



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

North, J (2012) Further development of the gymnastics participant model. Project Report. British Gymnastics / Sport Coaching Innovations, Carnegie Faculty.

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/77/>

Document Version:

Monograph (Other)

---

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.



# **Further Development of the Gymnastics Participant Model**

**Report prepared by:**

**J North  
Sport Coaching Innovations  
Carnegie Faculty  
Leeds Metropolitan University**

**20 February 2012**

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to British Gymnastics for sponsoring this important work.

Thanks to all the BG officers, coaches, parents and gymnasts who took part in this research.

Thanks to Sport England for sharing the Active People data.

J North  
Sport Coaching Innovations  
Carnegie Faculty  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
20 February 2012

## Executive Summary

British Gymnastics (BG) has developed a participant development model (the Gymnast Pathway) that outlines the typical participant categories (segments) in the sport.

In April 2011 BG commissioned Leeds Metropolitan University to undertake a review and provide detailed descriptions of the different participant segments, not only in order to have a better understanding of the market but also to ensure the appropriate alignment of products/resources; and services in particular coaching.

BG required detailed descriptions for the predominantly recreational segments of 'Developing Participation' (non-competitive) and 'Sustaining Participation'.

The participant modelling approach used in this work suggests that age/stage, participants'/performers' reasons for initial and continued engagement are the crucial differentiating characteristics for defining participant segments. Other variables such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, although important, have not been used to define the segments.

The segments are used to identify and store important information - why gymnasts participate, where and with whom, what they want from the sport, why they choose to stay or leave, what can be done better to support them etc. This information can then be used to target the most appropriate messages, environments, activities, and workforce to meet the gymnasts' wants/needs.

Three main methods were used in the study:

- Reference to Underpinning Theory and Evidence on Participant Development
- A Review of Secondary Evidence Relating To Gymnastics
- Interviews with BG Officers, Coaches, Participants and Parents

For most interviewees in the study the main issue was reducing drop-out.

Though there is a very high level of interest in gymnastics amongst young children (gymnastics is one of the top participation sports for young children), by 8-9 years many are already dropping out, and by 16 years only 15% of total participants remain active.

This has serious implications for the profile of the sport, for membership income, and for attracting funding, for example, from Sport England in relation to adult participation targets. What are the issues underlying drop-out? What should be done to increase participation, keep gymnasts in the sport, and to increase the average age?

Evidence from the interviews with BG staff, coaches, gymnasts and parents identified some common themes:

- Gymnastics, it is argued, is too orientated towards performance and competition in specific disciplines
- Coaching has been primarily concerned with technical skill development, an instructional model, and a "command" style which has not worked well with young children/recreational gymnasts
- The sport is seen as being too serious, narrow, rigid ... there are few opportunities for fun/enjoyment
- Participants who win in competitions are encouraged, those who are less successful may be discarded in favour of the next 'batch' of competition hopefuls
- There are simply not enough options available for youngsters wanting to follow a more recreationally orientated pathway which extends into late childhood/early adulthood

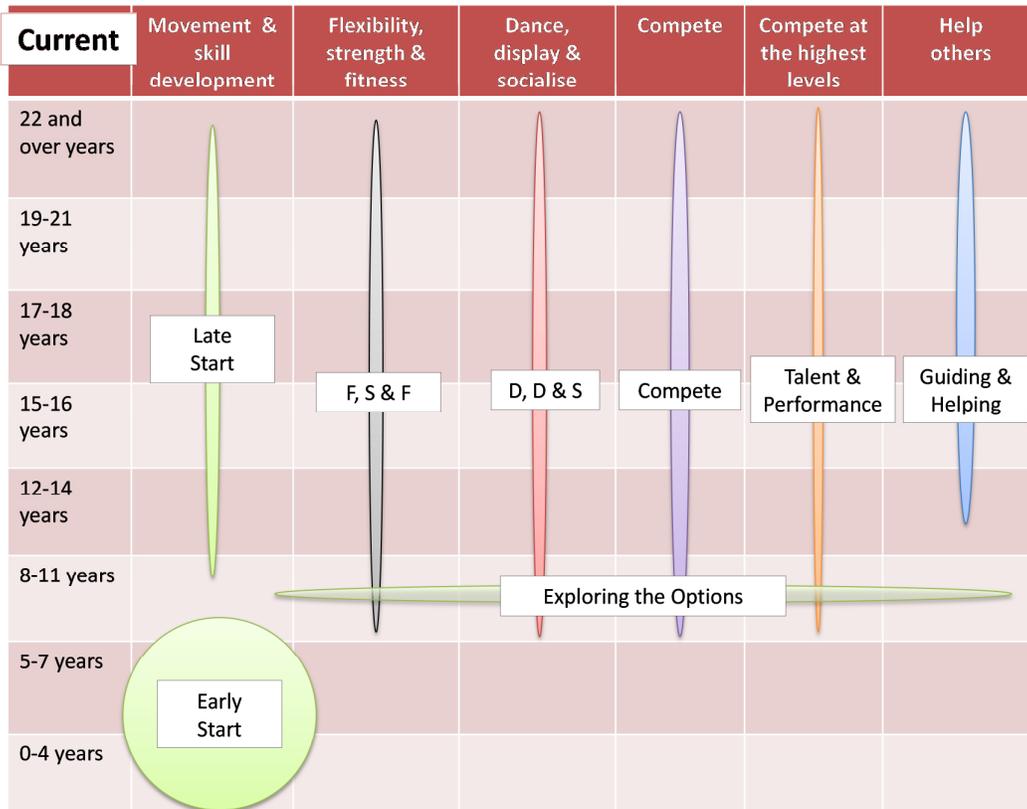
The research produced 8 defined age segments:

- 22 years and over
- 19-21 years
- 17-18 years
- 15-16 years
- 12-14 years
- 8-11 years
- 5-7 years
- 0-4 years

The following participant segment descriptions were identified through the research:

- Early start
- Exploring the options
- Late start
- Flexibility, strength and fitness
- Dance, display and socialise
- Compete
- Talent and performance
- Guiding and helping

**Chart: BG Participant Segments**



A number of reflections/recommendations emerged from the study:

- The sport has many benefits for children's physical, psychological and social development - which are recognised by the gymnasts and parents (i.e. the customers!)
- There is considerable demand – as evidenced by waiting lists/BG officer accounts – which would only increase if the quantity and quality of supply to children could be improved
- Though there are some age related physical and psychological constraints on participation in gymnastics, the sport has a sufficient range of 'product options' (disciplines, environments, activities) to cater for the needs of participants young and old, recreational and competitive
- There is considerable scope for keeping youngsters in the sport
- The main suggestion from this study is to increase the availability of sampling opportunities (disciplines, environments, activities) until at least 12 years, whilst still offering defined pathway provision for competition, talent and performance, fitness and strength, and display groups from possibly 6-7 years onwards
- This contrasts with the current position where there is often earlier specialisation in particular facets of gymnastics, and quite blurred pathway options for gymnasts after that with the competition structure looming large
- There are issues with provision at 5-7 years, and 8-9 years which have serious implications for longer term involvement in the sport
- Gymnastics is currently set-up as a sport with one main linear pathway – it needs to think more about non-linear entry and exit routes (i.e. thinking of gymnasts who might leave, but then come back), and a variety of product options to meet changing wants/needs
- There is certainly scope for increasing the involvement of boys, and adults – products such as free-style, fitness and strength groups, display teams hold considerable potential if the branding, facilities, environment, activities can be sorted
- Many of these activities have a 'street/urban' or 'adventure sport' feel which are very attractive to boys and young men (again the branding has to be right)
- Gymnastics providers need to fill the whole pathway – in many instances it is the pathway gaps which create the drop-out (they get bored/find it difficult to keep doing what they were doing)
- The branding/images and packaging of gymnastics in all its guises needs to be clearly thought through. The evidence suggests multiple products and multiple brand profiles targeted very specifically at particular groups

This research should be seen as part of a continuing process whereby the model and underpinning knowledge base are updated and refined by on-going research and market intelligence from officers on the ground.

To progress the work it is suggested that:

- There is critical scrutiny of the participant model, segments, and segment descriptions
- For each segment a clear service offer be developed which is clarified and communicated both nationally and at, for example, club level – so gymnasts know what opportunities are available to them
- The information is used to refine service provision around Gymnastics for All and to inform coach development and education opportunities
- Information provided by the model and segments is used to refine approaches to change management of gymnastics providers – clubs, coaches etc.

## The Project

In April 2011 British Gymnastics (BG) commissioned Leeds Metropolitan University to undertake further development work on their participant model.

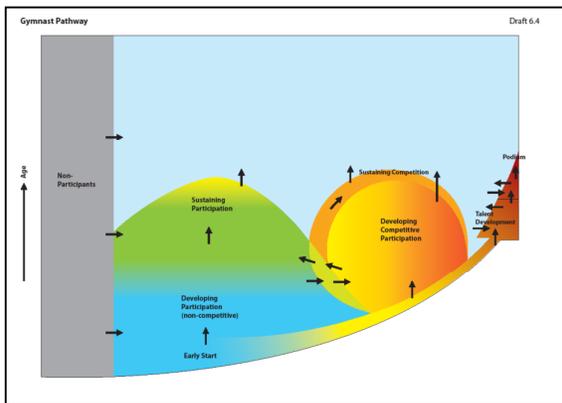
Participant modelling is a segmentation approach – based on an underpinning research literature (e.g. Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2009; Sports Coach UK, 2009), expert input, and new research work - which identifies distinctive ‘types’ of participants and performers based typically on their age/stage, and motivations for engaging in the sport e.g. to develop skills, to compete, to socialise (see North, 2011a&b).

The segments/types are used to identify and store important information - why gymnasts participate, where and with whom, what they want from the sport, why they choose to stay or leave, what can be done better to support them etc. This information can then be used to target the most appropriate messages, environments, activities, and workforce to meet the gymnasts’ wants/needs.

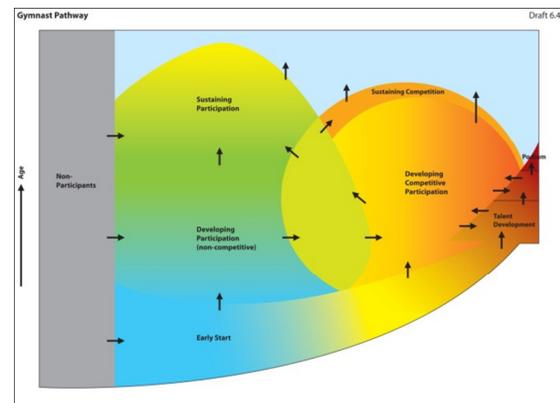
Ultimately, the purpose of the work is to better understand gymnastic participants and performers with a view to increasing and sustaining participation, and improving connectivity between pathways including talent development and high performance.

The work outlined in this report is the on-going refinement and expansion of existing work on the ‘Gymnast Pathway’:

### “Current”



### “Aspirational”



In many respects BG was one of the pioneering UK governing bodies using modelling approaches for strategic and operational change.

Though an excellent starting point, it is recognised that the ‘Pathway’ is lacking an evidential underpinning (it was based on the expertise and experience of BG officers), clarity around its definitional parameters (e.g. age/stage transition points), and in need of populating with segment information.

The work outlined in this reports seeks to draw on secondary evidence and new primary research with BG officers, coaches, gymnasts and parents to refine the model and to provide more detail about specific segments – notably in the recreational ‘developing’ and ‘sustaining participation’ pathways.

The work covers a range of possible uses – examination and validation of existing modelling work, examination and validation of existing strategic approaches in BG, more detailed market analysis, segmentation, product development and refinement, change management, implications for workforce etc.

The work can be seen as part of the on-going process of gathering market intelligence to inform strategic and operational planning within gymnastics.

## The Method

Three main methods were used in the study:

- Reference to Underpinning Theory and Evidence on Participant Development
- A Review of Secondary Evidence Relating To Gymnastics
- Interviews with BG Officers, Coaches, Participants and Parents

### Reference to Underpinning Theory and Evidence on Participant Development

- Participant centred approaches, participant modelling and participant and performer development are subject to increasing and on-going scrutiny in the research literature, in particular, research on child development, physiology, positive psychology, social psychology, sociology, specific work on talent development (see Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2009), and also social marketing (e.g. Hastings, 2007).
- This work provides the foundation principles and good practice ideas within which to situate the participant model for gymnastics. Detailed consideration and understanding of the work of Istvan Balyi, Jean Côté, Richard Bailey, and Angela Abbot, amongst others is an important facet of this work (see Bailey et al., 2010 for an overview).

### A Review of Secondary Evidence Relating To Gymnastics

- The following sources were used to build up a picture of the participant and performer base:

Author	Title	Date
British Gymnastics	Fact Pack	2010
British Gymnastics	Level 1 & 2 Assessment Sheets	Undated
British Gymnastics	LTAD Model – Physical, Mental, Cognitive and Emotional Development Through The Stages	Undated
British Gymnastics	Understanding Gymnastics for All & Foundations of Gymnastics	2011
CCPR	Survey of Sports Clubs 2009	2009
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	Taking Part Children Survey	2005-2008
Federation Internationale De Gymnastique	Age Group Development Program	Undated
Institute of Youth Sport	Examining the reasons why young gymnasts drop-out, or withdraw from, participation in recreational and competitive gymnastics	2010
Propeller	Review of Student Membership Proposition	2010
Sport England	Active People	Years 1-4
Sport England	Market Segmentation	
Sport England	Satisfaction Research	Year 2
Sports Coach UK	Sports Coaching in the UK	I, II, III
Transition UK	Gymnastics Coach Audit and Workforce Development Report	2009

- Note: Active People data was accessed with permission from Sport England; Taking Part data was accessed with permission from the UK Data Archive.

- One of the approaches used in the analysis of the secondary data was the combination of data sets – notably Taking Part and Active People - over a number of survey years. This provided the opportunity to look at data on children and adults together, as well as to bolster the sample for gymnastics.
- Quantitative research specialists would, perhaps, warn against this kind of data manipulation. These warnings are appropriate if the research is concerned with measuring small changes in participation over time. For example, small percentage decreases/increases in participation rates (e.g. -0.01%/+0.01%) every calendar year.
- The purpose of this initial study was not to measure small changes in participation (which is an issue for funders and subject to its own research problems), but rather to identify quantitative clues about the broad patterns in participation. This information, together with other data sources (e.g. other secondary information/primary research), is used to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying influences and structures in the sport, for example, at what age do children broadly start to drop-out of the sport and why.
- In this context the adding, comparison and triangulation of data sets is entirely appropriate (Pawson, 2006).
- All secondary data was analysed in SPSS v.19.

### **Interviews with BG Officers, Coaches, Participants and Parents**

Interviews were undertaken with 50 BG officers, coaches, participants and parents at BG offices and four gymnastics clubs. Interviews were conducted mainly face-to-face and some by telephone. Face-to-face interviews were recorded; extensive notes were made on telephone interviews. The interviews lasted from 5 minutes (8 year old child with parent) to 2.30 hours (BG officer).

- The interviews were used in two ways:
- (1) Interviewees were asked to describe in detail the participants and performers they worked closely with. Participants were asked to describe their own experiences. This data was then used to inductively sketch out segments by key issues such as age, participants' reasons for engagement in the sport, gender etc.
- (2) The draft segments and segment descriptions were presented to interviewees for detailed scrutiny. These segments were then modified 'adaptively' to take account of the comments and new evidence presented.
- The interviews with coaches, participants and players involved questions such as 'why are you involved in gymnastics', 'when did you start', 'what do you like', 'what don't you like' etc.
- Analysis was undertaken using a process of theoretical memos, and thematic analysis similar to the process outlined by Layder (1998).

### **Limitations**

- The research involved a good balance of gymnastics experts, coaches, participants of all ages, and parents.
- Thus, a range of perspectives was received on the key age/stages, transition points, and motivations for engagement in the sport.
- However, the research involved interviews with only 40 coaches, participants and parents using – in the main - a semi-structured interview approach. Further extensive research could be conducted with coaches and participants to firm-up on the segments and the segment descriptions.
- It is also important to note that though there will be some stability in the structures of participation, there will also be changes, as fashions and resources come and go. On-going market intelligence is required to monitor change, and to increasingly improve/refine specific segment knowledge.

## A Quantitative Overview of Gymnastics

### Overall Numbers Participating in Gymnastics

Before presenting data on the overall numbers of participants and performers regularly participating in gymnastics it is important to make a number of issues clear.

- The following figures are derived from multiple data sets over a period 2005 to 2010 – mainly Taking Part Children and Active People
- They are not intended as definitive measurements of participation in the sport and are not seen as a replacement or challenge to Active People
- They are presented to show the broad structural patterns of participation in the sport and should be interpreted in this way
- The figures are weighted using the latest Office for National Statistics population data (2010 mid-year estimates) and thus may appear slightly higher than recently reported results (e.g. Sport England Active People results). For example, using the adult participation 1\*30 mins per week measure (at a fairly consistent 0.12%) the 2009 population figures is 50,500; the 2010 equivalent is 60,800 because of population growth in the UK
- Consideration also has to be given to the compulsory provision of gymnastics as part of the National Curriculum in schools for children aged 5 to 11 years. It is estimated that about 25% of children have experienced gymnastics in the last year as a result of school and club provision (based on Sports Coaching in the UK data). There are some difficulties disentangling school and non-school provision and maintaining consistency over the age ranges covered.

