

# The ideal sports club for women

Research from the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation



Research conducted by Verve, December 2011

# Introduction

Many sports concentrate their delivery through 'sport clubs' and rely on the club structure to be able to reach out to new and returning participants, as well as engage and retain their current participants, making the 'sports club' a vital vehicle for NGBs in driving increased participation in their sport.

The 'sports club' no longer caters only for more experienced, competitive sports participants, but increasingly offers opportunities for participants

with more recreational and social motivations to be involved in the club. The culture of the 'sports club' therefore faces a challenge in needing to appeal to participants at various stages of the participation pathway, as well as servicing the talent pathway for their main sport.

Further insight is required to explore the ways that the female market currently perceive the "sports club", and in what cases negative

perceptions are formed and act as a barrier to membership of the club. We wish to understand what women actually want from a sports club, and therefore what the sports club needs to consider in order to engage and retain the female market.



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## Objectives, methodology and sample

# Objectives

Broadly, the research aimed to explore what sports clubs need to deliver to better support women's relationship with sport.

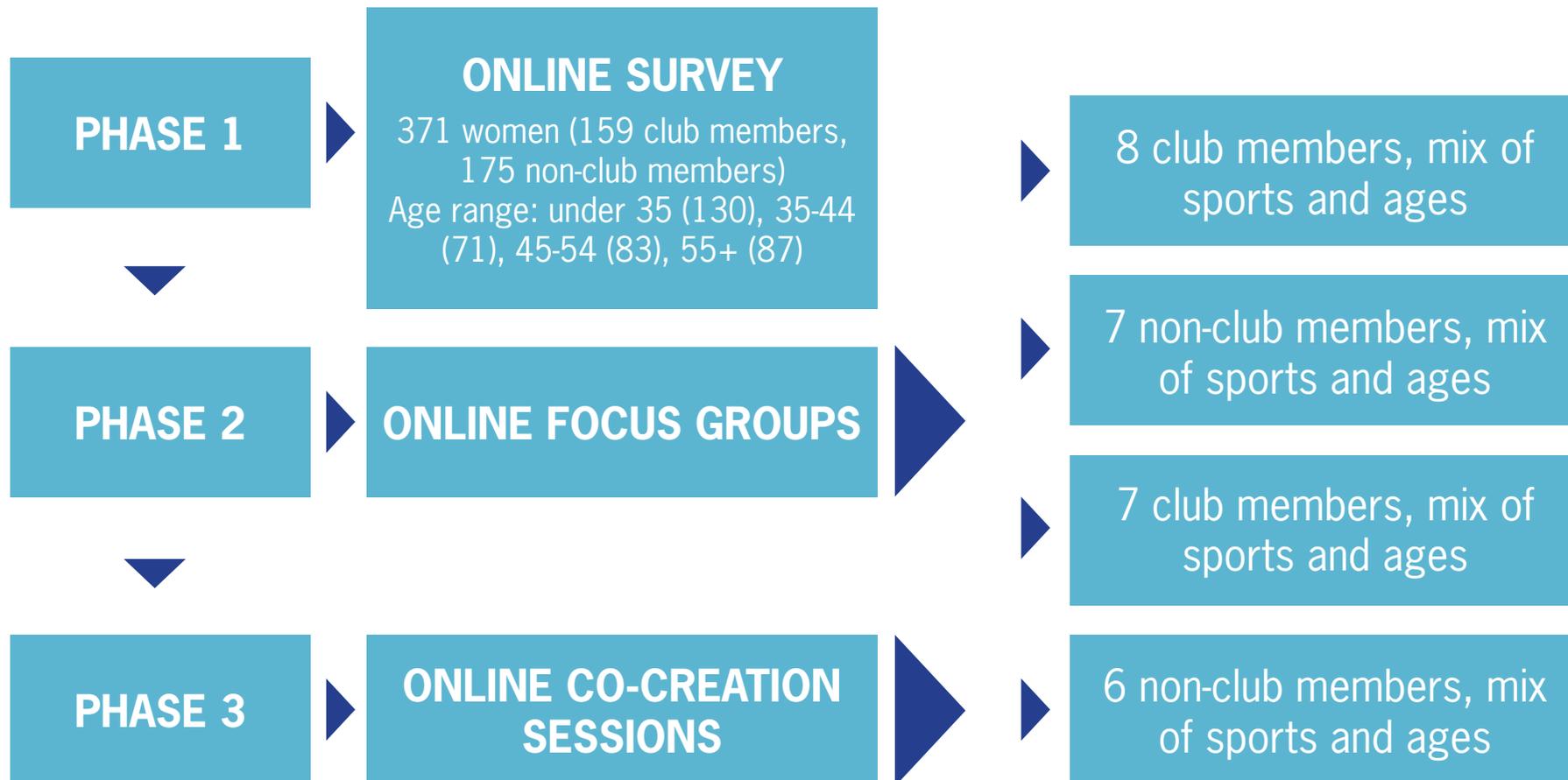
## More specifically, our objectives were to:

