

# ACTIVE AGEING AND THE ROLE OF THE FITNESS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SECTOR

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## State of play: a rapidly ageing and too physically inactive Europe

“Never before have so many Europeans enjoyed such long lives.”<sup>1</sup> In the last five decades, life expectancy at birth has increased by 10 years for both men and women, and current trends show an increase of a further 3 months per year. According to the European Commission’s 2021 Ageing Report, the EU will “turn increasingly grey” in the coming decades, but with an overall population set to shrink by 5% between 2019 (447 million) and 2070 (424 million). This population will not only decline, but also experience a significant change in its age structure, with a median age rising by 5 years for both men and women by 2070 (reaching 47.3 for men and 50.3 for women). It is estimated that by 2060, one third of EU the population will be over 65.<sup>2</sup>

This trend is having a significant impact on people’s everyday lives and on our societies. It has concrete implications for economic growth, fiscal sustainability, on pensions, for health care, in labour markets and for social cohesion. It also links with high levels of physical inactivity and sedentary behaviours across Europe. Such physical inactivity is considered the fourth biggest killer in the world<sup>3</sup>, and is the main cause of non-communicable diseases, such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, breast cancer, etc. Its economic cost is also considerable: a 2015 study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research estimated the cost of physical inactivity to 80 billion EUR per year in the EU.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore crucial to be reminded of the importance of regular physical activity which alongside its health and social benefits, it also has a significant impact on helping to reduce health care costs to the Member States.

## What is Active Ageing?

As a policy concept, ‘active ageing’ (sometimes referred to as ‘healthy and active ageing’) is about “promoting healthy lifestyles throughout our lives and includes our consumption and nutrition patterns and our levels of physical and social activity. It helps reduce the risk of obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases which are on the rise. (It) is a personal choice and responsibility, but it depends heavily on the environment in which people live, work and socialise.”<sup>5</sup>

Physical activity is central to active ageing as it enables elderly people to stay healthy and to remain longer in employment which helps in sustaining pension systems and most importantly, having an improved quality of life in later years. In this the World Health Organisation recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity weekly or at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity weekly or an equivalent combination of moderate and vigorous-intensity activity. Muscle-strengthening

<sup>1</sup> Green Paper on Ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations, European Commission. 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3i3Rj6M>

<sup>2</sup> The 2021 Ageing Report. Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2019-2070), European Commission. 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3u7gSsc>

<sup>3</sup> Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018- 2030: More Active for a Healthier World, World Health Organisation. 2018. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3AJPyE>

<sup>4</sup> The costs of inactivity in Europe, CEPR. 2015 Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3ziRALj>

<sup>5</sup> Green Paper on Ageing, European Commission. 2021.

activities should be done for major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week.<sup>6</sup>

Public policies can play a significant supporting role in active ageing where “proactive measures can help prevent and detect illness and protect people from the effects of ill health. They can help ensure that healthy and active ageing becomes an easier choice, including for those in situations of vulnerability.”<sup>7</sup>

Even though Member States are responsible for their own health policies, the EU can provide coordinated guidance and action, notably through the new [EU4Health programme](#), for example in the fight against cancer, dementia, mental health, and promoting healthy nutrition and diets as well as regular physical activity.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the United Nations proclaimed **2021–2030 the Decade of Healthy Ageing**, with the World Health Organisation leading international action to improve the lives of older people, their families and communities. A specific “European Programme of Work and Ageing” targets the specific needs of Europe’s oldest age groups.<sup>9</sup>

### The role of Fitness in Active Ageing

Whilst all other grassroots sports have “flat-lined” in their participation levels, the European Fitness and Physical Activity sector has experienced overall a very dynamic growth in the last decade, despite a slight decrease in fitness club memberships in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic: with over 62,000 facilities and 19 billion Euros of annual revenues, it involves 54.8 million consumers in Europe.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, it demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to change, and to react to social developments and consumer ever-changing needs.

However, the current level of engagement among older age groups is far below the potential of other users, with visits to fitness centres of people over 65-year-old accounting for only 9% of total members.<sup>11</sup> This lack of engagement is closely tied to a range of behavioural and socioeconomic factors, but it also indicates that the sector is not currently providing a tailored and sufficiently attractive offer to older people.

There are many ways in which the fitness sector can engage more older adults in appropriate, safe, and effective opportunities for physical activity, and to support healthy lifestyles. Mobilising the European fitness sector towards an active ageing agenda can undeniably help to ease pressures on healthcare systems and support the European recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, EuropeActive currently pilots the EU-funded **Active Ageing Communities**, with the main aim of engaging older adults in physical activity and healthy lifestyles. Through a tailored programme designed for fitness and recreational sport environments, the project ambitions not only to promote importance of regular physical activity towards older people but also to reduce their levels of social isolation by creating communities conducive to establishing long-term sustainable active lifestyles.

<sup>6</sup> WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour, World Health Organisation. 2020. Accessible <https://bit.ly/3i6g7Lj>

<sup>7</sup> Green Paper on Ageing, European Commission.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030, WHO. 1 June 2021. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3iVgqF5>

<sup>10</sup> European Health and Fitness Market Report 2021, Deloitte and EuropeActive. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3i2puLY>

*These are the latest 2021 figures, which reflect the state of the sector after the pandemic and several months of closing. The 2020 figures showed over 28 billion Euros of annual revenues.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.