

July 2025

# RETENTION & PARTICIPATION IN TRACK & FIELD

## VISION GROUP | RESEARCH SUMMARY



## RETENTION & PARTICIPATION IN T&F

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# Background & Research objectives

# Background

## What we know...

**Participation Decline:** Fewer 13–19-year-olds are engaging with track and field, with many lapsing or never starting

### Barriers:

- **Awareness:** Many don't know how to get involved or feel athletics is only for the 'talented'
- **Perceptions:** Seen as overly competitive and less fun or social than other sports
- **Accessibility:** Costs, travel, and unclear competition pathways limit participation
- **Inclusion:** Clubs and coaching experiences can feel inconsistent or unwelcoming
- **Changing demographics:** New audience needs and expectations aren't fully addressed

## What is planned...

### Vision for Change:

- A Vision Group consisting of young people from across the UK has been set up to create a future-focused, inclusive vision for track and field
- Part of their remit is to address barriers by reshaping competition formats, club environments, and accessibility

### Core Goals:

- Ensure the sport is welcoming, enjoyable, and engaging for all abilities
- Build participation pathways that are clear and adaptable to diverse needs

## The role of research...

**Deliver a comprehensive understanding of why participation is declining or failing to engage, and how to address it.**

### Key Focus Areas:

- Explore motivations and barriers for taking part and remaining in the sport
- Test concepts for making athletics more inclusive, enjoyable, and accessible.
- Equip the Vision Group with evidence to create innovative, youth-focused strategies

**Provide actionable insights to shape future planning and operational decisions, ensuring the sport thrives**

# Research objectives and key questions:

## Overarching Research Objectives

- To provide an immersion into the world of young people, their experiences and opinions and the role of sport and exercise
- To explore motivations, barriers, and perceptions across current athletes, lapsed athletes, and non-participants (across ages)
- To identify strategies for retention, re-engagement, and broadening participation in athletics

**Current Athletes** - Research Objective  
*To understand the experiences and needs of current athletes to enhance retention, specifically:*

- Investigate the motivations driving their continued participation and how these vary by age, gender, and discipline.
- Examine the role of club culture and coaching in creating inclusive, supportive, and adaptable environments
- Assess whether current competition formats meet the needs of teenage athletes in terms of accessibility, enjoyment, and inclusivity
- To explore how the holistic benefits of athletics, including mental health, social connection, and physical development, influence young athletes' participation, motivations, and experiences

**Lapsed Athletes** - Research Objective:  
*To uncover the reasons for disengagement among lapsed athletes and identify effective re-engagement pathways, focusing on:*

- Understanding the push (e.g., negative experiences) and pull (e.g., attractive alternatives) factors behind dropout.
- Analysing the impact of key life transitions, such as exams, work pressures, and injuries, on participation decisions
- Identifying opportunities for re-engagement, such as alternative roles in the sport (e.g., coaching, officiating, volunteering)
- Evaluating the influence of structural barriers like travel costs, competition intensity, and inflexible schedules on athlete retention

**Non-Participants (Never Participated)** - Research Objective: *To explore the perceptions and barriers faced by individuals who have never participated in athletics, with a focus on:*

- Investigating how athletics is viewed and how it compares to other sports.
- Identifying entry barriers, including lack of awareness, confidence, or understanding of how to join
- Examining outreach gaps and overlooked audiences, particularly those not identified as talented through schools or traditional pathways
- Developing strategies to reposition athletics as an inclusive, social, and appealing activity for a wider audience

# Executive Summary

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Participation in track and field among 13–19-year-olds is declining due to barriers such as limited awareness, perceptions of exclusivity, accessibility issues, and inconsistent club experiences. Findings from the research highlight how young people's attitudes towards the sport is evolving overtime - influences such as the pandemic, social media, and economic pressures have heightened expectations for creativity, accessibility, and flexibility.**

**There are opportunities for the youth-led Vision Group to reshape the sport to be more inclusive, enjoyable, and accessible and to ensure competition environments remain attractive and relevant for young people.**

### **Evolving Teen Attitudes to Sport**

- Teens value flexibility, emotional wellbeing, and social connection over rigid competition. Over 7 in 10 expect sport to fit around their lifestyle.
- Athletics is often perceived as elite, solitary, and hard to access.
- Sport must adapt to teens' changing lives, pressures, and identities. Over 8 in 10 teens expect sport to fit around exams and school.

### **Participation Patterns**

- Over half of lapsed athletes surveyed still train but no longer compete.
- Time pressures & exams, loss of motivation, and mental health are major reasons for dropout.
- However, some older teens cite discovering new sports and exercise opportunities at university, where they're able to access sport in new and more social ways

### **Barriers to Engagement**

- Athletics is seen as “for the talented,” with unclear entry points and limited visibility.
- Teens feel they don't “fit the image” of an athlete.
- Lack of social atmosphere and pressure to perform discourage sustained involvement.

### **What Teens Want**

- More inclusive, fun, and flexible formats.
- Recognition for effort, not just performance.
- Events with atmosphere—music, food, friends.
- Clearer progression pathways and better coaching access.

### **Competition Format Preferences**

- Most popular tested concepts: ‘Local Competitions’, ‘Progression League’, and ‘Try-It Festival’.
- Lapsed and less engaged teens prefer low-pressure, social-first formats.
- Teens want choice—from elite pathways to casual, community-based events.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**To thrive, athletics must feel like a place where young people want to start and where they also then want to stay**

### **Start with Open Doors**

- Create visible, low-pressure entry points that feel welcoming and inclusive.
- Improve outreach in schools and communities.

### **Offer Flexible Formats**

- Design events that fit around school, work, and wellbeing.
- Support varied levels of commitment, from casual to competitive.

### **Redefine Competition**

- Celebrate progress, resilience, and participation, not just podiums.
- Add social and fun elements to events to boost engagement.

### **Co-create with Youth**

- Involve young people in designing formats, events, and club culture.
- Use youth-led vision groups to ensure relevance and inclusivity.

Research approach & sample

## RESEARCH APPROACH

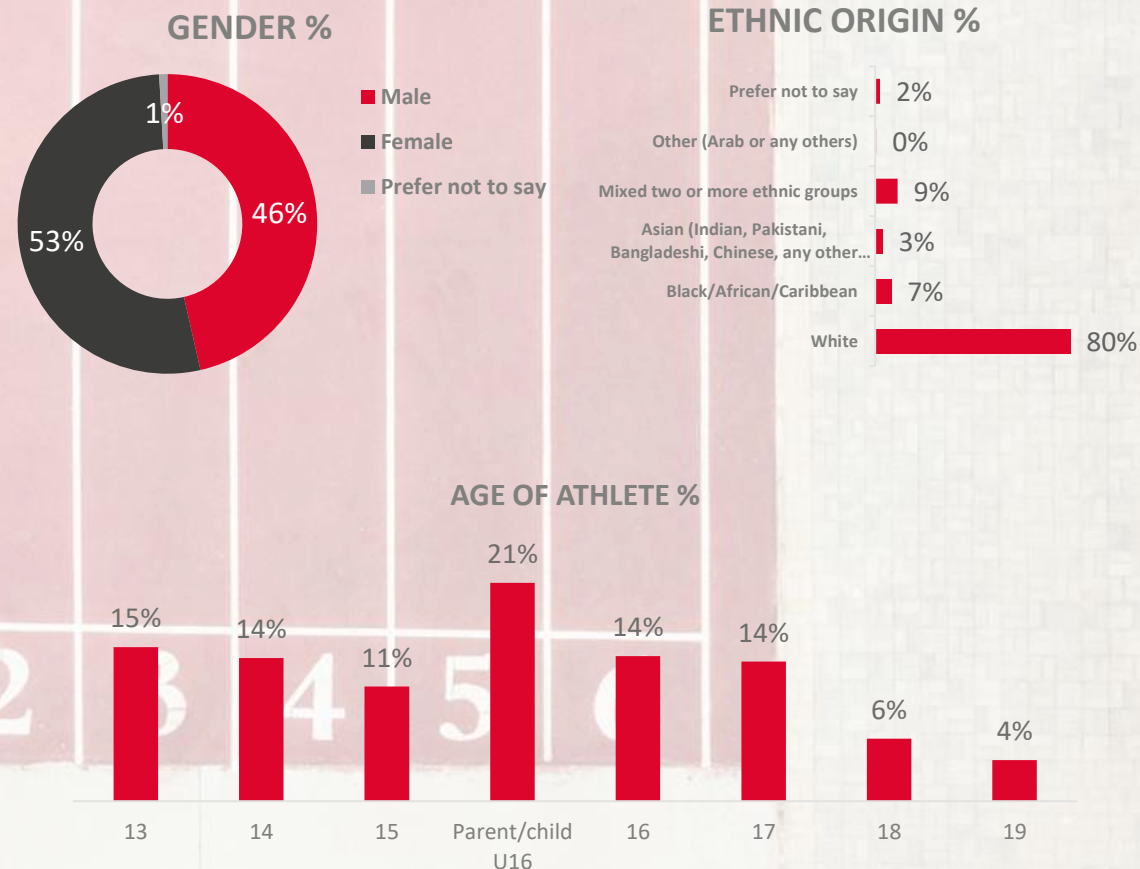
The research focussed on understanding motivations, barriers, and experiences within athletics. This report summarises the key findings from each phase of research:



## WHO DID WE SPEAK TO – ONLINE SURVEY

We targeted a mix of athletes with varying degrees of engagement within athletics and competition. The majority of respondents were those who *actively compete*. The majority of questions were optional to avoid respondent fatigue. Responses ranged from 455 to 590.

