

# THE ROLE AND VALUE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND SPORT IN ALTERNATIVE PROVISION SCHOOLS

Project Report  
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## **1. Acknowledgements**

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## 2. Executive Summary

Alternative provision includes settings such as pupil referral units (PRUs), alternative provision academies, free schools, and hospital schools. There are increasing numbers of children and young people with mental health needs in alternative provision, and there is a growing recognition that pupils' mental health and wellbeing influence their educational attainment. Importantly, sport and physical activity – provided through the physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools – may offer a viable means to reengage disaffected youth in learning and development. However, little is known about what physical education in alternative provision does and/or should involve, how it is experienced by pupils, how staff are trained to teach it, or how well the subject is resourced.

This research aimed to explore the role and value of physical education and sport in alternative provision through the following objectives:

- (1) to map the provision of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools in England
- (2) to foreground the voice of children/young people and key stakeholders (e.g., teachers) to gain insights about the nature, purpose and value of physical education and sport
- (3) to identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical education and sport
- (4) to examine the resourcing of physical education and sport and what training is provided for those who teach the subject
- (5) to identify evidence-based implications for policy and practice, and future research directions relating to physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.

The research was conducted across three distinct phases. In **Phase 1**, an online survey was distributed to lead practitioners of all alternative provision schools across England. **Phase 2** involved a purposive sample of lead practitioners who were invited to take part in individual ( $n=14$ ) and focus group ( $n=1$ , 15 participants) interviews. Finally, **Phase 3** drew on four case studies of children/young people ( $n=25$ ) who took part in focus group interviews using a range of different creative methods.

Survey findings revealed that 90% of alternative provision providers deliver some form of physical education, though less (78%) suggested that physical education was compulsory. In addition, physical education seems to be delivered by a range of individuals with just 57% suggesting it was delivered by a specialist physical education teacher, 46% suggesting it was delivered by a generalist classroom teacher, and 30% reporting that it was delivered by a sports coach.

In addition, one of the main purposes for physical education and sport in alternative provision schools is the development of physical and mental health, emphasised because of its claimed role in improving cardiovascular health and reducing childhood obesity. Developing social skills was also

seen to be an important purpose to ease the transition back to mainstream school, and for life in general, both outside of and once young people have left school.

A range of barriers were identified to delivering physical education and sport in alternative provision schools. These include, but were not limited to, teacher confidence and competence, and a perceived lack of pedagogical content knowledge. Pupil needs and abilities, their behaviour, confidence and competence, and motivation were also reported as key barriers. Most prominent however, was the space available to teach in. For instance, just 57% reported having access to an outdoor playground, while more than half (51%) did not have access to a dedicated indoor space for the delivery of physical education. Furthermore, the standard of equipment and facilities, and the challenges of employing staff with relevant expertise were also cited, with qualitative data highlighting a 'recruitment crisis'. Finally, negative perceptions and stigma of the young people who attend alternative provision from those in the local community, and a lack of financial support were also reported as key barriers.

This research proposes the following recommendations for policy, practice, and research:

- Recommendation 1: The **provision of a dedicated (and maintained) space** to support a wider variety of activities would help to support young people's development.
- Recommendation 2: Pre-service teachers to be provided with a **teaching placement** in some form of alternative provision school.
- Recommendation 3: Reconsider how **funding** is allocated for the provision of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.
- Recommendation 4: The creation of a formal or informal **network** to provide opportunities for teachers to feel connected and share ideas
- Recommendation 5: Facilitate the inclusion of **pupil voice in curriculum decision making** processes.
- Recommendation 6: Reframe competition to focus more on fostering internal motivation and provide opportunities for pupils to feel a **sense of achievement**.
- Recommendation 7: Identify ways to **foster positive relationships** between teachers and pupils.
- Recommendation 8: Provide **off-site opportunities** for young people to engage in physical activity and sport, to help them (re)engage with the outside world.
- Recommendation 9: Further research funding is required to continue to explore the alternative provision landscape as it relates to physical education and sport.

### **3. Introduction**

#### **3.1. Background**

Alternative provision is education arranged by local authorities for children and young people of compulsory school age who, because of reasons such as school exclusion, short or long-term illness or behaviour issues, would not otherwise receive suitable education in mainstream schools (DfE, 2013). Broadly speaking, alternative provision includes settings such as pupil referral units (PRUs), alternative provision academies, free schools, and hospital schools.

According to the latest report in January 2022, the number of pupils attending alternative provision (including local authority alternative provision, independent schools and other providers that are not able to register as a school) has increased by over 3,100 (10%) to 35,600 since 2020/21 (DfE, 2022). Most of the pupils that attend alternative provision are boys (74.3%). Interestingly, the rate of pupils eligible for free school meals is lower in alternative provision (20.4%) than the overall school population (22.5%). In addition, there were 11,684 pupils enrolled at PRUs (DfE, 2022). This is a decrease of 9% from the previous year. Most of the pupils that attend PRUs are boys (72.2%), but unlike in alternative provision, over half are eligible for free school meals (54.6%) (DfE, 2022). In addition, a further 11,100 pupils have a dual registration meaning they are also registered at another school.

A House of Commons (2018) briefing paper reported increasing numbers of children and young people with mental health needs in alternative provision, with one in two pupils having social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) as their primary category of special educational need (SEN). There is also a growing recognition that pupils' mental health and wellbeing influence their educational attainment. Most alternative provision providers therefore aim to facilitate re-engagement with learning, as well as promote social and emotional development, with the ultimate outcome of pupils re-integrating into mainstream education.

Crucially, physical education and sport offer a means of engaging young people in positive youth development (e.g., Holt, 2016), enhancing mental wellbeing and aiding the transfer back to mainstream schooling. For instance, young people who participate in organised sport and physical activity have better health related quality of life and mental health compared to non-participating peers (Vella et al., 2014). Participating in organised sport is not only associated with important physical health benefits (Strong et al., 2005), but with psychosocial benefits such as increased self-esteem, wellbeing, and social skills (e.g., Eime et al., 2013). Organised sport and physical activity have also been related to reduced maladaptive/risky behaviour, for example, lower incidences of smoking (Audrain-McGovern et al., 2006); use of illegal drugs (Kulig et al., 2003); engagement in risky sexual behaviours (Miller et al., 2002) and reduced levels of social isolation (Barber et al., 2001). As such, research evidence continues to highlight the potential of sport and physical activity

in facilitating positive social behaviour, reducing risky behaviour, and providing opportunities for the development of healthy and supportive peer friendships and adult relationships (Holt, 2016). From this research evidence, sport and physical activity as provided through the physical education curriculum may be viable means of re-engaging disaffected youth within alternative provision settings with learning and their development.

