



Growing up in England

Systemic barriers and the role of physical activity for children and young people

Version 1.0

June 2026



Context is important



This document accompanies an in-year data pack on children and young people's physical activity levels across Hertfordshire. Its purpose is to place those figures in context - to help the reader understand what has been happening in the lives of children and young people over the same period the data covers: 2017 to 2024-25.

That period spans a cost of living crisis, a global pandemic, significant cuts to youth and community infrastructure, and a growing mental health emergency among the young. *Youth Matters: State of the Nation (2025)* provides the most comprehensive account yet of how young people in England experience their lives today and offers an important lens through which to read the data.

Reading activity data alongside this context shifts the question from “Are children active enough?” to “What are the conditions that shape whether they can be?”.

Child poverty in England is not a marginal issue

It is a structural crisis. A defining feature of the landscape in which children and young people grow up. These are the material conditions that shape every aspect of their lives, including whether and how they move.

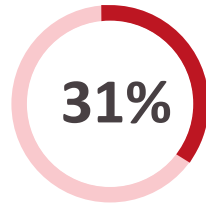


The UK has higher child poverty rates than most comparable EU and OECD countries

At current rates of social mobility, it could take **five generations** for a child from the poorest 10% of families to reach the national average income



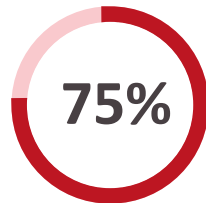
Children in relative low income after housing costs in 2023-24. 900,000 more than in 2010-11



That's nearly a third of all children in the UK living in relative low income



Children living in deep material poverty - unable to afford basic necessities like food, heating and housing



Of children in poverty are now in working families - poverty is not simply about worklessness

How we got here: The historical picture

Understanding today’s child poverty crisis requires context. The current situation is not inevitable - it reflects policy choices made over decades. Critically, we know that targeted action works, because we have seen it work before.

Period	Trend	What happened
1960s–1970s	Stable	Child poverty comparatively low - children less at risk than working-age adults or pensioners
1980s–1997	▲ Rising	Sharp increase driven by structural economic change - by 1997, children were more likely to be in poverty than any other age group
1997–2010/11	▼ Falling	Targeted government investment lifts 600,000 children out of poverty - proof that policy action works
2010–2023/24	▲ Rising	Cuts to public services, structural changes and weak economic growth reverses progress - 900,000 more children now in poverty than in 2010/11

A significant policy change is now in effect

The removal of the two-child benefit limit - widely regarded as one of the most significant structural drivers of child poverty in the UK - came into effect on 6th April 2026. The majority of families who benefit are in work. This change represents a meaningful shift in recognising poverty as a structural issue, not a behavioural one, and has the potential to lift hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty.



What young people are telling us

The Youth Matters: State of the Nation report (2025) drew on the voices of over 14,000 young people aged 10–25 across England.

Their experiences reveal a set of interlocking systemic pressures that shape their opportunities, wellbeing and ability to participate fully in community life.



1 Disappearing spaces

- There has been a real decline in affordable, safe places for young people to gather, socialise and do activities - including youth clubs and community facilities
- Even where spaces exist, cost and transport are significant barriers, particularly in rural areas
- Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face the greatest access barriers
- Young people report feeling judged or unwelcome in public spaces - reducing their confidence and use of outdoor spaces



When young people feel like they've got a place they belong, they act like they belong.

Young person,
Newcastle

2 Safety and feeling secure

- 16% of young people in the UK feel unsafe in their local areas
- Young women are 7 percentage points more likely to feel unsafe than young men
- Only 25% of transgender young people feel safe, compared to 52% of non-transgender young people
- Fear of crime and public hostility shapes where and how young people spend time, particularly for girls and young women

3 The cost of living crisis

- The cost of living crisis directly reduces young people's ability to afford activities, transport and to take part in community life
- The mental load of financial stress is a barrier in itself: anxiety about money, housing and an uncertain future limits young people's ability to engage, take risks and seek new experiences - including being physically active

4 Mental health and wellbeing

- 1 in 5 young people in England (aged 8–25) has a probable mental health disorder - referrals have tripled since 2016
- 44% of young people aged 11–18 regularly feel lonely

5 Unequal access to skills and opportunities

- Access to activities and opportunities is deeply unequal across gender, socioeconomic background and disability
- A narrow curriculum focused on attainment limits time for enrichment, practical life skills and broader development

“

If you can't afford to live, that's going to impact your health and other things, isn't it? Young person, Newcastle

These challenges do not operate in isolation

They form an interconnected system in which poverty, poor mental health, unsafe environments, disappearing spaces and constrained opportunity reinforce one another.

