

# UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S LIVES

RE-DESIGNING AND RE-POSITIONING  
SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY  
TO ENGAGE WOMEN



**WOMEN  
N  
SPORT**



# FOREWORD

Women in Sport has a rich history of conducting innovative insight into the way women engage with sport and physical activity. When we relaunched as Women in Sport in October 2014, we brought with us 30 years of expertise in the way that sport works – and, sometimes, doesn't work – for women. Insight has always been at the heart of what we do and it drives our vision to transform sport for the benefit of every woman and girl in the UK.

For many, 2012 was a real turning point for women's sport; the London Olympic and Paralympic Games helped propel women's elite sport into the public consciousness, but despite the promise of a sporting legacy for all, the latest data on the number of people playing sport shows a vast gap remaining between the number of women and men participating regularly. The prominence of the Olympic and Paralympic Games prompted us to review our core insight, which in turn highlighted key gaps in terms of identifying opportunities that exist to get more women active. We realised that we – and the sport sector as a whole – had an incomplete understanding of how women experience sport and the role that sport can play in women's lives.

We therefore launched a ground-breaking research programme in 2013 to understand what makes women tick, the role that sport and physical activity plays in their lives and the opportunities that exist to engage women and girls in a range of sporting offers.

Women in Sport champions an 'insight into action' approach. As a result we have spent the last 18 months testing this insight with our partners to see how it can be applied in practice at every level of sport from the field of play to the board room and through marketing communications channels. We now feel the time is right to share our work and showcase how it has been successfully applied in the field.

Never before has women's sport been so high on the agenda. If ever there was a great time to capitalise on, and reap the benefits from, this transformational insight, it is right now.



Ruth Holdaway,  
**Chief Executive,  
Women in Sport**

August 2015

# INTRODUCTION

This ground breaking study, funded by Sport England and based on fieldwork conducted by research agency 2CV, used an innovative semi-ethnographic qualitative approach to unlock new insight around:

- Women's lives in modern Britain and what's important to them;
- Women's perceptions of sport versus fitness and how we need to reposition sport to appeal to women; and
- How we can tap into women's values in order to activate behaviour change towards increased levels of physical activity.

The research was completed in late 2013. Over the past 18 months we have worked across the sport sector to apply the key insights and to test the research via a series of practical projects. This report summarises the key findings of the research and presents a series of case studies illustrating how sport can apply the insights to engage women more effectively in sport and physical activity.







# RESEARCH APPROACH

The initial research programme was multi-stage and ran over 6 months, drawing on the latest thinking from the behavioural sciences and a range of innovative qualitative approaches including online 'auto-ethnographic' sessions (online discussion forums where participants shared thoughts in real time with the researchers).

## Stage One: Insider Interviews

Series of interviews with 'experts' including a sports journalist and blogger, GP, Zumba teacher, personal trainer, mental and physical fitness coach, public health professor, Bootcamp founder and a sports psychologist.

## Stage Two: Semiotic Analysis

Semiotic analysis is the analysis of systems of communication, such as language, images, signs and symbolism. At this stage we applied these techniques to understand how culture manifest in media and advertising has shaped women's ideas of sport and fitness; why fitness is better than sport at engaging with female culture; and the drivers of female cultural attitudes to sport and fitness.

## Stage Three: Interactive Stakeholder Clinic

A hands-on workshop session with Sport England, National Governing Bodies and other partners to review emerging hypotheses and shape priorities for testing in subsequent research stages.

## Stage Four: Auto-Ethnography and In-Home Paired Depth Interviews

A four week online discussion forum initially with thirty women, later honed to twenty, from different backgrounds and walks of life. The women were tasked with noticing when fitness/physical activity media enters their everyday life and observing their response. This was followed by more detailed questions around their own personal motivations and barriers to participate. This stage was concluded by filmed in-depth interviews in pairs at women's homes.

## Stage Five: Imagination Co-Creation Sessions

Two interactive imagination sessions with a cross-section of women to test hypotheses and emerging recommendations. Participants were invited to co-design their ideal sport and fitness initiatives.

## Stage Six: Interactive Debrief Workshop

A final interactive workshop with National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to share the findings of the research and to begin to shape bespoke solutions to drive change for individual sports.

# KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

## 1. The cultural conditions are ripe to transform women's sport

There is a growing energy around sport for women, aligned with significant external investment in growing the women's sport and physical activity market.

Women want to be more active - 7.1 million women between the ages of 14 and 40 want to take part in more sport or physical activity (Sport England, 2015). Women's sport remains on the agenda for Government and funders – and we have recently seen a government investment of over £10 million into the 'This Girl Can' campaign to drive women's participation.

Holistic health and wellbeing is higher on women's agendas than ever before.

## 2. But to drive up participation, sport will have to adapt

Gym-based fitness still claims the lion's share of women's participation. Although some women enjoy and participate in 'traditional' sport, the majority still feel unenthused and distant from it. A class based gym session feels more accessible and relevant to women than playing netball or hockey.

NGBs of sport are responding, and in many cases re-thinking, the delivery of sport for women with positive results. But there are still many deep-rooted barriers preventing women from engaging with sport. Unless the way sport is framed changes, we can expect to see little significant change in women's levels of participation in sport in the future.

## 3. Every woman's relationship with physical activity is unique

A woman's relationship with physical activity and sport is highly complex, based upon a web of personal, social and environmental factors, influences and triggers. Creating a targeted strategy around isolated motivations and barriers misses the point.

There can be a whole range of barriers which push sport away from women's conscious consideration. These may include a disconnection with sport after leaving school (even for those who loved it), an absence of opportunities, perceptions of sport as unfeminine or a lack of role models. Each woman's journey will be different. Although many women do prioritise physical activity and make it an important part of their lives, for most, switching on to sport will require more effort than for men for whom these barriers are lower.

Even though sport doesn't currently feel accessible or relevant for most women, many would consider giving something a go. Lack of participation is not the same as lack of interest, and opportunities exist to reactivate and inspire women to try something new or different.

Given this complex mix of issues, women need to be considered 'holistically' and within the context of their everyday lives

## 4. Using typologies or segments to represent women is too simplistic

Women today have a complex inner value system that reflects what is important to them with multiple dominant values being held at any one time. The dominant values within this system also change quickly depending on life-stage and everyday experience. These values will vary for different women.

*"I do prioritise my time well but sometimes exercise may suffer with how much uni work I've got to do."* (Jennifer)

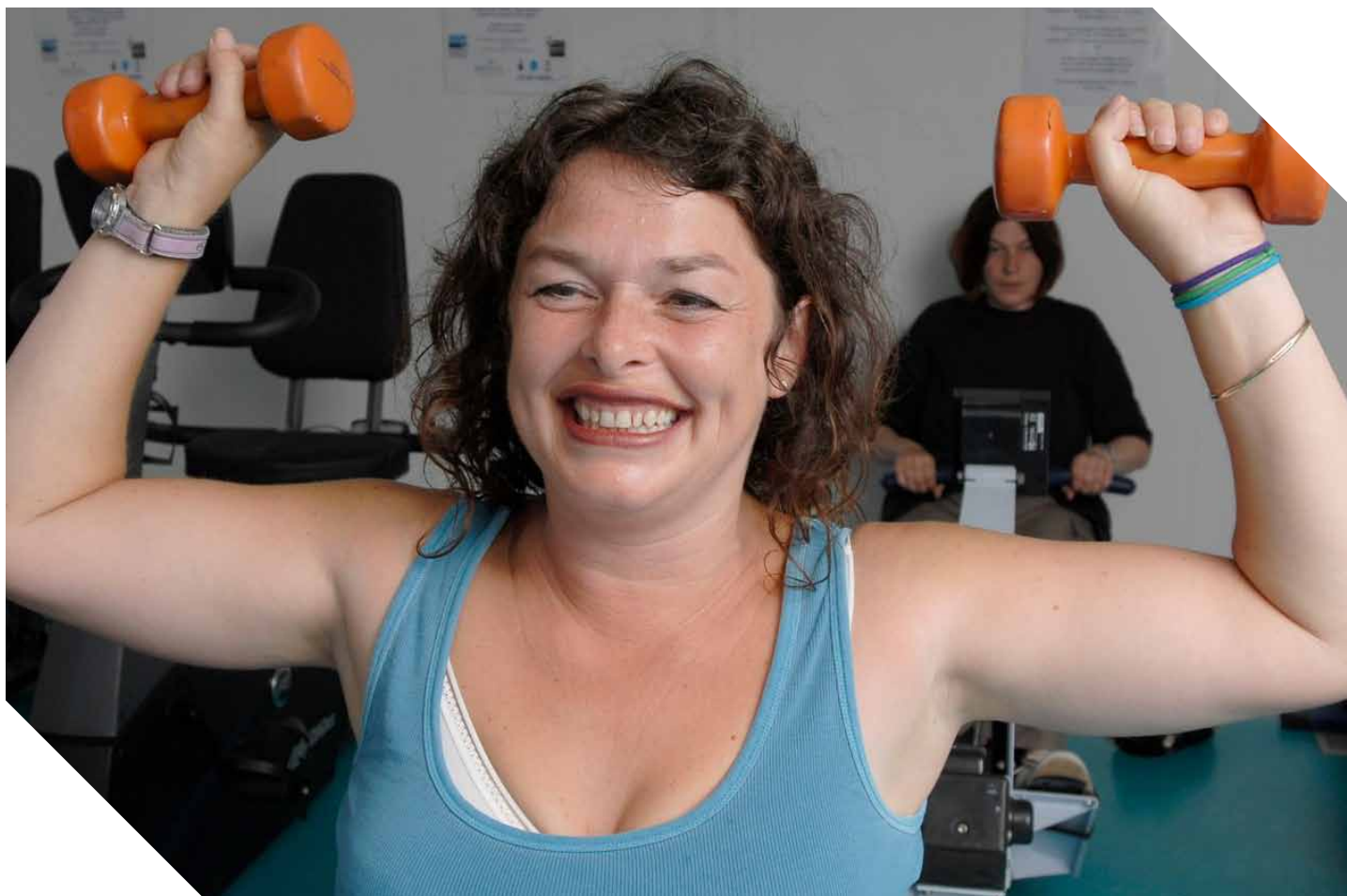
In their choice of what to prioritise and where to focus their time and energy, women constantly evaluate the bigger picture, checking if they are 'on track' with their goals and life plan, juggling to stay in control.

