



Think Papers in Sport

Rebound, regress or reinvent? The disruptive impact of Covid-19 on sport, exercise and physical activity in Scotland.

Nicholas F Rowe¹ (May 2021)

Summary

- The disruptive impact of Covid-19 has reached into all parts of society. Few areas have been impacted more than organised sport.
- Despite its importance for the longer-term health and wellbeing of the nation there has been little research in Scotland on the impact of Covid-19 on sport and physical activity.
- A nationally representative sample of adults were asked to think back over the past 12 months and consider the extent to which a range of activity related behaviours had changed compared with the 12-month period before Covid-19 and associated lockdown restrictions.
- 47% of the adult (18 years plus) population of Scotland (just over 2 million people) felt that their participation in sport and exercise activity was a lot or a little less over the last 12 months than the equivalent period before Covid-19.
- Over a third (36%) of the Scottish adult population say they were doing either a lot or a little less physical exercise and or sport indoors and the same percentage outdoors.
- There has been a positive profile of changes in walking behaviours locally. Over 4 in 10 Scots said that they were walking more in their local area during the 12 months of the pandemic compared with the 12 months previously. This has not, however, compensated for declines in activity through sport and exercise.
- Higher levels of total daily sitting time are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, independent of physical activity. 56% of adults (approximately 2.5 million people) in Scotland reported spending a little or a lot more time sitting during the 12 months of the pandemic.
- Evidence has been growing on the impact of Covid-19 on social anxiety, loneliness, depression, self-harm amongst the young, panic attacks and loss of motivation. Between 47% and 53% of the adult population perceived a very or somewhat negative impact of changes in their sport and exercise participation on their physical health, mental health and or happiness. This contrasts with the 17% to 23% who assessed the impact to be positive.
- 6 out of 10 Scots (over 2.5 million adults) consider it fairly or very important that opportunities are made available to take part regularly in sport and exercise activity in the 12 months after lockdown restrictions are lifted with this evenly split across men and women.

There is a powerful argument from both a public health and wider public good perspective that this is an opportunity for reinvention and renewal where Scotland embraces a philosophy that places sport and physical activity in a central and not peripheral place in public policy intervention. The outcome

¹ Nick Rowe is consultant research lead for the Observatory for Sport in Scotland, a Visiting Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University and former Head of Strategy and Research at Sport England

would be significant levels of investment in an infrastructure, support system, educational programme and capacity that builds a momentum for change. The argument is not whether post Covid we can afford to invest but whether post Covid we can afford not to.

Introduction

The disruptive impact of Covid-19 has reached into all parts of society leaving few aspects of our lives untouched. Ameliorating the impact of the negative economic consequences has been at the forefront of government policy. But increasingly, as the waves of the pandemic washed over us and sustained their impact, the focus has shifted to the disruption on our social networks, our leisure activities, our day-to-day behaviours and the consequences for our physical and mental health.

Few areas have been disrupted more than organised sport. By its nature it is an activity involving social interaction and contact. These intrinsic positive qualities of sport paradoxically have placed it as a frontline casualty of the Covid-19 response which has sought to minimise social activities and gatherings. Sports centres, swimming pools, gyms and sports clubs, have all been closed for extensive periods. School sport has been curtailed even as children returned to classes and sport in further and higher education has been non-existent as students stay away from campuses.

In the early days of the lockdowns there was an optimism, amongst health professionals at least, that people would respond to the restrictions on organised sport by becoming more physically active in other ways – by walking and cycling in their local areas or doing more ‘home exercise’. This optimism of a ‘compensation effect’ has been proved to be misplaced. Research in for example England, the United States, Denmark and Canada shows the net impact of Covid-19 on sport and physical activity levels, if not devastating has been sufficiently negative to raise alarm bells. A review of the evidence on changes in levels of physical activity carried out by Public Health Scotland in 2020 concluded that, *“Studies allowing quantitative assessment of changes in physical activity generally suggest that the overall trend among general population samples is of reducing physical activity duration and/or intensity (around 30% reductions during lockdown compared to pre-lockdown)”*.²

The alarm is not solely focused on immediate impact but extends to concerns about the potential longer-term consequences as habits shift towards more sedentary and less active pursuits. It is not without some irony that as we see activity levels decline the evidence mounts on the association between increased risk of serious illness and death from Covid-19 with overweight and obesity³.

