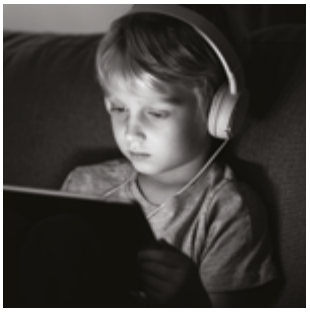
INACTIVE NATION

Part one: Getting under-11s in England moving again

May 2026






CSJ The Centre for Social Justice

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About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report Breakthrough Britain. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report It Happens Here shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century. Other CSJ policy initiatives include Universal Credit, Universal Support, and the Into Work Guarantee; Family Hubs; Housing First; Severe Absence from School; and Prisoner Work Placements.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners, and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of frontline charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations. These are curated by our CSJ Foundation and have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown in some of the UK's most challenging communities, far beyond Westminster.

The social issues facing Britain are chronic. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice and connect the back streets of Britain with the corridors of power, so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Acknowledgements

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- The Boathouse Youth
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- NE Youth
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Foreword

Children deserve the chance to move and play every day. That principle should be ever present in our policy making, our schools and our parenting. Yet for millions of children growing up in England today, it remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

Physical activity has formed an integral part of my life and career. Through professional mountaineering, I gained a great appreciation of what a physical challenge does for a person: the confidence it builds, the resilience it forges, the sense of belonging it creates. Access to physical recreation, or the lack of it, can shape life chances.

Which is why the findings in this report should concern all of us. Across England, over half of primary school children are not meeting basic activity guidelines. One in five of the least active children now report doing no physical activity at all. Rates of childhood obesity are only growing. All the while, time spent on screens continues to rise, stealing away hours once spent outdoors.

This report provides a timely intervention, with practical, evidence-based, and scalable solutions to break this trend. A School Activity Standard that supports teachers to embed physical activity into every primary school's culture and makes physical development a priority for Ofsted. Active lessons that give every child the chance to move during the school day. Reformed teacher training so that educators have the skills and confidence to make it happen. A focused and coordinated effort to unlock the facilities, spaces, and volunteering networks that make activity possible beyond the school gates. And importantly, an ambitious national target for three-quarters of children to meet activity guidelines by 2030.

It contributes to a growing consensus that ambitious action is needed, whether that be in rethinking the school day, or in making green and blue spaces accessible for everyone, as the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature recently called for.[1]

I hope ministers, local authorities, and school leaders will share this ambition. The children in our primary schools today cannot wait for another decade of stalled progress. It's time to get moving.

Andy MacNae MP
Labour Member of Parliament for Rossendale and Darwen,
Chair of the APPG for Outdoor Recreation and Access to Nature,
Vice-Chair of the APPG for Sport and Physical Activity

1 All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Recreation Access to Nature (2025) *Outdoors For All: Recommendations to Government on Access to Nature*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group, September. Available at: https://outdoors.inparliament.uk/outdoors-all-report.

Foreword

Children learn better when they move, play, and spend time outside. That's not a radical idea - it's what teachers know, what parents know, and what the evidence consistently shows.

And yet we've designed it out of so many children's lives. Physical challenges provide invaluable learning experiences that we are capable of much more than we tend to believe we are.

Becoming the first and only (so far) woman to row solo across the world's "Big Three" oceans, I realised I was able to expand far beyond my own limits. By not making physical activity a top educational priority, children are missing out on these vital life lessons.

Yet the benefits of being active extend far beyond the resilience they build.

Play and physical activity are essential in children's brain development, strengthening connections between emotional, social, and cognitive systems. They also make children happy and relaxed, therefore ready to learn.

Inactive Nation shows that it's the poorest children who lose out most - the ones with the least access to safe green spaces and the least likely to have sport or activity built into their school day. That's an injustice as well as a public health failure.

The report offers a clear pathway to solving this failure. By providing primary schools with the support and incentives they need to prioritise physical activity and embed it at the heart of their culture, we can teach every child the importance of being active every day.

Reinforcing this behavioural change with more opportunities to use safe spaces where children can play and be active, we may begin to raise an active generation.

Access to nature, to movement, to unstructured play - these aren't extras to be squeezed in around 'real' learning. They are how children thrive. I'm grateful to the Centre for Social Justice for putting this so clearly on the table.

Dr Roz Savage MBE MP
Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for South Cotswolds and the only woman to row solo across the world's "Big Three" oceans.

Executive summary

England is raising a generation of children who are not moving.

Despite our proud sporting heritage, millions of children are growing up without the physical activity they need to be healthy, confident, and ready to learn. In primary school classrooms today, one in two children are failing to meet basic activity levels.[2]

Instead, growing numbers of children under the age of 11 are swapping outdoor play and activity for screens, at the expense of their physical, social, and emotional development. At ages 8 to 9, children are now spending around two hours a day online, rising to three hours among older primary school pupils.[3]

But despite the unfolding consequences for children's health, wellbeing, and attainment, government policy has not kept pace, even as other countries speed ahead. It is time to tackle the inactivity crisis and put England's young people back on a path to a healthier and more productive future.

The inactivity divide

The evidence is resounding: an active childhood promotes healthy physical development, builds resilience, and supports good behaviour.[4] It provides mentors, role models, and friends. Yet too many children are missing out on the lifelong benefits that come with activity and sport.

To date, attention has centred on older children, yet this has underappreciated new and concerning trends among younger age groups, where outdoor play is increasingly being displaced by screen-based activity among the so-called "*iPad kids*".

New analysis for this report finds that English 10-year-olds are now more likely to own a smartphone than be able to throw a ball,[5] while over half of primary school children, or 2.1.million, are insufficiently active (defined as doing less than an average of 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity per day).[6]

Among disadvantaged children the picture is worse. Fewer than 4 in 10 meet recommended activity levels.[7] They are also significantly less likely to take part in sport, both inside and outside of school,[8] and

2 Sport England (n.d.) *Active Lives* (Active Lives). Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home (Accessed on: 20 December 2025). The Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) guidelines recommend young people average at least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity a day. NHS (2024) *Physical activity guidelines for children and young people* (NHS Physical Activity Guidelines). Available at: nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people (Accessed on: 23 February 2026).

3 Ofcom (2025), *Children's Passive Online Measurement*, 27 June. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/research-statistics-and-data/protecting-children/ofcom-childrens-passive-online-measurement.pdf.

4 See Chapter 2.

5 76 per cent of children aged between 10 and 12 have their own mobile phone, 94 per cent of which were smartphones. Ofcom (2026) *Children and Parents' Media Literacy Tracker Data Tables*, 20 March. Available at: ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/our-research/statistical-release-calendar-2026 (Accessed on: 21 April 2026), Tables 22-23. A study on English primary school pupils found only 43 per cent of children in Year 5 achieved '*near mastery*' or '*mastery*' in overarm throw, with the remaining 57 per cent classified as '*poor*'. Lawson, C. et al. (2021) *Fundamental Movement Skill Proficiency Among British Primary School Children: Analysis at a Behavioural Component Level*, Perceptual and Motor Skills, Vol. 128, No. 2, pp. 625-648. Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7890689/pdf/10.1177_0031512521990330.pdf.

6 *Active Lives*; *NHS Physical Activity Guidelines*.

7 *Ibid.*

8 See Section 1.2.5.

are more exposed to the dangerous rise in sedentary lifestyles due to poorer access to safe outdoor play areas.[9] Screen time is filling the gap.[10]

A generation stuck still

The consequences of this shift are already visible. Childhood obesity is rising, particularly in the most deprived communities, where children are now more than twice as likely to be obese than those in the least deprived areas.[11] Severe obesity is also increasing fastest among the poorest children.[12]

Mental health is deteriorating. Recent figures showed 1 in 6 children aged 8 to 10 to have a probable mental health disorder, up from 1 in 10 just six years prior.[13] At the same time, fundamental physical skills are not being developed. Only a small minority of children are '*mastering*' the basic motor skills they need to participate confidently in sport and physical activity.[14]

Time spent inactive is not harmless. According to the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, physical inactivity is associated with 1 in 6 deaths in the UK and is estimated to cost the UK £7.4 billion annually.[15]

When large parts of the day are spent sedentary, particularly on screens, children lose opportunities to develop physically, socially, and emotionally. To establish healthy habits that track into adulthood,[16] it is particularly urgent we introduce activity at primary school age to a generation spending their early years on screens.

> *"I've got two children [in my class] who physically cannot sit on the carpet. They don't have core strength. And when I went to visit one of the girls in July, she'd never been to a nursery, she'd been sat in a corner sofa on an iPad so she hasn't developed her core strength and it's really affecting her whole development."*
>
> *Source: Teacher, in evidence to Kindred Squared.*[17]

A recent study in New Zealand involving over 6,000 children aged 2 to 8 linked over 90 minutes of daily screen time to below-average performance in communication, writing and numeracy, alongside heightened behavioural issues and precursors to anxiety disorders.[18] CSJ analysis found that up to 800,000 children aged three to five use social media independently, while 40 per cent of children under 13 have a social media profile despite restrictions.

9 Brindley, P. et al. (2025) *To Play or Not to Play: Mapping Unequal Provision of Children's Playgrounds*, Land, Vol. 14, No. 3. Available at: mdpi.com/2073-445X/14/3/477.

10 Sandercock, R.H. et al. (2012) *Screen Time and Physical Activity in Youth: Thief of Time or Lifestyle Choice?*, Journal of Physical Activity and Health, Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 977-984. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21979868/.

11 Department of Health & Social Care (2025) *National Child Measurement Programme annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025* (NCMP 2025). Available at: fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/obesity-physical-activity-nutrition/national-child-measurement-programme-2024-2025-academic-year.html (Accessed on: 23 February 2026).

12 *Ibid*.

13 NHS England (2023) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey*, 21 November. Available at: https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up.

14 A study on 6- to 9-year-olds found that only 18.7 per cent '*mastered*' all four fundamental motor skills (run, jump, throw, and catch). Duncan, M. et al. (2020) *Run, Jump, Throw and Catch: How proficient are children attending English schools at the Fundamental Motor Skills identified as key within the school curriculum?*, European Physical Education Review, Vol. 23, No. 6, pp. 814-826 (Duncan, M. et al. 2020). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1356336X19888953.

15 Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (2022) *Physical activity: applying All Our Health*, 10 March. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health (Accessed on: 11 March 2026).

16 Ramos-Munell, J. et al. (2024) *Tracking of MVPA across childhood and adolescence*, Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, Vol. 27, No. 6, pp. 396-401. Available at: https://www.jsams.org/action/showPdf?pii=S1440-2440%2824%2900083-5.

17 Kindred Squared (2025) *School Readiness Survey*, January. Available at: https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/School-Readiness-Survey-January-2025-Kindred-Squared.pdf (Accessed on: 21 April 2026).

18 Gath, M. (2026) *Longitudinal Associations Between Screen Time and Children's Language, Early Educational Skills, and Peer Social Functioning*, Developmental Psychology, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 638-652. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39786801/.

The good news is that even small changes in behaviour could have a profound national impact. We calculate that if just 15 minutes of children's daily screen time was replaced with physical activity, almost 300,000 more primary school aged children would reach healthy activity levels,[19] with lifelong benefits for themselves and wider society.

The failure to prioritise movement in early life

This crisis is not inevitable. It is the result of a system that does not prioritise children's physical development in a world where inactivity is increasingly the default.

Primary schools are not held accountable for how active their pupils are. Too often, physical activity provision in schools is confined to PE lessons, rather than acting as a counterbalance to increasingly inactive lives.

Families often lack the access, capability, and motivation needed to break the cycle of increasingly inactive lives. One third of children aged between 8 and 11 cannot easily access a park, playing field, or playground,[20] 2 in 10 parents report cutting down on their children's participation in local sports clubs due to cost-of-living increases,[21] and 81 per cent of parents underestimated how much physical activity children need.[22]

It is time for a new approach. We are calling for a new national mission to make England a world-leader in children's physical activity and build an active culture. It starts with a simple principle: every child should have the opportunity to be active every day, regardless of background or ability.

A plan to get children active in school

The report makes a range of recommendations to open opportunities for activity, but at its core it calls on the Government to embed physical activity at the heart of the education system through the introduction of a School Activity Standard.

1. **The Department for Education (DfE) should introduce a national School Activity Standard.** This should set a clear expectation that every primary school embeds physical activity into its culture and support schools to do so through a Local Physical Activity Leader and a physical activity framework.

   The School Activity Standard would move physical activity from being an add-on to a core component of high educational standards by establishing minimum expectations of movement integrated into pupils' daily life. From teaching techniques to school culture and assessment, this would draw on recent successes from Bradford to Finland to Australia.[23]

   Importantly, schools would take responsibility for delivering this change. Domestic and international evidence shows that when schools are given an appropriate framework and support network, alongside flexibility in delivery, they develop effective, locally tailored approaches. Finland's Schools on the Move programme demonstrates how this model can be effective at a national

19 See Section 1.2.3.

20 Natural England (2025) *The Children's People and Nature Survey for England: 2025 update*, 10 December. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2025-update (Accessed on: 10 April 2026).

21 Barnardos (2025) *Cost of Living Crisis: Impact on Children 2025*. Dublin: Barnardos, July 8. Available at: https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Barnardos-Cost-Of-Living-Report-2025_.pdf, p. 4.

22 Department for Media, Culture and Sport (2025) *Nearly three in five parents expect children's physical activity to drop this winter as stars back new campaign to keep kids moving*, 2 November (Let's Move! Campaign Launch). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nearly-three-in-five-parents-expect-childrens-physical-activity-to-drop-this-winter-as-stars-back-new-campaign-to-keep-kids-active (Accessed on: 16 February 2026).

23 See Section 4.1.

scale,[24] while pupils in TransformUs schools in Australia have been found to spend up to 63 minutes less time sedentary and 5 minutes more active each school day.[25]

2. **Ofsted should introduce *'physical development'* as a key evaluation area.** Inspection drives action. Introducing physical development as a core judgement would ensure that schools prioritise activity as part of their overall performance, rather than treating it as optional or peripheral.
3. **The DfE should reform teacher training to include the integration of movement into classroom practice.** Following successful international experiences, teachers should be equipped to use physical activity to support learning, assess physical skills, and build confidence among less active pupils. Many teachers currently lack the training and confidence to incorporate movement into lessons. Strengthening initial teacher training and professional development would enable teachers to embed physical activity across the school day.
4. **The DfE should issue guidance recommending that every primary school pupil receives at least one active academic lesson per day.** Embedding activity into lessons ensures that all children benefit, not just those who participate in sport.

   In an increasingly sedentary world, activity must be designed into the school day. Active lessons provide a simple, scalable way to increase movement while also supporting concentration, behaviour, and attainment.

Raising our ambition and measuring what matters

The Government should set a clear national ambition for children's physical activity and introduce stronger accountability for delivering it.

5. **The DfE and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) should set a target for 75 per cent of children to be sufficiently active by 2030.** A clear national benchmark is necessary to drive progress and focus delivery across government and schools.
6. **Active Lives monitoring should be expanded to include sedentary time, screen use, and children's awareness of activity guidelines.** Current data does not capture the full picture of inactivity. Without measuring sedentary behaviour, including screen time, policymakers and schools cannot effectively respond.
7. **The DfE should introduce national standards in physical development, including baseline and end-of-primary fitness assessments.** Schools need consistent measures to evaluate whether they are successfully improving children's physical development.

Building active communities and unlocking facilities

In countries where children are most active in their daily lives, such as the Netherlands, activity regularly takes place outside of school through sport, active travel, and outdoor play.[26] We need to rebuild our social and physical infrastructure to support similar patterns of informal, everyday activity.

24 Blom, A. et al. (2018) *Bright spots, physical activity investments that work: the Finnish Schools on the Move programme*, British Journal of Sports Medicine, Vol. 52, No. 13, pp. 820-822. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28954798/, pp. 820-821 (Blom et al. 2018).

25 Hill, J. and Shewbridge, C. (2025) *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active?* Paris: OECD, 26 November (OECD 2025). Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/11/how-can-oecd-countries-empower-children-to-be-more-physically-active_29e50115/f534b2d0-en.pdf, p. 24.

26 Active Healthy Kids (2018) *The Global Matrix 3.0 on Physical Activity for Children and Youth*, 27 November. Available at: https://www.activehealthykids.org/3-0/ (Accessed on: 21 April 2026).

8. **Improving access to outdoor play areas.** Alongside supporting schools, the Local Physical Activity Leader should identify how local regulation can better incentivise young people to spend more time playing outdoor on local streets and in local parks. This should include initiatives such as controlled road closures on certain streets at certain times of day to increase playing area capacity.
9. **Parents should be encouraged to become more involved in volunteering in sports team, youth clubs, and schools.** Most of the ways young children are active outside of school, formally or informally, require voluntary oversight. Local Physical Activity Leaders should engage with local communities to support such volunteering.
10. **Unlock school facilities**. Working with local authorities, Local Physical Activity Leaders and schools should set out a plan for ensuring better usage of school facilities outside of school hours, including the possibility of making them open for the community throughout the week.
11. **National sports facility review.** Working with local authorities, the DfE should undertake a comprehensive evaluation of publicly available sports facilities, including underutilised facilities in schools, across the country to assess the level of accessibility and availability to children.

These reforms lay the foundations for a primary education system and wider environment that equips children to develop physically, mentally, and socially. In an increasingly sedentary world, where too many children spend large parts of their day inactive, schools must play a central role in ensuring every child has opportunities to move.

Done well, these changes will not only improve children's health and wellbeing, but also raise attainment, strengthen confidence, and better prepare pupils for the transition to secondary school. They would drive a decisive shift from treating physical activity as an optional extra to recognising it as a core part of a child's development. For the future of millions of children growing up with increasingly sedentary lifestyles, and for a country that depends on them to thrive, the time to act is now.

Chapter one:

The case for change

Action must be taken to tackle the number of deepening health and inactivity challenges in England. Children's health, identified through obesity, physical development, and mental health, is deteriorating. Physical activity levels are stagnant, likely due to an excessive and increasing amount of time being spent on screens, and large differences between the most and least advantaged children persist. As a result, England performs poorly compared to its international peers in terms of children's activity levels and health.

1.1. The deterioration of children's health

Children's health in England is following a dangerous path. Obesity has risen, children's motor skills and muscular fitness have shown signs of decline, and an increasing proportion of children require support for mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders.

1.1.1. Obesity

Over the past 15 years, obesity rates among young children have risen. Reversing this trend is critically important. Obese children are more than five times more likely than non-obese children to be obese as adults.[27]

In 2009/10, 1 in 10 children in Reception were obese, and that remains true today.[28] Severe obesity has increased. In 2009/10, two per cent of children in Reception were severely obese, whereas today three per cent are.[29]

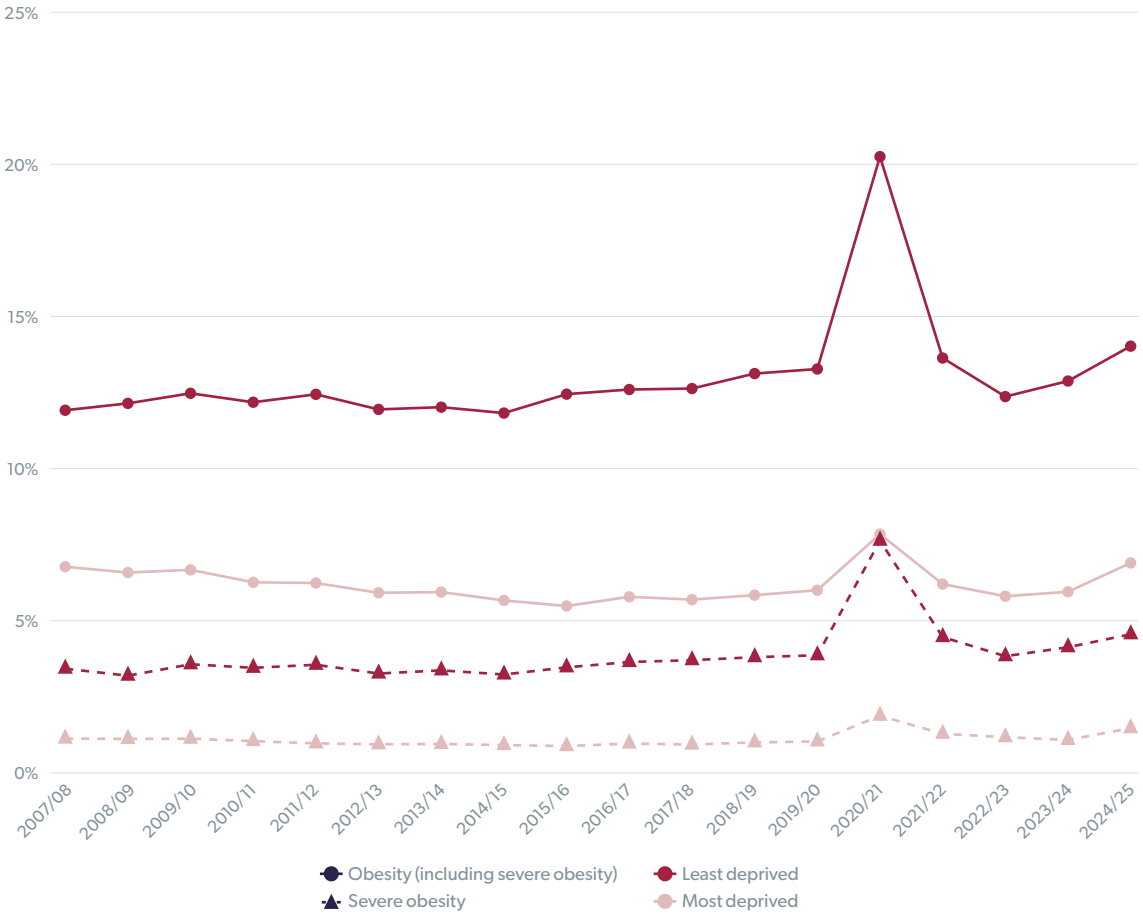
To make matters worse, the obesity rates of children in the most deprived areas have diverged further from those in the least deprived areas. As shown in Figure 1, in 2007/08, Reception pupils in the most deprived areas were five percentage points more likely to be obese than children in the least deprived areas. By 2024/25, this gap had widened to seven percentage points. For severe obesity, the gap increased from two per cent to three per cent. Both diverging paths were driven by the outcomes in the most deprived areas deteriorating faster than in the least deprived areas.