## 5. Women hold six core values which inform their behaviour and decision making

The six core values that our research has identified as being those women prioritise in life are:

- looking good
- feeling good
- achieving goals
- developing skills
- nurturing friends and family
- having fun

They represent what is important to women in modern life and how they want to spend their time and energy. These values will be dialled up and down for different women and at different stages in their lives.



# A COMPLEX VALUE SYSTEM

**Feeling good** is a growing priority for women. Women see the importance of looking after holistic mind, body and soul, as contributing to longer term health. They are increasingly investing in their emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as physical. Wholesome experiences and 'me-time' are increasingly being prioritised as women seek to avoid letting stressful lives get the better of them.

*"I feel fitter and stronger and happier and more comfortable in my body than ever, none of that is related to my dress size or goal weight but instead the strength I am building in my muscles."* (Linda)

**Looking good** is a value that resonates with many women, and increases in importance at different times in their lives. This can include being slim, toned, having muscle definition or taking care of hair and nails. The importance of this value is likely to increase when women are approaching 'on show' events like weddings, holidays and parties.

*"All I'm thinking about is my body in a bikini on the beach."* (Poppy)

**Nurturing friends and family:** Women value spending time with family, friends, children and partners, often instinctively prioritising others' needs over their own. Wives and mothers invest their time in their family's development - particularly in the case of their own children. Women often adopt the role as family linchpin.

*"My commitment is at home and my family are almost my team, I need to be there for them."* (Sam)

**Achieving goals:** Women like to feel as if they are progressing in life. They set themselves goals of what they'd like to achieve in life, not just professionally but also personally, and feel a great sense of satisfaction when they are able to tick these off. Women can be very determined in seeking to achieve these goals, especially when proving others wrong in terms of what they are capable of.

*"It's important for me to be ambitious and achieve things in life - I like to make sure I am getting the most out of life and making sure I tick all those things off my bucket list while I can!"* (Anne)

**Developing new skills** to enhance personal development is an important element of life. Women want to feel as if they are learning new things, developing as a person and broadening their horizons. They can gain satisfaction from mastering something new, increasing their knowledge or producing something. There is also interest in developing soft skills such as leadership, interpersonal skills and coaching.

