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Healthy Lifestyles for Europe (HL4EU) Advancing Cross-Sector Collaboration for a Healthier Europe



Healthy Lifestyles for Europe (HL4EU) final conference: Advancing Cross-Sector Collaboration for a Healthier Europe

The final conference of the Healthy Lifestyles for Europe (HL4EU) project brought together European stakeholders committed to promoting healthier, more active lifestyles through cross-sector collaboration. The conference took place on 4 May 2026 in collaboration with **European Public Health Association (EUPHA)** as part of European Public Health Week, Europe's largest annual campaign to raise awareness about public health. The event took place at European Parliament Info Hub through valued collaboration with DG COMM's Multipliers Outreach Unit.

Over the previous 30 months, HL4EU connected leading organisations from the physical activity, health, and active mobility sectors to strengthen cooperation and drive joint action at European level. The project responded to a key public health challenge of reducing NCDs and health inequalities in a policy landscape that remains fragmented and siloed.

Because physical activity does not fall under a single policy competence, co-ordination across sectors and between EU and national levels is often difficult. HL4EU addressed this reality by fostering alignment, sharing good practices, and reinforcing the need for structural cross-sector collaboration in this field.

THE FINAL EVENT:



Presented the project's key achievements and outcomes



Launched the HL4EU policy recommendations



Showcased inspiring cross-sector good practices



Connected collaborators from diverse fields

The conference convened project partners, policymakers, researchers, representatives of featured good practices, and wider European actors committed to advancing healthy lifestyles for all.



Welcome Remarks



The conference opened with welcome remarks from **Kai Troll (CEO, EuropeActive)** and **Charlotte Marchandise (Executive Director, European Public Health Association - EUPHA)**.



Both speakers emphasised the urgent need for stronger cross-sector collaboration to address the growing burden of NCDs, sedentary life-

styles, and health inequalities across Europe. Mr. Troll highlighted the importance of continued coordinated action and its long-term legacy, while Ms. Marchandise underlined the value of European Public Health Week and the need to raise the profile of physical activity on the policy agenda. Both stressed that physical activity should be recognised not only as a sport or leisure issue, but as a broader public health and societal priority that supports wellbeing, inclusion, resilience, and prevention.

What HL4EU Taught Us: Key Learnings and Outcomes



Alina Chebes (Health Policy Manager, EuropeActive) and HL4EU project coordinator presented the key activities and outcomes from the HL4EU project.

Ms. Chebes highlighted that, despite the well-established benefits of physical activity, policymaking in this area remains fragmented across sectors such as health, sport, active mobility and beyond. She presented the project's main activities, including the Call to Action, the Community Building Conference, the Good Practices Platform, and the policy recommendations informed by research and virtual focus groups. She also emphasised the project's focus on identifying successful and sustainable initiatives, as well as the barriers and enablers for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Finally, Ms. Chebes underlined the value of the diverse project consortium, noting that the partnership itself reflected the collaborative cross-sectoral approach promoted throughout the initiative.



Cross-sectoral Integration in European Healthy Lifestyles Promotion: A Descriptive Analysis of the HL4EU Database



Luz Divina De La Cruz Lastre
(Science Manager, European Initiative for Exercise in Medicine - EIEIM)

presented the findings from the descriptive analysis of the HL4EU good practice database.

The analysis aimed to better understand the current state of cross-sectoral approaches to promoting healthy lifestyles through physical activity. As part of the study, a “good practice”

was defined as an initiative that promotes healthy lifestyles through physical activity, involves collaboration across sectors, and demonstrates clear quantitative and/or qualitative outcomes.

The methodology included desk research guidelines, data collection, data cleaning, and analytical work assessing the characteristics and outcomes of the identified practices. A total of 136 good practices were accepted according to the project criteria.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDED:



52.2%

of initiatives were based on public-private partnership models;



64.7%

demonstrated elements of social innovation



95.5%

involved the sport and physical activity sector

The analysis also included a weighted assessment examining which combinations of sectors were associated with higher levels of impact, sustainability, scalability, and innovation diversity.

