



More people  
More active  
More often



## THE ACTIVE WORKFORCE:

How to support small and medium-sized businesses with physical activity at work – findings and recommendations

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## FOREWORDS



**Huw Edwards**  
CEO, ukactive

Now, more than ever, the wellbeing of our population is paramount. Roughly half of the UK population is of working age, and the average working adult will spend over 82,000 hours – over 9 years – of their life working. The workspaces that we populate and interact with can have a huge impact on both our physical and mental health, and because we spend so much time in them, we need those to be spaces that allow us to grow, thrive and remain healthy.

We've seen our working world change dramatically because of and since the Covid-19 pandemic hit. We know with it there have been detrimental impacts on individuals' mental health, increased experiences of stress and burnout at work, and an overall decrease in the levels of physical activity throughout the working day. Workplace physical activity, as we call it, is an integral part of workplace health and wellbeing that is often overlooked.

Yet, research shows that providing opportunities for our employees to be active during the working day - whether they are based in the office, on site, at home or hybrid working - can have multiple benefits for their individual health, including mental health, in addition to the productivity of our businesses. A healthier, more active workforce only equates to a healthier, happier, more productive population. As employers, leaders, business and sector representatives we can all do our bit to support levelling up the UK population wellbeing.

It goes without saying that the NHS faces enormous pressures in its mission to support levelling up population health and with it a more active workforce. The fitness and leisure sector can provide a wealth of knowledge, expertise, support and guidance around workplace physical activity. Physical activity is our sectors bread and butter, and with gyms, pools, studios, leisure facilities, online workouts and skilled staff that span the UK and operate at local and national levels, the sector provides places and opportunities to support workplaces of all sizes.

Our sector provides a number of existing workplace physical activity services, from discounted memberships, bespoke and hybrid guidance, resources, toolkits and training, to personalised activity delivery and online support, challenges and exercise classes. The sector continues to grow and develop these services and we are working with them to ensure that awareness of and access to workplace physical activity support is available to all businesses. Especially to those who face more challenges to access, such as small to medium sized enterprises, low wage workers and staff working in non-office industries and on the frontline.

However, conducting research and building an evidence base of how to best support and cater to businesses is fundamental to ensuring the above workplaces get the type of workplace physical activity and health opportunities that best suit their needs. Hence, we have to ensure that we use this report to further opportunities for businesses, and use it as a catalyst alongside other research and initiatives to form a collaborative working towards the same mission.

ukactive has laid out its shared ambition with the Government and partners to increase the membership of gyms and leisure facilities by more than five million people by 2030. As such, supporting workplace physical activity and health represents an opportunity for our sector's expansion into more local communities and business industries.

Local partnerships are key to ensuring this can happen. This involves development of cohesive and powerful partnerships across all local healthcare, leisure and business. The creation of a marketplace where the fitness and leisure sector and the business community can closely interact, co-operate and co-design, and regenerate local spaces could really maximise the impact that the sector can have on supporting workplace physical activity and thus population health - and improving access to existing services for SMEs. We can't forget that supporting the health of our workforce is a joint responsibility of those who work within and represent physical activity, sport and fitness and those working in and with businesses.

With likeminded partners in the wider sports and physical activity sector and in business, ukactive will work closely to connect the fitness and leisure spaces and people to the business community. This is also the time to drive the agenda of workplace physical activity forward with Government, and ensure the optimal operating conditions are put in place to provide businesses and the sector with the right incentives to support the health of employees.

We want the recommendations from this report to inspire collaboration, motivate employers, and expand opportunities around physical activity and wellbeing in the workplace. Together we can play a key role in improving our nations right to a fruitful and healthy life.

## CBI (Confederation of British Industry) Sport England FSB (Federation of Small Businesses)

Since the Covid-19 pandemic the country's mental and physical health and wellbeing and resilience have come up against considerable adversity. The wellbeing and health of our nation needs to be protected and prioritised more than ever. This includes ensuring there are opportunities for the UK workforce to be well and healthy whilst at work.

Workplace health and wellbeing has grown in its prominence, and expectations on employers and businesses have grown around them facilitating a working environment that supports employee's wellbeing and health. Yet while mental health is considered a key part of workplace wellbeing, the importance of integrating physical activity alongside this cannot be forgotten. Physical activity has a key role in supporting both mental and physical health, and in driving workplace satisfaction and productivity.

Improving wellbeing and healthy life expectancy of the UK population and reducing overall health inequalities by 2030 are key objectives laid out in the government's Levelling Up agenda. This includes healthy life expectancy rising by five years and narrowing in where it is highest and lowest, alongside improving overall productivity. Workplace physical activity can make a vital contribution to the Levelling Up and Health Disparities agenda, because of the important role it plays in improving individual and population-wide health.

The challenge now exists to ensure the right opportunities are in place to support employees to be healthy and active whilst at work or during the working day and subsequently outside of working hours. Support is needed for all businesses, but the pressure is felt hardest by the smaller businesses in our society. Small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), while comprising 99.9% of UK businesses – and half of UK private sector turnover – have less access to or means to provide workplace-related physical activity opportunities than larger organisations.

The findings in this report demonstrate that SMEs can be supported in multiple ways, and highlights recommendations targeted towards four different audiences who have a role to play

in this support. Employers, government, the fitness and leisure sector, and those representing and working with both the business community and the fitness, health, leisure and physical activity sectors have a part to play in supporting whole-system change around workplace physical activity and public health.

There are many health sector organisations and professionals, business umbrella groups, trade bodies and coalitions already working to support different areas of workplace wellbeing. It is not necessarily the case that support or services for SMEs does not exist, but rather that the promotion of and access to these services is currently limited and poses a barrier to use. Our strength therefore does not come from trying to re-invent the wheel but from harnessing and combining the existing knowledge and skill from across these individual areas. This would allow us to form a holistic approach to changing the way employers view health and help them to support their employees to have access to the services they need. Workplace physical activity cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest of health and wellbeing. The findings in this report indicate that a concerted effort is needed to ensure there is consistent public health messaging, communication of best practice and promotion of services around physical activity at work. The opportunity to make an impact thus comes from the development of aligned and reciprocal partnerships across healthcare, leisure and business.

The impact that we can have working in partnership towards a common goal to support workplace physical activity and wellbeing is much greater than if we work in silo. That is why we aim to jointly advocate in this space so that businesses get the financial incentives and support they need to provide their employees with opportunities to be active and healthy at work and to make use of the opportunities available at a local level. We are endeavouring to work together to connect up the fitness and leisure sector with the business community to support access for SMEs to relevant workplace physical activity and wider holistic health services at these local levels. Together we strive to improve the health and wellbeing of the UK through supporting an active and healthy workforce.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the coming years, as the United Kingdom (UK) working population continues to age and grow, more people will find themselves working for longer. It is therefore paramount that the health of the UK workforce is supported by increasing opportunities for employees to be physically active during working hours.

Promoting and facilitating opportunities for working adults to be physically active during their working day can bring with it the many physical and mental health benefits of regular participation in physical activity. This is valuable not only for the individual employees but also for employers, with an active workforce bringing numerous business- and employer-related benefits such as reduced presenteeism and absenteeism, as well as increased productivity.

Improving wellbeing and health life expectancy of the UK population, improving productivity and reducing health inequalities by 2030 are key objectives laid out in the government's Levelling Up agenda. Of course, the National Health Service (NHS) has a significant role to play in supporting this, but it faces well-documented resource pressures. Meanwhile, evidence shows that increasing physical activity levels can make a vital contribution to this agenda through improving both individual and population-wide health. There is therefore an important role to be played by a wide range of sectors, including businesses and specifically the fitness and leisure sector, all of whom can support the NHS by keeping the UK workforce healthier and more active.

Employers have a key role to play here, fostering an environment that supports opportunities for employees to be active. However, although small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) account for 99.9% of UK businesses – and half of UK private sector turnover – they have less access to or means to provide workplace-related physical activity opportunities than larger organisations. A combination of greater financial pressures, fewer resources and more competing priorities, a smaller number of employees, limited space and less employer support means SMEs often face more challenges. Additionally, research indicates that traditional workplace physical activity offerings and services might not be suitable for SMEs, suggesting that a different approach may be needed to ensure SMEs are able to support their employees in being active.

The fitness and leisure sector has the potential to help SMEs in this respect, by providing access to public and private gym and leisure facilities as well as a trained and expert workforce, and by linking with local communities and healthcare.

However, in order to deliver this support and aid SMEs in supporting their employees, the fitness and leisure sector and the business community both need a better understanding of workplace physical activity opportunities and the support SMEs currently use and have access to. Research is required to gain a greater understanding of what works and doesn't work for SMEs, as well as to provide a comprehensive view of what workplace physical activity provisions are currently available to support SMEs, both from the fitness and leisure sector and from wider health sector organisations.

### This research consultation aimed to:

1. Further the evidence base around the workplace physical activity support and opportunities that are currently in place for SMEs, exploring confidence levels, perceived barriers, motivators and attitudes towards implementing workplace physical activity opportunities.
2. Identify tangible steps that SME employers can take to support their employees to be active.
3. Provide valuable insights for the fitness and leisure sector, health sector organisations, business umbrella bodies and government, as well as steps they can take to better support SMEs with workplace physical activity.

A mixed methods research approach was used for this consultation, engaging respondents who worked in SMEs, in the fitness and leisure sector, and in business umbrella bodies and health sector organisations. The approach included a survey exploring the current physical activity opportunities and support available for SMEs, as well as their preferences and requirements for further support.

Survey responses were received from 68 SMEs and 54 fitness and leisure sector respondents that provide workplace physical activity support to businesses. Informed by the survey data themes, six one-hour focus groups and two 40-minute interviews were conducted with 36 individuals.

Combined analysis developed tangible insights around current physical activity opportunities, support and motivations, in addition to themes and recommendations.

**Key findings demonstrate that:**

- Overall, 44.4% of SMEs surveyed do not currently provide opportunities for employees to be active during working hours. There is a clear opportunity and need to support SMEs in this area.
- Nearly one-third of SMEs (32.4%) do not feel their organisation has the support it needs to help employees build physical activity into their working day, and believe that support could come from a range of bodies including government health bodies, membership bodies and the fitness and leisure sector.
- The most popular physical activity opportunities already in place among SMEs include the Cycle to work scheme (39.7%) and physical activity challenges and competitions (22.1%).
- The least popular opportunities and support methods are those that involve more cost, such as providing access to private leisure facilities through membership (7.4% of SMEs), a health and wellbeing allowance (5.9%), or providing equipment for employees to be active in the office or at home (10.3%).
- Key enablers encouraging physical activity at work include senior leadership giving time (e.g. offering flexible working and through verbal permission) and role modelling active behaviours.
- Barriers are generally the opposite of these enablers, as well as the newly experienced barriers of increased home and hybrid working.
- Easy, social opportunities are often the most successful and the most likely to be sustained.



The overarching themes and recommendations to support further workplace physical activity opportunities therefore include:

### Recommendations for government

- **Use the tax system to encourage physical activity** – for example, expanding existing schemes like Cycle to Work to include options that support home working (e.g. access to home physical activity equipment and gym membership).

### Recommendations for health sector organisations and business umbrella bodies

- **For ukactive, Sport England and business umbrella groups** – such as FSB - to strategically align to:
  - o Build connections between the business community and the fitness and leisure sector to improve access to workplace physical activity services for SMEs.
  - o Support or align with national public health messaging around workplace physical activity (as well as mental health), with explicit government support for this agenda.
- **For health sector bodies, including ukactive, to support existing data collection frameworks** – like the CBI/Business for Health (B4H) Health Index – which could provide SMEs with access to best practice implementation and measurement of workplace physical activity programmes.

This research is not exhaustive and represents the perspectives of a sub-sample of individuals. Yet it is the first step to understanding the perspectives of both the SME business community and the fitness and leisure sector on workplace physical activity. We hope the recommendations drawn from this research provide clear and tangible areas of focus for SMEs, the fitness and leisure sector and wider business umbrella, trade, health and governing bodies to develop and evolve opportunities for SME employees to be physically active at work.

### Recommendations for the fitness and leisure sector

- **Improve awareness of existing services among SMEs** through targeted marketing to these businesses, working in collaboration with partners to improve local reach, and working with ukactive to showcase the services the sector can offer.
- **Think holistically about workplace offers** – for example, considering service partnerships with broader wellbeing service providers to integrate physical activity into holistic wellbeing packages for businesses, as well as offering hybrid models of delivery.

### Recommendations for employers

- **Give employees time to be active at work** – for example, through flexible working, meeting-free days or scheduled breaks between meetings to allow for movement.
- **Role model workplace physical activity**, with senior leaders engaging in active behaviours and providing verbal and/or policy permission for employees to be active.
- **Keep workplace physical activity simple and social**. Implement simple ideas that are co-created with employees and that allow them to connect and socialise, focusing on removing existing barriers (e.g. lack of socialising, lack of time, reduced incidental movement). This might involve building connections with local fitness and leisure services/providers to increase access to support for employees.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to thank the individuals and organisations who contributed to this research, without whom the findings and recommendations of this report would not have been possible. To obtain the necessary data, both phases of the project required the input and knowledge of a range of respondents, and we value the open and honest contributions we received from these individuals. We hope this report rings true to what was discussed and supports you in your individual, collective and/or organisational missions to incorporate physical activity as a daily priority in the lives of the nation's workforce.

