

# **BMA Scotland Briefing Paper: Get Scotland Moving October 2008**

## **Key Points:**

- One in four Scots are at risk of dying early from diseases related to inactivity.
- Currently only around half of seven to 11 year olds are engaging in the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) every day.
- The number of children travelling to school by car has doubled over the last 20 years.

## **Introduction**

This briefing paper highlights the health and social impact of high levels of physical activity amongst Scotland's children. It recommends a number of ways in which the Scottish Government can work with local authorities, public services and local communities to:

- Develop an effective strategy to encourage teenagers and young adults to take part in regular exercise
- Encourage doctors to prescribe exercise for the overweight/obese (e.g. reduced cost/free access to local authority sports centres)
- Improve access to subsidised sporting facilities for both children and parents. Easy access for those from lower socio-economic groups is particularly important
- Take assertive action to improve communities and make them clean, safe and healthy for our children

Physical activity is linked to good health. It can decrease the risk of heart disease, help prevent high blood pressure, assist in weight control, reduce stress and bring real improvements to physical and mental well-being<sup>1</sup>. However, one in four Scots are at risk of dying early from diseases related to inactivity<sup>2</sup>.

Inactive people are at risk of being overweight or obese which increases the risk of other medical conditions. They have a greater risk of heart attacks and strokes, higher blood pressure, a higher risk of developing some cancers and a higher risk of osteoporosis<sup>3</sup>. In Scotland, over 40 people a day are diagnosed with diabetes and it is believed that there are tens of thousands who remain undiagnosed<sup>4</sup>. Most of these are cases of Type 2 diabetes, which is closely linked to obesity.

Coronary heart disease (CHD) affects half a million Scots a year and, each year in Scotland, 37% of CHD events are partly attributable to physical inactivity<sup>5</sup>. Although the number of deaths in

Scotland from heart disease has reduced by nearly a third (from 14012 in 1997 to 9532 in 2006), Scottish CHD mortality rates still remain among the highest in Western Europe<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Health Institute of Scotland. *Active commuting as a public health issue*.

<sup>2</sup> Cycling Scotland. *Did you know?* (<http://www.cyclingscotland.org/didyouknow.aspx>).

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Executive. *The National Strategy for Physical Activity*. 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Diabetes UK ([www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk))

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Executive. *Coronary heart disease and stroke in Scotland. Update on strategy report 2004*. Edinburgh. 2004

Inactive children are at risk of poorer self-esteem, greater anxiety and higher stress levels and are more likely to smoke and use drugs than physically active children<sup>7</sup>. To maintain good health and stave off obesity and other serious illness in later life, it is recommended that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) every day, such as brisk walking, running, and sports. However, research suggests that currently only around half of seven to 11 year olds are achieving this<sup>8</sup>.

### **Health Inequalities**

There are inequalities between rich and poor that have a profound influence on the future health of children in Scotland. In Scotland in 2006, healthy life expectancy at birth was 67.9 years for men and 69.0 years for women. In the most deprived 15% of areas in Scotland in 2005-06, healthy life expectancy at birth was considerably lower at 57.3 years for males and 59.0 years for females (Healthy life expectancy is defined as the number of years a person can expect to live in good health)<sup>9</sup>.

In Scotland in 2006/07, 21.0% of Primary 1 school children were overweight, including 8.5% who were obese and 4.3% who were severely obese<sup>10</sup>. Primary 1 figures for 2006/07 indicate that the highest levels of overweight, obese and severely obese children are found in the most deprived areas (22.5% overweight, including 9.9% obese and 5.5% severely obese) while children in the least deprived areas had the lowest levels (18.8% overweight, including 7.2% obese and 3.1% severely obese)<sup>11</sup>.

It is clear that children from poorer communities are more at risk of developing long term health conditions in adulthood and it is essential that any strategy recognises this and targets resources and activities accordingly.

Everyone can increase their activity levels and therefore exercise is an effective way of addressing health inequalities. However, opportunities to exercise may be limited in deprived areas; for example, there may be nowhere safe to play, no facilities for physical activities outside school and a shortage of money to participate in such activities.

Many children from deprived areas are unlikely to have access to sports facilities for local and economic reasons, emphasising the need for subsidies and investment in public facilities. The provision of physical environments that promote healthy lifestyles for children, including opportunities for play, physical activity and healthy eating, should be a priority for local authorities and other public services.

### **Interventions:**

#### **Increase levels of activity**

Most people in Scotland are not active enough. Increasing the level of physical activity among both adults and children is an important priority and in addition to benefits to an individual's health, a reduction in healthcare costs and chronic disease will be realised.

One of the single most effective ways to improve the health of the population would be to get those who are inactive to improve their activity levels. Physical activity is not just about taking time out to take part in sporting or leisure activity, it can be incorporated into daily living. For example, the number of children travelling to school by car has doubled over the

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Health Statistics. *ISD coronary heart disease incidence and mortality*. 30 October 2007 [http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/information-and-statistics.jsp?pContentID=3075&p\\_applic=CCC&p\\_service=Content.show&](http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/information-and-statistics.jsp?pContentID=3075&p_applic=CCC&p_service=Content.show&)

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Executive, *Let's Make Scotland More Active: A strategy for physical activity*. February 2003

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Executive. *Health in Scotland – Chief Medical Officer Annual report*. Edinburgh. 2004

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government, *Equally Well: Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Health Inequalities*. June 2008

<sup>10</sup> ISD Childhood Obesity Statistics, Statistical Publication Notice, 18 December 2007

<sup>11</sup> ISD Childhood Obesity Statistics, Statistical Publication Notice, 18 December 2007

last 20 years<sup>12</sup>. By encouraging regular walking or cycling to school, activity can become part of a healthy lifestyle.

**Increase funding and improve access to sport and recreation facilities within schools and communities.**

Physical education at school is an ideal way to encourage activity and develop fitness among children and for many, this will be their only preparation for an active lifestyle.

Choice in the style of exercise offered to children is desirable, as not all children want to play competitive sports. Indeed, activities that can be sustained after leaving school, such as walking, cycling and swimming should also be encouraged, alongside the more traditional school sports. The needs of disabled children should also be reflected in the choice available.

**Create a safe environment for children**

One of the main barriers to increasing physical activity is the built environment. Parents are scared to let their children play outside because the roads are so busy, and in many communities there are the additional dangers of unsafe environments, where play areas are littered with discarded syringes and broken glass etc. It is essential that the Scottish Government implements initiatives which ensure that the environment is safer to address these fears.

To get Scotland moving, the Scottish Government should:

- Develop an effective strategy to encourage teenagers and young adults to take part in regular exercise
- Encourage doctors to prescribe exercise for the overweight/obese (eg reduced cost/free access to local authority sports centres)
- Improve access to subsidised sporting facilities for both children and parents. Easy access for those from lower socio-economic groups is particularly important
- Take assertive action to improve communities and make them clean, safe and healthy for our children

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<sup>12</sup> Walk to School 2008 ([www.walktoschool.org.uk](http://www.walktoschool.org.uk))