

LGBT+ Sports and Physical Activity Groups: **Coronavirus Lockdown Survey**



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Contents

1. Introduction and key findings	1
2. Survey background	2
3. Lockdown impact on physical activity.....	3
3.1 Physical activity provided during lockdown	3
3.2 Impact on membership physical activity levels	4
4. Lockdown impact on social activity.....	6
4.1 Social activity before and after lockdown	6
4.2 Importance of social support for mental health and well-being.....	7
5. Lockdown impact on club governance.....	9
5.1 General governance since lockdown.....	9
5.2 Impact of lockdown on membership recruitment and retention...	10
5.3 Impact of lockdown on finance	11
5.4 Access to external support	13
6. Ability to return to activity after lockdown	14
7. Conclusion	15
8. Appendix – breakdown of survey responses.....	16
9. Bibliography	18

1. Introduction and key findings

Previous studies have demonstrated how LGBT+ sports groups provide physical activity for their membership, but also promote mental well-being through their social support and sense of community (e.g. Lawley and Smith, 2017; Jones and McCarthy, 2010). This report presents the results of a survey carried out during the coronavirus lockdown of 2020, which asked LGBT+ sports groups in the UK about the impact of the lockdown on their ability to provide both physical and social activities, and the impact this had on their membership. The survey also asked about the impact on the governance and management of these groups. The key findings are:

- All groups were unable to provide their regular sport and physical activity, however half of groups were able to substitute this with some form of online activity. Despite this, the vast majority of groups reported that the physical activity of their membership had declined during lockdown.
- The survey highlighted the positive impact that the social support and community provided by LGBT+ sports groups had on the mental well-being of their membership before lockdown. Whilst the majority of groups provided some form of social contact during lockdown, significant concerns were expressed about the negative impact on the mental health of their membership caused by isolation and reduced social support.
- Larger groups and those providing team sports were in the best position to provide online physical and social activity during lockdown. Smaller groups providing individual and one-to-one activities tended to be the groups which were unable to provide any online activity.
- The lockdown had a mixed impact on club governance and the amount of time and effort taken to run groups. The groups continuing to provide online physical activity and social support for their membership reported the greatest effort needed to keep their clubs running.
- There was a considerable impact on membership recruitment and retention, which was made difficult by the inability to engage in recruitment activities during lockdown and by uncertainty about the timing and nature of future activity.
- Club finance was generally stable for medium-sized groups, but there was a more negative impact felt by smaller groups and larger groups, who both had less contractual flexibility to mitigate the loss of income.
- Two thirds of clubs reported concerns about their ability to return to full activity post-lockdown.

2. Survey background

The survey was conducted by:

- **Pride Sports**, a UK organisation which works to challenge LGBT+phobia in sport and improve access to sport for LGBT+ people
- **Dr. Scott Lawley** of Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, who has previously worked with Pride Sports and Sport England to produce an overview of LGBT+ sports provision in England (Lawley and Smith, 2017)

The survey was conducted online, and consisted of 20 open-ended questions which asked LGBT+ sports groups about the impact of the coronavirus lockdown on their ability to provide physical and social activity, and the impact this had on the governance of the group and on the membership. The survey was open to responses for one month, starting on May 27, 2020, and publicised through direct emails to UK LGBT+ sports groups and further posts on Pride Sports social media networks.

Valid responses were received from 32 LGBT+ sports groups which collectively provide over 400 activities per month, with a combined membership in excess of 4000 people. The independent and community-based nature of these groups makes exact figures for overall LGBT+ sport provision difficult to measure. However, if the 2017 Pride Sports/ Sport England report is used as a basis for comparison, this survey represents around 25-30% of UK LGBT+ sports and physical activity group provision.

The responses covered a diverse range of LGBT+ sports and physical activity groups (see appendix for full breakdown). Geographically, just under half of responses were from London-based groups, with the remaining 50% from Scotland and elsewhere in England. A broad range of activities were covered, with just over half of groups providing team sports and the remainder providing individual or one-to-one activities. A range of group sizes was represented, from small groups with 20 or fewer members to larger groups with over 100 members. Activity volume per group ranged from one monthly activity to more than 5 activities provided per week.

