

Sport England Areas of Research Interest (ARI)

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1. Introduction

Sport England is an arms-length body of government, sponsored by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). We are responsible for growing and developing grassroots sport and getting more people active across England, with a focus on tackling inequalities.

Understanding how people think, feel, experience, and behave towards sport and physical activity is fundamental in shaping inclusive, equitable policies and practices.

Through our Areas of Research Interest, we particularly want to encourage research in areas that we think are less developed. Our work with Active Lives means we have a good understanding of what is happening, but we generally know less about why we are seeing these results. For example, the causal links between interventions and policies, and levels of sport and physical activity.

We seek to tackle inequalities in sport and physical activity, providing opportunities to people and communities that have traditionally been left behind, and helping to remove the barriers to activity. We need greater evidence on what works so we know how best to do this.

2. About our Areas of Research Interest

Our areas of research interest set out the key topics where we want to encourage new research and learning.

We have divided our Areas of Research into 4 broader themes:

- How people think, feel and behave in relation to sport and physical activity
- What influences how people think, feel and behave in relation sport and physical activity
- The people and organisations that make sport and physical activity possible
- The value of sport and physical activity to individuals and society

Detail of the ARIs and evidence needs under each of these themes are presented in Section 5.

3. Our definition of under-represented groups

To help us better understand what we need to do to effectively tackle inequalities, these ARIs include Sport England's definition of under-represented groups.

In 2024, we launched the Inequalities Metric – to identify who is least likely to be active. The Inequalities Metric has identified the following characteristics as having the most impact on minutes of activity.

For adults:

- Disabled adults and those with long-term health conditions.
- Age 65 or over.
- Lower socioeconomic groups (NSSEC6-8).
- Asian, Chinese, and Black adults.
- Pregnant women and parents of children under one year.
- Adults of Muslim faith.

For children and young people:

- Girls.
- Other gender for those secondary-aged.
- Low affluence.
- Asian and Black children.
- Lack of park/field or outdoor sports place for secondary-aged children.

We welcome research considering any of these groups, and are particularly interested in research to understand audiences, communities, and places where:

- The depth of demographic or geographic inequality (the extent to which the group is less likely to be active) and/or the breadth of demographic or

geographic inequality (the size of the group affected) is greatest (e.g. older people, low socioeconomic groups [SEG], disability and long-term health conditions, girls).

- We have the least evidence regarding their relationship with sport and physical activity (e.g. disabled young people outside of mainstream education).
- Intersecting characteristics increase the likelihood of audiences, communities, and places being less likely to be active or have a positive attitude towards sport and physical activity.

4. How you can help

We are building a diverse network of stakeholders interested in helping to fill these evidence gaps. We hope that individuals from academia, Government and sector partners more broadly, from all stages of their career, reach out to connect with us on our Areas of Research Interest. The evidence collected will help inform strategy, practice, policy, and new research.

If you would like to join the Sport England ARI network, attend events related to any of the topic areas, undertake new research, or share existing research, please complete this form: <https://forms.office.com/e/3awdtjK68y>

5. Areas of research interest and evidence needs

You can explore these evidence needs below, or you can search by topic using the [ari.gov.uk database](https://ari.gov.uk/database).

5.1. How people think, feel and behave in relation to sport and physical activity.

ARI 1: Understanding attitudes and behaviours in relation to sport and physical activity.

- Explore why certain under-represented groups* are less likely to be active or more likely to be inactive.
- Explore why certain under-represented groups* are less likely to have positive attitudes or more likely to have negative attitudes towards sport and physical activity.
- Explore the relationship between activity levels and the attitudes towards sport and physical activity among under-represented groups*.

- Examine how attitudes and behaviours towards sport and physical activity become entrenched over time.
- Explore how population level behaviour and attitudes among under-represented groups* have changed over time, and why.
- Explore how the attitudes and behaviours of people in under-represented groups* change as they age.
- Understand how new approaches and technology (e.g. wearable devices), can expand and improve our understanding of how people think, feel and behave in relation to sport and physical activity.
- Examine how new approaches to understanding attitudes and behaviours enrich existing Active Lives findings and trends, to identify areas for further analysis and research.

Please Note: While ARI 1 is critically important, we already have a strong understanding of this area, informed by our Active Lives surveys and other strategic research projects. If you are considering research that responds to this theme, please ensure that your work does not duplicate what we already know. Instead, focus on adding new perspectives or addressing significant evidence gaps that enhance our existing knowledge base.

ARI 2: Understanding barriers and enablers for under-represented groups in relation to sport and physical activity.

- Examine specific barriers and challenges faced by inactive individuals from under-represented groups*.
- Identify experiences and motivations of active individuals in under-represented groups* and how they overcome barriers.
- Understand what constitutes a positive experience for individuals from under-represented groups* and how this differs from other groups.

ARI 3: Understanding intersectionality and diverse identities in relation to sport and physical activity.

- Investigate how multiple aspects of identity (e.g. disability, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status) intersect to influence sport and physical activity engagement.
- Understand how best to tailor sport and physical activity initiatives to accommodate diverse identities and experiences.

5.2. What influences how people think, feel and behave in relation sport and physical activity.

ARI 4: Enhancing sport and physical activity participation among under-represented groups and within places of greatest need.