Alternative provision schools have greater autonomy over the curriculum they offer than other local authority-maintained schools. Consequently, there is greater variability when it comes to what pupils study, and how and why they study a particular subject. In one of the few studies to date that has explored this topic, research by Cullen and Monroe (2010) suggests that pupils in a PRU, who experienced football as part of a physical education curriculum, demonstrated higher levels of pro-social behaviour, and openness to and engagement with learning, relative to their behaviour in the PRU generally. Physical education may therefore serve as a catalyst to facilitate the transfer of pupils from PRUs and other alternative provision schools back to mainstream school populations. However, there is limited research that has explored the provision or impact of sport and physical activity through the physical education curriculum within alternative provision schools. Similarly, we know little about what physical education and sport in alternative provision does and/or should involve, how it is experienced by pupils, how staff are trained to teach it, or how well the subject is resourced.

### **3.2. Research Objectives**

This research sought to explore the role and value of physical education and sport in alternative provision through the following objectives:

1. To map the provision of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools in England.
2. To foreground the voice of children/young people and key stakeholders (e.g., teachers) to gain insights about the nature, purpose and value of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.
3. To identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.
4. To examine the resourcing of physical education and sport and what training is provided for those who teach the subject in alternative provision schools.
5. To identify evidence-based implications for policy and practice, and future research directions relating to physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.

### 3.3. Research approach

The table below maps the different phases of the study, the key stakeholder group we engaged with, which objectives that specific phase sought to address, along with the methodological approach that was employed.

*Table 1: Research approach*

Phase	Stakeholder Group	Objective	Methodological approach
1	Lead practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To map the provision of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools in England.</li> <li>To examine the resourcing of physical education and sport, and what training is provided for those who teach in alternative provision schools.</li> </ul>	<p>An online survey was distributed to lead practitioners of all alternative provision schools across England to identify how many offer physical education and sport as part of their curriculum and how this is supported. To achieve this, a Freedom of Information (FoI) Request was approved by the Department for Education for the contact details of all alternative provision schools in England (approximately 350). The survey was distributed by the Youth Sport Trust and contained a range of closed and open questions.</p>
2	Lead practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To foreground the voice <b>of lead practitioners</b> to gain insights about the nature, purpose, and value of physical education and sport.</li> <li>To identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.</li> <li>To examine how well physical education and sport is resourced and what training is provided for those who teach in alternative provision schools.</li> </ul>	<p>The second phase involved a purposive sample of lead practitioners from those alternative provision schools that responded to the survey in phase one. More specifically, we conducted 14 individual, online semi-structured interviews. These were conducted using Microsoft Teams with each interview being recorded and the audio being subsequently transcribed verbatim. In addition to the 14 individual interviews, we held a focus group interview with 15 practitioners who attended an event run by the Youth Sport Trust. The conversations for this focus group were centred around some of the key findings from the survey. The dialogue between practitioners was recorded using a Dictaphone and later transcribed verbatim.</p>



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3	Children and young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To foreground the voice of <b>children/young people</b> to gain insights about the nature, purpose, and value of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.</li> <li>• To identify barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.</li> </ul>	<p>The final phase of the study drew on four case studies of children/young people who attended alternative provision schools. Here, we used focus group interviews along with a range of creative research methods to help elicit their experiences, thoughts and perspectives on physical education and sport. In total, across the four settings, we engaged with 25 young people (20 male; 5 female) aged between 11-16 years. To engage with young people, we drew on a toolkit of four distinct activities. Pupils could choose which activities they wanted to engage with, and each creative method was designed to generate different discussions. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write, draw, show and tell (Noonan et al., 2016) – Pupils were invited to draw what a ‘PE’ lesson looks like to them. This could be done individually or as a group.</li> <li>• Character creation (Sandford et al., 2021) – Pupils could draw two opposing characters on a large piece of paper before identifying (using writing or drawing) what a good and bad experience of physical education might look like for someone in alternative provision.</li> <li>• Active mapping – Pupils were encouraged to draw a bird’s-eye view image/map of their school and mark on it the spaces and places they engage in physical education, sport or physical activity. This could be done individually or as a group, stationary or whilst walking around the school building.</li> <li>• Graffiti boards – Pupils were provided with a large sheet of paper and invited to write/draw/graffiti in response to why they do/do not engage in physical education and what they thought the benefits of it might be. Again, this could be done individually or as a group activity.</li> </ul> <p>Each of the subsequent discussions – that were generated during and after the activities – were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim for analysis.</p>
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### 3.4. Examples of research artefacts

As noted in the table above, young people were invited to engage with a number of creative methods that were used to help prompt discussion around key topics. Below are examples of the different types of creative method and the artefacts produced by young people. For instance, figure 1 and figure 2 below are maps drawn by young people, with stars (\*) indicating the spaces they engage in physical activity and sport.

