

Covid-19 Impact on Activity Habits of Black Country Residents

Insight Report

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**Active
Black Country**
Creating a healthy, active region

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Since the restrictions on movement were imposed by Government, ABC have committed capacity towards understanding the local impact. An initial consultation exercise with local community deliverers enabled a targeted approach to support those most in need.

This report goes into detail in relation to how the physical activity habits of Black Country residents have been impacted during this period and the potential for longer term behaviour change. The insight will be used to inform a refresh of *Towards an Active Black Country*.

The measures imposed by HM Government to promote social distancing in response to the global Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 have had an unprecedented economic and social impact on the lives of Black Country residents. The restrictions on movement for non-key workers meant that forms of exercise previously considered normal by many, such as going to a leisure centre, gym or group exercise class became impossible and people had to find new means of staying fit and healthy, including online exercise classes on YouTube, group sessions via Zoom and outdoor exercise in the local vicinity.

The situation has also had the impact of introducing new audiences to the benefits of an active lifestyle; when the Prime Minister announced the new measures, they included the caveat that people could leave their residence once-a-day for exercise, prompting some residents to become more active than they'd ever been before.

This report summarises the results collected across 2 surveys conducted across May and June in 2020. It seeks to understand;



If and how habits have changed



Whether or not changes are likely to be retained



The potential to build active travel into daily routines

Sample

Two surveys were conducted independently of each other to obtain a full range of views.

Survey of Black Country Residents



715 survey responses



27% of respondents live in deprived areas



16% of respondents were from a BAME background



40% of respondents were aged 50+

Survey of Black Country Parents



469 survey responses

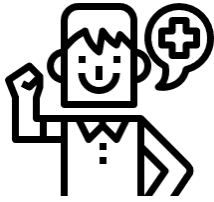


22% of respondents had a child in Primary School



77% of respondents had a child in Secondary School

Summary of Findings

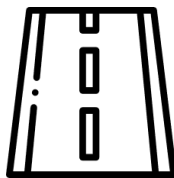
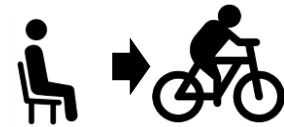


Whilst only **1 in 10** of all respondents said their pre-lockdown **Physical Health** was either *Poor* or *Very Poor*, this figure increased considerably amongst some respondents.

- People *Living in Deprived Areas* – **2 in 10**
- People who self-described as *Inactive* before the lockdown – **4 in 10**

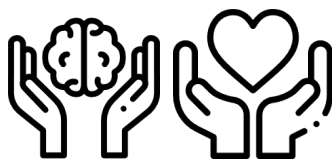
53.5% of respondents who had previously self-described as *Inactive* actually increased their levels to *Fairly Active* during the lockdown. Additionally, a further 23.3% went the extra mile and were *Active*.

People who were *Active* prior to lockdown were the group most likely to experience a drop in activity levels.



One factor that positively impacted on activity levels during lockdown was the reduced number of people in the streets during the early stages, with 60.9% of respondents stating this encouraged them to be more active.

Following initial confusion around rules regarding countryside access and the distance people were allowed to travel to be active, more people started to make use of the local countryside. 23.1% of respondents said they utilised open space for exercise.



Whilst the majority of respondents reported no change in physical health and a deterioration in mental health during lockdown, those who increased their activity levels from a previously sedentary baseline, were considerably more likely to report improvements in both.

Many people suggested that a continuation of **Flexible Working Patterns** would encourage them, and give them the requisite time, to be more active in future.

Additionally, having **Safer Places to Walk or Cycle** was important to a large number of respondents.