- Identify the perceptions women have of sports clubs
- Explore what women want and expect from a sports club
- Understand what the 'ideal club' might look like
- Identify potential barriers to joining a club
- Explore the differences between current club and non-club members in relation to the above objectives.



# Methodology and sample

The research involved a mixed-methodology approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data.



\*Co-creation is a qualitative research technique in which participants work together to create a vision of their ideal scenario

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## Executive summary

# Perceptions of sports clubs

- Women who are already club-members are motivated by the type of benefits a club is perceived to offer – structured training and development, and competing in events.
- Women who are not currently club members, however, are not at all motivated by these features.
- Instead, they perceive sports clubs to be elitist and exclusive. They do not perceive that sports clubs are 'for people like them' or that they cater for women of differing levels of ability.
- As a result, sports clubs are perceived to be intimidating. Very few women who are non-club members felt that joining a sports club would deliver them any benefit, and the vast majority said they wouldn't have the confidence to approach a club in the first place.
- Sports clubs must address these perceptions if they are to attract and retain more women. Sports clubs need to be more inclusive, place emphasis on creating a friendly and motivating environment, and better communicate these types of benefits to women.

# It's all about people

- Sports clubs are about people rather than institutions.
- Women are engaged with the people in their club, rather than with the club as an institution.
- The relationships and atmosphere in a club has a fundamental impact on the enjoyment women get from their favourite sport.
- One of the strongest motivations for joining a club is the opportunity to meet and socialise with like-minded women.
- The key driver of loyalty amongst club members is their relationship with the people in the club. Even where women were critical of the institutional elements of their club, they chose to remain at the club because of the group of people that made up the club.

# Flexibility

- Sports clubs are perceived to operate with rigid rules and structures. Women don't feel that clubs offer them any control over their membership. Rather, clubs dictate the terms around what and how to pay, and when sessions are held.
- This lack of flexibility does not reflect the dynamics of women's lives and causes a major barrier to many women joining a club. Women expect to be able to customise sport to fit their needs.
- There is significant appetite for variety in sports clubs in terms of the people, sports and fitness activities and training techniques. Both current club members and non-club members spontaneously talked about the appeal of multiple sports clubs.
- Women display a significant appetite for individual treatment and personal approach.



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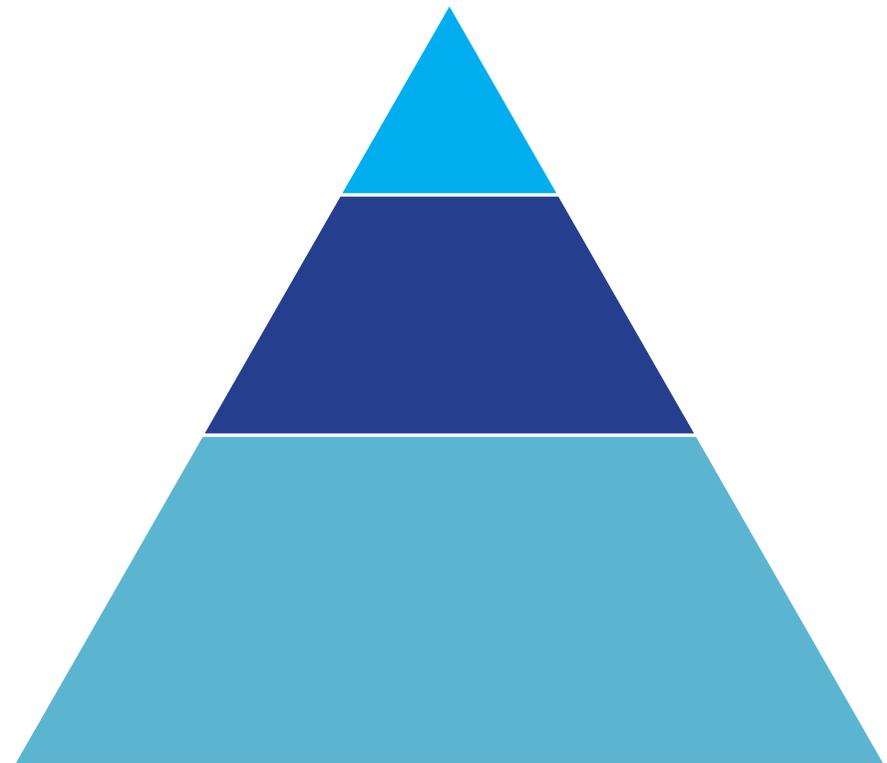
## Perceptions of sports clubs