Figure 1: Map of a hospital school

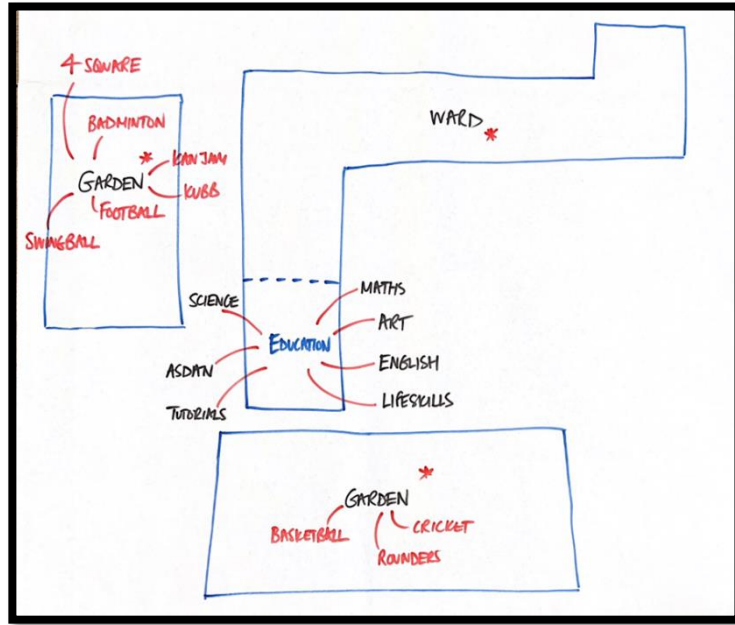


Figure 2: Map of an alternative provision school

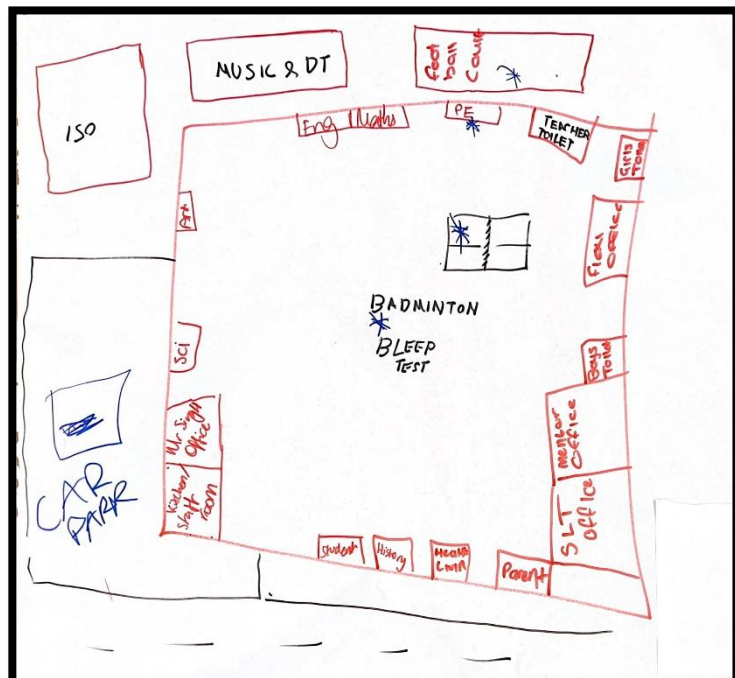


Figure 3 below represents a character created by young people who depicts a negative experience of physical education, while figure 4 reflects a graffiti board, created by young people attending a hospital school.

Figure 3: Character creation

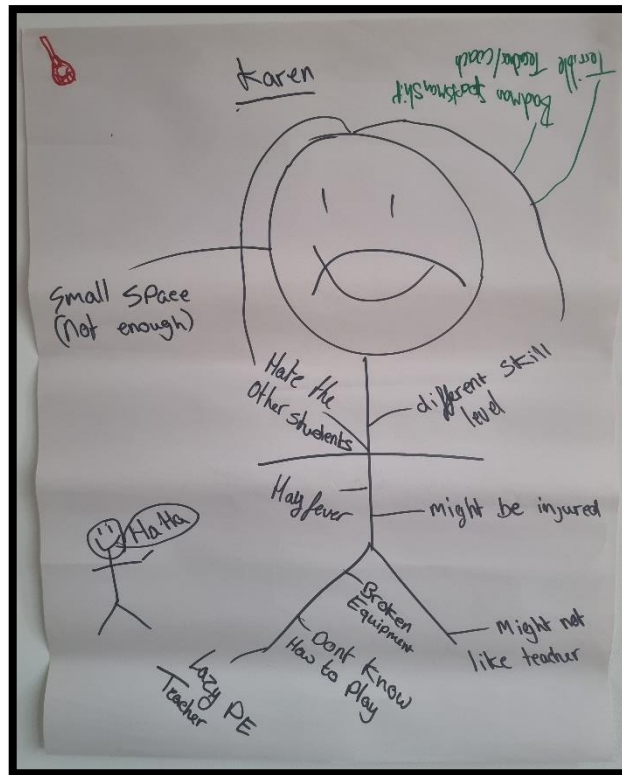
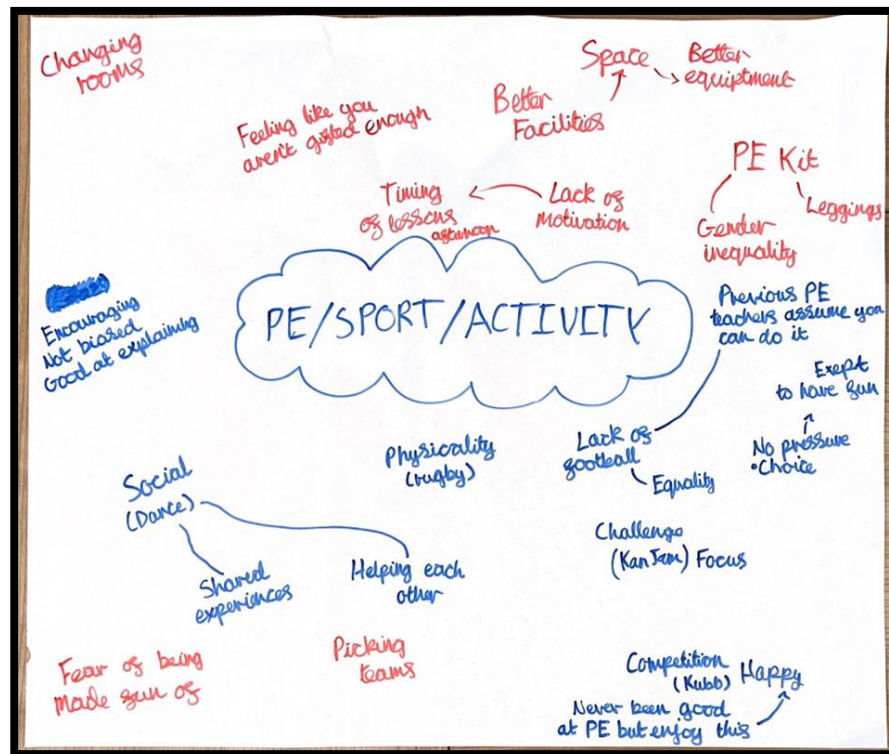


Figure 4: Graffiti board



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Survey findings

While the survey was distributed to around 350 alternative provision schools, a total of **48 responses** were received. Most of these responses ( $n=21$ ; 48%) were from PRUs. Eleven responses (25%) were from alternative provision academies, three were hospital schools (7%) and two were alternative provision free schools (4%). Seven responses (16%) were classified as 'other' and included specialist providers, independent schools and SEMH providers. Most of those that responded (88%) taught secondary school age pupils (e.g., Key stage 3 and 4). In total, **90% of those that responded offered some form of physical education**. However, only 78% suggested that physical education was compulsory. For those that did deliver physical education, the range of activities offered very much mirrored provision in mainstream school physical education curriculum with football (95%), cricket (81%), and badminton (78%) dominating. Outdoor and Adventurous Activities was offered by 13 out of the 37 respondents (35%).

The survey asked practitioners to note **who teaches their physical education curriculum** (note they could include multiple responses). Interestingly, only **57%** suggested it was taught by a **specialist physical education teacher**. In contrast, **46%** suggested it was a **generalist classroom teacher**, while **30%** said it was a **sports coach**. Only a few said that an external provider delivered physical education (11%), while a higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) was the other option reported (8%).

#### 4.1.1. Facilities and equipment

When asked to report on the facilities that they could access to teach physical education, a range of responses were provided. For instance, **57% reported having access to an outdoor playground**, while **49% suggested they had access to a dedicated indoor space** (e.g., sports hall). Hence, more than half of those that responded did not have an indoor space available for the delivery of physical education. Similarly, just **43% reported having access to a dedicated outdoor space** (e.g., AstroTurf, sports pitches, or multi-use games area [MUGA]).