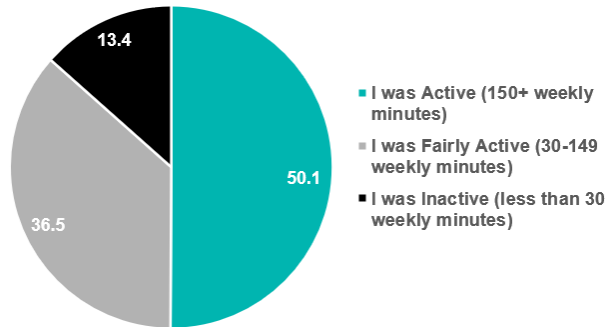


Of all the new habits that people picked up during lockdown, 23.6% of respondents indicated that they'd like to continue walking in one form or another.

Prior to Lockdown

Activity Levels of Respondents

In the month prior to the lockdown, how would you describe your activity levels?



Just over half of respondents to the survey self-reported as being **Active** in the month prior to the lockdown. This is in broadly line with the Active Lives Survey's analysis of activity rates in the area.

Only 13.4% of respondents describe themselves as **Inactive** (the most recent Active Lives Survey suggests the real figure is closer to 34.2%).

Types of Activities Respondents Did Pre-Lockdown



Walking for Leisure is the activity that most people (41%) say they *Regularly* did pre-lockdown, followed by **Going to the Gym** (32.5%) and doing a **Group Exercise** class (32.4%)



Men (30.6%) are considerably more likely than women (8.7%) to **Regularly Play or Train with a Sports Club**. Conversely, women (36.9%) were far more likely to attend a **Group Exercise** class than men (19.4%).



Only 3.1% of respondents regularly **Cycled to Work or a Destination**. This increases to 6% amongst those who are generally *Active* people.



Walking to Work or a Destination is far more popular, with 29.4% reporting doing this *Regularly*. 37.6% of **BAME** respondents choose to travel in this way.



Going for a Run is one of the best ways to get and stay active but only 10% of respondents did this *Regularly* pre-lockdown, and 71% said it was something they *Never* do.



Almost 8 in 10 said they *Never Cycled for Leisure* pre-lockdown. 6.1% of respondents who *Lived with Children* said they do this regularly, compared to 1.3% who *Lived Alone*.



Going to the Gym is the second most popular way that respondents liked to be active pre-lockdown. 32.5% said they went *Regularly*.



Swimming is regularly one of the most popular sports identified in the Active Lives Survey. 11.8% of respondents do this *Regularly*, rising to 17.6% amongst people over 55.

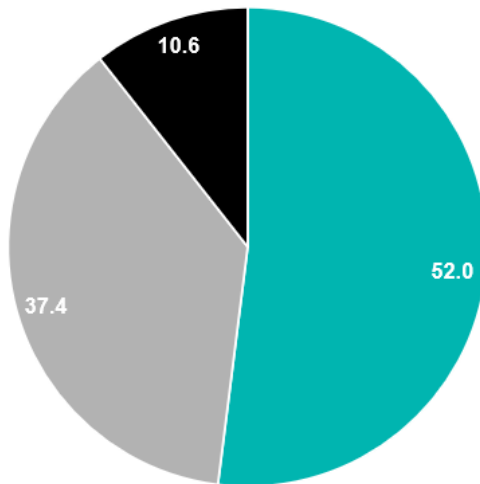


Prior to the lockdown **Exercising at Home** was something that 78.6% of respondents would *Never* do. However, it was still a more popular form of exercise than running, with 10.6% saying they did it *Regularly*.

Pre-Lockdown Self-Reported Health Levels



Physical Health



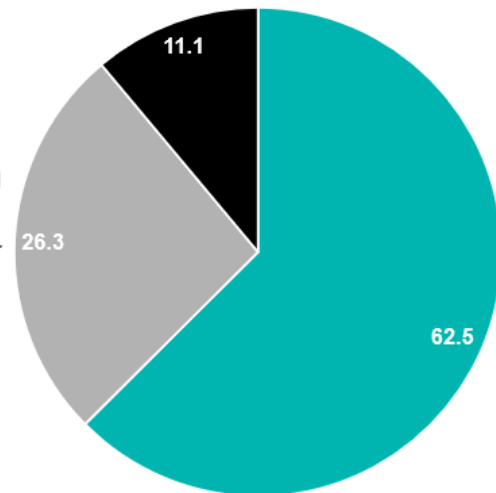
11% of respondents reported that their **Physical Health** was *Excellent*. This increased to 20.4% for *Active* people.