We would also like to thank the contribution, guidance and support of the ukactive Scientific Advisory Board: Professor Greg Whyte (Liverpool John Moores University and Advisory Board chair), Professor Andy Lane (University of Wolverhampton), Professor Alfonso Jimenez (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos and Ingesport-GO fit), Dr Ben Kelly (Nuffield Health), Professor Lynne Kennedy (Zayed University), Dr Nana Anokye (Brunel University London), Professor Stewart Bruce-Low (University of East London), Dr Hayley Mills (Canterbury Christ Church University), Dr Dale Esliger (Loughborough University), and Kerry Wardell (University of Winchester).

## INTRODUCTION

### The workforce and the impact of physical activity

The average adult spends a significant proportion of their lifetime working. In 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) workforce comprised approximately 32.5 million individuals of working age (16–64 years)<sup>1</sup>, which was roughly half (48.4%) of the total UK population that year. This, coupled with the continuous ageing of the UK population<sup>2</sup>, suggests that more people will be working for longer in the coming years, making it of paramount importance that their physical, mental and social health and wellbeing is supported and protected.

Physical activity has a vital role to play here. It is well established that being physically active has a multitude of health benefits, including reducing the risk of non-communicable diseases and mental illness by 35%<sup>3</sup>, supporting good physical and mental function, and improving sleep<sup>4</sup>. Recent research also indicates that physical activity is a protective factor against disease<sup>5</sup> as well as improving the effectiveness of vaccines<sup>6</sup>, including for COVID-19<sup>7</sup>. The positive contribution of physical activity to healthy life expectancy in general, and specifically following the COVID-19 pandemic, has been clearly demonstrated.

This is of direct relevance to the UK government's *Levelling Up* agenda<sup>8</sup>, which includes improving wellbeing and healthy life expectancy of the UK population, improving productivity and life satisfaction and reducing inequalities in the UK by 2030.

Given the amount of time UK adults will spend working, promoting and facilitating opportunities for employees to be more physically active during their working day – such as through active breaks, active travel or formal exercise activities – has the potential to support this wider government mission of “levelling up” population health and wellbeing, increasing people's daily physical activity participation and in turn supporting their individual, holistic wellbeing.

A physically active workforce also has business-related benefits for employers and the economy. Physical activity participation in employees is linked to:

- Increased productivity at work and job satisfaction<sup>9-11</sup>
- Reduced presenteeism (presence at work while sick)<sup>12</sup>
- Fewer sick days (absenteeism)<sup>11</sup>
- An overall reduced cost to the organisation<sup>13</sup>

These benefits are compared to the detrimental impact of an inactive workforce. Employees in sedentary work roles, who spend up to eight hours a day sitting and who are not considered ‘active’<sup>4</sup>, are up to 60% more likely to die early from non-communicable disease<sup>14</sup>.



According to Britain's Healthiest Workplaces Survey 2019:

- An average of 38 days were lost per employee due to absenteeism and presenteeism, of which inactivity accounted for 5.3 days (14.0%) of ill-health absence<sup>15</sup>
- Days lost due to ill-health related absence and presenteeism, which inactivity heightens, cost the British economy an estimated £91.9bn<sup>15</sup>

For the UK National Health Service (NHS), inactivity has been estimated to cost £0.9bn a year, increasing to £7.4bn when inclusive of wider societal costs<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, the NHS has a significant role to play in the government's Levelling Up agenda, in terms of improving healthy life expectancy and public health outcomes, yet its resources are already under significant pressure, with over 6 million individuals on the NHS waiting list<sup>16</sup>. Harnessing support from businesses and the health, fitness, leisure and physical activity sector to help the UK workforce get and remain active would be a positive way to reduce pressure on the NHS, pulling on the expertise, the people and the resources of these sectors to help achieve the government's mission of improving public health outcomes.



Yet since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in early 2020, overall physical activity levels among adults of working age (16+ years) have decreased. According to Sport England Active Lives Survey data from May 2021, one million more adults are classified as inactive and 0.7 million fewer classified as active compared to May 2020<sup>17</sup>.

This drop in activity levels coincided with the introduction of new restrictions (e.g. working from home and the closure of leisure centres and gyms)<sup>17</sup>, supporting recent research which indicates that such restrictions reduced opportunities to be physically active throughout the day and decreased overall physical activity participation in working adults<sup>18</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that this applies to employees across a broad range of professions and industries.

These restrictions may no longer be in place, but their lasting impact on the population's physical activity levels means a greater need than ever to support employers and employees in encouraging, promoting and engaging in physical activity throughout the working day.

The World Health Organisation (WHO)<sup>19</sup>, among others, has long recognised the workplace as an optimal place to engage employees in physical activity, thanks to the extended time adults spend at work<sup>20,21</sup>. Guidance or call to action for the promotion of physical activity in the workplace is also not new. Currently we have to go back to 2008 to find guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) aimed at employers, employees, health professionals and business federations to maximise opportunities for employees to be active during the working day<sup>22</sup>. Whilst this guidance is under review for updating as of 2019, it is unclear when new guidance will surface. In the meantime, workplace physical activity remains under-researched and under-recognised in its importance.

In this report, we refer to 'workplace physical activity', which consists of any movement or physical activity that takes place during an employee's working hours or in their work environment. That could be structured, such as lunchtime fitness classes or walking meetings; incidental, such as walking to get a coffee; or unstructured, such as active travel.

### A gap in the workplace physical activity research and market

When it comes to workplace physical activity, most research has explored what interventions, offers, services and support are available for large, corporate-based organisations. Less is known about how to support physical activity levels within smaller organisations<sup>23-25</sup>.

Yet the UK's 5.6 million small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – which encompass micro-enterprises (1–9 employees), small businesses (10–49 employees) and medium-sized business (50–249 employees) – account for 99.9% of all UK businesses<sup>26</sup>. Of these 5.6 million SMEs, 5.5 million (99.2%) are micro or small (0–49 employees). This leaves large businesses (250+ employees) making up just 0.1% of the total business population<sup>26</sup>.

Also of note, at the start of 2021, SMEs accounted for just under two-thirds of UK employment (61%) and half of all UK private sector turnover (52% – a value of £2.3trn)<sup>26</sup>.

Yet most of the evidence on how best to support workplace physical activity and develop workplace solutions is currently geared towards large businesses. This clearly excludes a large proportion of the workforce.

Similarly, research into physical activity provision and services to support businesses have traditionally tended to focus on corporate offers – such as corporate gym memberships or health and wellbeing discounts – that cater for a large number of employees<sup>27</sup>. This may be because larger businesses tend to have organisational structures that allow for more resources and larger budgets<sup>24</sup> to be invested in funding workplace physical activity opportunities, as well as in monitoring the uptake of these opportunities.

Research has found that, compared to large organisations, smaller businesses tend to report fewer physical activity opportunities or programmes, lower levels of senior leadership support for these opportunities, and a work schedule that's less flexible and that lacks time for physical activity during working hours<sup>28</sup>. SMEs face very different challenges from larger organisations, as putting workplace physical activity practices and initiatives in place is proportionally more resource- and cost-intensive due to smaller budgets, as well as less feasible due to limited space and/or access to facilities<sup>29,30</sup>.



SMEs have also reported having ‘other priorities’ that “outweigh” employee health, with leaders of SMEs feeling they were not at a size to take employee health seriously<sup>31</sup>. Opportunities that are in place tend to be ad hoc rather than part of a formal strategy<sup>32</sup>.

Where physical activity implementation has been successful for SMEs, this is the result of an existing culture and awareness of health and wellbeing<sup>24,33</sup>. However, research literature about the types of intervention, programme or service that work best for SMEs is limited. This makes it hard to draw conclusions about what works and what does not work for SMEs and suggests further research is needed to understand this.

The above challenges suggest that different approaches might be needed when looking to provide workplace physical activity opportunities or support for SMEs, compared to the approach that may be taken for larger organisations.

This may involve firstly understanding what works and does not work for SMEs, and asking for their current perceptions of the services available to them, before working with the relevant sectors to ensure access to, and awareness of, said services.

For example, there are a number of existing programmes in place to support local SMEs in improving employee physical and mental health, connecting them to the expertise that exists within the fitness and leisure sector and through other local partnerships.

One example is Business Health Matters<sup>34</sup>, a 2021 UKRI-funded Lancashire-based programme delivered by a consortium of Active Partnerships, the fitness and leisure sector, academia, local health and social care, Chambers of Commerce and mental health charities. The programme uses these partnerships to provide workplace health screenings to SME employees, pulling on the skills and support of gym and leisure provider staff to deliver the screenings; by diversifying the workforce in this way, it helps take pressure off NHS services.



Another local-level, Active Partnerships-operated programme is Workplace Movement<sup>35</sup>. This programme aims to provide local businesses with online tools and bespoke resources to support workplace movement, as well as providing access to networks of local health, education, fitness and leisure and sport professionals, and authorities.

It is clear that the fitness and leisure sector has great scope to support SMEs' workplace physical activity initiatives in a multitude of ways: through access to public and private gym and leisure facilities, the expertise of its trained workforce, and through links with local communities and healthcare.

This potential is further accentuated by the size, diversity and social value of the fitness and leisure sector, which spans public and private leisure operators, gyms, suppliers, independent and boutique services, consultancy and support services and self-employed fitness professionals. In 2019, before the pandemic, there were 4,510 private sector gyms – including independent and multi-centres – and 2,729 public gyms across the home nations, 83% of which were located across England<sup>36</sup>. The same year, just under 3 million people were members public leisure facilities<sup>37</sup>.

Meanwhile, between 2016 and 2019, private sector operator The Gym Group reported a social value of £553m (£3.1m per site) – an increase from £246m (£2.8m) in 2016<sup>38</sup>. In 2017, the social value of public sector leisure was estimated to be £3.3bn<sup>39</sup>, while in 2019, the overall social value of sport and physical activity – defined as value to health, mental wellbeing, education and crime reduction – was estimated to be £71.61bn<sup>40</sup>.

It is clear that the impact of the fitness and leisure sector is not just down to its geographical spread, but also to its social wellbeing benefits for local communities and businesses.

However, to support workplace physical activity in SMEs, the fitness and leisure sector and the business community both need a better understanding of workplace physical activity opportunities, as well as the support SMEs currently use and have access to. Research is required to establish what works and doesn't work for SMEs; to provide a comprehensive view of what workplace physical activity provisions are currently available to support SMEs, both from the fitness and leisure sector and from health sector organisations; and to establish SMEs' awareness of these provisions.



## AIMS & OBJECTIVES

In light of this need for further data and evidence around SME workplace physical activity, the ukactive Research Institute, commissioned by Sport England, undertook a research consultation to explore workplace physical activity support and opportunities for SMEs.

### This consultation aimed to:

1. Further the evidence base around workplace physical activity support and opportunities in place for SMEs, with a view to establishing what support and guidance is likely – or less likely – to work when implementing workplace physical activity.
2. Explore current confidence levels, perceived barriers, motivators and attitudes towards implementing workplace physical activity opportunities among those in SMEs.
3. Identify tangible steps that SMEs can take to support workplace physical activity.
4. Identify key insights for the fitness and leisure sector, as well as steps it can take to maintain, improve, expand or increase the exposure of its services to support SMEs with workplace physical activity.

Workplace physical activity is an area that represents great growth potential for the fitness and leisure sector; conducting research in this area is a key step to understanding how the fitness and leisure sector can grow by targeting services towards SMEs.

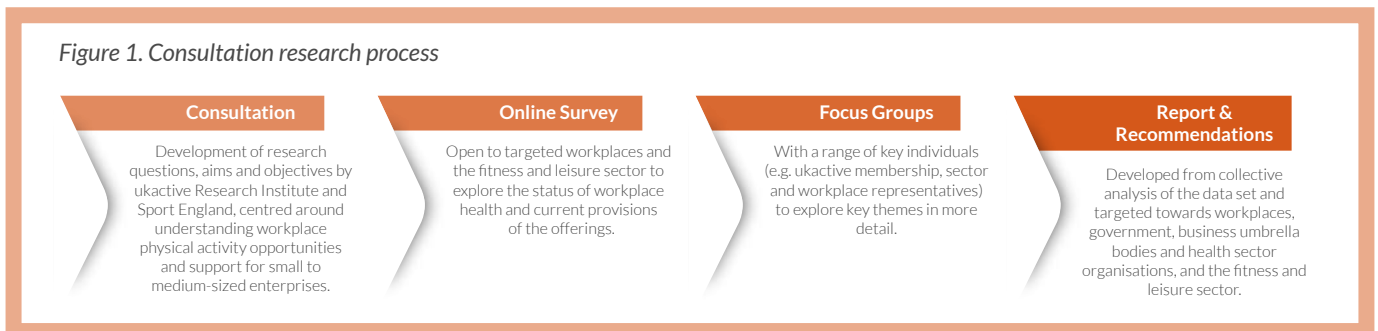
ukactive’s long-standing and uncompromising vision is to get more people, more active, more often. ukactive is therefore committed to improving the health of the nation through promoting active lifestyles. The ukactive Research Institute supports this vision by producing high-quality, rigorous and innovative research, evaluation and business intelligence to drive sector, policy and academic impact. ukactive’s strategic aims support the survival, recovery and development of the fitness and leisure sector following the COVID-19 pandemic. This is achieved through supporting, protecting and informing members; representing and championing members; and helping members grow.

