

**Sport and Physical Activity among those aged over 16 in Counties
Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford**

By

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Executive Summary

Active Participation in Sport

- 44.1% of adults took part in sport or exercise, this is the equivalent of 93,500 adults aged 16 years and older taking part in regular physical activity in the Midlands.
- Almost four times as many participants take part in individual activities as compared to team sports and individual sports account for 7 of the 10 most popular adult sports overall.
- When all other critical factors are taken into account, women are as likely to take part in sport as men.
- Exercise / gym activities are the most popular activity overall while soccer is the most popular sport among men and swimming is the most popular sport among women.
- Most sporting participants take part often enough, for long enough and at a sufficient intensity to benefit their health.
- The majority of participants who take part in sport and exercise take part on their own.

Broader Physical Activity

- 65.2% of adults took part in recreational walking within the past seven days.
- On average participants take four walks a week with the average walk lasting forty minutes.
- 36.1% walked for transport and 10.6% cycled for transport.
- Urban residents are significantly more likely to walk for transport than their rural counterparts.

Social Participation

- 36.4% belong to a sports club, 16% volunteer for sport and 23.7% attended a sporting event as a spectator.
- While individual activities dominate active participation, team sports are more popular among volunteers and spectators. Club members are fairly split between individual and team sports.
- Gaelic football is the most popular sport among club members, volunteers and spectators.

Sport and Health

- 28.6% of adults aged over 16 are meeting the physical activity guidelines while 14.3% are sedentary.
- 61% of adults aged over the age of 16 years would like to take part in more sport, particularly walking.
- Time is the most common barrier to taking part in more sport and physical activity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Physical Activity Guidelines¹ recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on 5 or more days a week for adults. The 30 minutes can be accumulated in bouts of 10 minutes or more over the course of a day. Being active confers significant health and related benefits² and participation in sport and active leisure plays an increasingly important role in adult physical activity levels worldwide³. The benefits from activity can be gained at any age. The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing⁴ tracked participants whose average age was over 65 for 8 years. Participants who took up activity in those 8 years also saw health benefits despite being previously inactive. Physical activity contributes to healthy ageing regardless of current age.

This report provides evidence on the sport and recreational exercise activity of adults (aged 16 and over) in counties Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford. The analysis aims to be of interest and assistance to those involved in the promotion of sport in these counties particularly Local Authorities, LSPs, clubs and volunteers.

Scope

The figures in this report are based on the results of the 2011 and 2013 Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) surveys. The data from both years were combined into one dataset of 857 respondents to try to reduce the error margin within the results. 22.4% of respondents were based in Westmeath, 33.2% in Offaly, 27.1% in Laois and 17.3% in Longford. Based on this overall sample size the error margin around key high level results is about 3.3%. So if we report a participation rate of 44.1% in the report we would expect that the true participation rate for the region lies somewhere between 44.1% - 3.3% and 44.1% + 3.3% i.e. between 40.8% and 47.4%⁵. Where the sample has been divided into further sub-samples by gender or age, the error margin is increased. **So, the results are an indication of participation in Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford and should be interpreted accordingly.**

¹ <http://www.getirelandactive.ie/guidelines-resources/how-much-physical-activity-is-required/>

² <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1402378/pdf/20060314s00023p801.pdf>

<http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/chapter2.aspx>

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs385/en/>

³ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3401184/pdf/nihms389131.pdf>

⁴ Regular physical activity in later life boosts likelihood of 'healthy aging' up to sevenfold, November 5th 2013, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/11/131125185600.htm>

⁵ This is known as a 95% confidence interval for the statistic in question. We would expect this interval to contain the true proportion 95% of the times that the survey was undertaken.

Unfortunately the variation in sample profile between the different counties and the relatively small sample numbers within each county makes it difficult to generate any meaningful inter-county comparisons of active and social participation in sport, participation in recreational walking, etc. There are large differences across almost all high level metrics between the counties which are reproduced in **Appendix 2** for information purposes. However, in many cases these differences are as likely to be a function of the sample variation by gender, age, employment status, socio-economic background, etc. as they are to reflect actual inter-county differences in behaviour. That said some may be genuinely indicative of a real underlying inter-county variation. To assess this possibility we have carried out some logistic regressions which compare the variation in these high level metrics across the counties while controlling for relevant demographic and socio-economic characteristics. This allows us to make some like for like comparisons around these high level metrics. We include in the report references where the inter-county differences remained significant even after controlling for these characteristics.

The ISM asks interviewees about their active and social participation in sport in the previous 7 days. Further details of the aims and methodology of the ISM can be found in ISM Annual Reports (available at http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Research/The_Irish_Sports_Monitor/). The ISM is designed to be representative of Ireland's population as a whole rather than the population of any individual county. Therefore it was necessary to re-weight the data for this report so that the sample more closely represented Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford's combined current demographic profile. Gender and age, employment status and year were considered in this re-weighting exercise. **Appendix 1** compares the demographic profile of the dataset used for the report with the profile of the counties recorded by the Central Statistics Office in the 2011 Census of Population.

A feature of the ISM is the inclusion of periodic flexible modules on particular topical policy issues. These modules are included over a number of months and therefore only include a sub-sample of the annual survey respondents. For this reason it is not always possible to carry out a meaningful analysis beyond the national situation. During 2011 and 2013 flexible modules were included on issues such as gender issues in Irish sport, interest in playing more sport, motivations for participating in sport, barriers to participation, perceptions of health and wellness and engagement in other behaviours (smoking, drinking alcohol, dieting, watching TV, etc.) which might influence health and wellness, and knowledge of the sports policy environment nationally and locally. These issues are reported on in the relevant annual report to which the reader is referred for such analysis. However, where respondent numbers allowed and where findings of local interest emerged these issues are explored in this current

report. Readers are reminded of the statistical limitations within such analysis and to regard such references as indicative only.

Statistical Analysis

In this report, the charts and tables generally show percentage participation rates in a given activity by a particular group (e.g. the percentage of women who play team sport). Where this is not the case the report highlights the basis for the participation rates. The report includes certain national figures for comparison purposes. In the main such national figures are composite averages from 2011 and 2013. Exceptions to this approach are noted.

ISM Definition of Sport and Physical Activity

The primary justification for public investment in sport is to increase physical activity and hence to improve health⁶. Consistent with this aim (and with the *Irish Sports Council Act, 1999*), the report defines “sport” broadly, to include recreational exercise (e.g. swimming, gym, dance, yoga, etc.), as well as field games (e.g. soccer, Gaelic football). The ISM also records recreational walking, walking and cycling for transport, allowing sport to be set in the context of more general physical activity.

Limitations

All statistical surveys are approximate. In the case of the ISM, measurement error may be caused by people recalling activity inaccurately, respondents wishing to paint themselves in a good light (social desirability bias), failure to survey hard-to-reach groups, mistakes made by interviewers, and so on. For example foreign nationals are underrepresented in the overall ISM and in the sample. Previous research has suggested that their participation rates are lower than Irish nationals, this suggests that participation rates are likely to be over-stated in this respect. All participation rates have margin of errors and small differences should not be over-interpreted as meaningful particularly where the sample size is relatively small. So, when looking at the figures below it is important to remember that they are at best an approximation.

⁶ <http://www.dttas.ie/corporate> - High Level Goal for sport “To contribute to a healthier and more active society by promoting sports participation and by supporting high performance and the provision of facilities.”

2. RESULTS

2.1 Overall Physical Activity

Table 1 compares physical activity participation in the region with the national average. It captures regular⁷ participation through sport, recreational walking and active travel i.e. walking and cycling for transport. In the tables below, the “highly active” are those who meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines⁸ through playing sport and recreational walking ONLY while those who are “sedentary” don’t take part in sport, do no recreational walking and don’t walk or cycle for transport. Based on the 2011 Census data the 44.1% participating in sport is equivalent to approximately 93,500 adults aged 16 and over taking part in regular sporting activity in Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford.

Table 1: Summary of Physical Activity – Midlands vs. National

	Midlands	National
Sporting Participation	44.1%	46.0%
Recreational Walking	65.2%	64.3%
Walk for Transport	36.1%	40.0%
Cycle for Transport	10.6%	10.1%
Highly Active	28.6%	30.3%
Sedentary	14.3%	13.2%

Overall, figures for all but one of these high level activity measures are similar between the Midlands and nationally. The exception is walking for transport where participation rates in the Midlands are significantly below the national average. This can be easily explained by the “rural” nature of the region. Almost 60% of the respondents from the Midlands described themselves as living in a village or an isolated location against just over 40% living in a city or town. These rural residents in the Midlands are far less likely to walk for transport than their urban counterparts (33.5% vs. 40.7% respectively).

In **Table 2** overleaf we look at these behaviours by gender. When compared to their national counterparts, participation rates among men and women in the region are quite similar although some

⁷ The ISM asks respondent about their participation in the previous 7 days so “regular” can be regarded here as being equivalent to participation at least once a week in each type of activity

⁸ For adults to be highly active requires that they take part in at least 5 sessions of physical activity per week of at least 30 minutes duration at a moderate intensity or greater. Moderate intensity is considered sufficient to raise the person’s breathing rate.

differences are worth noting. Men in the region are less likely to walk for transport and be highly active than their national counterparts after controlling for all relevant demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Table 2 suggests that men in the Midlands are much more likely to play sport than women in the region. However, when an analysis was conducted which took account of other potentially important factors impacting on participation such as age, living location, education, work status, car ownership, illness / disability status, social class, year of participation and whether or not an individual had played sport while at school, gender was found to be not statistically significant. We look later on at the factors that were significant in this analysis.

