

PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS A CORE SUBJECT IN SCHOOLS THE WESTMINSTER DEBATE

The House of Lords National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee's report *A National Plan for Sport, Health and Wellbeing*, released in December 2021 and summarised in the spring 2022 edition of *Physical Education Matters*, proposed that physical education (PE) become a 'core subject' in schools in England. As a follow up to that proposal, and in his role as Chair of the Association for Physical Education (afPE) Taskforce on PE, Edward Timpson MP, led a debate in Westminster Hall on 23rd March 2022 on physical education as a core subject in schools. This article shares a synopsis of that debate, using Hansard text¹.

Introduction

Edward Timpson (*Eddisbury*) (Con)

Last year, I chaired the PE taskforce – I thank Sue Wilkinson, the chief executive of afPE and her team for their support – and it laid bare that this is... a time when children's physical fitness and their mental health and wellbeing are all heading in the wrong direction, unfortunately. A Lords Select Committee report, *A national plan for sport, health and wellbeing*, cited data from the Active Lives annual survey showing that of 2.3 million children in England... almost a third... are doing less than 30 minutes of activity a day. It also found that girls and children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds are the most likely to have lower activity levels.

We have also seen a growing trend of obese children in both Reception and Year 6, leading to one in five secondary school pupils falling into that category. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the situation has gotten worse since the pandemic, with a surge in numbers of children being referred to mental health services, including a rise of 77 per cent in severe cases. At the same time, there is evidence of PE being side-lined by some schools as a 'nice to have', rather than a 'must do', reducing PE time in order to focus on catch-up in other areas, which is understandable but to the detriment of PE.

It is worth remembering that even before Covid, the situation was deteriorating. For example, as part of the research review series, Ofsted published its PE paper only last week, revealing reductions in the time allocated to PE of up to 20 per cent since 2013 at Key Stage 3 and 38 per cent at Key Stage 4. If we add increasingly sedentary lifestyles, gaming, phone addiction and sleep deprivation, we see that those are all turning children and

young people off physical movement, with dire consequences for their own health and that of the nation. If we are serious about taking on the ever-growing pressures on the NHS, instilling a habit of physical activity for life would be a good way to start alleviating that pressure. The Lords Committee also said in its report that schools are the place where, "Attitudes towards sport and physical activity...track into adulthood."

The even better news is that we can actually do something about it; that is where physical education comes in. I am not, I hope, naive enough to think that making PE a core subject will, on its own, achieve that laudable objective. As a father of four, I know I have a responsibility to lead by example and encourage my own children to find ways that they can enjoy keeping fit and active into adult life.

Having had the privilege of being Children's Minister, rarely have I come across a specific policy, with a modest price tag, that has a very real prospect of changing the trajectory of so many young people towards a healthier and more fulfilling life. The evidence is staring us in the face. It is no coincidence that the very best schools, both state and independent, have for many years understood that the holistic intertwining of PE into their school offer reaps rewards in so many different ways – physically, socially, emotionally and academically too.

Highlighting social benefits and need for all children to benefit

Dr Dan Poulter (*Central Suffolk and North Ipswich*) (Con)

There is a greater social benefit to children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds who do not have the life advantages of children from affluent backgrounds, in playing sport, coming together, learning team skills and enjoying being part of a team and the social fabric of sport. That is recognised, quite rightly, in much of the state sector—in good-performing state schools—and in the private sector. What he is proposing will ensure that all children have access to the opportunity to benefit from those wider parts of education, and that will bring their lives along further.

Highlighting impact on academic achievement

Edward Timpson

One of the benefits I saw when I was responsible for school sports as Children's Minister was from programmes in the inner cities where children do not always have access to other

¹ <https://bit.ly/3LLdXNr>

facilities. The children there were gaining so many of the elements, which other children take for granted, that sport, physical activity and... good physical education can bring to their lives. It is not only about their participation in sport; it is about their life skills, confidence and sense of achievement and purpose, and where that can lead.

As an academically rigorous curriculum is not at odds with having PE at its heart, we can see it as the only subject that educates through the physical domain. The evidence that it helps enhance academic performance—not forgetting concentration and behaviour—has never been greater. In 2015, the University of Texas at Austin published a paper entitled *Active Education: Growing Evidence on Physical Activity and Academic Performance*. The paper reviewed 39 separate studies and unanimously found that, “Physical activity can have both immediate and long-term benefits on academic performance. Almost immediately after engaging in physical activity, children are better able to concentrate on classroom tasks, which can enhance learning.”

