

Increasing participation in sport and physical activity

People who do regular physical activity have a lower risk of many chronic diseases, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and some cancers. Research also shows that physical activity can boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy, as well as reducing individual risk of stress, depression, dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Despite this, less than 65% of the population meet the latest physical activity recommendations. The proportion of people participating in regular exercise also varies with socio-economic group, gender and age.

This briefing explores the contribution of sport and physical activity to individuals and communities, looks at successful examples of increasing activity and considers ways in which policymakers are trying to overcome the barriers to participation in sport and physical exercise.

1 What is the issue?

Sport has occupied a longstanding and valued position in British society, contributing to health, economic and social development and to community cohesion. Many of the games and sports played today were first introduced in Britain during the nineteenth century, including rugby union, rugby league, football, tennis and badminton. In recent years, hosting the Olympic Games, Paralympics and Commonwealth Games has provided the public in the UK with closer and more frequent exposure to elite athletes, providing role models in particular for children and young people.

However, involving people of all ages in sport and physical activity has become increasingly challenging. Although millions of people enjoy spectating, the numbers actively involved in sport or other forms of physical exercise are falling. Sedentary lifestyles and a wider range of distractions have resulted in many people becoming inactive

This has serious implications for public health, as well as wider economic and social consequences.

2 Levels of activity

Physical activity is a broad term used to describe any movement of the body that

uses energy, and can refer to anything from walking or cycling, going for a run or engaging in competitive sport. Increasing activity at any point on this spectrum is desirable, as [research shows](#) that the more active a population is, the healthier and happier it tends to be.

Current [UK guidelines](#) for aerobic activity recommend that adults aged 19 and over should spend at least 150 minutes per week in moderately intensive physical activity, in bouts of ten minutes or longer, or 75 minutes per week of vigorous physical activity, or a combination of the two.

Survey [evidence](#) from the British Heart Foundation has revealed that:

- > 67% of men in England and Scotland reported meeting recommended levels of physical activity, compared to 59% in Northern Ireland and 37% in Wales [Wales is still using pre-2011 guidelines which relate to being active 5 days a week];
- > Women were less active than men in all UK countries, with 58% reporting meeting recommended levels in Scotland, 55% in England, and 49% in Northern Ireland and 23% in Wales;
- > Physical activity declined with age for both genders;

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Estimated gains in life expectancy if people get off the couch

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- > The highest levels of physical inactivity in England are in the North West for both men (26%) and women (31%).
- > Physical activity levels also vary by household income. In England, in 2012, 76% of men in the highest income quintile reached recommended levels, compared to 55% of men in the lowest income quintile.
- > In both boys and girls in England the proportion of children aged 5 to 15 years meeting recommendations fell between 2008 and 2012. A higher decline was observed amongst boys than girls. The largest declines were at age 13 to 15 years for both genders.

The gender difference in physical activity levels has been commented on by the House of Commons Committee on Culture, Media and Sport in its [investigation into women and sport](#) in 2012. Although the reasons for participating in sport apply equally to men and women, and there were some gains in women taking part in sport and exercise between 2005 and 2014, the committee was concerned about the gap between men's and women's participation in sport.

The committee also noted that women's participation is significantly lower among the lower socio-economic groups, and that women in the most deprived areas play sport the least.

International Experience: Canada

Since 1994, [Active Healthy Kids Canada \(AHKC\)](#) has been working to increase physical activity among children and young people. In 2014 it was announced that the work of Active Healthy Kids Canada would be integrated into [ParticipAction](#) which aims to promote behaviour change in physical activity for all Canadians.

A key focus of their work is providing the evidence base for communications and advocacy work to increase support for quality, accessible and enjoyable physical activity participation experiences.

Each year, the annual [Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth](#) provides a comprehensive assessment of the current state of physical activity among Canadian children and youth. This process uses nine common indicators (Overall Physical Activity, Organised Sport Participation, Active Play, Active Transportation, Sedentary Behaviour, Family and Peers, School, Community and Built Environment, and Government Strategies and Investments), and a standardised grading framework.

For the first time in 2015, the report card also looked at [active outdoor play](#) with recommendations for increasing children's opportunities for self-directed play outdoors.

