

Surviving a Pandemic: Community sports groups and COVID-19

Exploring how COVID-19 affected Sported's community sports groups from March 2020 until February 2021

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Research aims

This research aims to understand the experience of community sports groups throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It listened to the essential voice of these groups at key touch points as they faced unprecedented challenges. These reference points were essential to better understand how groups are navigating this new landscape, how experiences changed, and how organisations like Sported can best support them.

Importantly, this research hopes to elevate the voice of community sports groups in order to inform key decision makers and ensure recovery plans have people at the centre.

The research also examines this community voice in order to:

- Adapt to immediate needs and provide support accordingly
- Ensure resources and funding are directed appropriately
- Better understand how community sports groups perceive potential challenges in 2021 and adapt accordingly
- Evidence this insight and need to key national stakeholders

Methodology

Sported launched a series of surveys and focus groups to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on community sports groups.

Over **900 survey responses** were completed by group leaders and addressed the immediate and future impact of COVID-19 restrictions on themselves, their group, the young people they work with and the wider community. Surveys were opened and adapted to mirror restrictions on sport and exercise activities.

Focus groups with 18 community sports groups were conducted by a professional qualitative researcher; 4 x 1.5 hour online groups in May, July and December. Focus group participants varied by location, length of time established, size, community focus and sport offered, in order to reflect how COVID-19 impacted differently throughout the Sported network.