The responses were analysed and coded according to key themes identified in the responses. Anonymous quotes from the responses are used in the report where permission was given by respondents.

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3. Lockdown impact on physical activity

LGBT+ sports and physical activity groups have previously been found to be significant providers of sports and physical activity to LGBT+ participants (Lawley and Smith, 2017). During lockdown, these groups were unable to provide their regular activities due to social distancing rules and facility closures. The survey found that approximately half of groups were able to substitute this with some form of online physical activity provision, whilst the other half provided no physical activity at all.

3.1 Physical activity provided during lockdown

The nature of the activity provided had an impact on the ability of groups to provide alternative online activities, and the types of activity that they provided:

- Groups providing studio-based classes (e.g. dance, exercise and martial-arts) were able to transfer some classes online: “We’ve been trying to run classes through Zoom, about 7/8 a week & offering some pre-recorded too,” “Online - 6 days a week, 40 mins.”
- For individual activities such as running and cycling, which would usually take place in a group, social media tools were used to maintain and compare activity amongst the group: “Created a Strava group for members to see each others’ runs. Launched Bingo cards with challenges for members to complete and post photos of their achievements. Virtual races with other clubs,” “We’ve encouraged our cyclists to share their solo or social distance rides, routes and photos. This has been overwhelmingly positive. One day we had 20 people share their activities in our Facebook group which is brilliant for motivation and fantastic to see that level of engagement during lockdown.”
- Many groups that were unable to pursue their usual activities substituted these for activities which could be delivered online. For example, rugby and football clubs reported setting up club Strava pages to encourage running and cycling, or providing online classes and workouts. A smaller number linked these activities to their sport or pre-season training: “Online workouts, online yoga, 1 to 1 training plans, online ball skills session, tactics sessions,” “We are currently planning our pre-season training from home.”
- Some clubs were unable to provide online activities themselves, but engaged with external resources: “We have been signposting members to online fitness sessions, yoga and sessions provided by [our NGB],” “We have engaged with a PT who holds sessions every Sunday over zoom.”

- The clubs that were able to substitute their regular activities with online activities were overwhelmingly team sports groups. The groups that were unable to provide any online physical activity tended to be smaller groups providing individual or one-to-one activities such as badminton and walking.

Whilst the provision of online activity was generally viewed favourably by the respondents and their membership, its efficacy was limited, both in engaging the membership and in replicating the main activity offered by the group:

- “Not ... able to train from home as a pool is required for our sport”
- “In person IS very important – we need to hit each other.”
- “We started a weekly online HIIT/yoga class but this was discontinued due to lack of attendees”
- “Our online strength and conditioning session has been very well received, with some people that never did it in person now taking part as there is no travel involved - but only about half of the club has taken part in any activities.”

3.2 Impact on membership physical activity levels

Despite the provision of online physical activity, clubs reported overwhelmingly (25 out of the 32 clubs) that the physical activity of their membership had declined during lockdown, and also felt that a lack of fitness would be a challenge for their clubs once they returned from lockdown.

Many clubs reported the inability to play sport as a reason for the decline, for example: “Probably just lack of training will affect health and fitness.” However, some of the responses went into further detail about the important role their groups played in being the sole provider of physical activity for their membership, or in providing activity which motivates their membership away from physical inactivity:

- “Not being able to meet and train together. Many are poor self-starters and have let their physical activity drift,”
- “Not being able to play which may be members’ only fitness activity”

Many groups that were unable to pursue their usual activities substituted these for activities which could be delivered online

The groups that were unable to provide any online physical activity tended to be smaller groups

“Many are poor self-starters and have let their physical activity drift”

Whilst responses concerning decreased physical activity levels related to the current membership of LGBT+ sports groups, it should also be noted that many groups also commented on difficulties in bringing in new members, and having to cancel beginners' events such as couch to 5k running courses (see section 5.2).

