

# SILVER LININGS

Understanding women's  
relationship with sport and  
physical activity in later life



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Studies show that women are not as active as men in later life and are missing out on all the health and social benefits of sport.

Women in Sport champions the right of every woman and girl in the UK to take part in physical activity, and is working to change the current sporting environment to empower more women to take part in sport.



Above: participants from Dao Lu CIC's Senior Tai Chi Corner

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Women in Sport has produced this report to guide sport providers in how to support more women to become active in later life and reap the many benefits that sport brings.

We spoke to a sample of women to find out their attitudes to old age and how this affects their relationship with sport and physical activity. For some women, their personal experience of ageing can be a catalyst for change. For example, an individual who recovers from a serious illness may find they have a new lease of life and want to start a new sport or activity.

Many of the women we spoke to felt they had less structure and routine in their lives as they got older, and were looking to renew their sense of purpose and find new activities to fill their time.

Women who took part in the research didn't identify with the term **'older women'**. Instead, the term contributed to feelings of fear and uncertainty. For deliverers of sport, it is important to think about messaging and how you promote your activities.

Our research also looked at women's values and their priorities in later life. **Spending time with friends and family** was particularly important for the women we spoke to, as were developing new skills and volunteering and supporting others.

To engage women, sport providers need to align their activities with these values. For example, creating time for women to socialise at the end of an activity.

We also looked at the barriers that prevent women from taking part in sport in later life. Some of the common issues were **doubting their physical capability** to be active, **not having any role models** they could relate to and a **lack of positive messages** about physical activity. The women, however, did recognise that they should be more active. Deliverers of sport need to tackle these barriers to turn women's motivation into action.

It is important to note that this is a small-scale research project, with a small sample size, and does not reflect the views of all women. We feel that further research is needed to explore the experiences of women from lower socio-economic groups and those from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background.

We recommend that sport providers carry out their own research into the specific audiences they are targeting to find out women's values and their relationship with sport and physical activity.

This report offers a snapshot of women's relationship with sport in later life, and we hope it will provide a building block for the future, paving the way for more women to become active and stay that way.



Above: Moe completing a triathlon

© Catherine Giles

# INTRODUCTION

Women in Sport wanted to gain a greater understanding of what ageing means for women and how this impacts their relationship with sport and physical activity. With the pension age rising, many grandparents caring for grandchildren and all of us living longer, what does it mean to be considered old? And what is the effect of ageing on women's active lives?

This report sets out the findings from our research exploring the role that sport and physical activity play during women's later years.

According to the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), **42%** of people aged 55 and over are inactive (defined as doing less than 30 moderate minutes of physical activity per week), compared to **29%** of the adult population<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, the gap between men and women's activity levels continues into older age. Over half (**52%**) of women aged 65–74 meet CMO guidelines for physical activity compared with **58%** of men, decreasing to only **21%** of women aged 75–84 compared to **43%** of men<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, Sport England analysed inactivity data in 2016 to identify key behaviour patterns<sup>3</sup>. The survey found that for those aged 50 and over, **2.8 million people** did no activity in the space of 28 days; **700,000 people** did some form of moderate activity and **4.7 million people** did only light intensity activities. Women aged 50 and over were more likely to have done no physical activity in the last 28 days, compared to other groups of people.

This is of great concern, and means women continue to be disadvantaged in later life when it comes to sport and physical activity; they miss out on all the health, mental wellbeing and social benefits of sport. We therefore wanted to understand why these differences between men and women's relationships with sport and physical activity exist.

Previous research has shown that people understand the benefits of exercise in later life and want to be more active<sup>4</sup>, but this desire does not necessarily translate into action. We have built on our foundational piece of research, *Understanding Women's Lives*<sup>5</sup>, to explore the following areas:

## 1. Attitudes to ageing:

This section looks at how women feel about ageing and what role this plays in their propensity to be active.

## 2. Lifestyles and values:

This section delves into what women value in later life, how they currently fulfil these values outside of sport and physical activity, and how these activities can be a way to fulfil these values.

## 3. Barriers to being active:

This section examines women's motivations for, and barriers to, participating in sport and physical activity, as well as current and possible options to encourage them to take part more often.

## 4. How to support women to become active in later life:

This section looks at how sport providers can encourage women to take part in physical activity.

Through greater understanding of these issues, we will be able to support more women to become active in later life and reap the benefits that taking part in sport and physical activity brings.