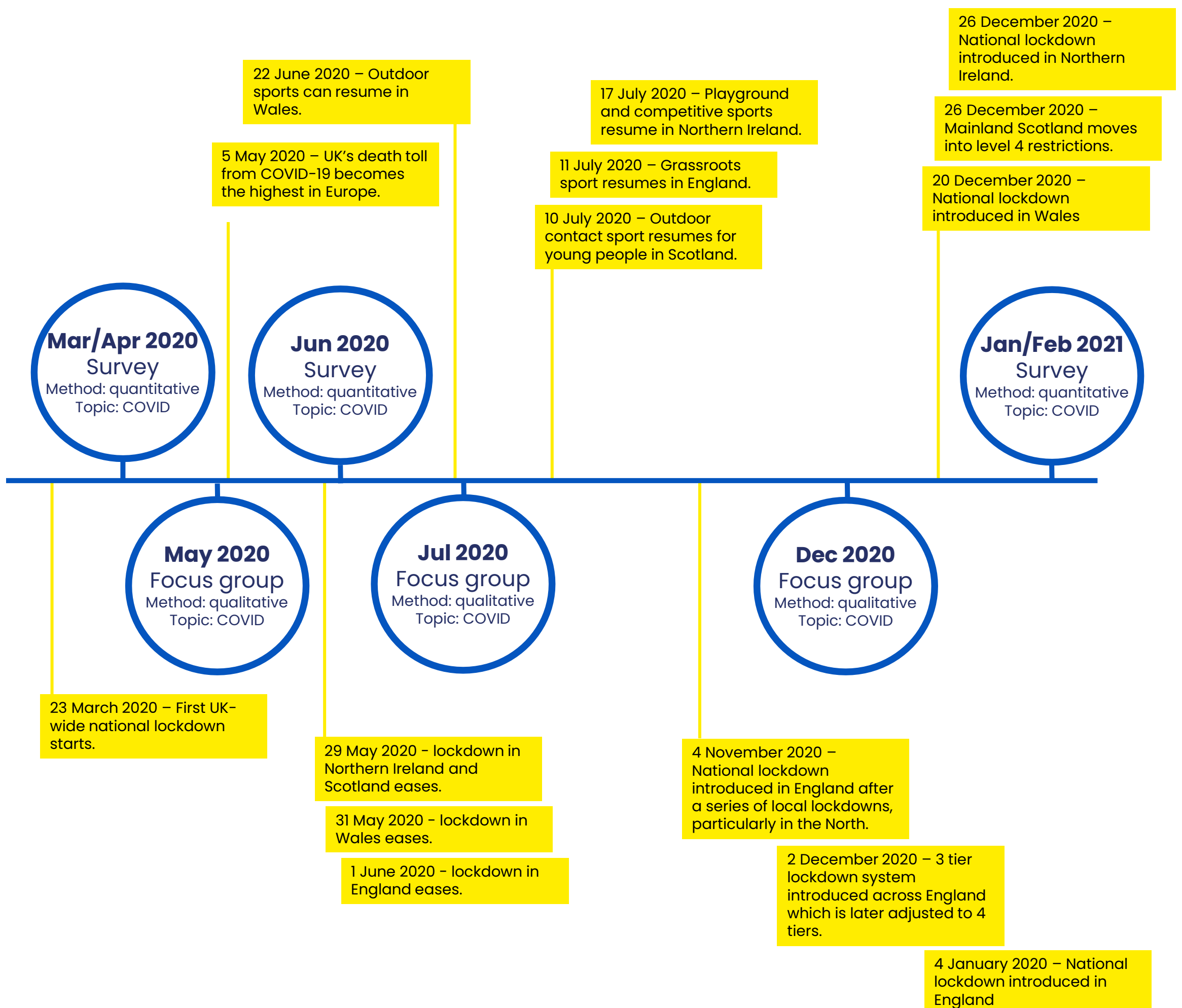
Context and Timeline

Over half of Sported's community sports groups are volunteer led, 44% have an income of less than £10,000 per year and 45% are located in the lowest 30% areas of multiple deprivation. The challenges of being volunteer led and under-funded have grown in the pandemic year and continuous restriction changes made it extremely difficult for groups to plan and respond effectively with the dwindling resources they had.

Sported's community sports groups also work within complex local contexts, often tackling some of society's biggest challenges. These groups work on addressing key social inequalities with 21% focussing on work with disabled people, 16% with ethnically diverse communities, 17% with women and girls, and 42% with people living in poverty or an area of deprivation. The pandemic exacerbated inequalities and left groups managing ever more complex issues with continued uncertainty.

The different landscapes nationally and locally meant groups often had to adapt quickly and be more resilient and flexible to continue providing essential support to young people. The regional restriction changes resulted in vastly different experiences depending on location after the easing of lockdown measures in June and July. While some sports groups were able to return to full activity, others were faced with continued and uncertain local restrictions with tightening limitations.

Many community sports groups remained resilient and as effective as they could be at utilising minimal resources and providing essential support to young people throughout the year. Their continued effort and work to deliver sport for young people is important and remarkable.



Key Findings

Community sports groups have faced significant challenges due to COVID-19 restrictions. Throughout the year groups continued to identify immediate and long-term **financial short falls**, more **difficulty engaging young people** in activities, and **lower morale**.

Despite increased anxiety and concern about participant wellbeing, most groups were confident they would reopen once government restrictions allowed. However, they recognised that the impact of COVID-19 would present **new challenges** that would be increasingly **difficult to overcome without essential support**.

Groups experienced 3 key phases during COVID-19 restrictions:

Phase 1: Emergency (Mar – May 2020)

- Group leaders' anxiety about mental and physical health was highest in the emergency phase and groups felt most uncertain about the future.

Phase 2: Refocus (Jun – Nov 2020)

- Anxiety dropped but group leaders remained particularly concerned about maintaining the wellbeing of participants and immediate funding needs.
- Groups adapted activities and provided support to young people where possible.

Phase 3: New Normal (Dec 2020–Feb 2021)

- Groups were more confident of survival but were concerned about new challenges, the lack of secure funds and mental health of young people, communities and volunteers.
- Concern about participant wellbeing remained high and groups recognised the need to reopen to support young people struggling.



Dave Poultney/The Times

Phase 1: Emergency (Mar–May 2020)

Gathered from:

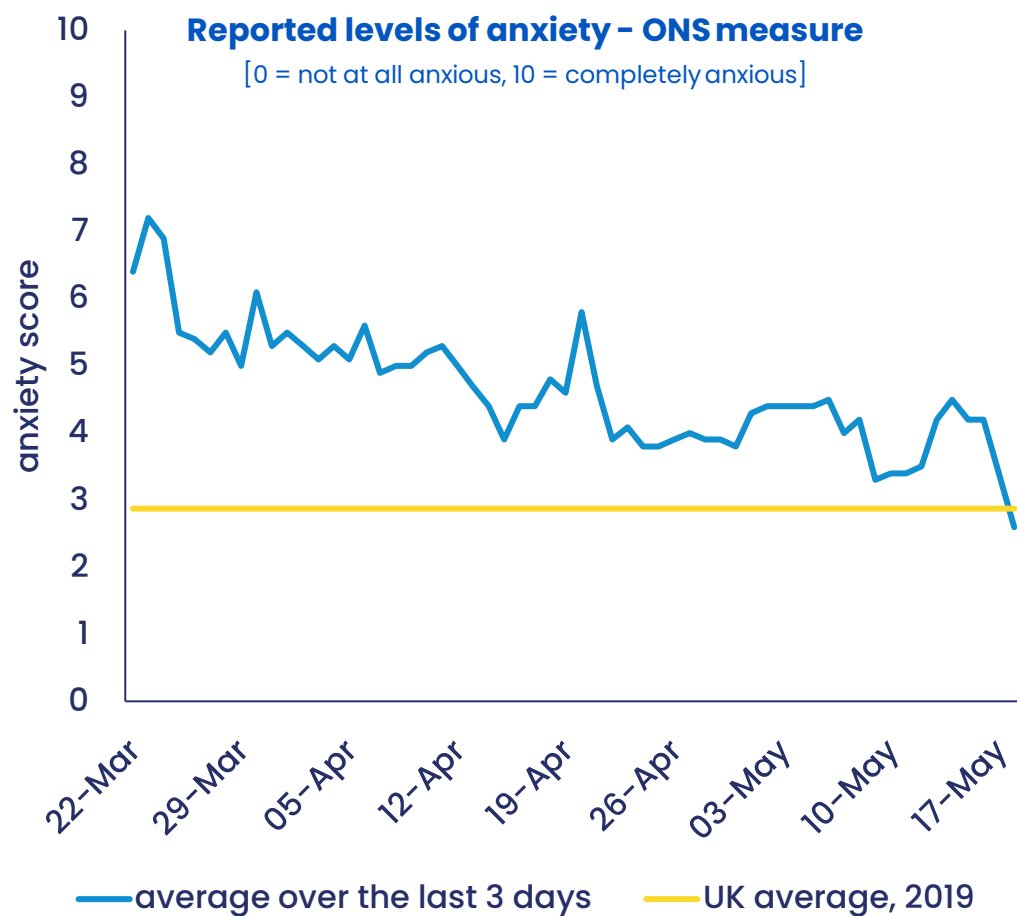


Impact

Most community sports groups across the country had to close buildings and stop all sports activities. Some groups switched to delivering emergency activities including food banks and shopping collection for more vulnerable participants.

Groups were nervous and uncertain about the near and distant future. Some groups were anxious about immediate financial costs with rent for facilities and equipment due without any income to offset it. The heavy reliance on weekly membership fees for some groups meant the immediate financial burden seemed almost impossible to overcome.

Anxiety peaked around 22 – 24 March, and was **much higher than UK averages**.



“Unfortunately, as face-to-face delivery [is] within the community to vulnerable young people, all our services have stopped.” – survey respondent

“Everything is closed but no expenditure other than some coaching fees, which can be covered. Keeping in touch with YP through our teams and adults are doing weekly quizzes etc. They usually host [an] end of season dinner and AGM in May and invite their sponsors, [we’re] worried they will lose some sponsors because of recession but doing their best to keep everyone onboard.” – survey respondent

“We have had to close the building completely so have no income.” – survey respondent

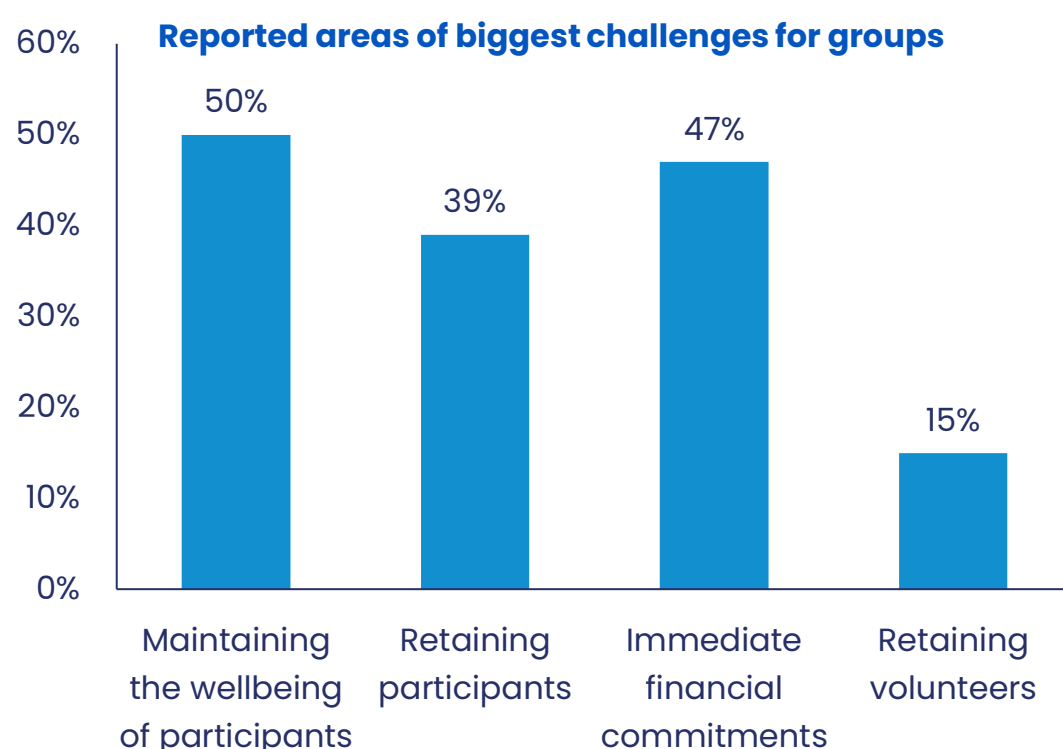
“We are a sailing club working with disabled young people who come to us via special schools. The season was supposed to start end of this month but it will now have to be postpone which means no income. We have enough money in the bank for a few months but if it goes beyond 3 months we will struggle financially. We have a SE grant for a new boat and security for the yard - we will try and pursue this as it is now imperative we get the security in place.” – survey respondent

Challenges

Groups faced different challenges mostly relating to varying levels of financial stability and the size of the organisation. Groups needed emergency funding to cover immediate costs with **62% of groups identifying emergency funding and fundraising as their immediate support need**.