The 2015 report highlighted recent research that structural constraints (e.g. time, injuries, cost, inadequate facilities) are not the leading reasons why children and youth drop out of sport. Rather, dropout is largely due to a lack of enjoyment, low perceived competence and an increase in family and intrapersonal pressure/stress.

In terms of international comparisons, 15 countries released a report card in 2014 based on the same methodology and indicators.

John Reilly, professor of physical activity and public health science at Strathclyde University, who was involved in the research in Scotland, said:

"The global matrix reveals an interesting relationship between lower physical activity and higher sedentary behaviour in countries with better infrastructure, and we found this to be the case in Scotland. What comes out very strongly is there is great variation around the globe and no single country has found a magic formula to improve children's health."

HOW CANADA STACKS UP

In 2014, 15 countries released a Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth based on the Active Healthy Kids Canada Model. Here are the results:



OVERALL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY	ORGANIZED SPORT PARTICIPATION	ACTIVE PLAY	ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION	SEDENTARY BEHAVIOURS	FAMILY & PEERS	SCHOOL	COMMUNITY & THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT	GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES & INVESTMENTS
Monaco B	New Zealand B	New Zealand B	Finland B	Ghana B	Australia C	England B-	Australia B-	Colombia B
New Zealand B	Australia B-	Kenya C	Kenya B	Kenya B	Canada C	Finland B	Canada B+	Finland B
Mexico C+	Canada C+	Monaco C	Monaco B	New Zealand C	Finland C	Australia B-	England B	Scotland B
Kenya C	Finland C	Nigeria C-	Nigeria B	Finland C	Kenya C-	New Zealand B-	France B	South Africa B
Nigeria C	Ghana C	Ireland B	Mexico B-	Colombia B	New Zealand C	Canada C+	Ireland B	Australia C+
England B+	Kenya C	Scotland INC	England C	Finland C	Scotland B-	Kenya C	Scotland B	Finland C
Colombia B	South Africa C	Canada INC	South Africa C	Mexico B	Colombia INC	Monaco C	United States B-	Kenya C
Ghana B	England C-	Colombia INC	South Africa C	United States B	England INC	Ireland C-	New Zealand C	Mexico C
Ireland B	Ireland C-	England INC	New Zealand C-	Australia B-	Ghana INC	United States C-	Ghana C	Monaco C
South Africa B	United States C-	Ghana INC	Australia B	Canada F	Ireland INC	Ghana B	South Africa D	Ghana D
Australia B-	Colombia B	Ireland INC	Finland D	Nigeria F	Mexico INC	Mexico B	Mexico F	England INC
Canada B-	Mexico B	Mexico INC	Spain D	Scotland F	Monaco INC	South Africa D	Monaco F	Ireland INC
Ireland B-	Monaco F	Scotland INC	Ireland D	South Africa F	Nigeria INC	Canada F	Colombia INC	New Zealand INC
United States B-	Nigeria INC	South Africa INC	United States F	England INC	South Africa INC	Nigeria INC	Kenya INC	United States INC
Scotland F	Scotland INC	United States INC	Colombia INC	Monaco INC	United States INC		Nigeria INC	Nigeria INC

Source: Active Healthy Kids Canada (2014). Is Canada in the Running? The 2014 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Toronto: Active Healthy Kids Canada.

Addressing participation of young people is important as it can improve the likelihood of being physically active throughout the lifecycle. Research suggests that a [number of factors are associated](#) with fewer young people taking part in sport:

- > Technology (computers, gaming, social networks, smartphones, music and television) dominating young people's lives;
- > Transport (increase in private and public transport use);
- > Academic pressure (greater numbers of exams and more academic pressure influence time available for sport);
- > Safety (concerns of parents about traffic accidents, street crime and high profile cases of child abuse).

Case study: StreetGames

StreetGames delivers a number of programmes to promote physical activity to young people within disadvantaged communities.

[Let's Get Fizzical](#) is a physical activity programme for young people, delivered by StreetGames in collaboration with Birmingham City Council.