THE FINDINGS SUGGESTED THAT:



The combination of health, physical activity, community organisations, and public administration was strongly associated with higher impact.



Community, equity, and urban planning sectors were linked to greater innovation diversity.

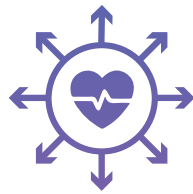


Sustainability was particularly associated with equity-focused, community-based initiatives supported by public administration.

SEVERAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT WERE IDENTIFIED:



Greater representation from Central and Eastern European countries;



Stronger diversification beyond the dominant physical activity–health–community sector combination;



Increased involvement of underrepresented sectors such as environmental sustainability, culture, and the arts;



More initiatives targeting early childhood and older populations.

The presentation highlighted the value of cross-sectoral approaches in generating broader social and health benefits and underlined the need for more balanced representation across sectors and population groups





Enablers and Barriers to Cross-sectoral Collaboration: Findings from Virtual Focus Groups



Margo de Lange (Secretary General, It's Great Out There Coalition - IGOTCo)

presented the findings from a series of virtual focus groups exploring barriers and enablers to cross-sectoral collaboration.

The focus groups aimed to deepen existing knowledge through stakeholder insights and

better understand how coordinated efforts between different actors can support healthy lifestyles promotion. Four online sessions lasting 90 minutes each were organised, involving 27 participants from different sectors and policy levels.

The discussions explored how stakeholders can work together to achieve shared goals that no sector alone could accomplish as effectively.

KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED INCLUDED:

- Strong institutional silos;
- Short-term funding cycles and policy frameworks;
- A persistent gap between knowledge and implementation;
- Differences in language and framing between sectors;
- Relational and networking barriers limiting cooperation.



PARTICIPANTS ALSO IDENTIFIED SEVERAL IMPORTANT ENABLERS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION:

- Using more sector-specific language tailored to different stakeholders;
- Creating shared narratives and holistic problem framing;
- Strengthening convening and connector roles;
- Developing supportive frameworks and strategies;
- Embedding incentives and collaboration structures into institutions.



THE FOCUS GROUPS SUPPORTED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS:

- Aligning policies with long-term health objectives;
- Broadening the understanding of physical activity beyond organised sport;
- Embedding cross-sectoral collaboration within institutional frameworks.



The findings demonstrated that effective collaboration requires not only shared goals, but also supportive governance structures, long-term commitment, and improved communication between sectors.



Translating Research into Policy: HL4EU Policy Recommendations



Benjamin Billet (Chairman, European Network of Outdoor Sports - ENOS) presented the HL4EU policy recommendations.

The recommendations aimed to translate the project's research findings into actionable policy directions and are organised into the following themes:

- 1.** Institutionalising cross-sector governance;
- 2.** Sustainable and cross-sector funding models;
- 3.** Integration of physical activity within health and prevention systems;
- 4.** Life-course and equity-oriented policy design
- 5.** Evidence, impact measurement and prevention framing
- 6.** Whole-of-society engagement and cross-sector collaboration

THE PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTED SEVERAL KEY FINDINGS EMERGING FROM THE PROJECT:



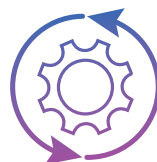
Cross-sectoral governance remains insufficiently institutionalised and often depends on personal relationships;



Long-term impact relies on stronger institutionalisation;



Many initiatives struggle to continue after project funding ends;



Temporary projects must evolve into systemic and lasting change;



Physical activity should be more effectively embedded into healthcare and prevention systems;



Policy approaches should better represent underrepresented and vulnerable groups;



Evidence collection and evaluation systems remain inconsistent.

The recommendations also stressed the importance of stronger societal engagement and collaboration across sectors.

Mr. Billet emphasised that the recommendations should not be implemented in isolation, but rather as part of a comprehensive and interconnected approach to promoting healthy lifestyles. The presentation concluded by underlining that promoting healthy lifestyles is not only a health investment, but also an investment in stronger communities, social inclusion, and resilient societies.