Both the maintenance of physical current physical activity and moving people from inactivity are key aspects of national strategies to achieve the UK Chief Medical Officer's recommendations for 150 minutes of physical activity per week (Scottish Government, 2018; Sport England, 2016; Sport Wales, 2012). The survey responses demonstrate the role played by LGBT+ sports groups in helping their membership to achieve this level of activity, and how the ability to do this was impeded during the lockdown.

4. Lockdown impact on social activity

The Pride Sports/Sport England report (Lawley and Smith, 2017) noted that the social context of LGBT+ sports groups is an important 'pull factor' (Elling and Janssens, 2009) in motivating their membership to take part in physical activity. The evidence from this survey suggests that this social context and support goes beyond physical health and also has a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of their membership. The lockdown has put this level of social support into focus and the removal of this support has raised significant concerns from LGBT+ sports groups about levels of isolation and poor mental health amongst their membership.

4.1 Social activity before and after lockdown

All groups reported that they organised some form of regular social activity before lockdown, with half of groups providing activities linked to their sporting activity (such as post-match food or socials) and the overwhelming majority (28 out of 32) providing social events separate from their physical activity (such as Christmas parties, bowling or cinema trips).

The importance of the social side of the groups is reflected in the finding that 26 out of the 32 groups provided some form of online social activity during lockdown, a far greater number than the 50% of groups that provided physical activity.

The social activity provided was mainly Zoom 'hangouts' and quizzes, with a small number of groups going further to provide activities such as DJs, learning activities and activities such as mindfulness to promote mental health. A small number made social activity a part of the online physical activities that they were providing. The small number of groups that were unable to provide any online social activity (5 out of 32) tended to be smaller groups who were also unable to provide online physical activity.

The importance of the social aspect of LGBT+ sports and physical activity groups was highlighted by the responses to a question which asked whether groups would choose physical or social activity if they could only provide one of these during lockdown. The vast majority (22 out of 32) said that they would prioritise social activity:

- "Online social activity because it is easier to exercise alone than to socialise alone, and providing support to others within the group and a community for our members is one of our core aims."

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"...providing support to others within the group and a community for our members is one of our core aims."

"There are lots of sources for online physical activity. We may be members only social activity with other LGBT people"

- “Social because all members (including non-players) can partake and the social aspect generally trumps the physical element for most members.”
- “Social. There are lots of sources for online physical activity. We may be members only social activity with other LGBT people”
- “Social - the physical activity is secondary to the social”

4.2 Importance of social support for mental health and well-being

Despite the provision of online social activity, a significant number of groups (13 out of 32) noted the negative impact that the lack of face-to-face social interaction was having on the mental well-being of their membership, in addition to the lack of physical activity:

- “Inability to catch up, connect with our friends, play the game we love, big impact on our physical and mental health.”
- “We suspended our weekly classes so our members lost out on the tuition, but more importantly, the social interaction and fun, which is the raison d’être of our club.”
- “No access to group exercise and limited access to the social support and community that the club brings.”

The roles that LGBT+ sports groups play in offering social support networks and positive mental health benefits to their members was highlighted by the inability of the groups to provide this support during lockdown and the effects that this had on their membership. Eight groups specifically mentioned the isolation faced by their members during lockdown:

- “A lot of our members rely on the club as a way of meeting people and a lot of them have had to do lockdown alone. The members are fairly active and self-motivated when it comes to fitness. However many use the club as a lifeline for social activity and they have spent lockdown alone and self-isolating”
- “I think general isolation. Some members live on their own and some have been in isolation from family members.”
- “...the loss of community has been felt really acutely across the membership. Our club is a safe, inclusive and encouraging space, and so it’s been very difficult to lose that during such a turbulent time.”
- “Providing social interaction for people who may be locked down by themselves is much more important at present”

Nine clubs further noted the negative impact that this isolation and lack of social interaction has had on the mental health of their membership:

- “Negative impact to mental health of members who miss the interaction that fixtures provided.”
- “People are intermittently finding the lack of social physical connection affects their mood and mental health.”
- “We have just completed an online survey and the biggest impact of lockdown has been a negative impact on people’s mental health”
- “I personally would say that mental health has been poor. People have complained for different health levels. Most live on their own and we have focused on ensuring people aren’t isolated.”

