

Tuesday 10 October 2023

Open Letter to Rishi Sunak, Keir Starmer and Ed Davey,

Our children are in a mental health crisis. We need to take action now.

This World Mental Health Day, we are calling on you, the leaders of our biggest political parties, to unlock the potential of sport and physical activity to play a more meaningful role in tackling the UK's growing mental health epidemic.

We're failing too many of our children, who leave school unfit, inactive and dealing with poor mental health on an unprecedented scale.

The number of children and young people in mental health crisis reached record levels this year. In the year to March 2023 there were 21,555 urgent referrals to mental health crisis teams, up 46% on 2022, according to analysis of NHS data by the charity Young Minds.

More than one in ten primary aged school children has an identifiable mental health condition – that is around three children in every class.

All of us involved in sport and physical activity, from grassroots community clubs to the UK's biggest mass participation running events, have seen the profound and positive effect physical activity can have on mental health and wellbeing in children and adults.

Research shows children experience increased feelings of happiness, improvements in self-esteem and feel calmer after taking part in The Daily Mile.

Meanwhile, data released by the government earlier this year showed the number of hours young people spend doing physical education and sport in secondary schools in England has fallen by more than 12% since the 2012 London Olympics.

As a country, our long term health and wellbeing strategy needs to prioritise prevention.

Poor mental health costs the nation £53-£56 billion a year. We spend more on healthcare, directly linked to inactivity, than all but two countries in Europe.

Our sector already saves the NHS an estimated £9.5 billion through preventing illness overall. The latest evidence shows increased access to physical activity could add another £1 billion to that total annually, through the prevention of non-communicable diseases and mental health conditions, like dementia and depression.

We applaud the approaches outlined in The Centre for Social Justice report *Game Changer: A plan to transform young lives through sport* and MP Kim Leadbeater's Fabian Society report *Healthy Britain: A new approach to health and wellbeing policy*.

As a sector, we're ready to help. We work to deliver solutions, facilitating activity outreach programmes in schools and communities, rolling out junior and adult parkruns across the nation, staging world-leading events that inspire people of all ages and abilities to get active and improve their mental and physical health and generating £85bn every year in economic, social and health uplift.

But we could do so much more. According to recent data from the Sport and Recreation Alliance, we currently rank a low joint 11th out of 15 neighbouring European nations in activity levels, which means missing out on a potential £71 billion wellbeing uplift. Our sector needs more ambition from leaders to work with us, to give our young people the best chance in life by striving to become the most active nation in Europe.

Government - both now and in the future – must therefore demonstrate boldness and bravery and commit to maximising the transformative power of our sector.

Louder than ever before, voices across the political spectrum are calling for new policies that embrace the potential of being physically active to change lives. We need to get our adults moving. We need to get our children moving.

A lifetime of activity, leading to a happier, healthier population needs to start and be embedded throughout our school years. This is the first and most important step to improving the health and wellbeing of the nation.

We're calling on all party leaders to put physical and health literacy at the heart of the future school curriculum, giving all children and young people access to high-quality PE, co-curricular activity, and community provision to truly leverage the unique position of schools to transform every childhood through physical activity.

Yours sincerely,