<sup>1</sup>Sport England (2016) Active people survey 10 Q2 April 15-March 16, cited in Sport England (2017) *Active ageing prospectus*

<sup>2</sup>Craig, R., & Mindell, J. (2013) *Health survey for England 2012*. London: the Health and Social Care Information Centre

<sup>3</sup>Sport England (2016) *Tackling inactivity: A guide to Sport England's approach and investment*

<sup>4</sup>Britain Thinks (2016) *People with long-term conditions and attitudes towards physical activity*. Richmond Group

<sup>5</sup>Women in Sport (2015) *Understanding Women's Lives*

# OUR APPROACH

Sport England defines older people as aged 55 and over. However, this is a huge age group, potentially spanning 40 years or more. The CMO's report<sup>6</sup> defines older people as 65 and above, but acknowledges that there are significant physical differences, ranging from athletic to frail and immobile.

To narrow the focus of our research we decided to focus on women aged 55-75. These women are part of the baby boomers generation, born post Second World War, and are likely to be retired or approaching retirement from work. Our research consisted of a **five-stage** qualitative methodology:

1

## DESK RESEARCH

We reviewed a range of research on women aged 55-75 and physical activity to build a picture of their relationship with sport.

2

## INTERVIEWS

We spoke to experts in the field of sport, fitness, and ageing to identify themes, areas of interest and interventions to explore further in the next stages of research.

3

## ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEWS

We interviewed five active women aged 55-75 to give us a greater understanding of the values and motivations of women who are still active, as well as the barriers and pathways to sport and physical activity. These women were involved in a range of sports and fitness activities, including running, badminton, Zumba, softball and exercising in a gym. We also joined in with their sport or activity to observe them being physically active.

4

## INTERACTIVE, CO-CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

Two groups of inactive women, aged between 55 and 75, took part in interactive workshops to enable us to better understand their values and attitudes towards sport and physical activity, and the barriers preventing them taking part.

The two groups were split by age—one group involved women aged 55-64 and the other 65-74—to identify key differences that emerge as age increases. During these workshops the women were asked to test hypotheses and emerging recommendations and invited to co-design their ideal sport and fitness initiatives.

5

## INTERACTIVE DEBRIEF WORKSHOP

We ran a workshop to share the findings of our research with key sport sector partners and a charity expert in ageing. From these discussions, we began to shape ideas for how to encourage more women to take part in sport and physical activity in later life.

This was a small-scale research project, involving a small pool of women mainly from higher social economic groups and of Caucasian ethnicity. It is important to be clear that this research does not represent **all** women but helps to give an indication of **some** of the barriers **some** women face.

We have included two anonymised case studies in the report.

<sup>6</sup>Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Protection (2011) *Start active, stay active: A report on physical activity in the UK*

# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS AGEING

We found that women's attitudes towards ageing are influenced by a range of different factors, both internal and external.

### HOW OLD DO YOU FEEL?

Chronological age is not the best measure of how old someone is. Instead, how women feel and the status of their health is more relevant. We found that women broadly come under a continuum based on their attitude towards ageing, with **'feeling young at heart'** at one end of the scale, through to **'feeling older'** at the other end. Feeling older is often associated with having a health condition, while those who feel young at heart are less likely to have a health condition.

We found that the label 'older women' did not define any of the women in our research and few identify with this term. 'Old' is typically seen as someone older than them, with stereotype images coming to mind of an elderly person to whom they don't relate.

*"When you think of someone old you think of a person curled up in their arm chair."*

Research suggests that perceptions of what it is to be old are established at an early age and then further informed by society and media representations<sup>7</sup>. These perceptions, however, have changed dramatically for many people due to a higher life expectancy, with many women today living beyond 90. Addressing this group as 'older women' may not match up with their perceptions of themselves, and can stir up fears about ageing.

#### ◀ FEELING YOUNG AT HEART

- Generally aged between 55 and 69
- Less likely to feel old
- Did not identify as old
- Express issues about being treated older than they feel

*"I went to Zumba Gold, I didn't know that it was different, but it was full of old people."*

*"It's like being offered a seat on the train and you say, 'No thank you, I don't need to sit down!'"*

#### FEELING OLDER ▶

- Tend to be aged 70 and over
- More likely to physically feel older
- Health conditions are more prevalent
- Generally do not identify with the label 'old'

*"My 50s were great. Now in my 70s I think what have I got to look forward to?"*

*"I used to go to salsa dancing when younger but now my conditions affect my muscles and it's painful."*

<sup>7</sup>Levy, B. R. (2003) *Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes*. Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences. Vol. 58B, No. 4, P203-P211



***“I want to see the grandchildren grow up. You have the time to do this now which perhaps you didn’t with your own kids.”***

## **AGEING IS AN INDIVIDUAL JOURNEY**

Ageing is a process that affects individuals differently and is often triggered by important life events, such as retirement, personal illness or injury, or the death of parents and/or close family members. These events are experienced at different points in life and so it is important to recognise the individual journey that women go on as they get older.

