

# Active Schools Horizon Scanning: 15 trends in 2025

## About this report

This report sets out 15 trends emerging from an Active Schools Horizon Scanning exercise in summer and autumn 2025.

The trends are based on a review of horizon scanning and societal change documents at UK and Scottish level, a review of relevant policy and practice, and interviews with 25 strategic leaders in the fields of health, sport, physical activity, education and equality.

The trends profiled in this document are those which are considered directly relevant to Active Schools. Wider societal changes which will impact on Scotland generally are well documented in other research – most notably the [Scotland in 2050](#) horizon scanning series. The broad format and style of the Scotland in 2050 horizon scanning has been replicated here, for this Active Schools specific piece of work.

The document will not cover all the possible factors that will be important in influencing how Active Schools develops in the future. However, it covers the 15 main trends emerging from existing written information and discussions with key individuals. It is intended to form a basis for discussion within **sportscotland**, and with wider stakeholders, about the future direction, priorities and focus of the Active Schools programme.

This document sits alongside an evaluation of the Active Schools programme, which explores impact, learning and future options.

The trends outlined in this report are not inevitable. Wider circumstances and events – including war, disease, climate change, changes in political leadership or devolution – may significantly impact on these trends. However, the work we do in Scotland, and the choices we make about how our work contributes to tackling trends such as inequality, worsening health and increasing gaps in attainment, can impact greatly on the direction these trends take in the future.

**“The Scotland of 2050 will be shaped by a series of unpredictable forces... but it will also be shaped by us. By the decisions we take, the policy choices we implement... We have to actively, purposefully, and I hope also joyfully, make it happen.”**  
First Minister, 2025<sup>1</sup>

# The 15 trends - overview

## Health and inequalities

Health inequalities worsen

Wider inequalities persist

Child poverty remains high

Mental health needs increase

Physical activity recognised as improving health

## Education

Persistent inequality in attainment

School rolls decrease

Additional support needs increase

Curriculum review and reform

Whole school approach to physical activity

## Ways of working

Public sector budget pressures

Local level decision making

Early prevention and collaboration

Young people's voices and rights

Climate and technology

## Health and inequalities: Trend 1: Health inequalities are increasing

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

After decades of improvement, Scotland's health is worsening<sup>2</sup>. The gap in health outcomes between the least and most deprived is growing, driving this decline in health<sup>3</sup>. Scotland's life expectancy is the lowest of all UK countries, and the lowest in Western Europe.

The ageing population is also affecting health needs. Analysis projects a 21% increase in the overall burden of disease in Scotland over the next 20 years. The population is declining, but ageing – and needs are highest in the oldest age groups. Obesity has also been slowly rising for many years<sup>4</sup>.

Inequalities drive poor health, and poor health drives inequality.<sup>5</sup> In Scotland, health inequalities are significant. Socially disadvantaged populations often have poorer health, for example:

- The gap in health life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in Scotland is roughly 23 years for males and 24 years for females<sup>6</sup>.
- Children living in the most deprived areas are much more likely to be at risk of obesity than those living in the least deprived areas<sup>7</sup>.
- Women experience more mental ill health and are at higher risk of gender based violence.
- Ethnic minority populations have higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and children of Black, Caribbean or African ethnicity are more likely to be at risk of obesity.
- The life expectancy of people with learning disabilities is shorter than the Scottish average<sup>8</sup>.

There is an increasing understanding of the impact of intersecting inequalities. This means that people experience multiple and compounding inequalities, through interconnected social categories, power relations and structural inequalities<sup>9</sup>.

Scotland's Population Health Framework aims to improve life expectancy, and reduce health inequalities<sup>10</sup>. It commits to routine collection, analysis, reporting and use of healthcare inequalities data by variables including SIMD, gender, age, disability, race and ethnicity<sup>11</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Strong recognition that Scotland is seeing worse health outcomes, widening health inequalities and growing concerns around obesity and sedentary behaviour.

Belief that public health reports, research and national surveys provide a compelling evidence base for change.

Investment in tackling health inequalities needs to be targeted, strategic and from as early in life as possible.

**“Tackling health inequalities is one of the key priorities of public health. So it underpins everything we do.”**

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Effective policies and programmes have the potential to alter trends, reduce inequalities, and improve health outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Active Schools could play a role in tackling health inequalities and establishing healthy behaviours which continue throughout people's lives - but is clearly not the whole answer.

There may be an interest in an increased focus on tackling health inequalities through the Active Schools programme – including targeting specific groups who experience inequalities in health, activity levels or wider wellbeing.

Staff and decision makers will need skills and data to be able to explore intersecting inequalities, target activity effectively and monitor impact.

## Inequality and health: Trend 2: Wider inequalities persist

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Scotland remains an unequal society. For example:

Young people with care experience are almost 2.5 times more likely to be excluded from school aged 16; more than twice as likely to have no educational qualifications; over three times as likely not to have a full time job by age 26; and almost twice as likely to have poor health as adults.

Disabled people's poverty and inequality is increasing. The pandemic, cost of living, high energy costs and austerity have impacted on disabled people's rights<sup>13</sup>. Young people with additional support needs are around five times more likely to be excluded from school, have below average attendance rates and are less likely to progress to a positive destination after school<sup>14</sup>. Disabled people, particularly women, are also more likely than non-disabled people to experience domestic abuse<sup>15</sup>.

Gender based violence and misogyny is prevalent. At least a third of sexual crimes recorded by the police relate to a victim under 18 and one in ten people in Scotland think that women often lie about being raped<sup>16</sup>. Recent research found one in four young women do not trust service providers or public authorities in Scotland to uphold their rights – with concerns about misogyny and ageism in the justice and health systems<sup>17</sup>.