Young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds face compounded pressures across all of these dimensions.



The challenge. And where physical activity can help

- **Child poverty & cost of living.** Freely accessible physical activity tackles cost barriers directly - it cannot solve poverty, but it can meaningfully improve the lives of children living in it
- **Disappearing community spaces.** Sport and physical activity create the shared 'third places' - building belonging, connection and a sense of community
- **Unsafe local environments.** Welcoming, inclusive physical activity environments create safe spaces for those who feel most excluded, including girls and young people with SEND
- **Poor mental health & loneliness.** Physical activity is among the most evidence-based routes to improved mental health; group activity reduces loneliness and builds resilience and self-esteem
- **Curriculum narrowing.** Physical activity develops confidence, leadership and teamwork; volunteering in sport provides work experience and civic engagement beyond the formal curriculum



Young people are not the problem - the system is

Child poverty shapes the conditions in which they grow up, and the systemic pressures documented in *Youth Matters* compound its effects.

Physical activity cannot solve child poverty, but as a freely accessible, community-anchored intervention it is a meaningful part of the system response - reducing isolation, building confidence and creating the trusted spaces and relationships young people tell us they need.

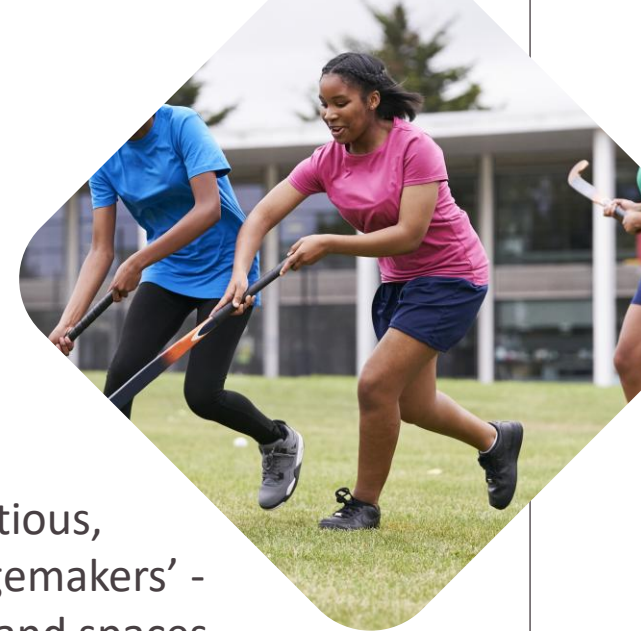
This is our opportunity and our responsibility. Our collective ambition must be active, connected, thriving young people, whatever their background or circumstance.



Young people must be at the heart of the solution

The clearest message from *Youth Matters* - from over 14,000 young people - is that **young people do not feel heard**.

- Young people want genuine co-production - not token consultation. They are alert to 'tick-box' engagement and will disengage from it
- We should actively involve children and young people in designing programmes, spaces and opportunities - from the earliest stages, not as an afterthought
- Young people tell us they are 'ambitious, hardworking and ready to be changemakers' - our role is to create the conditions and spaces that make this possible
- They want more free, safe spaces; more trusted adults; and more activities that reflect their lives and cultures



“

Sometimes it feels like involving young people is just a **tick-box exercise**, not a genuine effort to listen

“

Today's youth are tomorrow's nation.
Addressing these challenges isn't just good for young people; it's good for everyone

Bringing it closer to home

The following data covers broadly the same period as the Active Lives Children and Young People survey (2017–2024), organised around the themes identified in this summary.

Where possible, we have sourced data at a local level. Where an exact local measure does not exist, or where data is not available for the same timeframe, we have used the closest available proxy to give a meaningful indication of how these themes have been playing out for children and young people in this area.



