

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
Tuesday, 24 June 2025
20th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Children and young people's participation in sport and physical activity – Note by the Clerk

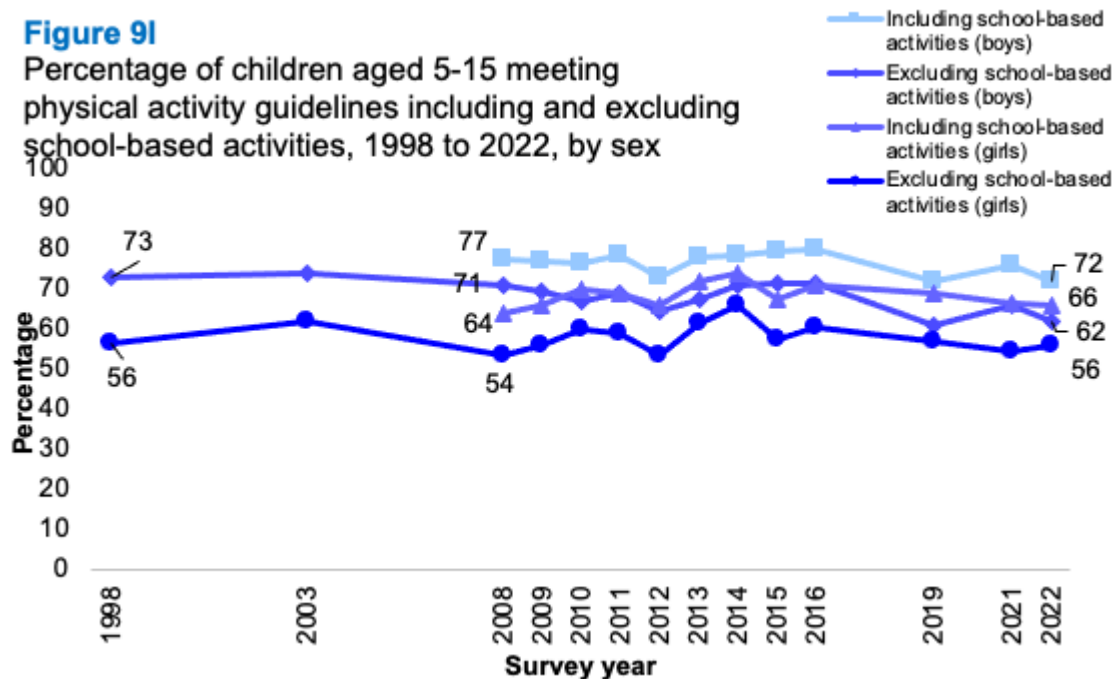
Background

1. At the Committee's business planning day on 1 April 2025, Members indicated a desire to investigate current trends in and potential barriers to participation of children and young people in sport and physical activity.
2. The Scottish Government's [Active Scotland Outcomes Framework](#) sets out a shared vision to enable people in Scotland to be more physically active. The framework is supported by [A More Active Scotland: Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan](#), launched in July 2018.
3. The [Physical Activity for Health: Framework](#) was published in October 2024 and draws on [a Systems-based Approach to Physical Activity: A Framework for Action at a National and Local Level](#). The systems-based approach recognises that public health outcomes are influenced by a complex and adaptive system of interacting components, which will require the action of many partners to redesign the system to one that protects and promotes health. This approach translates the following into a Scottish context:
 - the World Health Organisation's [Global Action Plan for Physical Activity](#)
 - the International Society for Physical Activity and Public Health's [Eight Investments that Work for Physical Activity](#)
4. The importance of physical activity is also recognised within the [Public Health Priorities for Scotland](#). It features specifically in priority 6, 'A Scotland where we eat well, have a healthy weight and are physically active'. It also contributes to the five other public health priorities.
5. A [previous paper from CoSLA](#) sets out how physical activity can positively contribute to cross-cutting policy areas including:
 - Education and Children's services
 - Strong, Safe and Sustainable Communities
 - Health and Social Care
 - Local Economies
 - Inclusive Growth
 - the Environment

6. In relation to sport specifically, [Sport for Life](#) (2019-2029) is sportscotland's strategy and outlines its vision of an active Scotland where everyone benefits from sport.