#### Participation in Last 12 Months

- UK participants (children and adults aged 5-90 years) – **c2.36 million including schools provision** (c4%) (Based on Sports Coaching in the UK series and Taking Part)
- UK children (aged 5-15 years) – **c1.94 million including schools provision** (c25% of 5-15 year olds) (Sports Coaching in the UK series)
- UK adults (aged 16 years and over) – **420,000** (0.8%) (3 year average based on Taking Part and Sports Coaching in the UK series)

#### Participation in Last 4 Weeks

- UK participants (children and adults aged 5-90 years) – **1.62 million including schools provision** (2.8%) (3 year average based on Active People, Taking Part series and BG Membership Data)
- UK participants (children and adults aged 1-90 years) – **1.02 million excluding schools provision** (1.7%) (3 year average based on Active People, Taking Part series and BG Membership Data)
- UK children (aged 5-15 years) – **1.53 million including schools provision** (19.8%) (3 year average based on Taking Part series and BG Membership Data)
- UK children (aged 1-15 years) – **867,800 excluding schools provision** (8%) (3 year average based on Active People, Taking Part series and BG Membership Data)
- UK adults (aged 16 years and over) – **86,100** (0.17%) (3 year average based on Active People)

#### Participation in the Last Week

- UK participants (children and adults aged 5-90 years) – **727,300 excluding school provision** (1.2%) (3 year average based on Active People, Taking Part and Sports Coaching in the UK series)
- UK children (aged 5 – 15 years) – **666,500 excluding school provision** (c1.5%) (based on Taking Part and Sports Coaching in the UK series and BG Membership Data)
- English adults (aged 16 years and over) - **60,800** (c0.12%) (3 year average based on Active People)

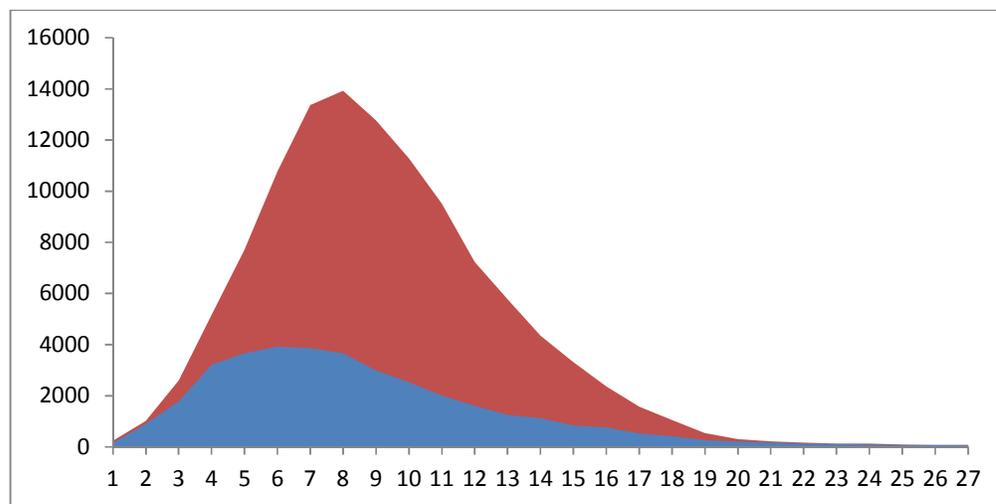
The above data suggests the following:

- There is high level of exposure to gymnastics for children – perhaps up to 2 million children every year – a good deal of which is through schools provision
- There is also a high level of regular engagement by children in out of school gymnastics – informal, local authority provision, clubs and private providers – perhaps about 867,800 children in the last 4 weeks
- Competition is a minority activity for children currently
- Adult gymnastics is currently a minority activity.

## Gender

- Survey data and BG registration data consistently highlights the female domination of gymnastics
- Overall, the figures suggest that there are about **3 females for every 1 male**
- There are similar levels of participation in younger age groups (1-5 years) for boys and girls, however, male participation peaks at 6 years while female participation grows substantially.

**Chart: British Gymnastics Members by Gender (Red=females; Blues=males) and Age**



## Ethnicity

- In 2011 it was estimated that 87% of the English population was white, and 13% 'non-white' (Office for National Statistics)
- Data from Taking Part 2006-2008 suggests that 85% of gymnasts aged 11-15 years engaged in out of school gymnastics in the last 4 weeks were white, and 15% non-white
- Data from Active People 2-4 suggests that 90% of adult gymnasts aged 16 years and over engaged in gymnastics in the last 4 weeks were white, and 10% non-white
- Thus Black and Ethnic Minority representation in gymnastics is good for children, but there is a slight under-representation for adults
- The issue appears to be retaining minority groups into adulthood.

## Socio-economic Group

- Unfortunately there is no survey data on socio-economic group for children participants
- However, there is likely to be some similarity with adult participation data
- Adult participation in gymnastics is typical of most sports – there is an overrepresentation of gymnasts in higher socio-economic groups and an underrepresentation in the lower groups
- Nearly half of adult gymnasts (47%) are in NS-Sec 1 ‘Managerial and Professional’ compared to 37% of the population
- There is an underrepresentation of individuals in NS-Sec 4 – ‘Lower supervisor, semi routine, routine, never worked and long term unemployed’ (a third (33%) compared to an England average of 41% = -8%)

**Table: Distribution of Adult Gymnasts (16 years and over) by NS Sec in England (Participation in Last 4 weeks; Active People 2, 3 and 4)**

NS – Sec	Population	%	Players	%	Diff
Managerial and Professional	15,663,209	37	28,542	47	10
Intermediate	5,221,070	12	6,659	11	-1
Small employers and own account	3,831,591	9	5,507	9	0
Lower supervisor, semi routine, routine, never worked and long-term unemployed	17,389,530	41	20,092	33	-8
England	42,105,400	100	60,800	100	-

## Segmentation and the Participant Model

The following issues are important in relation to participant and performer engagement in gymnastics:

- Discipline
- Age/Stage
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Socio-economic group
- Region

We need to find a method for understanding and working with participants and performers which moves beyond single variable approaches (e.g. age only, gender only etc.), provides the greatest explanatory capacity in terms how individuals engage in the sport, but is simple enough to operationalise.

A crucial consideration, therefore, is determining the factors that have the most influence on how participants and performers engage with the sport. That is, those factors which account for the greatest variation in how individuals take-up and become committed to gymnastics, what they want and need from the sport, and how the sport could be packaged and provided to meet their needs – notably: products, environments, workforce including coaching and leadership.

The participant modelling approach used in the gymnastics work draws heavily on the templates developed by Sports Coach UK (North, 2009; Sports Coach UK, 2009) and refined through work in canoeing (North, 2011a) and rugby league (North, 2011b). This work suggests that age/stage, participants’/performers’ reasons for initial and continued engagement are the crucial differentiating characteristics.

No automatic assumption was made that age/stage and reasons for engagement would provide the frame for the segmentation approach. However, after a careful consideration of the evidence from the study it is proposed, that this is the approach used – though the other factors notably gender are also important.

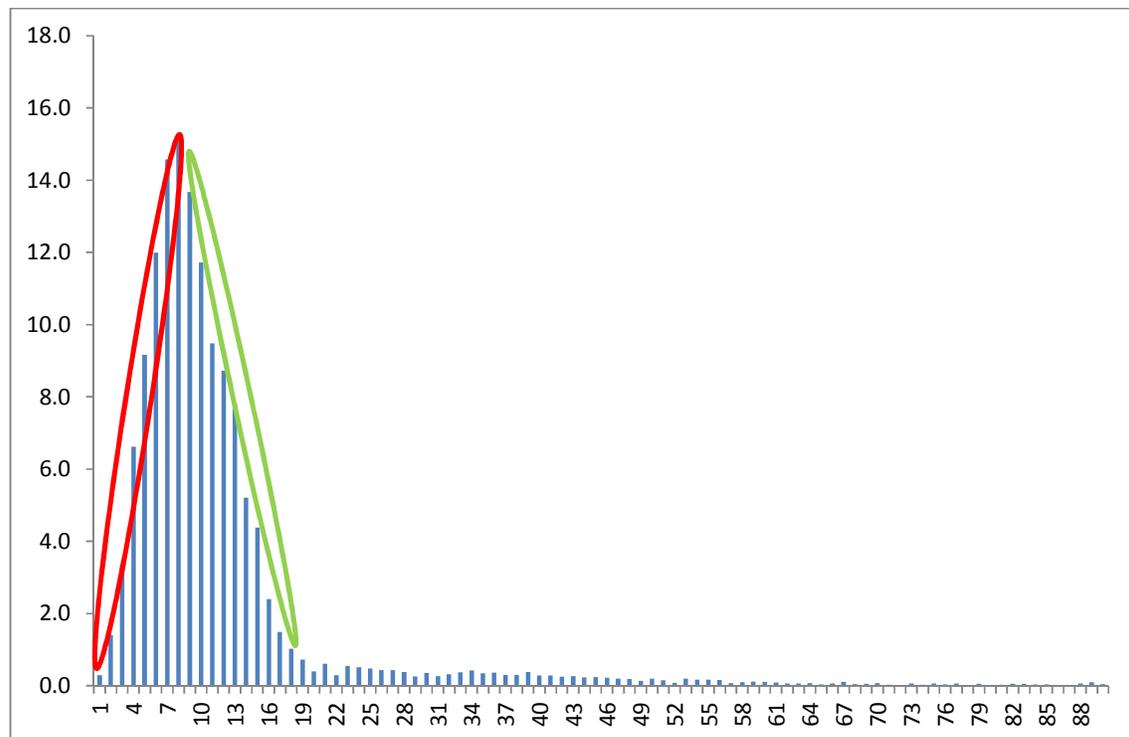
## Age/Stage

Age/stage is a common controlling variable in emerging participant models (e.g. Balyi, Côté et al., Bailey et al., Sports Coach UK).

The research literature is increasingly converging around the notion that children, young people, adults and older adults require different introductory and on-going experiences for sports, and require different environments and activities to be established to meet their wants/needs.

In gymnastics there is a very clear and to some extent concerning relationship with age particularly if the priority is to extend participation beyond 8 years and up into the Sport England target market (e.g. 16 years and over). This relationship is illustrated by data from general population surveys and BG membership data.

**Chart: % Participation in Gymnastics in the Last 4 Weeks by Age (Taking Part and Active People)**

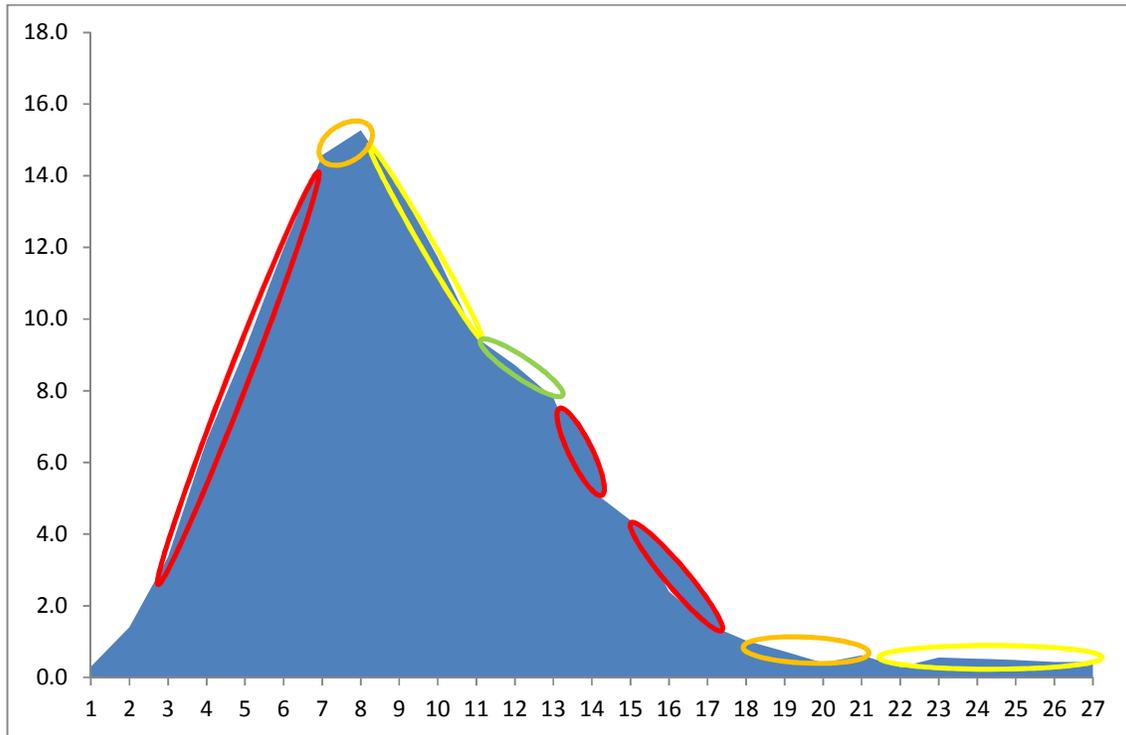


\*\* Significant increase in % participation from the very early years to about 7-8 years

\*\* Significant drop-off in % participation from 8-9 years onwards

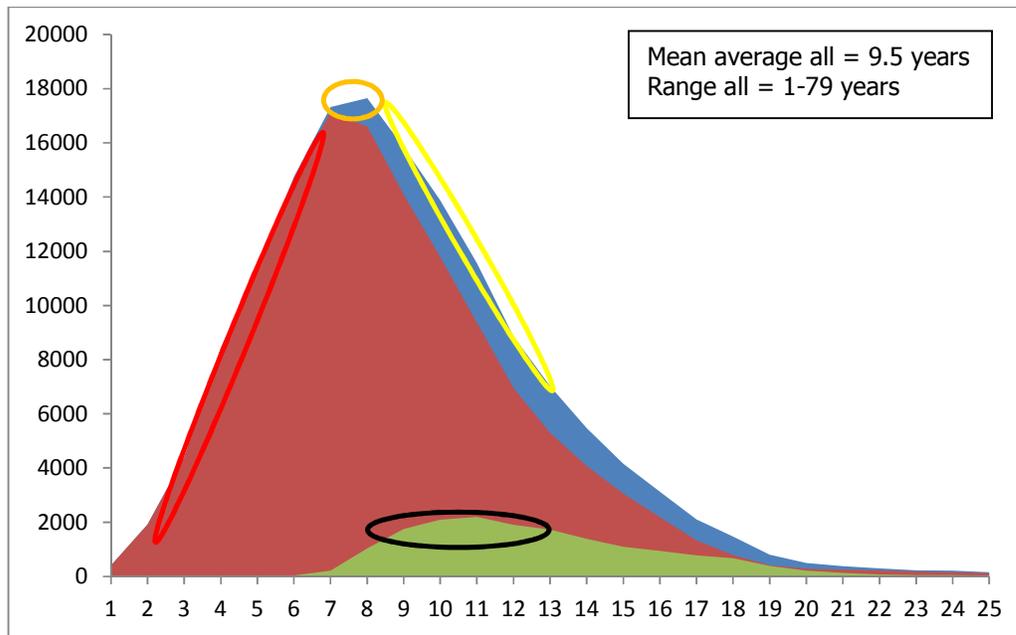
Note: this dataset provides coverage of participation levels in the general population. In other words these data provide evidence of all gymnastics participation irrespective of whether it is in schools, clubs or informally.