The **population of children and young people** has shown little growth in the last 7 years, but **the mix is different**

There are now **193,000** young people living in Hertfordshire



This is an increase of less than 1pp (around 14,000 more)

Poverty is rising. Two independent indicators, both pointing in the same direction



6,000 more
children are now living in
relative low-income families



10% in 2017 to
12% in 2024



17,000 more
pupils now eligible for
free school meals

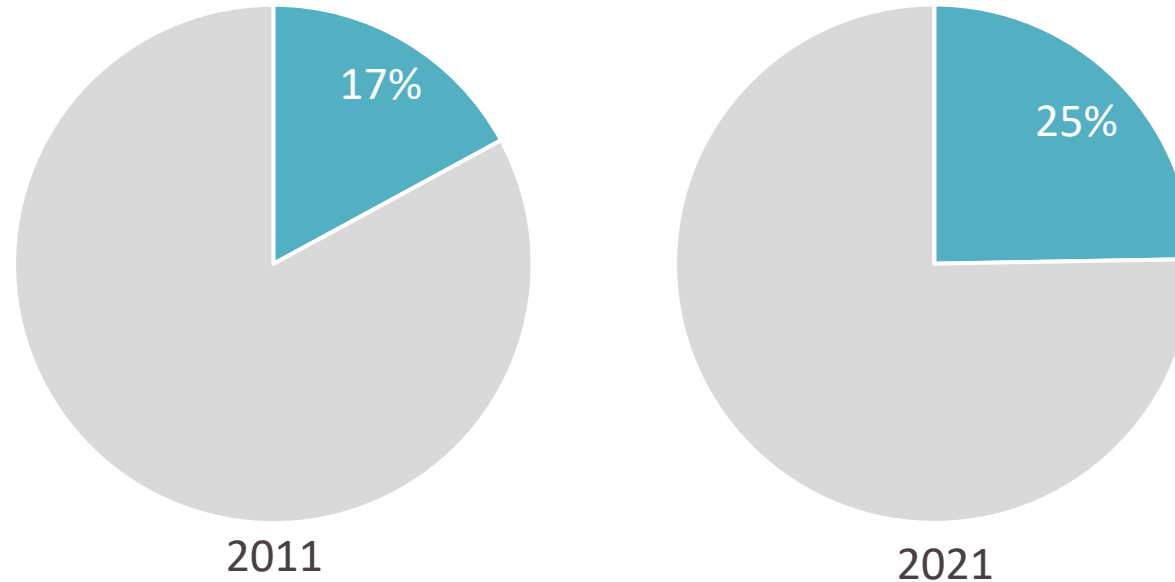


7% in 2017 to
14% in 2024-25



Our young people are **more diverse** than ever before

Children and young people from the **Global Majority** now account for **a quarter** of the population