27 Simmonds, M. et al. (2015) *The use of measures of obesity in childhood for predicting obesity and the development of obesity-related diseases in adulthood: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, Health Technology Assessment, Vol. 19, No. 43. Available at: https://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/hta/HTA19430.

28 *NCMP 2025*.

29 *NCMP 2025*. Although data from the Health Survey for England (HSE) finds a slight decrease in obesity rate of children aged between 2 and 10 years old from 14 per cent in 2008 to 12 per cent in 2022, the National Child Measurement Programme provides more reliable and precise statistics. The estimates from the HSE are based on only 3,463 children in 2008 and 354 children in 2022. In 2024/25, the NCMP measured 1,145,893 children. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-2/health-survey-for-england-hse-2022-part-2-data-tables.

Figure 1 – Obesity and severe obesity by deprivation in Reception, 2007/08 to 2024/25



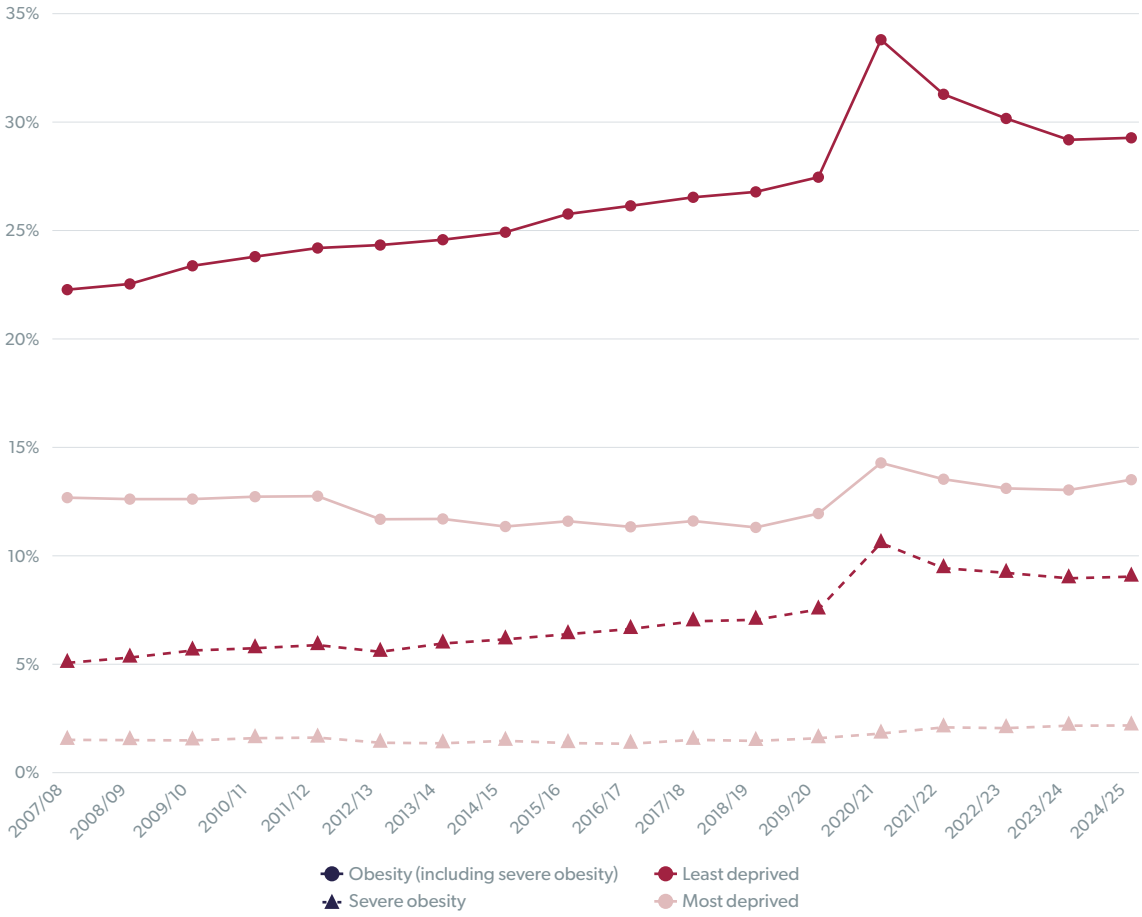
Source: *NCMP 2025*.

The trends are more pronounced among Year 6 pupils. Between 2009/10 and 2024/25, the rate of obesity increased from 19 per cent to 22 per cent, and severe obesity increased from four per cent to six per cent. If obesity rates returned to the rates observed in 2009/10, there would be 23,000 fewer obese children and 14,000 fewer severely obese children in Year 6 alone.[30]

Figure 2 shows that the divergence between the least and most deprived areas is even more severe for children in Year 6. In the most deprived areas, children in Year 6 are now over twice as likely to be obese and over four times as likely to be severely obese. Again, this is due to worsening outcomes in the most deprived areas, where children in Year 6 are now seven percentage points more likely to be obese and 3.9 percentage points more likely to be severely obese than in 2007/08.

30 In 2024/25, 3.5 percentage points more Year 6 children were measured as obese than in 2009/10. 2.1 percentage points more were measured as severely obese. In academic year 2024/25, the total headcount of Year 6 children was 655,074. *NCMP 2025*; Department for Education (2025) *Schools, pupils, and their* characteristics, 5 June. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25.

Figure 2 – Obesity and severe obesity by deprivation in Year 6, 2007/08 to 2024/25

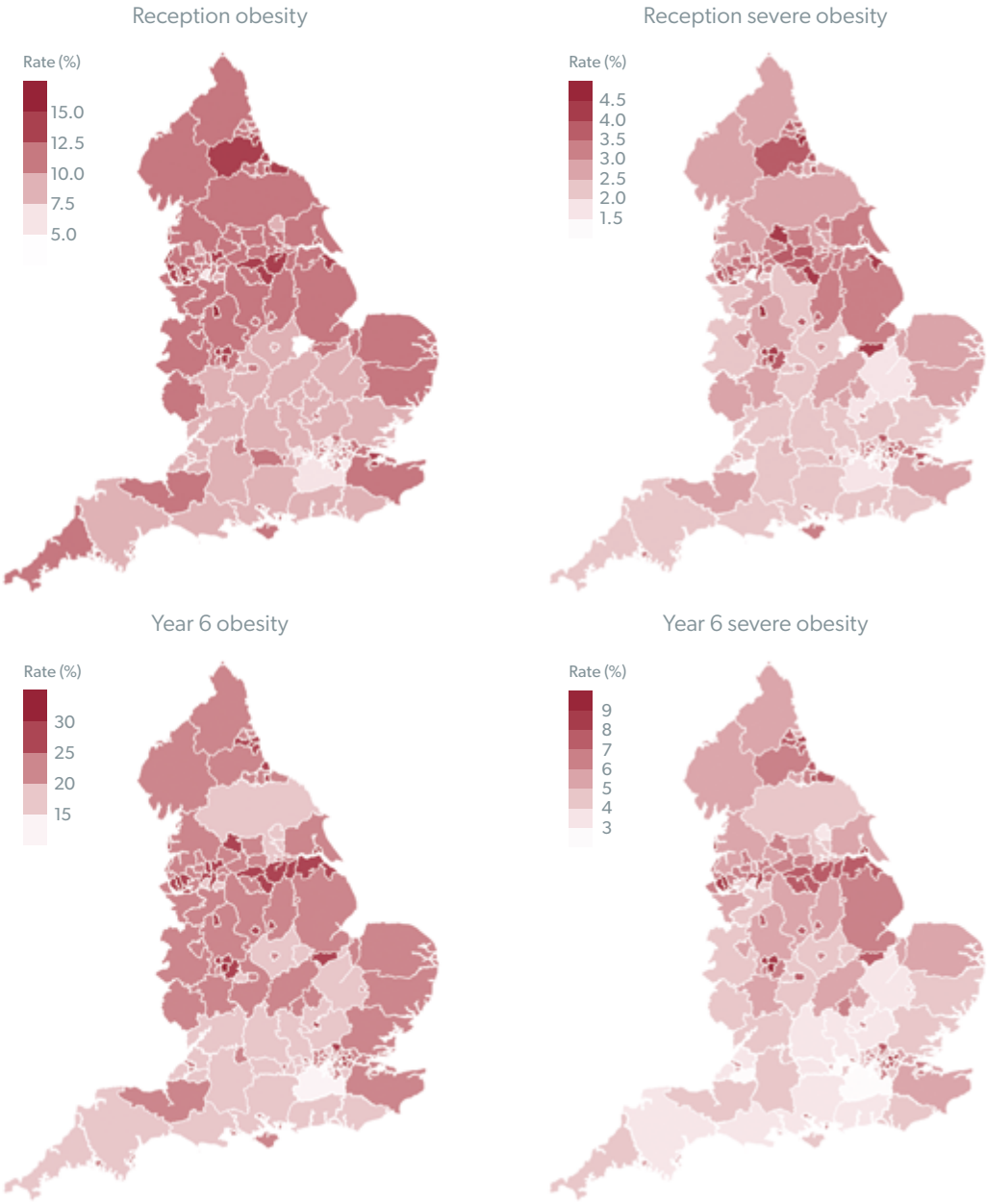


Source: *NCMP 2025.*

Deprivation is not the only classification that exhibits large differences in obesity rates. As illustrated by Figure 3, the areas surrounding London tend to have lower rates than the rest of the country. In the North West and North East, only 2 out of the 35 upper tier local authorities have an obesity rate in Year 6 of less than 20 per cent.[31] In the South East, 11 out of the 19 upper tier local authorities have a rate less than 20 per cent. Focusing on the worst affected areas reveals concerningly high rates. In both Knowsley and Sandwell, 3 in 10 children in Year 6 are obese and 1 in 10 are severely obese.

31 The two upper tier local authorities are Trafford and Stockport. Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness were combined into Cumbria.

Figure 3 – Obesity by upper tier local authority, 2024/25



Source: *NCMP 2025*.

The exact causes of the rise in obesity are unclear. As explained in Section 1.2, physical activity levels remain unacceptably low, particularly among disadvantaged children. However, it is difficult to judge the extent to which they have declined in the long-term. Undoubtedly, other factors, such as changing diets, have also contributed to higher rates of obesity.[32]

32 Libuy, N. et al. (2021) *Inequalities in body mass index, diet and physical activity in the UK: Longitudinal evidence across childhood and adolescence*, SSM - Population Health, Vol. 16. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827321002536.

1.1.2. Motor skills and muscular fitness

Obesity is not the only physical health outcome raising concern. There is growing evidence showing that the motor skills and muscular fitness of young children are below the expected standard and in deterioration.

Individual studies have revealed extremely poor performance in the fundamental motor skills (run, jump, throw, and catch). A 2019 study on 6- to 9-year-olds found that only 18.7 per cent '*mastered*' all four skills.[33] A separate study comparing English and Chinese pupils found that Chinese children were significantly more likely to have '*mastered*' the fundamental motor skills.[34] For example, Chinese boys were over twice as likely to have '*mastered*' or nearly '*mastered*' running, and Chinese girls were almost four times as likely.[35]

In 2025, a nationally representative survey found that over three-quarters of primary school teachers have witnessed a deterioration of children's basic fine motor skills since 2020, with a decrease in pupils' ability to perform precise movements such as holding a pencil, drawing, writing, and using scissors.[36] Children's competence in these skills is strongly linked with exposure to different types of physical activity.[37]

In their 2025 Annual Report, the Youth Sport Trust emphasised that poor physical development is impacting children's school readiness. In 2024, a third of surveyed teachers reported physical development challenges for children entering Reception.[38] This is detrimental to children's health and impacts their learning. In the same survey, teachers estimated that a lack of school readiness costs 2.4 hours of teaching time every day.[39]

Furthermore, a study of 10-year-old children found a decline in muscular fitness in 2014 compared to 2008 and 1998, measured by handgrip, sit-ups, and bent-arm hang.[40] The authors highlighted that the deterioration coincided with reduced physical activity.[41]

1.1.3. Mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders

It is widely acknowledged that the mental health of teenagers has deteriorated. More surprisingly, there are growing signs that primary school-aged children's mental health has declined and neurodevelopmental disorders have become more common.

In 2023, 16 per cent of children aged 8 to 10 had a probable mental health disorder, up from 11 per cent in 2017.[42] This has coincided with a large increase in the support provided by schools for social, emotional, and mental health. As shown in Figure 4, between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of 10-year-olds on an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan in this category increased by 72 per cent and the number with Special Educational Needs (SEN) support increased by 31 per cent.

33 *Duncan, M. et al. 2020.*

34 Ma, J. et al. (2021) *Cross-cultural comparison of fundamental movement skills in 9- to 10-year-old children from England and China*, European Physical Education Review, Vol. 28, No. 2. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X211055585.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Raspal, S. (2025) *Why Are Pupils' Fine Motor Skills Worsening?*, Teaching Times, 13 May. Available at: https://www.teachingtimes.com/pupils-ability-to-perform-precise-movements-such-as-holding-a-pencil-drawing-writing-worsening/ (Accessed on: 23 February 2026).

37 See Section 2.1.

38 Youth Sport Trust (2025) *PE and School Sport – The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf, p.58.

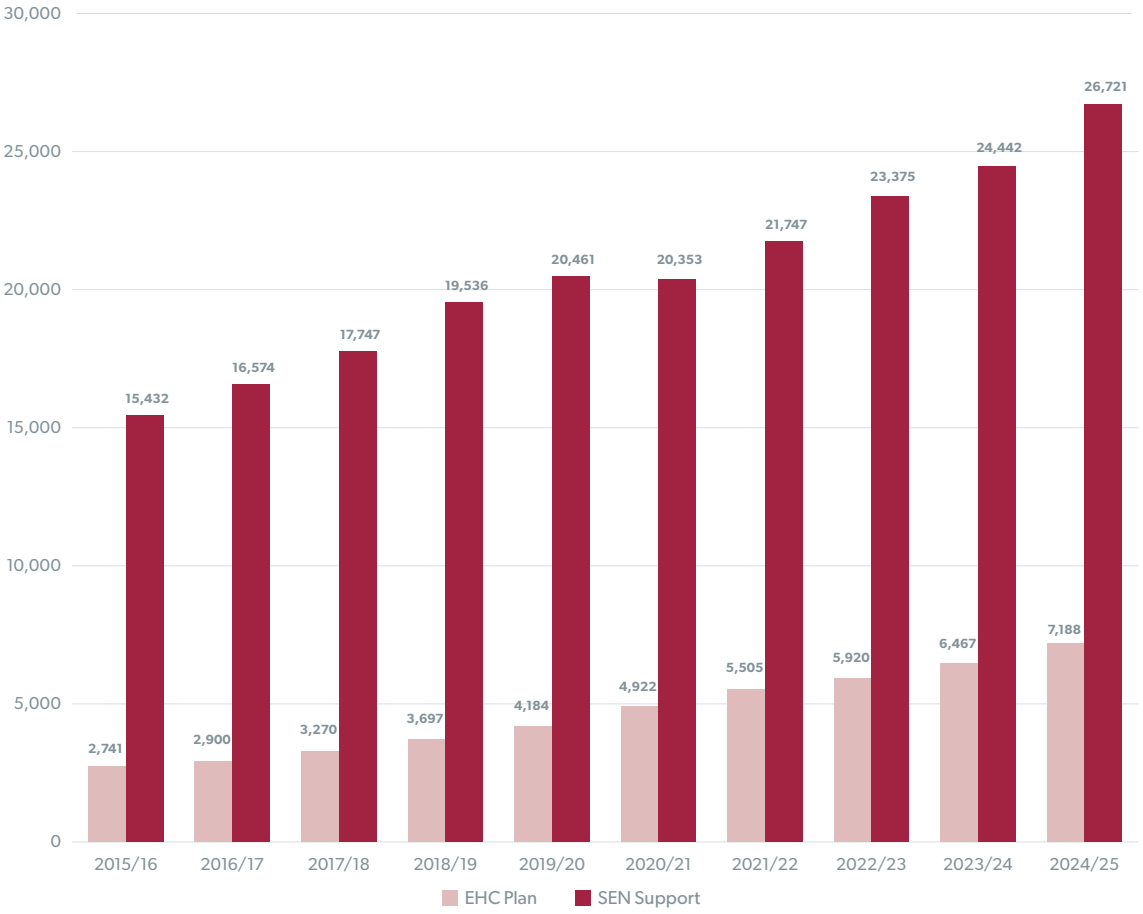
39 *Ibid.*

40 Sandercock, R.H. and Cohen, D. (2019) *Temporal trends in muscular fitness of English 10-year-olds 1998-2014: An allometric approach*, Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, Vol. 22, No.2, pp. 201-205. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30098974/.

41 *Ibid.*

42 NHS England (2023) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey*, 21 November. Available at: https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up.

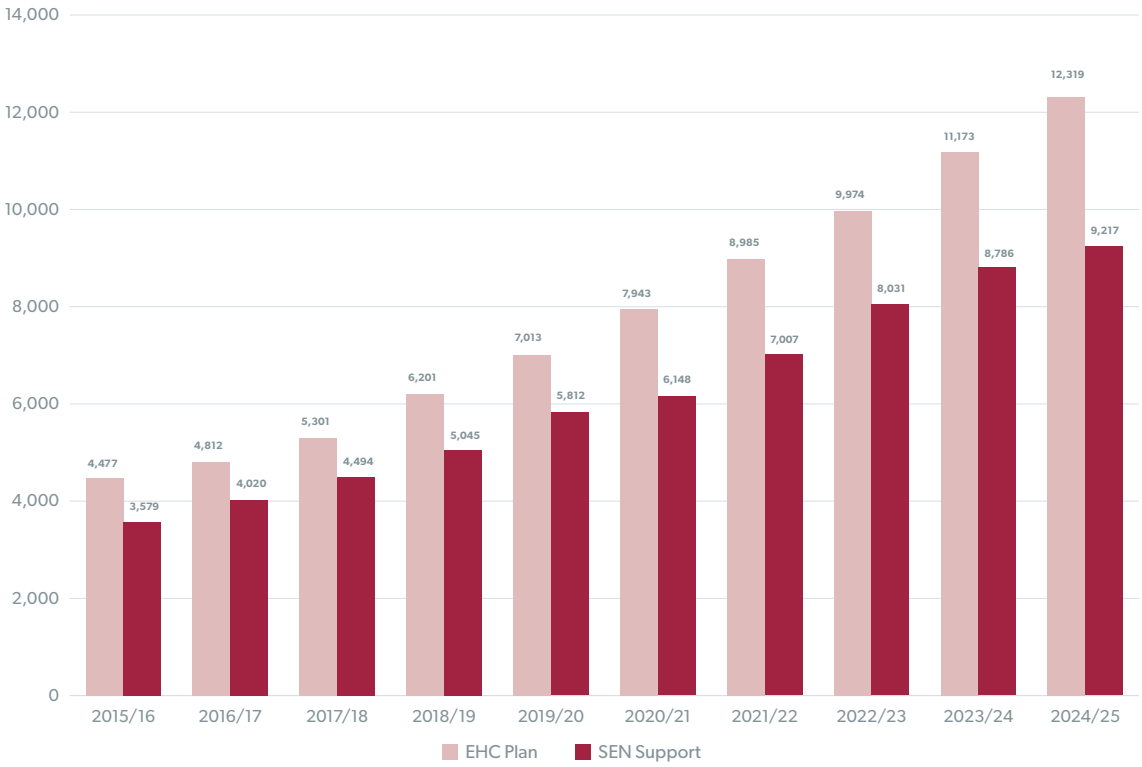
Figure 4 – Number of 10-year-olds with an EHC plan or SEN support for social, emotional, and mental health, 2015/16 to 2023/24



Source: Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England, 12 June. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25.

There has also been a large increase in the support provided by schools for autism spectrum disorder. As shown in Figure 5, between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of 10-year-olds on an EHC plan in this category increased by 76 per cent and the number with SEN support increased by 59 per cent.

Figure 5 – Number of 10-year-olds with an EHC plan or SEN support for Autistic Spectrum Disorder, 2015/16 to 2023/24



Source: Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England, 12 June. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25.

Although the reasons for the large and unsustainable increase in EHC plans and SEN support are nuanced and extend beyond the underlying mental health of children,[43] the rise highlights the need for schools to address issues relating to the mental health and neurodevelopment of their pupils. A first step must be to empower schools to create happy and healthy environments that support positive mental development.

1.2. Inadequate progress in physical activity

Physical activity rates have largely stagnated in recent years, with over half of children in primary school still failing to meet NHS guidelines. This section explores the extent of this stagnation, alongside persisting differences between groups, rising sedentary behaviour, inconsistencies in PE provision, and disparities in access to extracurricular activities that continue to shape children's activity levels.

