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The National Sport and Physical Activity Programme
for Older People

LOCKED UP, LOCKED IN, LOCKED OUT!

The impact of Covid-19 on physical activity in older people's groups

Mary Harkin, Policy, Research and Evaluation Manager, Age & Opportunity, in association with the Age & Opportunity Active Covid-19 Stakeholder Group and Amárach Research.

Age & Opportunity

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Age & Opportunity

We are Age & Opportunity, the national organisation that provides a range of opportunities for older people who want to get more involved in arts and culture, sport and physical activity, civic engagement and personal development.

Our aim is to inspire people aged 50+ to live a dynamic life in which they are more active, more visible, more creative and more connected.

One of our key priorities is to truly understand what ageing in Ireland means for people today by increasing the dialogue we have with them – conducting regular research through focus groups and workshops and by generating more opportunities for their feedback across all of our programmes.

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Age & Opportunity Active Covid-19 Stakeholder Group

In May, Age & Opportunity convened a Covid-19 Stakeholder Group for the purpose of producing guidelines on promoting the safe return of older people to sport and physical activity. At the first meeting of the Group it was agreed that they should also prepare a report that represents the views of older people on how Covid-19 has impacted on their involvement in sport and physical activity and provide a set of recommendations for dealing with potential future health crises, based on the learning from Covid-19.

The members of this group were:

John Kerrane (Independent Chair)

Aisling McGrath (Waterford Institute of Technology)

Jason King (Get Ireland Walking)

Caitriona Geraghty (Fingal LSP)

Brian Staunton (Sport Ireland)

Dr Mary O'Meara (Dept. Public Health)

Sylvia Guckian (Physical Activity Leader, Grange Woodbine)

Tom Lillis (Physical Activity Leader, Kingswood & Kilnamanagh Men's Club)

Margo Finnegan (Cycling Ireland)

Caroline Peppard (HSE)

Claire Hurley (Cork LSP)

Sue Guildea, Paul Gallier, Mary Harkin, Karen Horgan, Melissa Byrne and Ciara Dawson (Age & Opportunity)

Amárach Research

Age & Opportunity commissioned Amárach Research to carry out survey analysis, to conduct and report on the follow up focus groups and to provide support in preparing the final report.

Amárach Research are Irish market research and data specialists, who carry out social, behavioural and policy related research. Established since 1989, Amárach specialises in providing high-quality full service and societal research, consulting and analysis.

Amárach was the first Irish research organisation to receive ISO accreditation, the international quality standard for market, opinion and social research ISO 20252. Their quality standards reflect those set out in the ISO 9001 and ISO 20252 protocols.

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Mary Harkin
Policy, Research and Evaluation Manager, Age & Opportunity
December 2020

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Introduction

The events of 2020 have made all of us reflect on how we want to grow old in Ireland.

The full social, political and economic impacts of Covid-19 remain unknown; however it is clear that it has had a devastating impact on the lives of older people.

For over thirty years, participants of our programmes the length and breadth of the country have enabled Age & Opportunity to push the boundaries in exploring diverse models for ageing, and bring fresh thinking, bold experimentation and creativity to all aspects of our work in promoting a good quality of life for all older people.

This report represents our commitment to ensure that the voices of our participants are heard in capturing and reflecting on the impact of Covid-19 and influencing and shaping how society responds to the physical and emotional toil that the pandemic has had, and continues to have.

While these findings make for stark reading, I hope that our recommendations can help guide the way, for us and all those involved in the promotion of physical activity and social connectedness, as we look for new inspiration and start the essential task of rebuilding our communities.

Karen Horgan
CEO, Age & Opportunity

Executive Summary

For over 30 years Age & Opportunity has battled against ageism in all its forms. The contradictions of our national response to the Covid-19 global crisis - solidarity among generations on one hand with pervasive labelling of all older people as 'vulnerable elderly' on the other - has made us think deeply about how this episode of 'benevolent' or 'well-intentioned' ageism has impacted on the rights of older people to fully participate in all areas of society including sport and physical activity.

The "Delay" phase of Ireland's response to Covid-19 commenced on 12 March 2020 (school closures, limited outdoor gatherings, work from home if possible, etc.) while the "Stay at Home" enhanced lockdown phase commenced on 27 March with 'cocooning' or self-imposed isolation recommended for those over 70 who were at most risk from the virus. Restrictions were eased on a phased basis commencing 18 May but continued fear and uncertainty served to ensure that older people still did not feel comfortable about meeting in groups.

In May, Age & Opportunity convened a Covid-19 Stakeholder Group for the purpose of producing guidelines on promoting the safe return of older people to sport and physical activity. At the first meeting of the Group it was agreed that they should also prepare a report that represents the views of older people on how Covid-19 has impacted on their involvement in sport and physical activity and provide a set of recommendations for dealing with potential future health crises, based on the learning from Covid-19.

It was decided that in order to complete the second task Age & Opportunity would conduct a survey to gather more information about how Covid-19 and restrictions had impacted on activity levels of older people's groups. This would be followed by a series of focus groups to explore further the issues raised in the survey. Age & Opportunity commissioned Amárach Research and worked with the Covid-19 Stakeholder Group to analyse and report on the findings presented in this report.

Other organisations had looked at the impact of the pandemic on physical activity levels of individuals and they provide the background and context for the report. However, there was no focus on groups and how they were reacting. Age & Opportunity have promoted physical activity through groups for over 30 years and were therefore in a unique position to engage and find out more.

The survey was distributed to over 2,700 Age & Opportunity contacts in September 2020. There were 700 responses to the survey, indicating that these are voices that want to be heard. Age & Opportunity worked with Amárach Research to analyse the survey results and conduct follow up with four focus groups for a deeper exploration of the issues raised.

Representative of all the different kinds and geographical spread of groups, the findings present a detailed picture of how they have been impacted by and, in some cases, adapted to the restrictions imposed by the global pandemic.

The importance of these groups in older people's daily and weekly routines pre Covid-19, was considerable. In some circumstances, it could be said this face to face contact and ingrained habit of involvement and interpersonal communication was critical, particularly for those who lived alone and for many of those in rural locations where the likelihood of meeting other people daily was more limited.

Physical activities were factored into all group schedules to differing degrees. The range of physical activities mentioned included walking, dancing, chair-based exercises such as aerobics, yoga and Tai-Chi, along with a number of references to incorporating the Age & Opportunity Active programme.

Fear is now the dominant theme that re-occurs throughout this research. Individuals are fearful of mixing with each other, and society in general. Groups are fearful of organising activities, even where physical distancing requirements can be met and, although we did not interview umbrella bodies or policy makers, the evidence that caution is informing any direction given comes through from both survey and focus groups.

The impact of restrictions has been overwhelmingly negative for very many groups, with women's groups appearing to cope somewhat better than men's groups. While they have endeavoured to keep in touch with each other, most groups are not meeting and are therefore engaged in a lot less or no group physical activity. In a few cases where enabling environments such as large halls, safe outdoor spaces and access to the internet exist, groups have been able to adapt and keep going. However, as many service providers have made resources available online the digital divide is also a theme running through this report. It is clear that extra resources in different forms for the groups themselves and for the local and national agencies who support them will be required over the next few years to restore groups to pre-pandemic activity levels. The scale of the challenge involved will require co-ordinated and sustained commitment by these agencies. There will be a need to increase and/or divert resources, to increase capacity, to prioritise and co-operate across agencies.

The recommendations in this report include actions for policy makers and media providers in relation to addressing fears post pandemic – fear of meeting other people, of digital technologies, and of getting older.

Recommendations also point to opportunities and supports needed to encourage older people's groups to return to physical activity, upskilling group members, providing enabling environments both indoors and outdoors and the resources and transport infrastructure to avail of them.

Mary Harkin
Policy, Research and Evaluation Manager
Age & Opportunity
December 2020

Background and Context

Age & Opportunity is the national organisation that provides a range of opportunities for older people who want to get more involved in arts and culture, sport and physical activity, civic engagement and personal development.

Our aim is to inspire people aged 50+ to live a dynamic life where they are more active, more visible, more creative and more connected.

Age & Opportunity is a member of the Healthy Ireland Network and fully committed to playing its part in achieving the goals set out in the National Physical Activity Plan, increasing physical activity levels across the whole population and helping to create a society which facilitates people, whether at home, at work or at play, to lead an active way of life.

These goals are based on the principle that increasing physical activity will help improve the health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland and the plan seeks to ensure that no group is disadvantaged and recognises that targeted interventions are required to address and overcome barriers to participation which are experienced by some people.[(1)]

Since 2001, Age & Opportunity's Active programme has been funded by Sport Ireland and the HSE and charged with increasing the participation of those over 50 in sport and physical activity.

At the core of the Active programme is a unique peer leadership model where older people who are members of social groups are trained to become Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) enabled to devise and deliver physical activity programmes suited to the ability of their group and the venues and resources available to them. Over the last 19 years almost 2,500 older people have attended PALs workshops. The PALs are supported by the National Grant Scheme for Sport and Physical Activity for Older People. This scheme, administered by Age & Opportunity, has distributed €6.3 million in 15,000 grants since 2001 to older people's groups. These two initiatives have resulted in physical activity becoming a core part of the programme of most Active Retirement and Irish Countrywomen's Associations and other community groups not specifically set up to promote sport and physical activity.

Knitting physical activity into the lives of groups meeting weekly or monthly has been a very successful strategy. This work was done over nearly two decades through partnership and collaboration with all stakeholders, building and sustaining relationships with a wide variety of local, national and international organisations. The Irish Sports Monitor 2017[(2)], a biennial large population study, reported that there were 200,000 more older adults participating in sport in 2017 than in 2007. Sport Ireland related this to its strategic investment in older people through Age & Opportunity, and while acknowledging that correlations do not imply causation and that other investments and organisations are working to this end, it is clear that support for older people's groups is critical to achieving the goal of increasing participation in sport and physical activity by older people and contributing to the high level government targets set out in the National Physical Activity Plan.

But what happens to participation in sport and physical activity when a global pandemic results in a national 'lockdown'? How do people over 70 manage to stay moving when they are told that any social contact could put their lives at risk? How can older people's groups keep active if they cannot physically come together? What can government and community and voluntary sector organisations do better to support these groups during and after Covid-19?

The "Delay" phase of Ireland's response to Covid-19 commenced on 12 March 2020 (school closures, limited outdoor gatherings, work from home if possible, etc.). On St. Patrick's Day 2020, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar addressed the nation to outline Ireland's response to the global pandemic.

> *"At a certain point… we will advise the elderly and people who have a long-term illness to stay at home for several weeks. We are putting in place the systems to ensure that if you are one of them, you will have food, supplies and are checked on.*
>
> *We call this 'cocooning' and it will save many lives… particularly the most vulnerable… the most precious in our society."*

The "Stay at Home" enhanced lockdown phase commenced on 27 March with all those over 70 advised not to leave their homes or allow anyone into their homes except for essential caring activities.

Other key dates in the 2020 pandemic timeline (reference RTE):

29th February	**First Irish case of Covid-19 reported**
11th March	WHO says Covid-19 is a pandemic. Ireland announces the first death associated with the virus
12th March	Taoiseach announces schools, colleges & childcare to close temporarily. Restricted numbers on indoor (100) and outdoor (500) gatherings
15th March	Pubs asked to close until 29th March
27th March	Irish Government says everyone must stay at home. Physical exercise must be restricted to within 2km of homes
10th April	Measures to remain in place until 5th May
1st May	Measures to remain in place to 18th May. Easing of 2km to 5km for exercise. Those who have been cocooning may leave their homes
18th May	Shops, businesses and construction sites reopen
5th June	Roadmap to reopening the country announced
8th June	Phase 2: most retailers reopen, with restrictions. People allowed to travel within own county or 20km from home
29th June	Phase 3: pubs, restaurants, hairdressers reopen. Domestic travel restrictions lifted
September	Schools reopened. Some counties moved into higher levels of restrictions
21st October	All Ireland moved into Level 5 restrictions for 6 weeks

Throughout the reopening phases, restrictions on social distancing, mass gatherings, advice on the wearing of face coverings and judgement in respect of activities in respect of living with Covid-19 for the over 70s was continued. By June 2020 it was clear that life for anybody in Ireland, but particularly older people, was not going to return to normal for a long time. In order to support those involved in the provision of physical activity programmes for older people, Age & Opportunity brought a group of stakeholders together to develop Guidelines on Promoting the Safe Return of Older People to Recreational Sport and Physical Activity, a resource which was disseminated to all Local Sports Partnerships, National Governing Bodies of Sport and Ireland Active and published on both the Age & Opportunity and Sport Ireland websites in July.

In the course of developing this resource, feedback from the stakeholder group suggested that there has been a significant reduction in physical activity by older people during the pandemic period. In addition, the group believed that there were significant barriers to the resumption of physical activity linked to increased anxiety, nervousness, loss of confidence, feelings of exclusion, weakening of physical activity related social contacts and physical deconditioning among many older people.[3]

Set against a background of insufficient participation by older people in physical activity pre-pandemic [4,5] and with no immediate return to normality in sight, this feedback was a cause for concern. Furthermore, there were other indications that opportunities for participation in physical activity were in decline, with attendant negative impacts on health and wellbeing, as a result of the pandemic.

The Irish Sports Monitor 2019 found that sport is a habitual behaviour with most participants reporting that much of their sporting activity is repetitive in that it is participated in with the same people, at the same time and at the same locations each week.[4] With social groups and sports clubs closed down, what was happening to participation levels in 2020?