Practitioners were invited to rate the facilities and equipment they have available. While 40% suggested that the **facilities** were very good or good, (24% suggested they were average), **36% suggested that they were very poor or poor**. In addition, 40% suggested that the **equipment** they have available was very good or good, while **41% suggested it was average** (19% suggested it was very poor or poor).

A content analysis of the qualitative responses revealed two primary reasons for rating facilities poor: (1) spatial constraints and (2) limited financial resources (e.g., limited budgets to be used for physical education). When discussing spatial constraints, practitioners identified the limited space they have

available, the need to share what space they have and, in some instances, the poor condition of that space:

*Unfortunately, we have very limited space to deliver PE. Our school won't allow one full size badminton court which prevents us from delivering PE onsite. Our school field has a small 6-a-side football pitch, however the playing surface is uneven.*

*The PRU has to share the playground and school hall with the mainstream school on the same site. Time is at a premium always. Equipment is generally good although always in need of replenishing.*

*Our football field is in very poor condition. Our playground needs updating. Our equipment is old and needs updating.*

Those that did rate their facilities and equipment highly noted the use of external facilities as key to sustaining club and community engagement outside of school.

#### **4.1.2. Purpose and value of physical education**

Part of the survey asked practitioners to identify what they thought the purpose and value of physical education was. Interestingly, 51.3% rated the development of social skills as the most or second most important purpose of physical education, while 48.7% rated improving health as the most or second most important purpose of physical education. In contrast, competition was considered the least important purpose of physical education by most respondents (71.8%).

According to the qualitative responses, **improving physical and mental health** was identified as one of the key purposes of physical education:

*Many young people are largely sedentary outside of school. School PE may be the only physical exertion they get. Sport improves both physical and mental health. In my view, the improvement in mental health and wellbeing is the most important factor in a well-designed PE curriculum.*

In addition to physical and mental health, **developing physical, social, cognitive, and affective skills** was another key purpose. In fact, social skills were mentioned most frequently, supporting the quantitative data reported above:

*Many learners who attend have social communication and interaction needs and PE is a valuable way to develop positive, encouraging, and appropriate communication between peers. It also helps to encourage and develop teamwork*

*Our cohort of pupils need to develop social skills more than any other skills mentioned, as this is something that they lack more than the other skills mentioned*

### 4.1.3. Challenges of delivering physical education

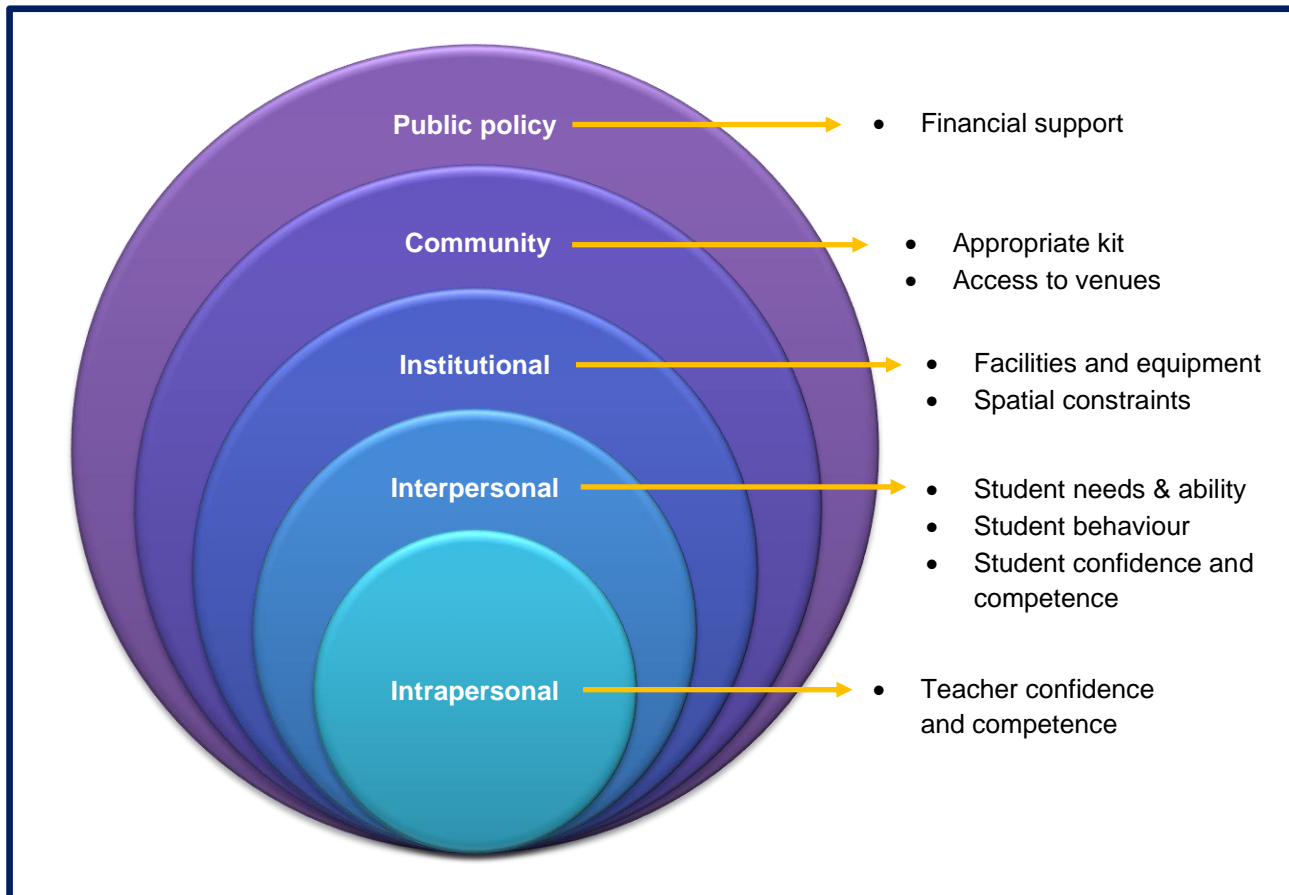
The survey asked practitioners to identify the challenges associated with delivering physical education in alternative provision schools. As a result, several challenges were identified that could be mapped to several different levels of the socioecological model. A socioecological model helps to illuminate the different, multidimensional influences that shape behaviour (i.e., in this instance, delivering physical education). As well as identifying individual and interpersonal factors, socioecological models also consider broader influences that impact on behaviour. Each of these is briefly outlined below:

- Intrapersonal level – challenges at this level may relate to an individual’s knowledge, skills, or level of self-efficacy
- Interpersonal level – this level is concerned with the interpersonal processes and different social groups that are central to the delivery of physical education
- Institutional level – this includes the rules, regulations, policies, and practices, coupled with the environment structures of the school/setting
- Community level – challenges here are concerned with the relationship between different institutions (e.g., the school and a community organisation) along with the social groups involved beyond the school (e.g., pupils’ parents)
- Policy level – including national or local policies that support or hinder the delivery of physical education in alternative provision.

