



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

IRISH SPORTS MONITOR 2023 / ANNUAL RESEARCH REPORT



B&A



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Foreword

On behalf of Sport Ireland, I welcome the 2023 Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) report publication. This iteration of the ISM demonstrates the continued recovery and growth of Sport in Ireland following the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, almost two million people, the highest number ever recorded, were involved in sport on a regular basis, via a combination of active participation, volunteering, and social engagement. I am particularly encouraged by the large six percentage point increase in women's sports participation in 2023, reducing the gender gradient to just under three percentage points. It is also encouraging to see the social participation figures in club membership, volunteering and event attendance increase in 2023. However, work remains to bring club membership and volunteering figures back to the pre-pandemic highs measured in 2019.

This year's report provides insights on people's life-long pathways through sport with a clear picture of the adaptability demonstrated by large numbers of young adults who confidently embark on new sporting journeys as they transition or change sports in early adulthood. With the majority of adult sports participants taking up sports in their late teenage years or early adulthood, a focus on supporting transitions between sports at these critical life stages will be crucial to achieving the 2027 government targets.

While it is positive to see the huge increase in engagement in sport continue in 2023, I must acknowledge the considerable work and resources required to achieve the National Sports Policy (NSP) 2027 targets. To reach the ambitious government target of 60% active participation by 2027, significant progress is still required. This goal necessitates a consistent three percent per annum increase in active participation across each of the next four years, equating to approximately 200,000 additional sports participants annually. Achieving this objective will require a substantial increase in sporting infrastructure as well as an increase in social participation in sports, particularly in club membership and volunteering to underpin the large numbers of new participants entering the sporting ecosystem.

Sport Ireland's statement of strategy, launched in 2023 provides us with a framework from which to deliver our ambitions for Sport in Ireland. However, I would like to acknowledge and thank our partners and stakeholders from Government Departments, National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships, to local clubs, coaches, officials, volunteers and participants for their continued work and commitment to promoting sport in all its forms. Continued work with and support of these critical stakeholders will be required to help us collectively progress the participation and performance agenda whilst working to eliminate the gender, socio-economic and disability inequities that can exist in sport.

We will continue to monitor progress throughout 2024 with an additional full year ISM report. Further ISMs are scheduled beyond this, making it possible to track and understand our progress towards meeting our NSP 2027 objectives. I thank Kieran O'Leary, Jessica Hearne and the team at Ipsos B&A as well as Benny Cullen, Neil Fleming, Barry Horgan, Eric Lacey and the Research team at Sport Ireland for their work over the past number of years on the ISM and for developing this insightful 2023 report.

Dr Úna May, Sport Ireland CEO



Introduction



Introduction

The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) is a long-standing and comprehensive survey that measures sports participation across Ireland. As set forth in the National Sports Policy (NSP 2018-2027) the survey measures recreational and competitive sport; recreational sport encompasses all forms of physical activity with the aim of enhancing physical fitness, mental wellbeing, and fostering social relationships through casual or regular participation in sport. Competitive sport, on the other hand, refers to all forms of physical activity that strive for physical fitness improvement and competitive success through organised participation.

Data for the ISM has been collected since 2007, providing an established series of cross-sectional studies of the sports landscape. Findings from ISM 2017 were used to set the baseline figures for the NSP 2018-2027 and since then the survey has continued to collect and report on data that shed light on the development of Irish sport.

The success of the ISM hinges on the use of consistent definitions which facilitate the measurement of sports participation, social participation, and broader physical activity overtime. The survey asks respondents about active participation in sport, by measuring participation in a broad range of sport, exercise, and physical activities during the 7-day period prior to the survey. In terms of social participation, the survey asks respondents about any volunteering or attendance at events that occurred in the prior 7-days and also assesses current club memberships held by respondents.

For broader physical activity, the ISM has used consistent measures of recreational walking, as well as cycling and walking for transport. During ISM 2023, new measures of cycling and walking for transport were introduced, which improved upon the original measures that were used in previous years. These new measures capture the frequency of active transport usage each week in addition to capturing the proportion of the population who engage in these activities. For ISM 2024 and subsequent ISM surveys, these new measures will replace the original active transport measures.

The ISM serves as a powerful tool for stakeholders across the sports landscape, be they local or national, by providing valuable insights that help shape the development of sport policy, strategy, and the necessary resources, finance, and infrastructure to foster sport participation.

A substantial sample size of 8,500 respondents per year allows for in-depth analysis across different population cohorts. This year's report features spotlight chapters on age, gender, disability, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and the urban-rural divide in location. To account for and measure any potential seasonality effects on participation data, survey interviewing is spread out over the year.

Alongside the three core chapters (sports participation, social sports participation, and broader physical activity) this year's report also includes a chapter on transitions in sport, exploring uptake and drop out in sport throughout the lifespan. Each year the survey incorporates flexible modules, results from which are also highlighted throughout the report. This year's modules focus on understanding children's sports participation and attitudes towards equal playing time for children.

This report continues from the ISM 2022 annual report, which highlighted a recovery in participation levels in the wake of a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Findings from ISM 2023 show that participation has largely returned to levels measured previously in 2019, setting out a strong foundation from which participation may develop and grow in the coming years.

Fieldwork is currently underway for the ISM 2024, which will monitor how sports participation continues to evolve.



Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Sport participation

- 47% of the adult population regularly participated in sport in 2023. This indicates that there was a 4 percentage point increase in sports participation since 2022, increasing the number of people regularly participating in sport from 1.75 million in 2022 to 1.97 million* in 2023. For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, sports participation rates have exceeded those measured in 2019 (46%).
- Personal exercise** (17%), swimming (8%), and running (7%) remained the three most popular sports.
- An increase was seen in the proportion of people taking part in organised competitions, returning to the same level as in 2019 (7%).
- Over three quarters of parents (78%) said they have at least one child participating in sport outside of school. For children whose parents do not participate in sport, participation rates fell to 68%, compared to 89% of children whose parents participate in sport.
- Respondents were asked about their attitudes to equal playing time in children's competitive matches. Over two thirds (69%) reported that they believe that all children should get equal playing time regardless of their ability or skill. Mothers (75%) supported equal playing time more than fathers (65%).

Transitions in sport – taking up sport

- Three in every five (60%) sports participants said they took up their sport aged 16 or older, while 39% were still involved in a sport they took up aged under 16.
- A quarter of participants (26%) first took up their main sport in a club, while another quarter (25%) started their main sport at a local sports facility. Notably, the third most common location for taking up sport was at home (15%), while a further 11% took up their sport in a public space.
- Team sports were most commonly taken up at a club, including Gaelic football (63%) and soccer (38%). Three-quarters (75%) of those who played golf also took up this sport at a club. The most common sports taken up at home were cycling (51%) and yoga (33%).
- Friends (23%), fathers (13%), other family members (11%), teachers (8%), and mothers (5%) were stated as the people who introduced participants to their main sport.
- A higher proportion of men (16%) compared to women (10%) reported that their father introduced them to sport. While mothers introduced 4% of men and 6% of women to their sports, highlighting the importance of gender specific role models.

*Population estimates referenced throughout this report are based on CSO Population Estimates (Persons in April), for people aged 16 and older in Ireland. Figures relating to 2017-2022 in this report are based on revised CSO figures following detailed analysis of the Census 2022. Available at: <https://data.cso.ie/table/PEA01>

**Personal exercise is a collection of different activities, most prominent of these are gym-based activities and classes.

Transitions in sport - dropping out of sport

- 84% of the population have participated in sport at some point in their life, while 16% have never participated in sport.
- Of the 72% of the population who have dropped out of a sport they used to play regularly, 38% switched to playing a different sport and 34% quit playing sport completely.
- Switching sport (60%) was more common than quitting (20%) sport among the youngest age group of those aged 16-24. Switching sport remained more prevalent than quitting up until ages 55-64, where 49% had quit sport and 27% had switched sports.
- The proportion who have never taken up sport was highest among those aged 65+ (31%), and lowest among those aged 16-24 (6%). This finding suggests that younger people are getting involved in sport at a higher rate than older cohorts did within their lifetime.
- Among those who had dropped out of regular sports participation, work commitments (27%), picking up an injury (26%) and family commitments (24%) were listed as the major factors behind drop out.

Social participation in sport

- Overall social participation was 45% in 2023. While this was a notable increase from 41% in 2022, it remained behind the level measured in 2019 (47%). At a population level, approximately 1.89 million people socially participate in sport.
- Club membership (35%) increased by 4 percentage points since 2022 (31%), bringing it close to the same level measured in 2019 (36%). Due to a population increase over this period, this means that there were more club members than ever before at around 1.47 million people.
- Event attendance (20%) increased by 3 percentage points compared to 2022 (17%). This means that the numbers regularly attending sports events are now higher than at any point previously, with 840,000 doing so in 2023 compared to around 740,000 in 2019.
- Volunteering rates returned to 11% which was the baseline figure recorded in 2017 and remained marginally behind 2019 (12%). Just under half (46%) of volunteers were in coaching roles – an increase of 6 percentage points since 2022 (40%), meaning that there were more volunteer sports coaches in Ireland than ever before (approximately 210,000).
- 34% of those involved socially in sport did not play sport on a regular basis, and a similar proportion of sports participants (36%) did not regularly volunteer, attend events, or state they were members of a sports club.

Broader physical activity

- In 2023, the ISM categorised 39% of the population as highly active, which equates to around 1.6 million adults who met the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking alone.
- This represents an increase of 2 percentage points on the 2022 figure (37%) and means that the proportion meeting the guidelines remained higher than the longer-term average.

- The decline in recreational walking identified in 2022 stabilised, with recreational walking levels (69%) higher than pre-pandemic levels (2019: 66%).
- A decline of 8 and 2 percentage points respectively were seen in the proportions walking for transport and cycling for transport. With a key focus on encouraging active forms of transport for environmental and physical activity reasons, these declines are particularly concerning.

Spotlight on Age

- Levels of sports participation increased among both the younger and older age groups during 2023, with 64% of those aged under 35 and 40% of those aged 35 and over playing sport regularly (2022, 60% and 35% respectively). This follows similar increases in the previous year meaning that sports participation levels for both groups are now aligned with pre-pandemic levels from 2019 (Aged under 35 63%, 35 and over 39%).
- Just over half (51%) of those aged under 35 participated socially in sport, compared with 43% of those aged 35 and over. A 5 percentage point increase in social participation among both age groups meant that the 8 percentage point age gradient in social participation was unchanged since 2022.
- The pattern of volunteering and event attendance across the life course was aligned with previous waves of the ISM. Volunteering levels were highest among those aged between 35 and 54 (16%), and lowest among those aged 20 to 24 (7%) and aged 65 and over (5%).
- It is worth noting that the proportion of younger people walking for recreation has increased substantially in the past few years. ISM 2019 found that 60% of those aged 16 to 24 walked for recreation, increasing to 69% in 2023. The proportion of older people walking recreationally has remained broadly unchanged (66%) of those aged 65 and over.

Spotlight on gender

- Sport participation among women (46%) reached an all-time high, increasing by 6 percentage points since 2022 (40%). Sports participation among men (49%) increased by 4 percentage points (45%).
- The gender gap in sports participation narrowed to 3 percentage points, compared to 5 percentage points in 2022. The gap was previously at 3 percentage points in 2019.
- The percentage of both men (9%) and women (5%) taking part in their sport through organised competition increased since 2022 (from 7% and 3% respectively).
- Among volunteers, 55% of men and 35% of women were involved in coaching roles, an increase of 5 percentage points among men and 6 percentage points among women since 2022 (Men 50%, Women 29%).
- Men in many age groups were twice as likely as women to cycle for transport. Among those aged between 16 to 24, 18% of men and 9% of women cycled regularly for transport.
- For the first time in the ISM series, an equal proportion of men and women were classified as highly active (39%). This was due to a 4 percentage point increase in men who were highly active since 2022 (Men 35%, Women 38%).

Spotlight on socio-economic status

- Each respondent on the ISM is assigned to a socio-economic category based on the occupation of the chief income earner in the household that they live in. Socio-economic categories are standardised across the survey research industry and include 7 different classifications – A, B, C1, C2, D, E, F. For the purposes of this section, the three highest categories (A, B and C1) and the three lowest (C2, D, and E) are grouped together. Category F (farming households) is excluded from this analysis.
- The existing 19 percentage point socio-economic gap in sport participation was lower than at any point since the pandemic, and much lower than the 34 percentage point gap measured in 2017.
- The most popular sports were the same for both socio-economic groups, though a social gradient existed in most cases. This gradient was widest for personal exercise and running (both 7 percentage point gaps). In the case of running, it is notable that participation levels among the higher socio-economic group (ABC1) are roughly 3 times higher than they are for the lower group (C2DE).
- Lower levels of sports participation among the C2DE socio-economic group are also reflected in the proportion of sports participants playing multiple sports. Under a third (29%) of C2DEs played multiple sports each week, compared to two in five (40%) ABC1s who were active in multiple sports.
- While the socio-economic gap was evident across all three forms of social participation, it was higher for club membership (19 percentage points), than it was for both event attendance and volunteering (9 and 6 percentage points respectively).
- Analysis by working status showed strong differences in active travel. Those in employment were less likely to walk (45%) or cycle (9%) for transport, compared to 61% of those who are unemployed walking for transport and 13% cycling for transport.

Spotlight on disability

- The ISM includes a simple measurement to identify disability and facilitate analysis between those with a long-term illness/disability and those without. Each respondent is asked to confirm whether or not they are experiencing any long-term illness, health issue, or disability that restricts their daily activities. The mean age of respondents who have a disability was 53 years, while the mean age of those without a disability came to 44 years. It's crucial to recognise that the age discrepancies among individuals with disabilities have not been accounted for in the study.
- 32% of those with a long-term illness or disability played sport on a regular basis. This compares to 52% among people without a long-term illness or disability. The level of sports participation among those with a long-term illness or disability returned to pre-pandemic levels (2019: 33%).
- Those with a disability were most likely to play sport at home (26%), followed by gyms/sports centres (25%). This compares to 18% and 29% respectively among those without a disability.
- As with the overall rate of social participation, the proportion of those with a long-term illness or disability involved socially in sport increased substantially, rising 12 percentage points to 34%.
- Inactivity was higher among people with a disability (21%), this compares to just under a tenth of people without a disability classified as inactive (9%). Both were broadly unchanged since 2019 (19% and 9% respectively).

Spotlight on ethnicity

- Ethnic categories as used in the 2022 census, were used in the ISM to assess the ethnicity of respondents. During analysis and reporting three broad ethnic groups were identified; White Irish, Other White Background, and Black, Asian or other. Some groups had small sample sizes and as a result the White Irish category includes those who identify as a Traveller, and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds have been combined into one group. The results for all ethnic groups are based on responses from individuals below the age of 45, to balance the average age across these groups. Note this age adjustment results in higher overall rates of sports participation in the ethnicity chapter.
- Sports participation increased among White Irish (62%) and Other White backgrounds (55%) since 2022 (56% and 51% respectively). White Irish sports participation exceeded the level of participation measured in 2019 (58%), while participation among Other White backgrounds almost returned to the same level as 2019 (56%).
- Sports participation among Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (52%) remained unchanged since 2022 (53%), but was 6 percentage points lower than the baseline measure set for this group in 2019 (58%).
- Soccer was the only sport that was more popular among Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (8%) than among White Irish (7%) and Other White backgrounds (5%). It was the second most popular sport among Black, Asian or Other backgrounds, while personal exercise (21%) was the most popular (White Irish 25%, Other White backgrounds 22%).
- A higher percentage of activities were participated in at home among Other White (25%) and Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (20%), than among White Irish (12%).
- Each ethnicity group saw an increase in the percentage of people classified as highly active. Since 2022, the percentage who were highly active increased by 3 percentage points among White Irish (45%), 2 percentage points among both Other White backgrounds (37%) and Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (34%).

Spotlight on the urban-rural divide

- Respondents of the ISM 2023 survey were asked to specify whether they lived in a city, town, village, or an isolated area. Those who answered city or town were categorised as living in an urban location, and those who answered village or isolated location were categorised as living in a rural location. This section discusses how sports participation varies between the populations who live in urban and rural locations.
- In line with the overall increase in sports participation, participation increased by 4 percentage points in both urban (50%) and rural (43%) areas since 2022 (46% and 39% respectively). The location gap in sports participation remained at 7 percentage points.
- Club membership rates increased by 3 percentage points in urban areas (35%) and 5 percentage points in rural areas (36%) since 2022 (32% and 31% respectively). As a result, membership rates remained similar in both areas.
- Walking for transport decreased by 9 and 7 percentage points in urban (56%) and rural (31%) areas respectively, since 2022 (urban 65%, rural 38%).



1. Participation in Sport



Participation in sport - Key findings

- 47% of the adult population regularly participated in sport in 2023. This indicates that there was a 4 percentage point increase in sports participation since 2022, increasing the number of people regularly participating in sport from 1.75 million in 2022 to 1.97 million* in 2023. For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, sports participation rates have exceeded those measured in 2019 (46%).
- Personal exercise (17%), swimming (8%), and running (7%) remained the three most popular sports.
- An increase was seen in the proportion of people taking part in organised competitions, returning to the same level as in 2019 (7%).
- Over three quarters of parents (78%) said they have at least one child participating in sport outside of school. For children whose parents do not participate in sport, participation rates fell to 68%, compared to 89% of children whose parents participate in sport.
- Respondents were asked about their attitudes to equal playing time in childrens competitive matches. Over two thirds (69%) reported that they believe that all children should get equal playing time regardless of their ability or skill. Mothers (75%) supported equal playing time more than fathers (65%).

Introduction

The Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) tracks sports participation at a population level. It uses a comprehensive approach that surveys respondents about their involvement in sports activities within the past seven days. Sports participation in the ISM refers to physical activities engaged in for exercise, recreation, or sport. The survey separately measures recreational walking and two forms of active travel: walking and cycling for transport within the past seven days.

The ISM is a vital tool for monitoring progress towards the goals outlined in the NSP 2018-2027. High-level goals monitored by the ISM include increasing the number of adults engaged in regular sporting activities and eliminating the gender gap in sports participation.

ISM 2023 captures sports participation after the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided. This follows ISM reports from 2021 and 2022 which identified declines in overall participation following the pandemic period when compared to ISM 2019. The first section of this report covers overall sports participation in 2023, including the most popular sports, location and format of participation. Where relevant, comparisons are made with baseline figures from 2017 and ISM figures between 2019 and 2022.

Overall participation in sport

Regular sport participation increased by 4 percentage points to 47%, compared to 2022 (43%). Based on population estimates this means that 1.97 million people participated in sport on a regular basis and approximately 210,000 people took up or returned to playing sport within the past year (2022: 1.76 million active participants).

*Population estimates referenced throughout this report are based on CSO Population Estimates (Persons in April), for people aged 16 and older in Ireland. Figures relating to 2017-2022 in this report are based on revised CSO figures following detailed analysis of the Census 2022. Available at: <https://data.cso.ie/table/PEA01>

Figure 1.1 Overall Participation in Sport 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data is shown in parentheses.

Regular participation in sport is associated with enhanced physical and mental wellbeing and reduced mortality rates. The uptake in sport participation since 2022, from 43% to 47%, suggests a positive trend. Further, participation rates in 2023 have exceeded the previous peak of sports participation recorded in 2019 (46%).

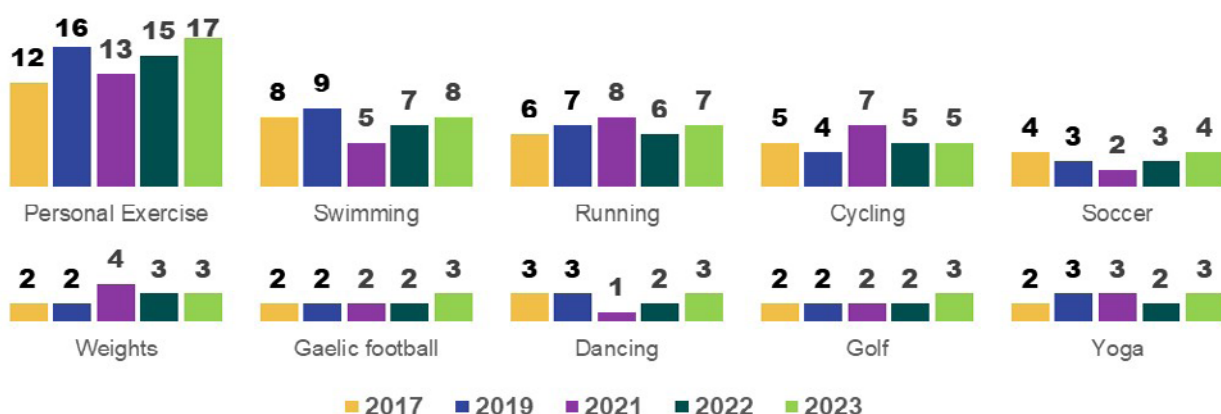
Despite the downturn in participation to 40% in 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, sporting infrastructure and policy has successfully attracted both new and returning participants to sport, increasing participation rates by 7 percentage points within two years. This growth is hopefully indicative of a positive shift in behaviour when it comes to regular sport participation in Ireland.

Most popular sports and physical activities in 2023

Participation rates in several of the most popular sports increased, in line with the overall increase in sports participation. The rank order of the most popular sports has changed slightly as participation in team sports including soccer (4%) and Gaelic football (3%) increased since 2022 (3% and 2% respectively). However, personal exercise (17%), swimming (8%), and running (7%) remained the three most popular sports.

Sports that traditionally are either played in a social setting or require specific sports facilities have shown increasing participation rates following a decline in 2021 due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In 2021 swimming participation levels decreased by 4 percentage points, personal exercise decreased by 3 percentage points, dancing decreased by 2 percentage points and soccer decreased by 1 percentage point when compared to 2019. Participation rates for these sports have increased throughout 2022 and 2023, with personal exercise (17%) and soccer (4%) marginally exceeding their 2019 participation rates (16% and 3% respectively). Dancing (3%) returned to 2019 levels and participation in swimming increased to 8% (2019: 9%).

Figure 1.2 Overall Participation in Sport 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was at most ±0.8.

The increasing popularity of team sports was reported in ISM 2022 (18%) following the removal of pandemic social restriction policies. In 2023, almost one in five sports participants (19%) reported participation in team sports, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2021 (14%).

Individual sports including personal exercise (17%) and golf (3%) have exceeded their 2019 levels of participation (16% and 2% respectively). Several other individual sports have also gained or regained participants compared to 2022 although they are still slightly behind 2019 levels, including swimming (8%) and running (7%).

Participation in multiple sports

The ISM asks respondents to provide details on up to three activities that they took part in over the last seven days. This allows the survey to capture the proportion of respondents who participated in multiple sports on a regular basis.

Three out of every ten people (30%) participate regularly in one sport, with this figure remaining stable since 2022. The number of people participating regularly in two sports (12%) per week has increased by 2 percentage points since 2022 (10%). Similarly, the number of people participating in three sports (5%) each week has also increased by 2 percentage points in the same period (2022: 3%). The proportion of adults participating in multiple sports had remained relatively stable between 2017 and 2022 (13%), peaking at 14% in 2019. In 2023 however, 17% of the adult population regularly participated in two or more sports each week. These findings suggest that as the overall rate of sport participation increases, the number and variety of sports people are participating in is also growing.

The growth in personal exercise may be influencing this trend as it is the activity most often combined with other sports. It is incorporated into the weekly activities of 29% of those who run, 24% of those who hill walk, 23% of those who play hurling and camogie, and 22% of those who play Gaelic football.

Many participants engaged in team sports, such as Gaelic football, soccer, hurling, or camogie also partake in an additional team sport from this list. Among soccer players, the most popular of these team sports, 13% also played Gaelic football and 8% played hurling or camogie. Similarly, among Gaelic football players, 18% also played soccer and 14% played hurling or camogie.