Compared to women in the region, men are more likely to cycle for transport while women are more likely to take part in recreational walking. This latter is a key factor in women being more likely to be highly active than men in the region.

Table 2: Summary of Physical Activity by gender – Midlands vs. National

	Midlands		National	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sporting Participation	47.3%	40.9%	51.5%	40.9%
Recreational Walking	57.8%	72.5%	58.0%	70.3%
Walk for Transport	35.7%	36.5%	39.1%	40.9%
Cycle for Transport	13.4%	7.9%	14.6%	5.7%
Highly Active	26.3%	30.8%	29.9%	30.7%
Sedentary	14.4%	14.2%	13.3%	13.0%

2.2 Most Popular Sporting Activities

Figures 2.2 and 2.3a and b shows the most popular sports in the midlands overall and by gender. Only sports with an overall participation level of 2% or greater are shown. Individual sports dominate, accounting for seven of the ten most popular activities. This is reflected at a combined level where almost four times as many participants take part in individual sports compared to team sports (38.1% and 10.9% respectively). While men and women equally prefer individual activities, over three times as many men take part in team sports as women (16.9% and 5% respectively).

Overall, there is little difference in the preferred sports within the region and nationally. Among men Gaelic football is more popular in the region than nationally while swimming is less popular. Soccer is the preferred sport among men in the Midlands while swimming is the most popular sport among

women. Men are more likely to take part in team sports, golf, cycling and running than women; women are more likely to take part in swimming and dance. Participation rates in exercise activities and hurling/ camogie are fairly similar among both genders.

Figure 2.2: Top Participation Sports in the Midlands - Overall⁹

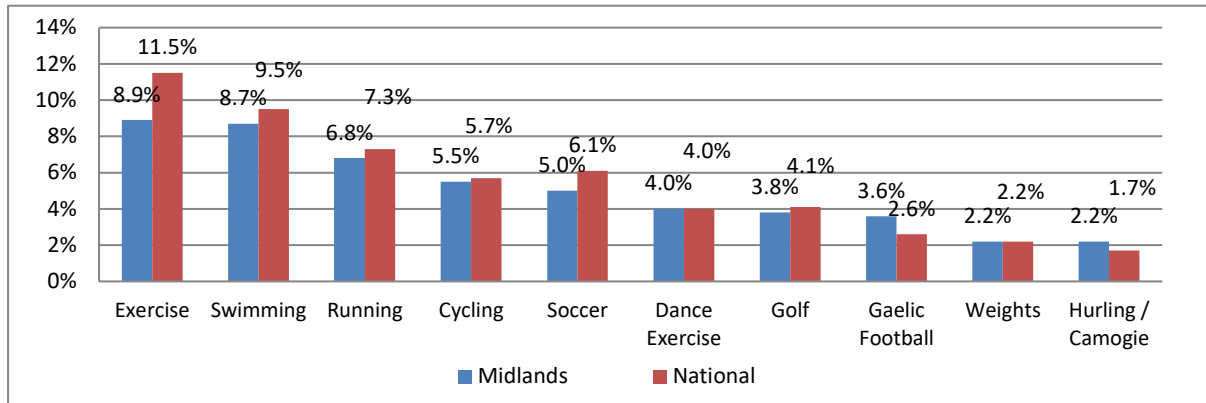


Figure 2.3a: Top Participation Sports in Midlands – Men¹⁰

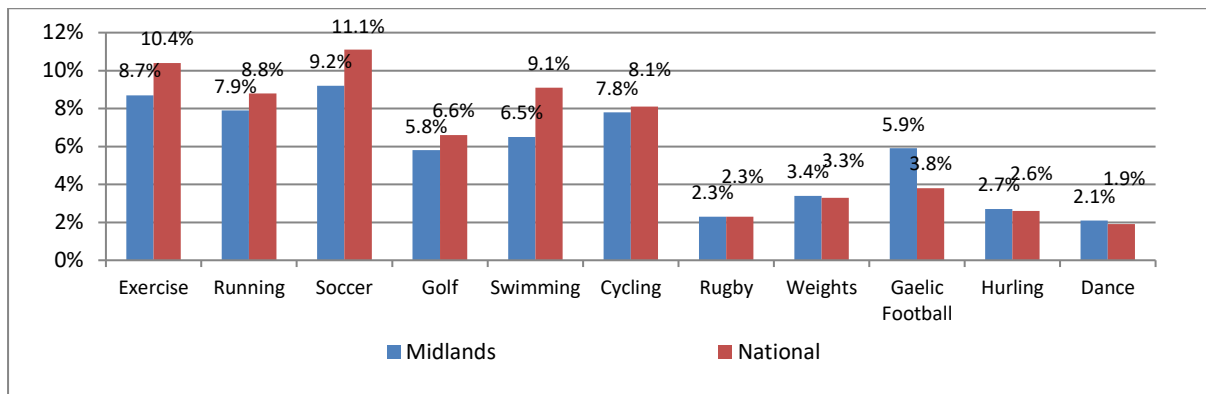
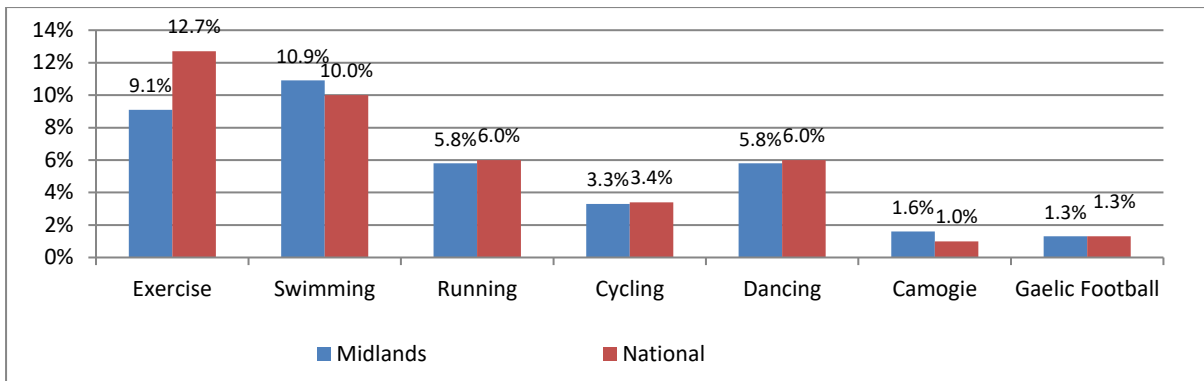


Figure 2.3b: Top Participation Sports in Midlands and nationally - among women¹¹

⁹ Overall the only sport with participation of between 1-2% is boxing, horse riding and rugby.

¹⁰ Among men the sports with participation rates of between 1-2% are boxing and tennis.

¹¹ Among women the sports with participation rates between 1-2% are badminton, golf, horse riding, pilates, soccer, weights and yoga.

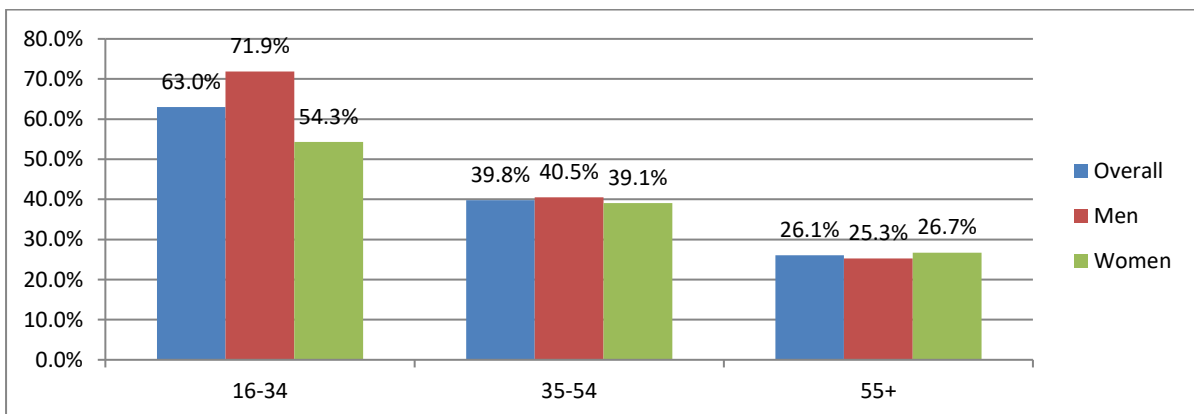


2.3 Participation by Age and Gender

Participation declines among men and women with age as can be seen from **Figure 2.4** below. Looking at the overall rates of participation what we find is that the younger groups (those aged up to the mid 30s) are between two and three times as likely to play sport as those in the older age groups.

It is also worth noting that the large gender gap evident among the younger cohorts has disappeared by the time they reach the mid-30s. This is primarily due to men dropping out from team sport. While men in the region are more likely to play sport in their younger years, both men and women aged 35 and over are equally likely to play sport¹². Participation in individual sports (not shown) tends to sustain more strongly and endure transitions across the life course for both genders.

