

Children and Young People Physical Activity Reflection Report 2025-26



Introduction

The 2025-26 year has demonstrated the continuing importance of physical activity in supporting the health, wellbeing and development of children and young people across the East Devon district. Through targeted community-based programmes delivered predominantly outside of the leisure centre environment, the Active Communities Team has worked collaboratively with schools, youth clubs, charitable organisations and specialist partners to engage children and young people who may otherwise have limited opportunities to participate in regular physical activity.

The focus has been supporting children from areas of deprivation and those identified as Pupil Premium children, recognising that inequalities in access to physical activity continue to exist. The Active Lives Children and Young People Survey highlights that children from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to be physically active and continue to experience poorer outcomes than their peers.

Our work throughout the year has been driven by the understanding that physical activity is not simply about improving physical fitness. Regular activity plays a significant role in supporting mental health, emotional wellbeing, confidence, resilience, social connection and overall quality of life for children and young people. The need for this support has become increasingly apparent following the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This report is a chance for the Active Communities Team to reflect on the last academic year and build plans for future work.





The Importance of Physical Activity and Mental Wellbeing

Research continues to show a strong relationship between physical activity and positive mental wellbeing in children and young people. The Active Lives Children and Young People Survey identifies links between participation in sport and physical activity and improved wellbeing, confidence, social connection and positive attitudes towards life. This report helps to build an understanding of childrens behaviours. Only 49% of children reach the Chief Medical Officers guidance of an average of an hours exercise a day. With activity levels showing the lowest in Year 3 and 4 and 5 and 6.



Since Covid-19, schools and community organisations have reported increased levels of anxiety, low confidence, social isolation and emotional challenges amongst young people. Many children continue to struggle with self-esteem, resilience and managing everyday pressures. As a result, there is a growing need for opportunities that support both physical and mental health in a safe, enjoyable and inclusive environment.

Our programmes have sought to address these challenges through non-competitive, fun and engaging activities which encourage participation at an individual level. The emphasis has been on enjoyment, achievement and personal progress rather than sporting performance.

Partnership Working



Successful delivery has been made possible through strong partnerships with a range of organisations and professionals across the district.

Key partners have included:

- PE Leads within schools
- School pastoral teams
- Youth clubs
- Charitable organisations
- Heads Up mental health services
- Community engagement organisations

These partnerships have enabled us to identify children most in need of support and provide targeted interventions that address both physical inactivity and wellbeing concerns.



A particularly positive development has been the continued delivery of joint sessions with Heads Up where an Active Communities Instructor works alongside a Mental Health coach on a session. These sessions have successfully highlighted the important relationship between physical and mental health while creating opportunities for children and young people to discuss wellbeing in a supportive environment.

We look forward to continue working closely with Heads up next year should funding allow.

Activities Delivered

The programme has predominantly been delivered once a week for a set period within schools and community settings rather than within the leisure centre, helping to reduce barriers to participation and reach children in familiar surroundings.

Sessions have been designed to be inclusive, adaptable and accessible to children of all abilities, ensuring participants can engage at their own level and experience success, with the main emphasis of FUN!

Activities have included:

- Parachute games
- Team-building challenges
- Dodgeball
- Ball games
- Hoops and movement activities
- Bat and racket skills
- Boccia
- New Age Curling
- Cooperative games
- Swim to Sea
- Creative instructor-led games and activities

The overall aim has been to:

- Encourage children to become more physically active
- Improve self-esteem and confidence
- Develop resilience
- Support positive mental wellbeing

Jane Nicholls Active Communities Co-ordinator
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- Foster social interaction and friendships
- Promote healthy habits for the future
- Enable children to better understand and manage their physical and mental health over time

Challenges and Barriers

Whilst the programme has achieved positive outcomes, a number of challenges have been encountered throughout the year.

School Facilities and Space - Many schools have experienced limitations in available space. Halls and activity areas are often booked for curriculum activities or other interventions, reducing opportunities for programme delivery.

Curriculum Pressures - Some schools have been reluctant to engage due to increasing academic pressures and competing priorities within the curriculum. This continues to present a challenge when promoting preventative wellbeing interventions despite the recognised benefits of physical activity.

Staffing Support - The presence of school staff during sessions has often been essential. Children generally engage more positively when supported by familiar teachers or pastoral staff, helping them feel safe, comfortable and encouraged to participate.

Additional Support Needs - There have been occasions where schools have referred children requiring significant individual support. While our sessions are inclusive and adaptable, they are not designed to provide specialist one-to-one interventions. Managing expectations around the level of support available remains an ongoing challenge.

Outcomes and Impact

Despite these challenges, the impact of the programme has been extremely encouraging.

Throughout the year we have observed:

- Increased participation and engagement
- Improved confidence among participants
- Stronger peer relationships
- Positive relationships between children and instructors
- Increased willingness to try new activities
- Greater enthusiasm and enjoyment of physical activity
- Enhanced social interaction and communication skills



As attendance has continued, children have become increasingly comfortable within sessions and more willing to challenge themselves and participate fully.

We have worked with 5 primary schools and 3 seniors schools as well as supporting Foster Families through Devon County Council, Active Champs through Active Devon, Youth Club sessions, Careers Fayres and Engage and Connect events for parents. With 237 sessions being delivered. At the end of term we have offered all schools a trip to Leisure Centre and offered Participation Certificates and Free passes to encourage the children and young people to use the Leisure Centre in their school holidays.

