WHY ARE WE FAILING OUR CHILDREN?
When the Alliance wrote its new strategy, *The Heart of An Active Nation*, in 2017, the desire to identify a strand of work around children and young people’s experience of sport and recreation was particularly strong.

This was driven by all of our members recognising, irrespective of size and focus, the importance of all young people having a good experience in their early years so that sport and recreation can be a positive influence throughout their life.

To guide our work in this area and make sure that our starting point was informed, we wanted to begin by analysing what has happened in recent years. As the first stage of this, we have conducted a foundation research exercise to establish the extent to which the current system, historic initiatives, public policy and investment have contributed to present outcomes.

In 1977 the Alliance, then the CCPR, published a report *Sport and Young People: The Need for Action Now* which highlights many of the issues that would, depressingly, feel very familiar today. Progress has been made in some of the areas highlighted in that report, and we know from the work of our members that there are many fantastic programmes which engage children and young people and give them a great experience.

Yet, as this report shows, activity levels have at best stayed the same, and at worst declined significantly. So, despite the huge efforts of many, and some considerable investment, we cannot continue on the same path and just hope things will get better.

We believe children and young people have a fundamental right to be active but that the system and our society are failing to deliver this. We all need to take responsibility for this – the responsibility does not lie just with government or schools, sports organisations or the media, or parents, carers and young people themselves. The system is complex – and the first thing we must do is recognise that we can all play a part in improving the opportunities for more children and young people to be engaged.

So, from this point onwards, we will be working to build a campaign to establish the fundamental right of the child to be active. We believe this is just as important as any other fundamental right and that this should be the single, unifying purpose for a revitalised system.

We look forward to working with our members and others who share our commitment.

Emma Boggis
Chief Executive,
Sport and Recreation Alliance
July 2018
The Sport and Recreation Alliance conducted this research project to reflect on how the domestic sport and recreation system around children and young people has operated in the recent political landscape.

Over 40 years on from the Central Council of Physical Recreation’s 1977 report Sport and Young People: The Need for Action Now, this research considers the same debate – are we achieving positive outcomes for children and young people through sport and recreation?

Since 1977 we have witnessed political turbulence and societal change, alongside significant activity, investment and a huge effort to get children and young people active. That being said, using government statistics, current data shows that:

- **20%** of children in Year 6 and 10% in Reception are classified as obese.
- **80%** of girls and 77% of boys do not meet the national recommended level of activity.
- **75%** of mental illnesses start before a child reaches their 18th birthday.

To read the full report, visit www.sportandrecreation.org.uk
With so many children enjoying being active there should be cause for hope, but by recognising the more concerning statistics, we must first acknowledge that the system is preventing them from getting active.

In 40 years’ time, we don’t want to be reporting a similar lack of progress, and after identifying a series of core objectives, this research actively targeted the focus of our analysis on particular sections of the debate. Namely, we sought to:

- Define the sporting system for children and young people;
- Consider the role of central government and parliament;
- Draw comparisons to international case studies of best practice.

While the overall indicators are very disappointing, this is not a critique of successful initiatives and organisations but rather the result of a lack of co-ordination, consistency, and political leadership. The evidence from this research supports concerns that progress across the recent political landscape has not been good enough and presents a challenging view that the current system is failing our children.
CHILDHOOD OBESITY:
THE EMERGENCE OF A CRISIS

INFLUENCING FACTORS:
Economic
Sport and Recreation
Children and Young People

% OF CHILDREN CLASSED AS OVERWEIGHT OR OBSE

LABOUR
CALLAGHAN - 1976-79
1976  Britain borrows money from IMF
1978/79  Winter of Discontent

CONSERTATIVE
THATCHER - 1979-90
1982  High unemployment and economic recession
1984  The miners’ strike
1986  Major national industries are privatised
1988  Education Reform Act (physical education becomes a foundation subject)
1989  Children Act
1990  Poll tax riots

CONSERTATIVE
CAMERON 2010-16
2012  London Olympics/Paralympics
2016  Brexit Referendum

CONSERTATIVE
MAJOR - 1990-97
1992  ‘Black Wednesday’ exchange rate crisis
1993  National Lottery Act
1997  Sport England and UK Sport established

LABOUR
BROWN 2007-10
2007/8  Start of global financial crisis
2010  Start of ‘age of austerity’ programme

LABOUR
BLAIR - 1997-2007
2000  Dotcom bubble burst
2002  Establishment of OFSTED
2004  Children Act (establishment of Children’s Commissioner)

2008  30%

2012  28%

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

The research has recognised some of the key failings of the existing system.