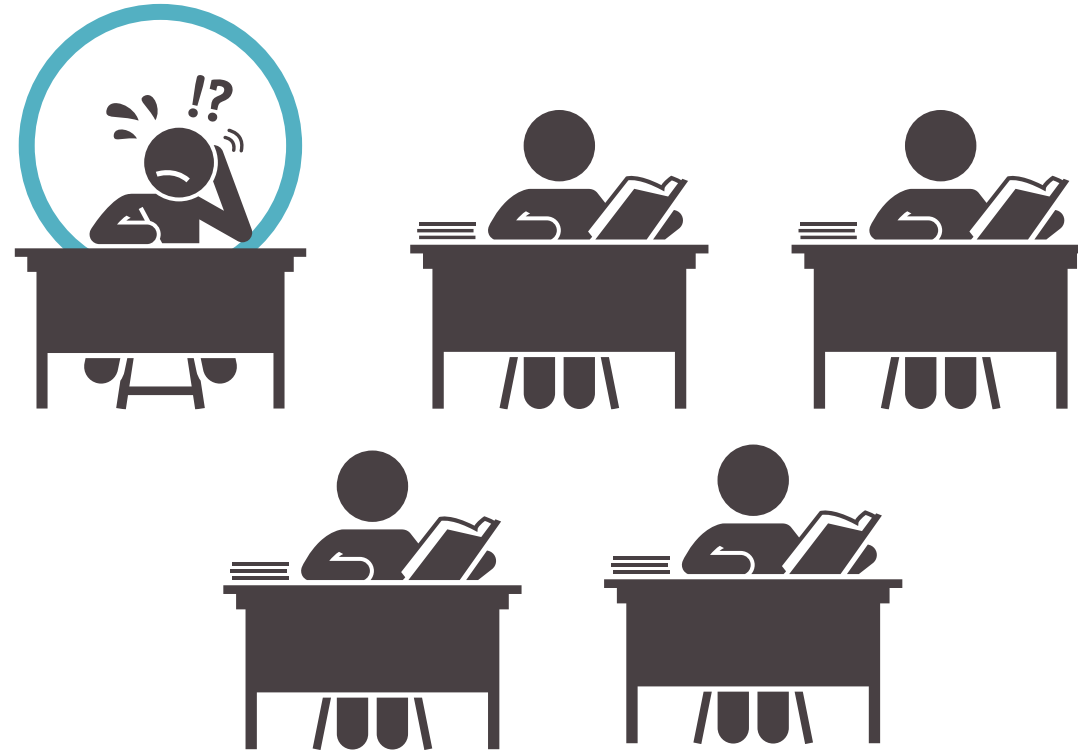


That's **almost 29,000 more** children and young people whose experiences and identities should be reflected in what we offer and how we deliver it

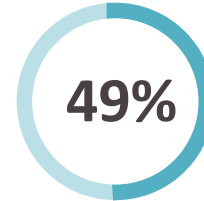
Our children have more complex needs

1 in 5 children and young people are being identified with **Special Educational Needs** (19%)

In 2017, this was **1 in 7 (14%)**



More young people are struggling with their **mental health**, and many feel **lonely** at least some of the time



Referrals to secondary **mental health** services have increased by almost 50% in recent years (under 18s)



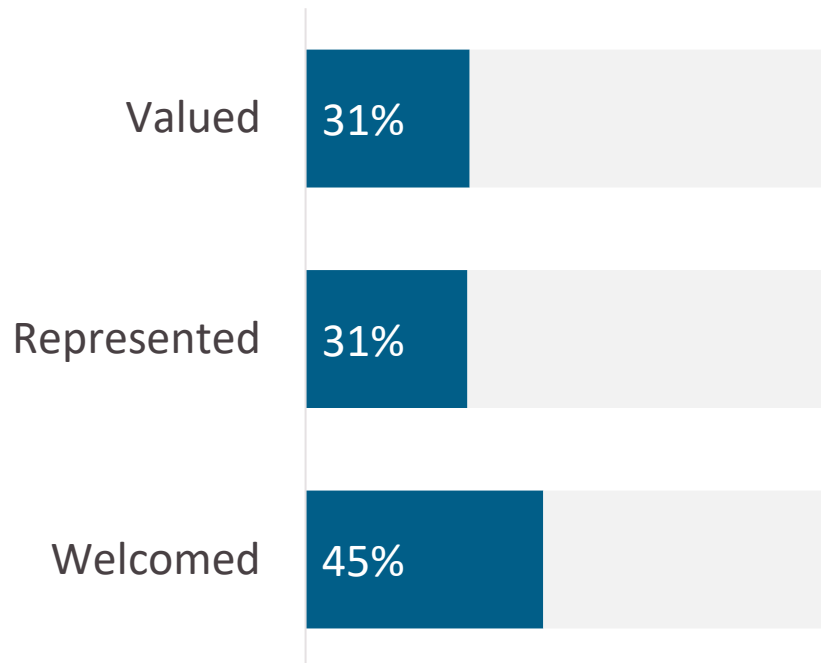
There has been a 20% increase in under-18s attending **mental health** services



Around 32% of secondary school aged children say they feel **lonely** - a pattern that is stable, compared to a slight increase nationally

Young people who **strongly feel** that they are **valued**, **represented** and **welcomed** are more likely to be **active**

This chart shows the relatively small **proportion of young people who strongly agree** that they feel this way