Whilst 10.6% of the total sample said their **Physical Health** was *Very Poor / Poor*, this increased to 17.3% for people living in *Deprived Areas* and 40% for *Inactive* people.

People over the age of 55 self-reported better pre-lockdown **Physical Health** levels than the overall sample with 57.9% saying their health was *Excellent* or *Good*.

Those *Living Alone* were less likely to report being in better health than the overall sample. 41.6% of those who live by themselves said they were in *Excellent / Good Physical Health*.

Mental Health



13.8% of respondents reported that their **Mental Health** was *Excellent*, increasing to 20.2% for *Active* people.

11.1% of the total sample reported their **Mental Health** as *Very Poor / Poor*. This increased to 17.3% for people living in *Deprived Areas* and 23.3% for *Inactive* people.

People over the age of 55 self-reported considerably better levels of **Mental Health** than the overall sample with 71.8% saying this was *Excellent* or *Good*.

The self-reported **Mental Health** levels of those *Living Alone* were considerably lower than the overall sample pre-lockdown. 21.5% of this group reported that their mental health was *Very Poor / Poor*.



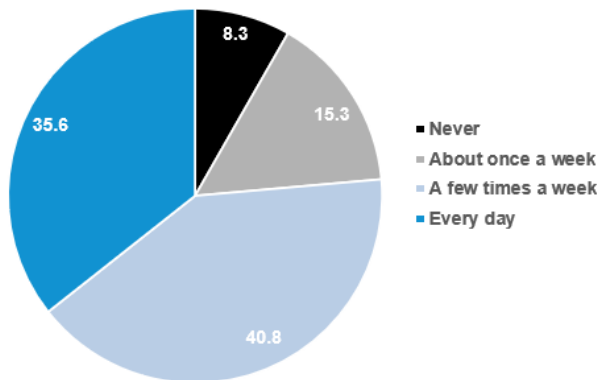
During the Lockdown

The UK went into full-scale lockdown on March 23rd 2020 following a gradual restriction on certain businesses and activities. During this period, the Prime Minister, supported by the Government’s Chief Medical Adviser, stated that non-key workers would be permitted to leave their homes once-a-day to partake in exercise.

This section looks at how, if at all, the activity habits of Black Country residents changed during this period.

Activity Levels of Respondents During Lockdown

During the lockdown period, how often, in a typical week, did you take part in exercise for at least 30 minutes?

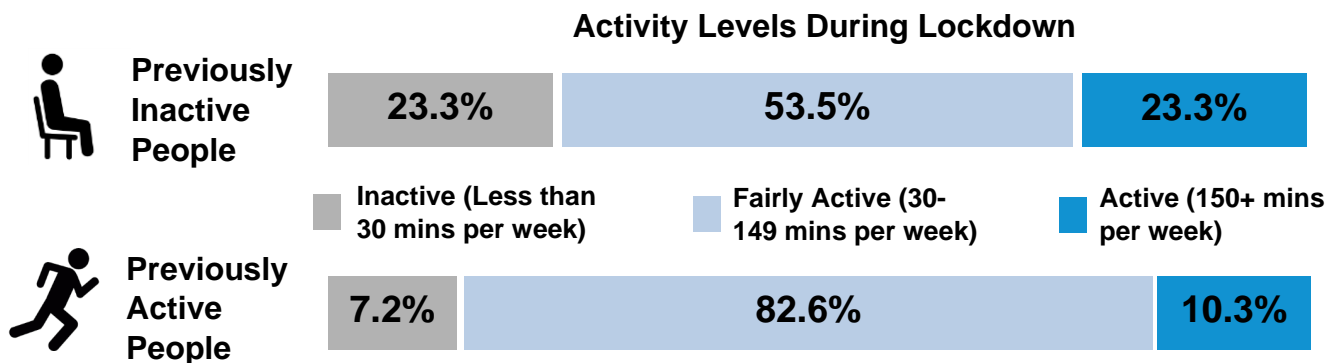


The vast majority of respondents (76.4%) were being active either every day during the lockdown or at least a few times per week