Let us take an example from England. At Sandal Castle VA Community Primary School in Wakefield, physical education is at the heart of their curriculum. It is also seen as a vital and critical priority driver for school improvement. They have two members of staff who have the afPE and Sports Leaders UK level 5 certificate in primary school physical education specialism, which is vital in raising standards in primary school physical education teaching and learning. The breadth of curriculum opportunity on offer in the extended school day has ensured that attainment in core subjects continues to be well above the national average. In 2019, 82 per cent of children achieved the national standard in reading, writing and maths, compared with the England average of 65 per cent. Progress measures in English are well above the national average, with reading at +3.5 and writing at +3.1 – no coincidence, one might think.

Clarifying what physical education is and its place in the curriculum

Edward Timpson cont.

At this stage, it is probably sensible to explain exactly what PE is and how it interrelates with physical activity and sport. The national curriculum is based on 12 subjects, classified as core and foundation subjects. English, mathematics and science are core subjects across all key stages, with PE being the only foundation subject across all key stages. The purpose of studying PE as outlined in the national curriculum is to [inspire] “all pupils to succeed and excel in competitive sport and other physically demanding activities. It should provide opportunities for pupils to become physically confident in a way which supports their health and fitness.” The stated aims of the national curriculum for PE are “To ensure that all pupils: develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities; are physically active for sustained periods of time; engage in competitive sports and activities and lead healthy, active lives.”

PE is essentially the planned progressive learning that takes place in the timetabled school curriculum involving both learning to move and moving to learn, the context for that learning being through physical activity. Sport is the structured learning that takes place beyond the curriculum, often within school settings, out of hours or in the community, but there is clearly a symbiotic relationship between all three, with PE being the foundation from which all other physical activity and sport flows. As Ofsted

points out, a child with lower levels of motor competence may be less inclined to participate in physical activity and sport. As such, getting PE right is fundamental.

Writing in the *British Medical Journal* on 2nd March, Michael Craig Watson and Dr John Lloyd from the Institute of Health Promotion and Education observed: “In addition to the current low levels of physical activity in the UK there are also stark inequalities in levels of physical activity within the population. There are large disparities in physical activity participation rates in relation to age, disability, ethnic group and gender” and that “physical activity should not just be for the elite or, for example, individuals of a certain age, or ability but should be actively promoted to the whole population.”

Schools have an important part to play in developing health literacy. That includes physical education, which is a central part of the curriculum for all pupils of all ages.

In calling for this debate, I am realistic: PE will not miraculously appear as a core subject overnight. Further work is needed to ensure we have the capacity, culture and commitment within the school system for it to have the desired effect. Some have also legitimately raised issues about curriculum time, assessment challenges, recruitment and the quality of PE teaching at primary level. The Government is already addressing the latter, and I suggest that, when it comes to recruitment, the Department for Education should use Ofsted's recent review of PE to help improve accountability and inspection of PE and the use of the Primary PE and Sport Premium, as well as develop a coherent standards and assessment framework for PE that would satisfy a core status in the future.

Turning to the question of curriculum time, PE has the flexibility to be incorporated more in the wider curriculum and woven into the school day if the leadership, innovation and desire is there. For instance, at St Gregory CEVC Primary School in Suffolk, the headteacher, Daniel Woodrow, has introduced a whole-school, 10-minute ‘wake and shake’ activity first thing and a 15-minute daily mile as well as three PE lessons every week.

Crucially, we should not see the curriculum as sacred and be dogmatic about its constitution; in my view, the move towards better vocational representation at school and college is testament to that. The curriculum has evolved over time and should continue to do so in order to best reflect the current and foreseeable demands and needs of society. Quite rightly, we place high value on all children having good knowledge and application of maths, English and science, but surely the time has come to recognise the equal value of good knowledge and application of PE as one of the cornerstones of setting up a child with some of the core attributes they will need for life.

Let us build on the excellent practice and leadership already out there. Let us learn from the outstanding schools that have already made PE essential to their delivery of an excellent education. Let us start to build the base of expertise and understanding across our school workforce. Let us set the achievable target of having a great PE teacher in every primary school, and let us make CPD more effective, so the transition from a foundation to core subject up to Key Stage 2 can be where we begin.

Pupils from the Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School told me that they wanted more time for PE and sports in the curriculum,

including different after-school and lunch timings to help to find that time. A survey of adults conducted by the Youth Sport Trust found that the majority of the general public wanted more physical activity in schools and would support enhancing physical education to core subject status. Almost two thirds of respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree that PE should be a core subject in the national curriculum, with 80 per cent agreeing that there should be more opportunities for young people of all ages to be physically active at school.