This research was conducted in partnership with Sport England, the arms-length body of government responsible for growing and developing grassroots sport and getting more people active across England. Sport England’s *Uniting the Movement* strategy is a 10-year vision to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity. At its heart, it seeks to tackle inequalities and give everyone access to the benefits of an active life. There are many organisations working to improve health and wellbeing, from the NHS to the fitness and leisure sector to local authorities to employers. *Uniting the Movement* recognises that, by using the power of physical activity alongside the work of all these organisations, there is huge potential to strengthen people’s health and wellbeing right through to retirement and older age.



# METHODOLOGY

To meet the aims and objectives of the research, a mixed methods approach was used, undertaken across two phases and using a fully digital data collection process (see Figure 1 for an overview).



## Phase 1 – Online survey

Survey responses were sought from two research populations of interest, the first being individuals working in SMEs (senior leaders, HR managers and employees), and the second being individuals who work in the fitness and leisure sector to support workplace physical activity for SMEs (including public and private leisure operators, suppliers, self-employed or independent services).

Questions centred around understanding the opportunities and support that’s currently in place for SMEs in the area of workplace physical activity, and within that, understanding what is seen as successful (and not successful) in terms

of uptake and sustainability. This included exploring the barriers, challenges, enablers, motivators, perceived confidence, comfort levels and priorities of SMEs in relation to workplace physical activity. Additionally, questions were asked to establish what else might be needed to improve workplace physical activity opportunities and support for SMEs.

The full set of survey questions can be found [here](#). The online survey was live between 28 September 2021 and 4 January 2022 and was disseminated across ukactive’s membership and wider network, Sport England’s network, and partners that represent SMEs.



## Phase 2 – Online focus groups and interviews

Focus groups followed the survey and engaged three research populations of interest:

1. Individuals working for SMEs (senior leaders, HR managers and employees).
2. Individuals working in the fitness and leisure sector to support workplace physical activity for SMEs.
3. Individuals working in health sector organisations and business umbrella groups supporting workplace physical activity.

Building on and informed by themes from the survey data, focus group participants were asked to identify challenges and successes in implementing workplace physical activity with/as an SME and to identify any further support required, including specifically discussing the role the fitness and leisure sector could play.

Six one-hour focus groups and two 40-minute interviews were undertaken by the ukactive Research Institute with 36 individuals across these research populations. These were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis, a process that identifies recurring patterns in the data and then categorises patterns into prevalent themes and sub-themes<sup>41</sup>.

Health sector organisations and business umbrella groups engaged through the focus groups (n=11) included representatives from the public and private health service, local government, an academic institution, governing health bodies and units, business umbrella bodies, business trade groups and business coalitions - such as Active Partnerships, FSB and Business for Health (B4H). These individuals were located in and working across the UK, with the majority in England (82.4%) – South-East (London), South-West (Devon), West Midlands, North-West (Manchester, Liverpool, Lancashire) and North-East (York).



## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Themes, discussion points and subsequent recommendations are based on the combined analysis and interpretation of the survey and focus group data. Although total survey click-through was higher, 122 survey responses were usable, from SMEs (n=68) and members of the fitness and leisure sector providing workplace physical activity support to businesses (n=54).

Findings presented in this section are based on SMEs respondents only, with responses from SMEs accounting for half of all responses from businesses (56.2%, n=68). Of the SME responses, two-fifths (42.6%, n=29) came from small enterprises of 10–49 employees (see Figure 2).

The survey was completed by individuals across a variety of sectors (based on the use of Standard Industrial Classification, or SIC, code<sup>42</sup>). However, the most frequently represented industries were: human health and social work activities (9.9%); other service activities (e.g. self-employed in any industry – 7.4%); arts, entertainment and recreation (7.4%); and professional, scientific and technical activities (6.6%). Individuals were either office-based (35.2%), home-based (22.7%) or working equally between both settings (21.6%).

Respondents that said they provided SME workplace physical activity support (n=54) came from across the fitness and leisure sector or worked in local council, government or national governing bodies. Of those working in the fitness and leisure sector, 42.9% were public operators (e.g. leisure centres, local authority facilities) and 32.7% were private operators (e.g. private gyms). They predominantly serviced organisations located in England (65.2%).

### Current physical activity opportunities and support in place for SMEs

#### Physical activity opportunities

Of the SMEs that responded to the survey (n=68), half (50.8%, n=32) stated that their organisation provided opportunities for employees to be physically active at work or during working hours. However, roughly two-fifths said there were no opportunities in place (44.4%, n=28) (Figure 3).

A physical activity opportunity was defined as a tangible opportunity that had been put in place to encourage employees to be active, such as a workplace step challenge or access to activity classes. It did not include any activity that was an integral part of the job role (e.g. manual lifting or loading).

Figure 2. Split of SME survey respondents (n=68) by business size

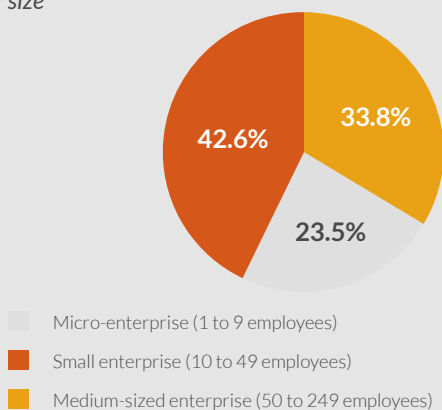
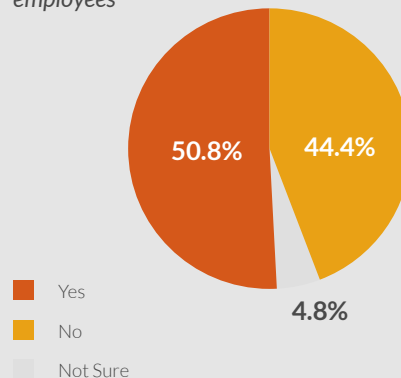


Figure 3. Responses (n=63) for 'Does your organisation provide workplace physical activity opportunities for employees'



Discussing opportunities already in place, a variety of physical activity opportunities were identified (see Figure 4). Among SME survey respondents, offering government schemes (e.g. Cycle to Work) (39.7%, n=27) was the most popular physical activity opportunity implemented. This was followed by SMEs putting in place:

- Physical activity challenges and competitions – e.g. step challenges (22.1%, n=15)
- Discounted and free gym membership for budget gyms (20.6%, n=14)
- Walking clubs / activity groups / team sports with colleagues (19.1%, n=13)

However, a quarter of SMEs (25.0%, n=17) said no physical activity opportunities were in place. Where this was the case, SMEs’ stated preferences regarding the types of opportunity they would put in place if they could included:

- Walking meetings or active breaks (36.8%, n=25)
- Walking clubs (30.9%, n=21)
- Physical activity challenges and competitions (26.5%, n=18)
- Organised exercise classes during paid time (26.5%, n=18)

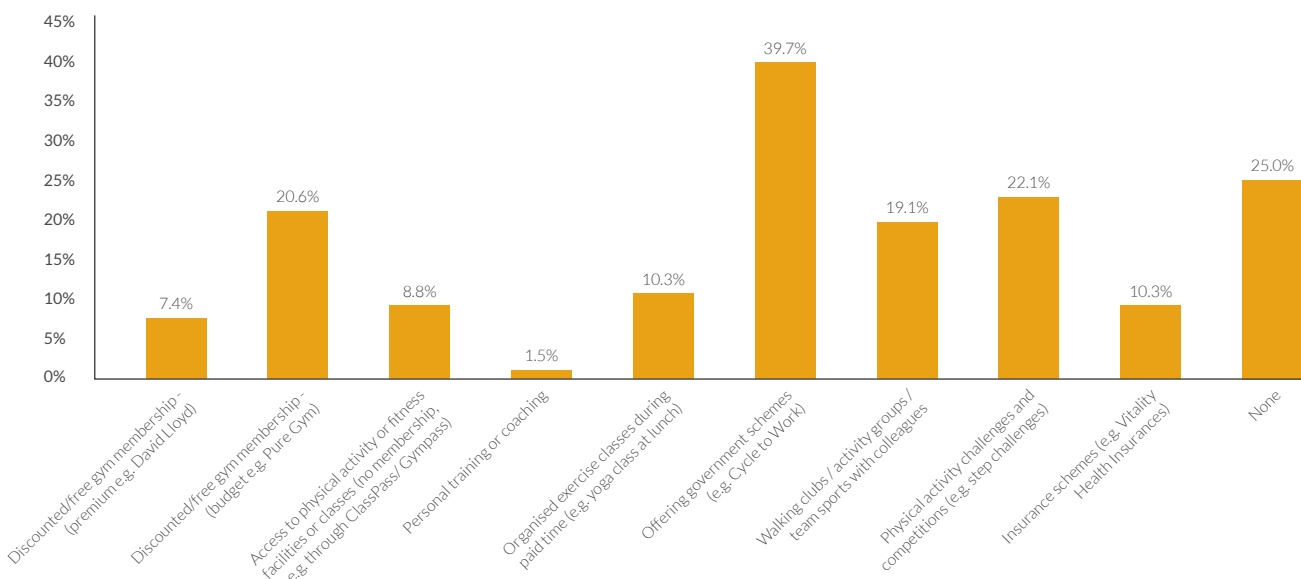
Common to all of these opportunities is the fact that they are easy to put in place, drawing on simple ideas and/or pre-existing schemes; relatively low-cost; and social, allowing employees to engage and connect with one another. These three points were identified as important enablers for SMEs.

Only one SME surveyed stated that it offered personal training or coaching (1.5%), while fewer than 10% provided access to private leisure facilities through discounted/free membership of premium clubs (7.4%, n=5) or access to facilities or classes through alternative methods (e.g. token system) such as ClassPass or Gympass (8.8%, n=4).

SMEs explained that these more traditional membership and gym access offers were less frequently implemented by their organisations due both to cost and to the feeling that the offers did not really cater for their size of company.

**Figure 4. Workplace physical activity opportunities in place for employees in SMEs (n=68)**

% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph



### Physical activity support

Physical activity support referred to aspects like advice, guidance, moral support, access to facilities, or any broader, less tangible support provided by a business to its employees around how to be active.

Nearly half of SMEs who answered the survey (47.1%, n=32) had put flexible working in place as a way to support workplace physical activity (see Figure 5). This was in line with findings from the focus groups as well as previous research<sup>43,44</sup>, all of which indicates that flexible working is a key enabler for workplace physical activity. Flexible working was seen as a way to give employees ‘permission’ to use their time to be active, as well as practically affording them the flexibility to fit activity around their workload and workday structure.

Other popular ways of supporting employee physical activity included encouragement and support from colleagues to be active (41.2%, n=28), access to facilities like bike parking and showers (36.8%, n=25), and encouragement and role modelling from senior managers (27.9%, n=19).

Conversely, a lack of access to facilities and a lack of senior management role models were noted as key barriers for SMEs.

Less common forms of support included:

- Health and wellbeing allowance (5.9%, n=4)
- Access to physical activity offers through employee benefit platforms (e.g. Perkbox) (7.4%, n=5)
- Providing space in the work environment to be physically active (8.8%, n=6)
- Providing employees with equipment for the office, home or other work location (10.3%, n=7)

Common to these less popular support mechanisms is the incurring of expense and/or the need for formalised allowances or benefit platforms, further implying that the things that work best for SMEs are low-cost options and/or options that are more ad hoc in nature. This is in line with previous research and further indicates that, when it comes to workplace physical activity, cost can be a real barrier for SMEs<sup>29,32</sup> – once again demonstrating a key difference between the needs of SMEs and those of larger businesses.

Figure 5. Workplace physical activity supports in place among SMEs (n=68)

% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph

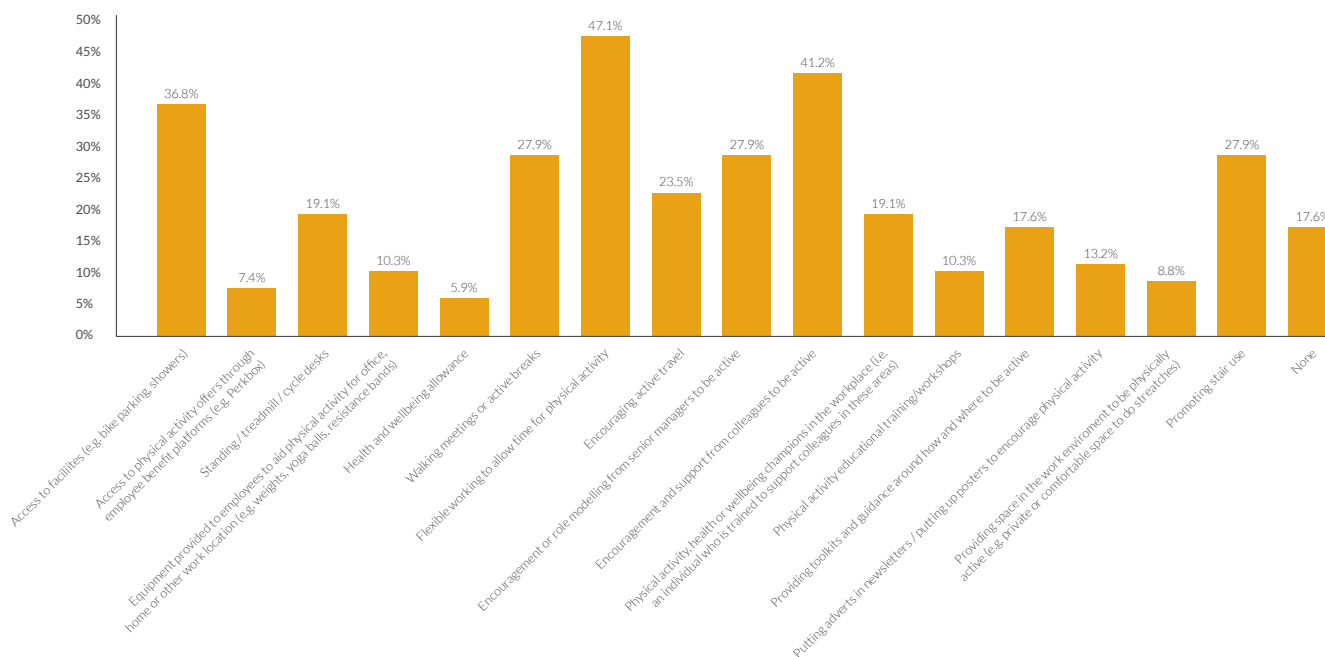
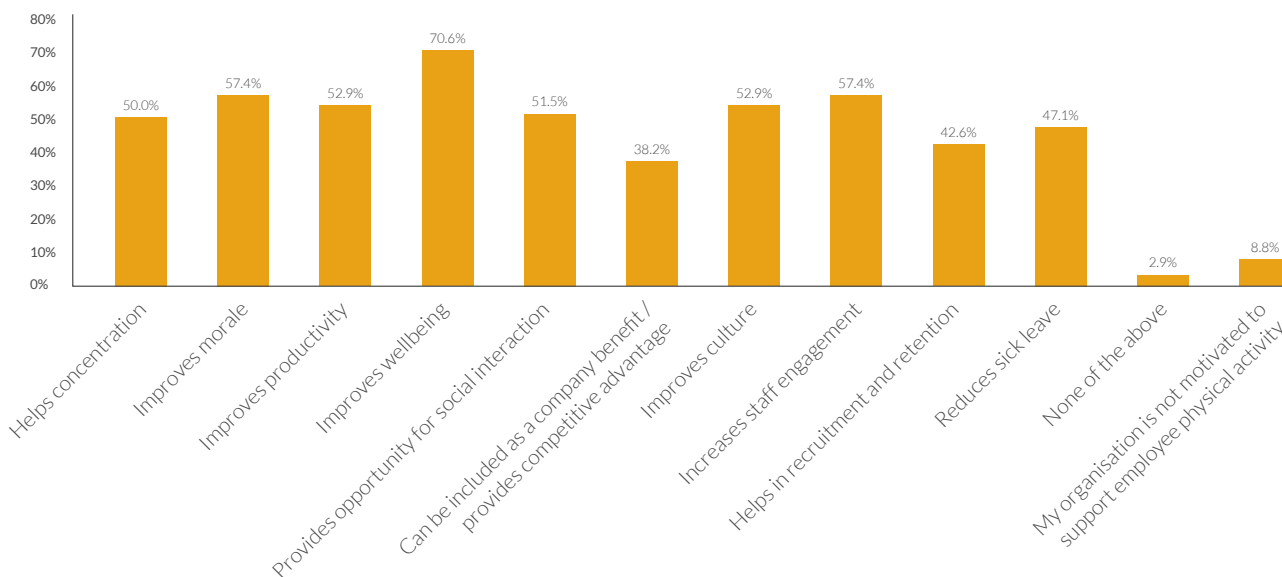


Figure 6. Motivations for SMEs to put workplace physical activity opportunities and support in place (n=68)  
% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph



### Motivators, confidence and comfort

Individuals working in SMEs were keen for their businesses to support and encourage workplace physical activity, listing various reasons why this was the case. When asked to select from a pre-determined list in the survey, the top motivators were that workplace physical activity improves wellbeing (70.6%, n=48), improves morale (57.4%, n=39), increases staff engagement (57.4%, n=39), improves productivity (52.9%, n=36) and improves culture (52.9%, n=36) – see Figure 6.

With close to three-quarters of SME respondents reporting that workplace physical activity improves wellbeing, it is clear that both employers and employees already see the link between the two. To maintain and continue to elevate awareness of this vital benefit of physical activity, it must now be integrated into the narrative around supporting wider mental health and wellbeing.

When asked how confident and comfortable SME survey respondents felt to deliver and support physical activity opportunities for employees, and offer guidance or advice to other employees about being physically active, the major responded positively: 71.2% felt confident (positive) about delivering physical activity opportunities (Figure 7), while 74.6% felt comfortable (positive) about offering guidance or advice (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Percentage of respondents (n=59) to: 'How confident do you feel to deliver and support physical activity and health opportunities for employees in your organisation? (0 = not at all confident and 10 = completely confident)'

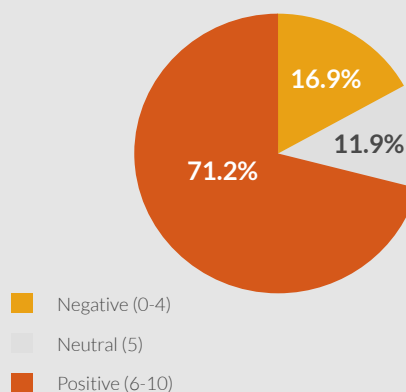
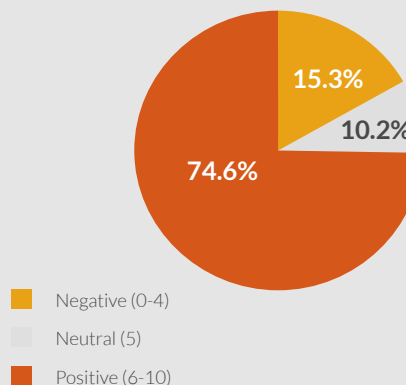


Figure 8. Percentage of respondents (n=59) to: 'How comfortable do you feel about offering guidance or advice to other employees in your organisation about being physically active? (0 = not at all comfortable and 10 = completely comfortable)'



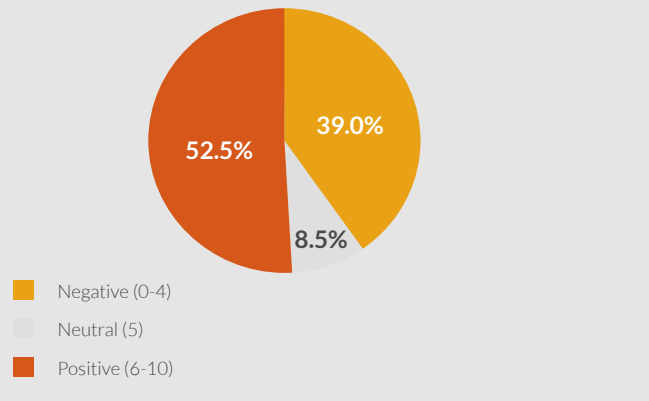
When respondents were asked to what extent they felt opportunities for employees to be physically active were prioritised in and by their organisation, just over half responded positively (52.5%, n=31). However, roughly two-fifths responded negatively (39.0%, n=23), indicating that they did not feel physical activity opportunities were prioritised by their organisation – see Figure 9.

A lack of prioritisation might explain the earlier finding that 44.4% of SMEs surveyed did not have workplace physical activity opportunities in place (n=28).

There also appears to be a disparity between the high levels of confidence and skills that individuals working in SMEs feel they have to deliver and offer workplace physical activity, and the actions of businesses in terms of actually prioritising this.

The following three sections of this report will build on these overarching findings and present combined results, recommendations and discussion around the support that can be provided – by health sector organisations, business umbrella bodies and government, the fitness and leisure sector, and SME employers themselves – to improve opportunities for employee workplace physical activity.

Figure 9. Percentage of respondents (n=59) to: 'To what extent do you feel opportunities for employees to be physically active and healthy are prioritised in your organisation? (0 = not at all prioritised and 10 = completely prioritised)'



## SECTION 1: HEALTH SECTOR ORGANISATION, BUSINESS UMBRELLA BODY AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR SME WORKPLACE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

When asked if their organisation had the support it needed to help employees build physical activity into the working day, 39.7% (n=27) of SMEs surveyed agreed that it did, while 32.3% (n=22) disagreed (Figure 10). This feeling that more support is required, evident among a third of respondents, echoes the lack of workplace physical activity opportunities overall – the previously mentioned 44.4% figure.

When asked who SMEs felt this support should come from, nearly a quarter selected the government or government health bodies (23.6%, n=47), followed by governing or membership bodies (20.1%, n=40) and the physical activity, fitness and leisure sector (18.6%, n=37) – see Figure 11.

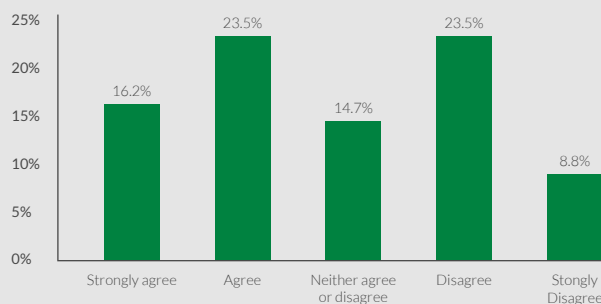
This suggests that SMEs feel support should be coming from multiple parties and implies that cross-sector input and collaboration is required to support workplace physical activity in SMEs.

A number of individuals involved in supporting workplace physical activity were then consulted through focus groups about the overarching support they felt was required, and from who, to better support SMEs in enabling workplace physical activity.

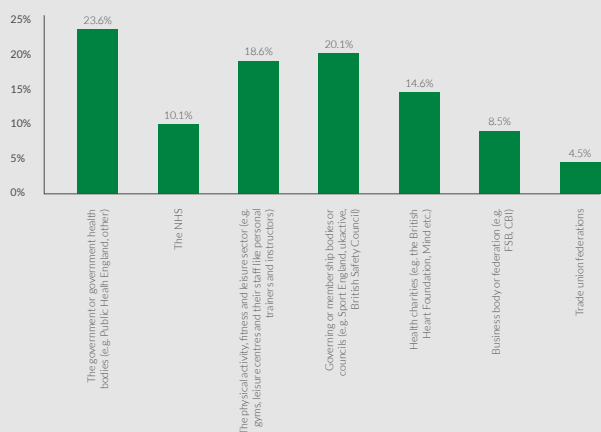
These individuals worked across a variety of roles – including in national and local public health, for national governing bodies and for local councils – and were offering or involved in a variety of services supporting SME workplace physical activity. These wide-ranging services spanned consultancy, development and delivery of workplace health and wellbeing programmes, development of active workplace charters and pledges, delivery of workshops, education and guidance, development of national campaigns, and awareness and policy work on behalf of the business community.

In combination with input from those working in the fitness and leisure sector and SMEs themselves, the discussion resulted in the development of four themes. These are outlined, with their respective sub-themes, in Figure 12.

**Figure 10. Percentage of respondents (n=68) to the statement: 'My organisation has the support it needs to help employees build physical activity into the working day'**  
% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph



**Figure 11. Percentage of respondents (n=68) to the question: 'Which organisation(s) should be providing support to enable physical activity in the workplace?'**  
% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph



### Consistent messaging and raising awareness

There was an overriding consensus that a lot of information currently exists on the health benefits of physical activity, as well as the benefits that an active workplace can have on both business and individual health outcomes. However, it was also agreed that the sharing of this information is not necessarily done consistently across the various bodies, organisations and platforms that may disseminate it, and that there is a need for stronger, more unified public health messaging about the benefits of workplace physical activity, including its link with mental health, to share with SMEs.

Individuals working in local authorities, councils, public health and leisure agreed they had a role to play in this messaging, but stressed the need for an overarching national voice.

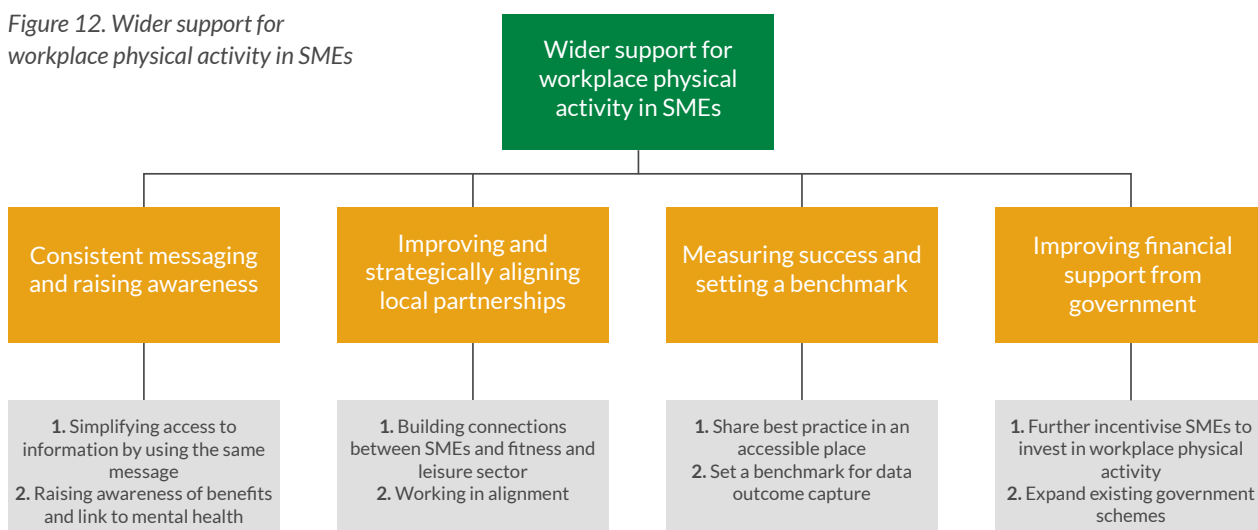
Also discussed was the fact that there will always be ‘multiple messengers’ sharing public health information about workplace physical activity, with information used in different ways to target specific business audiences. Who these messengers are will differ depending on the SME’s information source(s) and existing awareness levels, but there was consensus that each messenger should aim to share, signpost

and advocate the same kind of information around workplace physical activity. It was felt that where possible, this information should link back to a national campaign or national public health resources, aiming to ensure that SMEs across the country all have access to, and awareness of, the same information.