Sport is an important part of Scottish culture and many participate. But research carried out by the Observatory for Sport in Scotland (OSS) shows that even before the pandemic hit Scotland was at the lower end of international tables on sport participation, was near the

² Whitehead R, Martin L, Shearer E, Greci S. Rapid international evidence review: Impact of the COVID-19 disease control measures on physical activity and dietary behaviours and weight. Edinburgh: Public Health Scotland; 2020.

³ See: Rowe, N.F., April 2020, Sport, obesity and the coronavirus: a tale of two epidemics and two very different responses.

top of the league in terms of overweight and obesity and could be characterised as a 'divided sporting nation' with high levels of 'sporting inequality'⁴.

Despite its importance for the longer-term health and wellbeing of the nation there has been little research in Scotland on the impact of Covid-19 on sport and physical activity. To provide an evidenced-based perspective OSS commissioned a nationally representative survey of adults aged 18 plus in Scotland to explore changing levels of engagement in sport and exercise activity and its impacts on people's perceived physical and mental health and wellbeing⁵.

Changes in sport and exercise activity, walking in the local area and sitting behaviours

People were asked to think back over the past 12 months and consider the extent to which a range of activity related behaviours had changed compared with the 12-month period before Covid-19 and associated lockdown restrictions.⁶

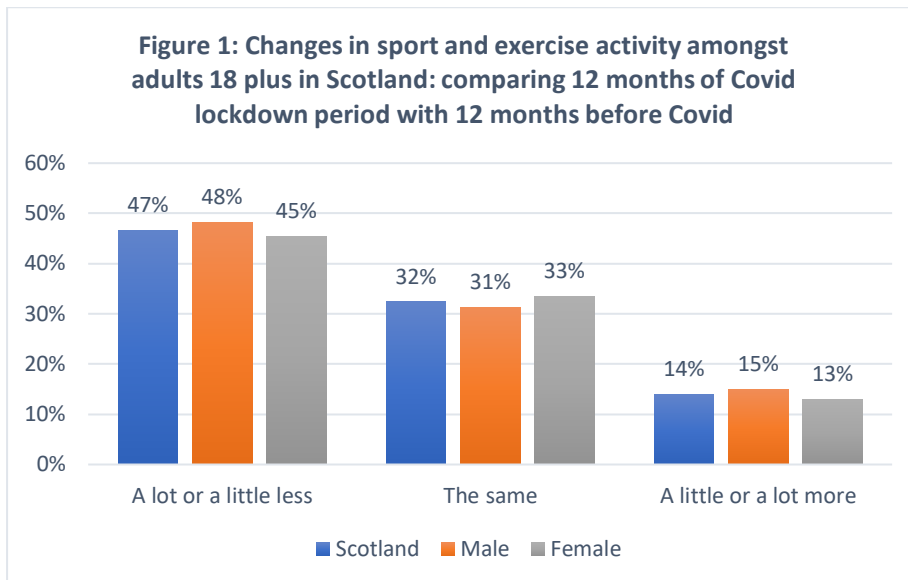
a) Changes in physical exercise and or sport

Figure 1 shows that 47% of the adult (18 years plus) population of Scotland (just over 2 million people) felt that their participation in sport and exercise activity was a lot or a little less over the last 12 months than the equivalent period before Covid-19. This was slightly higher amongst men than women although it should be remembered that participation amongst men started at a significantly higher level. At the other end of the spectrum about 1 in 7 adults said they were doing more sport and exercise activity during this period. The net consequence of this behaviour shift is a significant population wide decrease in participation in sport and exercise activity.