**Chart: % Participation in Gymnastics in the Last 4 Weeks by Age (Age Range 1-27 years)  
(Taking Part and Active People)**



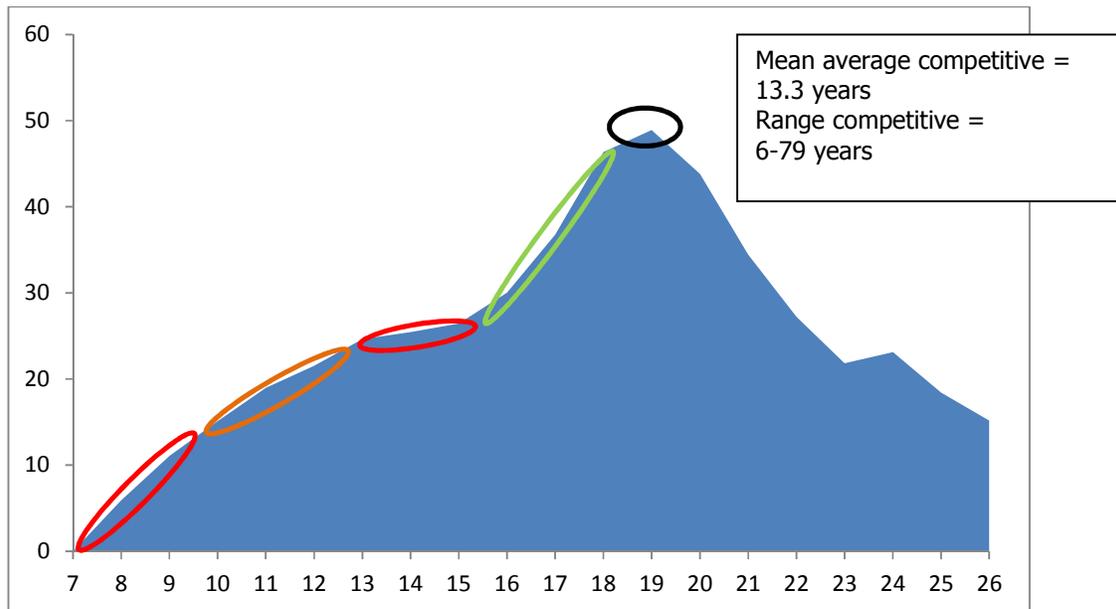
- \*\* Significant increase in participation from 3 to 7 years
- \*\* Participation plateaux at about 7-8 years
- \*\* Significant and sharp drop-off from 8-9 to 11 years
- \*\* Swallowing of drop-off from 12 and 13 years
- \*\* Another sharp decline at 14 years, from 16 – 17 years.
- \*\* Participation plateaux in university years
- \*\* Very low level plateaux post university years

**Chart: Number of BG Members by Age (Blue=all; Red=recreational; Green=competitive)**



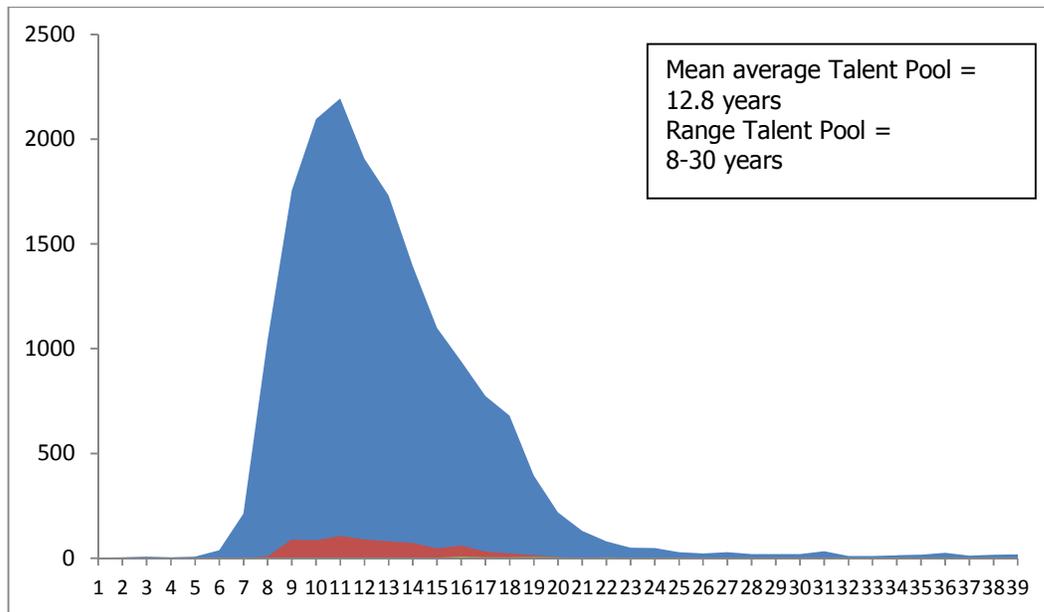
- \*\* Significant increase in recreational participation from 3 to 7 years
- \*\* Recreational participation starts to fall at 7-8 years; overall participation increases as some recreational participants move into competition
- \*\* Significant and sharp drop-off from 8-9 to 11 years
- \*\* Competition peaks at 11 years but continues to have significant influence on all participation 9 years onwards

**Chart: % of Total BG Members Registered for Competition by Age**



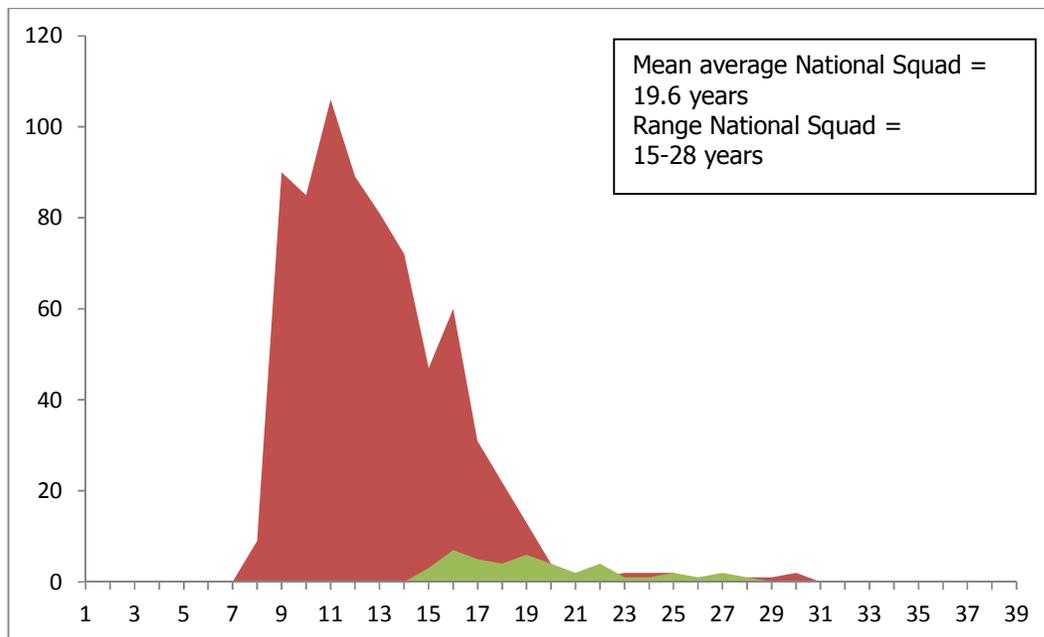
- \*\* Initial steep incline into competition 7-9 years
- \*\* Slower increase between 10-13, and 14 to 16 years
- \*\* Sharp increase 17-19 years
- \*\* Competition peak - 19 years

**Chart: Number of Competitive Gymnastics – Overall (Blue) and Talent Pool (Red) (BG Membership Data)**



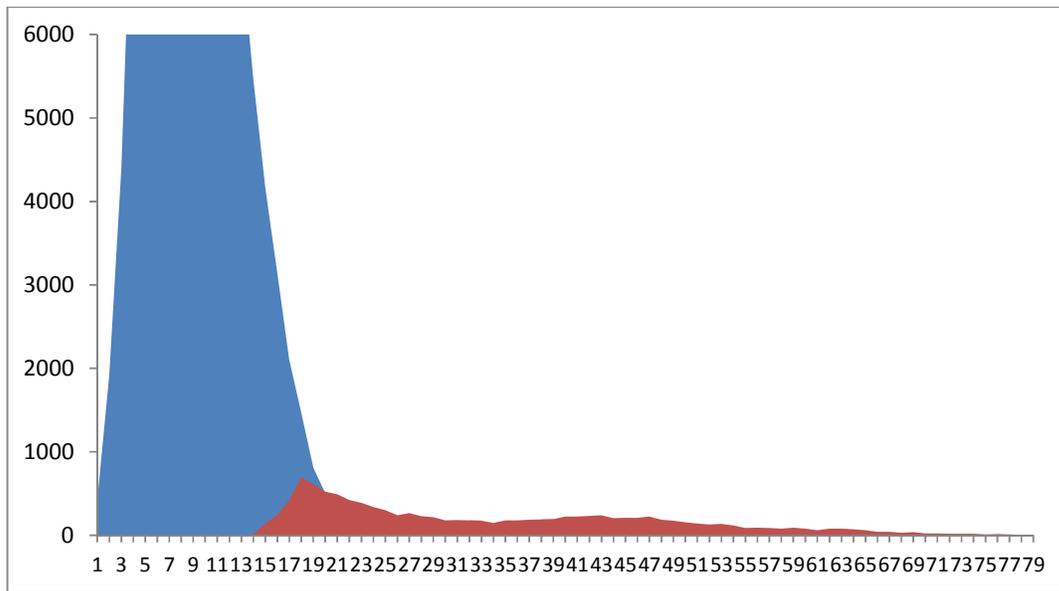
- Talent pool is only small proportion of overall competitive activity (c4%)

**Chart: Number of Competitive Gymnasts – Talent Pool (Red) National Squad Olympic Disciplines (Green) (BG Management Data)**



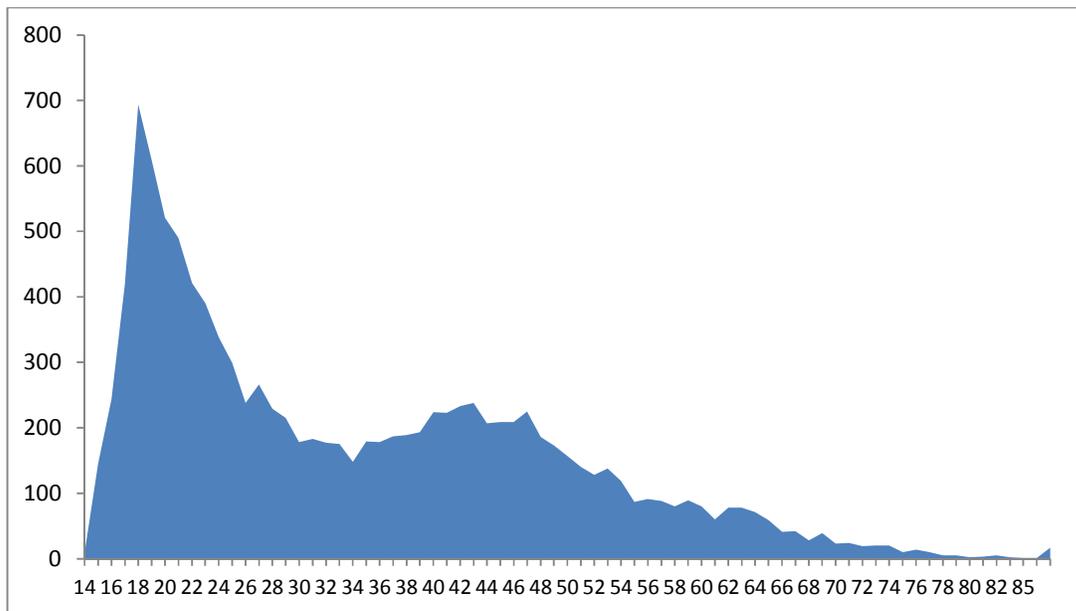
- National squad 6% of talent pool, and 0.2% of all competitive gymnasts

**Chart: BG Members (Blue- cut-off) and BG Registered Coaches with Current Membership (Red)**



- As participation declines in gymnastics an increasing proportion move into coaching around the mid to late teens

**Chart: BG Registered Coaches with Current Membership**



- There are two coaching peaks – late teens (18 years) and mid-40s
- Most coaches have retired by their mid-50s
- Note: the chart is based on a sample of 11,317 BG registered coaches with current membership out of possible 50-75,000 ‘practicing gymnastics coaches’ (North, 2009; Sports Coach UK, 2011).

## Qualitative Data on Age Segments

The following information on the characteristics, wants and needs of participants – organised by age – was gathered from the qualitative interviews with BG officers, coaches, gymnasts and parents.

The oldest groups are at the top:

Age	Description
22 years and over	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Older gymnasts may be reluctant to engage in “scary” moves/equipment</li> <li>Fitness and socialising more important to this age group (outside high performance)</li> <li>Interested in meeting people and having fun</li> <li>Gymnasts disappear from the sport to education, work, children with associated distractions/time pressures</li> <li>“21 year olds want to go out partying and clubbing”</li> <li>But then may come back with children later... (but often don’t re-engage with the sport)</li> <li>High performance gymnasts peaking early to mid-20s.</li> </ul>
19-21 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some gymnasts may come back to the sport through university clubs</li> <li>Some university students who have not participated in the sport before may give the sport a try</li> <li>Much more emphasis on social side of participation</li> <li>High performance gymnasts starting to perform at the highest level</li> </ul>
17-18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Looking for an increased degree of control over sporting and coached environment compared to last stage – relationship with coach more friend/mentor</li> <li>As participants they are much more self-organised from this age onwards – they will set-up their own display groups, for example</li> <li>Much more emphasis on social side of participation</li> <li>Notable conflicts with education and work at this age</li> <li>Problems committing to every session?</li> <li>Many gymnasts leave clubs to go to university</li> <li>Start of peak competitive ages</li> </ul>
15-16 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physically, psychologically, emotionally and socially much more developed</li> <li>The personalities are really starting to form which leads to clearer ideas about their wants and needs</li> <li>There are strong pressures at this age to leave the sport – exams, working opportunities</li> <li>“If they’ve not made it, and have not left, they do want to learn skills, but they are mainly there to have a catch up and a chat. If they miss their turn they don’t mind because there is more time for talking ... as a coach you have to work hard to get them to see the outcomes of the task”</li> <li>“They are mainly there to chat and have fun”</li> <li>Much more emphasis on social side of participation</li> <li>The balance between coach directed and participant directed extends one stage further in this age group. These gymnasts need to be given a big say in the way the sport is set-up and delivered “The coach must say ‘you tell me what you want, and I will do my best to deliver this””</li> <li>The gymnasts engaged in the sport at this age know what they want and can be very focused on their goals</li> <li>“As a coach you’ve really got to understand why they want to be there ... and your engagement and motivation has to go up another level”</li> <li>The gymnasts need to be aware of the full range of possible options – skill development, competition, strength and fitness, festivals and displays, leadership and coaching etc.</li> <li>These options need to be presented at the right time for the gymnast before they have even considered leaving the sport</li> <li>The coach then needs to facilitate these opportunities to meet the gymnasts wants/needs</li> <li>For example, if a group wants to enter a festival – they will need time to train, access to a coach and so on</li> <li>If they want to take part in competition it’s about making sure that competition is available locally, regionally, nationally and providing a coach to facilitate this.</li> <li>If they want to go into coaching – is this pathway open, is there a mentor?</li> <li>“The coach needs to have much more personal 1:1 relationship with the gymnast ... you need to be able to know them to engage them”</li> <li>Many gymnasts think about becoming, or start to become, coaches at this age/stage. They’ve been in the sport a long time, they’re interested, they want to help (“about 20% take this route”)</li> <li>The older gymnasts would often help the younger participants</li> <li>Festivals and displays are helping to keep this age group in the sport</li> </ul>
12-14 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changes associated with sexual maturity start to emerge from 12 years (sometimes earlier) – physical, psychological etc.</li> <li>Physical changes, centre of gravity changes – this may have implications for executing skills and injury</li> <li>Many gymnasts in this age group report feeling scared about moves they were previously</li> </ul>