I want to mention swimming and water safety. It is a statutory element of PE that every 11-year-old is required to be able to swim competently, confidently and proficiently over a distance of at least 25 metres. Despite the requirement being in place since 1994, one in three children, around 200,000 every year, leave primary school not being able to do so. I find that astonishing and worrying. It lends further credence to the need to take swimming even more seriously as an essential life skill. I hope the Minister will use the funding already announced to look at improving access to facilities, including pop-up pools, and better scrutinising this aspect of PE, so that we can ensure that all children get what they are entitled to.

I am aware from the Government's response to the Lords' report (see pages 8-10) of this edition of *Physical Education Matters* that there are no immediate plans to re-categorise PE as a core subject. However, I do not think it is giving away any state secrets to say that over the last few weeks I have had both enthusiastic and encouraging conversations with other ministerial colleagues in a position to make things happen. There will be people who want to put it off, either because it is not a priority, because it is too difficult to do or because they simply are not interested. As I said earlier, there are very few straightforward policy changes that sit on a Whitehall desk carrying such a clear need, evidential basis, public support and potentially far-reaching impact as this one.

If the Government were able to accept, at least in principle, the recommendations of the afPE taskforce, the Lords Select Committee and others focused on PE becoming a core subject, it is no exaggeration to say that we would be taking the lead with an absolute commitment to the development of healthy bodies and minds for all children, whatever their background. If we have the will, we can make it happen. PE should be at the heart of school life.

Highlighting the relationship to health and wellbeing

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab)

I have a background in sport and physical activity and health and wellbeing, having lectured in these subjects for over a decade and worked both in primary schools, delivering exercise sessions to young children, including the aforementioned 'wake up, shake up' activity, and in a secondary school PE department. Based on that experience, I strongly believe that PE should have a much more central role in the curriculum.

Successive governments have missed the chance to improve the nation's health and wellbeing by adopting a holistic and preventive approach, placing an emphasis on educating young people about the importance of physical activity, what it means to have a healthy lifestyle, and ensuring that they adopt healthy, enjoyable exercise habits from an early age. With alarming figures relating to childhood obesity, diabetes and a range of other

health conditions, along with serious concerns around children's mental health, we must take a more preventive and long-term approach to health and wellbeing. The provision of high-quality PE in our schools should be a fundamental part of that.

The provision of good-quality PE is not the only solution to those problems. ...we also have to look at a wide range of other things, such as active travel, active families and active communities, grassroots sports provision, nutrition, and addressing the barriers to being more active... However, young people's access to good-quality and wide-ranging physical education is an important part of addressing some of those serious health issues. That is why I think that PE should be a core subject.

I accept that that cannot happen overnight, and we... have to consider the implications for the broader curriculum. However, ...we should give PE a higher priority straightaway, with children spending more time on physical activity, and aim to have a highly trained PE teacher in every primary school within a few years.

In short, by exposing children to a wide variety of PE options and enabling them to develop healthy habits from a young age, we help to create a generation of healthy adults. The benefits of high-quality PE provision do not stop at the physical. The skills that children learn from PE are many: perseverance, resilience, collaboration, teamwork, initiative and confidence, to name just a few. Those skills help young people to flourish in education and life.

The great thing about physical activity is that there is something for everyone, whether that is in competitive sport, dance, gym, group exercise, running and everything in between. There is something for everyone. ...I am pleased to be providing a female perspective to today's debate. I had two very good female PE teachers, who were instrumental in inspiring me to adopt physical activity habits for the rest of my life... Those role models are important, and that is why PE should be a core curriculum subject at the heart of our education system.

As well as having PE on the curriculum, it is also important to look at how we can embed physical activity into the education system as a whole. The Creating Active Schools framework, designed in part by the Yorkshire Sport Foundation, is a good example of that. It encourages all stakeholders, from local authorities to school leaders and pupils, to play a role in embedding physical activity in the school's ethos.

Highlighting differences between independent and state school provision

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)

...PE is absolutely essential to tackling issues such as childhood obesity... There are a number of different factors for that obesity, but one definite challenge is that, all too often, in the advancement of students' literacy and numeracy... the physical education side has suffered.

...People always ask me, "What is the major difference between a pupil from a state school and a private school?" I was a teacher in a state school for eight and a half years before I entered this place. The answer is simple. Even though private schools produce fantastic academic results, they heavily invest time... and energy into giving children a rounded education, not just through debating, LAMDA and drama, but physical education.

