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**YST RESEARCH**

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## Returning to school after COVID restrictions: The view from PE and school leads

September 2020

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Page 1

## Introduction

In March 2020, schools closed their doors to the majority of their pupils and further restrictions were introduced in response to Covid-19. These measures not only affected children's education, but it also meant that they missed out on many other aspects of school life such as seeing their friends, taking part in sport, accessing support services and experiencing key milestone events in their lives. It is understandable then that, aside from the obvious economic and health impacts, the restrictions have the potential to have significant repercussions on children's mental, physical and social wellbeing.

At Youth Sport Trust, we are working to ensure that every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport and we have a deep understanding of the role that these have in supporting and enhancing all elements of a child's wellbeing. As such we are keen to ensure that, as children fully return to school, they are able to access a good quality Physical Education (PE) to help support their recovery and growth.

To build a picture of the current landscape, we conducted a short, online survey, receiving responses from 252 PE and school leads. The aim was to understand the current provision of both timetabled and extracurricular PE and any barriers to delivery, particularly in the light of ongoing Government guidelines and restrictions (e.g. maintaining class bubbles, cleaning and changing rules etc.), so that we can continue to support teachers and children during these challenging times.

## Key Findings

Teachers are identifying a number of issues as children return to school, which PE could help to address:

- Almost three quarters of teachers are reporting that children are returning with low levels of physical fitness and almost half have noticed mental wellbeing issues.
- Whilst the majority of teachers will deliver the same amount of curriculum PE as pre-COVID, some schools will deliver less or even none this term (26% of KS4 will deliver less or none).
- The majority of schools will be delivering all practical or mostly practical PE with some theory.
- Around four in ten schools will be delivering no extracurricular PE in the Autumn term and additionally, around half of schools will be delivering less than before.

Logistical issues relating to the delivery of PE in schools are the biggest barrier/issue for teachers and are cited as reasons for the reduction in PE and extracurricular delivery:

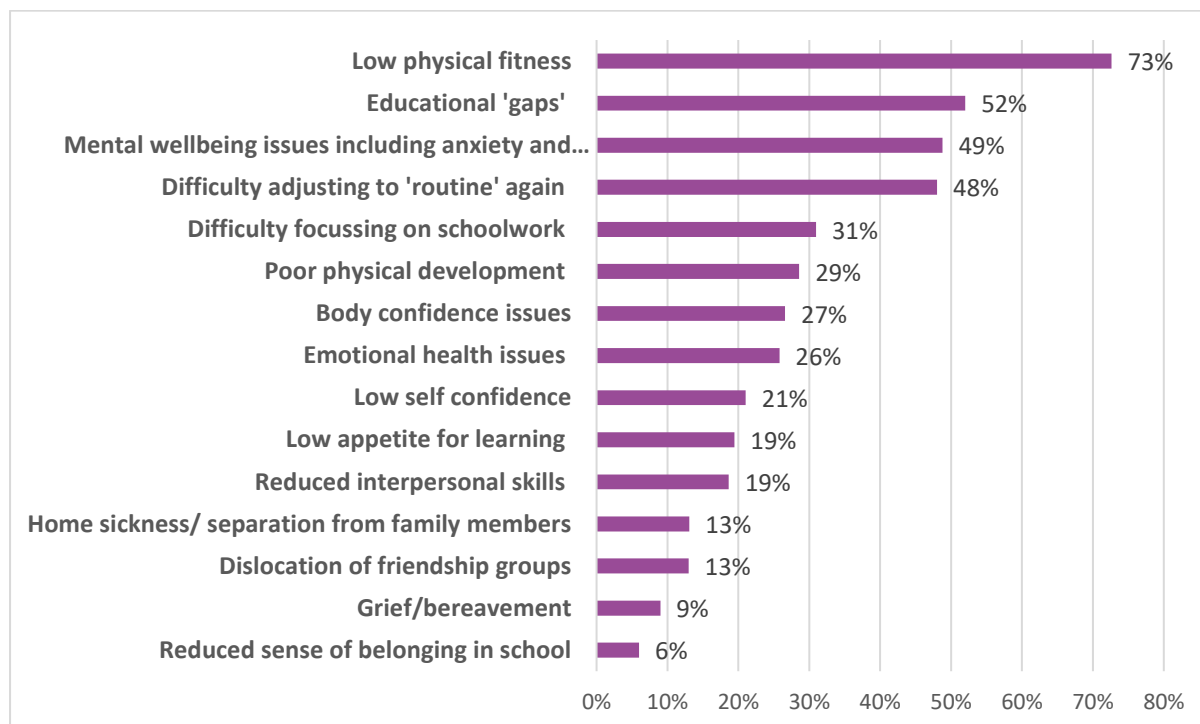
- The current guidelines and restrictions make it more difficult to deliver PE, particularly having to stay in class bubbles, the need for cleaning, and having staggered breaks/lunches.
- There is a cautiousness around interpreting the guidelines correctly e.g. how to deliver team sports, indoor PE, delivery within/across bubbles. More clarity and guidance in this area could help to alleviate concerns and potentially open up more opportunities for PE in schools.