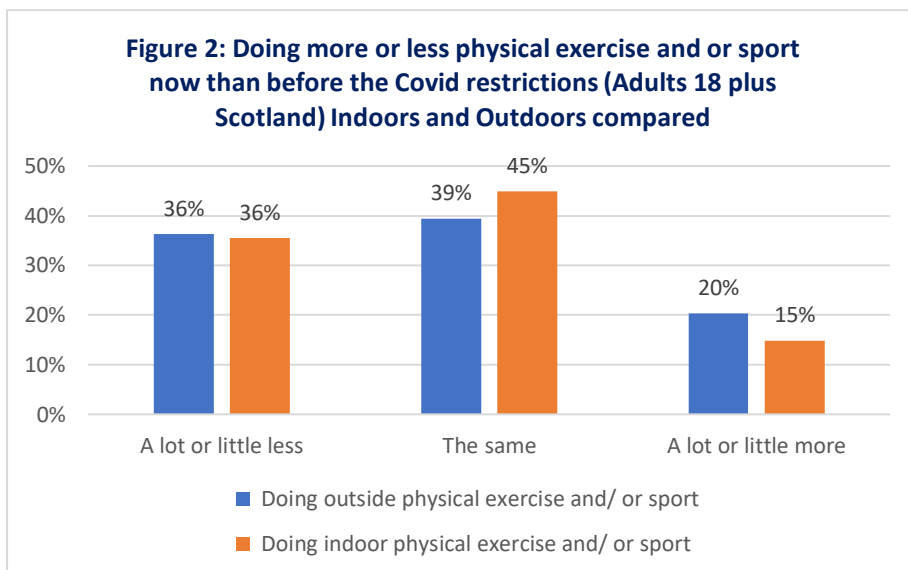
⁴ Rowe N. F., 2019. Sports participation in Scotland: Trends and Future Prospects. Observatory for Sport in Scotland.

⁵ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1012 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 13th May 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scotland adults (aged 18+).

⁶ Perceived change in activity related behaviours does not provide an objective measure of physical activity levels. But it is a reasonable subjective indicator of broad changes in behaviour applied statistically across a population. Reported changes are relative rather than absolute. So, for example, those with starting levels of participation in sport that are comparatively low – e.g., women compared with men and C2DE social group compared with ABC1 will have differential impacts. Percentages often do not add to 100 due to 'Don't Knows'