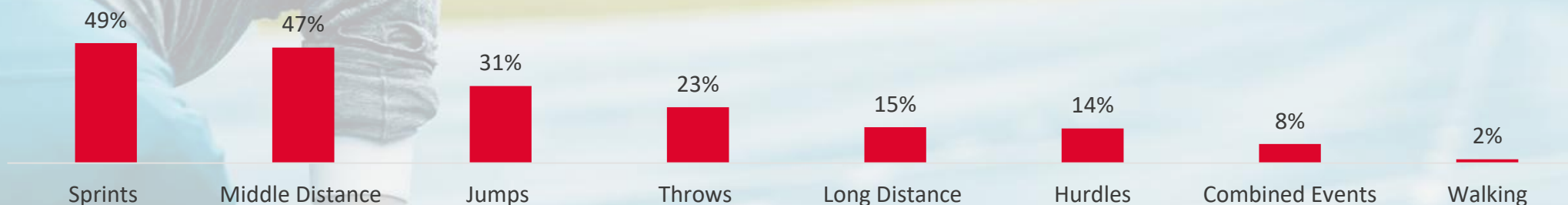
| ENGAGEMENT                                                                      | %   | n   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| I have never really tried athletics properly, but I am involved in other sports | 2%  | 9   |
| I participate in athletics and compete in events                                | 86% | 461 |
| I participate in athletics but don't compete in events                          | 7%  | 35  |
| I used to participate in athletics, but not any more                            | 6%  | 31  |
| HCAF                                                                            | %   | n   |
| Athletics Northern Ireland                                                      | 0%  | 0   |
| England Athletics                                                               | 85% | 388 |
| Welsh Athletics                                                                 | 1%  | 6   |
| Scottish Athletics                                                              | 14% | 64  |
| CLUB MEMBERSHIP                                                                 | %   | n   |
| Athletics club                                                                  | 91% | 416 |
| Running club or group                                                           | 14% | 65  |
| None of these                                                                   | 1%  | 4   |
| LEVEL COMPETE AT                                                                | %   | n   |
| Club level (Local League, Open Meets)                                           | 21% | 90  |
| County level (County Championships, County Schools)                             | 23% | 96  |
| Regional level (Midlands, Northern, Southern Championships)                     | 19% | 78  |
| National level (England Championships, British Champs)                          | 24% | 103 |
| Youth Development League (YDL)                                                  | 12% | 51  |
| No level, I just do it for fun                                                  | 1%  | 4   |



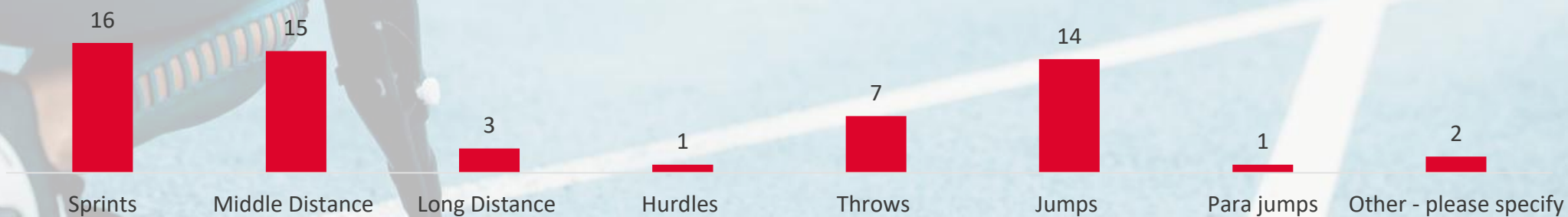
## WHO DID WE SPEAK TO | ONLINE SURVEY

**There is representation across a mix of events from both engaged and lapsed athletes.**

THOSE ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN ATHLETICS | EVENT (%)



LAPSED ATHLETES | EVENT (N=28)



Which track & field events do you participate in? Select all that apply. Active athletes N=455, Lapsed=28

Attitudes to sport

# Teenager...*from child to adult in six fast years*

**The teenage years are a time of intense transformation, physically, emotionally and socially**



Teenage development is anything but linear

Growth happens in bursts and backtracks

And they move between confidence and doubt, independence and support, energy and overload - sometimes all in the same day

Their world is shaped by where they live, who they know, and what they're exposed to

And their choices, about school, sport, identity and belonging are made in the middle of all this change

**Teenage growth is fast, varied, and full of contradictions**

# The teenage journey...3 phases of change, challenge and choice

## YOUNG TEENS (Ages 12–14)

Scotland: S1–S2

England/Wales: Years 7–9

NI: 8–10

## MIDDLE TEENS (Ages 14–16)

Scotland: S3–S4

England/Wales: Years 10–11

NI: 11–12

## OLDER TEENS (Ages 16–19)

Scotland: S5–S6 +

England/Wales: Years 12–13 +

NI: 13–14 +

### FIGURING IT OUT

- The move to secondary school brings new routines, new people, and growing independence
- Bodies change faster than confidence does
- Friendships matter more, but family is still the emotional anchor
- Curious, open, and up for trying things, but confidence is fragile

Sport preferences starting to emerge, but they are still up for trying something new

### PRESSURE POINTS AND PUSHBACK

- School gets serious - Nationals or GCSEs loom
- Friends become everything - peer approval shapes choices
- Confidence wobbles, image and identity take centre stage
- Life feels busy: school, screens, stress, social life
- Sport often starts to slide, unless it fits and feels worth it

### BECOMING WHO THEY ARE

- School is more self-directed - Highers, A-levels, apprenticeships or university
- Big life choices start taking shape
- Social circles shift – part-time work, wider networks, first taste of adult life
- Mental health and balance matter more than ever
- If sport survives, it's because it supports identity, wellbeing, and freedom

**Sport starts strong but doesn't always survive the middle years, unless it evolves with teens' needs**

# Sport can help support strategic thinking, decision making, and resilience...

**It can give teens something consistent and structured in a fast-changing world and help boost mood, energy levels, and provides a sense of routine**

- As well as learning to respond under pressure (in a game, a race) it's great practice for life outside sport
- During these years they are figuring things out, and sport can give them room to try and fail, but it's not always about medals or top performance
  - Improvement, routine, or feeling part of something can be just as meaningful
- And taking part in sports can help them feel included, valued and a place where they 'belong' esp. when/if school or home is tough

**Feeling part of a group can boost self-esteem and motivation**

A background image showing the faces of several smiling teenagers, mostly of African descent, looking towards the camera. The image is slightly out of focus, emphasizing the text overlays.

# The teenage years are full of pressure but also potential

**Teenage development is rapid, emotional, and non-linear... they don't move through life in straight lines**

School year and age matter, but mindset, relationships and confidence often matter more  
Social sensitivity, shifting motivation, time pressure and identity-searching are constants across groups  
Many start sport with energy, but something changes in mid-teens, often just as life starts to intensify

**The way teens relate to sport is deeply shaped by how it fits into their wider world, not just by what's on offer**

## Considerations

- Sport needs to flex with the rhythm of real teenage life
- Retention is about feeling seen and being free to choose
- One size won't fit all...and one offer won't work for everyone (at all times)

**IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND  
ENGAGEMENT, YOU HAVE TO  
UNDERSTAND THE PERSON, NOT JUST THE  
PARTICIPANT**

# Much still rings true, but there's more to the story now

## What remains consistent

*(From 2CV in 2019):*

**Academic pressure:** GCSEs, A-Levels still drive drop-off at critical ages

**Cost and access:** Fees, travel, kit continue to be obstacles

**Perception of exclusivity:** Athletics still seen as 'for the talented'



## What's Changed

*(2025 Insights):*

***Broader diversity of voices and personal stories enrich our understanding***

- **Mental health and balance** are now front and centre, most teens want sport to support, not stress them
- **Autonomy matters:** participation must flex to fit their identity, lifestyle, and choices
- **Sport discovery is social and digital:** online spaces now shape what teens try
- **Participation is broader:** being sporty doesn't always mean competing

# Teens today value freedom, flexibility, and emotional balance more than rigid routines or traditional competition

They are finding sport elsewhere - in gyms, schools, online trends, and self-led social spaces  
And 'success' looks different now: **it's about confidence, wellbeing, and self-expression as much as performance**