Trends in physical activity in children and young people

7. The [UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines](#) (2019) provides advice to the general population about the recommended frequency, intensity, time and types of physical activity required to prevent major chronic disease and to maintain health.
8. For children and young people, the recommendations are that those aged 5 to 18 years should endeavour to participate in an average minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity per day. This should include activity that develops movement skills, bones and muscles; and conversely spend less time sitting or lying down and break up periods of physical inactivity with sporadic movement and activity.
9. The [latest Scottish Household Survey report](#) presents data collected in 2022 and shows that 69% of children aged 5-15 undertook at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day on average, including school-based activities. When excluding school-based activities, this figure falls to 59%. Boys were slightly more active than girls, with 72% of boys and 66% of girls achieving more than 60 minutes of activity per day (including school activities). Girls were more likely to fall into the 30-60 minutes category (22%) compared to boys (16%).
10. When looking at the data over time, it shows trends in activity have been fairly static. The largest decline has been in girls' activity (when including school-based activities):



Inequalities in participation

11. Various sources highlight significant inequalities in sport and physical activity participation across a range of characteristics, including deprivation, sex, ethnicity, and disability ([Scottish Health Survey, 2022](#); [Meir & Scott, 2025](#):

- **Socioeconomic Status:** Children and young people from the most deprived areas in Scotland are more likely to be inactive. Specifically, 35% of pupils in the 20% most deprived areas are inactive, compared to 23% in the least deprived 20% areas. A [report from the Observatory of Sport in Scotland](#) found that deprivation and education are the main factors differentiating those who participate in sports from those who do not and poverty is a significant barrier to participation. Children and young people from lower-income families are less likely to engage in regular physical activity due to the costs associated with sports, such as equipment, membership fees, and travel expenses.
- **Sex:** There are notable differences in participation rates between boys and girls. Boys tend to be more active than girls, with 72% of boys achieving more than 60 minutes of activity per day compared to 66% of girls. The Committee's previous inquiry into female participation in sport found that girls and young women face barriers such as puberty, gendered/restricted activity offerings, a focus on competition rather than fun, negative attitudes from boys, and boys dominating playgrounds in schools.
- **Ethnicity:** There is a recognition that the development of more single sex opportunities for girls and young women from ethnically diverse communities and a range of religions would increase their engagement with sport and PA opportunities.
- **Disability:** Children and young people with disabilities encounter additional barriers, including lack of accessible facilities, specialised equipment, and trained staff.
- **Geographical Location:** Rural areas often have fewer sports facilities and organized activities compared to urban areas, limiting opportunities for children and young people in these regions.

Physical activity for health: Scottish Government Framework

12. The Scottish Government published its [Physical Activity for Health: Framework](#) in October 2024.

13. The new framework draws on [a Systems-based Approach to Physical Activity: A Framework for Action at a National and Local Level](#). The systems-based approach recognises that public health outcomes are influenced by a complex and adaptive system of interacting components, which will require the action of many partners to redesign the system to one that protects and promotes health.

14. As a result, the framework encourages the creation of environments that support active lifestyles, such as safe walking and cycling paths, and emphasises the importance of incorporating physical activity into daily routines, including active travel and recreational activities.

Facilities

15. The availability, accessibility, affordability and condition of sporting facilities are known to be key factors in enabling people to participate in sport and physical activity. A [comprehensive review of Scottish sports facilities](#) published in 2006 presented several key findings in relation to the ~6,000 sports facilities at the time:

- 74% of natural grass pitches, 61% of synthetic grass pitches and 50% of tennis courts needed replacement or significant upgrading.
- 49% of changing pavilions required replacement or significant upgrading.
- Club-owned facilities were typically in better condition than those owned by local authorities. However, the Public and Private Partnership scheme was beginning to shift this trend.