## Main findings

### Teachers are identifying a number of issues as children return to school which PE could help address

Almost three quarters of teachers of PE are noticing low levels of physical fitness among their pupils.

Other issues emerging are educational gaps, mental wellbeing issues (including anxiety and fear) and difficulties getting back to routine.



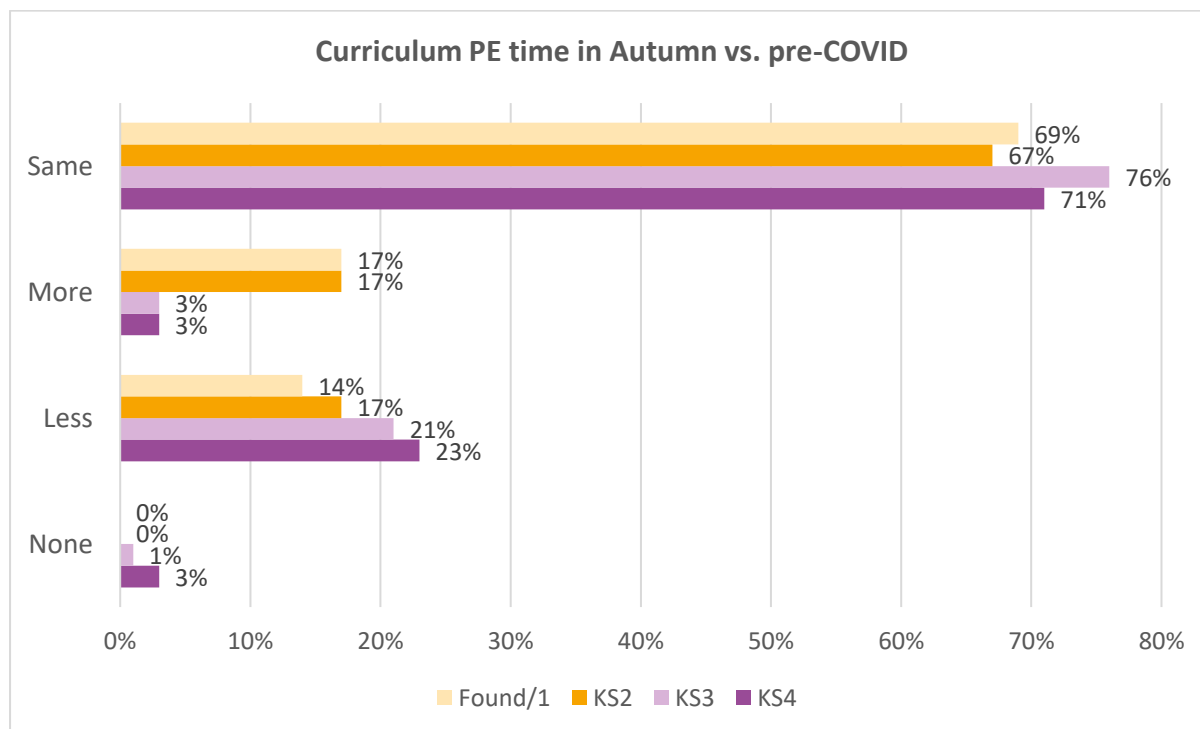
To provide more detail, we posed an open question asking what the biggest challenge to children's physical, emotional and social wellbeing had been on return to school. Qualitatively teachers told us of:

- low levels of fitness and weight-gain, not helped by the on-going restrictions:
  - *"no physical exercise over lockdown"*
  - *"they describe themselves as caged animals"*
  - *"It's very sedentary. They don't even move between lessons"*
  - *"struggle to complete short bursts of activity without becoming out of breath"*
- difficulties with children getting back to routines, their motivation and their ability to adapt to all the restrictions/bubbles/changes.
  - *"getting used to a new normal"*
  - *"not able to socialise outside their bubble"*
- Issues with anxiety, worry and issues with confidence
  - *"fearful of new routines",*
  - *"anxiety about crowds"*
  - *"students are very quiet, subdued in lessons and many are withdrawn"*

## Some schools will be delivering less or even no PE this term

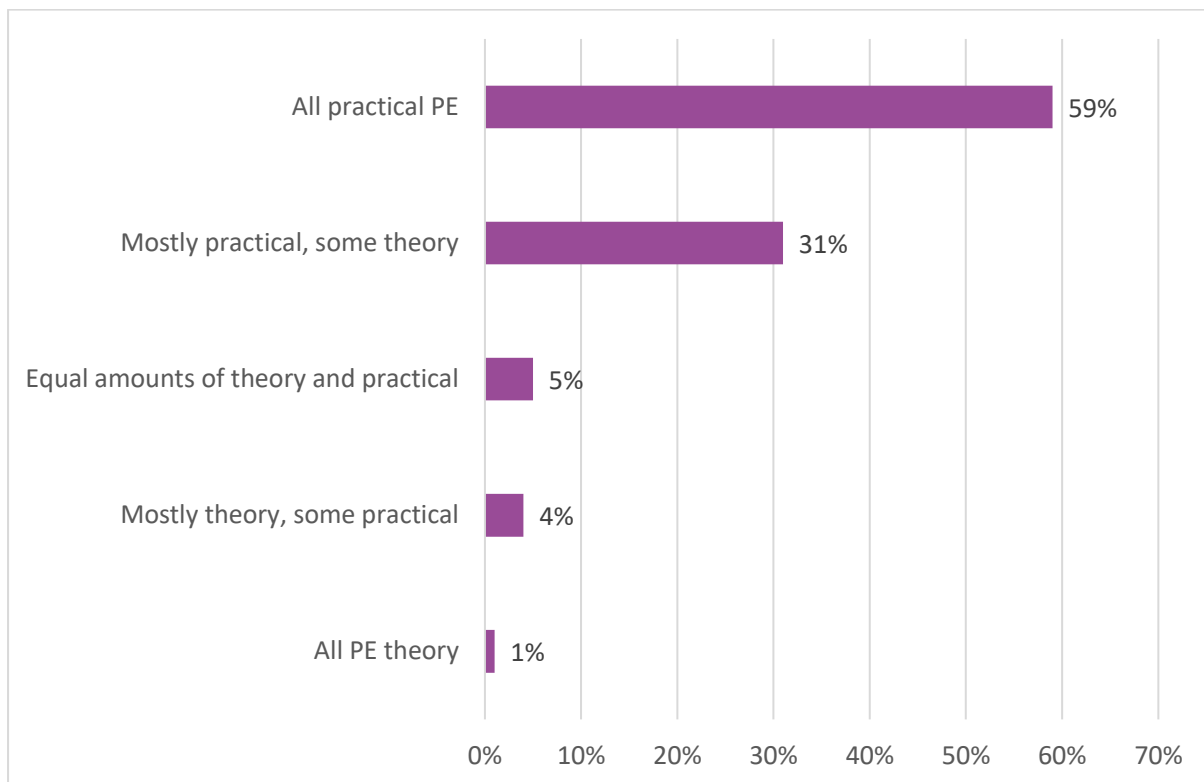
Whilst the majority of teachers will deliver the same amount of curriculum PE as pre-COVID, some schools will deliver less or even none this term (26% of KS4 will deliver less or none).

More than 4 out of 5 primary teachers will be offering the same or more curriculum PE. However, whilst many secondary schools are delivering the same, very few are doing more, indeed 22% of KS3 and 26% of KS4 teachers are delivering less or no PE vs. pre-COVID



	Same/More	Less/none
<b>KS4</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>KS3</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>KS2</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Found/1</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>14%</b>

## The majority of schools (90%) will be delivering all or mostly practical PE



## The mix of practical and theory is unchanged for many schools but where it has changed, the balance has tended to move towards more theory

When we compare this to normal (pre-COVID) provision we see that:

- most schools (75%) will be delivering the same balance of PE theory and practical PE as before
- 8% will offer more practical PE
- 17% will deliver more theory than usual (of which most are secondary schools)

## Logistical issues relating to the implementation of COVID guidance are the key barriers and issues to delivering curriculum PE in schools

Nearly all schools reported some barrier/issue to delivering PE in school.