An NHS survey of LGBT+ communities found that more than half (54%) said they had mental health issues, nearly one in three (31%) had made an attempt to end their life and more than a third (37%) had been in an abusive relationship<sup>18</sup>.

This short paper does not cover all the inequalities in Scotland, rather provides examples. We also recognise that people's characteristics intersect, compounding disadvantage and inequality.

### Stakeholder views

The Promise is a key driver for ensuring equality and positive outcomes for young people with care experience, and will remain important in future years.

Many stakeholders said that inequalities mean that support needs to be tailored and targeted. Young people who are disproportionately disadvantaged have a disproportionate right to tailored and targeted support.

Stakeholders recognised that tackling inequality and targeted work was essential – but was more intensive, tailored and likely to require more resources than universal approaches.

There are ways of working which are important in tackling inequality and disadvantage, including early intervention, prevention, early years work and taking a whole family approach.

There is a need to balance free or reduced cost services for people experiencing inequalities, with income generation to make some services sustainable.

**“We must use our resources wisely to target those who need it, not those who will just benefit from getting it.”**

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Targeted approaches – which involve working with fewer young people more intensively – may become increasingly important.

Taking an approach to Active Schools which aims to achieve wider outcomes through sport and physical activity, may become increasingly important.

## Health and inequalities: Trend 3: Child poverty levels remain high

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Child poverty in Scotland has remained at broadly the same level over the past decade<sup>19</sup>. Almost a quarter (23%) of children were living in relative poverty (after housing costs) from 2021 to 2023<sup>20</sup>.

Poverty rates are much higher for some groups than for others<sup>21</sup>. There are higher rates of child poverty in racialised minority households, lone parent households and in families with a mother under 25<sup>22</sup>. There is overlap between households in deepest poverty, and households containing a disabled person.

Inequality between generations has grown over time, with young generations being less well off than older generations<sup>23</sup>. And there are geographical concentrations of deprivation and poverty in Scotland.

Eradicating child poverty is currently the top priority for the Scottish Government. Scotland is not meeting its interim targets for child poverty and Scottish Government is committed to meeting the targets it has set for 2030<sup>24</sup>.

The current Child Poverty Delivery Plan runs to 2026. A new plan is being developed for 2026 to 2030, due to be published in spring 2026. Whole family support and supporting children and young people to reach their full potential to break the cycle of poverty are key themes being explored within this plan.

Key elements of Scotland's current approach to tackling child poverty which are particularly relevant to Active Schools include:

- building a system of school age childcare
- summer holiday programmes
- tackling food poverty
- providing free bikes for children who cannot afford them
- investing in sport, active living and Active Schools programmes.

### Stakeholder views

Tackling child poverty is a central issue in local policy discussions and decisions, as well as nationally.

Although the upcoming election and continued budget pressures will influence decisions, there was a belief that it was unlikely that a future Scottish administration would deprioritise tackling child poverty.

Increasing levels of need due to poverty will put more pressures on services in the future.

Stakeholders felt that there was a real shift towards whole family support to tackle interconnected issues of poverty and health inequalities.

**“There's a real focus now around whole family support.”**

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Active Schools activities being free of charge is important for Scottish Government support for the programme<sup>25</sup>.

It is expected that tackling child poverty will be an increasing focus through to 2030 and beyond.

Active Schools may wish to explore its potential contribution to tackling child poverty – for example through after-school and summer holiday programmes, providing access to food during activities, supporting active travel and tackling poverty related health inequalities.

Active Schools activities may be encouraged to be more targeted at children and families experiencing poverty, disadvantage and inequality.

## Health: Trend 4: Young people's mental health needs are increasing

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Children and young people's mental health has declined over the past decade, using a wide range of measures<sup>26</sup>.

Scotland's mental health indicators for children and young people<sup>27</sup> show:

- A decline in high life satisfaction for children
- An increase in children's behavioural and emotional difficulties
- A decline in children getting enough sleep
- An increase in children experiencing problematic social media usage
- An increase in children being bullied (at school and online)
- An increase in children with a parent with a common mental health problem
- A decline in children liking school
- An increase in children feeling pressure of school work.

There are patterns of inequality within these trends. For example reported behavioural and emotional difficulties are highest in the most deprived areas of Scotland.

Young women are more likely than men to report probable mental health conditions<sup>28</sup>.

There is good evidence that physical activity supports positive mental health. A recent review of evidence found that physical activity can support mental health and wellbeing, self-esteem, self-worth, resilience and social connections<sup>29</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Stakeholders recognised that there were clear benefits of physical activity on mental health, and good evidence showing this correlation. Some talked about the particular benefits of outdoor physical activity, and connecting to outdoor spaces.

Some stakeholders said local Active Schools teams are already working to use physical activity as an intervention to support mental health. However, others felt Active Schools was unlikely to be currently reaching young people with the most challenges in their lives.

Some stakeholders emphasised the link between positive mental health and school attendance, and felt that physical activity could play a key role in supporting the ongoing national priority around young people's attendance at school.

**“We've long recognised the benefits to mental health from physical activity.”**

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Mental health will be an increasingly important aspect of wellbeing.

Supporting mental health for those most at risk – for example people living in poverty or young women experiencing mental health issues – could become more of a priority for Active Schools.

Collaboration, signposting and joint working will be needed to support mental health needs – in an environment of pressured services.

Evidencing impact on mental health is challenging, and long term.

## Health: Trend 5: Physical activity is increasingly important in improving health

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Physical activity is increasingly recognised as an effective preventative approach to improving health<sup>30</sup>. Public Health Scotland looked at data from one year, 2022, and found that:

- more than 80% of the 3,000 deaths attributable to inactivity that year occurred among those undertaking very low levels of activity
- if people in the very low activity category increased their activity levels by just 15 minutes a week, an equivalent of around 1,000 years of life lost from premature ischaemic heart disease death alone could have been averted in Scotland<sup>31</sup>.

