Final Report
Virtual Focus Group Sessions

Healthy Lifestyles for Europe

Co-funded by the European Union

ELPA ENOS EPIONI europeactive Exe&cise is Medicine FESI Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry IT'S GREAT OUT THERE POLIS

Content

1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Purpose of the Virtual Focus Groups

The Virtual Focus Group Sessions were organised as part of the Healthy Lifestyles for Europe (HL4EU) project to deepen stakeholder input for policy recommendations on cross-sectoral collaboration for healthy lifestyles, with a specific focus on physical activity.

A virtual focus group was defined as:

> *"A virtual focus group is a qualitative data collection method where volunteer participants with specific background experience join a guided conversation on a specific topic. The conversation is aimed to provide deeper insight on a specific topic."*

The focus group objectives were as follows:

- Consolidate perspectives from stakeholders beyond the project consortium
- Identify perceived barriers and enablers to cross-sectoral collaboration
- Support the transition from a general Call to Action to more concrete policy recommendations
- Strengthen engagement and ownership among participating stakeholders

1.2 Methodological Approach

The focus groups followed a qualitative, participatory design:

- Four virtual focus group sessions
- 90 minutes per session
- 8–10 participants per session
- Participants joined on a voluntary basis
- Recruitment through:
  - Open registration
  - Invitations via the project mailing list
  - Direct outreach by project partners

Each session combined:

- Guided discussion
- Collective brainstorming on barriers and enablers
- Co-creation of emerging themes and recommendations

To complement the discussions, participants contributed via Mentimeter alongside the discussions, allowing anonymous input on recurring themes and priorities.

This report presents a thematic, cross-session synthesis of the discussions, integrating qualitative insights from the meetings through notes of the discussions and the results from the Mentimeter brainstorming and a cross-session thematic analysis.

1.3 Focus Group Central Question & Definition of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

For the purpose of the focus groups, cross-sectoral collaboration was defined as:

> *"Coordinated efforts of organisations, agencies, and stakeholders from different sectors working together to achieve shared goals that none could accomplish as effectively alone."*

Key aspects highlighted included:

- Shared objectives
- Resource sharing (expertise, funding, data, networks)
- Integrated planning across sectors
- Mutual accountability for joint outcomes
- Innovation and learning through diverse perspectives

The central theme for the Virtual Focus Groups was: Barriers and Enablers for cross-sectyoral collaboration.

1.4 Recruitment and Planning

Four Focus Groups were planned initially:

- HL4EU Virtual Focus Group N°1 - 16th December 2025 11:00-12:30

- HL4EU Virtual Focus Group N°2 - 16th December 2025 14:00-15:30
- HL4EU Virtual Focus Group N°3 - 8th January 2026 11:00-12:30
- HL4EU Virtual Focus Group N°4 - 8th January 2026 14:00-15:30

Registration took place via Typefrom to indicate availability for the pre-defined dates. The total number of registrations to take part in the Virtual Focus Groups was 57. Focus Group N°2 was cancelled for lack of availability from potential participants during the timeslot. One additional Virtual Focus Group was scheduled to facilitate for other participant availability after a Doodle poll was conducted:

- HL4EU Virtual Focus Group N°5 - 30th January 2026 14:00-15:30

The following table outlines actual attendance across the various sessions:

VFG N°	Invited	Replied	Attended
	Number (+ project partners)		
1	11 (+4)	9 (+4) yes 2 no reply	8 (+3)
2	*Cancelled*	*Cancelled*	*Cancelled*
3	9 (+4)	3 (+4) yes 1 no 4 no reply	5 (+3)
4	10 (+4)	4 (+4) yes 6 no reply	8 (+3)
5	24 (+3)	6 (+3) yes 3 no 15 no reply	6 (+3)
Totals	54 (+4)	37 yes 4 no 27 no reply	27 (+3)

2. Participant Profile

Each session started with various questions about the organisations involved, their familiarity with the project and cross-sectoral collaboration. The results are outlined below and help to understand the participant profile for the Virtual Focus Group Sessions.