	<p>comfortable with (see IYS, 2010:25)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gymnasts of this age (both boys and girls) may become much more self-conscious, for example, about performing, or about the clothing (leotards/white shorts)</li> <li>• Many girls leave at this age (both recreational and competitive/performance pathways) because they cannot cope with physical/psychological changes and the demands of the sport</li> <li>• Older, more independent, making own decisions, more adult – though there is still a significant role for the coach</li> <li>• Some may be ‘getting to that age’ – increased moodiness, stubbornness historically associated with the slightly older teenage years</li> <li>• From this age they may also be more inclined to socialise and chat with the older gymnasts and talk to the coaches “in an adult fashion”</li> <li>• They like to sit on the safety mat and talk about “what boys are coming to final session ... it’s not so much about gymnastics anymore I don’t think”</li> <li>• They can be difficult for the coach to manage – an appropriate balance needs to be struck between giving the gymnasts space to be young teenagers and keeping the gymnasts focused on the sessions</li> <li>• “The club becomes a family ... some will stay for hours even though their sessions have been and gone”</li> <li>• The social pressures escalate considerably at this age – parties, over-night stays, boyfriends and girlfriends – “if the gymnasts are not careful they can be excluded from the party scene because they’re concentrating on their gym ... it can be a lonely path in school”</li> <li>• If one gymnast leaves, then others may leave quickly afterwards because of friendship ties</li> <li>• The coach needs to be sensitive to the balance between involvement in gymnastics and these wider social changes – “[they should ] be a young person, but remember the discipline of gymnastics”</li> <li>• Coaches need to keep an eye on the number of hours spent at the club</li> <li>• Kids move to secondary school at 11-12 and an increasing array of alternative offers</li> <li>• Both boys and girls go to secondary school at this age and the transition may lead to drop-out. For example, the boys may get taunted for doing gymnastics from other boys in their school</li> <li>• “When they get to high school some people change so much ... there’s cliques, competition, they start gossiping, and talking about each other”</li> <li>• There appears to be more peer pressure when they move to senior school</li> <li>• School friends can have a significant influence on whether a gymnast continues – “why are you doing gymnastics”. This can be particularly acute in the first 1-2 years of secondary school (years 7&amp;8) and “then it settles down a bit”</li> <li>• Youngsters in recreational pathways may be more vulnerable to leave the sport than competitive gymnasts “the recreational gymnasts are there to have fun, and going to parties maybe more fun”</li> <li>• Many youngsters at this age start to show an interest in other forms of engagement in the sport – leadership (‘helping the youngsters’), coaching, judging, events, publicity/promotion, health and welfare, admin – using Leadership Academies</li> <li>• In IYS (2010) research ‘lack of time’ become an issue at this age which influences drop-out</li> <li>• At 14 years they are normally emerging from sexual change – if gymnastics has kept them involved at this stage it is usually a positive sign</li> <li>• “Very few 13-14-15 years olds (outside performance pathway) want to compete ... often because they are so much bigger than the rest of the kids who compete. They feel they stick out like a sore thumb” [Note: this comment was mentioned quite frequently in the interviews]</li> <li>• “The 13 year olds were just stopping, there was nothing for them beyond competition, there were no role models”</li> <li>• Display/floor based work becomes more desirable at this age (than apparatus based work)</li> <li>• Many of the girls – love the dancing/display side of gymnastics</li> <li>• From 13 onwards the gymnasts need to be aware of the full range of possible options – skill development, competition, strength and fitness, festivals and displays, leadership and coaching etc. (though they might not act on these options until later, until they are ready)</li> <li>• These options need to be presented at the right time for the gymnast before they have even considered leaving the sport</li> <li>• The coach then needs to facilitate these opportunities to meet the gymnasts wants/needs</li> <li>• For example, if a group wants to enter a festival – they will need time to train, access to a coach and so on</li> <li>• If they want to take part in competition it’s making sure that competition is available locally, regionally, nationally and providing a coach to facilitate this</li> <li>• If they want to go into coaching – is this pathway open, is there a mentor</li> <li>• Traditional coaching approaches may alienate this group – according to the IYS (2010) research one quarter (25%) of the sample drop-out because they ‘didn’t like the coach’</li> </ul>
8-11 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility, strength and skills continue to build</li> <li>• At 8 many youngsters start to become more self-aware</li> <li>• From 10/11 they become much more self-conscious</li> <li>• For example, they may become conscious of their own ability - they start to know their body and what it can and can’t do, they start to be aware of what they might look like</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are less influenced by parents and more likely to question, and be able to articulate what they like/dislike about the sport, the coach; what they do and don't want to do</li> <li>• They may start to get bored easily – because they are constrained by their own physical development, and that coach is not providing the right kind of environment “this is boring, why are we doing this”, “this is not challenging me”</li> <li>• “At year 6 (age 10/11) loads of people in our school stopped doing sport, saying it was boring”</li> <li>• In the IYS (2010) research ‘boredom’ peaks at 11-12 years</li> <li>• They start to become more aware of the options open to them - “they start to question whether gymnastics is the sport for them ... is it time to get a new interest, move to another sport”</li> <li>• 8-11 year olds will want much more involvement in what goes on in sessions</li> <li>• Those who have been in gymnastics for a number of years and have progressed appropriately will need the additional challenge – skills, choreography, coaching</li> <li>• Many children drop-out because they are uncomfortable with the level of training in competition/performance pathway, the pressures and exposure of competition, or because recreational opportunities are not signposted or, notably, available</li> <li>• In the absence of non-competitive opportunities, the less extrovert, showy offy, unconfident, nervous participants may leave the sport</li> <li>• If they do not have the “natural ability” – they start to drop-out at this age (if the provision isn't right); they are not keeping up with peers, for example, in achieving awards, or if selected for development squad, they are finding it hard to progress and to achieve what they want. There can be a confidence crisis at this age</li> <li>• By 10 years the options available to youngster in terms of recreational and competitive (including performance) gymnastics will be very clear</li> <li>• The older kids in this age group could be encouraged to provide feedback to each other on their moves – this encourages a form of critical reflection amongst the gymnasts, but also recognises that they are getting older and can be given more responsibility</li> <li>• From 10/11 onwards they start wanting to be treated more like an adult...</li> <li>• Some children (especially those who are performing well) may be participating in many different sports at this age - gymnastics, dance, swimming, athletics</li> <li>• Around 9-10 years many make a decision about which sport they intend to pursue – this may lead to commitment to gymnastics, or drop-out. Thus drop-out from gymnastics could be seen in two ways – as a rejection of gymnastics, but also the positive endorsement of other sports</li> <li>• Some gymnasts may drop-out due to social pressures, for example, from school friends</li> <li>• Many boys drop-out at this age because, for example, they choose to play football</li> <li>• Many girls start to get very chatty and sociable about 11 years and upwards. They may show less interest in the gymnastics and more on ‘pop stars’. This can be difficult for the coach to manage in terms of keeping the gymnasts focused on the sessions.</li> </ul>
5-7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant variation in physical size at 5; some seem like 3; some seem like 8</li> <li>• Significant variation in 5 year olds in terms of movement development – depending on abilities and whether they have done some pre-school gymnastics or not</li> <li>• Significant variation in psychological skills at 5 - some are confident and listen; some lack attention span</li> <li>• Those who are just starting school 4-5 years find it much harder to concentrate, than those who have experienced some schooling - e.g. late 5 to 6 years old</li> <li>• At 5-7 years “the parents are still doing a lot of thinking for them”</li> <li>• At 5 years kids are usually brought by parents (it is not the child's idea)</li> <li>• At 5-6 years they need to be engaged (or they start looking for mum, running around, hitting each other)</li> <li>• 5-6 years olds love the structure/repetition – they like to know what they're going to be doing/who is going to be coaching them; this starts to change around 7-8 years.</li> <li>• In terms of building friendships - at 5 they can often ignore each other; they may start making friends in the group when they're about 6/7 years</li> <li>• At 5-6 years they will not challenge the content of the session – but will be able to describe what they do and don't like in sessions</li> <li>• 6 and 7 year olds are more likely to tell their parents what they want to do (but it varies)</li> <li>• At 5-6 the kids will love the coach to use imagery/communications/language which ‘enters their head space’ e.g. pretending to be zoo animals or making a pizza when warming up</li> <li>• At 6-7 years the kids may start to be a little more discerning about how the coach uses imagery/communication – they may not ‘suspend disbelief’ so easily</li> <li>• Other kids at school may be involved and youngsters want to be with their friends</li> <li>• Anywhere between 4-7 years kids might be spotted for ‘development squads’ (on high performance pathway) – if they show appropriate balance, strength, coordination, listening skills; they are training towards ‘competition level’ (county, regional, and national) not a recreational pathway.</li> </ul>
0-4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children physically small</li> <li>• Parents strongly involved</li> <li>• Gymnasts have a low level of awareness of why they are there – they just want the fun</li> <li>• Pre-school</li> <li>• Parents may also want to exercise/socialise</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children from 3 years and onwards may become more independent from their parents</li></ul>
--	--

### Defining the Age Categories

The general population (Taking Part and Active People) and the BG membership data provide some very useful information on the broad patterns underpinning gymnastics participation and performance.

The value of this information is increased significantly if it's triangulated with the qualitative evidence present above to identify the individual and structural forces underpinning these broad patterns so that we have an understanding of why (for what reasons) individuals/groups do/do not engage in the sport. For example, why there is significant drop-out from the sport after 8 years of age. If we know the 'how' and 'why', we can put in place changes to make improvements to achieve outcomes.

**Important note:** Before presenting information on the age/stage segments it is important to note that chronological age presents significant challenges for segmentation approaches. There are significant differences between individuals of the same age, and the age segments should be seen as indicative only. In other words, they provide information about particular 'types' of individuals which should then be carefully applied by policy makers and coaches sensitive to the individual and context. This information is not concrete and should not be over-interpreted/applied.

## The Age Segments

The wider literature on participant development, the secondary data and expert opinion in gymnastics, and the primary research with coaches, parents and participants, supports eight age segments:

<b>Age Segment</b>	<b>Age Segment Descriptions</b>
22 years and over	<u>The world of work</u> Highly informal Fitness, socialising and fun Distractions of work and family
19-21 years	<u>University years</u> Coming back to the sport; trying something new Informal, social and fun
17-18 years	<u>Education and work II</u> Greater control over the sporting environment Coaching Social and fun
15-16 years	<u>Education and work I</u> Exploring the options they want Starting to coach Chatting and socialising
12-14 years	<u>All change – mind, body, school and social</u> Physical change Old moves become scary Increased awareness of self and others Striving for independence, social pressures, parties
8-11 years	Stronger Ready for skills Making friends Increasing levels of self-consciousness Awareness of relative ability The sport becomes difficult Starting to get bored
5-7 years	Physically small (though varied) Parents to begin with Like structure, familiarity, but with opportunities to play, to have fun Silly language and games Awareness of likes/dislikes
0-4 years	Very small Parents and bonding Have fun, explore

### Notes:

Many providers/clubs used similar age categories though they tended to collapse some of them together.

For example, 0-4 "Gym Tots", 5-11, 12-15, 16 and over...

One coach suggested that in her club – a display group – there were no significant changes between 15-18 years.

A decision was made to capture all gymnastics activity over the age of 22 years in one segment.

## Reasons for Initial and Continued Engagement in Gymnastics

The reasons/motivations why individuals engage in gymnastics – either initially or over the longer term - is also a common feature in emerging participant models (e.g. Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2009).

Common reasons/motivations are generally identified as ‘beginning’, ‘participating recreationally’, ‘participating for performance’, and for ‘high performance/elite’ (e.g. North, 2009) . (Note: there is, however, an extensive literature on participants’ engagement (motivations/adherence) with sport which is generally not mentioned in connection with modelling).

Although these categories have been used, and continue to have considerable currency in sports development, they remain rather elusive, apparently based on some non-specific or taken for granted assumptions about how and why individuals engage in sport.

Existing participant models have also not generally distinguished between reasons for engagement within particular sports or sporting environments, and the desirable characteristics of these environments (either determined by the wants/needs of the participant, or paternally by system builders). Both have rather bluntly been covered by the term ‘capability’ (Sports Coach UK, 2009).

Participants’ reasons/motivations for engaging in sport are influenced by a complex mix of physical, psychological and sociological factors, for example, they feel physically able to participate (physical); they wish to experience and enjoy a particular activity e.g. to get fit, to be part of a community etc. (psychological); there are appropriate opportunities for this engagement (social) (North, 2007).

The characteristics of the sporting environment are also conditioned by physical, psychological and sociological factors – but are much more grounded in the activity and environment itself, for example, the activity is appropriate to the participant’s physical characteristics, the activity has the right level of psychological challenge, and there are appropriate social support structures/systems in place. The benchmarking of these characteristics against particular outcomes might be referred to as ‘capabilities’. ‘Capabilities’ assumes a captive audience; equal if not more attention should be focused on setting up environments to attract individuals into sports.

One of the key questions in the research was ‘why do individuals engage in Gymnastics?’

Previous research has addressed this issue (Institute of Youth Sport, 2010) and the following factors were identified:

- Improved strength/fitness
- Fun/Enjoyment
- Social
- Good exercise
- Develop new skills
- Improved balance/coordination
- Improved discipline
- Improved confidence
- Like competition
- Parental involvement

These are very similar to the factors identified in the current research through qualitative interviews with BG officers, coaches, parents and gymnasts (next page):

**Table: Reasons for Initial and Continued Engagement in Gymnastics**

<p>To develop movement skills and competence</p>	<p>The ABCs (agility, balance, coordination)  Fundamental movement skills (locomotor, stability, manipulative)  Flexibility, strength and body control are essential ingredients in gymnastics  To learn the moves – the flips, the tricks!  Participants and notably performers from other sports may use gymnastics to enhance their movement skills and competence for their main sport e.g. Dance, Martial Arts, Mountain Bike Trialling, Tricking  “It’s a good sport to compliment another sport” – Parent (from IYS, 2010)  “It made me better at other sports” – Gymnast (from IYS, 2010)</p>
<p>To develop confidence and discipline</p>	<p>To build physical confidence, for example, to help in physical education at school  “<i>She can do a forward roll now, and she always tells her friends</i>”  “<i>I loved it when I could do a flick, I had to build a lot of confidence</i>”  To build social confidence drawing on friendship groups/team work  “<i>To realise it’s not just about her ... it can be a team thing</i>”  To build character, discipline  “<i>Coming down the club helps her to build her social skills, to make new friends</i>”  “<i>It helps with my work at school, with my GCSEs, I’ll get a better grade at school, it helps with CV</i>”  “<i>I’m much more confident. I used to be shy and scared of everything. It’s helped me socially, with my confidence</i>”  Many respondents suggested gymnastics helped with their psycho-social development – decision-making, responsibility, social competence</p>
<p>To develop social ties  To be part of a community</p>	<p>To feel part of a group/a sense of belonging/a community  To be with their friends  To make new friends (separate to school friends)  “<i>It’s nice to have friends outside school, I like coming here, I like something different to school</i>”  “<i>It’s like being in a family, these girls [fellow club members] are like my sisters</i>”  Working together on moves (either individual supporting/mentoring) or in a team  To enjoy the camaraderie/encouragement  To socialise and chat  Gymnasts may come to the club to socialise irrespective of whether they are training/competing  Parents may want to get involved/meet people  This is clearly a very important motivation for continued involvement in gymnastics  “<i>I like to be in a group, like team gym, it’s great to be able to work together, to help each other</i>”</p>
<p>Sense of excitement/achievement when performing and mastering a move</p>	<p>Performing and mastering of particular moves/equipment – e.g. cartwheels, back flick – “<i>is very motivational and produces a significant buzz when achieved!</i>”  “<i>I like progressing, I like learning new things</i>”  “<i>When you learn something new it makes you feel happy, you feel good about yourself</i>”  “<i>It’s challenging, exciting, there is an adrenalin rush ... it’s not like other sport ... you do different things with your body</i>”  “<i>I found it fun, hanging upside-down, running around</i>”  “<i>All your hard work takes you somewhere ... the sense of achievement is great</i>”  “<i>I like learning new things</i>”  “<i>Gymnastics is an aesthetically beautiful sport to watch and I think that’s what motivates a lot of children to become involved. They’ll see people doing back flips and somersaults, things that the human body doesn’t naturally do, it has to be trained to do, and that’s quite motivating for them</i>”  On the flipside – if sufficient progression is not made this can be very demotivating</p>
<p>To try something new  A form of entertainment; a distraction</p>	<p>“<i>I love trying new things</i>”  “<i>To do something different</i>”</p>
<p>To display/perform</p>	<p>“<i>Gymnastics is a very showy sport</i>”  “<i>Showing people the skills is all part of it</i>”  “<i>It’s about showing off, and having a laugh</i>”  There is a continual learn, design, train, perfect and show cycle in gymnastics  “<i>Gymnastics is a show off sport</i>”  “<i>It’s a performance [performing] sport</i>”</p>

To compete To win	<p>“They like winning things”</p> <p>“To be the next Olga Korbut”</p> <p>“The dream is to go to the Olympics ... to be the next Beth”</p> <p>“To get to as high a level as I possibly can”</p>
To improve physical condition	<p>To build and maintain flexibility, strength and fitness</p> <p>To build muscle definition and to burn off fat</p> <p>“It’s good for her physical condition”</p>
To help/support others	<p>Gymnasts like working with younger kids</p> <p>“I really like coaching the little ones”</p> <p>“It’s a nice way to stay in sport when you’re not training, you can pass on your knowledge, what you know, and when you see them happy, you feel good”</p>
To have fun and enjoyment	<p>Fun atmosphere in the gym</p> <p>“To burn off energy in a place where you are allowed to”</p> <p>There’s no pressure on them to achieve</p> <p>“It can be serious – but it’s also fun”</p>
Family/peer influence	<p>“It can be driven by the parents”</p> <p>“Do you want to do a hobby – dancing, gymnastics?”</p> <p>Parents often bring about the initial engagement in the sport, for example, the development of fundamental movement skills</p> <p>“To build movement skills; to build social skills”</p> <p>To build fitness and exercise into child’s weekly routine</p>

Defining the ‘Reasons for Engagement’ Categories

From these reasons for initial and continued engagement in Gymnastics it was possible to narrow them down to a number of discrete engagement categories (note: there is no quantitative validation of these categories and this could be a feature of future work).

These are: ‘Movement and skill development’, ‘Flexibility, strength and fitness’, ‘Dance, display and socialise’, ‘Compete’, ‘Compete at the highest levels’ and ‘Help others’ (next page).

Though there are some mutually exclusive categories, for example, it is highly unlikely that a gymnast will be both in the ‘Movement and skill development’ and ‘Compete at the highest levels’ segments, many individuals involved in gymnastics are likely to be in more than one category.

For example, a gymnast could be involved in an adult group which works on ‘Flexibility, strength and fitness’, ‘Dance, display and socialise’ group, and also helps to coach ‘Helps others’.

Though these categories may be rationalised as the work area evolves, it is argued that individuals – for the purpose of segmentation - can be more closely aligned with particular categories (that is, for example, individuals can be placed in the ‘Flexibility, strength and fitness’ category even though they also engage elsewhere and that sport can be tailored to meet their wants/needs based on these categories – though they may often stray into others).

Excluding ‘Movement and skill development’ and ‘Helps others’ – a broad continuum can be described from bottom to top, or left to right, depending on how the data is presented (e.g. table or model). To the top/left there is more emphasis on leisure, socialising and fitness for health, to the bottom/right there is more emphasis on skills, performance and winning.

Governing Bodies are generally most comfortable with children beginners, those involved in reasonably high level competition, and talent and performance. The additional categories represent new thinking in a sports/gymnastics context.

**Table: 'Reasons for Engagement' Categories**

Category	Reasons for Engagement Segment Description
'Movement and skill development'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To have fun</li> <li>• To develop basic movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To learn about the sport</li> <li>• To develop physical and psychological confidence</li> </ul>
'Flexibility, strength and fitness'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To improve physical condition</li> <li>• To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To develop confidence and discipline</li> <li>• To develop social ties</li> </ul>
'Dance, display and socialise'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To have fun</li> <li>• To display/perform</li> <li>• To develop (and maintain) social ties</li> <li>• To stay in a sport they love</li> <li>• To improve (and maintain) physical condition</li> </ul>
'Compete'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To compete</li> <li>• To win competition</li> </ul>
'Compete at the highest levels'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To compete at the highest level</li> <li>• To win medals</li> </ul>
'Help others'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To guide and support younger gymnasts</li> <li>• To stay in a sport they love</li> <li>• To give something back to the sport</li> </ul>

## Other Important Considerations

### Gender

Gender is clearly an important consideration in gymnastics, as noted earlier, there is a three to one ratio favouring girls over boys.

Though in the early years (ages 1-5) boys and girls have similar levels of participation, from 6 years onwards boys' involvement drops considerably. The IYS (2010) research identified issues with perceptions of masculinity around gymnastics for older boys when compared, for example, with football.

The research did not explicitly seek to explore gender issues but they did arise in interviews with respondents.

The following observations were made:

"Boys and girls are ok together in the same class/session from 4-6 years, but then the boys start to fall behind the girls a little bit. Boys do not appear to mature as quickly in gymnastics as girls; they do not appear to pick up the skills as quickly; it takes them longer to learn things and perfect it. If the boys feel they are falling behind they can get demotivated"

"The boys also start to complain about being in with the girls at this age, so it is good to separate them from 6/7 onwards"

A significant issue for boys was argued to be the lack of older/bigger male role models in the clubs. Though the 'Louis Smith/Daniel Keatings' phenomenon was certainly helping, many coaches remarked that the lack of older male role models in their clubs made a significant impact on younger boys' attitudes towards the sport.