When discussing where this messaging should come from, there was agreement around the need for more consistent, national public health messaging from government health bodies, which could then be both signposted and filtered down at a local level through public health services and business bodies, including targeting specific audiences (e.g. specific sizes of SME or specific industries).

**“““ We are working on having consistency [of] advice and a relative consistency of signposting [to] the resources that are going to be of most use and illustrate best practice. What we’re trying to do is to work with the business community, because in the end, this is for business, by business. But actually, it is very, very multi-stakeholder in the way that we’re approaching it, because you need collaboration between private, public and third sectors in what you’re trying to do, which is to improve health outcomes... it has to be part of a system change approach.” - Business for Health**

Figure 12. Wider support for workplace physical activity in SMEs





Our research found that in many cases, if SMEs were not already connected to a sport or health sector, their awareness of the risk of extended periods of inactivity during work hours was limited. For most participants – including those working directly with SMEs, such as Active Partnerships and FSB – one of the biggest areas of focus was therefore increasing awareness among employers and employees of the aforementioned basic public health information.

Participants also felt it was necessary to increase awareness of the link between physical activity, mental health and wider (e.g. social) wellbeing, in order to communicate the benefits of workplace physical activity and for it to be prioritised alongside mental health. It was felt that this messaging should also be segmented to focus on the specific benefits of workplace physical activity for both employees and employers, with messaging to employees focusing on individual health, fitness and wellbeing, and messaging to employers highlighting the benefits of workplace physical activity on business productivity.

Alongside this, it was felt that the fitness and leisure sector should align its own messaging around physical activity in the workplace with public health messaging, as a way to spotlight the sector’s role in supporting both workplace physical activity and the *Levelling Up* agenda more broadly.

Many of the SMEs we spoke to did not know where to look for health information on workplace physical activity, nor to find out about the workplace physical activity services available in their area. They did not feel this information could be clearly found on the websites of local authorities, councils or leisure centres.

When asked, SMEs said they would turn to government websites first for information on workplace physical activity, but thought it would be more useful if this information were available from their business umbrella body and local health and leisure centres, both on their websites and through other channels of communication.



**There is an awful lot of information out there. One of the things we get criticised on as an organisation is it's really difficult to find things on our website. And I think that can be demonstrated across the whole of the physical activity sector as well. There is lots that people can do, but it's just how accessible that information is. And I think that's one of the key things as well, I don't think we need to create lots more activity, we just need to make the information more accessible for people. And for people to feel that it's there for them, they don't have to go hunting for it [and] it's [not] too difficult for them to find. – *Provider of physical activity services to SMEs***



### Improving and strategically aligning local partnerships

Local partnerships – such as with local health, leisure or local authorities – were seen as an important way for employers and employees of SMEs to gain access to local services that provide workplace physical activity support, including individuals and organisations working in the fitness and leisure sector.

Many of the initiatives spoken about already in place to support workplace physical activity for SMEs – such as Active Partnerships (Workplace Movement) and Business Health Matters – operate their services by building and leveraging partnerships with local health services (e.g. NHS trusts), local leisure centres, local authorities and councils, then connecting these to local businesses.

There were similar findings among our focus group participants, who worked across some of the above areas in addition to local health and local government. All participants working at a local level stated that partnerships were in place, these acted as enablers for their organisations to facilitate workplace physical activity for SMEs. However, they also identified that, to improve SMEs' access to workplace physical activity services, advice, guidance and resources, a greater number of stronger relationships needed to be developed, specifically at a local level.

For example, one participant stated that better relationships with GP practices would aid workplace physical activity by harnessing the route of social prescribing. Another participant, who worked for a local authority, shared an example of partnering with the local leisure centre to secure affordable and flexible access to the centre for the SMEs they worked with. Others also noted the benefit of linking up local fitness and leisure with companies that provide wider health services, such as mental health and wellbeing services, to assist in providing holistic wellbeing packages to SMEs.

The initial challenge, as noted through the focus groups, was that individuals working in SMEs said it was difficult for them to know what workplace physical activity services were currently available through fitness and leisure sector providers in their local area. Similarly, individuals in the fitness and leisure sector said they did not know how to find out about local SMEs that might benefit from their services; fitness professionals felt that access to information on who the local SMEs were and the demographics of their workforces – e.g. size, location, sector – would be valuable, helping facilitate conversation and allowing fitness and leisure providers to approach SMEs and build partnerships within the local SME market.

It was felt that improving these local partnerships would result in part from making different parties aware of the existence of the other, further demonstrating the importance of consistent messaging. The data suggests there is, in the first instance, potential to improve links between SMEs and fitness and leisure sector services (e.g. fitness and leisure centres and gyms) in the same communities/ localities, increasing the access SMEs have to existing, local workplace physical activity services and professionals, and vice versa. This might take the form of a 'marketplace', whereby the business community and the fitness and leisure sector can network, communicate and collaborate on workplace physical activity opportunities.



There were various suggestions from our SME focus group participants around how these links could be improved. These included members of the fitness and leisure sector having access to, or working with, business bodies who represent SMEs – e.g. FSB or Confederation of British Industry (CBI) – and SMEs being able to view and research local fitness professionals and their expertise through professional bodies such as The Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA).

Respondents from the fitness and leisure sector also noted that local partnerships with health authorities might be a good way to reach a wider audience of SMEs.

“ ” Our strategy now, going forward, is that we want to engage more workplaces, [but] we find it very difficult to find out who the SMEs are. I don't know what the solution is to that, but that is definitely a barrier for us, because ...who are the SMEs? How do you find them? How do you find who to contact and to make that approach? – **Provider of physical activity services to SMEs**

### Measuring success and setting a benchmark

Along with the need to raise general awareness about the health benefits of physical activity and its relationship with mental health and wellbeing, a further need was established to more consistently measure the association between physical activity and wider business outcomes, such as Return on Investment (ROI) and productivity for employers, to help create a compelling case for SME investment in workplace physical activity.

This would include the sharing of best practice as a measure of success, with SMEs able to easily access ideas and guidance about what other companies were putting in place and the benefits they were seeing. A number of participants working in health sector organisations and with the business community talked about developing an accessible, trusted space for sharing best practice. This would also include details of relevant professional services to contact for help and support.

Other suggestions included benchmarking the types of outcomes that could be captured to measure the performance and success of workplace physical activity opportunities, programmes or interventions. This was linked to a desire to build a consistent evidence base –

something participants from of the fitness and leisure sector who work with SMEs also saw as a useful tool, to help them sell their services based on evidence and understanding of what works.

Due to the diversity in size of workplace within the SME bracket, this consistent evidence base would require the ongoing collection of research focused on understanding SMEs at a granular, local level. It is suggested that, as part of measuring success, local research should explore further inequalities, challenges and solutions.

“ ” I think sometimes it's [about] relating [our services] to what the business is looking for... They want more productive staff who are focused and motivated... We know all the benefits of physical activity, but [for] a lot of those who work in the businesses, that's not of interest to them. They want to hear about how [staff] can be more productive or more focused on work, and the CEOs will probably want to have more staff in work and [fewer] on sick leave. So it's trying to tick the boxes [with] what you're offering as a service and selling [it that way]. – **Private leisure facility owner**

This demonstrates the importance of the continuous collection of data and the building of evidence to demonstrate the link between physical activity and workplace business outcomes, ensuring that everyone – including the fitness and leisure sector – is sharing the same message.

In addition, it also points to the importance of having accessible examples of best practice, so SMEs can tap in to successful examples and understand what they could implement in their own organisations.

A collaborative business venture between CBI and B4H is looking to provide a framework for this, by creating a *Business Framework for Health and a Health Index*. The Framework's core purpose is to measure business contribution to health, using the Index to showcase what good business-led health intervention looks like, detailing the benefits to both workforce health and business growth<sup>45</sup>.

Building on existing and developing frameworks like this could provide a great platform not just for sharing best practice and raising workplace physical activity awareness among SMEs, but also for helping to align objectives, visions and messaging between health sector organisations and business umbrella bodies to support SME workplace physical activity.

## Improving financial support from government

SMEs often face challenges of smaller budgets and finances, which make investing in workplace physical activity services or structured opportunities difficult<sup>29,30</sup>. This was highlighted by the SMEs in our research, as was the desire for support from local governing bodies and trade and member bodies who could help with lobbying for, or directly providing, financial aid.

Smaller budgets and the barrier of cost could explain why SMEs consulted through our research were most likely to have implemented free or low-cost physical activity opportunities, like the Cycle to Work Scheme, and least likely to have provided opportunities requiring large upfront cost, such as gym memberships, workout equipment for the office or home, or wellbeing allowances.

When asked what further support they would like, SMEs most frequently stated that support in obtaining cheaper, more affordable memberships to well-maintained gyms (public and private) – including discounts specifically designed for smaller businesses – would be extremely valuable. Participants from SMEs also suggested that employers could be incentivised to support workplace physical activity through having access to discounts on physical activity equipment (e.g. sit to stand desks, yoga mats, weights).

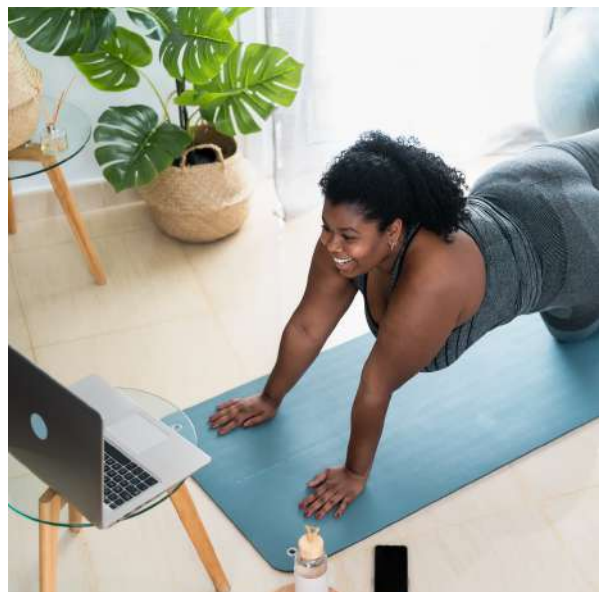
Infrastructure – and specifically, a lack of available space or access to appropriate facilities and equipment – was also noted barrier. This was more likely to impact SMEs than larger organisations due to the cost of creating an office or home set-up that promotes physical activity.

The smaller the business, the more significant the barrier of infrastructure became.

In most cases, individuals working in SMEs also reported infrastructure issues that could prevent workplace physical activity opportunities. For office-working specifically, a lack of showers or secure bike storage made active travel less appealing. For home working, a lack of equipment (e.g. standing desks, home workout equipment) continued to promote sedentary behaviour.

Indeed, lack of facilities (29.4%, n=20) and lack of budget to acquire such facilities (29.4%, n=20) were tied as the third most frequently selected barrier and challenge to workplace physical activity among individuals working in SMEs, after 'lack of time' and 'having an unmanageable workload' (see Giving Time under Section 3).

Lack of access to facilities is a barrier the fitness and leisure sector could potentially help address, by supporting, where possible, access to facility-only gym memberships. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2. Meanwhile, lack of budget to acquire home or office workout equipment or gym access could be tackled through expansion of existing government schemes, like the Cycle to Work Scheme, to include tax relief on home activity equipment and gym memberships.



Financial support for SMEs to invest in workplace physical activity infrastructure was seen as even more necessary since the pandemic, which for some SMEs – particularly the smaller ones that were most likely to have financial challenges – forced them to focus on business survival rather than employee physical activity and health.

While financially incentivised physical activity initiatives like the Cycle to Work scheme already exist, there was overarching agreement among the SMEs consulted, as well as the bodies (e.g. FSB) working to support and represent SMEs, that more could be done to ensure such tax benefit schemes are usable by SMEs and support the growth in hybrid and home working.