The dominant models of club-led, competition-first pathways no longer speak to everyone



## What this means for athletics:

**Athletics must move beyond the elite track and meet young people where they are**

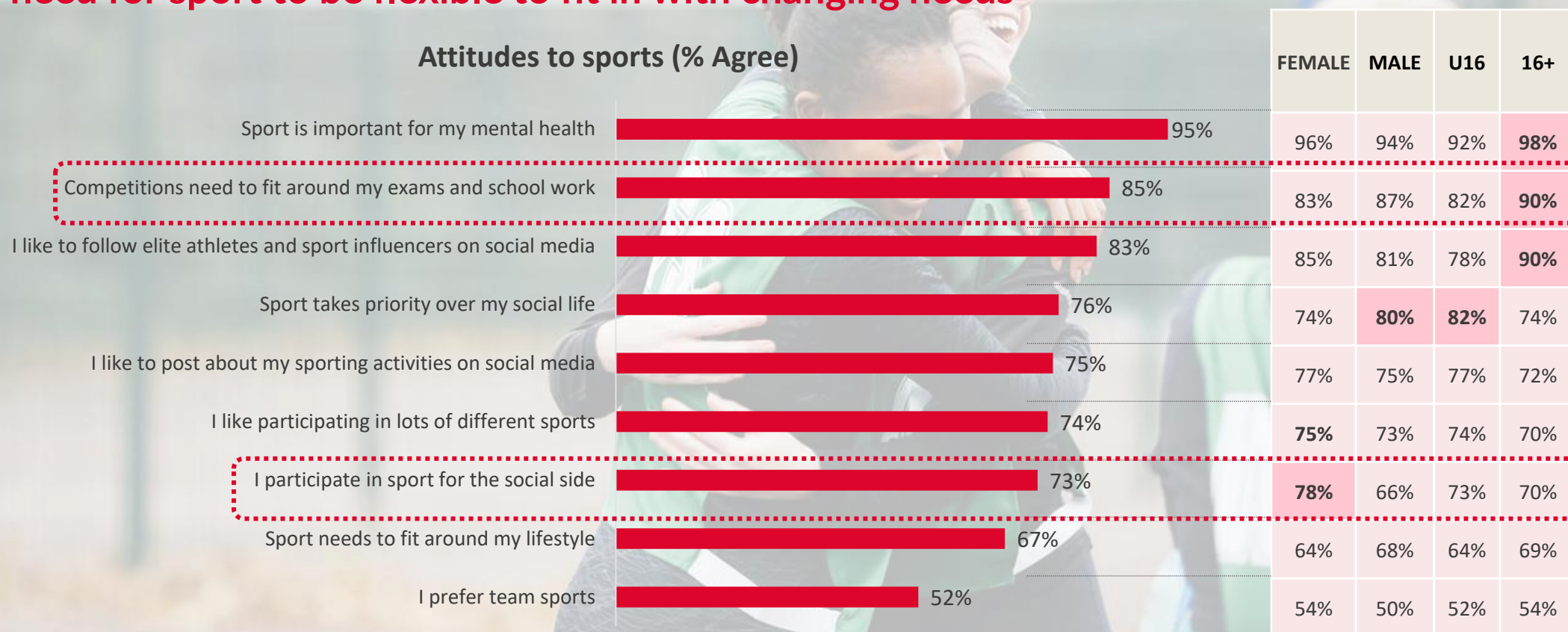
- Design for flexibility: create formats **that work around school, work, and shifting priorities**
- Make participation feel good: **enjoyable, safe, and socially meaningful**
- Reframe performance: to mean **progress and pride, not just medals and rankings**

**Above all, recognise the whole person, not just the athlete**

**Teenager's relationship with sport is evolving and athletics needs to evolve to 'keep up'**

## ATTITUDES TO SPORT

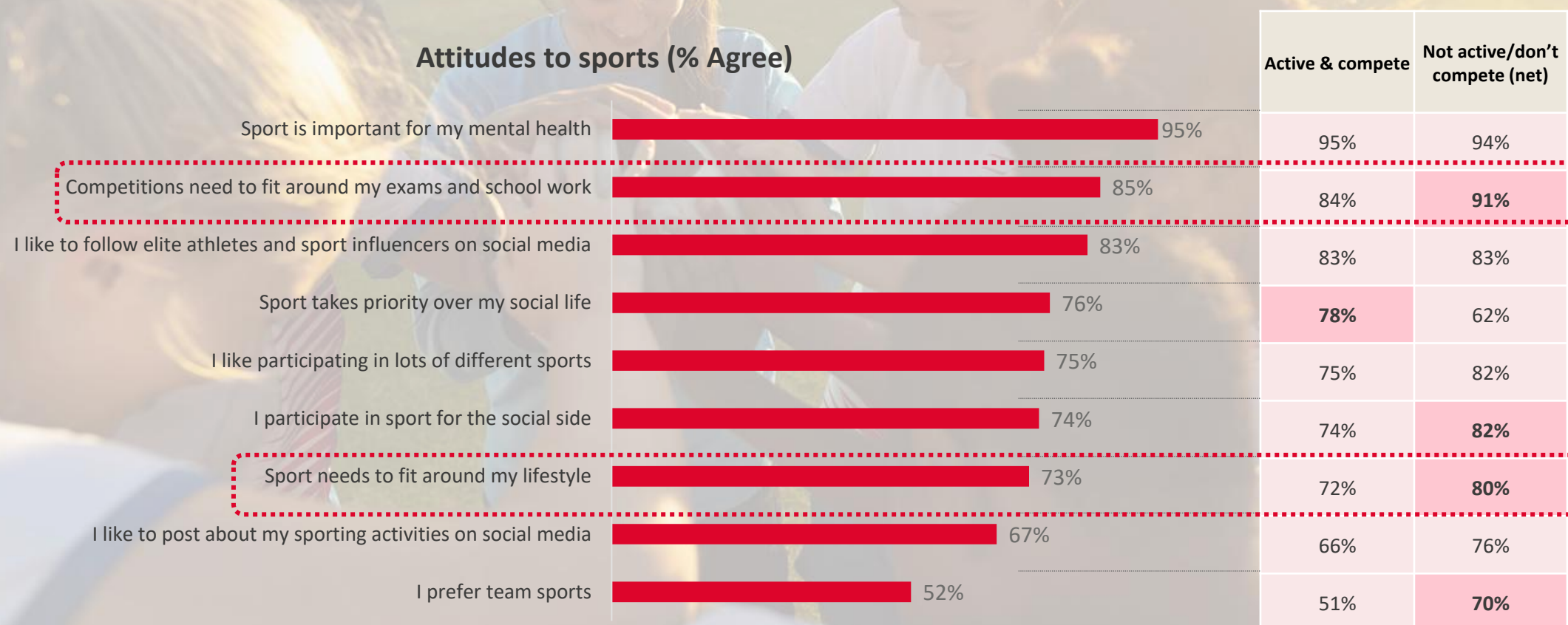
Attitudes to sport differ by gender and age with U16s more likely to want to participate in a range of sports and males more likely to prioritise sport over social life. Over 8 in 10 expect competitions to fit around exams & school highlighting the need for sport to be flexible to fit in with changing needs



When it comes to participating in sport, to what extent do you agree with the below? N=501