Whilst the provision of online social activity has helped with isolation, its benefits and ability to engage will all group members have been limited:

- “Quieter guys aren’t fully engaging with the team online,”
- “...there are only so many Zoom quizzes you can do before it’s starts to lose its appeal”

In addition to the online social activities, all groups reported some use of electronic communication (e.g. Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook) to maintain a sense of community. Whilst some of these were used simply to facilitate discussion or send out messages, there were some cases of groups making a considerable effort to communicate directly with all members in order to address issues of isolation and mental health:

- “I’ve been emailing updates of things we’re doing and I’ve been attempting to call everyone individually to check in with them, but have only managed about one third so far.”
- “... we have formed a network for periodically ensuring everyone is contacted directly by a member of the core team.”
- “Our players WhatsApp group has remained consistent with hundreds of messages between the team weekly. We’ve also been speaking privately with all players to ensure they are ok and just generally chatting from time to time.”

“Inability to catch up, connect with our friends, play the game we love, big impact on our physical and mental health.”

“...many use the club as a lifeline for social activity and they have spent lockdown alone and self-isolating”

“... we have formed a network for periodically ensuring everyone is contacted directly by a member of the core team.”

5. Lockdown impact on club governance

The measures to engage and maintain communication with members, as highlighted in the previous section, require a lot of increased effort by people with a governance role within LGBT+ sports groups. This section examines the impact of lockdown on the general governance these groups, including the time and effort needed, and upon specific functions such as recruitment and finance.

5.1 General governance since lockdown

Responses to the survey gave a mixed picture of the impact of lockdown on general governance issues such as the amount of work needed to keep the group running, with responses dividing into three groups of a roughly similar size.

The first group suggested that more work was needed in order to adapt to changing circumstances and to organise activities to keep members engaged. These tended to be groups that were providing online physical activity or increasing efforts to maintain the social support provided by the groups during lockdown.

- “Running the club and keeping morale and motivation up has been increased dramatically. So before I did 3 hours of admin a week I am doing a few hours every day.”
- “More, we have had to be clever in encouraging people to keep active.”
- “...any events or classes we have done do take as much or more time and energy and reap less of an award financially/in participation numbers.”
- “More - trying to keep members engaged during this time”

A second group suggested that the level of work was similar to before but that the nature of this work had shifted, with fewer physical activities such as fixtures being offset by the organisation of online activities.

- “About the same but different work, different type of admin, different concerns from members, engagement in virtual club champs has been something to replace races organised by external people”
- “It’s about the same. Whilst we haven’t spent time planning training sessions or arranging matches, we have been very active in engaging players during lockdown and promoting the club and campaigns we support via our social media.”

A final group said that there was less work to do, this tied in with there being fewer or no activities or fixtures to organise. These tended to be smaller groups whose physical and social activities were completely on hiatus during lockdown. Generally, these groups said that there was little impact on their club governance overall during lockdown.

In common with many other organisations and workplaces, many of the groups switched to online forms of governance for activities such as committee meetings and AGMs. This was generally reported as satisfactory and, for many groups, the lockdown provided an opportunity to review and improve existing governance structures and procedures. Nevertheless, six of the groups still reported problems in organising committee meetings and AGMs, and a small group of four respondents noted that external commitments, exacerbated by coronavirus, also impacted their ability to devote time to running their groups.

5.2 Impact of lockdown on membership recruitment and retention

The most common governance issue reported by clubs related to membership, with just over half of the clubs finding recruitment of new members difficult, and reporting issues with engagement and retention of existing members.

- “Our active members have dropped by about 85%. New members have dropped by about 98%.”
- “We have been unable to recruit new members, and have lost contact with some members...”

