

## **Lack of Physical Activity – a Warning**

Many colleagues will remember Seb Coe as a successful Olympian, middle-distance runner and winner of four medals at the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games including the 1500 metres gold medal at both. As Lord Coe he was chairman of the London Organising Committee for the 2012 London Olympic Games. Now, amongst other roles, he is Chairman of the British Olympic Association.

In April of this year Lord Coe spoke of his concerns about the “sedentary lifestyle” of today’s young people and referred to them as the “least active generation in history”. Significantly a group of MPs formed, towards the end of 2013, an All-Party Commission on Physical Activity – their first report appeared in the Summer of 2014.

The report identifies a significant number of concerns including:-

- The warning that today’s generation of young people may be the first to have a life expectancy shorter than that of their parents.
- That just half of seven-year olds are meeting Government recommendations to have an hour’s moderate to vigorous physical activity each day with levels of activity halving again between the ages of nine and 15.
- That over half of adults do not get the minimum amount of exercise recommended by experts. (The four UK Chief Medical Officers recommend at least two-and-one-half hours of moderate physical activity every week).
- That fewer children are playing freely in streets, parks and open spaces, with many ferried to school by car by parents who themselves spend most of their working lives behind a desk.
- Highlighting research which shows that the average office worker now spends five hours 41 minutes sitting at their desk each day, whilst just 22 per cent of adults achieve even half an hour’s exercise a week.

- That the average Briton is 24 per cent less active than they were in 1961, and on course to be 35 per cent less active by 2030, with this lack of activity linked to a rising burden of ill-health, from conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

We may well justify some of these figures by referencing a number of social changes that have taken place in post-war Britain – taking children to school by car for example being a reflection on the fact that so many families rely on two wage-earners rather than just one, concerns about children’s safety when outside the home as well as the increasing number of distractions (television, games consoles and the like) which tend to keep children indoors. We may also identify the number of children who do not conform to the above figures and who readily take advantage of every opportunity to get out of doors and to indulge in healthy activity. Nevertheless, whether or not we can ‘explain away’ some of the statistics, we do need to address their implications for the later well-being of our young people.

The Report continues:-

- “Physical inactivity leads to around 37,000 premature deaths a year – a number that is more than all deaths from murder, suicide and accident combined. Lack of physical activity is estimated to double the rate of absenteeism at work, and to cost the UK economy billions of pounds each year”
- The price we pay for physical inactivity is high – inactive children do not perform as well at school and are less likely to go to university. As they reach their adult years, they will not be as happy, healthy or productive as they would be if they had played more during childhood. Yes, simply played.
- Worldwide, inactivity is closely linked to more than nine million premature deaths. According to the NHS, inactivity costs Britain nearly £10 billion every year for just five conditions (post-menopausal breast cancer, lower gastrointestinal cancer, cerebrovascular disease, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes).

We may, cynically, examine the list of these five conditions and question one or two of them but we should not require the NHS to tell us that inactivity does have an impact on heart conditions, nor should we doubt that ‘modern’ living conditions are very different from what they were – we have seen many social changes, but have, in general, failed to compensate for some of the more negative elements of those changes.

We are starting to hear of the youngest of the children in our schools experiencing greater difficulties in socialization because in those first few years of life they are playing less with their peers – clearly this is a part of the same issue.

At a National level, we have seen £150 million a year invested in Primary School Sport and PE (the Primary School Sports Premium) – children do have every right to the benefits that participation in sports and physical activity can provide. We must ensure that the London Olympics and Paralympics of 2012 serve as a catalyst for change and that those events leave behind them a legacy, not just about medals or races won, but about the whole process of inspiring people to take part in sport or other physical activities.

Reference was made in a previous issue about the work that the National Trust are doing to encourage young people to take part in their recent “50 Things to do before you are eleven and three-quarters” challenge (see [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50things](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50things)) – they and others are taking up the challenge and we want to see children given every encouragement and opportunity to increase their level of physical activity within the context of schools – in sport of course, but also in non-sporting activities.

In conclusion we should revisit Lord Coe’s summary. “Now it is a matter of mobilising everyone to move more themselves to help our children and young people to be active; to ensure our cities and workplaces encourage activity; and for positive experiences of physical activities to be a national priority. If we do this – move our nation – we will thrive as a population, as an economy, as healthy neighbourhoods. We should be pushing and challenging young people”.

What can we do, as governors, to pick up that challenge and help to secure benefits for our children and for our communities?

*Praefectus vulgaris.*