# ATTITUDES TO SPORTS

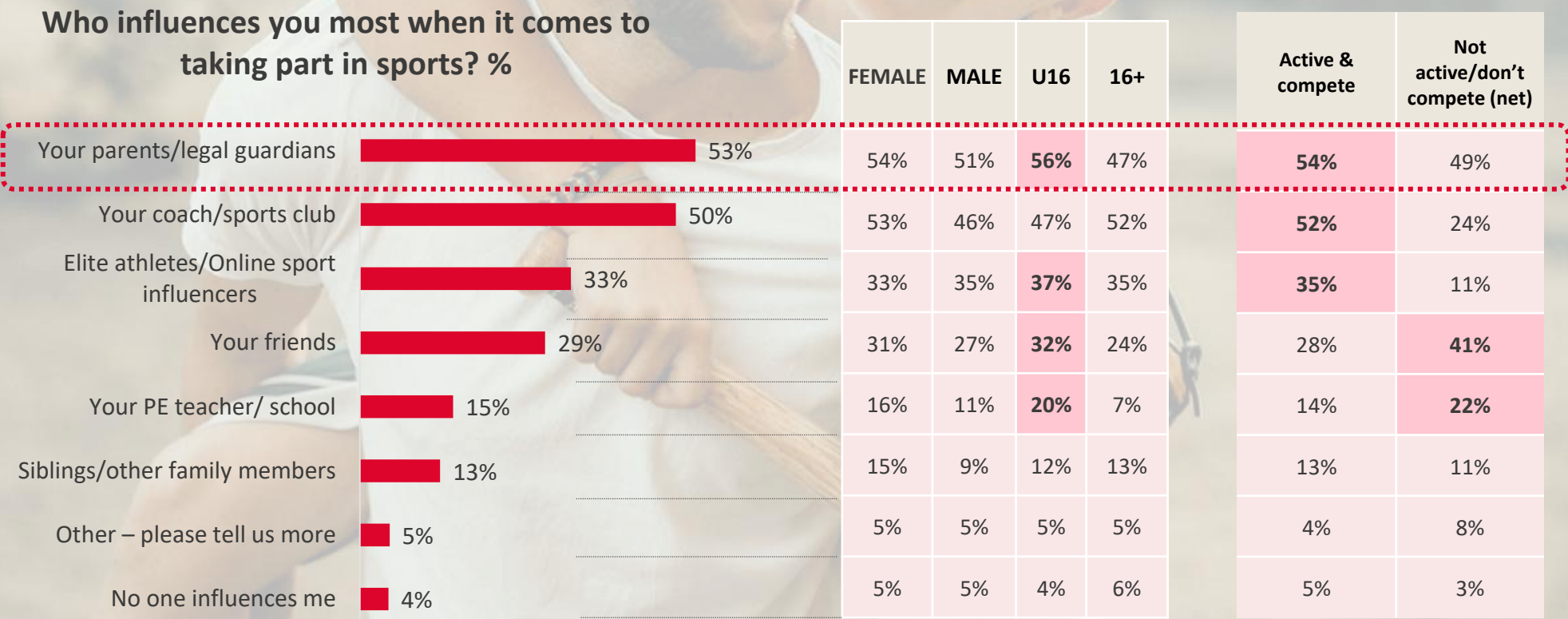
Those less engaged with athletics/lapsed athletes are more likely to prioritise social life over sports and are more likely to expect sport to fit around their lifestyle – which is consistent with the feedback from the qualitative research



When it comes to participating in sport, to what extent do you agree with the below? N=501

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Teens have several external influences when it comes to taking part in sports with parents/guardians perceived to have the greatest influence, particularly for the U16s who are generally more likely to be influenced than 16+.



Who influences you most when it comes to taking part in sports? N=493

Perceptions of athletics & other sports

# Athletics is perceived as a closed sport for those with talent

For many teenagers, athletics is not something to grow into, it's something they feel they need to already be "good enough" at before they even start

The perception of athletics as elite, solitary, and opaque creates invisible barriers that stop potential participants in their tracks

It's a sport many admire but don't see themselves in

## Too serious too early

*"You had to be good before you walked in"*

Athletics is seen as a sport where you must already excel just to take part and this perception starts early, at school sports days, only the "fast kids" shine

## Not social enough

*"Looked lonely, no team feel"*

Compared to football, netball or rugby, athletics lacks that natural sense of being part of something. It's seen as isolating, with less interaction and camaraderie

## Hard to access

*"I wouldn't even know where to go"*

Young people often don't know where local clubs are, how to join, or what the process looks like. There's little visibility or active invitation, it feels closed off to newcomers

## Doesn't reflect me

*"Didn't see myself in it"*

For some, the image of an athlete feels narrow, lean, confident, already high-performing. If you don't match that look or vibe, it feels like you don't belong

Athletics is often not perceived as a sport you grow into, but one you must already qualify for...this shuts out many before they even begin

# Perceptions and experience of athletics

**Teenagers form early impressions of athletics and for many outside the sport it feels:**

**Serious and individual**

- It's not something you do 'just for fun'

**Hard to access**

- It's unclear how or where to get involved

**Only for the already talented**

- Especially reinforced at school sports days

**These perceptions can often stop young people from ever considering athletics**

**But they're also echoed by some current and lapsed athletes, some of whom describe athletics as:**

High pressure and early expectations

Rigid pathways that don't flex with real life

Inconsistent emotional support or sense of belonging

## **Considerations:**

- Misperceptions about athletics start early and often go unchallenged
- Lived experiences inside the sport can reinforce those outside impressions
- **There is an appetite for a version of athletics that feels more open, social, and adaptable**
- **Meeting teenagers where they are will be key to widening appeal and deepening commitment**

# Same generation but different journeys



## CURRENT ATHLETES:

Still competing, often thriving  
Feel pride, but also pressure, overload, and a lack of voice  
Want balance, sense of control, and emotional support

## LAPSED ATHLETES:

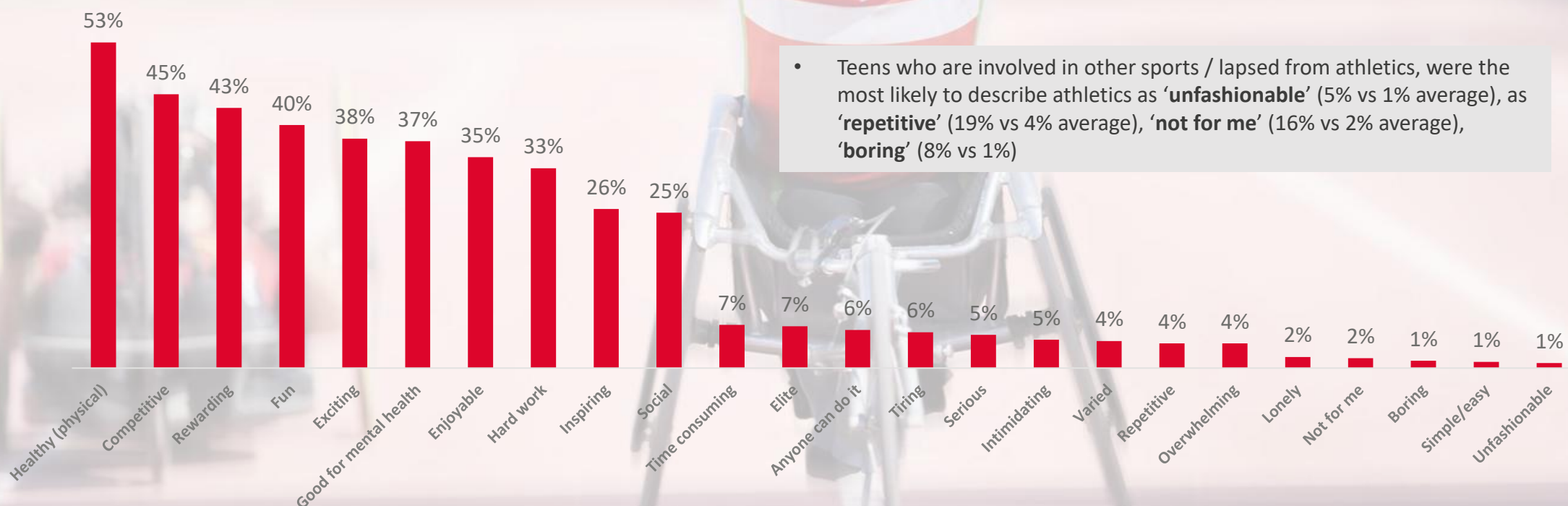
- Many active elsewhere but disconnected from athletics
  - Some still training but not competing
- Left due to stress, performance expectations, or appeal of other sports
  - Some happy to return if the environment changes

## OTHER SPORTS:

- Chose sports with stronger visibility, culture, or flexibility
- Never tried athletics seriously, didn't feel invited or confident enough
  - Might consider it, if it feels open, social, and welcoming

## PERCEPTION OF ATHLETICS

Healthy, competitive but rewarding are the most common attributes associated with athletics. 'Social' was only selected by 25% of respondents. Fewer than 4 in 10 describe it as good for mental health or enjoyable.



From this list choose 4 words that describe how you currently feel about athletics. N=458

# The pandemic and algorithms 'rewired' the way teens connect with sport...

## The pandemic reset routines:

- Lockdowns disrupted club sport and introduced new habits: solo running, walking, fitness apps
- Young people found new freedoms in being active on their own terms
- For many, this was the first time sport felt more flexible, stress-free, and self-directed

## Social media has also reshaped discovery:

- Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have become gateways to new activities - sport included
- Trends, reels, and challenges shape what teens try and how they see success and identity in sport
- Peer-led content feels more relatable than traditional coaching or club marketing

# Where sport lives now, from schools + gyms to TikTok + group chats

## Schools are stepping up

Schools are central to teen sport, especially for younger teens

Wider extracurricular 'enrichment' offers are giving more a chance to explore sport through fun, inclusive, and low-pressure formats (often free too)

And mental and physical wellbeing is now part of the brief... not just physical fitness

## Peers and platforms drive participation

- Teens are more likely to try something if a friend suggests it or they see it online
- Peer-organised sport, casual meetups, and social-first sessions are gaining ground

**This is participation on their terms, social, expressive, and self-led**

## Gyms are the new clubs

- Affordable memberships, flexible access, and a 'do-it-your-way' culture appeal to 13–19s
- Teens see gyms as places to go with friends, build confidence (and support their appearance and mental health)