Groups highlighted difficulty keeping in touch with participants and keeping them active, **particularly for groups who did not have access to remote activities or online connections**. A number of activities were moved online quickly but some young people struggled with access to technology and the internet while others often had limited interest taking part in online sessions.

Groups were **most concerned about the wellbeing of participants**. This remained the biggest concern throughout 2020.



Focus group participants highlighted a number of similar key challenges:

- Covering immediate financial loss
- Maintaining engagement with participants
- Supporting most vulnerable participants
- Access to technology for online delivery, and understanding additional liability and safeguarding
- Participant’s access to IT & internet
- Concern over future income, particularly those who rely on major fundraising events and those cross-subsidise

Phase 2: Refocus (Jun – Nov 2020)

Gathered from:

June
Survey
Method: quantitative
Topic: COVID

July
Focus group
Method: qualitative
Topic: COVID

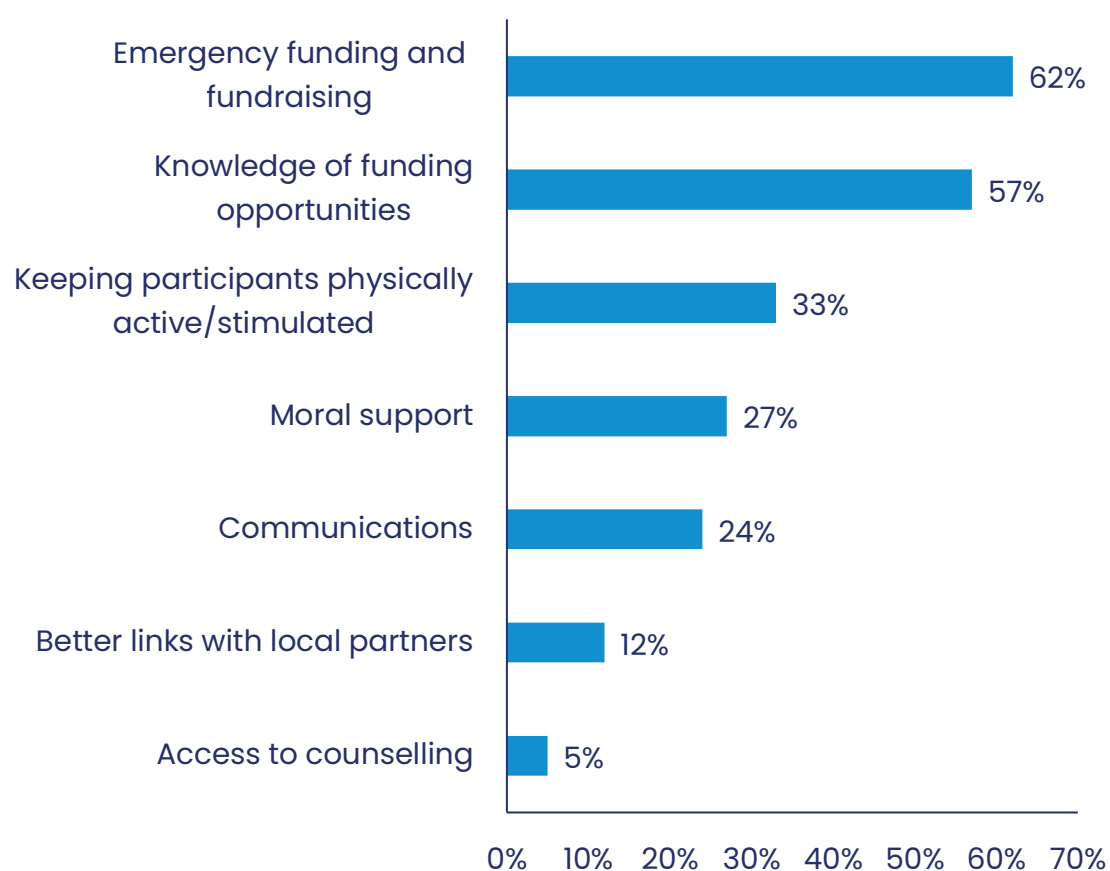
Shifting Focus

While in person activities returned, the majority of community sports groups had to adapt to changing community needs and government restrictions. The number of groups seeking support for returning to activities increased and resource pressure increased on staff, volunteers, equipment, facilities and health and safety practices. The **need for emergency funding remained** with group leaders also highlighting **growing concern for young people’s mental health and continued isolation**.