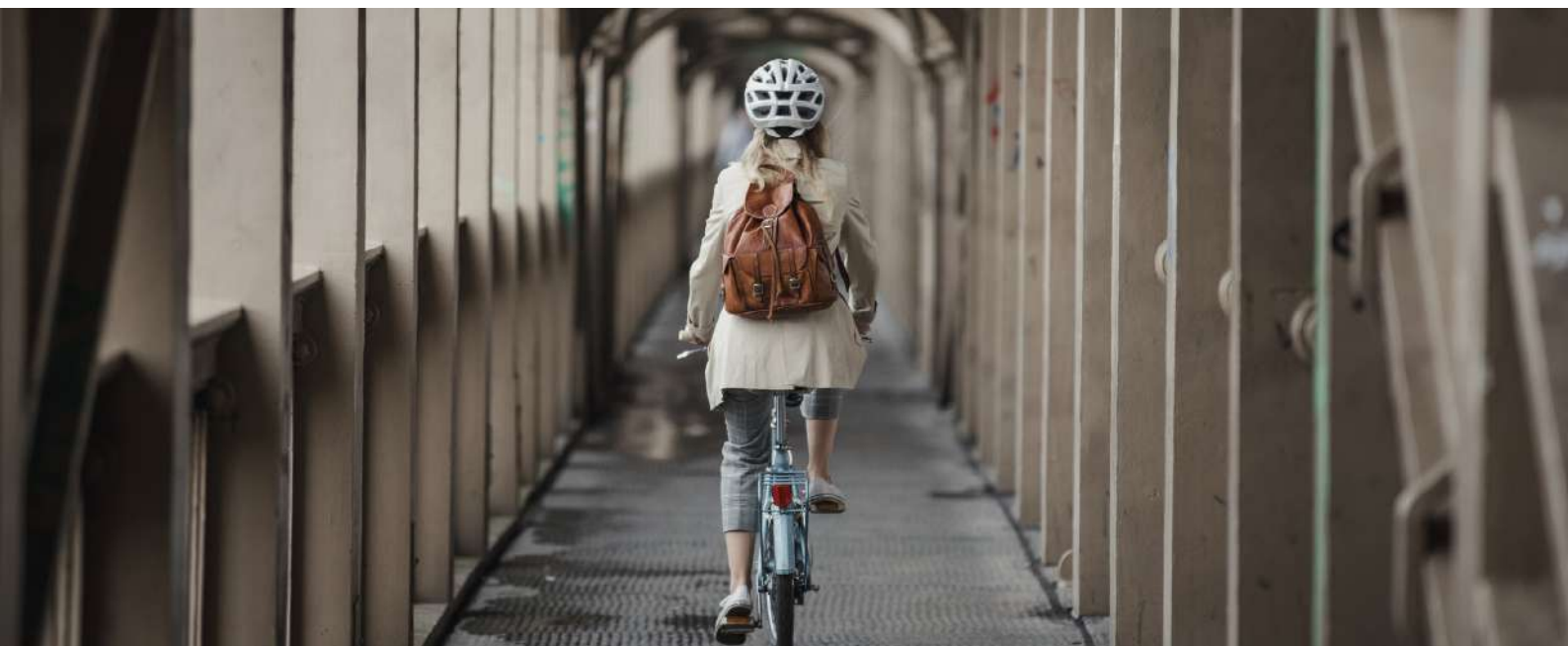
At present, the Cycle to Work scheme primarily supports office-based workplace physical activity through its focus on active travel, rather than home working. This in spite of the fact that, according to the SMEs we surveyed, home working has become a more prominent barrier to being physically active during working hours since the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 3).

In 2017, an independent cost benefit analysis (CBA) was conducted on ukactive's proposed expansion of the Cycle to Work Scheme, named Workout from Work, which further included discounted gym memberships and physical activity accessories like home workout equipment<sup>46</sup>. Workout from Work would also be subject to a double cap, meaning the scheme would be just as accessible for individuals on lower salaries.

This CBA demonstrated that, with the predicted increase in the number of Britons being active through the scheme, plus the increase in gym and equipment expenditure, cost savings of up to £385m in total economic benefits could have been achieved by 2021<sup>46</sup> had this expansion been implemented. This included a predicted cost saving of £210m to the NHS and £47m in workplace productivity benefits<sup>46</sup>.

Expanding the scope of tax benefits for employers – such as through implementation of the proposed Workout from Work – could incentivise them to support more workplace physical activity opportunities for employees, especially in SMEs.

There is also the potential to further incentivise physical activity for workplaces by reducing the level of VAT charged on health and wellbeing businesses such as gyms, pools and leisure centres. Permanent reductions in VAT exist in countries such as Malta and Ireland, where upticks in physical activity were registered once this was implemented<sup>47-49</sup>. Other countries such as Portugal and the Czech Republic have also recently introduced a VAT reduction on their fitness and leisure facilities.



## SECTION 2: FITNESS AND LEISURE SECTOR SUPPORT FOR WORKPLACE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SMES

Data collected from fitness and leisure sector professionals in the survey (n=54) and focus groups (n=15) suggests the sector is already working to support SMEs around workplace physical activity. Just under a third (30.8%, n=16) of fitness and leisure respondents to the survey said they provide workplace physical activity services to SMEs and are aware of the intended target audience. In comparison, almost half (48.1%, n=25) of fitness and leisure respondents were not aware of what size of organisation their workplace physical activity services targeted.

### Current support and services provided by the fitness and leisure sector

This section will discuss the workplace physical activity services provided by the fitness and leisure respondents who took part in this research, how these link to SMEs' needs, and SMEs' perceptions of existing services.

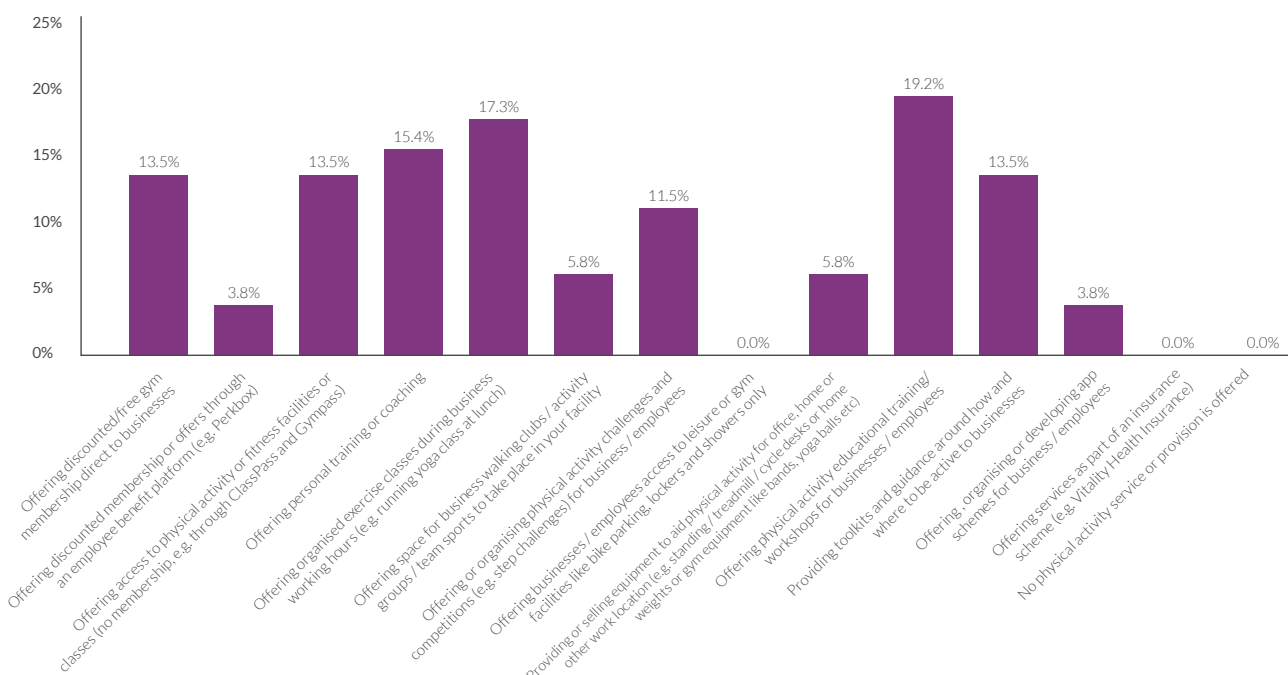
The survey findings showed a number of physical activity opportunities are already offered to SMEs by the fitness and leisure sector (Figure 13). The three most popular services are:

- Offering physical activity educational training/workshops for businesses/ employees (19.2%, n=10)
- Offering organised exercise classes during business working hours (17.3%, n=9)
- Offering personal training or coaching (15.4%, n=8)

The first two opportunities tend to be put in place by SMEs (17.6% and 10.3% respectively – see Figure 5 & Figure 4), albeit less frequently than other options like Cycle to Work or activity challenges. Fitness and leisure providers surveyed also stated that offering educational training, including providing toolkits, was the service most popular with the SMEs they worked with, because it provided employees with the opportunity to socially connect and was accessible through different formats (e.g. in person and online). SMEs gave similar feedback about organised classes during business hours (e.g. at lunch).

Figure 13. Workplace physical activity provisions and services offered to SMEs (n=64)

% are of the total number of SME respondents so will not equal 100% across the graph



It's important to note that the third most common service being offered by the fitness and leisure sector – personal training or coaching – was in fact one of the least likely opportunities to be taken up by the SMEs surveyed (Figure 4).

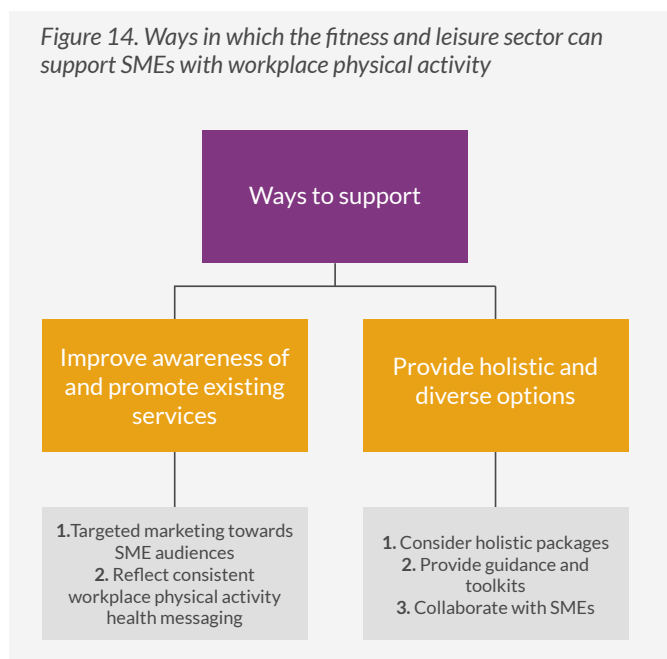
The types of service that were least likely to be put in place for SMEs by our fitness and leisure sector respondents were:

- Offering businesses/employees access to leisure or gym facilities, like bike parking, lockers and showers only (0.0%, n=0)
- Offering services as part of an insurance scheme (e.g. Vitality Health insurance) (0.0%, n=0)

This in spite of the fact that access to facilities (e.g. bike parking, showers) was the third most popular form of workplace physical activity support among the SMEs surveyed (Figure 4).

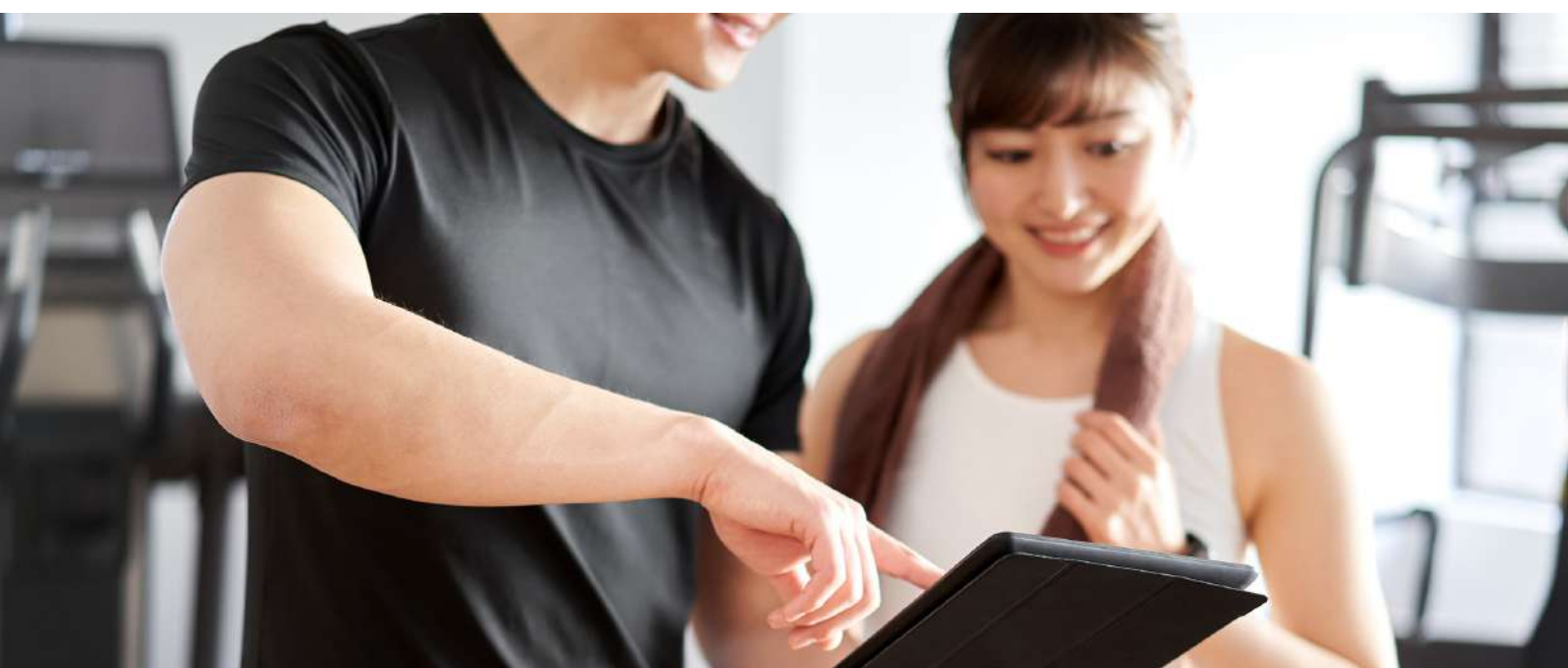
Initially, this suggests a misalignment between the types of provision and services that SMEs are looking for and those actually on offer. However, the current research has obtained examples from just a sub-sample of the sector. Additionally, there are a number of existing services in place – and this is growing across the fitness and leisure sector – indicating that SMEs may have an inaccurate picture of the services available to them.

