



# YOUTH VOICE

A STUDY OF GIRLS' ENGAGEMENT IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

## What we did and why?

The aim of this project was to understand how to engage girls (participants), school years 7-9, in sport, exercise and physical activity (PA). We aimed to understand both the current barriers, as well as the enablers, that these young people face in accessing and participating in these activities.

In addition to this, the research aimed to determine the most effective ways to market to this demographic and thus create a product or service that will appeal to them.

This information can then be used to support alternative provision, by charities, institutions and groups in Oxfordshire, to support and inform future

initiatives that aim to engage this demographic in sport and physical activity.

To carry out this research our team conducted a questionnaire at the Active Oxfordshire School Games which was designed to understand the participants' views about sport and PA. The majority of participants at the School Games already engaged in sport so this was a useful setting to gain information about the enablers to these activities.

Following this we went into four schools to carry out workshops in three different sports; boxing, weightlifting and skateboarding. We also held focus groups after the workshops to discuss what the participants enjoyed about them specifically and more generally attempt to understand their feeling towards sport and PA. Most of the participants in these groups were those who don't currently engage with PE and sport, so this allowed us to gain insight into potential barriers.

# The School Games

At the Active Oxfordshire School Games, we carried out a survey with 49 participants aged 11-15 years.

The questionnaire (see appendix) was structured into 4 sections to help gain specific information about their needs and how we can provide them; 1- Target Audience, 2- Why or Why not participate, 3- Product, 4- Marketing.

## The main findings from this questionnaire were as follows:

95% of the participants said they were currently physically active, mostly 2-3 times a week. Only 5% participants said they were not active.

The participants participated in a wide variety of sports such as: Gymnastics, running, football, tennis, swimming, kayaking, cricket, hockey, athletics, netball, rugby, dance, taekwondo and rounders.

Out of the 95% who said they were physically active, all of them said they also had a physically active family, guardians or care givers (support network).

Out of the 5% who were not active, they stated their support network were not physically active. Most of the participants' support network took them to clubs, some car shared. Many of the participants made their own way to clubs by walking or cycling if it was local. Some of the activities took place at school.

The majority of participants explained that their support network got them into sport or physical activity at a young age, - finding clubs for them and encouraging them to start. Only a few of the participants said they had shown interest initially and asked their support network if they could then start playing that sport or join a club.

These findings suggest that familial support is of huge importance in the initial engagement of young people in sport and physical activity, both with access/finding clubs and with emotional support and encouragement to try new activities.



Most participants struggled to differentiate between sport, exercise and PA.

Some of the participants felt that sports were fun and game based and exercise was just something that is good for you.

100% of the participants said they believed that PA is important.

A large number of the participants said that first and foremost PA was important for your mental health/ for feeling happy.

Many of the participants also said that physical activity was important for physical health- staying fit and healthy.

## Barriers

Some factors that were mentioned as barriers were feeling insecure or embarrassed to take part, worrying about not being good enough and being judged.

Multiple participants suggested that it gets harder as you get older to join a club as other people their age would be better than them and this would knock their confidence and make it less enjoyable.

A few of the participants brought up discrimination, saying that girls aren't expected or encouraged to do sports and PA- one group said that their PE teacher calls the boys 'athletes' but the girls aren't referred to as this. Others also said that if a club was mixed with boys this would put them off going and this is the

reason one participant quit playing football because they were made fun of by the boys.

Transport and cost were brought up, some participants said that some of their peers couldn't afford clubs or were not able to get to them. They thought there should be more activities at school as this would make it more accessible.

## Enablers

Some participants identified that Sport/PA gave them opportunities to meet new people and make more friends.

Lots of participants enjoyed the social aspect and found it fun and enjoyable.

Multiple participants brought up that they did it for their mood- participating made them feel happier and allowed them to not think about anything else while they were doing it.

Multiple participants stated that they enjoyed doing sport and PA as it allowed them to spend time outside which they enjoyed.

## Conclusions

With this demographic, there was an overall positive attitude towards sport and PA and they struggled more to think of potential barriers than enablers.

Generally, the participants were very aware of the benefits of PA, particularly around mental health.



There was a very mixed response to preference over individual or team sports; some enjoyed the social aspects of teams, others felt less pressure when doing individual sports and no team to 'let down'.

Around 90% of the young people currently paid/were aware of paying for the clubs and activities they participate in.

