

Activity Check-In

Identity, sport and physical activity: Black African adults

The Activity Check-In tracks behaviours and attitudes from both adults, children and young people towards sport and physical activity, revealing the impacts of a rapidly changing world.

Each wave captures views on a specific topic of current relevance – in this publication we focus on what sport and physical activity means for Black African adults in England.

Full data sets are available on our website.

This report is based on Sport England's Activity Check-In survey and focus groups held in spring and summer 2024. It looks at how culture, family, and social influences shape people's attitudes and experiences of sport and physical activity.

The research focuses on Black African and Pakistani and Bangladeshi adults – groups who are less active than average but generally positive about being active – using boosted survey samples and peer-led discussions in local communities.

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Context

There are approximately 1.5 million Black African adults living in England, making up 3% of the total population and 62% of the wider Black or Black British group. Almost half (47%) live in London, with two-thirds identifying as Christian and one-quarter as Muslim. The median age is 30, ten years younger than the England average.

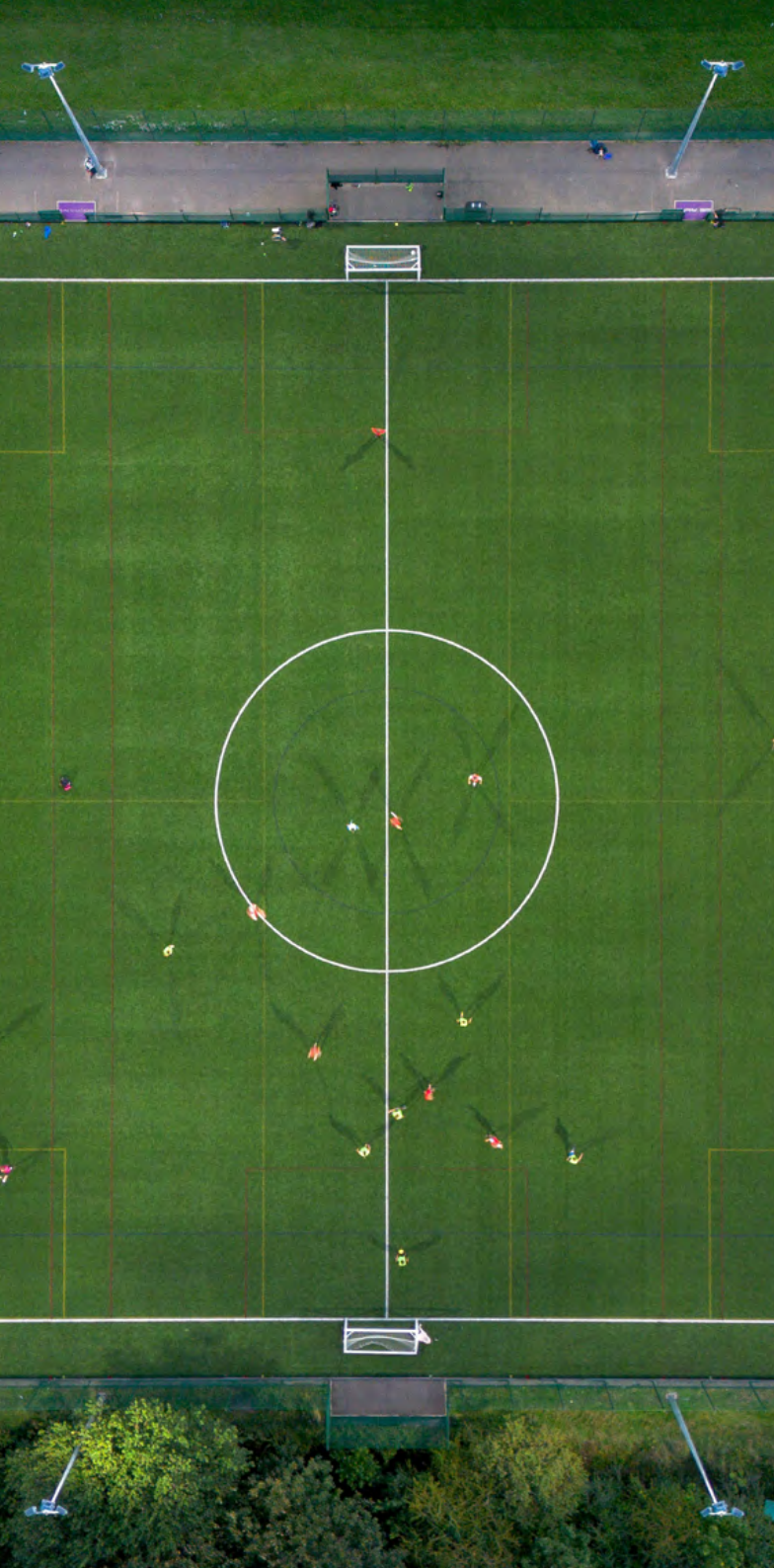
Black African adults are the focus of this research because they are less active¹ than the national average, though equally as active as both Black Caribbean adults and Black adults as a collective.

They are also more likely than average to hold positive attitudes towards sport and physical activity – 62% strongly agree with at least one of the Active Lives statements on capability, opportunity, or enjoyment (vs 49% adults overall).

This report draws on Wave 12 of the Activity Check-In survey and peer-led focus groups in London and Manchester, which took place in spring and summer 2024.

It aims to better understand how identity, culture, and lived experience shape behaviour – and where barriers and opportunities lie to support more equitable participation.