Special Module – Sports Children Play

At the start of 2023 the ISM ran a special module on children's sport participation outside of school. Respondents who had children aged five or older were asked questions about their children's participation including sports they played, age they were introduced to the sport, club memberships, and whether they received coaching for their sport. The survey recorded up to three sports that each child participated in.

When the lens is focused on parents, over three quarters (78%) reported that at least one of their children participated in sport outside of school. Overall, just under three quarters (74%) of all children were active sports participants. This means that just over a quarter of children (26%) do not participate in any sport outside of school in community settings. This is a similar finding to the 2022 Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study which found that 25% of children do not participate in community sport.

Over a third of children (34%) played one sport regularly and two in five (40%) of all children played more than one sport per week on a regular basis. This indicates that children (40%) were more likely than the adult population (17%) to play two or more sports per week.

The three most popular sports played by children were Gaelic football (30%), soccer (28%), and swimming (14%). Children who played one of the most popular sports were also likely to play a second one of these popular sports on a regular basis. Among children who played soccer, 43% also played Gaelic football. Conversely 40% of children who played Gaelic football also played soccer. Among children who were swimming regularly, 45% played Gaelic football and 40% played soccer.

Figure 1.3 Children's sports participation - most popular sports 2023 (%)

Children's sport	%
Gaelic football	30 (\pm 3.6)
Soccer	28 (\pm 3.5)
Swimming	14 (\pm 2.7)
Hurling	8 (\pm 2.1)
Basketball	7 (\pm 2.0)
Camogie	7 (\pm 2.0)
Martial arts	5 (\pm 1.7)
Dancing	5 (\pm 1.7)
Personal exercise	4 (\pm 1.5)
Gymnastics	4 (\pm 1.5)

Note: Margins of error shown in parentheses.

Most children who played sport were members of a sports club (85%), while nine in ten children who played sport (91%) received coaching. Sports clubs and volunteers, such as coaches, form the backbone of children's sports participation, as these figures suggest that most children participate in sport in organised settings. Sporting infrastructure is vital to engaging children in sport outside of school, by providing essential facilities and support for clubs and coaches. These supports can help to get children engaged and keep them involved in sport, especially during periods of transition between primary and secondary school and have a lasting impact on lifelong sports participation.

Location

Gyms and sports centres remain the most common location for sport participation (28%). The second most common location is in public places (22%), followed by participation at home (16%) and in sports clubs (13%). Among those who participated in public places, public roads (10%), parks (6%) and beaches (3%) were the most common locations.

Gyms and sports centres were used by a large proportion of participants engaging in personal exercise (63%), weights (43%), and swimming (38%). Public roads were used by 42% of runners and 69% of cyclists. Participants in activities including weights (58%), yoga (55%), exercise (26%), and dancing (23%) commonly did these sports at home. Team sports such as Gaelic football (67%) and soccer (41%) were most played in sports clubs.

Figure 1.4 Location for sports participation – most common location (% Sport Participants)

	2019	2021	2022	2023
Gym/sports centre	33	15	28	28 (± 1.1)
At home	11	32	19	16 (± 0.9)
Sports club	17	11	13	13 (± 0.8)
Public place (TOTAL)	23	35	23	22 (± 1)
- Road	-	19	11	10 (± 0.7)
- Park	-	6	5	6 (± 0.6)
- Beach/seaside	-	5	4	3 (± 0.4)
- Footpath	-	4	2	2 (± 0.3)
- Public green	-	2	1	1 (± 0.2)

Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

Despite being the most common location, the proportion of participation taking place in gyms and sports centres (28%) remained behind 2019, when a third (33%) of participants used these facilities. A shift in the types of sports played and the facilities that are required during 2021, may have impacted participants' likelihood to return to these locations following their reopening in early 2022. The proportion of participants using sports clubs (13%) has been stable since 2022, though a higher proportion of participation took place in sports clubs in 2019 (17%). Taking population growth into account this means 256,000 sports participants used sports clubs in 2023, which means sports clubs were used by approximately 47,000 less participants when compared to 2019 (303,000 sports participants used sports clubs).

Sport participation at home (16%) and in public places (22%) has declined since 2021 (32% and 35% respectively). This shift in location preferences may have occurred as participants returned to reopened sports facilities in early 2022. However, a higher proportion of participants still exercised at home (16%) than in 2019 (11%).

Figure 1.5 Location for sport participation by sport 2023 (%)

	Total	Exercise	Swim	Running	Cycling	Soccer	Weights	Gaelic Football	Dancing	Golf	Yoga
Gym/sports centre	28 (±1.1%)	63	38	7	5	8	43	4	9	1	12
At home	16 (±0.9%)	26	-	3	9	5	58	1	23	-	55
Sports club	13 (±0.8%)	2	2	7	1	41	1	67	6	26	4
Public road	10 (±0.7%)	-	-	42	69	1	-	-	-	-	-
Public green	7 (±0.6%)	-	-	29	12	21	1	8	2	-	-
Community hall	5 (±0.5%)	4	-	-	-	2	-	2	29	-	15
Beach/seaside	3 (±0.4%)	-	16	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Golf course	3 (±0.4%)	-	1	1	1	2	-	2	-	50	-
Swimming pool	3 (±0.4%)	2	15	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-
Other	20 (±1.1%)	6	28	28	16	29	2	21	35	23	18

Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses.

Special Module – Sport Ireland

The Sport Ireland Campus is the home of Irish sport. The campus provides facilities for a diverse range of sports for high performance athletes, which are also used by children and the community taking part in sport at all levels. Some of the main facilities include the National Aquatic Centre, Aquazone, and National Indoor Arena. At the end of 2023 the ISM ran a special module which focussed on awareness and experience of the Sport Ireland Campus.

Over one quarter (28%) of respondent’s reported visiting the Sport Ireland Campus. Almost half (49%) of these visitors went to the National Aquatic Centre to swim or spectate and over a quarter (26%) visited the Aquazone waterpark. Around one in every five visitors (18%) were at the campus to participate or spectate at another sports event, while 12% of visitors went just to see the campus. In the next twelve months 16% of respondents plan to visit the Sport Ireland Campus. Among those intending to visit, 29% will go just to see the campus, 25% will visit the National Aquatic Centre, and 23% intend to participate or spectate at other sports events.

Format of sports participation

Sports participants commonly engaged in activities on their own, though a growing preference for participation in social environments is evident. The proportion of participants engaging in activities on their own (45%) means this remained the most popular format of participation, 14 percentage points ahead of organised training (31%). The proportion of people engaging on their own declined by 4 percentage points since 2022 (49%) but remains 2 percentage points higher than 2019 (43%).

Participation in organised training (31%) increased in recent years, though it remained 3 percentage points lower than the participation rate in 2019 (34%). Remote training (2%) declined in popularity since 2021 (6%). In contrast, in-person training has increased year on year since 2021 (16%) when it was first tracked (2022: 26%, 2023 29%).

Figure 1.6 Format of sports participation 2019-2023

	2019	2021	2022	2023
On own	43	56	49	45 (± 1.2)
Casually with friends/ family	25	25	24	26 (± 1.1)
Organised training (TOTAL)	34	22	29	31 (± 1.1)
- In person	-	16	26	29 (± 1.1)
- Remote	-	6	3	2 (± 0.3)
Organised competition	7	3	5	7 (± 0.6)
Some other way	1	1	2	-

Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

An increase was seen in the proportion of people taking part in organised competitions, returning to the same level as in 2019 (7%). The lower proportion of people taking part in competitive sport since the pandemic, as low as 3% in 2021, has been of concern to the sports sector. The uptake of competitive sports participation is encouraging and builds a stable platform for competitive participation to grow.

Frequency, duration and intensity

The average frequency of sports participation per week remained unchanged since 2022, as participants took part in activities 2.6 times per week on average (2019: average of 2.5). The duration of these activities was on average 67.6 minutes per session, relatively unchanged from 2022 (69.4 minutes).

Figure 1.7 Average frequency and duration sports activities 2019-2023

	2019	2021	2022	2023
Average frequency (sessions per week)	2.5	2.8	2.6	2.6
Average duration (minutes per session)	69.2	68.0	69.4	67.6

Sports participants spent an average of 3.9 hours per week participating in sport, relatively unchanged since 2022 (average of 3.7 hours per week). The accumulative time spent playing sport per week varies greatly across participants. The largest proportion of sports participants, one fifth (20%), were in the group who played between 3 to 5 hours of sport per week, similar to 2022 (19%). The proportion of participants who played sport for more than 5 hours and up to 8 hours (15%) increased by 2 percentage points since 2022 (13%). The smallest proportion of sports participants (4%) are those who played sport up to 30 minutes per week (2022: 5%).

Figure 1.8 Time spent participating in sport per week (% of sports participants)

Time spent participating	2022	2023
Up to 30 minutes	5	4
31 to 60 minutes	15	13
More than 1 up to 1.5 hours	10	9
More than 1.5 up to 2 hours	12	12
More than 2 up to 3 hours	17	17
More than 3 up to 5 hours	19	20
More than 5 up to 8 hours	13	15
More than 8 hours	8	8
Average	3.7 hours	3.9 hours

The ISM measures intensity of activity by asking sports participants if the activity was enough to raise their breathing rate (moderate intensity) and for them to be out of breath (vigorous intensity). Participants are categorised by their peak level of intensity across reported activities. Sport was played to a vigorous level of intensity by 76% of participants, an increase of 2 percentage points since 2022. The proportion engaging up to moderate level of intensity (16%) remained unchanged since 2022. Less than one in every ten (8%) participants engaged in sport at a low level of intensity (2022: 9%).

The general trend in 2023 appears to indicate that more people are participating in sport than ever before and that those who are participating in sport are spending more time doing sport at a slightly higher intensity. In terms of overarching sport and physical activity policy which aims to have more people, more active, more often, the 2023 ISM results point towards a positive trend.

Special Module – Children’s playing time

There are two main viewpoints when it comes to the topic of playing time in children’s sports. One view is that all children should get equal playing time in competitive matches regardless of their ability or skill level as it benefits them as an individual. Another view is that players for matches should be chosen on the basis of their skills as it improves the team’s chances of success, even if this means that some children get to play fewer matches. Equal playing time policies in children’s team sports would ensure that all children regardless of ability and skill get equal playing time in competitive matches. At the start of 2023 the ISM explored people’s opinions on equal playing time for children’s sport.

Parents of children who play team sports were asked whether they believed the amount of time their children gets in matches is fair or unfair. Overall, 87% of parents believed their children’s playing time was fair, with 10% saying it was unfair.

When asked which view was closest to their own, over two thirds of respondents (69%) said all children should get equal playing time regardless of their ability or skill. This view was slightly more popular among individuals who were not a member of a sports club and did not play sport themselves (both 72%). Mothers (75%) were more likely than fathers (65%) to support equal playing time.

Figure 1.9 Support for equal playing time in children’s team sport, among mothers and fathers (%)

	Overall	Mothers	Fathers
All children	69	75	65
Children aged under 10	88	82	82
Children aged 10-12	73	73	65
Children aged 13-17	33	40	17

Support for equal playing time was strongest in relation to young children, aged under 10. Almost nine in ten people (88%) believe that children aged under 10 should get equal playing time in competitive matches. Though notably, non-parents (90%) were more supportive than parents (83%) of this ruling for children aged under 10. Support for equal playing time declined as children’s age groups got older, 73% supported equal playing time for children aged 10-12, declining to one third (33%) for children aged 13-17. An average age of 12 years was given when respondents were asked up to what age they would support the rule of equal playing time.

Mothers were consistently more likely than fathers to support equal playing time for children, except for children aged under 10 when 82% of both mothers and fathers supported this rule. The largest difference was in relation to the 13-17 aged group, when 40% of mothers and just 17% of fathers supported the rule. However, on average both mothers and fathers report that they would support the rule up to age 12.

An equal playing time rule may allow more children to develop in sport beyond those who have an early advantage due to age, biological maturity, or physical abilities, reduce favouritism among coaches, and keep sport fun, especially among younger age groups. However, given the diminishing support for equal playing time as children age, it should be noted that relative age effects and differences in biological maturity can be at their peak in the early teenage years. Athlete selection policies amongst teenagers which are based primarily on competitive success rather than athlete development can have negative impacts on both the achievement of athletic potential and lifelong participation.



2. Transitions in Sport



Taking up sport - Key findings

- Three in every five (60%) sports participants said they took up their sport aged 16 or older, while 39% were still involved in a sport they took up aged under 16.
- A quarter of participants (26%) first took up their main sport in a club, while another quarter (25%) started their main sport at a local sports facility. Notably, the third most common location for taking up sport was at home (15%), while a further 11% took up their sport in a public space.
- Team sports were most commonly taken up at a club, including Gaelic football (63%) and soccer (38%). Three-quarters (75%) of those who played golf also took up this sport at a club. The most common sports taken up at home were cycling (51%) and yoga (33%).
- Friends (23%), fathers (13%), other family members (11%), teachers (8%), and mothers (5%) were stated as the people who introduced participants to their main sport.
- A higher proportion of men (16%) compared to women (10%) reported their father introduced them to sport. While mothers introduced 4% of men and 6% of women to their sports, highlighting the importance of gender specific role models.

Introduction

A high-level goal of the NSP 2018-2027 is to increase the proportion of the population who are active sports participants. There are two ways to achieve this, increase the rate at which people take up sport or decrease the rate at which people drop out of sport.

The ISM ran a module on take up in sport between July and August, followed by a module on drop out in sport between September and October. The module on take up in sport focussed on the main sport currently played by participants and explored the age of take up, the types of sport taken up throughout the life course, locations used, and the influences behind taking up a new sport. Combined, these factors help to outline how the population transition into sport from childhood through to retirement age. By understanding how the take up of sport changes as the population ages, policies can be put in place to aid these transitions and potentially increase the uptake of sport.

Taking up sport

Sports participation varies throughout the life course, as the rate of participation and the types of sport played change as people get older.

Three in every five (60%) sports participants said they took up their sport aged 16 or older, while 39% are still involved in a sport they took up aged under 16. The following table shows the age at which a range of age cohorts took up the main sport they participated in at the time of survey. Across the age cohorts a noteworthy proportion remained active in sports they took up when they were aged under 16. This ranged from 67% of those aged 16-19 to 23% of participants aged 65 and older.

Figure 2.1 Age that sport was taken up by current age (%)

Age sport was taken up	Current age						
	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
<16	67	61	36	30	31	33	23
16-19	32	30	19	12	10	9	6
20-24	-	9	10	11	11	5	1
25-34	-	-	33	26	7	8	15
35-44	-	-	-	21	30	7	8
45-54	-	-	-	-	12	8	10
55-64	-	-	-	-	-	31	12
65+	-	-	-	-	-	-	24

Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

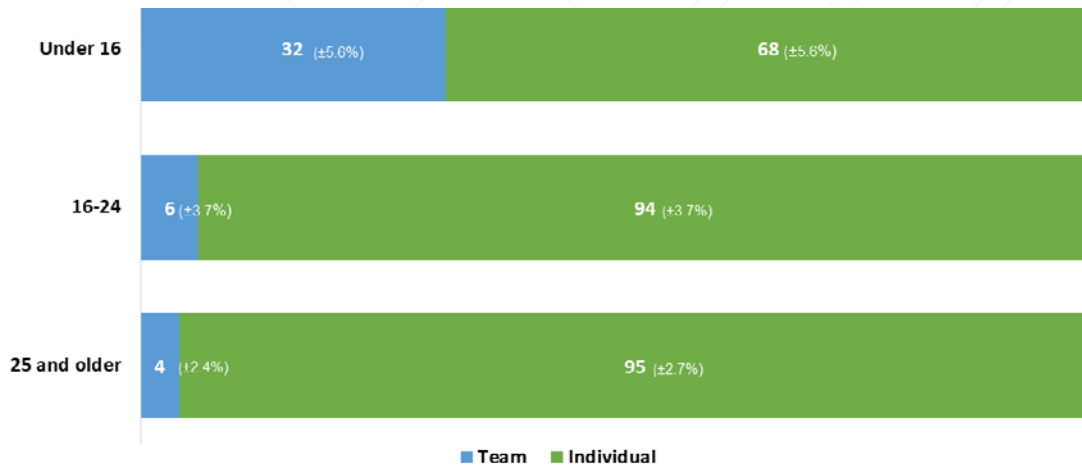
Another pattern evident across age cohorts was that many participants were active in a sport that they took up in recent years. In the youngest group aged 16-19, almost a third (32%) played a sport they had taken up while aged between 16 and 19. In the next age cohort, 20-24, 30% were still active in the sport they took up when they were aged 16-19, with a further 9% taking up their sport aged 20-24. This pattern continued among the older age groups as 31% of those aged 55-64 and 24% of those aged 65 and older had taken up their main sport in recent years.

Types of sports taken up

Previous research has indicated that individual activities account for the majority of sport taken up in adulthood. 95% of those who took up sport aged 16 or older reported that they took up an individual sport, this figure remained similar to what was reported in ISM 2015 (97%). Among adults who took up a sport aged 25 and older, just 4% reported that this was team sport (2015: 3%).

Team sports were more likely to be taken up by children, with almost a third (31%) reporting that they took up their current team sport while aged under 16 (2015: 29%). This compares to just 6% who took up their team sport aged 16-24 and 4% who took up their team sport aged 25 and older (2015: 10% and 3% respectively).

Figure 2.2 Age that sport was started, by team and individual sports (%)



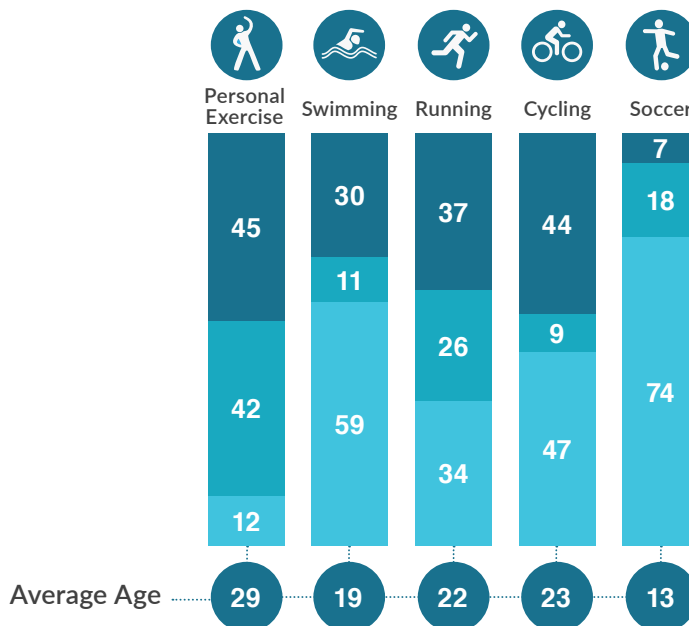
Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses.

Age 23 was the reported average age that respondents took up their main sport. Among those whose main sport was an individual activity, the average age of take up was 25, compared to age 12 being the average age of take up for those playing team sports. The average age of take up for both individual and team sports has remained consistent since last reported in 2015.

These findings indicate that the proportion of adults who play or may return to team sports is largely constrained by whether they played a team sport as a child.

Swimming was the only individual sport among the top five sports that had a higher level of take up aged under 16 (59%) than during adulthood (30% aged 25 and older). Personal exercise the overall most popular sport was primarily taken up when aged 16-24 (42%) and aged 25 and older (45%), and three in five people who play golf took up this sport aged 25 or over.

Figure 2.3 Age that sport was taken up by main sports participated in (%)



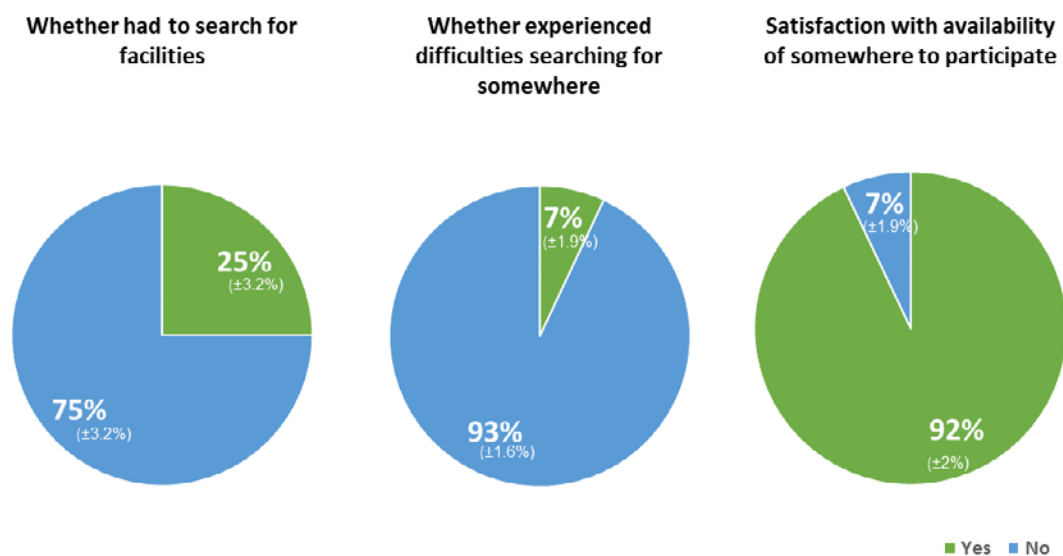
Note: The margin of error was at most ±13.2%.

Initial Involvement: Location and influence

Location

Access to facilities is another factor that impacts whether people get involved in sport and the types of sport they take up. When finding facilities to take up their sport, three quarters (75%) did not have to search for local facilities to participate and overall, 93% said they had no difficulties finding somewhere to participate. The proportion of participants who had to search for facilities to take up their sport (25%) has decreased by 2 percentage points since the question was last asked in 2015 (27%). While satisfaction with availability of a place to take up and participate in sport (92%) remains unchanged since last measured, also in 2015.

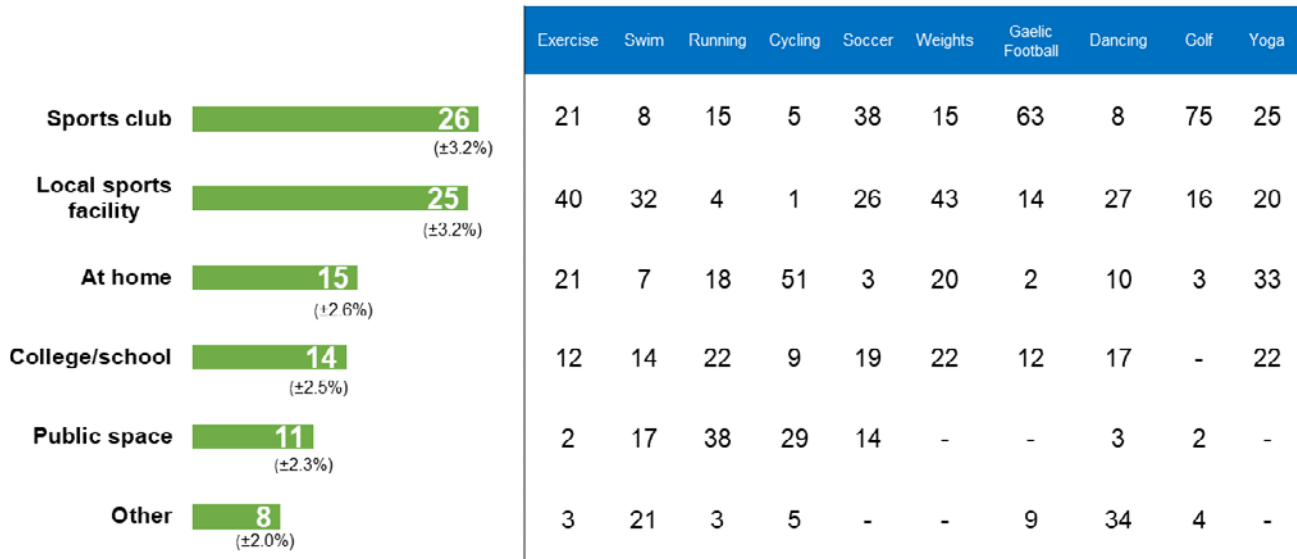
Figure 2.4 Experience of finding a location to take up a sport (%)



Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses. "Don't know" responses not included.