The figure overleaf identifies the main challenges at each level of the socioecological model as reported by practitioners in the survey. It should be noted that to influence the delivery of physical education (e.g., via targeted interventions), a minimum of two challenges at two different levels need to be addressed to increase the likelihood of success.



Figure 1: Challenges of delivering physical education



#### 4.2. Qualitative findings – Lead practitioners

The transcripts from the 14 individual interviews and one focus group interview were analysed using an inductive and deductive analysis. As a result, several themes were developed that relate to (1) the purpose and value of physical education, (2) the challenges of delivering physical education in alternative provision settings and (3) what could help in delivering physical education. The sub-themes that relate to these are each discussed below in turn.

##### 4.2.1. The purpose and value of physical education

Mirroring the survey findings, participants mostly identified physical and mental health, and social skills as the key outcomes from physical education. In relation to the former, there was a strong emphasis on using physical education as a vehicle to **improve physical and mental health**. This came through strongly in all settings, but especially hospital schools. However, the specific reasons for this focus generally differed across settings. For instance, in alternative provision free schools and academies the physical domain was emphasised because of its claimed role in improving cardiovascular health and reducing childhood obesity, while in some hospital schools it was more about using physical education as physiotherapy and for general therapeutic purposes. A few practitioners mentioned physical education in hospital schools as being important for 'getting them

[young people]' out of bed, with one suggesting that there was often a 'pyjama paralysis' in hospital schools.

*I've suffered with mental health myself and I think that there is a big - I know research supports it as well - the whole exercise and mental health, the positive things that it can bring. And that's how I, kind of, attacked it with school and said, it doesn't have to be PE as such, but some sort of physical exercise can have such a massive impact on mental health (Claire, hospital school).*

*I just think in terms of the wider development and the soft skills and all the different benefits from it, whether that's mentally, physically, socially, there's such a wide variety of that and I'm a big advocate [of PE] myself, obviously... So for me it's a massive thing and I've seen the benefits for me and I do see a real positive impact with students with PE as well (Jamie, alternative provision academy).*

*I think it's [participant's views on the purpose of PE] shifted over the last few years for me. When I first, sort of, came into PE it was about ensuring that pupils learnt sport, competitive sport. But for me now, it's shifted to encouraging healthy lifestyles and making healthy choices and just really creating a love for PE. They [pupils] learn the skills anyway and that for me is not the main focus, because that's what we do, that's what we're teaching them, but making sure that they do enjoy PE and come to PE and want to take part (Luke, alternative provision academy).*

*For me PE should be the pivotal point of every school, whether it's mainstream, hospital school, because it incorporates physical, mental, emotional aspects and it should be happening every day. It should be seen as not a chore but a core aspect of everybody's daily life, even the staff as well (Jenny, hospital school).*

In addition, it was often noted that physical education and sport were valued in alternative provision schools because they can contribute to the **development of social skills** among young people. This was deemed especially important because participants argued that most young people under their charge lacked those important skills. There was emphasis placed on the importance of developing social skills to be successful at school, to ease the transition back to mainstream school, and for life in general, both outside of and once young people have left school.

*For ours [pupils], I'm not saying that the physical is not important, but the social is so much more important. So, it's how can we use the physical to enhance the social more than anything. And on the hospital wards it's very much more about bringing a bit of normality, having a bit of fun (Katie, hospital school).*



*PE is great for building social skills. I mean, some of the sport we play, last year for example table tennis was a big thing, because of COVID it was kind of one of the only sports they could play. But you watch them and when they first started the academic year it was complete silence, they wouldn't speak to each other. But as the year slowly went on, they started to build those social skills and they would ask each other to come and play, which is just like a normal teenager, but most of our students don't have those skills to start with so I think it build on that massively (Helena, alternative provision academy)*

#### **4.2.2. The challenges of delivering physical education**

In addition to many of the challenges identified in the survey (see 2.1.3), practitioners also identified some other barriers that impacted on the overall delivery of physical education. For example, several practitioners queried the appropriateness of their own (and others) knowledge and skills to teach physical education. This tied to the appropriateness of initial teacher education but also what was termed a '**recruitment crisis**' in alternative provision generally and physical education specifically. Practitioners said that it was difficult to recruit staff with the expertise to deliver a physical education curriculum in alternative provision schools.

*I'm overseeing other teachers in PE. We find it difficult to recruit to the role [of PE teacher]... you put it on things like Indeed and stuff like that, it's on there in a certain wage bracket, a certain type of people are looking for it. Whereas, actually, maybe getting people who have had experience in this sort of setting in university, straight out of university, would be a better place and build up their wage as they come through rather than just finding someone who goes, I play football at the weekend, I can do PE with kids, because then you end up with the brain dead PE that we're trying to move away from. They're the only sort of people we seem to have go for the role, like people that, kind of, just look at the money and it pays better than a TA [teaching assistant] and they keep themselves fit, that's what we seem to have had (Ben, alternative provision academy).*

Accordingly, there were many instances when non-physical education specialists were teaching physical education. Often, this was a person who had an interest in and participated in sport outside of work. Given this lack of expertise, some of our participants emphasised the importance of appropriate continued professional development opportunities to upskill them.

*There needs to be some training for non-specialists in PE because it would never make economic sense for us to have a PE specialist, but some of our staff have got a real interest in PE and sport and want it to be offered [to young people], so some training for them would be useful (Katie, hospital school).*

In addition, there was a sense among participants that there are general **negative perceptions about alternative provision schools and the young people that attend them**. For our participants, this perception was unwarranted and inaccurate. Nonetheless, it was said to contribute to the creation of significant barriers when it came to applying for funding to support physical education; trying to gain access to local leisure facilities and community spaces to engage in physical education; for general partnership work, especially with local mainstream schools; and with parents of young people who attended both mainstream and alternative provision schools.