43 House of Commons Education Committee (2025) *Solving the SEND Crisis: Fifth Report of Session 2024-2025, HC 492*. London: House of Commons, 18 September. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/49536/documents/265373/default/.

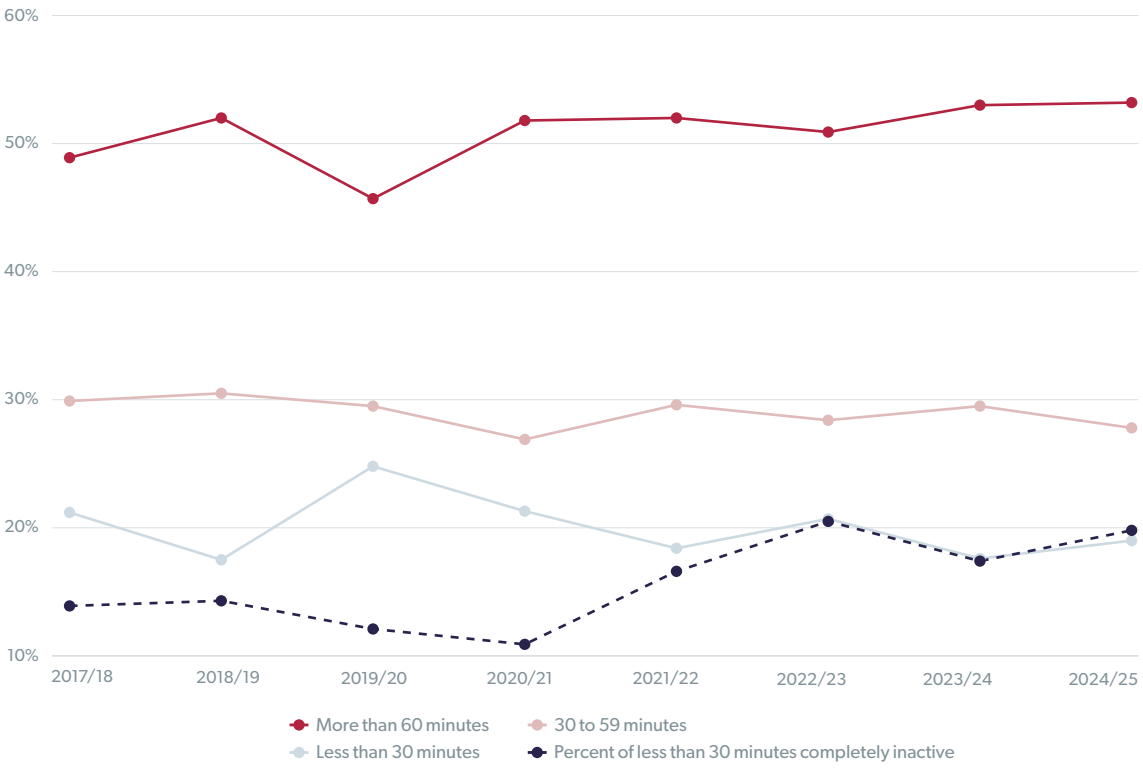
1.2.1. Flatlining physical activity

Physical activity levels among primary school children have changed little since 2017/18 and show few signs of improvement. A dangerously high proportion of children remain insufficiently active, i.e. they are not meeting the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) guidelines for young people to average at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day.[44]

In KS1, just under half of children, equating to over 600,000 pupils across England, are insufficiently active.[45] Despite this being a 4.3 percentage point improvement compared to 2017/18, Figure 6 shows that it is only a 1.2 percentage point improvement compared to 2018/19. The proportion of children who were physically active for less than 30 minutes a day has either increased or decreased depending on the starting point, suggesting that the overarching trend is one of little progress.

Another concerning trend is the upwards shift since the pandemic in the proportion of children in KS1 who are completely inactive. Between 2017/18 and 2024/25, the proportion of children reporting 0 minutes of physical activity per day among those active for less than 30 minutes has increased by 5.9 percentage points from 13.9 per cent to 19.8 per cent. It is concerning that a growing proportion of the children who were already being left behind are now completely inactive.[46]

Figure 6 – Physical activity of children in KS1, 2017/18 to 2024/25



Source: *Active Lives*.

44 NHS Physical Activity Guidelines.

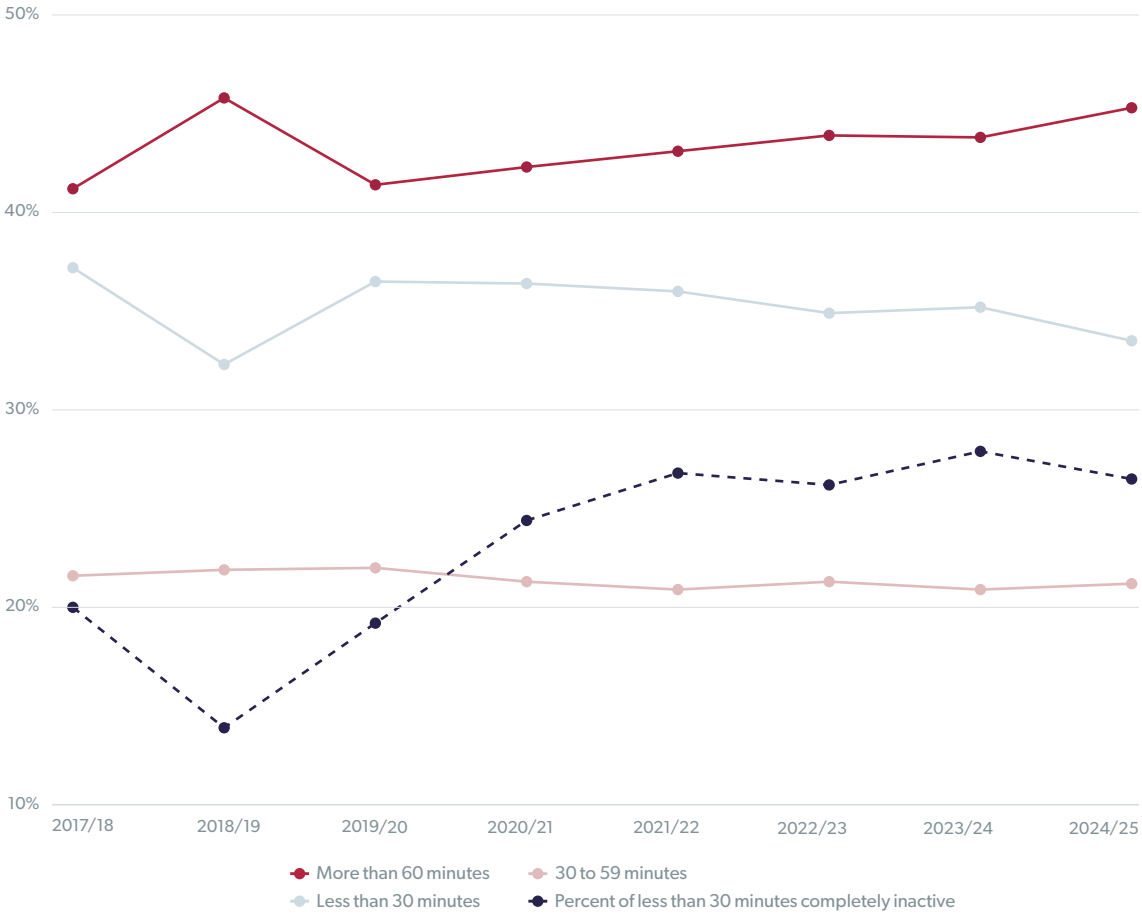
45 Active Lives is a self-reported survey that measures, among other things, children's activity based on the average number of minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity per day. Sport England (n.d.) *Active Lives Measures*. Available at: https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives?section=measures-section (Accessed on: 23 February 2026); *Active Lives*.

46 See Section 1.2.3 for more details on the rise of sedentary behaviour.

There is a marked deterioration in physical activity levels between KS1 and KS2. In KS2, over half of children, amounting to almost 1.5 million pupils, are insufficiently active. '*Less than 30 minutes*' is the second most common activity level, with 3 in 10 children, or over 900,000, not even reaching half of the required amount of exercise to remain healthy.

Similar to KS1, there is no clear sign of progress over the past 8 years. As Figure 7 shows, compared to 2017/18 the proportion of children who are sufficiently active has increased but compared to 2018/19 it has decreased. The reverse is true for the proportion of children who were physically active for less than 30 minutes a day, with a decrease since 2017/18 but an increase since 2018/19. There has also been a substantial and sustained rise in the proportion of children in KS2 with no daily physical activity within the group active for under 30 minutes per day.[47]

Figure 7 – Physical activity of children in KS2, 2017/18 to 2024/25



Source: *Active Lives*.

Since there has been little change over the past 8 years, it could be useful to compare current physical activity levels to the mid-2000s. Unfortunately, comparisons over longer time horizons are difficult due to changes in definitions, survey design, and measurement techniques.

47 See Section 1.2.3 for more details on the rise of sedentary behaviour.

The 2007 Health Survey for England (HSE) found that around 70 per cent of children aged between 5 and 10 were meeting the recommended amount of physical activity.[48] A year later the HSE used a revised methodology and found that less than 30 per cent of children were meeting recommendations.[49] By the 2015 HSE the rate remained below 30 per cent, but the introduction of the Active Lives survey in 2017/2018 saw a jump to over 40 per cent.[50] These repeated large shifts in activity levels show that comparisons between surveys are unreliable.

That said, other forms of evidence indicate a decline. In 2024, a survey of 500 primary school teachers found that three quarters think that children's physical activity is declining.[51] Whether or not physical activity rates are in fact higher or lower than 20 years ago, it is without question that over the past 8 years insufficient progress has been made.

The plateaued level of physical activity does not appear to reflect the preferences of children. Survey evidence from Active Lives suggests that if children's preferences and capabilities were fully reflected in their physical activity levels, a much higher proportion of children would be sufficiently active. Amongst KS1 children, 93 per cent '*like*' or '*love*' sport, 95 per cent '*like*' or '*love*' being active, and 82 per cent find sport easy.[52]

Similar attitudes are found amongst children in KS2. 95 per cent of pupils '*agree*' or '*strongly agree*' with the statement '*I enjoy taking part in exercise and sports*'.[53] 74 per cent '*agree*' or '*strongly agree*' with the statement '*I find exercise and sport easy*'.[54] Children even appear to understand the importance and benefits of physical activity. 97 per cent '*agree*' or '*strongly agree*' with the statement '*I understand why exercise and sports are good for me*'.[55]

A possible limiting factor is that children are unaware of how much physical activity they need to stay healthy. Active Lives does not directly test children's knowledge of the NHS's guidelines, but a recent survey found that 81 per cent of parents underestimated how much physical activity children need.[56]

1.2.2. Persistent differences in physical activity

As with overall physical activity, differences between groups have persisted or worsened over the past 8 years. This section focuses on KS2, since differences are more pronounced and problematic than for children in KS1.

48 NHS England (2009) *Health Survey for England - 2008, Trend tables*, 17 December. Available at: https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/health-survey-for-england-2008-trend-tables.

49 National Centre for Sport & Exercise Medicine (2014) *Physical activity for children and young people: Evidence briefing*. Available at: https://ncsem-em.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/cyp-evidence-briefing.pdf; NHS England (2017) *Health Survey for England*, 2016, 13 December. Available at: https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/health-survey-for-england-2016.

50 See Figures 6 and 7.

51 The Daily Mile (2024) *Three in four primary school teachers report children's physical activity is in decline*, 20 September. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/news/the-daily-mile-itv/ (Accessed on: 23 February 2026).

52 *Active Lives*.

53 *Active Lives*.

54 *Active Lives*.

55 *Active Lives*.

56 *Let's Move! Campaign Launch*.

Figure 8 – Proportion of KS2 children sufficiently active by group, 2017/18 and 2024/25

Source: *Active Lives*.

Figure 8 shows that, despite the proportion of sufficiently active children increasing for both groups, the disparity between children in low and high affluence families has not changed.[57] Children from high affluence families are a shocking 18.6 percentage points more likely to be sufficiently physically active, with fewer than 4 in 10 children from low affluence backgrounds getting the exercise they need.

These statistics are consistent with a study conducted by the University of Bath on more than 17,000 primary school pupils.[58] Using wearable technology tracking the activity of children during school hours, the study found that children attending more deprived schools completed 25 fewer minutes of physical activity each week.[59] As noted by the researchers, this finding is concerning given all schools follow the same national curriculum, therefore physical activity during school hours should be equal, yet some schools achieve triple the amount of physical activity.[60]

57 Active Lives determines family affluence through questions on the child's home, for example whether the child has their own bedroom and the technology the household owns. Sport England (2025) *Active Lives Survey 2024-25 Year 8 – technical note*. Available at: https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives/active-lives-data-tables/active-lives-survey-2024-25-year-8?section=questionnaire-content-section (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

58 University of Bath (2025) *Major study reveals stark inequalities in children's physical activity while at primary school*, 25 September (University of Bath 2025). Available at: https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/major-study-reveals-stark-inequalities-in-childrens-physical-activity-while-at-primary-school/.

59 The study measured the deprivation of schools using the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. *University of Bath 2025*.

60 *University of Bath 2025*.

The evidence points to a clear gap between more and less advantaged children. It is of vital importance that this gap is closed so that neither a child's background nor the school they attend dictates whether they get the support and opportunities they need for a healthy lifestyle.

Another lasting disparity presented in Figure 8 is the difference in physical activity between boys and girls. The difference decreased by less than 1 percentage point between 2017/18 and 2024/25, with boys remaining 5.9 percentage points more likely to be sufficiently active.

This finding is supported by objective accelerometer data. A study conducted in three primary schools in Bradford found that boys were physically active for 11 more minutes per day than girls.[61]

The University of Bath study also found that boys were generally more active than girls.[62] However, in 5 per cent of schools the physical activity of girls was greater than boys.[63] This shows that it is possible to close the gap and that all schools should strive to do so.

There are also large differences in the physical activity rates between ethnicities. Figure 8 shows that Asian and Black children have low activity rates, with 3.9 and 7.7 percentage points fewer children sufficiently active than the average for all KS2 children respectively. It is disappointing that Asian children are now less physically active than in 2017/18 and rates for Black children have barely improved. We must ensure that children from all backgrounds receive the appropriate support needed for active and healthy lifestyles.

Finally, a recent report by the Activity Alliance highlighted the difficulties faced by disabled children. It found that disabled children aged five to eight are 13 percentage points more likely to be '*less active*' than non-disabled children.[64] This is likely the result of only half of disabled children finding sport and activity easy, compared to three quarters of non-disabled children,[65] and emphasises the need for well-rounded and targeted physical activity provision.

1.2.3. Rising sedentary behaviour

An especially harmful and dangerous trend is the rise in sedentary behaviour. Across the globe, the prevalence of smartphones and social media has meant that children are switching physical activity for inactivity. The World Health Organization's (WHO) warns that technology and digital communications have influenced how people work, study, travel, and spend leisure-time, and have therefore increased the time children spend engaged in sedentary behaviours.[66]

In the UK, this is most clearly demonstrated by the incredible amount of time children are spending online. In 2024/25, Ofcom monitored the online activity of children and found that those aged between 8 and 9 years old spent on average two hours online a day, or 30 days a year, and those aged 10 to 12 averaged three hours a day, or 46 days a year. [67] Such large amounts of time are concerning since total

61 Nagy, L. et al. (2019) *Factors associated with accelerometer measured movement behaviours among White British and South Asian children aged 6-8 years during school terms and school holidays*, BMJ Open, Vol. 9, No.8, p.5. Available at: https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/9/8/e025071.full.pdf.

62 *University of Bath 2025*.

63 *University of Bath 2025*.

64 Activity Alliance (2025) *Play, move, belong: Active futures for young disabled people research report*. Loughborough: Activity Alliance, November. Available at https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/how-we-help/research/10249-play-move-belong-active-futures-for-young-disabled-people-nov-25, p. 3.

65 *Ibid*.

66 World Health Organization (2020), *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour*. Geneva: World Health Organization (WHO Physical Activity Guidelines). Available at: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/faa83413-d89e-4be9-bb01-b24671aef7ca/content, p. 29.

67 Ofcom (2025), *Children's Passive Online Measurement*, 27 June. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/research-statistics-and-data/protecting-children/ofcom-childrens-passive-online-measurement.pdf.

sedentary behaviour includes other activities such as watching TV, playing games consoles, reading, and doing homework.

This becomes all the more troubling given the dramatic surge in time spent online. Children now spend approximately 25 more days a year online than in 2009 and 13 more days a year than in 2018.[68] Although some of this rise is due to shifts from TV and games consoles,[69] so may not have directly led to increased sedentary behaviour, it remains important to slow the rise in time spent online.

Given that 96 per cent of 6- to 7-year-olds, 97 per cent of 8- to 9-year-olds, and 100 per cent of 10- to 12-year-olds are online,[70] the benefits of reducing the time each child spends online would be highly impactful. As an illustrative example, if just 15 minutes of the time spent online per day was converted into physical activity for all children in Years 3 to 6, more than 370,000 children would move from '*less active*' to '*fairly active*' and almost 290,000 children could become sufficiently active.[71]

1.2.4. Inconsistent quality of PE

In terms of the volume of PE taught in primary schools, it appears that the majority of primary schools are meeting the non-statutory guidance of 2 hours per week.[72] A 2023 survey by the DfE found that the median timetabled time for PE in primary schools was 120 minutes.[73] This is similar to the average curriculum time spent on PE and sport in primary schools in 2009/10 of 127 minutes.[74]

An in-depth review of PE by Ofsted in 2023 reiterated this finding. The report found that most primary schools teach PE for 2 hours per week, thus allowing enough time to teach a broad and ambitious PE curriculum.[75]

However, further interrogation by Ofsted into PE in primary schools revealed concerning issues regarding the quality of teaching. The report found that even though many staff have sufficient subject knowledge to provide effective explanations, too often teaching does not adapt quickly enough to pupils' misconceptions and insufficient feedback is provided.[76] As a result, too many pupils fail to gain the foundational knowledge needed to meaningfully participate in lessons and the curriculum may be covered but not learned.[77] A 2019 study on 6- to 9-year-olds found that only 18.7 per cent '*mastered*' all four fundamental motor skills (run, jump, throw, and catch).[78]

As shown in Figure 9, these issues are consistent with a 2023 survey that found that only 52 per cent of primary teachers felt confident in their knowledge of PE. This is the likely result of Early Career Teachers

68 5- to 15-year-old children spent 9 and 15 hours per week online in 2009 and 2018 respectively. The 2009 and 2018 estimates use a self-reported survey, therefore are less reliable than the objective measurement of time online made by Ofcom in 2024/25. House of Commons Education Committee (2024) *Screen time: impacts on education and wellbeing*. London: House of Commons, 25 May. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/45128/documents/223543/default/.

69 Ofcom (2025) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, 7 May. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2025/childrens-media-literacy-report-2025.pdf?v=396621, p. 18.

70 *Ibid*, p. 13.

71 Assumes that every child has at least 15 minutes of online screen time per day. '*Less active*' corresponds to less than an average of 30 minutes of physical activity per day and '*fairly active* corresponds to 30 to 59 minutes. The estimation uses activity rates and population estimates from Active Lives 2024/25 and assumes that half of 'fairly active' children averaged between 45 and 59 minutes per day. *Active Lives*.

72 Department for Education (2025) *PE and sport premium guidance for primary schools*. London: Department for Education, 6 October. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pe-and-sport-premium-for-primary-schools/pe-and-sport-premium-guidance-for-primary-schools.

73 Long, R. (2025) *Physical education, physical activity and sport in English schools*. London: House of Commons, 1 April (Long 2025). Available at: http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06836/SN06836.pdf.

74 Department for Education (2013) *Evidence on physical education and sport in schools*. London: Department for Education, June. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c725bed915d6969f44ed3/Evidence_on_physical_education_and_sport_in_schools.pdf.

75 Ofsted (2023) *Levelling the playing field: the physical education subject report*, 20 September (Ofsted PE Review 2023). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-pe/levelling-the-playing-field-the-physical-education-subject-report.