- Identify conditions that have supported positive behaviour changes in under-represented groups*, including causal evidence of policies or interventions resulting in increases in activity levels or decreases in inactivity.
- Understand how socio-ecological model factors (individual, social environment, organisational / institutional, physical environment, policy) interplay to support change.

ARI 5: Harnessing technology and tackling digital exclusion in relation to sport and physical activity.

- Assess the impact of technological developments and digital exclusion on perceptions and experiences of sport and physical activity.
- Identify components of successful strategies that address digital exclusion in sport and physical activity.

ARI 6: Enhancing cultural and social dynamics in relation to sport and physical activity.

- Explore the drivers of cultural and social relevance in sport and physical activity.
- Explore how to build and sustain positive social movements around sport and physical activity while addressing negative social issues like racism and abuse.

ARI 7: Tackling exclusion and discrimination in sport and physical activity.

- Understand the extent and impact of exclusionary practices and discrimination in sport and physical activity.

- Identify effective policies and practices to prevent exclusion and discrimination in sport and physical activity.

ARI 8: Understanding the impacts of a changing climate on people, places, and sport and physical activity.

- Explore how climate change (e.g. more frequent and intense weather events) affects attitudes, behaviours and participation in sport and physical activity, for both the workforce and participants.
- Examine how climate change is impacting facilities, infrastructure, and the availability of opportunities to be active.
- Explore how the impacts of climate change and the ability to adapt, vary across different audiences (including under-represented groups and those with higher health risks), places, sports and activities.
- Examine how the impacts of climate change on sport and physical activity are likely to evolve over the next 5-10+ years and investigate how the sector can adapt to these challenges, drawing on lessons from other countries and sectors.
- Identify additional considerations and emerging areas of research that could enhance our understanding of the relationship between climate change, sport, and physical activity.

5.3. The people and organisations that make sport and physical activity possible.

ARI 9: Workforce diversity and participation within sport and physical activity.

- Explore how diversity in the sport and physical activity workforce influences participation among under-represented groups*.
- Identify necessary changes to make the sport and physical activity workforce more representative of the population.

ARI 10: Training and youth engagement within sport and physical activity among underrepresented groups

- Understand the requirements of delivering optimal experiences within sport and physical activity for children and young people from under-represented groups*.
- Evaluate the alignment of training practices with inclusivity, safety, and incorporating youth voices.

ARI 11: Enabling environments for sport and physical activity

- Identify environmental and systemic features that effectively enable sport and physical activity among under-represented groups*.
- Evaluate successful systems, places, and initiatives for engaging under-represented groups*.
- Evidence the links between systems change and behaviour change in sport and physical activity.

ARI 12: Trends and future adaptations to promote sport and physical activity

- Investigate how societal trends impact efforts to address sport and physical activity inequalities.
- Explore how to effectively adapt sport and physical activity opportunities to respond to emerging trends.

5.4. The value of sport and physical activity to individuals and society.

ARI 13: Understanding long-term impacts of inequality in sport and physical activity across the life course

- Examine how experiences of sport and physical activity in childhood and youth influence behaviours and attitudes in later life.
- Explore the wider impacts of long-term inequality in sport and physical activity participation.

- Understand how addressing inequalities in sport and physical activity can contribute to breaking cycles of disadvantage and improve societal outcomes.

ARI 14: Benefits of sport and physical activity for under-represented groups

- Evaluate the impact of sport and physical activity on the lives of under-represented groups* and their communities.

ARI 15: Reducing social inequalities through sport and physical activity

- Evaluate how sport and physical activity investment reduces broader social inequalities.

ARI 16: Understanding physical and mental health impacts of sport and physical activity

- Understand and demonstrate the value of the dose-response relationship between sport and physical activity and its impact on physical and mental health — both for inactive adults and less active children and young people. Explore the role of sport and physical activity in the treatment and management of mental health conditions.
- Investigate the impact of sports injuries on sport and physical activity participation and develop methods to measure this.

ARI 17: Understanding mental wellbeing and subjective wellbeing in relation to sport and physical activity

- Evaluate the value of healthy wellbeing across different types and levels of sport and physical activity participation and across different socio-economic or demographic groups.

ARI 18: Social, community and economic development in relation to sport and physical activity

- Investigate the relationship between sport and physical activity participation and social capital, including valuation.
- Improve the measurement and valuation of outcomes relating to crime, including the impacts of targeted and rehabilitative programmes.
- Establish the relationship between sport and physical activity engagement and educational attainment.
- Investigate the relationship between sport and physical activity participation and economic productivity and labour market outcomes, including valuation.

ARI 19: Understanding environmental impact of sport and physical activity

- Understand the environmental impact of sport and physical activity.
- Evaluate strategies to reduce environmental impacts of sport and physical activity and contribute to sustainable local growth, including net-zero goals.

ARI 20: Influencing policy and strategy in relation to sport and physical activity

- Explore the interactions between inequalities in sport and physical activity and wider societal and geographical inequalities.
- Understand how the sport and physical activity sector can both influence and be influenced by broader policy and investment decisions in areas like health, transport, education, and housing.
- Identify effective messages, messengers, and channels for influencing policy and strategy across different sectors.

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