

INACTIVE NATION

Part two: Getting England's teenagers moving

September 2026



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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 political landscape by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, the CSJ provided the blueprint for the most significant reforms to welfare in a generation with the introduction of single working-age benefit, Universal Credit. Its research led to the introduction of the first ever Modern Slavery Act, as well as 'cuckooing' becoming a standalone statutory offence in 2026. Legislation in 2026 established the CSJ's Into Work Guarantee in law, allowing disabled people to try work without the fear of this triggering an automatic reassessment. And the CSJ's pioneering model of Family Hubs has grown into a major government programme, with hundreds today bringing family support services together in communities across England.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2026 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

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- › Youth Sport Trust
- › StreetGames
- › We Mind The Gap
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Executive Summary

The ‘bedroom generation’

‘Since I got my new phone I don’t want to come out my bedroom, and I’ve been more short-tempered and not feeling as energetic and active as I used to be... I keep losing track of the time and getting distracted’.

Girl, Year 8

England is raising a ‘bedroom generation’: a cohort of teenagers who are spending most of their free time in their bedrooms,¹ sedentary and cut off from the healthy and social activities that are proven to help them thrive into adulthood.²

New polling commissioned by the CSJ finds that more than a third (37 per cent) of 15-year-olds say they hardly ever leave their bedroom, except for school.³ Nearly one in five 15-year-olds do not spend any evenings out with friends in a usual week,⁴ compared with just one in seven in 2009/10.⁵ The proportion who spend most evenings out with friends has halved since 2009/10, from 35 per cent to just 17 per cent today.⁶

Nearly half of adolescents do not meet healthy levels of physical activity,⁷ and there are nearly an estimated 100,000 more sedentary 11 to 16-year-olds doing zero minutes of physical activity a day today than there were in 2018/19.⁸ One poll indicates that one in ten secondary school girls do no physical activity whatsoever.⁹

- 1 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/On-Side-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).
- 2 Chapter One of this report sets out how participation in physical activity or sport in adolescence is linked to a range of positive outcomes such as increased employability and reduced rates of mental illness. See, for example, Robinson, D. *Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes*. Education Policy Institute, 2024. Available at: epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EC-and-outcomes-final-1.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026); Karen Hughes et al Bangor University and Public Health Wales, 2018. *Sources of resilience and their moderating relationships with harms from adverse childhood experiences* Available at: phw.nhs.wales/reports/sources-of-resilience-and-their-moderating-relationships-with-harms-from-adverse-childhood-experiences-report-1-mental-illness (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 3 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 4 18.8% of 15-year-olds usually spend 0 evenings per week out with friends. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 5 University of Bergen, Data Management Centre. *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study (2009/10)*. Available at: hbosc.org (Accessed: 4 September 2026).
- 6 University of Bergen, Data Management Centre. *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study (2009/10)*. Available at: hbosc.org (Accessed: 4 September 2026); CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 7 The Chief Medical Officer’s guideline is for young people to do one hour of moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity per day. 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, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 13 August 2026).
- 8 CSJ analysis: the number of secondary school pupils active for 0 minutes a day has increased by an estimated 95,240-97,117 between 2018/19 and 2024/25. The comparison uses 2018/19, the low point in the series, to illustrate the extent of change from the most favourable pre-pandemic position. For working, cf. footnote 106. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 13 August 2026).
- 9 Sweaty Betty Foundation, 2025. *Change Starts in the Changing Room (White Paper)*. Available at: sweatybettyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Sweaty-Betty-Foundation-White-Paper-Change-Starts-in-the-Changing-Room.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Almost one in four 15-year-olds spend 6 hours or more in their bedroom (awake) on a normal weekend day.¹⁰ But who can blame them for retreating to their bedrooms? As the places and freedoms that once drew young people into the world have deteriorated, sedentary screen-based activities have filled the vacuum and become the default way adolescents spend their spare time. Young people are allowed out alone at an average age of 10.8, almost two years later than their parents were (8.9 years).¹¹ Places to socialise or be active are disappearing. More than 1000 youth centres shut between 2010 and 2023,¹² hundreds of playgrounds have closed over the past decade¹³ and 75 per cent of 15-year-olds go on screens because they have nothing else to do.¹⁴

'There's barely any places to go and play out anymore.'

Girl, Year 7

Meanwhile, the deterioration in adolescent health is becoming harder to ignore. 15-year-olds in the UK have the lowest life satisfaction out of 27 European countries,¹⁵ and referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have more than doubled in the past six years.¹⁶ More than one in five children now start secondary school with obesity,¹⁷ and health professionals report seeing a rapid deterioration in young people's health in just the past five years.¹⁸

If we are to turn the tide for the 'bedroom generation', we must do more than restrict social media: we must rebuild the active and social alternatives.

Sport and physical activity: an underused 'miracle cure'

Sport and other opportunities for movement are a crucial part of this picture. As the UK Chief Medical Officer put it, 'if physical activity were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure.'¹⁹

Sport protects physical and mental health, giving young people coping strategies, supportive communities and real-world social connections. While a third of young people report high or very high feelings of loneliness,²⁰ almost three in five (59 per cent) agree that being active helps them to make

- 10 23 per cent of 15-year-olds spend 6 hours or more in their bedroom awake on a normal weekend day. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 11 British Children's Play Survey, 2026. *Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2025: Results from the British Children's Play Survey*. Available at: osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/36ptm_v2 (Accessed: 19 August 2026).
- 12 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025. *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy (Accessed: 19 August 2026).
- 13 Centre for Young Lives, 2025. *State of Play: An interim report from the Raising the Nation Play Commission*. Available at centreforyounglives.org.uk/play-commission (Accessed: 17 August 2026).
- 14 75 per cent of 15-year-olds agree/strongly agree that 'I often use my phone or other screens because I have nothing else to do'. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 15 Children's Society analysis of 2022 PISA survey evidence. Children's Society, 2024. *The Good Childhood Report 2024*. Available at: childrengood.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2024 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 16 Onward, 2022. *The Kids Aren't Alright. Why young people are detaching from democratic and social norms – and what to do about it*. Available at: ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/kids-arent-alright-democracy.pdf (Accessed: 19 August 2026).
- 17 *National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England*. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/national-child-measurement-programme-ncmp-annual-report-academic-year-2024-to-2025-england (Accessed: 21 August 2026).
- 18 Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Survey of healthcare professionals: Young people and work report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report (Accessed: 28 August 2026).
- 19 Department for Health and Social Care, 2026. *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines (Accessed: 30 July 2026).
- 20 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/On-Side-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

friends.²¹ Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study has found that reallocating just 15 minutes of a 14-year-old's day to physical activity is linked with improved health and higher self-esteem.²² Nine in ten teachers think that being active improves pupils' behaviour and school work,²³ illustrating the positive impact of sport on building character and employability, which prevents young people ending up NEET.²⁴

Three in four 15-year-olds want to spend more time doing activities outside their home,²⁵ but as things stand, only four in ten secondary pupils take part in sport and physical activities outside of school,²⁶ and less affluent children are often priced out of sport clubs.²⁷ In theory, schools are uniquely placed to provide universal opportunities for physical activity, but the amount of curriculum time devoted to PE has steadily declined in recent years,²⁸ and PE is the most cancelled lesson in the school day.²⁹

Extra-curricular sport and physical activity opportunities vary hugely across schools, with girls, less advantaged and older pupils significantly less likely to participate.³⁰ Chances to be active have been squeezed out of lunch and breaktimes, as half of secondary schools table lunch breaks of just 45 minutes or less.³¹

'When I was younger, I did every kind of sport you could imagine... [but] I feel like I have no hobbies now. The reason people don't come in to school is it's not fun, there's no extra-curriculars, no sport.'

Girl, Year 12

There is also a huge disparity in pupils' experience of school sport. A 2026 Age UK survey estimated that negative school PE experiences have put four million 50 to 65-year-olds off exercise and sport for life.³² The proportion of girls who do not enjoy PE more than triples over their time at school.³³ Secondary school policy has not yet properly tackled the psychological barriers of 'fear of failure' and low resilience among adolescents that are increasingly putting young people off school sport and stopping them from receiving its benefits, even when the provision is there.

- 21 Sport England, 2020. *Physical Activity Can Help Children Catch Missed Work*. Available at: sportengland.org/physical-activity-can-help-children-catch-missed-work (Accessed: 2 September 2026).
- 22 Atkin AJ, Dainty JR, Dumuid D, et al., 2021. *Adolescent time use and mental health: a cross-sectional, compositional analysis in the Millennium Cohort Study*. (BMJ Open). Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8493927/pdf/bmjopen-2020-047189.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).
- 23 Sport England, 2020. *Physical Activity Can Help Children Catch Missed Work*. Available at: sportengland.org/physical-activity-can-help-children-catch-missed-work (Accessed: 2 September 2026).
- 24 'NEET' refers to young people not in education, employment or training.
- 25 74 per cent of 15-year-olds want to 'spend more time doing activities outside my home'. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 26 Department for Education. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice survey*: June 2025. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-june-2025 (Accessed: 2 September 2026).
- 27 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 28 House of Commons Library, 2026. *Physical education, physical activity and sport in English schools*. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06836/SN06836.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 29 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 30 *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).
- 31 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).
- 32 Age UK, 2026. *Millions in midlife put off exercise for life by school PE lessons - as new campaign from Age UK calls on the nation to Act Now, Age Better*. Available at: ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/millions-in-midlife-put-off-exercise-for-life-by-school-pe-lessons-as-new-campaign-from-age-uk-calls-on-the-nation-to-act-now-age-better (Accessed: 30 July 2026).
- 33 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: Girls' Report (Secondary Aged)*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/mtclksih/girls-active-national-report-girls-secondary-aged.pdf. (Accessed 30 July 2026).

A plan to build an active generation

The Prime Minister has said that he is ‘massive on school sport’ and to expect this to be a major feature of his time at Number 10.³⁴ Therefore, the Centre for Social Justice is calling for physical activity to move rapidly up the government’s agenda for children and young people, with nothing less than a Prime Minister-led taskforce to lead this vision from the top. If the government is serious about reversing the child mental health and obesity crises and preparing a generation of teenagers for adulthood and work, sport is the most powerful but under-utilised weapon in their arsenal.

CSJ polling has found that nearly half of the British public think teenage exercise is the responsibility of schools, while a quarter believes the responsibility belongs to families.³⁵ They are both right. Our plan for physical activity must both radically transform school sport and rebuild the opportunities for teenagers to be active and sociable outside of school.

A ‘Right to Sport’

Two thirds of 15-year-olds would take part in more sport or physical activity if their school offered a wider choice.³⁶ Independent schools already offer pupils a well-rounded education with access to an ‘unparalleled breadth and range’ of extra-curricular activities³⁷ including sport. More must be done to ensure every child can discover lifelong hobbies, build healthy habits, and learn the joy of being active at school. In Chapter 2, we set out an ambitious plan for school sport, including:

- A renewed call for an ‘Enrichment Guarantee’ with a ‘Right to Sport’: a policy blueprint to ensure every pupil, no matter what school they attend, participates in 5 hours a week of extra-curricular activities, of which at least 2 hours is sport or physical activity, on top of a mandatory 2 hours of curriculum PE.
- An expansion of social prescribing of sport and physical activity in schools to boost mental health support, connecting struggling young people with sport and physical activity clubs to support their wellbeing.
- Protected break and lunchtimes, with more opportunities for low-pressure, informal physical activity sessions that allow more sedentary pupils to build confidence being active.

From alone to active

Outside of the school day, if we want teenagers to spend less time on screens, we must take on the task of rebuilding an environment in which active, social and independent adolescence is the norm. Four in five 15-year-olds would like to spend more time face-to-face with friends,³⁸ and so there is an opportunity to capitalise on this desire for real-world connection by giving teenagers more reasons to leave their bedroom, with easy opportunities to spend time with friends face-to-face, and more routes into community activities which give belonging and purpose.

34 Jimmy’s Jobs of the Future, 30 July 2026. Andy Burnham: *Career Ladder is Rigged. Here’s How I’d Fix It*. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=mXnO06QfnCM (Accessed: 8 September 2026).

35 Social responsibility polling conducted by JL Partners for the CSJ in 2026. 49 per cent believe the responsibility for ‘Giving children opportunities for physical activity, exercise or sport’ belongs to schools, and 27 per cent believe it belongs to individual families/households.

36 67 per cent of 15-year-olds say they would ‘take part in more sport or physical activity if my school offered a wider choice’. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

37 Social Mobility Commission, 2019. *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

38 80% of 15-year-olds would like more face-to-face time with friends. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

'Once they are active, then they're not playing football with their phone in their hand.... once we get them outside, they're generally all right, but the question is: how do we actually get them outside?'

Youth sport coach

We have a plan to get teenagers from alone to active – a package of low-cost, high-impact reforms designed to fundamentally redesign the balance of teenage life away from the dopamine and isolation of the bedroom and into the adventure and belonging of the real world. This includes:

- › Unlocking school sport facilities for pupils to use informally out-of-hours.
- › A programme piloting £100 vouchers for Year 9 pupils to join sport clubs.
- › A digital directory of local facilities and clubs to help young people find hobbies.
- › A youth discount card scheme to mobilise local businesses to welcome teenagers into third spaces.
- › Directing basketball facilities funding into building standalone hoops in parks and housing estates for informal, self-directed play.
- › Removing 'no ball games' signs as part of routine maintenance work.
- › Encouraging independent, active travel to secondary school.

The challenges facing the 'bedroom generation' will not be solved by telling young people to spend less time online. Teenagers need opportunities to build friendships, take risks, be active and discover the possibilities in the outside world. Our ambition should be a generation of secondary school children who are not isolated in their bedrooms, but confident and connected to their communities.

The race towards a healthier, happier generation starts now.

The Bedroom Generation

Teenagers are spending more time alone in their bedrooms and less time out with friends.



250,000

37% of 15-year-olds hardly ever leave their bedroom, except for school



HALVED

15-year-olds spending most evenings out with friends has halved since 2010



1 in 4

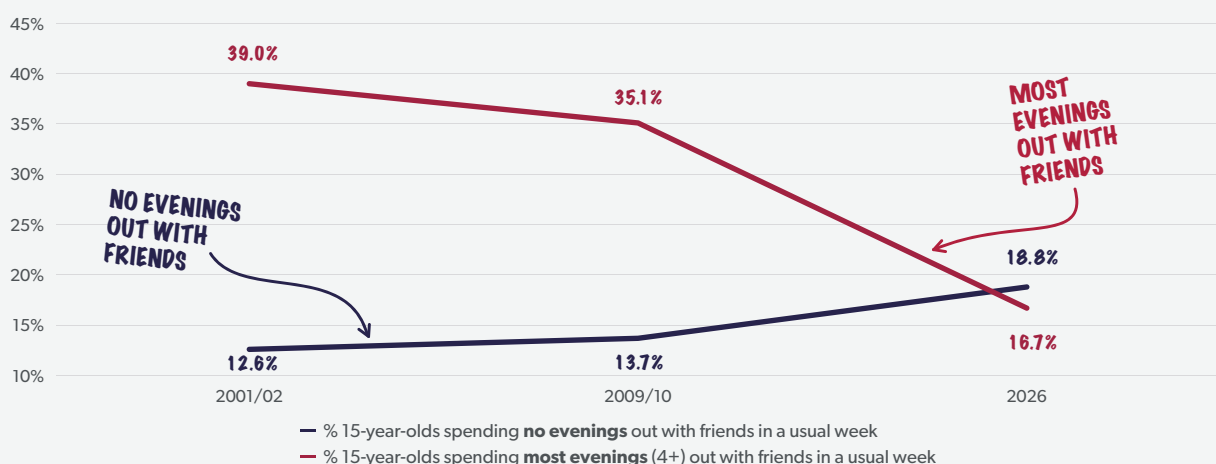
15-year-olds spend 6+ hours awake in their bedroom on a weekend day



3 in 4

15-year-olds use screens as they have nothing else to do

The collapse of teenage evenings out with friends



Source: CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity. Population figures are extrapolations based on ONS mid-year population estimates for the relevant age group. Comparative 2001/02 and 2009/10 figures drawn from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (2001/02; 2009/10).

Chapter One:

The state of teenage physical activity

1.1 The importance of physical activity

Physical activity and sport can provide an antidote to the sedentary, lonely and unhappy lifestyles that are increasingly normal in today's 'bedroom generation' of young people. Sport is not a panacea for all of the problems faced by teenagers, but it is a powerful tool for improving the nation's mental and physical health, building young people's character, fostering community, and supporting educational attainment.

The notion that sport is a tool for social good beyond just a means of recreation is not new: attempts to harness sport to tackle social problems have been a feature of government policy in the UK for over 50 years and has roots going back to the establishment of sport as a popular phenomenon in the Victorian era. The UK Chief Medical Officer has compared physical activity to a 'miracle cure',³⁹ and the evidence set out in this chapter challenges policymakers to ensure every young person can access its benefits.

1.1.1 Mental health and wellbeing

The role sport plays in boosting mental health and wellbeing is well-established and reflected in the Curriculum Review's recommendation that the defined purpose of compulsory PE is broadened to emphasise the subject's 'cognitive and emotional benefits'.⁴⁰ Amid concerning levels of mental ill health among young people, the role sport plays in boosting teenagers' happiness and wellbeing has never mattered more.

Children's Society analysis of 2022 PISA survey evidence found that the UK's 15-year-olds have the lowest average overall life satisfaction out of 27 European countries, with the largest gap of any European country between the least and most disadvantaged.⁴¹ Referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have more than doubled in the past six years,⁴² and more than one in five (22.6 per cent) of 11 to 16-year-olds in England had a probable mental disorder in 2023, up from one in eight (13.3 per cent) in 2017.⁴³ The Department for Health and Social Care recently reported that psychological distress has increased most clearly among younger people (compared to other age groups), with the

39 Department for Health and Social Care, 2026. *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

40 Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

41 Children's Society, 2024. *The Good Childhood Report 2024*. (Page 42-48). Available at: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2024 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

42 Onward, 2022. *The Kids Aren't Alright. Why young people are detaching from democratic and social norms – and what to do about it*. Available at: ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/kids-arent-alright-democracy.pdf (Accessed: 19 August 2026).

43 NHS England, 2023. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023: Wave 4 Follow-up, Part 1: Mental Health*. NHS Digital (Table 1. 2). Available at: digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/part-1-mental-health (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

largest increases among young people seen in emotional symptoms, loneliness, sleep problems, loss of confidence and difficulty concentrating.⁴⁴

A review of 189 studies concluded that children and young people's participation in sports (particularly team sports) was consistently associated with better mental health, including higher self-esteem, life satisfaction and reduced depressive and anxiety symptoms.⁴⁵ Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study found that reallocating just 15 minutes per day to physical activity was associated with improved socio-emotional health, reduced depressive symptoms and higher self-esteem among 14-year-olds.⁴⁶ Even gentle physical activity can boost mental health and reduce symptoms of depression, as another study found that an additional hour of light activity per day between the ages of 12 and 16 is associated with an 8–11 per cent decrease in depression levels.⁴⁷

Participating in sport in childhood is also associated with reduced rates of mental illness in later life.⁴⁸ Among adults with a history of adverse childhood experiences, those who took part in team sports as adolescents showed a lower propensity for depression and anxiety.⁴⁹

Grassroots charities see the positive impact of sport on mental health and wellbeing play out first-hand. KICK, a charity delivering sport and mentoring, was founded in response to a sense of hopelessness among young people, and believes that sport offers them 'hope for the future and joy in the present'.⁵⁰ This philosophy reflects the protective effect of sport for young people's mental health.

Physical activity benefits children's mental health, while sedentary behaviour correlates negatively with wellbeing, quality of life, and mental health.⁵¹ Screen time (a common sedentary behaviour) can displace more active or fulfilling pursuits, and because it is often a solitary activity, it can heighten feelings of social isolation and loneliness.⁵² The role of screen time in adolescent life is explored more fully in Chapter 3.

Poor mental health is now one of the leading causes of long-term sickness in the UK,⁵³ and rates of anxiety, low self-esteem and social isolation among young people in the 'bedroom generation' continue to rise. Sport and physical activity should be treated as a frontline tool for protecting young people's mental health. Yet despite growing evidence of the mental health benefits of sport, it is not systematically embedded within support pathways for young people.

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- 44 Department of Health and Social Care, 2026. *Independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism: Interim report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-mental-health-conditions-adhd-and-autism-interim-report/independent-review-into-mental-health-conditions-adhd-and-autism-interim-report#changes-in-psychological-distress-and-wellbeing (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- 45 Wade, L et al, 2026. *The impact of sports participation on psychological health and social outcomes in children and adolescents: a systematic review and update to the 'Mental Health through Sport' conceptual model*. Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC13064252 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 46 Atkin AJ, Dainty JR, Dumuid D, et al., 2021. *Adolescent time use and mental health: a cross-sectional, compositional analysis in the Millennium Cohort Study* (BMJ Open). Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8493927/pdf/bmjopen-2020-047189.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).
- 47 The Lancet, 2020. *Depressive symptoms and objectively measured physical activity and sedentary behaviour throughout adolescence: a prospective cohort study*. Available at: sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2215036620300341 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 48 Karen Hughes et al Bangor University and Public Health Wales, 2018. *Sources of resilience and their moderating relationships with harms from adverse childhood experiences* Available at: phw.nhs.wales/reports/sources-of-resilience-and-their-moderating-relationships-with-harms-from-adverse-childhood-experiences-report-1-mental-illness (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 49 Molly C Easterlin et al, 2019. *Association of Team Sports Participation with Long-term Mental Health Outcomes Among Individuals Exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences*. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31135890 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 50 KICK, 2026. Available at: kick.org.uk (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 51 World Health Organization, 2020. *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour* (Page 30). Available at: who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 52 Pfefferbaum B, and Van Horn, R. L., 2022. *Physical Activity and Sedentary Behavior in Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Mental Health*. Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9434093 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).
- 53 CSJ analysis found that 46 per cent of people with a long-term health condition in 2024/25 reported having a mental health difficulty. Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Family Resources Survey: Financial Year 2024 to 2025*. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2024-to-2025/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

1.1.2 Physical health

Rising childhood obesity is a ‘major public health issue’⁵⁴ and it is one of the biggest risk factors driving death and disability in England.⁵⁵ Nearly one in seven (14 per cent) of health professionals surveyed for Alan Milburn’s review into ‘Young people and work’ reported an increase in serious and complex conditions and co-morbidities in young people in just the last 5 years, including obesity, diabetes and poor diet.⁵⁶

National Child Measurement Programme data suggests that more than one in five (22.2 per cent) of children start secondary school with obesity.⁵⁷ Unhealthy weight is a growing problem, as a 2025 study found that the proportion of overweight and obese adolescents in England has increased by 50 per cent between 2008 and 2023, from 22 per cent to 33 per cent.⁵⁸ The significant rise of obesity over these years was attributed to sedentary lifestyles driven by excessive screen time, as well as diet, inadequate sleep and rising mental health challenges.⁵⁹ The Chief Medical Officers’ physical activity guidance referenced evidence that each additional hour per day of sedentary time is associated with a 5 per cent increase in the risk of cardiovascular events.⁶⁰

A 2025 Youth Sport Trust report forecasted that 43 per cent of 10 to 14-year-old girls and 38 per cent of 10–14-year-old boys will be classed as overweight or obese by 2050 if trends continue.⁶¹ Inactivity-related health concerns including headaches, sleep disruption and fatigue, as well as conditions once associated only with adulthood such as Type 2 diabetes, will become more prominent in children over the next decade.⁶²

The UK has a particularly acute obesity crisis compared with global counterparts: the UK has almost twice the proportion of overweight and obese children as France, for example.⁶³ NHS data suggests obesity affects young people unequally, as three times as many 11 to 15-year-olds in the most deprived quintile live with obesity compared to the least deprived.⁶⁴

Exercise has a crucial role in reversing the nation’s obesity crisis. Although all forms of physical activity can help young people maintain a healthy weight, at ages 14 and 19, participation in a team sport is associated with higher fitness levels than simply taking part in informal physical activity.⁶⁵ A study found

54 NHS England, 2026. *Obesity*. Available at: england.nhs.uk/ourwork/prevention/obesity (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

55 Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network, 2024. *Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 (GBD 2021): Results*. Available at: healthdata.org/research-analysis/gbd (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

56 Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Survey of healthcare professionals: Young people and work report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

57 22.2 per cent of Year 6 pupils were obese in 2024/25 (Year 6 is the last year of primary school before pupils start secondary school). Department of Health and Social Care, 2025. *National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England*. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/national-child-measurement-programme-ncmp-annual-report-academic-year-2024-to-2025-england (Accessed: 21 August 2026).