There has been a significant level of investment and a huge range of initiatives and programmes over the period since 1977, but the research finds that wider issues of political turbulence and a lack of consistency or long-term strategy have combined to deliver disappointing results overall.

This report also marks an acknowledgement from the Alliance that our own role within this debate has not been active or consistent enough over a long period. Our priority now is to look to the future and to make sure we take decisive action, with an appropriate long-term vision for enhanced outcomes.

So, how can we take action to overcome these challenges and build a bold, re-invigorated system delivering meaningful and impactful opportunities for children and young people?

OUR PRIMARY RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION IS:

ESTABLISH THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT OF A CHILD TO BE ACTIVE.

The UN Convention on The Rights of the Child already includes a ‘right of the child to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child’. We need to go beyond this and make sure that physical activity is explicitly referenced. We also need to recognise that existing rights are sometimes not lived in practice, and we should remind ourselves that actions speak louder than words. We must break down the fundamental right of a child to be active into a series of wider calls for the Sport and Recreation Alliance, government and the sector to collectively deliver upon.

WE WILL WORK TOGETHER WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
If we want to create meaningful change, we must work with members and partners to make sure children and young people are well represented in the design of policy and programmes which affect them. The Alliance pledges to engage and listen to young people in the direction of our work, and will work with members and partners to do the same.

We must prioritise a child-centred approach, with young people at the heart of our decision-making structures. Their voices will be heard.

The system is excessively complex and confusing. It lacks a clear, overarching purpose, and maintains ineffective systems of accountability. It is essential that there are clearly defined cross-government and departmental mandates around the delivery of sport and recreation and there is greater clarity on the workings of the current system.

Most importantly, there must be a clear consensus and system of responsibility for each policy area, with a real sense of accountability running throughout. We need to carry out an honest assessment of impact to date and collectively identify key learnings for future application.

Government must consider expenditure on children and young people a vital long-term investment for the development of this country’s future infrastructure. If we are to optimise economic productivity and ensure the future health and wellbeing of the population, early years interventions must be coordinated effectively to embed appropriate lifestyle foundations in our children’s formative years, with physical education formalised as a core subject within the school curriculum.

Collaboration across the sport, youth and education sectors should be reaffirmed and codified if we are to hold each other to account for how we enable children and young people to be active and enjoy sport, physical activity and recreation.

Meanwhile, within government, it is crucial that we have clarity around each Inter-Ministerial Group’s objectives and how they are engaging with their respective sectors, with a sound understanding of how progress will be measured and reported beyond each Group.

As part of this strategy, government should commit to a comprehensive review of the 2004 Children’s Act, and the wider legislative and regulatory landscape.

There is a lack of clarity around what we mean by ‘children and young people’. With very different perceptions of how we define children and young people, we must find common ground and make sure that the sector is working towards the same ultimate objectives, for the same beneficiaries.

Similarly, there is an urgent need for the sector to recognise parents and wider family groups as key stakeholders in our efforts to drive meaningful behavioural change. An active lifestyle begins at home and we must broaden our horizons if we are to support young people in truly developing healthy, happy lives.
WE MUST MAKE SURE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND

There are discrepancies in the quality of experience for children and young people when it comes to sport and recreation, both at school and beyond. We must work collaboratively to better understand the diversity of our children and young people, including their behaviours, wants and needs. Working in co-ordination with the wider youth sector, we must strive to eradicate negative contact and commit to introducing young people to positive experiences of sport, physical activity and recreation.

WE MUST LEARN FROM OTHERS

We must learn from others and history to identify key learnings. There is an under use of international comparisons. We must be mindful that we do not hold all the answers domestically, with opportunities for us to interrogate successful international case studies, learn from their journeys and apply their learning here in the UK. We should also recognise that there have been very successful interventions closer to home. We need to learn from what has worked and consider opportunities to work at scale and fully integrate these into a wider systemic approach.

CONCLUSION

We recognise that we don’t have all the answers, but we are determined to ask the questions necessary to make sure we don’t look back in 40 years’ time and see we continued to fail our children.

From today, we will be working to build a campaign to establish the fundamental right of the child to be active. This is just as important as any other fundamental right and should be the single, unifying purpose for a revitalised system.

We look forward to working with others who share our commitment.

Please visit www.sportandrecreation.org.uk to download the full version of Why are we failing our children?

To join the conversation around establishing the fundamental right of a child to be active, get involved via social media using our campaign hashtag.

#RightToBeActive