Boys – "if you don't keep them active and challenged you'll lose them"

Girls – "if they're a bit girly, you've got to give them some space"

Girls like to work in groups – "this dancing round the handbag thing ... it starts early".

## **Disciplines**

There are significant differences between disciplines

“There will be differences between disciplines ... mainly where the competition pressure comes”

“We need to break the strangle hold, the ‘chimney’, gymnastics is not just women’s and men’s artistic ... if you do that day in day out with your rec classes it’s going to get boring”.

## A Participant Model for Gymnastics

The following diagram pulls together the conceptual thinking presented above on age/stage and reasons for engagement. The 'Participant Model for Gymnastics' provides a tool to visually represent, think about and undertake planning with regard to the gymnastics participant base:

	Movement & skill development	Flexibility, strength & fitness	Dance, display & socialise	Compete	Compete at the highest levels	Help others
22 and over years						
19-21 years						
17-18 years						
15-16 years						
12-14 years						
8-11 years						
5-7 years						
0-4 years						

The model can be used to describe the sport as it is now (a 'model of') in terms of the quantities and qualities of players and performers, and the environments/structures they are exposed to.

For example, with further information (e.g. from a participant survey), it will be possible to estimate how many young children beginners there are in the sport, where they are being exposed to the sport (schools, clubs), what kind of coaching they are having, and whether the experience is beneficial.

The model can also be used to describe the sport as BG want it (a 'model for') in terms of the quantities and qualities of participants, and the environments/structures they should (ideally) be exposed to.

For example, there are concerns about drop-out from the sport at ages 8-9 years. Systems could be put in place and targets established to address this problem.

Note: a segmentation approach will inevitably involve some generalities – some individuals will not align neatly into the segments defined. However, it will work for a majority of participants and the segmentation approach provides a basis for thinking strategically and operationally about types of participants, and allocating resources accordingly. A segmentation approach is better than one size fits all!

## Populating the Participant Model

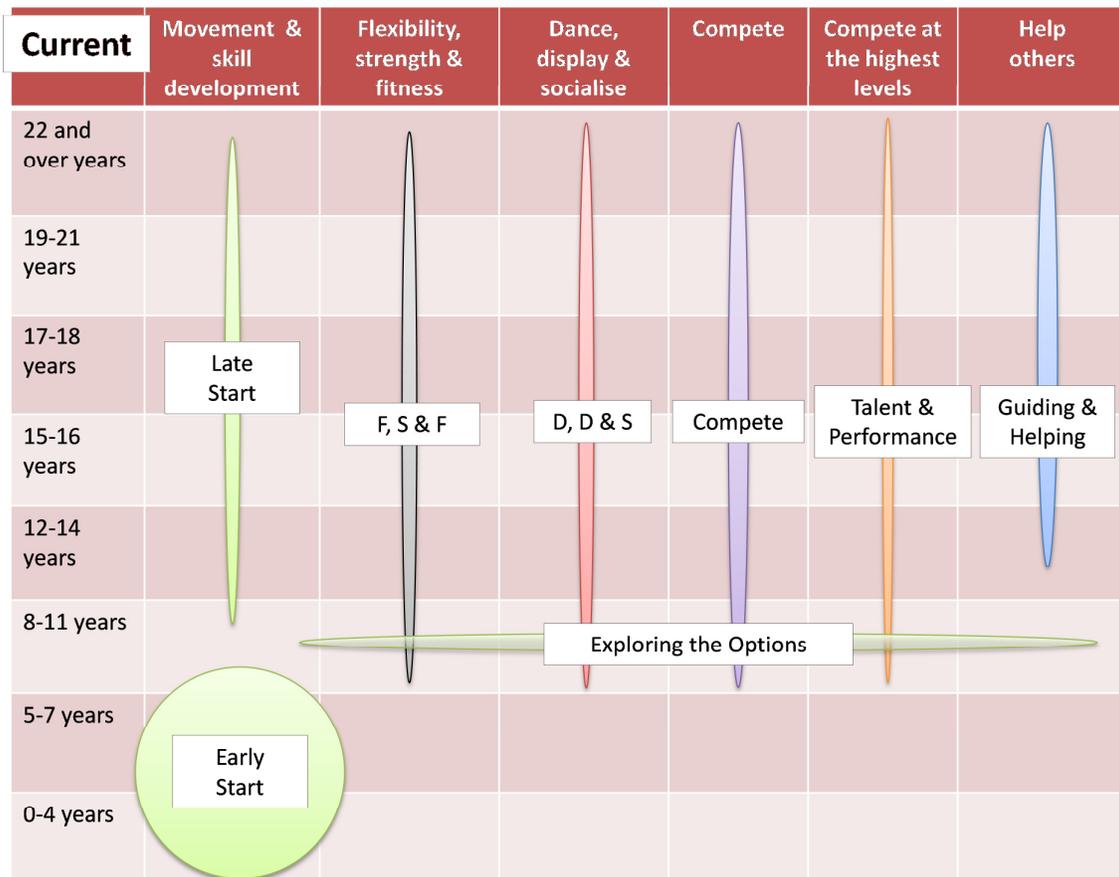
The Participant Model for Gymnastics provides a tool to describe, think about, and undertake planning to achieve participation and performance objectives.

To do this, however, we need to populate the model with information about participants, and use this information to, for example, develop strategies and plans for subsequent implementation. This includes developing new systems and aligning old ones, to best meet the participant wants and needs identified.

The following sub-sections provide some initial thoughts on how the Participant Model could be populated.

### Participant Segment Descriptions

The following high level segments were identified in the study:



The following tables provide detail on these segments and are presented in the following order:

- Early start
- Exploring the options
- Late start
- Flexibility, strength and fitness
- Dance, display and socialise
- Compete
- Talent and performance
- Guiding and helping

<b>EARLY START</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	0-4 years	
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gymnasts usually brought by parent/guardian</li> <li>Parents may take youngsters to sessions to socialise with other parents, to give them an opportunity to interact and move about</li> <li>To learn ABCs (agility, balance, coordination) fundamental movement skills</li> <li>To gain in confidence</li> <li>To learn discipline</li> <li>To burn off energy</li> </ul>	<p>Gymnasts at this age will have a very low level of awareness of why they are there</p> <p>"0-5 years is a crucial period" for learning ABCs</p>
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parent's earlier involvement in sport</li> <li>Word of mouth</li> </ul>	
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	Gymnasts are very small	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gymnasts highly dependent on parent/guardian in sessions</li> <li>Children from 3 years onwards may become more independent from their parents</li> </ul>	
<b>Family/friends</b>	Gymnasts highly dependent on parent/guardian in sessions	Considerable effort should be given to supporting parents
<b>Other influences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Baby/toddler swimming</li> <li>Later dance/ballet</li> </ul>	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'Fun for Babies': 8 weeks – 18 months</li> <li>'Parent and Toddler': 18 months – 3 years</li> <li>'Independent' / Pre-school gymnastics: 3-5 years</li> </ul>	
<b>Environments</b>	Emphasis on fun and relationship building	"It is just play in a gym environment based around gymnastics skills"
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play</li> <li>Simple exercises with parents</li> </ul>	
<b>Coaching</b>	Coaches coach through the parents	Concerns that some pre-school provision may be too structured in terms of session activities
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	Gymnastics clubs – junior sessions Some youngsters "talent ID'd" for more "challenging opportunities"	
<b>Drop-out</b>	No issues detected	

<b>EARLY START</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	5-7 years	Should be an introductory/fun age/stage – but concerns that the coaches are 'getting down to business' too quickly. Evidence suggests environments are too serious; there is too much emphasis on talent and performance in competitions
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent brings them</li> <li>• To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To develop confidence and discipline</li> <li>• To have fun and enjoyment</li> <li>• To develop social ties</li> </ul>	
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-school Gymnastics</li> <li>• Gymnasts come because their friends go, or because they want to be with their friends</li> <li>• Club taster sessions in schools</li> <li>• Gymnastics is on the PE curriculum in primary schools</li> <li>• After-school clubs</li> </ul>	Gymnasts may have done other classes – like dance classes
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant variation in physical size</li> <li>• Significant variation in movement skills – depending, amongst other things, on their developmental history (e.g. whether they've done pre-school gymnastics)</li> </ul>	"at 5 some seem like 3, some seem like 8"
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant variation in attention spans – some can listen, others find it very difficult</li> <li>• Many gymnasts will struggle to focus on instruction</li> <li>• Attention spans will improve the more they are exposed to the environment (for example, if they have been there from pre-school)</li> <li>• At 5 years old gymnasts may still look to their parents for purpose and engagement</li> <li>• The younger ones like structure, familiarity, to know what they are doing, to see the same coaches week on week</li> <li>• At 6/7 years the gymnasts are much more likely to be able to say what they do and don't like</li> </ul>	If gymnasts are not kept engaged/busy they may quickly become distracted/bored
<b>Family/friends</b>	<p>Parents are still very important to this group. Parents who are interested primarily in the child's development (both movement skills and in relation to the sport) may often be very keen to receive feedback on the child's progress. However, the parents also have to be managed in terms of space. Some clubs ask parents to wait outside until the session is over because it can be too distracting for the younger gymnasts</p> <p>At 5 years old the gymnasts often ignore each other. At 6/7 years they start making friends</p>	<p>Considerable effort should be made in managing parents – their objectives, their views on how the sport should be structured, their child's involvement, and progress</p> <p>Parents need to be managed around the gym. Dedicated viewing areas may be preferable to them sitting round the gym where it can be a 'health and safety' issue</p>

	in the group	Many parents/guardians do like to see their children take part in the session The BG Child Protection Policy has guidelines for clubs including the provision of an open door environment
<b>Other influences</b>	Some coaches believe that boys and girls can comfortably co-exist in sessions until about 6-7 years – then they should be separated	This of course may not apply to some disciplines e.g. ACRO, Aerobics, TeamGym
<b>Sport structures</b>	Freestyle – might bring in boys Some local/regional competition	
<b>Environments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive, encouraging, inclusive, fun, enjoyable, developmental</li> <li>• Learning through play, experiment and experience; not through assessment and feedback</li> <li>• 5-7 year olds need engagement, keeping busy “or they start looking for mum, running around, hitting each other”</li> <li>• Use music</li> </ul>	Concern that some coaches are creating quite serious/formal environments - that lack variety, are boring - at too young an age because they are primarily motivated by performance and competition. Concerns that there is too much queuing at stations/equipment
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A general introduction “a taster” to gymnastics drawing on elements from all the disciplines</li> <li>• Variety, music</li> <li>• Use of equipment – bean bags, hoops etc.</li> <li>• Circuits with multiple activities – floor, vault, trampette, bars, pits, ropes</li> <li>• Lots of games – ‘Traffic Lights’, ‘Washing Machine’</li> <li>• Activities no more than 10-15 minutes in length including set-up</li> <li>• Set up competitions on each piece of equipment e.g. “how long can you balance on the floor bar?”</li> <li>• 1-2 hours per week.</li> <li>• Proficiency Badges 8-1</li> <li>• Larger groups may warm up together and then split up into age groups – 5’s, 6’s, 7’s etc.</li> </ul>	
<b>Coaching</b>	<p>This is a tricky age to coach! A balance should be achieved between structure, familiarity, keeping the youngsters busy, and allowing fun and expression. This requires an appropriate coach to gymnast ratio - no more than 1:8. The sessions need to be planned – lots of activities, games – no more than 10-15 minutes long for each activity/games. The coach needs to use simple clear language and keep instruction to a minimum The coach needs to be fun, vibrant, engaged, busy, and energised, be prepared to make a fool of him/herself. The gymnasts need the freedom to play, experiment and interact. The coach will need to have some idea about individual gymnast progress (to ensure challenge) but avoid too much assessment</p>	<p>Use incentives to make things more fun e.g. Coach: “if you balance for 15 seconds, I’ll show you my somersault”</p> <p>For younger members of the age group the coach should use imagery/communications/language (body position, facial expression and tone of voice) which “enters their head space” e.g. ‘pretending to be zoo animals’ or ‘making a pizza’</p> <p>Considerable efforts have to be made to manage parents’ expectations</p>

	<p>and selection at this age (though many coaches will use this age to identify more able gymnasts for squads).  It is important to build variety into sessions – use games, as well as circuits – for example, game, equipment, game.  This includes setting up ground rules, for example, about when the young gymnasts can go and see mum and dad, for example, to get a drink</p>	
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anywhere between 4-7 years the gymnasts might be spotted for 'development squads' – if they show appropriate balance, strength, coordination, listening skills.</li> <li>• In terms of competition, gymnasts compete at 5 years (under 6) in club events, at 6 years (under 7), in county events, at 7 years (under 8) in regional events, and 8 years (under 9) for national events</li> <li>• Others – if provision is available – can enter intermediary or recreational groups</li> </ul>	
<b>Drop-out</b>	<p>Though drop-out in the sport does not start to any significant degree until 7-8 years there are concerns that the groundwork for this has already started. There needs to be more emphasis on fun, a variety of experiences, games, play and experimentation (especially to keep in boys)</p>	

<b>EXPLORING THE OPTIONS</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	8-11 years	This, it is suggested, is a crucial age for gymnastics (where most of the drop-out occurs). Currently, many gymnasts move from an introductory experience in the 0-4 years and (for some) 5-7 years, straight to narrow discipline specific work from 7-8 years onwards. This might be appropriate for some gymnasts who have developed the appropriate flexibility, strength and skills, and who have the requisite mind set, ambition and support. However, for others "it becomes too difficult ... when they get to 9 the skills get too difficult, they get stuck, notably particular skills in the advanced badges"
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To develop confidence and discipline</li> <li>• As a distraction, an activity</li> <li>• To develop social ties</li> <li>• To be part of the gymnastics community</li> <li>• For some there may be a fitness component at this age</li> </ul>	Parents still bring them along (though parental influence may be starting to wane at this age)
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connections to school provision, and school friends</li> <li>• Connections to leisure centre provision</li> <li>• Club pathways</li> </ul>	
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There will be noticeable differences in the flexibility, strength, and skills of the gymnasts – especially those who have been in the sport since pre-school, 5-7 years.</li> <li>• These markers need to be used to tailor programmes</li> </ul>	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At 8-9 years they are becoming much more conscious of their own ability – what their bodies can and cannot do, and their strengths/weaknesses in relation to their peers.</li> <li>• More conscious of body image</li> <li>• They become sensitive about their competence</li> <li>• It is very important to the gymnasts that coaches and peers are friendly and encouraging, and that they feel part of the 'family'</li> <li>• Inappropriate selection/summative feedback could easily lead to drop-out. Thus, pair work, team work and</li> </ul>	<p>This is the start of a very sensitive age for the gymnasts. If the gymnasts are forced into forms of sport where they are uncomfortable i.e. individual performances they may leave the sport. However, they also need to be appropriately stimulated and challenged</p> <p>This group are also much more conscious of their wants and needs/likes and dislikes</p>

	<p>displays may become more important</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This group wants to be much more involved in the longer term and session planning</li> <li>• This group may start to get bored easily, especially if they are constrained by physical and skill development, and the coach is not providing the options/variety required.</li> </ul>	and are prepared to vocalise this – “this is boring, why are we doing this?”
<b>Family/friends</b>	<p>Parents who are interested primarily in the child’s development (both movement skills and in relation to the sport) will be keen to receive feedback on the child’s progress</p> <p>However, the parents also have to be managed in terms of space. Some clubs ask parents to wait outside until the session is over because it can be too distracting for the younger gymnasts. Boy and girls (“but mainly girls from about 11 onwards”) start to get very chatty and sociable. They may show less interest in gymnastics and more in talking about “pop stars”.</p>	Considerable effort need to be made in managing parents – their objectives, their views on how the sport should be structured, their child’s involvement, and progress
<b>Other influences</b>	<p>Youngsters in this age group experience a wide range of leisure and sporting opportunities</p> <p>Many gymnasts will be participating in other sports e.g. dance, street dance, ballet, swimming, athletics.</p> <p>Boys, in particular, may fall out of gymnastics to play others sports such as football</p>	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreational participation peaks at 7-8 years just before the onset of national competition structures</li> <li>• In terms of competition, gymnasts compete at 5 years (under 6) in club events, at 6 years (under 7), in county events, at 7 years (under 8) in regional events, and 8 years (under 9) for national events</li> <li>• The grades get much harder at 8-9 years</li> <li>• By 10 the gymnasts should have a very clear idea of the options available to them (for better or worse)</li> <li>• Competitive participation peaks at 11 years of age.</li> <li>• Advanced award badges for those who have been in the sport since 5 years of age</li> </ul>	Concerns that many gymnasts are leaving the sport at 8-9 years because the sport gets much harder if they are in a competitive pathway structure/or undertaking advanced badges These gymnasts are very often not being offered an alternative
<b>Environments</b>	<p>There should still be emphasis on fun, enjoyment, though, for some, it may be appropriate to focus much more on skill development and preparation (for example, for competitions and displays)</p> <p>There should be no pressure for gymnasts to do moves/use equipment that they don’t feel comfortable with.</p> <p>Sessions should continue to show variation, use games, be busy and challenging.</p> <p>The sporting and social environment and culture are increasingly important to this age</p> <p>The gymnasts are likely to respond to a very friendly, inclusive, respectful, but ‘family/community’ orientated approach.</p> <p>For better or worse – coach, gymnast, parent</p>	Gymnasts of this age may start to become very chatty and less focused. The coach will need to take a view on the goals of the group/session but perhaps set-up some rules about talk e.g. gym talk in the gym, social talk in breaks and in the changing room