Figure 14. Ways in which the fitness and leisure sector can support SMEs with workplace physical activity



Instead of solely developing new services for SMEs, more may need to be done to better communicate the full landscape of what the fitness and leisure sector is offering around workplace physical activity, increasing visibility and awareness of these services to SMEs.

Through the survey and the focus groups, SME employees specified ways in which they felt the fitness and leisure sector could provide the workplace physical activity support they needed. This was categorised into two themes, with appropriate recommendations developed for each (see Figure 14) – the last of which links into the overarching theme of partnerships, as discussed in Section 1.



### Improve awareness of and promote existing services

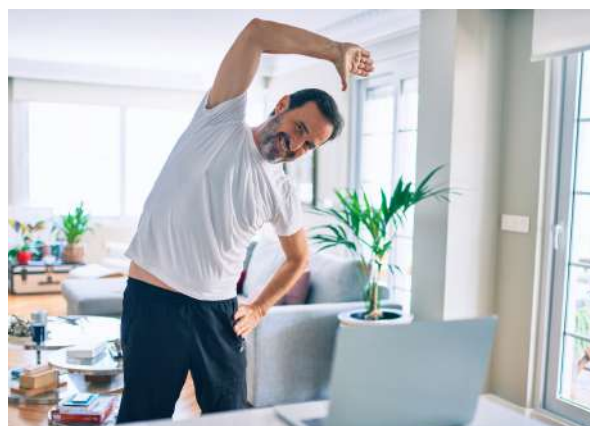
The perception among SMEs surveyed was that the fitness and leisure sector's current workplace physical activity services are not designed for their size of company, but rather for larger businesses.

Those working in SMEs, particularly micro- and small businesses, said an option for more flexibility over types of membership – such as pay as you go or token systems, rolling membership and facility-only access (e.g. use of showers and bike storage) – would better cater to their needs than more fixed, traditional memberships, especially given the smaller number of employees. This preference for flexibility in membership was due to perceptions of it being more affordable – i.e. SMEs would not be paying upfront for a membership before knowing if it would be regularly used by employees.

SMEs frequently claimed they would prefer to use services, like classes, tips and guidance, that could be accessed through a hybrid model – in a local centre (public or private), in an office and also through digital delivery – because this better catered for hybrid working patterns (i.e. a blend of office- and home working).

**“ ”** We're not alone in terms of doing blended working, and the world has changed since COVID. That's a real opportunity to embrace that work life balance and movement life balance. This whole 'movement while you're working [from home]' has got a major opportunity, simply because so many more people are working from home going forward. – *Senior Manager of SME (39 employees)*

Despite this perception from the SMEs surveyed, examples provided by fitness and leisure sector participants indicate that the sector is already supporting flexibility in a number of ways, such as offering hybrid delivery – online and in-office – as well as educational toolkits and resources to support employees in being active while working from home.



Beyond the current research, there are also a number of public leisure facilities that offer facility-only (e.g. shower) access. Additionally, various leisure intermediaries (e.g. Hussle, Gympass, MoveGB) provide access to a wide range of gym facilities and classes through a pay as you go or token system.

In early 2020, MoveGB – a provider of corporate gym memberships – partnered with Incorporate's MyGymDiscounts scheme to offer discounted gym memberships to 6 million employees from 1,800 UK companies<sup>50</sup>. Intermediaries like Hussle and Gympass have since announced new partnerships with fitness brands (e.g. Les Mills) and insurance companies (e.g. the AA) as part of ongoing work to provide workplaces of different sizes with access to physical activity opportunities and services<sup>51-52</sup>.

Other leisure providers, such as Halo Leisure, also have partnerships in place with local NHS trusts, to provide health and wellbeing to frontline staff<sup>53</sup>.

Partnerships like these are just a few examples of how the fitness and leisure sector is already growing and diversifying the ways in which it supports workplace physical activity for different sizes of business, including SMEs.

It may be the case that SMEs' perceptions of the current offers in place do not accurately depict the work that is underway in the fitness and leisure sector to support workplace physical activity; the fitness and leisure sector may need to better promote or market its existing services to the SME business community at a local level, to alter such perceptions and ensure its services are seen as more accessible, and thus more desirable, to SMEs.



### Provide holistic and diverse options

In the focus groups, SMEs were asked to explain in more detail the kinds of service the fitness and leisure sector could usefully provide. Suggestions centred around providing access not just to in-person or digital classes and exercise sessions, but to guidance and resources around how physical activity supported wider wellbeing and could be built into daily routines - a holistic health package, for example - rather than just fitness resources.

This was reflected in the feedback from our fitness and leisure sector respondents, too, who noted that holistic offers focused on whole-person wellbeing - integrating physical activity alongside things like mental health, diet and sleep - were popular with small businesses (10-49 employees). When asked why this was the case, it was suggested that these services better cater for the diversity in employee needs, and that employers are now more aware of the importance of mental health at work - indeed, that they are more likely to incorporate workplace physical activity if it's linked to mental health.

“ “ “ [Smaller companies] want [workplace wellbeing] as a package. [A company of about 70 people] might be big enough, or on the cusp of being big enough, to get some kind of consultant in [to] put some ideas together - maybe a wellbeing charter - [but not smaller businesses]. We've been doing quite a lot with little businesses [about how] physical movement ties into the whole wellbeing thing. - **Sole trader providing workplace physical activity services to other SMEs**

Some fitness providers discussed how working with SMEs to understand their needs and wants meant they could adapt and develop services that were fit for purpose. The owner of a private leisure facility described how this process of collaboration led to the creation of more holistic offers, encompassing not only its traditional physical activity services but also wider wellbeing services (e.g. motivational guidance). This is described below:

“ “ “ I think the [services] that work best with us are the ones that are more human-centred and refined... the ones that are sort of baked in the service, that's what I like to call it, rather than the sprinkles on the top. Because it's easiest just to start [by providing] a yoga session or a strength-based session. [But] it's then understanding that client base and then supporting them and empowering them to create a service that works for them. That's what's worked best for us. You know, initially, we did go in and offer sort of ad hoc [physical activity] services, [but] they're the ones that are less likely to be sustainable, because they haven't got that baked-in sort of wellbeing service. If [it's not] the sort of holistic offer and all the staff aren't involved with it, it's not something that's going to be easily engaged in. - **Private leisure facility owner**

However, other participants from the fitness and leisure sector that took part in the focus groups said it was difficult for them to provide holistic offers, because their speciality was in physical activity. This is a notable point that is also likely to apply beyond this piece of research, and highlights the potential for the fitness and leisure sector to partner with other wellbeing services and professionals to collectively support the provision of holistic packages for businesses. Although it did not come through in this piece of research, this might include broader holistic services - such as social prescribing - which the fitness and leisure sector can offer.

By incorporating physical activity alongside mental health and wellbeing services - which are of notable interest to employers and businesses - these partnerships can also play an important role in promoting the workplace physical activity services already offered by the fitness and leisure sector.

There is scope for the fitness and leisure sector to work closely with its membership and/or sector trade bodies (e.g. ukactive) to assist with the promotion of its services and facilitation of partnerships and relationships. This might include involvement in ongoing campaigns (e.g. National Fitness Day) and working to develop more holistic or local-level (e.g. with Active Partnerships) partnerships to extend both national and local reach of workplace physical activity products and services.

## SECTION 3: EMPLOYERS' SUPPORT FOR WORKPLACE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SMES

### Enablers, barriers & challenges for SMEs to implement or engage in workplace physical activity

Overall, four themes emerged as key enablers for SMEs looking to support employees in being physically active and/or integrating physical activity into their working day. These three themes were: giving time; role modelling (from senior leadership); and keeping opportunities easy (see Figure 15). These enablers were identified by SMEs themselves as well as by those working with, or to support, SMEs.

Meanwhile, three main barriers and challenges emerged which prevented or made it difficult for SMEs to put physical activity opportunities in place, or to support their employees in being active during the working day (Figure 16). Enablers and barriers are discussed in combination below.

#### Giving time versus lack of time

'Giving time' included implementing flexible working that allowed time for being active; having a working structure that allowed meeting-free time; and having clear verbal permission that taking time to be active during working hours was allowed.

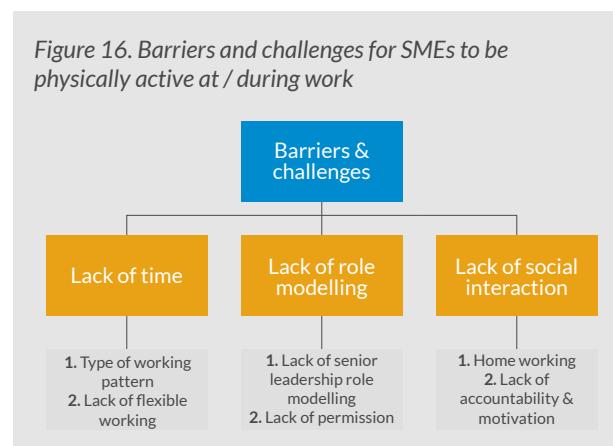
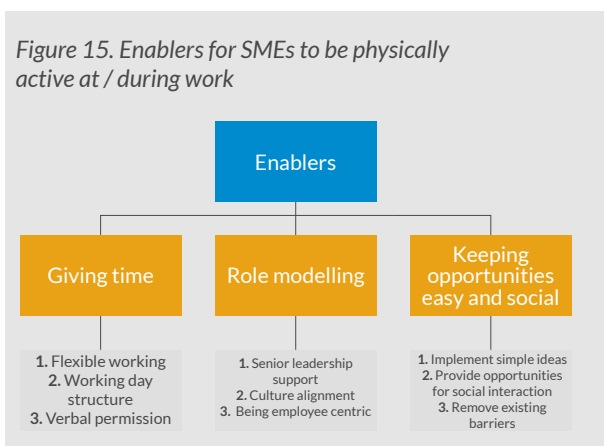
This enabler directly correlates with the 'lack of time' barrier, which was the most prevalent barrier to workplace physical activity, selected by almost two-thirds of SMEs (58.8%, n=40). This was followed by having an unmanageable workload (30.9%, n=21), which itself infers perceptions of not having enough time.

Lack of time was also a prominent and frequently mentioned theme in the focus groups, especially among micro- and small organisations. These organisations highlighted that limited capacity, working patterns of long hours and back-to-back meetings made it difficult for employees to find the time to move away from their desks. This was particularly the case if they worked in a computer-based or target-orientated industry (e.g. IT or sales), suggesting that type of industry is a contributing factor.

When asked about what *doesn't* work in supporting and enabling workplace physical activity, having no time allowance to be active and not having flexible working patterns in place were the top reasons why individuals working in SMEs felt they or their employees weren't able to be active during the working day.

By comparison, having time (38.4%, n=26) and having flexible working (36.8%, n=25) were the second and third most popular enablers allowing SME employees to engage in working hours physical activity. Flexible working was also the most frequently discussed reason why workplace physical activity did occur in SMEs; it was the form of workplace physical activity support most frequently offered by SMEs; and it was the most commonly referenced form of support that SMEs said they would like to put in place to encourage workplace physical activity.

Collectively, this indicates that offering flexible working hours is a primary way in which SME employers could support workplace physical activity.




### Role modelling versus a lack of role modelling

However, SME employees made it clear in the focus groups that providing time and flexible working alone was not enough to encourage physical activity, and that role modelling from senior leadership – not just saying, but also doing – was essential. Meanwhile, having management support (42.6%, n=29) and having permission from senior management (33.8%, n=23) were the first- and fourth-rated enablers from the survey among SME employees.


This demonstrates the importance of considering these enablers collectively rather than in isolation: being limited by physical time ('lack of time') was interlinked with perceptions that taking breaks and using time to be active was not supported by senior leadership. This was especially the case when senior leadership did not role model or engage in activity themselves, or clearly communicate that active behaviour was permitted and accepted; a key aspect of role modelling included senior leaders not just stating support but undertaking and actioning the support.

Examples of what works to support physical activity opportunities during the working day – provided through open-ended survey responses – included encouragement and role modelling from senior leaders, which featured as the third most popular answer among SMEs employees. As described by one individual working in an SME:

 We'll set up the team meeting in the morning, and you know, the director is one of those who might be out getting some fresh air or just got off the Zwift bike. It's active and kind of leading by example, which I think is hugely important. And I think that then kind of cascades down to the other staff members as well. They feel like they're empowered to be able to take some time out. At my last company...although the chief exec and the board would say, 'right, we need to put an hour in the diary to get outside'... then when you're not seeing them do it themselves, [it] kind of felt like it was more lip service. – **Employee of SME (10 employees)**

It was felt that a lack of senior leadership role modelling and a lack of permission can pervade a company culture, giving the impression that workplace physical activity is not supported. Conversely, role modelling and giving permission are two key influencing factors driving employees to engage in workplace physical activity<sup>54-59</sup>, and were noted as two of the five ways to build an active working culture in the most recent Active Employee Toolkit by Sport England<sup>60</sup>. While previous research does not necessarily focus solely on SMEs, our findings support those previously uncovered among larger organisations.