Our research showed that many women, particularly non-club members, hold very negative perceptions of sports clubs. This is causing a fundamental barrier to entry for these women – they simply do not perceive that sports clubs are for them.

# The perceived club 'offer' is at odds with what the majority of women want

Since the majority of women are motivated by fitness and fun, the perceived offer is entirely at odds with what most women actually want.

-  Only a minority of women are motivated by training to compete.
-  A large proportion of women are also motivated by improvement – setting and achieving their own personal goals.
-  For the vast majority of women, the motivation to participate is fitness and fun.



# Non-members think sports clubs are for the 'skilled'

The majority of women felt that sports clubs were for people with more skill, ability and commitment than themselves. As a result, the majority of women find sports clubs alienating.



## ALL ABILITIES

Sports clubs are seen by some non members to be potentially good for all, depending on the activities on offer...

“ They can be good for a lot of people if there are different levels, from beginners to those more advanced. ”

“ People in the community who have an interest in the sporting activities on offer. ”

## SERIOUS ABOUT SPORT

...Other non members think sports clubs are for those who take sport seriously.

“ I would say clubs are for people who are more serious about sport - they don't just want a 'knock about' or a bit of fun, they want to have fun but its more than that... ”

“ They are meant for people who are interested in seriously pursuing a physical sports activity, and leading a healthy, activity. ”

# The majority of non-club members feel that sports clubs are exclusive

Although the attitude of current club members differs, suggesting the experience of sports clubs is often different to the perception.

**Sports clubs are for people like me**

79% of members agreed, compared to only 23% of non-members

**Sports clubs are cliquy**

55% of members agreed, compared to 70% of non-members

**Sports clubs cater for people of all abilities**

65% of members agreed, compared to 47% of non-members

# Non-members also perceive that sports clubs are dominated by men

And interestingly, just under half of current club members agreed – suggesting this is more than just a perception.

**Sports clubs are dominated by men**

45% of members agreed, compared to 57% of non-members

**Sports clubs are chauvinistic**

21% of members agreed, compared to 43% of non-members

**Sports clubs are for men**

21% of members agreed, compared to 37% of non-members

# Sports clubs need to challenge these perceptions and capitalise on the benefits

Current club members perceive sports clubs to offer them a host of benefits – most importantly the opportunity to meet and participate with like-minded people, the opportunity to improve and achieve personal

goals, and, quite simply, the opportunity to embrace their favourite sport. These are the sort of benefits that non-members said they wanted from a club but simply do not *perceive* that this is what a club will offer them.

## PEOPLE

Meeting like minded people, socializing and making friends. Mutual help, support and encouragement. This is what current club members like about their sports clubs the most.

**“Being with like minded people.”**

**“Seeing with those who have a common interest and can help you to improve your stroke and share in your successes and commiserate with your failures!”**

**“The best thing is the friendship and support of like minded people, and help when it is needed. (swimming)”**

## IMPROVEMENT

None of the club members spontaneously mentioned competition among the things they like about sports clubs the most. Improvement, however, in terms of setting and achieving personal goals, was commonly mentioned. Importantly, improvement and progress are often associated with help, support and encouragement from the others.