	<p>should be in it together.</p> <p>Recreational groups 1-2 hours per week</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Again, variety is very important.</li> <li>• Warm ups, cool downs, skill work, equipment work, games etc. should all be in the mix – with different ingredients in different sessions</li> <li>• It is appropriate to offer gymnasts in this age group a range of product options – sessions/skill development/games, badges, displays (local galas/schools), competition – though the balance will depend on their ambitions/pathway stage</li> </ul>	
<b>Activities</b>		<p>Where general gymnastics clubs are offering competition opportunities – the gymnasts, when they compete, may not perform very well and this may lead to problems with the gymnasts and the parent. There are two issues here – appropriate recreational competition, and how the coach manages the gymnasts and the parents. For example, parents need to understand that if their child is doing 1 hour per week they are not going to perform at the highest level in competition</p>
<b>Coaching</b>	<p>There are three main issues that the coach should attend to at this age (1) increasing individualisation of programmes (2) involving the gymnasts more (3) environment and culture</p> <p><u>Increasing individualisation/recognition of different pathways</u></p> <p>The clubs/coaches need to provide a broad range of options to the gymnasts which meet their needs, aspirations and abilities – this includes recreational, competitive, and higher level competitive opportunities</p> <p>There should be no pressure on the gymnasts to follow pathways, undertake moves/skills, or use equipment that they do not want to. Development programmes could be structured, for example, through the proficiency awards.</p> <p><u>Involving the gymnasts more</u></p> <p>The coach should actively seek to understand the gymnasts’ experiences and opinions in terms of long term and session planning, environments, activities and so on “what would you like to do today? What pieces of equipment would you like to go on?”</p> <p>They should ask the gymnasts what works, and what does not in sessions and look to modify planning/sessions.</p> <p>Individualised programmes will be very important because some gymnasts may have been in the sport for 6-8 years.</p> <p>The coach needs to ensure an appropriate level of challenge.</p> <p>There should still be a significant emphasis on fun, enjoyment, games and so on for all groups</p> <p>However, the coach should start to be more specific about the gymnasts’ body management, strength and conditioning and skill development</p> <p>This includes goal setting, and providing technical feedback.</p> <p><u>Environment and culture</u></p> <p>The coach should establish a very friendly, encouraging, supportive environment around the gymnasts which includes a community of gymnasts, parents and coaches working</p>	<p>There is little doubt that coaches are making important assessments about the gymnasts’ capabilities at these ages.</p> <p>This may be legitimate, but there are concerns that those who are not making the grade in terms of competitive performance are being neglected/not being offered alternative disciplinary and recreational opportunities. E.g. a gymnast that does not make the grade in Women’s Artistic could be offered opportunities in a different discipline e.g. ACRO opportunity. This happens in some instances but it is far from universal</p>

	<p>together.</p> <p>Getting this environment/culture right may be one of the most important issues in determining what happens to the gymnasts as they progress. Though there is a need for individualisation, this does not mean that the coach should not encourage pair and team work, and displays. The gymnasts at this age like working together. The coach will need to understand and account for the gymnasts undertaking a range of sports at this age.</p> <p>Within one session the gymnasts could rotate between coaches with different styles, for example, one coach who is 'stricter' who focuses on skills, another who is more informal and plays more games 'jump over the safety mat'</p>	
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	<p>Those showing good flexibility, strength, skills, determination, willingness to learn, ambition, support should be directed towards competitive pathways e.g. development squads, the National Development Plan.</p> <p>Those who are interested/keen but may have less ability/drive should be given a range of alternatives.</p>	
<b>Drop-out</b>	<p>This is the age group in which serious drop-out starts to occur in the sport – particularly 8-9 years old.</p> <p>There appears to be a number of reasons for this (some of which the sport can control, some it cannot):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some gymnasts appear to be 'selected' out of the sport due to their lack of competitive success.</li> <li>• The sport is argued to get harder for 9 year olds. This was more common from artistic coaches.</li> <li>• Some parents seem to have a view that gymnasts is for small girls "who can throw themselves around", and is competitive. These ideas could be influencing the gymnasts</li> <li>• Gymnasts of this age also have lots more sporting options. From 10/11 years, and at secondary school, gymnasts are playing a number of sports and may make a decision to invest in another sport, or to narrow their sporting options</li> <li>• Children are much more conscious of their options</li> <li>• Those gymnasts who have set out in a discipline specific competitive pathway will generally have received signals either from their coach, or competitive results, that they will not make it by 9-10 years old</li> </ul>	

<b>LATE START</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	10 years and upwards	
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To improve physical condition</li> <li>To have fun and enjoyment</li> <li>To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>To develop confidence and discipline</li> <li>To develop social ties</li> <li>To be part of a community</li> <li>Sense of excitement/achievement when performing and mastering a move</li> <li>To do something different</li> </ul>	
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some returners who have already had previous experience of the sport ("about 22-30 years")</li> <li>Some from other sports – cheerleading, dance, martial arts, free-running, other urban such as 'tricking', cycling</li> <li>13/14 to 18/19 year olds - freestyle (mainly boys)</li> <li>Adult classes – 15/16</li> <li>50/50 gymnastics/non-gymnastic background</li> <li>With family/partner/friend</li> </ul>	A number of coaches noted that it was easier to target late starters amongst boys than girls – notably around products such as freestyle
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Possibly unfit and out of condition.</li> <li>Possibly fit, but lacking flexibility, strength and body control provided by gymnastics conditioning and skills to undertake more complex and potentially dangerous skills/moves</li> </ul>	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	Older gymnasts may be reluctant to attempt more complex and potentially dangerous skills/moves.	
<b>Sport structures</b>	"Novice class" Adult session/group Freestyle	
<b>Environments</b>	The facilities/equipment/safety – sprung floors/pits – are very important 1-2 hours per week.	Freestyle might need non-traditional equipment e.g. a false wall
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Warm-up together</li> <li>Individualised programmes</li> <li>Gymnasts will work in groups on a particular activity/piece of equipment</li> </ul>	
<b>Coaching</b>	Some freestyle/adult class sessions are coached in a more structured fashion "to get the technique right, to ensure the safety dimension".	<p>"I will look at their strength, flexibility etc. The moves and techniques will build. You break the more complicated movements down and build confidence"</p> <p>"I will build them individualised programmes depending on what they want out of the sport"</p> <p>Other coaches have a more relaxed "come in and use the equipment" approach</p> <p>"In the freestyle class [with 13-18 year olds] we don't tell them what to do"</p>

<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	Mainly Flexibility, Strength and Fitness Also, Dance, Display and Socialise and Competition Trampolining Tumbling, Vault and Floor, Cheerleading	"Many people don't get into tumbling until about 12 years old"
----------------------------------	---	--

<b>FLEXIBLE, STRONG AND FIT</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	From 12 years onwards Some may come in from 15/16 years Most, however, appear to be in their late teens/early 20s Very few in 30s/40s	
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To improve physical condition</li> <li>• To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To develop confidence and discipline</li> <li>• To develop social ties</li> <li>• To be part of a community</li> <li>• Sense of excitement/achievement when performing and mastering a move</li> <li>• To have fun and enjoyment</li> <li>• To do something different</li> </ul>	"It needs to move away from the leotard image, prancing about, it needs marketing as a cool urban sport. If you're in your 20s you're not going to the Olympics, you just want to come down and learn the moves"
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Club pathway</li> <li>• Returners, for example, to their childrens' club</li> <li>• Late entry e.g. performers from other sports – Cheerleading, Ice Skating, Kick Boxing, Martial Arts, Snow Boarding, Tricking, Trial Biking</li> <li>• Young males – free running, tricking</li> <li>• Many are likely to play other sports; one respondent noted similarities in movement with Basketball</li> <li>• Some come with friends/partners</li> <li>• Gymnasts will 'sell' the sport to friends</li> </ul>	With beginners/returners there can be a perception that adult classes are full of high performing gymnasts and that they will be out of their depth. This perception, however, appears ill-conceived and the club/coach needs to work on promoting the right messages
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	Longer term participant – building flexibility, strength, body coordination, skills	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant motivation to change body</li> <li>• Significant motivation to interact with other gymnasts</li> <li>• Many gymnasts will want a significant degree of control over activities and coaching input</li> <li>• Others will want a more structured class</li> <li>• No desire to 'show off' skills e.g. through display work or competition (at least in a gymnastics context), though they may use skills in other display environments/sports</li> </ul>	
<b>Family/friends</b>	Gymnasts may come with family/friends to group. For example, they may notice an 'adult group' when bringing their child to a session. They may come with an ex-gymnast friend etc. They may be looking to make friends within the group	
<b>Other influences</b>	Significant conflicts with education, work, family and social life. Gymnasts may have difficulties committing to	

	every session	
<b>Sport structures</b>	Freestyle Adult sessions/group	There was some evidence of very limited provision of adult classes across quite large geographical areas.
<b>Environments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly supportive relaxed atmosphere</li> <li>• High quality equipment and facilities e.g. sprung floor, trampolines – are very important</li> <li>• Low profile presence from coach</li> <li>• Low levels of structure – gymnasts may warm-up together and then focus on those activities they benefit from/enjoy</li> <li>• Appropriate group numbers</li> <li>• Opportunities for social interaction – possibly even 'nights out'</li> <li>• Non-typical times e.g. later evenings 8 pm onwards</li> <li>• Once a week for 2 hours</li> </ul>	<p>In a multi age group, multi-discipline gyms, the freestylers complained that they got second options on the equipment – thus there was often only limited space/kit they could work with. This reflected the priorities of the club.</p> <p>It's important to have appropriate group numbers – "you don't want to be waiting for too long for equipment"</p>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Varied depending on individual gymnast and their objectives</li> <li>• Most will 'get on and do' with support from coach if required</li> <li>• Others will want a structured programme</li> </ul>	<p>"It's good to have a joint warm up and then people just work to their personal aspirations and goals; everyone gets to do their own thing"</p> <p>It's kind of high quality personal training</p>
<b>Coaching</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low key approach to coaching from Head Coach respecting adults' choices about what they want</li> <li>• Low key approach in freestyle session with 13-14 year olds.</li> <li>• Considerable peer coaching</li> </ul>	
<b>Other support/services</b>	Access to high quality facilities is clearly very important to this group – sprung floors etc.	
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	Some may move into 'Display, Dance and Socialise', and 'Competition' e.g. regional/veterans competition	
<b>Drop-out</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost may be an issue for some gymnasts</li> <li>• Access/transport to appropriate facilities</li> <li>• If peers within the group drop-out</li> <li>• Injury</li> </ul>	

<b>DANCE, DISPLAY &amp; SOCIALISE</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	<p>Some display groups start as young as 6 years (rec classes and junior squads). At 12 onwards there may be two different types of provision (a recreational offer and senior squads). There is a slight difference between 12-14 year olds (more coach-led), and 15 years and above (more gymnast-led) It is probably good practice to keep the 12-15 year olds separate from the 16 years and over. Display groups extend to 50/60s and above</p>	<p>There is little doubt that encouragement and support for this segment – notably access to facilities and display events – will encourage older age participation in gymnastics</p>
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To have fun and enjoyment</li> <li>• To display/perform</li> <li>• To develop social ties</li> <li>• To be part of a community</li> <li>• To improve physical condition</li> <li>• To develop movement skills and competence</li> <li>• To develop confidence</li> <li>• Sense of excitement/achievement when performing and mastering a move</li> </ul>	<p>Display groups provide options for gymnasts of differing levels of confidence and gregariousness. “Those who want to be up front can be, but display groups may have 20-30 members, so the shyer ones can also get involved but in a way they feel comfortable”</p>
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<p>Club pathway (e.g. those not entering or falling out of the competition pathway)</p> <p>“Anyone can come who wants to get involved”</p>	<p>“There is loads of appetite out there for display group gymnastics. There are loads of competitive gymnasts – regional, national, international – who when they get to 13 think they have to quit the sport. But they don’t have to think like that, or do that, they can join a display group”</p>
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	<p>Many of these gymnasts will have developed a certain level of flexibility, strength, coordination and skills from earlier experiences in the sport However, physical condition needs to be watched in older gymnasts - particularly in relation to the complexity/difficulty of the moves</p>	<p>Some may suffer from older injuries</p>
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some gymnasts may have been in the sport for 8-9 years at 12, and even longer for those who are older.</li> <li>• At the younger ages there is a need to re-energise/re-engage these gymnasts’ love of the sport through different environments and activities</li> <li>• At 12 years of age many gymnasts (perhaps related to the changes associated with sexual maturity) show less interest in competing</li> <li>• This reenergising/change of direction may involve a coach/leader</li> <li>• In the older age groups 15/16 years and onwards (who have stuck with the sport) they will often be very self-motivated – “they don’t want anyone telling them what to do” - and will</li> </ul>	

	<p>often coach themselves (a lead coach may not be required)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Particular emphasis is placed on team work, camaraderie, and social ties in all groups</li> <li>• There is a particular emphasis on performance</li> <li>• They want to show off their skills and work towards a final goal (e.g. a performance/display)</li> <li>• Having a goal to work towards e.g. GymFusion or big events is a central motivating element for this segment</li> </ul>	
<b>Family/friends</b>	<p>Social ties are <u>very</u> important to this group They want to stay loyal to the club, their coach, their friends/community. They feel like they belong to a big family. They want to have a laugh together, to travel, to see different parts of the UK and overseas</p>	
<b>Other influences</b>	<p>Significant conflicts with education, work, family and social life. Gymnasts may have difficulties committing to every session. It requires a flexible approach from the group to gymnasts entering and withdrawing from routines.</p>	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult session</li> <li>• Display groups</li> <li>• School fairs</li> <li>• Club competitions/veterans competitions</li> <li>• Gym Fusion (Regional and National)</li> </ul>	<p>"The national Gym Fusion events are better, the crowds are bigger, the crowd are more informed, they can appreciate what you're doing"</p> <p>"The regional ones are better for the younger gymnasts. It lets them have a go"</p>
<b>Environments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly, welcoming, supportive, "a laugh"</li> <li>• Sessions/displays established so that the gymnasts have a large say in the moves/skills and choreography.</li> <li>• There is not as much pressure to perform as in, for example, competitive gymnastics. This provides, it is argued, a more comfortable experience for the gymnasts and the coaches.</li> <li>• Variety comes from the different backgrounds of the display group – gymnastics, cheerleading, dancing and so on</li> <li>• Goal focused</li> <li>• Self-organising</li> <li>• Self-coaching</li> <li>• The coach (where there is one) will largely just facilitate this.</li> <li>• That said there is need for leadership with groups to broker decisions. A clear agreed leader can make the group function much more effectively</li> <li>• Non-typical times for sessions e.g. later evenings 8 pm onwards</li> <li>• 2 hours per week</li> <li>• Sessions typically run once a week for 1-2 hours, though there may be more</li> </ul>	<p>Putting on a display can be quite hard work. It requires focused effort and attention and the 'fun' element can sometimes be lacking. But there are significant rewards after a 'successful' display.</p> <p>"The displays have to be engaging and exciting because that keeps people in [the groups]. We don't want to do the same things every day or week because people will drop out"</p>

	sessions closer to the Display (e.g. 2/3 times a week).	
<b>Activities</b>	Varied – gymnast led “They agree on the session agenda and get on with it”	One coach estimated that of those that would drop-out from the sport at 12-13 years under the traditional provision, 60% would stay on if the provision was changed to emphasise dancing, displays and floor work
<b>Coaching</b>	In the younger age groups the coach may have a more central role – though they will be guided by what the gymnasts want/enjoy doing. For example, the gymnasts will not be split up into groups by ability, but by friendship. There may be less of a role for a head coach/coach in older age groups – these gymnasts will often coach themselves.	The lack of a clear leader in the older age group can cause problems – there is often a lot of opinions (many of them are coaches), but no-one to make the final decision. This can present tensions with the group.
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some groups go on until their late 60s and beyond</li> <li>• GymFusion/Festivals</li> <li>• Those who don't want to display may go into 'Flexible, Strong and Fit'</li> </ul>	
<b>Drop-out</b>	Many gymnasts join display groups 14/15/16 years. However, they tend to drop-out when they go to university.	