The Institute of Public Health reported on CSO findings that when Covid-19 measures were introduced the biggest change in exercise habits was in the 70+ age group with more than half (53%) reporting a decrease in exercise frequency, 28% reporting no change and only 19% reporting an increase (compared to over 40% of those aged 35-44 and nearly 50% of those aged 45-54).[6]

Research by the Alzheimer Society of Ireland carried out in March among people living with dementia, their carers and community champions reported that cessation of services had limited access to accompanied walks and exercise for both those living with dementia and their carers.[7]

The Amárach weekly Public Opinion Surveys for the Department of Health published on 27 July – the week Age & Opportunity published the Guidance Resource - reported that 64% of the 18+ adult population were staying at home rather than going out more often and that 40% would continue to do this after Coronavirus.[8]

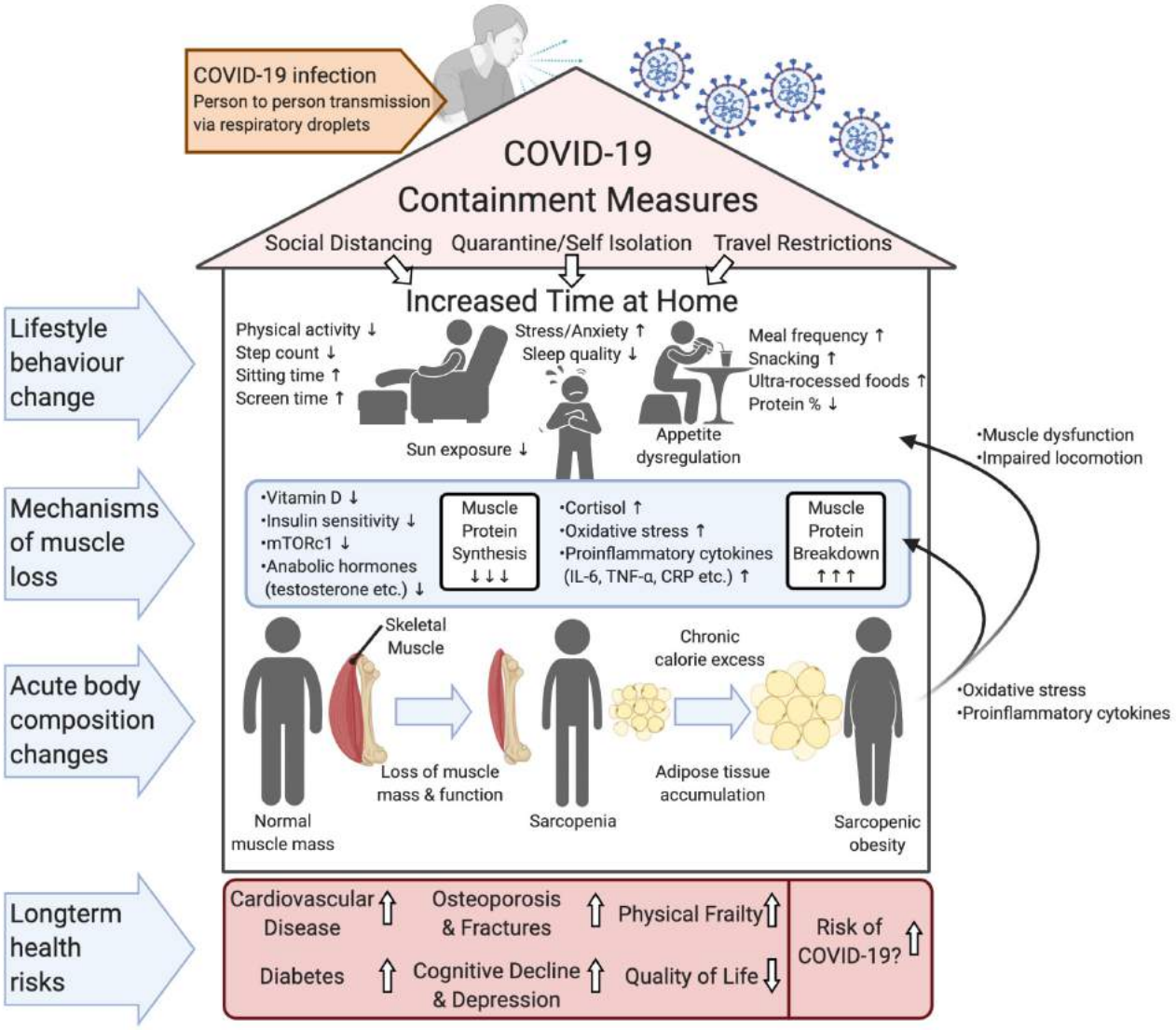
Also in July a report published by The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) and ALONE relating to loneliness and social isolation in the Covid-19 Pandemic among the over 70s found that calls to the ALONE National Support Helpline indicate that physical health is the highest area of need for older people, with chronic illnesses such as COPD and diabetes having greater impact on quality of life during cocooning than previously. Furthermore, they reported an increase in callers who were putting off medical treatment or examination, including after falls.[9]

While this report details survey and focus group findings, where impact as reported by respondents focuses on social and mental wellbeing, it is useful to provide a context for the impact on physical wellbeing of increased inactivity.

In October 2020 Kirwan et al [10] published a review article in the journal GeroScience on the potential long term health effects of Covid-19 confinement on physical activity, dietary habits, sleep, and stress which lead to a deterioration of muscle mass and function (more likely in older populations), as well as increases in body fat. These changes in body composition are associated with a number of chronic, lifestyle diseases including cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes, osteoporosis, frailty, cognitive decline, and depression. Furthermore, CVD, diabetes, and elevated body fat are associated with greater risk of Covid-19 infection and more severe symptomology, underscoring the importance of avoiding the development of such morbidities.

The following Figure illustrates their analysis (the use of the term Sarcopenia in the Figure refers to these changes in body composition i.e. deterioration of muscle mass and function (more likely in older populations), as well as increases in body fat.

Figure 1: Long term health effects of Covid-19 Confinement.



At the time Covid-19 began to impact on group activities, an evaluation of a men's health and wellbeing programme in the Men's Sheds setting called 'Sheds for Life' was ongoing. At the time of following up with participants of Sheds for Life in June 2020, there was a decrease in days active per week compared to prior to Covid-19. Findings in the study suggested that over a quarter (26.2%) of participants became less physically active with only 38.2% meeting the physical activity guidelines. Participants meeting the guidelines prior to Results from Wave 5 of the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing relating to internet access and use among adults aged 50 and over in Ireland were published in May. They showed that while 71% of adults over 50 have access to the internet in their homes, this decreases with age. Only 38% aged 80+ have home internet access, compared to 86% aged 50-69 years, and 66% aged 70-79 years. Of adults aged 50+ living alone, 30% do not have internet access in their homes and, relevant to the survey and focus group findings documented in this report, women are more likely to use social media than men.[12]

Age & Opportunity's own evaluation of the 2020 Bealtaine Festival delivered online during May concluded that for men and those aged 84+ who were underrepresented at previous Festivals, there was no difference between attendance rates at live events or attendance at online events. This suggests that online delivery does not mitigate social, physical or transport barriers to participation in live events by those over 84.[13]

In mid-July, Amárach Research carried out a survey commissioned by Virgin Media with 2,000 adults and found that people were intent on staying fit, no matter the circumstances with 38% reporting that they had watched online videos about exercise and fitness. However, there is a difference between those under 35 (57%) and those over 55 (23%) indicating that online resources may be less attractive or accessible as people age.[14]

Initial hopes that physical distancing for all, and particularly for older people, would be a temporary measure began to fade as it became apparent that Ireland, along with the rest of the world, would have to wait for a vaccine before returning to normal activities. With community centres and other meeting venues closed, most older people's groups were at least physically disbanded with no end in sight.

It is against this background, and following the initial explorations with the Active Covid-19 Stakeholder Group that we initiated a survey and commissioned follow-on focus groups to understand better the impact of Covid-19 on the participation in physical activity on members of older people's groups and what we, and our partners in this space, could do to help improve the situation now and into the future.

Participation in Sport and Physical Activity by Older People during the Covid-19 crisis

There were many creative responses to the challenge of keeping active while social distancing. As well as initiatives from Age Sector organisations, nearly every Local Sports Partnership generated an intervention specifically targeted at helping older people to keep active during the pandemic. The following examples are not a complete list of what was organised but they are representative of the content and delivery of physical activity interventions created or adapted by a wide variety of stakeholders specifically for older people. It is evident that online delivery was top of the leaderboard but other delivery pathways were also used to reach out.

Age & Opportunity's 'Movement Minutes', seated and standing physical activity sessions, began in March and continue to be broadcast live three times every week on Facebook and available for catch up viewing on the Age & Opportunity YouTube Channel.

Waterford Sports Partnership made their Over 50's Circuit Class available online and Cavan Local Sports Partnership offered a chair aerobics class to follow on their Facebook page from home. Clare Sports Partnership made a selection of gentle home exercise videos to follow in a sitting room or garden available on their website and YouTube channel. Laois Sports Partnership, in partnership with fitWALK Ireland, produced a video guide to 'Stepping with Sticks', an introduction to exercising using activator walking, which was available on YouTube and they also delivered 'Easy Peasy' exercise sessions over zoom.

A blend of online and print resources was also employed over the year. Sport Ireland linked in with the network of Local Sports Partnerhips across the country to develop an easy to follow Home Exercise Workout and activity tracker for older adults which was available for download and print.

HSE Community Physiotherapy produced an Activity Card with 8 simple exercises to be done at home with minimal equipment. This was accompanied by a demonstration video available online.

Also online, Siel Bleu scheduled a timetable of daily classes streaming live every day on Facebook & YouTube and also uploaded a number of Chair Gym Exercise Classes to suit older people in Nursing Homes.

Moving beyond the internet, Sligo Sports and Recreation Partnership tuned into local radio station Ocean FM with the Ageing Well at Home Exercise programme reaching out to older adults on 'The Francie Boylan Show' once a week. Sports Active Wexford also chose an audio route, they created a work-out routine and made it available in podcast form to listen and follow along.

Age & Opportunity accompanied their Movement Minutes with print resources on balance, posture and strength and saw a huge increase in demand for their existing DVD of 6 physical activity sessions.

In Donegal, a physical activity initiative, aimed at older adults who are cocooning, was organised by HSE Community Physiotherapy, in partnership with the Age Friendly Alliance, Sports Partnerships and Public Participation Networks across Donegal. A pack with the daily exercise programme and other activities was delivered to the homes of older people across the county.

Age & Opportunity's telephone support service FitLine continued to provide peer led motivation and, as this report finds, some PALs (Physical Activity Leaders) – although all older people themselves – managed to reach out and organise some physical activity sessions outdoors or in large indoor spaces. Using the phone in a different way, some PALs recorded and sent on WhatsApp, physical activity routines that members could join along to and take part in from home.

Organised outdoor activities included Meath Sports Partnership's Walk 'n' Tone – 20 minutes of gentle exercises each week with social distancing in a Park setting for people over 70. Laois Sports Partnership organised Activator Pole activity sessions, weekly walks & Scooch games during the summer and Age & Opportunity organised a range of Come and Try outdoor activities during European Week of Sport in September.

Of course, there were very many other activities organised for the general population in which older people would have participated online and in person, at home and in their local communities, mitigating to some degree the impact of Covid-19 on physical activity levels.

Participation in Sport and Physical Activity by Older People - The Policy Landscape

The National Positive Ageing Strategy published in 2013 [15] is a high level document outlining Ireland's vision for ageing and older people and the national goals and objectives required to promote positive ageing. It is an over-arching cross-departmental policy and the blueprint for age related policy and service delivery across Government. It specifies four national goals – each of which is relevant to this report:

1. **Remove barriers to participation and provide more opportunities for the continued involvement of people as they age in all aspects of cultural, economic and social life in their communities according to their needs, preferences and capacities.**
2. **Support people as they age to maintain, improve or manage their physical and mental health and wellbeing.**
3. **Enable people to age with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes and communities for as long as possible.**
4. **Support and use research about people as they age to better inform policy responses to population ageing in Ireland.**

Most specifically in this context, it is an objective under the first national goal to promote the development of opportunities for engagement and participation of people of all ages in a range of arts, cultural, spiritual, leisure, learning and physical activities in their local communities.

Of key relevance to the National Positive Ageing Strategy and also to this report is Healthy Ireland [16], the national framework for action to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in Ireland. It also has four high level goals which are to:

1. **Increase the proportion of people who are healthy at all stages of life;**
2. **Reduce health inequalities;**
3. **Protect the public from threats to health and wellbeing;**
4. **Create an environment where every individual and sector of society can play its part in achieving a healthy Ireland.**

Age & Opportunity is a member of the Healthy Ireland network and, through its advocacy and programme delivery across Ireland, actively supports the delivery of these outcomes. The 2016 National Physical Activity Plan [17] aims to encourage greater participation in, and greater recognition of, the importance of physical activity. This plan informs much of the work of Age & Opportunity's Active programme and of the network of Local Sports Partnerships and National Governing Bodies of Sports. All of these organisations are working to ensure that more people achieve the National Guidelines on Physical Activity for Ireland [18] which for older people (aged 65+) are at least 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity activity on 5 days a week, or 150 minutes a week with a focus on aerobic activity, muscle strengthening and balance.

Of particular relevance as we address the legacy of Covid-19 is the plan's commitment to ensure that no group is disadvantaged and recognition that targeted interventions are required to address and overcome barriers to participation which are experienced by some people.

