

Health Inequalities are getting worse, what can we do about it?

Ahead of the first Active Wellbeing Leadership Network in June in Wakefield, Martyn Allison asks if it's time to think differently.

The latest news showing declining and widening health inequalities appears shocking particularly the widening gap in healthy life expectancy (the number of years a person might live in good health). However, as some commentators have suggested, we should take care about some of the conclusions we may jump to. For example recent analysis by the Sunday Times shows that falls in healthy life expectancy are mainly due to reductions in mental health particularly among young people whilst physical health is static or improving particularly among those over 55.

Since 2010 the work of Michael Marmot has driven policy, trying to address the gap by highlighting the need to tackle the wider social determinants of health including early years, worklessness, housing, education and community environments. Many of these determinants are getting much worse for some people so the negative impact on their mental and physical health is not surprising. Although addressing them is now more and more urgent the route to solving them is looking harder and harder. Many of us would now argue that tinkering on the edges of the system is not working and the whole socio-economic system is so broken that only fundamental transformational change will address these widening inequalities.

Interestingly this announcement lands at the same time as the latest adult active lives data from Sport England which stimulated me to revisit the research I did in 2021 when I looked at how the sector was addressing inequality and suggested we adopt Marmots model of proportionate universalism to tackle the stubborn inequalities in activity. At the time, most of the data suggested that we were doing more to increase activity levels among the better off than the most deprived and as a result we may be inadvertently making health inequalities worse. However, I did identify two projects, StreetGames and the Active Wellbeing Society, that were successfully prioritising those most in need highlighting the significant effort being made across some parts of sector to address these long standing inequalities. As one colleague said recently "I have never seen the sector doing more than it does now for those experiencing hardship and those in more deprived areas". But is it working?

The latest Active Lives report covers the decade 2015 to 2025 in which the last two Sport England strategies, Towards an Active Nation and Uniting The Movement, established a clear pivot to increased activity rather than just participation in sport, place based system change and reinforced tackling inequality as the main objective. Quite rightly, overall improvements in activity levels are being celebrated, particularly our recovery since the pandemic with 850,000 more people active in 24/25 than the previous year and also the 3.3million more people active now than in 2015/16 when the survey began. It is only right that we recognise the hard work that has gone into these headline improvements particularly given the impact of the pandemic in the middle of this decade. But are we still allowing this apparent headline success to mask the deeper challenges. Looking over the decade the data suggests that the picture on inequality is one that's getting worse not better. And the geographical differences remain very significant.

1. Since 2015/16 **the activity gap between the most affluent and the least affluent has widened** by 3.2% from 16.2% to 19.4% last year. Whilst activity levels among the most affluent grew by 2.2% **among the least affluent it declined** by 1%.

2. Over the decade **the gap between activity levels in the least deprived places and the most has widened** by 5% from 8.1% to 13.1%. Whilst activity grew by 3.7% in the least deprived places it **declined by 1.3% in the most deprived areas**.

3. Over that same period whilst activity amongst all adults grew by 2.5% activity levels in the Local Delivery Pilots grew by only 0.8% but **in the most deprived places it declined by 1.3%**. Does this mean that at least some progress is being made where targeted investment by Sport England is being based on need?

4. In terms of priority groups many of the long-term inequalities remain. Over the decade **the gap between men and women's activity levels widened** from 4.6% to 5.1% as men's activity increased by 2.8% compared to 2.3% for women. Whilst activity levels amongst white British and other white groups grew by 3.4% and 3.2% and amongst Chinese by 5.5%, **activity levels amongst black and asian groups remained static** and **amongst mixed and other ethnic groups activity declined** by about 2%.

5. But in some groups there has been some positive change. **Activity amongst those with a disability or long term health condition increased** by 5.4% compared to 3.1% for those with no disability. **Activity levels amongst the 55-74 year olds increased** by 7.3%, and amongst those 75 and older levels has increased by a significant 10.9%. Have this age group got the message about keeping active with many having both the time and money to do something about it?

In reviewing the decade it's impossible to ignore the impact of the pandemic which lasted from March 2020 till May 2023. Marmot has already reported that the pandemic had a bigger impact on those from the most deprived communities and the active lives data reflects this. Whilst the most affluent showed a 1% dip in activity and recovered within about two years, the least affluent faced a 2.1% dip and have yet to recover to their 2015/16 levels. The least deprived areas again faced a 1% dip in activity whilst the most deprived areas faced a 3.6% dip and again have yet to fully recover. And whilst LDP areas and the most deprived places suffered more significant dips LDP areas have recovered better. Clearly the pandemic had a very significant negative impact on activity levels in the communities where need is greatest and post pandemic recovery has been much slower.

Whatever conclusions we may want to draw from the data something is clearly not working. Either change is happening but so slowly it's almost invisible and closing these gaps will take years. Or despite all our efforts the sector is itself just not able to change culturally at the scale necessary to trigger long-term system redesign. Or the problem is just too difficult for us to solve on our own without transformational change to the whole social economic system in which we currently operate.

This week's local government elections are likely to see a radical shift in the local political landscapes of many places and will trigger a national political reaction as parties respond ahead of the next election. Over this weekend commentators on social media have been speculating on what will happen and what that response might and should be. The main conclusion seems to be that it is the current system of how we govern that is broken. Tom Watson in his blog says "Whitehall still thinks in departments, reviews, consultations and efficiencies. The public think in broken appointments, rising bills, unanswered calls and things that never get fixed. The gap between those two worlds is now a political fact".

On the 22nd and 23rd of June the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network will be hosting their first conference in Wakefield – more information and tickets are available here. The network has always seen itself as having a "think tank" role and over the two days participants will be encouraged to engage in some "futures thinking" and consider among other things how we can address these widening inequalities and how the national and local government system needs to change to enable us to do it. Over coming weeks colleagues on the network will be sharing their own ideas about the future ahead of the conference. What are yours?

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