Figure 2.4: Participation in sport in the Midlands by gender and age groups



2.4 Participation and social gradients

While the ISM has reported a narrowing gender gap in active participation over the years, social gradients continue to strongly impact on all aspects of participation with higher income earners and

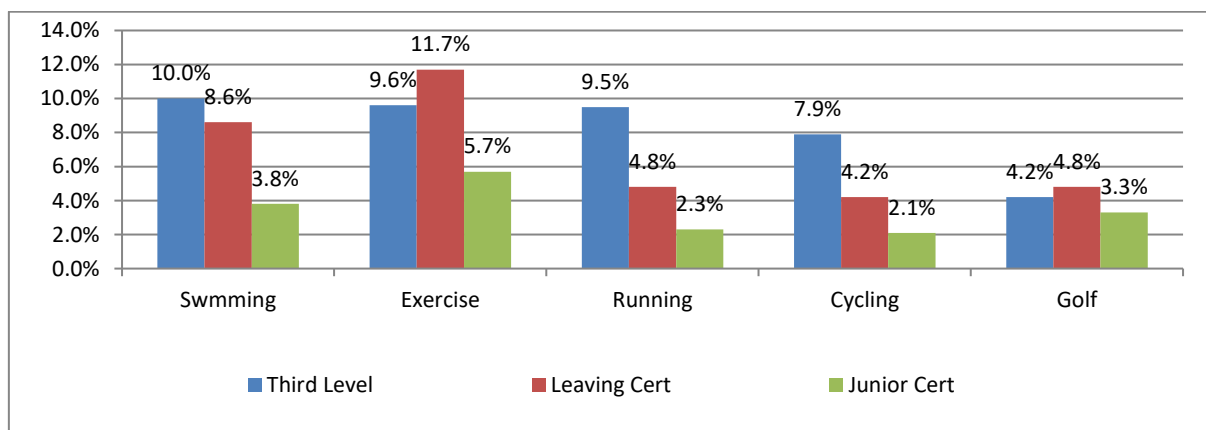
¹² See <http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Research/Keeping-Them-in-the-Game-2013-/> for detailed analysis of transitions into and out of sport over the life course

those with a higher educational attainment significantly more likely to play sport, be club members, volunteer for sport and attend sporting events. While income and education are closely correlated they have also been shown to be strong influences on participation separately. Social gradients have been a consistent feature of sports participation research in Ireland for over a decade and have been relatively resilient to policy efforts which have sought to address them in the intervening period.

The available evidence suggests that social gradients are as strong in the Midlands as elsewhere in the country. For example 48.9% of those with a third level education play sport regularly compared to 34.2% of those whose highest educational attainment is the Junior Certificate or lower¹³. Despite their low levels of participation as adults, a large proportion of this latter group played sport while at school (71.1%) suggesting that the participation gap by education level began during late adolescence / early adulthood¹⁴. Interestingly there is no difference in the amount of time spent playing sport by these different groups as adults. So the main challenge would appear to be how to keep groups with lower levels of education attainment participating in sport and exercise during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

As can be seen in **Figure 2.5** below those with third level education are more likely to take part in many of the more popular sports than those with lower levels of educational attainment.

Figure 2.5: Participation in selected sports in the Midlands by highest level of educational attainment



The ISM asks respondents whether they have any long-term illness, health problem or disability that limits their daily activities. Those who answer “yes” to this question are also asked whether this

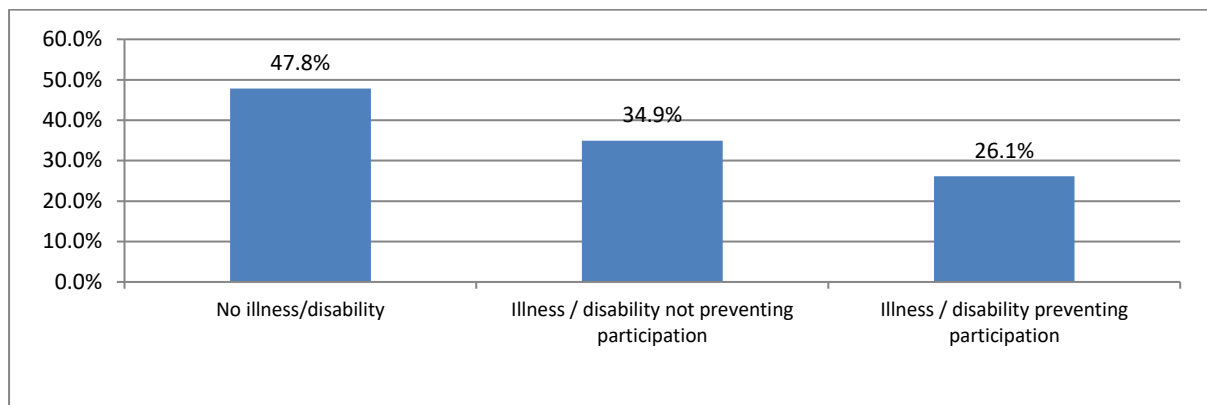
¹³ Includes the junior certificate, primary school or no formal education

¹⁴ More information about dropping out of sport can be found in “Keeping them in the Game: Taking Up and Dropping out of Sport and Exercise in Ireland” (2013)

problem prevents their participation in sport or exercise. 18.4% of respondents in the midlands answered yes to the first question with 14.7% also answering yes to the second question. These figures are in line with the national averages¹⁵.

While there is little difference in participation rates among the different groups as children¹⁶, participation rates differ significantly among adults as seen in **Figure 2.6** below. Encouragingly, over half of those with an illness/disability want to take part in more sport (61.4%)¹⁷.

Figure 2.6: Participation by illness/disability category in the Midlands



Apart from the above, two other factors were found to be important determinants of sports participation in the Midlands in the multivariate model. These were car ownership¹⁸ (individuals in households with a car were over twice as likely to be sports participants) and club membership (club members were more than three times as likely to be participants). There were no differences in likelihood of participation between residents from the four different counties in the region under the multivariate model.

2.5 FITT Analysis

The ISM asks respondents questions about how often they play sport, for how long, at what intensity and in what context. This allows us to conduct an F (Frequency), I (Intensity), T (Time) and T (Type) analysis on participation patterns. Before looking at this aspect of participation we look at the

¹⁵ Nationally the ISM reported that 18.3% had an illness/disability with 13.7% of the population indicating that this prevented participation.

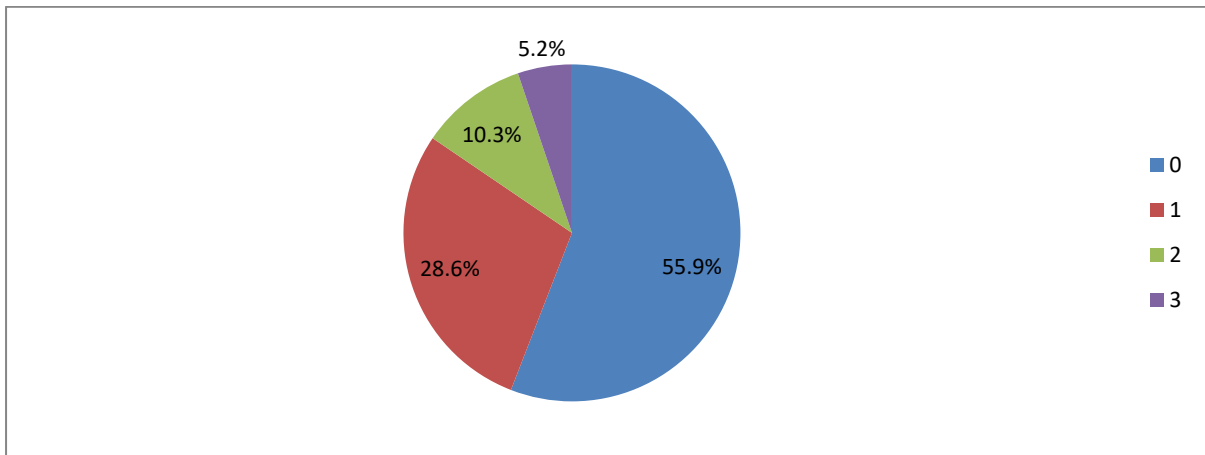
¹⁶ 71.8% of those with an illness/disability and 75% without an illness/disability played sport as a child.

¹⁷ The sample size for this figure is less than 100 while the sample size for those with an illness / disability preventing participation is only 32.

¹⁸ The number of non-car owners in the Midlands sample was less than 50 so some caution is suggested in interpreting this finding

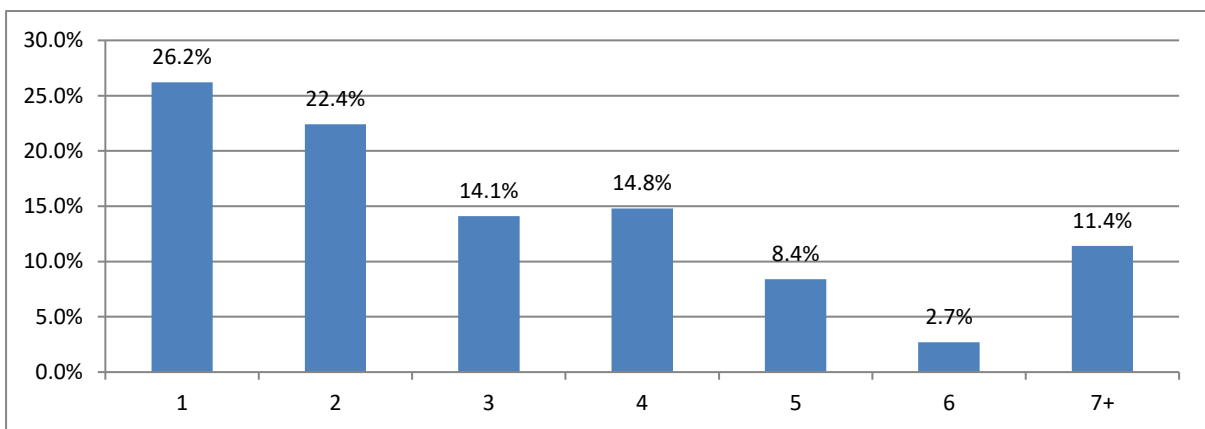
distribution of participants by number of sports played in **Figure 2.7** overleaf. We can see that almost 16% of adults in the Midlands played two or more sports in the previous 7 days with 5% playing more than 3 sports. Those in the youngest age group play more sports than any other group.