58 University of Bristol, 2025. *Study estimates proportion of adolescents living with overweight and obesity in England has increased by 50 per cent between 2008 and 2023*. Available at: bristol.ac.uk/news/2025/april/weight-adolescents-study.html (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

59 University of Bristol, 2025. *Study estimates proportion of adolescents living with overweight and obesity in England has increased by 50 per cent between 2008 and 2023*. Available at: bristol.ac.uk/news/2025/april/weight-adolescents-study.html (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

60 UK Chief Medical Officers, 2026. *UK Chief Medical Officers’ physical activity guidelines*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines#children-and-young-people-guidelines (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

61 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

62 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

63 World Obesity Federation, 2026. *World Obesity Atlas 2026, Childhood Obesity 2nd edition*. Available at: data.worldobesity.org/publications/WOF-Obesity-Atlas-2026-2026-03-18.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

64 NHS England, 2024. *Children’s Overweight and Obesity. NHS England Digital Data Tables*. Available at: digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2024 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

65 Lagestad, P and Mehui, I, 2017. *The Importance of Adolescents’ Participation in Organized Sport According to VO2 Peak: A Longitudinal Study*. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29648936/ (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

that teenagers who play in at least three sports teams are 27 per cent less likely to be overweight, and 39 per cent less likely to be obese, than those who do not participate in any sports teams.⁶⁶

Tackling obesity in the teenage years is vital to preventing obesity in adulthood, as 80 per cent of obese adolescents also experience obesity as adults.⁶⁷ The economic repercussions of obesity levels were highlighted by the Chief Medical Officer in 2019: the estimated lifetime earnings loss for an adolescent with obesity is £90,000 for males and £115,000 for females.⁶⁸ Physically active adolescents also benefit from improved cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, as well as better bone and heart health,⁶⁹ which positively impacts quality of life and helps reduce future pressure on NHS services.

In light of the public health and economic threat that obesity poses, physical activity and sport are essential interventions.

1.1.3 Community

Sport builds community for young people in at least two ways: by knitting together the social fabric of local areas, and by giving young people friends and role models.

Local sport charities like Brighton Table Tennis Club act as social glue in their local communities. The vision of Brighton Table Tennis Club is to be ‘an integrated community where people from all backgrounds play table tennis together’,⁷⁰ using table tennis as a vehicle to facilitate the social good of community-building between players. Sport England data indicates that active young people are more likely to strongly agree that they can trust people their own age than those who are fairly or less active.⁷¹

Within school communities, sport is key for fostering a positive school ethos. Sports days and tournaments bring whole school communities together and can strengthen relationships between pupils, teachers and parents. One study found that 87 per cent of staff feel that being physically active has a positive impact on the school environment in terms of the school’s values, culture and identity.⁷²

A third of 11 to 18-year-olds report high or very high feelings of loneliness, with the top reasons for this including that they spend time alone and do not have enough things to do.⁷³ The Government’s National Youth Strategy diagnosed young people as ‘the most connected and isolated generation in history’,⁷⁴ recognising the paradox that despite having extensive online networks, many young people lack meaningful face-to-face relationships. Being part of a sports team provides in-person social interaction, friendship and the sense of being part of something bigger than themselves, helping young people to feel less lonely. An Australian longitudinal study found that sustained participation in team sports

66 Drake, KM et al, 2012. *Influence of sports, physical education, and active commuting to school on adolescent weight status*. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22802608 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

67 Simmonds, M. et al, 2015. *Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis*. Available at: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12334 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

68 Chief Medical Officer, 2019. *Time to Solve Childhood Obesity: An Independent Report by the Chief Medical Officer, 2019 Professor Dame Sally Davies*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/837907/cmo-special-report-childhood-obesity-october-2019.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

69 WHO, 2019. *New WHO-led study says majority of adolescents worldwide are not sufficiently physically active, putting their current and future health at risk*. Available at: who.int/news/item/22-11-2019-new-who-led-study-says-majority-of-adolescents-worldwide-are-not-sufficiently-physically-active-putting-their-current-and-future-health-at-risk (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

70 Brighton Table Tennis Club. Available at: brightontabletennisclub.com/about-the-club (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

71 22 per cent of active young people say they can trust people a similar age to them ‘a lot’, compared to 17.7 per cent of less active young people. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

72 Sheffield Hallam University, 2020. *Research confirms being active helps pupils in school*. Available at: shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/research-confirms-being-active-helps-pupils-in-school (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

73 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/On-Side-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

74 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025. *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

was associated with a 30 per cent lower risk of loneliness compared with young people who did not participate in team or individual sports.⁷⁵

Young people understand the benefits of sport for building a community, indicated in polling evidence that 59 per cent of young people agree that being active helps them to make friends.⁷⁶ Girls Active found that one of the top motivators for secondary school girls living active lives at school was 'being with friends'.⁷⁷ School PE staff we spoke to confirmed this, explaining that many of their pupils engage with PE lessons in a 'highly social' way.

The sport and youth charities we spoke to emphasised that when young people start secondary school, their behaviours around physical activity are often shaped by a search for belonging as part of a peer group. The teenage drive to find acceptance and a secure identity explains why some young people commit strongly to sport or gym cultures.

The Government aims to make sure that all young people feel part of the community they live in,⁷⁸ and sport is one of the most effective routes to achieving that ambition. Whether through school teams, local clubs or informal physical activity, it creates opportunities for friendship, trust and shared purpose. In doing so, sport not only strengthens communities, but also helps shape the character, identity and sense of belonging that teenagers can carry into adult life.

1.1.4 Character

Sport charities across the country view sport as a vehicle, conduit and tool to facilitate the social good of helping young people to build character and reach their potential: a model often described as 'sport for development'. This is particularly important in the context of evidence about declining resilience and fear of failure among young people, which will be explored in Chapter 2.

A review of studies looking at whether young people can develop personal and social skills through participation in PE and sport programmes found positive relationships between participation and a wide range of character-related outcomes, including responsibility, leadership, cooperation, communication, work ethic, respect and empathy.⁷⁹

Participating in sport helps young people learn the soft skills that can enhance employability. This is particularly important given that a third of employers report concerns about resilience when hiring young people.⁸⁰ Department for Culture, Media and Sport research found that unemployed people who participate in sports are 11 per cent more likely to have looked for a job in the last four weeks,⁸¹ and the Education Policy Institute found that student participation in sports clubs was associated with a 42 per cent increase in the odds of being in employment or education at age 21/22.⁸² The Social

75 Lubans, D.F., et al. (2024). *Associations Between Sport Participation Trajectories and Loneliness in Young Adulthood*. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*. Available at: journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/jpah/21/12/article-p1341.xml (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

76 Sheffield Hallam University Secondary Teacher Training Programme evaluation cited in Sport England 'Physical activity can help children catch up on missed work' Sport England 5 October, 2020. *Physical Activity Can Help Children Catch Missed Work*. Available at: sportengland.org/physical-activity-can-help-children-catch-missed-work (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

77 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

78 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025. *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

79 Opstoel, K. et al., 2020. *Personal and social development in physical education and sports: A review study*. *European Physical Education Review*. Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X19882054 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

80 Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Employer views on hiring young people survey report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/employer-views-on-hiring-young-people-survey-report/employer-views-on-hiring-young-people-survey-report (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

81 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2014. *Quantifying the Social Impacts of Culture and Sport*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e463640fb62305b81ef6/Quantifying_the_Social_Impacts_of_Culture_and_Sport.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

82 Robinson, D. *Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes*. Education Policy Institute, 2024. Available at: epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EC-and-outcomes-final-1.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

Mobility Commission found that young people who participate in more sport than their peers from similar backgrounds are 10 per cent more likely to aspire to higher education, suggesting that this may be because sport broadens young people's social networks and exposes them to a more rounded set of interests.⁸³

Some charities, recognising its character-building value, use sport to teach life skills that prevent young people from becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training). Sport 4 Life UK is one example of a charity doing preventative work combining sport with mentoring and accredited qualifications for 11–18-year-olds who are at risk of becoming NEET, in addition to working with NEET cohorts. Sport 4 Life UK supports young people to channel new-found skills learnt through sport, such as leadership, teamwork and resilience, into job opportunities.

KICK's sport delivery model is underpinned by a theory of change in which sport has a transformational opportunity for the social, personal and spiritual development of a young person. KICK uses sport as a vehicle for values-training and communicating life lessons: for example, young people can be coached in perseverance through the experience of losing a football game, or in forgiveness during the challenge of playing with team-mates who make errors. Coaching young people in sport is an effective pedagogical method for building young people's character at a formative life-stage.

'There's this opportunity, as we're coaching the kids, to stop things and draw in life skills and values that are true to the whole of society, beyond the world of sport... sport gives a colourful way to communicate character.'

Joe Lowther, CEO of KICK

Sport, as well as recreational play activities like hide and seek, capture the flag or dodgeball, holds social educational value in teaching young people lessons about abiding by rules and co-operating with others. Sport is a safe place where children can learn the unwritten rules of civil society, such as winning graciously, picking yourself up after losing, and cooperating with people who you did not choose to work with.

'You can't win all the time. Sport teaches you that winning and losing is not all that desperate.'

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh⁸⁴

83 Social Mobility Commission, 2019. *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*. Available at: [gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility) (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

84 Centre for Social Justice, 2020. *A Level Playing Field: Equalising access to sport and exercise for young people after Covid-19*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CSJ-Sports_Policy_Paper-FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 21 August 2026).

Crime Prevention

One of the potential consequences of failing to build character in young people is high levels of adolescent crime. The Wolfenden Committee was established in 1957 to investigate the contribution that ‘games, sports and outdoor activities ... [might make] in promoting the general welfare of society’, tentatively endorsing the assumption that ‘if more young people had opportunities for playing games, fewer of them would develop criminal habits’.⁸⁵

The CSJ’s 2023 *Game Changer* report established the crucial role sport plays in reducing levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, including evidence that sport-based interventions can cut offending rates by half.⁸⁶ Data analysis in *Game Changer* illustrated that children in regions that report higher activity levels experience lower levels of violence.⁸⁷

Sport can help to fill the void in young people’s lives that could otherwise lead to antisocial behaviour, providing something engaging and character-building for young people to do.

Role Models

Character is shaped and nurtured by relationships, and local sport is fertile ground for young people to find role models, often in the format of the coach-pupil mentoring relationship.

The coach-pupil relationship can have particular resonance with young people who are reluctant to trust authority figures. Whereas traditional school-based teacher-pupil relationships are hierarchical, coaching relationships are more horizontal.⁸⁸ For this reason, some alternative provision settings have designed their education strategy around sport coaching models. For example, the Boxing Academy in Hackney, London educates children with attachment difficulties through pod leaders who are boxing coaches. This model is based on the understanding that ‘secure attachment relationships correlate strongly with higher academic attainment, better self-regulation and social competence, helping them lay the foundation for success in their next stages of education and adult lives.’⁸⁹

1.1.5 Educational attainment

Sport as a tool to help school engagement

For children who struggle to engage with their education in a traditional academic classroom, sport can be an effective tool to support learning. Providing more opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity gives these children the chance to see their skills recognised and to build a more positive sense of self outside of narrow categories of success.

Against the backdrop of a national survey finding that less than half of 13-year-old children say they enjoy school,⁹⁰ it is striking that 86 per cent of boys in this key stage say they enjoy school PE.⁹¹ This gap marks out PE as a rare point of positive school engagement for boys who may otherwise feel lukewarm about their education.

85 Wolfenden Committee, 1960. *Sport & The Community – The report of the Wolfenden Committee on Sport*. Central Council of Physical Recreation.

86 Centre for Social Justice, 2023. *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

87 Centre for Social Justice, 2023. *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport*. Available at centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

88 Morgan, H, 2022. *Sport, Physical Activity and Criminal Justice: Politics, Policy and Practice*.

89 The Boxing Academy, Available at theboxingacademy.co.uk/information/attachment-awareness (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

90 The Children’s Commissioner, 2024. *The Big Ambition*. Available at: childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-ambition/#downloads (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

91 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Boys’ Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/meeoppsp/girls-active-national-report-all-boys.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

Physical activity improves academic attainment

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)'s learning toolkit, which draws on academic research, includes physical activity as a school intervention to boost core academic attainment. The EEF found that the average impact of engaging in physical activity interventions in schools is about an additional two months' academic progress over the course of a year.⁹² Government research found that underachieving young people who take part in extra-curricular activities linked to sport increased their numeracy skills by an average of 29 per cent above those who did not participate in sport.⁹³

A review of nineteen studies found that physical activity levels of over ninety minutes a week were associated with improved academic performance, with a range of sports able to generate positive academic effects.⁹⁴ Teachers see this on the frontlines of delivering education: according to one study, nine in ten teachers think that being active improves pupils' behaviour and school work.⁹⁵

Schools under exam pressure often treat PE and studying as competing for the same time, particularly at GCSE level when PE time often declines. The evidence suggests this is a false economy. Physical activity clears the mind and sharpens concentration, improving rather than undermining academic performance.

1.2 How active are 11 to 16-year-olds in England?

England's teenagers are increasingly polarised between active and sedentary lifestyles. According to Sport England's large national Active Lives survey, around half of secondary school-aged children now meet the Chief Medical Officer's physical activity guidelines, but a persistent and growing minority remains extremely inactive despite overall improvements in activity levels.

1.2.1 A polarised generation

The UK Chief Medical Officer (CMO) recommends that children and young people should achieve an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day.⁹⁶

Sport England's 'Active Lives: Children and Young People Survey' classifies young people meeting the CMO's threshold as 'active'; those achieving 30–59 minutes per day are 'fairly active', while those achieving fewer than 30 minutes per day are 'less active'.⁹⁷ In 2024/25, 50.6 per cent of secondary school pupils in Years 7–11 were active, meaning that around half of 11–16-year-olds reported meeting the recommended level of physical activity. A further 21.4 per cent were fairly active, while 28.0 per cent were less active.⁹⁸

92 Education Endowment Foundation, *Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Physical activity*. Available at: educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/physical-activity (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

93 Case: The culture and sport evidence programme, 2010. *Understanding the impact of engagement in culture and sport A systematic review of the learning impacts for young people*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a796fde40f0b63d72fc5ccc/CASE-systematic-review-july10.pdf (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

94 James, J. et al, 2023. *The Effects of Physical Activity on Academic Performance in School-Aged Children: A Systematic Review*. Available at: mdpi.com/2227-9067/10/6/1019 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

95 Sheffield Hallam University Secondary Teacher Training Programme evaluation cited in Sport England 'Physical activity can help children catch up on missed work' Sport England, 2020. *Physical Activity Can Help Children Catch Missed Work*. Available at: sportengland.org/physical-activity-can-help-children-catch-missed-work (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

96 Department for Health and Social Care, 2026. *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

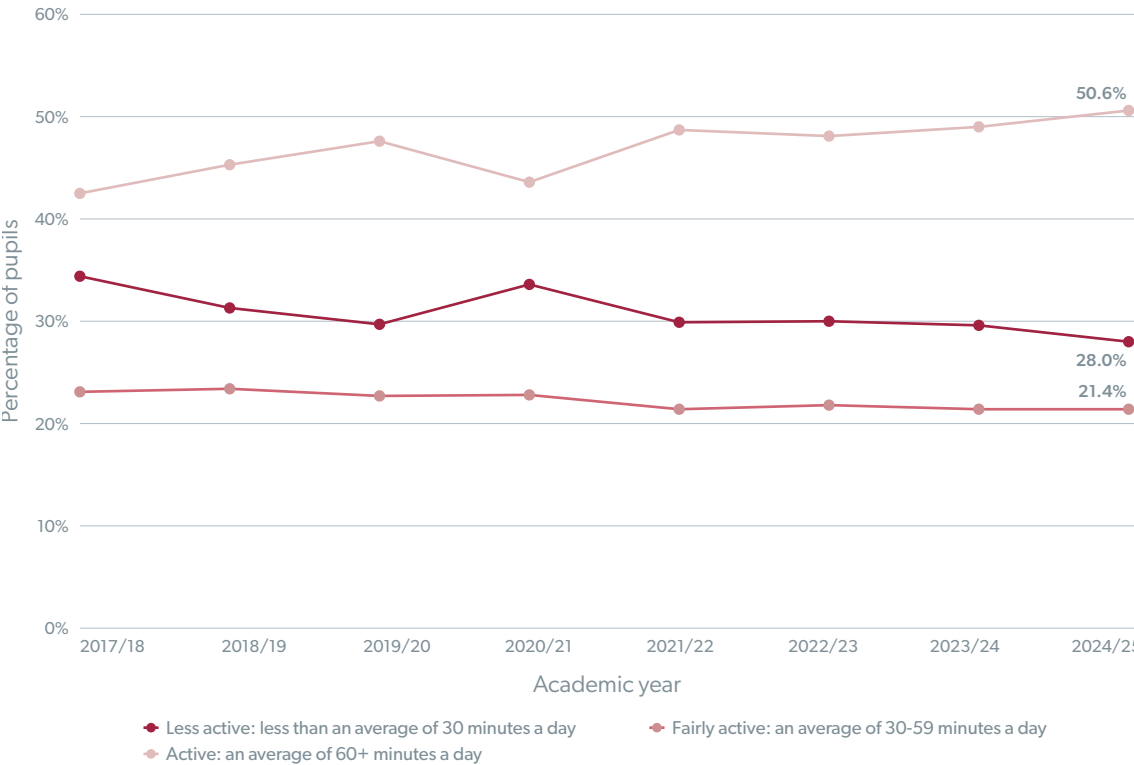
97 Active Lives is a self-reported survey that measures, among other things, children's activity based on the average number of minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity per day. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

98 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

The Active Lives survey findings align with objective accelerometer data from the Millennium Cohort Study. 41 per cent of 14-year-olds in the 2017–18 study were measured doing 60 minutes of physical activity per day,⁹⁹ which closely corresponds to the 39 per cent of 13–16-year-olds reporting this level of physical activity in the Active Lives survey from the same period.¹⁰⁰ The Millennium Cohort Study found that 50 per cent of children had met the ‘active’ threshold at age 7, showing how activity levels decline during the transition from childhood to adolescence.¹⁰¹

The long-term trend of secondary school pupils meeting the recommended activity levels is largely positive, as the active share has risen from 42.5 per cent in 2017/18 to 50.6 per cent in 2024/25, and over the same period, the proportion who are ‘less active’ has fallen from 34.4 per cent in 2017/18 to 28.0 per cent in 2024/25.¹⁰²

Figure 1 – Trends in activity levels since 2017/18



Source: Active Lives survey¹⁰³

However, despite this progress, it is concerning that half of secondary-age pupils are not meeting the Chief Medical Officers’ recommended activity level for young people.¹⁰⁴ If the proportion of active young people continued rising at the pace seen over the last eight years of data since 2017/18, it would take until 2050 for even three-quarters of secondary-age pupils to be meeting the recommended activity level.¹⁰⁵

99 Horvat-Gitsels, L. et al, 2023. *Impaired vision and physical activity in childhood and adolescence: findings from the Millennium Cohort Study* (BMJ Journals). Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34758961 (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

100 39 per cent of Years 9-11 were deemed ‘active’ in 2017/18. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

101 Horvat-Gitsels, L. et al, 2023. *Impaired vision and physical activity in childhood and adolescence: findings from the Millennium Cohort Study* (BMJ Journals). Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34758961 (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

102 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

103 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

104 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

105 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

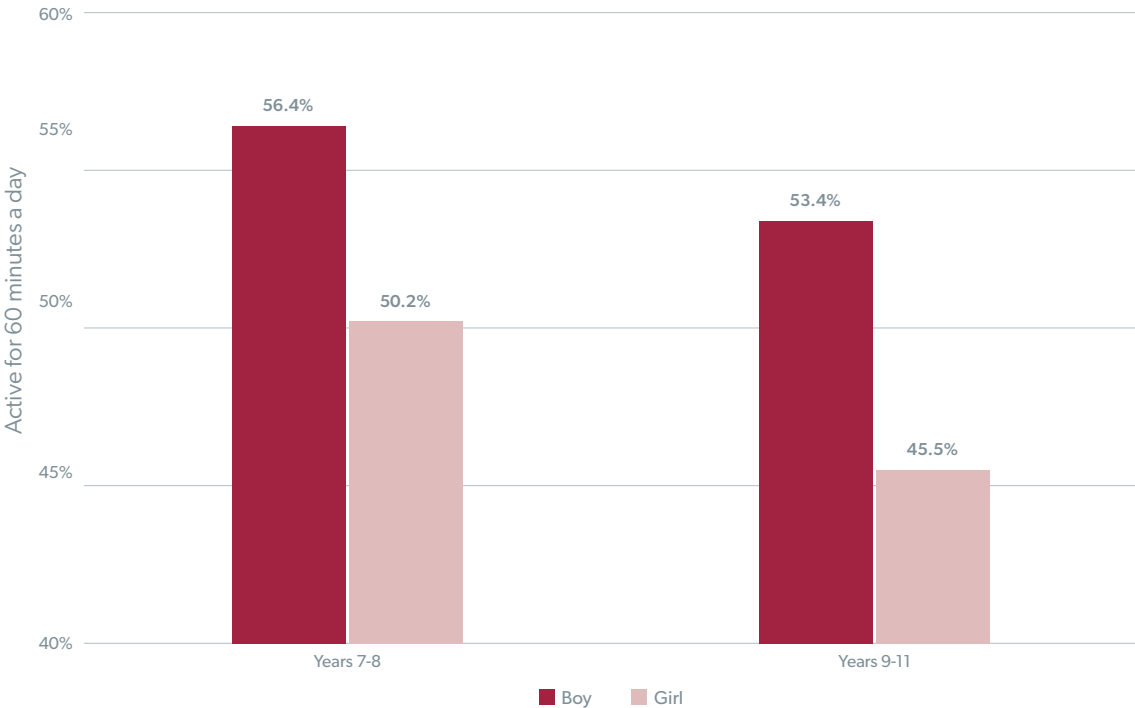
At the most extreme end of the activity spectrum, on an average day in 2024/25, an estimated 9 per cent of all 11 to 16-year-olds did no moderate to vigorous physical activity at all. This is an increase from the estimated 6.8 per cent who were completely sedentary in 2018/19. In absolute terms, this amounts to nearly an estimated 100,000 more secondary-age pupils doing zero minutes of physical activity a day than in 2018/19, despite the shrinking ‘less active’ cohort overall.¹⁰⁶

Internationally, England also lags behind several global counterparts. According to the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) 2022 survey, England’s 15-year-olds are less physically active than a number of countries including Ireland, Scotland, Croatia, Norway and the Netherlands.¹⁰⁷

1.2.2 Girls are not as active as boys

Secondary school boys are more likely to be physically active than girls. Active Lives survey data shows that in 2024/25, 54.6 per cent of secondary-age boys were ‘active’, compared with 47.4 per cent of girls. Research by Sky found that on average, 11 to 18-year-old boys spend 1.4 hours more per week playing sport than 11–18-year-old girls, which is equivalent to girls being sidelined for 52 football matches per year.¹⁰⁸ Figure 2 shows how the gender gap worsens with age and is widest in Years 9 to 11, in which 53.4 per cent of boys are active compared with 45.5 per cent of girls (a gap of 7.9 percentage points).¹⁰⁹

Figure 2 – The activity gap between girls and boys by year group



Source: Active Lives survey, 2024/25¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ CSJ analysis: the number of secondary school pupils active for 0 minutes a day is estimated to have increased by a number within the range of 95,240-97,117 between 2018/19 and 2024/25. The range shown reflects uncertainty from the reported percentages, calculated using the lower and upper bounds of the published proportions. Estimates were calculated by multiplying the total number of less active secondary-age pupils by the proportion within this group reporting zero minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on an average day. The comparison uses 2018/19, the low point in the series, to illustrate the extent of change from the most favourable pre-pandemic position). Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

¹⁰⁷ HBSC, 2023. *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study*. (Findings from the 2021/22 international HBSC survey). Available at: data-browser.hbsc.org (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

¹⁰⁸ Sky, 2025. *Game Changing: How Sport Gives Every Girl a Better Chance*. Available at: skygroup.sky/about/our-governance/documents/game-changing-sports-report (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

