

Horizon scanning: Demographics

Changing population

The future of sport and physical activity

Part two – Ageing and health

June 2026

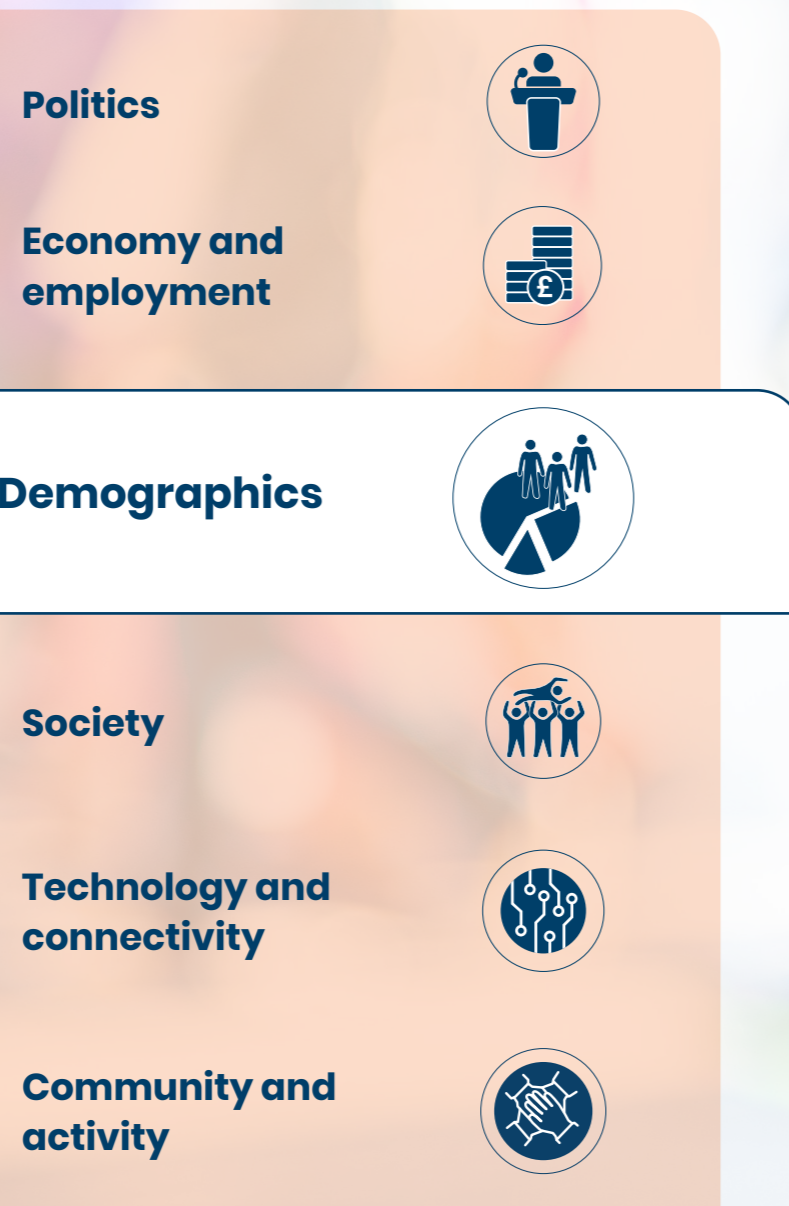
Horizon scanning

As part of our Horizon Scanning theme on demographics, this series explores how population change is reshaping who we are as a nation and what that means for sport and physical activity.

Sport England's [Horizon Scanning](#) helps us look beyond the immediate and understand the long-term shifts shaping sport and physical activity. We identified 16 trends across six themes: politics, economy and employment, demographics, technology and connectivity, society and community and activity.

We examined how these trends and changes across these themes may impact on the sport and physical activity sector as well as people's attitudes and behaviours to physical activity. You can explore the individual trends under each of these themes in our Horizon Scanning report [here](#).

Themes:



Population change is relatively slow moving but is one of the most significant overarching themes identified through our horizon scanning work. Demographic shifts are reshaping who we are as a nation – influencing how we live, age, and take part in sport and physical activity.

To understand these changes and possible implications, we commissioned [Trajectory](#), a specialist trends and foresight agency, who identified nine interconnected population trends which are listed below. These trends draw on evidence from the 2021 Census, wider national and international research, and consultation with stakeholders.

These findings are explored in a series of three parts which each focus on different elements of demographic change. Each part groups related trends to show how they interact and combine to form broader themes shaping the future of sport and physical activity:

Part one

Identity and belonging

- A. Changing population dynamics
- B. Changing diversity in England
- C. Immigration and integration

Part two

Ageing and health

- A. Older and more diverse
- B. Healthier ageing – but not equally
- C. Increasing disability in England

Part three

Generations and place

- A. Widening socioeconomic groups
- B. Rural and urban shifts
- C. Young Britons

Ageing and health

This is the second of a three-part series focusing on demographic change – specifically focusing on three trends: older and more diverse, healthier ageing – but not equally, and increasing disability in England. It explores how ageing, health, and disability trends are diverging across groups, creating unequal experiences of later life.

A. Older and more diverse

England's population is ageing – nearly 40% of people were over 50 in 2021, projected to increase to around 46% by 2031, and almost 20% over 65, projected to increase to between 24–26% by 2031. This shift is accelerating as the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement.

Older age groups are also becoming far more diverse. Since 2011, the number of over-65s from Black, Asian, and other ethnic backgrounds in England has increased by around 60%.

KEY FACTS

Increase in **number of people in England aged 65 and over** from Black, Asian and other ethnic backgrounds between 2011 and 2021:

- Asian – +174,418
- Black – +39,635
- Mixed – +10,426
- Other – +63,633

5.5 million – expected increase in the working age population over the age of 50 by 2050.