Figure 2.7: Proportion playing none, one, two and three sports in the Midlands



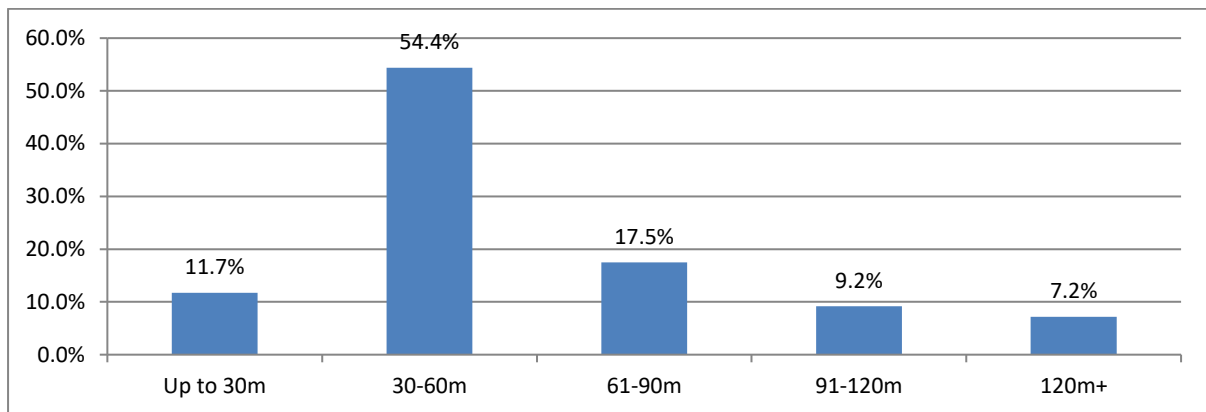
In **Figures 2.8 – 2.11** we look at the FITT of participation. **Figure 2.8** shows that nearly 74% of all sports participants took part more than once in the previous week with over one third taking part at least every other day. On average participants took part in 3.3 sessions per week with men taking part more often than women (3.7 vs. 2.9 sessions respectively).

Figure 2.8: Number of sporting sessions of participants in previous 7 days



In **Figure 2.9** we see that the majority of sessions last between 30 and 60 minutes reflecting the growing popularity of individual activities such as running, swimming and exercise which can be fitted around other time commitments. The average session lasts over an hour with men spending slightly longer playing sport. This may be due to their participation in team sports and golf where sessions typically last longer.

Figure 2.9: Duration of sporting sessions in the Midlands in previous 7 days



As shown in **Figure 2.10** below the majority of participants reported that their efforts in a typical sporting session were sufficient to raise their breathing rate noticeably or sweat with 89% reporting being out of breath or sweating as a result of the session. Among both genders close to 90% participate at a moderate intensity or greater with men more likely to play at a vigorous intensity (77% vs. 63%).

Figure 2.10: Intensity of sporting sessions of participants in previous 7 days

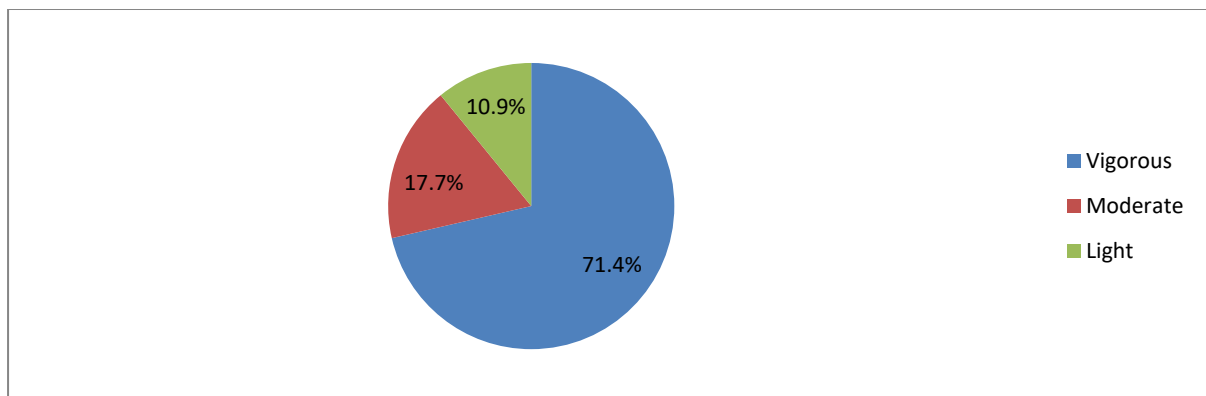
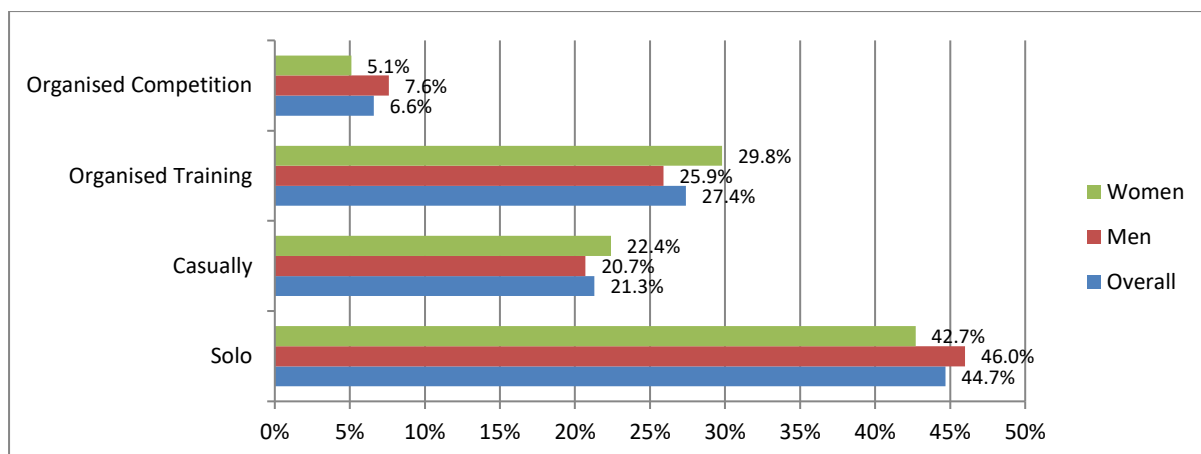


Figure 2.11 overleaf shows that 34% of adult sport in the Midlands was played in an organised context with the majority of that taking place in training sessions and classes rather than in a competitive setting. However, most adult sport now takes place in an informal context (either solo or casually with family and friends). This reflects the growth of sports such as running, swimming, exercise, and cycling in recent years. There is little difference in the Midlands in the proportion of men and women playing organised or informal sport with approximately 66% of both genders playing in the latter context.

Figure 2.11: Context of sporting sessions in the Midlands – overall and by gender



Research has shown that the biggest disparity in health status is between those who participate in no sport or physical activity and those who are active to any extent, rather than between those who are active to differing degrees (Fahey et al., 2004; Lunn and Layte, 2008). In keeping with this, it is a primary focus of national policy to concentrate on getting people, who do not actively participate in sport and exercise, to take up some form of activity.

The analysis presented above supports this as an appropriate goal for policy. What it shows is that in the Midlands, as elsewhere, once an individual is engaged in a sport or exercise activity, there is a good chance they will participate more than once a week, for longer than half-an-hour and that they will do so sufficiently to get out of breath or sweat. Thus, most participants are likely to be getting some degree of health benefit from their participation. The key issue remains whether they are an active participant in the first place.

Nevertheless, the findings with respect to the context of participation are also noteworthy as regards policy that aims to increase participation. The majority of sporting activity is occurring outside of formal sporting structures suggesting that policy mechanisms that rely on pre-existing sporting bodies are less likely to be successful unless those bodies can reach out beyond the existing sporting and social networks with which they currently engage.