Participants most commonly took up sports in environments that typically have facilities and support structures in place. A quarter (26%) of participants first took part in a sports club, while another quarter (25%) started at a local sports facility. Notably, the third most common location for taking up sport was at home (15%), while a further 11% took up their sport in a public space, showing that although sports infrastructure and facilities are important to increasing involvement in sports, initiatives can be taken to engage participants at home and in public spaces.

Figure 2.5 Facilities used when taking up sports (%)



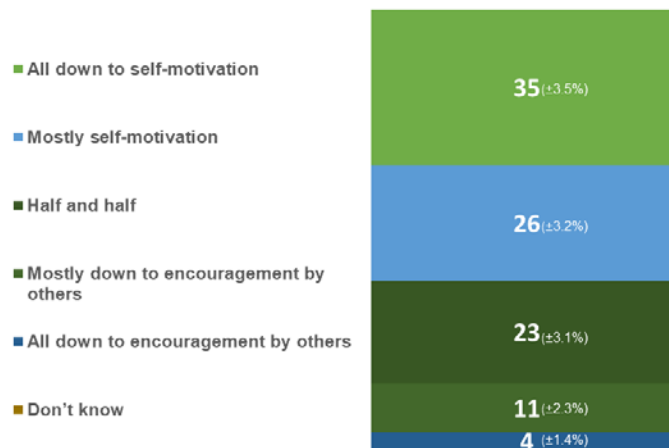
Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses. "Don't know" responses were less than 1%.

Sports clubs were the most common location used to take up team sports such as Gaelic football (63%) and soccer (38%). Three-quarters (75%) of those who played golf also took up this sport at a sports club. The most common sports taken up at home were cycling (51%) and yoga (33%). Figures from the earlier Sports Participation chapter showed that yoga (55%) was a common sport for at-home participation, showing continued engagement in the location where the sport was taken up. Almost half (47%) of those who cycle took up this sport aged under 16 and likely transitioned to road-cycling as they grew older and more experienced in the sport, as the earlier sports participation chapter reported that 69% of those who cycled did so on public roads.

Influence

While participants are often self-motivated to get involved in sport, many can also be influenced by people in their lives. Three in five sports participants (61%) said they took up their sport entirely or mostly because of self-motivation. Just 15% of sports participants said they took up sport entirely or mostly because of the encouragement of others. The remaining 23% of participants said it was half and half, due to both self-motivation and the encouragement of others.

Figure 2.6 Source of encouragement/motivation to take up sport (%)



Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses. "Don't know" was equal to 1%.

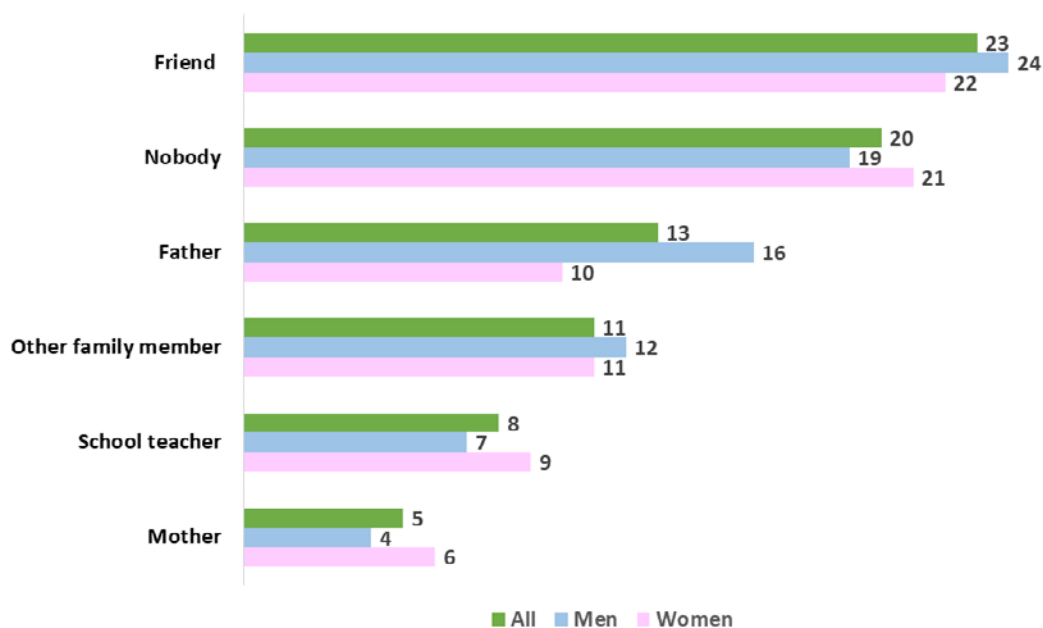
Participants who took up sport aged under 16 were the least likely to say their initial involvement in the sport was due to self-motivation (48%), among those who took up sport aged 20-24 this grew to 73% saying they took up sport due to self-motivation. The influence and encouragement of friends and family to take up sport appears to have more of an impact in childhood. A quarter (25%) of those who took up their sport aged under 16 said this was due to the encouragement of others, compared to 4% of those aged 20-24.

The type of sport taken up is also linked to motivation and whether encouragement was received from others. The majority of participants who took up running (71%) and personal exercise (70%) said their initial involvement was down to their own self-motivation. While, initial involvement in popular team sports such as Gaelic football (33%) and soccer (19%) was attributed to the encouragement of others.

Sports participants were separately asked who or what introduced them to their sport. Despite a large proportion of sports participants attributing their initial involvement to self-motivation, only 20% stated that nobody introduced them to the sport. Friends (23%), fathers (13%), other family members (11%), teachers (8%), and mothers (5%) were noted as being responsible for introducing participants to their sport.

A higher proportion of men (16%) compared to women (10%) reported their father introduced them to sport. While mothers introduced 4% of men and 6% of women to their sports. Schoolteachers were reported to have introduced 9% of women and 7% of men to their main sport.

Figure 2.7 First introduction to sport, by gender (%)



Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 4.4\%$. Other responses under 5% not listed.

Participants who took up their sport aged under 16 were most likely to state that fathers (27%), schoolteachers (17%), and mothers (11%) introduced them to their sports. While 37% of participants who took up their sport between ages 16-19 said their friends introduced them, and those who took up sport aged 35-44 (36%) were most likely to say nobody introduced them. As sports participants age, the likelihood of taking up new sports appears to be influenced by self-motivation and determination, as opposed to encouragement and introductions from others.

Dropping out of sport - Key findings

- 84% of the population have participated in sport at some point in their life, while 16% have never participated in sport.
- Of the 72% of the population who have dropped out of a sport they used to play regularly, 38% switched to playing a different sport and 34% quit playing sport completely.
- Switching sport (60%) was more common than quitting (20%) sport among the youngest age group of those aged 16-24. Switching sport remained more prevalent than quitting up until ages 55-64, where 49% had quit sport and 27% had switched sports.
- The proportion who have never taken up sport was highest among those aged 65+ (31%), and lowest among those aged 16-24 (6%). This finding suggests that younger people are getting involved in sport at a higher rate than older cohorts did within their lifetime.
- Among those who had dropped out of regular sports participation, work commitments (27%), picking up an injury (26%) and family commitments (24%) were listed as the major factors behind drop out.

Decreasing drop out in sport is one of the ways that active sports participation can be increased. By monitoring drop out in sport, barriers and deterrents to continued sport participation can be identified. Through understanding the reasons behind drop out in sport at different life stages, a more inclusive and engaging sports environment can be created.

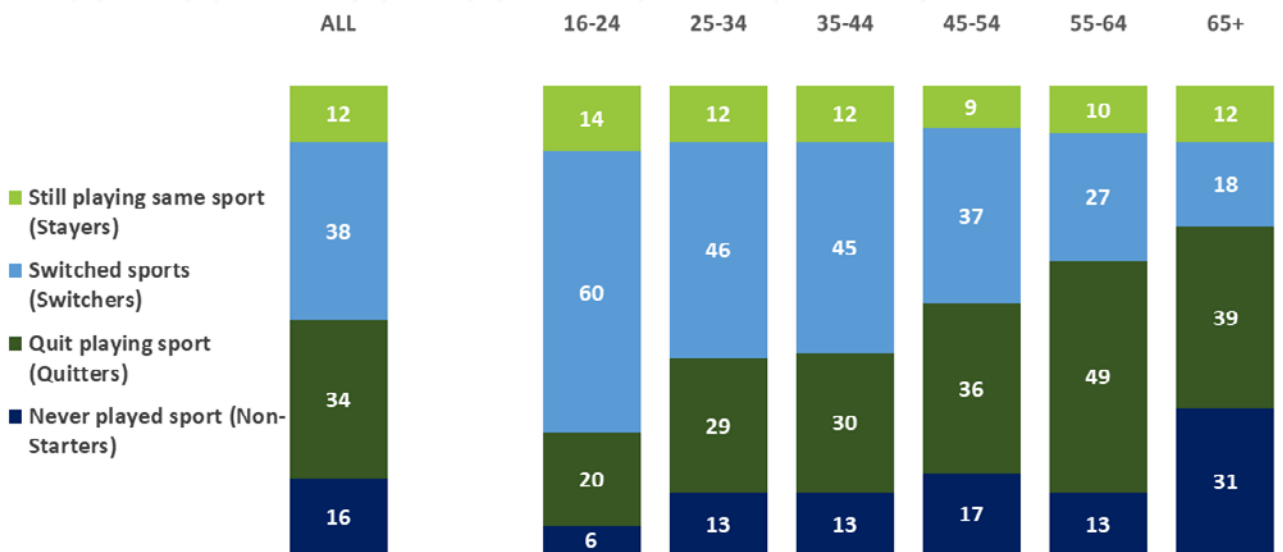
The ISM ran a special module on drop out in sport in September and October of 2023. The module explored the type of sports participants used to participate in on a regular basis and the major factors behind dropping out of sport.

Past sports participation

At an overall level, 84% have participated in sport at some point in their life, while 16% have never participated in sport.

By analysing whether respondents were current sports participants and whether they had ever been a participant of a sport they have since dropped out of, four categories were created for reporting purposes: Quitters, Switchers, Stayers, and Non-starters. Overall, 38% reported switching sports, 34% quit sport but had played at some point, 16% never took up any sport, and 12% have continued to play the first main sport they took up.

Figure 2.8 Involvement in sport by age (%)

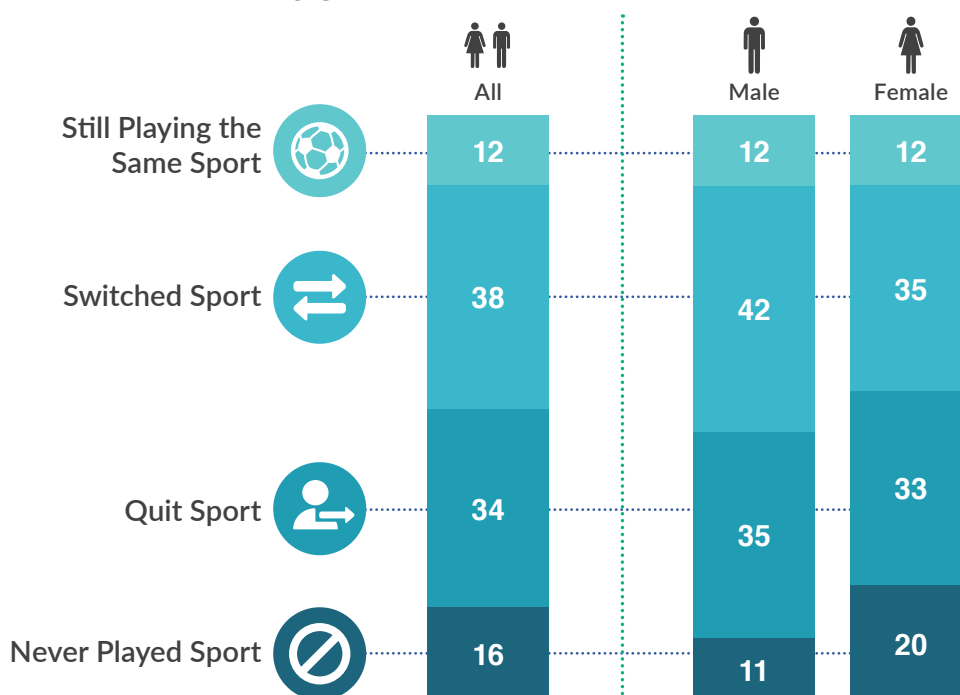


Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 7.4\%$.

Switching sport (60%) was more common than quitting sport (20%) among the youngest age group of those aged 16-24. Switching sport remained more prevalent than quitting up until ages 55-64, where 49% had quit sport and 27% had switched sports. Switching sports is encouraged as people age out of sports due to injury, interest, and other major factors of transition throughout the life stages. If younger age cohorts continue the behaviour of switching instead of dropping out of sport overtime, overall levels of sports participation could increase as these cohorts age throughout the lifespan.

The proportion who have never taken up sport was highest among those aged 65+ (31%), and lowest among those aged 16-24 (6%). This finding suggests that younger people are getting involved in sport at a higher rate than older cohorts did within their lifetime.

Figure 2.9 Involvement in sport by gender (%)



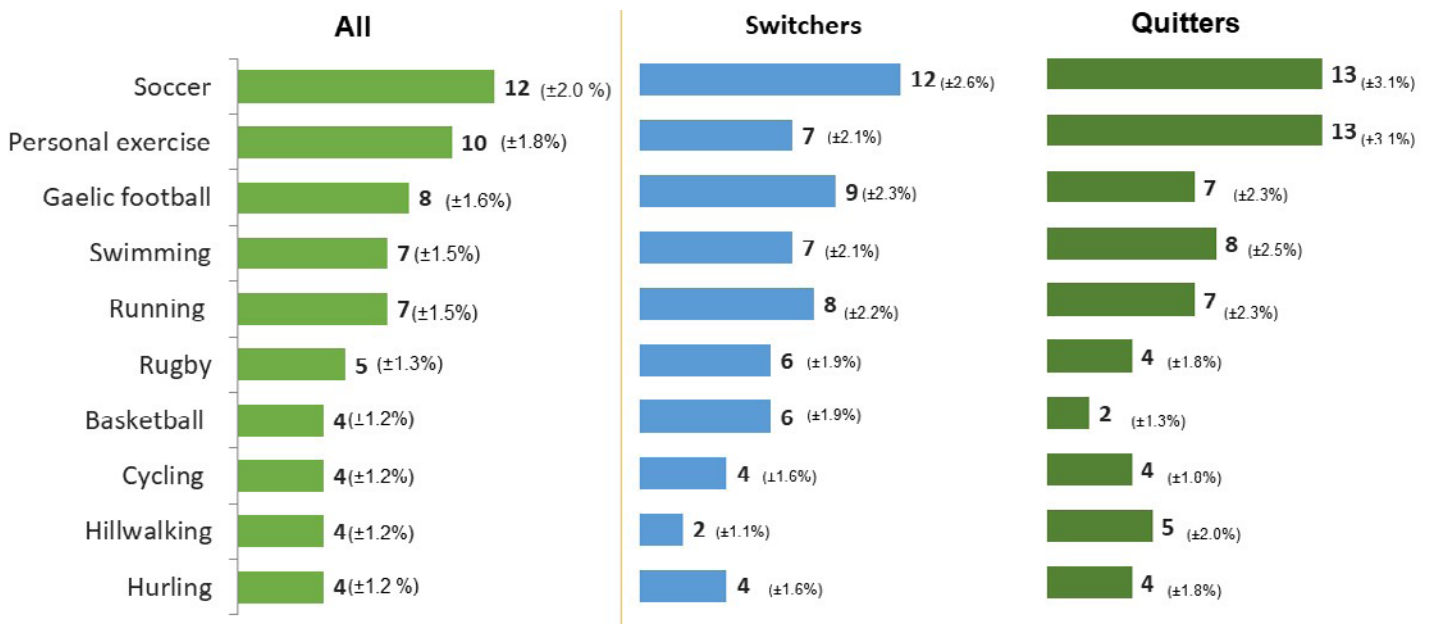
Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 3.5\%$

A fifth of women (20%) had never participated in sport, compared to just over one in ten men (11%). The level of drop out in sport was similar across the genders (35% of men and 33% of women), though a higher percentage of men (42%) than women (35%) switched sports.

Types of sport dropped out of

Among those who dropped out of sport, just over one in ten (12%) reported that they dropped out of soccer and 8% dropped out of Gaelic football. These are two of the most popular team sports as reported in the previous chapter, and these results indicate that drop out in team sports accounts for a large proportion of drop out in sport. Furthermore, other team sports including rugby (5%), hurling (4%), and basketball (4%) were also reported among the top ten sports that people had dropped out of.

Figure 2.10 Types of activity previously involved in (% of those who dropped out of sport)



Note: The margins of error are shown in parentheses

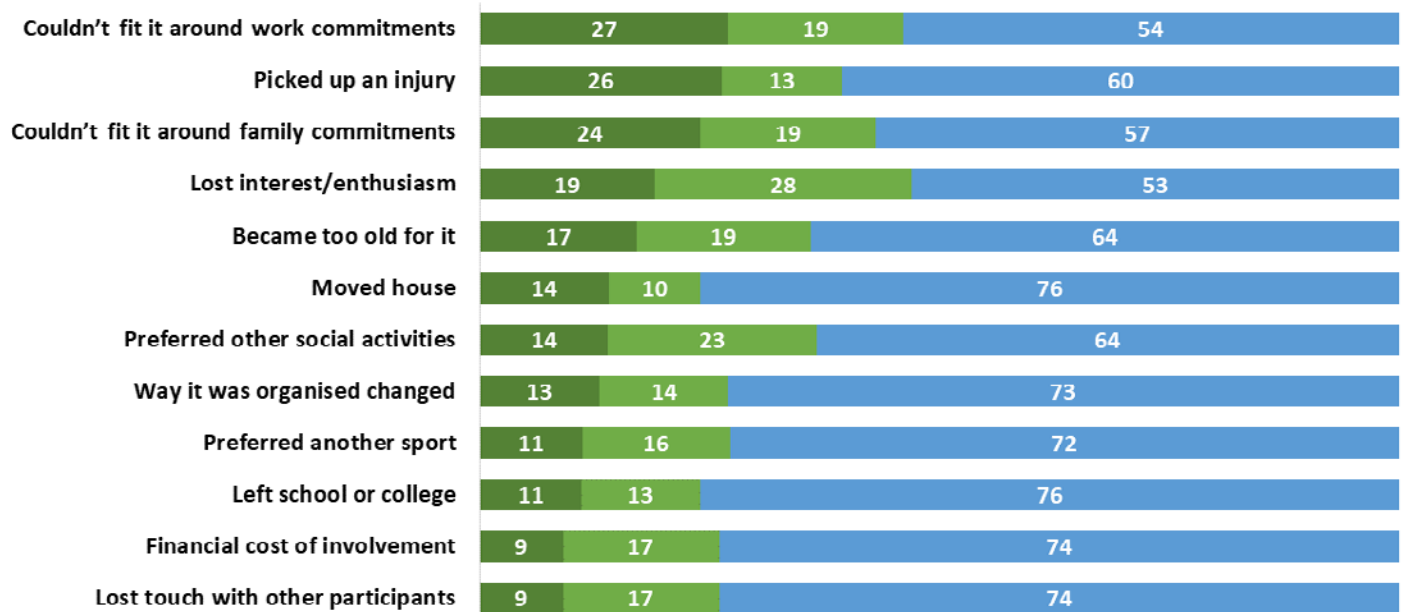
In terms of drop out in individual sports, a tenth (10%) reported dropping out of personal exercise. Personal exercise has been increasing in popularity in recent years and was the most popular sport again in 2023. In earlier chapters it was reported that 17% of the population participated in this activity, as a result it is unsurprising that overtime a high proportion of personal exercise participants tend to drop out of this activity or switch to a different sport. Running (7%) and swimming (7%) were the next most common individual sports that people dropped out of.

Factors behind drop out in sport

People drop out of sport for a wide range of reasons, though time constraints are a primary factor behind drop out. Among all who had dropped out of a regular sport or exercise, 27% stated work commitments and 24% stated family commitments as major factors in their drop out. Injury is another prominent factor behind drop out in sport as 26% reported picking up an injury as the major factor behind dropping out of an activity.

Figure 2.11 Factors behind dropping out of sport (%)

■ Major factor ■ Minor factor ■ No influence



Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 2.6\%$.

Gender and age differences were evident among the 27% who reported work commitments as the major factor behind them dropping out of sport. Almost a third (31%) of men who dropped out of sport stated they couldn't fit sport around their work commitments, compared to 22% of women. Drop out due to work commitments was highest among those aged 35-44 (38%) and increased to 43% among men in this age group (women aged 35-44: 32%).

In terms of drop out in sport due to family commitments, women (27%) were more likely than men (22%) to report this was a major factor.

For people who are in a busy period of their lives, where the majority of their time is committed to work, family and other commitments, it is important to highlight the necessity of moving and participating in sport in whatever way is achievable. In doing so, total drop out in sport can be avoided and participants can be encouraged to switch to activities that are convenient to them and less time consuming, as priorities change throughout the life course.

Similarly, for participants who drop out of sport due to injury (26%) it is important that these dropouts are supported by encouraging transitions into sports that are low impact or that can be adapted to facilitate injury recovery, or long-term disability. Almost half (48%) of people who dropped out of running and 29% of people who dropped out of soccer stated that picking up an injury was the major factor behind their dropout. A potential way to support these transitions, is by supporting the development of transitional pathways within sports communities and clubs that have high injury rates, such as running and soccer.



3. Social Participation in Sport



Social participation in sport - Key findings

- Overall social participation was 45% in 2023. While this was a notable increase from 41% in 2022, it remained behind the level measured in 2019 (47%). At a population level, approximately 1.89 million people regularly socially participate in sport.
- Club membership (35%) increased by 4 percentage points since 2022 (31%), bringing it close to the same level measured in 2019 (36%). Due to a population increase over this period, this means that there were more club members than ever before at around 1.47 million people.
- Event attendance (20%) increased by 3 percentage points compared to 2022 (17%). As with club membership, this means that the numbers regularly attending sports events are now higher than at any point previously, with 840,000 doing so in 2023 compared to around 740,000 in 2019.
- Volunteering rates returned to 11% which was the baseline figure recorded in 2017 and remained marginally behind 2019 (12%). Just under half (46%) of volunteers were in coaching roles – an increase of 6 percentage points since 2022 (40%), meaning that there were more volunteer sports coaches in Ireland than ever before (approximately 210,00).
- 34% of those involved socially in sport did not play sport on a regular basis, and a similar proportion of sports participants (36%) did not regularly volunteer, attend events, or state they were members of a sports club.

Introduction

The ISM monitors three aspects of social involvement in sports: membership of sports clubs, attendance at sports events, and volunteering.