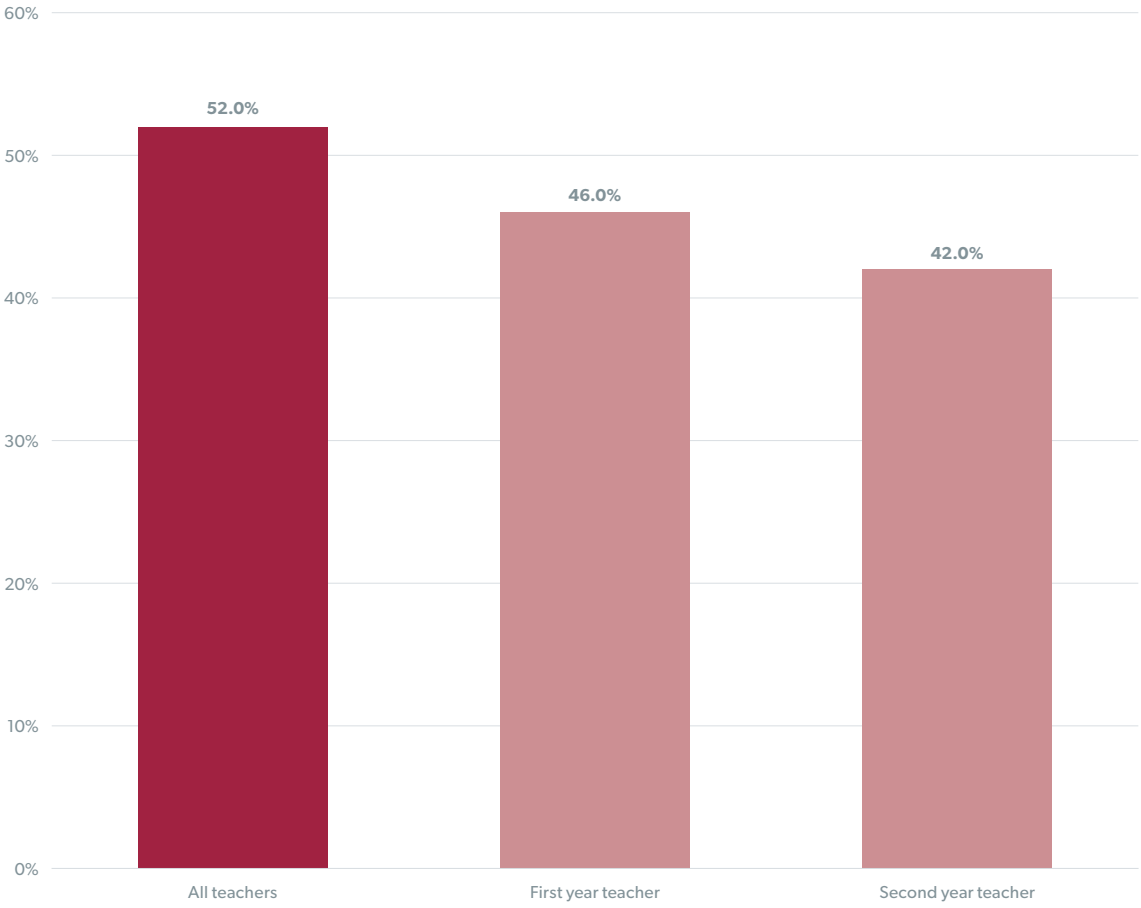
76 *Ofsted PE Review 2023*.

77 *Ofsted PE Review 2023*.

78 *Duncan, M. et al. 2020*.

not being given the PE training they need. Teachers in their first and second years of teaching report particularly low levels of confidence, with 46 per cent and 42 per cent respectively.

Figure 9 – Percentage of primary school teachers confident in their subject knowledge of PE, 2023



Source: IFF Research and IOE (2024). *Working lives of teachers and leaders – wave 2. London: Department for Education*, September. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66e2d57c718edd8177131646/Working_lives_of_teachers_and_leaders_-_wave_2_-_main_research_report.pdf. p. 191.

Such inconsistencies in the teaching quality of PE can lead to unfair and harmful outcomes. In their report, Ofsted warned that significant gaps in motor competence, in particular fundamental movement skills, are not being identified and addressed quickly enough.[79] Since childhood is a critical period for the development of these skills,[80] schools must deliver high-quality PE as part of their strategy to eradicate these gaps.

79 *Ofsted PE Review 2023*.

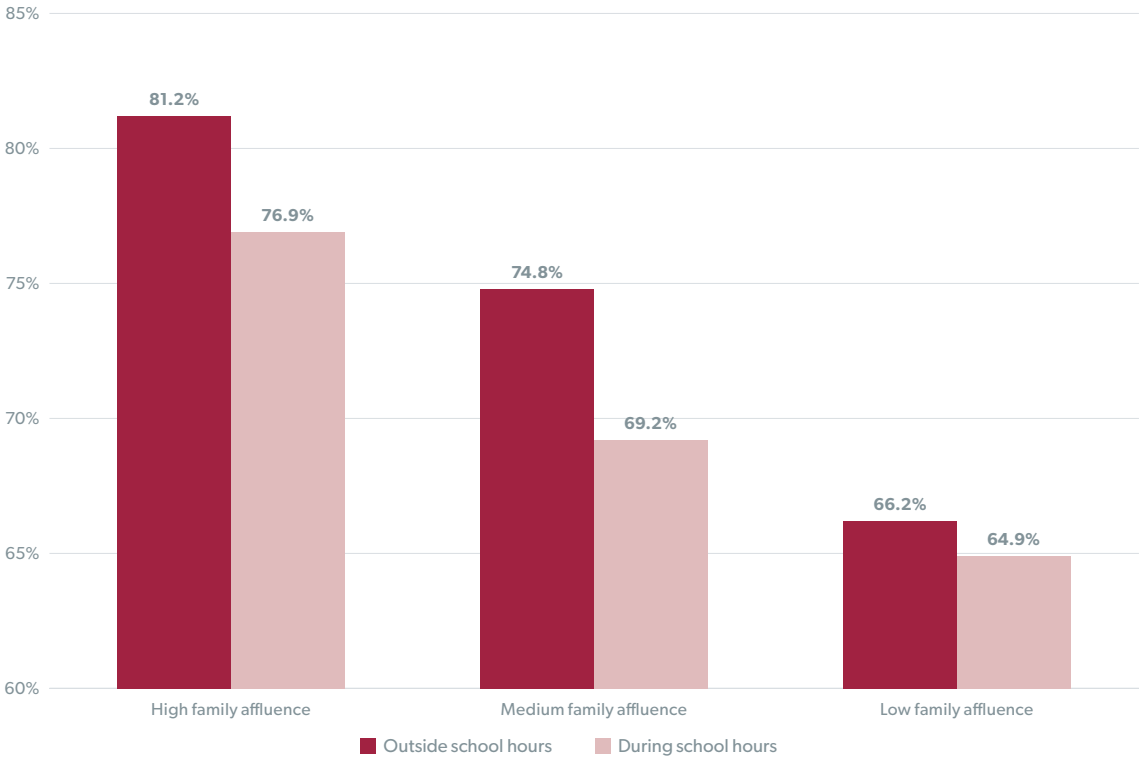
80 See Section 2.1.

1.2.5. Disparities in extracurricular activities

Sports clubs and other extracurricular activities provide children with the diverse range of physical activities they need to stay healthy, opportunities to have fun and relieve stress, and important social skills.[81] It is therefore essential that all children have convenient and affordable access to a range of extracurricular activities.

Sadly, this is not the case. Instead, a child's background is a large determinant of their participation in sports. As shown in Figure 10, over a third of children from low affluence families do not participate in a sporting activity outside of school hours at least once a week, making them 9 percentage points less likely to do so than children from medium affluence families and 15 percentage points less likely than children from high affluence families. This is consistent with research by the Local Government Association that found that only 16 per cent of young people in low-income neighbourhoods belong to a sports club and just 14 per cent visit leisure centres.[82] Even during school hours, when participation should be more equal, a child from a low affluence family is 12 percentage points less likely than a child from a high affluence family to participate in sport.

Figure 10 – Participation in sporting activities by family affluence, 2024/25



Source: *Active Lives*.

These disparities are not best explained by differences in preference.[83] Financial costs often act as a significant barrier for many families who would like to provide their children with more sporting

81 See Chapter 2.

82 Local Government Association (2024) *Supporting youth in low-income neighbourhoods stay active through sport*. London: Local Government Association, 28 August. Available at: https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/supporting-youth-low-income-neighbourhoods-stay-active-through-sport.

83 Woodward, J. and Southby, K. (2025) *Chiles Webster Baton Commission on Sport and Low-Income Neighbourhoods: Summative Report*. London: StreetGames (StreetGames 2025). Available at: streetgames.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ChilesWebsterBatsonCommissionOnSportAndLowincomeNeighbourhoods.pdf, p. i.

opportunities.[84] In April 2025, a nationally representative survey of 1,000 parents found that 2 in 10 had to cut down on or go without their children participating in local sports clubs due to cost-of-living increases.[85]

The costs incurred by families can be both direct, for example entrance or membership fees, and indirect, such as travel and clothing.[86] Kit and equipment costs have been frequently identified as a contributing factor to low participation in sports clubs and parents struggling with household bills describe sports kit as an "*unaffordable extra*".[87] Furthermore, rising financial pressures can make the opportunity cost of missed work hours untenable and force parents to sacrifice their children's sporting activities.[88]

1.3. Poor international performance

To fully understand the extent of England's crisis in children's physical activity and health, it is useful to examine how England performs relative to its peers. Fortunately, several institutions and organisations compile international comparisons and rankings for a variety of child health outcomes.

A prominent example is the UNICEF children's wellbeing report card, most recently published in 2025. For the physical health dimension of wellbeing, countries are ranked based on the mortality rate of 5- to 14-year-olds and the proportion of obese 5- to 19-year-olds.[89] Out of a list of the world's 41 wealthiest countries, the UK ranked 22nd in terms of physical health, with Japan, France, and Denmark forming the top three.[90]

As summarised in Table 1, other international comparisons are similarly disappointing. In 2021/22, England ranked 25th out of 28 OECD countries in terms of 11-year-olds self-reporting 'excellent' health. According to the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey in 2022, out of 43 countries England ranked 27th for the proportion of boys reporting at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) a day and 31st for girls. In 2022, the Active Healthy Kids Global Alliance (AHKGA) gave England the tied 16th highest grade for overall physical activity out of 57 assessed countries and regions. England was assigned a grade of C-, which implies it is succeeding with about half of children.

Individual country comparisons also reveal stark differences. In a study assessing the fundamental movement skills of 9- to 10-year-old children in England and China, researchers found that Chinese children were significantly more likely to have *'mastered'* the fundamental movement skills.[91] For example, Chinese boys were over twice as likely to have *'mastered'* or '*nearly mastered'* running, and Chinese girls were almost four times as likely.[92]

England's consistently poor performance in international comparisons and rankings emphasises that it has plenty to learn from its peers. In the 2010s, raising standards and ambition in academic education helped

84 *Ibid*, p. 15.

85 Barnardos (2025) *Cost of Living Crisis: Impact on Children 2025*. Dublin: Barnardos, July 8. Available at: https://www.barnardos.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Barnardos-Cost-Of-Living-Report-2025_.pdf, p. 4.

86 *StreetGames 2025*, p. 15.

87 *StreetGames 2025*; Rucker, Z. (2026) *No Kit, No Game: How Clothing Poverty is Excluding Children from Sport*, Clothing Collective, 13 January. Available at: https://www.clothingcollective.org/post/no-kit-no-game-how-clothing-poverty-is-excluding-children-from-sport.

88 *StreetGames 2025*, p. 15.

89 UNICEF (2025) *Innocenti Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World*. Florence: UNICEF, May. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/11111/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-19-Child-Wellbeing-Unpredictable-World-2025.pdf, p.3.

90 *Ibid*, p. 5.

91 Ma, J. et al. (2021) *Cross-cultural comparison of fundamental movement skills in 9- to 10-year-old children from England and China*, European Physical Education Review, Vol. 28, No. 2. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X211055585.

92 *Ibid*.

England climb the Programme for International Student Assessment rankings in maths, reading, and science.[93] A similar effort is now needed for physical activity so that England becomes world-leading in its provision for children.

Table 1 – Summary of International Comparisons

Organisation	Measure	Year	Countries Included	England's Rank	England's Value	Median Value	Top 3 Countries
UNICEF	Children's wellbeing, physical health dimension	2023/24	41 wealthiest countries	22nd (UK)	N/A	N/A	Japan, France, Denmark
OECD	11-year-old's self-reported "excellent" health	2021/22	28 OECD countries	25th	27%	36%	Israel, Greece, Sweden
HBSC	11-year-olds who report at least 60 minutes of MVPA daily, Boys	2022	43 countries	27th	26%	27%	Serbia, Finland, Ireland
HBSC	11-year-olds who report at least 60 minutes of MVPA daily, Girls	2022	43 countries	31st	15%	18%	Kazakhstan, Serbia, Albania
AHKGA	Global Matrix 4.0	2022	57 countries / regions	16th (Tied)	C-	N/A	Slovenia, Finland, Japan

Source: UNICEF (2025) *Innocenti Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World*. Florence: UNICEF, May. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/11111/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-19-Child-Wellbeing-Unpredictable-World-2025.pdf, p.5; OECD (n.d.) *Child well-being outcomes*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/child-well-being-outcomes0.html (Accessed on: 28 December 2025); HBSC (2023) *Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity*. Available at: https://data-browser.hbsc.org/measure/moderate-to-vigorous-physical-activity/ (Accessed on: 7 March 2026); Active Healthy Kids (2022) *Global Matrix 4.0*, 24 October. Available at: activehealthykids.org/4-0/ (Accessed on: 11 March 2026).

93 The Centre for Social Justice (2025) *Rewiring Education*, December. Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/CSJ-Rewiring_Education.pdf, p. 32.

Chapter two:

The benefits of physical activity

Although the benefits of exercise are well-known, just how important physical activity is for a child's physical, mental, social, and academic development is often underestimated.

The promotion of physical activity in childhood is made even more essential by evidence that physical activity levels track into adulthood and that high physical activity needs to be established by mid-childhood.[94]

2.1. Physical health

The general health benefits of physical activity for children are well-known, however the full extent of its impact is less obvious. In their guidelines for physical activity and sedentary behaviour, the WHO emphasises the importance of physical activity for a range of physical health outcomes.[95]

There is strong evidence that increased physical activity improves children's cardiorespiratory and musculoskeletal fitness.[96] For example, positive impacts are obtained from participation in MVPA for 30 to 60 minutes, 3 or more days a week.[97]

Regular physical activity can also improve children's cardiometabolic health,[98] thus lower their risk of developing a range of risk factors for cardiovascular disease including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.[99] School-based physical activity programmes, high intensity interval training, and resistance training have all been found to have a positive effect.

Furthermore, children who are more physically active than their peers have greater bone mass, higher bone density, and greater bone strength, which can help protect from bone fractures later in life.[100]

94 Ramos-Munell, J. et al. (2024) *Tracking of MVPA across childhood and adolescence*, Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, Vol. 27, No. 6, pp. 396-401. Available at: https://www.jsams.org/action/showPdf?pii=S1440-2440%2824%2900083-5.

95 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p.25.

96 Cardiorespiratory fitness refers to the capacity of the circulatory and respiratory systems to supply oxygen to skeletal muscle mitochondria for energy production needed during physical activity. In youth it is a predictor of several health indicators. Raghuveer, G. et al. (2020) *Cardiorespiratory Fitness in Youth: An Important Marker of Health: A Scientific Statement From the American Heart Association*, Circulation, Vol. 142, No. 7, pp. 101-118. Available at: https://www.ahajournals.org/doi/10.1161/CIR.0000000000000866. Musculoskeletal fitness includes muscle strength, muscle endurance, and muscle power. Although the connection between youth musculoskeletal fitness and health outcomes remains uncertain, there is a strong link between musculoskeletal fitness and health in adults. Pate R. et al. (2012) *Fitness Measures and Health Outcomes in Youth*. Washington DC: National Academies Press, 10 December. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK241310/.

97 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 26.

98 These include improved blood pressure, lipid profile, glucose control, and insulin resistance. *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 26.

99 Chalkley, A. et al. (2015) *Change4Life Evidence Review: Rapid evidence review on the effect of physical activity participation among children age 5 – 11 years*. London: Public Health England, June (Public Health England 2015). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c4f2a12ed915d7d4b571929/Change4Life_Evidence_review_26062015.pdf, p. 11.

100 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 26.

Higher levels of activity may also be associated with healthy weight status in children and decreases the risk of adult obesity.[101]

Considering this large body of evidence showing a positive effect of physical activity on children's health outcomes, the WHO recommends an average of 60 minutes of MVPA per day per week and muscle strengthening activities 3 times a week.[102] The NHS's guidelines are consistent with this recommendation,[103] which makes it even more disappointing that half of children in England are not getting the exercise they need to stay healthy.[104]

The WHO's guidelines also note the risks of the rise in sedentary behaviour, with particular attention to recreational screen time.[105] Evidence shows that higher amounts of sedentary behaviour in children are associated with increased body fat, poorer cardiometabolic health, and lower physical fitness.[106] According to the WHO, replacing some sedentary time with physical activity, especially MVPA, may improve health outcomes.[107]

Furthermore, the UK CMO's Physical Activity Guidelines, published in 2019, emphasise the role of physical activity and PE in the development of motor and movement skills.[108] The guidelines highlight that exposure to different types of activities enhances competence, therefore high-quality PE must be provided to improve children's skills and confidence.[109] Research argues that childhood is a critical time for the development of motor skills and children who do not participate in enriched physical activities may never reach their genetic potential for motor skill control.[110] On the other hand, excessive screen time in early childhood is linked to negative effects on motor development.[111]

Successfully encouraging all children to be active could have transformative effects. An active child is more likely to be an active adult, making them less likely to suffer from a number of serious diseases.[112] According to the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, physical inactivity is associated with 1 in 6 deaths in the UK and is estimated to cost the UK £7.4 billion annually.[113]

Now is the time for action. Healthy life expectancy at birth is the lowest it has been since 2011.[114] It is imperative that a much greater proportion of children meet the guidelines on physical activity and limit sedentary time to have the best possible chance of a healthy childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

101 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 26; Kwon, S. et al. (2015) *Active lifestyle in childhood and adolescence prevents obesity development in young adulthood*, Obesity Vol. 23, No.12, pp. 2462-2469. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/oby.21262.

102 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 27.

103 *NHS Physical Activity Guidelines.*

104 See Section 1.2.1.

105 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, pp. 29-30.

106 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, pp. 29-30.

107 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 31.

108 Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines*. London: Department of Health and Social Care, 7 September. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d839543ed915d52428dc134/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf, p. 26.

109 *Ibid.*

110 Myer, G.D. et al. (2015) *Sixty minutes of what? A developing brain perspective for activating children with an integrative exercise approach*, British Journal of Sports Medicine, Vol. 49, No.23, December, pp. 1510-1516. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25617423/.

111 Bakht, D. et al (2025) *Assessing the Impact of Screen Time on the Motor Development of Children: A Systematic Review*, Pediatric Discovery, Vol. 3, No. 2. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12258109/.

112 NHS (2024) *Benefits of Exercise*. Available at: https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/ (Accessed on: 7 March 2026); World Health Organization (2022) *Global status report on physical activity 2022*. Available at: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/8804f1b0-dbae-4e58-a251-36fd-14dc7e02/content, p. 3.

113 Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (2022) *Physical activity: applying All Our Health*, 10 March. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health/physical-activity-applying-all-our-health (Accessed on: 11 March 2026).

114 Office for National Statistics (2026) *Healthy life expectancy, UK: between 2011 to 2013 and 2022 to 2024*, 19 February. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/healthstatelifeexpectanciesuk/between2011to2013and2022to2024.

2.2. Mental health

Regular physical activity plays a crucial role in promoting happy childhoods. Countless studies have proven that physical activity has significant positive effects on a variety of psychological outcomes that determine children's wellbeing.[115]

Physical activity can help reduce children's levels of anxiety, stress, and depression.[116] Engaging children in fun physical activities can provide a distraction from negative thoughts.[117] Additionally, exercise that raises children's heart rate releases endorphins known as the 'feel-good' hormone due to their effects of reducing stress and improving mood.[118] There is even evidence to suggest that physical activity in childhood, in particular participation in sports clubs, can help protect from anxiety and depression in teenage years.[119]

Positive effects on children's confidence and self-esteem have been found repeatedly across studies and trials.[120] Children can be filled with self-belief through physically challenging goals in sports and other physical activities that provide a sense of achievement and progression.[121] Furthermore, self-concept has been found to be a strong predictor of children's participation in physical activity.[122] This makes it especially important to raise children's confidence as early as possible.

While physical activity improves children's mental health, excessive sedentary behaviour has the reverse effect. There is evidence to show that sedentary behaviour is negatively associated with well-being, quality of life, and mental health.[123] In particular, unfavourable relationships have been found between screen time and depression and sedentary behaviour and anxiety.[124] Screen time can displace more active or productive pursuits and is often consumed alone, therefore intensifies feelings of social isolation and loneliness.[125]

2.3. Social health

Physical activity plays a vital role in children's social development. In particular, team sports provide essential early experiences of the demands of working in a team and a setting in which social skills can be learned, practiced, and reinforced.

There is convincing evidence that peer acceptance and friendships are associated with physical activity and sport.[126] Team sports offer repeated interactions and shared experiences between children, which

115 *Public Health England 2015*, p. 13.

116 *Ibid.*

117 Singh, B. et al. (2026) *Systematic Umbrella Review and Meta-Meta-Analysis: Effectiveness of Physical Activity in Improving Depression and Anxiety in Children and Adolescents*, Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Vol. 65, No.2, February, pp. 171-186. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0890856725002084, p. 2.

118 The Children's Society (2024) *The importance of movement for mental health*, 16 May. Available at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/importance-movement-mental-health (Accessed on: 7 March 2026).

119 Lundgren, O. et al. (2025) *Impact of physical activity on the incidence of psychiatric conditions during childhood: a longitudinal Swedish birth cohort study*, British Journal of Sports Medicine, Vol. 59, No.14, July, pp.1001-1009. Available at: https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/59/14/1001.info.

120 *Public Health England 2015*, pp. 14-16.

121 Nuffield Health (2024) *Children's mental health – 5 ways movement and exercise can help*. Available at: https://www.nuffieldhealth.com/article/childrens-mental-health-movement-exercise (Accessed on: 7 March 2026).

122 Hu, D. et al. (2021) *Factors That Influence Participation in Physical Activity in School-Aged Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review from the Social Ecological Model Perspective*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 18, No. 6. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/6/3147.

123 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 30.

124 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 30.

125 Pfefferbaum, B. and Van Horn, R.L. (2022) *Physical Activity and Sedentary Behavior in Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Mental Health*, Current Psychiatry Reports, Vol. 24, No.10, pp. 493-501. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9434093/.