As regards the social benefits of sport, the fact that 45% of all adult sporting activity in the Midlands is undertaken by people on their own is striking. Previous research has also identified that the primary reason cited by non-participants for not playing sport is lack of time (Fahey et al., 2004; CSO, 2007). The solo activities identified are highly efficient forms of exercise, which take up relatively little time and do not require much in the way of coordination between people. There may therefore be a trade

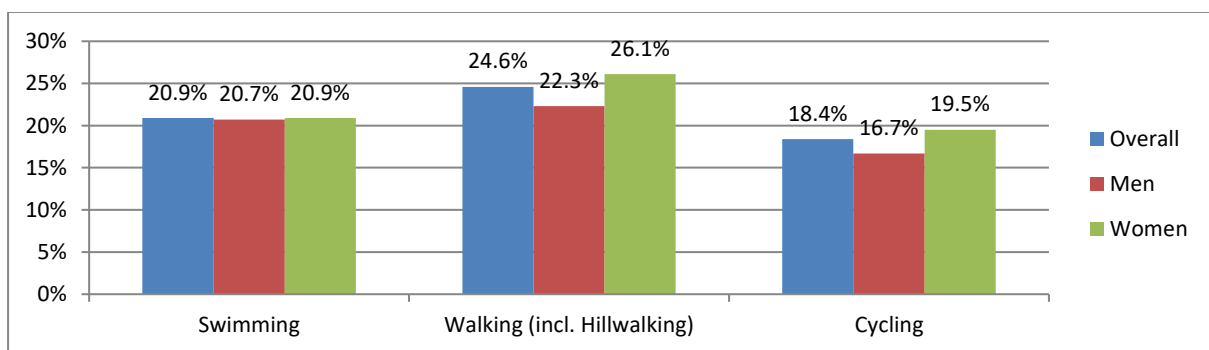
off between the health benefits that such solo exercise activities bring and the social benefits that accompany other types of participation.

2.6 Interest in doing more sports

In 2011 ISM respondents were asked whether or not they were interested in doing more sport or exercise and if so which sport they would like to do more of and, if not, what were the reasons preventing them from engaging in more activity. Encouragingly over half (61.8%) of participants in the Midlands are interested in increasing their sporting activity with women significantly more likely to be of this view. The majority of all age groups except for those aged over 55 are likely to say they would like to play more sport¹⁹.

Figure 2.12 displays the preferred sports in the midlands which is broadly similar to that reported at national level. These preferred sports mirror relatively closely the current most popular sports participated in with the exception of exercise which features much less in people’s sporting wish lists than in actual participation terms.

Figure 2.12 Interest in doing more sport in the Midlands – by sport (Base: All interested in doing more sport)



When it comes to barriers to increasing participation, time is overwhelmingly the most commonly cited factor overall while for those with an illness or disability, health is the most common barrier. Cost did not feature particularly strongly as a barrier to increasing participation. While a lack of facilities was cited overall by just over one in ten respondents as a barrier to participation, among women almost one in five cited it as a barrier. This is slightly unusual in modern Ireland where a lack of facilities is generally not seen as a significant impediment to participation (Fahey et al. 2004²⁰; Central Statistics

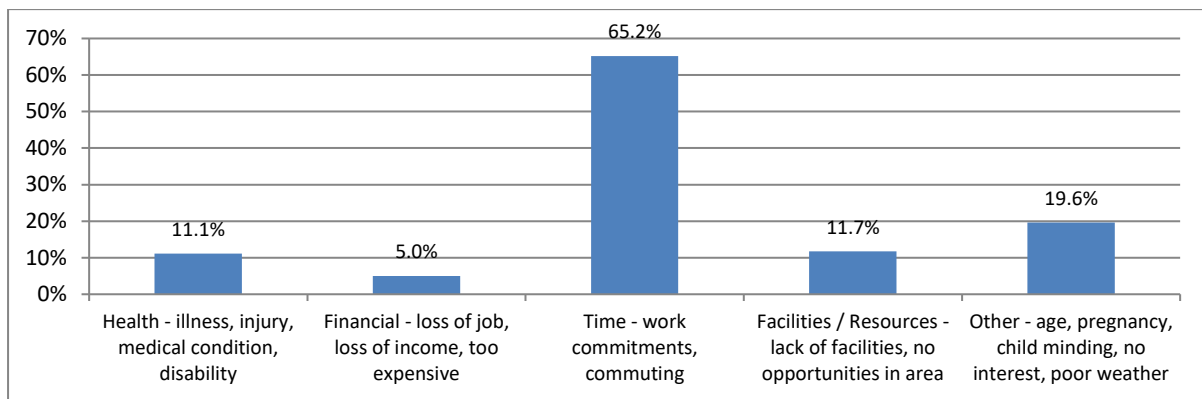
¹⁹ The sample size for this group is less than 100

²⁰ http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Research/Sports_Participation_Health_Among_Adults_2004_/Sports_Participation_Health.pdf

Office 2007²¹). Among the “other” category in **Figure 2.13** below, pregnancy and child minding responsibilities feature prominently.

The analysis suggests that the major factors limiting people’s ability to participate in (more) sport generally lie outside their immediate control but may be capable of being influenced by the provision of more convenient, accessible offerings which they can fit into their otherwise time-pressed lives. However, in the case of the Midlands there may also be issues around the attractiveness and availability of facilities for women.

Figure 2.13: Barriers to increasing participation (Base: Respondents not interested in increasing their participation)



²¹ <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/labourmarket/current/qnhssports.pdf>

3. BROADER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

As well as looking at participation in sport, the ISM also looks at participation in broader physical activity including recreational walking, and walking and cycling for transport. This section looks at these issues and the extent to which respondents meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines through participation in sport and recreational walking.

3.1 Recreational Walking

Recreational walking is an important source of physical activity for most adults. It can be particularly beneficial in providing health and other benefits to older age groups who do not play other sports. As a low load-bearing activity that can be undertaken at various intensities, it overcomes one of the main disadvantages identified by older people to being active, namely that it is easier to injure yourself.²² The ISM records information about the walking habits of Irish adults including the number of walks in the previous 7 days, the duration of each walk and the usual walking pace.

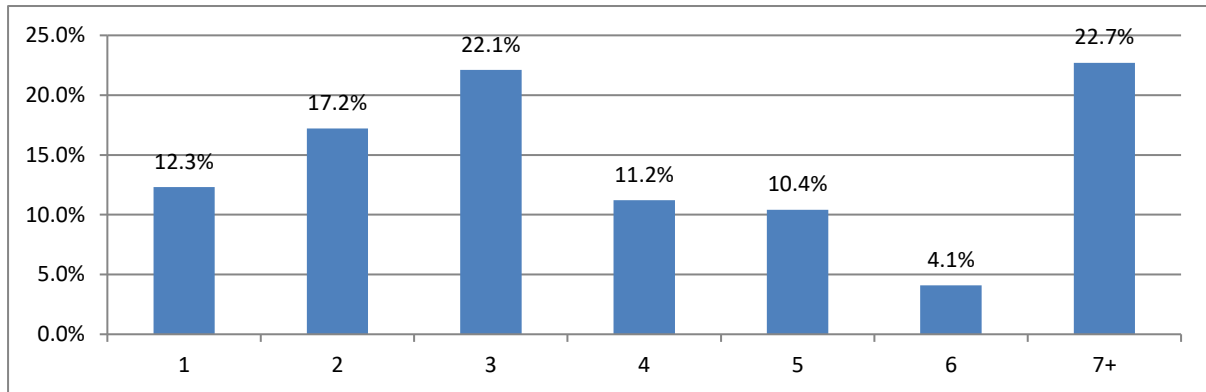
Recreational walking was the most popular sporting activity with over 65% of adults walking at least once in the previous 7 days. It is significantly more popular with women (72.5%) than men (57.8%) and is highly popular across all age groups. The gap in recreational walking between those with and without a third level education is not as severe (70.2% and 60.9% respectively) as is the case for participation in sport. Apart from gender and level of educational attainment, the presence of an illness / disability and employment status were found to be significant determinants of recreational walking in a multivariate analysis. While individuals with an illness/disability are much more likely to take recreational walks (61.3%) than play sport (27.8%) they are still significantly less likely to take part than those without disabilities (66.1%). Employees were found to be more likely to walk for recreation than the self employed, full-time home makers or students.

On average, participants take four walks a week with women taking more walks than men (4.5 walks vs. 3.9 walks respectively). Interestingly participants are more likely to take either 3, or 7 or more walks per week as seen in **Figure 3.1** overleaf. The average walk lasts forty minutes and the majority of walkers maintain a steady average or brisk pace. There is no difference between men and women in either regard. Given the nature of the activity it is perhaps not surprising that recreational walking has

²² Physical Activity and Sport: Participation and Attitudes of Older People in Ireland, Ipsos MORI September 2009

a broader appeal than sport as it is an affordable, relatively easy form of exercise. It appeals to every age group and participants of various socioeconomic groups and abilities.

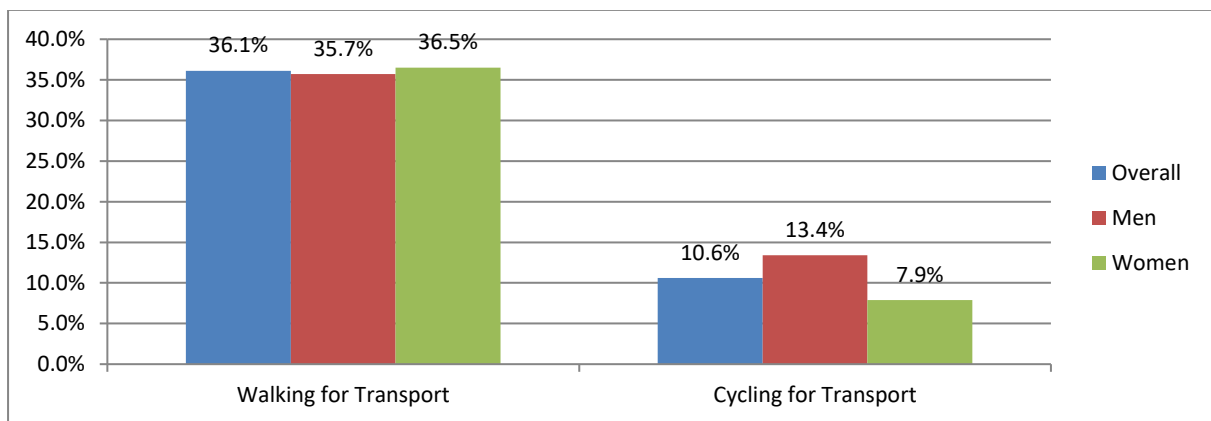
Figure 3.1: Recreational walking in the Midlands by number of walks in the previous 7 days



3.2 Walking and Cycling for Transport

The ISM asks respondents if they have engaged in any walking or cycling for transport in the previous 7 days. While walking for transport is equally appealing to men and women, men are much more likely to cycle for transport – see **Figure 3.2** below.