Less than one in ten said they were *Never* active during this period. To understand the real impact, it’s important to cross-correlate these responses with habits reported prior to lockdown.

Changing Habits

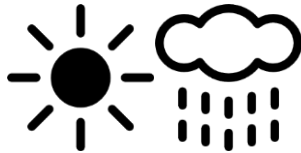
The following graphic demonstrates the activity levels of residents during lockdown



The key conclusion that can be drawn is that the lockdown has encouraged previously inactive people to start moving more. Less than a quarter of those who were doing less than 30 minutes of weekly activity prior to the restrictions on movement were still inactive during the lockdown. Encouragingly, the same proportion that were still inactive (23.3%) were being active for 30 minutes every day during the lockdown. Interestingly, people who had previously self-defined as *Active* tended to do less activity during the lockdown.

Impacts on Activity Levels

Respondents were asked what impact a number of different factors had on their activity levels.



The lockdown coincided with the sunniest April on record and respondents said that the weather had the biggest impact on their activity habits, both positively during good weather (85.8%) and negatively during poor weather (56.2%).



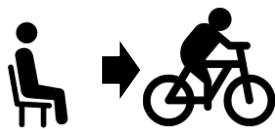
The Prime Minister made it clear that people were allowed to leave the house for exercise once every day, however only 44.6% of respondents said this positively influenced their activity levels. The words of the Chief Medical Adviser, who explicitly recommended that people should use the opportunity to exercise, had even less effect, with 72.3% saying they had *No Impact*.



One of the visibly notable features of the early stages of lockdown, supported by transport use data, was reduced traffic on the roads and 65.5% of respondents said this had a *Positive Impact* on their activity levels.



Another factor that positively impacted on activity levels during lockdown was the reduced number of people in the streets during the early stages, with 60.9% of respondents stating this encouraged them to be more active.



As with the overall sample, the good weather was the main reason given for increasing levels of activity amongst those who were previously inactive. However, a higher proportion of this group (64.1%) said that *Less People in the Streets* had a *Positive Impact* on their activity levels, potentially due to feeling less self-conscious that others were watching them.

Types of Activities Respondents Did During Lockdown

The table below summarises how often respondents did different types of activities during lockdown.

	All Respondents			Previously Inactive Respondents		
	Never / Almost Never	Once or Twice per week	3 times+ per week	Never / Almost Never	Once or Twice per week	3 times+ per week
Go for a run	75.3%	14.0%	13.0%	82.8%	9.4%	7.8%
Go for a walk (20+ mins)	15.6%	10.2%	58.1%	26.6%	29.7%	43.8%
Go for a cycle	81.3%	10.3%	7.8%	85.9%	6.3%	7.8%
Exercise to video	60.9%	17.1%	20.8%	73.4%	14.1%	12.5%
Virtual class (e.g. Zoom)	77.0%	8.0%	11.0%	89.1%	3.1%	7.8%

Whilst walking was the most popular activity during the lockdown, more than a fifth of respondents exercised to video (or YouTube) at least 3 times per week. Additionally, 11% took part in virtual classes where a live instructor carried out a session with others, demonstrating how Black Country residents adapted to be active within their own environments.

There was a similar pattern amongst those who were previously inactive. Most notably however, almost 1 in 10 of this cohort changed behaviour to the extent that they were taking part at least 3 times per week in activities such as running, cycling, virtual classes or exercising to video.