KEYNOTE 1: Bridging Healthcare Systems and Physical Activity Opportunities in Portugal: How and Why It Matters?



Gil B. Rosa, PhD (Faculty of Human Kinetics, University of Lisbon)

delivered the first keynote presentation focusing on good practice examples of integrating physical activity into the Portuguese healthcare system. The keynote explored how healthcare systems

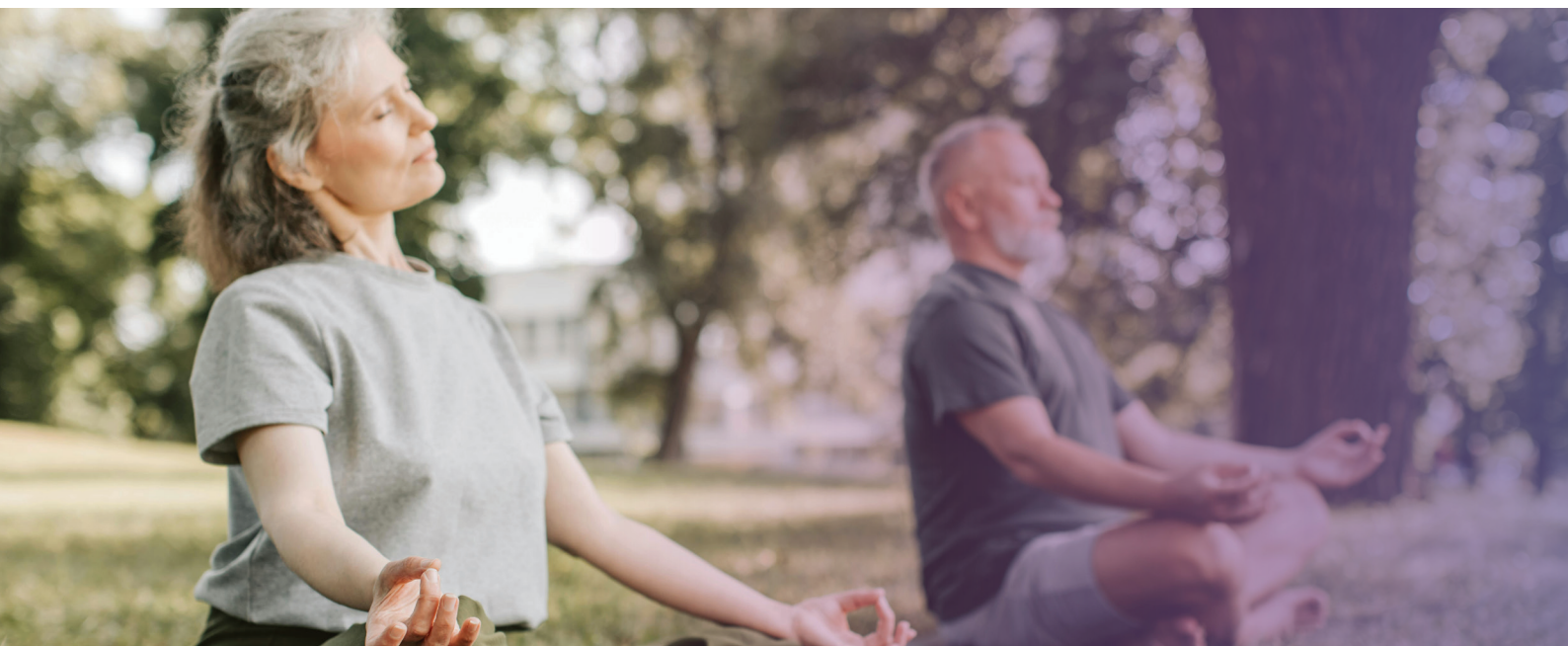
can support higher levels of physical activity and why stronger integration between healthcare and community programmes is essential. Mr. Rosa explained the structure of the Portuguese health system and how physical activity is increasingly being incorporated into healthcare pathways. The Portuguese health system includes:

- The Direção-Geral da Saúde (DGS), responsible for defining health policy, priority programmes, and guidelines; Short-term funding cycles and policy frameworks;
- The Serviço Nacional de Saúde (SNS), which includes physical activity assessment, counselling, and referral systems.