Ultimately, it was teachers... who inspired me to play rugby, a sport I had never played before I was 11. It is about that type of support network. ...it is about teamwork, the learning and camaraderie with colleagues, the resilience from taking a knock and getting back up, and accepting defeat, even when it feels undeserved. Those are the things that are inspiring, and why we need to do a much better job, ensuring that children in state schools are getting access to that.

...I understand the impact a poor diet and lack of exercise can have on mental health. It is no shock to me that high levels of obesity are leading to long waiting lists with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.... We talk about the first 1,001 days of a child's life being the most critical for imparting knowledge and nurturing their growth, but there is a physical aspect as well.

Asking about current funding

Edward Timpson

I am delighted that [the Premium] is still going, but long-term funding makes a significant difference to schools' ability to bed in some of the practical improvements that they need in the way that they teach PE. Do we not also need confirmation from the Government in relation to School Games organisers so that they can continue their excellent work on inter-school and intra-school competitions, which have been so successful over the last 10 years?

Highlighting the need for an extended school day

Jonathan Gullis

...It is so important for breeding confidence and motivation in young people within our education sphere, so long-term funding needs to be approved. We cannot have year-on-year uncertainty with primary schools and the providers that are doing such great work externally.

My final point is that we need an extended school day... Not only does it keep kids off the streets and make the most vulnerable kids feel safe in their school building... It also means that, regardless of whether there needs to be catch-up, the whole school can enjoy good-quality physical education if there is a challenge with fitting it within normal curriculum time. The extended school day is happening already in the private school sector, and it is unfair that it is not happening in the state school sector.

Highlighting the need to appeal to all children to reduce sedentary behaviours

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

...I was at school in the 1960s and early 1970s. I think about the grave impact of my type 2 diabetes and the benefits of PE. I went to a sporty school, and I was thin and wiry. I was always a good runner, and I loved rugby and cricket. Sport was an integral part of where we were. However, I was always aware of something else at school... There is always a child... who is always picked last when a team is picked. He came in last and was the last out of the changing room. That is how I learned to observe and consider how we encourage children. The fact is that boy always turned up for PE, but he did not seem to get enthused about it... I understand why some children ask their parents to write a note to get them out of what they perceive to be a humiliation. Yet the importance of a healthy lifestyle must be established from a young age.

We must make sure there is exciting, inclusive exercise in school to tackle the sedentary lure of the computer and tablet. Get children away from those things and give them a physical focus... if we can engage children through the schools or local sports clubs, we can make them be energetic and keen, as they are naturally, and then I believe that we can move in the right direction.... Although children playing indoors is completely understandable, it is not ideal. Thankfully, the schools are stepping up and putting on additional physical activity.

Questioning the role of the school sport and activity plan

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)

It is clear from today's contributions that Members on both sides of the House agree that physical education and sport are an important part of the curriculum... We know the pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to children's academic learning, but it is also important to recognise the impact of the lack of opportunities pupils have had to participate in organised team sports and physical education... [and the impact on] our young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Sport England's survey... showed that only 45 per cent of children and young people (3.2 million pupils) achieved the Chief Medical Officers' guideline of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more a day. Worse still, 32 per cent averaged less than 30 minutes a day. ...the Government's 2019 school sport and activity plan [also has the ambition] "that all children should have access to 60 minutes of physical activity every day". The Government had stated that it would publish an update on the plan this year but... it is still nowhere to be seen.... Will the Minister commit his department to publishing an update...? What specific action will he be taking to address the Government's failure to meet their own objective of all children having access to 60 minutes of physical activity every day?

Responding on behalf of Government

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince)

...PE, sport and physical activity have significant importance in keeping children healthy and for the positive impact that they can have on a child's health and wellbeing. I mention my own personal experience because, importantly, sport builds confidence. Schools should be aware of the difference that high-quality PE can make to a school. That is why PE is right at the heart of the national curriculum. In fact, it is the only foundation subject that is compulsory across all four key stages of the national curriculum.

Why now? ...we have an obesity crisis... Obesity is now a bigger cause of cancer than smoking and although sport is not the only solution to obesity, it is a part of it. PE, sport and physical activity can and should play their part in tackling that. Equally important, of course, are diet and nutrition, but setting behaviour and habits around physical activity early in life and, importantly, as part of family life is vital... High-quality PE at the earliest age at school is key to allowing children to learn and develop key skills that will... give them the confidence to take part in physical activity and competitive sport... and there is evidence to suggest that it also enhances academic performance.

I could say, "Everything is rosy. This happens for all children and they get excellent PE teaching at primary school." But the truth is that that is not the case... The teaching of PE is done very well in many schools up and down the country, but it is inconsistent and, particularly at primary level, there is an issue with teachers lacking the confidence to teach PE effectively. Too often, it is outsourced, as we know. As great as rugby and football coaching is in and of itself, that is not PE; it does not give children the confidence and life skills that will lead them to take part in competitive sport. I am determined to address that.