<b>COMPETITION</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	Mainly 8 years and upwards (though it can start before at local level e.g. 6 years)	Beyond the 'Early Start' phases 'Competition' has historically been one of the main pathway options for gymnasts. It is clear that many youngsters and indeed many adults get a great deal out of preparing for, and competing in competition. It provides focus, excitement and potentially reward. The use of competition is encouraged if appropriate to the gymnasts (i.e. in a consultation between coach, gymnast (and parent).
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To compete</li> <li>To win competitions</li> </ul>	
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Club pathways</li> <li>'Flexibility, Strength and Fitness'</li> <li>'Dance, Display and Socialise'</li> </ul> (The research picked up a number of individuals in these groups who were training – over the medium to long term – for a 'return' to competition)	The coach is encouraged to have an open dialogue with the gymnasts, and parents about the commitments involved preparing for and entering competitions. It should be a joint decision because it implies considerable commitment
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	Competition – at all levels – may require superior physical preparation. Injury may be an issue for some competitive gymnasts	Even at the lower levels one or two gymnasts suggested "sometimes when we are practicing for competition it gets too much ... it gets difficult ... and you feel like you can't do it"
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competition performers may require particular psychological attributes - competence, confidence, extroversion</li> <li>Confidence/self-motivation is the key because it can be a very individual sport – training and competing alone (depending on discipline and club set-up).</li> <li>Competition performers enjoy the status of competing</li> <li>On the other hand, some gymnasts may find it difficult to handle the training, and not winning/rejection.</li> </ul>	Gymnasts without the appropriate levels (or perceived levels) of ability may need to be managed because they can be quickly be put off if they are not keeping up, or are not progressing relative to their peer groups
<b>Family/friends</b>	Parents will often need to be very supportive of their child's participation – transport, funding, emotional support. There may be tensions/conflicts with school friends, for example, in relation to going to parties. Gymnasts may prioritise the sport over friends and this can lead to some issues. However, many gymnasts make friends at the gymnastics club	

<b>Other influences</b>	Talented performers will often be focused on gymnastics at the expense of other areas of their lives e.g. school work. Special arrangements may need to be made with, for example, schools so that schoolwork and gymnastics don't conflict with each other substantially	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower level competition (e.g. grass roots/general gymnastics)</li> <li>• Veterans' competitions (over 19s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s)</li> </ul>	Low level competition structures in many disciplines are not well established. Even those low level structures may still be too difficult for many gymnasts
<b>Environments</b>	Sessions more serious; more structured	
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced badges</li> <li>• National finals</li> </ul>	There is concern that the competition requirements/badges in the 8-11 years segment (especially around 8-9 years) becomes too difficult for many gymnasts and thus this may lead to drop-out
<b>Coaching</b>	Personal conditioning sheets	Coaches could think about passing gymnasts on to other clubs/coaches
<b>Progression / Exit Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display groups</li> <li>• Coaching</li> </ul>	
<b>Drop-out</b>	<p>It is suggested that those gymnasts who had experienced some success in a competition environment were among the most likely to stay in the sport. These participants were seen to be amongst the most enthusiastic about the sport, they were committed.</p> <p>Though the drop down to recreational gymnastics can be a challenge for some, there are certainly routes into display groups. Many competitive gymnasts, it was argued, go on to be coaches</p>	<p>"The pressure of competing is so high that people do drop-out, even at county level, if you are not doing certain moves, you can't compete".</p> <p>One of the issues with competition is that it requires minimum standards of performance for entry, and specific moves. This means that many gymnasts who were previously competing either cannot and do not want to do the moves.</p>

<b>TALENT &amp; PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	Young children may be recognised as early as 4 years for having exceptional flexibility, strength, coordination and skill 5-7 year olds with this ability may be given more specialised support BG Talent Pool includes youngsters as young as 8 years, and peaks about 11 years – there is a sharp drop-off from 11-12 year onwards until about 20 years when only the highest level performers are left in this pathway	The 'Talent Pool' describes the gymnasts that are below World Class programmes (or the equivalent for non-funded disciplines). Gymnasts are identified as talented based on the high standard of their competition results.
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To compete and win at the highest level</li> </ul>	
<b>Entry Routes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talent ID can happen from any age from 4 to 12 years</li> <li>Progression from club 'development squads' to national programmes can happen anywhere between 12 to 18 years.</li> </ul>	
<b>Physical characteristics and development</b>	High level of physical development – flexibility, strength, body control, skills etc.	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>	To compete at the highest level requires an almost fanatical devotion to the sport For many this psychological component is one of the main determining factors	
<b>Other influences</b>	Talented and high performing gymnasts – in many respects – need to block out 'the other' distractions. Relationships and social life may suffer. This needs to be carefully managed	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regional/national/international competition</li> <li>National Development Plan</li> </ul>	
<b>Environments</b>	A noticeable change in sporting environment. Much more serious/intense but with significant opportunities and rewards	
<b>Coaching</b>	Of all the segments, the traditional discipline specific – technical skills/instructional – coaching model is argued to fit most comfortably here. There should, however, be a time for fun and variation in any training programme. Coaches also need to acknowledge that as the gymnasts get older they will require a much bigger say in their training, preparation and competition	
<b>Other support/services</b>		The time involved in training and competing at the highest levels can be very onerous on the gymnasts – many drop-out because of over-training or because they have other competing considerations – school, other sport, friends etc.
<b>Drop-out</b>	According to BG data a great many talented/performance gymnasts drop-out of this pathway from 11-12 years onwards (well below	

	peak competition age) As might be expected from a high performance pathway there is considerable drop-out	
--	--	--

<b>GUIDING AND HELPING</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Age</b>	12 years and upwards Many youngsters get a taste for leadership and coaching from a young age Coaching starts (formally) at 16 years	Awards Scheme Coach is available from age 14 upwards
<b>Motivations for engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To guide and support younger gymnasts</li> <li>To stay in a sport they love</li> <li>To give something back to the sport</li> </ul>	"Leadership academies have been very successful at keeping youngsters in the sport at 12-14 years"
<b>Entry Routes</b>	Mainly through club pathways. Leadership academies can be used to address drop-off in the 12-14 years age range	
<b>Psychological characteristics and development</b>		"They get recognition in school when they're doing awards associated with the leadership academies" "I get much more out of coaching than I did as a participant"
<b>Family/friends</b>	Friendship and social ties are very important in gymnastics clubs. Leading, coaching, officiating, and other roles provide a means of keeping in touch.	
<b>Sport structures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership Academies</li> <li>Award Scheme Coach</li> <li>UKCC Levels 1-3</li> </ul>	
<b>Activities</b>	Judging course for 13 year olds	"they feel like they're getting a qualification"
<b>Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BG bursary scheme</li> <li>'New Coach' initiative</li> </ul>	The cost of coach education has increased since the introduction of the UKCC especially at Level 2. This is prohibitive to some potential coaches, but – it is argued – is also forcing clubs to think more carefully about who they put forward for coaching qualifications.
<b>Drop-out</b>	Many coaches will go to university at 18 years – but will look for participation and coaching opportunities when they are there	

## Strategic and Operational Issues in Gymnastics

The following section provides an overview of some of the main strategic and operational issues to emerge through the project work.

### Identifying 'the problem'

For most interviewees in the study the main issue was reducing drop-out.

Though there is a very high level of interest in gymnastics amongst young children (gymnastics is one of the top participation sports for young children), by 8-9 years many are already dropping out, and by 16 years only 15% of total participants remain active.

This has serious implications for the profile of the sport, for membership income, and for attracting funding, for example, from Sport England in relation to adult participation targets.

What are the issues underlying drop-out? What should be done to increase participation, keep gymnasts in the sport, and to increase the average age?

### The influence of performance orientated and competitive gymnastics

Evidence from the interviews with BG staff, coaches, gymnasts and parents identified some common themes:

- Gymnastics, it is argued, is too orientated towards performance and competition in specific disciplines - e.g. artistic
- Coaching has been primarily concerned with technical skill development, an instructional model, and a "command" style which has not worked well with young children/recreational gymnasts
- Participants who win in competitions are encouraged, those who are less successful may be discarded in favour of the next 'batch' of competition hopefuls
- There are simply not enough options available for youngsters wanting to follow a more recreationally orientated pathway which extends into late childhood/early adulthood
- The sport is seen as being too serious, narrow, rigid ... there are few opportunities for fun/enjoyment
- There is significant cultural/political resistance to change. It suits many to perpetuate the 'old model', not least because there is a constant stream of youngsters willing to join the sport at the bottom end.

There is evidence to support this view:

- Previous modelling and strategic reviews in BG have highlighted the importance of the performance pathway in terms of investment and (pre-UKCC) coaching preparation
  - The IYS (2010) drop-out research highlighted issues around performance focus and coaching provision
- The current research supports BG's analysis and suggests some additional structural issues:
- Drop-out starts to occur at 8-9 years, exactly the same time as national competition structures start to engage
  - There was evidence of problems in provision in the 5-7 years, and 8-11 years segments, in terms of breadth of provision, in the use of activities (e.g. not enough variety in sessions), and in coaching approaches (e.g. not child centred enough, not fun enough)
  - Evidence on drop-out from general gymnastics suggests problems in the provision of this discipline
  - A number of coaches suggested that skills progressions in gymnastics are presenting problems for 8-9 year olds – the sport becomes too difficult for them to progress compared with their peers
  - Very little proactively targeted provision for older teenagers and adults
  - There are issues with the provision to boys in terms of branding and role models
  - Though there are certainly efforts to change perceptions about gymnastics – gymnasts, parents, teachers, coaches and BG officers all appear to work with an unspoken assumption that gymnastics is a sport for smaller framed young people who engage in competition!

The research also highlighted a number of factors which were less related to the structure of provision:

- Many of the characteristics which facilitate engagement in gymnastics - flexibility, strength, coordination, and bravery - are more easily developed at a younger age – notably flexibility/bravery before sexual maturation – and that this makes gymnastics an early specialisation sport.
- Since gymnasts generally engage in the sport at a younger age they may already have had 5 years in the sport by the time they are 9 years old (and thus time to explore other interests)
- From 7-8 years, youngsters become much more conscious of what they do and don't like in sport (though this applies across all sports)
- Many youngsters are offered alternative sporting/leisure opportunities through school from 9-10 years onwards (though this applied across all sports)
- The social pressures on young gymnasts become considerable from 11-12 years onwards
- Many youngsters struggle to maintain existing levels of performance post sexual maturation
- Many youngsters withdraw from the sport because of injuries
- For some respondents there was a recognition that though it is possible to increase the average age of gymnasts (it is currently 9.5 years), there would always be limitations on how far it could go

### **Change management approaches employed by British Gymnastics**

BG has implemented a number of change management approaches to improve provision and address drop-out.

The first has resulted from the introduction of the **UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC)**. BG developed UKCC programmes which emphasised pedagogical 'how to' knowledge ("building rapport, understanding the participant") as much as technical 'what' knowledge in the new provision. The UKCC programmes also recognised that most coaching in the sport was targeted at children and those coaches required the knowledge and skills to deliver effectively to this target group – different objectives, environments, activities and coaching styles.

The main problem with using UKCC as a change mechanism has been how it has impacted/responded to the wider structural conditions (traditions, cultures) within the sport (which emphasise and replicate the 'old model'), reinforced through the extensive use of mentors as the principle tool for coach development, and the relatively low level impact that an x hour Level x UKCC course can have on a coach's development in the face of these other forces.

"When we go on our coaching courses, we come up with loads of good ideas. But when you get back into the club, you just tend to do what you've always done, you rest on your laurels, and, I suppose, that could become quite mundane" – **Artistic Coach**

"The coaches at my club are 40 years old. They did their coaching qualification when they were 18, that's 22 years ago. When they did their qualification it was all about strength, flexibility, getting the skills that they needed to progress into an elite gymnasts rather than providing a broader more inclusive view of gymnastics away from the competitive structure. They've had no recent connection with BG, they're just in their club doing it the way they want to do it" – **General Gymnastics Coach**

To reinforce the need for change BG have now introduced their **Gymnastics for All (GFA)** initiative. This is a governing body wide philosophy/programme which emphasises 'breadth' (beyond single disciplines), 'inclusion', 'fun' and 'friendship' in the sport - through reviewed coach education and resources, and new product development around competitions and festivals.

Early successes include attempts to change club and coach mind-sets through club conferences, coach development and education (notably the Excel coaching clips), resources (Understanding Gymnastics for All), and the GymFusion festival events. BG officers were fully behind the Gymnastics for All strategy.

## Some Reflections and Thoughts on the Ways Forward

The segmentation of the participant base presents some very positive signs for gymnastics if the aligned product options can be clarified, marketed, and delivered, and some fairly serious supply side issues ironed out.

There is considerable evidence and support for both expanding the number of children coming into the sport, for keeping them in longer, and for encouraging more adult participation. There is potential for both the absolute numbers to increase, and the average age.

- The sport has many benefits for children's physical, psychological and social development - which are recognised by the gymnasts and parents (i.e. the customers!)
- There is considerable demand – as evidenced by waiting lists/BG officer accounts – which would only increase if the quantity and quality of supply to children could be improved
- Though there are some age related physical and psychological constraints on participation in gymnastics, the sport has a sufficient range of 'product options' (disciplines, environments, activities) to cater for the needs of participants young and old, recreational and competitive
- There is considerable scope for keeping youngsters in the sport
- The main suggestion from this study is to increase the availability of sampling opportunities (disciplines, environments, activities) until at least 12 years, whilst still offering defined pathway provision for competition, talent and performance, fitness and strength, and display groups from possibly 6-7 years onwards (see insert next page)
- This contrasts with the current position where there is often earlier specialisation in particular facets of gymnastics, and quite blurred pathway options for gymnasts after that with the competition structure looming large
- There are issues with provision at 5-7 years, and 8-9 years which have serious implications for longer term involvement in the sport
- Gymnastics is currently set-up as a sport with one main linear pathway – it needs to think more about non-linear entry and exit routes (i.e. thinking of gymnasts who might leave, but then come back), and a variety of product options to meet changing wants/needs
- There is certainly scope for increasing the involvement of boys, and adults – products such as free-style, fitness and strength groups, display teams hold considerable potential if the branding, facilities, environment, activities can be sorted
- Many of these activities have a 'street/urban' or 'adventure sport' feel which are very attractive to boys and young men (again the branding has to be right)
- Clubs, workforce, environments and activities need to align much more with the segmentation approach offered in this report - this requires more diversity in provision
- Gymnastics providers need to fill the whole pathway – in many instances it is the pathway gaps which create the drop-out (they get bored/find it difficult to keep doing what they were doing)
- The branding/images and packaging of gymnastics in all its guises needs to be clearly thought through. The evidence suggests multiple products and multiple brand profiles targeted very specifically at particular groups

The extent to which these ideas can be implemented and adopted are contingent on some fairly fundamental barriers in/changes to the supply side.

- There is evidence of weaknesses in both the quantity and quality of existing provision and for particular participant segments
- There is evidence to suggest that there remains a 'lively' ideological/philosophical discussion amongst committees, clubs and coaches about what gymnastics is i.e. (1) a young, early specialisation, high turnover, performance orientated sport (2) a higher average age, more inclusive, lower turnover, multiple pathways and options
- There were comments that setting up the breadth of options – notably at 8-11 years highlighted above - would involve a lot of hard work in terms of planning and logistics [and that many clubs/coaches would find it difficult to do this – "it would be a big ask"]

- Serious scoping work needs to be undertaken to map-out strategic objectives e.g. increasing number of participants and increasing average age – against existing resource, and supply side possibilities/rigidities.
  - Increasing pressure on the existing facilities, club networks and workforce?
  - Building new facilities, capacity in clubs, attracting new coaches?
  - Utilising other gymnastics providers – schools, local authorities, universities, commercial providers, attracting new coaches? (BG is currently pursuing a strategy of working with providers from outside the clubs – e.g. schools, local authorities, universities, commercial providers)
  - Reprioritising the allocation of resource away from a broad base of young gymnastics participants (c 1 million regular children participants) with high levels of drop-out by adulthood, to a narrower/taller base with fewer children but more adults?
  - Some objectives may not be attainable without considerable growth in the supply side/or existing customer groups being deprioritised (thus changing considerably the structure of the sport).

### **More sampling; more dedicated pathways**

**Early Start - 5-7 year olds** – the seeds of drop-out especially for boys may well have been planted before 9 years and over. There are concerns that provision to this group is often far too skills orientated, serious, routine and boring. 5-7 year olds need structure in provision, but within this structure there should be opportunities for fun, games, variety – keeping the youngsters active and engaged.

**Exploring the Option – 8-11 years** – when most drop-out occurs. Currently the increase in technical demands in the sport, the increase in competitive activity, and an increased self-awareness amongst the youngsters in relation to their peers, are some main reasons for drop-out in the age. 8-11 year olds want a little more say in what they do, they want options, different experiences before deciding where they want to focus – this could be skills, competitions, displays, badges etc.

Taken together these two segments could be seen as expanding considerably the opportunity for individual gymnasts to sample different aspects of the sport from pre-school through to 11-12 years old. However, there remains an opportunity for youngsters to specialise in specific disciplines and competitions if they have the motivation, ability and support. The proposal, therefore, explicitly recognises a split pathway from as young as 6/7 years, with a recreational and competitive options running side by side before increased specialisation after 12 years old.

- A number of expert interviewees, coaches and gymnasts talked about getting the right philosophy and atmosphere in the clubs – the club should be seen as caring, inclusive, engaging, consultative, and democratic with reach far beyond the coach, or coach and gymnast, to parents and other community stakeholders. The ‘social glue’ is seen, as much, if not more, a contributor to long term engagement of participants in the sport than any other sporting ingredient (see insert next page).
- Clubs need to be clearer about their offer – how it hits particular types of participant need – what is their structure, what is their pathway... The gymnasts need to be aware of what is available.
- From a system change perspective the coaches are clearly crucial. Though the Gymnastics for All resources are going in the right direction, BG is also encouraged to think about how the ‘old model’ traditions and cultures in the sport can be addressed through changes to the mentoring system.

“I think mentoring is a massive area – and we don’t have it right” **BG Officer**

### Setting Up the Right Philosophy, Culture and Environment in Clubs for Both Performance and Participants

One of the major issues highlighted in the study has been the tendency for gymnastics clubs and coaches to focus on single discipline competitive success leading to high levels of gymnast turnover (in pursuit of 'talent'), and high levels of drop-out from 8-9 years onwards.

A number of head coaches in the research recognised this problem and suggested that getting the right philosophy, culture and environments in the club was an essential consideration.

"Gymnastics seems to me to be very individual and competitive. Gymnasts get flogged, there's no fun in the competitive element, it just gets too serious"

"It is tough at the higher levels – but there's still time to have fun. They are children after all"

"We believe in a team ethic. We support each other. None of the gymnasts, irrespective of their ability, are treated any differently. The gymnasts respond to and support the team idea"

"There's no gossip, no cliques – that's always trouble. They look after each other, they look after the new starters"

"We compete, we do well, but we also have fun. There is a time to work hard and there is a time to let go"

"It's not all about competing and winning ... we like to see the gymnasts develop as people, we like to give them the opportunity to deliver skills for later life"

"The gymnasts, the parents, the coaches are involved in the decision making"

"When gymnasts don't want to compete and perform we give them another option"

"Many clubs don't have 'the full pathway' ... we give them introductory experiences, recreational opportunities, competition opportunities, leadership, coaching and considerable variety within that"

"Many gymnasts stay with the club for years, so you've got to think 'how can I change things to keep the gymnasts interested and engaged?'"