Where Respondents went to be Active During Lockdown



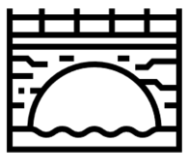
The most popular space in which Black Country residents were active during the lockdown was around **local streets**. 58.8% of all respondents stated this. Notably, this was also the most popular place to be active amongst those who were previously inactive (46.5%).



More than half of all respondents (55.3%) were active in their **home** during the lockdown, rising to 61.2% of women, 62.9% of people living in deprived areas and 66.7% of BAME respondents.



38.8% of respondents went to their local **park** as part of their daily exercise, rising to 43.7% amongst people over the age of 55.



Considerable investment has gone into improving **canal** towpaths in the Black Country and 30.5% of respondents said they used this space to be active during the lockdown, increasing to 42.6% for men and 46.8% for people living in deprived areas.



As restrictions on movement were gradually eased, more people started to make use of the local **countryside**, with 23.1% of respondents utilising open space to be active.

Access to Information about Activity

91%

More than 9 in 10 respondents said they had access to the requisite information and resources to support them to be active during lockdown. The type of help needed by those that disagreed is summarised below.



How to be active when living with specific injuries or conditions



How to be active when you don't have specific equipment

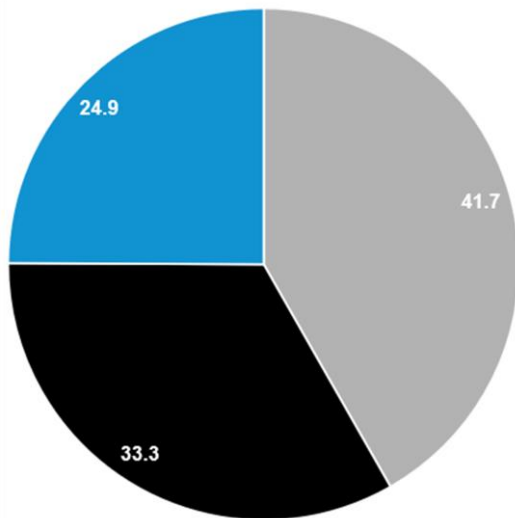


Lack of clarity about what was, and wasn't allowed

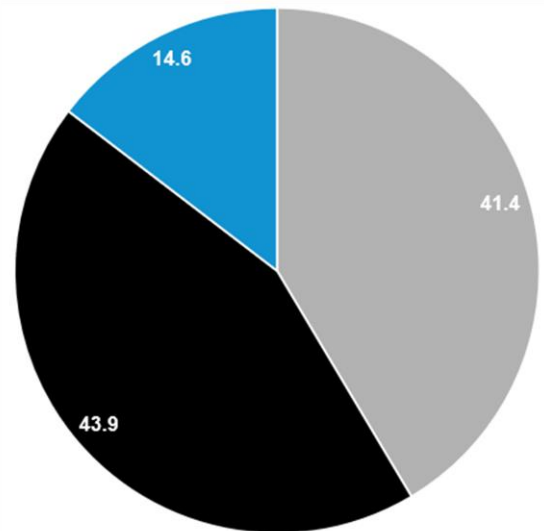
Changes to Self-Reported Health Levels



Physical Health

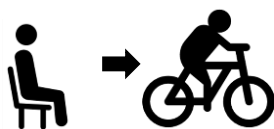


Mental Health



- No notable change in physical health
- Physical/mental health deteriorated
- Physical/mental health improved

Whilst the majority of respondents (41.7%) said there had been *no notable change* in their physical health during the lockdown period, most people (43.9%) did say their mental health had deteriorated during this time. Whilst these results may be expected in light of prolonged periods of isolation and restrictions on movement, there were notable differences in the data amongst those who were inactive, prior to lockdown.