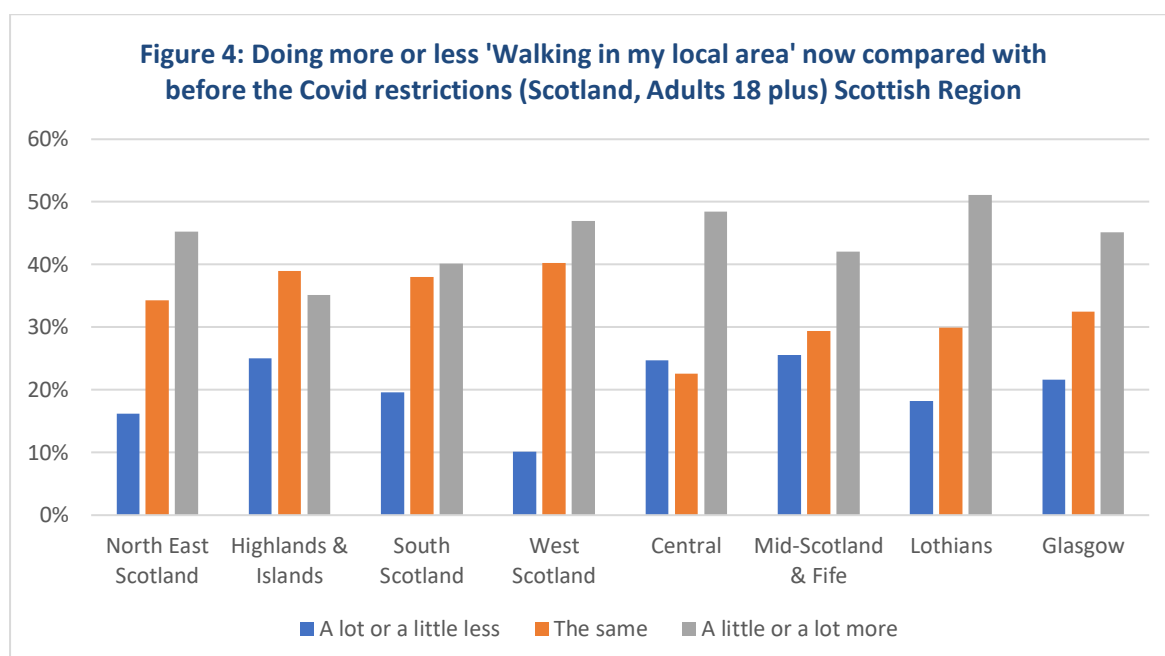
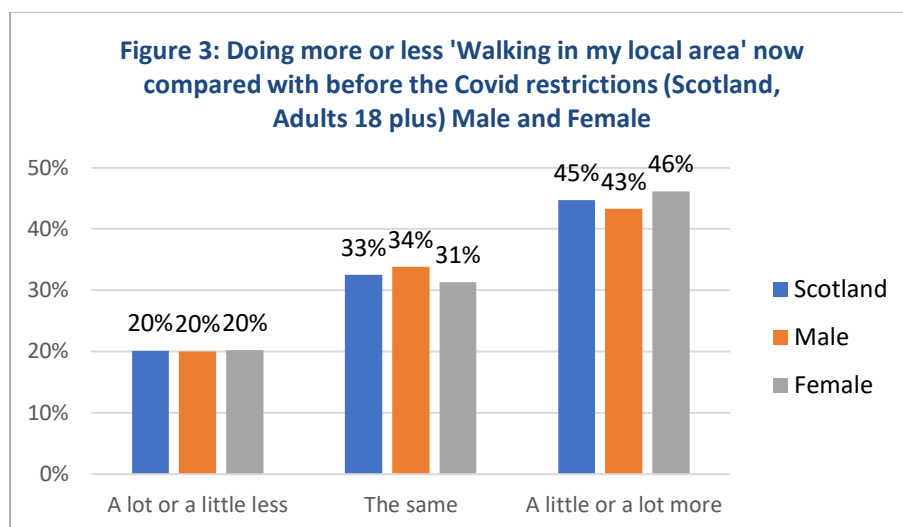
We explored the extent to which changes in participation were different for physical exercise and or sport ‘indoors’ compared with participation ‘outdoors’. The results were similar, with over a third (36%) of the Scottish adult population saying they were doing either a lot or a little less physical exercise and or sport indoors and the same percentage outdoors (Figure 2). One in 5 adults said that they did more physical exercise and or sport outside during the past 12 months compared with nearly one in 7 saying they were doing more indoor exercise or sport activity. Again, the net shift is in a negative direction.



b) Doing more or less walking ‘in my local area’

Figure 3 shows a positive profile of changes in walking behaviours locally. Over 4 in 10 Scots said that they were walking more in their local area during the 12 months of the pandemic compared with the 12 months previously. This applied to both men and women and extended across social class groups – although the profile was slightly less positive for those in the C2DE group compared with those in ABC1. Figure 4 shows a similar profile across all geographical areas of Scotland. Although the balance of the profile is positive, a significant minority of one in 5 Scots said they were walking less locally. And the statistics showing an overall net decrease in activity levels presented earlier demonstrates that this increase in

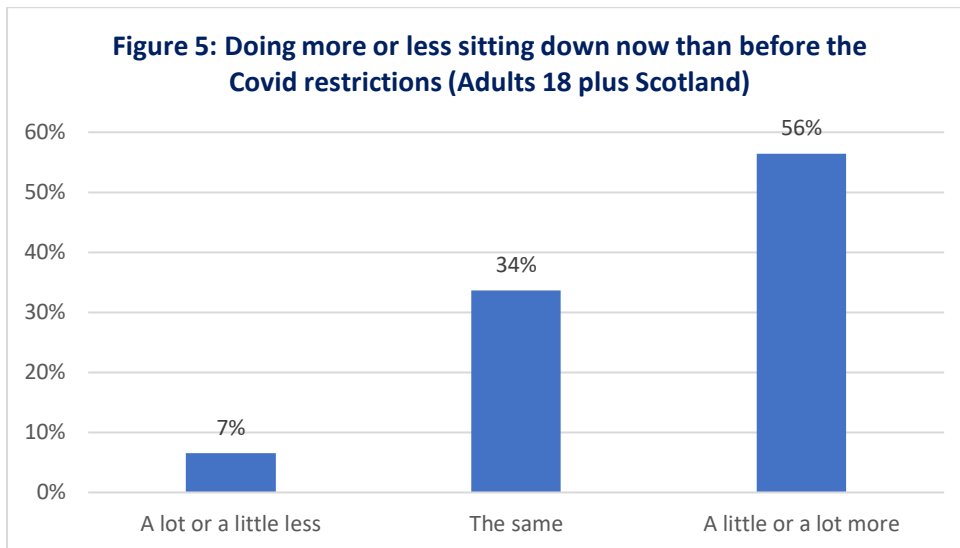
walking does not compensate for decreases in physical activity levels from sport and other exercise activities.



