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in the South East

Executive Summary

Older People, Sport and Active Recreation

A summary of the findings of a study of people and providers in South East England



With a grant from



South East

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Age Concern in the South East

Over 100 separate and independent Age Concerns in the South East have joined Age Concern, the federation, in order to promote joint quality standards and to work more effectively together for the benefit of older people in the region. **Age Concern in the South East** is the vehicle which enables these Age Concerns formally to undertake joint funded projects together, and it is the working name for **Age Concern Regional Support Services (South East)**, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee.

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ACRS

ACRS¹ is the market research function of Age Concern England, part of the Development Directorate. ACRS provides research services to a wide range of clients in the commercial, Governmental, and not-for-profit sectors, including Age Concern organisations and groups. ACRS specialises in research about the older population in the UK, but offers a range of research services (qualitative; quantitative; panel; programme evaluation; PR research; consultancy; training etc) to clients. ACRS has built a considerable wealth of insight into the older marketplace.

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1. Introduction

This report provides a summary of the findings of the research conducted in June 2007 by ACRS on behalf of Age Concern Regional Support Services (South East) with a grant from Sport England (South East).

The purpose of this research was to build on previous knowledge about sport and active recreation among the older population, to gather data relevant to the South East and to focus on greater qualitative detail from older people in the area concerning barriers to participation and ways of overcoming these.

The research took in the views of the professionals working in the communities who are tasked with building capacity and encouraging use of facilities by key audiences. In addition, data about older people and sport / active recreation from a large-scale study conducted by ACRS has been included to provide consumer context, along with detailed economic, social and demographic mapping from 'Local Knowledge' (www.localfutures.com).

Data relating to sport, health and fitness from nVision's survey of the 16+ population has also been included in this report (www.nvisiononline.co.uk).

2. Key issues and recommendations

This section provides a short summary of the key findings of the research including practical recommendations for service providers to encourage more people aged 50+ to participate in sport and active recreation.

Key Issues

- Older people are increasingly aware of the benefits of physical activity and there is a general desire to stay fit, healthy and happy for as long as possible
- Although there is evidence to suggest that uptake of this age group in sporting activities is slowly increasing, their overall level of involvement is relatively low
- In the South East participation rates are higher than other regions in England, but are still relatively low (c. 12%)
- For this age group, sport is closely connected to perceptions of ‘youth’, team activities and competition and does not have the resonance at their life stage as it may once have had
- Generally, the type of physical activities that individuals are likely to want to engage in as they get older shifts from competitive contact and organised team sports to other forms of physical recreation activities such as bowls, walking and swimming
- Personal achievement is important and this age group want to engage in activities that they can do at a more leisurely pace with an emphasis on ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’
- This age group have highlighted that they do not necessarily just want to engage in activities specifically for their age group, but with people who are ‘like them’ in terms of both ability and lifestage

Recommendations

1. There is a requirement for service providers to better understand their target market, which can be achieved by actively consulting with older people in their local area to identify their needs

2. The way in which opportunities are signposted and marketed to this age group is crucial. The findings have shown that there are several ways in which service providers can improve their promotional techniques:
 - Language and presentation are important and marketing should not necessarily be age neutral to reach this audience

 - Positive images of older people participating in sporting activities could encourage and increase participation

 - The social element of sport and recreational activities should increasingly be promoted to encourage participation of this age group

3. The routes to reaching this market are also vital and in addition to traditional methods such as leaflet campaigns, press articles and posters, the following have been highlighted as successful at increasing participation and awareness:
 - Promoting activities through talks in day centres and residential homes

 - Promotional events (such as Hastings' Over 50s Week), activity and open days at gyms and leisure facilities including free 'taster' sessions whereby older people can try different sports and physical recreation activities

- Promoting activities through working in partnership with organisations that have direct contact with this age group e.g. Age Concern and other voluntary organisations
 - GP referral schemes can provide access to older people and have in some cases been successful at retaining this age group in physical activity
4. The following have proven to be successful at engaging this age group in sport and physical activity. However, there is still scope for service providers to explore different modes and models of recreational activities such as:
- Versions of traditional sporting activities that have been adapted for people with disabilities such as Nordic Walking, Boccia and New Age Kurling
 - Transport schemes to encourage those who may not have their own transport to travel to sports and leisure facilities
 - Discounted rates and sessions to be made available at a various times of day for this age group, especially to suit those who are still working
 - Activities for people of the same ability and not just the same lifestage

3. Summary of Research and Implications

Following from the previous section, this is a more detailed synopsis of the findings of the research and the implications that this has for those involved in providing sports and physical recreation activities for older people.