	All Respondents	Previously Inactive Respondents
Physical Health Improved	24.9%	39.2%
Mental Health Improved	14.6%	30.0%

	Physical Health Improved	Mental Health Improved
All Respondents	24.9%	14.6%
Previously Inactive Respondents	39.2%	30.0%

Those who increased their activity levels during lockdown, from a previously sedentary baseline, were considerably more likely to report improvements in their health. This adds to the growing body of evidence that supports the notion that physical activity is a positive force for improving both physical and mental health.

Moving Forward

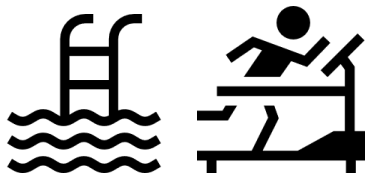
On Sunday 10th May, the Prime Minister announced a new 5-level Covid-19 Alert system to monitor the easing of lockdown restrictions and to provide the public with a pathway to a return to normality (or a new normal). This speech included a relaxation of previous rules that had only allowed one form of exercise a day.

The Prime Minister also made the recommendation that people should only use public transport if absolutely necessary. This coincided with the Transport Minister announcing significant investment in walking and cycling.

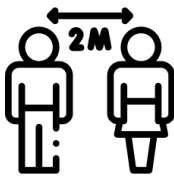
This section of the report looks into the potential for long-term behaviour change in the Black Country and explores the appetite for increasing the number of journeys we take on foot or by bike.

Incentivising Future Activity

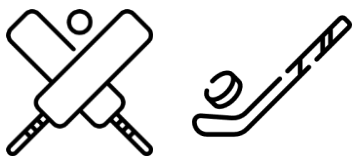
Respondents were asked to consider what, if anything, would incentivise them to be more active as restrictions on movement start to gradually be relaxed. There were 517 responses that have been grouped for analysis with the top 6 listed below.



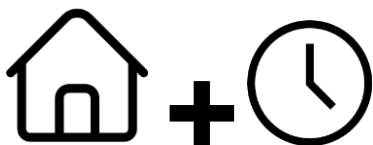
With regard to incentives for people to be more active, the **Reopening of Leisure Centres and Gyms** was the most common response provided. There's a desire amongst many respondents to return to their old routines as soon as possible.



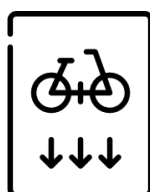
Being confident that an activity is **Safe**, that there are sufficient guidelines and that these are being both applied and followed is an important factor for respondents. Clear communications from deliverers about the measures they're taking will be key.



The return of **Group Activity and Team Sports** cannot come soon enough. Local consultation carried out by ABC confirms that community clubs have been hit hard by Covid-19, with many seeing all income disappear whilst significant overheads remain.