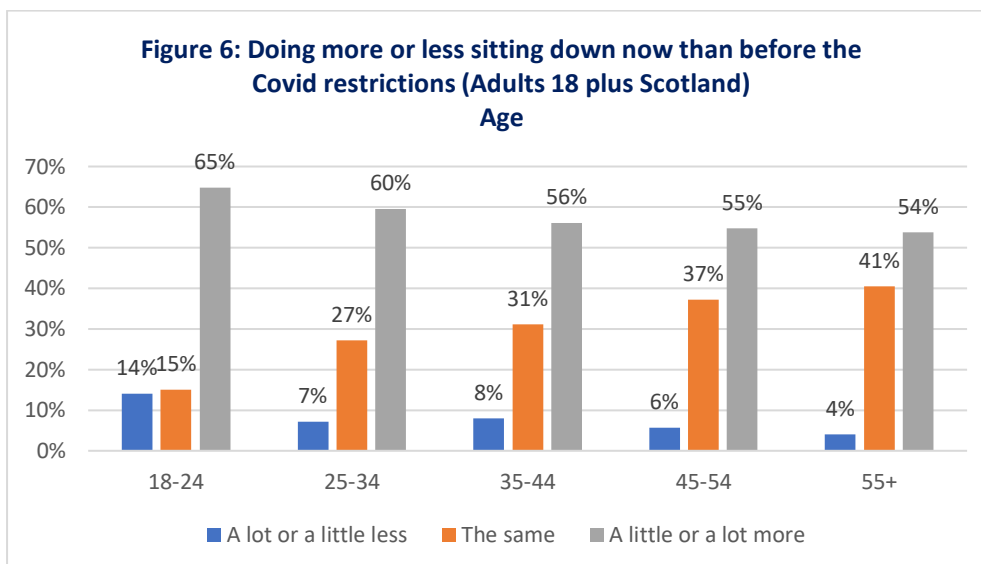
c) Doing more or less 'sitting down'

Higher levels of total daily sitting time are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, independent of physical activity⁷. Figure 5 shows that 56% of adults (approximately 2.5 million people) in Scotland reported spending a little or a lot more time sitting during the 12 months of the pandemic.

⁷ Bailey DP, Hewson DJ, Champion RB, Sayegh SM. Sitting Time and Risk of Cardiovascular Disease and Diabetes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Am J Prev Med. 2019 Sep;57(3):408-416.



Increases in the amount of time spent sitting spanned all age groups (Figure 6) but was at its highest amongst 18- to 24-year with two-thirds reporting an increase. Those doing a little or a lot more sitting decreased with age, however, this is again a relative and not an absolute measure.