**“Always looking for improvement.”**

## JOY OF THE SPORT

The joy of the sport is directly dependent on the nature of the social relationships in the club, especially when it comes to team sports. If the atmosphere in the club is not positive, the joy of the sport doesn't come.

**“Enjoyment of the sport itself.”**

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## Flexibility

Women, both club members and non-members, commonly talked about the rigidity of sports clubs. In an ideal world, women said that their sports club would be a lot more flexible and have a more 'informal' environment.

# Women want clubs to offer more flexibility

In order to reflect the increasing complexity of women's lives, clubs need to learn to fit around women's lives rather than demanding women fit in to a rigid club structure.

## Sessions

- Committing to a club is a key barrier to entry. Many women simply cannot commit to structured weekly sessions due to other life commitments
- Ideally, clubs would have 'drop-in' session where women could drop in and out at times that suited them.

Easy-going, come and go when you please

## Fees

- Up-front, seasonal fees can also be a barrier to entry. Many women need the flexibility to be able to miss a session here and there, so committing to and paying for a block of sessions can be undesirable.

Ideally, there should be a variety of payment options

## Adaptable

- Many women talked about the need for clubs to consult with participants more, to take on board some of their suggestions and be flexible and adaptable enough to make changes to the way the club is run.

Pay as you go

# Flexibility is also associated with variety

Women commonly mentioned the appeal of variety. Session activities should be variable and diverse. Many women discussed the appeal of multi-sports clubs, or clubs that offered activities beyond the major sport.

The ideal club also caters to individual needs. Women are treated as individuals, and there are activities for differing levels of ability.

Diverse... including yoga, pilates, etc. but also boxing, martial arts, etc...  
(football participant)

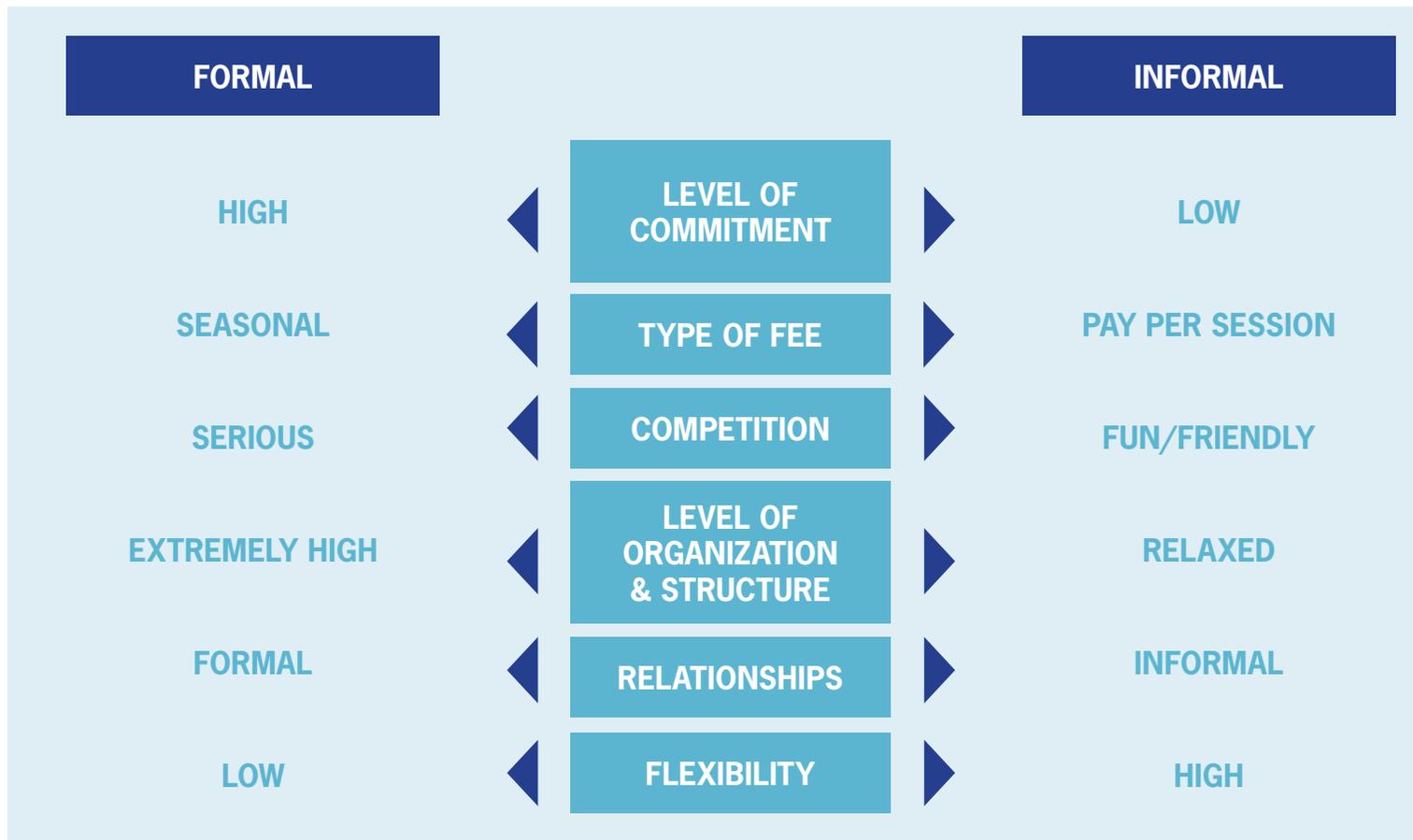
The sessions should be of a good variety - for all abilities and levels.