The new Physical Activity for Health Framework 2024 has an overarching vision of 'More People, More Active, More Often'. Scottish Government aims to achieve a 15% relative reduction in the prevalence of physical inactivity in adults and adolescents by 2030. The same target is set globally by the World Health Organisation.

The Framework recognises that everyday activity (like active travel), active recreation (like walking, cycling, playing and dance) and sport can all get people moving more and being physically active.

The Framework aims to prioritise public funds to target the least active. Evidence shows that those who are the least active include women, people aged 75 and over, people living in the most deprived areas, disabled adults<sup>32</sup>, people with mental health challenges and people belonging to ethnic minority groups. The Framework recognises that many of these characteristics intersect with each other.

The Framework also aims to retain existing and returning participants, and maximise the public health contribution of community sport clubs. It recognises **sportscotland's** support for community sport clubs and Hubs is key.

In 2023, 72% of children aged 5 to 15 years met physical activity guidelines of at least 60 minutes every day of the week<sup>33</sup>. In recent years levels of physical activity have been lower in the most deprived areas; among 13-15 year olds; and boys were more likely than girls to achieve the recommended level<sup>34 35</sup>. A third of children in Scotland (33%) are at risk of overweight (including obesity)<sup>36</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

The National Population Health Framework and Physical Activity for Health Framework provide real opportunities to capitalise on the role of preventing health inequalities through sport and physical activity. There is a strong case for investing in sport and physical activity programmes as part of a preventative health strategy. Active Schools is well placed to deliver significant impact, but this would require collaborative funding and long-term investment.

Physical activity behaviours are shaped early on in life, including at the pre-school age. Building habits and health literacy from a young age across the life course is important, thinking about activity, muscle strength and healthy weight.

There are wider benefits from sport and physical activity beyond health and activity, which must be recognised too.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

The Framework is clear that to be successful, investment must target audiences where needs are greatest, participation rates in sport and recreation are lower and physical activity levels are lowest. This is likely to have the most impact in terms of health outcomes. Decision makers will need to consider the extent to which the Active Schools programme should contribute to health improvement and tackling inequalities.

## Education: Trend 6: Persistent inequality in attainment remains

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Since 2015, Scottish Government has made closing the attainment gap – between Scotland’s most and least deprived school pupils – a priority.

It initially aimed to eliminate this gap within a decade (but it is important to note there was a pandemic in 2020).

The current Scottish Attainment Challenge programme, including Pupil Equity Funding, runs through to 2025/26. Some elements may continue into 2027 until after the election of a new government.

Despite a focus on closing the attainment gap, evidence published in 2025 shows the gap between pupils from the most and least deprived areas at SCQF level 4, level 5 and level 6 has widened<sup>37</sup>. Socio-economic disadvantage is correlated with lower educational attainment, as is being minority ethnic or being disabled<sup>38 39</sup>.

Other groups, such as children and young people involved in the justice system<sup>40</sup> and children with care experience<sup>41</sup> can experience lower levels of attainment and persistent absence during schooling.

Research has highlighted ongoing post-pandemic challenges in terms of relationships and behaviours, and the need for additional support to improve attendance, attainment and wider wellbeing<sup>42</sup>.

Wider research has recognised the need to take account of the cost of the school day, and links with affording transport to school, or not having the correct uniform or kit<sup>43</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Closing the attainment gap has been a key priority in Scotland for the past decade, but there is a shared understanding that progress hasn’t met original aspirations. Stakeholders felt it was likely that this priority would remain over the next five years, with a renewed focus and emphasis. But with elections upcoming, it is not clear what the future of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund programmes may look like beyond 2027.

Through the Curriculum Improvement Cycle, there is an opportunity to embed equity in curriculum design – including things like addressing food insecurity, active play and sport, and mental health challenges.

Attendance is likely to remain a national priority, and to be a key area of development over the next five years. Persistent absence is strongly correlated with poverty. Sport and physical activity can provide an incentive for young people to attend school, and engage with learning.

An important part of tackling inequality is improving educational outcomes for young people to improve their economic standing and use education as a pathway out of poverty. Developing skills, providing work experience and supporting volunteering will be important to this agenda.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Supporting engagement with school, wellbeing, attendance and attainment are likely to remain key priorities for Active Schools activity.

Demonstrating impact on these areas may be key to attracting ongoing investment and support.

## Education: Trend 7: School rolls are projected to decrease

Stakeholders identified this as being of minimal importance in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Scotland's population is ageing and there is a low fertility rate – the lowest recorded in Scotland and one of the lowest in Europe<sup>44</sup>.

School rolls are projected to decrease. Scotland's school age population peaked in 2022<sup>45</sup>.

The number of primary school pupils peaked in 2017. Primary school enrolments are expected to fall by 1.7% a year through to 2035.

The number of secondary school pupils was expected to peak in 2025, then fall by 1.2% a year to 2035.

The picture is different across Scotland. While most council areas still have an increasing population to mid-2028, population decline is concentrated in the west of Scotland<sup>46</sup>.

Areas seeing big falls in the 0-15 year population include Western Isles, North Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway and Inverclyde, while areas like Midlothian, East Renfrewshire, Aberdeen, East Lothian and East Dunbartonshire are seeing increases in this age group<sup>47</sup>.

Migration from the rest of the UK and internationally has driven population growth, and helped bring younger people to Scotland<sup>48</sup>.

Birth rates are projected to fall less in areas of high deprivation than in the least deprived parts of Scotland<sup>49</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Just a few stakeholders talked about this, in both urban and rural areas. A few said it may mean they needed to make decisions about the schools estate, to ensure that the right schools were in the right places.