This research highlights the challenges faced in engaging older people more in sport and active recreation. Although older people are now more aware of the need to engage in physical recreation, and there is evidence of uptake among this group slowly increasing, the overall level of involvement by older people in sport is relatively low.

The regional mapping undertaken for this project shows that participation rates among older people in sport in South East England are higher than other regions in England, but still relatively low (c. 12%). This masks variability within the South East, where there are specific areas with lower rates (e.g. Swale, Dover, Hastings) and others with much higher rates (e.g. Wokingham, Test Valley, Chiltern).

The regional analysis undertaken shows that these differences may be influenced by differences in health (status, obesity and long-term illnesses), employment, income, benefit support, quality of local services and deprivation. Further analysis of this data would be needed to examine whether this is a directly causal relationship.

Selecting two contrasting areas (Hastings and Chiltern) and interviewing a cross-section of inactive and active older residents provides useful local and comparative diagnosis of the issues and differences. This adds to the knowledge that Sport England has gleaned from previous research programmes.

The exploratory and initial research undertaken among Community Sports Networks reveals that they have yet to put in place strategies for increasing participation among the older population. Many of them are new, and the staff we spoke to were new in post, but the responses we received were positive about intentions to encourage older people to participate. They report that provision of activities for older people in their areas is generally good, but that focus is on activities that older

people express specific interest in (such as bowls, walking and swimming). Other than bowls, organised team sports (and especially any form of competitive contact sport) are beyond the physical capability of many older people to consider.

As our research demonstrates, many Community Sports Networks lack any research knowledge or insight about the older market, and we can not see how decisions about provision or marketing to this group can be successful without a clearer understanding of the needs and concerns of the target group. Making assumptions based on stereotypical models may be misleading at best, and detrimental at worst. We hope that this research will enable the Community Sports Networks to bridge that gap between perception and understanding, as long as they can find cost-effective strategies for engaging with older people, for example through local Age Concerns or other voluntary groups.

The older people interviewed in the qualitative research represent a broad range of needs, experiences and backgrounds. The findings bear out, in local detail, the learning from previous relevant research. Organised sport no longer appeals to many older people. Strenuous group sport activities are perceived as being for younger people. Active recreation, as long as it is accessible, cost effective, and engaging is much more acceptable to their lifestage, and lifestyle. By 'engaging' we mean free from the worries of fear or embarrassment that many older people feel around physical activity such as the 'gym' culture which is 'not for them'. They want the closeness of association with other people 'like them' in terms of ability and lifestage, without being stigmatised by age or deficiency of ability.

Accessibility is an issue. This is not just about location and access, nor the difference in provision between private and public providers, although this does have a significant local impact, as this research demonstrates. Accessibility is also determined by the models of engagement and marketing that providers deploy in communicating with prospective users and the wider public. Signposting to opportunities, and information about what is available to whom and on what basis are crucial. The language and presentation used in reaching out to a diverse range of audiences is key. The current perception in the marketing community is that marketing should be age neutral. This is fine in general terms, but needs to be refined when the strategic requirement is to engage specific audiences and to improve take up and continuation. This research provides insights into what older people want

from leisure providers, and our use of projective techniques in the group setting has started older people thinking laterally about models of recreation service provision.

However, it may be that we need to explore different models and modes of active recreation (which was not possible in this research) to create new opportunities for older people. The factors that condition their responses are those of health, confidence (and fear), cost and familiarity (or rejection of existing models). Providers, in their turn, are conditioned and perhaps hampered by their existing styles of engagement and delivery.

Improving engagement with and understanding of older people's needs will help. Finding effective ways of motivating local people to engage, through taster (free) sessions, or through networks and groups, may improve awareness and uptake. However it is clear from this research that there is no 'one right way' for increasing physical activity among older people, and there is no homogenous older population.