Activities that can be made harder/easier depending on the ability of individuals - so one basic activity can cater for a range of abilities.

E.g. running club and also a yoga studio for "yoga for runners".  
(running participant)

# The ideal club marries the organisation of a 'formal' club with the flexibility of an 'informal' club

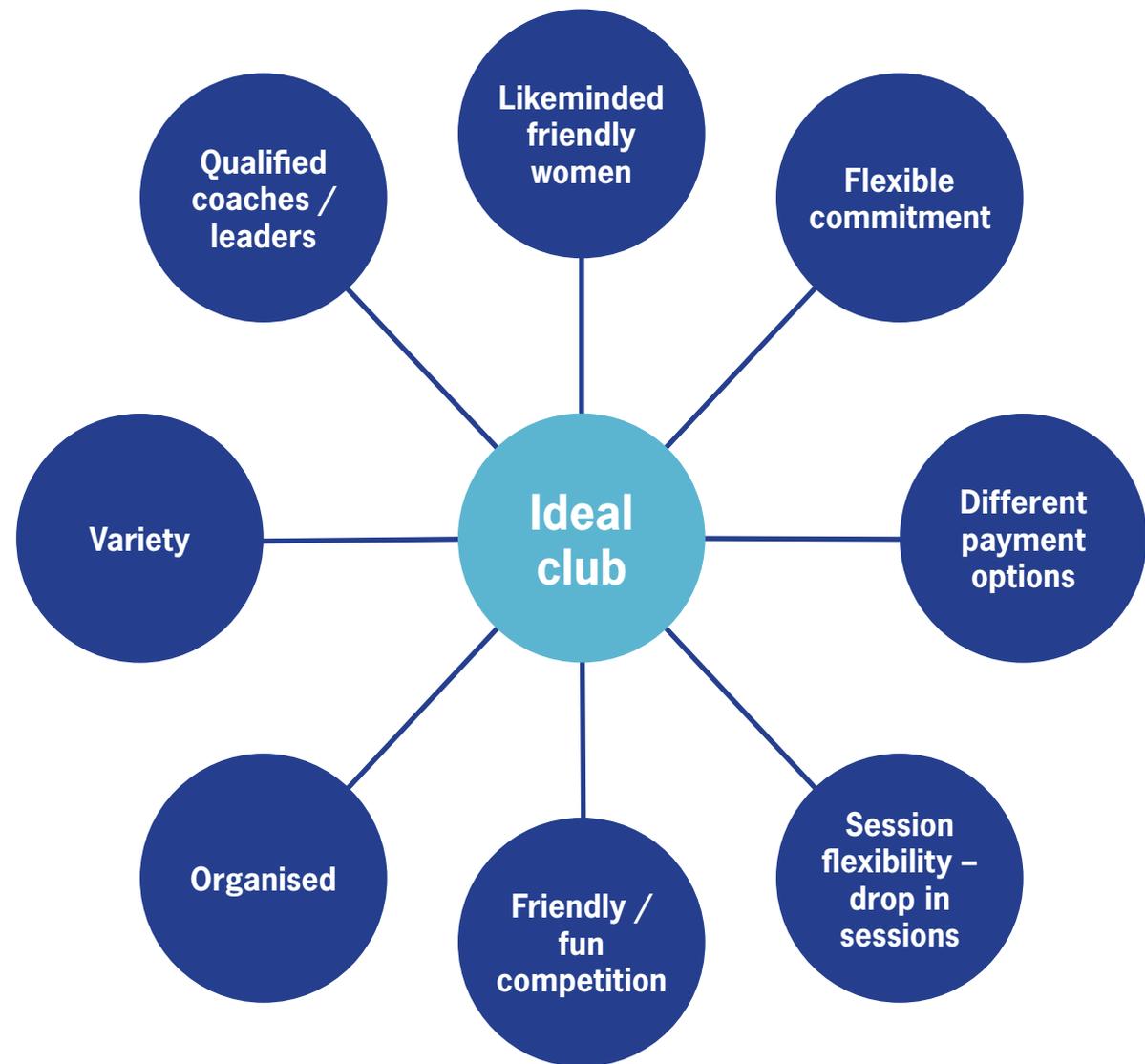
Perceived characteristics of formal and informal clubs.



