them back, it's quite painful, but sometimes you can't get them back and you end up in blooming hospital. So it's all things like what you have to think before you do anything, you know? And if you're not in pain, you think yourself, well, if I do that, I'm going to end up in pain. So you think ah I don't need it today and then you don't do it... And does it take a while to sort of did it take you some time to settle into understanding what you can and can't do and find your own rhythm? ... And now I know like you know, I can't do this for too long. I can't walk an awful long way because of getting back. I know, I can cut the grass. So when it comes to cutting the grass, I'll say right, I'm going to do it Wednesday. And if I'm all right, I'll get up alright and that and take the dog, then I'll do it. You know, but if Wednesday comes and I don't feel like it, I don't do it.

Male, 70, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

One reason I walk a lot was, like I said, my knees are bad and I feel that I have to keep using them. I have to like walk and not just do nothing.

Male, 53, not working, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

One participant talked about exercising to reduce pain:

---

I thought there was something really seriously wrong because it would come and go. I'm a pharmacist so I have tried all the different painkillers, and nothing has really helped. And then they basically said it was I needed to strengthen my core muscle. That was another reason as well I started exercising a bit more. And I do find that if it does play up I go for a brisk walk, and that really does help a lot more than any medication.

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Pakistani ethnicity

---

### **Feeling good after exercise**

Some of the more active participants talked about the 'endorphin rush' after exercise, but it was more common for participants to describe feeling satisfied, energized, or awake:

---

And it does feel good once you've done the exercise. Like when you're finished, you've got through it and you think "Oh, that wasn't too bad".

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

At times I thought "why am I doing this?", you know, half past seven in the morning. But once I actually got in the water, and started swimming. You know, everything changed. I became alive and suddenly awake again, you know?

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

### **Enjoying the outdoors**

‘Getting out of the house’; having some fresh air’ and enjoying the countryside or green space were frequently mentioned as motivators for activity. It is important to note however that this may have been exaggerated by the timing of the research: most of the fieldwork was conducted during the 2020 COVID-19 ‘lockdown’ and for many participants, exercise was one of the only reasons they were allowed, under the regulations, to leave the house. This may have meant that some people mentioned the lure of being outdoors, even though they might not mention this in more normal times.

---

**Probably just kind of getting out the house really, and doing something a bit different and seeing the different, seeing something a bit different.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

**Well, sometimes you just need that little bit of a break as well, to just, you know, get out and just give your head...just make you think, isn't it you know, you just want some fresh air, just get out the house?**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

Some participants were clearly motivated by being in natural surroundings and sought out green space whenever they could for physical activity, often mentioning the nice places near where they lived.

---

**Here, I can just go out the front door and I'm in heaven. But, you know, I enjoy that aspect of it, you know, just enjoying the countryside and watching it... I do love all that I love being part of, of nature.**

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

The attraction of being outdoors also seems to be intrinsically linked to mental health benefits, notably relaxation.

---

**It's very meditative as well, it's time to think introspect and especially if you're walking in the beautiful, beautiful nature, it's just so peaceful. It's very calming.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

### **Mental health and relaxation**

The relaxing and restorative impact of physical activity came across as a strong motivator for many participants – and not necessarily being outdoors. Some activities – notably yoga – were singled out primarily for their mental health or spiritual benefits. Keen swimmers also noted the relaxing impacts of swimming.

---

**I think it relaxed me. And like the swimming on your back and looking up at the ceiling at the lights is all... it's quite they say yoga is quite relaxing. I find swimming better.**

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Participants noted a number of ways that physical activity helped their mental health:

- Shaking off the worries of the day; 'clearing your head'
  - Feeling better about yourself when you have achieved something active
  - Being soothed by being in water (with a very small number of participants mentioning swimming in the sea specifically)
  - Enjoying being among nature
  - Getting out of the house
  - Keeping your mind active
  - (conversely) switching off; not thinking
- 

**Mentally, it's been a great help. I've had days where I've had a headache, just before logging off. That walk alone has helped. I think once you're out there, you switch off. So all the stress it sort of relieves the stress.**

Female, 56, working, active recently, Black African ethnicity

---

### **Time for me**

A related concept is using physical activity for some 'me time'. This is seen as a healthy indulgence; time away from responsibilities, notably caring. A number of participants said this motivated them to find some time in the day (or week) for themselves:

---

**I found it like it was like something I do for me... my time. And you know that as I said because it was including going swimming and going to jacuzzi...it was my time I just do something for me. Not getting the boys busy till their mum turns up, it's not about looking after my grandchildren, it's not I have to go because my partner wants to go for a walk. It was just for me. Yeah. And I always like dancing and being crazy.**

Female, 58, working, inactive recently, Iranian ethnicity

---

### **'OUR' time**

Some participants were motivated by finding time to spend being active with their partner, family or friends. This was for a number of reasons. Most frequently, people simply said they enjoyed being with other people, whether they were being active or not.

---

**Sometimes it's like just social. I've gone in and actually- gone in the gym and walked back out and just sat in the cafe area. Just chatted and... Yeah, yeah, I say a lot of its social. Or even just doing a class with like a group of friends. Like you're in the same class.**

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**There's also the social aspect when I'm running with my friends and then we kind of engage with each other. And then we'll, we'll laugh and have a joke afterwards or be challenging each other. So there's social aspect, and there's the aspect of kind of challenging myself. And self- engagement.**

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

For some, the existence of other people helped to motivate them, sometimes in a social, or sometimes in a competitive way:

---

**When you're in the pool with other people, we're all trying to do these movements, and we can't do them or someone slips, you know, or something. There's banter... whereas when you're at home... I haven't got that oomf to help me, you know?**

Female, 60, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

---

**Yeah, I do like training with other people, because they tend to push you, you push them.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

For some it was a chance to spend time with their partner, away from everyday worries:

---

**And I think we've I find it quite calming just to walk and talk. I knew you sort out your issues of the day. Calming, yeah, but I think we both find it very calming, relaxing. Sure.**

Female, 51, unemployed, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

### **'MY' activity**

Above we made the point that many more active participants felt defined by their choice of activity: it was seen as a part of their identity. This was seen to be a motivating factor for some participants: they know what they like doing, so they are going to make sure they do it as often as possible. Finding an activity that they enjoy is therefore seen as critical to keeping going:

---

**To me physical activity has to be natural. You have to sort of find it and go with it in whichever way suits you. Whichever way it can motivate you.**

Male, 65, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**I love running. Yeah, once you're running, and once you've come back, it's like really, really rewarding. I love running when it's windy. Not too windy, but windy. And it's like a bit cool. And even it's a bit raining. It's just so refreshing. It's really, really fresh.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---



---

**I'm more into the sort of sensory, relaxation, breathing, enjoying myself type thing. And it just, it's just, so it's lovely. I think both yoga and Tai Chi are such a feel good thing to have in your life, you know, I can't ever see my life without it.**

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---



---

**So legs, bums, and tums, dancing and so because it involves a lot of dancing, that's my, you know, yeah, that sort of thing. I prefer those.**

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

### **Counting steps (and other goals)**

While not strictly a motivational factor in itself, goal-setting was used by a number of participants to keep themselves 'on track'. This was primarily step-counting with participants saying they kept track of steps on a wearable device or on their phone. A small number of people said they aimed for 10,000 steps a day, but most just said they kept an eye on the steps and were encouraged when they reached a high number:

---

**I am doing my 10,000 steps every day. And I've been doing that for two or three years now. And it's almost become a habit which has almost become a habit now so I'm very conscious of it.**

Male, 65, working, active recently, White British ethnicity

---



---

**So I can do anything between 6000 and 10,000 steps a day, and I use a, like an equivalent of a Fitbit watch type thing?**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---



---

**It's like a forest thing. And it's really it's really, really nice. And it's like I just go there. And I've done I do about when I've gone around, I've done about 8000 steps.**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

One participant told us about a belt that registers movement and is used to gain rewards from Bronze to Gold (earning discounts on an Apple watch) .

No-one referred to any time-based recommendation for physical activity, or reported being motivated by official recommendations for amount and type of physical activity.

---

### **What would help other people be active?**

Finally in the section on motivators, we asked participants what they thought would help others be active. Several participants discussed ways in which they thought other people like them could be encouraged to be active. For some, the provision of age appropriate - and age specific - activities were important:

---

**Like I said, with the gym, if there was a few hours, within a week that they can do it for a certain age, I think that would help. Even swimming, swimming is good for older people because it takes your weight. But not just have it always as line swim and just have it as go at your own pace or maybe a few hours. It's just for that age, no children or whatever. I think that would help.**

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Others focused on making activity appealing by making it fun, sociable, affordable and achievable:

---

**Show them how to be active. Make it fun. Get them partnered up with other people. Explain it.**

Female, 52, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

---

**It's difficult, isn't it? Because you've either got it in you or you haven't? I mean I've tried to encourage people that I know who are inactive to be active. And it's like sometimes you flogging a dead horse. But the only thing I can suggest is sort of like enticing them with their surroundings, what's around them.**

Female, 60, working, active recently, Black Caribbean

---

---

**Planting trees in the park, so it's an activity that's not just saying, you need to do this because it's physical activity, that that's just like an aside from what somebody might be interested in.**

Male, 51, working, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**Well, if it was me, I think you have to do it around something social... If you were looking to motivate people, I think you're going to have to get some sort of social activity together. And you'd have to start small and be encouraging and I would say being accepting that people might be happy to**

come along and happy to do a certain amount. But if that were to be the case, I wouldn't want to see it as someone trying to push you into doing things that you really didn't want to do... I think if, if you want to get people into something, it needs to be something that's of personal interest. So needs to be on a friendly basis, a social basis. The exercise not being the whole part of it, I suppose you're adding to the mental health and wellbeing as well.

Male, 56, working, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

I think everybody should try to keep active. And I really wish we had more opportunities, especially people who may not be able to afford a gym. I think there should be enough out there for people to get involved with, maybe free of charge, put on by the local authorities. I think it should be available. You know, some amount of exercise, it may be something very simple, like dancing.

Female, 67, retired, active recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Um, don't ram it down anyone's throat, don't try to ram it down anyone's throat, but at the same time, use the word moderation. That by doing things in moderation, it will do you good. You know, don't sort of say go and buy a pair of such and such trainers and a pair of shorts and a T shirt or whatever it is, and go to your local park and run right around your park ten times. I'm not gonna do that. I laugh at these sort of things. And it is all about doing what you're comfortable doing.

Male, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Fitness is not necessarily about being incredibly competitive. You don't necessarily need to go and run a marathon. Maybe sometimes when you're going to go to do your shopping, for example, leave the car, and then walk into town if you can, or whatever. Take and bus and then walk a bit more, and all those kind of things.

Male, 52, working, active always, Black Caribbean ethnicity

---

A few participants observed that they thought one approach that would help would be to encourage people to be active from a young age:

---

I learned to swim at school. I did athletics, I did gym, I did all of those kinds of things at school. By the time it got to my children's age group none of those things were done at the school. Well, they did reintroduce it for one term. So one year group for one term, then the other year group for the other term, how the hell are you ever going to learn to swim at that rate? I think things like that need to come back into school.