Alongside the potential that improving these feelings could have on **active** levels

62% of children who strongly agree they **feel valued** in sports activities are active, compared to 50% who don't

69% who strongly agree they see **people like them** while exercising outside of school are active, compared to 48% who don't

64% of children who strongly agree they feel that there are places that are **inclusive and welcoming** are active, compared to 45% who don't

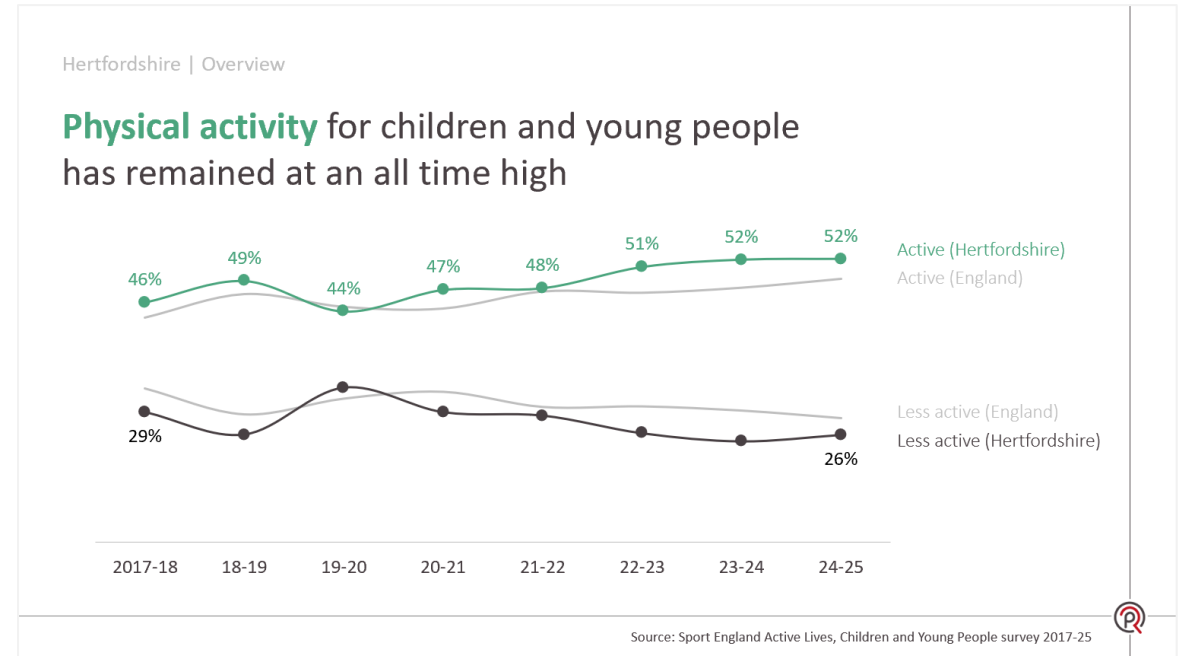


Record activity levels, against a more challenging backdrop

The population has not grown significantly, but the mix has changed - more **poverty**, more **diversity**, more **complex needs**. Leading to more children and young people facing the **structural barriers** that we know consistently predict inactivity.

Activity has improved despite these headwinds.

But widening inequalities remain and more must be done.



Looking ahead

This summary has focused on children and young people already in the school system - but it is equally important to look forward.

School readiness data signals that the same pressures identified in this summary, particularly poverty, are already shaping the development of very young children before they reach school age. The children arriving with unmet developmental milestones are the same children we already know to be at greatest risk of inactivity.

The challenges we see in the data today may be deepening.



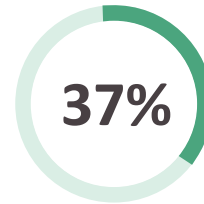
School Readiness Survey 2025

The Kindred² **School Readiness Survey** is an annual report now in its sixth year, exploring how many children are entering Reception without meeting key developmental milestones - and what impact this has.

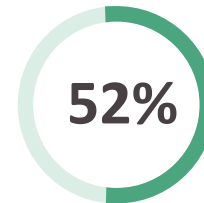
It captures perspectives from both parents and primary school staff, defining school readiness broadly as children being ready to access the learning and developmental opportunities available to them in Reception.