An ideal sports club marries both formal and informal elements. The ideal sports club should be flexible, friendly, relaxed and pressure-free and flexible (perceived as 'informal' characteristics). The ideal sports club should, however, be "reliable" from members' point of view, and reliability is strongly associated with the formal, rather than informal settings. Reliability means the sessions happen on time and are run by professional, qualified coaches.

# Summary: the ideal club for women

Whilst we know that clubs need to continue to deliver talent pathways, in order to engage and retain more women in the future, clubs need to consider how to incorporate the following features of delivery.



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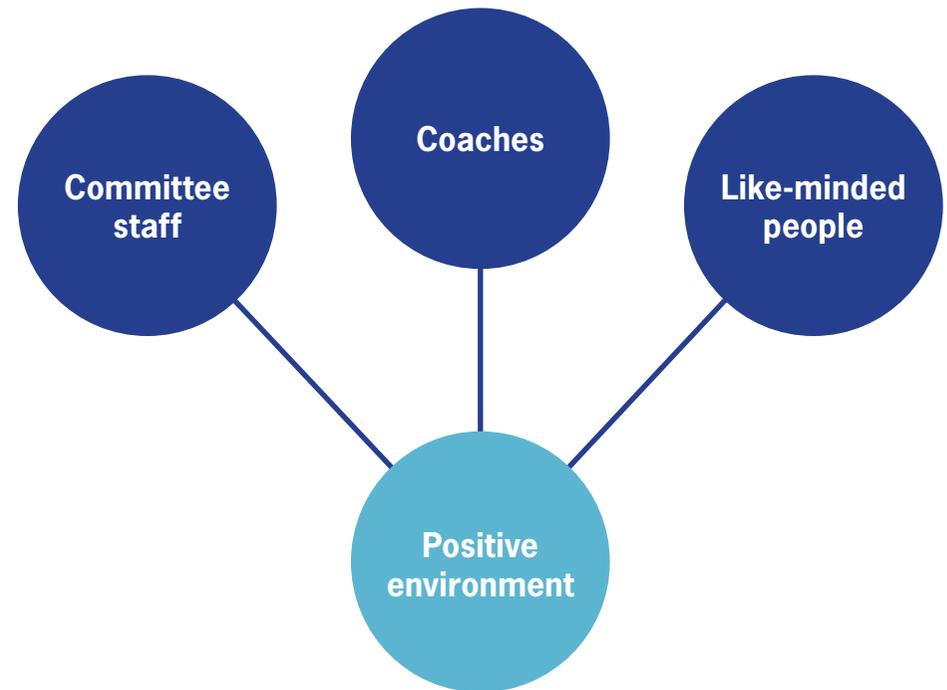
## It's all about people

A common feature across all of our discussions with women was the importance of the people at the club. Sports clubs are evaluated in terms of the positive environment built by the people at the club, rather than by any other features of the club (its facilities, for example).