¹⁰⁹ Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

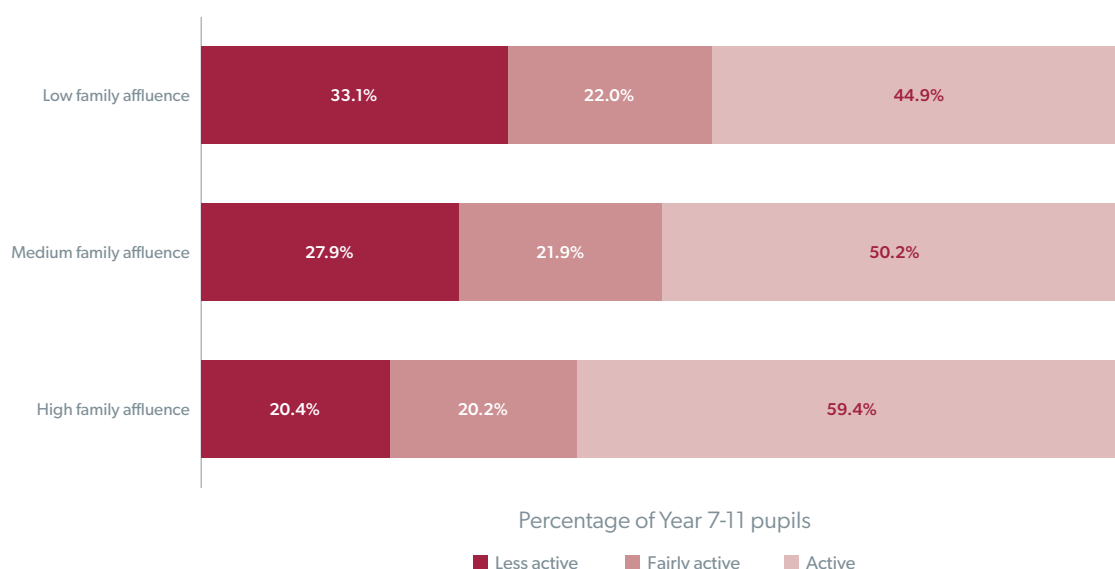
¹¹⁰ Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

Girls are more likely than boys to be part of the 'less active' cohort of young people. Nearly three in ten secondary school girls (29.3 per cent) fall into the 'less active' category, compared with one in four (25.6 per cent) of boys.¹¹¹ Sweaty Betty Foundation polling of secondary school girls found that one in ten do no physical activity whatsoever.¹¹² CSJ polling suggests that girls are less likely than boys to be active when spending time with friends.¹¹³

1.2.3 Physical activity levels vary sharply by affluence

Figure 3 shows the stark socioeconomic gap that exists in young people's physical activity levels. Active Lives data indicates that one in three secondary school children from low-affluence households are in the 'less active' category, compared with one in five from high-affluence households. Fewer than half of less affluent children meet recommended activity levels (44.9 per cent), while almost three in five of their more affluent peers do so (59.4 per cent).¹¹⁴

Figure 3 – A third of 'low affluence' pupils are 'less active', compared to a fifth of their 'high affluence' peers



Source: Active Lives¹¹⁵

111 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

112 Sweaty Betty Foundation, 2025. *Change Starts in the Changing Room (White Paper)*. Available at: sweatybettyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Sweaty-Betty-Foundation-White-Paper-Change-Starts-in-the-Changing-Room.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

113 75 per cent of girls agree that time with friends usually involves physical activity, compared to 83 per cent of boys. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

114 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

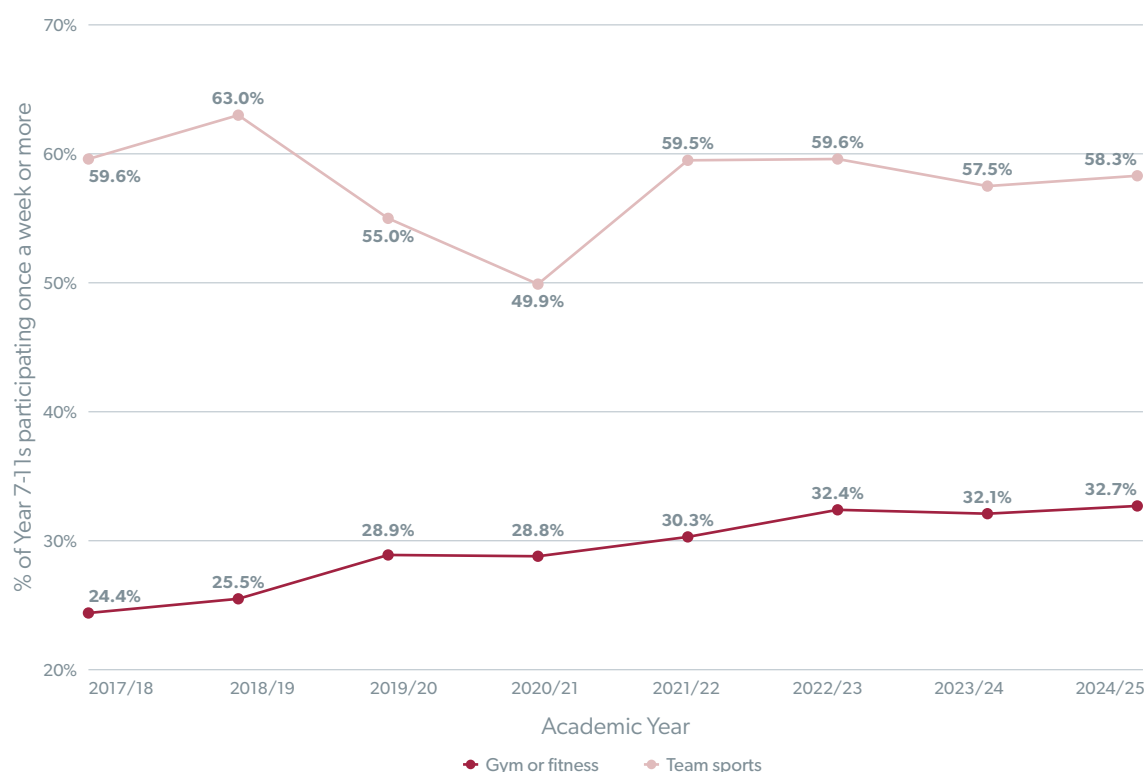
115 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

1.2.4 Physical activity is changing shape

While overall activity levels of secondary school pupils have improved, an analysis of the types of physical activity young people participate in indicates that this is not being driven by a renewed enthusiasm for playing traditional team sports. Team sport participation has plateaued in recent years among secondary pupils, while the gym and individual fitness activities have emerged as an important pillar of teenage physical activity.

Figure 4 below shows how nearly a third (32.7 per cent) of secondary school age children participated in gym or fitness activities in a given week in 2024/25, up from nearly a quarter in 2017–18. Over the same period, there was a slight decline in participation in team sports.¹¹⁶

Figure 4 – Adolescent physical activity is changing shape



Source: Active Lives survey¹¹⁷

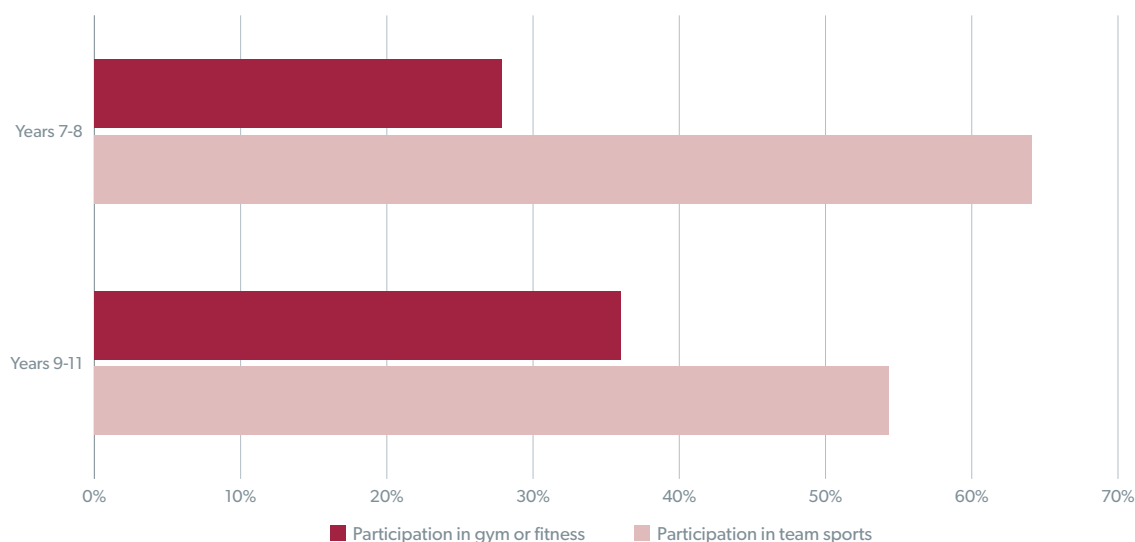
As pupils move through secondary school, participation appears to shift away from team sports and towards gym and fitness activities. Figure 5 shows that team sports are more popular among younger secondary pupils in Years 7–8 (64.1 per cent participate once a week or more) than among those in Years 9–11 (54.3 per cent), while taking part in gym or fitness activities is more common among pupils in Years 9–11 (36.0 per cent) than in Years 7–8 (27.9 per cent).¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

¹¹⁷ Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

¹¹⁸ This data is not longitudinal so a direct swap of activities cannot be confirmed by this evidence. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Figure 5 – As pupils get older, participation in team sports falls and participation in fitness/gym activities grows



Source: Active Lives¹¹⁹

It is striking that overall, a third of secondary school children now regularly participate in gym or fitness activities. All of the young people we spoke to said going to the gym was a popular activity in their year group. One boy said more people in his school go to the gym than take part in any other sporting activity. Year 10 girls described organising group walks to and from the gym together, and pupils spoke positively about its effect on their determination and fitness. The absence of survey data from the early 2000s about adolescent gym attendance indicates how rapidly gym-going has risen to become a mainstream teenage activity. Sport England’s 2002 *Young People and Sport* survey recorded participation in gymnastics, aerobics, swimming and team sports, but does not mention any individual fitness activities, which may be because it was not yet a mainstream category of adolescent exercise.¹²⁰

Gym attendance enables many young people to live active and healthy lives, but it does so in a different way to organised sport. Whereas sports teams and clubs connect young people to friendship groups, role models and a community, gym-based exercise is typically centred on individual goals and personal routines. In this sense, the rise of gym culture reflects a wider pattern running throughout teenage life which will be explored in Chapter 3: teenagers’ lives are becoming more solitary. Body Happy Org suggested to us that teenage gym-going parallels social media use in that both are activities one does on their own:

‘Social media is a solitary way of spending your time, and the gym can be very similar. Going to the gym is very different from joining a football club, for example, or a netball club, where the outcome isn’t just moving your body, but building a real-life community in a way that the gym doesn’t necessarily offer.’

Body Happy Org

¹¹⁹ Chart shows the proportion participating in the activity once a week or more. Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

¹²⁰ Sport England, 2003. *Young People and Sport National Survey 2002: Headline Findings*. Available at: sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/young-people-and-sport-2002-headline-1.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

Young people's physical activity habits are often shaped by their friendship groups and peer norms. A study of adolescents in Northern Ireland found that boys' physical activity behaviour is particularly influenced by their wider friendship group, while girls' activity is more closely predicted by their best friend.¹²¹ Evidence from our focus groups suggests that some young people have found ways to inject competition into individual fitness and turn gym-going into a shared social activity. One teenage girl we spoke to observed that boys her age prefer to attend the gym in groups:

'Boys always go to the gym in groups and they watch each other doing pull ups. They're comparing each other and how long they can do it. They're making it into a competitive thing – they're always huddled up as a group, and if one [boy] does something they all watch and then go and take turns.'

Girl, Year 12

Although some young people find ways to make gym-going social, unlike being part of a sport club, going to the gym does not inherently require teams, coaches, interdependence or a collective identity. The shift towards more individual forms of exercise reflects a broader transformation in teenage life. Young people are changing the way they participate in physical activity, moving away from activities built around teams and communities and choosing to exercise alone, on demand and with minimal reliance on other people. The factors changing the shape of teenage physical activity are explored further in Chapters 2 and 3.

1.3 A Prime Minister-led taskforce

'Enabling [young people] to feel confident, and the confidence that comes from excelling in sport and the arts is massive... expect that to be a feature of my time. I'm massive on school sport, they'll have to stop me from making it compulsory in this building.'

Andy Burnham, Jimmy's Jobs of the Future podcast (30 July 2026).¹²²

This chapter has made the case for the wide-ranging gains that flow from young people participating in sport and physical activity, from improving physical and mental health and supporting education, to building the character that prevents economic inactivity in later life. Although these benefits are clear, the disparities in physical activity levels indicate that they are not being enjoyed equally by all young people.

Physical activity must move rapidly up the government's agenda for children and young people. A coordinated policy approach is needed, spanning all the sectors that impact teenagers' lives. The Department for Education has announced a number of policies and funding pots related to school

¹²¹ Montgomery, S. et al, 2021. *A multi-method exploration into the social networks of young teenagers and their physical activity behaviour*. Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-020-10081-0 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

¹²² Jimmy's Jobs of the Future, 30 July 2026. *Andy Burnham: Career Ladder is Rigged. Here's How I'd Fix It*. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=mXnO06QfnCM (Accessed: 8 September 2026).

sport since July 2024.¹²³ Education policy alone, however, will not be sufficient to draw the ‘bedroom generation’ away from sedentary time at home. An OECD comparison of physical activity policies across 76 countries found that education-only interventions do not drive behaviour change.¹²⁴ The Department for Health and Social Care’s reported reluctance to contribute to school PE funding is one example of how a joined-up approach is lacking in Whitehall.¹²⁵

The previous government established a National Physical Activity Taskforce in 2023 to support a joint approach, but it has since closed with no plans for re-opening.¹²⁶ In the 2023 *Game Changer* report,¹²⁷ the Centre for Social Justice called for this taskforce to be led by the Prime Minister, in order to raise the nation’s activity levels with a vision from the top. Now, we recommend that the government re-open this Taskforce and that it is chaired personally by the Prime Minister, with a mandate to design and deliver a cross-government strategy for helping young people live more active lives.

International evidence shows what cross-government coordination can achieve. Ireland recorded the largest increase of any comparator country in the proportion of children attending PE at least once a week between 2015 and 2022, underpinned by its *Get Ireland Active!* National Physical Activity Plan (2016). Ireland has also improved across physical activity, school environment, and physical education indicators.¹²⁸

There is strong sector support for a comparable national strategy in England: the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s ‘Game On’ report called for the Government to publish a strategy by 31 December 2026,¹²⁹ and the Youth Sport Trust argued a strategy is necessary for a ‘comprehensive and coordinated approach, utilising levers for change across government and society’.¹³⁰ The Government has indicated that it is currently working on a National Plan for Physical Activity,¹³¹ and this plan must be published with no further delay, with the Prime Minister taking personal responsibility for its delivery. In a podcast interview shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Andy Burnham highlighted the role of sport in developing young people’s employability skills and confidence, describing himself as ‘massive on school sport’.¹³² Now, the Prime Minister has an opportunity to translate that support into a coherent national strategy. The health of England’s young people should not be put on the back burner any longer.

123 See, for example, the Enrichment Entitlement (gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges), Every Child Can (gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life), and the launch of a new School Sport Partnerships Network (gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery).

124 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active?* OECD Education Working Papers No. 339. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

125 The Guardian, 27 January 2026. theguardian.com/society/2026/jan/27/government-row-breaks-out-over-proposals-to-slash-spending-for-pe-in-schools (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

126 Written Parliamentary Question tabled by Mr Louie French MP on 10 March 2025, answered by Minister Stephanie Peacock. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-03-10/36804 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

127 Centre for Social Justice, 2023. *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport*. Available at centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

128 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active?* OECD Education Working Papers No. 339. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

129 Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2026. *Game On: Community and school sport*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/publications/52665/documents/293057/default (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

130 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

131 UK Government and NHS England, 2025. *Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England*. Available at assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6888a0b1a11f859994409147/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

132 Jimmy’s Jobs of the Future, 30 July 2026. *Andy Burnham: Career Ladder is Rigged. Here’s How I’d Fix It*. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=mXnO06QfnCM (Accessed: 8 September 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 1

A Prime Minister-led taskforce to deliver a young people's Physical Activity Strategy

The Government should design and deliver a multi-department, Prime Minister-led strategy for young people's physical activity that embeds physical activity within the Government's existing agendas on children's mental health, obesity and NEET prevention. Sport is a central tool for delivering the Government's own stated priorities for children and young people, and should be treated and funded accordingly.

The previous government established a National Physical Activity Taskforce in 2023 to support a joint approach, but it has since closed with no plans for re-opening.¹³³ Only a Prime Minister-led taskforce can transcend the boundaries of Whitehall departments and bring together the charitable, private and philanthropic partners needed to deliver an ambitious plan to raise the physical activity levels of the nation.

¹³³ Written Parliamentary Question tabled by Mr Louie French MP on 10 March 2025, answered by Minister Stephanie Peacock. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-03-10/36804 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

Chapter Two:

Making secondary schools more active places

Chapter 1 made the case that sport and physical activity are valuable, under-used tools available to policymakers seeking to improve young people’s mental health, physical health, character and educational outcomes. If England’s young people are to move from being a ‘bedroom generation’ to an active generation, schools must be at the centre of the solution.

The role of school in helping young people be active is illustrated by the finding that over a third (37 per cent) of 15-year-olds ‘hardly ever leave their bedroom, except for school’.¹³⁴ CSJ polling shows that half of the British public think schools are responsible for giving children opportunities to be active,¹³⁵ and young people identify school-based changes (such as better facilities and more after-school sports clubs) as the main things that would help them be more active.¹³⁶ Two of the strongest drivers of an active life are enjoying PE and attending a school that encourages pupils to be active at breaktimes and lunchtimes.¹³⁷

Schools can provide universal opportunities for physical activity through PE lessons, extra-curricular sport and active breaktimes. But too often these opportunities are constrained by squeezed PE time and patchy extra-curricular provision.

There is also a huge disparity in pupils’ experience of school sport. While three quarters of boys would like to be more active at school, only half of secondary school girls say the same.¹³⁸ An Age UK survey recently estimated that negative school PE experiences have put four million 50 to 65-year-olds off exercise and sport for life.¹³⁹ 40 per cent of mid-lifers remember feeling self-conscious about their body

134 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

135 Social responsibility polling conducted by JL Partners for the CSJ in 2026. 49 per cent believe the responsibility for ‘Giving children opportunities for physical activity, exercise or sport’ belongs to schools.

136 This survey found that the top three factors young people say would help them to do more sport or be more active are all related to school: having better equipment and facilities in school (41 per cent), schools offering after-school clubs where they can try different sports (39 per cent), and being able to choose which activities they do at school (38 per cent). Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

137 Savanta’s Key Drivers Analysis found that for every one-point increase in how positively a student feels about PE, they are active on 0.44 more days per week, and stronger agreement that their school encourages activity at break and lunchtime is associated with 0.23 additional active days per week. Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

138 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: All Boys*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/wfpd4mi4/girls-active-national-report-all-boys-091025.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: Girls’ Report (Secondary Aged)*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/mtclksih/girls-active-national-report-girls-secondary-aged.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2026).

139 Age UK, 2026. *Millions in midlife put off exercise for life by school PE lessons - as new campaign from Age UK calls on the nation to Act Now, Age Better*. Available at: ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/millions-in-midlife-put-off-exercise-for-life-by-school-pe-lessons-as-new-campaign-from-age-uk-calls-on-the-nation-to-act-now-age-better (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

in school PE, and the same proportion remember being picked last for teams.¹⁴⁰ Adverse adolescent experiences of school sport cast a long shadow, suppressing activity levels for the rest of a person's life.

This chapter examines the participation gap in school sport, highlighting how girls and pupils in older year groups are less likely to be active. It then explores the psychological barriers some pupils experience in school sport (body image concerns and fear of failure), before considering how schools can retain the character-building benefits of competitive sport while making participation less intimidating.

Section 2.3 makes the case for the structural reforms needed to build more physical activity into secondary school life, most significantly through expanding the government's existing PE policy initiatives into a more ambitious 'Right to Sport'. This would ensure that every secondary school pupil participates in enriching extra-curricular sport and physical activity, on top of a protected two hours of PE time each week. The policies recommended would ensure that physical activity is a core part of every young person's education and development, including for the most inactive pupils.

2.1 The participation gap in schools

Chapter 1 showed that while young people's physical activity levels have risen in recent years, inequalities persist, as girls are less active than boys and disadvantaged young people are less active than their more affluent peers. Schools have the potential to reduce these inequalities by providing universal opportunities for sport and physical activity, but as things stand, older teenagers and girls are often lost from school sport and less likely to engage with opportunities to exercise at school.

2.1.1 Losing older teenagers from school sport

Although PE remains a universal part of the school curriculum, opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity in the school day often diminish as pupils progress through secondary school. Survey data indicates that the transition from Year 8 to Year 9 is a drop-off point in participation in school sport: while 73.3 per cent of pupils in Years 7–8 reported participating in sporting activities at school once a week or more in 2024/25, this falls to 63.6 per cent of Years 9–11.¹⁴¹

The decline in physical activity as a child progresses through the school years extends beyond structured opportunities to play sport at school. Older pupils, particularly girls, are less likely to spend their breaktimes running around in the playground than younger pupils. Survey evidence suggests that the proportion of girls who report 'sometimes spending most of breaktime being so physically active that I am breathing hard and sweating' drops from one in five in Year 8 to only one in twelve by Year 10.¹⁴² The cohort of boys reporting sometimes spending breaktimes being physically active drops too, but more modestly, from 38 per cent in Year 8 to 30 per cent in Year 10.¹⁴³

140 Age UK, 2026. *Millions in midlife put off exercise for life by school PE lessons - as new campaign from Age UK calls on the nation to Act Now, Age Better*. Available at: ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/millions-in-midlife-put-off-exercise-for-life-by-school-pe-lessons---as-new-campaign-from-age-uk-calls-on-the-nation-to-act-now-age-better (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

141 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

142 The percentage of Year 8 girls who report that they 'sometimes spend most of breaktime being so physically active that I am breathing hard and sweating' is 20 per cent in Year 8 and 8 per cent in Year 10. Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

143 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

Pupils in the focus groups we conducted explained that sport-related extra-curricular activities and programmes are less popular with the older year-groups at their schools. This corresponds with national Department for Education data indicating that while more than half (53 per cent) of pupils in Years 7–9 participate in extra-curricular sports and physical activities, this drops to 41 per cent by Years 10–11.¹⁴⁴

‘When I was younger, I did every kind of sport you could imagine – swimming, triathlon, netball, cricket, rugby, but as you grow older you lose interest in hobbies, especially as a girl. I stopped doing cricket because I was the only girl my age doing it. I feel like I have no hobbies now.’

Girl, Year 12

This trend is concerning because the later secondary school years are precisely when many young people face growing academic pressures, declining overall physical activity levels and worsening mental health, and so could most benefit from sport.

2.1.2 Losing girls from school sport

Secondary school girls are less likely to participate in opportunities to be physically active at school than their male peers.

As discussed in section 2.1.1, secondary school girls are less likely than boys to spend their breaktimes and lunchtimes being active. This gap extends into participation in extra-curricular activities: Department for Education survey data indicates that 56 per cent of secondary school boys report taking part in extra-curricular sports and physical activities at school, compared with only 42 per cent of girls.¹⁴⁵

Research by Sky found that dislike of PE drove 15 per cent of 11–18 year-old girls to skip school for a day to avoid it, with adolescent girls currently at school estimated to have missed 2 million hours of teaching time to avoid having to participate in sports lessons.¹⁴⁶

This gap in participation is accompanied by a gap in enjoyment. The Youth Sport Trust’s *Girls Active* survey indicates that girls report significantly lower enjoyment of PE than boys, and that this gap widens as pupils progress through school. As Figure 6 shows, 85 per cent of girls report enjoying PE in Years 3–4, falling to 50 per cent by Years 10–11. Boys’ enjoyment of PE has a more modest decline over the same period, from 92 per cent to 77 per cent.¹⁴⁷

This represents a substantial shift between primary and secondary school. In Years 3–4, around 15 per cent of girls report not enjoying PE, but by Years 10–11, this rises to half of all girls, meaning that the proportion of girls who do not enjoy PE more than triples over this period.