StreetGames worked with local schools to identify young people who were doing little or no regular physical activity outside of school. The schools provided time and delivery space for sessions which took part during the school day. Young people taking part in the programme were offered:

- > six one-hour physical activity sessions at school;
- > up to ten one-hour multi-sport sessions in a community setting;
- > a home-based pedometer challenge, used as a self-monitoring motivational tool and a visual reminder for young people's families about being more active.

To deliver the programme, StreetGames employed coaches with the ability to empathise with 'non-sporty' children and who used non-traditional methods to combine playing and improving skills in a fun and enjoyable way. They also provided training to coaches to help address additional staff needs.

An evaluation of the programme found that 73% of participants increased or maintained their participation levels after 6 months, and weekly recorded pedometer readings demonstrated that 69% of the young people increased their step count over the six week school programme.

3 Negative consequences

This has serious implications for public health, as well as wider economic and social consequences. Lack of physical activity is the [fourth most important risk factor](#) worldwide for chronic, non-communicable diseases, after tobacco use, raised blood pressure, and hyperglycaemia (raised blood sugar).

The issue also has economic implications. In the UK, inactivity has been estimated to cost the NHS £1.1 billion (Allender, 2007) with indirect costs to society [bringing this cost](#) to a total of £8.2 billion.

In addition, sedentary behaviour (characterised by activities involving prolonged sitting) is emerging as a potentially important risk factor for chronic disease. Those who spend more time being sedentary are more likely to be obese and to have worse physical and mental health outcomes than their peers who spend less time sitting down.

4 The benefits of physical activity

The [identified benefits](#) of taking part in sport and physical exercise include:

- > Reduction in all-cause and cardiovascular mortality, even among those with an otherwise high cardiovascular risk profile, or with established cardiovascular disease;

- > Reduction in the incidence of ischaemic heart disease and stroke;
- > Improved cognitive function in older people, with and without existing impairment;
- > Reduced anxiety;
- > Improvements in mental wellbeing.

Increases in physical activity are [also associated](#) with an improved quality of life, as well as cost savings for health and social care services.

5 What is the UK government doing?

In August 2015, the UK government launched a [public consultation](#) into sport participation. This is a recognition that the increase in participation stimulated by the London Olympics in 2012 has not been sustained.

Agencies, such as Sport England, have

been funded to [help community sports grow](#). Between 2012 and 2017, Sport England are receiving £1 billion from the government and National Lottery funding to invest in community sport and encourage participation.

The London 2012 bid was centred on an ambition to use the visibility of the Olympic and Paralympic Games to inspire more young people into sport. The [third annual report](#) on the legacy programme, published in August 2015, highlights that:

- > £165m has been invested in over 2,400 community sports facilities by Sport England since 2011;
- > £5.4m awarded to 16 physical activity projects aimed at the least active;
- > "Everybody Active, Every Day" launched, providing a national framework for physical interventions.

The Department for Education are investing more than £150m per year

Case study: The HEAT Tool

The World Health Organisation (WHO) developed the [Health Economic Assessment Tool \(HEAT\)](#), an online application that can be used to make an economic assessment of the health benefits of walking or cycling. HEAT estimates the value of reduced mortality that results from specified amounts of walking or cycling, and can value projected increases in cycling or walking that result from new programmes or infrastructure, or to evaluate measured changes.

The Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) used HEAT to [estimate the value](#) of existing levels of cycling, using data on travel to work or study from Scotland's 2001 Census and annual cordon counts of cyclists. Results show the estimated mean annual benefit of cycling levels in the city was just over £3 million in 2009, increasing to over £4 million by 2012.

direct to Primary Schools in the form of the Primary PE and Sport Premium fund. Funded between 2013 and 2016, the premium is designed to help primary schools improve the quality of the PE and sport activities they offer their pupils.

A series of [case studies](#) from the DfE and DCMS in 2014 explored progress in encouraging more young people to play sport. A high profile media campaign developed by Sport England, [This Girl Can](#), was launched in 2015 to encourage more women to be physically active, regardless of shape or ability.

In 2012, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [published guidance](#) setting out how local authorities can encourage people to be physically active. More recently, in March 2015 they published a [quality standard](#) on increasing physical activity in people of all ages who are in contact with the NHS, including staff, patients and carers. Related guidance from November 2014 looks at exercise referral schemes to promote physical activity for people aged 19 and older; and in March 2015 they published guidance on behaviours that may help people maintain a healthy weight or prevent excess weight gain.