# All of the people involved in the club contribute to developing a positive environment

Women commonly talked about the importance of their relationships with other members – but their relationships with coaches and committee staff at the club were also

fundamentally important. Everyone involved with the club contributes to building a positive environment – which was by far the main thing that kept women coming back to their club.



# The people make the club

Current members say that their loyalty to the club is driven by the group of people at the club over any other factor.

For non-members, the opportunity to participate with 'like-minded' women is a key driver.

## MEMBERS

The ideal club is a place to meet and socialise with like-minded people. They are friendly and of various ages, abilities and standards.

## COACHES

Coaches are absolutely fundamental to the experience of the club. Coaches are qualified but more importantly they are, friendly and inclusive, enthusiastic, encouraging and approachable.

## COMMITTEE STAFF

Committees in the ideal sports club are representative of all members, open, approachable and trying to do the best for the club.

# In their own words, women say that at the ideal sports club there should be:

[Coaches who are] open, friendly, enthusiastic, competitive, fun.

Lots of friendly like minded women.

Coaches who are friendly and inclusive.

[Coaches who are] approachable, friendly, encouraging, organised, committed to the team/sport, understanding but touch on his/her players.

[Committee staff who] have the wishes of the members in mind.

[Committee staff] who represent everyone from all parts of a club, old and young.

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## New member journey

We asked women to tell us how confident they'd feel about joining a sports club, and what might make them feel more confident.

# 63% of women do not feel confident enough to approach a sports club

Focus/guidance on what activities I can participate in.

## Am I good enough?

- Women need assurance and guidance on the required level of ability required at each club.

A bad attitude would be making you feel like they didn't want newcomers to come in, or they only wanted people of a high standard.

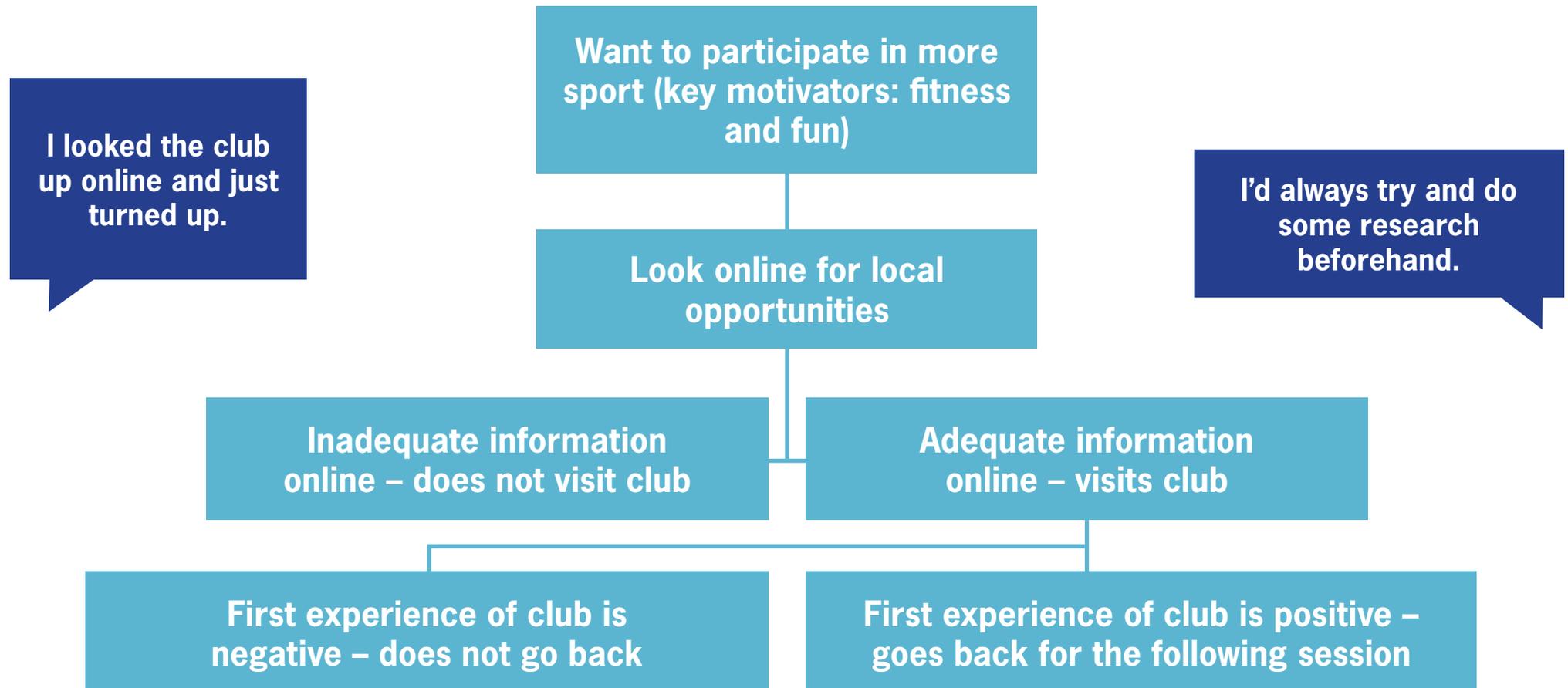
## Will they accept me?