School rolls are projected to decrease quite significantly in some areas, which affects the whole local authority, the education system, the tax base and the need for health and social care services.

Although there may be fewer young people in schools, they will be more likely to live in poverty and have complex needs.

“In terms of changing demographics, there isn't much we can do about that, but we need to plan long term for fewer young people.”

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

The pool of young people to work with will decrease slightly, but young people will have higher and more complex needs.

Success in engaging pupils will need to be measured by thinking about profile of people engaged, quality of engagement and impact – rather than number of participants.

There may be opportunities to provide more, and more in-depth opportunities for pupils.

## Education: Trend 8: The additional support needs of pupils are increasing

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of children with additional support needs in Scotland<sup>50</sup> and across the UK<sup>51</sup>.

There is a policy of presumption of mainstreaming and inclusion<sup>52</sup>, with most pupils attending mainstream schools with some additional support.

In 2024 more than 284,000 instances of additional support needs were recorded – but each pupil may have more than one type of additional support need meaning it is not possible to ascertain the number of pupils involved<sup>53</sup>.

There are also large variations across local authorities, and this makes it hard to understand the scale and nature of needs<sup>54</sup>.

Audit Scotland recommended in 2025 that the Scottish Government and councils must fundamentally review how they plan, fund and staff additional support for learning within school education<sup>55</sup>.

Pupils with additional support needs are more likely to be absent from or excluded from school<sup>56</sup>.

Research has found that challenges are experienced in meeting needs due to perceived reduction in resources and perceived increase in complexity of needs<sup>57</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Stakeholders recognised that the number of children with ASN was increasing, and the complexity of needs was also increasing. The presumption of mainstreaming remains, but with insufficient resource to meet growing demand, many schools are struggling to support needs. There are challenges around behaviour, violence and relationships in schools which are increasingly affecting young people's learning.

**“We’ve seen an exponential rise in ASN, not just in numbers, but the complexity of the need.”**

Stakeholders said that a commitment had been made to review how mainstreaming was being implemented in schools. Some suggested that the curriculum review needed to consider inclusive design including how to better support all students, aligning classroom practice and support services, and enhanced collaboration with the NHS.

Some said that supporting young people with ASN meant that a diverse team of professionals – not just teachers – was needed.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

More young people will have ASN, and their needs will be more complex. Young people with ASN are less likely to be active, so may need targeted approaches.

There may be increasing focus on additional targeting to address inequalities in health, education and physical activity outcomes for young people with additional support needs. This will require collaboration with other sectors, and an ongoing need for skills, support and resources to meet the needs of children and young people with additional support needs.

## Education: Trend 9: The Scottish curriculum will be reviewed and updated

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

An education reform programme is underway in Scotland, informed by a series of independent reviews from 2021 to 2023<sup>58</sup>. A new 10 year Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) began in early 2024, led by Education Scotland. Renewed guidance will be implemented from 2028/29 (for P1 to S3) and 2029/30 (for S4 to S6).

An important aspect of the reform is to help address complex issues like attendance, attainment and behaviour by making learning more accessible, appealing, relevant and enjoyable<sup>59</sup>.

Work is progressing on all areas of the curriculum, including Health and Wellbeing<sup>60</sup>. Education Scotland is working on an evidence paper to support the health and wellbeing strand of the CIC work – to be published winter 2025. This will consider evidence from the National Population Health Framework about physical activity and health; how health disparities and inconsistent access to physical activity impact on inequalities in attainment; and increasing numbers of learners with ASN.

The Scottish Population Health Framework commits to developing a public health approach to learning, collaborating with education and health agencies to improve health and wellbeing outcomes among the school aged population<sup>61</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

The changing education landscape creates an uncertain environment, even for those involved in national conversations. There is a lot of change happening, over a long period of time, at a stage when resources are stretched and the education system is under pressure. This makes it difficult for stakeholders to plan confidently.

Stakeholders felt that it was likely that school empowerment and school level approaches would continue. However, some indicated a need for greater consistency in educational experiences across the country.

Stakeholders felt that health and wellbeing topics were often overlooked, with a bias towards traditional subject areas. It was hoped that the CIC would address this, due to clear evidence both about:

- worsening health and widening health inequalities
- the link between physical activity, wellbeing and attainment.

Stakeholders talked a lot about the relationship between Active Schools and PE. Many felt there was a grey area between general physical activity and PE as a discipline, and inconsistencies and confusion about the purpose of Active Schools and how it is distinct from the PE curriculum.

Some stakeholders questioned whether Active Schools delivery could count within the 25 hours of learning offered by schools each week, and suggested this should be debated nationally. Stakeholders were aware of sensitivities around this.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

There will be a need for **sportscotland** to work with Education Scotland on the CIC, in relation to health and wellbeing. The outcome of this could have a considerable impact on how Active Schools operates.

There could be positive opportunities for Active Schools to connect more generally to education agendas around making learning more accessible, enjoyable, appealing and relevant.

## Education: Trend 10: A whole school approach to physical activity will be introduced

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

The Physical Activity for Health Framework aims to create active places for learning by applying a whole of school approach to physical activity in all places of learning<sup>62</sup>. Of particular relevance to this work, it aims to:

- ensure that the ethos of all places of learning is underpinned by health and wellbeing
- build the skills of teachers around physical activity, play and inclusion
- develop guidelines for creating active environments across all places of learning
- support active travel to and from places of learning
- continue to develop and maintain after-school activities that are accessible to all.

COSLA guidance on the policy context for the whole of school approach emphasises that community wide programmes and active recreation for all can contribute to tackling poverty and inequalities, and building safe, sustainable communities<sup>63</sup>.