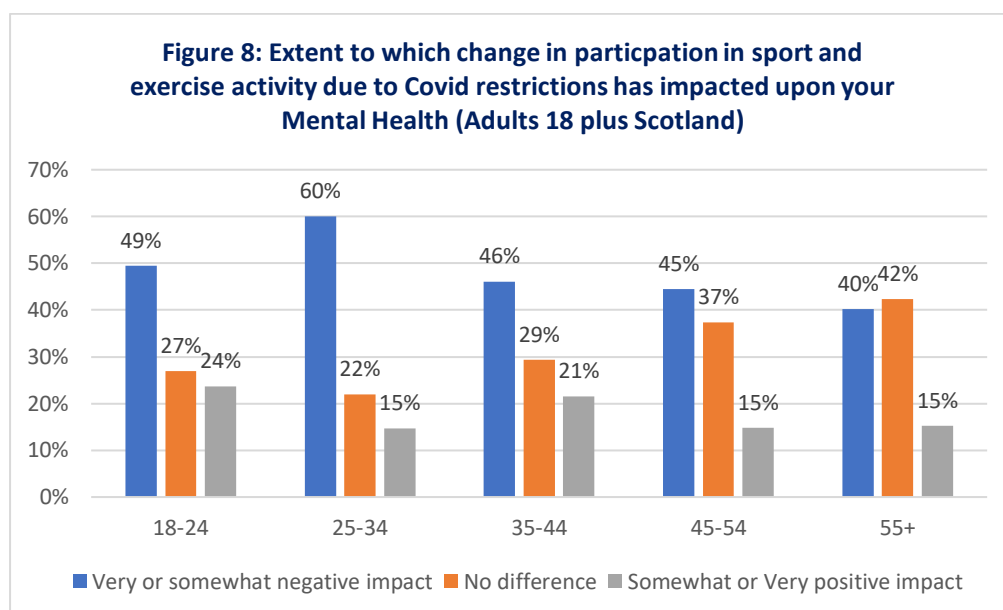
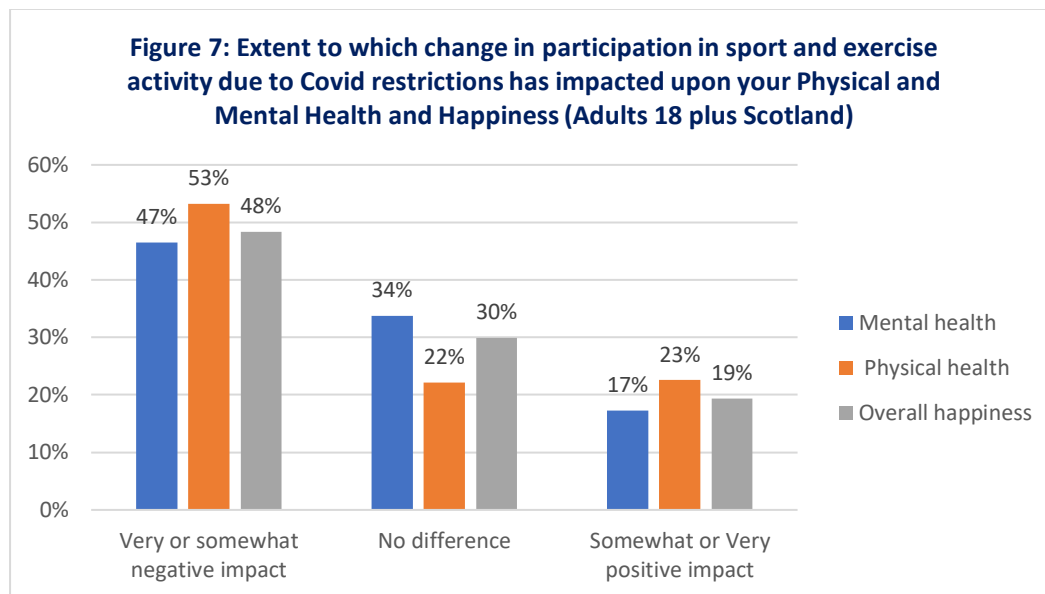
Extent to which changing levels of participation impact on physical and mental health and individual happiness.

Evidence has been growing on the impact of Covid-19 on social anxiety, loneliness, depression, self-harm amongst the young, panic attacks and loss of motivation⁸. These impacts have been pervasive but have differentially impacted on the young and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The consequences of reduced activity levels increased sedentary behaviours and declining opportunities for social interaction and engagement through sport extend beyond the physical to impact on broader aspects of mental health and wellbeing. We asked adults the