At the heart of the debate... is the challenge to ensure that PE as a subject is taken seriously by all schools and that it is done brilliantly and consistently across our country. That is vital so that all children have the chance to develop the fundamental physical literacy that they need to go on to live an active, healthy life and to experience different types of sport, so that they are enthused and have confidence. That is why I am clear on the importance of PE as a curriculum subject. As I say, it is the only foundation subject taught across all key stages, making it a requirement for children of all ages. I assure... the House that the Government places significant importance on the delivery of PE lessons.

Notwithstanding... we remain wary of making technical changes to the curriculum now. That could place additional burdens on teacher workloads and training requirements by introducing changes, which is particularly relevant as schools start to recover from the pandemic. That said... PE and sport are also vital to recovery. We want to focus on what we can do to build on what is already in place to ensure that PE is taught really well in schools. I therefore confirm that we remain committed to our manifesto commitments to support the effective use of school sport facilities and to invest in primary school PE teaching and the promotion of physical literacy and competitive sports.

...We will build on that £10.1 million that has supported schools to reopen their sports facilities after the pandemic, increasing opportunities for children and young people across England to take part in sport.... We are considering arrangements for the Primary PE and Sport Premium for the 2022-23 academic year... I desperately want to give that long-term certainty of funding. All I can say is that I am working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to enable us to do that as soon as possible. We are considering a series of approaches to bring together the evidence of what constitutes really good PE, how that can be delivered practically and how to support schools to identify and take the steps necessary to make their provision as good as it can be.... We remain committed to the ambitions that we set out in the [school sport and activity action] plan and we will publish an update to it later this year, to align with our publication of the new sports strategy. That update will not only cover ground lost during the Covid-19 restrictions but boost momentum to deliver an action plan for all pupils, regardless of their background.

...I am ambitious about what we can do in this space and about going further on PE, school sport and physical activity in schools. I am ambitious about expanding the holiday activities and food programme, to which we have committed £200 million per year for a further three years as part of the spending review. Some 600,000 children up and down our country have taken part in those activities over the past year. I am exploring whether we could be a daily mile nation... I am exploring a

summer activity challenge... so that we get kids moving and taking part in sports and activities over the summer holidays.

The ambition is there and the work is ongoing. I hope [Members] are assured that we are determined to achieve the same thing, which is every school teaching PE well and every pupil benefiting from that, wherever they are, up and down our country. We will work with Ofsted, schools, sporting bodies and PE teachers on the further steps that we will take to achieve exactly that.

Summarising the debate

Edward Timpson

...the quality of the debate has been extremely high and has ensured that we have brought to the fore the key aspects of what makes PE such a crucial part of school life.... I say to [the Government] that moving PE to core status is not just a technical change but would change the whole way in which it is seen in the school system. It will no longer be able to be an afterthought as every school will have to engage and think hard about how to deliver the high-quality physical education we want to see right across the board.

I am pleased that the Minister shares my ambition to go further and faster and is sympathetic to the arguments we have made today on making PE a core subject. I acknowledge... that there is still some work to do in order to satisfy not just ourselves but everyone who needs to be party to that decision that all the building blocks are in place so it becomes a plausible, effective and long-term change that we can rely on within schools. To that end, I would be pleased if I could continue to work with the Minister and his Department on how we build capacity within the system and develop some of the assessment and accountability measures that will be necessary to satisfy everybody with a vested interest that the children we are putting through our school system are reaping all the benefits that that education can provide. We know that this is already happening in the very best schools... and I still come across some very inspiring leadership within physical education, but it is not happening everywhere often enough.

PE has a huge part to play in moving our country forward, both in ensuring a happy, long and healthy life for more of our citizens and making sure that our education system is performing at the highest possible level. Ultimately, it is not just about making sure children come out healthy at the end of their schooling, important though that is; we want to make sure they reach their potential, emotionally, mentally and academically. PE can tick all those boxes, and whenever in their life a person discovers the benefits of exercise, they never turn back. Let us make sure that more children find that out much earlier.

You can listen to the debate by visiting the afPE website:

<https://www.afpe.org.uk/physical-education/westminster-debate-recording-now-available-physical-education-as-a-core-subject-in-schools/> or watching it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A--xk2Isicw> ■

Edited by Carol Hawman [afPE member]

Carol Hawman is the Editor of *Physical Education Matters* and edited this article from the Hansard text of the debate.