## Performance has a new meaning

- Today's teens still enjoy challenge but they're redefining what success looks like
- Some care less about winning and more about feeling proud, confident, and emotionally well
- Progress, personal goals and positive vibes matter as much as medals, it's about growing, not always about winning

# Teens doing other sports...

**These teens are sporty and active they just found their place elsewhere**

Whether in football, netball, dance, or gym, what stood out was access, community, team competition and fun

Most never seriously considered athletics, not because they weren't willing, but because they never felt they would be good enough

**The pull of other sports:**

**Team-first culture:** camaraderie, shared goals, support

**School was the start:** teachers and PE staff introduced them early

**Nearby and visible:** found through friends, school clubs, or posters

**Expression over perfection:** music, energy, room to mess up

**Low entry pressure:** no need to be 'good' already

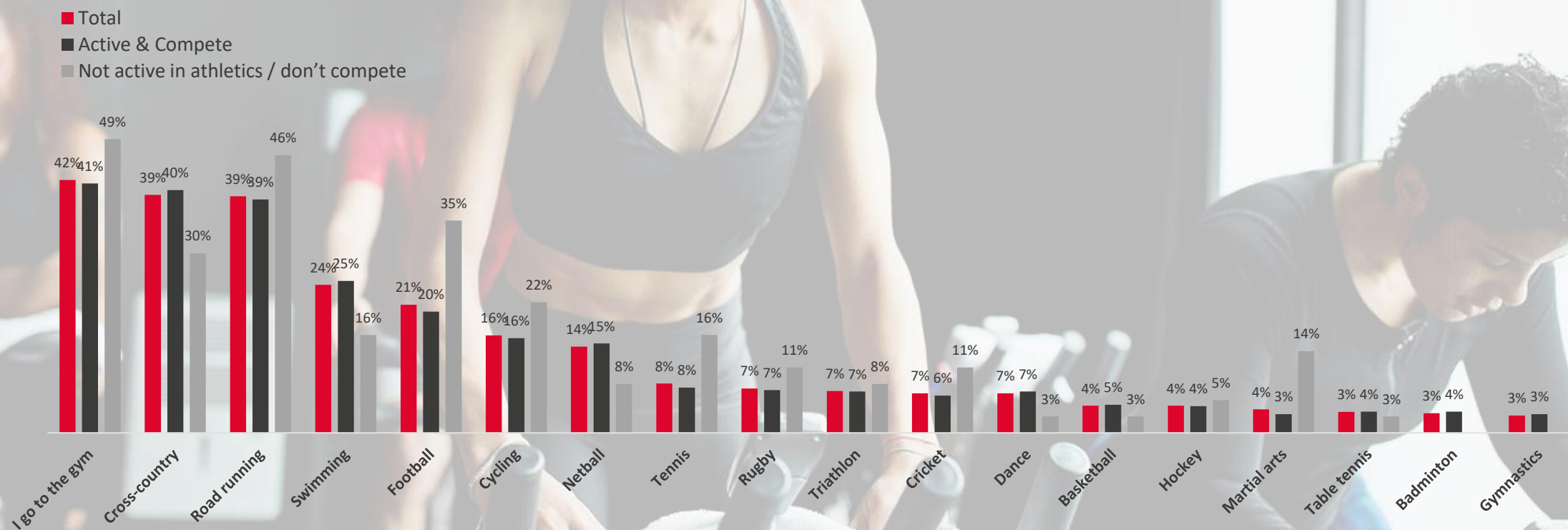
**Variety and flexibility:** choose your level of skills and commitment

**Their chosen sports felt like places they could grow, laugh and belong**



## PARTICIPATION IN OTHER SPORTS

**Gym and off-track running are popular sports for those involved in athletics or engaged with other sports**



Which of the below sports, outside of PE lessons, do you participate in? N=458

## DRIVERS TO OTHER SPORTS

# Convenience and flexibility are key drivers for the take-up of the popular sports/activities

| %                                                      | I go to the gym | Cross-country | Road running | Swimming | Football | Cycling |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|----------|----------|---------|
| <b>It is a sport I can do on my own</b>                | 28%             | 20%           | 26%          | 12%      | 3%       | 11%     |
| <b>It's something I can participate in at any time</b> | 22%             | 13%           | 24%          | 9%       | 6%       | 8%      |
| <b>Training is at a convenient time / place</b>        | 19%             | 11%           | 17%          | 8%       | 6%       | 3%      |
| I'm good at it                                         | 17%             | 28%           | 28%          | 13%      | 17%      | 6%      |
| It's something I want to learn how to do               | 16%             | 7%            | 8%           | 7%       | 7%       | 5%      |
| I don't have to be good at it to enjoy it              | 13%             | 10%           | 12%          | 7%       | 4%       | 6%      |
| My parents encouraged me                               | 12%             | 22%           | 21%          | 15%      | 11%      | 7%      |
| All my friends do it                                   | 12%             | 5%            | 4%           | 3%       | 13%      | 2%      |
| It is a sociable sport                                 | 11%             | 18%           | 18%          | 6%       | 16%      | 4%      |
| It is cheap to participate in                          | 10%             | 15%           | 17%          | 4%       | 5%       | 3%      |
| My school/PE teacher encouraged me                     | 6%              | 11%           | 7%           | 4%       | 7%       | 0%      |
| The competitions are fun                               | 5%              | 25%           | 21%          | 6%       | 14%      | 2%      |
| I watch it on TV                                       | 3%              | 9%            | 13%          | 4%       | 12%      | 6%      |
| Column n                                               | 194             | 188           | 188          | 114      | 103      | 75      |

*These sports are sports that I do alongside my Track/Field training and events. I swim to improve my stamina and use the gym to increase my strength. I train to a plan that is provided by my Coach at my athletics club.*

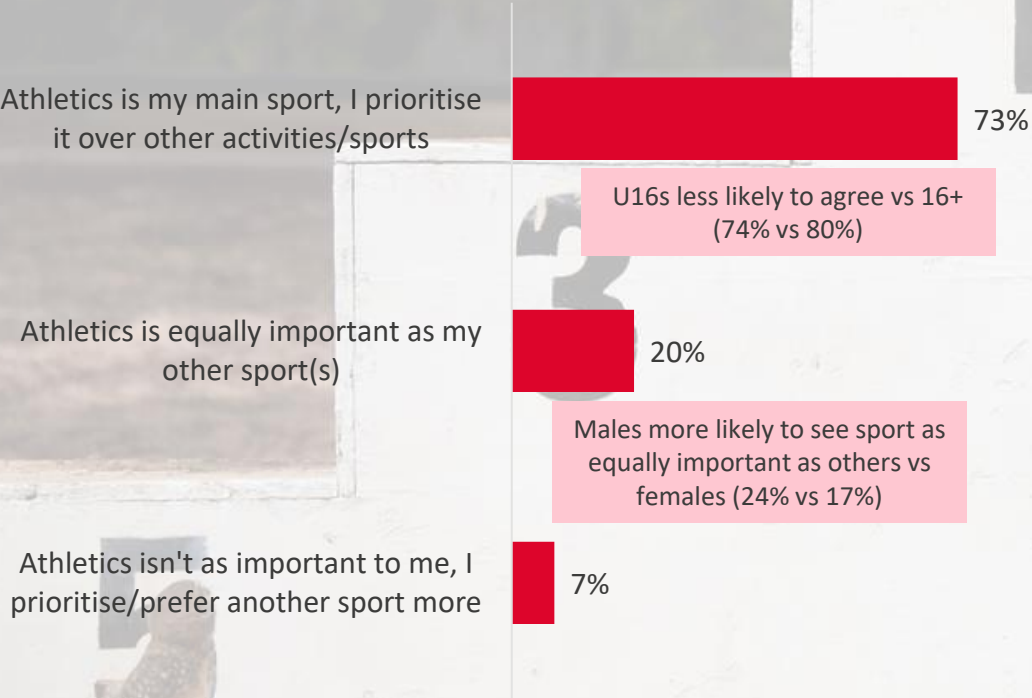
*I used to do bunch of sports that never really clicked for me. I used to feel like I was never really good at anything until I joined athletics and I felt like I was in the right place. Running is a big part of who I am and I'm really grateful I am able to do what I do.*

*For martial arts, I practice mainly because I feel like I should know how to defend myself (and others if need be), but also because I enjoy it and feel that it teaches some valuable skills. Gym and road running (road running mostly in the winter) are both largely supplements to improve my sprinting, although I still enjoy both.*

