

**LEARNING
FOCUS:**

**CHILDREN
& YOUNG
PEOPLE**



**Supporting vulnerable children and young
people in schools and communities**

Plymouth Pathfinder

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The challenge

In 2019, an [Appreciative Enquiry](#) in Plymouth identified children and young people as a priority audience for tackling inequality through physical activity. Many children and young people (CYP) experience trauma and/or have special educational needs, which affect their resilience, confidence and wellbeing.

In response, Plymouth Pathfinder launched in November 2020, aiming to support vulnerable CYP in schools and communities. This work aligns with local strategies like Thrive Plymouth and Active to Thrive, which address health and social inequalities.

By focusing on resilience, mental health, and inclusive physical activity, Plymouth Pathfinder aims to reduce barriers, build supportive networks and ensure every young person can benefit from positive movement experiences. The work continues to evolve, driven by local partnerships and the needs of young people.



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The solution

In Plymouth Pathfinder, we take a whole-system approach across four interconnected areas: schools, connection, place, and system. In **schools**, we embed youth workers and a youth social prescriber who provide one-to-one and group support for children who have experienced trauma and/or have SEN. These professionals also help with transition from primary to secondary and support CYP to connect with local physical activity opportunities.

Through **connection**, we map local physical activity offers, address barriers like transport or fees, and build links between schools, families and community providers. Our **place** work focuses on tailoring interventions to each neighbourhood, co-creating solutions with local partners and embedding physical literacy into youth services **and schools**.

At the **system** level, we collaborate with public health, the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network and others to share insights, encourage policy change and shape a co-ordinated response. We use real-time evaluation, capture stories from young people and align with city-wide plans like the Compassionate Approach to Children and Young People's Health and Weight.

We are working to embed physical literacy across education and youth work to enable more positive experiences that meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

Stakeholders involved

Stakeholders span education, health, youth services and the voluntary sector. Plymouth City Council's youth service, Proactive Plymouth, and Young Devon provide youth workers and a youth social prescriber, who engage directly with children.

Schools, including four secondary schools and three feeder primaries, host these workers and partner on activities like stormbreak and Healthy Movers to support wider school outcomes. Local physical activity providers – such as Argyle Community Trust, Plymouth Patriots Basketball, and YMCA Plymouth – offer diverse sports and training, while we address barriers like transport and costs.

We work closely with Plymouth City Council's public health team to align the work with city-wide strategies, including the Compassionate Approach to Children and Young People's Health and Weight plan. We also collaborate with the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network to embed trauma-informed practice, creating a new Sport and Physical Activity Branch.

StreetGames, Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, and the Youth Sport Trust contribute expertise and resources to help design and deliver targeted interventions.

By connecting these stakeholders through regular meetings, mapping exercises and shared training, Plymouth Pathfinder is supporting consistent communication and co-operation between partners.

The shared goal is to support children who have experienced trauma or have SEN by increasing resilience, promoting inclusive physical literacy and providing positive opportunities in sport and physical activity.





Impacts and benefits as a result of these interventions and new ways of working

Schools have reported improved attendance, behaviour and engagement among children involved in Plymouth Pathfinder-supported activities. Many young people report feeling more confident and willing to try new activities, while schools note fewer exclusions and better classroom focus.

Physical literacy has become a unifying concept, helping partners understand the importance of fun, inclusive movement experiences. This approach addresses an 'enjoyment gap,' especially among young people who have not previously found physical activity appealing.

By training youth workers, PE teachers and the wider CYP sectors on physical literacy and trauma-informed methods, we are starting to see a culture shift in the curriculum design and delivery. This is ongoing and is by no means a finished piece of work.

Stronger community links and connection to the workers mean that families are better informed about local opportunities, with transport and cost barriers tackled through flexible funding and collaboration. Networks such as the Sport and Physical Activity Branch of the Trauma Informed Plymouth Network are also emerging.

These shifts reflect a wider cultural change in how Plymouth views sport and physical activity, with a focus on building resilience and wellbeing rather than simply increasing participation. Partner feedback indicates that these new ways of working are becoming embedded across schools and community settings.

The learning:

- **Listening to the voice of children and young people remains essential** and engaging parents as partners and starting support early has reinforced that physical literacy is a unifying concept that underpins all our work.
- Youth social prescribers and youth workers need a **flexible approach as building trust with young people – especially those impacted by trauma or with special needs – often takes longer than 8–12 weeks**. Their ability to accompany children to their first session has a noticeable positive impact, yet current capacity limits and referral options remain challenges.
- Regular mapping of local activities, supported by a dedicated budget **for CYP**, is essential to know what's available and to address barriers like transport.
- In schools, speaking the school's language and aligning with their priorities have proven crucial. Supporting transitions from primary to secondary is key, as these periods influence engagement, attendance and behaviour. **Schools appreciate when physical activity is positioned as a tool for broader outcomes – supporting self-regulation and mental health – rather than simply increasing participation and activity levels.**
- Trusted relationships with schools and connections to wider community initiatives have improved outcomes, though many schools express a need for full-time youth worker/social prescriber support.
- In primary settings, mental health has become a top priority for both pupils and staff. **The introduction of mentally healthy movement strategies has had a positive effect**, and engagement with parents is notably easier.
- In secondary schools, starting support with year 7 students has supported a more positive outlook on school life. Individual, hand-held support is especially important for vulnerable young people, and schools benefit from external support to enhance these efforts.
- Community connections are vital. **Understanding what local activities are available – through comprehensive mapping efforts – is critical**, especially as there are hundreds of activities, with more work needed to include those with SEN.
- Upskilling the workforce around neurodiversity, trauma and physical literacy and addressing practical barriers like transport are key to enabling better access.
- **Collaboration with broader networks, sharing insights, and connecting with strategies** such as the Compassionate Approach to Children and Young People's Health and Weight Strategic Plan, further system-wide change.

Key takeaways

- Focus on relationships and local context.
- Give workers enough time and flexibility to build trust with CYP.
- Map activities to identify gaps and remove transport or fee barriers.
- Train staff in trauma-informed methods and physical literacy, making sessions welcoming.
- Work closely with parents, especially for younger children.
- Use real-time evaluation to adapt and share lessons with partners.
- Align efforts with broader strategies to secure support and sustainability.
- Stay flexible and open to new insights, recognising each child's journey is different.



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What's next?

- Putting CYP at the heart of the Active to Thrive strategy and physical activity work in Plymouth. Embedding physical literacy across schools, youth work, and the wider CYP sector.
- Expanding social prescribing and youth worker roles to reach more young people.
- Strengthening connections with youth voice organisations to ensure young people help shape future plans.
- Connecting with more partners and deepening existing connections and collaboration with existing partners to mutually strengthen the work.
- Deepening engagement with parents and communities.
- Increasing workforce training in trauma-informed approaches and wider training needs.
- A collective city-wide approach to mapping and collation of activities/opportunities.
- Identifying additional CYP target groups to be involved.

To find out more about Plymouth Pathfinder through a collection of videos, blogs and reports, please visit the dedicated [Plymouth Pathfinder webpage](#).

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