While health promotion policy and action is core to increasing participation in physical activity, an enabling environment is also necessary and the travel restrictions imposed in 2020 to tackle the spread of Covid-19 highlight the importance of creating such an enabling environment for all citizens in their local community. The Department of Rural and Community Development is charged with promoting rural and community development and supporting vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland with a specific focus on improving the quality of life of those who live in rural areas and supporting better infrastructure for rural recreation.[19] To this end it includes support of the role of volunteers in civil society and encouraging active citizenship as a strategic objective and one which is crucial in the context of this report.

It became clear, as many services migrated online exacerbating digital inequality, that an enabling environment includes digital access and literacy.

The Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment is charged with providing access to a world class communications network with high quality services, supporting connected communities and enabling citizens to embrace digital opportunities, in a safe environment. Their current strategy[20] recognises that digital tools … can support our older citizens to live independently, and can mean a higher quality of life for our citizens through better public services, such as more personalised health and education services.

But digital access for older people needs to be accompanied by digital literacy initiatives, and plans were announced by the Minister for Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on International Literacy Day in September 2020 - as this survey was being distributed to groups - for the development of a new 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy with an acknowledgement that Covid-19 had reinforced existing challenges in these areas.

The national response to Covid-19 impacted on older people more than other groups but impacted on some groups of older people more than others. Carers, both those working in care settings and the many older people who care for family members at home, have been at the 'frontline' of this national crisis and while the National Carers Strategy (2012) envisages that carers will be supported to maintain their own health and well-being and to care with confidence[21], this area may warrant scrutiny and extra support for participation by carers in physical activity with attendant health and wellbeing benefits.

Also more deeply affected by the threat of and response to Covid-19 were those older people living with disability or chronic disease. The National Disability Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021) aims to embed and promote presumption of capacity into the way services are designed and delivered and strengthen the focus on culture change from the 'care' to the 'support' model[22]. As the learnings from 2020 are distilled into policy revision and development we may have much to learn from those who were experiencing fear of, or living with, serious illness, social isolation and physical exclusion long before Covid-19 gave the whole population an opportunity to walk a few steps in their shoes.

Research Design

Age & Opportunity has a unique reach into over 1,000 older people's groups through the annual National grant scheme to promote Sport and Physical Activity, which in 2020, as in previous years, was advertised in early September. With the invitation to apply for a grant, Age & Opportunity invited over 2,700 contacts and Grant Applicants to participate in an online survey about the impact of Covid-19 on the level of physical activity and participation in recreational sport within older people's groups. Just under 700 responses were received and the survey was closed on 9 October.

Amárach Research analysed the data provided by Age & Opportunity and presented an overview of findings to the Stakeholder Group on 19 October.

To follow the self-completion survey Age & Opportunity also commissioned Amárach Research to conduct and report on a series of four focus groups to provide a deeper dive into the issues faced and further explore the impact of Covid-19 on physical activity within older person's groups.

Survey participants had been invited to express an interest in participating in the follow-up focus group research. Over 400 respondents indicated that they would be interested. Following consultation with the Stakeholder Group about the composition of the focus groups, Age & Opportunity subsequently recruited a cohort of participants to represent a range of urban and rural older people's groups as follows:

Group Composition	No. Attendees/ Groups represented	Date & Time
Women's groups – Active Retirement and resource centres	5	Tuesday 20th October 10am
Men's groups – Men's Sheds and community groups	7	Tuesday 20th October 11.30am
Women's groups - ICA and community groups	8	Wednesday 21st October 10am
Support groups – Community Care, day care and day centres, formal organisations including Rehab, IWA and Arthritis Ireland	9	Wednesday 21st October 11.30am

Focus group participants joined online focus groups hosted and facilitated by Amárach Research on Zoom. Each group discussion was structured around a pre-agreed topic guide and lasted around an hour and a quarter.

Topics:

- **Group arrangements, pre-Covid-19**
- **Changes within the pandemic period**
- **Impact and challenges faced by older people nowadays**
- **How members are coping**
- **Barriers to older people's activities / involvement / well being**
- **Support accessed during the pandemic**
- **Support required now / next**
- **What could state agencies, local or national organisations do differently?**
- **What positives have come out of Covid-19?**
- **Which resources do people access for ideas and support?**
- **What should be communicated and in what format?**

The survey analysis and focus group findings as prepared by Amárach Research are included in full in this report and they, along with subsequent consultation with the Stakeholder Group, inform the recommendations that we present here to support older people's groups to continue or return to group physical activity as soon and as fully as possible.

Survey Findings

The self- completion survey was sent to just over 2,700 contacts on the Age & Opportunity Active programme database. In most cases this was the person who had applied for a grant in previous years. A total sample of c. 670 to 690 was achieved for the majority of questions. Participants could opt out of questions if they wished. The sample size per question therefore varies. Base sizes are shown per question.

Group arrangements, pre pandemic

Respondents were asked to provide some information about themselves and about their group before the Covid-19 Lockdown.

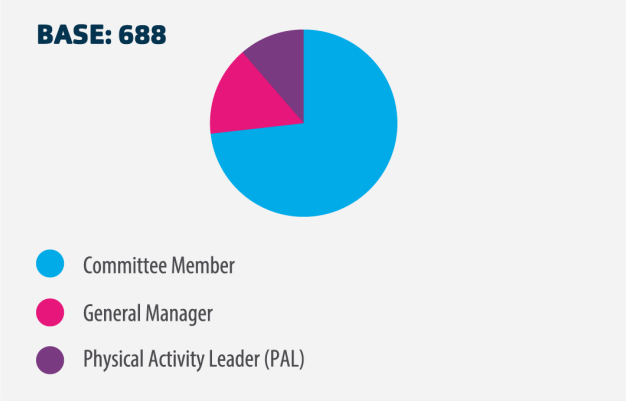


Figure 2: What is your role within the group?

All of the respondents occupy a position of leadership or authority within the group or organisation so we can be confident that in most cases they have the knowledge required to answer subsequent questions about their fellow members.

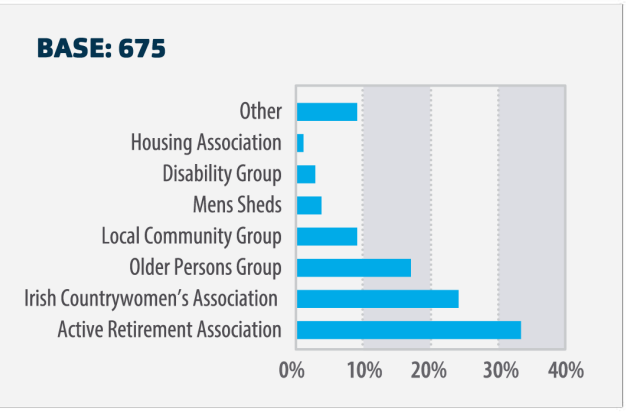


Figure 3: Type of group

The profile of the groups mirrors that of Age & Opportunity National Grant Scheme recipients and is representative of the landscape of older people's groups across Ireland. Those groups categorised as other includes Family Resource and Community Centres, support groups for people living with chronic illness, Carer Groups, Day Care Centres and Sports Clubs – 32% of groups were based in urban areas and 68% in rural areas.

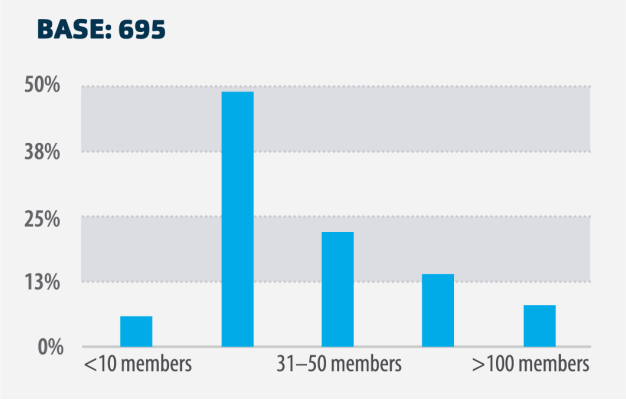


Figure 4: Size of group

More than half of the groups have less than 30 members and three quarters less than 50. This reinforces confidence that respondents do know their fellow members reasonably well and can answer the subsequent questions about them with veracity.

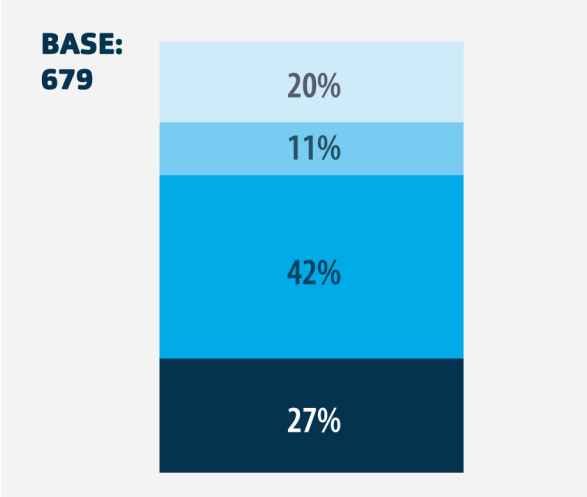


Figure 5 - How often the group met pre-Covid-19

Base: 679

More than two thirds of the groups were meeting at least once a week before the pandemic and therefore membership of a group would be a significant element of one's social life.

Pre-Covid-19 the majority of Active Retirement groups were meeting weekly, with ICAs meeting monthly and other groups most likely to meet 2-3 times a week.

Figure 6: Meeting frequency x group type

Local community halls had been the typical meeting places for many, pre Covid-19, particularly for groups with under 30 members, and rural locations. Other meeting places included Hotels and Public Houses, GAA Halls, Parish Centres, Day Care Centres and Scout Halls. Several Men's Sheds and ICA groups have their own premises but most groups are using facilities they don't own or control and for which, as we know from our grant scheme applications, they make a payment.

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
2-3 times or more	19%	38%	38%	24%	18%	3%	37%	54%
Once a week	44%	40%	43%	40%	59%	25%	45%	36%
Every 2-3 weeks	10%	11%	9%	11%	15%	14%	10%	3%
Once a month	27%	10%	9%	25%	8%	58%	8%	8%

Figure 7: Meeting places

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Local community hall	60%	38%	39%	62%	61%	68%	50%	39%
Resource centre	11%	9%	13%	9%	11%	6%	13%	13%
Sports Hall	6%	3%	5%	4%	3%	3%	5%	7%
Library	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%
Other	24%	39%	42%	24%	25%	23%	33%	41%

The Influence of Physical Activity Leaders (PALs)

We asked if there were Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) in the groups. A PAL is an older person who has taken part in Age & Opportunity's peer leadership initiative and who is actively leading or organising physical activity within the group. 43% reported that they had a PAL in the group. More of the groups with over 30 members, and Older Persons groups, have 3 or more PALs.

Figure 8: PALs in the group

		No. of members		Location		Group type			
	TOTAL	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Are there any PALs in your group?									
Base	*675*	*369*	*297*	*224*	*430*	*210*	*159*	*110*	*166*
Yes	43%	40%	47%	41%	45%	51%	46%	49%	31%
No	57%	60%	53%	59%	55%	49%	54%	51%	69%
If so, how many?									
Base	*291*	*145*	*141*	*89*	*195*	*107*	*72*	*54*	*50*
More than 5	2%	1%	3%	2%	3%	3%	1%	2%	2%
5	2%	2%	23%	3%	2%	4%	3%	0%	2%
4	9%	6%	12%	10%	8%	14%	6%	6%	6%
3	15%	10%	21%	15%	15%	18%	13%	20%	12%
2	35%	37%	34%	43%	33%	34%	39%	28%	42%
1	36%	43%	28%	27%	39%	28%	39%	44%	36%

Almost a quarter (23%) of groups with a PAL reported that the PAL had been in touch with members of the group since the beginning of the pandemic to organise physical activity. Those with more than 30 members were the most likely to have been contacted by a PAL, particularly during the March lockdown.

Figure 9: Contact with PALs

	No. of members			Location		Group type			
	TOTAL	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic has a PAL been in touch with you to organise physical activity?									
Base	*484*	*267*	*210*	*161*	*304*	*151*	*116*	*85*	*114*
Yes	23%	20%	26%	24%	24%	28%	20%	21%	25%
No	77%	80%	74%	76%	76%	72%	80%	79%	75%
If yes, when did the PAL make contact?									
Base	*112*	*56*	*53*	*36**	*76*	*43**	*22**	*15**	*29**
March - May	38%	34%	40%	31%	41%	33%	23%	67%	45%
June - July	31%	36%	28%	36%	30%	35%	32%	20%	34%
August - September	31%	30%	32%	33%	29%	33%	45%	13%	21%

Group activity during Covid-19

Four in ten of those contacted by a PAL reported that this resulted in some organised physical activity. Overall just over one third of groups had come together since Covid-19 to take part in physical activity, primarily outdoor activities, although 15% reported online interactions with those in urban locations slightly more likely to have engaged online than those in rural locations, 19% vs 12%.