For some of these groups, the lockdown has meant that their usual channels of recruitment, such as local Pride events, have been unavailable:

- “...recruiting new members will be a struggle and all the cancelled Pride events would have been our main focus for this.”
- “We had to cancel a couch-to-5k programme which would have increased recruitment, and have a waiting list of 7 people we can’t meet or progress to membership.”

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For other groups, the inability to provide and plan for sporting activity is affecting membership recruitment and retention:

- “Recruitment has been tricky - although we have had enquiries from new people, it’s hard to give accurate information at the moment as we don’t know when we will be back to normal.”
- “In July, our memberships will be up for renewal which will create issues if we still do not have an idea of when football will return. It is difficult to plan the exact processes for renewal.”

General anxieties about the post-lockdown situation are also having an impact on membership engagement and retention:

- “Members will be wary of meeting indoors, and have got used to running alone so some already told us they will not renew. The club membership will be permanently lower.”
- “I think our membership will be low. People will not feel confident coming back...straight away and it will be hard to engage the people who were new to our club before lockdown as we didn’t get a chance to get them properly cemented in the group.”
- “...we’ve still had a handful of enquiries about joining the club, but nobody is particularly looking to join sports clubs at present.”

5.3 Impact of lockdown on finance

The vast majority of groups reported a good state of group finances before lockdown, however there was a mixed response to the post-lockdown impact on finances, with approximately two-thirds of groups feeling that they would not be affected financially, whilst one third suggested that there would be a negative impact.

The groups who felt that there would be no impact or a negligible impact on finances tended to be medium-sized groups (such as football and rugby clubs) where losses in membership subscriptions were offset by fewer outgoings such as facility hire. A small number of groups suggested a positive impact on finances where members voluntarily continued to pay subscriptions throughout lockdown.

The groups which reported a negative impact on finances tended to polarise between smaller or larger groups, where contractual arrangements relating to income and expenditure afforded less flexibility with financial arrangements.

For smaller groups, existing spending commitments which were not being covered by subscription income had a large effect overall on club finances:

- “Overhead costs of website platform no longer covered - out of pocket £100 for 6 month period”
- “We honoured our hall booking through to June despite suspending our classes in March and having no income since then.”

Larger groups, some of which ran as commercial or charitable ventures, were often committed to ongoing spending such as coaching fees, and at the same time found that large areas of regular income had disappeared:

- “At the current time we continue to pay our coaches, although have no incoming finance.”
- “I hear that charities ... will run out of money this summer and as we have pre-booked them to provide training in the Autumn this is a worrying time.”
- “We’re unable to run physical classes and so unable to really make any money at all. My other teachers are self-employed so I’ve allowed them to do their own things and take the money directly. The company is earning nothing.”

Some groups felt that they had missed out on external funding as priorities for funding allocation changed due to coronavirus:

- “We have been rejected for 2 funding applications which had to change priority due to coronavirus.”
- “We have lost our major source of funding [...] and the decisions around various applications for grants have been postponed.”

“...recruiting new members will be a struggle and all the cancelled Pride events would have been our main focus for this.”

“...we’ve still had a handful of enquiries about joining the club, but nobody is particularly looking to join sports clubs at present.”

“We honoured our hall booking through to June despite suspending our classes in March and having no income since then.”

5.4 Access to external support

The majority of groups (21 out of 32) did not access any external support to help with difficulties through lockdown.

Seven groups accessed some form of financial support, but this was piecemeal, and in some cases uncertain or linked to previous funding. The types of funding mentioned were:

- Where groups had paid staff, the furlough scheme was used
- Two groups reported funding from Sport England
- One group adapted a previous grant for training
- Three groups mentioned potential funding from (a) their NGB (b) Community Foundation and (c) an unknown source

Five groups accessed other forms of external support:

- Three separate national governing bodies were mentioned for providing guidance on social distancing, maintaining activity and online courses.
- Other groups such as MCR Active and National LGBT Consortium were mentioned for wider sector networking or provision of governance courses.