A new programme, Get Set to Go, was announced in June 2015 to support people with mental health problems to get active. Delivered by MIND and backed by Sport England and the National Lottery, the programme will support 75,000 people

with mental health problems to join mainstream sports clubs, go to the gym or take up a new sport. Those taking part get one-to-one support from people who understand the challenges a mental health problem can present to getting active.

6 What is the Scottish Government doing?

The Scottish Government has made physical activity a national indicator to reflect its importance.

An annual investment of £3 million is aimed at increasing physical activity for all, including those furthest away from meeting the physical activity guidelines - teenage girls and older adults. This is in addition to national programmes such as Active Schools, which has provided over five million opportunities for young people to be physically active. An [evaluation](#) of Active Schools in 2014 suggested that providing girls-only activities had been helpful in increasing their participation.

Scotland's sport strategy for children and young people, Giving Children and Young People a Sporting Chance, was [published](#) in June 2014.

While the Scottish Government has the responsibility for national sports policy issues, it is the responsibility of sportscotland, the national agency for sport in Scotland, and in many cases the national sports governing bodies and local

Case study: Sainsbury's School Games

The Sainsbury's School Games aim to promote competitive sport among school children. The Games are made up of three levels of activity: competition in schools, between schools, and at a county/area level.

Over 19,000 schools have registered, with over 120 festivals planned for the 2015/16 academic year. These provide more than 150,000 young people with a competitive experience, as well as offering 11,000 young volunteers the opportunity to be involved in supporting these events.

Over £150m of Lottery and Government funding is being invested to support the School Games.

The School Games website provides a number of [case studies](#) highlighting the ways in which the games have benefited schools and their pupils, and methods used to engage pupils in sport.

authorities to organise the delivery of these policies. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there is adequate provision of staff and facilities for their residents that offer a range of sporting, cultural, recreational and social activities.

The Scottish Government also provides funding to support community-led regeneration and community empowerment that can be used by local authorities to provide sporting and cultural opportunities. These funds include the [Cycle Friendly and Sustainable Communities Fund](#) and the [Sport Facilities Fund](#) for capital expenditure.

A key part of Glasgow's preparations to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games was a [legacy programme](#) aiming to increase levels of physical inactivity in Scotland. An [evaluation](#) of the Commonwealth Games legacy and an [updated literature review](#) on the legacy of major sporting events, both published in July 2015, found that while major sporting events commonly leave an infrastructure legacy, and there can be a boost to host nation sporting performance, the evidence for a relationship between hosting major sporting events and improving population sports participation and physical activity is mixed and inconclusive.

International Experience: Finland

The success of a health promotion project in a region of eastern Finland has attracted international interest. In the 1970s, Finnish men had the world's highest rate of heart disease mortality, and the region of North Karelia's rate was 40 per cent worse: one-tenth of North Karelian men and women between the ages of 45 and 59 were on disability leave due to heart disease. By the early 2000s, the number of deaths of working-age men in the region had fallen by 82%. This dramatic improvement is the result of the [North Karelia Project](#), which set out to change the lifestyle of the whole community.

To achieve this, the North Karelia Project team worked with the local community to develop healthy eating options, providing counselling on smoking cessation and tackling sedentary lifestyles. The project team worked with local governments to make it easier for Finns to be active in any weather, increasing the number of miles of bike paths and creating well-lit, safe cross-country ski parks.

As the mortality rate in North Karelia began to fall, the message spread to the rest of the country. In 1980, Finland passed the Sports Act, obligating central and local governments to provide facilities for their citizens to get exercise—tracks, pools, ice rinks and sports halls.

The success of the North Karelia project can be seen not only in the increase in activity; the reduced numbers of heart attacks and strokes is [estimated to have saved](#) Finland around \$5.5 million, and the reduction in disability pensions saved another \$10.9 million.

7 What is the Welsh Government doing?

The Welsh Government is committed to widening participation in sport and through Sport Wales, aims to widen participation in sport and programmes targeted at increasing physical activity.

