

The Active Lives Survey: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Active Lives Survey?

The Active Lives Survey is a Sport England-led survey about people aged 16 and over and their participation in leisure and recreational activities, including sport, physical activity and culture. The survey has been conducted by Ipsos MORI since November 2015.

The survey collects representative data from the population in England aged 16 and over and in each local authority area in England. Participation in sporting, physical and cultural activities is tracked at a population-level by demographic group and geography.

The survey involves a push-to-web methodology, with an optional paper survey, and the overall number of respondents is around 180,000 to 200,000 people each year.

How and why is the Arts Council involved in the survey?

Arts Council England wants to understand patterns of arts and cultural participation and attendance at different geographical scales and among different population groups. Evidence from large-scale population surveys is used by the Arts Council and the arts and cultural sector for a variety of purposes:

- To inform policy-making, investment decisions and our development work;
- To benchmark data collected through other means such as audience profile data;
- As part of research and evaluation projects;
- To contribute to organisational and sector-knowledge.

The Arts Council decided to invest in the Active Lives Survey at its outset in order to collect new data about rates of arts and cultural participation by those aged 16 and over in each local authority area in England. Local-level data helps support future programmes funded by the Arts Council such as the Creative People and Places programme, project targeting and planning and place-based policy and activity across England.

The Active Lives Survey enables local decision-makers in local government, Local Enterprise Partnerships and their partners – and the cultural sector in local areas - to have access to local level data about the extent of resident engagement with arts, museums and libraries.

The Arts Council's investment into the survey was for an 18-month period between November 2015 – April 2017. Although the Arts Council no longer invests in the Active Lives Survey, a narrow range of cultural options have been retained within the survey and still provide data.

The Arts Council is currently working in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to boost their existing Participation Survey to Local Authority-level during 2023/24. Going forward, this will provide data on a significantly wider range of cultural and creative activities and the importance of culture and creativity in the lives of those living across England.

What does the survey measure about arts and culture?

There are five broad areas of arts and cultural participation that the survey measures:

- Arts participation (doing creative, artistic, theatrical or music activity or a craft)
- Arts attendance (attending an event, performance or festival involving creative, artistic, dance, theatrical or music activity)
- Museums and gallery attendance
- Use of a public library service
- Participation in dance activities, including creative and artistic dance.

The survey asks respondents whether they have undertaken each activity in the previous 12 month period. Between 2015 and 2017 the survey also collected data on how many times each respondent had done the activity (0, 1, 2, 3+) in the previous 12 months, but this is no longer collected.

Respondents who selected that they had danced in the previous 12 months will be asked whether they carried out artistic and creative dance.

How has arts and culture been defined for the purposes of the survey?

For each of the five types of arts and cultural activities asked about in the survey, information is provided to respondents on the online and postal versions of the questionnaire about what to include in their answers:

- **Spent time doing a creative, artistic, theatrical or music activity or a craft.** Respondents are prompted to: *‘include any activities connected with painting, artistic photography, sculpture, digital or electronic art/music, crafts, music, literature, drama and the theatre, carnivals, circus and festivals. Include professional, amateur and faith based activities in your local area and elsewhere’.*
- **Attended an event, performance or festival involving creative, artistic, dance, theatrical or music activity.** Respondents are prompted to: *‘include indoor or outdoor events, performances or festivals connected with painting, sculpture, crafts, music, literature, dance, drama and the theatre, carnivals and circus. Include photography exhibitions. Include professional, amateur and faith based events in your local area and elsewhere. Include attending a live cinema screening of an arts or creative event or performance. Do not include attending the cinema to watch a film’.*

- **Attended a museum or gallery.** Respondents are prompted to: *‘include museums and galleries attended in your local area and elsewhere’*.
- **Use a public library service.** Respondents are prompted to: *‘include public library services used in your local area and elsewhere during visits to library buildings and mobile libraries as well as library services accessed online. Include book borrowing, e-book borrowing, accessing information, or attending meetings, events, courses, or clubs’*.
- **Creative or artistic dance:** Respondents are prompted with examples: *For example ballet, ballroom, belly dancing, contemporary, contact improvisation, Flamenco, folk, hip-hop, historical/period, Irish, jazz, jive, Latin American, line or square dancing, salsa, street dance, South Asian, tango or tap’*.

Measurement of participation and attendance in specific art-forms would have taken-up a large amount of space on the questionnaire and would be prohibitively expensive to collect from such a large sample of people aged 16 and over in England.

The key strength of the Active Lives Survey is its depth of coverage in each local authority area in England, rather than the breadth of information collected about specific art-forms. The Participation Survey will provide much greater detail on specific art-forms following its boost year in 2023/24.