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

Whereas another participant noticed that the active people they knew had deliberately made activity part of their routine:

---

**It's part of their lifestyle because the way they work I think because of the pressures they have, they find it good to go to the gym after work. Just let the frustration out and go to the gym and just, it's become part of their routine you see, where in ours it hasn't.**

Male, 50, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

One participant suggested it was important to make time for activity:

---

**I know we always say that we've got we're too busy we're too busy. But no, no, no, we're not. We don't have any time. But I think we have to make time for our health and activity is essential. And most important things in our life, we should make time for, prioritise them in the day. That's why I like to do my meditation and my running in the morning, because it's most important, and then everything else can follow. And then you'll find in also, when you do exercise daily, you'll find that the rest of the day, you just feel so much more refreshed and good about yourself.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

Several participants reaffirmed the value of offering support to help encourage other people to try to be more active:

---

**So I do, you know, try to encourage people that if they don't want to be encouraged, you know, you're flogging a dead horse, and then you're just a nag. You're just getting on their nerves? Yeah, yeah, I think you've got to want to do it yourself. I think, you know, and the buddy thing helps, you know, if you can be with them and do it with them, you know, you know, that's, that does help.**

Female, 63, retired, inactive recently, White British ethnicity

---

---

**I'm ok doing things by myself but I'd put that down to ageing experiences, I suppose you know, but I can understand how people would find it a daunting situation... they don't know anybody you know, they're not sure what they should or shouldn't be doing... I'm happy motivating myself really but, in the beginning, like the Zumba sessions in [name of place] that I used to go to, I went along with two sisters. And within, within a few weeks, I sort of liked talking to lots of other people in the group there were about 70 of us, you know, and you get to know familiar faces and pass the time of day You know? And I was happy to go along on my own. But initially, I just needed somebody with me just to boost my confidence.**

Female, 65, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

---

## Barriers to physical activity

As discussed above with motivational factors, the issue of what prevents people from being active is covered at numerous points in this report. These range from personal to family, social or environmental influences. In this section, we report issues that were directly identified by participants as being barriers to them being more active.

### Practical barriers

#### Not enough time

It was quite common for participants to say they struggled to find the time to be active. Time was typically taken up with work and/or childcare responsibilities, leaving little time for leisure pursuits including physical activity

---

**I haven't got time to do that. I've got the school run and then I'm going to the [name of place] or wherever my boss is to send us, I'd think I haven't got time for that kind of lifestyle I can't talk to them about going to a gym, or going swimming or doing you know, different activities because I can't do them.**  
Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

This clearly changes over the years, especially as childcare responsibilities reduce, leaving more discretionary time. However, in some cases this was seen either to have set a pattern of inactivity that could not be broken or was used as a rationale for inactivity:

---

**It was finding the time. Because I've always worked full time. I have three children. Obviously. They've grown up now. But yeah, it was just finding the time, coming in to cook dinner and clean.**  
Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---



---

**No, not really, I think. I think it's just finding that time, the momentum to do it, you know, sometimes you can get you can get a call or something happens. And it's probably I'll be honest, it's probably an excuse not to go sometimes.**  
Male, 50, working, always active, Indian ethnicity

---

However, some people identified strategies to find the time to be active, despite other demands on their time. This implies that some participants were able to prioritise physical activity highly, and make sure they made the time for it:

---

I think it's fitting in because obviously, kids are getting older. Since they were 10. I've been on my own. So it's fitting everything in like fitting school run fitting in a spiritual meditation and the run and the kids' breakfast and getting in the school run and then getting myself to work. So it's all I could really manage. But I do recall that a few years back I used to do it on my day off, I would maybe run double sometimes, you know run the circuit twice. So I think it's a question of fitting it in...so I would quickly fit in a run right before my husband went to work like that. That was a question of fitting it in. Now it's become like a habit.

Female, 51, working, always active, Indian ethnicity

---

I mean time I have to make time. I would prefer to exercise in the morning before I went to work. I don't know if it's feasible though because I start at eight o'clock. I used to do my exercise before I went out., I used to have gone walking before I went to work. And weekends I'd do more on the weekends I'd say.

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

And - as highlighted in the section on retirement - retired people have said they do have more free time, though they do not automatically use this for physical activity.

---

Well, I don't have to watch the clock about getting up to go to work do I? I don't have to watch the clock about taking the children to school or picking up from school. I don't have to watch the clock about getting tea for a certain time cause the kids need to be bathed and in bed. I don't have to do that anymore. I don't have to clock watch.

Female, 59, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

## Money

A number of participants said that the cost of their preferred activity put them off – especially people who liked gyms, exercise classes or swimming:

---

Also being in and out of work, sometimes, if you know, affordability. Classes can be quite expensive, memberships can be quite expensive as well, now compared to all those years ago. Everything else is expensive. So it's always finding that you know, for bills and everything else, and then seeing what's left as to what I can do health wise and obviously, walking in doesn't cost anything. I don't do too much of it, but I walk.

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

---

Maybe money because it can be quite expensive. But I would probably say that sort of probably the only thing you know, some of the memberships are reasonable. Some of them aren't. Even though I work but sometimes it's like oh and then you're paying your membership and then you don't go.

Female, 56, working, inactive recently, Caribbean ethnicity

---

A few participants thought more should be done to ease the financial burden of exercising:

---

Maybe I think sometimes, you know, it's the affordability because a lot of people don't, you know, small pensions and overheads to pay. They're struggling and they've lost the loved one. Maybe, you know, I think sports centres like local council centres should offer more, you know, in helping people get back I think they do, but you've got to be over a certain age, and maybe they need to lower that age.

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

However, some participants had managed to get over the cost barriers, either by doing free activities – notably walking – or by setting themselves up at home:

---

I think I quite like, I don't mind, exercising at home and I think I get the same benefit from the gym because I don't use all the equipment. And you know, I've got my sort of like little weights here. Yeah. And there was one time about four years ago, when I wasn't earning that much because I had to leave my job. So at that time, I just didn't I just, you know, let go of any membership type of thing. It was like exercising at home to save money really. Yeah, yeah.

Female, 57, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

A few participants said that cost was a potential barrier to being active but they juggled things to make sure they could still take part, and one participant used the cost to motivate her to go to more classes:

---

So I spoke to my husband and said, What should I do? Should I cancel it? We haven't really got a spare £99 to be honest. What should I do? And he said, You know what? He said, just do it. Just do it. And that's what he said, just let them take the £99 and it might be that you do get up one day and decide I'm going to do yoga this morning. I think that's where I want to start just yoga I can stretch and get into it. So yeah, he said to me, just do it. If he had said 'Oh God! £ 99 pound! Oh no!' then I would have cancelled it. Without a doubt. I didn't need much of a push to cancel it but he didn't. He said, 'Oh, no, just just do it!' So the money's come out of my account which means I have to do it.

Female, 54, not working, inactive recently, Greek Cypriot ethnicity

---

## Weather

This was frequently mentioned as a barrier – especially rain:

---

**Never run in the rain. That's one of my rules. I don't run in the rain - people hurt themselves.**

Female, 50, working, active always, Caribbean ethnicity

---

**On a day, like today, where I am here, it's, it's wet, it's miserable. It would be a physical effort to go out. But if it was a nice sunny day, then you wouldn't think twice about it, you'd probably would just get up and go out....Do you really want to be outside for half an hour? in the pouring rain? on your own? Whether you've got headphones in and walking around or not, again, it's something that then becomes a chore rather than doing it for pleasure.**

Female, 51, unemployed, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Some participants said it was more of a seasonal issue: they stayed indoors more in winter and looked forward to doing more in the summer – especially on holidays:

---

**I enjoy gardening. I could spend all day Saturday just gardening, doing the hedges and doing stuff like that. And I don't mind in summer, I'm not a winter person, become a bit more reclusive, you know, find it cold going out for walks. You know, my wife dragged me along. For me it's the summer where I tend to be more active. And when we go when we go on holidays, I mean, unfortunately we haven't been for 18 months now, but we tend to do holidays where we walk as well a lot.**

Male, 50, working, always active, Indian ethnicity

---

As with all barriers to activity, some participants identified strategies to deal with the weather, or just 'put up with it':

---

**I love running when it's windy. Not too windy, but windy. And it's like a bit cool. And even it's a bit raining. It's just so refreshing. It's really, really fresh.**

Female, 51, working, active always, Indian ethnicity

---

---

**No, I don't mind if it's cold, you know, put a jacket on and on a scarf and gloves that doesn't it doesn't bother me because very often, when it's cold, [you]very often it's sunny.**

Female, 62, working, inactive always, Greek Cypriot ethnicity

---

## Health issues

A number of participants identified specific health issues that stopped them from being active – these are outlined in detail in the health and long term conditions sections.

---

**Well, I've never been one to leave the house a lot because I do have as I say arthritis, and I've such issues with my mobility and things like that. So I'm a bit of a hermit in the nicest possible way.**

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

## 'Laziness'

Some participants were quite candid when asked why they didn't do much physical activity, simply saying they were 'too lazy'. This was either seen as something that had crept up on them, or something that was somehow innate:

---

**It's just to set a reasonable time to be able to go in the morning or to be able to go after work. So I think I was lazy. I think it's just laziness crept in. Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. I think it's just laziness crept in.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

**You are what you are. If I was mentally programmed to be more active, I would be.**

Female, 70, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity.

---

A small number of participants said this was something they had to consciously fight:

---

**Yeah, it is something that I'm trying to get into sort of weekly schedule, because again, this is down to this laziness, I'm lazy to get out there and do it. But when I do it, and I enjoy it, enjoy the walking and enjoy how I feel afterwards.**

Male, 58, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

This was also linked to the feeling – voiced by a few participants – that physical activity was 'too tiring', and that their everyday life tended to leave them too tired to consider additional activity:

---

**I was exhausted. And I was working as well. And I thought I was too tired to do anything to be honest, you know, bringing up a family as well.**

Male, 51, working, active recently, White British ethnicity.

---

### Lack of confidence

This appeared as an important barrier for a number of participants. The most prevalent issue seemed to be where participants lacked confidence in their size or body shape, especially in front of others or in classes or facilities

---

**Try and avoid it. I've always been a bit self-conscious about my body. So I think I always used to try and try and avoid, you know, putting myself out there really.**

Female, 51, working, active always, White British ethnicity

---

**No, I did go to the gym a few times. But there's too many girls, tiny little girls there so I kept stopping it. Couldn't do anymore.**

Female, 56, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Participants with long-term health conditions described how their health led to psychological (as well as physical) barriers to physical activity. For one participant with severe arthritis, embarrassment about her condition led to her avoiding physical activity:

---

**Pure vanity it's all about image because, yes, it is bizarre, but I'm still very embarrassed about my condition. You know, because it's like, you get the age old question. Are you married? What to do for a living? Have you got kids? And it's like, then you have to say no, no, no. And then it's like, then you try and explain to people and they get all embarrassed, because, you know, they think they've said something wrong. But yes, it is what it is. It's best to avoid those situations, if possible.**

Female, 50, retired, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

While for another the issue was about confidence and self-esteem:

---

**When I was younger, even into my 40s I was very gym orientated. I then had two long term illnesses, I think that's kind of knocked me sideways. It's trying to get the mindspace back into the physical side of you know, the gym or cycling. So, you know, I used to ride a lot as well. But, yeah, and also the lockdown and the ongoing issue. It's, you know, it's knocked my confidence, it's knocked my self-esteem a bit, so I just don't really do as much as I used to.**

Female, 55, working, inactive recently, Black British ethnicity

---

Some participants identified a lack of confidence that was not connected to body shape or size, but to do with being confident that they could do the activities or use the equipment. One participant thought this was worse for older people:

---

The older you get the harder you find to do things on your own. I mean the sort of walking into a gym on my own and saying to them help. I'd like to start something, it terrifies the thought... they because I think it's not been part of what we've done being brought up as from if we'd have done it from a young age and carried it on that I think it's difficult. I think when you're very young, you're encouraged to go to, you know, whether it be Judo class or keep fit or karate or whatever. I think it becomes part of your everyday life as a youngster, not something that I was ever encouraged to do.

Female, 51, unemployed, inactive always, White British ethnicity

---

Finally, a small number of participants identified how their confidence would be increased if they had other people to be active with:

---

**I think it's motivation, I've got no one to go with, I don't want to go on my own.**

Female, 50, working, inactive recently, Indian ethnicity

---

### **Fear of falling**

This was highlighted in the evidence review as pertinent to this age group. However, this was hardly ever mentioned by participants. When it was referred to, it was by older participants, and in the context of more risky behaviours (slippery leaves; steep steps) rather than everyday walking or activities of daily living.

# Discussion

---

## Introduction

This research has provided a rich and varied insight into the views of participants aged 50-70 in England regarding physical activity. It is the first study of its kind, and by far the largest exploration of attitudes to physical activity among people in mid-life. Through careful sampling and recruitment, we were able to interview people from a range of diverse backgrounds, with quite different physical activity 'stories'.