Most participants liked to have the sport or PA available throughout the year, especially during the holidays as it gave them something to do and look forward to.

Most of the participants said that 2-3 times a week was a good amount to be doing sport or PA, more than once a week as they felt then they would be able to improve more.

Most of the participants said they just did the activities for fun but enjoyed having matches or levels to work towards and motivate them. They enjoyed the sense of achievement they got from it.

These findings show that although the primary reason for taking part for most of the participants` was enjoyment, an aspect of competition and having goals to work towards were an important motivator. Around 80% of the participants said they would prefer girls only clubs.

Many participants said that clubs would be more enjoyable if there was less expectation on people when they joined and were instead treated like a beginner when they joined instead of being expected to keep up. Lots of the participants emphasised that clubs should be friendlier and more supportive to new joiners.

Many of the participants said other people are put off because of PE. Only the people who are already good at sport are encouraged in school sport, others are left out and then always think it's not for them. Most of the participants used social media and said they felt that it is influential. Lots of them said they don't really see much about sport or PA on there unless they actively followed certain accounts which they sought out.

The platforms used the most were Tiktok and snapchat, some also used Instagram if they were older and BeReal.

When it comes to participating in extra curricular activities, positive experiences in PE are important

to give young people a positive view of sport and PA. Self-esteem and how the participants view their abilities plays a big role in whether they have a positive or negative experience in sport/PA.

## School 1

The group was mostly made up of students who do not engage with sport and PE and included some students who don't regularly attend school.

### Overview of participation for each activity:

Boxing- all participated, enjoyed being in partners and doing as a group, liked doing a different sport that they don't do in school.

Skateboarding- all participated, liked doing a different sport that they don't do in school.

Volleyball- enjoyed but didn't participate for very long.

Weightlifting- Only few enjoyed (~5). Didn't like the individual aspect of it and people watching them. Most agreed that if it was 1:1, they would have enjoyed more.

**Percentages of group who enjoyed the sport the most: Total students: 28; Boxing: 32%, Skateboarding: 57%, Weightlifting: 11%**

### Additional Findings/Conclusions:

Individual and group ability determines success/enjoyment in the activity. - if you are taking part in an individual sport and you are good at it, you enjoy it. If you are taking part in a sport that also requires someone else to be good, that can determine whether you enjoy it or not. E.g.- good player against poor player- neither will enjoy as you can't have a proper game. There is also additional pressure when playing in a team to not let others down, as also mentioned at the school games, which can make the activity less enjoyable.

If their support network takes part in physical activity/sport, participants are more likely to participate as their support network do it alongside them and encourage them. E.g. those who were good at weightlifting had only done this previously due to their support network showing them and supporting them to engage.



Many of the participants feel PE teachers use language that isn't appropriate and discourages them. For example, there is a 'Good group' so those who are not in this feel disheartened and then disengage.

At this school we also did a Volleyball workshop, that unlike the other sports, which were individual was only successful if both participants in each pair were skilled. Again, highlighting how confidence and belief in ability are important factors for this demographic when shaping their experiences with sport and PA.

Skateboarding at this school was very popular and, comments were made about the sport being 'scary', 'dangerous' which was appealing to them. The participants did not enjoy wearing safety gear and this did become a barrier, but overall most participants wanted to participate in the sport and thus overcame their concerns about wearing unfamiliar clothing.

At the end of the day most participants chose to continue to participate in one of the sports, all were given the option to choose a sport or relax. 80% choose to participate.

Boxing at this school was the second most popular sport; comments were made about the sport being 'violent', which was appealing.

The focus group shared their feelings towards their PE teachers, the language used and their perceived lack of enthusiasm in the sports/PA they were coaching. Most participants asked if The Project PT would return for more sessions.

## School 2

---

The participant group was made up of girls, years 7-9, who do not engage in physical activity outside of school and some do not take part in PE at school. Some of the students have low attendance levels at school.

### Overview of participation for each activity:

Boxing- all participated, some participants stood out more than others (those with extrovert personalities), only 1-2 students didn't want to participate.

Skateboarding- all participated, liked doing a different sport that they don't do in school, some didn't want to wear protective equipment due to 'looking silly'.

Weightlifting- Only few enjoyed (~5). Didn't like the individual aspect of it and people watching them. Most agreed that if it was 1:1, they would have enjoyed.