6. Ability to return to activity after lockdown

Finally groups were asked how they felt about their ability to return to previous levels of activity once the lockdown restrictions are eased. Whilst seven groups suggested they saw no problems in returning to activity, and a further five felt that they would be able to return to full activity with some planning, the remaining twenty groups highlighted a series of potential issues which might hinder this return.

The impact of social distancing on physical activity was a concern for a number of clubs:

- “Group activities are on hold, returning in small groups will create a different club to what we had before.”
- “I am worried that as a full contact sport we haven’t got any indication when we can ‘touch’ people from other households. This makes planning even more complicated than simply opening a gym.”
- “I think just working out how to run a training session that is socially distanced”
- “Yes - social distancing in the pool and changing rooms”
- “Rugby is expected to be one of the last sports to return to ‘normal’ due to high levels of close physical contact”

The impact of social distancing on future social events and on club finances was also noted:

- “Inability to socialise like we used to before... Social distancing is, as it says, distant and the idea of our society is to stay connected and close. The virus is the antithesis of this sadly.”
- “Yes... we need at least 50 members attending to break even at each session, but we might not be allowed to have that many people attending”

A number of potential anxieties amongst the membership about returning to activity were also highlighted. These included fears about the inability to social distance within activities, or in using public transport to travel to and from activities; the financial impact of coronavirus on members, and the safety of more vulnerable members.

As highlighted in the physical activity and governance sections, some groups were also worried about member recruitment and the retention of current members during lockdown, and the loss of fitness amongst the membership from decreased physical activity.

7. Conclusion

This survey has found a number of different ways in which LGBT+ sports clubs and groups have coped during the lockdown period, with groups facing different challenges and different levels of capacity to substitute their regular physical and social activity with online activities. This reflects the heterogeneous nature of LGBT+ sports groups (Hekma, 1998), which are often independent, community-based groups with a variety of different organisational structures, aims and objectives.

However, the lockdown has also highlighted commonalities across the provision of these groups. By curtailing these activities, the lockdown has brought into focus the value that these groups provide in promoting both the physical and mental well-being of their memberships. In particular, the value of these groups in providing social support and a sense of community to their membership has been highlighted by the feelings of isolation and decreased mental health reported during lockdown, and the efforts made by LGBT+ sports groups to maintain their social connections over and above all other activity.

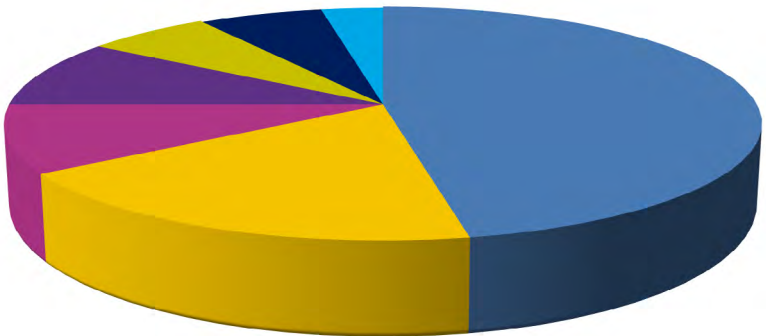
Physical and mental well-being are interconnected, and for many members of the LGBT+ community there are many challenges and obstacles to maintaining both of these. This survey has highlighted the important role played by LGBT+ sports and physical activity groups in helping to overcome these challenges through the activities that they provide.



8. Appendix – breakdown of survey responses

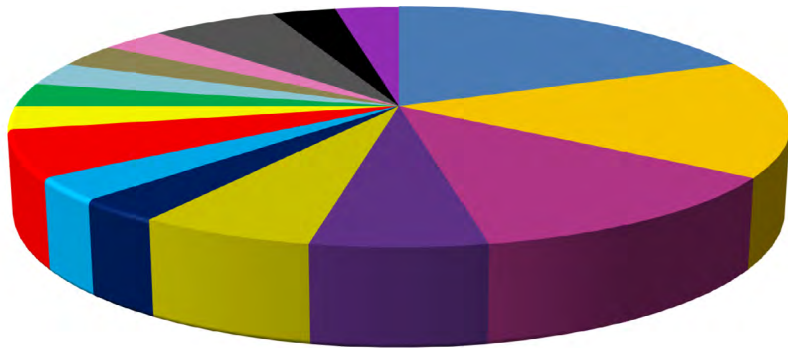
Location

London	15
North West England	6
Scotland	3
Yorkshire and the Humber	3
South East England	2
West Midlands	2
North East England	1