2.1 Familiarity with HL4EU

Based on the question: *"How much do you know about the HL4EU project?"*; we established a baseline for the participant's knowledge about the HL4EU project ranging from 'What you just learned' (1) to 'Everything' (5).

The participants scored their knowledge as follows:

VFG N°	Scored 1	Scored 2	Scored 3	Scored 4	Scored 5	Average
1	2	2	2	1	3	3.1
3	3	1	1	1	1	2.43
4	4	4	0	0	3	2.45
5	2	3	0	2	1	2.63
Totals	11	10	3	4	8	2.65

Interpretation:
Most participants entered the focus groups with prior knowledge or active engagement, positioning the discussions at a practice-informed level rather than introductory.

2.2 Participating organisations

Based on the question: *"What is your organisation?"* in the Mentimeter tool; we identified various participation organisations:

EuropeActive	Surpass Sport Systems Ltd.	It's Great Out There Coalition
EIEIM	Trinity college dublin - Trinity Sport	EuroHockey
DNA running collective // Outrun the Patriarchy	European Healthy Lifestyle Action Erasmus+ project	Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland

European Medical Students' Asssociation (EMSA)	European Network of Outdoor Sports	University of Pretoria
Diabetes International	Football Cooperative Ireland	Padova University Hospital
TU Dublin University	International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA)	European Cyclists' Federation (ECF)
Exercise is Medicine Germany / German Sport University	Sports Medicine Deperatment, University of Basel	Independent consultancy City Health
University of Padova	Nuupes	JOGG

We also asked: *"Describe the vision of your organisation in one word."* and created the following word cloud on basis of participant input across the four Virtual Focus Group Sessions:

2.3 Sector positioning & affiliation

Based on the question "Is your organisation public or private sector?"; we identified a certain level of sectoral positioning across the various Virtual Focus Groups. Participants could select either Public or Private or could select both Public & Private.

VFG N°	N° Participants	Public	Private
1	10	6	5
3	7	4	4
4	10	5	5
5	8	5	4
Totals		20	18

Based on the question "Which sector or sectors are the best match?"; we identified some level of sectoral affiliation. Mentimeter does not accurately allow us to retrace who indicated what sector overlaps individually so what remains is a very general picture of weighted sector afifiliation without indication which sectors most often go together.

Choices	VFG N°1	VFG N°3	VFG N°4	VFG N°5	Total
Culture & Arts	1	0	0	0	1
Community	5	3	5	1	14
Physical Activity, Exercise & Sports	9	6	11	7	33
Health	8	5	9	4	26
Environmental sustainability	3	2	4	1	10
Mobility	0	2	1	2	5
Public Administration	0	0	0	0	0
Equity	3	1	3	1	8
Urban Planning & Design	0	2	3	1	6

Interpretation:
Few actors identified as both Public and Private. Participants strongly clustered around core HL4EU sectors, while repeatedly pointing to underrepresented enabling sectors, a tension echoed throughout the focus group discussions.

2.4 Involvement in cross-sector collaboration projects

Based on the question: "Are you currently involved in any cross-sectoral collaboration?";
we fotrmed a picture of experience levels of our Vitual Focus Group participants:

Choices	VFG N°1	VFG N°3	VFG N°4	VFG N°5	Total
Yes	8	6	9	7	30
No	2	1	2	1	6

Interpretation:
Most participants have been involved in cross-sector collaboration projects.

3. Barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration

Based on the Focus Group discussion we have identified various barriers blocking Cross-Sectoral Collaboration for the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

The individual Mentimeter contributions for each of the barriers are collected in Annex I.

3.1 Structural and Institutional Silos

Participants consistently highlighted that collaboration is constrained by sectoral and disciplinary silos, reinforced by institutional mandates, funding structures, and governance arrangements.

Responsibility for physical activity and healthy lifestyles was frequently described as fragmented, with issues "falling between" ministries, departments, or levels of governance.

> *"Everyone agrees it matters, but when it comes to action, it's suddenly someone else's responsibility."* *(Interpretative quote)*

3.2 Short-Term Policy and Funding Cycles

Short political and funding cycles were identified as a major obstacle, particularly for prevention-oriented approaches whose outcomes materialise over the long term. Despite low voting scores, this theme featured strongly in qualitative discussion, indicating high perceived importance but lower Mentimeter prioritisation.