*"I use the internet to research how to do things - it's amazing what you can find online - there are really good tutorials that take you through it step by step."* (Maureen)

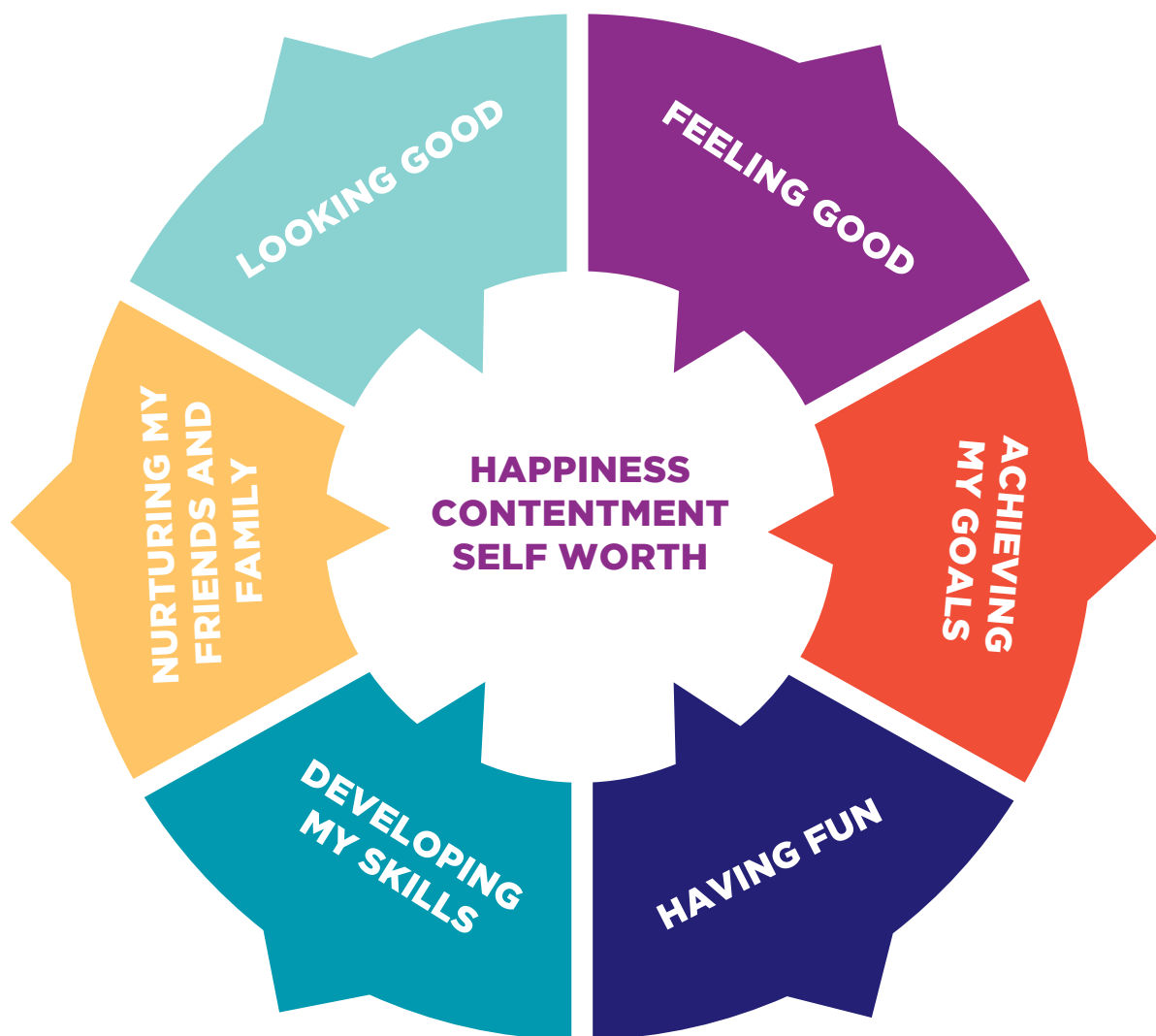
**Having fun** is a fundamentally important part of women's lives. It provides an essential release from the day to day grind that women can often feel. Having fun is about doing things they choose to do rather than feel obligated to do. Socialising, interacting and laughing with friends is an essential part of life. However spending time alone can also fulfil this value.