### **General observations from participants in this study:**

- There was an almost universal understanding that physical activity is a 'good thing'. But the 'intention-behaviour gap' means that this is not automatically translated into activity.
- Health is a strong motivator for this age group – including avoiding health problems.
- This can extend to the idea of 'negative role models' (i.e. not wanting to end up like X). This may be more relevant to people 50+ compared to younger people.
- There are many complex, overlapping factors that prevent people from being active. But many active people are able to overcome these barriers. Participants identifying as 'active people' tended to prioritise being active: that's how they enjoy using their limited time
- Participants who think of themselves as 'inactive people' tend to prefer and enjoy being inactive in their spare time.
- The notion of being an 'active person' is well accepted (including among inactive people). But this may well not be translated into active behaviours.
- Participants wanted different things – especially when it came to facilities or exercise classes. Some prefer walking; most like sociable activity. Competition is less a driver.
- Definitions of physical activity were highly variable. There was little understanding of intensity of activity.

- When assessing how active (and fit) they are, participants compared themselves to others of the same age; compared themselves to their fitter former self; or assessed their ability to do certain everyday tasks or activities.
- Participants reported that support from family and friends was very important, but this could lead to sedentary as well as active lifestyles (if family and friends preferred to be sedentary).
- Life events got in the way of being active – especially caring and illness.
- Participants faced and discussed already known barriers to activity.
- Falls were not important in this sample. Their focus was on: feeling fit; mobility; strength; independence; feeling young.
- Similarly, they rarely mentioned the importance of strength or balance training for older people
- Retirement is a critical life change, offering opportunities to plan and have an active retirement. But many participants faced challenges in doing this, or drifted into retirement with no plan.
- Health professionals' advice to be active was rarely mentioned. And when it was, it was thought to be confusing, or unrealistic.
- Overall, physical activity is an unstable behaviour and most participants' lifecycles showed periods of inactivity and change.

---

## Demographic characteristics

As discussed previously, our purpose was to ensure we included a broad range of people, and not to be able to 'segment' or analyse the sample by demographic characteristics – for example comparing the stories of men and women – as this would have required a different study approach. However, the breadth of the sample does allow us to make some observations.

### Gender

Quantitative survey data shows that women in general are less active than men<sup>6</sup>. However, we did not see strong differences between male and female participants in terms of their attitudes to physical activity, or their activity journeys. Women may have been more likely to talk about hating sport or

---

6 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england>

PE at school, or not being motivated by sport and competition, but we heard similar stories from men. Many female participants discussed caring responsibilities getting in the way of their desire to be active, but again we also heard that from male participants. Similarly we were interested to see that identifying as an active or inactive person was expressed by men and women. One finding of interest here is that more women tended to talk about activity helping them to lose/control weight and look good/feel good.

### **Work, and socio-economic status**

We explored the influence of work on physical activity, which we found to be important. Some participants reported being highly active at work (especially people in manual occupations), while conversely some people in highly sedentary occupations reported that their jobs left them too tired to exercise. Work also reduced discretionary time that might have been used for activity. This was explored in detail when interviewing retired people: they reported plenty of time that might be available for physical activity, but had highly varying stories about how that time was used. Some found physical activity helped to provide structure for their day, while others found that they still did not 'get around to' active hobbies.

Beyond the direct influence of work, we did not discern clear differences in attitudes among participants from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, it should be borne in mind that the recruitment process used a two-level SES assessment (ABC1/C2DE) and this relatively simple approach may have masked some differences.

### **Ethnicity**

We did not ask participants from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities any questions about how their ethnicity might influence their attitudes to physical activity. Participants from BAME backgrounds expressed a diverse and interesting range of views about physical activity, but it was notable how rarely we heard any reference to any specific barriers or motivators. The exception was one Pakistani woman who discussed the lack of women-only pools; and a small number of participants who made passing reference to their community being supportive of activity. This is an area that could be explored in much more depth in a specifically tailored study. Such a study might take a different approach to sampling, for example, as our sample was drawn from people who are listed on a research register, and have English as their first language.

---

## Research questions

Here we take another look at the data using the original research questions for this study.

### **Considering adults who are inactive in mid-life, what are their attitudes towards; preferences for; knowledge and past experiences of physical activity?**

With such a diverse sample we naturally found a diverse range of attitudes, preferences, knowledge and past experiences.

- **Attitudes** varied enormously, from the few who had always disliked physical activity, through to most participants who had had varied and changing activity patterns, to the few who had always enjoyed being active and found space for it throughout their lives.
- **Knowledge** was very interesting. Virtually all participants knew that physical activity was healthy. However their knowledge of the specifics (what type of activity, how intense it had to be etc.) was hardly mentioned
- **Past experiences** also varied enormously, but most had some strong recall of past childhood activity – usually a positive memory. This seems likely to have a significant influence on activity patterns – though is by no means a guarantee of a lifetime of activity. One clear finding is that physical activity is an unstable behaviour and most participants' lifecycles showed periods of inactivity and change.

### **What do people in midlife perceive as physical activity? Do they see physical activity as a specific, planned event or as an accumulation of movement throughout the day?**

Participants' instinctive thoughts often focused on sport – especially when thinking about their past experiences, or other people's. They often underestimated their activity, especially by discounting walking or gardening. Typically, during the interview – after exploring the issue for half an hour or so – they changed their view of how active they were. Most participants had only a vague understanding of the intensity of different activities, or the relevance of intensity. Participants in general did see physical activity as a specific event (not necessarily planned) and not as accumulation. We had few – if any – participants mention the desire to accumulate activity throughout the day, to any target level. The exception to this were the people who counted steps, which implied accumulation across the day. This could be a fruitful avenue to explore.

### **How do people in midlife perceive their past experiences with physical activity, and how do they believe it has influenced their current participation in, and attitude to physical activity?**

As outlined above, physically active early years were common among our participants. A few ‘hated PE’ and talked of ‘being picked last’ but many more told of happy times playing sport – sometimes at a high level - or being out and active in the countryside. We heard quite clearly that physical activity can be important in shaping identities – helping people to think of themselves (or others) as ‘the active type’. Past activity influences this, but this is clearly not essential as we also found people who reported an inactive youth and active midlife. Activity in midlife is influenced by a multitude of factors from prioritization (especially due to health concerns) to social support and social norms.

### **What challenges do inactive adults face in becoming physically active?**

The report section on barriers outlined the range of practical, psychological, and social barriers faced by participants. For people in midlife, caring responsibilities were key – either for young children still at home, or older parents. However, across this age range there are also many who now have more time available than for younger people – especially retired people without dependent children at home. Here the challenge may be more overcoming inflexible or entrenched habits and patterns, building the confidence to be active, or overcoming more practical barriers such as cost of activity or weather.

### **What motivators exist to enable people in midlife to become active? Are these internal or external motivators? What motivators exist outside of health and fitness? E.g. competition, enjoyment of sport**

The range of motivators was outlined in the report in detail – a combination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ motivations. Few talked about being competitive – now – they were much more likely to talk about health benefits; feeling fit; and maintaining independence and quality of life or using physical activity as a ‘trade-off’ for other unhealthy behaviours, notably poor diet or alcohol consumption. They were more likely to talk of being competitive in their younger years (especially schooldays).

When thinking about the extent to which they ‘need’ to be more active, participants tended to compare themselves to others of the same age; compare themselves to their fitter former self; or assess their ability to do certain tasks or activities. This is not necessarily helpful if they are comparing to inactive peers, or assessing their ability to do relatively undemanding activities of daily living. We also found participants tended to focus on ‘negative role models’ (i.e. not wanting to end up like X).

**What barriers and perceived barriers exist which prevent them becoming active? Are these individual or system level barriers?**

‘System-level’ barriers mentioned included road safety - primarily participants wanting to cycle but being scared of traffic - and the provision of inappropriate leisure or sports facilities for their age group. Social norms were clearly important to motivate or support people to be active, but we found little discussion of any structural social barriers to activity.

**What do we know about adults who were active or fairly active and then became inactive? What, if anything, could enable them to become more active again or stop them from becoming inactive in the first place?**

There are many reasons why participants dropped previous activity habits, but they primarily come down to lifestage changes, especially starting work, or having children. These presented largely practical barriers to physical activity. Even when these practical barriers were removed, many participants stuck with their inactive habits.

Possible interventions might be targeted specifically at these lifestages, to minimise the drop-off. Other ideas will be discussed in the recommendations section below.

**What, if any, impact did going from active to inactive have for them? Was the change gradual or sudden?**

Participants who had become inactive did not often report any specific issues. The change was usually gradual, with the most frequently discussed issue being increased body weight. Others spoke of a general desire to be active again. But overall, it was clear that people were happy living an inactive life

The exceptions were people who stopped activity due to a specific health concern; these were often sudden (knee operation; heart attack) and the impacts more severe.

**Are there trigger points which precipitate moving from active to inactive? How are these trigger points different for different people?**

As discussed above these are largely life stage changes. The most significant of which is retirement. Few if any people planned to have an inactive retirement. Some planned an active retirement – either in a general way or with quite specific plans - but faced challenges turning their plans into reality. Many drifted into retirement with no plan.

### **Which of these findings might be relevant specifically to people aged 50- 70?**

- Health/ avoiding illness as a motivator
- The importance of negative health role models
- Time needed for caring as a barrier
- Underestimating the importance of strength and balance training
- Strong influence of family and friends (fewer wider social influences)
- Life is (getting) settled; habits are hard to break; new ones hard to form
- Retirement could be a new start for activity, but only among those who plan

---

### **How do these findings add to the literature on attitudes to physical activity in mid-life?**

This primary research built upon a literature review conducted in 2020 by the same research team [[link to report](#)]. The review explored studies conducted in the UK since 1990 that used qualitative methods to identify or describe the thoughts, feelings and experiences of UK adults (aged 50-70) and their experiences of non-participation in physical activity.

Following extensive searching and selection, 16 research papers were included. These included publications from peer-reviewed and grey literature.

Findings from the literature review were grouped into a number of meta-themes:

- Health as a motivator and a barrier to physical activity
- The importance of support from partners, family, peers and health professionals
- Practicalities including time, cost, access and opportunities
- Retirement as a significant life-event with wide-ranging implications for physical activity habits

The primary research has added a significant level of detail and nuance to the findings from the literature review. It has provided a rich and varied insight into the views of participants aged 50-70 in England regarding physical activity. It is the first study of its kind, and the largest exploration to date of attitudes to physical activity among people in mid-life. For this

reason, it is an important addition to this literature. In this section we explore the extent to which the findings of the primary research complement or add to the findings from the literature review.

### **Findings from the primary research that reinforce the findings in the literature review.**

The research reinforced many of the main findings from the literature review, notably:

- Health as a motivator for (and a potential barrier to) physical activity
- Strong agreement with the notion that physical activity is important
- Seeing physical activity as helping to maintain both good physical and mental health and independence
- Pre-existing health problems being a used by some people as a reasonable rationale for non-participation
- Recognition that physical activity might be helpful in improving health and managing the effects of existing conditions
- The importance of support from partners, family, peers, and community members
- Seeing social networks as particularly important in influencing physical activity
- Reporting that spouses could influence encourage regular physical activity (although without necessarily being active together)
- The critical role of practical issues (mainly as barriers) including time, cost, access and opportunities
- Retirement as a significant life-event with wide-ranging implications for physical activity habits
- Retirees either reporting an increase in physical activity levels after retirement, or seeing retirement as a key lifestage that will not make much difference to physical activity levels
- Seeing retirement as bringing a lack of structure to the day, offering freedom from routines, and an opportunity to do what they want, when they want which sometimes led to procrastination, but could lead to a physically active routine that can add a sense of daily purpose
- The influence of lifelong physical activity habits

### **Findings from the literature review that were not found in the primary research**

- Little mention was made of the importance of advice from health professionals. Few participants said they had been advised to exercise more by a GP or other health professional.