The impact of such events can also vary. For some, they can be hugely negative, but for others they

can have a positive impact, acting as a catalyst to re-evaluate their plans and providing a new lust for life, including taking part in physical activity. This can be the case for someone who has experienced a life-threatening illness.

***“I had a cancer diagnosis – breast and thyroid cancer. I got treated and it’s gone, but now everything is heightened. Every day counts now.”***

## **MENOPAUSE**

The menopause poses challenges for women as they get older. Its impact can be significant, affecting everyday life with physical symptoms such as night sweats and sudden temperature changes or emotional upheaval. For others, the impact can be subtler with some women barely affected by it. Sport and physical activity can play a positive role in lessening the physical symptoms of the menopause<sup>8</sup>.

However, the menopause remains a taboo subject, with many women feeling uncomfortable

talking about it publicly. One interviewee, who runs a women’s beginners running group, told us that running has significantly decreased the effects of her menopause symptoms but, despite this, she does not highlight this benefit to women in her running group.

***“We don’t really talk about menopause, occasionally you’ll chat about it individually but we don’t make a big thing about it – we should really.”***

## **CONFLICTED FEELINGS TOWARDS AGEING**

Ageing stimulated conflicted feelings for the women involved in our research. Positives identified included good pensions and disposable income and freedom to travel frequently and enjoy holidays. Some also spoke about having more leisure time to enjoy themselves, fewer direct responsibilities such as children and work, and more quality time to spend with their grandchildren.

The women also spoke of their underlying fears about not having anything to look forward to in the future. They want to make the most of the time they have left “before their bodies and minds start to decline”.

***“You feel you need to make the most of time left.”***

***“When you’re younger you’re always working towards something...but now...you’re working towards death.”***

<sup>8</sup>Karacan, S. (2010) *Effects of long-term aerobic exercise on physical fitness and postmenopausal symptoms with menopausal rating scale*. Science & Sports, vol. 25, no. 1, 39-46

*“It looks like fun — dancing to Latin style music. It’s for the over 50s so I might be able to keep up!”*

## MARGARET

- **Age:** 68
- **Family:** Has two children and five young grandchildren who she loves spending time with and looking after when she can.
- **Work:** Retired.
- **Physical activity:** Margaret doesn't currently take part in any structured activity but does consider herself to live a fairly active life. She enjoys gardening, visiting galleries and going to the park with her grandchildren. Margaret used to be more active until she broke her ankle several years ago.
- **Enjoys:** Knitting, reading, and socialising with friends and family.

Margaret's perception of ageing is not so positive; she does not like getting older. She misses the goals she used to have to work towards, such as building her career and looking after her house and children. She fears there is not much to look forward to now.

Margaret would like to be more active but needs reassuring that any physical activity is suitable for her age and ability. She feels that gyms are for younger people and is intimidated by the idea of gym membership. Margaret would like to try Zumba Gold which she feels is suitable for her age group: lower impact and easy to follow.



Above: Actress Lesley Joseph competing in Strictly Come Dancing in 2016 aged 71

© BBC/Guy Levy

## SHIFTING IDENTITY AND CHANGING GOALS

As women grow older, their focus may turn to creating a new sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging. When they were younger, they had clear goals, such as raising a family, paying off the mortgage and working towards retirement; they felt they had a role in society. In contrast, older age can feel like you are in free fall with women unsure about their next goal in life and what their role in the world should be. Their daily routine has less structure and they increasingly feel more invisible in society. Entering older age means defining new boundaries and adjusting to a shifting identity.

*“I live alone and I’m divorced, free fall, no plan.”*

For many women, having somewhere they need to be and feeling involved helps them to feel needed and increases their overall happiness and sense of self-worth.

### SUMMARY

Our research shows that women’s attitudes to older age can vary, depending on a range of different factors. For some women, their individual experiences of ageing can spur them into taking up a new sport or physical activity. For example, life events, including retirement, personal illness or the death of a close family member, can give some women a new lease of life.

The women in our research didn’t identify with the label **‘older women’**. Instead, this term stirred up fears about ageing, with many worried about not having anything to look forward to in the future. As they get older, women find they have less structure and routine in their lives. Taking part in activities and trying new hobbies can help them to renew their sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging.