126 *Public Health England 2015*, pp. 15-16.

foster a sense of belonging to a group and encourage the formation of positive social relationships.[127] They also provide low-stake opportunities for children to work together to achieve a common goal, where they must learn how to balance group demands with individual demands and handle victory and defeat.[128]

Excessive sedentary behaviour can have the opposite effect. Screen time activities, such as television use and video gaming, have been found to have a negative impact on pro-social behaviour.[129] Increased screen time among young children often comes at the expense of play time with peers, resulting in fewer opportunities to develop social skills.[130]

2.4. Academic achievement

On top of, and partly the result of, the physical, mental, and social health benefits, physical activity plays an important role in academic achievement. Not only does physical activity directly enhance school performance through improved cognitive development and concentration, but it also increases children's enjoyment of school and therefore their eagerness and ability to learn.

Being physically active is important for children's cognitive development. [131] Studies have shown that physical activity improves memory, problem solving, and creativity and that these effects are strongest for children aged between 4 and 13 years old. [132]

Children who are more physically active are also better at paying attention and concentrating in class. The largest effects are the result of continuous regular physical activity over several weeks,[133] but even just a single bout of physical activity increases children's ability to focus on specific information while ignoring other stimuli.[134]

These benefits are reflected in teachers' opinions of the effect of physical activity. In a recent survey of teachers, nearly half stated that they had observed low levels of physical activity leading to children being less attentive in class, and 4 in 10 stated that it made children more disruptive.[135] 87 per cent of teachers agree that daily physical activity would improve school children's behaviour and their learning outcomes.[136]

127 De Bruijn, A.G.M. and van der Wilt, F. (2023) *Social Acceptance in Physical Education and the Regular Classroom: Perceived Motor Competency and Frequency and Type of Sports Participation*, Children, Vol. 10, No.3. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/10/3/568.

128 Khanjari, Y. (2024) *The Role of Physical Activity in Children's Brain Development and Learning: A Systematic Review*, Brain and Neurological Disorders, Vol. 7, No.4. Available at: https://auctoresonline.com/article/the-role-of-physical-activity-in-childrens-brain-development-and-learning--a-systematic-review.

129 Carson, V. et al. (2016) *Systematic review of sedentary behaviour and health indicators in school-aged children and youth: an update*, Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 240-265. Available at: https://cdnsciencepub.com/doi/10.1139/apnm-2015-0630, p. 242.

130 Putnick, D.L. (2022) *Displacement of peer play by screen time: associations with toddler development*, Paediatric Research, Vol. 93, No.5, pp. 1425-1431. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9390097/.

131 *Public Health England 2015*, p. 14.

132 Vasilopoulos, F. et al. (2023) *Multi-level meta-analysis of whether fostering creativity during physical activity interventions increases their impact on cognitive and academic outcomes during childhood*, Scientific Reports, Vol. 13. Available at: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-35082-y. On-task behaviour is defined as verbal or motor behaviour that follows the class rules and is appropriate to the learning situation. Mahar, T.M. et al. (2006) *Effects of a classroom-based program on physical activity and on-task behavior*, Medicine and science in sports and exercise, Vol. 38, No. 12, pp. 2086-94. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17146314/, p. 2088.

133 De Greeff, J.W. et al. (2018) *Effects of physical activity on executive functions, attention and academic performance in preadolescent children: a meta-analysis*, Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, Vol. 21, No. 5, pp. 501-507. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1440244017316419.

134 *Ibid*, p. 504; Mile High Psychiatry (n.d.) *What Is Selective Attention, and How Does It Work?* Available at: https://milehighpsychiatry.com/what-is-selective-attention-and-how-does-it-work/ (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

135 The Daily Mile (2024) *Three in four primary school teachers report children's physical activity is in decline*, 20 September. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/news/the-daily-mile-itv/ (Accessed on: 23 February 2026).

136 *Ibid*.

Less direct benefits of physical activity beyond cognitive functioning and concentration compound its importance. Firstly, the improved self-esteem associated with physical activity is conducive to performing well in school.[137] Positive self-esteem provides the foundations for effective learning, as confident children engage better with activities and their peers and are more willing to take risks.[138]

Furthermore, the happier children are at school the better they perform academically.[139] A happy school life creates a greater sense of belonging and enjoyment of learning, which encourages children to be more engaged in lessons.[140] We must therefore ensure that schools are empowered to create an environment and culture that reflects the factors that influence their pupils' happiness.

Finally, extra-curricular sporting activities can increase pupil attendance and retention, as they can be used to engage children in other learning activities such as literacy and mathematics.[141] Improved physical fitness, for example lower and less severe rates of asthma and obesity, may also increase attendance.[142]

Within these findings, one of particular importance is that spending more time physically active during school hours can have a positive impact on academic outcomes.[143] This is especially pressing because there is an assumption that PE and physical activity can be discarded in favour of a school's academic priorities.

Overall, given the wide-ranging benefits explored in this chapter, it is unsurprising that physical activity improves children's academic performance.

137 Barbosa, A. et al. (2020) *Physical Activity and Academic Achievement: An Umbrella Review*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 17, No.16, pp.1-29. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/16/5972, p. 2; Elizarov, E. et al. (2025) *Fostering Academic Performance in 5-Year-Olds: The Role of Self-Direction Values, Presented Self-Esteem, and Positive Self-Perception*, Early Education and Development, Vol. 36, No. 7, pp. 1599-1617. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10409289.2025.2454727.

138 Education Gateshead (2020) *Supporting pupils with low self-esteem: Advice and Guidance from the Primary Behaviour Support Service*. Available at: https://education-gateshead.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/updated-self-esteem-leaflet-1.pdf.

139 Hochschild Ovalle, H. et al. (2024) *Happiness at School and Its Relationship with Academic Achievement*, Education Sciences, Vol. 14, No.12, pp.1-18. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/14/12/1321.

140 Dorrian, J. (2025) *Is he happy? Summary of an investigation to discover the influences on the happiness of young children while at school*, *Early Childhood Blog*, 14 August. Available at: https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/EarlyChildhood/index.php/2025/08/14/is-he-happy-summary-of-an-investigation-to-discover-the-influences-on-the-happiness-of-young-children-while-at-school/.

141 YST Research (2019) *Brief Summary of evidence linking Physical activity and school sport to academic attainment and wellbeing*. Loughborough: Youth Sport Trust, 26 April. Available at: https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/cgikv2mc/evidence_relating_to_school_sport_and_physical_activity.pdf, p. 3; Education Endowment Foundation (2025) *Physical Activity*. Available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/physical-activity (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

142 National Collaborative on Education and Health (2015) *Brief on Chronic Absenteeism and School Health*. Available at: https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Chronic-Absenteeism-and-School-Health-Brief-1.pdf.

143 Barbosa, A. et al. (2020) *Physical Activity and Academic Achievement: An Umbrella Review*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 17, No.16, pp.1-29. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/16/5972.

Chapter three:

The changing policy landscape

Policymakers have been attempting to address issues surrounding children's physical activity for well over a century. As early as 1889, concerns were raised in the House of Lords that the provision of PE was insufficient to protect young children's physical and mental health.[144]

In the last two decades, successive governments have publicly emphasised the importance of sport and physical activity for children. Yet children's physical development at the end of primary school is worse, not better, than it was twenty years ago. This stems from successive policy solutions being undermined by the same fundamental errors.

First, although the measurement and tracking of children's physical activity has improved in the past 10 years, it is too often treated as an end in itself, instead of a means towards improving children's lives. Guidelines are largely unknown, targets are vague and unambitious, and tracking does not provide meaningful insights into children's development.

Second, while time spent in PE has been increased and sustained, it has largely been implemented through a box-ticking approach. Policy changes have repeatedly failed to ensure that PE effectively develops children's physical capabilities, hindering the formation of lifelong healthy habits.

Third, active travel initiatives have consistently underperformed in terms of boosting participation. Active travel is important, but it is just one part of the broader picture of children's physical activity outside of school.

We need to rethink how physical activity policy works towards ambitious targets, with data as a tool to identify interventions, whole school prioritisation, and active childhoods outside of school. This chapter evaluates why we must move from the underpowered bureaucratic hegemony of the last twenty years to finally tackle this issue for children across the country.

3.1. Tracking progress

For a successful national policy framework, the WHO encourages the development of national guidelines on physical activity, effective measurement of children's physical activity levels, and setting national level targets.[145]

144 UK Parliament (1889) *House of Lords debate: Physical Education in Elementary schools*, 13 May, vol. 335, cc1815-1829. Available at: https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1889/may/13/physical-education-in-elementary-schools.

145 Milton, K. and Chalkley, A. (2020) *A critical review of national physical activity policies relating to children and young people in England*, Journal of Sport and Health Science, Vol. 10, No.3, pp. 255-262 (Milton and Chalkley 2020). Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8167315/.

In this regard, England has developed solid foundations for the development of coherent national policy targeting physical activity. National guidelines and measurement are well-established and provide consistent monitoring of the country's progress in certain aspects of physical activity.

However, tracking progress is ultimately only worthwhile as a vehicle to stimulating improved action. Measurement and monitoring are a means, not an end. Similarly, national guidelines are only useful if they are known, and progress towards them is fully monitored. National surveillance is missing important elements of children's health. Furthermore, the lack of a clear and ambitious national target harms incentives for action and accountability.

3.1.1. Physical activity guidelines

National recommendations on physical activity for children were first developed in the 1990s and officially endorsed by the UK's CMO in 2004.[146] These recommendations were later revised in 2011 and 2019 to reflect new evidence on physical activity and sedentary behaviour.

The current NHS guidelines recommend children to complete an average of 60 minutes of MVPA a day across a week, a variety of types and intensities of physical activity across the week to develop movement skills, muscles, and bones, and to reduce time spent sitting or lying down and break up long periods of not moving.[147] These are in line with the WHO's guidelines.[148]

However, the guidelines can only be effective if parents and children are aware of them. This is not the case. In 2025, it was found that 81 per cent of parents underestimate the amount of physical activity children need.[149] This alarming information gap must be closed for the guidelines to be effective.[150]

RECOMMENDATION 1

Improve the 'Let's Move!' campaign.

The DHSC should integrate into the '*Let's Move!*' campaign a greater focus on breaking up sedentary time, in particular screen time. The campaign should make a more concerted effort to inform parents and their children of the benefits of regular activity breaks and the dangers of excessive sedentary behaviour. There should also be a greater emphasis on the importance of social interaction between children and young people during play outside of school hours, in particular outdoors.

146 Milton, K. and Bauman, A. (2015) *A critical analysis of the cycles of physical activity policy in England*, International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, Vol. 12, No.8, pp.1-9. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4318185/. Children were recommended to complete 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a day, including exercises to improve bone health, muscle strength, and flexibility at least twice a week. Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Prevention (2004) *At least five a week*. London: Department of Health, 29 April. Available at: https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2004/04/29/At_least5aweek.pdf.

147 *NHS Physical Activity Guidelines*.

148 *WHO Physical Activity Guidelines*, p. 27.

149 *Let's Move! Campaign Launch*.

150 The Government recently launched the 'Let's Move!' campaign, which provides parents with information on the amount of physical activity their children need and activities to keep them active. The Government should monitor closely if this has been effective in closing information gaps. *Let's Move! Campaign Launch*.

3.1.2. National surveillance

England has one of the world's largest national surveillance programmes tracking children's physical activity.[151] Since its deployment in 2017/18, Sport England's Active Lives survey has annually conducted a large and high-quality yearly survey. In its latest edition covering 2024/25, the survey received responses from over 150,000 pupils, parents, and teachers from 1,750 schools.[152] Continuing the collection of reliable information is crucial to developing evidence-based interventions and monitoring progress towards national physical activity targets.

However, tracking focuses entirely on the inputs and not the outcomes. The Active Lives survey focuses on physical activity, instead of on children's development of movement skills, muscles, and bones. Considering recent markers of decline in this regard,[153] it is important to better track this component of the physical activity guidelines.[154]

Considering this, primary schools should engage in basic testing of physical fitness at the beginning and end of primary schooling, as done in Finland,[155] to understand children's development level and identify key areas of focus for improving children's activity prospects.

The Active Lives survey also lacks surveillance of children's sedentary behaviour. Given the rise in sedentary time,[156] the increasing evidence of its harmful effects on children's health,[157] and recommendations that it should be limited, there must be large-scale annual monitoring of the time children are spending sedentary.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Additional Active Lives measurements.

Expand monitoring by Active Lives to include:

- Time spent sedentary, both inside and outside of school.
- Screen time.
- Children's awareness of the CMO's activity guidelines.

3.1.3. National targets

National targets have so far focused on PE, active travel, and sports clubs, and not included an appropriate overall target for the proportion of children meeting the physical activity guidelines.[158] It

151 *Milton and Chalkley 2020.*

152 IPSOS (2025) *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2024-25, 2 December*. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/active-lives-children-and-young-people-survey-2024-25 (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

153 See Section 1.1.2.

154 See Recommendation 10.

155 See Section 5.1.

156 See Section 1.2.3.

157 See Chapter 2.

158 *Milton and Chalkley 2020.*

was only in 2023 that the Government published its first target for the number of children it aimed to be physically active.[159] Unfortunately, the target was unproductively vague and disappointingly unambitious.

The Government set the aim of increasing the number of children classed as active in England by 1 million by 2030.[160] In 2022/23, 47.0 per cent of children, or 3.5 million, were classed as active.[161] An additional 1 million active children would take this proportion to approximately 62.5 per cent.[162] Between 2022/23 and 2024/25, an additional 2.1 per cent, or 156,000, were classed as active.[163] For the target to be achieved, a further 13.4 per cent, or 844,000, need to be classed as active by 2030.

Considering the scale of this challenge, and its lifelong consequence for health and wellbeing, such a target is not fit for purpose. The Government should set an explicit and ambitious target for the proportion of children it aims to be active by 2030, making this a genuine priority and holding policymakers to account for success. A target of 75 per cent of children being sufficiently active will demand the Government to outline a comprehensive strategy for improving physical activity.

The Government should also incorporate clear participation targets into the new School Sport Partnerships.[164] These should include specific targets for children who are known to be less active, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds, female pupils, and children with special educational needs and disabilities. This is to ensure that the children most in need of support unlock the benefits of being active.

RECOMMENDATION 3

National targets.

The DfE and the DHSC should introduce a clear target for the proportion of children that are sufficiently active according to the CMO's guidelines of 75 per cent by 2030, with interim milestones and accountability mechanisms for government departments and local authorities.

3.2. Physical education and sport

PE lessons are a vital part of a child's development. They provide regular opportunities to be active and high-quality teaching equips children of all abilities and backgrounds with the skills and confidence needed for an active lifestyle.

In government policy, PE has become a tick-box exercise. English primary schools perform well in terms of delivering the two hours of PE they are recommended to.[165] However, the quality of this provision

159 Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2023) *Get Active: a strategy for the future of sport and physical activity*. London: Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 30 August. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-active-a-strategy-for-the-future-of-sport-and-physical-activity/get-active-a-strategy-for-the-future-of-sport-and-physical-activity.

160 In this context, children is defined as ages 5 to 16.

161 *Active Lives*.

162 The estimate of the population in 2030 uses the underlying population of the Active Lives survey, adjusted for the ONS's projection of a 3.1 per cent decrease in the population of children aged between 5 and 16 by 2030. Office for National Statistics (2025) *Zipped population projections data files, England*, 28 January. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/z3zippedpopulationprojectionsdatafileseng-land (Accessed on: 22 December 2025).

163 *Active Lives*.

164 See Section 5.3.

165 See Section 1.2.4.

is suspect: a lack of progress in building teacher confidence has inhibited the quality of teaching and therefore children's development.[166]

Delivering high-quality PE lessons needs to rapidly and substantially climb school's list of priorities, but for this to be effective it must form part of a wider strategy that provides children with multiple opportunities to be active every school day. In 2016, the Government recognised that two hours of PE was not providing children with sufficient encouragement to be active.[167] It consequently included a recommendation to primary schools that "*at least 30 minutes should be delivered in school every day through active break times, PE, extra-curricular clubs, active lessons, or other sport and physical activity events*".[168]

This gentle encouragement has unsurprisingly been ineffective. While the quantity of provision has met statutory obligations, it has not delivered a meaningful improvement in the opportunities for physical activity for young people. If we want to raise a healthier and more resilient generation, physical activity must stop being treated as a compliance exercise and instead become a daily expectation of school life.

3.2.1. Quantity

The quantity of PE provision has grown steadily over recent decades.

In 1988, the Education Reform Act introduced the National Curriculum to provide every child with access to the same standard and content of teaching and hold schools and local authorities accountable.[169] Although it was already widely taught in schools, PE's inclusion in the act established it as a mandatory subject to be taught by schools.

The 2002 Education Act prohibits the Secretary of State for Education from prescribing the amount of time to be spent on any curriculum subject.[170] This restriction exists to give schools the flexibility to organise their curriculum according to local needs, focusing on educational outcomes rather than mandating fixed hours for any subject.

However, the Government is permitted to provide guidance to schools on how much time schools should spend on PE.[171] In 2002, the Government set a target of 75 per cent of children and young people to spend a minimum of 2 hours a week on PE and sport in school by 2006, and 85 per cent by 2008.[172] This target was met early.[173]

In 2008, the targets became more ambitious, with an expectation of schools to provide three hours of physical activity a week through two hours of PE and an additional hour outside of school hours on school sites.[174] However, the strategy was ended in 2010 by the Coalition Government and schools were no longer required to report the time spent on PE.[175] The change was part of the Government's broader approach of reducing central prescription.

166 See Section 1.2.4.

167 HM Government (2016) *Childhood Obesity: A Plan for Action*. London: Department of Health & Social Care, August. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action, p. 7.

168 *Ibid.* This advice was reiterated in the School Sport and Activity Action Plan in 2019. *Long 2025*, p. 15.

169 House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2009) *Minutes of evidence: National Curriculum – Children, Schools and Families Committee, Session 2008-2009, HC 666*. London: House of Commons. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/344/8060403.htm.

170 *Long 2025*, p. 11.

171 *Ibid.*

172 *Milton and Chalkley 2020.*

173 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Departmental Report 2008*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, May. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dedd5ed915d74e6222fc1/dcsf_departmental_report_2008.pdf, p. 169.

174 *Milton and Chalkley 2020.*

175 *Long 2025*, p. 13.

Instead, schools were encouraged to maintain the current levels of PE and in 2013 Ofsted recommended primary schools to spend at least 2 hours a week on core PE.[176] Current guidance reiterates this advice, and it is used as a benchmark by Ofsted in their assessment of primary schools' provision of PE.[177] Evidence suggests most primary schools are meeting this target.[178]

3.2.2. Quality

While the number of hours of PE taught by schools has reached a satisfactory level, successive governments have struggled to find ways to improve the quality of provision

In October 2002, the Labour Government launched School Sport Partnerships to increase the proportion of children who participated in two hours of *'high quality'* PE and sport.[179] These partnerships involved the creation *'families'* of schools which comprised of a Specialist Sports College linked to a set of secondary schools, which in turn were connected to a group of primary and special schools.[180]

At the centre of each partnership was a Partnership Development Manager, who worked alongside School Sport Coordinators in secondary schools and Primary Link Teachers in primary schools.[181] Together, they coordinated provision across the partnership, established connections to community sports clubs, and developed tailored strategies to increase participation in PE and school sport that reflected the specific needs of the local schools and community.[182]

A 2011 report by Ofsted found that School Sport Partnerships had a beneficial effect on the quantity and quality of PE and sport provision, especially in primary schools.[183] Partnerships were also thought to have improved the link between schools and local sports clubs.[184] However, funding for the partnerships was withdrawn in 2011.[185] By 2013, 50 per cent of partnerships had survived in some form, with Ofsted noting that the "*partnerships had left a notable legacy*", including a broader curriculum, participation in sport festivals and events, and stronger links with sports providers in the local community enhanced the experiences of pupils of all abilities.[186]

To improve the quality of PE lessons in primary school the Government launched the PE and sport premium in 2013.[187] This aimed to provide more targeted and less bureaucratic funding to schools, who could decide to spend the money as was most appropriate.

After concerns were raised regarding how schools were spending the premium, in particular frequent use of funds to outsource PE rather than upskill teachers,[188] the Government released additional guidance to

176 *Ibid.*

177 Department for Education (2023) *School Sport and Activity Action Plan: Update*. London: Department for Education, July. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b7c813ef5371000d7aee6c/School_Sport_and_Activity_Action_Plan.pdf; *Ofsted PE Review 2023*.

178 See Section 1.2.4.

179 Foster, D. (2015) *School Sport Partnerships*. London: House of Commons, 10 September. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06052/SN06052.pdf, p. 4.

180 *Ibid.*

181 *Ibid.*

182 Ofsted (2011) *School Sport Partnerships*. Manchester: Ofsted, June. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81902140f0b62305b8fa0a/School_Sport_Partnerships.pdf.

183 Foster, D. (2015) *School Sport Partnerships*. London: House of Commons, 10 September. Available at: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06052/SN06052.pdf, p. 9.

184 *Ibid.*

185 *Ibid*, p. 6.

186 *Ibid*, pp. 8-10.