In combination these three components are crucial for the efficient operation of sport. Sport clubs provide the necessary framework to underpin sports development including facilities, coaching, athlete and participant pathways, and community engagement. Volunteers play a key role in sport facilitation by offering coaching, financial and administrative support, and coordinating training and events. Lastly, attending events adds to the financial resources generated by sports and fosters social connections within the sports community.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental effect on each of these three components of social participation, as restrictions led to the necessary closure of many sports clubs, venues and facilities. While the results of the 2023 ISM highlight a significant recovery, each form of social participation remains behind pre-pandemic levels.

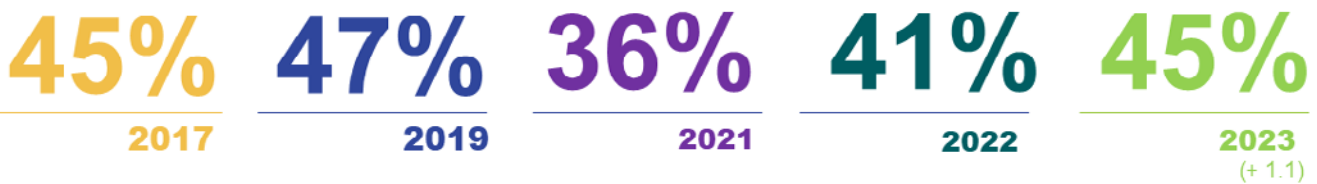
In addition to continued measurement of these core metrics, this year's report considers coaching in more detail and explores differences in terms of the profile of coaches and how this has evolved over time.

Overall social participation in sport

Overall social participation was 45% in 2023, and while it was a notable increase from 41% in 2022, it still remained behind the level measured in 2019 (47%). Although the percentage of the population engaging in social sports participation is lower than in 2019, due to population growth over the same time period, the number of people participating in sport socially has increased. At a population level, approximately 1.89 million people now regularly socially participate in sport, compared to 1.82 million people in 2019.

These results indicate that around 140,000 people ceased their social participation in sport over the course of the pandemic between 2019 and 2022, but 210,000 have since returned or commenced social participation in sport.

Figure 3.1 Overall social participation, 2017-2023 (%)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data shown in parentheses.

Relationship between social and active participation

One important finding of the ISM series, highlighted in each report, is that social and active participation in sport are not necessarily interlinked. Many sports participants do not participate socially in sport, and many social participants do not actively participate in sport.

In 2023, 34% of those involved socially in sport did not participate in sport on a regular basis, and a similar proportion of sports participants (36%) did not regularly volunteer, attend events, or state they were members of a sports club. Non-participation in sport was highest among those who attended events (41%), followed by those who were members of a sports club (25%) and volunteered (24%).

While in all cases, these proportions are declining due to increasing sports participation, there remains a sizeable number of people (600,000) who participate socially in sport, but do not play on a regular basis. Furthermore, roughly half (51%) of social participants do not meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines, despite having this social engagement with sport. This is broadly consistent across each form of social participation with 52% of those attending events, 50% of volunteers, and 48% of club members not meeting these guidelines.

There is potentially a mutual benefit to be harnessed by the delivery of initiatives which encourage and support active participants to engage socially in sport and similarly to encourage social participants in sport to engage in regular active sports participation.

Club membership

Club membership is one of the social aspects of sport measured in the ISM. When club memberships are referenced in the ISM this includes all memberships to clubs for traditional sports, but also for walking, cycling or swimming clubs, fitness centres, gyms or other organisations that provide opportunities to engage in physical activity for recreation, exercise or sport.

In many respects, club membership was more resilient to the impact of the pandemic as club loyalty and membership fee structures meant that many maintained their membership over this period despite not having access to club facilities for much of the time. Despite this, memberships still saw a decline of 6 percentage points between 2019 and 2021.

The past year saw a sizeable increase of 4 percentage points in the proportion (35%) who were members of a club, bringing it close to the same level measured in 2019 (36%). Due to population increase over this period it means that there were more club members than ever before with 1.47 million people having some form of club membership.

Figure 3.2 Club membership rates 2017-2023 (%)



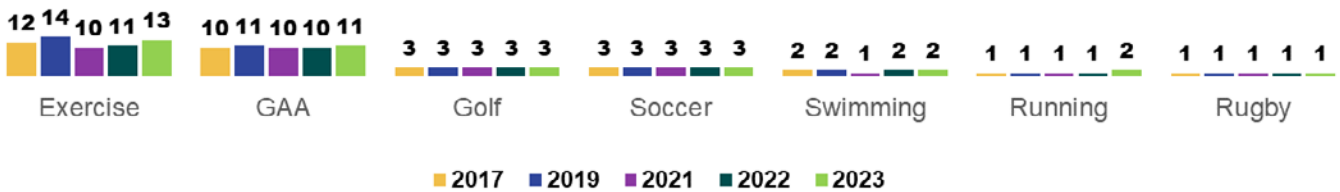
Note: Margin of error for 2023 data shown in parentheses.

The majority (73%) of club members were members of one club, with 27% having multiple club memberships. Despite the changes in overall membership levels over the past few years, these proportions remained broadly consistent.

In addition to overall club membership returning to pre-pandemic levels, the proportion that were members of each type of club also returned to similar levels. Most of the decline in club membership during the pandemic was due to people giving up gym memberships during a time when they were unable to use the facilities, while membership of other clubs remained broadly stable.

In 2023, 13% were members of an exercise club, meaning gyms regained their position as the most popular type of sports club. Just over 1 in 10 people (11%) reported being members of a GAA club, with all other types of club having membership levels lower than 5% of the adult population.

Figure 3.3 Club memberships rates by sport, 2017-2023 (%)

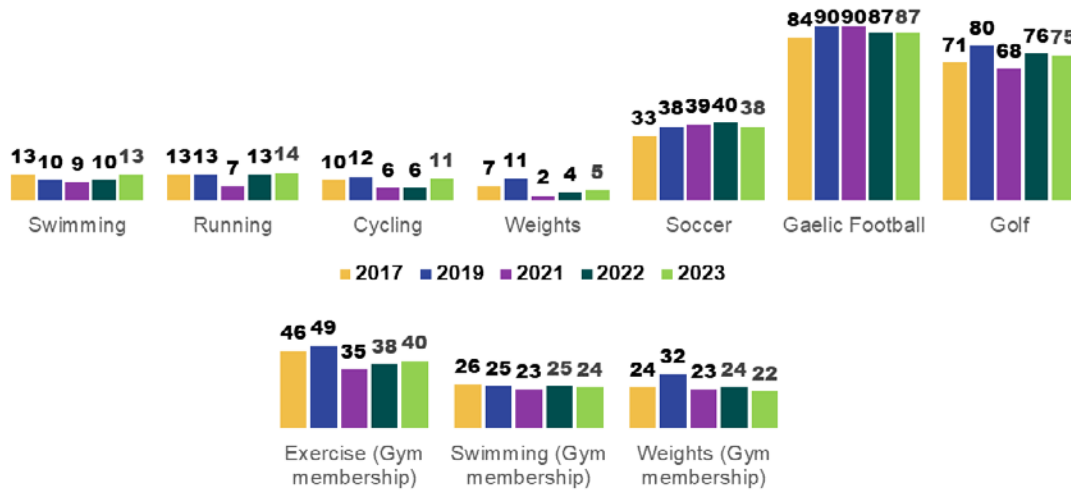


Note: Margin of error for 2023 data was at most ± 0.7.

A further dynamic which arose over the course of the pandemic was an increase in the proportion who played sports, but were not club members. This increased from 44% in 2019 to 51% in 2021 as a result of a number of factors, but predominantly due to the changing nature of sports participation during that period with many more participating in sports that complied with the social restrictions that were introduced. As with overall club membership and sports participation more generally, this has returned to be more aligned with the 2019 measurement, with 45% of sports participants stating they were not club members.

In most cases, club membership among participants of each type of sport returned to the levels measured in 2019. However, there were two exceptions where the proportion of participants who are members of a club for that sport are lower than they were in 2019. These are among those participating in weights (declined from 11% to 5%) and those participating in personal exercise (declined from 49% to 40%). Both of these activities were popular during the pandemic period meaning that some individuals may have adjusted their participation or invested in equipment that enabled them to participate in this activity without having to be members of a club. Indeed, analysis of the location for participation – as outlined in the previous chapter – identified that these are among the most popular activities participated in at home with 58% of those lifting weights and 26% of those participating in personal exercise doing so at home.

Figure 3.4 Proportion of participants by sport that have a club membership (%)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data was at most ± 4.5 .

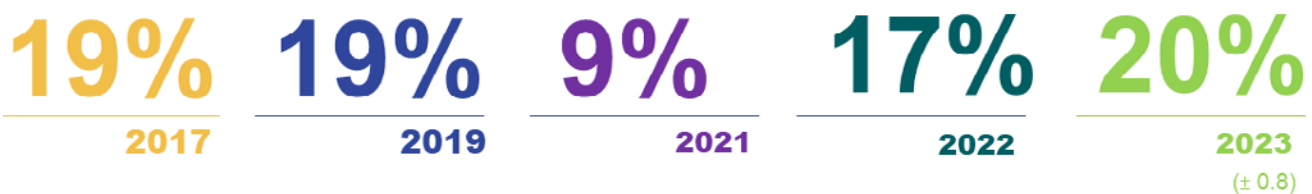
Event attendance

The ISM measures event attendance based on a 7 day recall period at the time of survey. Attendance at sporting events is defined as attendance at any fixtures or events, either children's or adult events, as a spectator or supporter, where the respondent was not an active participant. The events attended can be anywhere on the broad spectrum of sports events, from large-scale stadium events to games at local and community level.

Of the various forms of social participation, attendance at events saw the sharpest decline in participation as a result of pandemic restrictions. Between 2019 and 2021 the proportion regularly attending a sports event declined by more than half, from 19% to 9%. Much of this lost activity was recovered during 2022 when 17% regularly attended an event, and 2023 builds on this further with 20% doing so.

As with club membership, this means that the numbers regularly attending sports events are now higher than at any point previously, with 840,000 doing so in 2023 compared to around 740,000 in 2019. Furthermore, one-third (35%) of those attending an event reported attending multiple events during the previous week, a slight increase on the proportion doing so in 2019 (32%).

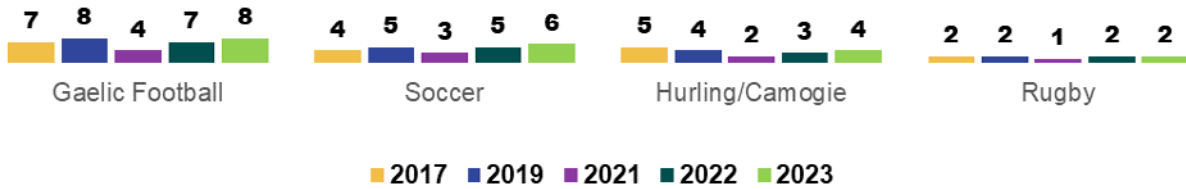
Figure 3.5 Event attendance rates 2017-2023 (%)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data shown in parentheses.

The types of sports attended are in line with that measured in 2019, with Gaelic football (8%) and soccer (6%) the most popular types of sport spectating. These were followed by hurling and camogie (4%) and rugby (2%), with attendance at both marginally unchanged compared to 2022 and 2019.

Figure 3.6 Attendance at sporting events by sport 2017-2023 (%)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data was at most ± 0.6.

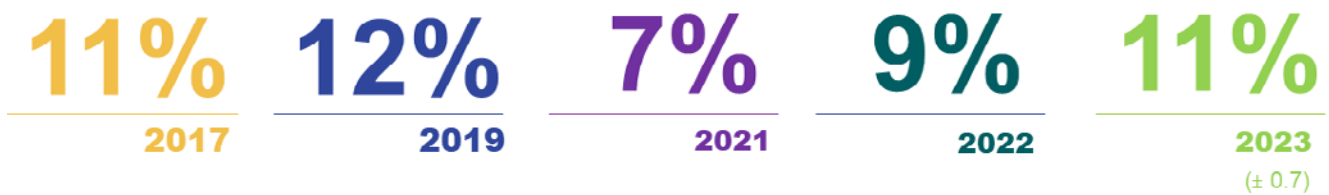
As highlighted in previous ISM reports, attendance at events often coincides with other forms of sports participation. Almost three in five (59%) event attendees were also active sports participants, an increase of 5 percentage points since 2022 (54%). Similarly, there was an overlap with other forms of social participation, 56% of event attendees were club members while 28% were volunteers (54% and 26% respectively in 2022).

Volunteering

Volunteering activities are measured on a 7 day recall period in the ISM, and volunteering can be related to any sport, exercise or physical activity. Voluntary activities are defined as any role fulfilled in support of sport or recreational physical activity for adults or children. The types of volunteering roles measured includes providing transport, food, equipment, or kit, coaching, fundraising, or acting in any form of official capacity related to sport or recreational physical activities.

As with the other forms of social participation, 2022 and 2023 indicated a gradual return to volunteering as 11% volunteered on a regular basis during 2023. This was very close to the proportion volunteering in 2019 (12%) and means that approximately 462,000 people volunteered in sport in 2023. When population growth is taken into account this number remains just slightly behind the number volunteering in 2019 (465,000).

Figure 3.7 Volunteering rates 2017-2023 (%)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data shown in parentheses

As in previous years, the majority of volunteers (85%) volunteered for one sport, meaning that almost 1 in 7 (15%) volunteers were active in a voluntary role across multiple sports. In terms of the sports volunteered for, Gaelic games remained the most common sport volunteered for as 5% volunteered for either Gaelic football, hurling or camogie. The next most common sport was soccer (2%), with 1% or less volunteering among a range of other sports.

The ISM series has shown that volunteers play a diverse range of roles in sport, ranging from coaching to club administration and including other roles such as providing transport and supervising activities. All of these roles are vital in ensuring the sporting infrastructure is maintained and to enhancing the experience of those participating in sport.

Figure 3.8 Nature of volunteering 2017-2023 (% of all volunteers)



Note: Margin of error for 2023 data was at most ± 3.1 .

Just under half (46%) of volunteers were involved in coaching – an increase of 6 percentage points since 2022 (40%). In 2023, there were more regular volunteer sports coaches in Ireland than ever before (approximately 210,00). The next section in this chapter includes a spotlight on coaching to understand those active in this role. Participation in other volunteer roles have been broadly stable over the past few years, with participation rates remaining marginally unchanged since 2022. Among volunteers 18% provided transport, 12% were club officials, and a further 12% were activity organisers .

The time invested by volunteers is a particularly important consideration in terms of identifying the extent of their involvement in this role. Around half of all volunteers spent 1 to 2 hours volunteering per week, 23% volunteered for 3 to 4 hours per week, and a further 28% volunteered for more than 5 hours each week. While it is noted that volunteering and club membership are closely interlinked, roughly a quarter (26%) of volunteers reported that they were not members of a sports club, and a third (34%) did not play sport themselves. Just over 1 out of every 5 (22%) club members volunteered regularly for a sport.

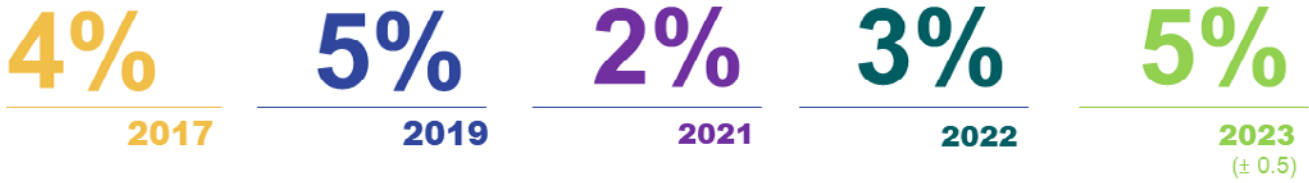
A spotlight on coaching

Coaching was explored in the ISM as a subsection of volunteering and was measured based on a 7 day recall period. Coaching is defined in this report as any volunteer active in a coaching role with either children or adults, for any sport or recreational physical activity.

Volunteer coaches are vital to supporting sports participation within and outside of club environments. Coaches engage and empower their teams and athletes, and provide immeasurable knowledge in the form of skills development, performance, and support. By analysing responses from volunteer coaches, the ISM can be used to describe the current landscape of coaching. It should be noted that the ISM data accounts for volunteer coaches and does not account for those who are employed in a coaching role.

At an overall level, just 5% of the population identified themselves as coaches, the same percentage as identified in 2019. Coaching figures dropped in 2021 (2%) and 2022 (3%) compared to 2019 (5%). This was a result of the pandemic restrictions and an overall decline in volunteering figures during this period, which dropped to 7% (2021).

Figure 3.9 Percentage of the population who are volunteer coaches, 2017-2023 (%)

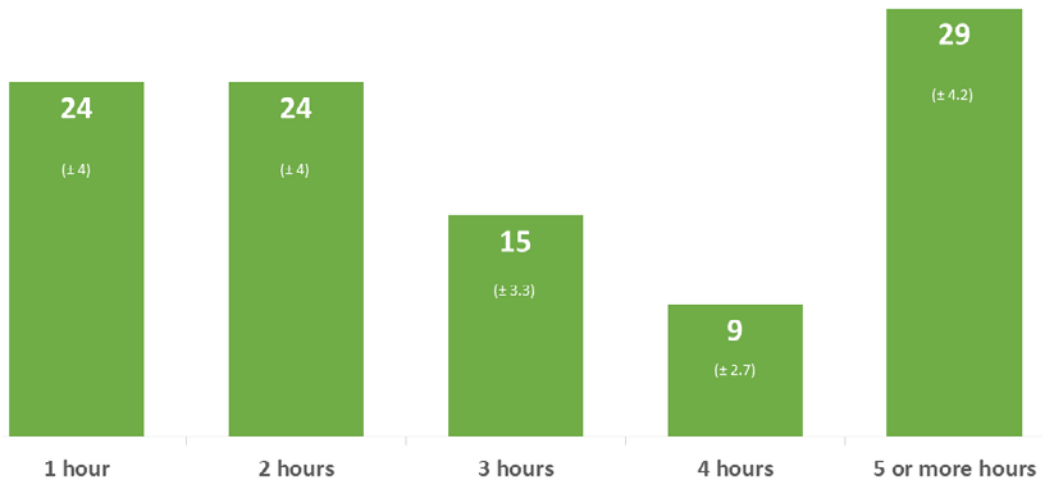


Note: Margin of error for 2023 data is shown in parentheses.

The percentage of coaches increased by 2 percentage points since 2022 (3%) as coaches returned and new coaches took up roles, based on population estimates this means the number of volunteer coaches grew by about 87,000, to a total of 210,000, in this period.

Many sports clubs and organisations are reliant on the volunteer hours of their coaches, with clubs only able to facilitate as many members as their coaches have capacity for. Almost a third (29%) of coaches reported that they devoted five or more hours to coaching activities each week. Not all coaches have the capacity to devote such a high number of voluntary hours each week. Around half (48%) of coaches invested 1 to 2 hours of coaching time each week.

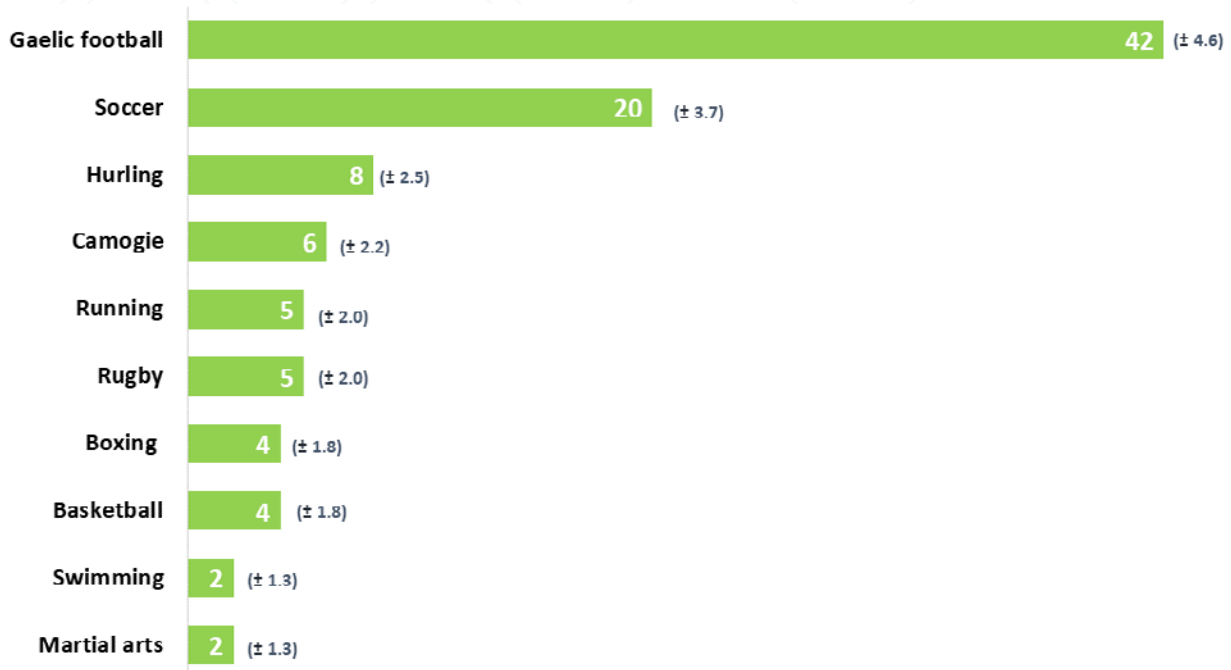
Figure 3.10 Hours volunteered by coaches each week (%)



Note: Margins of error shown in parentheses.

Many factors likely impact the hours contributed by coaches, including available supports, the existing ratio of participants to coaches, and the type of sport being played. Volunteer coaching in Ireland is dominated by Gaelic games, with more than half of coaching respondents coaching Gaelic football, Hurling or Camogie. Two in five volunteer coaches (42%), coached Gaelic football and a further one in eight (14%) coached Hurling or Camogie.

Figure 3.11 Top ten sports coached by volunteers (%)



Note: Margins of error shown in parentheses.

Soccer accounted for a fifth (20%) of all activities that were coached by volunteers, followed by hurling (8%) and camogie (6%). Soccer and Gaelic games combined made up three quarters (76%) of all activities coached by volunteers. The final quarter (24%) of coaching activity was distributed across the remaining sports. Running (5%) and boxing (4%) were the two most common individual sports coached by volunteers. Despite high participation rates, activities like running (5%) and swimming (2%) did not account for a high percentage of coached activities. Many participants in these sports are likely not coached and instead take part in leisure and general fitness settings.

Further analysis on coaching is included in the later sociodemographic chapters of this report; which breakdown the above coaching analysis by gender, age, socio-economic status and disability.



4. Broader Physical Activity



Broader physical activity - Key findings

- In 2023, the ISM categorised 39% of the population as highly active, which equates to around 1.6 million adults who met the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking alone.
- This represents an increase of 2 percentage points on the 2022 figure (37%) and means that the proportion meeting the guidelines remained higher than the longer-term average.
- The decline in recreational walking identified in 2022 stabilised, with recreational walking levels (69%) higher than pre-pandemic levels (2019: 66%).
- A decline of 8 and 2 percentage points respectively were seen in the proportions walking for transport and cycling for transport. With a key focus on encouraging active forms of transport for environmental and physical activity reasons, these declines are particularly concerning.

Introduction

In addition to sports participation the ISM measures other forms of physical activity that make a positive contribution to health and wellbeing. These include recreational walking, as well as walking and cycling for transport. These activities provide a wider perspective of how people engage with physical activity in their everyday life, not just within the context of sport participation.

The tracking of these non-sport activities is crucial, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of overall physical activity trends within the population. It provides the bigger picture, to understand the daily habits and routines that contribute to our physical health.

When these activities - everyday walking, cycling as a means of transport, and recreational activities - are combined with sports participation, we can gain a full spectrum view of physical activity. This merged data enables us to monitor the overall proportion of the population who are meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines.