The Physical Activity for Health Framework is being used locally for partners to develop their Physical Activity and Sport Strategies, with support from **sportscotland**.

### Stakeholder views

Stakeholders felt that a whole school approach had to:

- embed physical activity across the whole day
- integrate curricular and extracurricular activities
- involve families and communities
- include outdoor learning, active play and active travel
- be connected to work to address inequality in access to facilities (particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas).

Stakeholders said there were good examples of PEPAS approaches, which took a whole school approach to delivering PE and physical activity.

Stakeholders expected that as part of the whole school approach, there would be increased national direction around physical activity:

- discussion around PE in schools, quality and quantity
- discussion of roles of PE and Active Schools.

Many stakeholders made connections between the whole school approach and play. Stakeholders suggested:

- a focus on movement, play and activity, rather than organised sport
- work with children from early years, to build lifelong healthy habits
- the value of play for children with ASN.

Some stakeholders were aware of research in England that said by the time some children (particularly girls) reach primary school they are already saying sport is not for them<sup>64</sup>. Stakeholders emphasised that the Curriculum for Excellence now begins at age 3.

**“If you leave it too late, mentally they’re saying it’s not for me, and physically they’re less able.”**

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Potential for discussions around PE and Active Schools within a whole school approach to clarify roles, responsibilities and parameters.

Positive opportunities to connect around:

- Local physical activity and sport strategies
- Building a school ethos of health and wellbeing
- Providing inclusive after school activities
- Play and movement, as well as sport
- Early years physical activity and play
- Outdoor activity and active travel.

## Ways of working: Trend 11: Decisions are increasingly made at local authority level

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

In 2023, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Scottish Government agreed [The Verity House Agreement](#). An important part of this agreement creates more freedom and flexibility for councils to address shared priorities in locally appropriate ways.

The agreement says that the default position will be no ring-fencing or direction of funding, unless there is a clear, jointly agreed rationale. This means that funding previously provided in ring-fenced pots for specific purposes is going through a process of being baselined into local government settlements.

In the Verity House Agreement, Community Planning Partnerships are recognised as a key mechanism for resource allocation and delivering shared priorities. Other important policy documents, such as Scotland's Population Health Framework, also recognise that Community Planning Partnerships are central to collaborative working locally.<sup>65</sup> Other local partnerships such as Health and Social Care Partnerships and Children's Services Planning Partnerships<sup>66</sup> are important vehicles for local decision making.

Where national approaches or delivery models are being explored, local authorities should be fully involved in the process from the outset, involved in decision making, and the rationale for national delivery should be clearly evidenced and outcomes focused. There should be a presumption in favour of local flexibility.

The Verity House Agreement identifies three key priorities:

- Tackling poverty, particularly child poverty
- Transforming the economy through a just transition to net zero
- Sustainable person-centred public services.

Scottish Government's National Performance Framework is in a period of reform, with development through to 2026 and implementation planned at the start of the new parliamentary session and new government<sup>67</sup>. For now, the 11 existing national outcomes remain in place – including 'We are healthy and active'<sup>68</sup>. The next Scottish Government election is expected to be held in May 2026 and local government elections in 2027<sup>69</sup>.

### Stakeholder views

Stakeholders were clear that local flexibility for Active Schools delivery will remain an important and increasing priority. Some emphasised that within local authority areas, there were trends towards community empowerment, school empowerment and de-centralisation of services. Some highlighted that Active Schools teams can play a key role in understanding and responding to community need, developing connections and engaging communities.

Stakeholders also mentioned the potential of local government or education authority reform, which would impact on local level activity.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

- **sportscotland** will need to collaborate with local government, COSLA and professional networks such as SOLACE (the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) in taking forward ideas about the Active Schools programme.
- Decisions will need to be made about what is reasonable to suggest or require nationally, and what can be agreed locally.
- Any required reporting and data collection will need to be proportionate and clearly support future decision making at local and national level.
- Active Schools will need to align with and support priorities within local strategies and plans, including local physical activity strategies.

## Ways of working: Trend 12: Public sector budgets and health services continue to be under pressure

Stakeholders identified this as a critical trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Scotland is experiencing significant budgetary pressures<sup>70</sup>. Public sector budgets including NHS services are stretched and under pressure<sup>71 72 73</sup>.

Many public and third sector organisations, including Scottish Government and local authorities, have static or reducing budgets, increasing costs, and pressures to reduce costs and identify savings. There are concerns about the fiscal sustainability of public services in their current form<sup>74</sup>.

Research shows that local authorities with more deprived populations were more impacted by austerity and public sector cuts<sup>75</sup>. This could deepen participation gaps and further increase inequality<sup>76</sup>.

Local government investment in culture, sport and leisure services in Scotland has reduced by at least 20% in real terms between 2010/11 and 2022/23. Increasing needs and demand, alongside financial pressures, means that Audit Scotland says that councils must urgently transform the way they work<sup>77</sup>.

Research suggests that most councils and arms-length organisations in culture, sport and leisure have had to make substantial savings through reducing hours, reducing staff and closing facilities. This research found little sign of optimism as most expect further reductions in budgets in the future.<sup>78</sup>

Scottish Government is looking at the National Performance Framework to better focus budgets. Providing social and economic impact, and contributing to local and national government priorities, will be crucial for securing investment in sport and physical activity<sup>79</sup>.