*"I don't know what I'd do without my friends to have a laugh with at the end of a hard day!"* (Alice)

## 6. In order for sport to engage women, it must align itself with their values

The 'gym based' fitness sphere is positioned primarily around Looking Good and also increasingly around Feeling Good. Big marketing spend, high visibility and strategic communications from commercial providers in this field mean women use the gym and fitness classes as ways of fulfilling these values.

Sport has not applied an understanding of these values nor has it had the same promotional push. But the opportunity to apply the insight around women's values and to align sporting offers, communication and delivery around them is huge.





# CASE STUDIES

## 1. England Athletics, Why We Run



### The challenge

England Athletics wanted to increase the number of women running. They recognised a need to use communications as a way to better align running with women's lives.

### The solution

In 2014 England Athletics launched a new campaign - 'Why We Run'. Primarily a digital campaign, it aimed to talk to women and show how running can fit into their busy lives. It included a social media campaign using the hashtag #whywerun along with campaign imagery and the production of campaign videos.

The insights from this research were used to create communications that align with women's values; specifically Looking Good and Achieving Goals. England Athletics developed straplines for images that talked directly to these values such as 'I run to stay in shape' and 'I run for the challenge'. The campaign videos were also cleverly scripted to convey how running can help fulfil certain values that drive decision making. This video is called 'I run for some me time' and demonstrates how Women in Sport insight has been put into action:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ohm0lyXZSbl>

### The result

The 'Why We Run' campaign has had a positive impact by increasing the awareness of running for a female audience, leading to an increase in the number of Run England registrations.

England Athletics saw a growth of

**4,600**

new registrations during phase 2 of the campaign. (December 2014 - March 2015).

The campaign was also hugely successful in terms of digital reach.



Campaign videos achieved

**60,000**

views and key messages were shared through popular media such as the Guardian and Good Housekeeping magazine among others.



Interaction across social media channels grew significantly with



**3,500**

more Twitter followers and



Instagram

**420**

Instagram followers.

This activity was also supported by BBC Sport, Nicky Morgan MP, Jo Pavey and Nell McAndrew.



More information on the campaign can be found here: [www.runengland.org/whywerun](http://www.runengland.org/whywerun)

## 2. The Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), Tennis Tuesdays



### The challenge

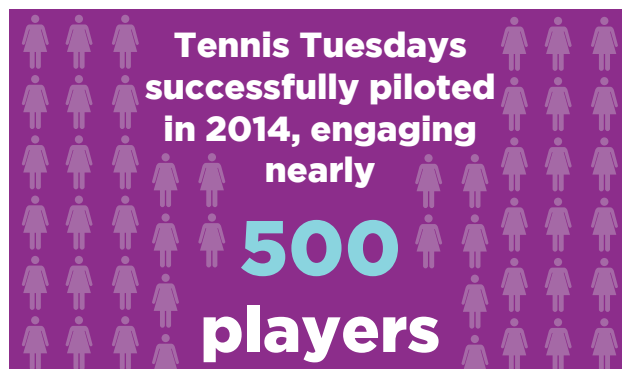
The LTA wanted to pilot a new tennis offer to encourage women aged 20-34 to play tennis more frequently – ideally weekly – and over a longer season, not only in the summer months.

### The solution

Their new product - 'Tennis Tuesdays' is a programme of informal, female only sessions that women can fit into their day. The LTA championed an insight-led approach from the start of its development, using the values system as a key model.

The Women in Sport values model reinforced LTA insight into their female audience, and the LTA identified three dominant values for this target market: Developing My Skills, Having Fun and Feeling Good. During development stages, the LTA briefed the creative agency on these three values to ensure that the brand concept and campaign were fully aligned and that women would believe that tennis was for them.

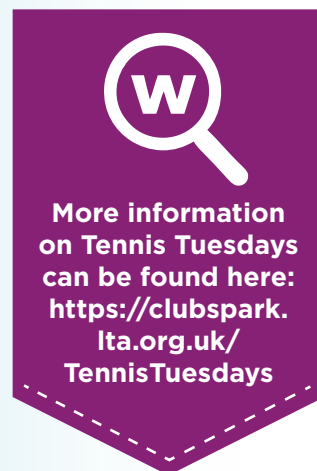
### The result



Following the success of the pilot, the LTA expanded the programme across **100** cities across GB from May 2015.