The number of people aged 80 and over is set to **more than double** from three to six million in the next 40 years.

Sources: Centre for Ageing Better 2023; Government Office for Science 2016; ONS 2022.



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Potential impact:

The older population will continue to grow and diversify. Longer lives and lower birth rates mean over-65s will make up a larger share of society, reflecting a wider range of ethnicities and identities. This will reshape what ageing looks like in future generations.

- Sector insight must go beyond stereotypes through engagement, data and intersectional thinking, to deliver sport and physical activity that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse community of older adults.
- Rising health and disability needs make prevention essential. Sport and physical activity can play a role in supporting physical and mental health, easing NHS and care system pressures.
- Isolation is a growing risk among older adults, making group-based, inclusive activities increasingly vital to support connection and wellbeing.
- These shifts call for stronger cross-sector collaboration and a more diverse, age-inclusive workforce, with older adults represented in leadership and delivery roles.

B. Healthier ageing – but not equally

Older people reported feeling healthier in 2024 than in 2021, especially those aged 55–79. However, these mask widening inequalities around later-life health.

People in more affluent areas are healthier for longer, while those who are poorer and those from Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups face higher rates of illness and disability in later life. Women across all ethnicities are also more likely to experience poor health or disability as they age.

KEY FACTS

Overall activity levels in England have increased:

- 36% of 55–64-year-olds
- 37% of 65–74-year-olds
- 54% of 75–84-year-olds
- and 75% of over 84-year-olds – do not participate in 150 minutes of physical activity a week.

The health conditions that have increased in prevalence the most in the UK in the last

10 years are **mental health conditions, musculoskeletal conditions, and Type 2 diabetes**. Sport and physical activity play a preventative role for all these conditions.

Physical health tends to decline the most among older individuals, whereas mental, social and spiritual wellbeing tend to remain higher.

People from Pakistani backgrounds are reported to be **twice as likely to indicate poor health** compared with White British people; for Bangladeshi backgrounds, the odds are around 1.6 times higher; and for Black Caribbean backgrounds, the odds are about 1.5 times higher.

22% of White British women in their 80s **report poor health** – the same proportion as for women from Pakistani backgrounds in their 50s (23%). And the rate of poor health for women from Bangladeshi backgrounds in their 40s (14%) is equivalent to that of White British women in their 70s (14%).

Sources: Sport England Active Lives 2023–2024; McKinsey 2023, Centre for Ageing Better 2023.

Potential impact:

More people will live longer in good health – but inequalities in health outcomes will deepen, shaped by income and ethnicity.

- A growing divide will emerge between healthy, affluent older adults and those living with long-term illness or disability. Sport and physical activity has a role to play as a preventative health intervention.
- Health and social care spending will continue to grow, but local inequalities in health and social care will widen, increasing regional variation.
- Greater pressures will be put on unpaid carers – the sector can help relieve pressures by supporting active ageing and supporting unpaid carers to be more active too.
- Ageing experiences differ greatly across communities. A place-based approach to understand different experiences and working with identified communities is vital.

People in more affluent areas are healthier for longer



C. Increasing disability in England

The number of people living with disabilities has grown since 2021, though they now represent a smaller proportion of the population overall.

Disability is closely linked to gender and deprivation: women and people in poorer areas are more likely to experience it.

Lower employment levels, higher rates of anxiety, and greater reported loneliness remain key challenges for those living with a disability or long-term health condition.

KEY FACTS

16 million **disabled people** in the UK as of 2023.

Disability is **more common** among older adults:

- 11% children
- 23% working age
- 45% state pension age – report having a disability.

Ease of access to services for disabled people **still lags behind** required levels.

In the UK in 2025, the **employment rate** for disabled people of working age was 52.8%, compared with 82.5% for non-disabled people.

Average **anxiety ratings** for disabled people are higher than for non-disabled people. In the year ending June 2019, disabled people reported an average anxiety score of about 4.27/10, compared with 2.66/10 for non-disabled people.

2019 data show 13.3% of disabled people reported **feeling lonely** 'often or always', which was almost four times higher than the 3.4% of non-disabled people reporting the same.

Source: DWP Family Resources Survey 2023/2024; ONS disability and wellbeing analysis 2019; DWP/ONS employment statistics 2025.

Potential impact:

An ageing population will increase the number of people living with one or more disabilities.

- Older-age disabilities will remain a major health and social care issue. Sport and physical activity must play a preventative role and offer inclusive opportunities for those with health conditions from all ages.
- Overlapping disabilities and inequalities, particularly around wealth, ethnicity, and gender, will add complexity in how to design opportunities that meet a range of intersecting needs.
- The sector must improve accessibility in facilities, workforce skills, and communications.
- Fear of losing disability benefits can deter participation in sport and activity – systems need to change to remove this barrier.
- Balancing specialist support with inclusive, affordable, accessible, and local opportunities will be key.

16 million disabled people in the UK as of 2023





Conclusion

The 'healthier ageing – but not equally' trend highlights the widening gaps in how ageing and disability is experienced across society, shaped by factors such as health, income, ethnicity, gender, and place.

For sport and physical activity, this presents both a challenge and a responsibility to act. As people live longer, ensuring that opportunities to stay active are inclusive, accessible, and reflective of diverse needs becomes essential.

Sport and physical activity play a critical role in prevention – supporting physical health, mental wellbeing, independence, and social connection as people age. It also has the power to challenge stereotypes about ageing and disability by improving representation, visibility, and voice for older and disabled adults across all communities.

An ageing and increasingly diverse population represents one of the greatest opportunities for sport and physical activity to have lasting social impact – but only if inequality is acknowledged and directly addressed through intentional, inclusive action.

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