Scotland's Population Health Framework states that robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be established to track progress and contributions.<sup>80</sup>

### Stakeholder views

All stakeholders raised the issue of public sector budget pressures, and said that budgets were driving decision making. Stakeholders felt that:

- Persistent budget pressures at both national and local level meant that local authorities had to prioritise cuts, savings and protecting existing services over new initiatives or bringing about change.
- Local authorities had to focus on statutory services.
- Any funded services needed to demonstrate clear connections with local priorities (through corporate plans and Local Outcome Improvement Plans).
- Limited resources mean services are increasingly carefully targeted based on needs, and universal services may be hard to sustain.
- Savings have resulted in facility closure, baseline staffing in some facilities and current or expected workforce cuts. Local authorities are rationalising their estates, selling facilities and struggling to invest in existing facility maintenance or improvement.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

- While Active Schools is highly valued, its sustainability is uncertain due to current financial constraints.
- Funding from **sportscotland** is currently match funded by local authorities and this model may not be sustainable.
- Active Schools service delivery may be part of identified areas for transformation for local authorities.
- Investment in a national programme like Active Schools will need to be set carefully in the wider context of funding for physical activity, health and education.
- Active Schools will need to clearly demonstrate its contribution to both local and national priorities.
- Wider resources, networks and partnerships may be affected by pressures and cuts, reducing capacity to support Active Schools.

## Ways of working: Trend 13: Collaboration and prevention become increasingly important

Stakeholders identified this as a relatively important trend in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

Increasingly, since devolution, policy making at national and local level has been focused on prevention<sup>81</sup>.

Research exploring learning from 2000 to 2025 in Scotland shows that prevention can be successful at reducing socio-economic disadvantage and health inequalities<sup>82</sup>. The same research also shows that using preventative approaches can be challenging, particularly due to requiring closer multi-agency working and collaboration.

Scotland's Population Health Framework 2025 is focused on primary prevention – action that is designed to stop problems from emerging in the first place<sup>83</sup>. It recognises the social determinants of health and the need to develop supportive environments that promote and enable healthy living.

The Framework aims to build a prevention focused system, prioritising actions to keep people healthy. This preventative approach is underpinned by collaboration, 'health in all policies' and a whole system approach to addressing health issues.

The Physical Activity for Health Framework also takes a preventative approach. It aims to use physical activity as a tool to prevent health issues emerging.

**"If physical activity were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure, due to the great many illnesses it can prevent and help treat."**<sup>84</sup>

### Stakeholder views

In the context of limited resources, stakeholders felt that collaboration would become increasingly important at both national and local level. There is also increasing recognition that tackling complex issues requires collaboration.

Stakeholders were clear that the Population Health Framework and Physical Activity for Health Framework support prevention and collaboration. Some gave examples of work at local authority level to develop systems based approaches to health and physical activity.

Stakeholders expected increased collaboration in terms of co-location, service planning and delivery, sharing staff and training, pooling budgets, commissioning services and in decision making.

While stakeholders all agreed that the focus should be on preventative action, they felt this was extremely challenging with limited resources. There is limited space to think innovatively, transform services and invest in early intervention.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Opportunities to position Active Schools as a preventative programme.

Likely increasing focus on the most inactive, those experiencing inequality and those most likely to experience health problems in the future.

Opportunities in the Population Health Framework commitment to develop new approaches to resource allocation that support prevention, across health and other public services.

Challenges moving resources to prevention in a context of financial constraints.

More emphasis likely on collaboration, multi-sector working and joint approaches.

## Ways of working: Trend 14: Hearing young people's voices becomes increasingly important

Stakeholders identified this as being of minimal importance in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Scots Law in July 2024<sup>85</sup>.

That means children's rights must be embedded across public policy and the actions of public authorities.

All children must have equal access to their rights. Some children who are listed within the guidance as those rights may be at risk could include<sup>86</sup>:

- Female children
- Disabled children
- Minority ethnic children, particularly Gypsy/ Traveller children
- Children living in poverty
- LGBTI children
- Children with care experience or on the edge of care
- Children with a parent/ carer in the armed forces
- Child migrants, asylum seekers and refugees
- Children at risk of significant harm with a child protection plan
- Children with additional support needs
- Children experiencing poor physical or mental health
- Children experiencing disadvantages such as problem alcohol or drug use by family members, domestic abuse or bereavement
- Children in the justice system or in conflict with the law
- Children affected by parental imprisonment.

### Stakeholder views

Just a few stakeholders talked about this in relation to Active Schools.

Stakeholders said that hearing young people's views was increasingly important in decision making, and that it was important to align with UNCRC principles.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Leadership, voice and engagement within Active Schools will continue to be important.

Potential increasing focus on children whose rights may be at risk.

## Ways of working: Trend 15: Tackling the climate emergency and advances in technology

Stakeholders identified this as being of minimal importance in relation to Active Schools.

### Trend highlights

The climate emergency may exacerbate inequalities, including health inequalities, and climate actions must take account of equality<sup>87</sup>.

The National Physical Activity for Health Framework prioritises encouraging active travel behaviour. Active travel provides health benefits to individuals and wider society.<sup>88</sup>

Within Scotland's Active Travel Framework is an aim to increase the proportion of journeys to school by walking, cycling and wheeling<sup>89</sup>. Scotland's National Performance Framework includes a journeys by Active Travel indicator – levels increasing to 50.6% in 2023<sup>90</sup>.

Scottish Government supports the concept of 20 minute neighbourhoods to prioritise sustainability<sup>91</sup>. COSLA recognises the opportunity for local government to enhance local environments, and support physical activity<sup>92</sup>.

Tackling the climate emergency is a clear priority for Scotland's young people<sup>93</sup>. More widely, young people will need skills and knowledge to live in and support a society which tackles the climate emergency, and reduces the impact of human activity on the environment.<sup>94</sup>

In technology, Scottish horizon scanning identified that AI technology is likely to have an important role in healthcare and education reforms<sup>95</sup>. In terms of physical activity, research shows that while technology could help with some aspects of delivery, the social aspect of sport and physical activity may become more important as online opportunities grow.<sup>96</sup>

### Stakeholder views

Very few stakeholders talked about technology or the climate emergency in relation to Active Schools. A few said that climate and sustainability were a key priority. However, it was noted that without funding to address issues such as ageing facilities with a large carbon footprint, it was challenging to make progress.