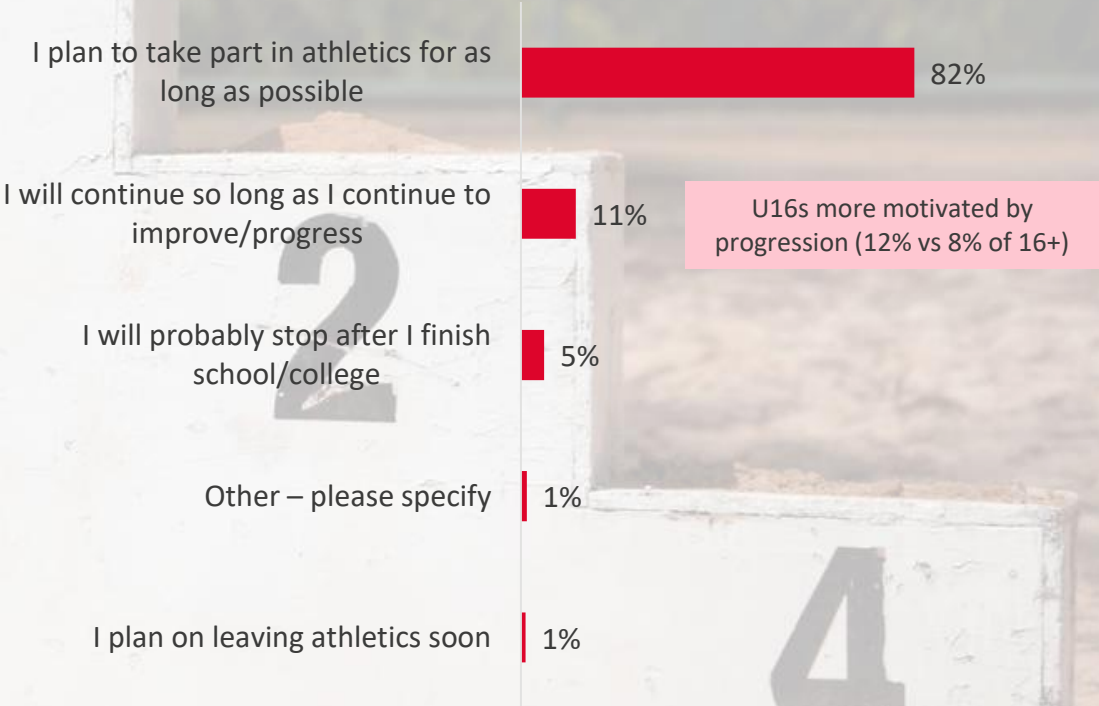
# IMPORTANCE OF ATHLETICS

For those engaged in athletics over 7 in 10 prioritise it over other sports and over 8 in 10 plan to continue in the sport for as long as possible

How important is athletics compared to other sports you do? (Select one)



How long do you expect to continue taking part in athletics? Select the option which best applies to you - Selected Choice

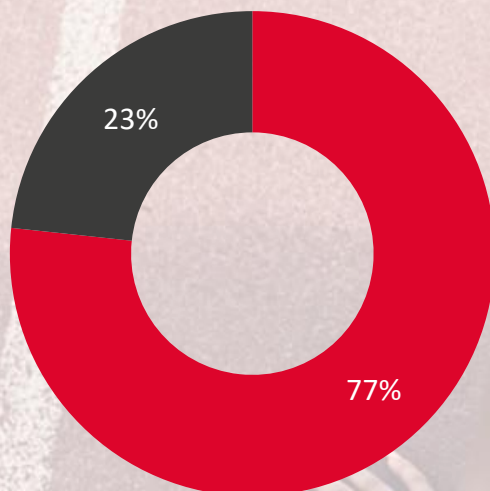


## TAKING A BREAK FROM ATHLETICS

Just over 2 in 10 have had a break from athletics and then come back with just under 3 in 10 being encouraged by their parents

Have you ever had a break from athletics and then come back?

■ No ■ Yes



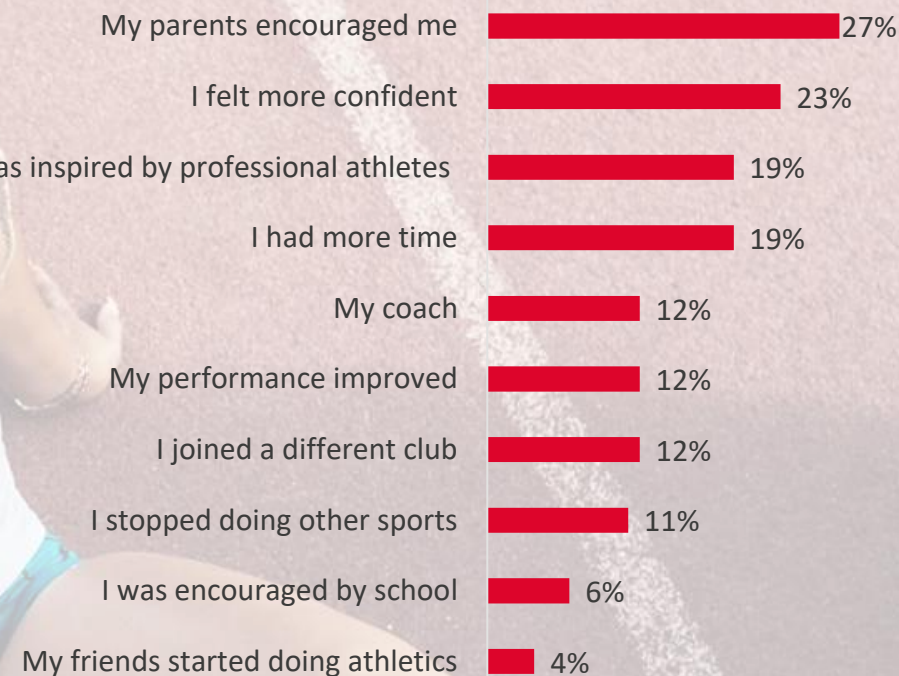
Age 16+ more likely to have taken a break and then come back (32% vs 18%) and also females (26% vs 21% of males)

*"I planned a break as I was struggling with my mental health at the time and so had stopped enjoying, it became more of a stress. I always planned to come back once I'd taken care of my mental health and was in a better position to start enjoying it again!"*

*I started taking part in parkruns. Coach told me I wasn't allowed to train with them if I did. I chose parkrun over the stress caused by this conflict*

*I was getting pains in my legs and groin from doing too much, and at the time wanted to focus on other sports. But then realised I preferred athletics so came back once I knew I would stop the other sports*

What made you come back to athletics?



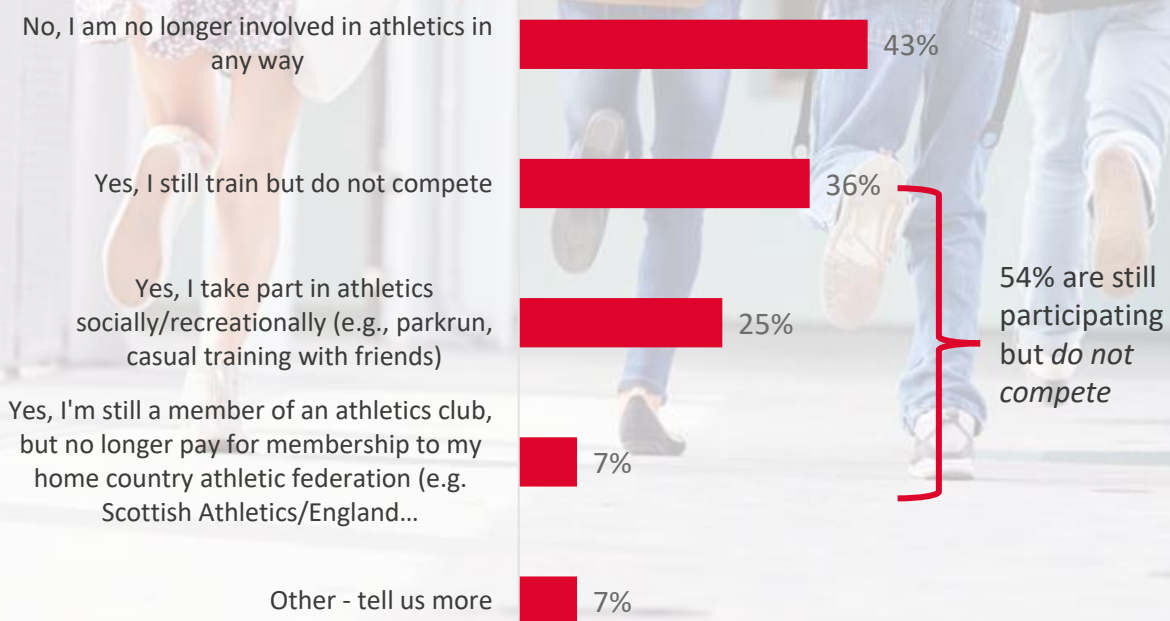
Most common 'other' reasons included returning from illness or injury

Retaining athletes

## REASONS FOR LEAVING THE SPORT & CURRENT INVOLVEMENT

**Time and loss of interest are key drivers for lapsing. Over 1 in 2 of 'lapsed' athletes are *still participating* but just not competing in the sport which is consistent with the qualitative research phase.**

Are you still involved in athletics in any way?