*Just giving them [pupils] opportunities, that stigma as much as I say it's improved it's still there. You know, especially when we're doing some media things they're looked on in a certain way, whether that's me being overly protective, I still think that that's an issue. And I just think you've got to give them a chance, how are you writing off a young person, I think it's disgusting (Helena, alternative provision academy).*

*I think people are surprised when they come into the school that, one, the way it looks, there's displays everywhere and, two, the pupil behaviour. Pupils are in lessons. I don't know what people's perceptions are of APs sometimes but some people come in and expect pupils, I don't know, to be running around the corridor or sitting down somewhere where they shouldn't be. But our pupils are in lessons. Yes, like I said, we have the odd one that will walk out of the classroom and need five minutes and maybe go for a walk outside. That happens sometimes, but on the whole they're in lessons and they are learning (Luke, alternative provision academy)*

*I've recently been having some conversations with NGBs [national governing bodies] about what they can provide for alternate provision, and as soon as I mention alternative provision to them there this like, "Oh, you mean all the really naughty kids?" [Laughter] And I think we need to be starting to have those conversations with those people who are often ... Because actually the things that they're providing would be perfect and provide lots of opportunity, but it's busting some of those myths as well, I think (Female 5, focus group).*

*Local sport clubs don't want our kids in there. They are scared of them, of what they'll do. It's stupid (Male 5, focus group).*

Finally, all participants mentioned the importance of having **appropriate space and facilities** to teach physical education. While some were content with the space and facilities they had available, most said that the physical education that they could offer was restricted by the lack of space and facilities available. In some instances, the spaces that were available were said to be in such poor condition that they could not be used safely. Some practitioners had resorted to trying to use dinner halls and even classrooms to deliver physical education, but these spaces were deemed

inappropriate and there were also issues to do with the physical education time-loss associated with set up (moving tables and chairs). Some practitioners were able to use local leisure and community facilities for physical education, but again there were concerns about physical education time-loss, as well as cost, travel and transition concerns.

*Our school is tiny so in terms of sports hall we haven't got one... Quite rightly many secondary schools are linked to leisure centres and so they have the sports hall during the day... at one stage we had PE going on in a town hall, and it was rubbish, like, we had to use a sponge ball in case one of the windows got broken and the vicar's wife wasn't happy about some of the language, it was just painful (David, independent school).*

*I had a basketball team and didn't have a basketball hoop so we took the inside out of a bin. I'll be honest with you, inside the hall that we do have we didn't have lines down, they wanted me to do GCSE PE and I had to masking tape down badminton lines (Helena, alternative provision school)*

#### **4.2.3. What could help in delivering physical education**

The interviews with participants also identified what could be done to potentially support the development and delivery of physical education in alternative provision schools. The most immediate of this was **variety of activities taught and allowing pupils choice**. For instance, there were several practitioners who were critical of traditional forms of physical education, particularly when there was a focus on competitive sport and some forms of team games (e.g., celebrating the success of just one team as opposed to celebrating the individual achievements and broader successes achieved by all). According to practitioners, these activities deterred young people from participating in physical education. Therefore, practitioners said that there was a need for them and others to deliver a variety of activities that young people found enjoyable to engage them in physical education. There was also a focus on involving young people in activity and curriculum decisions to increase the likelihood that they would engage in physical education.

*I do try and give them [pupils] a variety of activities. And then if there are events going on, like the Olympics, if there are things in there they want to try, then we will. I've had a couple of students that tried to teach me to dance, which is not an easy thing, because that's what they were into. So I try and go with the interest in the students just to get them active (Claire, hospital school).*

*Next year we spoke about putting out a questionnaire to pupils just to see which sports they've enjoyed. Just a Google form, but just to go out to all pupils in the school, what they've enjoyed, what they didn't like, is there anything they'd like to try that they haven't had the chance to. Just to get some sort of feedback and data, sort of, hard data which we can then use to shape the curriculum for next year (Luke, alternative provision academy).*

In addition, to this more immediate idea, there was a general consensus among practitioners that their initial teacher education had not prepared them for teaching young people who attend alternative provision schools. Hence, there was said to be a need for **teacher education programmes and continued professional developing opportunities to be more tailored towards the young people who find themselves in alternative provision schools**. Specifically, our participants said that there needs to be greater focus on SEND and inclusion generally and SEMH specifically; trauma-informed approaches; alternative provision school culture and policy landscapes; behaviour and classroom management; and mental wellbeing and pastoral support, all of which needs contextualising in relation to physical education.

*I think that things like Team Teach should be part of teacher training. I think that de-escalation skills and more of a restorative approach and trauma should be part of actual teacher training because it's only until you get placed in a setting that you might be lucky enough... We've got agency staff that, you know, if you're there on the day you can obviously get involved with it but that should be part and parcel of being in one of our environments (Helena, alternative provision academy)*

Some practitioners suggested that pre-service teachers should be expected to **attend an alternative provision setting as part of their school placement experience(s)** to better prepare them for working in that setting but also to help with alternative provision teacher recruitment.

*I think people need to have experience going into those [AP] settings, because I had experience of that when I was at university. We had to do a module in an alternative provision [school] doing PE and that really opened me up to that, actually, working in AP. I don't care if they call me a twat, you know what I mean, it doesn't bother me, I'm happy to do my job here, I actually enjoy this setting. And I wouldn't have known that and I wouldn't have looked for it if I hadn't of been there on placement (Ben, alternative provision academy).*

Finally, practitioners noted how isolating it is working in physical education in alternative provision schools and, hence, the potential **value of establishing networks**. Whilst they recognised that there were challenges to this (e.g., time restraints), they felt that networks could be important for sharing ideas and developing their practice.

*I think because you're quite isolated in the way that alternative provision is that you almost lead your own department, it's nice to network and talk strategies and things that have worked well and have those kinds of conversations. I do think, as well, actually seeing things and experiencing, and even just shadowing and being able to witness other practitioners is really valuable just to try and pick up those little tips. And even if you just think, actually, I'm doing alright here and I'm doing the right sort of thing, just having someone to bounce ideas off, as well, is important (Jamie, alternative provision academy).*

*It's difficult developing partnerships and networks, even with other schools. I think it's just time, like, time is an issue. I've either got a club on after school; there is always something on and it's hard to find time to either be released from timetable to go. Our head is really supportive. If you ever want to go and view another school we're encouraged to, but in my eyes if I'm out of school for the day it then makes things hard work the next day. I mean, earlier on in my career I did spend a lot of time out watching other teachers and that and it was really useful. I do still like to get out for new ideas every so often but not as frequently as what I did, sort of, five years ago, for instance, and when I first started out [teaching] (Luke, alternative provision academy).*

#### **4.3. Qualitative findings – Pupils**

The qualitative data from the 25 pupils was used to construct short vignettes to help depict the different experiences they reported in relation to physical education and sport in alternative provision schools. To create these vignettes the transcribed data was first analysed via inductive analysis. The transcripts were read and re-read before keywords, quotes, and ideas that represented the individual vignettes were highlighted. The subsequent vignettes – formed from the verbatim words of participants – are presented below, each representing a different feature of what makes for a good or bad experience in physical education according to pupils in alternative provision schools.

