

Physical Activity in Retirement Transitions Study

Key Findings & Recommendations



Key Findings

Adults in England are spending more years of their life working than ever before, and with an ageing population there is also an ageing workforce who need support to age, work and retire actively. The Physical Activity and Retirement Transitions Study (PARTS) investigated five research questions to gather insight about the relationship between retirement and physical activity. PARTS defines the “retirement transition” as the period from age 55 and above where older adults are likely to be conscious of approaching retirement and beginning to plan and take steps to move away from the labour market.

In England, participation in physical activity tends to decrease around the age of 55¹, which for most older adults is whilst they are still employed. Frailty and pre-frailty (the decline in health, resilience and mobility, often associated with ageing) are conditions previously expected to be found in people at retirement age and over, but now these conditions affect a third of British adults aged 50-65². Transitioning to retirement is a life-changing event which provides opportunities for behaviour change and coincides with declining physical activity, health and wellbeing associated with age. The approach to retirement therefore presents an opportune time to protect existing PA habits, combat decline and enable individuals to be active prior to and following retirement.

Does physical activity decrease as people transition into retirement?

Evidence in the literature around the direction and magnitude of changes in physical activity at retirement is mixed. There is some evidence to suggest that leisure physical activity typically increases in retirement, but that loss of other physical activity can mean that individuals are not more active overall.

Analysis of Active Lives Survey data suggests that over the age of 55, less time spent working is associated with greater overall physical activity levels, including gardening and leisure activities, although those who work more do more active travel. Transitioning away from employment can therefore have a positive or negative impact on overall activity depending on an individual's habits prior to retirement.

What are people's individual experiences of whether physical activity increases or declines during the transition to retirement?

The PARTS survey found that retirement is seen by most over-55s as an opportunity to increase PA and many find that once retired they have more time, motivation and opportunities to take part in PA. However, the survey found that there are still 30-45% of people aged 55+ who don't experience these benefits when retiring, and a quarter of people face barriers linked to caring responsibilities, affordability and availability of peer support which prevent them from being as active as they'd like.

¹ Active Ageing - Sport England <https://www.sportengland.org/our-work/health-and-inactivity/active-ageing/>

² Palmer, K.T., D'angelo, S., Harris, E.C., Linaker, C., Gale, C.R., Evandrou, M., Syddall, H., van Staa, T., Cooper, C., Sayer, A.A. and Coggon, D., 2017. Frailty, prefrailty and employment outcomes in Health and Employment After Fifty (HEAF) Study. *Occup Environ Med*, 74(7), pp.476-482.

What are the barriers and facilitators to physical activity experienced by those approaching and transitioning into retirement?

The main barriers to PA reported in PARTs were poor health, not having enough time or energy due to work, and a general lack of time or convenient PA opportunities. Other lesser reported barriers to PA included; lack of motivation, unsupportive or unrelatable instructors, and finding activity opportunities intimidating and unappealing.

Whilst retirement may remove some of the barriers previously preventing people from being active, deteriorating health and wellbeing that could be addressed by supporting people to be active in the lead up to retirement (55+) mean that the challenge of becoming active at retirement is greater. Supporting older adults to lead active lifestyles ahead of, and at retirement could ensure people are more mobile, capable and healthier once retired.

Activity that is combined with socialising or results from other purposeful actions such as looking after a dog, gardening, housework, childcare, volunteering, etc., emerged as key facilitators for this audience.

What sorts of physical activity interventions might be appropriate for engaging people at the retirement transition stage?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting over-55s to be active in the lead-up to and following retirement. Working to improve the key parts within the system has the potential to achieve the greatest impact for this audience.

Making information about opportunities to be active locally more accessible could help this target audience to be more active. Providing opportunities to try activities for free could also enable more people to maintain or increase their PA in the lead up to and during retirement.

Recommendations for supporting physical activity during this retirement transition

Due to the complex and varied nature of retirement in England the research leads us to recommend a systems approach, identifying key parts of the system to influence, to support people aged 55+ to retire actively. This approach should be made up of strategies that target those who are working full-time, part-time and who are retired, influencing policy and provision across three key areas; provision and opportunities to be active, the workplace, and support services.

Provision and opportunities to be active

Opportunities to be physically active exist mainly within three contexts. These are;

- Activity provided or facilitated by the sport and physical activity (SPA) sector
- Activity led by or held in communities
- Activity directed and undertaken by individuals

The findings of PARTs highlight the value of improving access to opportunities in each of these contexts for over-55s in the lead up to, and during retirement.

Areas for improvement within the sport and physical activity sector:



Time:

Ensure suitable opportunities are available at times that support over-55s who are still working full- or part-time as well as those who are fully retired.



Type:

Provide a variety of opportunities including activities that are low-intensity or can be adapted to suit a range of abilities and are promoted as such.



Price:

Offer free taster sessions and affordable or discounted opportunities to encourage over-55s to take up activities.



Visibility:

Diversify marketing and communication to represent over-55s and develop strategies to market opportunities to be active specifically to this age group to encourage over-55s to take up activities.



Social:

Build in opportunities to socialise before, during or after activities to help with uptake and retention of this age group and provide peer support during this transition.



Supportive:

Offer a mix of general activities that are suitable for all ages and abilities and specific activities that provide additional support for over 55s or those with health conditions. Offer support to individuals to enable them to undertake activities on their own.



Workforce:

Up-skill the SPA workforce to better understand and cater for older adults and encourage over-55s to enter the SPA workforce and become role models and advocates.

Areas for improvement for community physical activity opportunities:

Empower individuals and communities to lead and take part in physical activities. Work with community groups and services to embed physical activity opportunities suitable for this age group so that SPA opportunities are available in a range of settings which may appeal to this audience and not just leisure centres. E.g. local parks, community centres, libraries etc.

Harness the potential of activity that is a result of other purposeful actions such as volunteering, community action and intergenerational activity and play.

Areas for improvement to support self-determined or unstructured activities

Provide clear and accessible information to support people to access unstructured, independent and self-motivated activity including access to green space and the outdoors.

Workplaces

PARTs findings highlight the important role that workplaces can play in supporting workers to be physically active as they approach retirement. The research leads us to three potential key areas for improvement, influencing employers to offer:

Wellbeing policies and strategies:



Have an employee health and wellbeing policy that promotes physical activity for all employees, including over 55s, to formalise organisational commitment to employee physical activity.

Workplace physical activity offer:



Encourage older workers to be active before they retire by promoting and providing a range of opportunities to be active at work, including low-intensity exercises, social, and non-competitive activities that appeal to older employees. E.g. walking groups. Include sport and physical activity offers and incentives in employee benefit packages to encourage uptake of external activity opportunities and initiatives. E.g. Cycle to work schemes.

Pre-retirement support:



Develop a pre-retirement support package to help employees prepare for retirement that includes nudges to encourage them to think about physical activity and make plans to be active in their retirement.



Support services

The research has outlined the importance of receiving information about physical activity and especially from trusted sources. This presents an opportunity to influence a range of services and front-line staff to support older adults to be active in the lead up to and during retirement. These include health professionals, social prescribers, and age or retirement-related support services e.g. Age UK.



Training:

Train professionals to promote a culture shift and encourage them to advocate keeping active as people age. Build professionals' confidence in providing physical activity advice and support, and raise awareness of available resources or opportunities to signpost over 55s to.



Promote:

Include physical activity in communication that is likely to reach this target audience. Make information about the benefits of remaining active whilst ageing visible and attractive to over 55s ●