187 Department for Education (2014) *PE and sport premium: more children benefitting from school sport*, 9 September. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pe-and-sport-premium-more-children-benefiting-from-school-sport (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

188 *Long 2025*, pp. 18-19.

ensure the premium was being used to make sustainable improvements.[189] Current guidance explicitly prohibits spending the £16,000 plus £10 per pupil that schools receive on staff salaries and employing external coaches to teach, plan, and assess.[190] Schools are also prevented from using the premium for capital expenditure.[191]

Although the encouragement of sustainable interventions through the restrictions on spending are well-intentioned, the requirements are overly restrictive. Preventing schools from using the premium for infrastructure investments, such as climbing frames, blocks schools from making long-term investments that can be part of a wider strategy to increase physical activity.[192] More importantly, excessive restrictions on spending disempower schools from taking responsibility for physical activity and therefore inhibit the creation of an active culture beyond PE lessons.[193]

Furthermore, there is growing criticism of the structure and nature of PE lessons and sport in England. Last year's Curriculum and Assessment Review suggested that brief and unclear subject aims make it difficult for non-specialist PE teachers to deliver high-quality lessons.[194] The Government has acknowledged the need for a scaffolded approach to developing fundamental movement skills and participation in sport and physical activity.[195]

It is also argued that the content of the PE curriculum overemphasises competitive sport. Although competitive sport can be effective in ensuring active children establish lifelong healthy habits, it is not always conducive to making inactive children more active. Those whose performance is weaker than their peers can find competitive sport anxiety inducing and stressful, which often reinforces hesitancy over getting involved.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review highlighted that England stands out compared to other countries that are shifting to a more holistic curriculum that balances competition and sports with less competitive physical activity.[196] Some of this can thin the sporting experience of children. Experiences such as losing together in a team are formative for social and emotional development. However, these benefits can only be reaped by the children who are involved in the first place. The OECD has suggested that a single-minded emphasis on competition may be limiting participation among certain groups of pupils.[197]

189 Education & Skills Funding Agency (2023) *PE and sport premium: conditions of grant 2023 to 2024 (academies)*, 23 September. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/pe-and-sport-premium-conditions-of-grant-2023-to-2024/pe-and-sport-premium-conditions-of-grant-2023-to-2024-academies (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

190 Schools with fewer than 16 pupils receive £1,000 per pupil. Department for Education (2025) *Primary PE and sport premium: conditions of grant for the academic year 2025 to 2026*, 6 October. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pe-and-sport-premium-conditions-of-grant-2025-to-2026/primary-pe-and-sport-premium-conditions-of-grant-for-the-academic-year-2025-to-2026 (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

191 *Ibid*.

192 Nielsen, G. et al. (2012) *School Playground Facilities as a Determinant of Children's Daily Activity: A Cross-Sectional Study of Danish Primary School Children*, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 104-114. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221735950_School_Playground_Facilities_as_a_Determinant_of_Children's_Daily_Activity_A_Cross-Sectional_Study_of_Danish_Primary_School_Children; Coates, J. et al. (2023) *Youth Sport Trust: Early Years Physical Activity Review*, Youth Sports Trust, August. Available at: https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/bnnj50f1/early-years-review-report.pdf, p. 15.

193 Daly-Smith, A. et al. (2020) *Using a multi-stakeholder experience-based design process to co-develop the Creating Active Schools Framework*, International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, Vol. 17, No.13, pp. 1-12 (Daly-Smith et al. 2020). Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7006100/pdf/12966_2020_Article_917.pdf, p. 2.

194 *Curriculum and Assessment Review 2025*, p. 102.

195 Department for Education (2025) *Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review*. London: Department for Education, November. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government_response_to_the_Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review.pdf, p. 35.

196 Department for Education (2025) *Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. London: Department for Education, 5 November (Curriculum and Assessment Review 2025). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report, pp. 101-102.

197 *Curriculum and Assessment Review 2025*, p. 102.

3.3. Active travel

Active travel has the potential to provide an important boost to physical activity. An additional 30 minutes a day can be the difference between an inactive and active child. However, constraints, such as family inclination and distance from school, mean active travel interventions must be coordinated with other interventions to form a full solution. Broader thinking on how to organise society to create an active culture is needed.

In the early 2000s, growing environmental and health concerns regarding car use for school journeys increased the pressure on local and national government to act.[198] For the Government, the primary issue was excessive traffic congestion, however the negative side effects of fewer children walking or cycling to school on the health and fitness of children were in consideration.[199]

The core intervention of the 2000s was the Travelling to School Initiative (TTSI), which was launched in 2003 and aimed for every school in England to have an active School Travel Plan (STP) by 2010.[200] The STPs involved schools developing their own strategy of initiatives to reduce car use and promote active travel.[201] Schools were supported in their coordination, development, and implementation of STPs by School Travel Advisors (STAs).[202]

Evidence on the effectiveness of the TTSI and STPs is mixed. Surveys of STAs found the majority believed there had been a positive effect on modes of travel and there was increased awareness of obesity issues associated with physical activity among pupils, parents, and teachers.[203] Furthermore, case studies of schools provide examples of a large impact.[204] However, STPs were found to have had only a small or negligible effect on aggregate car use and active travel.[205] Funding for the TTSI was not extended beyond March 2010.[206]

Nonetheless, the TTSI provides an example of effective nationwide encouragement of schools to take responsibility for their own strategies in tackling physical activity related issues. It was mostly successful in achieving its goal of school coverage, reaching over 90 per cent by the deadline.[207] Although concerns were raised regarding the dependency of STPs on funding, the willingness of primary schools to engage in the process meant it was expected they would be more likely to maintain their STP than secondary schools.[208] This was partly due to less rigid timetables that allowed pupils to be more involved in the STP process and more active engagement from parents.[209] Aggregate effects of modes of travel were largest for primary schools.[210]

Since 2010, several different strategies have been implemented to encourage active travel. In 2017, the first cycling and walking investment strategy (CWIS) introduced funding for a wide range of interventions to make walking and cycling easier, for example £50 million for children's cycling proficiency training

198 Gillie, C. (2004) *The School Transport Bill: Research Paper 04/78*. London: House of Commons Library, 25 October. Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/22836/1/RP04-78.pdf.

199 *Ibid*, p. 12.

200 Atkins (2010) *An Evaluation of the 'Travelling to School Initiative' Programme: Final Report*. Birmingham: Department for Children, Schools and Families, October (TTSI Evaluation). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cd15aed915d63cc65d036/TTSI_Final_Report.pdf, p. 7.

201 *Ibid*, p. 41.

202 *Ibid*, p. 73.

203 *Ibid*, pp. 119-120.

204 *Ibid*, p. 119.

205 *Ibid*, pp. 46, 118-119.

206 School Travel Plans Ad-hoc Scrutiny Committee (2010) *School Travel Plans Scrutiny Review – Draft Final Report*. York: City of York Council, 18 November. Available at: https://democracy.york.gov.uk/documents/s44963/Report.pdf, ¶ 52.

207 *TTSI Evaluation*, p. 117.

208 *Ibid*, p. 9.

209 *Ibid*, p. 127.

210 *Ibid*, p. 40.

and £101 million to improve cycling infrastructure.[211] The Gear Change plan, the second CWIS, and the proposal for the third CWIS have reiterated or extended similar commitments.[212]

To assist in the effective delivery of the Government's active travel strategies, Active Travel England (ATE) was established in 2022 and became fully operational in August 2023.[213] The organisation works through three main areas: funding, spatial planning, and design guidance.[214] In 2023/2024, ATE distributed £45.8 million to local authorities to support 851 active travel projects across 80 schemes.[215] It also helps councils design infrastructure and is a statutory consultee on all large planning applications in England.[216] As a recently formed Executive Agency, it is too early to draw concrete conclusions on the effectiveness of this intervention. However, concerns remain regarding whether there is sufficient funding to deliver schemes that make progress towards active travel targets.[217]

The first and second CWISs included a target to increase the percentage of children aged 5 to 10 that usually walk to school from 49 per cent in 2014 to 55 per cent in 2025.[218] As of 2024, 51 per cent of trips to school by 5- to 10-year-olds were made by walking and a very small proportion were made by bike.[219] Although improvements in cycling and walking infrastructure are worthwhile investments into an environment that encourages physical activity, the unambitious target shows that they are unlikely to transform children's physical activity levels without complementary reforms.

We must instead focus on more ambitious, more fundamental solutions. Other crucial areas of childhood activity that could potentially have a larger impact have received alarmingly little recent attention. For example, the backbone of sporting facility provision exists in schools, of which the majority is inaccessible, behind locked school gates.[220] Continuing to encourage active travel should be a valued, but small, part a wider strategy to create an active culture.

211 Department for Transport (2017) *Government publishes £1.2 billion plan to increase cycling and walking*, 21 April. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-publishes-12-billion-plan-to-increase-cycling-and-walking (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

212 Department for Transport (2020) *Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking*. London: Department for Transport. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f1f59458fa8f53d39c0def9/gear-change-a-bold-vision-for-cycling-and-walking.pdf; Department for Transport and Active Travel England (2022) *The second cycling and walking investment strategy*, 6 July. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis2; Department for Transport and Active Travel England (2025) *The third cycling and walking investment strategy (CWIS3)*, 3 November. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/developing-the-third-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis3/the-third-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis3.

213 National Audit Office (2023) *Active Travel in* England. London: National Audit Office, 7 June. Available at: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/active-travel-in-england.pdf, p. 5.

214 Active Travel England (n.d.) *Active Travel* England. Available at: https://www.activetravelengland.gov.uk/ (Accessed on: 16 March 2026).

215 Active Travel England (2024) *Active Travel England: annual report and accounts 2023/24*. London: House of Commons, 29 July. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66ab445a49b9c0597fdb091b/ate-annual-report-23-24.pdf.

216 Active Travel England (n.d.) *Support for local planning authorities*. Available at: https://www.activetravelengland.gov.uk/planning (Accessed on: 16 March 2026).

217 House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2023) *Active travel in England*. London: House of Commons, 16 October. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41918/documents/209082/default/.

218 Department for Transport (2017) *Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy*. London: Department for Transport, 21 April. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f622fade90e072bb68d5c74/cycling-walking-investment-strategy.pdf, p. 9; Department for Transport and Active Travel England (2022) *The second cycling and walking investment strategy*, 6 July. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy/the-second-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy-cwis2.

219 Department for Transport (2025) *NTS 2024: Travel to and from school*. London: Department for Transport, 27 August. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2024/nts-2024-travel-to-and-from-school.

220 London Sport (2024) *Written evidence submitted by London Sport*. Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/133841/html/ (Accessed: 16 March 2026).

Chapter four:

Integrating activity into school life

Materially impacting the physical activity levels will require substantial cultural and environmental changes to integrate activity into everyday life. Achieving this demands a reorientation of the systems that children interact with to make physical activity a priority.

School, though not everything, is a good place to start. Children spend a substantial amount of time at or travelling to and from school, and each school day can offer multiple opportunities for pupils to be active, including PE, break times, and active travel. While schools alone cannot solve inactivity, they have the potential to become the central element in a community that ensures all children lead healthy lifestyles.

However, there is a growing consensus that single-component school-based interventions are too often ineffective in producing a long-term impact.[221] To achieve sustained change, school stakeholders must have positive attitudes towards physical activity. For example, school leaders and teachers, who set the priorities of the school and the classroom, may undermine even the best-designed single-component interventions if their actions disfavour physical activity.[222]

Guidance from the OECD and the WHO therefore recommends adopting a whole school approach to physical activity, which means promoting movement throughout the school day by embedding it in lessons, break times, school policies, the physical environment, and wider school culture.[223] An effective approach must first encourage school leaders and teachers to have pro-physical activity behaviours and attitudes. Previous findings of ineffective physical activity interventions have been attributed to '*top-down*' approaches driven by researchers and stakeholders external to the school. To foster a sense of responsibility and motivation for physical activity in schools, school leaders must take a prominent role in the creation of interventions.[224] Providing school leaders with local data on health, obesity, and inactivity has also been found to be an effective way of evoking action.[225]

A successful whole school approach also influences the behaviours of parents so that positive actions at school are reinforced at home. To do so, parents should be included in the development of interventions and on wellbeing committees. Combined with providing parents with information on the guidelines for physical activity and the importance of physical activity in the development of their children, this will raise the status of physical activity in the home to reflect its greater priority in school.

221 Tibbits, B. et al. (2021) *Considerations for Individual-Level Versus Whole-School Physical Activity Interventions: Stakeholder Perspectives*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 18, No.14, pp.1-15. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34300080/, pp. 1-2; World Health Organization (2025) *Whole-of-school approach to the promotion of physical activity: using research, policy and practice to understand system's needs and structures*. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 29 August. Available at: iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/47a58ee1-8cd9-4608-a26f-84a90f9a7631/content, p. 1.

222 Tibbits, B. et al. (2021) *Considerations for Individual-Level Versus Whole-School Physical Activity Interventions: Stakeholder Perspectives*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 18, No.14, pp.1-15. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34300080/, p. 6.

223 *OECD 2025*, pp. 22-23; World Health Organization (2018) *Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030: more active people for a healthier world*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 21 January. Available at: https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/33339c9c-3a9f-46d4-9f12-ae9ff0dfdc6a/content, p. 36.

224 *Daly-Smith et al. 2020.*

225 Morris, J. L. et al. (2023) *Initial insights into the impact and implementation of Creating Active schools in Bradford, UK*, International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, Vol. 20, No.1, pp. 1-13 (Morris et al. 2023). Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10320983/pdf/12966_2023_Article_1485.pdf, p. 6.

Practically, the whole school approach involves the implementation of various elements of physical activity promotion within and around schools, which in combination provide children with multiple opportunities to be active every school day. Instead of focusing on one area, such as sport or active travel, that may not fit the capabilities, needs and preferences of all children, the whole school approach provides multiple inclusive opportunities to be physically active. For example, active academic lessons, in which children move around the classroom or outdoors whilst learning, can benefit all pupils.[226]

In recent guidance on enhancing PE and improving access to sport and physical activity, the Government highlighted the changes made at St James Primary School in Bradford,[227] which has adopted the whole school approach.[228] To embed physical activity into school ethos and improve concentration in the classroom, the school includes physical activity outcomes in every aspect of its culture, including the school commute, break times, and lessons. In its inspection in 2022, Ofsted noted that "*physical education is a real strength of the school. Leaders have planned a curriculum that gives pupils an excellent experience of sport and physical activity.*"[229]

The latest Curriculum and Assessment Review states that "*it is essential that more children and young people build strong foundations and a love of learning in the primary years*".[230] By empowering schools to create happy and healthy school environments and cultures that reflect the needs of their pupils, the whole school approach offers the perfect solution.

4.1. Case studies

The following international and domestic case studies of effective, large-scale whole school approaches provide lessons on why it is the necessary next step for primary schools to make a real difference on the lifestyles of their pupils and how such an approach should be designed.

4.1.1. Finland – Schools on the Move

The Finnish Schools on the Move programme (FSM) was established in the late-2000s to combat growing obesity, inactivity, and low proportions of children meeting the recommendations for physical activity.[231] In 2009, then Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen acknowledged the need to activate the school day,[232] and through a whole school approach, FSM was offered as a new and innovative way to combat the issue by ingraining physical activity in school culture.[233]

226 See Section 4.2.2.

227 Department for Education (2024) *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school: Non-statutory guidance*. London: Department for Education, March. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9f1d3a0001d32adbc/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf, p. 16.

228 St James Primary School is part of the Creating Active Schools programme. See Section 4.1.3.

229 Department for Education (2024) *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school: Non-statutory guidance*. London: Department for Education, March. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9f1d3a0001d32adbc/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf, p. 16.

230 *Curriculum and Assessment Review 2025*, p. 8.

231 Hietikko, T. (2015) *Cross-sectoral cooperation in Finnish schools on the move programme*. Finland: Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. Available at: https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/102438/lopullinen.pdf, p. 13.

232 *Ibid*.

233 *Ibid*; Occupational Safety and Health (2020) *Schools and Students on the Move – A Finnish initiative*. 28 October. Available at: https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/schools-and-students-move-finnish-initiative.

The success of the programme has led to national expansion. Starting from a pilot of just 45 schools in 2010, FSM now covers over 90 per cent of Finnish schools, reaches 95 per cent of pupils, and is included in the national curriculum.[234]

In 2016, it was found that 9-year-olds in FSM schools were nine percentage points more likely to meet recommendations for physical activity than children in non-FSM schools and 11-year-olds were seven percentage points more likely.[235] Research has shown several other positive changes in FSM schools: increased physical activity during break time and throughout the school day, more break time spent outdoors, more active commuting to school during winter, greater pupil involvement in the planning of school activities, and a more peaceful learning environment during academic lessons due to increased student satisfaction with school.[236]

The FSM strategy largely depends on schools developing and implementing their own strategies to increase physical activity during the school day.[237] This has effectively empowered principals, teachers, and pupils to take ownership over the process and aligns with evidence that change must be driven internally to be most effective.[238]

Other key principles that underpin FSM are research, monitoring, and evaluation. To support schools in implementing their strategies, FSM developed a self-evaluation tool so that schools can better understand their progress regarding physical activity and plan future interventions.[239] The tool is also used to systematically collect data from schools.[240] This helps decision-makers monitor the expansion of FSM and assess good practises for increasing physical activity.[241]

The approach involves significant changes to break times. Schools have increased the frequency and length of break times to ensure children are getting sufficient time outdoors.[242] They have also included guided physical activities to break times and gymnasiums are utilised when forced indoors.[243] In 2017, a survey found that 70 per cent of primary schools had long breaks with physical activity, emphasising that these changes have been widespread.

Another key intervention has been the addition of activity breaks and learning by doing to academic lessons to break up sedentary time.[244] For example, a maths lesson may be conducted outside or an English lesson could include active roleplay.[245] In 2017, a survey of teachers found that half utilised action-based methods in most lessons and 6 in 10 were breaking off long sedentary periods in most lessons.[246]

Many other interventions have important roles. Information and planning support is provided to municipalities, schools, pupils, and parents to promote active travel to school.[247] A particular focus is applied to trips under 5km, which has contributed to 85 per cent of primary school students making these

234 *Blom et al. 2018*, pp. 820-821.

235 Blom, A. et al. (2017) *Towards more active and pleasant school days: Interim report on the Finnish Schools on the Move programme 2015-2016*. Finland: Likkuva koulu. Available at: https://schoolsonthemove.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/LK_va%CC%88liraportti_111017_en.pdf, p. 9.

236 *Blom et al. 2018*, p. 821.

237 *Blom et al. 2018*, p. 820.

238 *Blom et al. 2018*, p. 820; *Daly-Smith et al. 2020*, p. 2.

239 *Blom et al. 2018*, p. 821.

240 *Ibid.*

241 Schools on the Move (2020) *National network to support schools' activities: The development of the schools on the Move programme and implementation of key project*. Jyväskylä: Schools on the Move (Schools on the Move 2020). Available at: https://schoolsonthemove.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/KHR_EN_web.pdf, p. 12.

242 *Schools on the Move 2020*, p. 93.

243 *Schools on the Move 2020*, p. 20.

244 *Schools on the Move 2020*, p. 20.

245 Techclass (2025) *Why Movement is a Requirement in Every Finnish Classroom*, 10 September. Available at: https://www.techclass.com/resources/education-insights/why-movement-is-a-requirement-in-every-finnish-classroom (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

246 *Schools on the Move 2020*, pp. 93-94.

247 Fiksusti Kuluun (n.d.) *Active way to School programme*. Available at: https://fiksustikouluun.fi/english/ (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

journeys actively.[248] Schools have also been encouraged to increase their provision of extracurricular activities. In 2015/16, 34 per cent of schools cooperated with local organisations to implement club activities.[249] Just two years later this had increased to 44 per cent.[250] Furthermore, indoor and outdoor spaces have been adapted to be more conducive to physical activity. By 2017/18, a quarter of schools had adapted teaching facilities to facilitate more activity-based learning methods and half of schools had increased stimuli in the playground.[251]

FSM is a prominent and world leading example of a whole school approach.[252] The programme demonstrates that with the appropriate support and motivation high-quality national adoption of the approach is possible. Even after just a few years, the school life of young children can be radically transformed.

4.1.2. Victoria, Australia – TransformUs

TransformUs in Victoria, Australia, provides another example of an effective whole school approach.[253] In primary schools, the initiative integrates physical activity into daily teaching through a variety of methods, for example active lessons, breaking up prolonged periods of sitting, and active school environments.[254]

Having begun as a research trial in 20 primary schools in 2009, the programme has now reached over 950 schools and delivered remarkable results.[255] Compared to traditional lessons, pupils in TransformUs schools have been found to spend up to 63 minutes less time sedentary and 5 minutes more active each school day.[256] This coincided with improvements in physical health, including lowering body mass index and blood pressure.[257]

There were also positive effects in the classroom. 85 per cent of teachers reported improved concentration among pupils and 82 per cent observed time on task increase following activity breaks.[258] The pupils themselves reported greater satisfaction with learning.[259] It has consequently offered a solution to declining student engagement, absenteeism, and teacher burnout.[260]

TransformUs provides an important example of an effective whole school approach that has been applied in a variety of contexts. In 2018, the initiative was made available to all primary schools in Victoria.[261] It was found that there was no difference in the socioeconomic status between adopting and non-adopting schools, suggesting equitable uptake.[262]

248 *Schools on the Move 2020*, p. 96.
249 *Ibid*, p. 97.
250 *Ibid*, p. 97.
251 *Ibid*, p. 94.
252 International Society for Physical Activity and Health (2020) *Eight Investments that work for Physical Activity*. Available at: https://ispah.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/English-Eight-Investments-That-Work-FINAL.pdf, p. 6.
253 *OECD 2025*, p. 24.
254 TransformUs (n.d.) *What does TransformUs involve?* Available at: https://transformus.com.au/for-teachers/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).
255 TransformUs (n.d.) *Our Story*. Available at: https://transformus.com.au/our-story/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).
256 *OECD 2025*, p. 24.
257 *Ibid*
258 *OECD 2025*, p. 24.
259 *Ibid*
260 *Ibid*
261 TransformUs (n.d.) *TransformUs Research.* Available at: https://transformus.com.au/transformus-research/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).
262 *Ibid.*

4.1.3. England – Creating Active Schools

Bradford has led the way in England with the whole school approach through the Creating Active Schools programme (CAS), which focuses on organisational and cultural change promoting physical activity in schools.[263] The programme was developed in light of the national and international evidence recommending whole school approaches to physical activity,[264] which emphasises that for a sustained impact strategies must include input from school stakeholders, i.e. teachers and pupils, rather than a *'top-down'* approach influenced only by researchers and external stakeholders.[265]

Schools adopting CAS take part in a four-stage annual cycle to embed physical activity into their culture and ethos. The in-school CAS lead first completes a profiling of current whole school physical activity provision, then develops a plan for change identifying evidence-informed interventions. Next, the local CAS leader supports the school in implementing interventions. Finally, schools evaluate the impact of interventions to inform their next cycle.[266]

The interventions that have been applied by CAS schools are wide-ranging and differ by school but have included: closing streets to encourage walking to school, buying children weatherproof clothing to facilitate outdoor activity in all weathers, and active academic lessons in which children move about to complete tasks.[267]

Evidence suggests that CAS has been effective in promoting organisational and cultural change for physical activity in schools. Research has found that 9 months after CAS implementation there were large positive effects on the whole school culture and ethos, i.e. schools' policies, strategies, monitoring and evaluation, and evidence-based practice around physical activity improved.[268] Importantly, there were also large positive effects on the provision of physical activity during academic lessons, PE lessons, and the school commute.