A few stakeholders said that local authorities were looking at AI, process automation and digitisation to improve service delivery and reduce administrative burdens.

A few noted that while technology offers opportunities to redesign learning and teaching, a physical presence in schools and early years settings is expected to continue. Technology is increasingly present in schools, but is a supplement rather than a replacement for in-person learning.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

Positive opportunities around:

- supporting active travel
- traveling/ using space for activity in 20 minute neighbourhoods
- building skills of young people to reduce the impact of human behaviour on the environment (through active travel).

Potential need to consider sustainability, environmental impact and build skills in this area.

Technology could increasingly offer opportunities – for example for connecting staff and deliverers, offering remote activities, and understanding needs<sup>97</sup>. However, increasing use of technology could also make face to face, social opportunities available through Active Schools increasingly important – helping to build connections, friendships and reduce isolation.

## Wider context: sportscotland priorities

**Key relevant strategic priorities to 2026<sup>98</sup> as set out in sportscotland's strategic guidance letter 2023-26, from Scottish Government:**

***Strategic priority 1: reduce inequalities in sport and physical activity***

- Including tackling racism and racial inequality, reducing cost barriers to sport and increasing participation and visibility of girls and women in sport

***Strategic priority 2: Accessible and inclusive opportunities for children and young people to be active in the schools and education environment***

- Ensuring Active Schools is free for all; working with partners to support the delivery of PE, physical activity and sport; supporting schools with water safety and learning to swim

***Strategic priority 3: Support sports clubs and community organisations to provide accessible and inclusive sport and physical activity opportunities***

- Strengthen Community Sport Hubs and support inclusive facilities.

Work is to align with the National Performance Framework, Scotland's Economic Strategy and Programme for Government.

sportscotland's corporate strategy Sport for Life<sup>99</sup> sets out its vision for sport in Scotland – where everyone benefits from sport. It highlights three environments for sport and physical activity – schools and education, clubs and communities and performance sport.

The Business Plan 2025/26<sup>100</sup> highlights priorities for the year, including prioritising support in the clubs and communities environment, and working to build resilience and reduce impact around climate change.

More widely, sportscotland is seeking to integrate an approach which meets community needs and drives positive change around inclusion, health and wellbeing, communities and skills through sport and physical activity.

### Potential impacts for Active Schools

- Active Schools is currently a clear strategic priority to 2026.
- A new strategic guidance letter from 2027 onwards (in new parliamentary term) may highlight different approaches or priorities which could directly impact on the focus of Active Schools.
- The National Performance Framework is being reviewed.
- The Physical Activity for Health Framework may change how impact is measured, moving on from the Active Scotland Outcomes Framework.
- Integrating an approach based on community needs and inclusion may help to demonstrate connection to wider policy areas/ prevention/ whole systems approaches.
- Outcomes and indicators in Sport for Life may need reviewed.
- Focus on equality, diversity and inclusion may need to shift to targeting/ prioritising inequalities meaning decisions need to be made about resource allocation.

## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Conference Speech: Re-Imagining Scotland's Potential](#), June 2025
- <sup>2</sup> [Population Health Framework: Evidence Paper](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>3</sup> [Poverty is a Public Health and Human Rights Issue](#), Public Health Scotland blog, 2023
- <sup>4</sup> [Population Health Framework: Evidence Paper](#), Scottish Government, June 2025 and [Scottish Burden of Disease Study](#), Public Health Scotland, 2022
- <sup>5</sup> [Scotland to 2050, Trend Pack, Cross Cutting Insights – Inequality](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>6</sup> [Scotland's Public Health Challenges](#), Public Health Scotland webpage
- <sup>7</sup> [Primary 1 BMI Statistics Scotland, 2023/24](#), Public Health Scotland, 2024
- <sup>8</sup> [Health Inequalities](#), Public Health Scotland webpage
- <sup>9</sup> [Using Intersectionality to Understand Structural Inequality in Scotland: Evidence Synthesis](#), Scottish Government, 2022
- <sup>10</sup> [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>11</sup> [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>12</sup> [Population Health Framework: Evidence Paper](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>13</sup> [Disabled People, Poverty and the Cost of Living Crisis](#), Inclusion Scotland, 2023
- <sup>14</sup> [Additional Support for Learning Briefing](#), Audit Scotland, 2025
- <sup>15</sup> [Tackling Child Poverty Priority Families Overview](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>16</sup> [Equally Safe 2023 – Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls](#), Scottish Government, 2023
- <sup>17</sup> [Status of Young Women in Scotland 2024-25](#), The Young Women's Movement, 2025
- <sup>18</sup> [Health Needs Assessment of LGBT+ People](#), NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Lothian , Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership, 2022
- <sup>19</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack, Trend 4](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>20</sup> [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland, 2021-24](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>21</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack, Cross Cutting Insights – Inequality](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>22</sup> [Scottish Budget 2024 to 2025: Equality and Fairer Scotland Statement](#), Scottish Government, 2023
- <sup>23</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack, Cross Cutting Insights – Children and Young People](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>24</sup> [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan: Progress Report](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>25</sup> [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan: Progress Report](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- <sup>26</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack, Trend H7](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>27</sup> [Scot PHO Profiles](#), Scottish Public Health Observatory
- <sup>28</sup> [Scotland to 2050, Trend Pack, Health](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>29</sup> [Physical Activity and Mental Health: A Systematic Review and Best-Evidence Synthesis](#), White et al, 2024
- <sup>30</sup> [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025
- <sup>31</sup> [Estimating the Burden of Disease Attributable to Physical Inactivity in Scotland](#), Public Health Scotland, 2024
- <sup>32</sup> [Scottish Disability Sport, A Call to Action](#)
- <sup>33</sup> [Scottish Health Survey 2023: Volume 1](#), Scottish Government, 2024
- <sup>34</sup> [Scot PHO Physical Activity webpage](#), Scottish Public Health Observatory
- <sup>35</sup> [Scottish Health Survey 2023: Volume 1](#), Scottish Government, 2024
- <sup>36</sup> [Scottish Health Survey 2023: Volume 1](#), Scottish Government, 2024
- <sup>37</sup> [Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations](#), No7: 2025 Edition, Scottish Government 2025
- <sup>38</sup> [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack, Trend 8](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- <sup>39</sup> [Scottish Budget 2024 to 2025: Equality and Fairer Scotland Statement](#), Scottish Government, 2023