The size, sport, and length of time groups had been established impacted the number of challenges they faced and their ability to adapt effectively. Small volunteer-run organisations could adjust without staffing costs while large established organisations had more capacity to generate new funding. **Organisations in the middle with 1 or 2 paid staff, and particularly those that had only recently opened struggled the most** and faced increasing difficulties.

Emergency funding and fundraising remained the highest immediate priority for community groups.

Areas of support that groups identified as immediate need



The Impact on Disability sports groups (England)

- Groups providing online activities for young disabled people faced more challenges with **61% reporting difficulty keeping young people active or engaged**.
- The added health risks for young disabled people meant **disability sports groups were even more concerned (70%) about participants returning** compared to non-disability groups (64%).
- Disability sports groups reported needing more PPE and additional support staff/volunteers to ensure appropriate protection of their participants.
- Increased **financial pressures were worse for disability sports groups** with 67% identifying a need for emergency funding.
- **Social distancing requirements make returning to sports near impossible** for many disabled participants.

“The return to business, however, is not going to be easy. The social distancing rules will make sessions unviable so are not workable long term.” – survey respondent from disability sport group

Response

Groups found **it increasingly difficult to respond and adapt as government guidelines moved**. The lack of clarity made it hard to plan effectively and group leaders, staff and volunteers often found this continual change exhausting to manage. Groups also had growing concerns about families being unable to afford membership fees or subs which compounded financial sustainability worries.

Often groups did adapt and re-adapt while needing to find new and innovative ways to support young people in their community. **Some groups did not have the capacity to manage ever-changing restrictions and closed their doors completely**.

- More groups started virtual delivery to keep young people engaged
- Activities were locally focussed and varied depending on restrictions and resources
- Groups asked for clearer messaging from governments to effectively plan returning to activities
- Groups sought support establishing partnerships with specialist organisations but felt connected within their own network
- Groups sought more cohesion and commitment from governments to recognise the benefits of sport and physical activity

“Through the zoom meetings you could see the young people are isolated and frustrated... we’ve brought more councillors on board who are having sessions with them as well” – focus group participant.

“[We have] shut down but not paying rent and staying in contact with participants. We’ve even had some youngsters enquiring about joining, because they’ve taken up kitchen-table table tennis during lockdown!” – survey respondent

“With nobody being able to attend and so not having membership money our utility and other bills are sucking what very little funds we have left.” – survey respondent

Phase 3: Managing a New Normal

(Dec 2020 – Feb 2021)

Changes

In this new normal phase, groups faced a combination of new and recurring challenges. This new normal represented **a constant and continuous balance between planning and readjusting** relating to shifts in funding and facility access. **Planning for long-term stability was impossible** but some groups used the opportunity to see positives in their own resilience and aim to return stronger.

Group leaders had growing concern over young people's isolation and mental health and recognised that **inequalities had been exacerbated by the pandemic**. Despite the need for increased collaboration, groups found that organisations had turned inwards, focussing on their own survival rather than supporting and building the network.

Groups faced increased challenges delivering activities with more **strain on resources, support, facility access and mental health**.

- Groups highlighted a deepening negative impact of COVID-19 on **young people's mental health**
- **Experiences varied** depending on the type of sport and **need for social distancing**
- **Challenges accessing facilities increased**– hiring, opening, and providing space was more complex
- There was concern over a **lack of resources and financial support**, particularly for smaller less established community groups
- The increased COVID-19 and financial risks **lowered volunteer engagement**
- Community **groups have adjusted** and are putting in every effort to operate as much as they can

"I'm apprehensive that COVID-19 will have a lasting effect on our age group – Under 6s to Under 16s. But I don't think NORMAL will exist for quite some time."
survey respondent

"We are under financial pressure, our insurance is due for renewal in April if we can't offer a service to our members how can we justify asking them to renew their membership?" – survey respondent

"As an organisation that deals with young people, my concern is the parents and players themselves are hard to engage, so we have lost the ability to check on their mental health" – survey respondent