- Little mention was made in the primary research of the risk of falling. When it was referred to, it was by older participants, and in the context of more risky external environments (slippery leaves; steep steps) rather than everyday walking or activities of daily living.
- Retired participants in our research talked a lot about adaptations to their lives, notably having more time, but few talked of the issue identified in the literature review of adapting to learning to spend more time with partner and/or building in space from a retired partner.
- We found few findings regarding barriers to activity that were specific to BAME participants, although the literature review contained several papers that explored this issue specifically.

### **New findings from the primary research that were not found in the literature review.**

- We described many different ‘pathways’ to activity (or inactivity) in mid-life, with lifestage-related changes playing a critical role. Life events can get in the way of being active – especially caring and illness. Overall, physical activity is an unstable behaviour and most participants’ lifecycles showed periods of inactivity and change.
- There were interesting findings about identity, and the extent to which people see themselves as ‘sporty’ or ‘active’ types. The notion of being an ‘active person’ seemed to be well accepted - including among inactive people. This was not always expressed by participants as a motivator for being active.
- Although time is often seen to be a barrier, participants were more likely to express this as being about priorities, and how people value their time. Participants who say they are ‘active people’ prioritise being active. That’s how they enjoy using their limited time. ‘Inactive’ participants preferred and enjoyed being inactive in their spare time.
- Definitions of physical activity are highly variable. There is little understanding of intensity of activity, or the benefits of combining activities of different intensities.
- We found the existence of ‘negative role models’ (i.e. not wanting to end up like X), and suggest this factor may be more relevant to people 50+ compared to younger people.
- When assessing how active (and fit) they are, participants compared themselves to others of the same age; compare themselves to their fitter former self; or assess their ability to do certain tasks or activities (i.e. can I carry the shopping home?).
- People in the study rarely mentioned the importance of strength or balance training for older people.

---

## Research Gaps

This research has filled many gaps in the literature. However, it has also shown that there are a number of research questions still remaining. Many of these would require quite different or mixed method research designs, to answer the questions directly.

- 1 Are there differences in attitudes to physical activity among people aged 50-70 from different Black Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in the UK?
- 2 How does gender influence attitudes to physical activity among 50-70 year olds?
- 3 What are the barriers to physical activity among 50-70 year olds living in deprived communities in the UK?
- 4 What are the barriers to physical activity among 50-70 year olds living with long-term health conditions?
- 5 How does physical activity 'track' through life-stages until mid-life?
- 6 How can declines in physical activity be minimized at key life-stages?
- 7 What works to promote physical activity among 50-70 year olds?

# Appendix one

## Case studies

---

### **Female 1. Active to less active**

**Female, 55, Inactive recently, Lives alone, in a multi-cultural urban setting, working, C2DE, Black British ethnicity, hobbies – reading, listening to music, family, socialising, travelling**

**Q: Thinking about a typical week for you, how much physical activity would you say that you did in a week?**

Not much, I think walk to and from work. Yeah, but works only 10 minutes down the road, three days a week. Yeah, just walking to and from work, walk to the local shop.

When I was younger, even into my 40s, I was very gym orientated. I then had two long term illnesses, I think that's kind of knocked me sideways. It's trying to get the mind space back into the physical side of you know, the gym or cycling. So, you know, I used to ride a lot as well. But, yeah, and also the lockdown and the ongoing issue. It's, you know, it's knocked my confidence, it's knocked my self esteem a bit, so I just don't really do as much as I used to. Where it's like, oh, let's start going back to the gym or with a friend or someone and that facility is not available at the moment. It's very different, very different. Yeah.

**Q: If you think back to when you were younger, were you fairly active at that point?**

I was fairly active, Yeah, yeah. I used to run. I was in the running team, I played netball, I played rounders, played football. Having a household full of boys, I would say, I used to be climbing trees and football or whatever they were into, because obviously, they were my role models. So yeah, I like physical, when I was much younger, school age yeah. It was good, especially when it was summer, six weeks holidays, and we were always out, walking on our bikes or exploring. Yeah, so it was it was fun. It was fun. It was fun [so when you left school and got into your 20s, were you active at that point?] I would say sociable, so went to clubs and things like that, so dancing, and everything was my form of exercise. Because we used to go to a club or a show or something on a regular basis, so yeah, I used to dance a lot. You know, just generally, and that was, you know, dancing in a club from

11 until 3am. Obviously, my metabolism was higher as well, so as I've gotten older, that increased in itself. Sideways problem. So, you know, my metabolism was higher when I was younger.

**Q: Did you have a regular routine?**

No, I've always kind of done, I would do the gym for a period of time if I was going on holiday, to get into shape, because I think, for me, I was always physically able. What I mean by that, I was able to keep the weight off, I was able to, you know, my metabolism was higher. So it was just being young as well. You know, you're just bouncing around and just enjoying life. It goes down as you get older. Yeah, that's the only, yeah, that's the only difference I find at the moment. And you know, things are different times as we speak.

The affordability, you know, gyms can be quite expensive. I used to join gyms for the first month when it was free. And then go to another one. I didn't find, yeah, I'm very, I'm very old fashioned in certain ways. A lot of these gyms, I didn't know if people are there to get fit or there to show off what they are wearing. You know, I like a gym where you go to work out. I used to box with a couple of the local boxers because the gym was very, you know, they sweat to the core sweat box and but you were there to train. You didn't go there to look at yourself a mirror and laugh and who wears the best leggings, to me, that's not what training is about. So this is why I always used to go to a gym for a month free and then think okay, let me try another one because I was always looking for a gym that accommodated me, though. They're all very generic gyms nowadays. I did boxing for a period of time but the trainer died and he was a really good trainer. So I could never find anyone as good as you know, taught you the correct boxing stance because I was sampled from a left hander. Yeah, you know, and also, the training behind that, which was very good boxing training was very good. I did thoroughly enjoy that. But as I said, he's been dead as good few years now. You know because it was just a local gym, local people go in mostly 10 subs, I think it was about five pounds, which was very good. And it was longer than an hour it was. And it was almost family orientated as well, you knew everybody. And it was encouraged and supported. So it was also a nice social, but it's also the fitness level and the training was really good. I must have been I would say late 20s, early 30s. I did enjoy that, I did enjoy it.

**Q: Did you go on to do anything after that, when you'd finished the boxing?**

No, no, no, no. Occasionally, it might take the skipping rope out, but you know, yeah, I've been inactive for quite some time now, which talking about it, is not good. [you mentioned that you'd have had some health problems] No, it was underlining as another you know, high blood pressure, you know, thyroid problems. So it's, you know, and I think they would like me to do a bit more, but I think sometimes you get I'm not sure how scared because obviously the heart's beating and doing a lot of work so yeah. On one hand

they say to be more physical and on the other hand, they say to do more, like yoga and Pilates. So it's like, which one is best for me? It's like just trying to find a balance at the moment regarding conditions and which one was good. Do I need to do high intensity? Or do I need to do more moderate or? Much more? You know, yoga, you know. And it's hard to even speak to your healthcare professional at the moment. Very confusing, yeah, very confusing, my GP, yeah, so where's that balance, where do I go? As you know, yeah, I do like physical and I do like yoga. But do I concentrate more on the physical side or do I as I said, I have no idea I this is why I've kind of just drawn a line in the sand basically.

What do you want me to do or what do I need to do? [did that coincide with your doing less activity, you having those health problems?] No, no. I think it's just something that was inadvertently already in my system that it's one of those things as they say.

I drive as well, so it was always going in the car. So, although, yeah, it's all kind of sedentary, so yeah, I don't do much. And being in and out of work, sometimes, if you know, affordability. Classes can be quite expensive, memberships can be quite expensive as well, now compared to all those years ago. Everything else is expensive. So it's always finding that you know, for bills and everything else, and then seeing what's left as to what I can do health wise and obviously, walking in doesn't cost anything. I don't do too much of it but I walk. It's just to set a reasonable time to be able to go in the morning or to be able to go after work. So I think I was lazy. I think it's just laziness crept in. Yeah, yeah. I know, I know. I think it's just laziness crept in. You know, as you get older sometimes. I don't know. You tend to well, for me, personally, I just tend to think, this is who I am. Now, don't get me wrong health is wealth as they say, but I just haven't had anything that holds my interest. It's kind of gotten bigger and bigger. It started off as I need to do something. And then it's like, oh, I haven't done anything. It's like another year, another week, another month, go by and realise that oh gosh, I really haven't done anything.

**Q: is there anything that would encourage you to be more active?**

Sometimes I think more interesting activity activities, you know, because you have the standard gym, you have the rowing machine, you have this and that. I wouldn't even mind taking up salsa classes, you know, dance, something like that where you can interact and learn something new. I don't think you learn much when you just sit and pedal or row you know, for me a bit more even, I haven't tried you know there's classes and called it is it barre? Is it the ballet type thing? Kind of, you know, yeah. Much more kind of therapeutic even though I said about the physical. But you know, this is something that you know, because you look at ballet dancer's figures, they have amazing figures. That's also because they restrict, but they are very toned so I think something like that. But classes like that tend to be very

expensive. Very expensive. They seem to be, you know, for a particular section of the community, you know as opposed to for everyone.

Yeah, yeah. I enjoy dancing and yeah, so salsa, just, you know, something, you know, learning to dance properly, you know or the tango, where your minds also invested in what you're doing, as opposed to just pedalling and pulling weights? See how big your arms can get?

Yeah, I think sometimes it's easier, you can get into something quicker, that you can get out of something even quicker and forget about it. I think it's just laziness. I think it's just sheer willpower and just getting up and doing it. It's just having that motivation as well. And just lacking motivation, obviously. I need something to tell me to want to do it, even though they say about my health so I should want to do it. But it's just kind of getting over that last hurdle, that getting over that last hurdle? Thinking, yeah, I need to change the way I think about this. I do like training with other people, because they tend to push you, you push them. The only other thing, if I could afford it, is maybe having a personal trainer, who will just be solely for you, but he will push you as well, beyond your capabilities and limitations.

**Q: do you think age and stage of life particularly midlife, has any impact on how physically active people are?**

I think there is. I think we all do is I think, you get, you know, I'm not saying everybody but you get to for me, you get to a point in your life where you're just thinking, you know I'm longer dead than I'm alive. I know that sounds pessimistic. But you know, yeah, as I said, maybe it's because of the current climate, you know, just not feeling encouraged about getting involved, not being encouraged about, no joy. There's no joy at the moment. And maybe that has impacted on how I think about my health at the moment. So it's kind of soulless enjoyment at the moment. And the weather, you know, it was a lovely day today, maybe come spring, summer. Being able to come out of lockdown, being able to just breathe and be able to live my life the way I choose to live, as opposed to someone telling me how to live it, choices being taken away. You know, facilities to go swimming, even swimming. I don't mind swimming. You know, the pools are closed. And it's, you know, it's never ending. It's just like a never ending. So it kind of seeps into your soul... [you mentioned swimming there. Is that something you've done in the past?] I have, yeah, you know, every now and again, I would go before the rush hour and just do, I'm not a great swimmer. But, you know, water is very soothing. Before, you know, the mad dash of everybody else? Yeah, I managed to do maybe a lap or so, because it's also good for your stamina as well. And then I got fed up with that. I gave it a couple of weeks and then it's like oh okay, I can swim. From the moment I lose momentum, especially with training, you know, I can't, I'm looking for that constant high, but it doesn't exist. I need to just acknowledge that and just stick to something that keeps you energetically fit.

I thoroughly enjoyed the boxing, I really did enjoy the boxing that was, you know, that was a good motivator because you had all the guys just kind of pushing you. And it took you out of your comfort zone. It made me realise that I'm stronger than I thought I was and more determined and I thought I was. So it's like oh, okay, so when you have that the same scattered people invested in their training, I find that highly enjoyable. If I could find a decent boxing class or gym, then yeah, definitely I'd have a go.