144 Department for Education, 2025. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: June 2025. Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

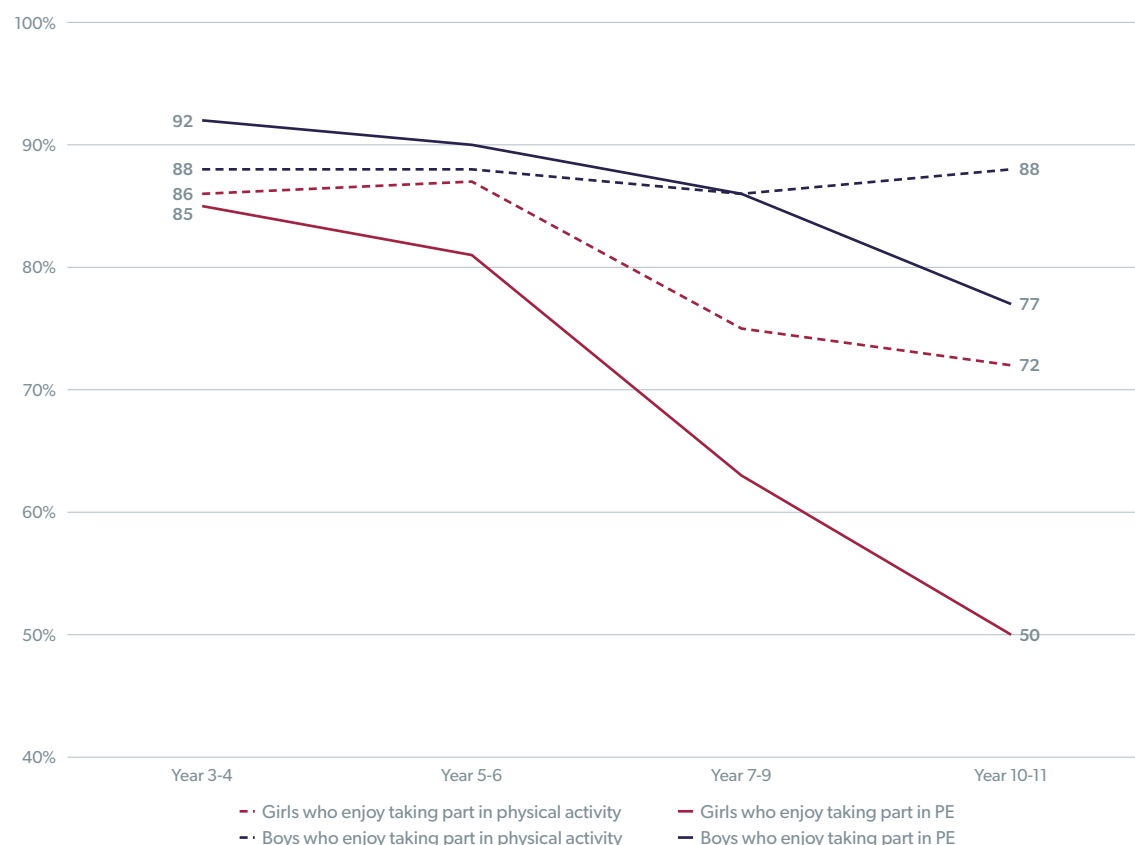
145 Department for Education, 2025. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: June 2025. Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

146 Sky, 2025. *Game Changing: How Sport Gives Every Girl a Better Chance*. Available at: skygroup.sky/about/our-governance/documents/game-changing-sports-report (Accessed: 31 July 2026).

147 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: All Boys*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/wfpd4mi4/girls-active-national-report-all-boys-091025.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: Girls’ Report (Secondary Aged)*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/mtclsih/girls-active-national-report-girls-secondary-aged.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2026).

The decline in girls' enjoyment of school PE is steeper than the decline in their enjoyment of physical activity more broadly.¹⁴⁸ For girls, enjoyment of physical activity falls from 86 per cent in Years 3–4 to 72 per cent in Years 10–11, which is a 14 percentage point decline, compared with a 35 percentage point decline in their enjoyment of PE. Boys' enjoyment of physical activity shows no overall decline over the same period, remaining at 88 per cent throughout primary and secondary school.¹⁴⁹

Figure 6 – Girls' enjoyment of PE falls further and faster than boys'



Source: Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: All Boys & Girls' Reports*.¹⁵⁰

The gap between how much girls enjoy physical activity in general and how much they enjoy PE lessons in particular suggests that something specific to the PE lesson environment is driving the erosion of girls' enjoyment of sport during their school years. These factors are explored in section 2.2.

¹⁴⁸ While this data does not track the same pupils over time, it provides a snapshot of attitudes across different age groups.

¹⁴⁹ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: All Boys*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/wfpd4mi4/girls-active-national-report-all-boys-091025.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: Girls' Report (Secondary Aged)*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/mtclksih/girls-active-national-report-girls-secondary-aged.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2026).

¹⁵⁰ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: All Boys* Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/wfpd4mi4/girls-active-national-report-all-boys-091025.pdf (Accessed: 30 July 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: Girls' Report (Secondary Aged)*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/mtclksih/girls-active-national-report-girls-secondary-aged.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2026).

2.2 Breaking down psychological barriers to participation in school sport

The previous section outlined how participation in school sport falls during adolescence, particularly among girls. Many young people who have access to PE lessons and extra-curricular sport and physical activity still choose not to participate, particularly during the secondary school years, suggesting that the barriers preventing some young people from taking part are not purely practical but also psychological.

This section explores the psychological barriers that cause some young people to disengage from sport at school, including body image concerns and the fear of failure, and considers how schools can create environments that encourage participation rather than discourage it. Understanding these barriers is essential to helping the pupils who are currently least active to participate in school sport opportunities.

2.2.1 Body image and the participation gap

Body image anxieties are a key psychological barrier for many of the pupils who do not want to participate in school sport. Concerns about body image are also helping to drive some young people towards individual forms of exercise outside of the school environment, such as gym-going.

Existing body image concerns can become particularly pronounced in school PE lessons, where pupils are often required to change clothes, wear sports kit and participate in activities while being watched by classmates. Body image anxieties are often cited by pupils as reasons why they do not participate in school sport, and they are disproportionately reported by girls, which helps to explain the gender participation gap discussed in section 2.1.2. Almost twice as many girls as boys say that a dislike of their PE kit prevents them from being more active (28 per cent compared with 15 per cent),¹⁵¹ and the Sweaty Betty Foundation reported that one in three girls missed PE lessons because of the thought of using school changing rooms.¹⁵² Sky's research found that 47 per cent of 11 to 18 year-old girls feel uncomfortable when getting changed for PE, compared to 22 per cent of boys.¹⁵³

When we asked Love4Life (Twenty Twenty)'s youth workers about the barriers to participating in sport or PE experienced by the girls they work with, they highlighted the changing room as one of the most significant obstacles:

'It's definitely getting changed for PE. If they have to get changed, they won't do it – they'll pretend they forgot their kit. That is a really big block to them actually doing PE. They don't want to get changed in front of people. They feel like people are looking at them, then comparing themselves with other people and other bodies.'

Love4Life (Twenty Twenty) youth worker

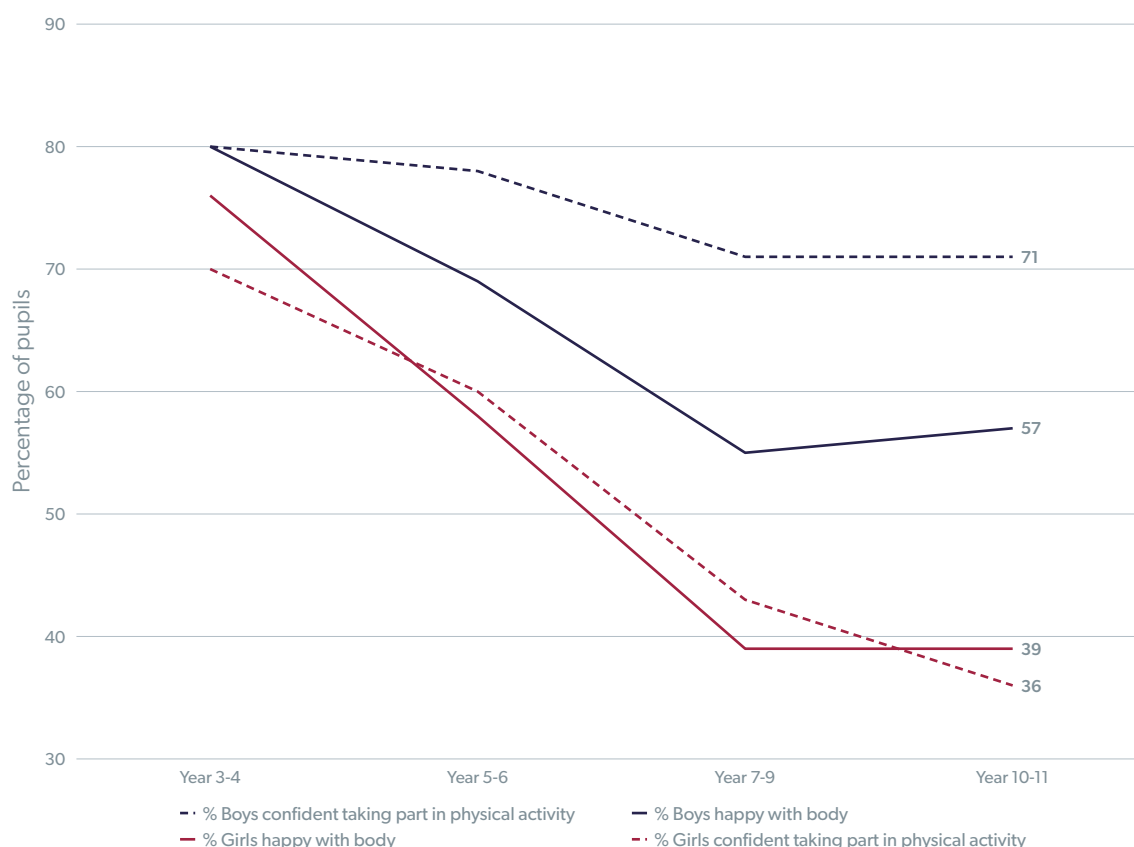
151 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

152 Sweaty Betty Foundation, 2025. *Change Starts in the Changing Room (White Paper)*. Available at: sweatybettyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Sweaty-Betty-Foundation-White-Paper-Change-Starts-in-the-Changing-Room.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

153 Sky, 2025. *Game Changing: How Sport Gives Every Girl a Better Chance*. Available at: skygroup.sky/about/our-governance/documents/game-changing-sports-report (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Figure 7 shows a striking parallel decline in positive body image and confidence participating in physical activity across school year groups, particularly for girls. While three quarters of primary school girls (76 per cent) have positive body image, this compares to less than half (39 per cent) among the secondary school cohort.¹⁵⁴ Girls' confidence when taking part in physical activity follows an almost identical trajectory, halving from 70 per cent to 36 per cent when comparing pupils in primary versus secondary school.¹⁵⁵ This suggests that worsening body image may be an important factor behind declining confidence to participate in sport and PE during the secondary school years. While boys also experience a decline in physical activity confidence, it is substantially less severe than the change experienced by their female peers.¹⁵⁶

Figure 7 – A parallel decline in body image and confidence as pupils grow older



Source: Youth Sport Trust 'Girls Active' reports¹⁵⁷

Self-consciousness about changing bodies is a long-standing, common feature of adolescence due to a number of factors.¹⁵⁸ However, today's teenagers often experience this developmental stage in a social media-saturated environment that exposes them to a constant stream of idealised and appearance-

¹⁵⁴ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026). Appendix 1 data table 'I am happy with the way my body looks'.

¹⁵⁵ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026). Appendix 1 data table 'I feel confident when I take part in physical activity'.

¹⁵⁶ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Boys' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/meeoppsp/girls-active-national-report-all-boys.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026). Appendix 1 data table 'I am happy with the way my body looks' and 'I feel confident when I take part in physical activity'.

¹⁵⁷ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Boys' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/meeoppsp/girls-active-national-report-all-boys.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026) Appendix 1 data table, % of pupils agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statements 'I am happy with the way my body looks' and 'I feel confident when I take part in physical activity'.

¹⁵⁸ Markey, C.N., 2010. *Invited Commentary: Why Body Image is Important to Adolescent Development* (Journal of Youth Adolescence). Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10964-010-9510-0 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

focused content, creating unprecedented opportunities for social comparison that can damage body image.¹⁵⁹

How body image is reshaping teenage physical activity

For some young people, body image anxieties lead to a preference for more controlled forms of exercise outside of the school environment. As discussed in Chapter 1.2.4, the gym and individual fitness activities have become increasingly popular among adolescents. Unlike PE lessons or team sports at school, gym-based exercise can be undertaken alone, with greater control over who is present, what is worn and how performance is judged.

Concerns about body image can also act as a motivation to engage intensely with fitness and gym culture in pursuit of a desired physique. As one youth charity put it,

'It is clear that the image, not necessarily being healthy, is what young people want from the gym.'

The Sporting Way

Youth workers, sport coaches and PE teachers told us that young people are often highly informed about weight loss, muscle gain and hypertrophy through social media influencers. While this can help young people learn physical literacy and healthy habits, some of these frontline professionals warned of a 'tipping point' where an adolescent's pursuit of an 'ideal body' becomes excessive or unhealthy. One Year 11 boy described what he perceived as intense appearance-related pressures among his female peers:

'Gym use is more prevalent among boys, although I believe that there are likely more girls doing workouts as a whole – just at home. The standards that are placed on my female peers by social media are what I blame for this... There is an enormous desire to get fit for purely aesthetic reasons, which often leads to unhealthy levels of gym attendance.'

Boy, Year 11

Body image pressures are contributing to the wider polarisation in young people's engagement with physical activity, pushing some away from school sport while pulling others towards more individual fitness activities. For many adolescents, particularly those who feel self-conscious in PE lessons at school, gym-based activity can provide a welcome entry route into an active lifestyle. However, if gym participation increasingly replaces rather than complements organised sport, there is a risk that young people miss out on some of the distinctive benefits of playing traditional sports including community, belonging, and learning to cope with winning and losing.

159 Fortunato, L., Gullo, S., Muscolino, A. et al., 2026. *Relation Between Social Media Use and Body Image Concerns and Disordered Eating in Adolescence: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (Adolescence Research Review)*. Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40894-026-00285-7. (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

2.2.2 Fear of failure and the role of competition in school sport

In addition to body image concerns, another reason why some young people do not participate in school sport is fear of failure and low resilience. A Youth Sport Trust survey found that among pupils who dislike PE, the top reason (19 per cent) is that they are ‘worried they will let the team down’, with another popular reason being that they feel they ‘are not very good at exercise/playing sports’ (16 per cent).¹⁶⁰ Half of 15-year-old girls say they sometimes avoid school sport because they worry they will not be good enough, compared with 38 per cent of boys.¹⁶¹

Adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to peer perception,¹⁶² and the fear of failure or embarrassment in front of classmates while playing sport is key to understanding why some pupils do not want to participate in physical activity in the school environment. The Sporting Way described a polarisation between active young people and those who ‘disengage from physical activity altogether’ specifically due to the risk of embarrassment or failure, which becomes more intense due to ‘huge emotional, social and physical transition’ at the point of starting secondary school. Several youth charities described working with young people who avoid sport not because they dislike being active, but because they are anxious about embarrassment or failure in front of others at school. Sport is one of the few areas of school life where performance is public and visible, and so participation may feel particularly intimidating to pupils who lack confidence. This suggests that participation may be increased by creating environments that reduce these psychological barriers.

Many teachers and coaches we spoke to identified fear of failure and low resilience as growing issues among adolescents, observing that young people today show less confidence to try a sport and fail than previous generations of teenagers. The independent review into mental health (commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care) noted a large increase in the percentage of young people reporting a high amount of nervousness in new situations and who easily lose confidence between 2009/10 and 2022/23.¹⁶³ If this fear of failure is becoming more common, it may help to explain the polarisation in activity levels described in section 1.2.1. While a growing share of young people are becoming more active, a smaller group are increasingly reluctant to engage with physical activity at all.

The reasons why young people today may lack the resilience of previous generations are multi-faceted. Health professionals surveyed for Milburn’s review of young people and work described the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people’s social development in terms of low confidence and resilience, with several professionals relating the lack of resilience to fear of failure and changes in parenting/discipline.¹⁶⁴ Youth workers we spoke to also identified the COVID-19 pandemic as instrumental in eroding resilience in young people, who became used to being in the comfort and safety of their own homes in their formative childhood years. Others linked growing fear of failure to social media, which has made growing up ‘all about how we’re perceived.’ They also highlighted how social media intensifies fear of failure in sport, because mistakes can be recorded and shared, making them public and permanent.

160 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

161 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

162 Somerville, L.H., 2013. *The Teenage Brain: Sensitivity to Social Evaluation* (Current Directions in Psychological Science). Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963721413476512 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

163 Department of Health and Social Care, 2026. *Independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism: Interim report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-into-mental-health-conditions-adhd-and-autism-interim-report/independent-review-into-mental-health-conditions-adhd-and-autism-interim-report#changes-in-psychological-distress-and-wellbeing (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

164 Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Survey of healthcare professionals: Young people and work report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

'They're scared to make mistakes... they're scared to try something out... because well, what if I'm really rubbish at it, or what if I fall over? I'm going to embarrass myself. And I think that links with that social anxiety of caring so much about what other people are going to be thinking, and I think also it can link a lot to how they're all using mobile phones. I've heard girls talk about things like, 'Well, why would I try that? Because if someone were to take a picture or video then they've got that then of me.'

Love4Life (Twenty Twenty) youth worker

Some Year 10 students in our focus groups described an off-putting atmosphere in PE created by classmates who are 'overly competitive and judgemental of those who are 'less sporty.' One girl said that she stopped participating in PE altogether when she got to secondary school because she was judged by team-mates for not being as good as them.

One youth sport coach explained how parents can internalise the fear of their children failing, passing on an anxiety that makes children afraid to try new activities or sports.

'There are lots of different factors behind young people's anxiety about trying things. COVID has definitely had a social impact, but parents play a role too. I see two camps of parents: some are quite hands-off, and others are very involved – and you can really feel the anxiety they carry. The very involved parents will often say their child has a learning or behavioural difficulty, or mention an EHCP, and then add that it's actually still undiagnosed. Some parents internalise things for their children, so instead of a child getting used to failing and learning from it, any failure is treated as something disproportionately negative.'

Sport coach

In recognition that fear of failure is a barrier for many young people participating in school sport, some stakeholders have called for competition to be made less central to the PE curriculum. The Association for Physical Education has argued that traditional forms of PE with a heavy focus on competition and performance are 'exclusionary', resulting in some children being put off PE and physical activity in general.¹⁶⁵ The Culture, Media and Sport Committee warned in the *Game On* report that 'a narrow, traditional' PE curriculum 'often alienates pupils', recommending that the Government supports schools to deliver a 'broader and more inclusive PE curriculum that prioritises enjoyment, comfort and a welcoming environment for all pupils'.¹⁶⁶ The tension between preserving competitive sport and widening participation was also addressed by the Curriculum Review, which recommended that the purpose statement for PE is broadened to emphasise its wider physical, social, cognitive and emotional benefits, while retaining the importance of competitive sport.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Association for Physical Education, *Future Physical Education Curriculum Position Paper*. Available at: cdn.ymaws.com/afpe.org.uk/resource/resmgr/website/Future_PE_Paper.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁶⁶ Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2026. *Game On: Community and school sport*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/publications/52665/documents/293057/default (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁶⁷ Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

Successive governments have adjusted the balance between competition and participation in school sport policy. Labour’s 2002 School Sport Partnerships sought to widen access to sport at school,¹⁶⁸ but they were abolished in 2010 by the Coalition Government in favour of the School Games (an Olympic-legacy competition), because the proportion of pupils playing competitive sport regularly remained ‘disappointingly low’.¹⁶⁹ More recently, school sport policy has swung back towards focusing on widening participation, with the School Games evolving towards a balance between participation and competition,¹⁷⁰ and the 2024 Labour Government’s rhetoric on school sport focused primarily on reducing inactivity.¹⁷¹ Yet despite two decades of reforms and repeated efforts to widen participation, participation in sport still drops during many young people’s time at secondary school, particularly among groups known to report lower confidence and enjoyment in PE, including girls (see chapter 1.2.2).

The evidence gathered for this report suggests that the presence of competition in school PE is not the root cause of lack of participation in sport. Rather, competition exposes the growing fear of failure felt by today’s ‘bedroom generation’. The case for the character-building benefits of sport for adolescents was built in section 1.1.4, and it is important that competitive, traditional sports are protected within the PE curriculum as these provide a rare opportunity for young people to learn to cope with failure and ‘losing’ in a safe environment.

As Olympic swimmer Anna Hopkin pointed out in her evidence given to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s *Game On* report, shielding pupils from competition denies them the resilience it can build.¹⁷² Similarly, KICK stressed that sporting tournaments can be powerful experiences that bring school communities together, while teaching lessons that extend beyond the sports field:

‘Competition is good for the soul.’

KICK

Although fear of failure discourages some young people from participating in sport, the solution is not to remove competition. For many young people, particularly those who struggle academically at school, sport provides one of the few environments in which they can experience achievement, gain recognition from peers and adults, and develop self-confidence. Even for pupils who find sport difficult, requiring participation in competitive sport within the PE curriculum matters for character-building at a formative developmental age. This was something the young people we spoke to felt strongly about: when discussing the fear of failure in PE, the dominant view was that pupils should not be allowed to opt out of games they didn’t want to take part in. As one girl put it:

168 Foster, D. House of Commons Library. *School Sport Partnerships Briefing Paper*. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06052/SN06052.pdf (Accessed: 31 July 2026).

169 Foster, D. House of Commons Library. *School Sport Partnerships Briefing Paper*. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06052/SN06052.pdf (Accessed: 31 July 2026).

170 Sport England, 2025. *School Games Organiser Network Review Objective A – Impact and Value for Money Summary of findings*. Available at: sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-07/SGO%20Network%20Review%20Objective%20A%20Report_July%202025-08_2.pdf?VersionId=3b5mRskufK0iDuDrlaQg78bAGGpMQo5j (Accessed: 31 July 2026).

171 See for example: Department for Education, 21 May 2026, *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

172 Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2026. *Game On: Community and school sport*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/publications/52665/documents/293057/default (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

'You're going to be embarrassed about stuff in school PE but you have to learn how not to be embarrassed about it. You shouldn't be taught to be scared.'

Girl, Year 12

Another pupil said he valued having to participate in PE as this lowers the stakes about his performance:

'I enjoy the lack of choice when it comes to participation; everybody in the group will be participating in the activity, meaning that no one is tempted to sit out. It means that if I perform badly, it's not such a big deal because I have been forced into it.'

Boy, Year 11

Competitive sport should remain a central feature of school PE because it provides a structured opportunity at school for young people to learn how to cope with failure and disappointment in a safe environment. However, preserving the benefits of competitive sport depends on creating conditions in which all pupils, including those with lower confidence, feel able to participate.

2.2.3 Creating supportive environments for competitive school sport

Helping more sedentary, unconfident pupils overcome the fear of failure that stops them from participating in school sport will require changes to the whole school culture that go beyond PE lessons. Schools should create opportunities for informal, low-pressure physical activity outside of PE that can act as an entry route into participation in sport, helping pupils build confidence to be active. While section 2.3 explores how schools can build a more active culture through policy changes to breaktimes and extra-curricular activities, there are also changes to the way PE is delivered that could help less confident pupils participate.

For many girls, particularly as they grow older, single-sex PE lessons provide a more supportive and empowering setting to participate in school sport than mixed groups. Research suggests that mixed-sex PE can unintentionally reinforce gender inequalities in participation, with activities often shaped by boys' interests, experience and confidence levels.¹⁷³ This can leave some girls less willing to participate, particularly when combined with the heightened self-consciousness that many experience during adolescence.

A Youth Sport Trust survey found that more than two thirds of girls prefer single-sex PE lessons, and the majority of boys also prefer single-sex groupings.¹⁷⁴ Youth workers and PE staff told us that girls find mixed PE intimidating because boys can be physically dominant in ball games, and that girls fear injury when playing against the opposite sex. A third of boys report preferring single sex PE because it enables them to 'compete harder' and 'be more physical'.¹⁷⁵

173 Wilkinson, S. D., Stride, A., & Penney, D. (2026). *Gendered grouping practices in secondary physical education in England: Listening to student voice* (European Physical Education Review). Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X251340247#bibr25-1356336X251340247 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

174 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026); Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Boys Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/wfpd4mi4/girls-active-national-report-all-boys-091025.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

175 Wilkinson, S. D., Stride, A., & Penney, D. (2026). *Gendered grouping practices in secondary physical education in England: Listening to student voice* (European Physical Education Review). Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X251340247#bibr25-1356336X251340247 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

Another report found that girls preferred single sex PE settings because ‘their bodies, physical competencies and/or performances were not subjected to scrutiny and judgement by boys’.¹⁷⁶ The survey results suggest that single-sex groupings may be particularly effective at engaging less active girls with sport, as girls identifying as ‘low ability’ were the most likely group in the survey (by gender and ability) to have a preference for single-sex PE.¹⁷⁷ In light of the confidence, body image and fear-of-failure barriers explored earlier in this section, single-sex groupings for PE are a promising tool for widening participation among less active girls.

Current policy gives schools discretion to group pupils for PE, and around two thirds of schools already predominantly use single-sex groupings, frequently reporting that this is to create a safer space for students, particularly girls.¹⁷⁸ Yet despite strong pupil preference for single-sex PE, a national survey found that almost a third of schools ‘fully’ or ‘mostly’ use mixed-sex grouping in core PE in Year 7, largely due to pragmatic considerations including timetabling and staff availability.¹⁷⁹

To narrow the participation gap, the government should expand their investment in school sport to remove the practical barriers stopping schools from providing single-sex PE, particularly in order to help less active or confident girls participate in school sport. The plan for reforms to school sport outlined in section 2.3 would provide the investment needed to facilitate this.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Department for Education guidance should recommend single-sex grouping as the default model for secondary school PE

Schools should create conditions in which less confident pupils, particularly girls, feel able to participate in and succeed in school sport. For many secondary-age girls, single-sex PE appears to be a more effective setting than mixed groups to build confidence and reduce the barriers of self-consciousness and body image.