*“It’s only when I see a photo of myself that I think, Oh gosh am I actually that old?”*

# KEY FINDINGS

## 2. WOMEN'S LIFESTYLES AND VALUES

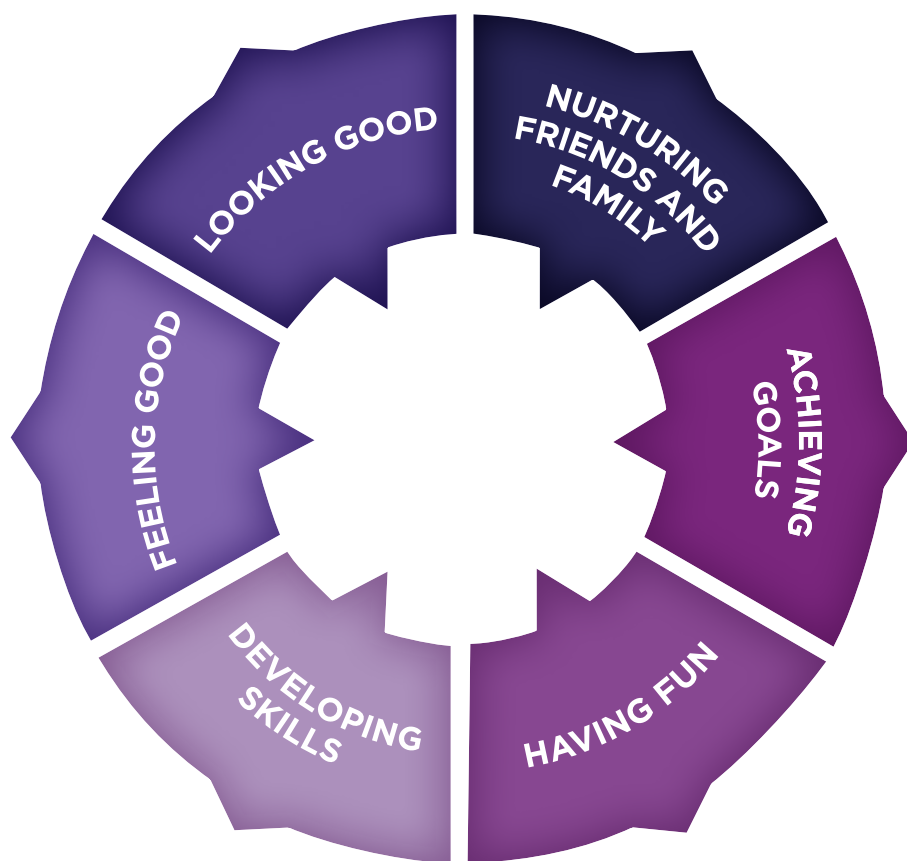
We examined the values of women aged 55-75 and how they want to spend their time.

### WOMEN'S VALUE SYSTEMS IN LATER LIFE

Our *Understanding Women's Lives*<sup>9</sup> research identified six core values that are important to women: nurturing friends and family, achieving goals, having fun, developing skills, feeling good and looking good.

These values show how women want to spend their time and focus their energy. The significance women place on each value will change throughout their life. As a sport provider knowing the values of your target audience is important so you can align your activity with these values.

The value systems of women aged 55-75 are very similar to those of younger women but with some values becoming more prominent. Also, the hobbies that women take up to fulfil those six values change as they get older.



<sup>9</sup>Women in Sport (2015) *Understanding Women's Lives*



## SPENDING TIME WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Spending time with children and grandchildren was the top priority for the women who took part in our research. Many women can enjoy having more spare time in later life and less work pressure. Although some of the women continued to work past the age of 70, and were enjoying it, this tended to be on a part-time basis.

Friendship networks become more important at this stage of life, with women spending more time socialising. They are increasingly using technology, including Skype, WhatsApp and social media, to connect with friends and to research local groups.

***“Dinner with friends ... it was nice to catch up with them – I felt inspired, happy and enjoyed the stimulating conversation.”***

Despite their efforts, however, some women can feel the loss of other important social groups. For example, missing colleagues after retirement and feeling sad when children have left home.



***“[With my grandchild]...we go to the park, play on the swings and look at the wildlife.”***

*“As I get older and now the children have left home, I am feeling the empty nest syndrome... so it’s important to have a network, at the club it’s all about that — having a circle of friends.”*

Below: Participants from Dao Lu CIC’s Senior Tai Chi Corner

© Ping Zhang/ Cambridge Photographers Association CIC



## DIANE

- **Age:** 59
- **Family:** Husband and two grown-up children who live away from home.
- **Work:** Full-time teacher but plans to reduce to part-time soon.
- **Physical activity:** Diane is part of a running club and runs three times a week averaging 15 miles in total. She volunteers at the club once a week, leading a beginners’ running group, which gives her a real sense of worth. She also plays badminton with her son and sometimes cycles at the weekend.
- **Enjoys:** Photography and spending time with friends.