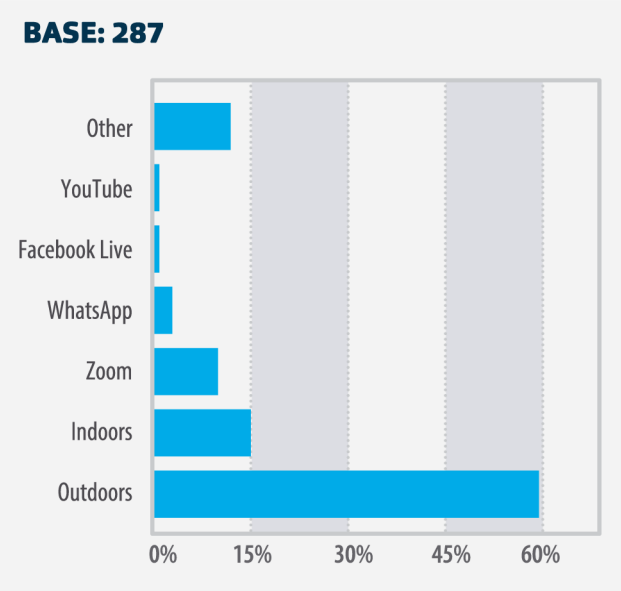


Figure 10: How groups met for physical activity

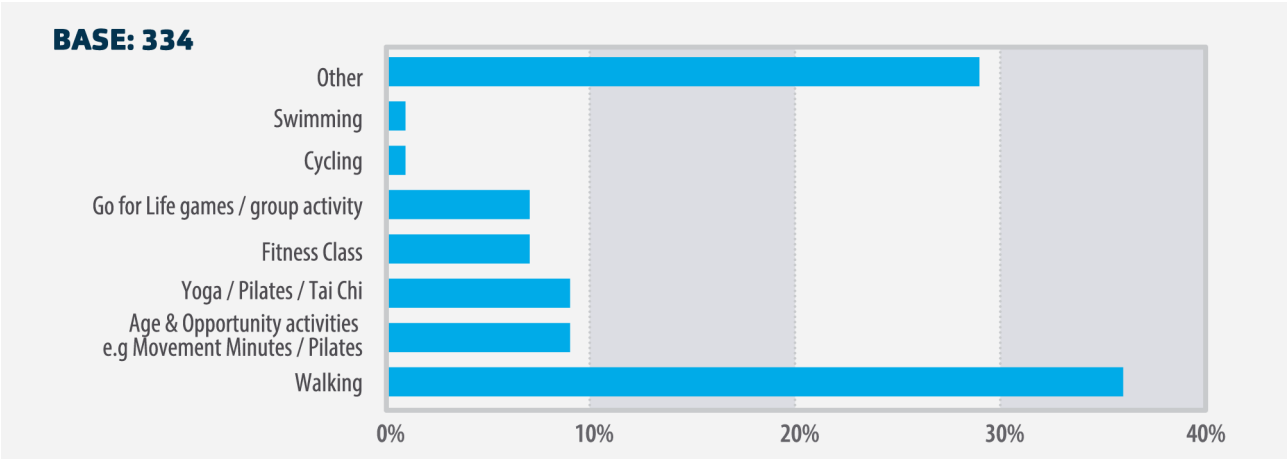
Some of the 12% who responded 'other' here were using the phone to contact each other for motivation to be active and others had distributed factsheets and DVDs to members. Three groups mentioned an exercise programme with accompanying materials on Ocean FM (covering Sligo, Leitrim and South Donegal). One group reported setting up a daily walking challenge with members walking themselves and together logging a total of 3,000 miles at the time of the survey. Poor broadband in rural areas was cited as a barrier to meeting online.

Figure 11: How groups met for physical activity x group type

		No. of members			Location		Group type			
	TOTAL	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Has your group come together since Covid-19 to take part in any form of physical activity?									
Base	*659*	*355*	*295*	*223*	*417*	*206*	*152*	*108*	*165*
Yes	38%	36%	39%	40%	37%	35%	37%	5%	47%
No	62%	64%	61%	60%	63%	56%	63%	75%	53%
If so, where or how?									
Base	*287*	*147*	*134*	*107*	*172*	*88*	*63*	*32*	*88*
Outdoors	59%	60%	59%	58%	61%	58%	68%	56%	53%
Indoors	15%	16%	13%	13%	15%	16%	14%	9%	15%
Zoom	10%	2%	4%	4%	2%	3%	2%	6%	2%
WhatsApp	3%	10%	10%	12%	9%	3%	5%	16%	17%
Facebook Live	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	2%	0%	3%	0%
YouTube	1%	1%	1%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Other	12%	10%	13%	10%	12%	16%	11%	9%	11%

38% of all groups managed to organise some physical activity together since the beginning of the pandemic. There was no great variance on this according to rural or urban and less or more than 30 members.

Figure 12: Range of activities



Groups described a range of activities during the pandemic, with walking being the dominant choice, particularly among ICA members. Other activities included bowling, kurling, pickleball, pitch and putt croquet and boules. Again local radio was mentioned by several groups.

Figure 13: Range of activities x group type

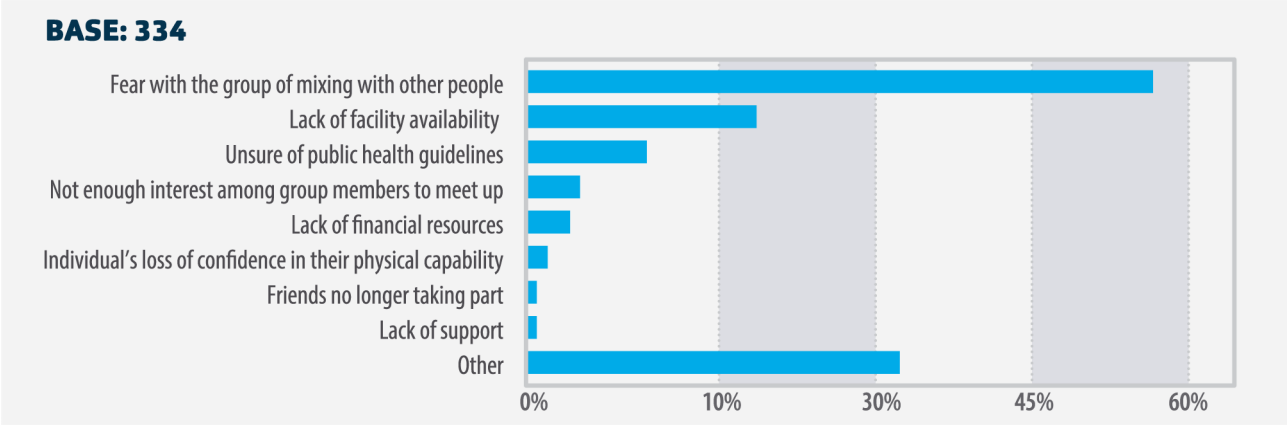
Activity choices were primarily dictated by the need to adopt an outdoor activity, 45%. One fifth continued regular activities and, of those groups who did continue, most tended to do so around once a week with over 9 out of 10 groups reporting that these meetings had been successful and half still meeting regularly at the time of the survey. One group had progressed from outdoor walking for those who were comfortable to meet to indoor walking with activator poles and reported that this activity, with minimal equipment and room to physically distance, worked well.

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Base	*175*	*153*	*125*	*200*	*97*	*74*	*46*	*98*
Walking	35%	37%	40%	35%	38%	54%	30%	26%
Age & Opportunity activities	8%	10%	9%	10%	14%	7%	13%	5%
Yoga/Pilates/Tai Chi	10%	7%	5%	12%	7%	12%	11%	9%
Fitness Class	9%	6%	9%	7%	3%	5%	9%	11%
Go for Life Games/ group activity	8%	6%	4%	8%	8%	1%	20%	5%
Cycling	2%	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Swimming	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Other	28%	32%	33%	27%	27%	19%	17%	42%

Figure 14: Reasons for activity choices

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Base	*170*	*152*	*124*	*196*	*100*	*72*	*40*	*97*
It was an outdoor activity	46%	44%	43%	46%	47%	60%	43%	34%
It was a continuation of our regular activity	19%	26%	27%	18%	24%	10%	15%	30%
Local fitness professional was available to the group	9%	6%	8%	8%	2%	8%	13%	11%
It was an online activity	8%	3%	4%	7%	4%	8%	8%	6%
It was offered by Local Sports Partnership or other local agency	4%	2%	5%	2%	4%	0%	5%	2%
It was offered by Age & Opportunity or other national agency	4%	2%	2%	4%	4%	3%	5%	2%
We wanted to spend our Age & Opportunity Active grant	4%	2%	1%	5%	2%	6%	0%	3%
PAL was available to the group	1%	4%	2%	2%	4%	0%	5%	2%
It was free	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	3%	1%
Other	5%	10%	6%	7%	7%	4%	5%	8%

Figure 15: Reasons for groups not meeting



Across the groups, rural and urban, big and small, fear within the group of mixing with others was the major concern where the groups had not met recently. One fifth reported a lack of an available facility to meet. Those who provided a comment reflected fear either within the group or instruction from their umbrella body, HSE or government guidelines not to meet. High levels of frustration are evident in some of the responses:

"Look! We are simply a group of mostly elderly people, normally constantly involved in parish and community activities, or socialising among ourselves... we can't do anything until it's safe to do so. We are locked up! in! out!"

ICA Member

"Stop the media terrifying the elderly, people are petrified of their neighbours almost."

Community Council Member

"There is a bit of all of the above but mostly we were locked up! For our group there has been an abysmal lack of guidance and definition and this must be addressed. We have many who want to come back to classes but want to be within the guidelines and we are not gym bunnies but we are sociable. Equally we had almost 20 classes running each week before lockdown."

Active Age Group Member

Even though lack of financial resources is only cited by 4% of respondents as a reason for the group not meeting, 30% have identified funding as a key support for a return to group activities. Contact and support from national and umbrella bodies was also identified with national support more important than umbrella organisation support for most groups.

Many comments reinforced the availability of a suitable venue, big enough for physical distancing, or extra resources to hire the venue more often so the group could break into smaller units. Several groups cited instructions not to meet from their umbrella body as a reason and indicated that when this instruction changed they would meet again. However there were several comments to the effect that the group would not meet again until Covid-19 was eliminated.

Support requirements

Figure 16: Supports needed for groups to continue or return to physical activity

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Base	312	275	209	369	186	132	96	154
Funding	33%	26%	28%	31%	28%	33%	29%	31%
More contact and support from national bodies like Age & Opportunity, HSE, Healthy Ireland, Sport Ireland	17%	20%	22%	16%	16%	16%	17%	24%
More contact and support from your own umbrella body e.g. Active Retirement Ireland	8%	9%	8%	8%	15%	12%	1%	4%
More contact and support from local agency e.g Local Sports Partnerships	8%	5%	9%	6%	6%	9%	8%	5%
More PALs in the group	4%	6%	3%	6%	3%	7%	5%	5%
Other	29%	33%	31%	33%	31%	23%	40%	31%

Other supports included organised open air activities organised locally, postal and phone contact were highlighted and local radio slots were again alluded to as a potential support. The need to renew lost enthusiasm was mentioned and specific training for PALs to feel comfortable to do activities during this pandemic was suggested. One respondent elaborated on this saying

> ***"Train new PALs and give them some skills for "remote" delivery. There are a lot of online activities available however we find people like to link with some one local as it creates a focal point in their day".***

There were quite a few responses relating to communications suggesting that information about restrictions from government at the time was confusing and that clear communication about what physical activities were safe would be useful.

"I think the communication coming from the Government is very mixed and unclear. Older people need contact especially the ones living alone and rural. We keep in touch by phone and put all our stuff up on Facebook but a lot of people are not computer literate or have no internet access."

Women's Group Member

"Better communication like it was in the early months - too much confusion now - they don't seem to know what they are doing"

ARA Member

"More communication especially from HSE regarding the ever changing restrictions around Covid19"

ICA Member

Online Access

7 out of 10 said under half their members had online access. More members of urban groups were likely to have access to the internet or social media.

"Those that are online are participating well in exercise classes. Many not online, some because they can't master the technology and some have no access to internet supports from local organisations"

Stroke Support Group Member

"Relying on internet activity is not suitable for our group, less than 50% can use computers competently we need outreach supports and more phone supports from local organisations"

ICA Member

"As our group are mostly over 60's we could not meet up to do any sort of activity, we cannot do Zoom or any other internet activity as internet connection is very bad or non-existent here in rural Ireland."

ICA Member

BASE:
All respondents
657

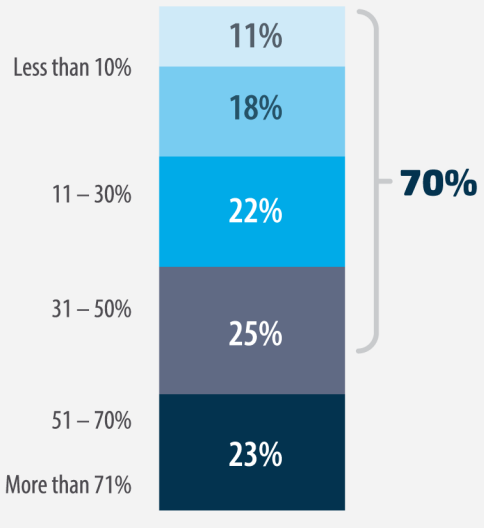


Figure 17: Percentage of group with access to internet or social media

	No. of members		Location		Group type			
	Up to 30	>30 members	Urban	Rural	Active Retirement	ICA	Older Persons Group	Other
Base	*363*	*286*	*220*	*417*	*201*	*158*	*105*	*164*
Less than 10%	27%	19%	18%	27%	28%	16%	39%	18%
11–30%	24%	26%	25%	25%	25%	23%	30%	23%
31–50%	18%	27%	23%	21%	26%	23%	15%	20%
51–70%	18%	19%	18%	18%	15%	25%	10%	20%
More than 71%	12%	10%	16%	9%	6%	13%	7%	20%

Summary of Survey Findings

Group arrangements, pre pandemic

Pre-Covid-19, the majority of Active Retirement groups were meeting weekly, with ICAs meeting monthly and other groups most likely to meet 2-3 times a week.