The programme's success has led to CAS being implemented in 443 schools and has drawn national attention.[269] In recent government guidance on enhancing PE and improving access to sport and physical activity, five separate CAS schools were used as examples of schools making a positive difference.[270] The following case studies demonstrate how CAS provides schools with the framework and support they need to identify and solve their own unique issues regarding physical activity.

Case study 1 – St James Primary School, Bradford

To embed physical activity into school ethos and improve concentration in the classroom, St James Primary School includes physical activity outcomes in every aspect of its culture, including the school commute, break times, and academic lessons. In its inspection in 2022, Ofsted noted that *"physical education is a real strength of the school. Leaders have planned a curriculum that gives pupils an excellent experience of sport and physical activity."*

263 Helme, Z. E. et al. (2022) *Assessing the Impacts of Creating Active Schools on Organisational Culture for Physical Activity*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 19, No.24, pp.1-14 (Helme et al. 2022). Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778943/pdf/ijerph-19-16950.pdf, p. 2.

264 *Ibid.*

265 *Daly-Smith et al. 2020*, p. 2.

266 *Morris et al. 2023*, p. 3; For more details, see *Helme et al. 2022*, pp. 3-4.

267 University of Bradford (2023) *Creating Active Schools recognised internationally*, 1 November. Available at: https://www.bradford.ac.uk/news/archive/2023/creating-active-schools-recognised-internationally-.php (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

268 *Helme et al. 2022*, pp. 9-10.

269 Centre for Applied Education Research (n.d.) *Creating Active Schools (CAS)*. Available at: caer.org.uk/projects/creating-active-schools-cas/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

270 Department for Education (2024) *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school: Non-statutory guidance*. London: Department for Education, March. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9f1d3a0001d32adbc/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf, p. 15.

Case study 2 – Westerton Primary Academy, Tingley

Following Westerton Primary Academy's participation in the Active Lives Survey in 2021, the school decided to integrate physically active learning into academic lessons to boost levels of physical activity. A survey of pupils found 82 per cent enjoyed active learning and 64 per cent felt a positive impact on learning. Active lessons also increased teacher's awareness of the benefits of an active school environment and the school's progress was noted by Ofsted.

Case study 3 – Easterside Academy, Middlesbrough

After finding that participation in extra-curricular activities was concentrated in a certain number of its pupils, Easterside Academy tracked activity to develop a programme targeting the pupils engaging in extra-curricular activities the least. Inactive children were then encouraged to participate in physically active after-school clubs. The programme led to a wider variety of children attending after-school clubs, an increase in physical activity of identified children, and improved attitudes towards and enjoyment of physical activity. Furthermore, parental involvement effectively educated families on physical activity's benefits to extend behavioural changes into routines and habits outside of school.

Case study 4 – Girlington Primary School, Bradford

To investigate how effectively PE was tackling sedentary behaviour, Girlington Primary School used monitoring devices to track movement patterns throughout a school week. It was found that most pupils were not moving for more than 30 minutes during the school day, even on days they had PE. Consequently, a target of at least 2 hours a week of PE was included in the school improvement plan. The school believes PE lessons are essential for the development of movement skills and tackling sedentary behaviour.

Case study 5 – Red Hall Primary School, Darlington

Facility constrains meant that Red Hall Primary School struggled to provide 2 hours of PE a week during periods of poor weather. The school overcame this issue by dedicating a whole day to PE, during which each year group has PE on the same day and facilities are used only for sports and physical activity. This ensures PE lessons take place in all weather conditions.

CAS has also received international accolades. In 2023, it was nominated for a health award by the International Sport and Culture Association, which honours the change-makers in promoting wellbeing and a healthier society.[271] In the World Heart Foundation's first policy brief on physical activity, CAS was included as a case study on how to create and promote systems change in schools and is recommended for adoption outside of the UK.[272]

271 University of Bradford (2023) *Creating Active Schools recognised internationally*, 1 November. Available at: https://www.bradford.ac.uk/news/archive/2023/creating-active-schools-recognised-internationally-.php (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

272 World Heart Federation (2024) *More people, more active, more often for heart health – taking action on physical activity*. Geneva: World Heart Federation. Available at: https://world-heart-federation.org/resource/whf-policy-brief-more-people-more-active-more-often-for-heart-health/.

4.2. Single-component interventions

The following case studies provide examples of simple and cost-effective individual interventions that can be used by schools as part of their wider whole school approach to make physical activity accessible for all pupils.

Example 1 – The Daily Mile

Founded in 2012 at St Ninian's Primary School in Stirling, the Daily Mile has grown into a global movement.[273] Today over 11,000 schools in the UK participate along with many in the USA, Ireland, the Netherlands, and other countries.[274]

The initiative is simple. At least 3 times a week, children run, walk, or wheel together outside for 15 minutes during class time.[275] By being non-competitive, the activity is kept fun and inclusive so that every child can take part. Importantly for schools and teachers, it is free and easy to implement. The Daily Mile provides schools with everything they need to get started and no equipment is required.[276]

Research has shown significant positive effects in a variety of dimensions. Multiple studies have identified a positive effect on the physical fitness of children after 3 months, for example improved results in endurance, jumping, and balance tests.[277] The initiative has also been found to have benefited children's mental health, with improvements in self-worth and reduced behavioural difficulties.[278] A study finding enhanced performance in a computer-based task testing visual-spatial memory has suggested short-term benefits for cognition.[279]

The Daily Mile shows that even the most straight-forward initiatives that provide children with additional structured and recurring opportunities to be active in school can benefit children. The individual school-based interventions that form the wider whole school approach do not need to be complicated or expensive. Instead, they must focus on getting children outside and moving as much as possible.

However, a recent study of schools in Greater London found less promising results, identifying no association between the Daily Mile and improvements in physical activity, mental health, or educational performance.[280] These findings serve as a reminder that, to guarantee material and long-term impacts, individual interventions must form part of a wider strategy.

273 The Daily Mile (n.d.) *The Daily Mile*. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

274 The Daily Mile (n.d.) *Countries*. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/countries/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

275 The Daily Mile (n.d.) *About The Daily Mile*. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/about-the-daily-mile/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

276 The Daily Mile (n.d.) *Why the Daily Mile Works*. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/why-the-daily-mile-works/ (Accessed on: 9 March 2026).

277 Booth, J.N. et al. (2022) *The Impact of the Daily Mile on School Pupils' Fitness, Cognition, and Wellbeing: Findings From Longer Term Participation*, Frontiers in Psychology, Vol. 13, pp. 1-10. Available at: thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-minds-research/impact-on-fitness-cognition; Brustio, P. R. et al. (2019) *The Daily Mile: 15 Minutes Running Improves the Physcial Fitness of Italian Primary School Children*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 16, No.20, pp. 3921-3931. Available at: thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-bodies-research/improves-physical-fitness; De Jonge, M. et al. (2020) *The Effect of The Daily Mile on Primary School Children's Aerobic Fitness Levels After 12 Weeks: A Controlled Trial*, The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, Vol. 17, No.7, pp. 2198-2208. Available at: thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-bodies-research/effect-on-childrens-aerobic-fitness-levels-after-12-weeks. One study found a positive effect on balance and endurance after 6 months. Mancini, A. et al. (2024) *Six months of different exercise type in sedentary primary schoolchildren: impact on physical fitness and saliva microbiota composition*, Frontiers in Nutrition, Vol. 11. Available at: thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-bodies-research/impact-on-physical-fitness-and-saliva-microbiota-composition.

278 Arkesteyn, A. et al. (2022) *Mental health outcomes of the Daily Mile in elementary school children: a single-arm pilot study*, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp.361-368. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-minds-research/happier-children/.

279 Booth, J.N. et al. (2022) *The Impact of the Daily Mile on School Pupils' Fitness, Cognition, and Wellbeing: Findings From Longer Term Participation*, Frontiers in Psychology, Vol. 13, pp. 1-10. Available at: https://www.thedailymile.co.uk/the-daily-mile/research/healthy-minds-research/impact-on-fitness-cognition/.

280 Ram, B. et al. (2026). *The Daily Mile and children's physical activity, mental health and educational performance: a quasi-experimental study in Greater London primary schools*, BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine, Vol. 12, No. 1. Available at: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/41497829/.

Example 2 – imoves

Inspired by the growing evidence in support of active learning as an effective, efficient, and equitable approach to increasing the physical activity of children, imoves integrates movement into the school day. The company this achieves through an easy-to-use platform that facilitates engaging active learning.

The principle is to meet teachers half-way. The imoves library contains over 2,500 lesson plans and videos for active learning across various subjects. A Year 4 teacher, for instance, can click on an imoves video that turns a fractions lesson into an interactive dance, or use a 5-minute 'brain break' routine to re-energise a class between English and science. By providing straight-forward integrations of active learning into teaching, imoves makes it easier for teachers to keep their pupils active throughout the school day.

A study on the imoves platform conducted on 123 pupils in two primary schools in Sheffield found encouraging results.[281] Objective monitoring of physical activity using accelerometers during a one-hour lesson found that, compared to children not using the platform, imoves significantly reduced sedentary behaviour, increased total activity by 10.3 minutes a day, and increased MVPA by 2.9 minutes per day. Importantly, imoves had the largest effect on the least active children, significantly reducing the gap between the bottom and top third of pupils.

Consistent with evidence that physical activity has positive effects beyond health,[282] the study found that imoves improved children's behaviour. Specifically, listening and attention, completing work on time, and working neatly and carefully significantly increased. Following rules and instructions, following directions, and working and playing co-operatively with other children also improved but not significantly. It is uncertain which change in physical activity caused the improvement, since pupils increased their total activity, reduced sedentary behaviour, and increased MVPA.

Given these results were found after just 2 months of using the platform, the study shows that it is possible to implement active learning programmes, which are an integral part of the whole school approach, that immediately deliver positive results.

281 Jones, G. and Pickles, I. (2019) *The Impact of Physically Active Lessons in the Classroom*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, Spring. Available at: https://media.edtechimpact.com/imoves/evidence/imoves-active-education-case-study-ncsem-report-summary.pdf.

282 See Chapter 2.

Example 3 – The Boathouse Youth

The Boathouse Youth is a Blackpool-based youth charity that aims to '*facilitate a safe space*' and, amongst other things, '*encourage a healthy lifestyle*.' In 2022, operating out of four sites located in the most deprived areas of Blackpool, the charity worked with 1,140 children and recorded an incredible 30,608 attendances.[283]

One of the charity's many interventions it uses to integrate physical activity into children's daily life is a *'Walking Bus'*. At the end of the school day, a volunteer picks children up from three local primary schools and walks them to the youth centre.

"Without the walking bus many of the young people would just go home because it's closer, but walking with us to the centre means they get a 30-minute walk and then take part in an activity session." Boathouse Youth Volunteer

The *'Walking Bus'* has two benefits linked to physical activity. Children gain an activity boost by walking to the centre as well as free and safe travel to sessions that include movement. It demonstrates a simple, cheap, and scalable way in which local organisations can broaden accessibility to physical activity. Implementing a whole school approach would make it easier for schools to develop similar interventions tailored to their community.

4.3. Boosting activity beyond the school gates

Although nationwide adoption of the whole school approach to physical activity is a necessary first step in the right direction, schools cannot solve the inactivity crisis alone. Research suggests that single setting interventions are unlikely to have a significant impact due to the importance of positive reinforcement.[284] The wider environment must be supportive of behaviour change.[285]

The JU:MP programme in Bradford provides a stand-out domestic example of the transformative possibilities of a whole-system approach. As Sport England continues to fund over 90 similar initiatives,[286] the lessons learnt in Bradford must be taken on board. In particular, it must be ensured that each initiative is supported by the research and evidence collection necessary for the development of context-specific interventions.

4.3.1. Bradford – JU:MP

In 2018, Sport England funded 12 localities across England to pilot whole-system, place-based approaches to increase physical activity and reduce health inequalities.[287] These aimed to encourage wider, collaborative partnerships that enable all parts of a community to better work together to help the most inactive.

283 The Boathouse Youth (2022) *A Year in Review: The Best Bits of 2022*, 31 December. Available at: https://www.thebhy.co.uk/a-year-in-review-the-best-bits-of-2022 (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

284 *OECD 2025*, p. 25.

285 *OECD 2025*, p. 25.

286 Sport England (2025) *Our funding helps Bradford deliver world-leading results for children*, 23 May. Available at: https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-inspiration/our-funding-helps-bradford-deliver-world-leading-results-children (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

287 Sport England (2017) *Transforming the delivery of physical activity locally*, 5 December. Available at: https://www.sportengland.org/news/transforming-the-delivery-of-physical-activity-locally (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

One of the chosen localities was Bradford, a city that is young, ethnically diverse, contains some of the most deprived places in England, and performs below average in terms of children's physical activity.[288]

Its pilot, the JU:MP programme, targets children aged between 5 and 15 and aims to address inequalities for girls and ethnic minorities.[289] So far, it has reached over 30,000 children and their families to give them more opportunities to be active through positive movement experiences.[290]

JU:MP is led by the Born in Bradford research programme,[291] who root interventions in theory and evidence.[292] The programme applies a systems-based design aimed to enable sustainable change by embedding physical activity within everyday community life, practice, and infrastructure.[293]

Recently, JU:MP has gained international recognition for its innovative, research-led solutions that have already delivered world-leading results.[294] A recent study found that after two years JU:MP increased the MVPA of children aged 5 to 8 by 5 minutes a day.[295] Sedentary time was also found to have declined by 9 minutes a day, with an especially large reduction on weekends of 21 minutes a day.[296]

A closer look at the results shows why JU:MP stands out from other interventions. Firstly, JU:MP successfully fostered behavioural change over two years, rather than a short-term boost in physical activity that eventually dissipates, which has often been found with other interventions.[297] Secondly, the rate of age-related decline in physical activity slowed, suggesting that physical activity could be increased by 12 minutes a day by the age of 14 or 15.[298] Finally, the reduced sedentary time was driven by an improvement on the weekend, suggesting interventions where physical activity is less structured, i.e. the '*environment, community, and family levels*', were effective.[299]

These results were achieved through a wide range of interventions that were created with and by local communities and organisations.[300] These include, but are not limited to, the development of '*Healthy Madrasas*', deployment of 57 CAS schools, the transformation of green spaces, and active travel.

Prior to developing '*Healthy Madrasas'*, researchers at Born in Bradford found that 90 per cent of Muslim South Asian children attend mosque or madrassa every day after school for 2 hours of supplementary Islamic teaching.[301] Madrasas were therefore identified as providing an additional captive educational setting on top of school. To capitalise on this, culturally sensitive health interventions were introduced to faith settings to prevent childhood obesity, an issue that disproportionately affects South Asian children.[302] This included a toolkit with detailed guidelines on how to conduct sessions and workshops on healthy diet, physical activity, and madrasas as healthy places.

288 Hall, J. et al. (2021) *A whole system approach to increasing children's physical activity in a multi-ethnic UK city: a process evaluation protocol*, BMC Public Health, Vol.21, No.2296. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8684063/pdf/12889_2021_Article_12255.pdf, p. 2.

289 Barber, S.E. et al. (2026) *The effectiveness of JU:MP a whole system approach to improve physical activity of children aged 5 to 11 years living in multi-ethnic and socio-economically deprived communities: a non-randomised controlled trial*, BMC Public Health, Vol. 26, No.152 (Barber et al. 2026). Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-025-25772-9.

290 Active Bradford (2025) *JU:MP Programme Delivers World-Leading Results in Getting Children Active*, 23 May (Active Bradford 2025). Available at: https://www.active-bradford.com/latest-news/2025/05/ju-mp-programme-delivers-world-leading-results-in-getting-children-active (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

291 Hall, J. et al. (2021) *A whole system approach to increasing children's physical activity in a multi-ethnic UK city: a process evaluation protocol*, BMC Public Health, Vol.21, No.2296. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8684063/pdf/12889_2021_Article_12255.pdf, p.2.

292 *Barber et al. 2026*, p. 7.

293 *Barber et al. 2026*.

294 *Active Bradford 2025*.

295 *Barber et al. 2026*, p. 23.

296 *Ibid*.

297 *Ibid*, p. 29.

298 *Ibid*, p. 31.

299 *Ibid*, p. 29.

300 *Active Bradford 2025*.

301 Born in Bradford (n.d.) *Health Promotion Through Faith Settings*. Available at: https://borninbradford.nhs.uk/what-we-do/studies/health-promotion-through-faith-settings (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

302 In Bradford, children of South Asian heritage live with 10 per cent higher rates of childhood obesity by age 11 than white British children. *Ibid*.

Another key part of JU:MP was the adoption of the CAS by 57 schools.[303] All primary schools in wards aligned to JU:MP were invited to the CAS programme and received an additional small grant (£4,000 to £10,000) as support for CAS if they joined.[304] See Section 4.1.3 for more on CAS and its success.

To satisfy children's desire for fun and informal activities near their homes and address inequalities in access to green spaces, JU:MP has invested in eight and completed three greenspace developments.[305] The JU:MP team emphasises that access to greenspaces is vital in getting children outdoors and active.[306]

Consistent with the wider JU:MP project, these green spaces have been designed in an innovative, community-led manner. Peel Park Nature Play area is now a popular children's play that was rebuilt to be made of natural materials, which research has found can increase activity compared to traditional play areas.[307] Kashmir Park was co-designed with the local community. It has become well used for children's play and is looked after by the local community who do regular litter picks. Eccleshill playground was re-developed as a safe space for girls, and a group has been formed to build community ownership. So far, the group has engaged in bulb planting and there are plans to revamp the park by painting the seating and railings. Other spaces have been co-designed by adolescent girls to lower barriers for girls to use these spaces and therefore reduce gender inequalities in physical activity.[308]

A final major component of JU:MP is active travel. Despite national attention on the matter, active methods of transport are not the social norm in Bradford and large barriers remain.[309] So, to encourage families to walk, scoot, or cycle to school, the JU:MP to School initiative was created.[310] Children are incentivised to actively travel by reward cards, badges, and the opportunity to win a scooter. The intervention has been viewed as successful. Schools reported a longer-term impact with some families continuing to travel actively and the approach is being rolled out in community, sports, and faith settings.

A number of interacting reasons have been offered to explain JU:MP's success.[311] Firstly, its systems approach meant multiple partners were engaged to provide a broad array of physical activities across Bradford. Secondly, its interventions were underpinned by theory and developed with stakeholders to enhance relevance, engagement, and sustainability. Thirdly, a district-wide strategy strengthened relationships between organisations whilst national advocacy and funding via Sport England ensured political support. Lastly, the iterative learning process embedded within intervention delivery allowed for and encouraged continuing adjustments.

Despite its success, JU:MP does not offer a perfect copy-and-paste approach that could be applied across the country. The individual interventions used were often heavily influenced by their context, therefore careful consideration is required before they are applied in other places. Furthermore, the pilot demanded significant amounts of resources and time.[312] Subsequent initiatives may be less successful if they are more constrained.

Nevertheless, JU:MP does provide a clear example of an effective whole-systems approach and offers well-documented lessons for the successful design of subsequent initiatives. Out of the 12 pilots launched in 2018, JU:MP has been the most successful. It stands out from the other 11 due to its commitment

303 *Active Bradford 2025*.

304 *Helme et al. 2022*, pp. 3-4.

305 Active Bradford (n.d.) *Active Playful Parks*. Available at: https://www.activebradford.com/active-playful-parks (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

306 *Ibid*.

307 *Ibid*.

308 Local Government Association (2024) *Gender-sensitive greenspace development: a co-designed approach with adolescent girls in Bradford, UK*, 18 July. Available at: www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/gender-sensitive-greenspace-development-co-designed-approach-adolescent-girls-bradford (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

309 Active Bradford (n.d.) *Active Travel*. Available at: https://www.activebradford.com/active-travel (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

310 *Ibid*.

311 *Barber et al. 2026*, pp. 30-31.