Participants noted that:

- Preventive physical activity struggles to demonstrate short-term return on investment
- Long-term infrastructure or environmental interventions are difficult to sustain politically

"We're asked to prove impact quickly, while the benefits we're working towards are generational." (Interpretative quote)

3.3 Siloed and Competitive Funding Systems

Funding structures were widely perceived as reinforcing single-sector approaches:

- Calls are often designed around narrow remits
- Organisations funded by one sector tend to adopt that sector's perspective
- The "grey space" between sectors remains underfunded and poorly supported

Gatekeeping, closed networks, and competition for limited resources further restricted access to cross-sector partnerships.

3.4 Language, Framing, and Conceptual Gaps

Different sectors were described as using distinct languages, frameworks, and success metrics, complicating collaboration.

Several participants stressed that:

- Guideline-based or sport-centric narratives do not resonate equally across sectors

- Policymakers often equate physical activity solely with sport, overlooking everyday activity

"We're often talking about the same goal, but using completely different words." *(Interpretative quote)*

3.5 Knowledge–Action Gap

While awareness of physical inactivity as a problem was considered high, participants emphasised that knowledge alone does not translate into action.

Examples were shared where initiatives lost funding once awareness was deemed "sufficient," despite evidence that behaviour change requires sustained structural support.

3.6 Cross-Cutting Relational / Network Barriers

Finally, there were frequent barriers spanning all five categories that referred mainly to operational aspect and that often scored low individually. These can be brought together as describing the following picture:

A fragmented and closed ecosystem marked by gatekeeping, lack of diversity and inclusion, weak connectivity across sectors, missing platforms and contact points, and insufficient opportunities for collaboration and interaction.

4. Enablers of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Based on the Focus Group discussion we have identified various enablers for Cross-Sectoral Collaboration for the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

The individual Mentimeter contributions for each of the enablers are collected in Annex I.

4.1 Shared Problem Framing and Holistic Narratives

Collaboration was seen to improve when physical activity was framed within broader concepts such as:

- Wellbeing and quality of life
- Mental health
- Social connection
- Environmental and community benefits

This broader framing was perceived as more effective than sector-specific or guideline-driven messaging.

> *"When we talk about living well, not just exercising more, more sectors lean in."*
> *(Interpretative quote)*

4.2 Use of Sector-Specific Language

Participants highlighted the importance of tailoring messages to different sectors:

- Health: wellbeing, prevention, mental health
- Environment: human–nature connection, outdoor activity
- Finance: healthcare costs, workforce participation, productivity

Targeted engagement with ministries—focusing on their specific priorities—was cited as an effective strategy.

4.3 Convening and Connector Roles

Neutral conveners, networks, and intermediary organisations were repeatedly identified as critical enablers. Their role included:

- Translating across sectoral languages
- Facilitating trust-building
- Helping organisations identify appropriate partners

> *"Having a trusted convener makes collaboration feel possible, not burdensome."*
> *(Interpretative quote)*

4.4 Supportive Frameworks and Strategies

High-level frameworks (EU, national, or global) were seen as powerful enablers, as they:

- Legitimate cross-sector approaches
- Clarify shared responsibility
- Provide a common reference point across sectors

WHO's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity was frequently referenced as an example of a systems-based approach.

4.5 Incentives and Embedded Structures

Participants stressed that voluntary collaboration alone is insufficient. More durable collaboration emerges when:

- Cross-sector approaches are embedded in formal strategies
- Funding calls include incentives or requirements for collaboration
- Responsibilities are institutionalised rather than person-dependent

5. Policy Recommendations

Across the four sessions, participants converged on the view that:

- Cross-sectoral collaboration is widely recognised as necessary
- Persistent barriers are structural rather than motivational
- Effective collaboration depends on intentional policy design, not goodwill alone

  "If collaboration remains optional, it will always be fragile."
  (Interpretative quote)

The discussions broadly underline the importance of:

- Aligning policy, funding, and governance structures with long-term health objectives
- Broadening the understanding of physical activity beyond sport

- Embedding cross-sectoral approaches within institutional frameworks to ensure resilience over time

The individual Mentimeter contributions for each of the policy recommendations are collected in Annex I.