Local community halls had been the typical meeting places for many, pre Covid-19, particularly for groups with under 30 members, and those in rural locations.

The influence of Physical Activity Leaders (PALs)

4 in 10 have PALs in their group. Two thirds of those with PALs have one or two, however some groups have 3 or more.

More of the groups with over 30 members, and Older Persons groups, have 3 or more PALs.

Less than one quarter of those in groups with PALs said a PAL has been in touch since the beginning of the pandemic.

Those with more than 30 members were the most likely to have been contacted by a PAL, particularly during the March lockdown.

4 in 10 of those contacted by a PAL during the pandemic said this resulted in organised physical activity.

Group activity during Covid-19

Fear within the group of mixing with others was a major concern where groups had not met recently. One fifth reported a lack of facility availability.

Just over one third of groups had come together since Covid-19 to take part in physical activity, primarily outdoor activities, although 15% reported online interactions.

Those in urban locations were slightly more likely to have engaged online than those in rural locations, 19% vs 12%.

Groups described a range of activities during the pandemic, with walking being the dominant choice, particularly among ICA members.

Activity choices were primarily dictated by the need to adopt an outdoor activity, 45%.
One fifth continued regular activities.

Meeting since Covid-19 had been successful for over 9 out of 10 groups.

Half of those who had arranged to meet during Covid-19 were still meeting regularly at the time of the survey, generally around once a week.

Support requirements

Funding is a key route to supporting a return to group activities, however contact and support from national and umbrella bodies was also needed. 7 out of 10 said under half their members had online access. More members of urban groups were likely to have access to the internet or social media.

Focus Group Findings

The Covid-19 Context and Timeline

The Age & Opportunity survey took place in September 2020, closing on 9th October.

The focus group research was undertaken during week commencing 19th October.

On Monday 19th October the Government announced an intended move towards all Ireland Level 5 Restrictions from midnight on Wednesday 21st October for a period of 6 weeks.

In the context of meeting other people and physical activity, Level 5 restrictions involve among other things people being asked to stay at home. People are permitted to exercise within 5km of their homes but there should be no visits to other people's homes or gardens. It is possible to meet with one other household in an outdoor setting, such as a park. Support bubbles are permitted for certain categories to support those at risk of social isolation and/or mental ill-health. Those aged over 70 and medically vulnerable are advised to continue to exercise personal judgement.

The pre-planned focus groups were held on 20th and 21st October immediately after this announcement and in the 2 days prior to Level 5 restrictions commencing.

Group Sentiment - Context

In setting the scene, it is important to note the general level of responsibility felt by those who are involved in organising and leading older people's groups and those involved in support groups.

Although it is quite usual for those involved in arranging groups and their activities to widely care for the welfare and wellbeing of their members beyond their attendance at meetings and events, this has been heightened to a much greater level during the Covid-19 pandemic and there are indications that the concern and worry for others is not only taking its toll widely, but highlighting the enormous gaps in state-provided support for older people at this time.

The announcement by the Government earlier in the week that the groups took place, that the country was to return to a 'lockdown' situation, similar to that already experienced in the spring and early summer, was adding significantly to the burden felt by older people and those providing support both formally and informally. Although the Level 5 restrictions were slightly different to those imposed in March, concerns about the impact of the winter period were adding to people's worries.

The focus group discussions opened with some general introductions. Within these it quickly became clear that any resilience and determination held during the March to October period was now on shaky ground. The overall sentiment of the participants set a useful context for the wider discussions.

Women's Groups

The women's groups represented included ICA, Active Retirement, Community, Friendship and Fitness groups and resource centres. Women also represented Active Retirement Associations which have men and women as members. They varied in size from under 20 to over 120 members. Some were informal whilst others incorporated a more formal structure. Some were city-based, others were rural or located in smaller towns and communities.

What was striking about all the women's groups represented, was their absolute determination to keep the group spirit and support mechanism alive throughout the pandemic. No doubt much of this was the result of individual actions and mindsets generating a collective strength, but there was a marked difference in the approach taken since the initial national lockdown in March in comparison with the men's groups represented. The women's groups demonstrated creativity, proactivity and resilience to ensure members and the wider community had the support it needed. There was also evidence of various attempts to keep physical activity on the agenda.

Men's Groups

The men's groups were a combination of representatives from Men's Sheds across the country and local community, project and active groups. Active Retirement Associations which have men and women as members were represented by men in this group. All men's groups appeared to have a formal structure, in the sense of being run by elected leaders/chairs.

There was some, but limited evidence that the men's groups have attempted to maintain their links and to a degree certain activities, however a more definite air of despondency was evident. Those representing Men's Sheds were especially downbeat. Attempts to keep the supports going were there, but there was an overwhelming concern about building their group back to what it had grown to be, and the gaps already created by groups not meeting. Evidence of physical activity during the pandemic was more limited than was noted for women's groups. Those involved in wider community groups indicated a greater resilience, but did not show as much creativity or proactivity to work with and around restrictions as the women's groups.

Support organisations

A variety of support organisations were represented, based in both rural and urban locations including community day and resource centres, RehabCare, the Irish Wheelchair Association, Arthritis Ireland and a Sit Fit group.

Whilst outreach support had been possible in certain circumstances, many physical activities had been put on hold. The focus group participants expressed real concern about the impact of this on the ongoing physical and mental health and wellbeing of their service users. Despite the easing of Covid-19 restrictions allowing some services to recommence, there was much frustration in respect of the ongoing limitations faced by groups, particularly where services were outside of / complementing HSE services / voluntary. Wider implications of not being able to use certain venues for meetings and exercise, or being unable to provide transport links were already having a lasting effect on people.

Pre-Covid-19 Older People's Group Arrangements

The level of activity and the regularity of face to face meetings pre-Covid-19 was significant. All group types were meeting frequently. For some, such as ICA groups, formal meetings may have been once or twice a month, however other ad-hoc or less formal activities also took place in between times. Active Retirement, Fitness and Friendship groups tended to meet weekly and others such as Men's Sheds, community and support groups met several times a week. For some, their activity range was so extensive that people could attend a centre or meeting place and take part in something daily if they wished.

Consequently, the importance of these groups in older people's daily and weekly routines was considerable. In some circumstances, it could be said this face to face contact and ingrained habit of involvement and interpersonal communication was critical, particularly for those who lived alone and for many of those in rural locations where the likelihood of meeting other people daily was more limited.

All groups had a dedicated meeting venue, either a community hall or similar venue. Some used halls large enough to accommodate indoor exercise, sports and dance activities, others were more limited for space but all had a place for their group to call 'home'.

Activities were wide ranging, from social get-togethers to outings and holidays, from community initiatives, DIY, crafts and arts to music and choirs. Physical activities were factored into all group schedules to differing degrees. Some had sub-groups for certain activities, such as walking groups and choirs. The range of physical activities mentioned included walking, dancing, chair-based exercises such as aerobics, yoga and Tai-Chi, along with a number of references to incorporating the Age & Opportunity Active programme.

The importance of the face to face physical activity sessions for those attending support groups, such as Rehab and community centres and with the IWA and Arthritis Ireland could not be overemphasised. Physical activities were key to both the physical and mental health of members and attendees.

Challenges faced by older people

Group representatives explained that even before the pandemic struck, older people and those with wider support needs benefited hugely from attending organised groups. Loneliness and isolation are well documented issues. The importance of keeping moving physically, looking after mental health and continuing to learn and remain engaged have always been key.

As far as physical activity is concerned, "use it or lose it" was a widely cited phrase within the discussions.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on older people

Covid-19 has impacted older people in many ways and to a devastating extent.

The overwhelming emotions conveyed were those of total fear.

This word was used throughout all the sessions over and over. Fear is the shadow cast over people's lives, the choices they are making and the consequences they face. Whether people were fit and healthy or had underlying conditions, whether they were 60 or 90, fear had taken hold. A fear of contracting the virus. A fear of spreading the virus. A fear of not doing the right thing. A fear of other people. A fear of the unknown.

As a result of this fear and anguish, people had very definitely pulled back from that all-important social contact, even in some cases once lockdown restrictions were eased. They believed they had been following the restrictions and guidelines carefully, and in many cases, people were aware that fear had led some to close themselves off totally, and remain closed off, even to telephone contact.

> ***"... a lot of our members are absolutely terrified out of their wits, because of Corona Virus they really don't want to have any contact with anybody, they don't want to meet for a coffee, they are just totally confined to their house. We keep in contact by phone, but they are still very, very nervous, extremely nervous"***
>
> **Active Retirement member**

Isolation and loneliness therefore went hand in hand with fear. There were many examples of the impact of not meeting up with others, not seeing friends and families, missing grandchildren and the lack of social interactions in general.

This was thought to be particularly marked amongst those living alone, those in rural communities where the only person they might see was the postman once or twice a week, where it wasn't safe to walk on the roads within their 2km or 5km, or where they were physically unable to get out. Those who were not confident or experienced in using online communications, or those living in areas where internet coverage was difficult also missed out on alternative routes to contact with and from others. For people in these circumstances their information came from the landline, TV and radio. Despite some supportive programming during the pandemic, it was difficult for people to switch off from the tragedy and concerns reported to the nation day after day. Additionally, many older people didn't have others with whom to share their worries or diffuse the burden.

> ***"…. most of them live on their own and they are very isolated in there, very isolated some of them, I would be very worried about them at this point for their mental health"***
>
> **Community Resource Centre**

> ***"… one lady went to bed for two weeks so upset at not being able to go to town get groceries … another lady - blood pressure gone high with fear"***
>
> **ICA member**

> ***"I know some people have actually been treated for depression and loneliness and all that type of stuff is happening…"***
>
> **Men's Shed member**

As far as physical activity went, there was a definite worry that restrictions on group activities and exercise have now taken their toll on physical health and fitness.

Support groups had various examples of issues now faced by their members for whom regular exercise was so critical in helping manage health conditions – both from a therapeutic and mental health perspective.

Other older people's groups spoke about the impact on motivation to exercise without the group dynamic, aside from issues with not now having a safe, monitored or comfortable environment in which to exercise.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on older people's groups

Group meetings closed in March 2020

In March 2020 when the national lockdown was announced, all older people's group activity and the majority of support functions ceased. This was dictated by Government advice, but was also aligned with the fear people felt about mixing with others and going out.

> ***"As well as being closed down from the top we are being closed down from the bottom, the men themselves are worried about their health and lots of people, including myself, have underlying conditions that you cannot risk going into a group circumstance, so we have just suspended everything. What effect does it have, it's having a serious effect on the men themselves."***
>
> **Men's Shed member**

Managing lockdown and restrictions – an overview

Groups reported a variety of different approaches to managing the situation.

Organisations like the IWA and those working in care settings described how some of their services had continued as outreach services, but that many of their general community support and activity-based services had been paused. Service users could no longer come into the centres during lockdown. Sports facilities, including hydrotherapy pools used for certain therapeutic exercise were no longer available. Transport was more limited, and for some, a risky option.

These types of organisations did however find ways to open up centres again once restrictions were eased. Services were more limited though, and operational requirements were now quite different and the extent of services, including exercise and physical activity sessions, were reduced. Specialist aqua facilities were not being used due to risk of cross contamination. Information was being shared in hard copy format, with some examples of videos and online materials being adopted.

> ***"We had 100+ clients in 5 day services – since March run all as out-reach services - supporting people in own homes – after lockdown we commenced outings and walks and were back into day services with restricted services, but it stopped again at level 4"***
>
> **Irish Wheelchair Association member**

The Men's Sheds members reported that their umbrella organisation advised immediate and then continued closure. Those in the Men's Sheds had kept in touch with their members by phone to some degree, although as time had gone on this had become more difficult. They described how they were running out of things to say, and that despondency had set in. Many were concerned the Sheds would never return to what they were. They seemed distanced from the umbrella organisation.

Some Men's Sheds had arranged pared back activities once restrictions were adjusted, but the impression given was that the Association as a whole advised that risks should not be taken, so Sheds should remain closed. This led to only limited and ad-hoc neighbourly checking-in with each other, some small-scale arrangements, such as two people picking garden produce, 2-3 in outdoor working groups or a small number taking a walk together. The general message was they did not hold any indoor activities or meet in many other ways.

The majority were not using technology within their arrangements. They spoke about the ethos of Men's Sheds. Men working side by side. The importance of face to face contact was emphasised, as was the reluctance of men to admit that they were not ok. Technical knowledge, equipment availability and sketchy broadband were issues, but to a lesser extent than an overall reluctance to adopt any different approaches in their communications. In the main, the Men's Sheds were simply 'closed until further notice', with great sadness, and worry for the future.

> ***"Not being able to meet as a group, and it's a lifeline for many … we have at least a half a dozen men… all in their 70's and some in their 80's and I'd say half a dozen would be widowers and they're alone and it was a lifeline… and now they're more or less stuck at home"***
>
> **Men's Shed member**

Men's community centre based groups had taken a different approach. These were larger groups and were run and managed by a formal committee usually with elected members in control of proceedings. They were also city-based and in populated suburbs with large memberships. Although the centres in which they were operating had closed, and in some cases when they reopened it was difficult to run again easily – some centres were shared with other groups, such as childcare - there were examples of the power of support and committees working together to ensure some activities resumed, including online.

During the lockdown there was a definite member support network in place, with phone calls and practical support taking place. These men did however echo the concerns the Men's Sheds shared, that as time went on it was more difficult to find things to chat about on the phone, and they also expressed the importance of face to face contact for men.