### 4.3.1. Negative experiences of physical education

The following vignettes depict key features that account for negative experiences in physical education:

*PE can be really fun... but it's not always. I don't like it when it's really noisy. You know, when there's too much noise and everyone's shouting. Shouting at me, shouting at the game, just constantly shouting. Sometimes, other students are booing and that makes you feel crap, or if you fall over or trip up, everyone laughs and makes fun of you! I had a real fear of being made fun of in PE and that's why I never used to like back in mainstream school.*

*In mainstream, I used to hate being removed from PE. I was only at the school a few weeks and I never got to do PE – not once. It sucks! If you don't have the right kit, you couldn't do it. We always had to wear a certain kit – it was never what we wanted to wear or what we felt comfortable wearing. And like, if your kit doesn't fit you or your shoes are ripped, like everyone notices and then you get bullied. I used to hate being bullied in PE, it made me feel worthless!*

*Getting hit in the face when we play dodgeball – yeah, I never liked that. And I used to hate how repetitive the sports were – it's just the same thing over and over again and the teacher always assumes you can do it, or you want to do it. And then when you can't, you feel like shit. Like they always thought I wanted to do football, but I never did. For football, they used to always pick teams and I'd always get picked last. I always felt like I wasn't gifted or like good enough to do PE well – I just didn't think I could do it!*

*PE would be so much better if we had more space... Like we don't have the right space now, there's only a small indoor space and like nothing really outdoors like big open spaces or that. Outdoors, we've got some like cages, like fenced areas to play next to the car park, but they aren't that tidy. When the weathers rubbish and you can't go outdoors it's too cramped indoors. Like, if we had more space, we could do more stuff, we could do so many more activities.*

*I don't like PE when I don't have any friends or like, you can't do PE with your friends. And like, if you're tired or hungry and you don't get on with your teacher. I never really got on with any of my old teachers – they just didn't get me, they didn't understand me, but then they never really tried to.*



### 4.3.2. Positive experiences of physical education

The following vignettes reflect key features of physical education that support positive experiences:

*I really like it when you score a goal, or nail a basket, or something like that, when you can show off to everyone and show them that you are good at PE. Like, you can show them that you have some skill, like you can run and keep running, you've got good stamina. That's really important to me that I can show them that I am a good player.*

*PE is way better here, way better. Like for me, it's less competitive. Like, it can still be competitive if you want it to be, but in comparison to mainstream, it's less competitive and also less pressured. Like it's not just the same activities done over and over again. Here, you're not forced to do activities, like you can choose, and you have options. We could do individual activities with some bits of challenge, but not too much. I think it's good to have some challenge coz it keeps me focused so like some competition is fine but not physical if you get me. Not like me against you, but like, can I beat my score. And like, some of the activities we do in small teams which is great because it gives us a shared experience and something we can then chat about later. Like, I said earlier, I never felt good enough to do PE, but some of the small, individual activities we do here I really enjoy.*

*I think like, having supportive teachers is a massive plus. No doubt. That's what makes PE good. If you don't have supportive teachers, then what's the point. They could be like super sporty, but they don't have to be. Like, it's just really nice when they take part and play the games with you. It helps if they're decent – you know, like funny, approachable and you can have some good banter with them. I think it really helps having a supportive teacher, someone who isn't biased, like doesn't judge you on what you did before or what you couldn't do before. They take time to get to know you and to explain things to you clearly, like how a new game is played. So yeah, having like supportive teachers is a biggie!*

*It's fun when it's not boring – that's what makes PE good for me. You know, when you're occupied and doing stuff... but not the same stuff all the time. So, like maybe you can choose from stuff to do – it's then different, but fun and exciting.*

*I like PE when it's social. Like, when you interact with other people who are supportive of you and what you're trying to do. And like, when you can do things with your friends. Like doing stuff in teams – it doesn't have to be you know, like, not necessarily competitive stuff – but like other stuff in teams. I can then help, I can contribute. That makes me feel wanted... it's a nice feeling.*

### 4.3.3. Summary

There are several factors identified in the above vignettes that contribute to a positive and negative physical education experience for young people. This includes how physical education in alternative provision schools compares to physical education in mainstream schools. Each of these key features is identified in the table below:

Type of experience	Key feature
Positive experience	Helping to create a <b>sense of achievement</b> Having the required <b>space</b> available to engage in activities <b>Supportive</b> and <b>relatable</b> teachers Being able to <b>interact</b> and <b>play with friends</b> Having some input and <b>choice over the type of activities</b> <b>Avoiding competition</b> but aiming to better previous achievements
Negative experience	Too much <b>noise</b> Traditional games and activities that are <b>repetitive</b> Students have to perform in front of others, and are <b>bullied</b> Perception that they have <b>limited ability (low self-esteem)</b> Forced to wear a particular <b>kit</b> <b>Limited opportunity to build rapport</b> with the teachers The <b>space</b> available is <b>unkempt</b>



## 5. Summary and conclusions

In summarising the main findings across the three phases of the research, we return to the original aims and objectives driving the study. As such, each of the key objectives is outlined below.

### 5.1. Objective 1 – Mapping the provision of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools in England.

Based on data from the first phase – the survey – 90% of alternative provision providers deliver some form of physical education, though less (78%) suggested that physical education was compulsory. The range of activities delivered in physical education appears to mirror mainstream school physical education with football (95%), cricket (81%), and badminton (78%) dominating. In addition, physical education seems to be delivered by a range of individuals with just 57% suggesting it was delivered by a specialist physical education teacher, 46% suggesting it was delivered by a generalist classroom teacher, and 30% reporting it was delivered by a sports coach.

### 5.2. Objective 2 – Foregrounding the voice of children/young people and key stakeholders to gain insights about the nature, purpose, and value of physical education and sport.

According to practitioners, the main purpose for physical education and sport in alternative provision schools is (1) the development of physical and mental health, and (2) enhancing social skills. The physical benefits of physical education were emphasised because of its claimed role in improving cardiovascular health and reducing childhood obesity. However, it was a particular prominent purpose in hospital schools whereby physical education was used as physiotherapy and for general therapeutic purposes. Developing social skills were also seen to be an important purpose in order to ease the transition back to mainstream school, and for life in general, both outside of and once young people have left school.

### 5.3. Objective 3 – Identifying barriers and facilitators to engagement with physical education and sport in alternative provision schools.

The barriers to delivering physical education and sport in alternative provision schools span a range of levels. At the **intrapersonal level**, the challenges include teacher confidence and competence, and a perceived lack of pedagogical content knowledge. At the **intrapersonal level**, pupil needs and abilities, pupil behaviour, their confidence and competence, and motivation were also considered key challenges. In addition, pupil trauma – which impact on their engagement in physical education – along with their past negative experiences of physical education in mainstream school were seen as important factors that shaped engagement with physical education and sport. At an **institutional level**, the available space, equipment and facilities, a lack of changing rooms and the challenges of employing staff with relevant expertise were identified as key barriers. Similarly, at the **community level**, the key challenges included the availability of transport to and from offsite venues, the costs associated with supporting transitions to community sport, and community organisations not wanting

to support young people in alternative provision schools because of negative perceptions and stigma. Finally, at the **public policy level**, a lack of financial support and the lack of funding aligned with dual registered students were reported as key challenges to the delivery of physical education and sport. Given the range of barriers identified by practitioners, it is worth noting that any interventions that aim to enhance physical education and sport in alternative provision should seek to address multiple barriers across multiple levels to increase the chances of success.