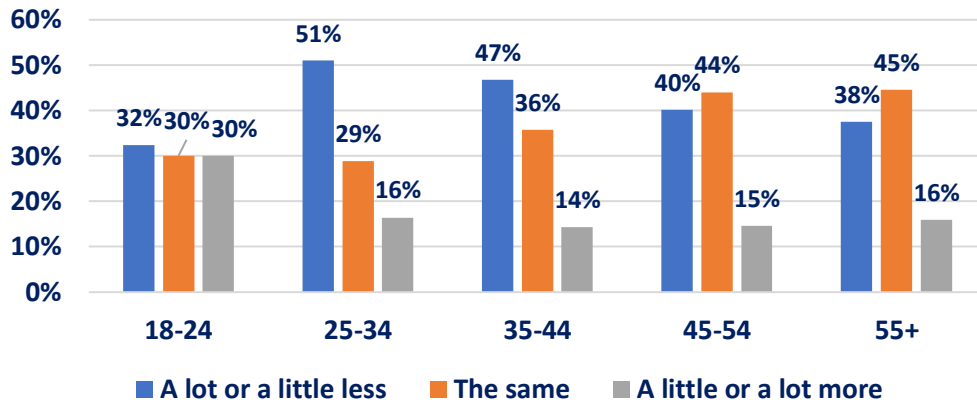
⁸ For evidence of the impact on mental health and wellbeing in Scotland see: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Health-Wellbeing-and-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Final-Report.pdf>

extent to which changes in participation in sport and exercise activity as a consequence of Covid-19 have impacted upon their physical and mental health and overall levels of 'happiness'. Figure 7 shows that between 47% and 53% of the adult population have perceived a very or somewhat negative impact. This contrasts with the 17% to 23% who assessed the impact to be positive.



Focusing on mental health, Figure 8 shows that the negative impacts outweigh the positive ones across all age groups but are particularly high amongst the 25 to 34 years age group.

Figure 9: Feeling more or less motivated and enthusiastic about hobbies and activities now than before the Covid restrictions (Adults 18 plus Scotland)
Age



Feeling motivated to do things is an important marker of wellbeing and positive mental health. Figure 9 again shows a negative balance sheet from the impact of Covid-19. The pattern broadly maps the one seen for mental health with the 25- to 34-year-old group having the most negative profile while the youngest group of 18- to 24-year-olds demonstrate a more balanced picture but even here nearly a third feel a lot or a little less motivated now compared with before the pandemic.

Looking forward – the importance people attach to having the opportunity to take part regularly in sport and exercise activity as we come out of lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions.

Figure 10 shows that 6 out of 10 Scots (over 2.5 million adults) consider it fairly or very important that opportunities are made available to take part regularly in sport and exercise activity in the 12 months after lockdown restrictions are lifted with this evenly split across men and women. The importance of having opportunities to take part in sport and exercise span all the age groups (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Looking forward to the 12 months coming out of lockdown restrictions, how important is it to you that you have the opportunity to take part regularly in sport and exercise activity?

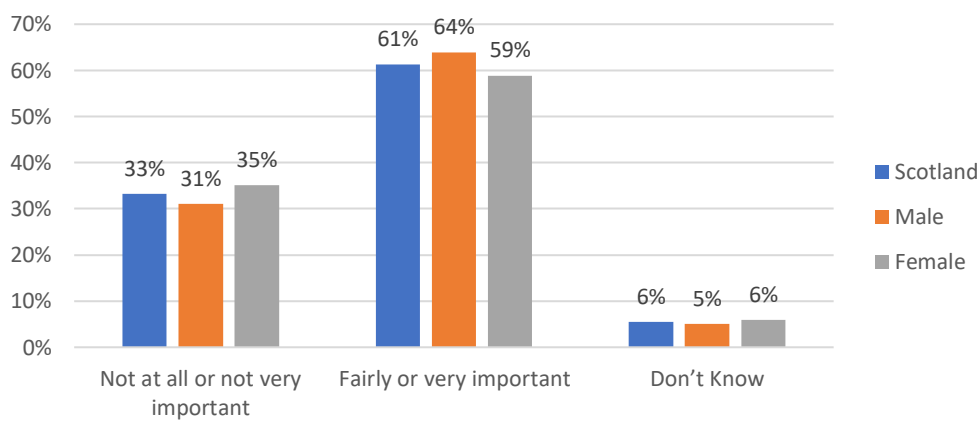
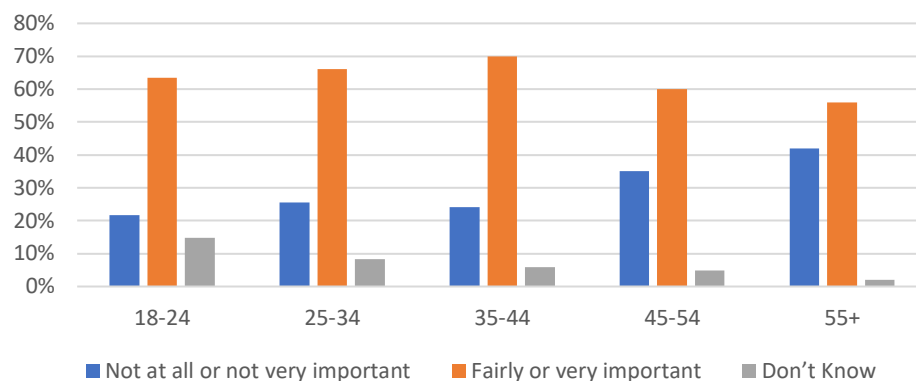