Their online activity was limited in terms of incorporating physical activity, but it did include quizzes and choir sessions on Zoom and a general opportunity to chat together as a result. There were however non-technical individuals who were thought to be more isolated.

The women's groups took the most alternative and creative approaches during lockdown. Their proactivity in re-grouping and thinking of different ways of maintaining contact with each other and looking out for those in most need was marked. All reported immediately switching to phone calls, and in effect, setting up a 'checking-in' service, with those living alone being a specific priority for these calls. Some of the men were doing this too, but it was more prevalent and for a longer period with the women. Some were following a formal approach, almost to a timetable. Some referred to Age & Opportunity's 'FitLine' service, a telephone support service offering motivation to people to be more active.

Those representing Active Retirement and fitness-focused groups appeared to be particularly proactive. As restrictions eased, they began to find ways of meeting for socially distanced walks or setting up outdoor events such as chair aerobics, yoga and Tai Chi in a marked-out car park space. Equally though, they had members who were too afraid to meet, even for an outdoor stroll or coffee. Fear remained their greatest barrier. These groups, along with some of the ICA groups used technology in a number of ways, particularly Zoom and WhatsApp. They also shared printed materials as hard copies and by email.

"I do FitLine motivational phone calls - calls take a lot longer because people want to talk"

ICA member

"For some active retirement groups, they were going to parks and having a walk and talk"

Active Retirement member

"We're still getting to do something – chair aerobics – done safely – Age & Opportunity have great online courses. Women can be afraid to meet, but like communication. We're sticking to guidelines

ICA member

The impact of reduced physical activity

All groups noted a far-reaching impact resulting from reduced physical activity since the lockdown in March 2020.

At the time of the research, older people and those in need of the support services had been without their usual physical activities for 7 months. They had also only just heard the news from Government that a new version of 'lockdown', would be placed on the country within the week and that this would last a further 6 weeks. Many were sceptical this could then be lifted – or if it is lifted for Christmas that people would be locked down again by January. There was much anger and frustration about the ongoing situation. Some participants felt that older people were being blamed for the spread of the pandemic, hence being told to stay at home, yet they believed they had done 'as they were told' whilst they watched what they deemed to be reckless behaviours in other demographics. They viewed the cocooning directive as wholly unfair to their generation, and described the earlier messaging around this as having been damaging to older people. They concurred the communications around this have been adjusted since, but felt that the initial approach had added fuel to the fire of fear and anguish felt by older people, and those in need of wider supports.

In turn, this became an issue of confidence, which consequently had a knock-on effect on motivation. People were not confident to leave their homes, even once this was more widely permitted. They did not then meet up with others and participate in activities as a group, or hear face to face how beneficial maintaining physical activity would be.

Many spoke about the pre-Covid-19 power of group motivation and peer-led support, even peer pressure. Not only were group meetings sociable occasions, good for mental health as well as physical activity, they were a way to get people moving together, and have some fun in a safe and comfortable environment.

For some people, their previous regular physical activity had been the key to retaining mobility or coping with a physical illness or disability. They shared stories of people who had now lost mobility to a degree they may never again regain it, where ageing had accelerated or where illnesses like Parkinson's and Arthritis had now taken hold in a more aggressive way, because physical activity had reduced considerably once people had been restricted to their homes and not had the supports and facilities once taken for granted.

> ***"I think it has been detrimental actually because we would have had a lot of people who had Parkinson's and other issues like that and we had exercise classes every week for them here and they were doing tremendously well and one gentleman, actually I met him there recently and he is nearly completely bent over because of his lack of activity"***
>
> **Active Retirement member**

What did older people's groups do to keep physical activity on the agenda during the pandemic?

Despite the numerous concerns and worries expressed, the focus group participants shared an extensive list of attempts to keep their groups moving.

As far as proactive approaches are concerned this was divided into three camps, often with cross over.

Those who were able to keep active individually without wider group motivation or dedicated facilities and activities put in place for them tended to be those with already higher fitness levels, in the younger age groups (although not always), group organisers/leaders, those living in locations where they could walk locally or go to a park safely or where outdoor spaces could accommodate socially distanced groups, and those who were generally less fearful.

Those who already had technology within their lifestyle – confidence to use, owned or had access to equipment such as tablets and smartphones, and where there was reliable broadband – and those who were open to embracing technology quickly, opening up new but exciting paths to communicating for them - through WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings and classes/demos, YouTube and Facebook.

Those who were open / able to build physical activity into their daily routine at home despite being unable to get out to exercise and despite not being online or smartphone users. They were motivated and willing, with or without support, so used printed materials, sought out advice from professionals, and practiced what they saw and heard on tv and radio.

Those outside the three proactive groups also require support - the fourth group, already referred to above within references to isolation and loneliness, includes all those older people, and people in need of supports to assist them in physical activity, who manage best with face to face interactions and encouragement from the presence of others. Many of those in the above three groups could make a number of choices in terms of the options open to them and found ways to adapt to their 'new normal'. In some cases, they thrived, they learnt new skills, and had plenty to talk about, keep them occupied and share back with others. This fourth group however are a concern to group leaders, and the community overall. They may feel further abandoned as time goes on, and it did seem to many participants that this was the group with the greatest need for supports to help them maintain and perhaps further build on their physical and mental health, strength and resilience. They were also the group hardest to support under the shadow of Covid-19 restrictions.

Carers also need support - those representing day centres and people with wider support needs acknowledged that living with Covid-19 as a carer has also taken its toll on people's mental and physical health. They called for wider recognition of the pressure carers have been placed under, and the even greater limits on their time for managing their own needs.

Activities adopted and adapted during the pandemic among those able to take part included:

In-person activities

These were introduced after lockdown, as restrictions were eased. Groups organised themselves independently of their usual structure, or had sub groups who took part in outdoor activities. Walking dominated, particularly for those in rural areas where they had greater access to open spaces, forestry trails, walks to the bog and where there were safe roads. Others walked in parks or local to home. Some created an extension to 'a walk' by incorporating a stop for a take away coffee, bringing a flask and arranging a socially distanced chat, or simply naming their event 'Walk & Talk'.

Some groups had access to car parks or outdoor space and described how once restrictions started to ease, they had attempted to re-convene some group exercising, yoga or Tai Chi outdoors, by marking out 2-meter spaces to ensure compliance with guidelines, and assisted by the good weather.

Others had looked at using their indoor halls again where large enough, but this hadn't worked out well due to concerns about health and safety and the blanket rule applied to all circumstances. An example being a group with a venue large enough to accommodate 4 pickleball courts usually had reduced this to two courts, but in practice this was still potentially risky and had to be abandoned, to their dismay.

In-person activities
Walking programmes
Walking groups
Walk & Talk
Walk & Coffee
Chair Aerobics - outdoors
Chair Tai Chi - outdoors
Yoga – outdoors
Pitch & Putt – when courses reopened
Clay Pigeon Shooting - Age & Opportunity event
Line dancing – attempted but people fearful
Gardening – small groups / individually
Pickleball – restarted with reduced number of courts
Cycling – 2 people going out together

The introduction of online communications was rapid, for some

Once a national lockdown was announced many groups were at an immediate disadvantage – their members could not meet, they were not tech savvy, nor did they have widespread access to tablets, laptops or smartphones. Some areas could not rely on their internet connectivity. Telephone calls were key to checking on general wellbeing, but people were very restricted and felt a huge sense of loss of their freedom, companionship and stimulation.

Nevertheless, some groups already had tech savvy members and others had previously moved into upskilling members where IT was of interest. Some had received grants to support this or successfully accessed schemes such as 'GrandPads' or the Vodafone ALONE smartphone scheme. Others had contacted local businesses on their own initiative and requested support, which they had, to their delight, received.

A two-tier situation quickly evolved – those who were equipped or partially ready to move certain interactions and activities online, and those who were not. Some of these did then start from scratch. Within this, appeared an until now non-techy group of older people who were keen with a little help to embrace this new situation. As was the case for the population as a whole, the discovery of Zoom, and the wider use of WhatsApp groups, YouTube and other platforms opened up new avenues for a host of older people not previously engaged in online communications.

Research participants explained that this was far from their ideal, and it took some time to create new ways of doing things, but once this compromise to not meeting face to face was embraced, many people did benefit. Not only were they able to keep up some of their interactions and continue to support each other, for many this was a new set of skills, for which they were thankful.

As far as physical activity was concerned, groups found various ways to use technology to keep this on the agenda:

- **They accessed information online, sometimes also then printing it for wider distribution;**
- **They shared information with the group by emailing and WhatsApp – sending links to ideas for exercise and healthier living;**
- **They used YouTube to access and do, or for a group to simultaneously view together programmes developed by organisations such as Age & Opportunity, Sport Ireland, Sports Partnerships and celebrities who became synonymous with lockdown such as Joe Wicks (Daily PE for kids);**
- **They used Zoom so an activity leader could demonstrate a session attendees could take part in together from home;**
- **They set each other daily tasks through WhatsApp groups, and generated healthy competition to complete activities;**
- **They organised meditation and mindfulness Zoom sessions;**
- **They used Facebook to broadcast classes and ensure accessibility where equipment was limited to a smartphone or where platform access was a barrier.**

Online activities

Chair Aerobics
Chair Yoga
Pilates
Exercise classes
YouTube exercise videos
Age & Opportunity Movement Minute sessions
Local Authority Sports Partnerships 4-week physical exercise course
Daily challenges – set via a WhatsApp group
TikTok posts – creating videos
Meditation
Mindfulness
Choirs / singing

The need to receive visual prompts remains critical

All believed there is no substitute for face to face interaction and group motivation, and equally there is a requirement for people to receive something physical and visually helpful to encourage activity. Some research participants shared examples of printed materials they had received or that their group had distributed to its members. They explained that these included clear steps and examples of what is possible to do at home, in terms of stretches, chair exercises and similar, and why this is so important.

Some had created their own versions of information leaflets, and others were in the process of creating packs to share with people as Level 5 restrictions loomed. People were very conscious that wintery days and nights would provide a very different set of circumstances for older people to endure in 'Lockdown2' and they were keen to provide whatever support was possible.

Participants also discussed the relevance of TV and radio programming in supporting older people. The RTE Today Show was popular and people knew this had a health and fitness slot, which some of them did follow. They confirmed that regional radio and local papers play a significant part in the media habits of older people. As do church and community organisations. Many had accessed information through these routes and shared them within their communities during the recent months.

"Our members are under and over 65 – we suspended the day service in March. Have been going to people's homes and bringing activity packs and Age & Opportunity Active video – plus exercise book – have 54 users but only got about 25 books. Biggest problem with zoom is the internet and confidence to use it. Have a zoom class but out of 54 users only 7 use it. Hard to reach out to older people through social media."

Irish Wheelchair Association member

"Television and the radio are very important because people who are tech-savvy can really sort themselves out can't they, it's the people who aren't tech-savvy and they are going to need to get all of their information through television and radio"

Active Retirement member

"TV is our friend; our radio is never off in the kitchen – don't need Wi-Fi"

RehabCare member

"Should go back to tv programmes – RTE should cover something in afternoon, Daithi on for two hours – could bring in something for the elderly that they can turn on – at a certain time, tv should be doing a lot more – everyone has a television"

ICA member

Printed and other media sources used

RTE Today Show with Daithi & Maura exercise slot

Local radio advice slots e.g. with professional physio

HSE physio leaflets

Printed sheets of exercises to follow at home

Activity packs with space to tick off as complete steps

Simple visuals – chair / other exercises to do at home

Support provision and routes to communication

Older people had been especially impressed by the community spirit during the pandemic. They spoke about younger neighbours getting to know their older neighbours more, and new habits forming in respect of offers of help with shopping, generations in families spending more time together, for example going for family walks once cocooning restrictions eased, and people saluting each other and saying hello when passing in the street.

Whilst individuals and groups had created their own support networks, older people had also drawn on local community support, especially during the height of the pandemic. In addition, they shared examples of wider corporate initiatives.

- **The GAA's reputation was strong in respect of local community initiatives and practical help – shopping, pharmacy runs, bringing in coal etc.**
- **Church volunteers were a welcome sight to many when they socially distanced hand delivered mass and information leaflets**
- **Local Link bus service - picked up and dropped off shopping for people**
- **Meals on Wheels kept in daily contact and some extended service days**
- **Local hotels and catering companies provided hot dinners, often delivered to doors by the local GAA**
- **Library services, made up packs with treats and ideas for keeping busy along with library books**
- **An Post were called out for their proactivity, both as an organisation and the extent to which some said their local delivery people went to, particularly in very rural areas**
- **The Good Morning Service in Donegal, invaluable to many as a free telephone service – befriend, care and repair**
- **The ALONE collaboration with Vodafone to provide smartphone access**
- **An Garda Siochána were praised for their support in communities and approach**

These, and other community routes to communication, may well offer future routes to sharing information more widely in respect of health and wellbeing.

There was a distinct impression that the level of support offered on a national basis, both in a general duty of care sense, and in respect of support for physical activity, was not focused in the most needed areas.

The support groups had strong views on where greater state assistance was needed. Discussions covered state allowances and other matters outside the scope of this research. Transport issues were however raised, in respect of ensuring people can get to group activity locations when they are open. Transport has always been a challenge in elder care day centre settings, and this has become more of an issue during the pandemic as services have been cut and the fear of using public transport affects people's motivation to travel. Families and carers share these concerns.

These barriers impact on people's abilities to benefit from attending group activities, events and support when these are available to use.