The government should make clear, through updated Department for Education guidance, that core PE in secondary schools should normally be delivered on a single-sex basis unless there is a clear educational or practical reason against this. This expectation should be accompanied by measures to address practical constraints that currently prevent some schools from doing so (please see section 2.3 for examples of these measures).

¹⁷⁶ Wilkinson, S. D., Stride, A., & Penney, D. (2026). *Gendered grouping practices in secondary physical education in England: Listening to student voice* (European Physical Education Review). Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X251340247#bibr25-1356336X251340247 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁷⁷ Wilkinson, S.D. and Penney, D., 2023. *A national survey of gendered grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England* (Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy). Available at: tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17408989.2023.2236642#abstract (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁷⁸ Wilkinson, S.D. and Penney, D., 2023. *A national survey of gendered grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England* (Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy). Available at: tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17408989.2023.2236642#abstract (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁷⁹ Wilkinson, S.D. and Penney, D., 2023. *A national survey of gendered grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England* (Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy). Available at: tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17408989.2023.2236642#abstract (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

2.3 Building physical activity into secondary school life

The previous section showed that some pupils' disengagement from sport is driven by psychological barriers such as low confidence, body image anxiety and fear of failure. However, pupils' activity habits throughout the school day are also shaped by the opportunities schools provide. More active pupils will struggle to stay active if PE time is squeezed or extra-curricular time is limited, and less active pupils are more likely to learn active habits if schools create low-pressure opportunities to be active throughout the day.

This section examines the structural, school-level factors that influence pupils' activity levels, including the amount of curriculum time devoted to PE, the role of extra-curricular sport and the length and format of breaktimes. It recommends policy changes to create the conditions for more active school cultures, particularly for the pupils who are currently the least active.

2.3.1 Making breaktimes more active

As sections 2.1 and 2.2 discussed, more sedentary pupils may be reluctant to participate in school PE and organised sport due to fear of failure and body image anxiety. Breaktimes and lunchtimes are particularly valuable for these pupils because they create opportunities for informal, low-stakes physical activity that can act as a bridge between complete inactivity and participation in sport.

Joining a casual football game in the playground at breaktime, playing with a hula hoop with friends, or walking around the school grounds or surrounding local area can provide less intimidating first steps into being active than participating in more formal school sport. These experiences allow young people to build confidence and competence being active in a context where the consequences of getting something wrong are low, and over time, this can act as a pathway into more structured physical activity and sport. Informal activity during breaktimes also removes some of the practical barriers explored earlier in this chapter, as pupils can be active without changing clothes, wearing PE kit or performing in front of an entire class.

Yet one of the most valuable opportunities for pupils engaging with physical activity in the school day has been shrinking for decades. The Nuffield Foundation found that the time allocated per week to secondary school breaktimes has reduced by around 65 minutes since 1995. This was due to the eradication of afternoon breaks which are now 'virtually non-existent' in secondary schools, and the shortening of lunch breaks.¹⁸⁰

Half of secondary schools had short lunch breaks of 45 minutes or less in 2017, leaving little time for pupils to engage in physical activity as well as eat lunch.¹⁸¹ Just 10 per cent of independent secondary schools table such short lunch breaks.¹⁸² A study in Norfolk measuring accelerometer data found that boys at secondary schools with longer breaks spent around 20 fewer minutes sedentary per day than

180 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

181 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

182 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

those with the shortest breaks.¹⁸³ However, this study found that the length of breaktimes did not make a difference to girls' activity levels, indicating that the benefits of long breaktimes for raising activity levels are not spread out evenly across pupils. One secondary school student we spoke to estimated that only around 10 per cent of his year group spends any part of their 45-minute lunchtime being active (with the active group consisting of a group of 'sporty' boys playing football), and very few girls playing or being active.

In addition to the length of breaktimes shortening over time, Nuffield Foundation research shows that schools have become less willing to allow pupils to walk off-site at lunchtime, with the proportion of secondary schools permitting any students to leave the school premises at lunchtime falling from 67 per cent in 1995 to just 12 per cent in 2017.¹⁸⁴ This shift has removed a valuable opportunity for young people to engage in light, informal physical activity by walking around the local area. It also reflects a wider culture of risk aversion that has reduced opportunities for teenagers to develop independence. Chapter 3 explores the trends resulting in many adolescents spending more of their life indoors and online: restricting access to the wider community during the school day may unfortunately reinforce these patterns of sedentary behaviour and social withdrawal.

Breaktimes and lunchtimes are a crucial component of an active whole school culture. The Youth Sport Trust found that more than four in ten young people (42 per cent) would like more time during breaktimes and lunchtimes to be active, and that when schools encourage pupils to be active at these times, this is associated with higher overall weekly activity levels for those individuals.¹⁸⁵ An OECD review of international policies identified minimum break-time duration as a 'promising' policy lever for improving physical activity levels.¹⁸⁶ Action is needed to reverse the decline in breaktimes for secondary school pupils.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Set a minimum duration of breaktimes and lunchtimes

The Government should set a minimum duration for secondary school break and lunchtimes through statutory guidance, reversing the erosion of time for social and unstructured physical activity in the school day. Lunchtimes should be a full hour long for all secondary pupils, and breaktimes should be at least 20 minutes.

The Government has recently given legal force to guidance that all schools should be mobile phone-free environments by default, with schools given discretion over how they choose to enforce this policy.¹⁸⁷ The teachers we spoke to reported that since phones were restricted in their schools, there has been an increase in pupils 'making their own fun' at breaktimes, with a noticeable rise in noise and informal play in playgrounds. Government policy should now build on this momentum by ensuring that schools have the resources and encouragement to support informal play and physical activity.

183 Morton, K.L., Corder, K., Suhrcke, M. et al., 2016. *School policies, programmes and facilities, and objectively measured sedentary time, LPA and MVPA: associations in secondary school and over the transition from primary to secondary school* (International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity). Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12966-016-0378-6#citeas (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

184 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

185 Savanta Key Drivers Analysis found that for every one-point increase in agreement that a school encourages activity during breaks (on a five-point scale), pupils reported being active on an additional 0.23 days per week. Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

186 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

187 *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026*, section 36. Available at: legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2026/21/section/36 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 4

Provide more resources for informal fun and games in school playgrounds

Guidance should be updated so that schools are actively encouraged to support informal fun and games in the playground through low-cost equipment provision of basketball and netball hoops, small football goals, balls, hula hoops, table tennis tables, skipping ropes, and similar playground equipment for students to use informally.

To facilitate this, the Department for Education should provide small capital grants for basic playground equipment/markings, targeted at schools with the least existing provision.

It is important to offer pupils non-competitive, 'give it a go' type turn up and play opportunities at lunchtimes alongside the traditional offer in which pupils can join extra-curricular clubs and teams. Such provision can be especially effective for pupils with low self-esteem, anxiety or limited previous experience of sport, giving them a safe environment in which to try new activities without fear of judgement. The Government's own PE guidance highlights a college that launched a 'Let's Play' initiative to widen participation, consisting of ten daily thirty-minute active clubs requiring only appropriate footwear and removal of jewellery to take part, rather than a full PE kit change. By reducing practical and psychological barriers to participation, the school changed the culture of the PE department into an area of school life 'where all pupils feel they belong', rather than one perceived as being reserved for the already sporty and confident pupils.¹⁸⁸

Given that girls are more likely to experience the psychological barriers to school sport (see section 2.2.) and they are currently less likely to spend their breaktimes being physically active (see section 2.1.2.), introducing informal physical activity sessions at breaktimes could particularly help girls become more active at school. Government policy should do more to encourage schools to provide these opportunities as a routine part of school life.

RECOMMENDATION 5

More opportunities for informal physical activity sessions in schools

Informal, low-stakes physical activity sessions at break and lunchtimes should be considered a key part of schools' sport and physical activity offer. Modelled on the 'Let's Play' approach, these sessions should ask for minimal commitment from pupils and no change into PE kit beyond removing jewellery, and could include activities such as dodgeball, basketball/netball shooting games (rather than formal matches), frisbee, fitness sessions, skipping, table tennis and walking groups. The emphasis should be on enjoyment, social connection and movement rather than competition or performance. This would complement (not replace) more organised, traditional competitive sport in PE curriculum time and extra-curricular sport clubs.

¹⁸⁸ Department for Education, 2024. *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school Non-statutory guidance*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9fd3a0001d32adbcd/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Benchmark 5 of the Enrichment Framework, *An Accessible and Engaging Enrichment Offer*,¹⁸⁹ already requires schools to monitor participation and design provision for pupils missing out on enrichment. From September 2026, when Ofsted begins using the Framework as a reference point for its personal development judgement, inspectors should look at whether a school successfully supports pupils who are currently inactive at school sport to participate in more physical activity at school, such as through offering these informal physical activity sessions.

2.3.2 The squeeze on PE time

Although PE is often considered to be a universal part of school life, the amount of curriculum time allocated to it has fallen over the past decade. This squeeze on PE has been particularly pronounced for older pupils, reinforcing the pattern described in section 2.1.1 in which pupils are lost from school sport as they move through secondary school.

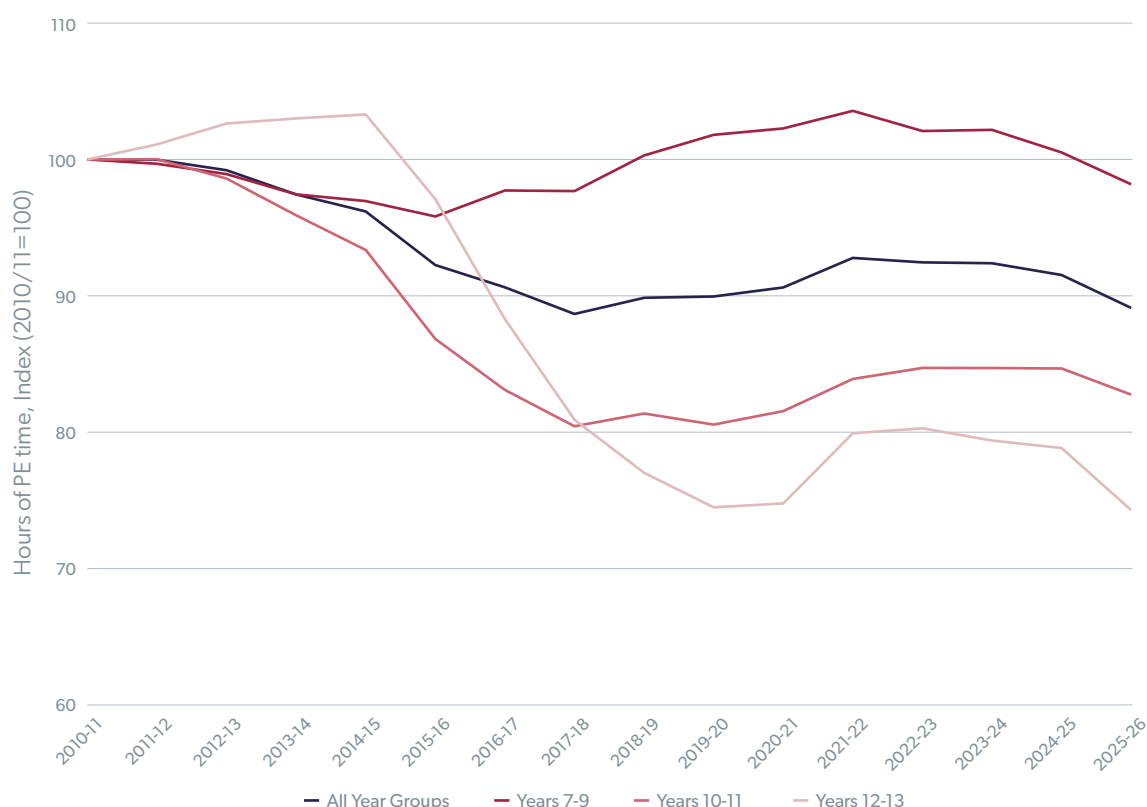
The amount of secondary school curriculum time devoted to PE has declined from 8.6 per cent of teaching hours in 2011/12 to 7.3 per cent of hours in 2025/26.¹⁹⁰ As Figure 8 shows, the fall has been most pronounced among older pupils, with pupils in Year 10 and above experiencing a much steeper reduction in PE time than younger secondary school pupils. The median time allocated to PE is only one hour per week in Years 10–11 compared to two hours in all other key stages.¹⁹¹ This means that opportunities for structured physical activity in the school day are often reduced at the point when young people face growing academic pressures due to GCSE exams, declining overall activity levels and worsening mental health. Given the evidence set out in Chapter 1 on the role of physical activity in supporting wellbeing, resilience and educational attainment, this reduction in PE time is difficult to justify.

¹⁸⁹ Department for Education, *Enrichment Benchmark 5: An accessible and engaging enrichment offer*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges/enrichment-benchmarks#an-accessible-and-engaging-enrichment-offer (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁹⁰ House of Commons Library, 2026. Physical education, physical activity and sport in English schools. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06836/SN06836.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

¹⁹¹ GOV.UK, 2023. *School And College Voice December 2023*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2023-to-2024/school-and-college-voice-december-2023#pe-timetabling (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

Figure 8 – Older pupils have had the biggest decline in PE time since 2011



Source: Department for Education, *School Workforce in England Statistics*¹⁹²

Schools are currently 'strongly encouraged' to provide a minimum of two hours of PE per week,¹⁹³ but the absence of a statutory requirement means that access to PE varies considerably between schools. As a result, provision is dependent on school priorities, staffing capacity and timetabling pressures rather than guaranteed for all pupils. Government guidance recognises the challenges schools face in finding time for two hours of PE in the school timetable each week, while also noting that PE is 'especially important during periods of revision and exam preparation'.¹⁹⁴

Even when PE is in the school timetable, it is the most commonly cancelled lesson in the school day, with the main reasons for its cancellation cited as teacher unavailability (42 per cent), lack of available space (31 per cent), poor weather (29 per cent) or the need to make time for other subjects (24 per cent).¹⁹⁵

Schools with strong PE provision typically have senior leadership teams that actively champion sport and protect curriculum time.¹⁹⁶ While this demonstrates what is possible for schools, it also highlights the

¹⁹² Department for Education. *Annual statistics on teachers and support staff (TAs) in England: Subjects taught and specialist teachers in secondary schools*. Data available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england/2025#section-subjects-taught-and-specialist-teachers-in-secondary-schools (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

¹⁹³ Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

¹⁹⁴ GOV.UK, 2024. *Enhancing Physical Education Provision And Improving Access To Sport And Physical Activity In School* Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9f1d3a0001d32adbc/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

¹⁹⁵ Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

¹⁹⁶ Sheffield Hallam University research, quoted in Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

problem that access to PE depends too much on a school's priorities. The Government should take action to level the playing field and ensure that all pupils have access to a minimum of two hours of PE each week, closing the gap left by current, unenforced guidance.

The Government's current strategy for protecting PE time is to ensure that the subject has a clearly defined purpose in the curriculum.¹⁹⁷ CSJ polling shows that two thirds (67 per cent) of 15-year-olds say they would take part in more sport or physical activity if their school offered a wider choice.¹⁹⁸ However, as the decline in PE provision since 2011 demonstrates, guidance alone has failed to secure two hours of PE for all pupils, and without a statutory requirement, PE time will continue to be vulnerable.

International evidence suggests that stronger policy levers can make a positive difference: the OECD found that education policies mandating a minimum amount of PE time were particularly effective, with the potential to reduce disparities across schools. Hungary, for example, mandates five hours of PE per week in primary and secondary schools,¹⁹⁹ and is one of only three OECD countries where more than 20 per cent of 15-year-olds reported at least an hour of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity every day in 2022.²⁰⁰

There is significant political momentum to pass the required legislation to make two hours of PE per week mandatory for secondary school pupils. Youth Sport Trust polling of MPs in 2025 showed that 81 per cent agreed schools should provide two hours a week of PE.²⁰¹ The Conservative Party's 2024 manifesto promised two compulsory hours of PE a week in both primary and secondary schools.²⁰² At a time when concerns about children's mental health, obesity and inactivity are rising, the case for guaranteeing a minimum amount of PE time has broad political appeal.

RECOMMENDATION 6

2 hours of PE time a week should become mandatory

Without action to make PE time mandatory, the most disadvantaged pupils will continue to lose out on its benefits. Mandating 2 hours a week of PE time would require legislation, as the Education Act 2002 prohibits the Secretary of State for Education from prescribing the amount of time to be spent on any curriculum subject.²⁰³

Some schools will find implementation challenging, but best-practice schools already demonstrate that two hours a week is achievable, and the evidence for the benefits of physical activity is too strong to leave PE delivery to chance. Government investment in the Right to Sport would also help to expand the capacity of schools to deliver two hours a week of PE.

197 UK Government, 2025. *Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b2a4a14b040dfe82922ea/Government_response_to_the_Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

198 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

199 European Commission and World Health Organisation Europe, 2018. *Hungary Physical Activity Factsheet 2018*. Available at: sport.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/physical-activity-factsheet_who-hu-201811_en.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

200 OECD, 2025. *Health at a Glance 2025: OECD Indicators*. Available at: oecd.org/en/publications/health-at-a-glance-2025_8f9e3f98-en/full-report/nutrition-and-physical-activity-among-adolescents_faeabbca.html#figure-d1e24220-e1287f6b27 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

201 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/ys_t_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

202 Schools Week, *Conservatives manifesto 2024: All the schools policies*. Available at: schoolsweek.co.uk/conservatives-manifesto-2024-all-the-schools-policies (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

203 House of Commons Library, 2026. *Physical education, physical activity and sport in English schools*. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06836/SN06836.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

2.3.3 Raising the quality of school sport

Guaranteeing sufficient PE time is an important first step, but the quality of PE lessons also matters if schools are to become more active places. The National Curriculum allows schools flexibility to choose sporting and physical activities ‘that best meet the needs of their school community and pupils.’²⁰⁴ However, the Curriculum Review found that PE varies considerably in quality across the nation.²⁰⁵ For example, many schools do not teach dance,²⁰⁶ despite its place in the national curriculum and its status as one of the more popular physical activities that secondary age girls say they would like to do as part of their PE lessons.²⁰⁷ Girls are less likely than boys to say their school offers a sport or physical activity they enjoy (70 per cent compared with 81 per cent), and seven in ten girls say they would be more active if activities were made more fun and less competitive.²⁰⁸ The Review also raised the concern that the wide range of activities schools cycle through in PE does not give pupils enough time to master any one sport,²⁰⁹ which may worsen the fear of failure preventing some pupils from participating in sport at school.

PE lessons aim to educate pupils in physical literacy and support their physical development, but schools can only deliver a high-quality PE offer if they have sufficient specialist staff to teach, organise and champion it. Schools with an insufficient number of PE teachers are likely to find it difficult to provide the recommended two hours of PE per week for all pupils and run extra-curricular activities such as sport clubs. School budget pressures mean that PE staffing is often deprioritised relative to subjects that are more directly linked to school accountability measures and examination performance.

Adequate sports facilities are another essential part of the delivery infrastructure for school physical activity and sport. 70 per cent of sports halls and 48 per cent of grass pitches are in educational ownership,²¹⁰ but this stock is not evenly distributed between schools. Independent schools typically enjoy significantly greater possession of sport facilities and spaces than state schools, and so they often share their sports facilities with other local schools.²¹¹ For example, whereas around 41 per cent of Independent Schools Council members have their own swimming pool,²¹² only around 15 per cent of state secondary schools have the same privilege.²¹³ A 2024 Guardian investigation found that pupils at England’s top 250 private schools have access to an average of 322 square metres of green space each, compared to just 32 square metres available to each state school student.²¹⁴

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- 204 Department for Education, 2024. *Enhancing physical education provision and improving access to sport and physical activity in school: Non-statutory guidance*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fd68f9fd3a0001d32adbc/Enhancing_physical_education_provision_and_improving_access_to_sport_and_physical_activity_in_school.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 205 Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 206 Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 207 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Girls Active National Report: June 2025 Girls' Report*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/whuh43sh/girls-active-national-report-all-girls-091025.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 208 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.
- 209 Department for Education, 2026. *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Final Report*. (Page 102-104). Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 210 Sport England, 2025. *Written evidence submitted by Sport England (for the Culture, Media and Sport Committee)*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/133739/html (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 211 Independent Schools Council, 2023. *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 212 Independent Schools Council, 2023. *ISC census and annual report 2023*. Available at: isc.co.uk/media/9316/isc_census_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 213 15 per cent of state secondary schools in this study had a swimming pool in 2012-14. Hong SM, Godoy-Shimizu D, Schwartz Y, Korolija I, Mavrogianni A, Mumovic D. *Characterising the English school stock using a unified national on-site survey and energy database*. (Building Services Engineering Research & Technology.) Available at: journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01436244211030667 (Accessed: 11 August 2026).
- 214 The Guardian, 16 June 2024. *Revealed: students at top private schools have 10 times more green space than state pupils*. Available at: theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jun/16/revealed-private-schools-have-10-times-more-green-space-than-state-schools (Accessed: 26 August 2026).

The value of extra-curricular sport and physical activity

Extra-curricular activities are a pillar of a well-rounded school life and one of the most effective ways for pupils to develop lasting physical activity habits, build friendships and gain confidence. While PE lessons should build pupils' physical skills and competence in traditional sports, extra-curricular provision should prioritise fun and enjoyment to foster a lasting love of being active. The Youth Sport Trust found that the top factors encouraging young people to do more sport or be more active include, 'My school offering an after-school club where you could try different sports' (39 per cent), and 'Being able to choose what activities I want to do at school' (38 per cent).²¹⁵ However, not all pupils are receiving the benefits of a high-quality, broad extra-curricular programme at school.

Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 outlined the participation gap in extra-curricular sport and physical activities between older and younger pupils, and girls and boys. The Education Policy Institute found that pupils with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities are 23 per cent less likely to participate in sports clubs than their peers.²¹⁶ Disadvantaged pupils are also less likely than their more affluent peers to enjoy the benefits and opportunities of extra-curricular sport and physical activity. A Department for Education survey of secondary school parents found that participation in extra-curricular sport and physical activity at school was 10 percentage points lower among secondary school pupils eligible for Free School Meals (42 per cent participation) compared to pupils who were not eligible (52 per cent participation).²¹⁷ Similarly, children whose parents attended university are almost 50 per cent more likely to participate than those whose parents did not (58 per cent compared with 39 per cent).²¹⁸ The Social Mobility Commission found that the barriers to taking part in extra-curricular activities for those from low income households include their high cost, a lack of confidence, and difficulties in access.²¹⁹

In addition to unequal participation at school-level, there is a disparity in the provision of extra-curricular activities between schools, as some schools provide a substantially better, more extensive extra-curricular sport and physical activity offer than others. The government appears to recognise this issue as the Department for Education is making information on each school's enrichment provision publicly available to parents through new school profiles.²²⁰ Disparity in schools' extra-curricular offer is linked to budget pressures: Sutton Trust polling of senior school leaders in 2026 found that one in six (15 per cent) of secondary schools had to cut back on sport and other extra-curricular activities for financial reasons over the past year.²²¹ There is also a divide between the enrichment opportunities available to pupils in independent schools compared to state schools: the Social Mobility Commission found that independent schools offer an 'unparalleled breadth and range of activities' compared to the state sector.²²² Civitas research in 2024 found that nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of the public think that the range of extracurricular activities offered in private schools is better than in most other schools.²²³

215 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

216 Robinson, D. *Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes*. Education Policy Institute, 2024. Available at: epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EC-and-outcomes-final-1.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

217 Department for Education, 2025. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: June 2025. Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

218 Department for Education, 2025. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: June 2025. Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

219 Social Mobility Commission, 2019. *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

220 Department for Education, 2026. *Every child achieving and thriving*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version (Accessed: 1 September 2026).

221 The Sutton Trust, 2026. *School Funding and Pupil Premium 2026*. Available at: suttontrust.com/our-research/school-funding-and-pupil-premium-2026 (Accessed: 1 September 2026).

222 Social Mobility Commission, 2019. *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

223 Civitas, 2024. *Independent schools: What does the public think?* Available at: civitas.org.uk/publications/independent-schools-what-does-the-public-think (Accessed: 1 September 2026).