Diane has a positive attitude towards ageing and doesn’t consider herself to be an older woman. However, she does have concerns about ageing, mainly that she will have less energy, limiting what she can do. Diane sometimes thinks she looks older in photos. Staying active and keeping herself fit is a preventative measure for these concerns.

Diane thinks it is especially important for women to take part in group physical activities to foster a social support network, which can often be missing from their lives. Diane has an active life in general and when she isn’t working or keeping fit, she enjoys spending time with friends and hobbies such as photography.



## ACHIEVING GOALS

Achieving goals and ticking things off is particularly important to women aged 55-75 who feel they have an increasingly finite amount of time left. This renewed urgency can be extremely motivating for women. They have grown up with a list of things they want to achieve and they are looking to prioritise their time around these activities. Travel is often attached to this value but goals can also be smaller in scope, for example, decorating their house.

*“Travelling is very important to me and I go away as much as I can. I went to Vietnam and Cambodia by myself the year before last for a month and had the time of my life!”*



## HAVING FUN

With less responsibility, such as work and looking after children, women are seeking fun and enjoyment in later life and making the most of the time they now have. They have more space to think about themselves and are keen to fill this time with the things that they enjoy and make them feel good.

*“I feel like I have some me time back to think about what I want to do.”*



## DEVELOPING SKILLS

The women in our research wanted to continue to learn, acquire and develop new skills as they enter later life. They wanted to broaden their mind, enjoy new experiences and be invigorated. Many women are actively looking for something new and novel to try in later life, something they've thought about previously but have never had the time to do. Also, some women are keen to revisit previous interests and activities they had before work and family took over. These can range from creative hobbies through to the more social or academic activities.

*“Learning new things keeps life interesting.”*



© London Sport



**“Exercise is better than health insurance.”**

© Trees for Life

Above: Anne out volunteering with conservation charity Trees for Life



## FEELING GOOD

At this point in their life, health is central to women’s value systems and has become an increasing focus. Keeping in good health in later life is fundamental to women. Without good health they can’t enjoy all the things they value in life. Women notice that their health has started to decline – good health isn’t a given as it was for many when they were younger (especially for those aged 65 and above), and so it can no longer be taken for granted. Some of the women in our research were now experiencing health problems, such as osteoporosis, cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, as well as injuries such as strained muscles and bad backs.

Women are keen to look after their health to ensure they maintain their quality of life, mobility and independence for as long as possible, and to ensure they can keep up with the grandchildren. They focus on eating healthy food, exercising (to greater and lesser extents), and activities such as gardening and walking to look after joints and stay supple. They are also trying to keep their minds active by reading and doing puzzles.

We also found that feeling good was increasingly linked to being more outward; the women who took part in the research were focused on what they can give back and where they can help. They wanted to contribute and to interact with people beyond their social circle, while working towards something that feels meaningful.

Typical activities that the women were involved in include charity work, volunteering, campaigning, especially on local issues; and coaching. Being part of a team and working towards a common goal, having their voice heard and imparting their wisdom all help women feel valued.

***“Volunteering means I have to be somewhere, at a certain time, people need me.”***

The women also talked about how spending time with younger people helped them to feel tuned in to modern life.

***“The world is changing and you might get left behind if you don’t interact with younger people.”***





## LOOKING GOOD

The extent to which women value looking good starts to change as they get older; it becomes less important. However, it is still an important value in women's lives. Not caring about their visible appearance is perceived to be a negative commentary on their inner life, suggesting that they have given up. Many of the women in our research still felt it was important to continue to put an effort into their appearance. Wanting to be slimmer, not putting on weight and looking good is still a focus for women aged 55-75 but slightly less top of mind than it is for younger women.

### SUMMARY

Our Understanding Women's Lives<sup>10</sup> research recognised that for sport and physical activity to engage women, it must align itself with their values. This study, Silver linings, has identified that spending time with friends and family is the number one priority for women aged 55-75. Offering physical activities which line up with this value can help to encourage women to give them a go. This may include allowing women to socialise during the activity, or providing social time at the end of the session. Other values are also important to women in later life and can be used to motivate them, such as supporting them to develop a new skill or providing the opportunity to volunteer and support others.



***“I put makeup on every day...it’s important not to let standards slip.”***

<sup>10</sup>Women in Sport (2015) *Understanding Women's Lives*

# KEY FINDINGS

## 3. BARRIERS TO BEING ACTIVE

We researched the barriers to women being active at a later stage in life.

We want women to be active at all stages of their lives. This research therefore sets out to explore the barriers that prevent or limit women's participation in physical activity in later life.