**Percentages of group who enjoyed the sport the most: Total students: 30. Boxing: 41%, Skateboarding: 53%, Weightlifting: 6%**

### Additional findings/conclusions:

Participants didn't want to stop skateboarding- they like the individual and fearsome aspect of the sport. This made it very engaging and exciting.



Most of the participants reported that they 'don't mind' doing PE with the boys but just want to try a bigger variety of sports at school. The vast majority of the participants expressed that they were 'bored' of the current sports on offer in the curriculum and therefore had disengaged from PE as they wanted to try something new.

Having the same sports in PE each year meant that if the participants felt they were not good at it one year, then the next year they would disengage and not want to try as they felt it was pointless. This again highlights how perception of ability often determines whether these young people will have a positive or negative experience with sport and PA.

It was observed during their break times that the participants started showing peers, not involved in the workshops, what they had been doing, teaching them boxing positions.

It was also observed during break times at the school that boys would play sport during the break time, but girls of the same age would stand and talk. When questioned their response was sport at breaktime was not for them, 'only boys participated in sport at breaktime'.

Participants expressed a liking towards the coaches, comparing the coaches in the workshops to their coaches/PE teachers. Although the participants made comparisons it was noted at this school that teachers used positive language and encouraged the girls when walking past the workshops.

PE Teachers and Senior Management at this school were very interested in the findings of the research and how they could continue to support the girls. Most participants asked if The Project PT would return for more sessions.

## School 3

---

The participant group was girls who participate in PE in school but don't do much activity out of school. At this school teachers didn't want to reward girls who don't engage in PE with our sessions, we didn't get to access the girls who don't engage in PE at school. This was an important insight into how PE was viewed.

## Overview of participation for each activity:

Boxing- All participated and enjoyed boxing.

Skateboarding- All participated and enjoyed skateboarding. Most popular in 'do whatever' session.

Weightlifting- All participated. Participants began to show teamwork when helping each other trying to get the best techniques. Out of all schools, these participants showed most interest in weightlifting.

**Percentages of group who enjoyed the sport the most: Total students: 30, Boxing: 40%, Skateboarding: 50%, Weightlifting: 10%**

### Additional findings/conclusions:

Out of all schools, these participants showed most interest in weightlifting. We believed this to be because they already had previous experience- tried before with their support network, already been to gym and therefore had confidence and familiarity with the activity.

Participants are 'bored' of regular sports in school which they do every year. Again, this causes them to disengage if they have already had a previous negative experience with these sports. Allowing them to try new sports allows them to form new opinions and feelings around sport and PE.

Some of the students had negative feelings towards doing PE with boys. This was due to them feeling the boys were 'too loud' and didn't allow them to participate as much or judged their abilities.

Barriers such as clothing and getting changed were identified.

# School 4

## Demographic of girls we worked with:

- Some students were SEN
- Some students do not attend school regularly
- Some students regularly 'forget' PE kits and do not participate in PE
- Roughly half of the students were participating in sport outside of school including football and dance.

## Overview of participation for each activity:

Boxing- All participants participated and enjoyed boxing. 8 participants went back to it during 'do whatever' session. Some participants already had experience of boxing so this would have given them more confidence with this activity.

Skateboarding- all participants enjoyed skateboarding. They liked the risk-taking aspect and learning a new skill, this made it very engaging for them.

Weightlifting- fewer participants enjoyed weightlifting, when participating only 2 could go at a time so some disengaged when it was not their turn. This also meant the young people felt more uncomfortable as other people were watching them do it. However, 1 young person stood out during the 'do whatever' session and we saw a big improvement in confidence.

**Percentages of group who enjoyed the sport the most: Total students: 22, Boxing: 23%, Skateboarding: 64%, Weightlifting: 13%**

### Additional findings/conclusions:

The participants loved skateboarding and although they were all nervous initially they tried very hard to learn skate boarding skills. All participants enjoyed positive feedback and were visibly surprised when receiving it.

The participants also loved boxing. Many identified that it was a good way to release anger with your friends. Boxing is an individual sport but doing pad work in pairs meant it was always social and engaging for them but without the competitive element.

After not initially taking part, 2 participants went back to the weightlifting at the 'do whatever' session and asked where they could do this outside of school. Some participants did not want to leave the session when it had finished.

PE Teachers at this school were very interested in how they could continue to work with the participants, positive language and encouragement towards the participants was witnessed by our staff.