Schools with strong extra-curricular programmes report benefits that extend beyond physical activity, including improved attendance, stronger school belonging and better pupil wellbeing. A Department for Education research report on Extended Activity Provision in Secondary Schools found schools, parents and teachers cited improved pupil confidence, stronger relationships with staff and peers, and greater parental confidence that pupils were in a safe environment.²²⁴ In 2021/22, the Welsh government trialled a £2 million ten-week enrichment programme across 14 settings, extending the school day by an hour each day for extra-curricular activities. 91 per cent of pupils reported having fun, and 84 per cent felt the extra time helped them socialise with peers.²²⁵ The Policy Exchange commissioned polling in 2014 finding that half of secondary school parents were in favour of a longer school day, with a preference for this including enrichment activities.²²⁶ Where extra-curricular provision is missing from schools, there is a missed opportunity to engage pupils with school life. One girl who currently does not participate in sport or physical activity at school said,

'The reason people don't come in to school is it's not fun, there's no extra-curriculars, no sport. If there were extra-curriculars I would do it. As soon as something comes up that I could do after school, I do it. If I could be part of a netball club, I would.'

Girl, Year 12

Winstanley School, in an area of high deprivation in Leicester, runs an after-school enrichment programme funded by donations and run by teachers that has transformed the school community and pupils' sense of belonging. It offers 'something for everyone': for example, football on the astroturf, a lunchtime sports club, and dance and line dancing clubs in the drama studio. The Bemrose School in Derby hosts a full programme of free clubs covering 'every sport you can probably think about, within reason,' with a different club every night. Taking part has inspired some pupils to continue sport outside school, and girl-only clubs have helped female pupils find a love for physical activity.

Extra-curricular activities after school provide an alternative to the sedentary routines that increasingly define the lives of the 'bedroom generation'. Many young people we spoke to said they are frequently bored at home and spend time on their phones because they have 'nothing else to do'. High-quality extra-curricular provision gives pupils structured opportunities to develop new hobbies, build friendships and spend time away from screens.

Recent reforms to secondary school sport policy

The 2024 Labour Government announced an overhaul of the school sport policy model, with the primary school PE premium replaced by a new School Sport Partnerships Network (SSPN).²²⁷ From Spring 2027, primary and secondary school PE will be delivered using the SSPN: a model which aims to strengthen links between schools, sports clubs and local community providers, particularly to increase participation

224 Department for Education, 2017. *Extended activity provision in secondary schools: Research report*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/635002/Extended_Activity_Provision_in_Secondary_Schools.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

225 Welsh Government, 2023. *Additional Enrichment Sessions Trial Evaluation: summary*. Available at: gov.wales/additional-enrichment-sessions-trial-evaluation-summary.html (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

226 Policy Exchange, 2014. *Only A Matter of Time? A framework for the most effective way to lengthen the school day in England*. Available at: policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/only-a-matter-of-time.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

227 Department for Education, 2026. *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

among disadvantaged pupils, girls and pupils with SEND.²²⁸ The government notes that the new system will help schools make strategic use of their facilities, and that targeted support will bring sport coaches into schools.²²⁹

The move to deliver more school sport through external providers reflects the CSJ's long-standing view that the government should support schools to draw more extensively on the expertise and reach of the third sector to engage young people in sport.²³⁰ The original School Sport Partnerships, introduced by the Labour Government in 2002, sought to increase participation in high-quality PE and school sport,²³¹ and Ofsted found that the original Partnerships enhanced school-club links, strengthened connections between schools and community sport organisations and improved participation.²³²

For the new SSPN to succeed in widening pupils' participation in school PE, it must engage the organisations best placed to reach the pupils who are currently least active. Traditional grassroots sports clubs are important delivery partners, but they are not always the organisations with the strongest relationships with young people. The CSJ's *Underfunded and Overlooked* report found that larger, national organisations are often awarded public contracts in favour of smaller grassroots charities with track records of delivery in a local area.²³³ Today, many small, local community sport charities have developed partnerships with schools and are successful at engaging the most sedentary children with school sport, often combining the delivery of sport coaching with mentoring and pastoral support. However, if the new SSPN delivery model favours large national providers, schools could lose access to local organisations with trusted relationships among less active pupils.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The new School Sport Partnerships should prioritise smaller community sport charities

The CSJ recommends that School Sport Partnerships funding is integrated into the Right to Sport (please see section 2.3.4). However, if the government retains a separate SSP funding stream, it should prioritise small community sport charities as key local delivery partners in school PE and sport. Local partnership networks should prioritise voluntary and community sector organisations that already hold relationships with schools.

The success of the new School Sport Partnerships will ultimately depend on whether they can engage the pupils who are currently least likely to participate in sport and physical activity, including girls, disadvantaged pupils and those with low confidence. Many small community sport charities have developed expertise in working with these groups, often combining coaching with mentoring, youth work and pastoral support, helping young people overcome barriers to trying sport such as the fear of failure.

The Government should avoid creating a commissioning model that favours large organisations at the expense of local providers. As the CSJ's *Underfunded and Overlooked* report highlighted, smaller grassroots charities can be overlooked despite having strong local track records.

228 Department for Education, 2026. *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

229 UK Parliament, 2026. *Game On: Community and school sport: Government Response*. Available at: publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5902/cmselect/cmcmds/462/report.html (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

230 See, for example, Centre for Social Justice, 2023. *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport*. Available at centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

231 Foster, D. House of Commons Library, 2015. *School Sport Partnerships Briefing Paper*. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06052/SN06052.pdf (Accessed: 31 July 2026).

232 Ofsted, 2011. *School Sport Partnerships: A survey of good practice*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81902140f0b62305b8fa0a/School_Sport_Partnerships.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

233 Centre for Social Justice, 2024. *Underfunded and Overlooked: The perilous state of Britain's grassroots charities*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CSJF-Overlooked_and_Underfunded.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

As things stand, the government's plans for school sport will be limited by inadequate funding and low ambition. The SSPN has £580 million of dedicated funding²³⁴ alongside the 'almost £200 million' capital injection to improve school sport facilities. These steps mark a small increase in secondary school sport funding (and a large cut in primary school sport funding), but it is spread across all schools, and the scope has expanded far more than the resource has. We estimate that it is an effective pot of £114.7 million annually in secondary school sport funding, which amounts to a mere £30 per pupil per year.

The new Department for Education Enrichment Framework provides helpful guidance for schools with benchmarks explaining what their enrichment offer should constitute, but it is non-statutory, contains no minimum number of hours for enrichment activities, and comes without an adequate funding stream for schools to deliver what it expects.²³⁵ The £22.5 million Enrichment Expansion Programme will only support 400 out of 3,458 secondary schools,²³⁶ and even then £16.8 million is being paid to a delivery partner, with very little making its way into school grants. Similarly, the 'Every Child Can' initiative, backed by £132.5 million, is welcome, but it is a one-off pot injection that cannot realistically allow schools to expand their enrichment provision over medium-to-long-term, while questions also remain on how this funding will be accessed and distributed.²³⁷

At a time when too many young people are spending their free time sedentary and alone, access to school sport is too important to be left to chance. Opportunities to take part in extra-curricular sport and physical activity should not depend on circumstances but be a core part of every young person's education.

The CSJ's Right to Sport policy is a more ambitious vision for school sport than the government's existing plans, building on the delivery infrastructure laid by the new School Sport Partnerships model to provide every secondary school pupil with high-quality sport and physical activity opportunities at school.

2.3.4 The Right to Sport: A more ambitious plan

The CSJ has long advocated for a universal 'Right to Sport' for secondary school pupils, in which every pupil would be entitled to a minimum of two hours of extra-curricular sport or physical activity per week, in addition to curriculum PE.²³⁸ This is needed because as things stand, pupils with SEND, girls, less advantaged pupils and older pupils are less likely to access and enjoy the benefits of extra-curricular sport and physical activity at school. The Department for Education has declared an ambition to help every child thrive through reforms to create a more inclusive mainstream education system, and the Right to Sport would help this agenda by giving schools the resources, incentive and accountability that are necessary to provide enrichment for all pupils (especially those who are currently less likely to participate).

To ensure consistent delivery and equitable access of enrichment and extra-curricular sport and physical activity, the government should offer secondary schools an **Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant**. Schools would commit to providing a 2 + 5 sport and enrichment guarantee, including:

- › A minimum of 2 hours a week of timetabled PE for every pupil

234 Department for Education, 21 May 2026. *£1bn boost to PE and school sport to end fitness postcode lottery*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/1bn-boost-to-pe-and-school-sport-to-end-fitness-postcode-lottery (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

235 Department for Education, 2026. *The enrichment framework for schools and colleges*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

236 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 13 June 2026. *Every child to get access to enriching activities to build skills and confidence for life*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

237 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 13 June 2026. *Every child to get access to enriching activities to build skills and confidence for life*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

238 Centre for Social Justice, 2023. *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport*. Available at centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSJ-Game_Changer.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2026).

- › A minimum of 5 hours a week of extra-curricular enrichment for every pupil, of which at least 2 hours must be extra-curricular sport or physical activity.²³⁹

It is likely these 5 hours of enrichment will be primarily delivered through after school extra-curricular activity; however, schools would retain autonomy over how they provide the guarantee. Extra-curricular activities could be delivered during lunch breaks, before or after school, or through another model that suits local circumstances.

Universal rollout would be graduated through two tranches of 'vanguard schools', evolving into a mandatory expectation in the third year of the policy. 'Vanguard' schools must demonstrate universal or near-universal participation of pupils, to ensure that the pupils who need it most receive the benefits.

Costing

We recommend setting the Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant at £25,000 plus £225 per pupil in Years 7 to 11. This follows a similar model to that of the PE and Sport Premium that was received by primary schools, as it covers the fixed cost of provision (staffing an enrichment coordinator) plus the variable cost per child attending (the cost of running extra-curricular sessions). £25,000 is the approximate gross cost for a 0.6 FTE coordinator, and £225 is the estimated annual cost of offering every pupil two extra-curricular sport sessions per week, one of which is charity partner-led and one of which is school-led.²⁴⁰

We recommend rolling out the Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport to an initial 30 per cent of secondary schools as vanguard schools. Rising to full take-up by its third year, we estimate that this policy would have an average annual cost of £591.4 million over this three-year period.

The policy could be funded through a combination of repurposing existing school sport expenditure and reinvesting savings generated by reforms elsewhere in the education and welfare system. A more detailed funding recommendation for this policy is set out in the Appendix.

Accountability

Schools would receive a 3-year commitment to the first 75 per cent of the grant annually based on a published session schedule showing, for each session: category, duration, weeks per year, and available places. These would have to meet or exceed the enrichment guarantee.

Each year, only upon proof of success, verifying that participation met conditions of 'universal or approaching universal' uptake across FSM, sex, ethnicity and year group, would schools receive the final 25 per cent of the grant for that year. This could be achieved through provision being set as mandatory by schools or through demonstrating sufficiently high attendance in enrichment provision. Enforcement would follow standard escalation, within existing grant enforcement processes.

239 Offering more than 2 hours a week of timetabled PE or Games would count towards meeting this requirement.

240 See Appendix for detail on costing.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Right to Sport

At a time when too many young people are spending their free time sedentary and alone, access to extra-curricular sport and physical activity should be treated as a core part of secondary school education rather than an optional extra.

The Government should offer secondary schools an Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant. Schools would commit to providing a minimum of 5 hours a week of extra-curricular enrichment for every pupil, of which at least 2 hours must be sport or physical activity (in addition to 2 hours a week of timetabled PE lessons).

Universal rollout would be graduated through two tranches of 'vanguard schools', evolving into a mandatory expectation of secondary schools in the third year of the policy.

Expanding social prescribing of physical activity and sport

The case for expanding extra-curricular sport goes beyond raising young people's activity levels. As Chapter 1.1. showed, physical activity improves mental health, reduces loneliness and builds resilience. In the context of rising mental ill-health among adolescents and long waits for specialist support, sport should be used more effectively as a social prescribing tool to support young people. It is striking that health professionals surveyed for Milburn's review of young people and work were twice as likely to endorse non-clinical interventions such as social prescribing (76 per cent) as they were to favour medication (38 per cent) as a means of supporting young people with mental health challenges.²⁴¹

In late 2024, over 350,000 children and young people were waiting for specialist mental health care in England, with average wait times of just under eight months,²⁴² and evidence suggests that up to three-quarters experience a deterioration in their mental health while waiting.²⁴³ The 'Wellbeing While Waiting' trial, led by UCL and delivered with support from StreetGames, followed 550 adolescents awaiting mental health treatment in 11 NHS CAMHS trusts.²⁴⁴ The study compared young people who were given social prescribing referrals while waiting (including to karate and nature walking clubs) with those who were not. Referred young people showed improved behaviour, stronger relationships and greater resilience, including higher self-esteem and confidence in problem-solving. The study concluded that social prescribing can be an effective tool to support young people's mental health, although it is not a substitute for clinical treatment.²⁴⁵

Building more active schools with universal extra-curricular provision under the Right to Sport would create the foundations for physical activity and sport to be used as routine social prescribing interventions in schools. School mental health teams should be encouraged to give young people needing mental health support a 'prescription' to join a sport or physical activity club, on top of the support they already

241 Department for Work and Pensions, 2026. *Survey of healthcare professionals: Young people and work report*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report/survey-of-healthcare-professionals-young-people-and-work-report (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

242 UCL, 2026. *Social Prescribing May Help Young People Awaiting Mental Health Care*. Available at: ucl.ac.uk/news/2026/jul/social-prescribing-may-help-young-people-awaiting-mental-health-care (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

243 Street Games, 2026. *Wellbeing While Waiting (WWW)*. Available at: streetgames.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/WWW.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

244 UCL, 2026. *Social Prescribing May Help Young People Awaiting Mental Health Care*. Available at: ucl.ac.uk/news/2026/jul/social-prescribing-may-help-young-people-awaiting-mental-health-care (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

245 UCL, 2026. *Social Prescribing May Help Young People Awaiting Mental Health Care*. Available at: ucl.ac.uk/news/2026/jul/social-prescribing-may-help-young-people-awaiting-mental-health-care (Accessed: 27 August 2026); The Social Biobehavioural Research Group, 2025. *Wellbeing While Waiting ('INSPIRE'): Evidence summary – December 2025*. Available at: sbbresearch.org/projects/wellbeing-while-waiting-inspire (Accessed: 10 September 2026).

receive. These referrals could be to clubs or sessions at school, or to an external provider linked to the school through the new School Sport Partnership Network. Given that mental health support teams are already in place in nearly 80 per cent of secondary schools and the government has pledged to ensure universal coverage by 2029/30,²⁴⁶ this policy comes at no cost.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Expand social prescribing of sport and physical activity in schools

The CSJ's *Change the Prescription* report²⁴⁷ made the case for social prescribing, calling for a National Strategy for Social Prescribing with a dedicated branch for children and young people. Sport should be a central pillar of that strategy.

The 2024 UCL-led Wellbeing While Waiting trial found that young people awaiting CAMHS treatment who were referred to community activities (including physical activity) developed greater resilience, stronger relationships and improved behaviour while they waited for care.

School mental health teams should give young people needing mental health or wellbeing support a 'prescription' to join a sport or physical activity club, in addition to other support (where needed). This would embed sport and physical activity within school mental health intervention.

²⁴⁶ Department for Education, 10 June 2026. *Record numbers of children with mental health support in schools*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/record-numbers-of-children-with-mental-health-support-in-schools (Accessed: 26 August 2026).

²⁴⁷ CSJ, 2025. *Change the Prescription: A new approach to mental health*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/change-the-prescription (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

Chapter Three:

From 'bedroom generation' to active generation

Building more active schools is an essential part of the solution to teenage inactivity, but if today's young people are to become a more active generation, policy and culture changes must stretch beyond the school day.

Young people need more reasons to leave their bedroom, more opportunities to spend time with friends face-to-face, and more pathways into active lives beyond school. This is particularly crucial for the secondary-school age bracket, to support them to transition to adulthood when they will no longer have the structures of school to help them be active.

This chapter argues that rising teenage inactivity is part of a broader transformation in the way young people live. England's teenagers are spending more of their free time sedentary, in their bedrooms and on screens, while face-to-face socialising and time spent with friends outside school has declined substantially. If we want teenagers to spend less time online, we must create more attractive alternatives in the real world. Young people need places to go, freedom to explore and clear pathways into sport and other structured activities.

The sections that follow examine the forces driving the rise of the 'bedroom generation': the disappearance of teenage spaces, declining independence, barriers to community sport and the growth of sedentary screen time which has filled the vacuum. The chapter concludes with a 'From Alone to Active' policy programme to rebuild the social infrastructure of teenage life, helping young people spend less time sedentary and alone, and more time being active and social.

3.1 The 'bedroom generation': a retreat indoors

A defining feature of modern adolescence is a retreat within the home: they are the 'bedroom generation'.

More than a third (37 per cent) of 15-year-olds in England say they hardly ever leave their bedroom, except for school, which is over a quarter of a million 15-year-olds by a population extrapolation.²⁴⁸ The poll found that almost two in five (39 per cent) of girls say they hardly ever leave their bedroom except to attend school, compared with 35 per cent of boys. One in four (25 per cent) 15-year-old girls now spend

²⁴⁸ A population extrapolation based on ONS data estimates that 263,316 15 year olds in England hardly ever leave their bedroom, except for school. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity; Office for National Statistics, 2026. Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2025. Available at: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2025#data-on-population-estimates (Accessed: 16 September 2026).

at least six waking hours in their bedroom on a normal weekend day, compared to one in five (21 per cent) boys, and only 18 per cent of 15-year-olds spend at least half an hour outside every day (other than at school).²⁴⁹ A survey by YouGov for the youth charity OnSide in 2025 found that nearly half (48 per cent) of young people are spending most of their spare time in their bedroom, and that 76 per cent of young people spend most of their free time at home.²⁵⁰

In previous generations, teenagers commonly spent their evenings out with friends, but this appears to be a less typical pattern for today's 'bedroom generation'. The infographic on page 9 shows how in 2001/2, nearly two in five (39 per cent) of 15-year-olds spent time with friends in the evenings on most nights of a typical week, falling slightly to 35 per cent in 2009/10.²⁵¹ New CSJ polling shows that the proportion who spend most evenings out with friends has halved since 2010, falling to just 17 per cent today, which amounts to over 100,000 fewer 15-year olds today enjoying this social life.²⁵² The proportion of 15-year-olds spending every evening out with friends was 13.5 per cent in 2002 and is now 1.9 per cent - a decrease of 86 per cent.²⁵³ More girls (21 per cent) than boys (16.6 per cent) now spends no evenings out with friends during a typical week, and girls are 30 per cent more likely to spend no more than a single evening a week out with friends than boys.²⁵⁴

Nearly one in five (18.8 per cent) of 15-year-olds today do not spend any evenings out with friends in a usual week, compared with just one in seven in 2009/10 (13.7 per cent).²⁵⁵

When we asked young people in focus groups what they like to do after school, many of them said they just like to go home. This corresponds with poll data indicating that one in four (23 per cent) of 15-year-olds spends four hours or more in their bedroom while awake on a normal school day.²⁵⁶ One sixth form girl described what she saw as a pervasive 'bedroom culture' of girls her age (sixth form): she said,

'I like to sit on my phone and watch Love Island or play Roblox. It's a calming thing to do. I enjoy sitting on my bed and doing nothing'.

Girl, Year 12

Analysis of another survey found that between 2006–2017, the proportion of Year 10 pupils who reported that they 'played/hung out with friends after school yesterday' fell from 42 per cent to just 17

249 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

250 In England, 48 per cent of young people (11 to 18) spend most of their free time in their bedroom. OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/OnSide-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

251 University of Bergen, Data Management Centre. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study (2002/1; 2009/10). Available at: hbsc.org (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

252 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity; Office for National Statistics, 2026. Population estimates for England and Wales: mid-2025. Available at: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2025#data-on-population-estimates (Accessed: 16 September 2026).

253 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity; University of Bergen, Data Management Centre. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study (2001/02). Available at: hbsc.org (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

254 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

255 18.8% of 15 year olds usually spend 0 evenings per week out with friends. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity; University of Bergen, Data Management Centre. Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study (2009/10). Available at: hbsc.org (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

256 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

per cent.²⁵⁷ Over the same period, the proportion who only met friends outside school less than once a week more than quadrupled, from 4 per cent to 17 per cent.²⁵⁸ In Ofcom's 2025/26 survey, fewer than three in ten (27 per cent) of secondary school aged-children named seeing friends in person as one of their three favourite ways to spend free time out of a list of 16 activities.²⁵⁹

Social isolation limits opportunities to be active: four in five 15-year-olds agree that spending time with their friends outside of the home usually involves some physical activity, such as walking, playing or doing sport.²⁶⁰ CSJ analysis of Understanding Society data shows that the cohort of young people with overlapping physical inactivity and social isolation is growing rapidly. In 2023/24, 4.4 per cent of 10–15 year-olds were both very physically inactive and had low levels of face-to-face contact with friends, which is an increase from 2.9 per cent in 2021/22.²⁶¹

School absence and the 'bedroom generation'

At the most extreme end of this overlapping sedentary and socially isolated cohort are the 'ghost children' who have disappeared from school: a growing number of children are spending a large proportion of their week at home due to school absence. In 2024/25, 129,873 secondary school pupils in England missed at least half of school (3.88 per cent), which is more than triple the number of severely absent pupils pre-pandemic in 2018/19 (39,823).²⁶² These young people are isolated from the active, social routines provided by the school day.

The impact of school absence on children's physical health was recently spotlighted by the BBC, who reported that there is emerging evidence that school absence can cause obesity.²⁶³ A 2017 meta-analysis of studies in seven countries found that obese children were 54 per cent more likely to be absent from school than peers of a 'normal' weight.²⁶⁴ Although the relationship between obesity and school absence is likely caused in both directions, regular school absence removes the everyday opportunities for movement and physical activity that school life provides. The routines of leaving the house, travelling to school, walking between lessons, spending time with peers at breaktimes and PE lessons collectively make a meaningful contribution to a young person's physical activity levels.

While nearly half of young people spend most of their spare time in their bedroom,²⁶⁵ the small but growing minority of young people who are severely absent from school may spend their entire week confined to the house. As Professor Simon Kenny, NHS England's national clinical director for children and young people puts it (quoted by the BBC): 'I hadn't quite clocked how absent these children are not

257 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

258 Baines, E. and Blatchford, P., 2019. *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education. Available at: [nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%2042402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf) (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

259 Ofcom, 2026. *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. Figures from the accompanying data tables. Data tables available at: ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/our-research/statistical-release-calendar-2026 (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

260 79 per cent agree that 'Spending time with my friends outside the home usually involves some physical activity, such as walking, playing or doing sport'. CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

261 CSJ analysis: 4.4% of 10-15-year-olds were physically active less often than once a week/never/hardly ever, and also met with friends less often or never. *Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study, Wave 13 2021/2022 and Wave 14 2023/24*. Available at: understandingsociety.ac.uk (Accessed: 25 August 2026).

262 Department for Education, *Pupil absence in Schools in England: Absence for persistent and severe absentees*. Data table available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2024-25?subjectId=4c3daeba-10a4-463e-b269-08de89b38603 (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

263 BBC, 3 September 2026. *The overlooked factor driving the childhood obesity crisis*. Available at: bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70de1ny92wo (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

264 An, R., Yan, H. et al., 2017. Childhood obesity and school absenteeism: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Available at: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12599 (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

265 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/On-Side-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

just from school but from life. You don't see them in the street or youth clubs or sports centres. They are outside of society.'²⁶⁶

3.2 What is driving the new pattern of teenage life?

Despite evidence that young people are choosing to spend large amounts of time sedentary and at home, CSJ polling indicates that half of 15-year-olds spend more time in their bedroom than they would like to, and three quarters want to spend more time doing activities outside of their home.²⁶⁷ This section examines the reasons driving the emergence of 'the bedroom generation'.

3.2.1 The disappearance of teenage spaces

The lifestyle of the 'bedroom generation' reflects the erosion of the places and spaces that once drew young people out of the house and into their local communities. Thirty per cent of 15-year-olds say that it is difficult to spend more time out with friends because there is nowhere nearby they want to go.²⁶⁸

The 1975 White Paper on Sport and Recreation defined facilities for sport and recreation as 'part of the general fabric of the social services', motivated by underlying social policy concerns.²⁶⁹ Sport England data from 2024/25 shows a strong relationship between young people's physical activity levels and access to sport facilities and outdoor space, and while this does not prove that access itself causes higher activity levels, the association is striking. Just 37.8 per cent of secondary school pupils who report having no access to a local park or field are sufficiently active, compared with 53.5 per cent of those who do have access. The gap is wider for outdoor sports facilities, as 59.5 per cent of pupils with access meet recommended activity levels, compared with 39.0 per cent of those without.²⁷⁰

Parks are an important part of the social infrastructure that supports adolescent friendship, independence and informal physical activity. They were the most cited location for 'hanging out with friends' among the young people we spoke to, yet there are indications that these spaces may be in decline. The Centre for Young Lives' 'Raising the Nation' Play Commission raised concern that at least 429 playgrounds closed across England between 2012–2022, and that half of the population has noted that the quality of their local park or play area has declined.²⁷¹ The Guardian conducted analysis in 2023 indicating that annual park budgets in England fell by more than £350 million in real terms between 2011 and 2023, with some councils cutting their park budget by more than 80 per cent.²⁷² Pupils in our focus groups said they wished the government would create more spaces for young people to play, with one Year 7 girl commenting that 'there's barely any places to go and play out anymore'.