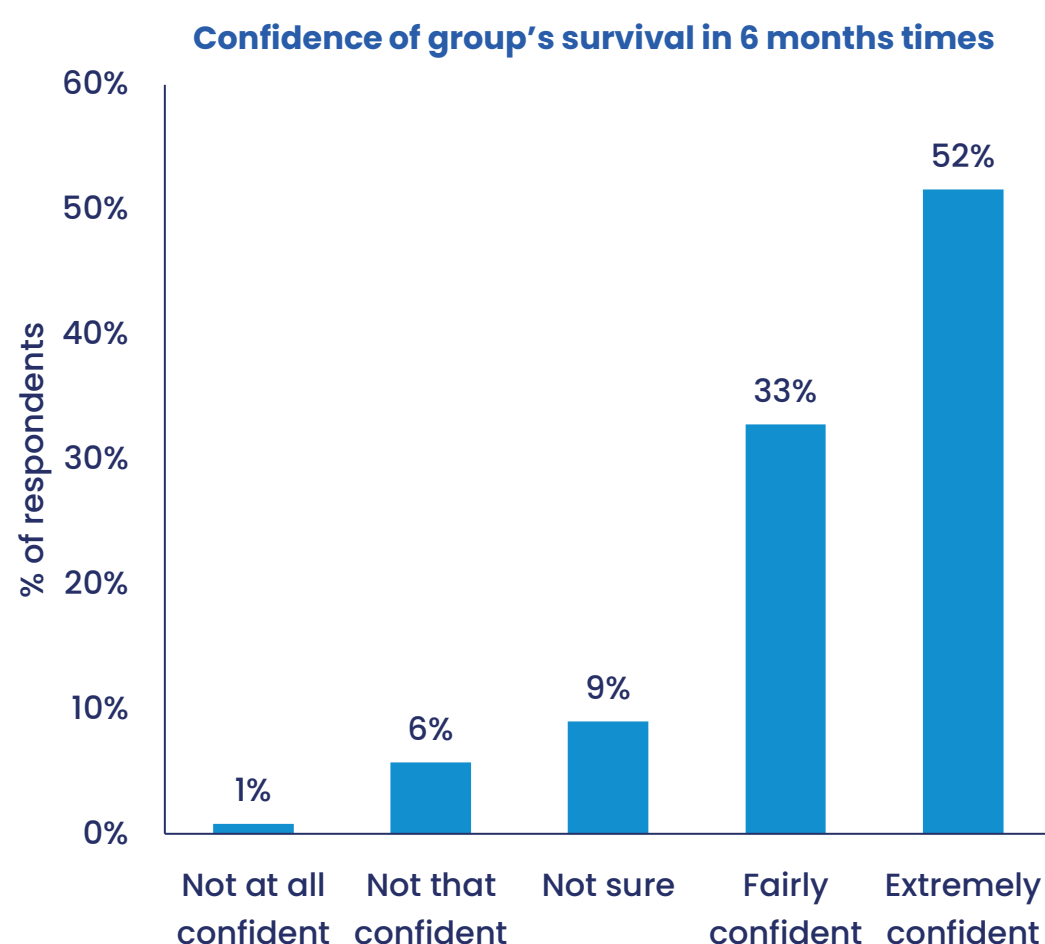
"Just a bit concerned about the fact we don't know when we can get back to activity and when we do, what type of activity will be allowed. We actually gained members during the first lockdown but I think we will definitely lose players during this one. That's frustrating as we feel we were getting close to developing a club that could really serve our members and the local community." – survey respondent

Survival

Group leaders faced growing challenges and an increased strain on mental health and wellbeing. Despite these challenges, many groups remained committed to survival in order to provide essential services to young people. This often meant utilising facilities and support networks for activities like emergency food delivery and connecting young people to mental health support.

Regional governance and restrictions also impacted the confidence of groups being able to survive and how easily they could access facilities, funding and further support.

Over half of groups were extremely confident they would survive in 6 months time in January 2021



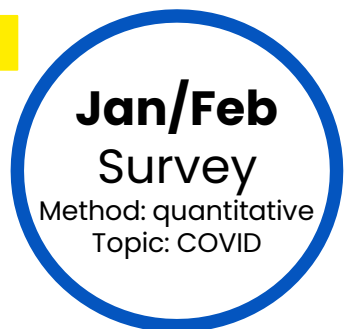
Average of reported confidence in survival by region

[1 = not at all confident, 5 = extremely confident]



Looking Forward in 2021

Gathered from:



The **fluctuation between new normal and emergency continues for most groups in 2021**. The feeling amongst participants mirrors this uncertainty with some frustrated and isolated while others are engaging more than ever before.

Groups have recognised new opportunities to attract and engage young people who were previously excluded from activities and groups are identifying ways to include these young people in the future. Despite challenges from throughout 2020, **community sports groups remain resilient and committed to serving young people in need**.