What were the main reasons that stopped you competing or taking part in the athletics?

|                                                              | %   | n  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Time commitments (school, work, social life)                 | 46% | 13 |
| Lost interest or motivation                                  | 46% | 13 |
| Injury or health reasons                                     | 21% | 6  |
| Pressure to compete made it un-enjoyable                     | 21% | 6  |
| I didn't have any friends                                    | 18% | 5  |
| Lack of progression or opportunities in my event             | 14% | 4  |
| Didn't enjoy the competition format                          | 14% | 4  |
| Moved to another sport or activity                           | 14% | 4  |
| Other reason - tell us more                                  | 14% | 4  |
| Coaching issues (lack of support, poor relationship, etc)    | 11% | 3  |
| Costs (membership fees, travel, equipment, competition fees) | 7%  | 2  |
| Didn't enjoy travelling to events                            | 7%  | 2  |
| Club environment wasn't welcoming or enjoyable               | 4%  | 1  |
| There wasn't a coach available to help me in my event        | 4%  | 1  |



### **Young people want athletics to feel:**

- More social, less solitary
- More flexible, less all-or-nothing
- More inclusive, less intimidating
- More fun but (still) serious when it matters

**They showed a real appetite to stay involved (or get involved), if the offer speaks to them, not just to the already confident or competitive**

### **Considerations:**

- Create casual low-pressure ways into the sport
- Mix competition and connection, not one at the expense of the other
- Recognise that consistency looks different for every teen
- Let them co-create the experience, not just react to it

**These insights lay the foundation for what comes next: testing new formats with teens, and seeing what sticks**



## **Young people want choice, not just one pathway**

They value fun, flexibility and fairness as much as formal challenge

Events that offer entry points and progression work best

Blending social and serious elements is seen as a strength not a contradiction

### **Considerations:**

Build a portfolio of formats that speaks to different motivations

Use tone and branding to signal social vs serious - both are valid (and a single event could have elements of both)

Let young people co-own delivery - especially fun-first events

Don't replace current provision - add to it to extend reach and retention



**These ideas weren't just well received, they were energising  
The next step is bringing them to life with teens at the centre**

## RETAINING ATHLETES

Those who are currently engaged were most likely to ask for improvements around access to high-level coaching & a clear pathway, whereas those less engaged are looking for less pressure & a less competitive environment

### Lapsed athletes

|                                                                                        | %   | n |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|---|
| A clearer pathway for progressing in my event                                          | 32% | 9 |
| A less competitive environment for those who don't want to compete at a high level     | 25% | 7 |
| More inclusive coaching and support                                                    | 25% | 7 |
| Nothing – I just had no interest in continuing                                         | 21% | 6 |
| More flexible training options (e.g., casual sessions, different time slots)           | 18% | 5 |
| More support & encouragement from my school                                            | 18% | 5 |
| Less pressure to train/compete on a regular basis                                      | 18% | 5 |
| Better financial support for young athletes                                            | 14% | 4 |
| Being able to follow a digital/online plan so that I could train solo when it suits me | 11% | 3 |
| Something else - tell us more                                                          | 11% | 3 |
| More social opportunities within athletics clubs                                       | 4%  | 1 |

### All participants

|                                                                                      | Total | Active & compete | Don't compete | U16s | 16+ |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------------|---------------|------|-----|
| More access to high-level coaching                                                   | 47%   | 48%              | 24%           | 48%  | 52% |
| A clearer pathway for progressing in my event                                        | 40%   | 42%              | 21%           | 41%  | 38% |
| Better financial support for young athletes                                          | 37%   | 39%              | 7%            | 38%  | 40% |
| Better competition opportunities at my level                                         | 35%   | 36%              | 24%           | 31%  | 43% |
| Increased financial support/funding                                                  | 35%   | 37%              | 10%           | 34%  | 40% |
| Clearer/easier way to get to elite level                                             | 31%   | 33%              | 3%            | 29%  | 35% |
| Being able to follow a digital/online plan so that I can train solo when it suits me | 29%   | 29%              | 34%           | 29%  | 31% |
| More support & encouragement from my school                                          | 27%   | 28%              | 17%           | 33%  | 21% |
| More flexible training options (e.g., casual sessions, different time slots)         | 24%   | 23%              | 34%           | 21%  | 22% |
| More social opportunities within athletics clubs                                     | 19%   | 18%              | 34%           | 19%  | 19% |
| Less pressure to compete & more flexible ways to get involved                        | 14%   | 12%              | 52%           | 13%  | 16% |
| More inclusive coaching and support                                                  | 14%   | 14%              | 7%            | 15%  | 12% |
| More inclusive/social aspects in clubs                                               | 11%   | 11%              | 7%            | 10%  | 9%  |
| A less competitive environment for those who don't want to compete at a high level   | 10%   | 8%               | 38%           | 9%   | 10% |
| Something else - tell us more                                                        | 9%    | 9%               | 10%           | 10%  | 9%  |

Looking back, do you feel there was anything that could have kept you in the sport? Small sample N=28  
What do you think might improve your experience in athletics? (Select all that apply) n= 435

## FEEDBACK ON COMPETITION FORMAT – COMMON THEMES

# 7 common themes emerged when asking young people on what needs to change within the sport:

### More Accessible and Inclusive Competitions (44%)

- Less pressure and more beginner-friendly events
- Non-elite pathways and ability-based races
- Fun-focused formats

More opportunities to compete:

- Frequent and local competitions
- Varied competition formats
- Clearer pathways from school to elite level

### Improved Coaching and Facilities (34%)

- More coaches and specialist training
- Better training facilities
- Funding and support for grassroots clubs

### Better Promotion and Visibility (10%)

- More advertising in schools and local communities
- Use of social media and TV coverage
- Appearances by elite athletes

### Make Athletics More Fun and Social (22%)

- Team-based events and music at competitions
- Social events and less rigid formats
- Emphasis on community and mental health benefits

### Reduce Financial Barriers (21%)

- Cost of travel, equipment, and entry fees
- Suggestions for scholarships and free events
- Government or sponsor support

### Better Organisation and Communication (6%)

- Clearer timetables and simplified sign-up processes
- Live results and electronic timing
- Improved officiating

I think a big part of competing is meeting new people, but the competitive environment discourages athletes from speaking to each other. I think it would be great if photographers took group pictures of athletes and not just the winners, getting new people in athletics more involved. and more social media aspects will attract people to athletics.

Individual clubs should hold social events and competitions for togetherness and community building!

More open graded level meets with no standards so anyone can access but also slightly relaxed rules so not as scary.

Some of my friends won't join athletics because they are afraid of being too slow. If there was a way to encourage them by maybe doing sessions like relays where you can't tell everyone's speed for new people that would be good.

Competition format



Given the chance teens would love to redesign athletic competitions to feel more flexible, friendly and inclusive

Whether they're current athletes, lapsed athletes, or involved in other sports, teens spoke clearly and creatively about how to make athletics and athletics competitions more appealing, sustainable, and fun



**What they're asking for:**

- A mix of serious and fun
- Visible entry points, not just elite pathways
- Events with a vibe, not just a schedule
- Recognition for effort, not just medals
- Flexibility that fits around school, jobs, and life

# In their own words...

## **A mix of serious and fun**

*"It needs to be chill but still feel like you're improving, that's what makes it satisfying"* Girl, 17, current athlete

*"You don't want everything to be jokes, just not always intense"* Boy, 16, lapsed

## **Visible entry points**

*"Make it feel like something for people like me, not just the fast ones"* Girl, 15, other sport

*"You should be able to show up and try things without it being all official"* Girl, 13, other sport

## **Events with a vibe**

*"More events with music, food and fun, not just standing around waiting to race"* Boy, 14, lapsed

*"If your friends are in it, you'll stay, if it's all strangers and silence, you won't"* Boy, 15, current athlete

## **Recognition for effort**

*"You should get noticed just for turning up and pushing yourself, not just winning"* Girl, 16, lapsed

## **Flexibility that fits their lives**

*"Give us stuff that fits with school and jobs, we're not free every evening!"* Boy, 16, lapsed

*"Sometimes you need to switch off. It shouldn't be all or nothing"* Girl, 17, current