5.1 Aligning with long-term health objectives

Recommendations focused on aligning policy goals, funding mechanisms, governance, and implementation with long-term prevention, population health, and sustainability objectives.

5.2 Broadening the understanding of physical activity beyond sport

Recommendations addressing narrative change, awareness-raising, holistic framing of physical activity, and recognition of physical activity as a societal and life-course issue.

Some items appear in both 5.1 and 5.2 conceptually; they are placed here based on primary intent (narrative vs structural)

5.3 Embedding within institutional frameworks

Recommendations aimed at institutionalisation, leadership, accountability, coordination mechanisms, and long-term resilience of cross-sectoral collaboration.

5.4 Other considerations

5.4.1 Most prioritised policy domains

The contributions to the Virtual Focus Groups discussions gave us insight into most prioritised policy domains verus underrepresented domains.

Most prioritised domains:

- Health
- Physical activity, sport, and exercise
- Community and civil society
- Public administration and governance

Emerging / underrepresented but valued:

- Mobility and urban planning
- Environment and outdoor spaces
- Education (beyond children and sport)
- Equity and social inclusion

5.4.2 Level of Government and Policy Levers

Based on the discussions, we can identify various levels of giovernment and policy levers.

EU Level

- Strategic frameworks and guidance
- Funding programme design
- Cross-sector policy alignment

National Level

- Inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms
- Long-term prevention strategies
- Budget alignment across sectors

Regional / Local Level

- Integrated planning (urban, mobility, community)
- Implementation and experimentation
- Community-based partnerships

5.4.3 Grouping by Policy "Mechanism Type"

Alternatively we can also group by policy mechanism type that came up in the discussions.

Regulatory Mechanisms

- Mandating cross-sector cooperation in strategies
- Embedding physical activity across policy domains

Financial Mechanisms

- Incentivising collaboration in funding calls
- Supporting multi-annual and flexible funding

Institutional Mechanisms

- Establishing permanent coordination structures
- Strengthening intermediary and convening roles

Knowledge & Capacity Mechanisms

- Training in partnership and systems thinking
- Shared learning platforms and networks

"When collaboration is embedded in institutions, it survives political change."
(Interpretative quote)

---

6. Conclusions

Across all sessions and aggregated inputs, participants consistently framed cross-sectoral collaboration as essential but structurally constrained. The strongest signal from the Mentimeter results and discussions is that:

- Barriers are systemic, not motivational
- Enablers require intentional policy and funding design
- Sustainable collaboration depends on institutional embedding, not ad-hoc projects

This report is designed to stand alongside quantitative data analysis, offering a qualitative, stakeholder-grounded perspective on *how* cross-sectoral collaboration is experienced in practice.

Annex I - Individual Mentimeter Contributions per chapter

3. Barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration

3.1 Structural and Institutional Silos

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Siloed governmental approaches, ministries don't align	0
Policy Silos	0
Various ministries work in silos	2
Siloed administrative structures	2
Health & mobility are distinct sectors in governments, separate funding, separate priorities	2
Different policy areas with different goals and finance	2
No accountability (e.g. sport vs health ministry competence)	0
Governance / leadership	0
Policy control	1
Unaligned policy goals	1
Lack of policy alignment	1
Lack of overarching goals and strategies	2
Institutional and structural separation, communication gap	1
Complex policy system and structuring of where PA belongs	0
Controlled environments	1
Strategic priorities	1

3.2 Short-Term Policy and Funding Cycles

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Short lifespan for different ministers	0
Short-term political cycles vs long-term perspective	0
Political short-term thinking	0
Competing political priorities	2
It's not priorities	0
Political support	0