The scale of the problem



of children in the 2025 Reception cohort were not school ready - up from **33%** in 2024



Over half of primary school staff say the proportion of unready children is increasing year on year

What reception children are starting school without



26%

are not toilet trained
(up from 24%; rising to 36% in the North East)



28%

are unable to eat and drink independently
(up from 26%)



25%

struggle with basic language skills
(up from 23%)



32%

become overly upset when separated from their parents



Despite this, **88%** of parents believe their child is ready for school, a picture that sits in sharp contrast to what teachers are experiencing in the classroom

Impact on Schools



2.4 hrs

of teaching time is lost per day due to catch-up needs



1.4 hrs

of that is spent on toileting alone

Causes

Cost of living pressures

Almost half of parents and staff cite **longer working hours** as a contributing factor

Screen time

52% of staff identify **excessive device use** as the biggest single factor

Only **36% of parents** agree

SEND

39% of staff cite identified or suspected SEND as a major contributor to readiness challenges

Access to nursery

Children who attended nursery arrive with markedly **higher readiness** across all measures

What this means for children's **physical activity development**



The developmental gaps described in this report are not just indicators of school readiness in a narrow sense - they are **early warning signs** for children's physical literacy and **long-term movement behaviours**

- **Physical development is already affected.** 37% of children are reported to struggle with holding a pencil, 35% cannot dress independently, and significant proportions lack the motor control, body awareness, and coordination that underpin physical competence. These are foundational to physical literacy.
- **Emotional regulation is a prerequisite for participation.** The marked rise in emotional dysregulation and separation anxiety will directly affect children's ability to engage with PE, sport, and active play - activities that require risk tolerance, turn-taking, resilience, and the ability to function in group settings.
- **The lost teaching time has a knock-on effect.** With nearly a quarter of the school day absorbed by catch-up support, time and energy for physical development, outdoor learning, and active play is squeezed - affecting all children, not just those who are less ready.

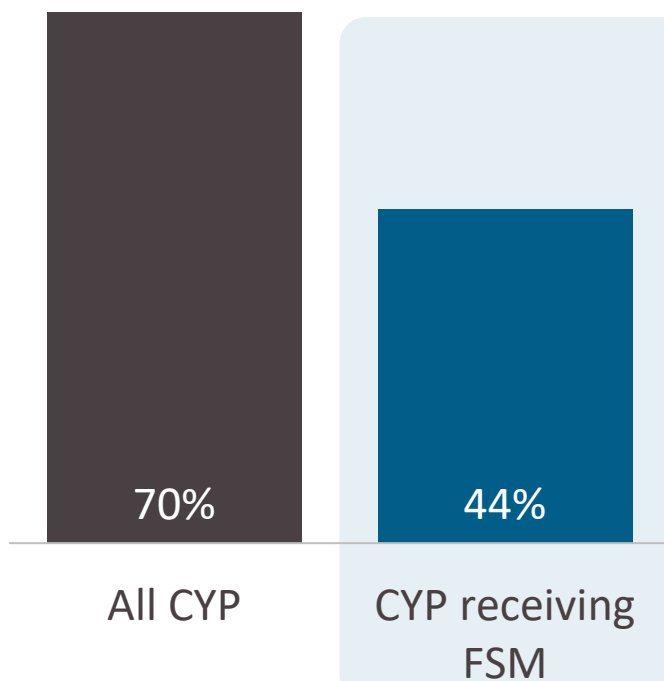
School readiness - The local picture

While local data at the point of school entry is not available, end-of-Reception figures offer the closest comparable picture.



Only 7 in 10 children are achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception

This has improved over time



Children who receive free school meals are far less likely to **achieve a good level of development** at the end of Reception.

This is not a local anomaly; it is a national pattern.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are falling behind from the very start of their school lives



What does this mean for our work?

Record activity levels. More challenging conditions. **What do we do with that?**

- Are you now thinking about anything differently?
- What will you take from this that will affect your work in the next 12 months?
- What do you need to be thinking about for your future work?
- What support would help you use this evidence?





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