312 *Ibid*, p. 33.

to basing interventions on theory and evidence and involving the communities it aims to help. These principles should form the foundations of the additional 80 '*Place Partnerships*' confirmed by Sport England in 2025.[313]

313 Sport England (n.d.) *Place-based work*. Available at: https://www.sportengland.org/funding-and-campaigns/our-work-places?section=place-partnerships-section (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

Chapter five:

A new School Activity Standard

To fully address the inactivity crisis, we must create a culture in which physical activity is embedded as a core part of daily life. As a first step, the DfE should develop a School Activity Standard for primary schools, which will include national adoption of the whole school approach to physical activity, closer inspection of schools' physical activity provision by Ofsted, and more sophisticated monitoring of physical development.

RECOMMENDATION 4

School Activity Standard roadmap.

The DfE should develop a plan for implementing the School Activity Standard in primary schools, which will include national adoption of the whole school approach to physical activity, closer inspection of schools' physical activity provision by Ofsted, and more sophisticated monitoring of physical development. This should involve a development phase, where theory and evidence underpin the initial design, followed by a pilot to evaluate the initial design before nationwide adoption by the 2029/30 academic year.

Ofsted's inspection guidelines should be updated to reflect physical activity becoming a top priority for schools. Establishing physical activity provision as a key evaluation area will reinforce to school leaders the importance of high-quality physical activity provision and incentivise improvements.[314]

314 For primary schools, Ofsted inspectors currently make graded judgements on the following evaluation areas: '*safeguarding*', '*inclusion*', '*curriculum and teaching*', '*achievement*, '*attendance and behaviour*', '*personal development and well-being*', and '*leadership and governance*'. Ofsted (2025) *Education inspection framework: for use from November 2025*, 9 September. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025 (Accessed on: 30 March 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 5

Ofsted 'physical development' key evaluation area.

Ofsted should add '*physical development*' as a key evaluation area for primary schools. While aspects of physical development fall under the '*personal development and well-being*' key evaluation area, this dilutes the importance of physical activity. Physical activity should carry significant weight in Ofsted inspections of primary schools.

Aspects the additional evaluation area should consider include:

- Does the culture of the school encourage physical activity?
- Are pupils offered a range of opportunities to be active outside of PE?
- Does the school's physical activity provision enable pupils from all groups to be active?
- Are teachers confident in their ability to deliver high-quality PE, integrate movement into learning, assess children's physical capabilities, and build physical competence?
- Does the school effectively develop pupils' knowledge of physical activity guidelines, understanding of the importance of physical activity and dangers of sedentary behaviour, and physical competence?
- Is the school making a concerted effort to improve outcomes in its physical fitness testing?[315]

At the heart of the School Activity Standard for primary schools is the introduction of a whole school approach to physical activity. While the DfE develops the School Activity Standard and its whole school approach, smaller changes should be implemented alongside closer inspection of physical activity provision by Ofsted to help prepare schools for national adoption.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Physical activity teacher training.

Teachers should be upskilled in the integration of movement into daily teaching. Greater emphasis on physical activity within teacher training should include topics on how to use movement to support learning, assess pupils' physical skills, and build pupils' confidence in being active. When teachers feel confident in their physical activity provision, it helps to create a school culture where physical activity is a natural and valued part of daily learning for all pupils. This will lead to immediate improvements and reduce frictions in the eventual national adoption of the whole school approach.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Active lessons.

The DfE should issue non-statutory guidance that every primary school pupil should receive on average at least one active lesson a day. To support schools in introducing active lessons, the DfE should provide guidance and resources on how movement can be integrated into learning.

315 See Recommendation 10.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Active homework.

The DfE should develop guidance and resources enabling schools to assign movement-based homework, for example step challenges, family walks, and skill practice. This will help extend a culture that promotes physical activity from school into the home.

Successful whole school approaches to physical activity share three fundamental principles: they are driven by research to provide evidence-based solutions, they create an active culture by empowering school leaders and the local community to drive context-specific interventions, and they are coordinated with changes to the wider environment for full-effectiveness. The remainder of this section provides guidance on how the DfE should implement a nationwide whole school approach within the School Activity Standard.

5.1. Research-led evaluation

In a 2019 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, it was recognised that the leading nations in terms of children's fitness have made physical activity central to their health and education programmes and that this is informed by university research.[316] Utilising the insights of high-quality research will be important in both the development and continuous evaluation of the whole school approach.

The best whole school approaches are underpinned by theories of behavioural change, which identify the factors that influence behaviour and how targeting those factors can change behaviour.[317] This is an important distinction from previous policy interventions. To materially impact physical activity levels, we must rewire attitudes to physical activity so that it becomes a top priority for children and adults, instead of aiming for incremental improvements through small policy changes. Research on influencing behavioural change provides strong underlying mechanisms for increasing physical activity levels through the whole school approach and should be utilised in the design of nationwide adoption.

High-quality research and analysis will also be essential in the evolution of a nationwide whole school approach. Changes to children's physical activity provision must be evidence-informed, context-sensitive, and continuously improving. Too often broad assumptions and isolated initiatives have dominated strategies to increasing physical activity even when their effectiveness is uncertain. Consequently, physical activity strategies have been too slow to adjust to the rise in sedentary behaviour, in particular mobile phone screen time. Continuous evaluation and refinements of the whole school approach will increase adaptability and enable the Government, local authorities, and schools to deliver sustained improvements.

The success of both FSM and CAS can be largely attributed to the prominence of academic research. FSM is highly influenced by the LIKES Research Centre for Physical Activity and Health, which is part of the JAMK University of Applied Sciences and funded by Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture.[318] The centre identifies the challenges and strengths of the programme at local, regional, and national levels. Similarly, work by the University of Bradford continuously informs CAS's evidence-based interventions.[319]

316 All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood (2019) *The Primary PE and Sport Premium*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group. Available at: https://fhcappg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/the-primary-pe-and-sport-premium-report-180219-2.pdf, p. 8.

317 Davis, R. et al. (2014) *Theories of behaviour and behaviour change across the social and behavioural sciences: a scoping review*, Health Psychology Review, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 323-344. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4566873.

318 *Blom et al. 2018*, pp. 820-821; JAMK (n.d.) LIKES. Available at: hjamk.fi/en/jamk/organisation/school-of-health-and-social-studies/likes (Accessed on: 24 March 2026).

319 University of Bradford (2025) *Creating Active Schools network part of £4m Sport England grant*, 23 May. Available at: https://www.bradford.ac.uk/news/archive/2025/creating-active-schools-network-part-of-4m-sport-england-grant.php (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 9

School Activity Standard Unit.

The DfE should establish a School Activity Standard Unit (SASU) as the focal point for evidence-based nationwide adoption of the whole school approach. Alongside other responsibilities, the SASU will shape the optimum design of the approach and monitor progress in terms of implementation and effectiveness at the national, regional, local, and school levels.

To further the possibilities of the research guiding the whole school approach, the DfE should create a sophisticated system for evaluating children's physical capabilities. This will enable researchers and schools to better track the effectiveness of physical activity strategies at the national, regional, local, and school levels. Not only will this facilitate more targeted interventions at all levels, but it will also provide meaningful insight into the outcome interventions should be aiming to improve – children's physical development.

Primary school children should participate in a range of exercises that evaluate different physical capabilities. The tests should be modelled on Finland's national monitoring and feedback system '*Move!*'.[320] Children are assessed on their endurance, muscle fitness, mobility, and motor skills in exercises such as a 20-meter dash, throwing and catching, and squats.[321] The core purpose is to encourage pupils to take responsibility for their health and to support schools and parents in promoting an active lifestyle. The results are also used to assist PE teaching and in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of interventions at national, regional, local, and school levels.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Primary school physical fitness testing

Primary schools should conduct two sets of tests examining the physical fitness of their pupils. The first test should take place in Reception to monitor school readiness. The second should take place in Year 6. Schools will then be able to evaluate if they are effectively promoting the physical development of their pupils by reviewing the progress made by each child. The tests should be designed so that they require limited equipment and can be conducted in a non-competitive manner. They should not be used for grading or ranking pupils.

320 Move! (n.d.) Move! Available at: https://www.oph.fi/en/move-0 (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

321 Vipunen (n.d.) Move! Available at: https://vipunen.fi/fi-fi/perus/Sivut/Move!.aspx (Accessed on: 10 March 2026).

5.2. Creating an active school culture

To achieve substantial and sustained change, we must create an active culture that makes physical activity a regular and expected part of everyday life. A natural starting point for building such an active culture is primary schools. Primary schools are not only capable of providing pupils multiple opportunities a day to be active and develop skills, but also instilling the importance, value, and expectation of being physically active every day.

Changing the way primary schools deliver and view physical activity will not be achieved via small national level policy tweaks that aim for incremental increases or improvements to physical activity. We must instead provide schools with the support and encouragement that they need to integrate physical activity into their culture and ethos, so that it becomes a top priority.

Current government guidance encourages schools to deliver 30 minutes of physical activity a day but does not provide an adequate structure for delivery. We should instead provide schools with a sophisticated online framework and a local support network that assists in the design of their own whole school physical activity strategy to address the specific needs of their pupils.

Along with information on how to create a whole school strategy and integrate physical activity into school culture, the online framework should contain tools for the school to conduct an annual review of the effectiveness of its strategy. This should include an automated evaluation of the school's physical fitness testing, as well as other aspects that are less directly measurable yet provide important indicators of the school's provision, such as information on its physical activity infrastructure, teacher confidence in promoting physical activity, and frequency of active travel.

Continuous feedback from the framework will incentivise action and increase accountability. It will also better enable schools to identify groups of pupils that are less active and not accessing extracurricular activities, often girls, disabled children, and disadvantaged pupils,[322] and subsequently facilitate more targeted interventions.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Whole school strategy framework.

The Whole School Approach to Physical Activity Unit should develop an online whole school physical activity framework for schools to create their whole school physical activity strategy. Alongside a Local Physical Activity Leader,[323] the framework will guide school leaders on how to improve their physical activity provision and provide tools for annual evaluation.

To prevent overburdening school leaders with additional demands, schools should be supported by a Local Physical Activity Leader (LPAL). At the outset, the LPAL will inform schools of local health issues and the benefits of adopting a whole school approach. This will help raise physical activity up the priority list for school leaders. In the early implementation of CAS, it was found that providing school leaders with local data on health, obesity, and inactivity was an effective way of getting schools on board.[324]

322 See Section 1.2.2.

323 See Recommendation 12.

324 *Morris et al. 2023*, p. 6.

LPALs will then be responsible for assisting schools in their initial evaluation of their physical activity provision. After the evaluation, LPALs will help schools design and implement their new whole school strategy. Although LPALs will provide schools support, it is important that schools themselves lead on the design. This will increase ownership and integrate physical activity into school culture. Moreover, putting school leaders at the centre of strategy development enables those closest to the specific issues of the school to find solutions. LPALs should also be able to provide assistance in the annual review process and actioning improvements, but this should be designed so that limited support is necessary.

The role of LPALs should also include coordinating across the schools in its locality. The LPAL should use quantitative and qualitative information to identify common issues its schools face and encourage schools to cooperate in creating solutions. For example, a LPAL may find that multiple schools in its network report low levels of physical activity during break times. The LPAL could then initiate a joint training programme on how to encourage physical activity during break times.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Local Physical Activity Leaders.

The DfE should employ Local Physical Activity Leaders to support schools in their development, implementation, and continuous evaluation of a whole school approach to physical activity. Each LPAL should be responsible for between 10 and 20 primary schools.

The LPAL role should not be conceived as an entirely new workforce. In many areas, relevant capacity already exists across School Games Organisers, Active Partnerships, and local authority public health teams. The role should instead be delivered through a combination of repurposed existing roles and targeted new capacity where gaps exist. The key reform is to provide a clear mandate, defined geography, and stronger alignment with the priorities of individual schools, rather than to duplicate existing provision.

5.3. Boosting activity at the local level

To be fully effective, the whole school approach should be coordinated with physical activity interventions outside of school. It is important that the shift to an active culture in schools is reinforced by opportunities to be active in the wider environment.

In June 2025, the Government announced the new School Sport Partnerships (SSPs).[325] The core aim of the SSPs is to support schools to consistently deliver high-quality experiences in PE, sport, and physical activity by building strong partnerships with local clubs and national governing bodies.[326] If done well, SSPs could provide valuable extracurricular opportunities for children to be active.

325 Prime Minister's Office (2025) *Prime Minister meets with Lionesses ahead of the Euros to announce a new approach to school sport*, 19 June. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-meets-with-lionesses-ahead-of-the-euros-to-announce-a-new-approach-to-school-sport (Accessed on: 30 March 2026).

326 GOV UK (2025) *PE and School Sport Partnership Network – Market Engagement Event*, 10 September. Available at: https://www.find-tender.service.gov.uk/Notice/055601-2025?origin=SearchResults&p=1 (Accessed on: 30 March 2026); Prime Minister's Office (2025) *Prime Minister meets with Lionesses ahead of the Euros to announce a new approach to school sport*, 19 June. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-meets-with-lionesses-ahead-of-the-euros-to-announce-a-new-approach-to-school-sport (Accessed on: 30 March 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 13

School Sport Partnerships and Local Physical Activity Leaders.

The incoming School Sport Partnerships should be coordinated by Local Physical Activity Leaders. This will make it easier for schools to integrate access to sports clubs into their whole school approach and extend the opportunities they offer children beyond the school day. It will also ensure the School Sport Partnerships are aligned with each school's physical activity strategy.

The LPAL should also coordinate amongst its schools to identify common issues with the wider environment that are inhibiting children's physical activity, including understanding what makes parents nervous about letting their children play outside. For example, a LPAL may identify that a lack of safe green space is preventing children in the local area from playing outside. The LPAL will then work with the local authority to address issues with local parks and play areas.

Recent initiatives have shown the benefit of improving access to play areas. Playing Out, a community-led movement reclaiming streets for children's free outdoor play, has enabled over 1,650 streets across more than 100 councils to host regular play sessions.[327] Research by the University of Bristol found that children were three to five times more active on days with Playing Out sessions and spent 16 minutes per hour in MVPA while their street was closed.[328] Research also shows that Playing Out sessions can reduce social isolation and increase parental confidence in children playing outside.[329] Hackney Council and Bristol City Council have demonstrated that these schemes can be delivered within existing regulatory frameworks through light-touch, low-cost processes driven by local residents.[330] Building on this model offers a practical and scalable route to expanding children's access to safe outdoor play space.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Improving access to outdoor play areas.

The Local Physical Activity Leader should be responsible for identifying local issues that are inhibiting outdoor play. They should then work with local authorities to address these issues. The Local Physical Activity Leader should also work with local authorities to explore how local regulations can better incentivise young people to spend more time playing outdoor on local streets and in local parks. This should include evaluating the ability of local residents to apply for controlled road closures on certain streets at certain times of day to increase playing area capacity.

To improve provision of sporting facilities outside of school hours, LPALs should be responsible for ensuring local sporting facilities are being utilised. Currently, the backbone of sporting facility provision exists in schools, of which the majority is inaccessible, behind locked school gates.[331] Within their whole school physical activity strategy, school leaders should be encouraged to consider how they could better utilise their sports facilities outside of school hours.

327 Playing Out (n.d.) *Impact of play streets*. Available at: https://www.playingout.net/play-streets/impact-of-play-streets (Accessed on: 7 April 2026).

328 Playing Out (n.d.) *Street play and public* health. Available at: playingout.net/why/why-playing-out-matters/street-play-and-public-health (Accessed on: 7 April 2026)

329 *Ibid.*

330 Hackney Council (n.d.) *Play* streets. Available at: https://www.hackney.gov.uk/parking-streets-and-transport/sustainable-transport-and-parking/play-streets (Accessed on: 7 April 2026); Bristol City Council (n.d.) *Playing out on your street*. Available at: https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/streets-travel/road-closures/playing-out-on-your-street (Accessed on: 7 April 2026).

331 London Sport (2024) *Written evidence submitted by London Sport*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/133841/html/ (Accessed: 16 March 2026).

The Government recently discontinued the Opening School Facilities Fund (OSF), which supported schools to open their sports facilities outside of school hours.[332] Despite evidence of improved accessibility and reduced geographical and financial barriers to participation, OSF lacked long-term planning and often failed to reflect local needs.[333] These issues could be largely overcome through improved coordination between schools' strategies and the needs of the local community by LPALs. Furthermore, increased expectations and incentives for schools to open facilities to the public would widen impact.

RECOMMENDATION 15

Unlock school facilities.

Working with local authorities, Local Physical Activity Leaders and school leaders should set out a plan for ensuring better usage of school facilities outside of school hours, including the possibility of making them open for the community throughout the week.

RECOMMENDATION 16

National sports facility review.

Working with local authorities, the DfE should undertake a comprehensive evaluation of publicly available sports facilities, including underutilised facilities in schools, across the country to assess the level of accessibility and availability to children. Online platforms like The Big Map,[334] which help schools and local sports clubs connect, could form part of the solution.

To materially impact activity levels, changes must influence the attitudes and behaviours of parents, so that a physically active culture in school is reflected at home. Closer inspection of physical development by Ofsted, physical activity becoming a priority for schools, and higher expectations on parents partnering with designing school-based interventions will reinforce to parents that physical activity must be taken seriously.

Furthermore, parents should be encouraged to engage with physical activity in their local community. Only 7 per cent of men claim to volunteer for a sports or leisure club.[335] Given most of the ways young children are active outside of school, formally or informally, require voluntary oversight, we must increase parental engagement to improve provision for children.

RECOMMENDATION 17

Improve parental engagement.

The role of LPALs should involve improving parental engagement with physical activity provision in schools and local sports clubs, ensuring that families are involved and on board with local changes. The DfE should explore how to further encourage volunteering through LPALs and other means.

332 House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2026) *Game On: Community and school sport*. London: House of Commons, 20 April. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmcumeds/593/report.html, p. 21.

333 *Ibid*.

334 The Big Map (n.d.) *Home*. Available at: https://thebigmap.co.uk/ (Accessed on: 23 April 2026).

335 The Centre for Social Justice (2026) *Lost Boys: Mentors and role models*, March. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/mentors-and-role-models, p. 34.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Improve the 'Let's Move!' campaign.

The DHSC should integrate into the '*Let's Move!*' campaign a greater focus on breaking up sedentary time, in particular screen time. The campaign should make a more concerted effort to inform parents and their children of the benefits of regular activity breaks and the dangers of excessive sedentary behaviour. There should also be a greater emphasis on the importance of social interaction between children and young people during play outside of school hours, in particular outdoors.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Additional Active Lives measurements.

Expand monitoring by Active Lives to include:

1. Time spent sedentary, both inside and outside of school.
2. Screen time.
3. Children's awareness of the CMO's activity guidelines.

RECOMMENDATION 3

National targets.

The DfE and the DHSC should introduce a clear target for the proportion of children that are sufficiently active according to the CMO's guidelines of 75 per cent by 2030, with interim milestones and accountability mechanisms for government departments and local authorities.

RECOMMENDATION 4

School Activity Standard roadmap.

The DfE should develop a plan for implementing the School Activity Standard in primary schools, which will include national adoption of the whole school approach to physical activity, closer inspection of schools' physical activity provision by Ofsted, and more sophisticated monitoring of physical development. This should involve a development phase, where theory and evidence underpin the initial design, followed by a pilot to evaluate the initial design before nationwide adoption by the 2029/30 academic year.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Ofsted 'physical development' key evaluation area.

Ofsted should add '*physical development*' as a key evaluation area for primary schools. While aspects of physical development fall under the '*personal development and well-being*' key evaluation area, this dilutes the importance of physical activity. Physical activity should carry significant weight in Ofsted inspections of primary schools.

Aspects the additional evaluation area should consider include:

- Does the culture of the school encourage physical activity?
- Are pupils offered a range of opportunities to be active outside of PE?
- Does the school's physical activity provision enable pupils from all groups to be active?
- Are teachers confident in their ability to deliver high-quality PE, integrate movement into learning, assess children's physical capabilities, and build physical competence?
- Does the school effectively develop pupils' knowledge of physical activity guidelines, understanding of the importance of physical activity and dangers of sedentary behaviour, and physical competence?
- Is the school making a concerted effort to improve outcomes in its physical fitness testing?[336]

RECOMMENDATION 6

Physical activity teacher training

Teachers should be upskilled in the integration of movement into daily teaching. Greater emphasis on physical activity within teacher training should include topics on how to use movement to support learning, assess pupils' physical skills, and build pupils' confidence in being active. When teachers feel confident in their physical activity provision, it helps to create a school culture where physical activity is a natural and valued part of daily learning for all pupils. This will lead to immediate improvements and reduce frictions in the eventual national adoption of the whole school approach.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Active lessons.

The DfE should issue non-statutory guidance that every primary school pupil should receive on average at least one active lesson a day. To support schools in introducing active lessons, the DfE should provide guidance and resources on how movement can be integrated into learning.

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Table 2 – Recommendation by predicted implementation timeframe and cost

	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Lower-cost	1 – Improved campainging 3 – National targets 7 – Active lessons 8 – Active homework	13 – SSPs and LPALs 14 – Outdoor play access 17 – LPALs and parental engagement	
Medium-cost	2 – Improved Active Lives Surveillance 5 – Ofsted 'physical development' 9 – School Activity Standard Unit	6 – Improved teacher training 10 – Fitness testing 11 – Whole school approach framework 12 – LPALs 15 – Unlock school facilities 16 – National sports facilities review	
Higher-cost			4 – School Activity Standard

338 The Big Map (n.d.) *Home*. Available at: https://thebigmap.co.uk/ (Accessed on: 23 April 2026).

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