3.3 Siloed and Competitive Funding Systems

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Lack of funds	1
Lack of fundings	2
Budgets	0
Financial scarcity	1
Funding success rate	2
Financing systems	0
Joint projects funding	0
Funding of collaborations	0
Lack of funding programs or specialised institutions	1
No long-term funding	1
No long-term funding which impacts sustainability	0
Lack of long-term funding	1
Lack of long-term funding	2

3.4 Language, Framing, and Conceptual Gaps

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Communication	3
Communication issues	5
Information and communication barriers	1
Language	0
Terminology	0
Different vocabulary	0
Different "languages" (e.g. what is health?)	3
Different "terminology" and ways of working	0
Lack of understanding of other sectors	4
The lack of knowledge of other activities and fields	4
Different expectations	1
Different interest	0
Different beliefs (culture)	0
Sport stigmatised (seen as commercial/competitive)	0
Cycling for health vs mobility conflict	0
Difficult to connect different ideas	0
Misaligned goals, poor communication, resistance to change	1

3.5 Knowledge–Action Gap

Mentimeter contribution	Score
'It's not our responsibility' attitude	3
Organisations think about their own objectives	1
Own core goals	0
Individualistic thinking	1
Mono-tasking	3
Comfort of the known	3
Afraid to push outside comfort zone	0
Bias	0
Poor listening	1
Adressing symptoms, not root causes	2
Lack of understanding cross-sectoral collaboration	0
Stakeholders contributions accepted	1
Knowledge about each other, personal interest	1
Capacity to carry big projects	0
People resources to commence collaboration	2
Challenges with capacity, resources & prioritisation	3

3.6 Cross-Cutting Relational / Network Barriers

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Closed networks	2
Gatekeeping	1
Networks	1
Lack of diversity / no POC involved	1
Racism	1
Misogynism	0
Lack of networking opportunities	0
Lack of cross-collab events	0
No collab platforms	1
Missing platforms	0
Lack of points of contact	2
Contact point missing	0
Unaware of partners to work with	1
Lack of contacts in other sectors	1
Lack of connections	0
A lot of people involved without knowing from each other	0

Distance	0
Lack of opportunities for interaction	0

4. Enablers of Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

4.1 Shared Problem Framing and Holistic Narratives

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Shared Vision	2
Shared visions and mission	4
Shared interest	1
Win-win	2
Community-focus	2
Community	0
Holistic view on health promotion with space for preventive health care	1
Holistic approach to health and physical activity	4
Holistic approach in European initiatives	0
System thinking approach	0
Adressing underlying root causes	0
Try to come to a jointly mission for improving physical activity	0
More vision-based collaboration in long term	0
Balance	0
Good mental health	0
Human centered approach	0
Non-patriotism	0
Intersectionality	0

4.2 Use of Sector-Specific Language

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Clear communication	1
Communication	0
Open communication	1
Efficient communication tool	0
Convincing data and engaging storytelling	1
Data and research to prove ROI and societal / economic benefits	0
Data / research / economics highlighting positive ROI	2
Social Return on Investment	0
Using concepts that fits the branch	2

Different concepts that fit the branch	2
Evidence of succesful partnerships	2
Strong case for societal problem of inactivity + evidence	1
Higher level of education	1

4.3 Convening and Connector Roles

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Access to the right people and funding	2
In-person networking	1
Networking events	1
Events & fairs	0
Get together & cooperation with local teams	1
Networking structures	0
Outreach and networking across sectors	1
Reaching out and asking other organisations for help	3
Shared and neutral platform/direction	2
Official cross-ministry platforms	2
Data platform	2
Trained facilitators	1
We work in municipalities with one person who brings the network together	0
Bring all the people together ("whole system in the room")	0
Experts and stakeholders involving in technical project stages	1
Exchange of knowledge and field of work	2
Identifying like-minded individuals who can convince leadership	1
Lack of points of contact *(inverse, but enabling when addressed)*	2

4.4 Supportive Frameworks and Strategies

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Joint strategies	2
Joint cross-sectoral advocacy	0
More high-level frameworks calling for cross-sectoral collaboration	3
Shared policy frameworks	3
Defining collaboration at the strategy level	2
Multi sectors, coordination of actions and joint policies	1
Holistic approach in European initiatives	0
Deliberate leadership decision to cross over	2
Leadership	2