Figure 11: Looking forward to the 12 months coming out of lockdown restrictions, how important is it to you that you have the opportunity to take part regularly in sport and exercise activity?



Rebound, regress or reinvent - what does the future hold?

The evidence presented in this paper is cause for some concern. A country where participation rates in sport and levels of physical activity were at best static and showing some indications of reversing has been hit by a pandemic that has pushed them in a negative direction. The future is uncertain. An optimistic scenario would see a speedy rebound as people at least regress to their pre-pandemic levels of participation in sport and physical activity. The desire for opportunities to be available is an indication of a public appetite for this return to 'normality'.

But there is legitimate concern for a more pessimistic scenario. People's engagement in positive behaviours are no less habitual than their engagement in negative ones. Those at the sporty end of the participation spectrum – i.e., those with high levels of sporting capital⁹ – are likely to bounce back quickly as sport and exercise opportunities open. But those who could perhaps 'take or leave sport' or who have a more ambivalent relationship to physical activity may lack the motivation to overcome what may well be increasing barriers. They may of course make positive alternative choices for how they spend their time, but often the choice can become not doing things rather than active positive engagement in doing something different. For these people inactivity and disengagement can become a downward spiral from which they find it difficult if not impossible to recover. And the likelihood is that the impacts will not be evenly distributed but will be felt more by those already living in disadvantage and poverty.

Whilst many people are looking forward to the opportunity to return to sport and exercise activity the pandemic has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the capacity and infrastructure available to support participation. Many public facilities were already facing challenges on their viability before the pandemic. The extent to which the pandemic has tipped them over the edge towards permanent closure remains to be seen¹⁰. The evidence suggests that the voluntary club sector may have weathered the storm as people's

⁹ For more information about Sporting Capital see: Rowe, N.F. Sporting Capital: Transforming sports development policy and practice, Routledge, 2018

¹⁰ See: <https://communityleisureuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CLUK-Covid-19-Impact-Report.pdf>

commitment to civic engagement has proved resilient. But even here the verdict is out. And evidence from England has raised concerns about the potential ‘bounce back’ for young people into organised sport¹¹.

In a public policy context positive shifts in sport and exercise behaviours are hard won but much more easily lost. The evidence in this paper is indicative of a high risk that sport and exercise activity will emerge from the pandemic in a worse place than where it entered it. Our research shows that many people are already feeling the negative impact of a less active and sporty lifestyle on their physical and mental health and happiness. And the concern is that this ‘worse place’ will persist with long term impacts on physical and mental health.

The Government response can be one of passively hoping that if left alone things will return to ‘normal’. But the indications are that this is at best a high-risk and at worse one that lacks ambition and foresight. Rather, there is a powerful argument from both a public health and wider public good perspective that this is an opportunity for reinvention and renewal where Scotland embraces a philosophy that places sport and physical activity in a central and not peripheral place in public policy intervention. The outcome would be significant levels of investment in an infrastructure, support system, educational programme and capacity that builds a momentum for change. The argument is not whether post Covid we can afford to invest but whether post Covid we can afford not to.

¹¹ See: <https://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/news/covid-19/new-insight-reveals-young-people-are-less-lik>