- Many women perceive that sports clubs are for people of better abilities than themselves. Clubs need to ensure that on a first visit to the club, new members are made to feel welcome and that there is emphasis on a positive, encouraging environment. A negative first experience will usually mean the woman will not return a second time.

I would be put off if I felt the club was too advanced for me - that everyone else was more serious, or better.

# Typical new member journey

Clubs face a significant challenge in attracting women to visit and join them. However, an online presence is the easiest fix - 74% of women said that finding adequate information online would make them more confident about visiting a club for the first time.



# The importance of an online presence

A proper website is an absolute communication minimum that every sport club should have. If potential members are looking for a club in their area, the website is the first touch point. If they hear about a club from other people, they will still check the website before visiting the club in person.

## **Websites should contain:**

- Information about where the club meets, and on what days and times.
- Clear information about fees and payment.
- Information about the required ability level. If the club is open to all, this should be made explicitly clear so that women do not feel they aren't good enough to try the club out.
- The website would ideally contain images of current club members – images that look friendly and welcoming, as opposed to serious and intimidating.
- The website would give a good feel for the culture and environment at the club.

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## Recommendations

While no club can accommodate all of the suggestions we have outlined in this report, we have made a series of recommendations as to next steps clubs could take to both retain current women members and attract new ones. Clubs should think about which of these may be most practical and achievable rather than attempt to achieve them all – even a little change can go a long way.

- **Concentrate on current members in the first place.** If they are happy in the club, they will automatically snowball newcomers. If they are not happy with the club, all potential actions geared towards attracting new members may break down (because people, especially women, talk). Think of ways to turn current members into active **club ambassadors**.
- Consider in what ways you could **combine the advantages** of formality (such as reliability, organisation) **with informality** (friendly atmosphere, flexibility).
- Whenever possible, **offer a variety of options** and **give the members a possibility to choose** the solution which suits them best. For example, it should be the individual member, not the club, who decides if she pays monthly, per session or per season. It should be the individual member, not the club, who decides if she is notified via email or SMS when a session is cancelled for some reason. Make women feel like it is them who are managing their club membership, not the club imposing rules and duties on them.
- Whenever possible, **treat the club members individually**: reflect their individual needs, abilities and standards. Emphasize this information in your communications – it will also make the club more appealing to newcomers.
- Make sure your **club committee is representative** of the different people in your club – remember that different women have different motivations for becoming a member of the club.

- Give current members the opportunity to shape the face of the club with you. Give them space for their own ideas, recommendations and comments. However, don't force anybody to do anything beyond standard participation unless they proactively want to.
- Make the most of the new communication channels: a 'proper' club website is a must, Facebook group or fan page and a Twitter account will shift the perception of any club to a more dynamic, modern, flexible level.
- Personal recommendation is powerful. Make sure your website, as the first-touch point with a club, is populated with real people, current members and their stories (and their pictures and videos!).
- Try to use as many soft, emotional, relationship-related, human-centred "information" in communications as possible. Don't forget that pictures convey emotions better than words.
- Make sure communication send out inclusive messaging, make sure you send the message that everyone is good enough to join and everyone will be welcomed.
- Emphasize the value of what people get for their club fees.