Even where facilities are available, they are not appealing to all young people. 'Make Space for Girls' conducted an audit which found that where councils do provide park facilities for teenagers, 90 per cent

266 BBC, 3 September 2026. *The overlooked factor driving the childhood obesity crisis*. Available at: bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70de1ny92wo (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

267 49 per cent agree they spend more time in their bedroom than they would like. 74 per cent want to 'spend more time doing activities outside my home.' CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

268 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

269 Department of the Environment, Sport and Recreation, 1975. *A Wider Social Role for Sport: Who's Keeping the Score?*

270 Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026). Sport England, *Active Lives Online: Children and Young People Survey*. Available at: activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData (Accessed: 29 July 2026).

271 Centre for Young Lives, 2025. *State of Play: An interim report from the Raising the Nation Play Commission*. Available at centreforyounglives.org.uk/play-commission (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

272 The Guardian, 2023. *England's playgrounds crumble as council budgets fall*. Available at: theguardian.com/environment/2023/aug/04/england-playgrounds-crumble-council-budgets-fall (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

of these facilities are Multi-Use Games Areas, BMX tracks or skateparks, yet boys make up 88 per cent of the young people using them.²⁷³ Girls in our focus groups reported feeling unsafe in local parks, which reflects evidence provided by 'Make Space for Girls' to the 2023–24 inquiry into Urban Green Spaces on the striking mismatch between the perceptions of park professionals and teenage girls: while 89 per cent of park professionals in West Yorkshire considered local parks to be safe, only 22 per cent of teenage girls agreed.²⁷⁴ More generally, one in five 15-year-olds said that not feeling safe makes it difficult for them to spend more time out with friends, and girls were more likely to report this than boys (23 per cent of girls compared to 19 per cent of boys).²⁷⁵

The 'Raising the Nation' Play Commission described the 'stigmatisation of adolescent play' as a recurring theme of their inquiry, with teenagers getting 'bad press' for simply hanging out in public places.²⁷⁶ As one youth worker we spoke to put it,

'There's a perception that young people don't want to be active. But where are teenagers allowed to exist anymore without being seen as a problem? We need a societal shift in the negative connotations around young people....We need to make them feel more welcome in their communities.'

Youth worker

A secondary school boy in a different region said,

'Even in parks, we feel like we are being judged by adults and are automatically being treated as a problem.'

Boy, Year 11

Public attitudes towards teenagers in public spaces are shaped by a range of factors, including reasonable concerns about worsening anti-social behaviour on high streets.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the experiences shared in our focus groups suggest that many young people who simply want to spend time with friends feel there are few affordable and welcoming places where they can do so.

OnSide's YouGov polling found that among the young people who spend most of their free time on their phone, nearly one in five (18 per cent) say this is 'because they have nothing else to do'.²⁷⁸ While the government has announced action to reduce access to social media for under-16s, more attention should be given to ensuring young people have places to go and meaningful alternative things to do. Cost was the biggest reason that 15-year-olds reported as a barrier to spending more time out with friends (cited by

273 ParkWatch, 2023. *ParkWatch Report: September 2023* (Make Space for Girls and Sweaty Betty Foundation). Available at: cdn.prod.website-files.com/63989e164f27a3461de801f1/650959220c2ba45328a16390_MSFG_PW_Report_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

274 Make Spaces for Girls, 2024. *Written evidence submitted to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee: Call for Evidence on Urban Green Spaces*. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/125755/html (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

275 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

276 Centre for Young Lives, 2025. *Everything to play for – raising the nation play commission*. Available at: centreforyounglives.org.uk/play-commission (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

277 CSJ, 2026. *Hijacked High Streets: A plan to repair Britain's broken high streets*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/hijacked-high-streets (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

278 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/OnSide-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

51 per cent),²⁷⁹ and the young people in our focus groups described a lack of age-appropriate, affordable places for them to spend time. One girl said,

‘There’s not really much to do as a teenager, because everything is designed for kids or for adults, so you need social media and YouTube to fill time’.

Girl, Year 8

Another girl told us,

‘Things are so expensive so even when you go out to meet friends, you have to pay for everything, like bowling, food, even going to the toilet. It’s cheaper to talk to friends over apps instead. People won’t put on events for teenagers as they think they are bad and violent.’

Girl, Year 9

As opportunities to socialise in public ‘third spaces’ have become more limited, youth centres remain one of the few places designed specifically with young people in mind, and they often give opportunities to try physical activity and sport. OnSide Youth Zones, for example, give young people ‘somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to’ outside of the school day, generating a £13 social return on investment for every £1 invested into YouthZones.²⁸⁰

However, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport states that between 2010 and 2023, more than 1000 youth centres shut and 4500 youth worker roles disappeared, while local authority spending on youth services fell by 73 per cent.²⁸¹ As places designed for young people to spend their evenings and school holidays socialising and participating in activities have declined, many have retreated instead into more sedentary and isolated forms of leisure.

Reforms that provide better, safer places for teenagers and young people to ‘hang out’ with friends and participate in informal physical activity are vital to make socialising in the ‘real world’ more appealing to ‘the ‘bedroom generation’.

3.2.2 A decline in teenage independence

The social, active world of teenagers is also shaped by changing attitudes of parents. Compared with previous generations, many secondary school-aged children experience restricted independent mobility and fewer opportunities to spend time in public places away from adult supervision, which may reduce opportunities for physical activity.

279 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

280 Onside. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/onside-social-value (Accessed: 15 September 2026).

281 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025. *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy (Accessed: 19 August 2026).

Today's teenagers have less freedom to move around independently than previous generations. In 1990, four in five (80 per cent) secondary-age children were allowed to travel alone to places (other than school) within walking distance, compared with just half (50 per cent) in 2010.²⁸² The 2025 'Children's Play and Independent Mobility' study found that children are now allowed out alone at an average age of 10.8, almost two years later than their parents were (8.9 years), and that girls enjoy this independence even later on average, at a mean age of 11.2.²⁸³ The study argues that delaying independent mobility until the transition to secondary school removes the chance for children to gradually build up confidence and skills to navigate their local area safely. Nearly one in five (18 per cent) of 15-year-olds polled by the CSJ report that it is difficult for them to spend more time out with friends because their parents or carers do not usually allow them.²⁸⁴

Reduced independent mobility means that opportunities for incidental or light physical activity such as active travel are lost, contributing to the sedentary lifestyle patterns lived by the 'bedroom generation'. Among 11 to 16-year-olds, the share of school journeys made by car increased from 26 per cent in 2019 to 30 per cent in 2024, while walking fell from 39 to 37 per cent and cycling from 3 to 2 per cent.²⁸⁵ Some of the growth in car travel is explained by a withdrawal of bus services rather than a change in parental attitudes, but the effect is that young people are making fewer active, independent journeys.

This broader decline in adolescent independence appears to persist into late adolescence and early adulthood. One indicator of this trend is the fall in driving licence ownership among young people: the CSJ's *Rewiring Education: a path from school to work* report found that the proportion of 17-to-20-year-olds holding a full driving licence in England fell from 48 per cent in 1994 to just 29 per cent in 2024.²⁸⁶ Today's young people are travelling independently less often and at a later age.

The decline in teenage independence is partly explained by their parents' attitudes. A 2025 OECD report described the international decline of children's independent mobility, such as walking or cycling to school alone, as a 'particularly concerning' example of parental risk-aversion.²⁸⁷ The 2025 'Children's Play and Independent Mobility' study found that parental attitudes predict outcomes; when parents had higher tolerance of risk scores this was linked to their children having earlier independent mobility.²⁸⁸

Parents' reluctance to grant independence to their adolescent children may be related to safety. One youth charity we spoke to said that local knife crime has stopped parents from letting their children spend time with friends in public places. A year 11 boy we spoke to in another area said that some parents of teenagers in his year-group would discourage their children from attending after school clubs to ensure they get home before dark. Teaching staff in another secondary school said that the majority of their pupils would not know how to get to school on their own because parents were reluctant to let them spend time unsupervised. They linked this to parents being anxious themselves about the outside world, often due to social-media driven fear and 24/7 news cycles, leading them to keep their children indoors.

282 Policy Studies Institute, 2015. *Children's Independent Mobility: an international comparison and recommendations for action*. Available at: nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/7350_PSI_Report_CIM_final.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

283 British Children's Play Survey, 2026. *Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2025: Results from the British Children's Play Survey*. Available at: osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/36ptm_v2 (Accessed: 19 August 2026).

284 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

285 Department for Transport, 2024. *NTS 2024: Travel to and from school*. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/national-travel-survey-2024/nts-2024-travel-to-and-from-school (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

286 Centre for Social Justice, 2026. *Rewiring Education: A path from school to work*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/rewiring-education-from-school-to-work?_thumbnail_id=30995 (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

287 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

288 British Children's Play Survey, 2026. *Children's Play and Independent Mobility in 2025: Results from the British Children's Play Survey*. Available at: osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/36ptm_v2 (Accessed: 19 August 2026).

‘Parents are very anxious in letting their children out... they mean well, they want to protect them, but then that means they’re not allowed out, they are literally shipped to school and shipped home again... I think some of our parents potentially don’t work, so will sit at home on social media and see the bad stuff happening...’

Secondary school teacher

The near-universal ownership of smartphones by adolescents and their parents may reinforce the decline in teenage independence as they enable constant communication and location tracking, reducing the necessity and expectation that young people navigate the world independently. A 2026 industry research poll of UK parents found that almost half (47 per cent) of parents planning to buy their child a smartphone cited being able to track their child’s location as a reason.²⁸⁹ A teenager who can be tracked and contacted by parents at any moment has less need to develop the confidence to be outside, alone and unsupervised, which is what is needed to live an active, social life away from screens.

If adolescents are spending less time travelling independently, meeting friends locally and exploring their communities, they are missing out on many of the everyday opportunities for movement and social connection that previous generations enjoyed.

3.2.3 Missing pathways into community sport

The decline in teenage independence helps to explain why many young people are spending more time at home. But even for those who are willing to get out and about, many lack a clear pathway into regular physical activity outside school. CSJ polling indicates that seven in ten (71 per cent) 15-year-olds would do more sport or physical activity if there were enjoyable opportunities nearby.²⁹⁰ The retreat of the ‘bedroom generation’ indoors is partly a consequence of a lack of accessible, affordable routes into structured activities in the community that provide a reason to leave the house on a regular basis.

The cost of joining a sport club is a barrier for many young people taking part in physical activity outside of school. The costs include entry and membership fees, as well as travel and the necessary kit and equipment such as rackets or bats. Over half (52 per cent) of parents responding to the Youth Sport Trust’s annual parent survey agree that cost of living increases have had a negative impact on the number of opportunities their children have to be physically active and take part in sport, and a quarter (26 per cent) of young people surveyed said they would be more active if their family had more money to afford activities out of school.²⁹¹ StreetGames’ analysis of family spending in the UK shows a stark difference in how much households spend per week on sporting activities: while families in the lowest income decile spend £1.40 a week, households in the highest decile spend £18.70.²⁹² Financial barriers risk locking the most vulnerable children out of these opportunities, as NHS England research found that more than one in four children aged 8 to 16 with a probable mental disorder have a parent who cannot afford for them to do activities outside school, compared with just one in ten children who are unlikely to have a mental disorder.²⁹³

289 Bryter, 15 March 2026. *Smartphones by Default: The phone UK children get, whatever their age*. Available at: bryter-global.com/blog/uk-smartphones-children (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

290 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

291 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/ysT_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

292 StreetGames, 2024. *Family spending on sport: data from ONS (2023-24)*. Available at: streetgames.org/research/family-spending-on-sport-data-from-ons-2023-24 (Accessed: 19 August 2026).

293 NHS England, 2023. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England*. Available at: digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up#data-sets (Accessed: 20 August 2026).

Our meetings with some of the small charities offering community sport to young people highlighted the recurring problem that young people do not always know what opportunities are available to them locally. Many of these charities had scalable delivery models which could be rolled out to more adolescents if there was demand. Participation in community sport should be encouraged as much as possible, as a complement to school sport. The teachers we spoke to explained how young people are much more engaged with school sport when they are participating in sport clubs outside of school, as the two hours of timetabled PE per week is not always enough to keep their interest going. Sport clubs outside of school can also act as a ramp into sport and physical activity for those children who dislike PE or who have become locked into the idea that they ‘can’t do sports’. Outside of the social pressures of the school environment, children struggling with the ‘fear of failure’ explored in Chapter 2 can have a chance to try out physical activity in a different environment.

Sport and physical activity clubs and opportunities outside of school can help young people build healthy habits that spill into the rest of the week. Junior Parkrun, which puts on a weekly, free community run open to 4 to 14-year-olds, conducted a survey in 2026 of their participants which found that 88 per cent of the least active young people (who reported exercising once a week or less) became more active after joining, and that more parents and carers in areas of deprivation saw a positive difference in their child’s activity levels (73 per cent versus 66 per cent).²⁹⁴

Community sport clubs and activities provide a reason for young people to leave their bedroom and an opportunity to build a social life, and the barriers that stop more teenagers from accessing them should be addressed as far as possible. The wider the range of entry points available to sport and physical activity, the more likely it is that teenagers with different interests and abilities will find a form of exercise that they enjoy.

3.2.4 Screens fill the vacuum

While adolescent face-to-face socialising and independence have declined and community activities remain inaccessible, screens have filled the vacuum left in many teenagers’ lives. Time on screens has become the default way young people choose to relax, socialise and overcome boredom. The government’s planned restrictions on social media use for under-16s²⁹⁵ therefore present an important opportunity: if accompanied by an expansion of real-world alternatives such as sport, youth provision and community activities, they could help shift the balance of teenage life away from the bedroom and back towards more active, social and connected lifestyles.

YouGov polling commissioned by OnSide in 2025 found that 76 per cent of 11 to 18-year-olds in England say a screen-based activity takes up most of their spare time, and smartphone use is the most time-consuming activity chosen by young people, driven by wanting entertainment, habit, boredom and fear of missing out.²⁹⁶ Ofcom data suggests that 15 to 17-year-olds spend an average of 6 hours 20 minutes per day online (on smartphones, tablets and computers), including 1 hour 46 minutes on YouTube and 50 minutes of time on TikTok.²⁹⁷ This compares to the average of 4 hours 19 minutes spent by 13–14-year-olds and 2 hours 53 minutes spent online by 8–9-year-olds. The heaviest users aged 13 to 14 spend close

294 Junior Parkrun. *More than a 2k: How junior parkrun boosts children’s wellbeing*. Available at: blog.parkrun.com/uk/2026/08/03/more-than-a-2k-how-junior-parkrun-boosts-childrens-wellbeing (Accessed: 17 August 2026).

295 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2026. *Fact sheet: New rules to protect children online*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/fact-sheet-new-rules-to-protect-children-online/fact-sheet-new-rules-to-protect-children-online (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

296 OnSide, 2025. *Generation Isolation 2025: Social lives, trust and connection in an AI age*. Available at: onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2025/11/On-Side-Generation-Isolation-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

297 Ofcom, 2025. *Online Nation Report 2025*. Available at: ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2025/online-nations-report-2025.pdf?v=409837 (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

to 7 hours a day online.²⁹⁸ One youth worker we spoke to who works with vulnerable young people reported even higher levels of use, estimating average screen time in their groups at around ten hours per day. The screen-based activities of gaming and watching TV or films are more popular ways for secondary school-aged young people to spend their free time than playing or hanging out with friends in person.²⁹⁹

The ability to connect with others through digital technology has undoubtedly brought some benefits for young people, particularly in helping those who might otherwise be entirely socially isolated to find like-minded friends.³⁰⁰ However, the evidence that today's young people are lonelier than previous generations³⁰¹ suggests that digital connection is not an adequate substitute for face-to-face relationships and participation in shared, in-person social activities. Research directly comparing the two forms of interaction supports this distinction: a study of 1,705 adolescents found that young people experienced more positive emotions, fewer negative emotions and less loneliness when interacting face-to-face than when interacting online.³⁰² According to a Youth Sport Trust survey, the vast majority (84 per cent) of parents are concerned that young people are spending too much time online and not enough time with each other in person.³⁰³

As more of young people's social lives move online, concerns have also grown about the effects on their physical activity levels. The World Health Organization has warned that technology and digital communications have increased the time children spend engaged in sedentary behaviours.³⁰⁴ A Youth Sport Trust survey of young people in 2025 found that higher rates of screen time are correlated with lower levels of physical activity (and lower levels of happiness and confidence).³⁰⁵ One study found that boys who owned games consoles are five times more likely to have high amounts of sedentary time.³⁰⁶

The sedentary time young people spend on screens is occupying time that might otherwise be spent elsewhere if better opportunities existed. Three in four 15-year-olds say they often use their phones or screens because they have nothing else to do.³⁰⁷ Young people in the focus groups we held made it clear that spending time on their phones is something they do as a 'last resort' because of boredom. There was strong feeling from a large proportion of the groups that 'there's nothing else for me to do at home'. For many young people, screen time is filling a gap rather than something they particularly enjoy: as one girl said, 'when I have something to do, I won't go on my phone'. Another girl commented,

'It feels like mum had a lot more to do when she was a teenager.'

Girl, Year 9

298 Ofcom, 2026. *Children's online experiences: Including a comparative analysis of the periods before and after the children's safety duties came into force*. Available at: ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/research-statistics-and-data/protecting-children/childrens-online-experiences-research-report.pdf (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

299 Ofcom, 2026. *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. Survey findings from the accompanying data tables. Data tables available at: ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/our-research/statistical-release-calendar-2026 (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

300 Government Office for Science, 12 June 2026. *Beyond the headlines: what research shows on children's online lives*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/beyond-the-headlines-what-research-shows-on-childrens-online-lives (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

301 IPPR, 2026. *The loneliest generation: What it is like to grow up in England today*. Available at: ippr.org/articles/the-loneliest-generation (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

302 Achterof, R. Kirtley, O.J. et al, 2022. *Adolescents' real-time social and affective experiences of online and face-to-face interactions*. Available at: sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563221004829 (Accessed: 7 September 2026).

303 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *PE and School Sport: The Annual Report 2025*. Available at: youthsporttrust.org/media/qw5i5s4h/yst_pe_school_sport_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

304 World Health Organization (2020), *WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour*. Geneva: World Health Organization (WHO Physical Activity Guidelines). Available at: iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/faa83413-d89e-4be9-bb01-b24671aef7ca/content (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

305 Youth Sport Trust, 2025. *Class of 2035 Report: 2025 Edition*. Available at youthsporttrust.org/media/q3dh3hlo/yst_class_of_2035_report_2025_final.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

306 Sandercock GR, et al 2016. 'Screentime and physical activity in youth: thief of time or a lifestyle choice?' (*Journal of Physical Activity and Health*). Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21979868 (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

307 CSJ poll conducted by Merlin Strategy between 8th–15th September 2026. An online poll surveyed n=1,554 fifteen-year-olds in England. The results were weighted by gender, region, density and ethnicity.

Our meetings with youth charities made clear that social media has taken its toll on the ‘bedroom generation’, negatively impacting their mental health. A study conducted in 2020 found that 18.7 per cent of 16–18-year-olds recruited from English secondary schools self-reported problematic smartphone use, and these young people were twice as likely to experience anxiety and almost three times as likely to experience depression.³⁰⁸ Many young people we spoke to understood how screen time is unhealthy. One sixth form girl said,

‘When I look at younger teenagers I think they are addicted to their phones. I look at younger generations, and I see that children are brought up on technology...[but] they don’t need it. They won’t have any interests when they grow up.’

Girl, Year 12

A girl in Year 8 told us,

‘Since I got my new phone I don’t want to come out my bedroom, and I’ve been more short tempered and not feeling as energetic and active as I used to be... I keep losing track of the time and getting distracted’.

Girl, Year 8

The government’s Youth Strategy warns that ‘too many young people have retreated into their bedrooms where the online world presents serious challenges to their safety and wellbeing’.³⁰⁹ By contrast, being active has proven benefits for adolescent mental health (see section 1.1.1.), and physical activity has been described as ‘one of the most powerful stimuli for recovery from phone addiction’, as it helps the part of the brain that is affected by addiction to recover.³¹⁰ Sport and physical activity have an important role to play in giving teenagers an alternative to the time spent on their phones once the social media ban for under 16s takes effect.

‘Once they are active, then they’re not playing football with their phone in their hand.... once we get them outside, they’re generally all right, but the question is: how do we actually get them outside?’

Youth sport coach

The introduction of restrictions on teenage social media use therefore creates a significant policy opportunity. If accompanied by a wider policy package to help teenagers move ‘from alone to active’, it could help shift the balance of teenage life away from sedentary, isolated time in their bedrooms and

308 Carter, B. and Payne, M. et al., 2024. *A multi-school study in England, to assess problematic smartphone usage and anxiety and depression* (Acta Paediatrica). Available at: onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apa.17317 (Accessed: 14 August 2026).

309 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025. *Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy/youth-matters-your-national-youth-strategy (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

310 The Sunday Times, 30 May 2026. *I created infinite scroll. Now I regret how it damages our brains*. Available at: thetimes.com/uk/social-media/article/infinite-scroll-creator-aza-raskin-gbjtp898 (Accessed: 13 August 2026).

towards more active, social and connected lifestyles. The report concludes below with the CSJ's policy blueprint to achieve this ambition.

3.3 From alone to active: rebuilding teenage life

Screens have filled a vacuum in many teenagers' lives. Teenagers are spending less time with friends in person, have fewer places to go, experience less independence than previous generations, and often lack clear pathways into sport and other structured activities outside school.

Many of the teenagers we spoke to view the government's planned social media ban for under 16s with scepticism. One sixth-form student articulated an uncomfortable contradiction at the heart of modern adolescence, which is that society wants teenagers to think like adults but often treats them like children:

'The government is being contradictory. They're treating [us] like children but wanting [us] to be adults... they're giving us the vote but banning us from using social media.'

Girl, Year 12

Too often, the offer society makes to young people is small and restrictive. Teenagers are being told to spend less time online when youth services have been decimated, public spaces feel less welcoming, they have lost freedoms to independently navigate their local area, and affordable places to socialise have disappeared.

If we want teenagers to spend less time on screens, we must create more attractive alternatives in the real world. This is a lesson already understood by many organisations working directly with young people: OnSide youth zones told us that their biggest competitor is not another youth service but smartphones.

The government must go further than restricting social media and take on the task of rebuilding an environment in which active, social and independent lives are the norm. Teenagers need more reasons to leave the bedroom, more opportunities to spend time with friends face-to-face, and more routes into activities, including sport, which can give belonging and purpose.

The following recommendations are a 'From alone to active' policy programme: a package of reforms designed to help young people spend less time sedentary and alone, and more time active, social and engaged in their communities. Together, they ambitiously seek to shift the balance of teenage life away from the bedroom and back into the real world.

RECOMMENDATION 10

'From Alone to Active' policy package

1. Unlock school facilities for pupils to use informally out of school hours

School playgrounds and playing fields are significant assets that are often unused out of the school day. Outdoor school facilities should be made available for use by pupils outside of the school day when they are not in use, so that, for example, a group of pupils could use a school tarmac, basketball court or playing field at the weekend, in the holidays or before/after school.

The Welsh government has successfully implemented a similar policy. Its 2025 'Opening school grounds for play' toolkit provides guidance for schools and local organisations to make facilities available for playing out of school hours.³¹¹ The toolkit provides advice about insurance and litigation, and deals with concerns about vandalism (it argues that opening school grounds to the public helps local communities feel more involved in the school, reducing this risk).

The Welsh approach shows how this policy can be low-cost, as Wales has used non-statutory guidance to encourage individual schools and local authorities to adopt the measure by utilising their existing outdoor spaces.

2. Give £100 vouchers to all year 9 pupils to join community sport clubs

To help the 'bedroom generation' spend more time participating in physical activity in their local communities, the government should pilot a scheme giving £100 vouchers³¹² to teenagers to cash in on local accredited sport club memberships.