**Q: Once the gyms open and swimming pools open, do you think you'll feel more inclined to get back into things at that point?**

I think I want to feel more inclined because I noticed my clothing is not fitting as well. Through the midlife change, so my body shape is not as it was, I'm not sure if I could ever get it back to how it was, but maybe I need to give myself some you know, premise to say, let's see if I can at least get rid of the couple of tyres around my tummy. You know, type of thing. Let's see if I can, yeah. So, you know, that might be my incentive to go out and give myself at least six months to say if you train twice, three times a week. You know, cos yeah, if you like my shape at the moment, but I have to do something about it but as I said, just getting in that mindset. You know, when I was younger. I'm not in the bikini anymore here, I think I just kind of let it all go but it would be nice to hold up that bikini and say can I get back into that? And give myself a window of time to say okay, you know, yeah.

**Q: Do you ever think ahead in terms of what you might want to do at a point in time when you're not working anymore?**

No, I didn't really think ahead that well, I am one of these people I think, you know, tomorrow is not promised to anyone. So to say, I'm going to do this in 10 years time, I'm going to do this when I retire. And to me, when you kind of come close to dying a few years back, it's like you look at things differently. It's a case of if I hit 60, then if I hit 56 then that's a bonus. So I wake up and I live my day, then go on to the next and the next. So, yeah, you can only cast your net so far and you can still pick up rubbish as you pull it back in. So you might go to a class tomorrow, at least you know what you can pull it as opposed to casting it 10 years down the line. The last year has also proven that, you know, all the plans people made. And then bang, you know, COVID-19.

## Male 1. Always active

**Male, 68, Active Always, retired, C2DE, married with two grown up children and four grandchildren, lives in a sub-urban area, White British ethnicity, hobbies – gardening, walking, cycling, golf.**

**Q: Thinking about a typical week for you, how much physical activity would you say that you do?**

I probably walk probably three times a week. And when I say walk, I mean a longer walk than, sort of half a mile is probably I try to be an hour, hour and a quarter. Yeah. I'm not doing so much cycling at a moment. Only purely from the fact of just choice really, you know, I'll probably start getting the bike again. Now the weather's better. So, you know, we've got cycle paths within about four or 500 yards of us, which were all railway tracks and they're quite they're fairly safe apart from you get guys on there that think they're on a tour de france. They've gone about 35 miles an hour up there, now the weather is getting better probably get back out on the bike.

Usually all by myself, sometimes my wife will come with me, but not all the time. So I go out on my own. Something else I do, I help my son with his building company, I basically do a bit of labouring for him. Probably once, twice, three times a week sometimes, so still active in that way as well. Mainly when I retired, I did start working for a friend of mine for about three years retired, like I said, about six, well, it'll be exactly six years in June. And a mate of mine who retired earlier than me set up a garden business. And so I used to work with him three days a week as soon as I retired, I think I had about a month off, and then started with him three days a week. Yeah. That went on for three years. And then I've started working more, obviously, with my son now.

I was office based, in the Fire Service, because I was on call from the office. Because I did go up through the ranks, so I got called out on a night that'd be I'd be on duty, from my bed if there was a massive fire. But I was in the office. Probably from the age of 40 until I retired, like, a lot of people you just went up the ladder a bit.

**Q: What is it that motivates you to do the activities you do?**

Really, I just want to keep myself fit. I don't want to sit about you know, watching the television all day. So I can't do that, it drives me around the bend, you know, and so, yeah, it's purely for my own health, yeah, it's like we say, if you don't use it, you lose it, basically.

Probably I enjoy the golf most, because I play with the same guys every week. And we all used to play football years ago, so they're like-minded

people. So yeah, I do enjoy getting out and play the golf. I don't see that is a fitness thing, though, I see that, because it's not getting the heart rate up whereas if I go cycling then you know, I'm getting the heart rate faster. And I see that as my fitness side. This is sort of well being and keeping in touch with blokes that I knew.

**Q: Have you always been fairly active? As a child growing up, were you?**

I always played football, for a number of teams, I finished playing football for the fire service, when I was 47. So I still played a league standard in [name of city]. But I was almost 47. We played cricket too and, as a child, I was always active running football, rugby, or the same sort of games, you know? I couldn't afford, I couldn't afford golf when I was a kid, back in the 60s.

Luckily, I've not had a bad injury. You know, I've not got something that causes me because a lot of people can't do exercise because, you know, they've got something wrong with their leg or something wrong with their heart. So, yeah, touchwood, I've been lucky.

**Q: Have there been times during your life when you've been less active?**

Looking back now you've said that it has been pretty steady, to be honest. I mean, I did find when I was younger, because I was like, just go and play football, I'd go running, that I fitness wasn't a problem to me. I didn't, then I feel now because I'm older, I need to do something to supple and flexible, whereas then I didn't do it for that. I played football then for enjoyment and fitness, because I sort of remained fit in myself.

**Would you say you came from an active family?**

No, not really. My Dad he played rugby at school, but that was it. You know, the activity was cycling his bike about four miles work and then back. My mum as a child was active, but not when she got older because she had myself and my younger sister to bring up. Well, then back in the 50s, a lot of women really didn't go out to work. You know, she didn't have a washing machine. I remember her doing washing in the sink, you know? It was a different time. And Sunday lunches seem to take hours, you know.

**Q: Was your sister active as a child?**

Well, to be honest, no, thinking of it no, she wasn't. She wasn't inactive, but I can, the trouble is, she was about nine years younger. So I left home when she was nine. So I, I can't remember her when I left her doing anything, you know? Yeah. Yeah. I think I've followed up after my mother's side. My grandma, my maternal grandparents, the grandfather was active, yeah, he was.

**Q: Do you find that that you've been able to fill your fill your time since retirement?**

I think it has because like I said to you earlier, I was only off for a month from the day I retired till I was three days a week working with the gardening. Yeah. And after that, to after those three years, about 2018, I started doing more with my son. So like I said, that's not that regular. I could work a day this week. I mean, I've worked since last Monday week. But it to me, I might be doing something this Thursday, Friday. So usually he lets me know the sort of night before, you know... I guess, like I said earlier we did in the garden, you know, this morning? Yeah. Yeah, we've got, we've always got stuff to do. I think keep yourself busy as well. You know, like I said, I don't like sitting down. Yeah, forgetting the pandemic at the moment. My wife's got friends from school that we still see. And I've got mates and you know, we have people around. So we're more active, like, like. You go out more, we like going to restaurants and stuff like yeah, we're not doing that now.

**Q: Is there anything that does stop you being active?**

Yeah, I mean, I might have a day when I get up and think no, I'm not bothering today, that's probably why I'm thinking I can't see that fitness, activity defines me.

When I was younger, I used to run a lot from the house and I'd run. Now I look after my legs, my knees. I have too many mates their knees, ankles and hips, they have knee replacements, because of football as well. So I do watch. But if I didn't go running the next day, your, I forgot what the chemical is in your body. It makes you want to go run. You think oh, I have missed something. I don't feel like that now. No. You know, whether it's the endorphins. [So you got that from running them when you were younger?] Yeah, I got into that mode. I used to do long runs when I was a teenager. But now I do a couple of miles. I never did marathons. Something I've always done is looked after the body to a degree where I'm not putting too much strain on it. You know what, I've got a choice. let's put it like this, but yeah, sometimes you didn't have a choice. But it was like when I was playing football until 46 I didn't get strains in my legs, like other guys did. You know, I was again, physically my skeleton and muscles, I was lucky. Some guys I knew were always getting injured. But I was lucky. So I thought when I got to my late 40s I thought I'm going to stop pounding the streets now, you know, not much impact sport.

**Q: Do you think your age and stage of life, particularly midlife, has any impact on how physically active people are?**

Yeah, I do. Actually, I must admit, I think I've noticed probably the last four years, probably since I sort of turned 64, that possibly I ache a little bit more. I'm trying to keep myself flexible. But I don't feel as flexible as I used

to. You know, I think from the age of 60, up to 63, 64, I didn't feel any different. But I do. I think it's a mind thing as well. I think all of a sudden, you know, you think well, Christ, I'm 68 you know, another 18 months, I'm flippin 70 you know, but it dawns on you as well. Crikey, you know.

Yeah, to a degree, age does impact on what I can do. I think twice now about, we've got about less than five foot off this patio down to the next patio. Because our gardens down steps. And only, even though it's only just under five foot, I probably think twice about jumping off the top of it onto the one below. Whereas a few years ago, I wouldn't have, because I'm thinking if I land awkwardly I'm going to flipping break an ankle or something. But I might not. But yeah, I'm watching myself, and I'm not gonna do anything silly and start getting breaks now. Maybe four years. Yeah, yeah, but I think that that is an age, that's an age mindset, you know?

**Q: Do you have any plans to change your activity levels in the future?**

I must admit, I've been wondering how long I can play golf at the standard that I want to play golf that. Okay. I mean, my handicaps all right, I'm off 11. And that's an all right handicap. But I'm thinking if I can't hit the ball as far as I was, you know, a couple of years ago. Do I still want to play golf then? So there's things going through my mind that I probably got another, I mean, I'm hoping I got as long as I can go with golf where I stay. Because although it's a social thing with friends, I still want to be good at it. I still, you know, want be up to a certain standard with it.

We play for money, play like 20 quid, you know, a round. Sometimes when there's two, four balls, you know, you've got about, you know, 80 100 quid in the pot. And then we go and have a drink at the clubhouse. So that's a winner. You can only stand losing so much, not so much the money but the fact of Christ, [name] is always last, you know.

**Q: And in terms of further into retirement, do you have any other plans or any other things that you're hoping to do?**

Well, we like going away. I mean, because of I've always worked, I was always loath to take a lot of time off from annual leave. And we did quite a quite a few long cruises. So there's still places that I'd like to cruise to, like Australia. We haven't done Australia, New Zealand and that. We've basically done Southampton, through to Los Angeles through the Panama Canal. We've done Dubai, back to Southampton, we've done Hong Kong, back to Southampton. And we've done it. I always wanted to go to Palm Springs, we did in 2017 so we've been active with going abroad. But of course, that stopped last year. And we both said we're definitely not planning to do anything this year. So, in answer to your question, that's more things we want to do. We want to have more holidays and that. But I just want to get through the rest of my life as healthy as we both can.

Luckily, my wife, she's a good cook. And, you know, she has been since we met, she hasn't just learned. But yeah, and I must admit, you know, I do try and do a bit of cooking now, but I'll look in Mary Berry's book and I'll try and rustle something up but it's never as good as what the wife can do. But yeah, we do eat a varied diet. We don't eat a Mediterranean type diet but we might have it now and again. But I mean, for instance, we're having steak chips and egg tonight. So it's, it's good for it's varied. We eat fish. We don't eat meat all the time. But we're not going down the road of, you know, sticking to anything in particular. I think the last takeaway was just fish and chips. And that was about three weeks ago.

**Q: So school was quite important for you, by the sound of it?**

Yeah, and we did live, I lived then in a terraced house, which backed on to a main park in [name of city]. So I'd get over the fence. I play with my mates. I didn't have a distraction like kids have got now. Yeah, because if you stayed in, there was nothing to do, there's no telly on until five o'clock. Then I used to go out and I used to get over the fence at the house, and I played cricket, I played football. You know, we're getting over the park. So I suppose thinking of it, I was lucky where we lived, how it went to a lot of children with that. And like I said, we didn't have social but I didn't have a distraction. We had to go out.

---

## Female 2. Inactive to active

**Female, 62, Inactive Always, married, lives with husband, son and two cats. Daughter lives locally, lives in an urban area, working, C2, Multiple ethnicity (Greek Cypriot), hobbies – going to the cinema**

### Q: Are you active at all at the moment?

What I do is I do actually take her [daughter's] dog for a walk, I sort of I babysit the dog basically about one or two days a week while she's working. And it's a Siberian Husky, so it's quite, it's quite energetic. And that's happened in the last couple of months. So it's actually made me go for a walk, which is quite good. I don't mind going for a walk. And I did in the first lockdown. But I think, you know, you've got when it's raining, you're not so inspired. It's a reason to drag me out the house when the weather's not good.