#### **5.4. Objective 4 – Examining the resourcing of physical education and sport and what training is provided for those who deliver in alternative provision schools.**

While it is important to recognise that not every school has access to the same facilities and spaces, just 57% reported having access to an outdoor playground, more than half (51%) of those that responded did not have access to a dedicated indoor space for the delivery of physical education. Similarly, just 43% reported having access to a dedicated outdoor space (e.g., AstroTurf, sports pitches, or MUGA). While 40% suggested the **facilities** were very good or good, (24% suggested they were average), **36% suggested they were very poor or poor**. In addition, 40% suggested the **equipment** they have available were very good or good, while **41% suggested it was average** (19% suggested it was very poor or poor). It was also apparent via the qualitative data that there is a **'recruitment crisis'** impacting on the ability to employ and train/develop new staff, while those that do enter into alternative provision have limited, if any, prior knowledge and experience of working in this area – which may impact on delivery and how children/young people experience physical education.

## **6. Recommendations**

The final objective of the study was to identify evidence-based implications for policy and practice, and future research directions. As such, these are detailed below.

### **6.1. Recommendation 1 – Policy: Provision of space**

The first recommendation has implications for policy and relates to the provision of space in alternative provision schools. Currently there is no requirement to provide a dedicated space for students to engage in physical education, informal physical activity, or sport within alternative provision schools and this was identified as a key issue by both practitioners and young people. Indeed, the provision of a dedicated (and maintained) space to support a wider and more varied array of activities would help to support young people's physical, social, cognitive, and affective development.

### **6.2. Recommendation 2 – Policy: Teacher education**

Initial teacher education (ITE) has a key role to play in supporting the delivery of physical education and sport in alternative provision schools. We recommend that pre-service teachers are provided with a teaching placement in some form of alternative provision school to gain experience of working with children and young people in these contexts, which may also support teacher recruitment. In addition, ITE and continued professional development should focus more on SEND and SEMH, trauma-informed approaches, and behaviour management in the context of physical education.

### **6.3. Recommendation 3 – Policy: Funding for physical education and sport**

A key policy recommendation is to reconsider how funding is allocated for the provision of physical education and sport. For instance, for dual-registered students – that is, those enrolled at mainstream and alternative provision schools – funding is allocated to, and stays with, the mainstream school. As a result, alternative provision schools are not able to access this and are reliant on other (limited) funds to help facilitate physical education and sport.

### **6.4. Recommendation 4 – Policy: Support network**

The creation of a formal or informal network would act as a community of practice, providing opportunities for teachers to feel connected with others in the profession, and helping to facilitate the sharing of ideas. This could be facilitated by the Youth Sport Trust as a key organisation with the resources and reach to connect individuals and bring them together on a regular basis (e.g., annually) to help cultivate the community of practice.

### **6.5. Recommendation 5 – Practice: Facilitate pupil voice**

A key recommendation is to facilitate the inclusion of pupil voice in curriculum decision making processes. Providing students with choice and options over what activities to engage with was seen

as key to facilitating their initial and continued engagement in physical education. As such, finding ways to allow young people to be involved in the planning, design and even delivery of physical education would likely increase their engagement and enjoyment. This may be done with surveys, suggestions boxes, informal individual/focus group discussions, or more formally through a student council. In addition, the Youth Sport Trust [Youth Voice Toolkit](#)<sup>i</sup> (and Chateez emoji cards) could be used as a means of considering how to facilitate pupil voice.

#### **6.6. Recommendation 6 – Practice: Facilitate a sense of achievement**

Individual or small-sided games and activities should be used when the numbers taking part are low. Practitioners should seek to reframe competition in order to foster internal motivation (e.g., by beating their previous scores) and provide opportunities for pupils to feel a sense of achievement in their own ability. This is potentially easier to achieve in individual activities or small-sided games than in the traditional activities usually delivered in physical education. Helping students to succeed and develop a sense of achievement was identified by pupils as key to a good and enjoyable physical education experience. To support here, the Youth Sport Trust have identified [five principles of competition](#)<sup>ii</sup> to help facilitate positive experiences. In addition, the [positive experiences of competition toolkit](#)<sup>iii</sup> is available for teachers as an immediate resource to support their continuous professional development.

#### **6.7. Recommendation 7 – Practice: Build trust and rapport**

Key to supporting vulnerable young people – especially those young people who have experienced trauma (as many have in alternative provision settings) – is to foster positive relationships between teachers and pupils. One way of doing this is by teachers actively engaging in activities with young people since pupils here reported this helps to build trust and rapport and was key to a good physical education experience. Other ways of building trust and rapport including finding opportunities to check-in with students and see how they are, using positive, restorative conversations and avoiding shouting and loud noises (since this was noted to reflect bad physical education experiences).

#### **6.8. Recommendation 8 – Practice: Provide off-site opportunities**

A further recommendation for practitioners is to try and provide off-site opportunities for young people to engage in physical activity and sport, since this would help them to (re)engage with the outside world and offer an opportunity to counter the stigma evident in the wider community. However, we recognise that this is not without its challenges (e.g., financial, logistical) and may require changes to the way funding is allocated to alternative provision settings (see recommendation 3).

#### **6.9. Recommendation 9 – Research: Future directions**

Further research funding is required to continue to explore the alternative provision landscape as it relates to physical education and sport. There needs to be further research with children and young

people. This should include prolonged engagement in the field, and should engage with novel, creative methods to help pupils share their voice (and help researchers and practitioners listen). Specific focus should be cast on (1) the role of physical education in transitioning young people from mainstream to alternative provision schools, and back again; (2) using physical education to develop the life and employment skills of pupils in alternative provision schools; (3) the relationship between space and physical education teacher pedagogical practices in alternative provision schools; (4) developing trust and rapport between teachers and pupils in alternative provisions; (5) using trauma-informed approaches in alternative provision school physical education; (6) developing feelings of belonging, acceptance and value among pupils through physical education in alternative provision schools; (7) the impact of placement in an alternative provision school on the knowledge, skills and confidence of pre-service physical education teachers; and (8) the impact of support networks on the knowledge, skills and confidence of physical education teachers in alternative provision schools.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/media/j1xf0qap/yst-inclusion-2020-youth-voice-toolkitfinal.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://media.yourschoolgames.com/documents/Approaches\\_to\\_Competition\\_-\\_Download.pdf](https://media.yourschoolgames.com/documents/Approaches_to_Competition_-_Download.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://media.yourschoolgames.com/documents/YST\\_Positive\\_Experiences\\_of\\_Competition\\_school\\_and\\_teacher\\_toolkit\\_Feb\\_2021.pdf](https://media.yourschoolgames.com/documents/YST_Positive_Experiences_of_Competition_school_and_teacher_toolkit_Feb_2021.pdf)