Healthcare professionals, particularly family doctors, can refer patients to physical activity professionals such as exercise physiologists. The initiative currently involves 14 healthcare units. The presentation also highlighted the growing use of social prescribing approaches, where social prescribers guide patients towards appropriate physical activity and community-based opportunities.

Examples of external referral pathways included community programmes such as “Diabetes em Movimento” and “+Saúde - Diabetes”, implemented across approximately 16 municipalities.

Monitoring systems were also discussed, including a national surveillance system measuring physical activity and physical fitness levels.



KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED INCLUDED:

- Portugal remains among the lowest-ranking countries in Europe for physical activity according to Eurobarometer data;
- National data suggest levels closer to the EU average;
- Much reported physical activity occurs during work rather than leisure time;
- Developing supportive frameworks and strategies;
- Only one in five people with non-communicable diseases meet physical activity recommendations



The keynote also stressed the importance of considering both physical activity and sedentary behaviour together, noting the synergistic effects of increasing activity while reducing sedentary time. According to the analysis presented, increasing physical activity levels and reducing sedentary behaviour could reduce direct diabetes-related healthcare costs by up to €80 million.

Mr. Rosa underlined that healthcare systems cannot operate alone and require strong collaboration with local authorities and community actors to develop and sustain physical activity programmes.





Q&A Session

DURING THE DISCUSSION, PARTICIPANTS RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT PREVENTION, IMPLEMENTATION, AND DATA COLLECTION.



In response to a question from Marleen Kestens (European Heart Network) regarding low physical activity rates among girls, Mr. Rosa explained that the results were based on device-based measurements and aligned with EU and WHO data. He also noted that survey-based data can sometimes be misleading because many people who report not exercising may still engage in physical activity during work.



Responding to a question from Sabine Vuik (OECD) regarding implementation challenges, Mr. Rosa highlighted the importance of physician training and maintaining close relationships between healthcare professionals and community systems. He also noted that Portugal is increasingly adopting social prescribing approaches.



When asked by Charlotte Marchandise (EUPHA) about prevention, Mr. Rosa acknowledged that prevention remains a challenge, particularly for adults, and stressed the need for stronger investment and prioritisation.



PANEL DISCUSSION 1: Integrating Physical Activity into Healthcare Systems

The first panel discussion was moderated by Margo de Lange (Secretary General, IGOTCo) and brought together:

- **Sarah Lynch (Deputy Head of Sport Unit, DG EAC, European Commission);**
- **Sabine Vuik (Health Policy Analyst, OECD);**
- **Prof. Niall Moyna (Professor of Clinical Exercise Physiology, Dublin City University).**



The discussion explored how physical activity can be more effectively integrated into healthcare systems and wider public health policies.

Sarah Lynch - European Commission Perspective

Ms. Lynch highlighted several ongoing policy developments at European level. These included:

- The integration of physical activity into cardiovascular disease strategies through "Safe Hearts Plan";
- The upcoming revision of the Council Recommendation on Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA), including stronger consideration of mental health;
- Efforts to improve cross-sectoral data collection and alignment in collaboration with Eurostat.

Ms. Lynch stressed that physical activity alone cannot address current health challenges with-

out stronger cross-sectoral action involving multiple policy areas. She also noted the importance of integrating physical activity into broader strategies related to poverty reduction, disability, mental health, and social inclusion.

A key ambition discussed was the scaling-up of "physical activity on prescription" approaches across healthcare systems. Ms. Lynch also highlighted the importance of addressing loneliness epidemic and ensuring policies focus not only on long-term health outcomes but also on immediate wellbeing and social connection.

Sabine Vuik – OECD Perspective

Ms. Vuik emphasised the importance of strengthening data systems and improving the availability and use of high-quality data. She stressed that stronger evidence on health outcomes and behavioural patterns is essential for informing policy development, implementation, and evaluation.