Tennis Tuesdays has been extremely well received and initial sessions have been popular. The LTA will continue to monitor the programme and make improvements to ensure it continues to provide a viable option for women to get active.



### 3. The Football Association (FA), Soccercise



#### The challenge

The FA was approached by its partners in County FAs, Premier League and Football League clubs for help designing resources for a football themed workout for women.

#### The solution

The FA championed an insight-led approach and responded to demand by developing 'Soccercise'; an instructor led aerobic exercise or circuit class combined with a football.

Women in Sport were heavily involved in the product development process to ensure its alignment with the values system. Women in Sport commissioned an omnibus survey to test the proposition and to determine which of the values were most dominant for the target

audience. This allowed the FA to align all subsequent programming and communications with these values.

The value system was also considered throughout the development of the brand identity, communications and instructor resources, to ensure Soccercise key messages, imagery and session delivery would be consistent and provide a positive and engaging experience for women - so they come back each week and develop their interest in other football activities.

#### The result

A pilot phase took place in early 2014 with women aged 15 – 82 in Bury, Birmingham, London and Reading and the resources including a video, exercise cards and posters have now been released to the general public to download free of charge from [www.thefa.com/soccercise](http://www.thefa.com/soccercise)





The background is a solid purple color with several overlapping geometric shapes in different shades of purple, creating a layered effect. A vertical dashed white line runs along the left edge of the page.

# **PUTTING IT INTO PLAY**

# PUTTING IT INTO PLAY

## How can you apply this insight to your work?

The good news is that sport and physical activity can align itself with women's values by showing women what's in it for them and making women believe that sport is for them.

Sport can align itself with women's values through three key channels:

- Strategy
- Programming
- Communications

### Example:

Laura's story (27)

*"I need a push... at school I got pushed to do certain things... now I have every excuse you could think of not to do something."*

Laura was 'sporty' at school and told she was good at hockey. In her late twenties she started to think about returning to the sport, to fulfil her dominant values at the time; Having Fun and Nurturing Friends and Family. Laura had started to prepare to return to hockey by signing up to her local hockey club mailing list, researching hockey sticks and planning her travel route to get to training. However, for some reason she hadn't taken that next step and gone to a training session.

## What could be stopping Laura?

### Strategy: Women's participation not a priority...

- Is women's participation part of the club strategy?
- Does the club promote equal opportunities?
- Does the club consider the experience of participants like Laura within their policies?

### Programming: Training times v busy life...

- Are training sessions a mix of fun skills, drills and match play?
- Are training sessions aimed at a variety of abilities?
- Is there a chance to meet and chat with other players?
- Are training sessions available at a suitable, or range of times?

### Communications: How does the hockey club talk to Laura?

- How were the emails Laura received written - were they friendly and welcoming? Did they let Laura know what to expect and tell her what to bring?
- Were the images on the club website suitable for returning players or beginners?
- Did the club's communications motivate Laura to want to go along to a session?

**In order to align to Laura's and other women and girls' values the club needs to consider all of the above.**

## SUMMING UP – THE LEARNING

Understanding Women's Lives research showed us

- Multiple and simultaneously held values drive decision making and prioritisation in women's lives.
- Sport in general and at present does not successfully engage with this value system when it is looking to increase participation.
- There is an opportunity to reposition sporting offers to engage with women's value systems to increase participation.

The case studies have highlighted some important learnings in applying the insight from the *Understanding Women's Lives* research and subsequent values framework.

- The values system provides a foundation, built on insight, which can enhance product development or review.
- Addressing more than one value maximises your chance of relevance – where sports address more than one value through their products and marketing, they are more likely to engage women holistically and therefore more likely to be impactful and relevant
- Consultation is key – regular monitoring of programmes to ensure they continue to align to the most dominant values will ensure ongoing success

## NEXT STEPS

To find out more about our research, our work in behaviour change or how Women in Sport could help to transform your sport offer for women, please visit [www.womeninsport.org](http://www.womeninsport.org).



WOMEN IN SPORT

[womeninsport.org](http://womeninsport.org)

General Enquiries  
020 3137 6263  
[info@womeninsport.org](mailto:info@womeninsport.org)

Registered charity no. 1060267



**SPORT  
ENGLAND**