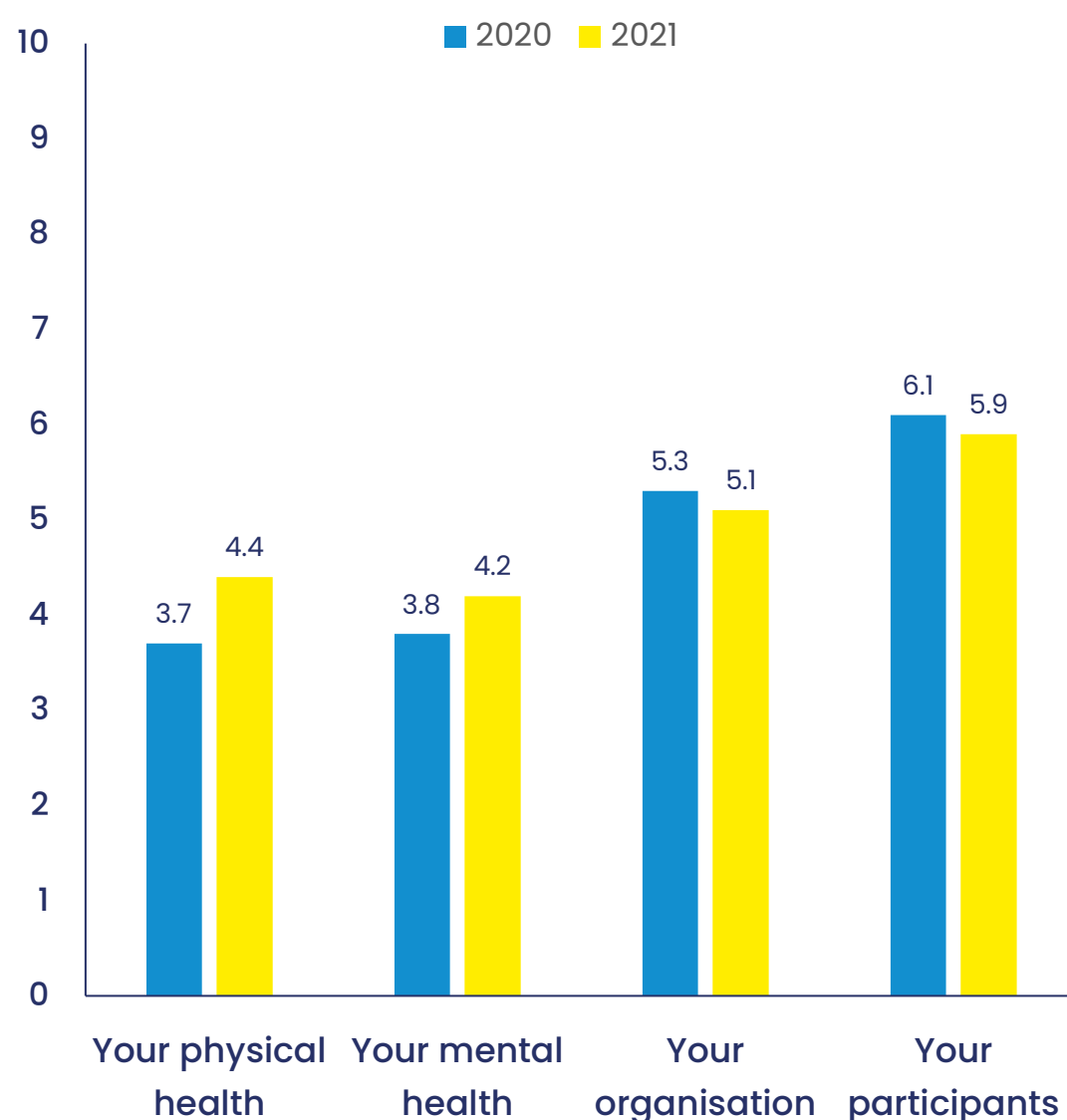
Groups were more confident about survival in 2021 but concerns about new and unprecedented challenges had grown.

- The biggest challenge facing groups is immediate and continued funding needs with **groups struggling to cover costs accrued throughout 2020**.
- Groups are concerned about the **impact on vulnerable communities** and recognise that young people who were difficult to engage before will be even harder to motivate.
- The lack of clarity from governing bodies and government authorities makes **planning and preparing for return very hard**.
- Groups felt that **reopening was like starting from scratch** and that all and any help was needed at this vulnerable time.
- Some groups identified **new opportunities to attract more young people** with aims to increase participation from pre-pandemic levels.
- Groups recognised that a new normal meant a complete **re-visioning of strategy and sustainability plans** for more secure futures.