**Averages from across the schools:  
Total Participants: 110 Boxing: 34%, Skateboarding: 56%, Weightlifting: 10%**



## Overall Themes/ Findings

### Time:

Many of the participants expressed that by the time they get back from school, it is too late to go out and participate in sport and that they're too tired and/or too busy with other things. This suggests to us that the most beneficial thing for these students would be to have more sport and PA clubs available at their school after school. It would also be important to have food available so that the participants have both the time and energy to participate in the activities.

### Support:

Having a support network that are physically active was a huge factor. If their support network are not active and have not had positive experiences in sport, then they don't encourage their young people to participate. It is important to provide role models to support and encourage participants to participate in sport and PA. These role models may come

from within the community, local sports clubs or a designated teacher at school. This is another reason for having more clubs at schools, straight after school finishes as teachers and staff who the participants are already familiar with can be there and support them to participate.

### School PE:

Many of the participants expressed how they did not have positive experiences in PE, and many at the school games who were very physically active felt that PE was not very inclusive. Many of the participants felt there were stereotypes between girls and boys and didn't enjoy mixed classes as a result of this. For example, the boys being called 'athletes'. Many participants felt only those who were 'good' at sports were prioritised in PE and those who weren't were just able to disengage and didn't receive much encouragement and support. These negative experiences then shaped how the participants felt about sport and PA generally.

### Access:

Many of the participants we spoke to said they wouldn't know where to go if they did want to join a club or start an activity. In addition to this many of them said they wouldn't have transport available to get there. This suggests the best way to make

activities available to these participants is to have them located at their school, where it can also be advertised directly to them. Many of the participants at both the school games and in the focus groups expressed that clubs should be suitable for all levels. If a participant starts a club later than their peers and are expected to be the same level then this just causes them to have a negative experience and lose confidence. Money was brought up as a barrier to accessing sport/PA.

#### **Type of sport:**

Sports which are deemed to be daring, have an element of fear to them proved to be popular. Sports that were individual in their nature. Traditional sports and PE lessons were not popular with the participants.

#### **Changes:**

The research suggests that some schools/PE teachers would benefit from training on inclusivity, helping them to build PE lessons that focus on enjoyment not ability. This does not need to deter from the current national curriculum, it should be considered that certain pupils can be removed from the national curriculum for certain subjects.

#### **Recommendations:**

#### **Support:**

The overriding theme from all participants showed that a supportive network was paramount to ensuring participation in PA. This support could be provided by schools and sports clubs, any sports clubs or organisations looking to engage with this demographic must understand how they can provide this support in the absence of a support network. Consideration towards transport, costs, confidence and emotional support would be highly recommended.

#### **After school clubs:**

School, for most of the participants, was seen as a safe space to be and try new things. For after school clubs to work, schools must provide appropriate spaces for clubs to take part. Participants were aware of the type of room that the sessions took place in, and they did not want to be seen or looked at. After school clubs would benefit from offering in school time taster sessions for different sports, where this demographic do not have an opportunity to 'opt out'. These taster sessions will help them create relationships with the coaches.

#### **Type of sport/PA:**

Participants enjoyed sports with an element of 'danger' or 'fear'. Sports that weren't team based,

didn't follow traditional sports and allowed them to partake at their own level. Other sports that were explored were BMX, Mountain Biking, Climbing. Sports with an element of fear and that were individual but could be completed with others.

#### **Culture:**

The participants consulted all shared common thoughts around girls and in particular inactive girls' 'space' in sport and PA. These thoughts were echoed by the schools we worked in and the language used by both the participants and teachers. Teachers and schools would benefit from training in inclusivity, language and delivery of PA sessions. A shift into providing girls with a safe space to play sport, with inclusive language and focus on enjoyment during the session would lead to more engagement for this demographic, moving away from the idea that PA and sport should be a reward.

#### **Social Media:**

Social media played a large part in the participant's lives, some wanted to post pictures of them skateboarding. Most discussed that they did not 'follow' anyone on social media that participated in sport or PA, 'girls didn't do sport'. Clubs or organisations have an opportunity to provide role modelling for participants using social media.

#### **Clothing:**

What clothes the participants were wearing and getting changed for PE were expressed as barriers to participating in PE. We would recommend that schools consider changing uniform options on PE and sport days, a policy adopted by some secondary and primary schools already.