Also, I did, you know, I did used to belong to the local authority, sort of, well I still am a member of the local authority, gym type thing. And I did used to, I didn't really use the gym, but I used to use it do quite a few classes a week. And that was quite good. Because over a period of years, you get to know people. So it's a social thing. But again, that's been closed. So that's gone out the window. I think I'm looking forward to sort of trying to get my life back on some sort of track. Because I think, you know, you have put weight on and you don't realise it, because it's sort of creeps on. And you feel so much better when you've lost a few pounds, when you have been out for a walk. I mean, now that the rules have changed, and we can meet someone, I think I will be sort of trying to sort of meet maybe a friend to sort of go and do a walk with.

Where I live it's not very rural, it's more urban, but there are, you know, I can drive somewhere for five minutes and go for a nice walk. Or even just walking around here is quite pleasant, but my husband's not interested. So it's got to be the motivation has got to come through, from me, I've got to sort of wake up and think, right, okay, I'm gonna do something today. I mean, I do housework, I don't really stop, but I don't think housework is the same as sort of doing some sort of other activity. You do feel better when you when you've cleaned up and the house is, you know, my house is sort of fairly, fairly modern. So it's not, I don't, you know, I don't like clutter. So you do feel better when things are nice and clean. But I think it's good for you when you go out mentally. I think it's getting out the house to be honest.

You find that your life has changed, you're in your late 50s. You know, it's, it's just a completely different thing. And you do, you do slow down at some point, you wake up one morning, you actually realise that mentally, the mind is willing, but the body necessarily isn't. And it's, it's hard. It's, it's a funny thing. I'm sure that everyone at my age at some point goes through this. And it's accepting what you can do and what you can't do. So yeah, it's just a

little bit. It's a little bit different. But, you know, I'm never sort of sitting at home being bored. I mean, in theory, I should really have an awful lot of time to myself, but I don't, you know, lumbered in a nice way now with my daughter's dog. So yeah, it's almost like people have almost like filled up your time.

**Q: So, segwaying into physical activity, you've already said a bit about dog walking...**

I walk the dog. At the moment, I have the dog always on a Wednesday. And sometimes I have a dog on a Tuesday. I think now that the weather is, you know, starting to get a little bit better, and I'm not saying that because I feel guilty talking to you, but I do want to sort of start doing a walk. There's a nice little route that I can do around here, which is about a 40 minute walk, which is fine. And I've got two really close friends that live not very far. So we sort of said that we're going to start trying to do a walk. And I said, there's no point in us trying to say we're going to do it every day, because it's not going to happen. So if we just can do it once if I can do a walk with a friend once a week. And then I've got the dog once or twice a week, and that's fine. And obviously, I've got the house, you know, I don't have a cleaner. So some of the bedrooms are not used every week, but you've still got to do, there is sort of housework. So yeah, so I'm hoping to sort of get a little bit more get a bit more physical in the sense that get back to what I used to do.

In terms of when the gyms open, pre COVID, I used to do that sort of, they do classes every day. But I used to do the classes that were on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, which were perfect, because they were in the morning, 9.30 to 10.30. And then when it finished, if I had any errands to do, I could do my errands, and then come home. So it was almost like I had some sort of routine. Yeah, so three times a week. And there was a there's a nice little group of people that go there. So we you know, it was a social thing as well. Because once a week we used to on a Tuesday, after the class had finished, we used to sort of have a coffee there. So that was a little bit of a social and a catch up. And then that was it. And then you can sort of either come home or if you've got things to do go and do your bits.

They were just normal sort of aerobic classes, but not very high impact. But they were quite good because I used to do three different classes. And they were run by three different people, so I used to find that you didn't get bored because they were run by three different people. And it also meant that you exercise all parts of your body. I mean, it's all well and good going out for a walk. But it's not the same as doing a class. I think with the class, you feel better. So therefore you're less likely to come home and have a cup of tea with biscuits. You know, it's the mental thing as well as where it helps you. And it just means that you perhaps you haven't lost loads of weight, but because it gives you mentally, you know, put you in a good mood, you're

more likely to eat something healthy when you come back. And your body shape is better. I've noticed that I haven't, I mean yes I've put on a little bit of weight, haven't put on masses, but I've noticed that my body shape has changed. Because you notice it on your clothes and if you don't feel nice in your own clothes, then you're gonna feel miserable as a woman, aren't you?

There's no shops that are really, well there are there are local shops that I can walk to but that's if I want to just pick up something I don't know, like a milk or a loaf of bread or something. I mean, I have a [name of supermarket] delivery. So if I'm meeting friends, there is somewhere that we can drive to that's literally a five, five minute drive away. There's a big [name of store] which we could always have a coffee in there or even some lunch or something, and walk around. And, and a few other shops that if you just needed to, perhaps get out and meet with a friend, and that's literally five minutes up the road. But it's not walkable, so I wouldn't have walked there.

**Q: Why do you enjoy the classes?**

The most important, I think they're, I think they're equally important. They became equally important, because there's a nice group of people that really do the same classes that I've got to know. So they're almost like another, I mean, I'm very good with keeping in touch with friends, but, and with people, you know, that I've known over the years, but what you do find is that different people like to do different things. And a lot of my personal friends, if you like, you know, don't want to commit themselves to doing these classes, which is fine. So it's almost like, I've got another little set of friends at the gym. They're not, I mean, they're not necessarily people that that I would socialise with all the time, but they are my little group of friends, if you like, at the gym, that we would have, once a week, we would have a coffee together. So but I mean, obviously, when I started going there, I didn't know these people, so I went there with the intention to keep fit. And just mentally, you know, you know, something for me to do and, and help for my own health. And obviously, as times gone by, then they've become important too. So the balances become a bit more 50:50.

When I had the kids, etc, I wasn't really doing any exercise. I think I was just so busy that perhaps I was eating less or I was burning up more energy just rushing around. But it never really, I didn't really take it seriously. I think I started doing more exercise, probably about 15 years ago. Really, when I was in my 50s, think just sort of getting to 50, realising that you need to be a little bit fitter, just I don't know, from information around, maybe from adverts on you know, I mean my husband's a diabetic and I, I don't take any tablets whatsoever for anything. And I want to try and keep that for as long as possible.

**Q: So preparing yourself and protecting yourself as you get older?**

Yeah, I just sort of think. I mean, on my, my mum's side, I mean, I lost my mum to cancer, she was 70. And my dad was, was 91. So on my father's side

of the family, they're quite sort of long lived. I don't know who I've taken after. So I don't you know, I don't know. But I don't want to be an old, sick person. You know, and sometimes when you watch TV, and you see some of these, you see programmes, documentaries, where, you know, people are sitting at home, and they're, they're on, you know, they can't they're having to rely on people coming in to do their shopping, and they're sitting there and they've got a tray of tablets, which they've got to, you know, have every day. And I'm thinking I really, I really don't want I don't want that kind of life. And if I don't want that kind of life, then I've got to sort of think about it really. And I know, I feel that I have gone backwards in the last year a little bit, because I have gained a few pounds. And I've now got almost like re-evaluate everything. And I just want to go back to what I was doing, because it seemed to be working for me. And I wasn't, you know, this fantastic person who was out for a run and, and doing all that. But the little that I was doing was helping me both mentally and physically. I need to sort of get back to that. And I probably for the first few months, I probably need to do more to sort of just get back to that level.

**Q: How has your activity changed throughout your life?**

When I was at school, yes, I did, you know, I did the normal PE lessons, I think. I don't know, I don't think girls in those days were sort of encouraged as much as they are now, in all fairness. And if you haven't got that confidence, then you then you're not going to be that way inclined. So I think growing up as a teenager, I was, I mean, my background is my parents are Greek Cypriot. So they were quite strict. I think they had views of, you know, girls getting married. And I mean I was probably a little bit different to some of my friends, because I didn't get married in my early 20s. I met my husband in my late 20s. I did have more of a career than some of my friends. So I was probably a little bit different in that aspect. But yeah, I mean, you know, I didn't belong to any clubs. I didn't I didn't play really any sports. I never ever had an issue with my weight. I think the, you know, I'd sort of I mean, when I, when I got married, which was in 1990, I, I weighed eight and a half stone for someone who was like five foot three. You know, I didn't, I didn't have a weight problem at all. And if I put on a couple of pounds, I could lose it within, you know, within a week, it wasn't a problem. My clothes fitted well. It wasn't really until even after I had the kids. I did, yes, I was heavier after I had the kids and the weight crept up. But again, it wasn't really an issue. I wasn't, you know, I wasn't sort of big if you like, I think my weights gone up more than than ever, really, in the last? I don't know, in the last sort of five, six years. And I think, yeah, and I think that's partly I don't know, well, I don't know, probably my age, you slow down without realising it. I don't know whether it's your metabolic rate, maybe I'm eating differently. And that's why being at home this last sort of year, you do tend to sort of just pick things. It's not, I always cook from scratch, my meals are always fresh, I cook every day fresh food. So, you know, we don't live on, you know,

ready made meals that are high in salt or sugar. So it's not my meals, it's, it's the picking.

**Q: Is having a routine an important part of your activity?**

Yeah, it is. Because, for example, my classes used to be on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the Monday classes used to start at 930. So I would have to, I mean, it was wasn't far from here. But I would leave the house at nine because it was always a bit of traffic. Aim to get there by sort of quarter past twenty past, park up, you know, walk towards the class. So I knew that that was my routine. So it meant that you know, anything that had to be done, but if I had any errands, then I'd know I'd have to be organised and have my bits if I needed to go to the bank, for example. I'd make sure the night before I'd have all my bits ready. Because I'd know that I'd have to leave the house at nine. That was good, because it was a routine.

You have to be realistic and accept you know what it is? Is it good enough for you? If it isn't, I mean, you might still do that, but then you need to tag something else along. I mean, I you know, I'm, I'm quite good in the sense that. I mean, on Sunday, for example, a friend of mine had a memorial at the church, that that's a yearly thing that the Greeks do when someone's died. So and I've always, I've always, I've always supported her in that. So I did go to church on Sunday, I'm not really a really particularly religious person or a church goer, but I do go a couple of times a year for certain things. So I really, I went there for my friend, and then they all wanted to go to the cemetery because it was, you know, the day and they wanted to put flowers down, etc. So I drove to the cemetery. But I actually parked outside the cemetery because I knew where they were going in there was going to be a lot of cars there. And people were going to be blocking other people, etc. So I parked outside, and then I walked into the cemetery. And it was really only a two, three minute walk. And people sort of said to me, where's your car what you're doing? And I said, I just parked outside. Oh, why? And I said, Well, I said, you know, it's a bit chaotic here. But also, I said, it's just made me walk for five minutes for two, three minutes. And then I've got the two three minute walk back. I know it's nothing special, but at least I'm moving. And if I do go to the supermarket, I don't park right by the door, I tend to park further away. And then that just makes me walk a little bit more, I'm conscious of all these other little things. I know that nothing big and it's not gonna sort of necessarily change my life dramatically. But at least it's making me walk just little bit more. It's the extra 5-10 minutes that I wouldn't have done that I think add up really, it makes me feel it makes me mentally feel that I'm sort of doing that.

Today, I woke up and I don't have the dog today. The house is reasonably clean, I'm not obsessed, I'm not one of these obsessive people, I like the house to be reasonable but I'm certainly not obsessed. So I thought well maybe I've got some paperwork to do after this morning but really this

afternoon I've got no excuse it's not raining today. So I'm going to try and aim to sort of get out, because I'm not going to go out, I'm not going to go for a walk if it's raining. I don't mind if it's cold, you know, put a jacket on and on a scarf and gloves that doesn't it doesn't bother me because very often, when it's cold, very often it's sunny. You get days where the skies clear, but it's just really cold. But that doesn't bother me at all. Or even if it's not sunny, as long as it's not raining, cold doesn't bother me because once you start walking, you know, you're gonna warm up anyway.

I think it's just getting back into the habit, and I think, you know, spring is here, isn't it? And it's nice when you go out because people are now starting to cut their grass. So when you smell the grass, you see a few daffodils trying to come out, you do feel better. But yeah, I mean, I am looking forward to my classes opening up.