Positive change and learnings

Whilst this unprecedented period of concern has cast a shadow across the country, and groups report their concerns of the considerable implications for the health and wellbeing of older people, the older people of Ireland have also acknowledged positive change during the last 7 months. These changes are expected to also have a lasting impact and will, for some people, make a positive difference during the challenging times ahead.

Technology:
People have embraced technology more than they ever expected they would do, and more quickly than could have been anticipated before Covid-19. Whilst many older people have not yet been able to transition online, a significant number have. People who were previously dabbling, with guidance from their younger family members, are now the ones leading others, or instigating wider involvement. Those who had shied away from technology are now taking part in Zoom choirs and quizzes, setting challenges on WhatsApp and video calling their grandchildren.

There is some way to go, but confidence, creativity and curiosity is growing, and at a pace that could not have been imagined before 2020. This provides an ideal platform for delivering a wider reach in respect of physical activity, motivation, improved and increased inclusivity and communication.

Community spirit:
Many older people spoke about the ways in which communities had come together to support each other. We had examples of organisations such as the GAA and An Post making a big impact, alongside individual acts of kindness and consideration. Could this now open the way to greater community spirit within sport and physical activity, beyond the GAA and other formal organisations?

Inter-generational connection:
Observations around families spending more time together came through in many ways, whether this was through family walks or simply grandchildren spending more time chatting to and helping their grandparents. Similarly, people gave various examples of younger and older neighbours chatting together more, people checking in on each other and offering help, making more regular phone calls and also supporting by accompanying others on a walk or cycle.

Looking forward rather than back:

What was striking throughout the focus group discussions was that like much of the population, older people had spent much of the spring and summer looking back at what they had, what they felt they had lost, the damage this has done and what they were worried may not come back – certainly not in the same way, as far as many groups were concerned.

However, within each group one or two individuals were starting to think and express the situation differently, to look forward more and consider how best to cope with what is to come, and to live with the situation more. They believe this needs to be more infectious than the virus and, with support, they would like to now drive forward with a more proactive, positive and resilient outlook.

They hope to use the time now to upskill, for example with technology, to educate and encourage people, and develop from here.

"I think what we have to do is try and be a little innovative and realise instead of rueing the fact that we can't meet and we can't do this, we can't do that, we have to look at the situation we're in and examine that situation and see how do we develop our various clubs and interests from here? and forget about the meetings we used to have and the activities we used to have, we are not going to be able to do them... there's no point, there's no point what so ever it's not going to solve anything today in this pandemic, we need to look at what we're in now and say right, what do we do with this, how do we develop this?

Given the fact that the news last night said we could be in this until the end of 2021, we're going to have to rethink everything you know and forget about pining back to the days of going for walks and doing whatever we used to do, the choir, the thing I miss most is the choir, we are just in what we are in and that's it, and we're going to have to look at this, see how we can make the best of it"

Community Men's Group member

Suggestions from the Focus Groups for Action and Support

Participants discussed their concerns for people during a winter of Covid-19. Notwithstanding health concerns, people said their enthusiasm has waned, and they are tired, particularly of doing things alone. They miss the group interaction and they need greater motivation. Covid-19 is now a 'known'. It's no longer novel – it is a very real ongoing worry for people and they are genuinely anxious about how they and others will cope 'this time round'.

Looking ahead, to the very near future, older people's groups are seeking help and support in a number of areas in order to continue their mission to keep older people and those in need of support as active as possible as the pandemic rolls on into the winter.

Ultimately, they want to see tangible action to keep older people motivated and to encourage them to take part in physical activities. Primarily they are looking;

- **For ideas and inspiration that they can carry forward themselves**
- **To share relevant information on the best platforms for their audience**
- **For the difficulties faced by older people to be recognised and responded to appropriately on a national level**

Collectively, the groups identified a number of ways they suggest influential organisations could support the cause. A summary of these forms our recommended areas for consideration, with an added request to expedite as many ideas as possible.

Now the country is in a period of Level 5 restrictions, and moving into the winter months, older people's groups, support groups and their members are open to all the information they can get to encourage participation in physical activity and recreational sport during the pandemic, and beyond:

CREATE	DELIVER
Simple leaflets	Demonstrating simple activities such as stretches, chair exercises, how-to-guides e.g. how to meditate, how to fit exercise into your day, how to choose healthy snacks – and the headline benefits.
Activity packs	Hard copy printed materials, presented as a pack or bundle and including visual leaflets demonstrating simple exercises which can be done at home and motivational tick lists to record progress. DVDs or memory sticks may be useful for those without online access.
Motivational messages	Creating 'reasons why' type messages that resonate to encourage and motivate people to stay fit and healthy – increase your bone strength, stay in your own home longer, still be able to get up from the loo etc when you are 90.
Winter-ready specific messages	Encourage people to plan ahead, create their own timetable, line up their exercise routine, seek membership group commitment to participate, even if this is remotely or on an individual basis during current restrictions.

Use of peer group 'influencers'	Highlight and share real people and real success stories in respect of physical activity, use role models from the peer group to ensure these messages resonate strongly – how people have managed adversity through being fitter or how getting fit has influenced a change in their lives.
Provide technical support to facilitate remote group activities	Provide links to suitable physical activity programmes and teachers online, share step by step guides to setting up your own cascade effect Zoom class e.g. 2-3 in a location with a suitably large space to work in, socially distanced, demonstrating, with other small groups in other locations logging in together.
Connect groups together	Where digitally possible, link groups with common interests together to improve the dynamics and share learnings.
Make use of regional media	Local radio stations are widely listened to and respected, as are their guests. Similarly, regional newspapers remain strong in certain areas – create material for programming and articles, suggest guests, provide inspiration.
Lobby national media	Consider where RTE and other national channels can make changes to make a difference to older people and their commitment to physical activity through their programming choices, messaging, creative ideas, and even suggestions of what to do during the ad breaks to keep moving – think Operation Transformation, Home School Hub.
Present circumstances to Government for policy consideration	Consider requesting exclusivity for certain groups in dual use exercise/therapy settings which in effect impact on physical health or restrict rehabilitation – such as hydro-pools, or permit certain types of indoor exercise / use of indoor space with guidance e.g. badminton, pickleball, curling, bowls.
Provide 'reopening' support	Offer guidance and advice for safe opening up and initiating activities as restrictions ease.
Utilise links to umbrella groups	Look at ways to encourage smaller groups – fewer members/less formal structures - in physical activity whilst they are officially 'closed', e.g. those coming under the Men's Shed / ICA and other national associations. Work with umbrella groups to tailor support and advice to members – whilst the groups are relatively autonomous, they are looking for more guidance within these unprecedented circumstances.

Conclusions

Almost 700 valid survey responses were received and over two thirds of respondents indicated a willingness to take part in a follow up focus group. This points to a need for these voices to be heard and the fact that they have a lot to say about the impact of Covid-19 on their groups.

It is clear from both survey and focus group responses that Covid-19 restrictions on social gathering have had a devastating effect on older people's groups and that these groups will need significant extra supports from local and national agencies to recommence physical and other activities.

Prior to Covid-19 groups met often and were perceived as an important part of their communities and the lives of their members. Physical activities were factored into all group schedules to differing degrees and were considered to be a core part of their programme.

While acknowledging that this is a particularly challenging time, there is no sense that people are willing to give up on their groups.

Fear of getting Covid-19 is the biggest barrier to recommencing group activities, including physical activity. Many groups will not meet again in real space until the virus is no longer a threat.

Individuals with access to the internet have more opportunities for contact with their group and groups in areas with poor broadband are at a disadvantage because they cannot meet online.

Some groups have fared better than others. Those with access to safe places to walk or engage in other outdoor activities and large halls in which to meet indoors are at an advantage. Men's groups have been less successful at keeping in touch and getting together than women's groups.

Walking is perceived as a safe activity and could be a good focus for re-engaging in group physical activity.

The Age & Opportunity peer leadership model of Physical Activity Leaders (PALs) was found to have been present in over 40 percent of all groups. Despite this very significant presence, it would appear that PALs were also severely impacted by the debilitating impact of the pandemic, as having a PAL in the group did not make a significant difference to the group engaging in physical activity during Covid-19.

Communication – from government to citizen, from media to audiences, from national and local agencies to groups and within the groups themselves during this crisis was often not clear or satisfactory. However, communication – by internet, phone, post and broadcast media – is perceived to hold potential solutions for groups to keep in touch and to keep active.

In the aftermath of Covid-19 supports such as access to bigger venues, safe transport, more enabling environments, more and varied physical activity resources for groups and a positive outlook about ageing will be crucial to bringing groups back to life and back to physical activity.

Recommendations

Addressing fear

Policy makers and public health officials should be made aware of the extent and scale of an overwhelming sense of fear engendered by the national response to Covid-19 which singled out older people for isolation from society, removing their own agency and judgement about their own health and social interactions. This should be highlighted as ageism, however well-intentioned, and steps should be taken to redress the damage done to older people's confidence to participate fully in all areas of society. Furthermore, any future responses to similar crises should not single out nor segregate any group of people on the basis of chronological age.

The Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, eight organisations that between them reach practically every older person across the country, should prioritise how they can support and represent their members, participants and service users to resume full participation in all areas of Irish life as soon as those in other age groups are doing so. This may require a need to increase and/or divert resources, to increase capacity and to prioritise and co-operate across organisations.

Age & Opportunity, as the lead organisation for the promotion of physical activity for older adults, should ensure representation on national decision making fora such as Advisory Groups or Expert Groups on safe return to sport and physical activity.

All those involved in the promotion of sport and physical activity should be encouraged to place greater emphasis on living with Covid-19 and any future health crises rather than restricting activities. This could involve more categorising of activities to allow safer ones to take place.

Fear extends to use of digital technologies – older people should be prioritised under the 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy currently being developed by the Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. In addition, greater support should be made available to Age Action, the National Adult Literacy Association and other organisations involved in promoting digital literacy among older people and safe and secure ways to use the internet and social media to access physical activity programmes and other online supports for greater wellbeing.

Use of ageist language and imagery in the media and by spokespersons for organisations in authority also contributes to fear. Stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies, as they can affect how older people view themselves, their own capabilities and the kinds of activities they engage with, including returning to their social group activities. Age & Opportunity, along with other organisations in the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs should seek funding specifically to tackle ageism and create greater awareness of age positive language and imagery through a targeted campaign.

Communication

Public health messages relating to older people and physical activity should be clear, unambiguous and easy to understand. 'Sense checking' by organisations such as Age & Opportunity and the National Adult Literacy Association should be considered where possible.

Public health messages should include Winter Ready specific communications relating to physical activity using peer group 'influencers' to motivate people to make their own physical activity plan if they can't get out to their groups or organised events and to understand the benefits of participation.

Organisations involved in the promotion of physical activity should make particular effort to create and distribute printed resources for physical activity to those who are not online.

More use should be made of local radio, regional print media and national television to deliver physical activity messages and opportunities to older people.

Supporting groups to meet for physical activity

Revitalising groups should be a priority for Age sector and community development organisations. If groups of older people cannot get together socially then group pursuits including sport and physical activity cannot take place. The scale of the challenge involved will require co-ordinated and sustained commitment by these agencies. The Department of Rural and Community Development should resource a multi-agency initiative to help revitalise Group activity. Furthermore, the Department of Rural and Community Development should make extra funds available to enable more groups to meet safely, including access and support for transport to and from meeting spaces for those who need it. Particular attention and support should be focused on Men's groups as they appear to be most overwhelmed by the events of 2020.

The capacity of Age & Opportunity's PALs network to influence, coordinate and lead on physical activity within their groups should be reviewed with a view to identifying areas that could be strengthened and expanded.

Walking is acknowledged by most contributors to this report as the main form of physical activity. As it is an activity that can be safely carried out with physical distancing, Age & Opportunity, in collaboration with Get Ireland Walking should upskill PALs to organise and lead safe walks for their group members in the wake of Covid-19. Age & Opportunity should also explore the potential to promote the other outdoor activities mentioned by respondents in the findings.

Where Group members cannot meet

While many older people have embraced digital technologies during 2020, there is still a need for greater support for programmes such as Age Action's Getting Started programme to increase access and confidence so that more older people can access the physical activity resources being made available on the internet.

Digital initiatives such as Age & Opportunity's Movement Minutes should be continued after restrictions are lifted. Older people who were not members of groups and those who will not choose or be able to return to their groups should be encouraged and enabled to access these online communities and resources to support physical activity.

Support should be made available for innovative initiatives that enable live delivery of physical activity to smaller groups in several remote locations as suggested by the focus groups.

Policy makers should be made aware of the consequences of physical inactivity and lobbied to consider exclusivity for certain groups in dual use exercise/therapy settings which in effect impact on physical health or restrict rehabilitation.

An Post and the Library Service were also emphasised as national assets playing their part to reach out to older people at risk of isolation. Furthermore, feedback from the focus groups indicated that even where people do have access to the internet it is good to have printed resources and activity packs. Further exploration about how these national resources could help to distribute materials widely should be undertaken.

Telephone was also cited as a communication tool available and being used by many older people to keep in touch whilst physically distancing. Age & Opportunity should extend its FitLine mentor service to all counties to provide free telephone support to be more active particularly for older people who will not choose or be able to join or return to a group.

Environmental Supports

An enabling physical environment with safe and pleasant places to walk and cycle is even more crucial for participation in physical activity with many indoor facilities either closed or older people afraid to use them. During the first lockdown Local Authorities and the Office of Public Works assigned designated times to Older Adults for exercise. Presence of community guards has been shown in other countries to address fears people might have about using public spaces. Mobile coffee units at designated times can also encourage use of public spaces. Further Stakeholder Engagement and focus groups should be conducted by Age & Opportunity to prepare guidance for those involved in managing public spaces to encourage more use by older people.