16. In the [Minister's Strategic Guidance Letter for 2023-2026 to sportscotland](#), the Minister wrote:

“We have discussed the longer-term challenges around an ageing sporting estate, which will need a significant capital investment programme in due course. I would welcome work to undertake a review of the sport facilities estate.”

17. Several key issues surrounding physical activity and sports facilities in Scotland have been raised including:

Accessibility: Many communities, [especially in rural areas](#), face challenges accessing sports facilities due to their remote locations and limited public transport options.

Funding and Maintenance: Insufficient funding for the maintenance and development of sports facilities can lead to deteriorating conditions, making them less appealing and safe for use. A [Review of leisure and culture services](#) by sportscotland found operating costs have increased sharply since the pandemic, while funding has decreased over the last decade. Councils and Arm's Length External Organisations (ALEOs) have reduced opening hours and staff, and closed facilities. Around a third of ALEOs have closed indoor and outdoor facilities, and the report concludes that:

“Long term funding reductions have now meant that there is little left to do other than withdraw services and close facilities.”

Socioeconomic Barriers: The cost of participating in sports, including membership fees, equipment, and travel expenses, can be prohibitive for low-

income families. sportscotland conducts a survey of public sector charges for indoor and outdoor sports facilities and swimming pools each year. The report for [the latest year](#) shows the smallest increase in charges was for an adult bowls season ticket (+0.2%) and the largest increase was 18.4% for juvenile squash.

18. The report also found juvenile prices rose faster than adult prices for:

- Swimming lessons (per person)
- Golf round weekends (per person)
- Squash (per court per 40 minutes)
- Badminton (per court per hour)
- 5-a-side football (hall hire per hour)

19. The report also found that:

“most charges have increased, there is a clear pattern of significant price increase across most activities for most users. The average price increase across all sports and activities in table one was 10.3%. This is a historic high.”

Funding

20. A [report reviewing Leisure and Culture Services](#) found:

- Local government investment in culture, sport and leisure services across Scotland has reduced by at least 20% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2022/23.
- Income has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, reflecting the current cost of living pressures on households.
- Operating costs have increased sharply since the pandemic, particularly in relation to energy and staff, exerting further financial pressure on what are already stretched services.
- Most Councils and ALEOs have already had to make substantial savings through reducing hours, closing facilities and staff reductions. Around a third of ALEOs have closed facilities including indoor and outdoor sports facilities
- Long term funding reductions have now meant that there is little left to do other than withdraw services and close facilities.
- There is little sign of optimism as most councils and ALEOs expect further reductions in budgets in the future.

21. It has [been estimated](#) that physical inactivity costs Scotland £77m per year.

Volunteers

22. In 2023, [sportscotland reported](#) that data from the [2020 Scottish Household Survey](#) showed that 64% of adults volunteered in the last year. 56% took part in informal volunteering and 26% took part in formal volunteering. Of those that had formally volunteered, 12% volunteered in the exercise, physical activity, and sport

sector. The [2023 paper from sportscotland](#) found:

“At present, the single biggest challenge facing Scottish third sector organisations (TSOs) is volunteer shortages. This is particularly evident among smaller TSOs (turnover <£100k). At the same time, the Scottish Third Sector Tracker indicates that overall demand for Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) services is increasing. Whilst there is increased demand for volunteers, 22% of TSOs reported fewer active volunteers.”

23. [Volunteer Scotland](#) has suggested that the shortage of volunteers can be explained by the following factors:

- Volunteering is no longer affordable, particularly when there is travel involved.
- People have less time to volunteer due to working longer hours or multiple jobs.
- Volunteers' health and wellbeing may be adversely impacted on the cost-of-living crisis/Covid-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting

24. At today's meeting, Members will take evidence from representatives of the following organisations:

- COSLA
- Scottish Sports Association
- sportscotland

Clerks to Committee and SPICe
June 2025