

Active Ageing

The Role and Opportunities for the Fitness Sector with the Ageing Population of Europe

The COVID-19 pandemic's grave impact on older people has brought the fragility of an ageing society into the political and societal spotlight. Regions in which there is a significant number of older adults have suffered the most severely.¹ Europe has a rapidly ageing population, as *Figure 1* demonstrates, the percentage of the European population over the age of 65 has grown from 17.3% to 20.3% of the overall population in just 11 years, and it is estimated that by 2060, 1/3 of the population will be over 65.²

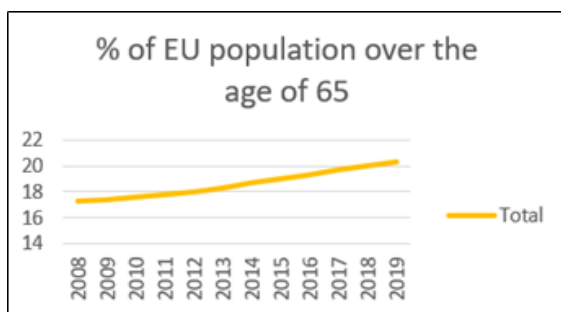


Figure 1: % of EU population over the age of 65. Source: Eurostat

In response to this, the EU Commission recently published a [Report on the Impact of Demographic Change in Europe](#). This launches a process that will help identify concrete actions and solutions, mindful of lessons learned from COVID-19, to support people, regions and communities that are most affected and to enable them to adapt to changing realities. The Report represents the bridge towards a more comprehensive document - **The Green Paper on ageing** - which will be published in 2021 and will focus on this issue in more depth, taking full account of the vulnerabilities that have emerged during the pandemic.

An ageing European population will constitute higher health and social costs for future generations of Europeans, this is a challenge

without a doubt but one that creates an opportunity to respond with innovative and sustainable solutions, as the EU addressed in developing the European “**silver economy**”, through a *wide array of economy-related policy initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life, better inclusion in society, and the involvement in economic activity of our ageing population.*³

The development of Silver-economy Europe is expected to provide great economic opportunities especially for those involved in the care of older people and all those committed to improving the health of the population. The fitness sector is exceptionally well placed to play a key role in the promotion of healthy lifestyles through physical activity and to provide appropriate services to develop a more active ageing society.

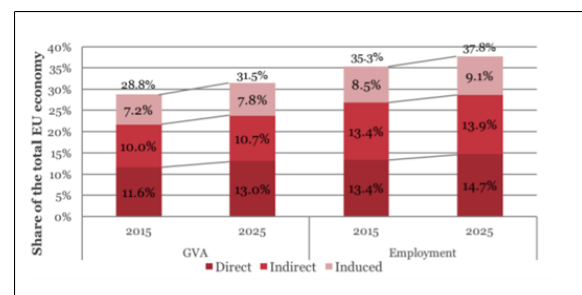


Figure 2: Economic Impact of Silver Economy in the EU. Source: EU Commission

Physical activity is an important factor for a healthy and independent life in older age. Recent studies have indeed demonstrated how the detrimental effects of social isolation are related not only to mental health and emotional well-being but also on physical health and functioning. The gradual decline in health that people experience as they age will vary considerably according to their genetic characteristics but also to their social environments and their lifestyle choices.

The increase in life-expectancy demands that sectors such as the fitness and physical activity sector find and create opportunities to guarantee that there are not just more years in your life, but more life in your years. Indeed, while life expectancy has increased in Europe, the quality of life has not, with the proportion of life spent in poor health, unfortunately, remaining stagnant.

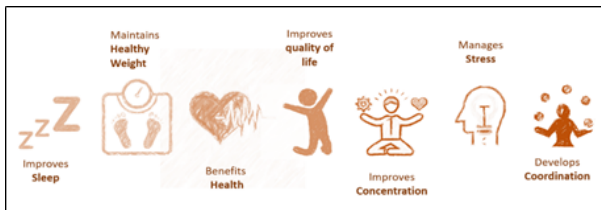


Figure 3: The Importance of Physical Activity in Older Adults

Physical activity has an immense role to play in combatting this, research has shown that, “moderate physical activity increases immune response to viral respiratory infections, and social engagement which provides protective health benefits across the lifespan”.⁴ Fitness has the potential to combine its health and social role in promoting active ageing societies while simultaneously utilising the business opportunities provided by the silver economy.

The fitness and physical activity sector has experienced constant growth in terms of revenue and membership in recent years. However, the current level of engagement among older people is far below the potential of the profile of people using the fitness sector. In detail, the visits of people to fitness centres over 65-year-old account for only 9% of total users.⁵

	Regularly	With some regularity	Seldom	Never
Gender				
Men	8	36	16	40
Women	7	29	12	52
Age				
15-24	9	53	14	24
25-39	6	40	19	35
40-54	7	32	17	44
55+	8	22	9	61

Figure 4: Eurobarometer – How often Europeans exercise

As figure 4 reflects the level of physical inactivity among older adults in Europe and the potential to develop this area. This lack of engagement is closely tied to a range of behavioural and socioeconomic factors, but it also indicates that the sector is not currently providing a tailored and sufficiently attractive offer to older people.

According to the EuropeActive Employer Skills Survey 2019, 88% of the fitness and physical activity sector employers believe that exercise professionals should be better equipped to work with older adults and that a lack of communication has been identified as one of the key skills' gaps amongst activity professionals in the sector today. Although the social relevance of fitness and consequently the role of coaches and instructors is a shared opinion, the sector must take a more proactive approach to support and engaging with older adults and thus the demand for professional staff is expected to rise in line with the demand for health and long term care.

EuropeActive has a long commitment to the Active Ageing policy throughout its participation at the *European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing* platform and EU funded projects in collaboration with Universities, National Fitness Associations, fitness operators, and suppliers. In the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme, the projects run by EuropeActive were able to implement a structured programme to bring older adults in fitness centres around Europe. Future projects will be based on interventions addressing behavioural, mental, and socioeconomic barriers to physical activity in later life by proposing a mix of methodologies from already successful projects together with the new piloting based on an intergenerational approach. EuropeActive's ambition is that the outcomes guidelines produced by projects can be reused by other fitness and recreational sports centres around Europe to replicate the methodology and engage older adults.

References

1. Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, Statement-Older people are at Highest risk from COVID-19, but all must act to prevent community spread, World health organization Europe, (Copenhagen, 2 April 2020), <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/statements/statement-older-people-are-at-highest-risk-from-covid-19,-but-all-must-act-to-prevent-community-spread>.

2. European Commission, 2018 Ageing Report: Policy Challenges for Ageing Societies, <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/statements/statement-older-people-are-at-highest-risk-from-covid-19,-but-all-must-act-to-prevent-community-spread>

3. Oxford Economics, "The silver economy", A Study for EU Commission DG COMM, <https://op.europa.eu/de/publication-detail/-/publication/a9efa929-3ec7-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1>

4. Julie S. Son, et al, " Promoting Older Adults' Physical Activity and Social Wellbeing during COVID-19", Leisure Sciences 2020.

5. Herman Rutgers et al., "European Health & Fitness Market Report 2019", (EuropeActive and Deloitte, 2019).