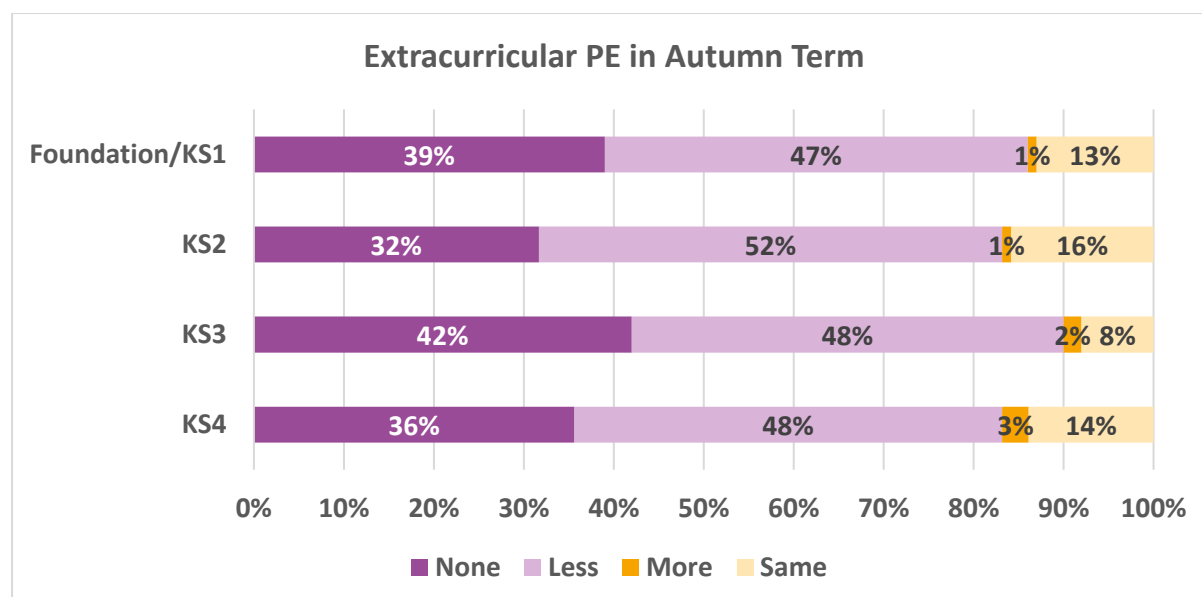
Being able to follow the delivery guidance is their key concern, particularly for those teaching in secondary schools. Wet weather makes compliance even more difficult. Additionally, almost half of secondary school teachers believe that the current guidance is unclear, no doubt contributing to their cautiousness.

	Foundation /KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4
Being able to follow delivery guidance e.g. social distancing, changing rooms, cleaning	43%	44%	69%	59%
Wet weather	51%	54%	60%	56%
Cautiousness about interpreting the guidelines correctly	40%	38%	53%	44%
Lack of access to facilities and space	52%	45%	47%	43%
Unclear guidance/rules for delivery	27%	29%	48%	42%
Reduced access to resources and equipment	40%	42%	44%	38%
De-prioritisation of PE in favour of other subjects	14%	15%	13%	24%
Children's fitness levels	14%	15%	20%	17%
Lack of school's focus on PE's contribution to wider school outcomes e.g. character and wellbeing	12%	10%	17%	16%
PE staff concerns	8%	11%	15%	12%
Children's lack of engagement/motivation	1%	4%	6%	11%
Wellbeing concerns e.g. children's confidence, anxiety etc.	6%	6%	14%	11%
None	3%	4%	3%	3%

**Around four in ten schools will be delivering no extracurricular PE in the Autumn term and additionally, around half of schools will be delivering less than before.**

Less than a fifth of schools are offering the same extracurricular provision as pre-COVID.

Provision patterns are similar across Key Stages, being driven by physical logistics/limitations.



Nearly all schools reported some barrier/issue to extracurricular delivery. The main issues related to following or understanding the guidelines. Staggered breaks and lunches also affected a school's ability to deliver extracurricular PE. Other issues, particularly for primary schools, included staffing, weather and parental concerns.