How were the survey questions about arts and culture developed and tested?

The questions included in the survey were drafted by the Arts Council England Research team, in consultation with art-form specialists and the Engagement and Audiences team within the Arts Council prior to the survey being launched in 2015. The questions were drafted drawing-on wording and answer categories used in other major national and international surveys about arts and cultural participation.

The respondent information guidance was drafted based on the major art-forms and a consideration of the range of settings and places where people may access arts and culture. The respondent information guidance ensures that professional, amateur and faith-based activities are included.

Ipsos MORI have stringent procedures in place for the development, testing and piloting of all questions used in their surveys. The piloting and testing of the questionnaire included a set of cognitive interviews with members of the public, where they were asked to talk about their thought processes when reading, understanding and completing the questionnaire. Through such testing, members of the public reported feeling overwhelmed by earlier drafts of the respondent information text, which contained a longer list of artistic genres and settings in which arts participation or attendance could occur. Following this feedback, the respondent information text was shortened and simplified so that it was understandable for respondents completing the survey. A balance was reached between a description of art-forms and settings and the length and ease of understanding of the information text.

How many respondents take part in the survey nationally and in each local authority area?

The survey is completed by around 180,000 to 200,000 people each year in England aged 16+. The survey collects data annually from at least 500 people in each local authority area (including district council areas) in England, with the exception of the City of London and the Isles of Scilly (250 respondents in each).

How are respondents be sampled?

A survey invite is sent to a random sample of households from the postcode address file (PAF) in England. The PAF is the most widely used source for sampling for high quality social surveys in the UK and is maintained by the Royal Mail. The random selection of addresses will be stratified by local authority areas to ensure that the minimum local authority sample size is achieved in each local authority area across England, and in any places where sample sizes are being boosted. The random selection of addresses will also be stratified within each local authority area in order to increase the precision of survey estimates for each local authority area population.

Up to two people (aged 16+) in each household will be invited to participate in the survey. Respondents can either complete the survey online (including via a mobile phone or tablet) or via a paper questionnaire.

How does the survey differ from the Taking Part Survey?

The Taking Part Survey was a national survey about adult and children and young people's participation in culture and sport. Taking Part was jointly funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, Sport England and Historic England. The Taking Part Survey measured adult and child participation in culture and sport via a face-to-face household survey of 10,000 adults (aged 16+) and around 2,000 children and young people aged 5-15.

The Taking Part Survey ran from 2005/06 but the Covid-19 Pandemic prevented the face-to-face methodology from continuing during the 2020/21 survey year. As all fieldwork was paused and the time series disrupted, rather than renew the survey contract the decision was taken to commission the push-to-web Participation Survey from October 2021.

The key differences between the Taking Part Survey and the Active Lives Survey related to:

- **Depth of geographical coverage and sample size.** Taking Part was statistically robust at a national-level of geography and for each English region (e.g. North East, South West, London). The Active Lives Survey is robust at a local-authority level area in England, as well as regions and nationally.

- **Breadth of data collected about different art-forms.** The Taking Part Survey collected data about attendance and participation in range of different art forms and artistic genres. The Active Lives Survey collects high-level data about overall rates of attendance and participation in arts and culture.
- **Methods of data collection.** The Taking Part Survey was conducted via household surveys conducted face-to-face with a representative sample of households across England. The Active Lives Survey is conducted via a push-to-web methodology, with the option of a paper survey, of a representative sample of households in each local authority area in England and across England as a whole.

The Participation Survey was commissioned using the same push-to-web methodology as Active Lives. It provides a similar level of breadth as the Taking Part Survey and, in boosted years, will offer a similar geographic granularity to the Active Lives Survey.

How does the survey differ from the Active People Survey?

The Active Lives Survey superseded Sport England's Active People Survey. Between August and October 2015, Sport England consulted stakeholders on the methodology of measuring sports participation. The Active People Survey had existed since 2005/06 and over that time, its design has remained largely unchanged. The cross sectional, random digit dial (RDD), landline telephone design provided an effective mechanism to measure a wide range of sports and provide local authority level data.

However, given changing patterns of telephone use, surveys based purely on residential landlines no longer had complete or even coverage of the target population. Changing use of technology meant new and alternative approaches have been developed that are more effective at reaching a representative sample of the population. The Active Lives Survey uses postal methods to direct people to an online survey and is a more effective and future-proof approach.

The Active People Survey (APS) continued to run in parallel with the Active Lives Survey until September 2015.

How can I find out more information?

Please contact research@artscouncil.org.uk with any questions about the Active Lives Survey, or visit the research pages of Arts Council's website for latest updates.