Ms. Vuik also highlighted the challenges linked to implementation, noting that many

systems already have counselling and referral pathways in place, but that these are often limited in scale and geographic reach. Stronger coordination between healthcare providers and community systems remains essential. Training healthcare professionals was identified as another key priority, particularly ensuring that physicians are equipped to support physical activity counselling and referral systems.

Prof. Niall Moyna – Healthcare / Academia Perspective

Prof. Moyna discussed the challenges of integrating physical activity into healthcare systems in Ireland. He emphasised the need to translate good practices into actionable government policies and highlighted the social dimension of physical activity as a major driver of participation. A key message from his intervention was that physical activity should not

be communicated solely in terms of long-term health outcomes. Instead, communication should also emphasise immediate benefits such as improved mood, wellbeing, enjoyment, and social connection. He also stressed that the social aspects of physical activity can play an important role in tackling loneliness and improving quality of life.

Audience Discussion

During the Q&A session, participants discussed how the impact of exercise is measured and whether current metrics adequately capture long-term outcomes. In response, Prof. Moyna noted that everyone can benefit from exercise, although the magnitude and

type of benefits vary depending on the dose, intensity, frequency, duration, and type of activity. He also stressed the need for improved metrics and data systems capable of capturing both short- and long-term outcomes more effectively.



Message of Support – MEP Nina Carberry (EPP, Ireland)

MEP Carberry delivered a video message of support in which she stressed the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in promoting healthy lifestyles through physical activity and highlighted her efforts since 2024 to make sport and physical activity a stronger EU priority. She warned about rising physical inactivity across Europe, particularly among older people, and underlined its

negative impact on public health, healthcare systems, economies, and social cohesion.

Ms. Carberry also emphasised the role of EU programmes such as Erasmus+, EU4Health, and ERDF in supporting disadvantaged communities. She promised to keep advocating for continued and increased EU funding for sport and health initiatives in the next EU budget.

KEYNOTE 2 : Getting Finland Moving What Happens When Government Works as One



Minttu Korsberg (Secretary General, Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland) delivered the second keynote presentation.

The keynote focused on Finland's "Get Finland Moving" programme and explored how governments can adopt whole-of-government approaches to physical activity promotion.

Ms. Korsberg described the paradox of physical activity in Finland: although participation in certain forms of physical activity has increased, overall levels of movement have declined due to broader societal and technological changes. She explained that modern lifestyles and technological innovations have increasingly reduced opportunities for movement in everyday life. Reflecting on changing lifestyles, she invited participants to consider how few reasons many people now have to leave their homes, particularly with the rise of homeworking and increasingly sedentary daily routines. As a result, Finland is now seeking to reintegrate physical activity into daily

life, particularly through movement integrated into work, transport, and ordinary everyday activities beyond organised sport.

The keynote also highlighted Finland's long-term monitoring of population fitness levels, including data collected through military service assessments. These trends showed that endurance levels among young men had significantly declined over time, while average body weight had increased by approximately eight kilograms. However, Ms. Korsberg also presented encouraging data showing positive developments since 2019, which Finland associates with increased efforts to reverse sedentary trends.



A CENTRAL ELEMENT OF THE FINNISH APPROACH HAS BEEN BROADENING THE UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENT MOVEMENT-RELATED CONCEPTS:



Physical activity refers to movement integrated into everyday life and work;



Exercise refers to intentional physical activity performed independently or under supervision;



Sport refers to exercise undertaken with goals, performance, or competition in mind.

The presentation stressed that the distinction between these concepts lies primarily in the intention behind the activity, and that promoting healthier lifestyles requires moving beyond a narrow sport-focused perspective.

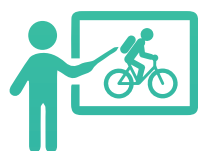
The “Get Finland Moving” programme adopts a cross-sectoral approach involving multiple ministries and sectors.