## COMPETITION FORMAT – CONCEPT OUTLINE

# We tested the appeal of 11 competition formats:

- **Local Competitions** – Join a Club & compete with new people, make new friends - for developing athletes, building confidence, friendships, and competitive experience
- **Progression League** – Racing at your level, every time. A dynamic format where athletes compete in graded heats, ensuring tight, competitive races and real progression. Helps club athletes push for new PBs without feeling out of their depth.
- **Fast & Timed Championships** – Pure performance, no delays/no waiting! Chip-timed races, efficient schedules, and instant results— elite-level precision for serious athletes.
- **Try-It Festival** – A relaxed, festival-style event where athletes can try different events, track personal bests, and just have fun. No rankings, no pressure, just a bit of fun at your local track. Great for beginners or those returning to the sport.
- **More Competitive** – A league-based and graded competition format with event-specific meets and team challenges. Designed for strong club athletes to race at their level, push for PBs, and stay motivated. With a mix of solo and club-based challenges, it keeps motivation high and progression clear.
- **Squad Challenge** – Tactical, fast, and fun. Sprinters, jumpers, and throwers team up to score points across different events, bringing a social, team focused element to competition. Designed to keep multi-event athletes engaged.
- **Friday Night Compete & Eat** – Short, sharp, and social (approx. 2hrs). A quickfire competition against local clubs, followed by great food and music—the perfect way to start the weekend. Encourages club rivalries in a fun, low-pressure format.
- **‘Have a Go at Athletics’** – A social event but with a competitive element - for newcomers and casual athletes, making athletics fun and accessible.
- **Elite Grand Prix Series** – High-stakes championship meets with invitation-only fields, prize money, and ranking points. Athletes compete in a series of elite-level races, mirroring Diamond League-style formats to prepare for top-tier international competition.
- **Squad Relay challenge**- Each runner completes a solo lap, then the whole team runs the final lap together. The team’s time ends on the last runner’s finish. Held monthly on track or in a local park, it’s a regular challenge for clubs and social runners.
- **Virtual Track Challenge** – An app-based competition where athletes log their performances remotely and see their ranking on live leaderboards. Compete with others from anywhere in the UK, complete weekly challenges, and track progress over a few weeks or season.

# In their words, what they said about the concepts...

*"I'd love to try the **Try-It one**, you don't have to be good, just try stuff" Girl, 13, other sport*

*"The **Friday Night one** is cool, racing and then chilling with your mates and music, yes sounds great to me" Boy, 15, current athlete*

*"**Virtual** is sick, especially if you're not near a club or don't want the stress" Girl, 16, lapsed athlete*

*"**Progression League** makes sense, like, you know you're racing people on your level" Boy, 17, current athlete*

*"**Have-a-Go** would've been great for me, I never thought I was fast enough to try, but this feels more open" Girl, 15, other sport*

*"The **Elite one** is proper, that's something to aim for if you're serious" Boy, 16, current athlete*

## COMPETITION FORMAT APPEAL

**‘Local competitions’ hold the most appeal across audiences apart from the less engaged group who are more attracted to the ‘Try it Festival’ format**

| Competition format %       | Total | Female | Male | U16 | 16+ | Active & compete | Lapsed/not engaged |
|----------------------------|-------|--------|------|-----|-----|------------------|--------------------|
| Local Competitions         | 90%   | 91%    | 89%  | 88% | 93% | 91%              | 83%                |
| Progression League         | 85%   | 83%    | 87%  | 86% | 88% | 86%              | 77%                |
| Fast & Timed Championships | 83%   | 82%    | 85%  | 81% | 89% | 84%              | 70%                |
| Try-It Festival            | 82%   | 83%    | 80%  | 81% | 85% | 82%              | 86%                |
| More Competitive           | 81%   | 80%    | 83%  | 77% | 88% | 83%              | 63%                |
| Squad Challenge            | 79%   | 79%    | 78%  | 75% | 83% | 79%              | 80%                |
| Friday Night Compete & Eat | 78%   | 81%    | 75%  | 77% | 83% | 80%              | 67%                |
| ‘Have a Go at Athletics’   | 78%   | 81%    | 74%  | 77% | 81% | 79%              | 66%                |
| Elite Grand Prix Series    | 73%   | 71%    | 76%  | 70% | 77% | 74%              | 63%                |
| Squad Relay challenge      | 67%   | 68%    | 65%  | 71% | 66% | 67%              | 63%                |
| Virtual Track Challenge    | 65%   | 66%    | 64%  | 61% | 67% | 67%              | 47%                |

Final thoughts & recommendations

# What they'd say to the people in charge

**We asked teens directly: What would you say to the people shaping the sport of athletics? Their answers were clear, constructive and heartfelt...**

*"Make it more welcoming. It should be less about proving yourself and more about just being able to show up" Boy, 15, lapsed athlete (football)*

*"Athletics isn't bad, it's just that some of the things around it, like how serious it is, make it feel like it's not for everyone" Girl, 13, current athlete (athletics)*

*"Let people try it in a low-key way, like have events where there's music, people chilling, food...something more casual" Girl, 19, other sport (netball)*

*"You have to be part of it to know how to join, it's weird, it's not visible unless you're already in" Boy, 17, current athlete (athletics and football)*

*"You could definitely keep more people if it wasn't so all or nothing" Girl, 15, lapsed (athletics)*

*"We don't want the whole thing to change, just let us help shape it a bit and give us ways to say what we want" Boy, 13, current athlete*

*"Not everyone wants medals, some people just want to feel like they're getting better or part of something " Girl, 16, other sport (dance)*

# Their final thoughts...

Young people shared ideas, energy, and emotion throughout the project 😊  
Here is some of what really matters most to them as the sport moves forward

| What they want               | What they told us                                                             |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| More ways In                 | <i>"Let people try it first without needing to be amazing"</i>                |
| Atmosphere that feels right  | <i>"Music, food, friends, we want to feel like it's a thing, not a test"</i>  |
| Flexibility and choice       | <i>"I couldn't keep up every week, but I didn't want to quit either"</i>      |
| Progress that feels personal | <i>"It's not always about medals, I just want to know I'm getting better"</i> |
| Representation and a voice   | <i>"Ask us and we'll tell you because we have ideas"</i>                      |

## FINAL FEEDBACK – FOR THOSE ‘IN CHARGE’ OF ATHLETICS

**The themes reflect a strong desire for a more welcoming, engaging, and supportive competition experience that caters to a wide range of abilities and motivations.**

- **Fun and social environment (31%)** *"Local options, fun and social environment."*
- **Inclusivity and accessibility (9%)** *"Be more inclusive, be involved at grass roots, support clubs better with practical knowledge in person."*
- **More local and frequent competitions (9%)** *"More access to non-elite, beginner events in local areas."*
- **Recognition and rewards (8%)** *"More incentives, medals, more spectators."*
- **Support for all skill levels (7%)** *"Needs to be more fun, shorter and clear on ability level. Have different formats to attract all young people—from those just keeping fit to those wanting to progress to elite—but that needs to be separate. Also needs to be simple and less about rules to help new young people and their parents understand and want to have a go."*
- **Opportunities for personal improvement (5%)** *"An opportunity to socialise and gain personal improvement. An opportunity to access guidance and gain attraction of those coaches at higher levels in lower-level competitions."*
- **Clear progression pathways** *"Clearer information on race opportunities and progression pathways for those who want to take it seriously. More fun festival or evening events for young athletes. Athletics is a good sport to be involved in right now especially with young athletes being inspired by events like the Keely Klassic and the Diamond League."*
- **Better communication and information (3%)** *"Make more people aware of what's going on at my local athletics club—get on social media for my age group."*
- **Shorter and well-organized events (1%)** *"Not to take all day—either a morning or afternoon event. And win prizes."*
- **Less pressure and more enjoyment (1%)** *"Young people my age want from competitions to be able to have fun, enjoy the day, but also seek some sort of reward and recognition. They want a prize—it doesn't have to be physical or money—but they want something that will feel like a reward from coming first or reaching the top."*

# Today's teenagers are shifting their relationship with sport...

They see sport differently

Mental health and emotional balance matter more than ever

Sport must feel flexible, not fixed

Teens want choice, not pressure

Participation is broader, being 'sporty' doesn't always mean competing

Social media often shapes how they discover and relate to sport and they're curating what fits them

→ **To stay relevant, athletics must adapt to the way teens now define, discover and value sport; on their terms, in their time**

# The opportunity for athletics

There's real appetite to join or return, if the offer speaks to them

They want a sport that pushes them when they're ready and supports them when they're not

Entry points must feel open and visible

Competition should include progress and pride, not just podiums

They are ready to help shape what comes next

→The future of athletics depends on expanding the offer, one that balances ambition with enjoyment, and community with competition

# Recommendations...moving forwards

## Start with open doors

- Create **low-pressure, visible entry points** that feel welcoming — not selective or intimidating
- Re-think **how, where and by whom** children and teens first experience the sport

## Offer formats that flex with real life

- Build **options that fit around exams, work and wellbeing**
- Let teens step in and out without guilt and return when ready
- Support **different levels of commitment**, from casual enjoyment to serious progression

## Rethink what competition can be

- Design events with **energy, music and shared moments**, not just results
- Celebrate **progress, resilience and effort**, alongside elite achievement
- Give space for those **chasing big goals**, but don't let that be the only story

## Let young people help shape it

- Involve teens in **co-creating formats, events and club culture**
- Use vision groups to make sure the sport feels **relevant, inclusive and worth returning to**

→ To thrive, athletics must feel like a place where they want to start and where they also then want to stay