Many groups could meet indoors if they had access to bigger venues in which they could meet social distancing requirements. Most older people's groups meet during weekday mornings when large venues could be empty. The GAA, FAI and Churches should be encouraged, and supported, to make large premises available to older people's groups for physical activity where possible.

Feedback suggests that transport will continue to be an issue even when groups can come back together safely. Even where public transport is available many older people will be afraid to use it. Focus group respondents indicated that this would be an even bigger issue for those older people with disabilities or chronic illness. The Department of Transport is charged with the safe and sustainable development of transport, to support economic growth and social progress. Greater participation in physical activity is an indicator of social progress and Age & Opportunity, along with the Age Friendly Ireland Programme should engage with the Department of Transport to ensure that the participation of older people informs transport developments, particularly in rural areas.

Further Research

This report focused mainly on groups in community settings. The impact of Covid-19 on organised physical activities in day and residential care settings should be assessed so that recommendations for future health crises can be acted upon.

Age & Opportunity should commission an independent review of its PALs initiative with a view to identifying areas that could be strengthened or improved.

Age & Opportunity should facilitate a national reflection by older people on whether the policy of cocooning based on being over 70 was ageist and whether the human rights of older persons were compromised by the national response to Covid-19 with a view to developing recommendations for future policy making regarding older people in a Pandemic.

Greater use of public space for physical activities has been a positive consequence of the pandemic. Age & Opportunity should conduct further research looking to countries where this is more developed and disseminate the findings in order to generate new ideas for older people's groups to be physically active safely in public spaces.

December 2020

For further information about any aspect of this report please contact:

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Appendix 1 – Survey Questionnaire

1.

1. Name of the Group

2. What is your role within the group?

- ◯ Committee Member
- ◯ PAL (Physical Activity Leader)
- ◯ General Manager

3. What type of group is it?

- ◯ Active Retirement
- ◯ ICA
- ◯ Men's Shed
- ◯ Local Community Group
- ◯ Older Persons Group
- ◯ Housing Association
- ◯ Disability Group
- ◯ Other

Other (please specify)

4. How many members are in the group?

- ◯ <10
- ◯ 11-30
- ◯ 31-50
- ◯ 51-100
- ◯ >100

5. What county is your group based in?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Rural

County

6. Before the Covid-19 pandemic how many times would your group normally meet?

- 2-3 times a week or more
- Once a week
- Every 2-3 weeks
- Once a month
- Less than once a month

7. Where would your group normally meet?

- Local community hall
- Resource centre
- Sports Hall
- Library
- Other (please specify)

8. Are there any PALs (Physical Activity Leaders) in your group (PAL is someone who has taken part in Age & Opportunity PALs training)?

- Yes
- No

9. If so, how many?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- More than 5
- N/A

10. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic has a PAL been in touch with you to organise physical activity?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

11. If yes, when did the PAL make contact?

- March - May
- June - July
- August - September
- N/A

12. Did this contact result in members of the group taking part in organised physical activity?

- Yes
- No
- N/A

13. Has your group come together since Covid-19 to take part in any form of physical activity?

- Yes
- No

14. If yes, where or how did you meet?

- Outdoors
- Indoors
- WhatsApp
- Zoom
- Other (please specify)
- Facebook Live
- YouTube
- Other, give details
- N/A

15. What type of activity did you do?

- Age & Opportunity activities eg Movement Minutes/Pilates
- Cycling
- Fitness Class
- Go for Life games/group activity
- Other (please specify)
- Swimming
- Walking
- Yoga/Pilates/Tai Chi
- N/A

16. Why did you choose this type of activity?

- It was an outdoors activity
- It was an online activity
- PAL was available to the group
- Local fitness professional was available to the group
- It was a continuation of our regular activity
- It was offered by Local Sports Partnership or other local agency
- It was offered by Age & Opportunity or other national agency
- It was free
- We wanted to spend our GFL grant
- N/A
- Other (please specify)

17. How many times did your group meet up for physical activity?

- ○ Once only
- ○ More than once?
- ○ 2-3 times a week or more
- ○ Once a week
- ○ Every 2-3 weeks
- ○ Once a month
- ○ Less than once a month
- ○ N/A

18. Were these meetings successful?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ N/A

19. If yes, are you still meeting regularly

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ N/A

20. If no, select reasons why:

- ☐ Friends no longer taking part
- ☐ Fear within the group of mixing with other people
- ☐ Lack of facility availability (e.g. local community hall closed)
- ☐ Individual's loss of confidence in their physical capability
- ☐ Other (please specify)
- ☐ Not enough interest among group members to meet up
- ☐ Lack of support
- ☐ Unsure of public health guidelines
- ☐ Lack of financial resources

21. What supports would help you and your group to get back to or continue to stay physically active?

- ○ Funding
- ○ More PALs in the group
- ○ More contact and support from local agency e.g Local Sports Partnerships
- ○ Other (please specify)
- ○ More contact and support from national bodies like Age & Opportunity, HSE, Healthy Ireland, Sport Ireland
- ○ More contact and support from your own umbrella body e.g. Active Retirement Ireland

22. Please give more detail about what type of contact and support would help

23. What would you suggest that state agencies, local or national organisations could do differently to keep older people motivated to stay as active as possible during current or possible future Covid-19 restrictions?

24. As far as you know, approximately what percentage of your group has access to the internet or social media platforms?

- Less than 10%
- 11-30%
- 31-50%
- 51-70%
- More than 71%

25. In relation to your group and their participation in physical activity over the Covid-19 period have you any further comments?

26. Would you be willing to take part in an Age & Opportunity online focus group to help further explore the impact of Covid-19 on group activity and what can be done to help older people to remain or return to physical activity?

- Yes
- No

27. If yes, please provide:

Name:

Mobile Number:

Email

28. Do we have your permission to share these details with our research partner for the purpose of this research only as they will be conducting the focus groups with us?

- Yes
- No

Appendix 2

Age & Opportunity
Incorporating **Age & Opportunity active**,
The National Sport and Physical Activity Programme
for Older People

SPÓRT ÉIREANN
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Guidelines on Promoting **the Safe Return of Older People to Recreational Sport and Physical Activity**

Introduction

In order to support those of you involved in the provision of physical activity programmes for older people Age & Opportunity brought a group of stakeholders together in June 2020 to develop this guidance resource.

Feedback from the group is that there has been a significant reduction in physical activity by older people during the pandemic period. In addition, the group believes that there are significant barriers to the resumption of physical activity linked to increased anxiety, nervousness, loss of confidence, feelings of exclusion, weakening of physical activity related social contacts and physical deconditioning among many older people.

We all want to see older people come back to recreational sport and physical activity and so we hope the following guidance will help you inform, encourage, build confidence and in particular reassure older people as they return to a more active lifestyle, in accordance with the public health guidelines and the recommendations of your own sporting body or organisation.

Mind Your Language!

When engaging with older people, appropriate language and tone are most important in challenging ageism and encouraging their participation in sport, physical activity and other meaningful pursuits. Older people or older persons are the most appropriate terms to use. The 'er' qualifier makes it more acceptable and inclusive than just old and it recognises a continuum of ageing, all older people are not the same age.

Referring to older people as the elderly, geriatrics, senior citizens, pensioners or OAPs is not what Age & Opportunity recommend. None of these terms have equal or opposite terms in common use and each one reinforces a negative stereotype. Likewise, frequent use of the terms "vulnerable", "frail", "underlying conditions" linked to older people suggests that it is appropriate and indeed necessary to make decisions about this group which are "for their good". Such terms make critical analysis of these decisions and discussion of possible alternatives very difficult.

Challenges Facing Older People Returning to Recreational Sport and Physical Activity

- Loss of confidence in their ability to be physically active after cocooning for months;
- Increased anxiety about their own health;
- The stigma attached to being classed as a "vulnerable" group and feeling alienated from society;
- Confusion and lack of clarity about the national public health advice relating to physical activity;
- Physical decline and possible deconditioning due to inactivity;
- Increased loneliness due to lack of social contact;
- Lack of social support linked to the absence of group physical activity in their lives;
- Those having contracted Covid 19 taking a long time to recover;
- Lack of access to and knowledge of internet use;
- Safety concerns regarding returning to recreational sport or a facility;
- Concerns about using public transport.

Solutions for Overcoming these Challenges

Reminding and Reassuring Older People of Positive Benefits of Exercise and Fitness

- Physical activity for all older people is positive for their physical and mental health;
- This is true for 'healthy' older people and those with medical (underlying) conditions of all ages;
- Unfitness or poor physical conditioning causes or increases poor health and reduces quality of life;
- Inactivity is bad for your health at any age, whether you have a medical condition or not;
- Involvement in physical activity in either individual or group contexts increases opportunities for building social contacts and strengthening social networks.

Physical Activity Advice to those who have Deconditioned

- Older people who have been inactive for some time may have reduced strength, flexibility, balance or overall fitness levels. This should be taken into account when older people are being reintroduced back to recreational sport and physical activity;
- The level of activity best suited for older people is described as 'moderate intensity', engaged in for at least 30 minutes on five or more days of every week;
- Activities could range from walking, stretching, cycling, working in the garden or washing the car, to lifting light weights, practising yoga or tai chi.

Confidence Building

- **Older people need to feel a sense of ownership and purpose;**
- **Work with individuals to set specific goals for their return to physical activity and recreational sport;**
- **Invite older people to co-design a return to activity plan with you, for themselves or their group.**

Outdoor activities

Prioritise more outdoor activities for older people e.g. walking / cycling programmes where there is less risk of virus transmission. Consider adapting traditional indoor activities to an outdoor space if possible;

Designated times

Choose a specific time for the initial return to activity which is exclusively for older people. Knowing the initial session will be carefully managed will help limit any apprehension of returning.

Small group sizes

Accommodating smaller group sizes will help older people to return to activity as there will be less apprehension regarding large crowds and their ability to socially distance;

Social aspect

For many older people, the social element of their activities is just as important as the exercise. Care should be taken that a cuppa and a chat post-activity are not dismissed as being unnecessary when redesigning programmes;

Designated outdoor spaces

'Bring Your Own' options could be used to accommodate socially distanced interaction;

Re-orientation events

A 'welcome back' event, day, time slot or publication could be created specifically for older people. This may provide an opportunity to visit your facility or location in order to reassure them that all appropriate measures have been put in place regarding their safe return to activity;

Mentoring

A specific older peoples' mentor could be nominated across your facility or sports organisation. This would give older people a specific individual contact who could answer any new or ongoing concerns relating to themselves or their groups. This could also be handed down to a member of that group then, once people are happy and settled back in;

Buddy system

A buddy system could be put in place where older people are linked in with other members of your facility or organisation to assist with their return. Friends may be slower to return to use the facility and having an identifiable support person, even for their initial visit, may increase their likelihood to return. This could also help to promote intergenerational solidarity;

Obtain feedback

Allow for some time pre and post-session to address any concern that older people may have. This feedback from the participants themselves will be very useful in order to continue adapting your return to sport procedures. Ensure to conduct ongoing informal feedback during sessions, perhaps at break times;

Older People's Views on Covid-19 and Cocooning

"I have found the lockdown very hard. I was being active but I need the company for the motivation so I have stopped. I have no internet access and I struggle with technology."
Frank, Men's Shed Member*

"I am feeling anxious. I am reluctant to go out and to return to the shed. My physical activity has gone down as I haven't been going out. I am nervous to be too active on my own after an injury, don't want to go through it again."
Nigel, Men's Shed Member*

"I felt very positive about the way people adhered to social distancing while shopping or out walking, but feel the lockdown has dented our confidence somewhat."
Mary Kennedy

"It was the weirdest feeling good one day and awful another day. Wanting to do so much but couldn't get motivated. Comfort eating putting on pounds it was a helpless feeling."
Sylvia K, Grange Woodbine

"I am living alone so I miss the comradery and having someone to talk to about things. I don't have a computer so I am a bit left behind."
Peter, Men's Shed Member*

"I'm still a bit nervous when I see young people not heeding the rules. Not wearing masks and grouping together as if there is no virus."
Margaret McHugh

*The Irish Men's Sheds Associations' Sheds for Life programme evaluation- funded by the Irish Research Council"

Resources Available

Contact Age & Opportunity for further resources by visiting our website

www.ageandopportunity.ie **or phone 01 8057709**

Useful contacts

www.sportireland.ie/covid19

www.irelandactive.ie

www.hse.ie/coronavirus

www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/olderpeople/tipsforhealthyliving/keepingactive

Please Note: All activity should be consistent with the government guidance regarding health, social distancing and hygiene. See latest Government updates at www.gov.ie/covid19

Age & Opportunity Active Covid Stakeholder Group consists of:

John Kerrane (Independent Chair), Aisling McGrath (Waterford Institute of Technology), Jason King (Get Ireland Walking), Caitriona Geraghty (Fingal LSP), Brian Staunton (Sport Ireland), Mary O'Meara (Dept. Public Health), Sylvia Guckian (Physical Activity Leader, Grange Woodbine), Tom Lillis (Physical Activity Leader, Kingswood & Kilmanagh Men's Club) Margo Finnegan (Cycling Ireland), Caroline Peppard (HSE), Claire Hurley (Cork LSP), Bernie Murray (CarePAL, Sunbeam House), Sue Guildea, Paul Gallier, Mary Harkin, Karen Horgan, Melissa Byrne and Ciara Dawson (Age & Opportunity) July 2020.

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