KEY ELEMENTS INCLUDE:

- A €20 million annual implementation budget distributed across several ministries;
- Cross-sectoral working groups;
- Integration of physical activity objectives into broader government policies;
- A total of 35 measures designed to increase physical activity levels across society.

The programme focuses on creating the structural prerequisites that enable people to move more in everyday life.

KEY ELEMENTS INCLUDE:



Developing physical activity operating cultures;



Strengthening physical activity counselling systems;



Improving conditions and environments for physical activity;



Building physical activity competence;



Using taxation measures to encourage movement;



Communication and promotion campaigns.

EXAMPLES PRESENTED INCLUDED:

- A new Basic Education Act recognising physically active lifestyles as an educational objective;
- Inclusion of a ball and information leaflet promoting active play in Finland's maternity boxes;
- Counselling initiatives;
- Taxation-related measures;
- Communication campaigns encouraging movement in everyday life.

The programme aims to make physical activity easier and more accessible for people by shaping environments and systems rather than focusing only on individual behaviour change.

PANEL DISCUSSION 2: Embedding Physical Activity Across Policies

The second panel discussion was moderated by Kai Troll (CEO, EuropeActive) and brought together:

- **Minttu Korsberg (Secretary General, Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland);**
- **Caroline Costongs (Director, EuroHealthNet);**
- **Sara König (Community Engagement Adviser, adidas Foundation).**

Minttu Korsberg – Member State Perspective



Ms. Korsberg explained that Finland increasingly approaches physical activity as a societal phenomenon requiring coordinated action across government sectors. She highlighted that while funding remains important, high-level political commitment and leadership are even more critical for long-term progress. For ex-

ample, the Get Finland Moving programme was proposed by Finland's Prime Minister Petteri Orpo.

Physical activity is now included within Finland's government programme, reflecting a broader shift from a sport-centred approach towards a wider Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) perspective.

Ms. Korsberg also reflected on how public and political discussions around physical activity evolved between 2018 and 2024:

- In 2018, discussions focused largely on the cost of children's participation in sport;
- By 2024, discussions had shifted towards broader HEPA-related issues.



Caroline Costongs - NGO Perspective



Ms. Costongs highlighted the importance of addressing social inequalities through healthy lifestyle policies. Referring to recent findings on health inequalities in the European Union, she noted that:

- One in three people report poor health;
- Individuals with lower educational levels are affected at approximately twice the rate.

Ms. Costongs stressed that structural barriers often limit people's opportunities to be physically active and warned against approaches that place responsibility solely on individuals

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDED:



Creating environments supportive of physical activity, including access to green spaces and parks;



Supporting health-promoting schools approaches integrating physical activity and healthy diets;



Ensuring policies reach all children and population groups;



Allocating resources strategically to reduce inequalities and maximise impact.



Sara König - Private Sector Perspective



Ms. König presented the work of the adidas Foundation and its focus on using sport and physical activity as tools for social cohesion and inclusion.

THE FOUNDATION SUPPORTS INITIATIVES AIMED AT:



Removing barriers to participation in physical activity;



Strengthening social cohesion through sport;



Integrating physical activity into humanitarian and inclusion agendas;



Fighting discrimination and exclusion.

She highlighted the “Moving for Change” initiative, which works with humanitarian organisations to integrate physical activity and sport into wider social and community strategies.





Closing Remarks

The conference concluded with closing remarks from **Charlotte Marchandise (Executive Director, EUPHA)**.

Ms. Marchandise reflected on the importance of moving from policy framing towards implementation and action.

SHE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF:



Learning from promising practices and understanding the conditions that enabled successful implementation;



Ensuring that science and policymaking become more inclusive and equity-driven;



Strengthening governance structures and political commitment;



Addressing the commercial determinants of health.



Amplifying existing good practices rather than constantly re-inventing new initiatives;

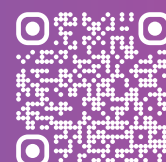


A **FINAL MESSAGE** emphasised the importance of persistence, collaboration, and advocacy in ensuring that healthy lifestyles and public health remain priorities within broader European policy debates, including discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the balance between health and competitiveness.



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