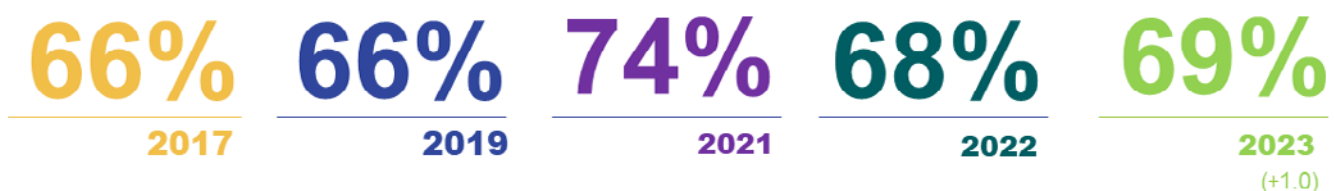
Additionally, this broad measurement of physical activity also allows us to observe and monitor the levels of physical inactivity within the population. Sedentarism is a growing concern with increasing evidence of its negative impact on health. Therefore, through tracking both physical activity and inactivity, we can better understand the health behaviours of our population and make informed decisions to encourage increased physical activity and reduce sedentarism.

Recreational walking

Recreational walking was the most popular form of physical activity with the majority of the population taking regular walks. The pandemic period saw sharp increases in recreational walking with almost three-quarters taking advantage of restricted social activities and increased free time to go for more regular walks.

As restrictions eased and other forms of leisure activity returned the proportion engaging in recreational walking declined to 68% in 2022 and has remained broadly unchanged since, with 69% regularly walking for recreation.

Figure 4.1 Participation in recreational walking 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

In addition to the notable changes in the proportion walking for recreation the frequency and duration of the walks also changed considerably. ISM 2021 which was conducted during periods of pandemic restrictions found that those who were going for walks did so more frequently and for longer durations, with the average duration increasing from roughly 50 minutes to 57 minutes and the number of walks per week increasing from 4.4 to 5.0. Encouragingly, much of the increase in the average number of walks per week has persisted, with recreational walkers now walking on average for an additional 19 minutes per week when compared to 2019 (2023: 240.5 minutes, 2019: 221.3 minutes).

Figure 4.2 Average frequency and duration of recreational walking per week 2019-2022 (%)

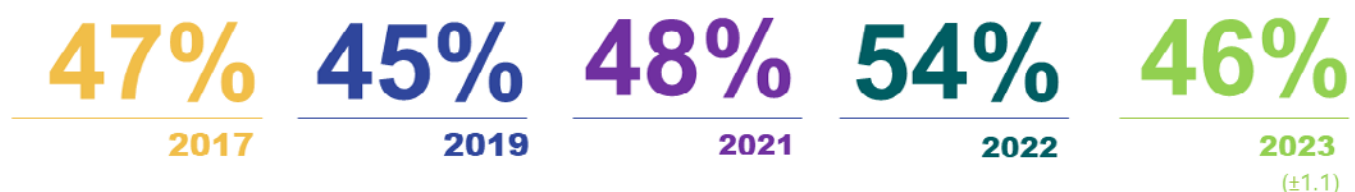
	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Average frequency (per week)	4.6	4.4	5.0	4.7	4.8
Average duration (in mins per walk)	47.9	50.3	57.5	50.7	50.1
Average walking minutes per week	220.3	221.3	287.5	238.7	240.5

Walking for transport

Active forms of travel provide a significant contribution to physical activity levels, but they are also part of the strategy to reduce carbon emissions and present an environmentally sustainable alternative to car travel. As such, the promotion of walking and cycling for transport are key policy priorities for multiple reasons. The 2022 ISM report identified a sharp increase in the proportion walking for transport with 54% then engaging in this form of active transport, a 6 percentage point increase on the level measured in 2021. Increases were seen throughout the population, although particularly among younger people.

The exact reasons for the increases measured last year are unclear, however this year's results find that levels of walking for transport (46%) have reverted to pre-pandemic levels and are now aligned with the longer-term trend. This suggests that the sudden increase was a short-term phenomenon.

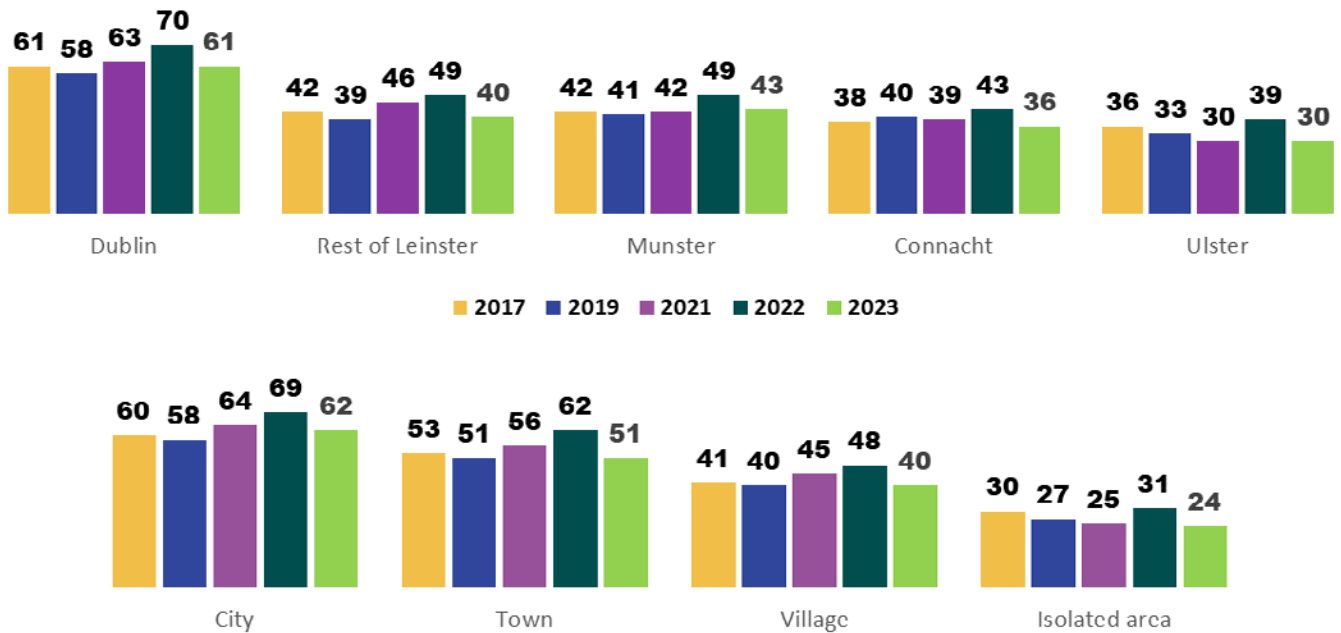
Figure 4.3 Participation in walking for transport 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

Higher levels of walking for transport in urban areas has been a constant throughout the ISM series. This is likely a result of a number of factors including differences in lifestyles, proximity of work, education and shops to people's homes, accessibility of safer walking infrastructure and population profiles between urban and rural areas. While a decline in walking for transport can be seen across all regions, and with both urban and rural locations, the differences between them remained consistent.

Figure 4.4 Participation in walking for transport by location 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most ± 4.1 .

Introduction of a new walking for transport measure

At the start of 2023, the ISM introduced a new, second, walking for transport question which was asked in parallel to the original question in 2023. This new measure assessed the number of days that respondents walked for transport for a total of 30 minutes or more within the past week. The new measure allows the ISM to assess the frequency of walks for transport per week, in addition to measuring the proportion of the population who take part in this activity.

The new measure accounts for days when respondents walked for transport for 30 minutes or more, while the original measure accounted for days when respondents walked for transport for 15 minutes or more. Due to this change in duration, the proportion of the population walking for transport using the new measure (40%) was 6 percentage points lower when compared to the original measure (46%) as reported earlier in this chapter. For those who walked for transport regularly, the average number of walks per week was 3.7. For ISM 2024 and subsequent reports the new measure will be the sole walking for transport measure in the ISM.

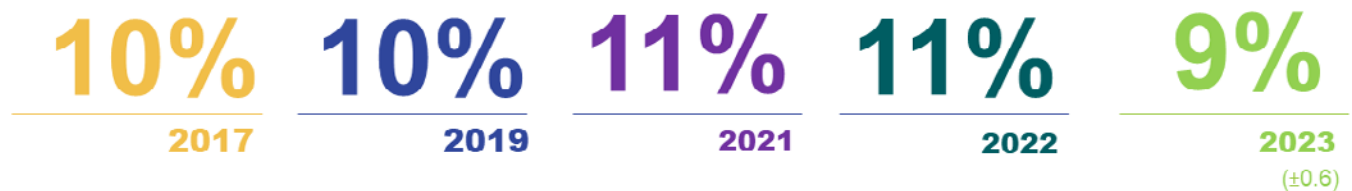
Cycling for transport

The past number of years has seen considerable investment in the cycling infrastructure around Ireland, particularly in cities and urban areas in order to provide safer routes for those cycling for transport and leisure purposes, with people encouraged to choose this form of transport for a number of reasons including sustainability, reduction of traffic congestion, as well as the physical health benefits that accrue.

The proportion cycling for transport has remained broadly stable throughout the ISM series with roughly 1 in 10 cycling at least once a week for transport purposes – although higher levels are measured among various population cohorts. However, it is important to note that this is within a growing population, so the actual number of people cycling for transport has been increasing over the longer-term.

This year’s report finds that there has been a small, but statistically significant decline since 2022 in the proportion that cycle regularly for transport, declining by 2 percentage point to 9% of adults in Ireland.

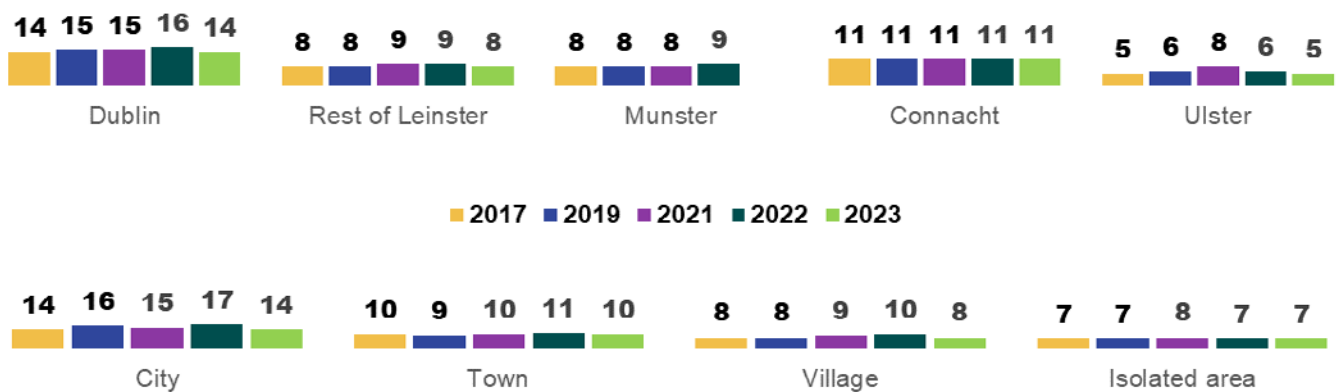
Figure 4.5 Participation in cycling for transport 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margins of error for 2023 data are shown in parentheses.

Analysis of cycling for transport data by region finds that much of the decline was focussed on areas where cycling for transport levels were higher – cities and broader urban areas. Notably these are also the areas which have received significant investment in cycling infrastructure, suggesting that further research may be necessary to understand the factors preventing people from choosing this form of transport.

Figure 4.6 Participation in cycling for transport by location 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most ±1.9.

Introduction of a new cycling for transport measure

As with walking for transport, at the start of 2023 the ISM introduced a new, second, cycling for transport question which was asked in parallel to the original question in 2023. This new measure assessed the number of days that respondent’s cycled for transport for a total of 30 minutes or more within the past week. This measure allows the ISM to assess the average frequency of cycles for transport per week, in addition to measuring the proportion of the population who regularly cycled for transport.

The new measure accounts for days when respondents cycled for transport for 30 minutes or more, while the original measure specified that cycles for transport were regular and did not specify a duration. The proportion of the population who cycled for transport did not vary between the original and new measures, with both finding that 9% cycled for transport. Those who regularly cycled for transport reported that they did this on average 2.9 times per week. For ISM 2024 and subsequent reports the new measure will be the sole cycling for transport measure in the ISM.

Physical activity categories

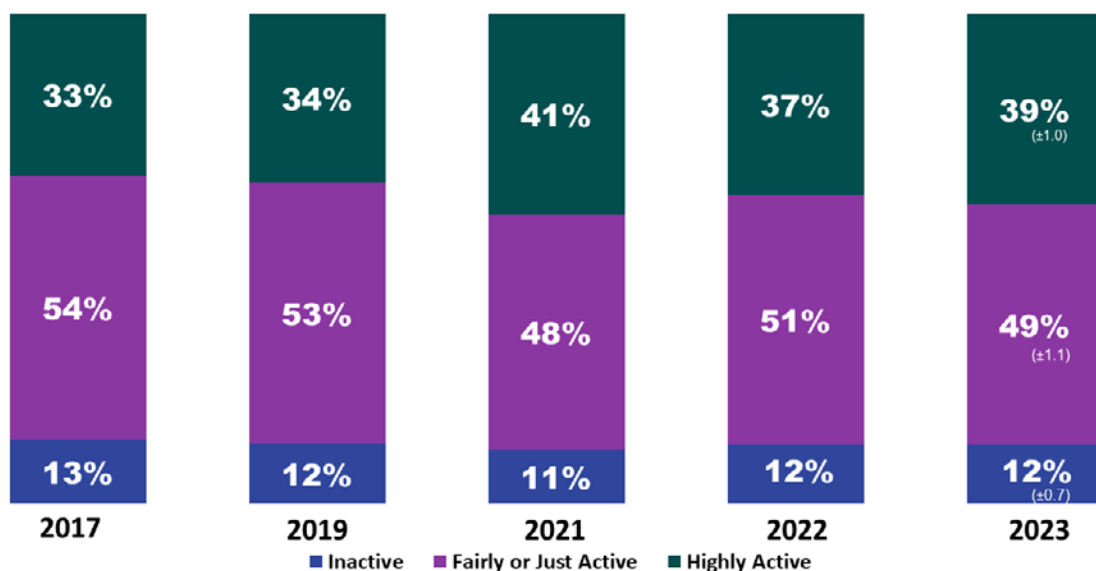
The ISM can determine the proportion of the population who meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sport and recreational walking. Over the course of ISM waves, respondents have been classified as either highly active¹, fairly²/just active³, or inactive⁴ based on the frequency, duration, and intensity of their activity.

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

This year's ISM finds that the proportion that is highly active has regained some of the decline seen between 2021 and 2022. The proportion that is highly active remains ahead of the longer-term trends and is broadly aligned with the levels measured in 2021 when activity levels were the highest measured throughout the ISM series.

Almost 2 out of every 5 adults (39%) in Ireland were sufficiently active to meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines, with 12% not participating in any physical activity during the past week and categorised as inactive – although this excludes activity that they may undertake as part of work or domestic responsibilities or travel. Notably, despite fluctuations in activity levels over the past number of years, the proportion that is inactive has remained stable.

Figure 4.7 Hierarchy of activity 2017-2023 (%)



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most ±1.9.

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

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

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

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

The NSP 2018-2027 also measures sedentarism which is defined as not engaging regularly in either sport or recreational walking. Almost a fifth (19%) of the population were recorded as sedentary, which remains 4 percentage points higher than the NSP's goal of reducing sedentarism to 15% by 2027. However, the level of sedentarism (19%) reduced by 2 percentage points since 2022 (21%) and returned to a similar level as measured in 2019 (20%).

Figure 4.8 Sedentarism (non-participation in sport or recreational walking) 2017-2023 (%)

	2017 (Baseline)	2019	2021	2022	2023	2027 (Target)
Sedentarism (%)	22	20	18	21	19	15

Note: The margin of error was ± 0.9 for 2022 and ± 0.8 for 2023 data.

In March 2024, during the course of reporting for ISM 2023, the HSE released new National Physical Activity Guidelines for Ireland. For adults aged 18 and older, the new guidelines recommend between 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity physical activity throughout the week. This activity should also be supplemented with muscle-strengthening activities at least a moderate level of intensity on two or more days per week. The guidelines also place further emphasis on the limitation of sedentary activity for all age groups.

The introduction of the new walking and cycling for transport questions create an opportunity to calculate their contribution to meeting the national physical activity guidelines in future iterations of the Irish Sports Monitor Report.

The figures for activity levels in the current report are based on the guidelines that were in place during data collection in 2023. For ISM 2024 and subsequent reports, analysis will be completed to report on the new National Physical Activity Guidelines.



5. Spotlight on Age

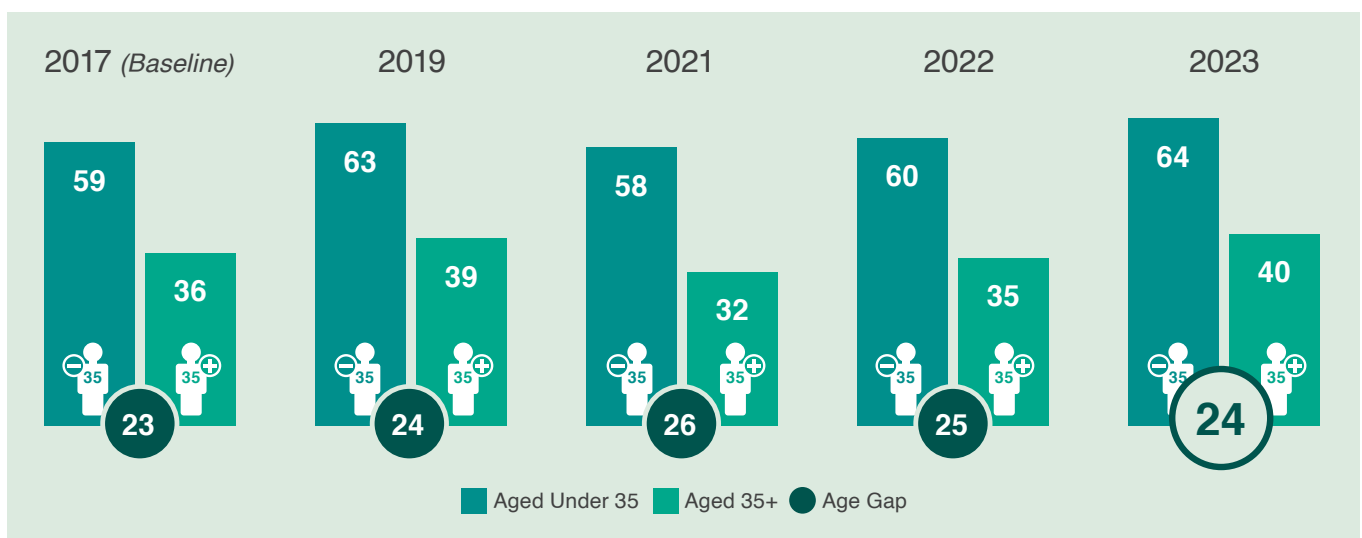


Spotlight on age - Sports participation

- Levels of sports participation increased among both the younger and older age groups during 2023, with 64% of those aged under 35 and 40% of those aged 35 and over playing sport regularly (2022, 60% and 35% respectively). This follows similar increases in the previous year meaning that sports participation levels for both groups are now aligned with pre-pandemic levels from 2019 (Aged under 35 63%, 35 and over 39%).
- A consistent feature of the ISM has been a sharper decline in participation among men as they age. This is reflected in the 2023 results with the higher levels of participation among men aged under 35 (men 68%, women 60%), eliminated in those aged 35 and over as 40% of both men and women were regular sports participants.
- The age gradient in sports participation has remained remarkably consistent over the duration of the ISM series with the existing 24 percentage point gap in participation broadly the same as that measured in 2017 (23 percentage points).
- Personal exercise was the most popular activity among both age groups although there were much higher levels of participation among those aged under 35 (26%) than among those aged 35 and over (14%). Strong age gradients were also evident in running (Aged under 35 11%, 35 and over 5%) and soccer (Aged under 35 8%, 35 and over 2%).
- Among sports participants, younger people were more likely to play multiple sports with 41% of those aged under 35 and 32% of those aged 35 and over playing more than one sport.

Figure 5.1 Sports participation by age 2017-2023 (%)

The levels of sport participation among those aged under 35 (64%) and 35 and over (40%) have returned the same levels as in 2019 (63% and 39% respectively). The age gap in sports participation has remained relatively consistent throughout the ISM series.



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was ± 1.9 for those aged under 35 and ± 1.2 for those aged 35 and over.

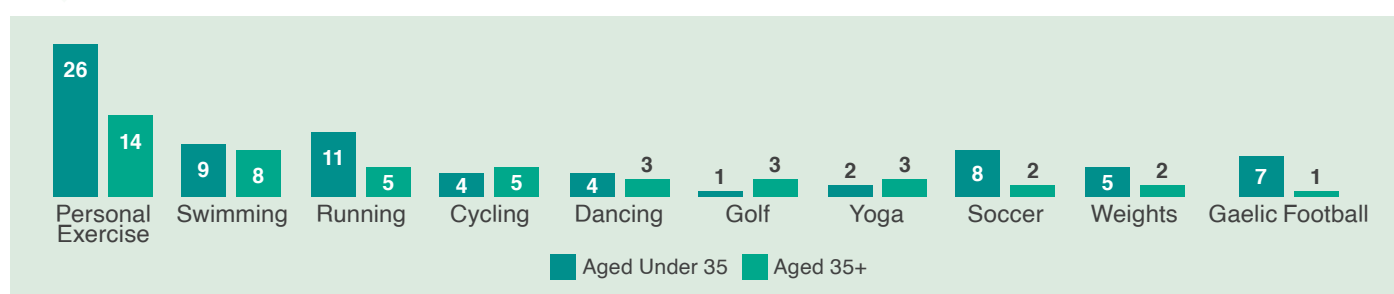
Figure 5.2 Sports participation by age group (%)

Sports participation was highest among those aged 16-19 (76%) and steadily declined across the age cohorts, with 26% of those aged 75 and over actively participating in sport.

	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-75	75+
Sports participation (%)	76	65	57	52	44	35	29	26

Figure 5.3 Most popular sports by age (%)

Cycling, golf and yoga were more popular among those aged 35 and over than those aged under 35.



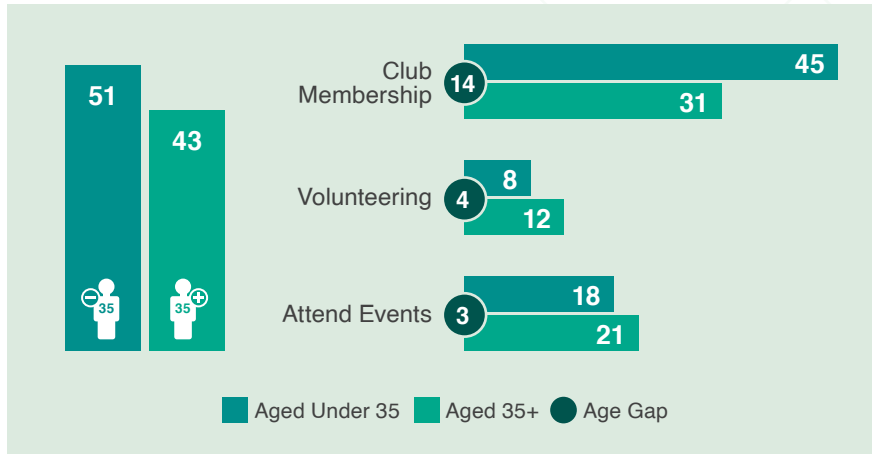
Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.7 .