Figure 3.2: Walking and cycling for transport in the Midlands by gender and overall



A multivariate statistical model identified a number of factors which influenced walking for transport in the region. It was least popular in Quarter 4 and most popular in Quarter 2; urban residents were almost twice as likely to walk for transport as their rural counterparts; employees were less likely to walk for transport than the unemployed or students; Laois and Westmeath residents more likely than Longford residents; and those aged 65+ less likely than any other age group.

In the case of cycling for transport, three variables were found to be significant in the multivariate analysis. Members of a sports club were more likely to cycle for transport than non-members, the unemployed and students were more than three times as likely to cycle for transport as employees and males were 1.7 times more likely than females.

3.3 Overall Activity Levels

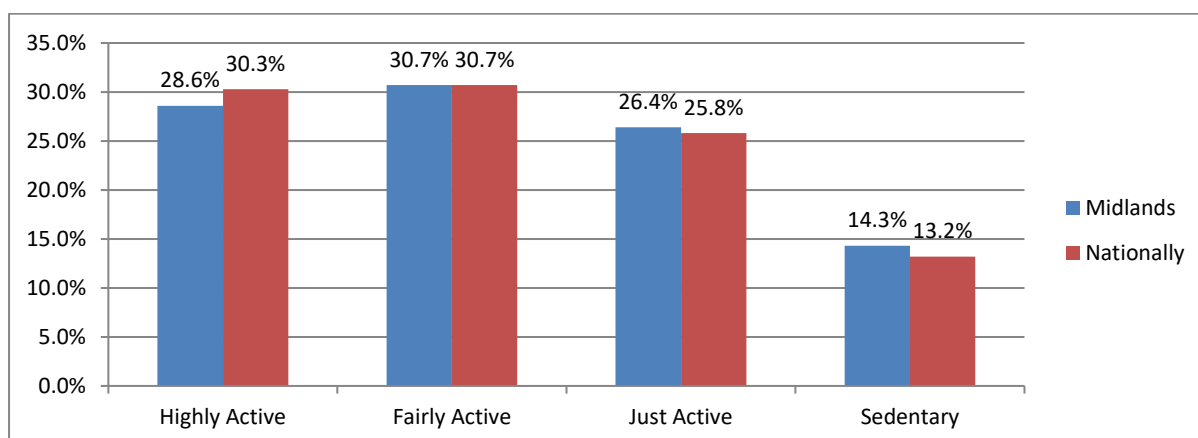
The ISM allows an approximate²³ analysis of adult activity levels against the National Physical Activity Guidelines based on a four-category classification system shown in **Figure 3.3** below. The system is bookended by “sedentary” and “highly active” categories which are the main focus of this section.

Figure 3.3: Activity Spectrum Categories and Definitions

Highly active	Participate in 30 minutes moderate ¹ physical activity at least five times during the previous seven days (i.e. meet the National Physical Activity Guidelines)
Fairly Active	Participated in 30 minutes physical activity at least twice during the previous seven days
Just active	Participated in a sporting activity or recreational walking for 20 minutes at least once during the previous seven days, or regularly walks or cycles for transport (at least once a week)
Sedentary	Did not participate (20 minutes) in sporting activity or recreational walking during the previous seven days and does not cycle or walk regularly for transport.

Activity levels are broadly in line with the national picture as seen in **Figure 3.4** below.

Figure 3.4 Population by activity category in Midlands and Nationally



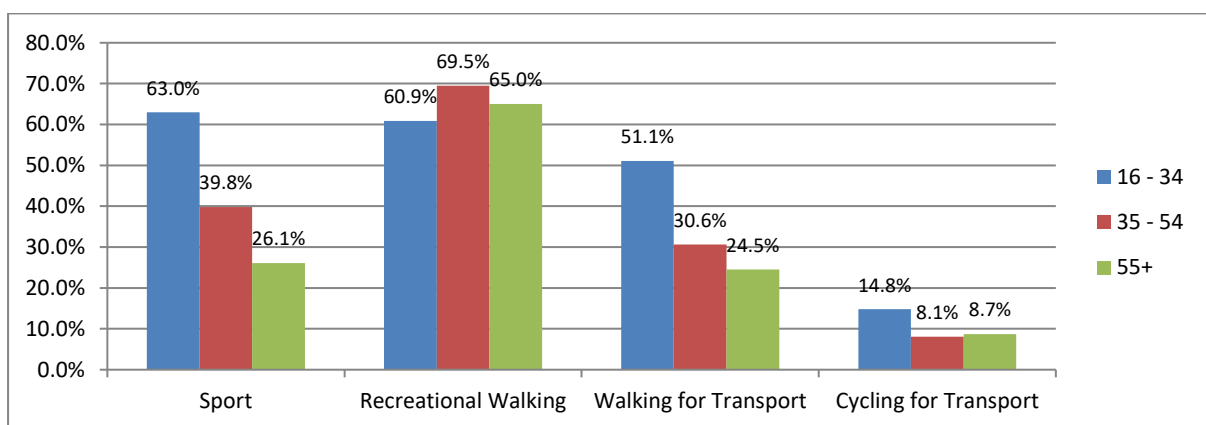
²³ This analysis can only be regarded as approximate as it does not take account of physical activity undertaken in the workplace or in the home.

Unlike the case nationally, women were significantly more likely to be highly active than men in the Midlands due primarily to their greater participation in recreational walking. Other important factors in the likelihood of being highly active were:

- Age (those aged 25 – 44 and 55 – 64 are less likely to be highly active compared to 45 – 54 year olds);
- time of year (respondents were most likely to be highly active in Quarter 2 and least likely to be highly active in Quarter 4);
- work status (employees were more likely to be highly active than the self-employed and those who are not working due to long term illness or disability); and
- whether or not the respondent played sport while at school (those who did play were almost three times as likely to be highly active than those who didn't).

It is of even greater importance from a policy perspective to understand the factors associated with being sedentary²⁴ given that those who are sedentary stand to gain the most health benefits from taking part in physical activity. Again, using a multivariate statistical model we found that age, work status, club membership and time of year were the most significant factors determining whether or not an individual was likely to be sedentary. Those aged 55+ were more likely to be sedentary than all other age groups. This can be better understood by looking at the individual behaviours by age group²⁵ as we do in **Figure 3.5** below.

Figure 3.5: Participation in all forms of physical activity in the Midlands by age group



²⁴ In the context of the ISM sedentary means not walking for recreation or playing sport, or walking or cycling for transport

²⁵ Age Groups have been merged to aid in the presentation

While older groups are as likely to walk for recreation as their younger counterparts they are significantly less likely to play sport and walk for transport. Levels of cycling for transport are generally quite low across all age groups compared to the other activities. As it is unlikely that large numbers of those in the older age groups can easily be encouraged to play sport (see Section 2.6 in this respect) it seems that walking, either for recreation or for transport, represent the best opportunities to encourage those who are sedentary to engage in some activity. Local policy makers should seek to promote opportunities for older adults in this regard.

In relation to the other factors impacting on sedentarism we found that the self-employed were more than twice as likely to be sedentary as those in employment and non-members of sports clubs were twice as likely to be sedentary as club members. This last finding suggests that in the Midlands at least, encouraging membership of sports club is likely to prove beneficial for policy makers wishing to reduce the numbers of those who are sedentary.

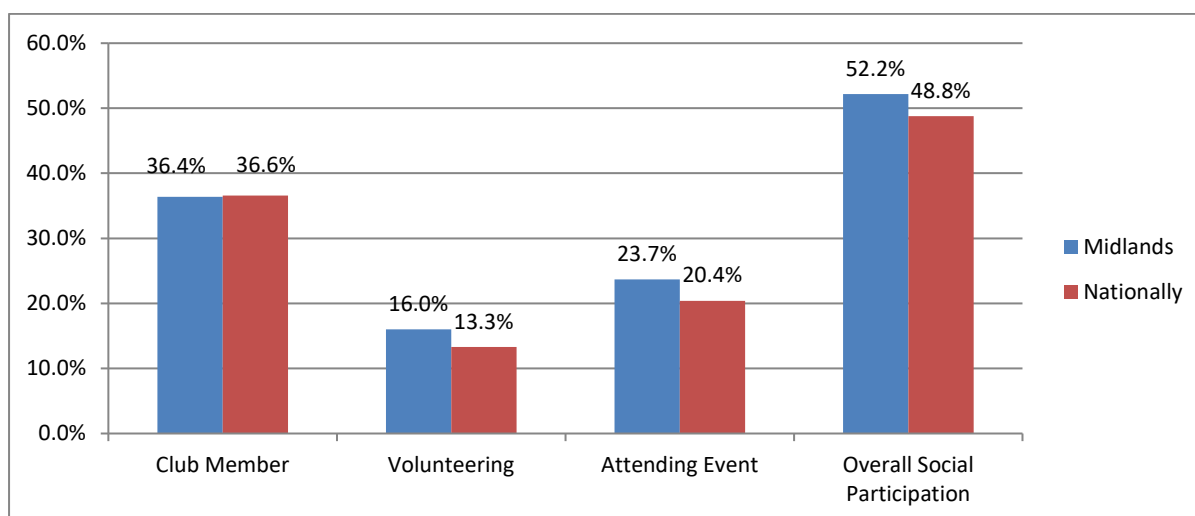
4. SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

4.1 Overall

The ISM looks at social participation through club membership, volunteering and attendance at sports events. In 2013 it also looked at perceptions around gender and sports administration locally and nationally as well as the reasons for participating in sport outside the club environment. These issues are examined in depth in the 2013 ISM Annual Report to which the reader is referred for further detail. That report also examines the demographics of social participation in some detail. This chapter therefore concentrates on the main headlines around social participation in the Midlands.