Sport Wales has a number of grants schemes to increase levels of physical activity and sport in Welsh communities. The Free Swimming pilot initiative is the first of its kind in Europe - £3.5m per year has been invested so that local authorities in Wales can offer free swimming for children and young people aged 16 and under during all school holidays and at the weekend, and for older people aged 60 and over outside school holidays.

The 5x60 programme aims to increase the number of secondary age pupils taking part in sport or physical activity for 60 minutes, at least 5 times a week. The £4.9m Welsh Government funded programme is managed by local authority 5x60 officers, based in designated schools. They work with local stakeholders to create opportunities that meet the needs and choices of the pupils.

The physical activity plan '[Creating an Active Wales](#)' was published in 2010. In 2013, an independent Task Force report [Physical literacy: an all-Wales approach to increasing levels of physical activity](#) for children and young people was published. The Welsh Government's £5m [sports facilities capital loan scheme](#) was established in 2015 to help local authorities to support the development and provision of local sport and recreation facilities.

Case study: Active Travel

In 2013, Public Health England, in conjunction with the Local Government Association, produced a [report](#) for local authorities on how to create environments where people are more likely to walk or cycle for short journeys.

It summarised the importance of action on obesity and a specific focus on active travel, and outlined the regulatory and policy approaches that can be taken.

The report also included case studies highlighting local walking and cycling strategies.

8 What is the Northern Ireland Executive doing?

Sport NI works in partnership with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to deliver on [Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009-2019](#). This sets out a shared vision of "a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport", as well as the key strategic priorities for sport and physical recreation, and informs the direction of future investment – underpinning three areas: participation, performance and places.

In May 2015, Sport NI announced plans to invest £17.5m of lottery funding in sports facilities projects over the next five years, which will result in significant investment in sporting and leisure infrastructure and will help to increase participation in sport and physical activity across the communities.

A series of policy briefings for the Northern Ireland Assembly published as part of a Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series in 2014 and 2015 have looked at the [challenge of increasing female participation](#) in physical activity and sport in Northern Ireland, sport as an [intervention impacting on mental health](#), and [addressing inequalities](#) in sports and physical activity participation.

9 Conclusion

Prompted by concerns about insufficient physical activity, governments at national, regional and local levels have introduced policies, guidance and funded initiatives to improve levels of participation.

In spite of this, long-term challenges remain and it is widely agreed that individuals' efforts to improve their levels of activity require long-term support from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

In its evidence to a 2013 enquiry by the Welsh Assembly's Communities, Equalities and Local Government Committee, Public Health Wales observed:

"Participation levels in sport have been static for a decade or more despite a range of promotions and incentives provided by Sport Wales. However, this is no different to the equally static trend in physical activity in the population generally which has also not

International Experience: New Zealand

One of the countries which performed well in the international report cards was New Zealand, which recorded an overall B grade. Some observers have attributed New Zealand's relative success in physical activity among young people to the "active play" philosophy. After banning [safety-based playground rules](#), the country found that children were more active, there was less bullying and vandalism, and pupils had higher levels of concentration in the classroom.

The New Zealand system of [green prescriptions](#) has also been highlighted as good practice and an inexpensive way of increasing activity. [Research](#) has found that a Green Prescription can improve a patient's quality of life over 12 months, with no evidence of adverse effects; and in primary care settings, 'community walking, exercise and nutrition, and brief advice with exercise on prescription (Green Prescription) were the most cost-effective with respect to cost-utility.'

shifted for many years."

The reasons for this are complex, and suggest that interventions need to be directed not only at the whole population but recognise the different motivation of subgroups, by developing a range of complementary approaches.

Even when a country has well-developed policies, places and programme, this may not translate into sufficient levels of physical activity.

The authors of the 2014 international Report Card comparison made some observations which may strike a chord in other developed societies.

"Our country values efficiency – doing more in less time – which may be at direct odds with promoting children's health ... Parents have been conditioned to look to structured activities and schools to get their kids moving. However, only 37% of parents often play actively with their children."

What is clear is that there are no quick fixes when it comes to addressing the challenges of improving levels of physical activity in a population.

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