Spotlight on age - Social participation

- A 5 percentage point increase in social participation among both age groups meant that the 8 percentage point age gradient in social participation was unchanged since 2022. Just over half (51%) of those aged under 35 participated socially in sport, compared with 43% of those aged 35 and over.
- The age gradient in social participation was entirely due to the higher levels of club membership among those aged under 35, with a 14 percentage point gap in club membership between the two age groups (aged under 35 45%, aged 35 and over 31%).
- For both volunteering and event attendance participation was higher among those aged 35 and over, albeit there was a narrower gap in both cases (volunteering 4 percentage points, event attendance 3 percentage points).
- While social participation across most age groups was broadly aligned with that measured in 2019, participation levels have not yet recovered among those aged between 25 and 34 (43%). Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, 49% of those aged 25 to 34 had a regular social participation in sport, 6 percentage points higher than in 2023.
- The pattern of volunteering and event attendance across the life course was aligned with previous waves. Volunteering levels were highest among those aged between 35 and 54 (16%), and lowest among those aged 20 to 24 (7%) and aged 65 and over (5%).
- Event attendance followed a similar pattern, although is unique in that higher levels of attendance are seen among those aged 16 and 19 (27%) before a decline between the ages of 20 to 34 (14%), followed by a rise again aged 35 to 54 (25%).

Figure 5.4 Social participation by age (%)

The widest age gap existed in club membership (14 percentage points), as 45% of those aged under 35 and 31% of those aged 35 and over were club members.



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.9 .

Figure 5.5 Aspects of social participation by age group (%)

Volunteering was highest among those aged 45-54 (17%) and lowest among the older age groups (4% among those aged 75 and over).

	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-75	75+
Club membership	60	46	36	38	35	26	24	25
Volunteering	10	7	8	15	17	8	6	4
Event attendance	27	17	14	24	26	17	14	12

Note: The margin of error was at most ± 3.7 .

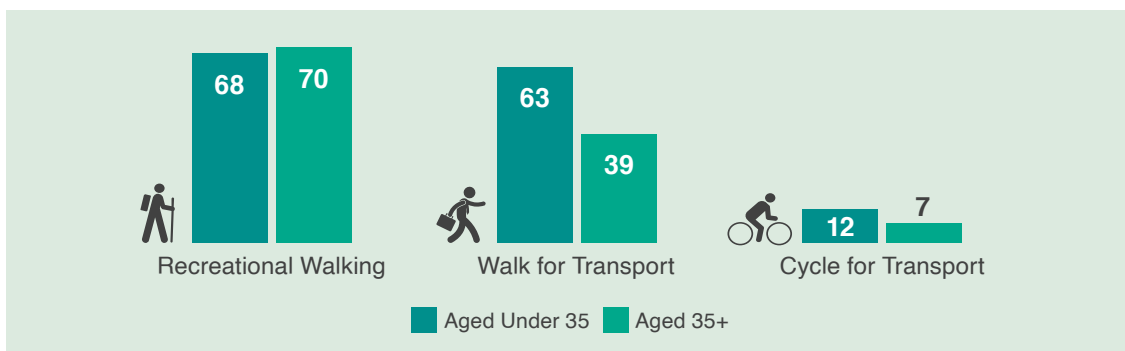
Spotlight on age - Broader physical activity

- Unlike many forms of sports participation, the incidence of recreational walking increases across the life course. However, changes in the nature of recreational walking over the past number of years means that the gradient across the life course is not as steep as it once was.
- Over two thirds of both those aged 16 to 19 (69%) and aged 20 to 24 (67%) walked regularly for recreation, rising to 73% of those aged 55 to 64 and declining again to 66% of those aged 65 and over.
- It is worth noting that the proportion of younger people walking for recreation has increased substantially in the past few years. ISM 2019 found that 60% of those aged 16 to 24 walked for recreation, increasing to 69% in 2023. The proportion of older people walking recreationally has remained broadly unchanged.
- Both forms of active travel showed strong age gradients, with 63% of those aged under 35 walking for transport on a regular basis compared with 39% of those aged 35 and over. The proportion of those aged under 35 cycling for transport was also substantially higher than it was among the group aged 35 and over (12% and 7% respectively). This gradient has remained broadly consistent over time.
- Cycling for transport was highest among those aged between 16 and 19 with 18% in this age group regularly cycling for transport. This declines to 9% of those aged between 20 and 24, and remains at that level until the 45 to 54 age group before a further decline occurs.

- Among people aged 16 and 34, 45% met the National Physical Activity Guidelines, compared to 37% of those aged 35 and over. Additionally, the proportion that were inactive was notably higher among those aged 35 and over (14%) compared to those aged under 35 (6%).
- There was no age group where the majority of people were categorised as highly active. Almost half (49%) of those aged between 16 and 19 achieve this level of activity, and this declines gradually over the life course to 32% of people aged 65 and over.
- Equally, the proportion that is inactive rises across the life course, increasing from 3% of those aged between 16 to 19 to 23% of those aged 65 and over.

Figure 5.6 Recreational walking and active transport by age (%)

Levels of recreational walking were higher among the group aged 35 and over (70%) than among those aged under 35 (68%). In contrast, walking for transport is more common among those aged under 35 (63%) compared to 39% of those aged 35 and over.



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.8 .

Figure 5.7 Recreational walking and active transport by age group (%)

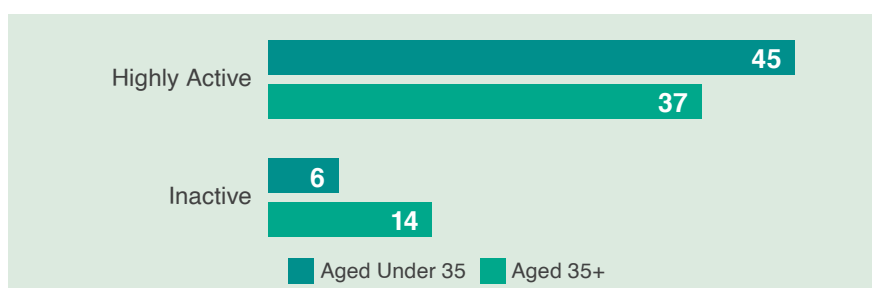
The proportion of people cycling and walking for transport declines with age, while recreational walking is highest among those aged 45-64 (73%) compared to 67% of those aged 20-34.

	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-75	75+
Recreational walking	69	67	67	70	73	73	70	58
Walking for transport	73	66	56	46	40	35	36	28
Cycling for transport	18	9	11	10	8	6	5	3

Note: The margin of error was at most ± 4.0 .

Figure 5.8 Level of activity by age (%)

Levels of inactivity were higher among those aged 35 and over (14%) than among those aged under 35 (6%).



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.9 .

Figure 5.9 Percentage of highly active and inactive people by age group (%)

The percentage of people who are highly active decreased with age, Almost half of those aged 16 to 19 (49%) were highly active. This declined to 39% among those aged 35 to 44, and continued to decline among older age groups.

	16-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-75	75+
Highly active	49	48	41	39	38	39	36	27
Inactive	3	6	8	9	11	15	18	30

Note: The margin of error was at most ± 4.5 .



6. Spotlight on Gender

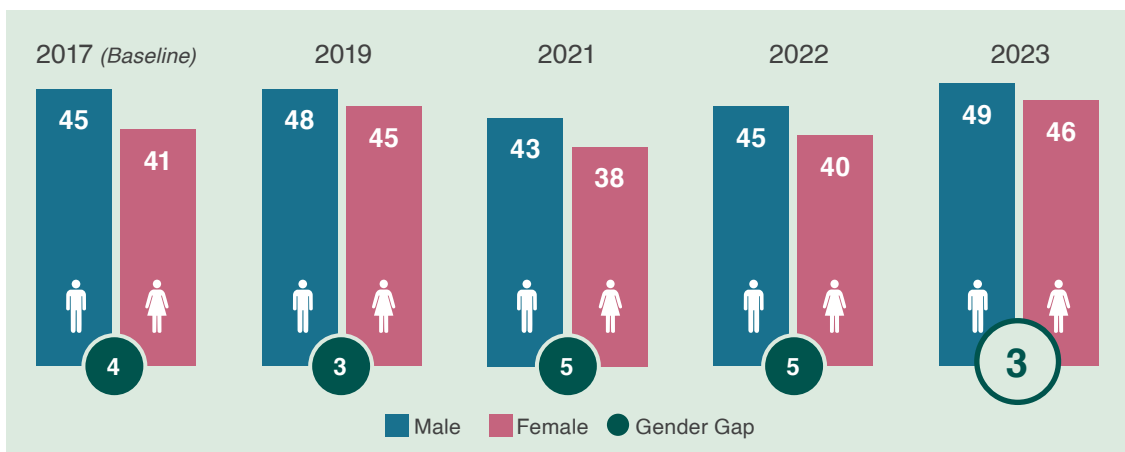


Spotlight on gender - Sports participation

- Sport participation among women (46%) reached an all-time high, increasing by 6 percentage points since 2022 (40%). Sports participation among men (49%) increased by 4 percentage points (45%).
- The gender gap in sports participation narrowed to 3 percentage points, compared to 5 percentage points in 2022. The gap was previously at 3 percentage points in 2019.
- The three most popular sports were the same among men and women; personal exercise, swimming, and running. Personal exercise was the most popular sport, with similar participation levels among both men (17%) and women (18%). Swimming was more popular among women (9%) than men (7%), and conversely running was more popular among men (8%) than women (6%).
- For the first time participation rates in Gaelic Football were similar for men and women in 2023 (3%) whilst participation in soccer still remains much more common amongst men (7%) than women (1%).
- Over a third of both men (38%) and women (34%) participated in sport to a vigorous level of intensity (defined as an effort of activity enough to make you out of breath). This proportion increased among both groups compared to 2022 (Men 34%, Women 30%).
- Gyms and sports centres remained the most popular location for sports participation with 28% of both men and women using these facilities, marginally unchanged since 2022 (Men 28%, Women 29%). Almost one in five women (19%) participated in sport at home compared to 14% of men. Men (15%) were more likely than women (11%) to participate in sport at sports clubs.
- The percentage of both men (9%) and women (5%) taking part in their sport through organised competition increased since 2022 (from 7% and 3% respectively).

Figure 6.1 Sports participation by gender 2017-2023 (%)

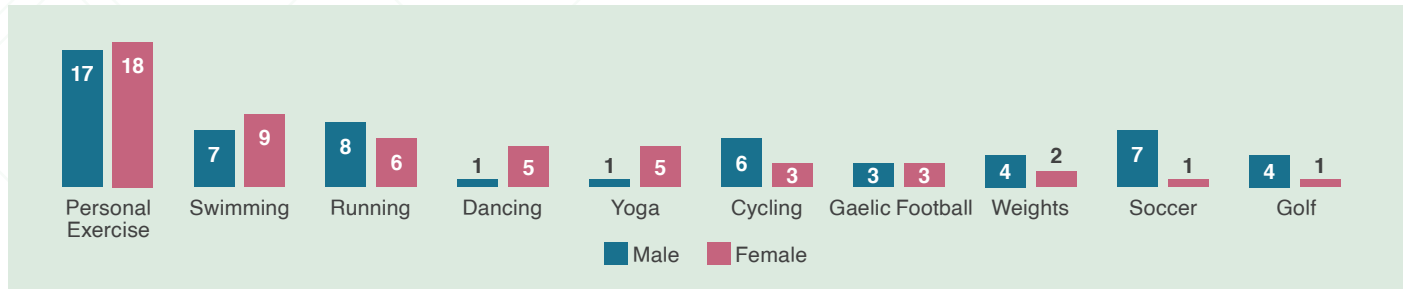
The gender gap narrowed to 3 percentage points, the same gap that was measured in 2019.



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was ± 1.5 for both men and women.

Figure 6.2 Most popular sports by gender (%)

Participation in personal exercise was similar across both genders (Men 17%, Women 18%). Swimming was more popular among women (9%) than men (7%). While running was more popular among men (8%) than women (6%).



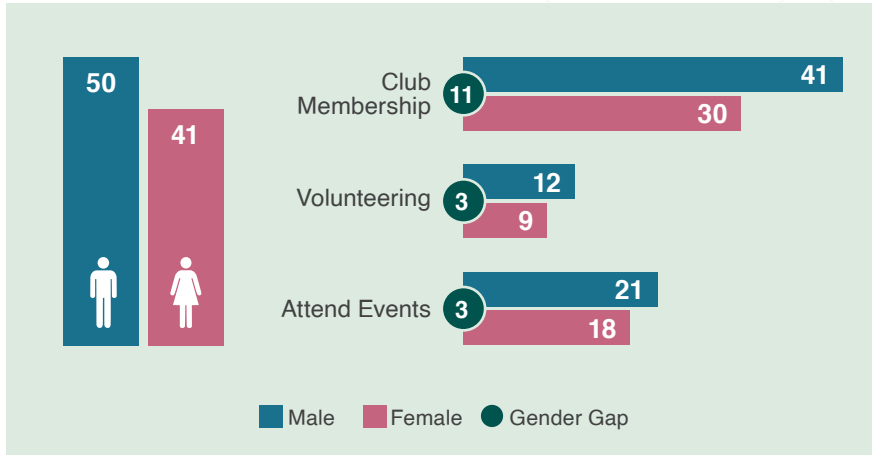
Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.2 .

Spotlight on gender - Social participation

- Half of all men (50%) and two in five women (41%) were involved socially in sport, an increase of 6 and 4 percentage points respectively since 2022 (Men 44%, Women 37%).
- Throughout the ISM series men have consistently been more likely than women to participate socially in sport. Despite the overall increase in social participation, the gender gap widened slightly to 9 percentage points, after narrowing to 7 percentage points in 2022. The gap remained narrower than 2019 (13 percentage points).
- Volunteering among men (12%) increased by 2 percentage points, while among women (9%) this figure remained broadly unchanged since 2022 (10% and 8% respectively).
- Among volunteers, 55% of men and 35% of women were involved in coaching roles, an increase of 5 percentage points among men and 6 percentage points among women since 2022 (Men 50%, Women 29%).
- Provision of transport was the most common role among women who volunteered (28%), compared to 13% of men.
- Gaelic football was the most common sport coached by both genders, accounting for 47% of activities coached by men and 34% of activities coached by women.
- Club membership rates increased among men (41%) and women (30%) since 2022 (37% and 27% respectively). However, men's club membership levels remain behind 2019 (2019: men 43%, women 29%).
- Event attendance continued to grow by 3 percentage points among men (21%) and 2 percentage points among women (18%) since 2022 (Men 18%, Women 16%).

Figure 6.3 Social participation by gender (%)

Half of all men (50%) and two in five women (41%) were involved socially in sport, increasing by 6 and 4 percentage points respectively since 2022 (Men 44%, Women 37%).



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.5.

Figure 6.4 Men and women in coaching roles 2017-2023 (% of population)

7% of men and 3% of women were active in coaching roles, a 4 percentage point gender gap.

	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Men	5	6	3	5	7
Women	2	3	2	2	3

Note: The margin of error for 2023 was ± 0.8 for men and ± 0.5 for women.

Figure 6.5 Club membership by gender 2017-2023 (%)

Women’s overall club membership rates (30%) returned to 2019 levels (29%). While men’s membership levels (41%) remained 2 percentage points behind 2019 (43%).

	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Men	40	43	37	37	41
Women	29	29	24	27	30

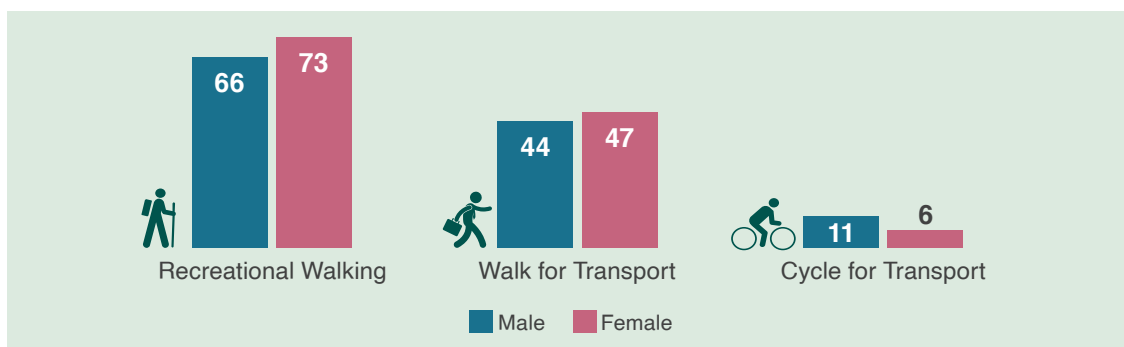
Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was ± 1.5 for men and ± 1.4 for women.

Spotlight on gender - Broader physical activity

- The percentage of men (66%) and women (73%) walking for recreation has stabilised in the past year, although there was a slight rise in walking for recreation among men increasing by 2 percentage points (2022: Men 64%, Women 72%). This follows a decline of 5 percentage points among men and 6 percentage points among women between 2021 and 2022 after sharp increases were seen during the pandemic period.
- Across all age groups, women were more likely than men to walk for recreation, with the largest difference among those aged between 16 and 24 with 75% of women and 61% of men walking regularly.
- Walking for transport decreased among men (44%) and women (47%), following the increase that occurred in 2022 (Men 53%, Women 55%). The percentage of men and women walking for transport roughly returned to the level seen in 2019 (Men 43%, Women 46%).
- Men in many age groups were twice as likely as women to cycle for transport. Among those aged between 16 to 24, 18% of men and 9% of women cycled regularly for transport.
- For the first time in the ISM series, an equal proportion of men and women were classified as highly active (39%). This was due to a 4 percentage point increase in men who were highly active since 2022 (Men 35%, Women 38%).
- The percentage of highly active men increased across all age groups, but the widest increase was among older men. Around a third of men aged 65-74 (34%) and aged 75+ (32%) were highly active, an increase of 4 and 11 percentage points respectively since 2022. A notable increase of 9 percentage points was also seen among men aged 35-44 (40%) (2022: 31%).

Figure 6.6 Recreational walking and active transport by gender (%)

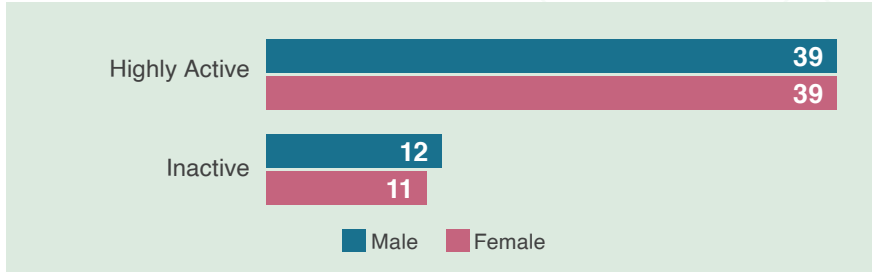
Women remained more likely than men to walk recreationally and for transport, with 7 and 3 percentage point gaps existing respectively. However men were still more likely to cycle for transport than women.



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.3 .

Figure 6.7 Level of activity by gender (%)

For the first time in the ISM series, men and women were equally classified as highly active. Two in every five people (39%) were highly active, regardless of gender.



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.5 .

Figure 6.8 Highly active by gender 2017-2023 (%)

For the first time in the ISM the same percentage of men and women were highly active (39%). In previous years, there was a higher percentage of highly active women compared to men, largely due to higher rates of recreational walking amongst women.

	2017	2019	2021	2022	2023
Men	31	33	39	35	39
Women	34	36	43	38	39

Note: The margin of error was ± 1.5 for both men and women in 2023.



7. Spotlight on Socio-Economic Status



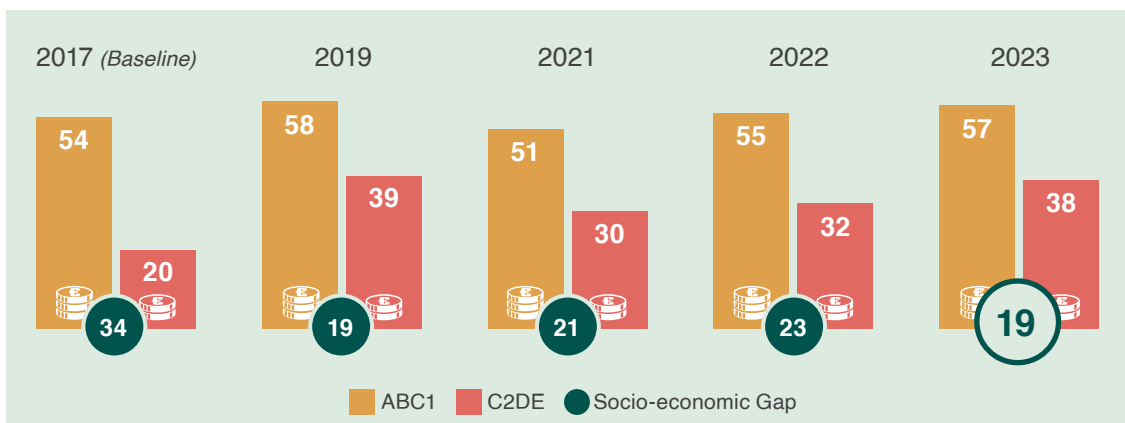
Each respondent on the ISM is assigned to a socio-economic category based on the occupation of the chief income earner in the household that they live in. Socio-economic categories are standardised across the survey research industry and include 7 different classifications – A, B, C1, C2, D, E, F. For the purposes of this section, the three highest categories (A, B and C1) and the three lowest (C2, D, and E) are grouped together. Category F (farming households) is excluded from this analysis.

Spotlight on socio-economic status - Sports participation

- Sports participation levels increased in both socio-economic groups over the past year (ABC1s 57%, C2DEs 38%). However, a slightly larger increase in the C2DE category led to a narrowed socio-economic gap (19 percentage points). Participation levels in both groups returned to proportions measured in 2019 (ABC1s 58%, C2DEs 39%).
- The existing 19 percentage point socio-economic gap was lower than at any point since the pandemic, and much lower than the 34 percentage point gap measured in 2017.
- The most popular sports were the same for both socio-economic groups, though a social gradient existed in most cases. This gradient was widest for personal exercise and running (both 7 percentage point gaps). In the case of running, it is notable that participation levels among the higher socio-economic group (ABC1) are roughly 3 times higher than they are for the lower group (C2DE).
- Lower levels of sports participation among the C2DE socio-economic group are also reflected in the proportion of sports participants playing multiple sports. Under a third (29%) of C2DEs played multiple sports each week, compared to two in five (40%) ABC1s who were active in multiple sports.

Figure 7.1 Sports Participation by socio-economic status 2017-2023 (%)

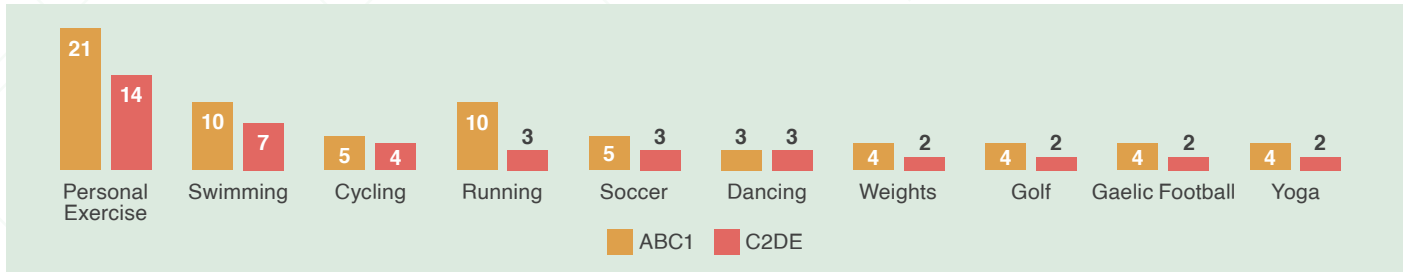
The social gradient in sports participation narrowed to 19 percentage points, the same as measured in 2019, and is notably much narrower than the 2017 baseline of 34 percentage points.