I think it was easier when I had the classes, it was a lot easier, because I just say, well, I won't be here, I'm at my class. But I think if you haven't got something that's actually booked, that you're going to go to, then you're not going to start an argument because someone's gonna say, well, can't you go for a walk a bit later? What's the big deal? And there isn't really a big deal is there really. But where I had my class, it will be well, I'm leaving at nine. So yeah, if you, you know, let's say I'm leaving at nine, I won't be back till whenever, whereas now if somebody says, oh, I've got that delivery coming, you said, Okay, I'll go for a walk at two o'clock or something. But then something happens at two and then sometimes you've missed it or it starts raining or something you think oh okay, it's not gonna happen today. You've got to be quite sort of determined that that's what you're, you're gonna do.

**Q: Do you think being at your sort of mid stage of life has impacted on how active you are?**

It has in a way because I think when you get to, I don't want to make it an age thing, but when you get to, I suppose my age, you just feel that you want to choose more of what you want to do, you don't want to be dictated to. But you also know what your limitations are, where your weaknesses are. So yeah, I mean, whether I think whether I like it or not my age does affect me. And I think it's important to be able to accept that, because then you can work around it, and you can do things that you feel that you can do.

**Q: Do you have any other plans to change your activity levels in the future?**

Only when this lockdown opens up, I want to go back to my classes. I don't think the classes are going to start again. After the first lockdown, they did temporarily open but they were running them in the sports hall, spaced out. So it might be that they start them up again, in the sports hall where people can be really spaced out. I don't know when I mean, they hadn't sort of I don't think they, I can't recall anything's been said about gyms. But I mean, if the restaurants are going to open in in May, then I presume maybe the

gyms will open in May. I don't know, so I'm just presuming that, you know, the end of May, June that they will open. I'm just going to be honest, I'm just going to try and sort of do a bit more walking until then. And cut out carbs, I think, because the weather is changing. And I need to sort of start wearing some different clothes. And I daren't try them on at the moment.

---

### **Female 3, inactive always**

**Female, 51, Inactive always, married, no children, pets, live in a small market town, not currently working – recently made redundant after 24 years, C2DE, White British ethnicity, Hobbies – reading, seeing family, crafting**

**Q: Thinking back over your lifetime, would you ever say that you've had a regular physical activity or exercise routine?**

I'm not a gym person, never joined the gym doesn't interest me in the slightest. I've, I've had periods in my life where I've done swimming. But again, I think as I've got older, I think that's something that may be quite self conscious of doing. You know, as you get older, your body's not quite in the same shape or format as it used to be. And I think that makes you makes you self conscious. And I think once you get out of the habit of, of going, Yeah, yeah. Again, your life changes, you know, when you're single, you're young. And then when you marry and you you know, your life changes again, and, and work gets in the way of life. You know, your work your way, health and all your weekends is like, I've got to this, I've got to do that. You're dashing around here, there and everywhere. You know, you're trying to fit in a supermarket shop. You know, at that stage, I'd got elderly parents that I was looking after as well. You know, things like that take priority over yourself.

**Q: When you were at school, were you fairly active, did you do sports at school?**

No, no, never interested me at all. I did PE lessons, which I found very tedious, because they were really quite boring. No, it was just like running around school playing field. When I was at school, it was never something that was really encouraged. It was only if you were shown to be very good at something like that, then I think you were encouraged. Whereas I think those were what I would call a mediocre, you know, we're never encouraged to do anything like that. And I think that I think that's actually quite a regret that I have. If if it had been encouraged when I was at school, I think it would have been something that I would have probably carried on to adulthood.

I was always sort of, like, you know, I was felt like, you know, I would be one of those that would be the last to be picked for the team. So therefore, I think that never encourages you to carry on or to improve in, especially team sports, I think if you're, you know, you're the child, and it wasn't because I was a fat child or stupid or anything, I think it was just I think I was just very plain. So I was never I was never part of the 'it' crowd all day, all my day. If you know you would never therefore I think if you would never sort of picked as like one of the bright ones in the background.

The school that I went to had got quite a lot of different activities. I do remember that I started going to like a badminton club, after school. But again, because I was living in one of the outside villages, we had to always get a bus home from which was privately ran through school. But I could never stay after school for club because I always had to arrange for somebody to pick me up. My mum didn't drive and my dad didn't come in until quite a lot later during the evening. So there was never anybody there to pick me up. And there was no other way of getting home. In those days it would have had to be a taxi. And that was just out of the question. My family weren't in a position to afford anything like that. I did go for a badminton classes for a little while, but then I had to arrange to go to a friend's house afterwards. And then my dad picked me up later in the evening. So and you know, you couldn't do that with people on a regular basis. And I think that was maybe one of the disadvantages of living in a village, or a town.

I don't have brothers and sisters, so it was me and my mum or dad. And my mum and dad were just very normal, working class family. They were, you know, my dad went out of work that the door sort of like six o'clock and didn't come home till sort of seven, eight o'clock at night. My mum was a housewife. So there was never anything there, as a youngster, you were encouraged to go to your friends and play. But it was never really a physical place, if that makes sense, or a sport activity or that type of thing?

I think it's one of the things I think if you're encouraged as a youngster, I think carry on, you know, the older you get the harder it is to get yourself into things.

**Q: When you left school and started college, or work or whatever you did, at that point did you pick up any different activities, you mentioned swimming?**

We used to do a little bit when I was married. We'd sort of go on a Sunday morning. But again, I think I'd got quite elderly parents. And I think that as their health gradually deteriorated, I was finding that my weekends were very much more involved in doing things for them and looking after them. Because I've got no brothers and sisters, it was all down to me. You know, so my time was with them rather than anything for myself.

I've always worked full time. I just think the time wasn't there, you know, you've got up and you've gone to work, and you come home, you've got you know, quite often I would be going to see my parents straight from work and doing things to them. Weekend again would have been, you know, I had to go and do shopping for them. Then, after I lost my dad, it would be taking my mum shopping. And, you know, then you'd be coming home and try and do your own thing at home, fitting in seeing family. And, you know, the occasional friends. Just, I suppose. To me, for me, it just felt like life got in the way of...I think that's one of the disadvantages of having elderly parents. You know, I was 29 when I lost my dad. He was 62, and then my mum was

only a few years younger. So then, any time that I had spare was with her towards the end. And then again, she's been gone about six years now. But I think when I, after I lost her, my work hours increased even more...it was going to work coming home getting an evening meal. And then, you know, taking the dog out for a walk, and then coming home and just, you know, you might watch an hour of television and then go to bed and then start the routine all over again. And at that stage, we'd also I'd also got in-laws that were, again, elderly. So it was sort of weekends were divided between seeing looking after my mum and doing things for her. And then travelling about an hour and a half away. And again, looking after in laws, even though my husband was one of four. And him being the youngest, meant that all the others seem to wash their hands have any responsibility of looking after them, I think come down to us, again, because we hadn't got children, always convenient. They can go down there, they haven't got to do this and do that. Life revolves around elderly parents.

I think, if I'd had my time over again I think I would have probably tried to do things a little bit different. I'm not what I call a team player, as in sports or anything like that. Whether it be going to an exercise class, or going out for a run or something like that. I think if I'd have been 20-30 years younger than I am now, I think I probably would have found it easier to do. Yeah, but I think also you need that encouragement as well. I don't think it's definitely something that you just pick up on off your own back. Yeah, so when I think of my nephew and his wife, they're in their early 30s and they live quite near us. And my nephew and my husband go out on pushbikes at the weekend, quite often. And I think that's been good that my nephew, going out with his uncle. Because I think it's pushed him to actually go out. And I know, there's been a few weekends when it's been a bit dodgy weather, and you all don't really want to go and I sort of said, how would you go you're loving once you're out. You really enjoy it, leave, come back. And he said, I'm so pleased. I've gone really enjoyed myself. Yeah. But I think if I've got maybe sisters or something like that to do things together, then it would have been easier to do that. Yeah, it would have been part of a routine I guess, in some respects.

I think, you know, on a day, like today, where I am here, it's, it's wet, it's miserable. It would be a physical effort to go out. But if it was a nice sunny day, then you wouldn't think twice about it, you'd probably would just get up and go out and think Oh, that's nice. Oh, I'll just have walked around the block. And then you'd think to yourself, okay, well, I've done that. Okay. I might walk a little bit further, and a little bit further still. So it's something you've got to I find that to do that. I would have to I've got to push myself to do it.

**Q: Is there anything that would encourage you to be more active?**

I don't really know at the moment, because obviously, I don't know how work is gonna go, if I, I'm, I'm trying to find a local job. Previous jobs I've had in the past have been where I've been able to walk to work, which is, I would

love to be able to do that again. And I used to up to probably about 10 years ago when the company moved, but they moved within the town. But the distance that was to walk would be just that little bit too far, to be able to do comfortably in the morning, or an evening. More so in the evening, by the time you come out, six o'clock, and it's dark. And walking home alone was not really an option where the company were locate, it does make you think twice about walking home on your own. If I could find something local, within walking distance of the main town, that would be perfect for me. And it would be something that I would do, though, whether it be 10, you know, 10, 15, 20 minutes, walk home, if that was possible, would be lovely. Something that you would do as a routine. And you wouldn't even be thinking that you're doing it as part of regular exercise because you would just be doing it.

I'm not the type of person to do an exercise class, you know, aerobics or anything like that. It would bore the tears out of me. But that's just me. Other people I know love it and enjoy it. Again, I think maybe if I'd have done it when I was in my early 20s and then be just became a routine. I probably would have probably done it. But where I was my first job was not local. And again, it was I had to get into the town where I live now. And then I had to also get them back to the village that I lived in. Because I was that young, I wasn't driving so you know that then when I, I didn't start driving to like, I'd moved into the town and I'd been married quite a few years. Because company that I worked for had a minibus and they picked people up. So I suppose it never was part of my day to day.

**Q: Do you think your age and stage of life has any impact on how physically active you are?**

I think so. I think as the as the older that you get, midlife, I think your life changes. Whether it's, you know, if you've got family, and you've got kids to leave home and go to university, I think you have different stages of your life. And I think you do. Yeah, life changes a lot. I think, in your, in the mid-life, if you have, you know, whether you've got children that are leaving go University, you've got elderly parents, more of that, I think, yeah, things do change. Definitely. And I don't think you necessarily make enough time for yourself, because you're running around doing other things, whether it be work, trying to socialise the friends, or running around after your kids family. Don't necessarily do things for yourself. I know there's some people in this world that think of only of themselves and can do it because their disciplined, not selfish, but disciplined enough to do that. I seem to be the person who was running around after everybody else.

I think probably in the last year or or two has probably changed that. I think it's, it's been more time to do things together as a couple rather than I'm very lucky, I've got a marriage where we actually enjoy each other's company and want to be together... We've had a lot of couples, friends over

the years that have split, I think we've probably only got maybe a couple of friends are still together.

I think you start to look at things a little bit differently, I think, you know, you try to eat healthily. So I think as long as I eat healthily, and do some exercise, as I said, better than nothing at all.

I was only talking to my husband last night about this saying now, maybe I should go out while I'm not working or trying to look for another job, go out for a walk. But again, it's that motivating yourself on a day like this. It's wet and miserable. Do you really want to be outside for half an hour in the pouring rain on your own? Whether you've got headphones in and walking around or not, again, it's something that then becomes a chore rather than doing it for pleasure.

**Q: Do you ever look further ahead to, you know, a point in time when you might be able to retire?**

I'd love to, I'd love to be in retirement now, but bills to be paid. But, again, it's always been something that we've looked at, for retirement, be able to get to that stage, hopefully, and alive. We've got a caravan down in [name of place]. And so hopefully we'd be in a position to go down there a bit more often. For us, you know, it's walking on [name of place], you know, my ideal day would be at the caravan, going out on the moors, taking the dog walk, stopping and having, you know, a cup of coffee somewhere, and then carrying on just not like a rucksack and walking boots and you know, hiking 20 miles. Just taking a wander finding different places, and exploring the countryside. That's, you know, that would be ideal, but you know, you can't do that on every single day. But again, even if not, it would still just be able to physically go out and whether it's be walking into town to get newspaper every day or just to do something, thought of being stuck indoors. 24, seven would probably drive me a little bit stir crazy.