"We've got a basketball net, and badminton for cool downs, we have lots of social events, Halloween parties and other things. It all keeps them engaged and involved. Some other attraction when their session doesn't go quite as well"

"Variety and options are essential – we do badminton, basketball, it's just a bit of fun at the end of the session. We organise things ... parties, Halloween parties, judging, coaching, coaching qualifications ... it keeps us in the sport, they variety keeps people interested and in the sport for longer" **Competitive gymnast**

## Using the Segments to Inform Coaching, Coach Development and Education

Though participant modelling can be used to inform a broad range of sport development activities – product development, club development, competition structure etc. - the link to coaching in gymnastics is obvious.

The nature of gymnastics i.e. with its emphasis on very specific technique, and a considerable safety component, means that all forms of the activity require coach input or supervision and there are BG regulations to this effect.

Furthermore, in recent research (Institute of Youth Sport, 2010), coaching was identified as one of the main reasons for drop-out from the sport – sessions were seen as ‘boring/repetitive’, there was a ‘lack of progression’, gymnasts ‘didn’t like coaches’, not enough feedback/encouragement, there was ‘shouting’ and favouritism based on ability. Improving coaching – e.g. making sessions ‘more fun/less serious’, less repetitive’, ‘more varied/progression’, helping the coaches ‘to understand children’, be inclusive, ‘to be nicer’, helping coaches provide feedback and encouragement - was seen as being the main remedy.

These issues were certainly picked up in the current research, however, the main additional issue (which was only partially picked up in IYS (2010)), was the coaches’ role in providing a variety of pathways and options outside the traditional competitive route. The coaches – in the club context – clearly have a very important role lobbying for, establishing and delivering these options, which will undoubtedly have significant implications for future participation in the sport.

When these issues are viewed collectively, therefore, it is of no surprise that BG have asked for the implications of the current work to be explored for coaching, coach development and education.

In the original brief BG requested a ‘coaching skills matrix’. This could be interpreted in many different ways – for example, a comprehensive document which considers the definition of coaching, the knowledge, skills and attributes/capabilities of effective coaching in different domains and at different levels, assessment criteria and so on.

This is a considerable task in its own right – so after further discussion with BG it was determined that the segments would be used to provide some high-level implications for coaching practitioners who worked with these groups.

This information could be seen to compliment a range of existing source materials which consider coaching, effective coaching practice, coaching children, and coach development and education resources (e.g. Abraham & Collins, 2011; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Haskins, Jolly, & Lara-Bercial, 2011; Muir, Morgan, Abraham, & Morley, 2011; North, undated; Stafford, 2011). Also, BG’s UKCC resources etc.

The information can also be seen as complimenting/adding to the BG ‘Understanding Gymnastics for All & Foundations of Gymnastics’ resources with more specific knowledge about participants, and in particular recreationally orientated participants, in terms of favoured environments, activities, and coaching approaches.

## **Generic Features of Coaching Which Complement the Gymnastics for All Strategy**

Throughout the fieldwork stage BG officers, the coaches, the parents and participants were asked to reflect on good or effective coaching.

The following generic features were identified:

### Participant centred

The coaches should not focus on what they personally want to achieve (e.g. competitive success), but on what the gymnasts want/need from the sport, what motivates them, what do they enjoy, what environments and activities meets their needs

### Establish a people centred environment

Get to know the gymnasts - their first names, their families, background, interest, motivations, aspirations and difficulties

Make the gymnasts and the parents feel welcome, included and informed (parents want to know what is happening in sessions and with their child)

Ask 'how can I set-up this club, or this session, to make it as enjoyable, motivating and inclusive as possible?'

Manage the wider social environment – tell parents the ground rules, keep them informed about their child's progress, ask them for feedback, ask them for help

### Coverage of provision

Ensure there is provision to meet a wide range of gymnasts' needs, and tailor this provision in terms of age/stage (young and old), and motivations for engagement (recreational and competitive)

Different age groups, and recreational and competitive gymnasts want/need very different environments, activities, and coaching styles – meet these wants/needs

### Session planning and goals

Session plans relevant to what gymnasts want/need from the sport

Sessions planned in advance and situated within a longer term scheme of work (where possible given uncertainties in some environments about who will turn up)

Variation between and within sessions (note: some younger gymnasts like the routine elements)

Active involve of gymnast (and parent for younger gymnasts) in their learning, development and progression (either providing feedback on sessions for the youngsters, or actively involved in planning)

Session plans are not a straightjacket - they can be applied flexibly (or indeed abandoned) to meet the needs of a particular session (i.e. depending on who turns up, to fit the mood of the gymnasts, depending on how long activities take and so on).

However, it is always better to plan (contingently), than to do none at all!

### In the Session

Session activities relevant to coaching goals

Gymnasts are active, busy, and on task (e.g. no queuing!) [Note: for older gymnasts it might be appropriate to give them space, to let them direct their own activities]

Sessions are fun, interesting, stimulating and show variation – not just conditioning and skills in same order every week! Use games, move the order around, think about how games can be used to develop skills

There is progression in sessions – the gymnasts are always working towards their next goal

Show enthusiasm; be active, engaged and participatory

Be friendly, supportive, encouraging and sensitive [for some gymnasts this may be the crucial factor!]

Use appropriate communication methods – keep language/messages simple, use demonstrations – but don't over coach!

Establish clear boundaries, rules and discipline – for example, so the gymnasts know when to focus on the task, and know when to have a chat

Experiment in sessions – use different communication styles, activities, approaches – see what works and what doesn't

Reflect in the session – is it working, is it not? Don't be frightened to change things if they are not working

Allow opportunities for youngsters to play, to experiment and to get things wrong (whilst bearing in mind the safety aspects associated with gymnastics)

#### Session Organisation

Environment is safe, up to date, and with appropriate facilities, equipment and personnel

Sessions start and finish on time

#### Review

Always seek feedback and reflect on sessions – what worked, what didn't work

Ask when did the gymnasts seem happy, when were they bored and fidgety?

Encourage gymnasts to reflect and learn from their session

## Segment Specific Features of Coaching Which Complement the Gymnastics for All Strategy

The segment descriptions provide extensive details of the characteristics, desired environments, activities and coaching points.

Here are some examples of how coaching could vary in a recreational pathway:

22 and over years	Gymnast directed/very low profile coaching/peer coaching Good facilities Social opportunities/travel
15-16 years	Gymnast directed Gymnast and coach enjoy 'equal' adult relationship Space for gymnasts to pursue social objectives
12-14 years	Gymnast wants an even greater say in structure of sessions/activities Gymnast may have an idea of what they want to achieve through sport Sensitivity to physical, psychological and social changes in athletes Friendship, emotional support etc.
8-11 years	Still fun and enjoyment Gymnast wants a greater say in structure of session/activities Lots of games/but greater focus on skill development/physical preparation Continue to sample different parts of sport
5-7 years	Fun and enjoyment Structured session but provide youngster with opportunity to play/experiment Lots of games (which incorporate skills) Sample different parts of the sport Ask for feedback

## Next Steps

The report has made the case for an evolved 'Participant Model for Gymnastics'.

It has suggested that the model should be defined by age/stage and motivations for engagement, and that initial data collection suggests eight main segments:

- Early start
- Exploring the options
- Late start
- Flexibility, strength and fitness
- Dance, display and socialise
- Compete
- Talent and performance
- Guiding and helping

Details have been provided about these segments in terms of an emerging consolidated information base.

This research should be seen as part of a continuing process whereby the model and underpinning knowledge base are updated and refined by on-going research, and market intelligence from officers on the grounds.

To progress the work it is suggested that:

- There is critical scrutiny of the participant model, segments, and segment descriptions
- For each segment a clear service offer be developed which is clarified and communicated both nationally and at, for example, club level – so gymnasts know what opportunities are available to them
- The information is used to refine service provision around Gymnastics for All and to inform coach development and education opportunities
- Information provided by the model and segments is used to refine approaches to change management of gymnastics providers – clubs, coaches etc.

## References

- Abraham, A., & Collins, D. (2011). Effective skill development: how should athletes' skills be developed? In D. Collins, A. Button & H. Richards (Eds.), *Performance psychology: a practitioner's guide*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.
- Bailey, R., Collins, D., Ford, P., MacNamara, A., Toms, M., and Pearce, G., (2010) *Participant Development in Sport: An Academic Review*, Leeds, Sports Coach UK.
- Côté, J., & Gilbert, W. D. (2009). An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, 17(1), 1-17.
- Haskins, D., Jolly, S., & Lara-Bercial, S. (2011). *Coaching children curriculum: A guide for governing bodies of sport*. Leeds: The National Coaching Foundation.
- Hastings, G (2007) *Social Marketing: Why Should the Devil Have All The Best Tunes*, Elsevier, London.
- Institute of Youth Sport (2010) *Examining the Research Why Young Gymnasts Drop-out , or Withdraw from, Participant in Recreational and Competitive Gymnastics*, Institute of Youth Sport, Loughborough University.
- Layder, D. (1998) *Sociological Practice: Linking Theory and Social Research*, Sage Publications, London.
- Muir, B., Morgan, G., Abraham, A., & Morley, D. (2011). Developmentally appropriate approaches to coaching children. In I. Stafford (Ed.), *Coaching children in sport*. London: Routledge.
- North, J. (undated). *Recognising effective coaching*. Sports Coach UK, Available from author. Leeds.
- North, J. (2009) *Coaching Workforce 2009-2016*, Sports Coach UK, Leeds.
- North, J. (2011a) *A Participant Model for Paddlesports: Initial Technical Considerations and Model Draft*, Fusion Research, Leeds.
- North, J. (2011b) *A Participant Model for Rugby League: Initial Technical Considerations and Model Draft*, Fusion Research, Leeds.
- Pawson, R. (2006) *Evidence Based Policy: A Realist Perspective*, London, Sage.
- Sports Coach UK (2009) *Participant Development Model User Guide*, Sports Coach UK, Leeds.
- Stafford, I. (2011). *Coaching children in sport* I. Stafford (Ed.)

## Appendix One – Anecdotal Feedback on Gymnastics Products

The research identified a number of key gymnastics products and any anecdotal feedback on them is recorded here:

### Gymnastics ‘Sessions’

This is the meat and drink of gymnastics the weekly (or multiple weekly) session at the club focusing on (1) a warm-up – perhaps with games (2) conditioning (3) skills (4) a cool down – perhaps with games.

There appears to be a number of standard formats for sessions.

Historically, gymnastics sessions were structured as follows – warm-up, conditioning, skills work, with many single lines and queues, then cool down.

More recently, and in response to criticisms about queuing, boredom and repetition, coaches have started to split up sessions into warm-up, 4 stations with particular skills for 10 minutes each, and then cool down.

This is an improvement, however:

“After a while it’s going to get boring”

“They took that long warming up they only really had half an hour and then moved around the four different things [apparatus] in that time so they only really had five or ten minutes on each thing which was just not long enough. They did the same thing week after week so it did get a bit boring. When I did it as a child it was two and a half to three hours and went twice a week so you actually got much longer on each apparatus” – Parent (from IYS, 2010)

“She wasn’t learning anything new. She didn’t learn how to do flips or anything like that. It was just the same old thing. Most of it was warm-up and they were doing bunny hops” - Parent (from IYS, 2010)

“They just did the same thing every week and the classes were very big so it was on a sort of a circuit. So I could see they were getting a bit bored when it was the same thing each week” - Parent (from IYS, 2010)

[See also ‘Josh’s story’ next page]

A suggestion from the research is that the basic format – warm-up, 4 stations, and cool down can work. However, there needs to be more use of variety/games (mini-competitions) within the session and not just in warm-up and cool down. Indeed, skills work could easily be integrated into a games format. Instead of four skills for ten minutes each, how about – warm-up with game, skill, game (with skill), skill, game (with skill), cool down?

In conditioning sessions – “make it fun so they don’t realise they are doing conditioning work ... races through the pits, trying to knock each other off the beam”

The coaches also need to think about how they present the activities (skills/games) – their language, metaphor, encouragement, motivation, humour.

“There is a limit to how much you can do in a one hour session – warm-up, conditioning etc. It doesn’t leave much time to work on skills – thus for those who want to develop they need to stay more than 1 hour per week. So there is a group who stays on for a second hour whilst the other class warms up ... it is a smaller group who get much more specialist and individualised coaching, for example, on beam or vault. They are already warmed up, they are very focused”.

## Josh's Story

Josh started gymnastics with his Dad when he was 4 years old in a pre-school session.

He enjoyed the sessions greatly - they were fun, there was freedom to try lots of the things, there were games.

When Josh went to school he stayed with the club a joined a junior recreational/beginners group.

Josh did not enjoy the sessions half as much – they were rigid, structured, with a warm up, skills using four areas with different types of equipment; there was waiting, queuing and no games.

Josh decided he didn't want to do gymnastics any longer and he left and now plays Rugby.

Here is what his Dad witnessed:

In this particular club there was four age group running concurrently in four quadrants – 3-4 years, 5-7 years, 8-11 years, 12 and over... in each group there was progressively fewer gymnasts and boys:

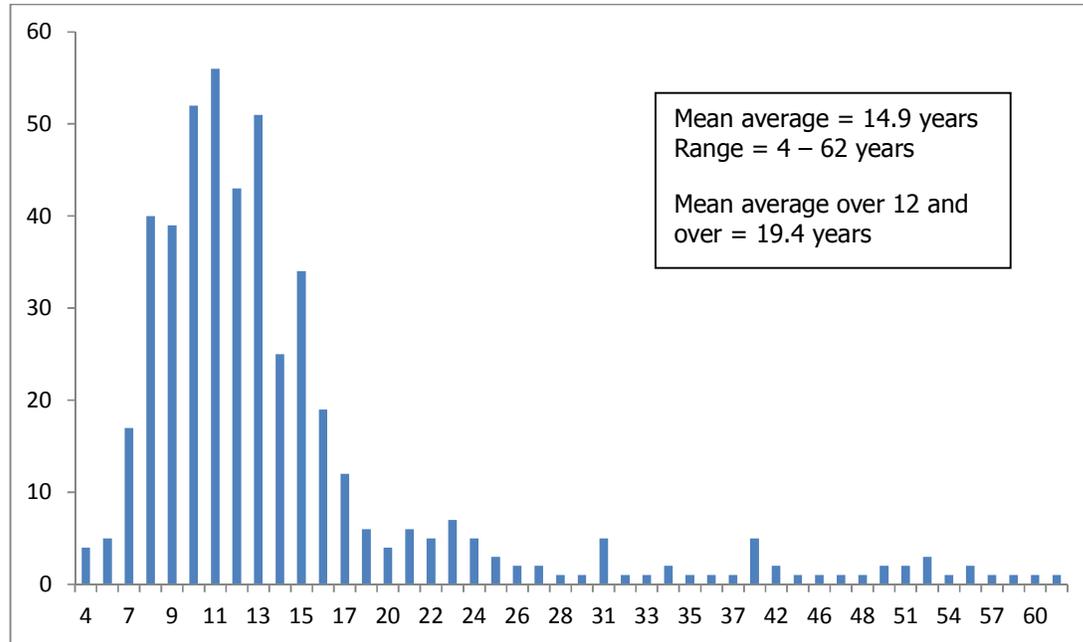
<b>12 year and over</b> 4 in group All girls	<b>8-11 year olds</b> 10 in group 90% girls
<b>3-4 year olds</b> 30 in group 50% girls/50% boys	<b>5-7 year olds</b> 18 in group 70% girls

Something was clearly going wrong – why were the kids dropping out of the sport, where were the boys?

Josh's Dad noticed that as the age groups got older the sessions were increasingly skill driven and more serious. "Where had the games gone? Why couldn't the coaches using a mixture of games and skills during sessions and not just in the warm ups? Josh loved the games – but at five the sport changed"

## Festivals and Displays

Chart: Number of Participants in Gym Fusion by Age (2011)



“Children love display work – it’s different from the normal slog of competition”

“The kids love it ... and the people in the community they like to see the displays as well”

“Girls like to work in groups – and displays get them working together. It becomes a more social thing”

“The boys, well men, love doing the displays ... they love it ... there’s one bloke who’s 37 and he gets in there and has a good time. They’re doing the cartwheels, handstands and flicks”

“Everybody really really loved Gym Fusion, we put so much effort in the display, we had so many people join afterwards”

“We loved Gym Fusion in April, and the London event ... it brings the group together, it is something to work towards, we all bounce ideas off each other, it’s something to aim for ... next year we’re going to Australia!”

“I think it’s changing; I think Gym Fusion, festivals and displays will make an impact, but I don’t think that’s going to take away the external reasons for a lot of people stopping, and that is predominantly university, work, relationships, marriage and babies. There are an awful lot of other things happening in the late teens and early 20s”

“Zumba’s great but it only fills a small hole; it doesn’t fill a hole as big as gymnastics leaves. Gymnastics provides an opportunity to do certain things with your body – handstands, rolls, flicks, cartwheels – Zumba doesn’t even come close. Ex competition gymnasts need a thrill, and that is not provided by Zumba”

“If you could set-up a class for an hour or two a week for ex-gymnasts, with a certain minimum skill level, where they could get condition, fitness and dance, and even make up routines just for fun, then that’s a way into the ‘Zumba’ market”

“Gym Fusion is an event based product targeted at teenage kids to keep them in longer”

“It’s about showing off and that’s what a lot of Gymnastics is about. It’s more a performance, a show, than a gymnastics competition”