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was ± 1.8 for ABC1's and ± 2.7 for C2DE's

Figure 7.2 Most popular sports by socio-economic status (%)

A social gradient existed among all popular sports, as participation was higher among ABC1s than C2DEs. Dancing was the only exception as participation was 3% for both ABC1s and C2DEs.



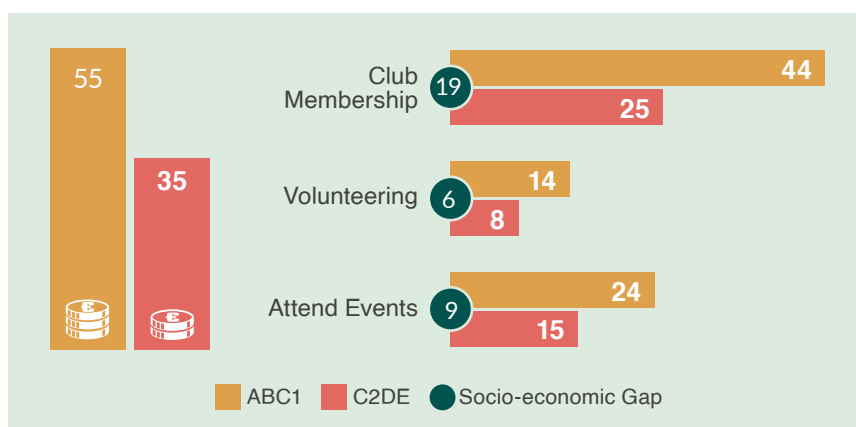
Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.9 .

Spotlight on socio-economic status - Social participation

- There was a 5 percentage point increase in social participation among both socio-economic groups, as 55% of the ABC1 group and 35% of the C2DE group had regular social involvement in sport. This means that the socio-economic gap remained consistent at 20 percentage points, since 2022.
- While the socio-economic gap was evident across all three forms of social participation, it was higher for club membership (19 percentage points), than it was for both event attendance and volunteering (9 and 6 percentage points respectively).
- Notably there was a 5 percentage point increase in event attendance among the ABC1 group (24%), while attendance rates remained broadly unchanged among the C2DE group (15%). This socio-economic difference is higher than measured in 2019 when 21% of the ABC1 group and 17% of the C2DE group regularly attended sports events.
- A social gradient was evident among both of the most popular clubs, gyms and GAA clubs. Although, this gradient was wider among gyms (ABC1 17%, C2DE 8%) than among GAA clubs (ABC1 13%, C2DE 7%).
- Increases in coaching among volunteers from both socio-economic groups means that the socio-economic gap in this regard remains broadly unchanged at 7 percentage points. Almost half (49%) of volunteers from the ABC1 group were involved in coaching, compared with 42% of those from the C2DE group.

Figure 7.3 Social participation by socio-economic status (%)

Across the types of social participation measured in the ISM, the socio-economic gradient was widest among club membership (19 percentage points) as 44% of ABC1s and 25% of C2DEs were club members.



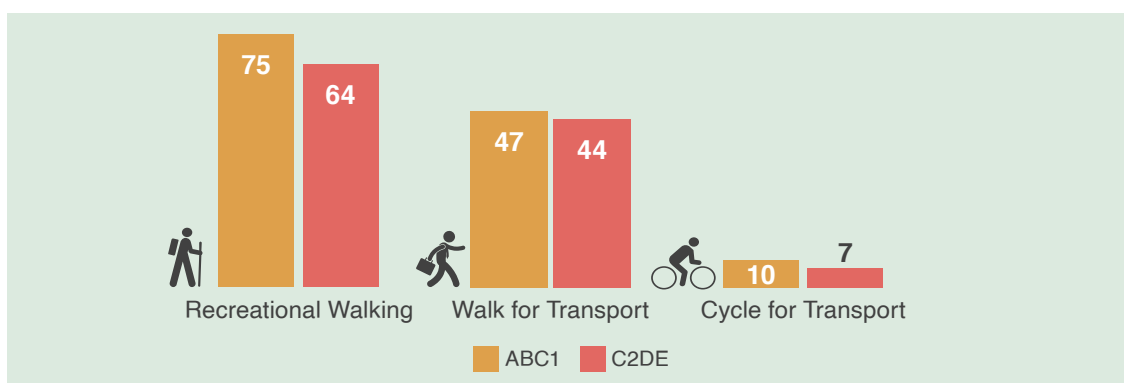
Note: The margin of error for was at most ± 2.7 .

Spotlight on socio-economic status - Broader physical activity

- The socio-economic gradient across each of the three forms of broader physical activity – recreational walking, walking for transport and cycling for transport – remained consistent over the past year. Declines in walking for transport (ABC1 47%, C2DE 44%) and cycling for transport (ABC1 10%, C2DE 7%) were seen in both groups, while levels of recreational walking were broadly unchanged in both cases (ABC1 75%, C2DE 64%).
- Analysis by working status showed strong differences in active travel. Those in employment were less likely to walk (45%) or cycle (9%) for transport, compared to 61% of those who are unemployed walking for transport and 13% cycling for transport.
- The gap in recreational walking between those in employment and those who were unemployed that was noted in both the 2022 and 2021 ISM reports (6 percentage points and 8 percentage points respectively) narrowed over the past year. This was due to a 9 percentage point increase in the proportion of those who are unemployed walking for recreation (74%), while the proportion of those in employment walking for recreation remained unchanged (72%). As a result, the gap narrowed to 2 percentage points.
- A 3 percentage point increase in the proportion of C2DEs that were highly active, from 31% in 2022 to 34%, means that the social gradient in the proportion meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines has narrowed slightly to 10 percentage points. This compares with 12 and 11 percentage point gaps that existed in 2022 and 2021 respectively. However, the gap remained higher than the 6 percentage point gap measured in 2019.
- The social gradient in the proportion that were inactive widened slightly to 9 percentage points from 7 percentage points in 2022. Inactivity was higher among C2DEs (16%) than among ABC1s (7%). In 2019 14% of C2DEs and 8% of ABC1s were inactive.

Figure 7.4 Recreational walking and active transport by socio-economic status (%)

Three quarters of ABC1s (75%) regularly walked for recreation compared to 64% of C2DEs (11 percentage point gap). The socio-economic gap (3 percentage points) was much narrower in terms of walking for transport as 47% of ABC1s and 44% of C2DEs walked for transport each week.



Note: The margin of error for was at most ± 2.7 .



8. Spotlight on Disability



The ISM includes a simple, measurement to identify disability and facilitate analysis between those with a long-term illness/disability and those without. Each respondent is asked to confirm whether or not they are experiencing any long-term illness, health issue, or disability that restricts their daily activities.

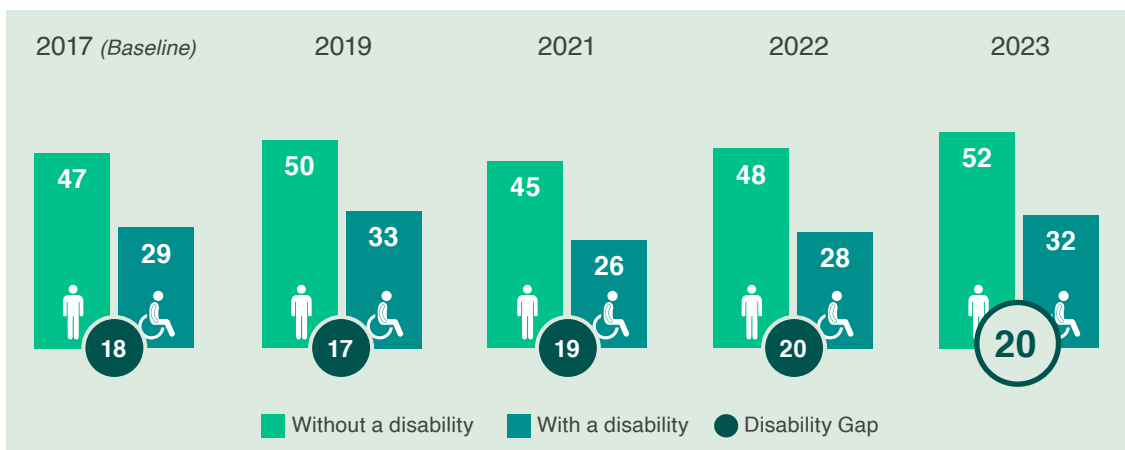
The mean age of respondents who have a disability was 53 years, while the mean age of those without a disability came to 44 years. It's crucial to recognise that the age discrepancies among individuals with disabilities have not been accounted for in the study.

Spotlight on disability - Sports participation

- 32% of those with a long-term illness or disability played sport on a regular basis. This compares to 52% among people without a long-term illness or disability. As a result, the level of sports participation among those with a long-term illness or disability returned to pre-pandemic levels (2019: 33%).
- The 20 percentage point disability gap is consistent with that measured in 2022, which was the widest disability gap measured in the ISM series. In contrast, a 17 percentage point gap was measured in 2019.
- The most popular sports among those with a disability are aligned with those with no disability, although with consistently lower levels of participation. Personal exercise (11%), swimming (6%), cycling and running (both 3%) were the most popular sports among those with a disability.
- The only sport where participation levels are the same among both groups is yoga, with 3% of both groups participating in this activity. Other activities where participation levels are broadly aligned are weights, dancing and golf. In all three cases 2% of those with a disability participate in the activity compared with 3% of those without a disability.
- In addition to lower levels of sports participation generally, those with a disability who do play sport are less likely to participate in multiple activities, with 25% of this group playing multiple sports, compared to 38% of those without a disability.
- Those with a disability were most likely to play sport at home (26%), followed by gyms/sports centres (25%). This compares to 18% and 29% respectively among those without a disability.

Figure 8.1 Sports participation by disability 2017-2023 (%)

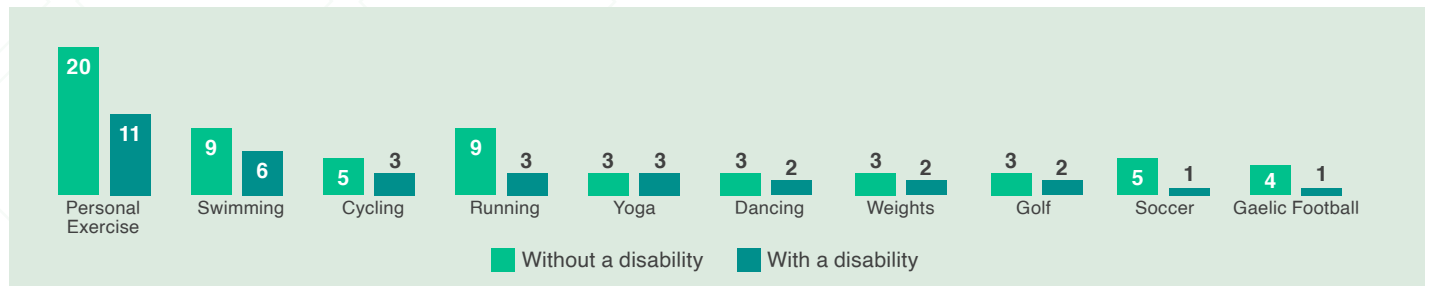
Sports participation among those with a long-term illness or disability (32%) returned to the same level as in 2019 (33%). While sports participation among those without a long-term illness or disability (52%) was 2 percentage points higher than in 2019 (50%).



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was ± 2.1 for those with a long-term illness or disability and ± 1.2 for those without a long-term illness or disability.

Figure 8.2 Most popular sports by disability (%)

Yoga (3%) was the only sport that had the same level of participation among those with a disability as well as among those without a disability.



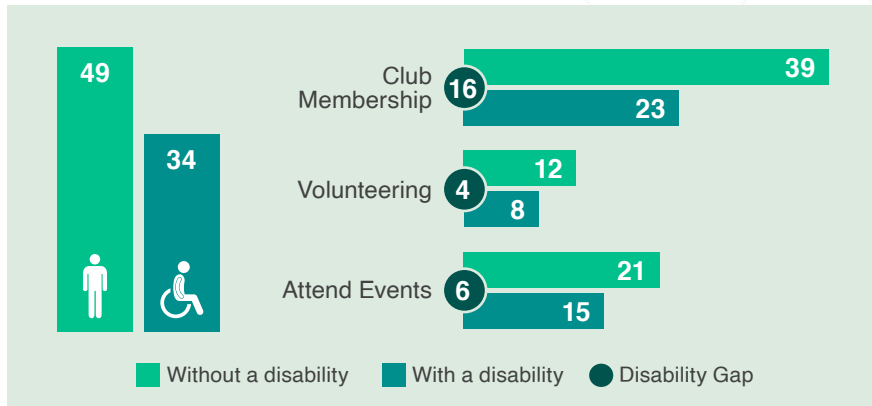
Note: The margin of error was at most ± 1.4 for those with a long-term illness or disability and ± 1.0 for those without a long-term illness or disability.

Spotlight on disability - Social participation

- As with the overall rate of social participation, the proportion of those with a long-term illness or disability involved socially in sport has increased substantially this year, rising 12 percentage points to 34%.
- A sizeable, but consistent, disability gap of 15 percentage points still exists. This has remained broadly stable throughout most of the ISM series despite changing levels of social participation.
- Increased levels of involvement across all forms of social participation are measured for those with a disability, with these increases broadly in line with trends in the overall population. As such the disability gaps remain generally unchanged – 16 percentage points for club membership, 6 percentage points for event attendance and 4 percentage points for volunteering.
- In terms of volunteering roles, people without a disability (6%) were more likely to be in coaching roles than people with a disability (3%).
- The most popular clubs are the same among both those with a disability and those without a disability. However, membership levels of each club are lower among those with a disability, with membership rates roughly half the level of those without a disability.
- The lower levels of club membership among those with a disability are reflected as 16% of those with a disability are members of multiple clubs, compared with 29% of those without a disability.
- Gaelic football (6%), soccer (5%), and hurling (2%) are the most popular sports events among those with a disability.

Figure 8.3 Social participation by disability (%)

A 16 percentage point disability gap existed in relation to club memberships, as 23% of those with a disability and 39% of those without a disability were members of a club. This was the widest disability gap in terms of social participation.



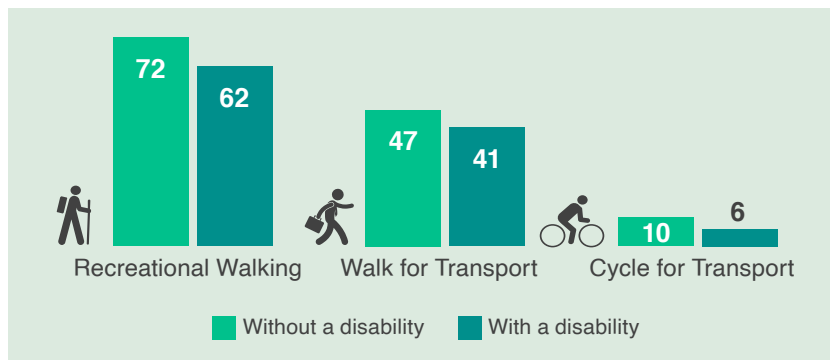
Note: The margin of error was at most ± 2.2 for those with a long-term illness or disability and ± 1.2 for those without a long-term illness or disability.

Spotlight on disability - Broader physical activity

- Levels of recreational walking among those with a disability was unchanged since 2022, with 62% of this group walking recreationally, compared to 72% of those without a disability (a 2 percentage point increase since 2022).
- 29% of people with a disability were classified as highly active, compared to 43% of people without a disability. Notably, while the portion of those without a disability categorised as highly active increased by 7 percentage points since 2019, the proportion of those with a disability categorised in this way has remained broadly unchanged (2019: 28%).
- Inactivity was higher among people with a disability (21%), this compares to just under a tenth of people without a disability classified as inactive (9%). Both are broadly unchanged over the past year, as well as since 2019 (19% and 9% respectively).

Figure 8.4 Recreational walking and active transport by disability (%)

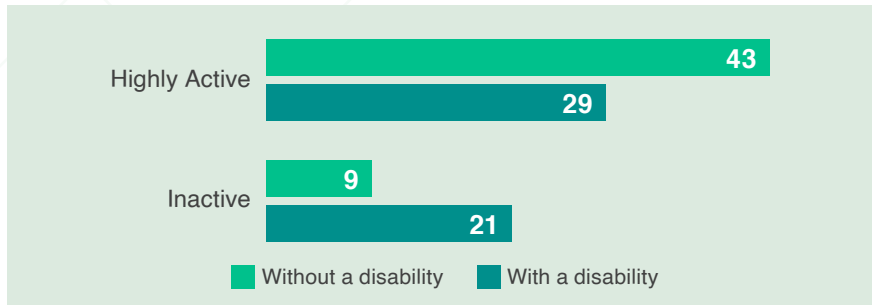
A 10 percentage point gap existed in recreational walking, as people with a disability (62%) were less likely to walk for recreation than those without a disability (72%).



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 2.2 for those with a long-term illness or disability and ± 1.1 for those without a long-term illness or disability.

Figure 8.5 Level of activity by disability (%)

One in five people with a disability (21%) were inactive, compared to around one in ten (9%) people without a disability.



Note: The margin of error was at most ± 2.1 for those with a long-term illness or disability and ± 1.2 for those without a long-term illness or disability.



9. Spotlight on Urban and Rural



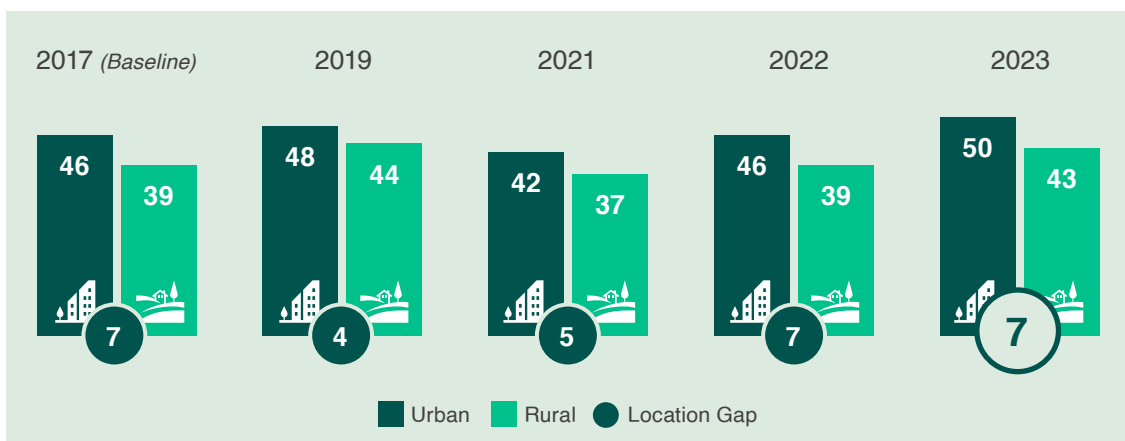
Spotlight on urban and rural - Sports participation

Respondents of the ISM 2023 survey were asked to specify whether they lived in a city, town, village, or an isolated area. Those who answered city or town were categorised as living in an urban location, and those who answered village or isolated location were categorised as living in a rural location. This section discusses how sports participation varies between the populations who live in urban and rural locations.

- In line with the overall increase in sports participation, participation increased by 4 percentage points in both in urban (50%) and rural (43%) areas since 2022 (46% and 39% respectively). The location gap in sports participation remained at 7 percentage points.
- Personal exercise, swimming, and running were the three most popular sports in both urban and rural areas. Gaelic football was the only sport more popular in rural areas (4%) than in urban areas (2%).

Figure 9.1 Sports Participation by Urban and Rural divide, 2017-2023 (%)

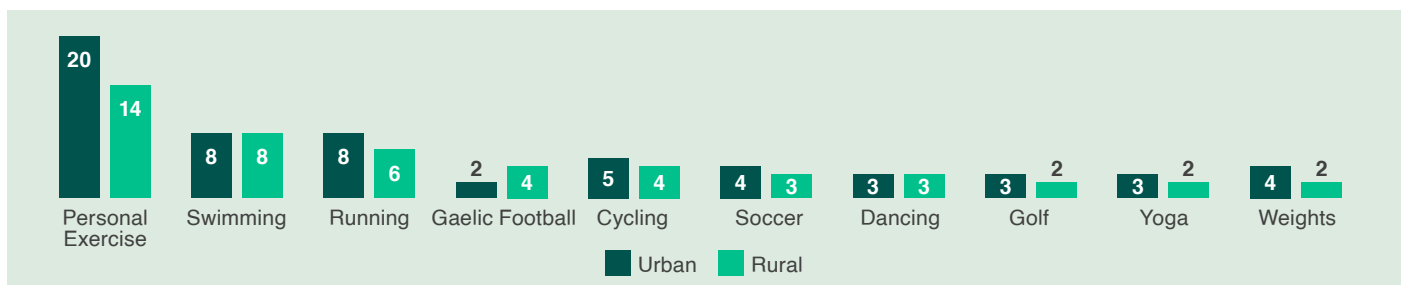
Sports participation in urban areas (50%) reached its highest level compared to previous years (2019: 48%). Sports participation in rural areas (43%) remained marginally similar to the level recorded in 2019 (44%).



Note: The margin of error for 2023 was $\pm 1.4\%$ for urban and $\pm 1.7\%$ for rural.

Figure 9.2 Most popular sports by urban and rural (%)

Gaelic football was the fourth most popular sport in rural areas (4%) and was the only sport more popular in rural areas than in urban areas (2%).



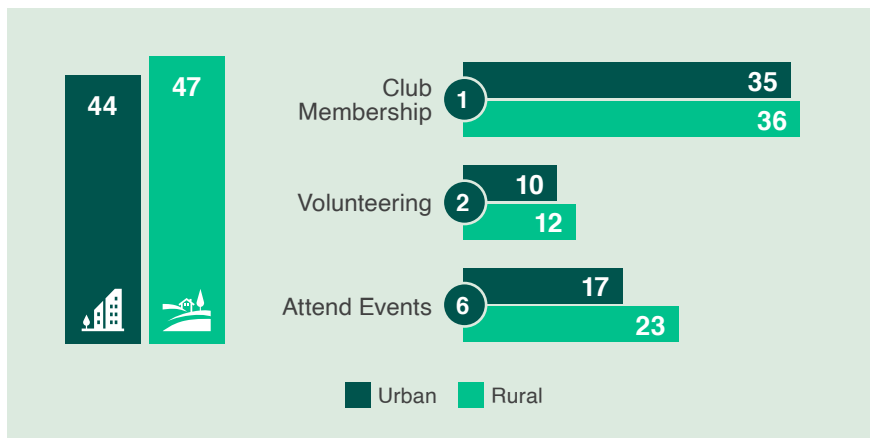
Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 1.2\%$.

Spotlight on urban and rural - Social participation

- Social participation in urban areas (44%) increased by 5 percentage points since 2022 (39%) and returned to the level measured in 2019 (44%). Social participation in rural areas also increased by 5 percentage points since 2022 (42%) but remained behind the 2019 level (50%).
- Club membership rates increased by 3 percentage points in urban areas (35%) and 5 percentage points in rural areas (36%) since 2022 (32% and 31% respectively). As a result, membership rates remained similar in both areas.
- Volunteer rates have consistently been higher in rural areas (12%) than in urban areas (10%). However, the location gap in volunteering has narrowed from 4 percentage points in 2022 to 2 percentage points in 2023.