Cost is a well-established barrier to sports club membership, and previous studies in South Wales giving pupils activity vouchers to enrol in activities have had positive results on decreasing sedentary behaviour, raising pupils' fitness levels and improving cardiovascular health.³¹³

Given that there is a drop in activity levels between Years 7–8 and 9–11,³¹⁴ Year 9 should be a pilot year for the vouchers scheme. After this pilot year, the National Audit Office should review whether the initiative delivers value for money, with the intention of expanding the scheme to years 7–11 in future years if it is found to be successful at boosting physical activity levels. Assuming 40–60 per cent of Year 9s cashed in their voucher,³¹⁵ the rough cost of this policy in the pilot year would be an estimated £25–40 million,³¹⁶ which could be sourced from 'Every Child Can' programme funds.³¹⁷

311 Play Wales, 2025. *Opening school grounds for play: A toolkit for schools and partners*. Available at: play.wales/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Opening-school-grounds-for-play.pdf (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

312 £100 would provide a meaningful contribution towards the cost of community sport. Research by the University of Bristol found that community-based active clubs cost a median £6.67 per session in 2022, meaning a £100 voucher could cover around 15 sessions. Walker, R., Salway, R., House, D. et al. *The status of active after-school clubs among primary school children in England (UK) after the COVID-19 lockdowns: implications for policy and practice*. Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12966-023-01499-x (Accessed: 21 August 2026).

313 Christian, D., Todd, C., Hill, R. et al., 2016. *Active children through incentive vouchers – evaluation (ACTIVE): a mixed-method feasibility study (BMC Public Health)*. Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-016-3381-6 (Accessed: 4 September 2026); James ML, Christian D, et al., 2020. *Active Children Through Individual Vouchers Evaluation: A Mixed-Method RCT*. Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6955646 (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

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315 In 2025, 43 per cent of secondary school pupils took part in sports and physical activities outside of school in the past term, according to Department for Education, 2025. *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: June 2025. Omnibus Surveys for 2024 to 2025; Data Tables; Pupils and Parents Data Tables; 2024-12*. Available at gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025 (Accessed: 30 July 2026).

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317 Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Education, 13 June 2026. *Every child to get access to enriching activities to build skills and confidence for life*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/every-child-to-get-access-to-enriching-activities-to-build-skills-and-confidence-for-life (Accessed: 26 August 2026).

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Building on the data collected through the National Youth Sector Census, DCMS should commit to creating a bespoke, child-friendly online directory of youth services including sport facilities and clubs, broken down by local authority.

The Big Map, which connects local sports providers with schools, is a case study of how this can be done at the school-club level.³¹⁸ A similar resource could be made available for young people to view themselves, which would include facilities and spaces they can use for self-directed physical activity (such as playgrounds, indoor sports halls, skateparks and tennis courts), as well as a list or map showing the local sport and physical activity clubs and sessions available to them.

4. Mobilise local businesses to offer youth discounts

The evidence set out earlier in this chapter suggests that feeling unwelcome in public places and cost are barriers to in-person socialising between teenagers. To encourage the 'bedroom generation' to spend time out with their friends in their local communities, the government should roll out a nationally recognised youth discount card scheme for secondary school pupils, in which businesses opt-in to give discounts on leisure activities, restaurants and cafes.

This could be modelled on the Young Scot National Entitlement Card, which is used by 700,000 young people in Scotland to get discounts from businesses offering a range of services including activities such as mini golf, bungee jumping and the zoo. Young Scot Enterprise encourages businesses to join the scheme to 'do their bit' for society and attract new customers (young people are 20 per cent more likely to think a brand is relevant to them if they can use their Young Scot card).³¹⁹

5. Install standalone basketball and netball hoops for informal play

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has already pledged £5 million for basketball facilities and access in 2026/27, which is a popular sport with young people.³²⁰ This funding should not be used solely to build full courts that require booking and formal management, but also used to install standalone basketball and netball hoops for informal, self-directed use in parks, housing estates and other public spaces. This would support informal teenage play and physical activity that does not require membership, registration or extensive equipment, creating a low-barrier route into sport for young people who are less likely to join organised activities.

Informal basketball requires minimal space, can be played alone or with friends, and does not depend on adult supervision, making it particularly well suited to spontaneous play. A single hoop can be used by large numbers of young people over many years, with minimal maintenance costs and no staffing requirement.

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320 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 17 September 2025. *NBA and UK Government announce comprehensive plan to elevate basketball in the UK*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/nba-and-uk-government-announce-comprehensive-plan-to-elevate-basketball-in-the-uk (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

Priority should be given to local authorities that have lower levels of sports facility provision.³²¹ More broadly, increasing the number of freely accessible basketball and netball hoops should be a priority within the Government's £400 million investment in grassroots sports facilities between 2025 and 2030.³²²

6. Remove 'no ball games' signs as part of routine maintenance work

The Government should work with local authorities and housing providers to remove unnecessary 'No Ball Games' signs from residential areas and public spaces as part of routine maintenance work. These signs became widespread during the 1970s and 1980s and, while often lacking legal force, continue to send a message that children's play is not welcome.

London alone has an estimated 7,000 'No Ball Games' signs and was cited as a negative example in an OECD international comparison because of the way such restrictions limit children's opportunities for active outdoor play.³²³ This is particularly concerning in light of research suggesting that only a quarter of children in the UK now play out regularly on their street, compared with almost three-quarters of their grandparents' generation.³²⁴

Removing unnecessary 'No Ball Games' signs would be a low-cost way to encourage physical activity, support children's wellbeing and signal that play is valued within communities. Local authorities should also consider replacing such signs with positive measures that encourage active play (such as basketball hoops), particularly in areas where children have limited access to recreational facilities.

7. Encourage independent, active travel to secondary school

The Department for Education should update guidance to make clear that secondary schools should encourage independent travel for the large proportion of pupils who live within walking, cycling or public transport distance of school.

As outlined in section 3.2.2, young people today enjoy less independence to navigate their local areas than previous generations, and teenagers who are driven everywhere may miss out on the daily opportunities for movement, confidence-building and social interaction that previous generations enjoyed.

Independent travel to school, whether walking, cycling or using public transport without adult supervision, is a routine way that young people can build physical activity into their week. It also helps teenagers develop confidence, independence and familiarity with their local community.

321 See for example, Office for National Statistics, 2024. *Number of sports facilities across Local Authority Districts (LAD) and Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOA) in England*. Available at: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/numberofsportsfacilitiesacrosslocalauthoritiesdistrictsladandmiddlelayersuperoutputareasmsoainenglandandwales (Accessed: 24 August 2026).

322 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 16 March 2026. *Prime Minister hosts reception to celebrate grassroots sport and announce further facilities investments*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-hosts-reception-to-celebrate-grassroots-sport-and-announce-further-facilities-investments (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

323 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

324 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

List of recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

A Prime Minister-led taskforce to deliver a young people's Physical Activity Strategy

The Government should design and deliver a multi-department, Prime Minister-led strategy for young people's physical activity that embeds physical activity within the Government's existing agendas on children's mental health, obesity and NEET prevention. Sport is a central tool for delivering the Government's own stated priorities for children and young people, and should be treated and funded accordingly.

The previous government established a National Physical Activity Taskforce in 2023 to support a joint approach, but it has since closed with no plans for re-opening.³²⁵ Only a Prime Minister-led taskforce can transcend the boundaries of Whitehall departments and bring together the charitable, private and philanthropic partners needed to deliver an ambitious plan to raise the physical activity levels of the nation.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Department for Education guidance should recommend single-sex grouping as the default model for secondary school PE

Schools should create conditions in which less confident pupils, particularly girls, feel able to participate in and succeed in school sport. For many secondary-age girls, single-sex PE appears to be a more effective setting than mixed groups to build confidence and reduce the barriers of self-consciousness and body image.

The government should make clear, through updated Department for Education guidance, that core PE in secondary schools should normally be delivered on a single-sex basis unless there is a clear educational or practical reason against this. This expectation should be accompanied by measures to address practical constraints that currently prevent some schools from doing so (please see section 2.3. for examples of these measures).

RECOMMENDATION 3

Set a minimum duration of breaktimes and lunchtimes

The Government should set a minimum duration for secondary school break and lunchtimes through statutory guidance, reversing the erosion of time for social and unstructured physical activity in the school day. Lunchtimes should be a full hour long for all secondary pupils, and breaktimes should be at least 20 minutes.

³²⁵ Written Parliamentary Question tabled by Mr Louie French MP on 10 March 2025, answered by Minister Stephanie Peacock. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-03-10/36804 (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 4

Provide more resources for informal fun and games in school playgrounds

Guidance should be updated so that schools are actively encouraged to support informal fun and games in the playground through low-cost equipment provision of basketball and netball hoops, small football goals, balls, hula hoops, table tennis tables, skipping ropes, and similar playground equipment for students to use informally.

To facilitate this, the Department for Education should provide small capital grants for basic playground equipment/markings, targeted at schools with the least existing provision.

RECOMMENDATION 5

More opportunities for informal physical activity sessions in schools

Informal, low-stakes physical activity sessions at break and lunchtimes should be considered a key part of schools' sport and physical activity offer. Modelled on the 'Let's Play' approach, these sessions should ask for minimal commitment from pupils and no change into PE kit beyond removing jewellery, and could include activities such as dodgeball, basketball/netball shooting games (rather than formal matches), frisbee, fitness sessions, skipping, table tennis and walking groups. The emphasis should be on enjoyment, social connection and movement rather than competition or performance. This would complement (not replace) more organised, traditional competitive sport in PE curriculum time and extra-curricular sport clubs.

Benchmark 5 of the Enrichment Framework, *An Accessible and Engaging Enrichment Offer*,³²⁶ already requires schools to monitor participation and design provision for pupils missing out on enrichment. From September 2026, when Ofsted begins using the Framework as a reference point for its personal development judgement, inspectors should look at whether a school successfully supports pupils who are currently inactive at school sport to participate in more physical activity at school, such as through offering these informal physical activity sessions.

RECOMMENDATION 6

2 hours of PE time a week should become mandatory

Without action to make PE time mandatory, the most disadvantaged pupils will continue to lose out on its benefits. Mandating 2 hours a week of PE time would require legislation, as the Education Act 2002 prohibits the Secretary of State for Education from prescribing the amount of time to be spent on any curriculum subject.³²⁷

Some schools will find implementation challenging, but best-practice schools already demonstrate that two hours a week is achievable, and the evidence for the benefits of physical activity is too strong to leave PE delivery to chance. Government investment in the Right to Sport would also help to expand the capacity of schools to deliver two hours a week of PE.

³²⁶ Department for Education, *Enrichment Benchmark 5: An accessible and engaging enrichment offer*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/the-enrichment-framework-for-schools-and-colleges/enrichment-benchmarks#an-accessible-and-engaging-enrichment-offer (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

³²⁷ House of Commons Library, 2026. Physical education, physical activity and sport in English schools. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06836/SN06836.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 7

The new School Sport Partnerships should prioritise smaller community sport charities

The CSJ recommends that School Sport Partnerships funding is integrated into the Right to Sport (please see section 2.3.4). However, if the government retains a separate SSP funding stream, it should prioritise small community sport charities as key local delivery partners in school PE and sport. Local partnership networks should prioritise voluntary and community sector organisations that already hold relationships with schools.

The success of the new School Sport Partnerships will ultimately depend on whether they can engage the pupils who are currently least likely to participate in sport and physical activity, including girls, disadvantaged pupils and those with low confidence. Many small community sport charities have developed expertise in working with these groups, often combining coaching with mentoring, youth work and pastoral support, helping young people overcome barriers to trying sport such as the fear of failure.

The Government should avoid creating a commissioning model that favours large organisations at the expense of local providers. As the CSJ's *Underfunded and Overlooked* report highlighted, smaller grassroots charities can be overlooked despite having strong local track records.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Right to Sport

At a time when too many young people are spending their free time sedentary and alone, access to extra-curricular sport and physical activity should be treated as a core part of secondary school education rather than an optional extra.

The Government should offer secondary schools an Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant. Schools would commit to providing a minimum of 5 hours a week of extra-curricular enrichment for every pupil, of which at least 2 hours must be sport or physical activity (in addition to 2 hours a week of timetabled PE lessons).

Universal rollout would be graduated through two tranches of 'vanguard schools', evolving into a mandatory expectation of secondary schools in the third year of the policy.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Expand social prescribing of sport and physical activity in schools

The CSJ's *Change the Prescription* report³²⁸ made the case for social prescribing, calling for a National Strategy for Social Prescribing with a dedicated branch for children and young people. Sport should be a central pillar of that strategy.

The 2024 UCL-led Wellbeing While Waiting trial found that young people awaiting CAMHS treatment who were referred to community activities (including physical activity) developed greater resilience, stronger relationships and improved behaviour while they waited for care.

School mental health teams should give young people needing mental health or wellbeing support a 'prescription' to join a sport or physical activity club, in addition to other support (where needed). This would embed sport and physical activity within school mental health intervention.

328 CSJ, 2025. *Change the Prescription: A new approach to mental health*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/change-the-prescription (Accessed: 27 August 2026).

RECOMMENDATION 10

'From Alone to Active' policy package

1. Unlock school facilities for pupils to use informally out of school hours

School playgrounds and playing fields are significant assets that are often unused out of the school day. Outdoor school facilities should be made available for use by pupils outside of the school day when they are not in use, so that, for example, a group of pupils could use a school tarmac, basketball court or playing field at the weekend, in the holidays or before/after school.

The Welsh government has successfully implemented a similar policy. Its 2025 'Opening school grounds for play' toolkit provides guidance for schools and local organisations to make facilities available for playing out of school hours.³²⁹ The toolkit provides advice about insurance and litigation, and deals with concerns about vandalism (it argues that opening school grounds to the public helps local communities feel more involved in the school, reducing this risk).

The Welsh approach shows how this policy can be low-cost, as Wales has used non-statutory guidance to encourage individual schools and local authorities to adopt the measure by utilising their existing outdoor spaces.

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Cost is a well-established barrier to sports club membership, and previous studies in South Wales giving pupils activity vouchers to enrol in activities have had positive results on decreasing sedentary behaviour, raising pupils' fitness levels and improving cardiovascular health.³³¹

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331 Christian, D., Todd, C., Hill, R. et al., 2016. *Active children through incentive vouchers – evaluation (ACTIVE): a mixed-method feasibility study (BMC Public Health)*. Available at: link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12889-016-3381-6 (Accessed: 4 September 2026); James ML, Christian D, et al., 2020. *Active Children Through Individual Vouchers Evaluation: A Mixed-Method RCT*. Available at: pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6955646 (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

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Priority should be given to local authorities that have lower levels of sports facility provision.³³⁹ More broadly, increasing the number of freely accessible basketball and netball hoops should be a priority within the Government's £400 million investment in grassroots sports facilities between 2025 and 2030.³⁴⁰

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340 Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 16 March 2026. *Prime Minister hosts reception to celebrate grassroots sport and announce further facilities investments*. Available at: gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-hosts-reception-to-celebrate-grassroots-sport-and-announce-further-facilities-investments (Accessed: 28 August 2026).

341 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

342 OECD, 2025. *How can OECD countries empower children to be more physically active? OECD Education Working Papers No. 339*. Available at: 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 (Accessed: 10 August 2026).

Appendix:

Costing the Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport

Policy cost

We recommend setting the Enrichment Guarantee and Right to Sport grant at £25,000 plus £225 per pupil in Years 7 to 11. This follows a similar model to that of the PE and Sport Premium that was received by primary schools, corresponding to the fixed cost of PE provision plus the variable cost per each child attending. £25,000 is the approximate gross cost for a 0.6 FTE coordinator, and £225 is the approximate annual cost of offering every pupil two extra-curricular sport sessions per week, one of which is charity partner-led and one of which is school-led.

The cost of giving a secondary school pupil two extra-curricular hours of sport sessions per week at school is estimated at £2.47 per pupil per hour (for charity partner delivery)³⁴³ and £3.18 per pupil per hour (for school led provision). £3.18 per hour is based on an estimate of school input costs: the average secondary school class size of 22.6,³⁴⁴ uprating the average classroom teacher cost (salary, pension, and National Insurance)³⁴⁵ we estimate that the per pupil per hour staffing cost is £2.54 per pupil-hour. Staffing is approximately 80 per cent of school costs,³⁴⁶ leaving an estimated unit cost of £3.18 per pupil per hour. Together these sum to £5.65 for two hours of provision. Over the course of the year, this comes to £220.35 per pupil, which we have set at £225. We cost the provision of two additional hours of extra-curricular sport per pupil per week, rather than the full five hours of extra-curricular enrichment, on the basis that most schools already deliver some enrichment activity.

There are 3,659,508 secondary school pupils at 3,458 secondary schools in England at an average size of 1,058 pupils. Table A below details the expected cost of the policy at £25,000+£225 per pupil funding for the first, second, and third years of the policy.

343 This is based on an inflation-adjusted estimate of the HAF programme. HM Treasury, 2026. *GDP deflators at market prices, and money GDP March 2026 (Spring Statement)*. Published 3 March 2026. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/gdp-deflators-at-market-prices-and-money-gdp-march-2026-spring-statement (Accessed: 16 September 2026).

344 Department for Education, 2026. *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*, academic year 2025/26. Published 4 June 2026, last updated 14 July 2026. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2025-26 (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

345 Department for Education, 2026. *School workforce in England*, reporting year 2025. Published 4 June 2026, last updated 17 August 2026. Available at: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england/2025 (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

346 Department for Education, 2025. *Schools' Costs 2024 to 2026*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67d974935bad4b1a7f01ed62/Schools_costs_technical_note_2024_to_2026.pdf (Accessed: 15 September 2026).

Table A – the cost of the enrichment guarantee and Right to Sport grant

Take-up	School take up	Pupils covered	Total cost
30%	1,037	1,097,852	£273.0 million
65%	2,248	2,378,680	£591.4 million
100%	3,458	3,659,508	£909.8 million

Source: CSJ analysis of Department for Education data

We estimate that in the first year of the policy, 30 per cent of secondary schools would be part of the ‘vanguard’ group. By the third year, we expect complete or near-complete rollout. For this reason, we estimate that the total cost over the first three years of provision would be £1.77 billion, at an average annual cost of £591.4 million over the three-year rollout. The annual cost at universal rollout would be £909.8 million.

The policy could be funded using three main sources: repurposing existing spend, savings outlined in the CSJ’s Change the Prescription: Update report, and Department for Education headcount reduction.

Funding the policy

Table B outlines the full costing and savings package and net fiscal impact at different take-up rates.

Table B – Savings and total cost of enrichment guarantee and Right to Sport by take-up

Cost/saving	Estimate
Repurposing existing spend	£114.7 million
DfE headcount to 2018/19 levels	£122.3 million
Reforms outlined in the CSJ’s Change the Prescription: Update report	£390.0 million
Total savings	£627.0 million
Annual cost over first three years	£591.4 million
Annual cost at full rollout	£909.8 million
Average annual net cost over first three years	-£35.6 million
Annual net cost at full rollout	£282.8 million

Repurposing existing school sport spend

With the abolition of the PE and Sport Premium and the consolidation of a number of funding pots, the primary anticipated government spend is the PE and School Sport Partnerships Network £580 million funding over three years, alongside the ‘almost £200 million’ facilities pot (which we estimate at £180 million) over three years, the one-off £150 million primary schools transition payment, and the £22.5 million Enrichment Expansion Programme. Secondary school pupils account for 44 per cent of the headcount covered by this funding, and if we assume that this ratio holds, we estimate that there is £114.7 million of existing secondary spend to repurpose and fold into the Right to Sport, as shown in Table C.

Table C – Repurposing existing Department for Education sport spend

Announced spend	Funding announced	Estimated annual funding	Estimated annual secondary school funding
PE and School Sport Partnerships	£580.0 million	£193.3 million	£85.0 million
School Sporting Facilities	£180.0 million	£60.0 million	£26.4 million
Enrichment Expansion Programme	£22.5 million	£7.5 million	£3.3 million
Total	£782.5 million	£260.8 million	£114.7 million

Source: CSJ analysis.

Note: figures are rounded.

Savings from Department for Education staffing

Real-terms staffing spending at the Department for Education, its executive agencies and its non-departmental public bodies almost tripled between 2014/15 and 2024/25, from £290.2 million to £857.8 million. Table D shows the 2018/19 to 2024/25 period. In the last decade, the agencies have grown in headcount by 128 per cent, compared to an overall FTE growth in the civil service of just 35 per cent over the same period. The government has already announced an intention to reduce the size of the civil service,³⁴⁷ and the Department for Education should ensure a greater share of its budget reaches children and young people directly. We estimate that a reduction to 2014/15 Department for Education headcount levels would save £567.6 million in real terms, however, we recommend a more moderate reduction to 2018/19 headcount levels (the last full financial year before the pandemic), which would save £122.3 million in real terms.³⁴⁸

Table D – Department for Education staffing spending, 2018/19 and 2024/25, 2026/27 prices³⁴⁹

Staff type	2018/19	2024/25	Change
Department and agencies	£472.3 million	£553.0 million	£80.6 million
NDPBs	£263.2 million	£304.8 million	£41.6 million
Total	£735.5 million	£857.8 million	£122.3 million

347 Goddard, J., 2025. *Reforming the civil service*. Available at: lordslibrary.parliament.uk/reforming-the-civil-service (Accessed: 11 September 2026).

348 Department for Education 2018/19 figures from Department for Education, 2019. *Consolidated Annual Report and Accounts 2018 to 2019*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/dfe-consolidated-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-to-2019 (Accessed: 29 May 2026). Department for Education 2024/25 figures from Department for Education, 2025. *Consolidated Annual Report and Accounts 2024 to 2025*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-education-consolidated-annual-report-and-accounts-2024-to-2025 (Accessed 29 May 2026). GDP deflator: HM Treasury, 2026. *GDP deflators at market prices, and money GDP March 2026 (Spring Statement)*. Available at: gov.uk/government/statistics/gdp-deflators-at-market-prices-and-money-gdp-march-2026-spring-statement (Accessed 29 May 2026).

349 Notes: All figures are uprated to 2026/27 prices using the HM Treasury GDP deflator (2026-27 = 100). Department and Agencies figures combine core departmental spend with agency spend; these are not reported separately in the 2018/19 accounts on a comparable basis, so the combined line is used throughout. NDPB figures cover non-departmental public bodies sponsored by DfE. Totals may differ slightly from the sum of rounded components shown. Because this comparison only captures growth between 2018/19 and 2024/25, it is likely to understate the department's true growth and, correspondingly, the potential savings available.

Savings outlined in the CSJ's *Change the Prescription: Update: Transforming support for children in the welfare and education system* report

Investing in the Right to Sport would support the Government's shift towards earlier intervention by helping to create a more inclusive mainstream school system in which every child has the opportunities and support needed to thrive.³⁵⁰ Children with SEND are less likely than their peers to access extra-curricular activities, and schools often do not have the resources to provide a high quality enrichment offer for all pupils. By channelling resources into guaranteeing that every child has access to high-quality enrichment including physical activity through the Right to Sport, the government would ensure that all children, including those with SEND, can enjoy the benefits of sport and physical activity for boosting mental and physical health, wellbeing, educational attainment and belonging at school.³⁵¹ This is consistent with the government's agenda to put inclusion at the heart of mainstream education.³⁵²

CSJ analysis finds that the Department for Education's projections imply potential annual savings to SEND spending of around £2–4 billion by 2035.³⁵³ The CSJ's *Change the Prescription: Update: Transforming support for children in the welfare and education system*³⁵⁴ report proposes reforms that could bring forward these savings, and recommends other reforms to the SEND system. Against this scale of potential savings, we propose investing £390 million of these savings in the Enrichment Guarantee, using the resources released by a more sustainable SEND system to strengthen earlier intervention, prevent needs from escalating and help more children thrive at school. Please refer to the *Change the Prescription: Update*³⁵⁵ report for more detail on these savings.

350 Department for Education, 2026. *Every child achieving and thriving*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version (Accessed: 1 September 2026).

351 Please see Chapter One, section 1.1.: The importance of physical activity.

352 Department for Education, 2026. *Every child achieving and thriving*. Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version (Accessed: 1 September 2026).

353 The Department for Education has estimated that the proportion of children with an EHCP will rise from 5.8 per cent in 2025/26 to 7.7 per cent in 2029/30 before falling to 4.7 per cent in 2034/35. CSJ analysis: the rise from 2.8 per cent of pupils in 2015/16 to 5.3 per cent of pupils in 2024/25 led to a £5.4 billion rise in annual spending by local authorities on SEND in 2026/27 prices. Correspondingly, we estimate a further £3.3 billion annual rise from 2026/27 to 2029/30, with an average rise over the three financial years from 2027/28–2029/30 of £2.2 billion per year in 26/27 prices. Department for Education (2026) *Annex – Background on projections: SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First*. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69987b40bfdab2546272c096/Background_on_projections.pdf (Accessed: 4 September 2026).

354 Centre for Social Justice, 2026. *Change the Prescription: Update: Transforming support for children in the welfare and education system*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/CSJ-Change_the_Prescription-Update.pdf (Accessed: 3 September 2026).

355 Centre for Social Justice, 2026. *Change the Prescription: Update: Transforming support for children in the welfare and education system*. Available at: centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/CSJ-Change_the_Prescription-Update.pdf (Accessed: 3 September 2026).



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