	Foundation/ KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4
Being able to follow delivery guidance e.g. social distancing, changing rooms, cleaning	55%	59%	63%	59%
Cautiousness about interpreting the guidelines correctly	44%	41%	47%	44%
Reduced/staggered break and lunch times	44%	47%	44%	41%
Unclear guidance/rules for delivery	25%	31%	46%	41%
Lack of access to facilities and space	31%	30%	28%	27%
Reduced access to resources and equipment	30%	29%	28%	27%
Staff availability	34%	30%	26%	24%
Wet weather	34%	34%	19%	18%
Other	10%	13%	15%	15%
Parental concerns	25%	24%	19%	15%
PE staff concerns	10%	8%	14%	15%
De-prioritisation of school sport vs. subjects/activities	5%	5%	6%	10%
Lack of school's focus on school sport's contribution to wider school outcomes e.g. character and wellbeing	9%	7%	9%	8%
Children's lack of engagement/motivation	1%	3%	5%	5%
Wellbeing concerns e.g. children's confidence, anxiety etc.	3%	3%	5%	4%
Children's fitness levels	8%	6%	5%	3%
None	4%	2%	2%	2%

Qualitatively, many also mentioned that the need for bubbles and the need for additional cleaning hampered their ability to deliver PE and extra-curricular activities

Others were looking for more guidance and reassurances around safety

- *"clear guidance on what we are allowed to do",*
- *"clear guidance with bubbles"*
- *"more detailed guidelines for teams/contact sports in wet weather"*

Staffing was also mentioned: a few reported that staff were *"exhausted"* which reduced capacity to deliver extracurricular activity.

Others mentioned difficulties with travel, and access to facilities, whilst, for a few, they were looking for prioritisation of PE from their senior leadership team (SLT) or Government

- *"it's been banned by SLT"*
- *"make PE a core subject, then staff will pay attention"*

## Reflections

The current circumstances and restrictions are having and will continue to have an impact on nearly every aspect of our lives so it's no surprise that children are returning to school with a number of physical, mental and social wellbeing issues. PE has a distinct and unique role to play in helping children overcome these wellbeing challenges so it's crucial that schools can provide high quality PE to their pupils. However, practical limitations and a cautiousness around delivery means that teachers continue to face delivery challenges.

To support teachers, Youth Sport Trust has created a range of free guidance and support for schools around a return to delivering safe, inclusive and fun school sport, physical activity and PE. The resources are available to view and download at [www.youthsporttrust.org/return-school-support](http://www.youthsporttrust.org/return-school-support)

*“Schools have been working creatively to ensure young people access daily physical activity, weekly Physical Education and after-school sport. However, this insight reveals that many schools are struggling to resume PE successfully with the challenge greatest in secondary schools, where over a fifth are offering less PE than before COVID.*

*The wellbeing of our children has to be a national priority right now. If we want to help children ‘catch up’ in the classroom we need to ensure they are active every day and are learning important skills through PE that they can draw on to help them cope with the continued disruption in their lives.*

*We have spent the last six months adapting as a charity and working with partners to create free support to give teachers confidence and clear guidance they can follow. We hope to play our part in helping the country recover.”*

Ali Oliver CEO of Youth Sport Trust



## Appendices:

### Survey details

- Conducted by Youth Sport Trust Research and Insight Team and served online via social media channels
- Fieldwork dates: 9<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020
- A total of 252 responses were received
- Respondents were PE leads and senior school leaders from a mix of schools covering foundation to KS4
- Some results were analysed by provision within key stage. This means that total answers may equal more than the number of respondents if a teacher covers more than one key stage.
- The sample composition was: Foundation/KS1 (77), KS2 (97), KS3 (163), KS4 (157)
- 41% of respondents were YST members.

### YST Research

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. YST Research offers research, analysis, insight and evaluation services to organisations with an interest in the wider children and young people's sector. Our research expertise is focussed on improving the wellbeing of children and young people through sport and physical activity.

Our specialisms include:

- Education, PE and school sport
- Community sport / clubs
- Early years settings
- Life skills and employability
- Activism and volunteering
- Health (physical, social and emotional)
- For our latest research findings, visit.

By working with us, you are supporting us to achieve our mission to improve children's lives and their future.