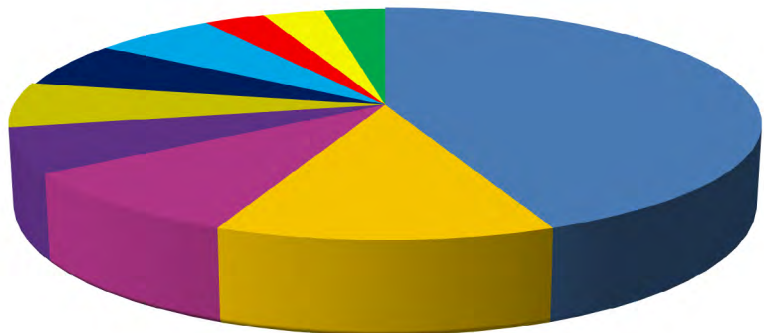
Sports provided

Football	6
Rugby union	5
Badminton	4
Basketball	2
Multisport	2
Cricket	1
Cycling	1
Dance and fitness	2
Golf	1
Hiking and walking	1
Hockey	1
Martial Arts	1
Roller derby	1
Running and Triathlon	2
Softball	1
Water polo	1



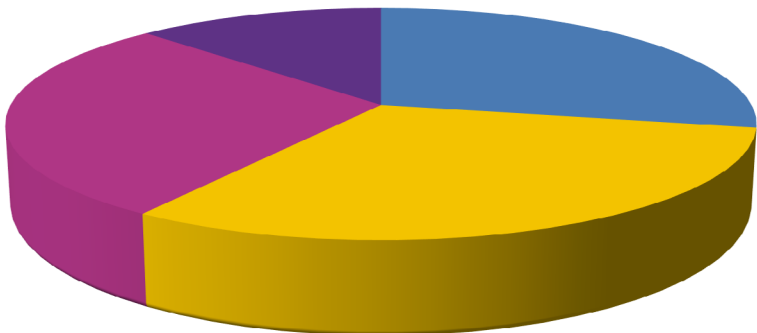
Sport categories

Outdoor team sports	14
Racquet sports	4
Indoor team sports	3
Athletics	2
Exercise movement & dance	2
Multisport	2
Outdoor activities	2
Aquatics	1
Combat & martial arts	1
Outdoor individual	1



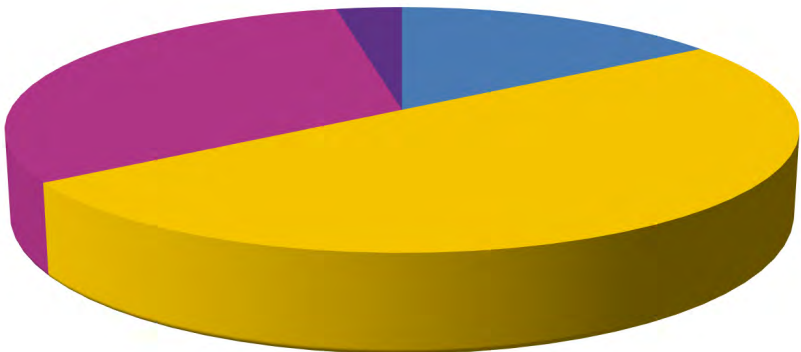
Membership levels

101 or more	9
51-100	10
21 to 50	9
20 or fewer	4



Volume of physical activity events organised pre-lockdown

Heavy (more than 4 activities per week)	5
2-4 activities per week	16
1 activity per week	10
Sparse (less than one activity per week)	1



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