The inactive women we spoke with identified several barriers that prevented them from taking action and being physically active. We have examined these barriers using the COM-B model of behaviour change<sup>11</sup>. COM-B stands for Capability, Opportunity, Motivation and Behaviour. For a behaviour to occur, in this case, being physically active, the women must have the capability, motivation and opportunity.



<sup>11</sup>Michie, S., Atkins, L. and West, R. (2014) *The Behaviour Change Wheel. A guide to designing interventions*. Silverback Publishing



## CAPABILITY

We found low self-efficacy, an individual's limited belief in their own ability to carry out a task<sup>12</sup>, to be a substantial barrier to taking part in sport and physical activity for inactive women. The idea of exercise can be quite challenging for them. They question their ability to do it, fear they will not be able to keep up with others or will embarrass themselves. Lack of confidence is a deep-seated emotional barrier for many women in later life.

If you are trying to motivate inactive women to start being active, you need to reassure them that they can do it and will feel the benefits, before presenting the practicalities of the activity.

The women in our workshops also discussed feeling tired after exercising and worrying whether they have done the exercise in the right way or whether they might injure themselves.

***“You need to be a bit careful about walking into something at our age – it would need to be one on one.”***

This fear and anxiety about physical activity is likely to contribute to women feeling they don't have the capability to be active.

***“If I lie down doing Pilates I can't get up again and it's embarrassing!”***

<sup>12</sup>Bandura, A. (1997) *Self efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman

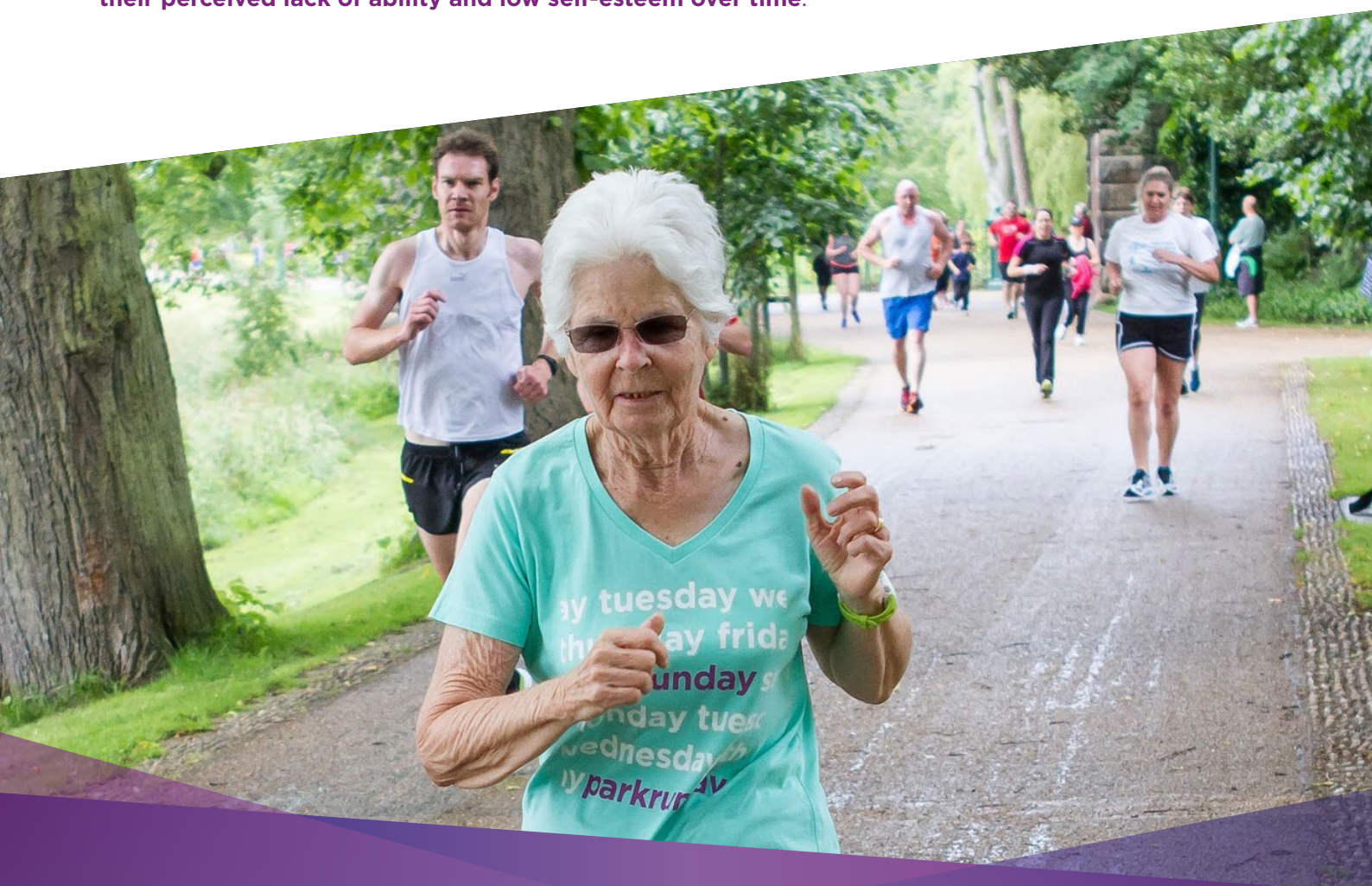


## MOTIVATION

**We found that inactive women aged 55-75 don't naturally encounter many places that prompt fitness behaviours.** They tend to spend time at the homes of friends and family, in shops and restaurants, at grandchildren's schools or in the workplace. Furthermore, we found that many of the women actively dislike fitness spaces where they feel alienated or intimidated, such as the gym or fitness class venues which they perceive to be dominated by younger people. These women are therefore not experiencing cues within their environment to be active.

Women also lack social opportunity to be active, with a shortage of role models aged 55-75 who are active women in our research. Many of the women we spoke to had a stereotype of a sporty person in mind; generally, a younger and much fitter woman than themselves. The media's general focus on young and fit women in sport reinforces this image and leaves women aged 55-75 with no one to identify with. Women who have not exercised for a long time do not associate themselves with the type of woman they perceive to take part in sport and fitness activities.

Women aged 55-75 are interested in active living, getting out and doing things, rather than fitness or sport activities specifically. As they get older and continue to be inactive, women get further and further away from this stereotype of a sporty person. **It becomes harder to imagine themselves in this role and life events tend to reinforce their perceived lack of ability and low self-esteem over time.**





## OPPORTUNITY

**We found that inactive women are primed to take part in physical activity; they know they should be active and understand the benefits to their health and wellbeing.** However, this alone does not motivate them to be active.

Women involved in the research reported being exposed to negative messages such as those found in disease prevention campaigns. These messages tend to come from doctors and the media, and depict later life as a time of ill health, loneliness, dependency, and poor physical and mental wellbeing, rather than focusing on the positive aspects of ageing. And most often, these campaigns fail to acknowledge the diversity among people aged 55-75.

It is tempting to focus messaging on the health benefits of physical activity for non-active women but this approach is often viewed negatively, creating anxiety and fear, and is likely to have the opposite effect of inspiring or motivating them.

Research by the Richmond Group into older people with long-term health conditions<sup>13</sup> found that women want messaging and language to be reassuring, encouraging, inclusive and non-threatening as well as realistic. The women in our research talked about positive messages which are visual and emotional. They want to see people like them, who they can relate to, being active and having fun. For example, watching the contestants in the BBC TV programme *Strictly Come Dancing*.

### SUMMARY

Inactive women in our research identified a number of barriers to being active. **They doubted their physical capability to be active, they didn't have any environmental cues or role models and said there was a lack of positive messages about physical activity to encourage them.** Alongside these barriers, it is then easy for women to use rational excuses to not be active, such as cost, time and weather, to reinforce their reservations about sport and exercise<sup>14</sup>.

On a positive note, the women recognised in section 2 (Women's lifestyles and values) that they should be more active. Interventions therefore need to be designed to address the barriers, and draw on women's motivation to be active as well as their values.

<sup>13</sup>BritainThinks (2016) *People with long-term conditions and attitudes towards physical activity*. Richmond Group

<sup>14</sup>Women in Sport (2016) *Keeping women warm to sport in winter*

Women's Sport And Fitness Foundation (2008) *Barriers to sports participation for women and girls*

# KEY FINDINGS

## 4. HOW TO SUPPORT WOMEN TO BECOME ACTIVE IN LATER LIFE

We found a number of ways sports deliverers can support women to be physically active.

**As part of the task, the women thought about what would motivate them to take part in an activity, what reassurance they would need and how they could be supported to do an activity more than once.**

1

### ENGAGE

#### Put the fun and social aspects centre stage

The women in our research said they seek fun and enjoyment from everything they do. They are therefore more likely to attend an activity if they can go with friends, have a chat and enjoy time socialising.

*“For me it’s the social side, we walk for one and a half hours and chat along the way. We all go for a coffee afterwards.”*

*“I made a call to enquire about classes for over 70s. The man who answered the phone said the stretch class would be like driving in a Lamborghini to the south of France!”*

#### Offer non-traditional activities

Women aged 55-75 want to take part in new activities that they haven’t tried before. The women in our workshops suggested activities such as Tai Chi, Nordic walking, cheerleading and walking netball. These activities appear new and exciting.