Leaders at high-level support the work	5
Being in the right moment politically and socially	0
Stronger recognition of need for cross-sectoral collaboration	1

*

4.5 Incentives and Embedded Structures

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Sustainable funding	2
Sustainable fundings	1
Long-term funding	3
Funding	3
Allocating cross-sectoral funding	2
Joint funding mechanisms	0
Transdisciplinary fundings	4
Monitise and incentivise collaborative projects	1
Reward collaborations	0
Reallocation of healthcare resources	0
Stakeholder assets (people, facilities, funding)	1
Prioritising space/time/resources in professional schedules	1
Willingness to collaborate	1
Collaborative mindset	0
Trust	0
Empowerment	1
Women empowerment	2
Enforce diversity in collaboration	0
Resilience	0
Asking for help	0
Openness to learn from each other	1
Being open-minded and seeking information	0

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Aligning with long-term health objectives

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Integrating physical activity into healthcare pathways, reallocation of healthcare resources towards prevention and health promotion	7
Integrate physical activity into healthcare system	3

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Champion intersectoral action through clear mandate, implementation strategy and funding	4
Set targets, milestones and implementation roadmap to reduce physical inactivity	0
Publish joint strategies on preventive health care	0
Streamline physical activity across policies and strengthen alignment amongst policy departments	1
Getting physical activity into the strategies of different sectors	1
Defined & increased funding needed	1
Provide funding to support cross-sector work	0
Allocate people and financial resources to intersectoral work	0
Cross-sectoral funding and measures	1
Funding mechanism favour cross-sector initiatives	1
Mandate collaborations in project funding calls	2
Funding criteria explicitly scoring cross-sector partnerships	1
Bonus for proposal scoring for cross-sectoral benefits	3
Funded collaboration across public-funded projects (e.g. Erasmus+)	2
Publicly fund networking	2
Formulate policy goals on intersectoral collaboration and reward successful implementation	2
Develop cross-sectoral standards	0
Importance of implementation	1
Set targets, milestones and implementation roadmap	0

5.2 Broadening the understanding of physical activity beyond sport

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Public awareness on healthy lifestyle	4
Widen the understanding what physical inactivity is about	2
Will increase politicians' knowledge about the role of physical activity for health	0
More holistic approach more generally	0
Embedding holistic approach to physical activity promotion at highest level	0
Explore physical literacy as a social innovation tool	3
Support wellbeing focus that matches with individual experiences	1
Integrating physical activity into healthcare pathways *(also structural)*	7
Integrate physical activity into healthcare system *(also structural)*	3
Enable healthcare providers to prescribe physical activity, linked to incentives	2
School programs physical activities	1

Space to new generations	0
Think out of the box	2
Language accessibility (English)	0
Publish a language guide	0
Make sure you present arguments that resonate with different sectors	1
Sport and physical activity input into other policy debates	2
Addressing underlying root causes	0

5.3 Embedding within institutional frameworks

Mentimeter contribution	Score
Leadership engagement	3
Leaders at high-level support the work *(implicit, echoed)*	3
Establish a shared vision	1
Clear communication channels	1
Set up cross-sectoral contact points around PA & healthy lifestyles	1
Create formal working groups (e.g. transport/mobility & health)	1
Advice on who to involve and how to contact them	0
Providing guide/checklist of what constitutes collaboration	0
Publish a language guide	0
Report and disseminate projects and results	3
Regular events to keep community engaged	0
Meaningful events & partnerships with local teams	0
Like this project, be more purposeful in engaging across sectors	0
Think of ways to move the conversation between stakeholders	1
Simultaneous development of trained people, places and programmes	2
Shared vision *(duplicate phrasing)*	1
Defined & increased funding needed *(institutional sustainability)*	1
Fund women-led or POC initiatives	0
Integrate gender equality into all public policies	1
Accountability: hold institutions accountable for discrimination	1
Stopping funding when empowerment is achieved	0
No interest from politicians, no support for us (problem statement)	0
Prioritise most important barriers and enablers	0