---

40 [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024

41 [Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23](#), Scottish Government, 2024

42 [Let's Talk Scottish Education](#), Scottish Government National Discussion on Education webpage and [Behaviour in Scottish Schools: Research Report](#), Scottish Government 2023

43 [Priced Out of School](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 2025

44 [Scotland's Population 2023: The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends](#), November 2024

45 [Pupil Projections and Implications for Teacher Resourcing Needs](#), Scottish Government, 2024

46 [Scotland to 2050 Trend Pack](#), Society and Communities, Trend 2, Scottish Government, 2025

47 [Mid-2024 Population Estimates](#), National Records of Scotland, August 2025

48 [Mid-2024 Population Estimates](#), National Records of Scotland, August 2025

49 [Vital Events Reference Tables 2024](#), National Records of Scotland, 2025

50 [Scotland to 2050, Trend Pack](#), Scottish Government, 2025

51 [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024

52 [Presumption to Provide Education in a Mainstream Setting: Guidance](#), Scottish Government, 2019

53 [Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2024](#), Scottish Government, 2024

54 [Fundamental Review Needed of Planning and Resourcing of Additional Support for Learning](#), Audit Scotland blog, 2025

55 [Fundamental Review Needed of Planning and Resourcing of Additional Support for Learning](#), Audit Scotland blog, 2025

56 [Fundamental Review Needed of Planning and Resourcing of Additional Support for Learning](#), Audit Scotland blog, 2025

57 [Pupils with Complex Additional Support Needs: Research into Provision](#), Scottish Government, 2023

58 [Curriculum, Qualifications and Assessment Reform: Progress and Next Steps](#), Scottish Government, 2025

59 [Curriculum, Qualifications and Assessment Reform: Progress and Next Steps](#), Scottish Government, 2025

60 [Curriculum Improvement Cycle News Bulletin: Issue 2](#), Education Scotland, January 2025

61 [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025

62 [A Systems-Based Approach to Physical Activity in Scotland](#), Public Health Scotland, 2022

63 [The Positive Contribution of Physical Activity and Sport to Scotland](#), CoSLA

64 [Sport, stereotypes and stolen dreams: Why girls still feel they don't belong in sport](#), Women in Sport, 2023

65 [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025

66 [Scotland's Children's Services Plans 2023-2026 Review](#), Scottish Government, 2025

67 [National Performance Framework](#), Scottish Government

68 [National Performance Framework \(Archived\)](#), Scottish Government

69 [The Scottish Parliament, Elections](#)

70 [Scotland to 2050 Conference Speech: Re-Imagining Scotland's Potential](#), June 2025

71 [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025

72 [Scotland's Public Finances: Challenges and Risks](#), Audit Scotland, 2022

73 [Future Trends for Scotland: Findings from the 2024/2025 Horizon Scanning Project](#), Scottish Government, 2025

74 [SPICe Social Justice and Social Security Committee: Budget scrutiny 2025-26: Third Sector Funding Principles](#)

75 [The cost of the cuts: the impact on local government and poorer communities](#), Hastings, A. et al. (2015) in [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024

- 
- 76 [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025
- 77 <https://audit.scot/news/faster-reform-needed-to-protect-key-services>
- 78 [Review-of-Culture-and-Sport-and-Leisure-Services-in-Scotland-Final-Report-2024.pdf](#)
- 79 [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025
- 80 [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- 81 [Learning from 25 Years of Preventative Interventions in Scotland](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- 82 [Learning from 25 Years of Preventative Interventions in Scotland](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- 83 [Scotland's Population Health Framework](#), Scottish Government, June 2025
- 84 [Physical activity guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' report](#), Department of Health and Social Care, 2019
- 85 [UNCRC \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#)
- 86 [UNCRC: Clarification of Inherent Obligations](#), Scottish Government, 2024
- 87 [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024
- 88 [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024
- 89 [Key Policy Approaches to Improving the Uptake of Walking and Cycling in Scotland for Travel](#), Transport Scotland
- 90 [Active Travel National Indicator](#), Transport Scotland
- 91 [Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods](#), Scottish Government, April 2024
- 92 [The Positive Contribution of Physical Activity and Sport to Scotland](#), CoSLA
- 93 [Young People and the Future of Scotland: Participatory Horizon Scanning](#)
- 94 [Horizon Scan 2024: Emerging policy issues for the next five years](#), UK Parliament, 2024
- 95 [Future Trends for Scotland: Findings from the 2024/2025 Horizon Scanning Project](#), Scottish Government, 2025
- 96 [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025
- 97 [Horizon Scanning: Future Trends in Sport and Physical Activity](#), Sport England, May 2025
- 98 [Strategic Guidance Letter for 2023-2026](#), Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, 2023
- 99 [Sport For Life - sportscotland the national agency for sport in Scotland](#)
- 100 [Business plan - sportscotland the national agency for sport in Scotland](#)