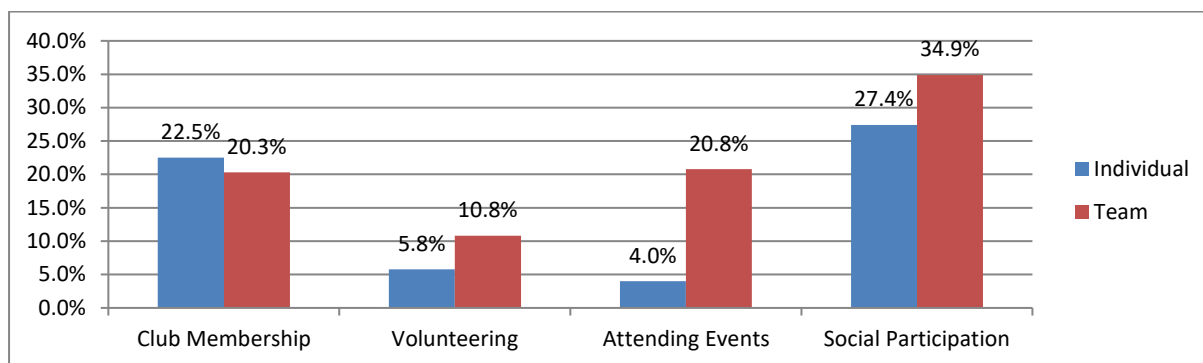
Before looking at each of the different forms of social participation in turn we compare the overall levels of social participation in the region with the national situation in **Figure 4.1** below. Social participation is broadly in line with the national picture. Overall, over half of all respondents reported their involvement in some form of regular social participation in sport underscoring its importance in contributing to Ireland's social capital.

Figure 4.1: Levels of Social Participation in the Midlands and nationally



While active participation is dominated by individual sporting activities the situation is more mixed when it comes to social participation as we can see from **Figure 4.2** overleaf. Volunteering and even more particularly attendance at sporting events are strongly associated with team sports, most of which is connected with children's participation. Club membership is relatively evenly split between team and individual sports. Given that active participation is dominated by individual sports this suggests that membership is more about the social than the physical aspect of participation.

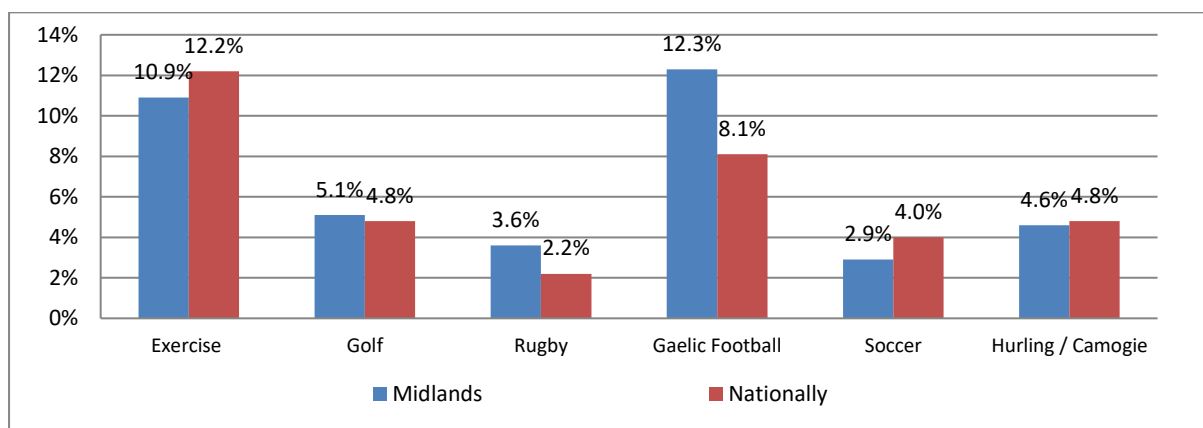
Figure 4.2: Social Participation in Sport in the Midlands by type of sport²⁶



4.2 Club Membership

While overall membership is fairly evenly split between team and individual sports, the most popular clubs to belong to are team based as can be seen in **Figure 4.3** below. Gaelic football has very high membership numbers in the regional compared to nationally.

Figure 4.3: Club Membership in the Midlands by sport²⁷



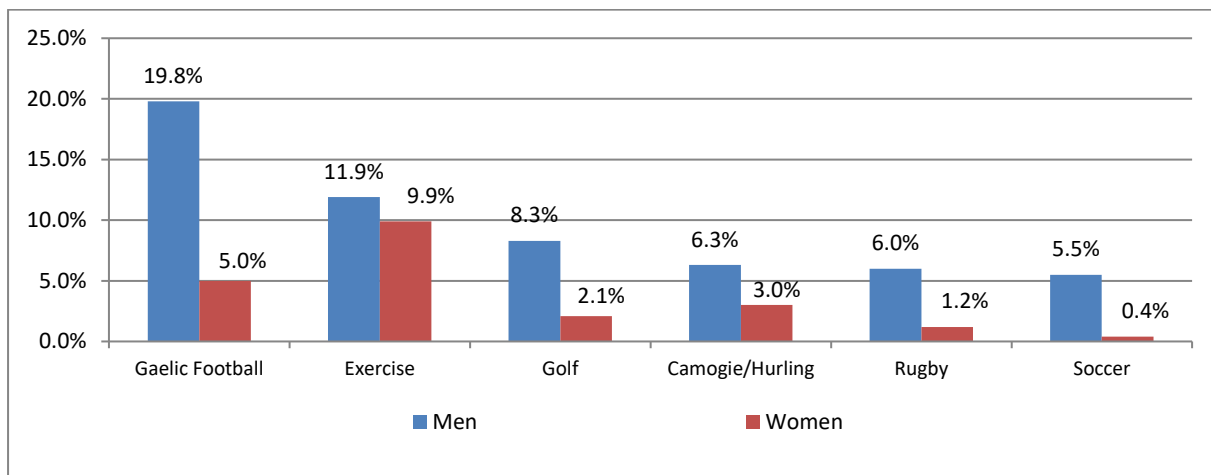
Gender, employment status, time of year, sports participation, participation in school sport, car ownership and county of residence all feature as important determinants of club membership in the Midlands. Below we describe briefly the impact of each of these factors.

²⁶ Percentages add up to more than 100 due to certain respondents participating socially in both types of sport

²⁷ Only sports with membership of 2% or more in the Midlands are shown. Swimming, running and tennis had membership levels between 1 – 2%.

In the Midlands nearly twice as many men as women belong to a sports club (48.5% and 24.6%). The gender gap is greater in the Midlands than nationally, driven primarily by relatively low levels of membership among women. Gyms and swimming clubs are the only types of clubs where membership is relatively even among men and women; men significantly outnumber women in membership of every other type of club. Men are most likely to belong to Gaelic football clubs while women prefer gyms as seen in **Figure 4.4** below. Policy makers should seek to examine the issues which are giving rise to the significant gender gap in membership seen here.

Figure 4.4: Club Membership in the Midlands by sport by gender²⁸



Apart from the issue of gender, other findings to emerge from the multivariate analysis were that:

- Sports participants were more than 3 times as likely to be club members as non-participants;
- Club membership peaked in Quarter 1 compared to Quarter 3 probably reflecting annual renewal periods as well as the importance of New Year’s resolutions;
- Respondents who played sport at school (outside of PE) were almost twice as likely to be club members as those who didn’t play sport at school. One possible reason for this is that not having any relationship with sport / sports clubs at a formative age could make more intimidating the idea of joining a club as an adult;
- Those with access to a car were more likely to be club members than those without;
- Residents of Westmeath were the most likely to be club members twice as likely as residents of Laois and Offaly, and four times as likely to be club members as Longford residents; and

²⁸ Clubs with membership between 1-2% among men include cycling, martial arts and shooting. Clubs with membership between 1-2% among women include basketball and sports shown above in the graph.

- Students were more likely to be club members than all other groups.