Figure 9.3 Social participation by urban and rural (%)

Social participation remained higher in rural areas (47%) than in urban areas (44%), a finding that has remained consistent across ISM reports.



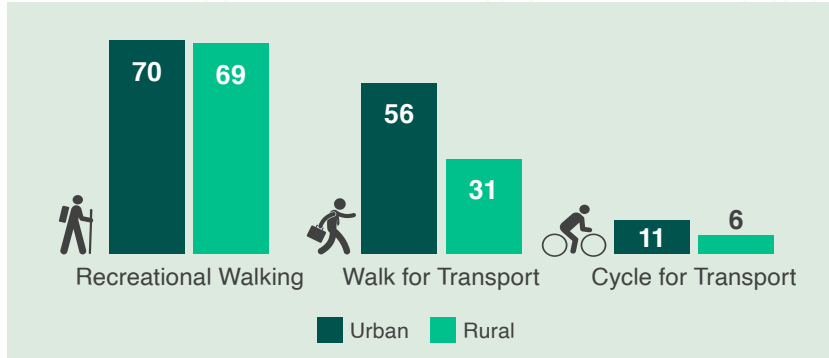
Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 1.7\%$.

Spotlight on urban and rural - Broader physical activity

- Recreational walking increased by 2 percentage points in rural areas (69%) since 2022 (67%) and remained stable in urban areas (70%) (2022: 69%).
- Walking for transport decreased by 9 and 7 percentage points in urban (56%) and rural (31%) areas respectively, since 2022 (urban 65%, rural 38%).
- The percentage of people in rural areas categorised as highly active (38%) increased by 4 percentage points since 2022 (34%). This caused the location gap in the percentage of people meeting National Physical Activity Guidelines to narrow to 2 percentage points, compared to 5 percentage points in 2023.

Figure 9.4 Recreational walking and active transport by urban and rural (%)

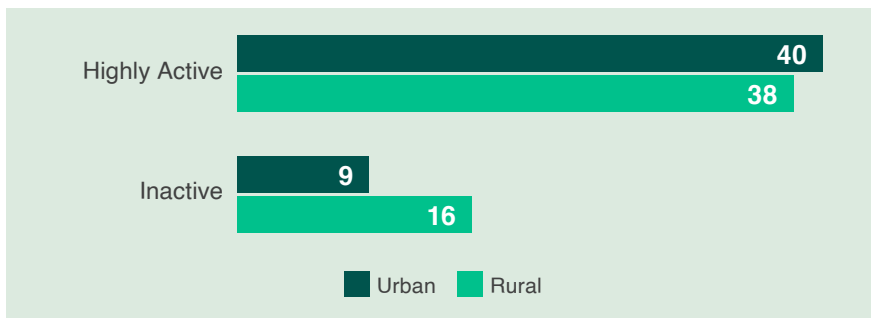
Recreational walking levels were similar in urban (70%) and rural (69%) areas, though people in urban areas (56%) were more likely to walk for transport compared to in rural areas (31%).



Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 1.5\%$.

Figure 9.5 Level of activity by urban and rural (%)

Just a 2 percentage point gap existed between the percentage of highly active people in urban (40%) and rural areas (38%). However, there was a higher percentage of inactive people in rural areas (16%) than in urban areas (9%).



Note: The margin of error was at most $\pm 1.6\%$.



10. Spotlight on Ethnicity



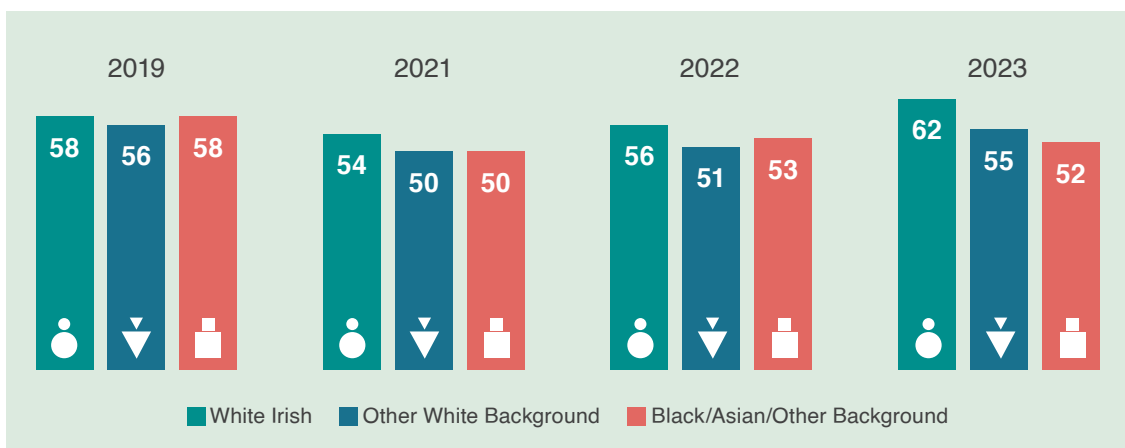
Ethnic categories as used in the 2022 census, were used in the ISM to assess the ethnicity of respondents. During analysis and reporting three broad ethnic groups were identified; White Irish, Other White Background, and Black, Asian or Other. Some groups had small sample sizes and as a result the White Irish category includes those who identify as a Traveller, and Black, Asian, or other backgrounds have been combined into one group. The results for all ethnic groups are based on responses from individuals below the age of 45, to balance the average age across these groups. Note this age adjustment results in higher overall rates of sports participation in this chapter.

Spotlight on ethnicity - Sport participation

- Sports participation increased among White Irish (62%) and Other White backgrounds (55%) since 2022 (56% and 51% respectively). White Irish sports participation exceeded the level of participation measured in 2019 (58%), while participation among Other White backgrounds almost returned to the same level as 2019 (56%).
- Sports participation among Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (52%) remained unchanged since 2022 (53%), but was 6 percentage points lower than the baseline measure set for this group in 2019 (58%).
- Soccer was the only sport that was more popular among Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (8%) than among White Irish (7%) and Other White backgrounds (5%). It was the second most popular sport among Black, Asian or Other backgrounds, while personal exercise (21%) was the most popular (White Irish 25%, Other White backgrounds 22%).
- Gyms and sports centres were the most popular location with around a third of each ethnic group’s activities taking place in these locations (White Irish 32%, Other White 32%, and Black, Asian or Other 33%).
- A higher percentage of activities were participated in at home among Other White (25%) and Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (20%), than among White Irish (12%).
- There was a 5 percentage point gap between the percentage of White Irish (16%) and Black, Asian or Other backgrounds (11%) participating in sports clubs. A 4 percentage point gap also existed in sports club participation between White Irish (16%) and Other White backgrounds (12%).

Figure 10.1 Sports participation by ethnicity 2019-2023 (%)

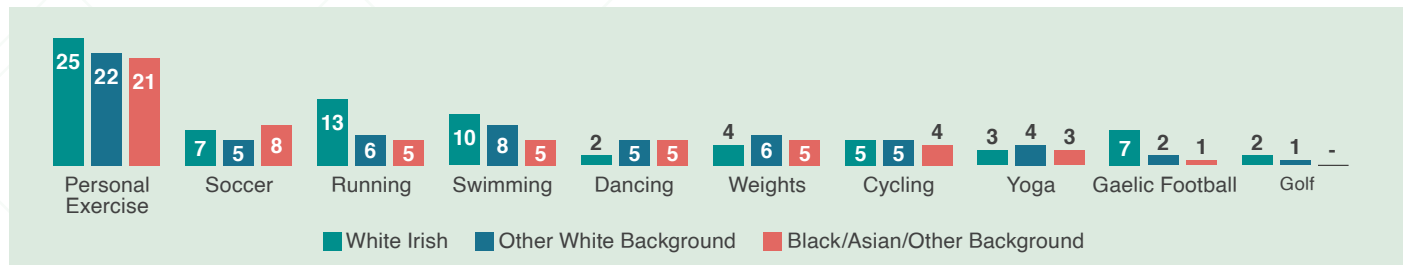
Sports participation among White Irish (62%) and Other White backgrounds (55%) increased by 6 and 4 percentage points since 2022 (White Irish 56%, Other White backgrounds 51%). Participation among Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (52%) remained unchanged since 2022 (53%) and 6 percentage points lower than the 2019 baseline (58%).



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most ±4.4%.

Figure 10.2 Most popular sports by ethnicity 2017-2023 (%)

Soccer was the only top ten sport that was more popular among Black, Asian, or Other (8%) ethnicities than among White Irish (7%) and Other White backgrounds (5%).



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most $\pm 3.7\%$.

Figure 10.3 Most common locations for participation (% Activities of Sport Participants)

At-home sport participation was more common among Other White (25%) and Black, Asian, or Other backgrounds (20%), than among White Irish (12%).

	White Irish	Other White	Black, Asian, Other
Gym/sports centre	32	31	33
At home	12	25	20
Sports club	16	12	11
Public place (TOTAL)	22	20	25
- Road	10	8	7
- Park	6	7	13
- Beach/seaside	2	2	2
- Footpath	3	2	1
- Public green	1	1	2

Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most $\pm 4.7\%$.

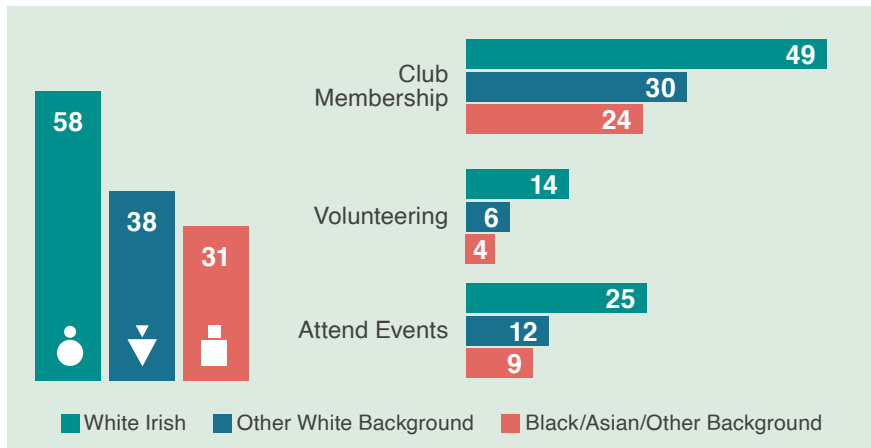
Spotlight on ethnicity - Social participation

- Overall social participation remained highest among White Irish (58%) increasing by a further 7 percentage points since 2022 (51%). Social participation among Other White backgrounds (38%) also increased by 9 percentage points in the same period (2022: 29%).
- Social participation remained lowest among Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (31%), remaining marginally unchanged since 2022 (32%), despite increasing by 7 percentage points between 2021 and 2022.
- A similar pattern exists for club memberships, which among White Irish (49%) and Other White backgrounds (30%) increased by 6 and 9 percentage points respectively since 2022 (43% and 23% respectively). While club memberships among Black, Asian and Other backgrounds (24%) decreased by 3 percentage points in the same period (2022: 27%).

- Volunteering increased within each ethnicity group, as 14% of White Irish, 6% of Other White backgrounds and 4% of Black, Asian and Other backgrounds were regular volunteers (2022: 10% White Irish, and 3% of both Other White and Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds).

Figure 10.4 Social participation by ethnicity (%)

Almost half (49%) of people from White Irish backgrounds are club members compared to just under a third (30%) of those from Other White backgrounds and under a quarter (24%) from Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds.



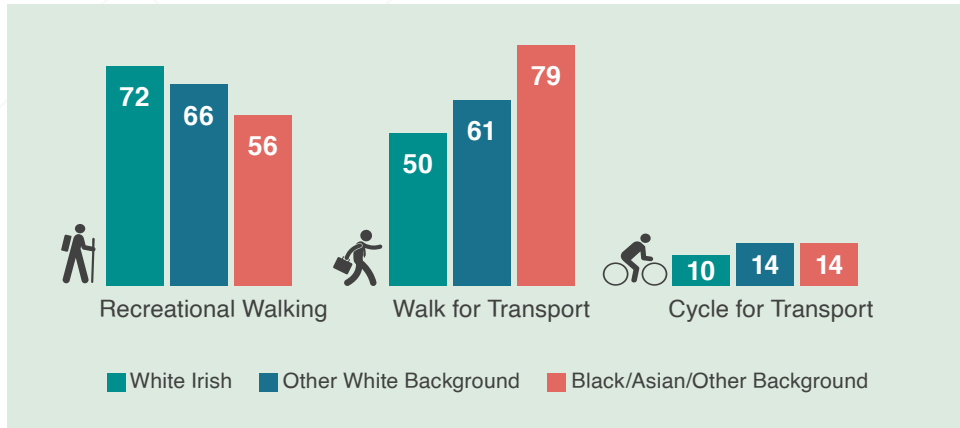
Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most ±4.3%.

Spotlight on ethnicity - Broader physical activity

- The proportion within each ethnic background walking recreationally appears to have stabilised since 2022, as 72% of White Irish and 56% of Black, Asian and Other backgrounds walked regularly for recreation (2022: 71% and 58% respectively). However, the proportion of Other White backgrounds (66%) walking recreationally increased by 4 percentage points (62%).
- Walks for transport remained highest among Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (79%) and lowest among White Irish (50%). The ethnicity gap between these two groups widened to 19 percentage points within the last year (14 percentage points in 2022). Walking for transport decreased by 9 percentage points among White Irish since 2022 (59%) and increased by 6 percentage points among Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds in the same period (2022: 73%).
- Cycling for transport decreased among both White Irish (10%) and Other White backgrounds (14%) since 2022 (13% and 20% respectively), while the percentage cycling for transport among Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (14%) remained stable (2022: 15%).
- Each ethnicity group saw an increase in the percentage of people classified as highly active. Since 2022, the percentage who were highly active increased by 3 percentage points among White Irish (45%), and 2 percentage points among both Other White backgrounds (37%) and Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (34%).
- The level of inactivity within each ethnicity group remained stable since 2022 and White Irish (8%) remained the group with the highest level of inactivity, though closely followed by Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (7%), and (6%) Other White backgrounds.

Figure 10.5 Recreational walking and active transport participation by ethnicity (%)

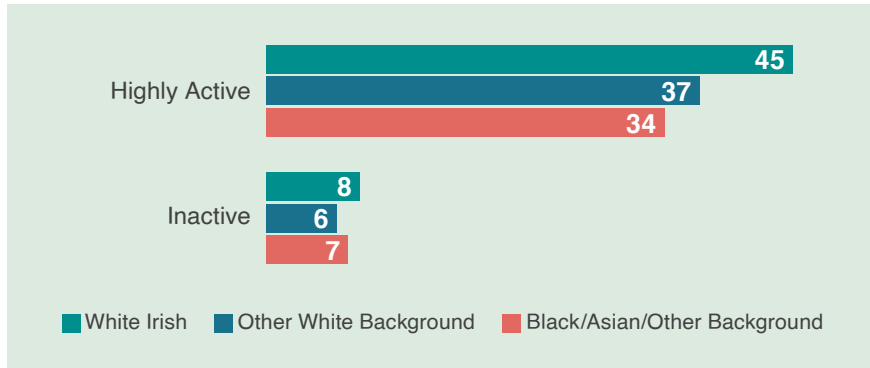
Walking for transport was highest among Black, Asian, and Other backgrounds (79%) and lowest among White Irish (50%), which means there is a 29 percentage point ethnicity gap between these two groups.



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most $\pm 4.2\%$.

Figure 10.6 Level of activity by ethnicity (%)

White Irish had the highest percentage of people classified as highly active (45%), with an 8 point percentage gap existing between the percentage of people from Other White backgrounds classified as highly active (37%).



Note: The margin of error for 2023 data was at most $\pm 4.3\%$.



Key Considerations



Key Considerations – ISM 2023

Sports participation – on the road to recovery and beyond

In the 2022 study, we observed a return to normality after the substantial turmoil inflicted by the global pandemic, which had a severe impact on sports participation. This unprecedented event led to a significant decrease in the number of individuals actively engaged in sports, the volunteers who work to support sport, and the spectators who enhance sports events.

ISM 2023 finds that this trend has continued to progress positively. We are witnessing an all-time high rate of individuals in Ireland actively participating in sports on a regular basis. These findings are very encouraging. They are bolstered by an increasing number of people who, while not always directly playing, are socially engaged in sports. This social engagement includes a range of activities such as volunteering, being an active member of sports clubs, and regular attendance at diverse sporting events.

This upward trend is undeniably heartening, especially considering the widespread apprehension that existed previously. Many feared that the disruption caused by the pandemic could instigate a challenging restart to both active and social participation in sports. However, the trends we have observed since then tell a different story. They show that the majority of people have enthusiastically re-engaged with their sporting lives. They are making full use of the various facilities, pitches, roads, and footpaths across the nation, resuming physical activities that were temporarily halted.

As a result of this surge in participation, approximately 2 million people in Ireland are currently partaking in sports on a regular basis. These individuals are reaping the myriad benefits of their involvement. The rewards are not just physical; they are also mental and social, contributing to an overall healthier lifestyle. When we consider those who are involved in sports through other means, such as through their association with sports clubs, their attendance at matches and other sporting events, or their contributions as volunteers, it becomes evident that sports are a pivotal aspect of life for the majority of people in Ireland.

However, despite these promising trends, there is still significant work to be done. Currently, 47% of the adult population in Ireland is actively engaged in sports. To reach the ambitious target of 60% active participation by the year 2027, considerable progress is required. This goal necessitates a consistent 3 percentage point increase in active participation each year for the next four years. This equates to approximately 200,000 new sports participants annually.

While we have seen this growth rate for the past two years during a recovery phase, maintaining this momentum in the following years would be a truly remarkable achievement. Achieving this objective would also require a substantial increase in social participation in sports, particularly in club membership and volunteering. These aspects have seen a gradual increase over recent years, but they still lag slightly behind their pre-pandemic 2019 levels.

Addressing this lag will require significant further investment in sports infrastructure. This will ensure that sports clubs and volunteers, who are the lifeblood of Irish sports, are adequately equipped, trained, and supported. They must be prepared to accommodate a larger number of sports participants.

There are certainly ample opportunities to increase participation. This could be achieved by eliminating disparities caused by unequal levels of participation across different societal groups. However, these measures alone would not be sufficient to attain the 2027 target. It is also essential to reach out to those who may have discontinued their participation in sports many years ago, or those who have never been involved in sports before. Engaging them is key to achieving the 2027 target.

Narrowing the gaps in sports participation, but frustrating persistence evident

A key objective of Irish sports policy is to eliminate the prevalent disparities that exist across sports participation. This is crucial to guarantee that regardless of their circumstances, everyone enjoys equal access to sports of their preference, thereby ensuring that overall participation levels are increased to their maximum potential.

This year's report examines several of these disparities – age, gender, socio-economic status, disability, ethnicity, and the urban-rural divide. While the report reveals progress in these areas, it also emphasizes that this progress is not evenly distributed.

One of the primary focuses is the gender disparity that persists in sport. Historically, women have been less likely to participate in sports compared to men – a trend that should not and cannot be allowed to continue.

The ISM previously noted an intriguing development during the early stages of the pandemic: the gender gap in sports participation briefly disappeared, only to re-emerge over the subsequent two years. This year's study, however, brings encouraging news with the gender gap dropping below 3 percentage points (2.9) for the first time. The increase in women's sports participation, which rose by 6 percentage points, surpassed the 4 percentage point rise observed among men.

This gender disparity extends beyond active sports participation and is also evident in social forms of participation. Despite this gap having widened slightly over the past year, it still remains lower than the levels measured in 2019. Concerning issues persist, with women being less likely to join sports clubs and their volunteering contributions often restricted to tasks such as providing transportation, rather than coaching or similar higher profile roles.

Addressing this issue necessitates a multi-pronged approach. The journey begins with encouraging and facilitating girls and young women to maintain their involvement in sports as they transition into adulthood, acknowledging the various hurdles that exist. The remarkable successes achieved by Irish women at national and international levels during 2023 present significant opportunities in this regard. The anticipated success of 2024, especially during the Olympics, provides potential for further progress.

These disparities are not confined to gender alone. The ISM series highlights that gaps in participation due to age, socioeconomic status, and the urban-rural divide persist. The rising levels of sports participation have not significantly impacted these gaps. Most alarmingly, this year's study reveals a 20 percentage point gap in sports participation between individuals with disabilities and those without. This marks the second consecutive year that this substantial gap has been identified, surpassing the 17 percentage point gap measured in 2019.

To ensure that the substantial benefits of sports participation are accessible to all, it is evident that sustained focus and efforts are needed across all these areas.

Sporting adaptability: A lifetime journey through diverse activities

Sport is inherently flexible and can be enjoyed at all life stages, and players are not confined to a single discipline. This year's ISM report clearly demonstrates this adaptability. It reveals that three out of five sports participants are engaging in a sport that they adopted after turning 16, indicating that the majority of players are exploring sports they only began to play in adulthood. Many people adapt their sporting pursuits over their lifetime, reinforcing the idea that it's never too late to embark on a new sporting journey.

A closer look at individual activities shows that different sports are adopted at various life stages. While the majority of players engaged in popular team sports like Gaelic football and soccer have been involved since their youth, a substantial number of golfers, gym-goers, cyclists, and runners embarked on their sporting journey after turning 25, and often significantly later. For instance, the average age reported for initiating personal exercise activities, such as gym workouts, is 29 years old.

When it comes to motivating individuals to venture into a sport, the role of companionship and introduction by someone familiar with the sport is paramount. Friends and family members are vital catalysts in this context. Most people initiate sports outside of the club environment (though team sports favour club contexts), highlighting the importance of influencing these informal structures to promote broader sports adoption, especially for first-time players.

The influence of parents, particularly gender-specific role models, is a critical factor and should not be undervalued. Both men and women are more likely to attribute their sporting initiation to their fathers than their mothers. Nevertheless, the impact of mothers is more pronounced for girls than for boys. Encouraging parents, both fathers and mothers, to actively engage and maintain their involvement in sports is crucial. Parents who participate in sports are more likely to report that their children also engage in sports. Promoting an early start in building sporting habits is certainly important, but it's equally crucial to remember that it's never too late to try a new sport or embrace one for the first time.

Beyond sports: Broader physical activity in Ireland

The ISM takes a comprehensive approach to physical activity, extending its measurements beyond just sports. It also evaluates levels of recreational walking and active modes of travel. This broader perspective on activity is vital, particularly when estimating the number of people meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines through sports and recreational walking.

Encouragingly, this year's ISM reports a slight recovery in the proportion of people deemed sufficiently active. This follows a decline in 2022 as individuals resumed their regular routines after the pandemic. The pandemic period was characterised by higher levels of recreational walking, leading to unprecedented numbers of people meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines. The easing of pandemic restrictions led to a decrease in this form of activity and, consequently, the number of people considered sufficiently active. However, this decline has now stabilised and combined with the increased level of sports participation, the numbers of sufficiently active individuals are now significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Interestingly, the numbers of people engaging in active forms of travel have remained consistent with pre-pandemic levels. Walking for transportation saw increased popularity during 2021 and 2022, perhaps due to shifts in people's habits and the nature of their journeys. However, 2023 saw a sharp 8 percentage point drop in the proportion of people engaging in this activity. The proportion of people cycling for transportation has remained fairly steady throughout the entire ISM series, and is still aligned with those observed in 2011. Promoting the wider adoption of active forms of travel is a key policy priority. This is not only beneficial to individual and population health but also crucial in reducing carbon emissions by choosing more sustainable transportation options.

The question remains as to why we are not witnessing increased regular use of active travel, especially among traditional urban and younger population cohorts. This issue certainly warrants further consideration.



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