Role modelling also involved ensuring that whatever was put in place to support physical activity – whether tangible opportunities, support or communication – was person-centric, aligned to the company culture and the needs of the employees. In the focus groups, fitness professionals noted that some employers would come to them seeking to put opportunities in place without considering the needs of their employees, the alignment with the company or the feasibility for employees to engage due to working patterns, which made it difficult to develop a suitable programme.

 **The whole thing has to [have]... a cultural alignment... If it really feels in alignment with the company's culture, and you can come up with something that feels like this is us doing this, not them doing this, I think you have a lot more chance of success with that. – *Individual working in a company providing activity-based team-building programmes to SMEs***

When this subject was discussed by SME employees in the focus groups, the senior leaders who were described as person-centric were those who took the time to listen to employees and co-create or select physical activity opportunities that were centred around the needs of their workforce. For example, this might involve choosing a holistic service that ties physical activity into overall wellbeing, because it resonates better with employees' wider wellbeing needs.

## Keeping opportunities easy and social

Individuals working in SMEs reported that keeping opportunities easy and simple to implement increased the chances of them being sustained over time. Frequently noted examples of workplace physical activity were walking meetings and workplace challenges; among SME survey respondents, these two examples emerged as the second and third enablers and examples of “what works” to support workplace physical activity, after flexible working (see Figure 5). Opportunities such as these were considered easy to implement, not requiring too much additional resource or cost, and suitable for all abilities, making them inclusive for all staff.

However, this theme did not refer only to *implementing* easy and simple opportunities, but also to *keeping* things easy and simple by removing existing barriers and working with employees to do so. Individuals who supported SMEs with workplace physical activity, including those from the fitness and leisure sector, stated that some of the most effective yet simple services they offered were the ones that looked at removing existing barriers rather than creating new opportunities.

Home working – introduced during the pandemic – was noted as a new barrier for most SMEs, resulting in more employees spending more time away from the office and each other. Indeed, for some individuals, particularly those working in micro-businesses, home was already the predominant working location. While some individuals saw this as a positive, a majority reported – both through the focus groups and through open-ended survey questions – that working from home made it harder to engage in regular physical activity. This was in part due to a lack of incidental activity (e.g. no commute, not walking to buy lunch or coffee, and not having to walk as far to get to the desk, the bathroom or to get water).

Research conducted since the pandemic demonstrates that prolonged sitting when working from home, most likely with a sub-optimal ergonomic work set-up, results in musculoskeletal (MSK) problems (e.g. back, neck and upper limb pain)<sup>61</sup>. Symptoms of MSK, especially lower back pain, are also known to be exacerbated by lack of physical activity<sup>61</sup>, further highlighting the importance of integrating more incidental physical activity into the day when working from home.

In our consultation, senior leaders from SMEs noted that finding ways to integrate more incidental physical activity into the working day when working from home, rather than the office, was a major area of concern, especially because they foresaw blended working patterns – combining at-home with in-office – continuing.

Those working with SMEs made similar observations. For example, a self-employed fitness and yoga professional who supported SMEs in integrating physical activity into the working day explained how they had been encouraging employees to re-arrange their home working environment to force more incidental activity. This involved removing existing barriers, working with the existing environment to allow more physical activity to occur naturally.



**I think businesses can sometimes be so focused on putting something on when perhaps it's more about actually removing the barriers in the first place. We've talked already about time... blocking time out and making it perfectly acceptable to go and engage [in physical activity]. Facilities can sometimes be difficult, I get it, and obviously can cost a lot of money. But whether it's maybe [renting] shower facilities... or somewhere safe to be able to park your bike for the day to try and encourage them [to active travel in]. All of these barriers and excuses and reasons why people might decide [not to be active], perhaps try to remove the barriers rather than creating new opportunities. Sometimes it might be as simple as thinking [about] what the barriers [are] and removing them, rather than developing something new and fancy.**

**- Sports therapist supporting SMEs**

Due to the changes in working patterns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has already been a shift within the fitness and leisure sector towards hybrid services – services that support both in-person (e.g. in-centre) and at-home physical activity. The sector is therefore well-positioned to support SMEs in and around physical activity for home workers, with a number of leisure providers already having developed bespoke and hybrid services (e.g. PureGym, Les Mills On Demand) including some designed specifically for workplaces (e.g. Anytime Fitness). It is therefore strongly recommended that employers consider building connections with their local leisure facilities and providers, to open up access to these services for their employees.

The second aspect that made being active while working from home harder was linked to a lack of social connection and interaction. This was partly due to reduced face-to-face interaction and partly down to staff being more geographically dispersed, making it difficult to do any in-person activities as a group. This aligns with recent research which found that of 451 employees surveyed, isolation was the primary problem experienced when working from home during the pandemic<sup>62</sup>. Over two-fifths (43.3%) of this sample were employees working in SMEs, indicating the prevalence of isolation as an issue for smaller businesses.

In our research, lack of social connection and interaction was named as a key cause of employees' reduced motivation to maintain structured activity during the working day (e.g. lunch walks). Seeking to address this, the bringing together of staff through social interaction was listed as the second most popular motivation for SMEs to put workplace physical activity opportunities in place (Figure 6).

Individuals in SMEs as well as individuals who provided physical activity services to SMEs reported that services like app-based challenges, walking or active volunteering were also popular, not only because they were easy to implement but because they brought staff together (Figure 4).

Our focus group participants also stated that in-person activities as a group helped social connection, with the enjoyment and accountability associated with these activities providing an additional incentive to be active. This also correlates with previous research<sup>63</sup>.

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of providing workplace physical activity opportunities that feature a social element, not only for motivation but also to support wider mental health, such as reducing social isolation.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings highlighted throughout this report, the following section outlines recommendations on how to support SME employers and employees to implement workplace physical activity opportunities. These recommendations are aimed at government, health sector organisations (including ukactive and Sport England) and business umbrella bodies, the fitness and leisure sector and SME employers.

### Recommendations for government

Section 1 highlights that, while a variety of parties from a national to a local level have a role to play in supporting workplace physical activity, government has a specific role in terms of providing financial support to SMEs through incentivisation and tax relief. This would encourage and facilitate businesses with smaller budgets to invest in workplace physical activity opportunities for employees. The following recommendation has been made for government.

#### **Recommendation: Use the tax system to encourage physical activity**

The government can further support opportunities for SME employees to be active during working hours by considering the expansion of existing schemes, like the Cycle to work scheme, to include options that support home working (e.g. access to home physical activity equipment and gym membership) as well as office-based working.



### Recommendations for health sector organisations and business umbrella bodies

Health sector organisations (including trade and member bodies), business umbrella bodies, local and public health and local authorities also have a responsibility, alongside government, to support workplace physical activity in SMEs. Our research findings suggest that strategic alignment between said parties – such as those representing or supporting the fitness and leisure sector (e.g. ukactive, Sport England) and those representing the business community (e.g. FSB) – could help improve access to and promotion of workplace physical activity services for SMEs. This may include bringing the fitness and leisure sector and business community together to collaborate and network, in addition to sharing a consistent public health message about workplace physical activity and its benefits for physical and mental health and business productivity.

As part of growing the evidence base around the benefits of workplace physical activity, our findings also flag the importance of setting a benchmark for how and what to measure to demonstrate the impact of workplace physical activity.

Two recommendations have been developed in line with these findings.

#### Recommendation: Build and align partnerships between local membership bodies and business umbrella groups

Membership bodies such as ukactive, Sport England, and business umbrella groups such as FSB, should aim to strategically align to improve access to and promotion of workplace physical activity services. This could include:

- Collaborating on building connections between their reciprocal memberships to develop a marketplace where the business community and fitness and leisure sector can interact.
- Supporting and aligning public health messaging around workplace physical activity with existing national campaigns, including explicit government support for this agenda.
- Developing partnerships between organisations that specialise in physical activity and those that specialise in mental health, to improve national awareness of the link between the two.

#### Recommendation: Support existing frameworks for data collection and best practice that will help set a benchmark for what ‘successful’ workplace physical activity implementation looks like

To ensure SMEs are receiving consistent information and advice on how to measure the success of workplace physical activity programmes, as well as to ensure they can access the right resources – including credible best practice – membership bodies like ukactive should aim to build on, support and endorse existing data collection frameworks, such as the CBI / B4H Health Index.

### Recommendations for the fitness and leisure sector

Based on the findings outlined in Sections 1 and 2, the fitness and leisure sector has an important role to play in supporting SME workplace physical activity. Primarily, our research findings indicate that opportunities and access to opportunities for SMEs would be improved by the fitness and leisure sector simply working to raise awareness of its existing services – namely by working closely with organisations like ukactive to promote them, and by sharing consistent public health messaging.

The sector also has a role to play in integrating physical activity services into wider holistic packages, either independently or with partners.

Two recommendations for the fitness and leisure sector have been developed in line with these findings.

#### Recommendation: Improve awareness of existing services among SMEs

To improve the perception that workplace physical activity services are accessible and relevant to SMEs, the fitness and leisure sector should work to improve awareness of its existing services. This can be supported through:

- Clear and targeted marketing of current workplace physical activity services to SMEs.
- Working in collaboration with partners to improve local reach (e.g. Active Partnerships).
- Working with SMEs to conduct a needs analysis and identify relevant support and services.
- Working in collaboration with ukactive to showcase the services the sector can offer SMEs and to share examples of best practice (including aligning with national campaigns).

#### Recommendation: Tie physical activity into holistic wellbeing and health

To expand the reach of workplace physical activity services to SMEs, the fitness and leisure sector should consider services that tie into holistic wellbeing and health. This could be supported through:

- Building partnerships with wellbeing services (e.g. mental health, nutrition) to support the provision of holistic wellbeing packages for businesses.
- Providing consultancy services (e.g. resources, educational workshops, at-home workout guidance) alongside physical activity delivery for businesses.
- Consider providing, or continue to provide, services through a hybrid delivery model to support in-centre, at-home and in-office physical activity for businesses.





## Recommendations for SME employers

Based on the key barriers, challenges and enablers for SME employees to be active during the working day, as outlined in Section 3, three recommendations have been developed for SME employers. These are in line with the three themes of giving time, role modelling, and keeping opportunities simple and social.

### **Recommendation: Give your employees time to be active at work**

Employers can support SME workplace physical activity opportunities by giving employees the time to be active during the working day. This can be done by implementing flexible working hours, scheduling breaks between meetings or implementing meeting-free days.

### **Recommendation: Role model workplace physical activity**

Senior leaders at SMEs should support workplace physical activity opportunities by providing clear verbal permission to be active during the working day and role modelling these active behaviours.

### **Recommendation: Keep workplace physical activity simple and social**

SME employers can support workplace physical activity opportunities by implementing simple opportunities that are co-created with employees, allowing them to interact socially and connect with one another. This might include focusing on removing existing barriers for employees before implementing new opportunities.



## CONCLUSION

This report is the first step in understanding the perspectives of both the SME business community and the fitness and leisure sector when it comes to workplace physical activity opportunities for SMEs. Through a survey and through focus groups, this research consultation set out to explore the perspectives of employers and employees in SMEs and individuals in the fitness and leisure sector, public health, local authorities and the business community who are providing workplace physical activity services to SMEs.

In comparison with larger businesses, workplace physical activity services and research to date has not accurately represented the needs and wants of SMEs, in particular the support they feel the fitness and leisure sector can provide. However, with SMEs making up a majority of UK businesses – and half of UK private sector turnover – it is essential that these enterprises are catered for as we work to support the government's Levelling Up agenda, improving productivity and life satisfaction and reducing inequalities in the UK by 2030.

More than ever before, the fitness and leisure sector has a vital role to play, including supporting *Levelling Up* through the development and promotion of appropriate workplace physical activity services for the SME market.

The fitness and leisure sector has a shared ambition to support and improve the health of the nation. Across the more than 7,000 gyms, fitness and leisure centres in the UK, millions of people are provided with the opportunity to be physically active and benefit from the physical, mental, social and economic benefits of regular participation in physical activity. This sector is in a prime position – through its size, scale and expertise – to improve the healthy life expectancy and wellbeing of the UK population and contribute as an essential service to the *Levelling Up* agenda.

This can be done by drawing on the expertise and services the sector already makes available to support workplace physical activity, as well as by putting additional offerings in place in the future.

However, the fitness sector cannot do it alone, with multiple parties needing to come together to drive the workplace physical activity agenda: a collective ambition is required to increase the awareness of, promotion of, and access to opportunities to be physically active in the work environment and during working hours – and this must be the case for all employees, no matter what size of company they work for.

This research is not exhaustive, representing the perspectives of a sub-sample of individuals working in SMEs and the fitness and leisure sector; it can be expanded on in either sample size or detail. It does, however, already highlight the need for deeper understanding of the needs of SMEs across different sectors at a granular, local level, in addition to highlighting the breadth of workplace physical activity services available across the fitness and leisure sector for smaller organisations.

The recommendations in this report target four groups. There are recommendations for SME employers, providing information to help them implement workplace physical activity opportunities in their organisations. There are recommendations for the fitness and leisure sector around expanding and enhancing existing workplace physical activity services for small businesses. To go alongside these, a single recommendation is made to government around further incentivising employers to invest in physical activity through providing tax relief on related services and equipment. Finally, there are recommendations for business umbrella bodies, trade bodies and health sector organisations, which have a wider role to play in influencing whole-system change around workplace physical activity and public health. This is through a focus on strategic partnerships, health policy and advocacy of the role the fitness and leisure sector can play in supporting the *Levelling Up* agenda.

We hope the recommendations drawn from this research provide clear and tangible areas of focus for all parties to continue to develop and evolve opportunities for SMEs to support physical activity at work and during working hours.

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