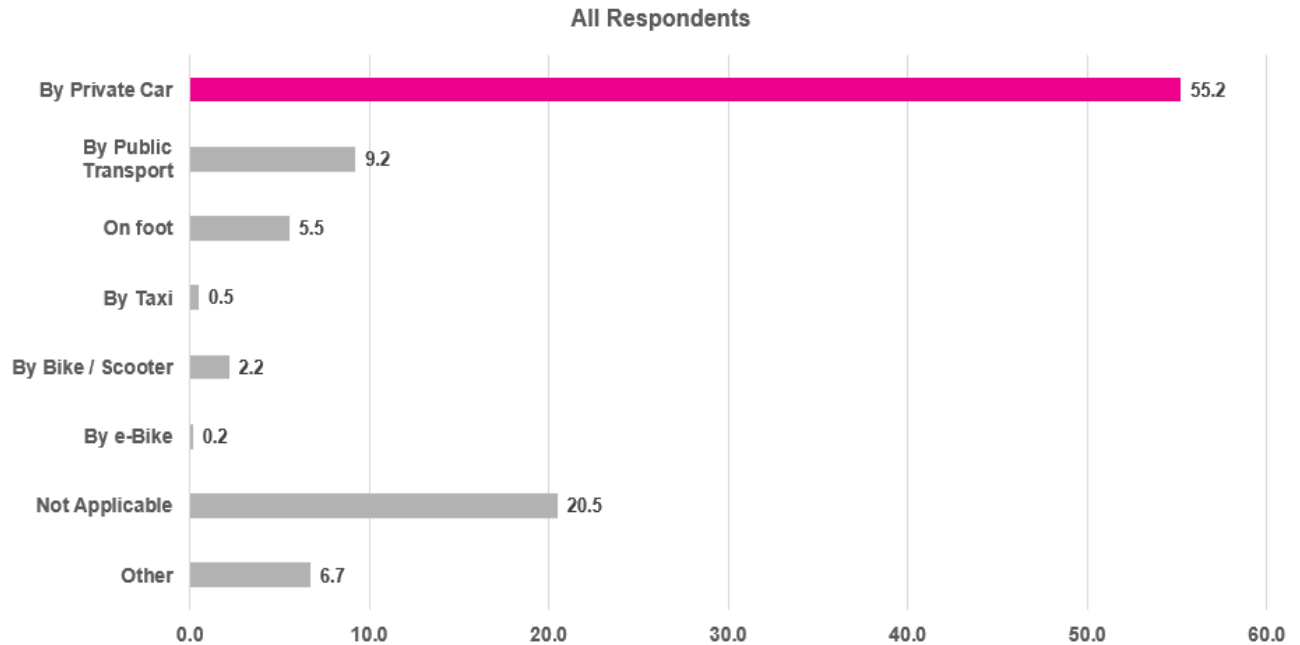
Many respondents suggested that a continuation of **Flexible Working Patterns** with more home working and less commuting would give them the requisite time to be more active, more often.



Having **Safer Places to Walk or Cycle** was important to many respondents. Better cycle routes and a more joined up transport network would enable more people to be more active. Active Black Country are working closely in partnership with local transport planning departments and Transport for West Midlands to ensure new investment coming into the region can benefit the most inactive people.

Travel to Work

Respondents were asked how they typically tend to travel to work. The results, as shown below, demonstrate that most people in the Black Country commute via private car.



Barriers to Active Travel

Of those respondents who are in employment, **29%** say that it would be realistically possible for them to walk or cycle to work. However, **81%** of this cohort choose to commute by private car. The following analysis explores the reasons that prevent people from choosing *Active Travel*.



46% of respondents think it would take too much **Time** to commute on foot or by bike.



Concerns about **Traffic** and the **Safety of Cycling** were cited by 39.8% of respondents.



35.4% said that they can't cycle to work (or other destinations) because they **Don't Own a Bike**.



The threat of **Poor Weather** was cited as a barrier to active travel by 33.6% of respondents.



Bikes need to be maintained just like cars do and concerns around **Puncturing a Tyre** were cited by 18.6%.



17.7% raised concerns about the **Topography** being too much for them. Additionally, 14.2% said they **Weren't Fit Enough**.






Travel to School

A survey of 469 parents of children who go to school in the Black Country sought to understand how pupils had travelled to school pre-lockdown and whether or not parents were planning on making any changes to their school-run travel habits in light of Coronavirus and associated Government advice.



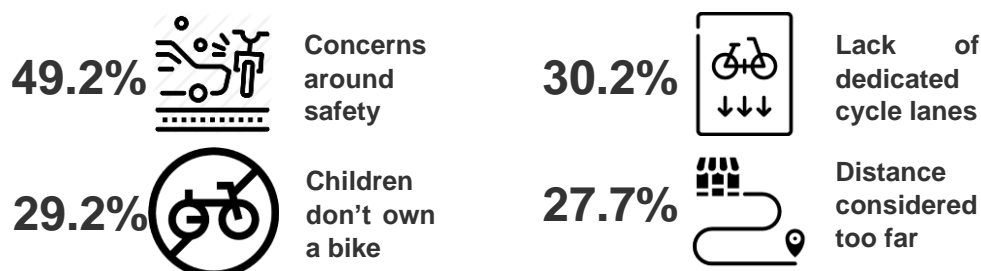
87.4% of respondents said they lived within 3 miles of the school that their child/children attend, therefore within realistic walking or cycling distance.