#### Design activities around their values

As discussed in the key findings in section 2 (*Women’s lifestyles and values*), women’s values drive their decision making; therefore, by designing your activity to appeal to these values, you will encourage women to give it a go. Our research shows that women prioritise seeing friends and family in later life, so consider planning activities that target women and their grandchildren.

## REASSURE

### Use cues to match ability

Women wanted help to identify activities that feel suitable for them. Terms such as ‘silver’ and ‘over 50s’ help some women to determine which activities match their ability. Other women preferred references such as ‘beginners’ or ‘gentle’ to advise them on the likely skill level. Consider including these terms and references in your communications.

Also, use positive images in your promotional materials, with photos of women that your target audience can relate to.

### Instructor reassurance

For those women who do take action and try out a physical activity or sport, it is vital there is a positive and reassuring instructor or coach who can help them to develop their self-efficacy.

***“The instructors need to make you feel that even if you’re bad [at exercise] you’re good.”***

Successful coaches will support the women, and structure classes and activities in a way that ensures participants cannot fail, building their self-confidence.

### Think about your language

As identified in the key findings in section 3 ([Barriers to being active](#)), the women in our research viewed sporty people as young and active far removed from themselves. When advertising physical activities for women aged 55-75, don’t use the term sport. Instead, use positive language and role models that help to challenge the stereotype of who does physical activity.

***“One feels like you want to do it [activity], the other feels like you don’t [sport].”***

The leader of a sports organisation aimed at people at a later stage in life said: “We have taken out all references to running, jogging, sport... none of that appeals.”

***“The instructor was the best thing at the gym...he was great, really kind and caring.”***

## SUPPORT

### Create social glue

Harness the motivation and camaraderie of the social group. Start a WhatsApp group among the participants to aid staying power and encourage attendance from week to week.



*“Lots of women my age use WhatsApp, it means you get to see photos of your grandchildren more often.”*

### Stay local

Women are often anchored to their local community in later life and more likely to participate in an activity in their local area, especially at a venue they already attend as it feels familiar and is close by. For example, a National Trust day out, a local church group or an activity at a community hall. And targeting women via local channels is more likely to be effective, such as putting up posters in a local supermarket, library and GP surgery or on a park notice board; or advertising online such as local Facebook groups.



*“I’ve seen a local group in my area publicising a walk on Facebook.”*

### Loyalty incentives

Incentives help to build healthy habits. Encourage women to repeat good habits with rewards. For example, do five classes and receive the sixth one for free.





# CONCLUSION

Women are not a homogeneous group and their values and attitudes differ depending on age, lifestyle and other personal characteristics.

The women in our research did not associate themselves with being old, and indeed this term is often linked to fears about ageing. Instead, the women were along a continuum, from feeling young at heart through to feeling older.

Ageing is an individual journey, dependent on your experiences of illness, injury, or death of friends and family members. Women have conflicted feelings about ageing, recognising the positives, such as spare time, while also being aware of the increased risks of injury and illness, and a feeling of time running out.

Women can also experience a shifting identity as they age; consequently, some women feel the need to develop new goals and priorities now that work, and possibly childcare responsibilities, are behind them.

Our research found that women aged 55-75 share the same values as other women, but with some values becoming more prominent and nuanced over time.

The study shows that:

- **Spending time with friends and family** becomes a top priority, particularly looking after grandchildren and socialising with friends.
- Women are actively looking to **have fun in later life**, and are interested in **learning new skills** or revisiting old ones.
- **Achieving goals** is important — the women we spoke to wanted to tick off activities and make the most of the time they have.
- **Feeling good** becomes increasingly focused around maintaining their health, with exercise seen as one way to support this. The women in our study also wanted to give back and were keen on volunteering and supporting local charities, helping them to feel like they were contributing to society and to feel positive.
- **Looking good** has become slightly less important for this group of women compared to other values, but they still see maintaining their appearance as important.

While this research provides an indication of the values of women aged 55-75, it is important for activity providers to understand the specific audience they are trying to reach. Women's values are likely to be different depending on their age, ethnicity, socio-economic group and life experience. We would always recommend that providers carry out their own research to ensure they are targeting the correct values.

Women's relationship with sport and physical activity in later life is varied but low self-belief and confidence was a barrier across the board for the research group. As relatively inactive women, they did not feel confident participating in sport or physical activity successfully. They also had a stereotype of a sporty person in their minds who was young and very fit, which did not match with how they view themselves.

Our sample of women for this research was small. Further research would be useful to explore the experiences of and barriers facing a wider range of women. For example, those from lower socio-economic groups and/or from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background.

**This qualitative study involved 20 female participants aged between 55-75 and was completed in February 2017.**

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