Importantly, the sessions have offered far more than physical activity alone. They have provided opportunities for children and young people to:

- Socialise with peers
- Cooperate as part of a team
- Develop communication skills
- Experience success and achievement
- Develop resilience when facing challenges
- Build trust and positive relationships

Kings School, Ottery had this to say...

“We are delighted to have had the opportunity to work with LED Community Team again this year. Our Year 9 girls have all engaged in a range of activities – this has been down to the inclusive and relational approach from the team, positively role modelling participation in exercise which we feel has changed their perspectives and hope will be maintained moving forward. The highlight was certainly a trip to the swimming pool which the girls were all enthusiastic to do and thoroughly enjoyed.”

Jason Edmunds at Beacon Primary School had this to say at the end of the Summer term...

‘The LED sessions delivered through Heads Up and Active Communities Team have provided a valuable CPD opportunity for two teaching assistants working in a supportive SEND role, helping them to develop a deeper understanding of the important link between physical education, physical activity, and mental health. Through participating in and observing a range of practical activities, staff have gained first-hand experience of how targeted mental health support can encourage children to lead more active lifestyles and better manage their emotions, wellbeing, and self-regulation. These sessions have introduced a variety of strategies and



approaches that can now be incorporated into everyday practice within school to support pupils' emotional development alongside their physical development.

The knowledge, skills, and confidence gained through these sessions have strengthened the school's capacity to provide inclusive support and create opportunities for all children to benefit from the positive relationship between physical activity and emotional wellbeing.

The children participating have seen progress and felt valued as we have moved through the sessions. They have gained much from the sessions and are talking about and applying the strategies within school and their personal lives.'

We also had this feedback from Littleton Primary, children....

'I like doing fun things and I don't have to speak if I don't want to'

'It helps me calm down and talk about my feelings'

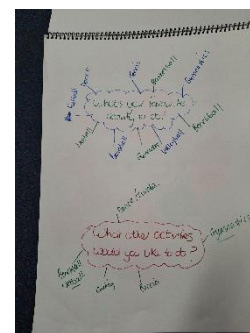
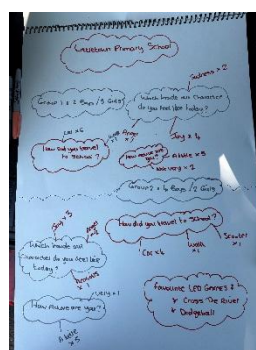
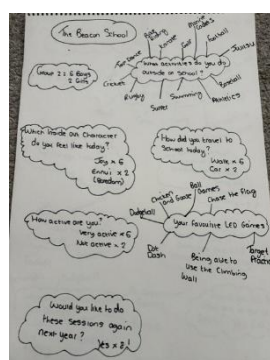
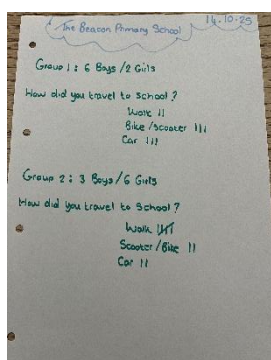
'Gives me energy to run around'

'Its fun and relieved stress'

'Jenny and Emily are fun and kind'

And from the Teachers....

'From our point of view, the children have enjoyed attending the sessions and it has been lovely to see them smiling, joining in and being active. I think they have enjoyed being part of a small group with no pressure that they may get from being in the classroom.'



Alongside these social and emotional benefits, children have also developed key physical competencies including:

- Balance
- Coordination
- Agility
- Strength
- Movement skills
- Spatial awareness

These foundations support lifelong participation in physical activity and contribute to healthier lifestyles into adulthood.

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Reflection and Learning

The experiences of 2025-26 reinforce the value of taking physical activity into communities, schools and youth settings to engage children who may not access traditional sport or leisure centre provision.

The strongest outcomes have been achieved where:

- Schools have fully embraced partnership working.
- Pastoral teams have identified children most in need.
- Staff have actively supported delivery.
- Sessions have focused on fun, inclusion and enjoyment.
- Physical activity has been linked directly to wellbeing outcomes.

The success of the Heads Up partnership has also highlighted the potential for greater integration between physical activity and mental health services moving forward.

Conclusion

The 2025-26 programme has demonstrated that physical activity remains a powerful tool for supporting both the physical and mental health of children and young people. Against a backdrop of increasing mental health challenges and persistent inequalities, targeted physical activity interventions have provided meaningful opportunities for children to be active, build confidence, develop resilience and improve wellbeing.

By working in partnership with schools, youth clubs, charitable organisations and mental health providers, we have successfully reached many children who may otherwise not have engaged in regular activity. The enthusiasm, personal development and positive relationships developed throughout the year demonstrate the significant impact that community-based physical activity programmes can have.

Looking ahead, continued partnership working, increased access to suitable spaces and ongoing focus on children from deprived communities and those eligible for Pupil Premium support will remain essential in ensuring every child has the opportunity to enjoy the lifelong benefits of being active.

We look forward to continuing our work with existing partners as well as new organisations to achieve the best possible outcome for the children and young people we are working with.