The graphic below lists the ways that pupils associated with this sample travelled to school pre-lockdown and compares this to future travel intentions.

	Pre-Lockdown	Future	Change
 Walk	38.5%	40.2%	+1.7 points
 By bike or scooter	1%	1.5%	+0.5 points
 By car	26.3%	23.9%	-2.4 points
 By public transport	22.7%	19.5%	-3.2 points
 Mix of the above	11.5%	14.9%	+3.4 points

The data suggests that parents will be less likely to send their children to school by public transport once they properly reopen. Combined with the increases in walking, cycling and a mix of transport modes, parents would appear to be preparing to build additional active travel into their children's routines.

The increase in intention for pupils to cycle to school may appear slight (0.5-point increase), however this would still represent a 50% modal shift. Parents were asked why their children didn't currently use a bike to get to school. The most common responses are demonstrated below.



Capacity for Change

Our survey of Black Country residents explored the capacity amongst respondents for sustained changes in activity patterns. This section provides an analysis of the findings.

Gym and Leisure Centre Membership

138 respondents had a gym or leisure centre membership and a further 21 stated that they'd had a membership within the last year that had now expired. Of those with a current membership;



78.8%

of members at Local Authority / Leisure Trust managed leisure facilities said they would retain their membership. Only 6% said they were planning on cancelling, with a further 11% not sure.



63.8%

of members at Private Gyms said they would retain their membership. 27.6% were undecided whilst 8.6% said they would cancel.

New Habits to Retain

Respondents were asked to consider if there were any new habits that they'd picked up during lockdown in relation to physical activity that they were aiming to keep, moving forward. There were 242 responses that were categorised for analysis.



23.6% of respondents indicated that they'd like to continue walking in one form or another, with some stipulating daily walks and others specifying walks with their family.



19.4% had started doing home-based workouts such as HIIT classes or other high intensity workouts during lockdown and were aiming to continue. A much smaller percentage said they'd continue doing low intensity activities like yoga and Pilates.



Jogging has lots of health benefits. Aerobic exercise can help someone reach and maintain a healthy weight, improve cardiovascular health and lower blood pressure. **9.1%** of respondents started jogging during lockdown and are now looking to keep the habit.



5% want to retain their new cycling routines as restrictions on movement start to ease. However, several indicated their concerns that a return to previous working patterns will prevent this.

A desire to do more physical work around the home such as gardening and cleaning was cited by a number of respondents. A small number have started using a pedometer that they plan to continue using whilst 2% specifically referenced that they'll continue to use their car less.

Further Reading



Active Black Country are committed to working in partnership with our partners including Local Authorities, Voluntary Sector Councils, Health bodies, schools and community groups to collectively tackle inactivity in Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

We take an insight-led approach to all our work. Further reading is available at the sites below.

Active Black Country Schools Hub

The hub provides examples of best practise (case studies, videos and summaries) from across the region in relation to Primary schools use of the Primary PE and Sport Premium. Within the Hub a dedicated section exists providing examples of successful approaches Schools have undertaken in both meeting national curriculum Swimming requirements and additional provision for swimming and water safety funded through the Primary PE and Sport Premium.

<http://blackcountryschoolshub.co.uk>



SCHOOLS HUB

Active Black Country Insight Hub

Active Black Country's new Insight Hub collates primary research, secondary data and softer thematic learnings in relation to tackling inactivity across the sub-region. The site is full of helpful information to help partners understand their area, evidence need and make decisions in relation to physical activity.

<http://blackcountryinsighthub.co.uk>



INSIGHT HUB

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Insight produced by

**Active
Black Country**

Creating a healthy, active region