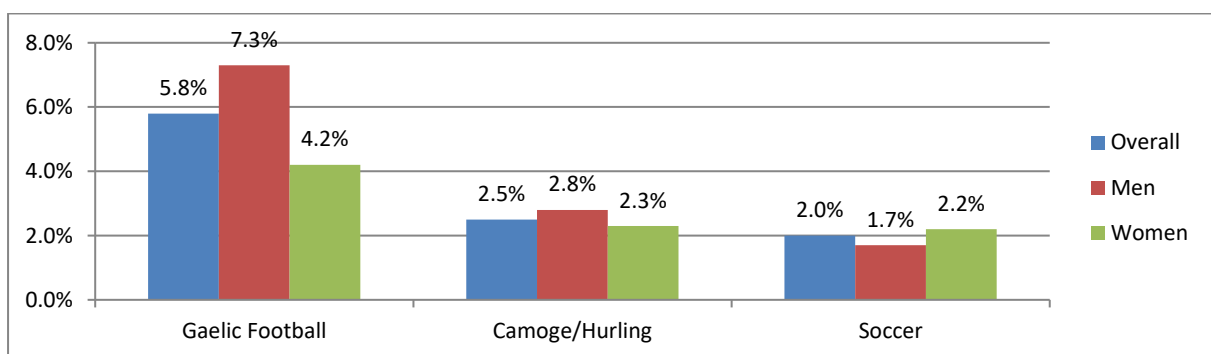
4.3 Volunteering

Volunteering is regarded by many as the lifeblood of sport, without which much of sporting activity, particularly that involving children, would simply not occur. It is a key component of organised sport in Ireland and, according to official sources sport features as the single activity involving the greatest amount of volunteering. The 2006 Census of Population²⁹ identified that 33% of all volunteers were involved in sport only slightly behind the much broader category of “social / charity” at 35%.

The picture in the Midlands is similar to that nationally. One in six volunteered at least once in the previous 7 days during 2011 – 2013 with both men and women equally likely to volunteer (16.7% and 15.3% respectively). Volunteering is strongly associated with children’s participation in sport and hence with team sport. Unsurprisingly adults with children are more likely to volunteer than those without (19.5% and 10.2% respectively). Volunteers are more likely to be drawn from the 35 – 54 year old age group although volunteering is also quite strong among 16 – 24 year olds in the region.

The importance of club membership (a theme throughout the report) is further underscored here by the fact that club members are more than three times as likely to volunteer for sport as non-members of a club. Those educated to 3rd level are more likely to volunteer than individuals with a lower level of educational attainment. Men and women are most likely to volunteer for Gaelic football as seen in **Figure 4.5** below.

Figure 4.5: Volunteering by sport by gender³⁰

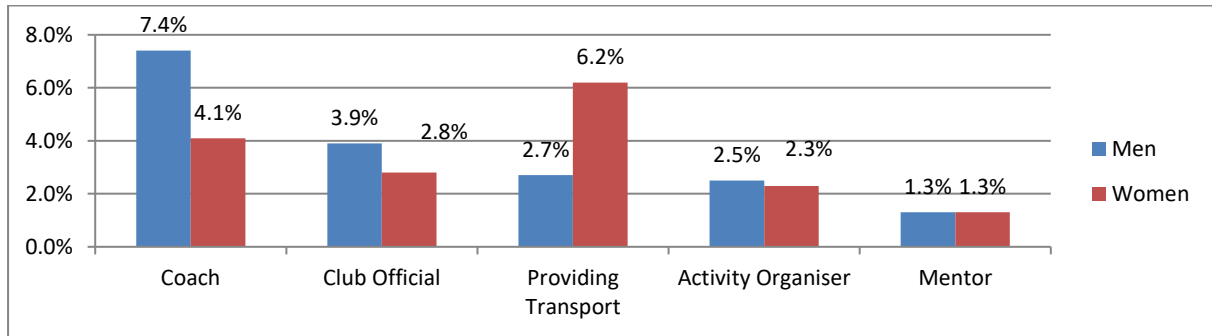


²⁹ <http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/saveselections.asp>

³⁰ Only sports with volunteering rates above 2% overall are shown. 1 – 2% of men volunteer for golf and more than 2% volunteer for rugby. Dancing has a volunteering rate of 1-2% among women.

Volunteers spend on average just over 4 hours per week volunteering with men spending more time volunteering than women (5 vs. 4 hours). The type of volunteering roles carried out varies by gender as can be seen in **Figure 4.6** below. The nature of these roles reinforces the highly gendered nature in the administration of sport as perceived by ISM respondents during 2013.

Figure 4.6: Volunteering roles in the Midlands by gender

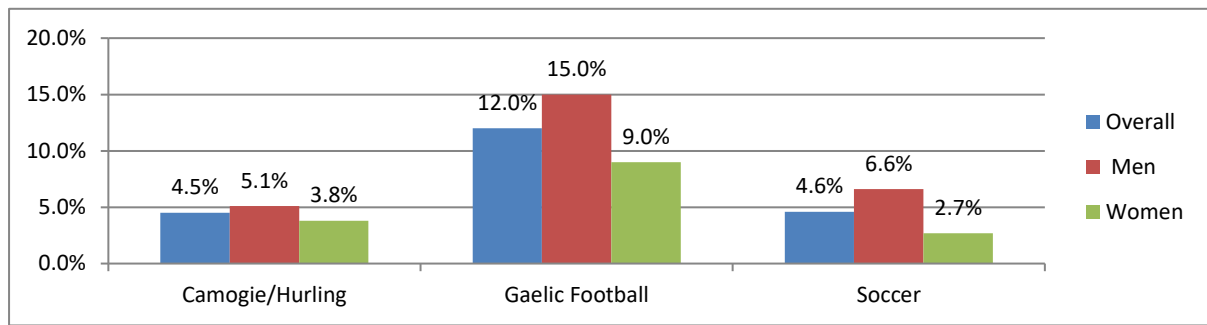


4.4 Attendance at Sporting Events

Nearly one in four adults in the Midlands regularly attends some form of sporting event whether involving adults or children. This is slightly higher than the national average and is driven by Gaelic football where attendance is almost twice the national figure. While attendance is generally high across the region, it is particularly so in Laois, Longford and Offaly compared to Westmeath.

Attendance is dominated by team sports with five times as many adults attending such events as those involving individual activities. Individuals with children are significantly more likely to attend an event than those without (27.2% and 18.2% respectively). Otherwise attendees are most likely to be male (28.7% vs 18.9% of women), 35 – 54 years old, club members, urban residents, and individuals without an illness / disability. Attendance peaks in Quarter 3 when one in three respondents attends an event and dips sharply in Quarter 1 when the figure is less than one in seven who attend events. **Figure 4.7** below shows attendance by sport in the region.

Figure 4.7: Attendance at sporting events in the Midlands by sport by gender



5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This briefing report has provided descriptive information on participation in sport and physical activity in the midlands. Age, socio-economic status and the presence or absence of a disability all play important roles in whether or not individuals within the counties are likely to be active through sport and physical activity. Policy responses to these issues have been looked at in the context of previously commissioned ISC research such as the Sporting Lives, Fair Play?, Keeping Them in the Game and Irish Sports Monitor reports; all available at www.irishsportsCouncil.ie. The reader is referred to these reports for further exposition on these issues and some suggestions on how to deal with them. This section therefore focuses on issues which have not necessarily been covered in depth in these research reports.

a. Club membership

Club membership was found to be strongly associated with active participation in sport as well as a positive influence on volunteering, attendance at sporting events and cycling for transport. Clubs members were also less likely to be sedentary. Sports clubs are a strong source of social capital as well as being sites of significant physical activity in the region. That said, men are twice as likely to belong to a sports club as women and there are significant differences in membership across the counties. We recommend that policy makers throughout the region look at initiatives to increase club membership particularly targeting women.

b. Inter-county differences in social participation

While acknowledging that the small sample sizes means our findings should be treated with some caution the variations in aspects of social participation across the region is worthy of further investigation by policy makers in the context where such variations might also underpin differences in ancillary behaviours (as above) but also given the importance of all aspects of social participation to personal and community development.

c. Higher levels of sedentarism among over 55 year olds

Over 55 year olds in the region are much more likely to be sedentary than all other age groups. From a policy perspective where getting “inactive” people active is a key goal, getting these older groups to engage in some form of activity represents a key challenge. The promotion of recreational walking opportunities would appear to be the most likely means of achieving this goal given the lack of interest in this group in “doing more sports”.

Appendix 1 – Demographics of ISM Sample compared to 2011 Census

	2011 Census	2011+2013 ISM combined
Gender	16 years plus	16 years plus
Male	49.8%	49.5%
Female	50.2%	50.5%
Age		
16-19	6.5%	6.5%
20-24	8.0%	8%
25-34	20.6%	20.6%
35-44	20.1%	20.2%
45-54	16.8%	16.8%
55-64	13.1%	13.1%
65+	14.9%	14.1%
Working Status (Census 2011 includes those under 16)		
Employee/Self Employed	48.9%	48.5%
Unemployed	12.9%	12.8%
Retired	12.4%	12.7%
Homemaker	10.7%	10.7%
Student	10.3%	10.5%
Unemployed-illness/disabled	4.8%	4.7%

Appendix 2 – Comparison of High Level Metrics between Westmeath, Offaly, Laois and Longford³¹

High Level Metric	Westmeath (%)	Offaly (%)	Laois (%)	Longford (%)
Recreational Walking	59.4	67.1	64.7	70.0
Sports Participation	46.3	44.9	41.3	44.2
Volunteering	18.9	16.9	15.4	11.1
Club Membership	43.7	35.8	37.7	26.1
Event Attendance	21.4	23.3	24.9	26.0
Walking for Transport	41.3	34.6	36.9	30.6
Cycling for Transport	9.6	11.1	11.2	10.2
Any Social Participation	56.8	54.1	50.4	45.2
Highly Active	24.1	28.7	27.8	35.4
Sedentary	16.2	12.1	15.2	14.5

³¹ Please note the caution on page 4 of the report.