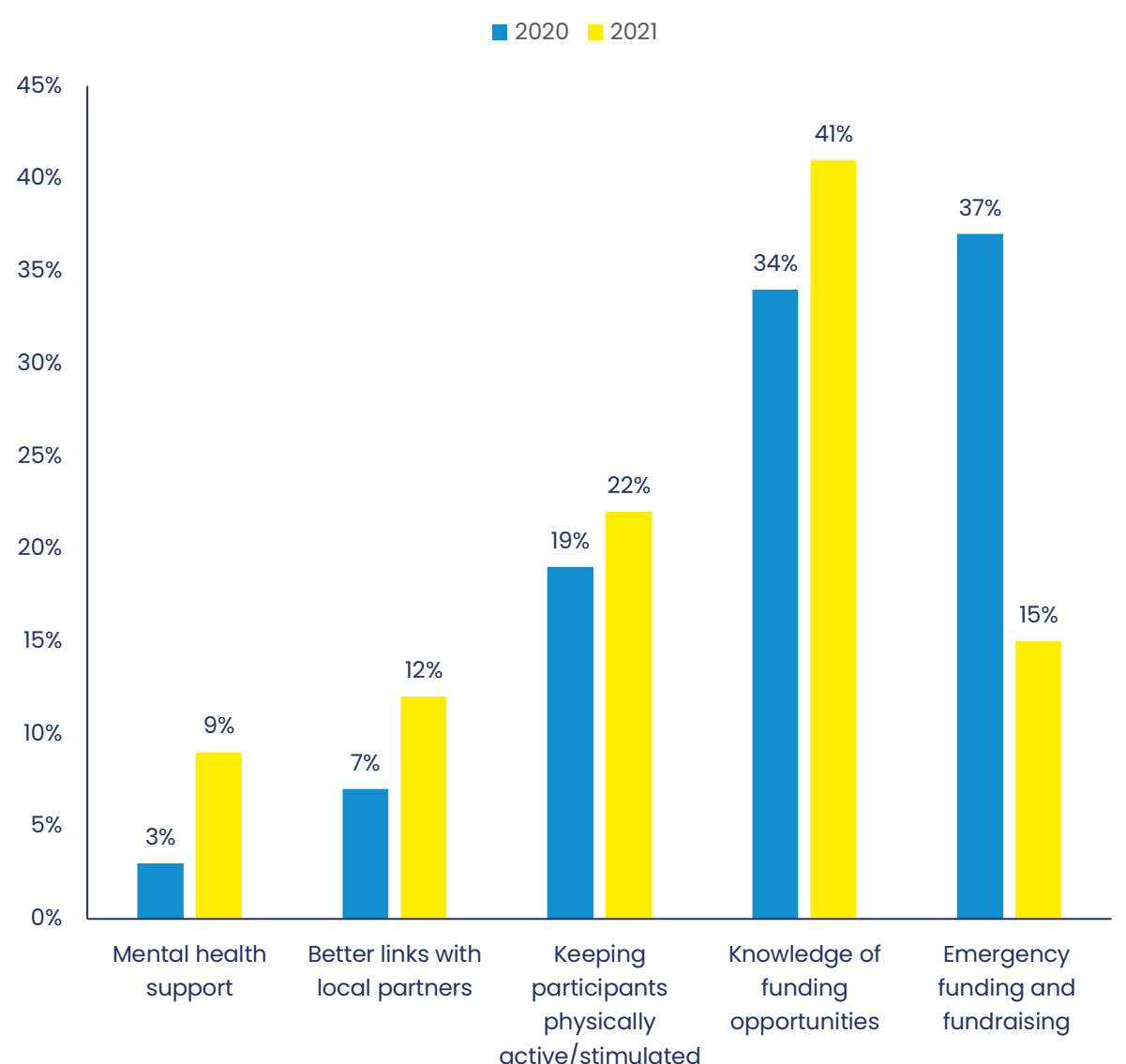
In 2021, anxiety about physical and mental health increased while anxiety about groups and participants remained high.

In 2021, immediate support needs for emergency funding dropped by over half but tripled for mental health support.

Reported average levels of anxiety, in relation to different aspects
[0 = not at all anxious, 10 = completely anxious]



Reported areas of support needed now
[top 5 areas of support from 2020 and 2021]



Next Steps

Community sports groups hold a foundational place within local communities throughout the UK. Their work to support the mental and physical well being of young people and their contribution to a more cohesive society is well recognised.

Community sports groups experienced 3 key phases throughout COVID-19 pandemic; emergency, re-focus, and a new normal. Groups that have survived these phases will return with increased concerns about fewer participants, financial insecurity, struggling volunteers, and lower overall morale. Despite the continued resilience and commitment of these groups, the new challenges are leaving them anxious about the effectiveness of their return.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community sports groups has been severe. Their successful and sustainable return to delivering sport activities is vital for young people throughout the country. Community sports groups need additional support and increased resources to manage new challenges and mitigate the consequences of such an unprecedented year.

What's needed?

- **New funding opportunities**
- **Support applying to grants and funding**
- **Support with mental health of groups and young people**
- **Support to re-engage and recruit young people**
- **Increase support for groups' resilience and sustainability**
- **Clear and practical advice for groups to deliver activities which meet government and governing body guidelines**
- **Expand research to understand the deeper impact of COVID-19 on young people participating in community sports groups**