1. 'Active' refers to the Chief Medical Officer's guideline of at least 150 minutes of at least moderate intensity activity per week for adults in England.



Attitudes

Our research suggests that ‘sport’ and ‘physical activity’ hold distinct, but broadly similar meanings for Black African adults as for adults in England overall:

- Sport is often viewed as organised, structured, and something done with others for enjoyment.
- Physical activity is seen as broader and more individual
 - to maintain health, fitness and wellbeing.

As one participant put it:

“Sports, it’s more like you want to do it together with people, like, ‘Oh, let’s go play football,’ assuming I wouldn’t go on my own. Sport seems like more of a group effort, in my opinion.”

– Female, 29



Quantitative data reinforces these differences while showing that many of these views are shared with adults more generally:

- For Black African adults overall, 'Sport' is more likely to be associated with words like Team, Competitive, and Fun.
- Physical activity is associated with Necessary, Spontaneous, and Important, suggesting something essential and part of daily life.
- Older Black African adults (55+) were more likely to link sport with Health; men were more likely than women to associate sport with Important.

While Black African adults draw similar distinctions between sport and physical activity to those held by adults in England overall, they tend to express these meanings with more emphasis – particularly highlighting sport as important and social, and physical activity as both health-focused and enjoyable.



Barriers and motivations

Barriers are often similar to those faced by the wider population – such as, lack of motivation, not feeling fit enough, time pressures, and the weather – but there are notable differences:

- Cost is a greater concern (7% vs 3% overall) – covering equipment, clothing, or access fees.
- Unwanted attention of a sexual nature is more often mentioned (6% vs 3%).
- Family expectations can act as a barrier (5%), and while over half (52%) said their parents encouraged them to take part in activity, this encouragement was often selective.
- Cultural appearance norms – including concerns about hair maintenance or body shape – can prevent participation.

Motivations are also distinctive:

- Mental health benefits (52% vs 45% overall)
- To be social (28% vs 21%)
- Career development (19% vs 11%)
- Seeing others people do it (18% vs 11%)



Role of family and expectations

Family plays a strong and complex role in shaping participation for Black African adults – often more so than for adults overall.

- Encouragement is lower and more selective: 56% said their parents encouraged them to take part in any sport or activity (vs 63% nationally), while 38% said parents were selective about which activities were acceptable (vs 29%).
- Expectations are more directive: 15% said their family had expectations about what sports they should do – double the national average (7%).
- Cultural and gender norms influence support: Some families prioritised education or career over sport, or valued it only if it led to elite or professional success.
- Responsibilities shape participation: Balancing work, study, and caregiving can limit time for activity, though some use being active to better manage these demands.

“Sports weren’t really encouraged in my family. I think they saw exercise as something that you would have to only do as a professional sport...I don’t think they realised that you can actually just do exercise for the fun of it.”

Female 22



Culture, identity and participation

Culture and identity strongly shape how Black African adults approach sport and physical activity. Experiences are influenced by family support, cultural expectations, and the opportunities encountered in childhood.

Some participants felt pressure to align with accepted norms within their communities, reporting self-consciousness or reluctance to be active in public spaces for fear it might detract from “more important” responsibilities.

Stereotypes about “Black athleticism” were cited, with some feeling pushed towards specific sports and discouraged from others.

These issues were particularly evident among second-generation Black African adults, who were more likely than first-generation migrants to face challenges around maintaining physical appearance (24% vs 15%) and fitting the image of others being active (19% vs 10%).

Safety concerns — especially among women — were linked to harassment or unwanted attention, leading many to seek trusted or female-only environments that respect cultural or religious values.



Quantitative findings show

- 33% said it was very important to be active in ways that maintained cultural traditions or views.
- A further 33% said it was quite important.
- However, 44% said it was important but that they could not always do so.

Nearly half said their sport and activity choices were mainly or partly based on their own culture.

Length of time in the UK influenced attitudes:

- In the UK less than three years: 62% based choices on their own culture.
- Three years or more: 41% based choices on their own culture.

Generational differences were clear: second and third-generation migrants were more likely to challenge expectations, valuing personal enjoyment of activity regardless of professional or academic outcomes.



Opportunities

This research highlights the need for the sector to recognise and respond to the contexts shaping how Black African adults engage with sport and physical activity.

While many hold positive attitudes, participation is influenced by family expectations, cultural values, access, and social networks – shaping not just whether people take part, but how and why.

The sector can strengthen engagement by:

- Broadening how being active is framed, reflecting that health, wellbeing, and social belonging matter as much as competition or performance.
- Working with family and community networks that strongly influence participation.
- Creating more flexible, accessible opportunities, especially for those who value structure but face practical or cultural barriers.
- Designing offers that fit real lives, showing that activity can sit alongside work, study, and family.

Adapting to different cultural contexts and motivations is key to a more inclusive and relevant sport and physical activity system.



Methodology

Wave 12 of the Activity Check-In used a mixed-methods approach and took place in spring and summer 2024:

The quantitative survey included both a nationally representative sample of adults in England and a boosted sample of 716 Black African adults to enable subgroup analysis.

Survey results are weighted to be representative of the national adult population, unless otherwise stated. Comparisons labelled as “overall” refer to all adults in England from the full survey sample.

The qualitative research involved two peer-led focus groups with Black African adults in London and Birmingham (April–May 2024), representing a mix of gender, age, and attitudes to activity.

Discussions explored how identity, culture, family expectations, and social context influence participation and perceptions of sport and physical activity.

Full data tables and qualitative reports are available on the Sport England website.