Yeah, I think winter is not a good time for me. As soon as the sun starts to come out, and you've got that little bit of warmth on your back, it just makes everything just that little bit better. Yeah. And I think then you are, you do feel a bit more motivated to go out? And I think I try to I think it's very easy just to get into the car and go somewhere, whereas I think, lockdown more or just everybody in general, that is you because you can't go out in the car. You've had to go out for walks. Yeah. But it's for us. It's always been something that we've done. But it just, it was we might have done a quick half hour walk with the dog in the evening, and we might have extended it and it's been an hour's walk. You know, it's just depends what other things you've got on during the day. Yeah, I've been coming home late, then. It's a quick 15 minute 20 minute walk. They say is home on good time, then it's, you know, a good half hour walk at me. And it's our time of the day to well, when we were both working with to get your moans and groans out of the day. And then you come home. And you've got all your work out of your head.

Because we've got the dog, we've obviously got to take her around. I think it does us good. We had a little period where in we were in between dogs. We lost our dog a couple years ago. We were both like after about two weeks, it's like this is bad we need to get another dog, just to get out. I think more so with my husband. I can see that that was really becoming an issue with him not going out the house. Even though he's got a physical job. And I think it was just that going out for fresh air. And I think we've I find it quite calming just to walk and talk. I knew you sort out your issues as the day calming Yeah, but I think we both find it very calming, relaxing.

# Appendix two

# Discussion guide

---

## Physical Activity in Mid-Life (the UNDERPIN Study)

### Interview schedule

Thank you for taking the time to take part in our study today, which aims to explore the experiences of physical activity for people aged 50-70 years old. It's been commissioned by the Centre for Ageing Better. We are interested in hearing about your attitudes, preferences for, knowledge and past experiences of physical activity, whether or not you've been physically active in the past.

Physical activity includes things like walking (walking to work or to exercise the dog, for example), dancing, swimming, going to the gym, taking part in team or individual sports, jogging or running and many others. The interviews are taking about an hour, is that ok?

What I'd like to do is to ask you a series of questions about your own experiences. There are no right or wrong answers, we are really interested in what you have to say. With your permission, the interview will be recorded via Zoom, or using an audio digital recorder if we're speaking via telephone, so that we have a full record of what is said. If you prefer not to be recorded, I will make some notes about the answers you provide. If you don't want to answer any of the questions asked during the interview you don't have to. You may withdraw from the research at any time just by telling us that you don't want to take part anymore. You don't have to give a reason, although it is helpful for us if you do.

The information you provide will only be shared within the research team. Any information you provide will be stored securely. We will give a unique identifying number to the information you provide. This means that we will not need to use your name to keep track of your information, so it will not be possible to identify you personally in any reports or papers which are produced. If you withdraw from the study, where research data have already been anonymously analysed and reported we may not be able to remove your data from any analyses or reports.

Any personal information which you provide will be held and processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act. At the end of the study, we will destroy all personal information.

The results of the research will contribute to a report and academic papers about the experiences of people like you. However, like we've said, it will not be possible to identify you as a participant in the research.

Can I just check that you've completed and signed the consent form?

Great, before we get started, do you have any questions?

**Q: So before we get going it would be good to get to know a bit about you first.**

- Are you working, retired, semi-retired etc – was this planned or not?
- Who do you live with?
- What is a typical day like in the week?
- How about the weekend?
- Hobbies and interests?

**Q: To start off, how much physical activity do you think you do in a 'normal/typical' week?**

(reminder: physical activity is...)

(prompt: can you explain in a bit more detail...? what sort of things do you do?)

(prompt: anything else?)

**Q: And the activities you've described, have they continued throughout the 'lockdowns' of 2020/21? How has Covid 19 and the different lockdowns affected how active you have been?**

(prompt: this is not a key focus of the study, we are interested to see how Covid 19 has impacted on what you 'normally' do...)

**Q: What makes you do [add in an activity they have mentioned]? What do you enjoy about it? What keeps you doing it?**

(prompt: physical health? mental health?)

(prompt: that sounds important to you, can you tell me a bit more about that?)

**Q: Is that the same for [add in another activity they've mentioned]? What do you enjoy about it? What keeps you doing it?**

(prompt: so, it's similar to [the other activity]? /different to [the other activity]  
- why do you think that is?)

**Q: How has your activity changed during your lifetime? Have there been any specific times when you've been more or less active?**

(prompt: in what way specifically..., why do you think that is...)

(prompt: tell me a bit more about that...)

**Q: How active were you when you were younger?**

(prompt: can you explain in a bit more detail...? What did you enjoy/dislike about it...)

Prompt: Add in a summary here, if it's useful, to remind you – and them – what's already been covered...

**Q: How important do you think it is for you/people like you to be physically active?**

(prompt: can you say a bit more, that's interesting, why do you think that?)

(prompt: what do you mean by that, exactly?)

**Q: Some people think its 'normal' to be active regularly, do you think this is true/typical for the people you live with/ your family/your friends/others in your community?**

(prompt: what does community mean to you? local or social (for example, BAME community, geographical location?)

**Q: Some people also say that 'being active' is part of their identity, feels like who they are... What do you think about that statement?**

(prompt: 'sporty' or 'active' type? Why do you think come this isn't how you see yourself?)

(prompt: tell me a bit more...)

**Q: What would encourage you to be more active?**

(prompt: that's interesting, why do you say that?)

(prompt: anything else?)

**Q: What stops you from being active at the moment?**

(prompt: physical illness, long-term conditions such as diabetes or heart disease, disability, time, energy, confidence... etc)

**Q: and are there ways you could get around those things?**

(prompt: or if not; how to they deal with those barriers getting in the way?)

**Q: What role do you think other people have in how active you are at the moment?**

(prompt: partner, family, friends, health care practitioners, others?)

(prompt: is this different from in the past, in what way?)

**Q: We're wondering whether your age and stage of life (Mid-Life) has any impact on how physically active you are – what do you think about this?**

(prompt: can you say a bit more, that's interesting, why do you think that?)

**Q: What about the future? Do you have plans to change your activity levels in the future?**

(prompt: can you say a bit more, that's interesting, why do you think that?)

**Q: Please remind me: are you working/not working/retired?**

Retired: have your patterns of activity changed on retirement? Did you retire as planned (or due e.g. to a health condition or for caring). Was it a deliberate decision to change? Was it planned? How does retirement affect your ability to be active?

(explore having more time; and lack of structure to the day; volunteering)

Pre-retired: are you thinking about retirement? Do you actively plan for it? How does physical activity fit into any plans? Do you think you will be more or less active?

Working: how does work affect your physical activity?

**Q: Is there anything else you want to say?**

Anything else?

Thank you very much for giving up your time today for this interview. Do you have any questions about this interview or the whole research process?

Would you like us to send you a summary of results from this research when it is available?

THANK YOU

# Appendix three

# Participant information

---

## Physical Activity in Mid-Life (the UNDERPIN Study)

### Participant Information Sheet

#### What is this purpose of the study?

Physical inactivity is one of the main risk factors for developing health conditions that lead to preventable disability in later life and even early deaths. However, the proportion of people who are physically inactive generally increases with age. Interventions targeted at improving physical activity levels amongst people in mid-life can have a significant impact on the quality of life for those in later life. Getting individuals who are inactive to take some level of activity may be more beneficial overall than increasing levels of activity in those who are already physically active.

This study aims to explore the experiences of physically inactive people in mid-life. We hope to identify and explore attitudes towards, preferences for, knowledge and past experiences of physical activity and seek to understand the challenges inactive adults may face in becoming physically active. For adults who were previously active and then became inactive, we hope to investigate what might enable them to become more active in the future.

#### Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are aged between 50 and 70 and live in England. We wish to speak to adults of this age who are physically inactive. It is important that we speak to people with a variety of previous physical activity experiences in order to meet the aims of the study. As well as speaking with people with these varying experiences, we also wish to ensure that we speak to people from a variety of backgrounds, and with different personal characteristics. We therefore need people a mix of genders, ethnicities, professions and living circumstances. You have been approached about participating because you have previously expressed an interest in taking part in social and market research.

#### Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part, and you will be given a chance to ask questions about the research before making your decision. If you do agree

to take part, you may withdraw from the research at any time. If you do wish to withdraw, you do not have to give a reason, although it is helpful for us if you do. You can withdraw from the study at any time, however, where research data have already been anonymously analysed and reported we may not be able to remove your data from any analyses or reports.

### **What will happen if I choose to take part in the research?**

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an online video interview (using Zoom) or a telephone interview with an experienced social researcher from University of Bristol or Qa Research. If you're new to using Zoom you'll be given full support in getting started, otherwise you can choose a telephone interview if you prefer.

During the interview you will be asked questions about your current and past experience of physical activity, including questions about the types of physical activity you take part in, or have previously participated in. Physical activity includes things like walking (walking to work, for example), going to the gym, taking part in team or individual sports, dancing, swimming, jogging or running and many others. You will also be asked questions about your attitudes towards being active and also asked to discuss the factors that either encourage or discourage you when it comes to being physically active.

The interview can be arranged at a time to suit you, and will take no more than one hour. You will have the chance to ask questions about the study. If you are happy to take part you will be asked to email or post a completed consent form to us. We would like to record the interview so we can have an accurate record of the discussion.

### **Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

There is very little risk to being involved in this study. We will not meet you face to face and will not ask you to share confidential information about yourself or others. Further, we will ensure that interviews cannot be overheard and can assure you that interview recordings will not be shared outside of the research team.

We will ensure that individuals who take part cannot be identified from the information we report at the end of the research. We never use names when reporting and whilst we may wish to quote some of the things you say during interview in our report, we always remove any information or references that might identify you.

### **What happens to the data I provide and how is my data protected?**

The information you provide during the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified (your name, contact details and the audio recording) is known as **personal data**.

**Personal data** will be stored on University of Bristol or Qa Research password-protected secure servers for 2 years, after which it will be destroyed. **Other research data** will be stored for at least 3 years after publication or public release of the outputs of the research. Only members of this research team will have access to the research data. Further information about how University of Bristol protects your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/secretary/data-protection/>

The University of Bristol believes that knowledge and understanding gained through our research should be made freely and openly available to the world. We would therefore like to ask for your permission to make fully anonymised transcripts available to other researchers to use in the future. These would be posted to <https://data.bris.ac.uk/data/>. You may take part in our research but refuse permission for sharing of your interview data in this way if you prefer.

### **Will the research be published?**

We plan to publish the results of this study as a report with Centre for Better Aging. We will also publish results as an academic paper in a specialist journal. We will write shorter reports, called policy briefings, for national policy makers like the Chief Medical Officers, Department of Health and Social Care and other interested organisations like Sport England. Finally, we will also work with national newspapers to provide publicity for the study and to share its impact and importance as widely as possible.

### **Who is funding the research?**

The study is being funded by Centre for Ageing Better, who have commissioned University of Bristol School for Policy Studies and Qa Research to undertake this project on their behalf.

### **Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee SPSREC/20-21/139).

### **What should I do if I have any questions or concerns?**

If you have questions about taking part in the study, are unhappy with how this research is being carried out, or wish to make a formal complaint, you should contact Ben Thatcher ([ben.thatcher@garesearch.co.uk](mailto:ben.thatcher@garesearch.co.uk)), the study lead, in the first instance. If you are still unhappy you should contact Professor Charlie Foster ([charlie.foster@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:charlie.foster@bristol.ac.uk)).

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this important research.

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.  
**Let's make ageing better.**



This report is part of our work on Healthy ageing  
and is freely available at [ageing-better.org.uk](https://ageing-better.org.uk)

Reproduction of the findings of this report by third  
parties is permitted. We ask that you notify us of  
planned usage at [digital@ageing-better.org.uk](mailto:digital@ageing-better.org.uk)

The Centre for Ageing Better creates change in policy and  
practice informed by evidence and works with partners  
across England to improve employment, housing, health  
and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation,  
funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

