OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
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Promoting physical activity in Oxfordshire schools

An audit of the implementation of NICE public health guidance on promoting physical activity in schools across Oxfordshire showed that only half of the recommendations were being met. The main barriers were lack of awareness of the guidance, and time and monetary constraints.

"More needs to be done locally to promote physical activity in schools – not only through the curriculum but through encouraging children and their families to be active outside of school hours."

Lisa Peto, Public Health Speciality Registrar, NHS Oxfordshire

Healthy children become healthy adults

Regular activity as a child reduces the risk of obesity in adulthood, as well as reducing risk factors for chronic diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. But a PE and sport survey in 2009 found that only a quarter of school children in Oxfordshire spent at least 3 hours a week on high quality physical education and school sport, compared to a national average of 55%. NICE's guidance on promoting physical activity in children and young people recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day. The guidance contains many recommendations aimed at schools covering active travel, promoting physical activity in the curriculum, involving families and the provision of facilities.

The audit aimed to find out about current provision, determine gaps and variations, and also to provide information to NICE on the implementation of guidance.

Meeting the NICE guidance recommendations

An email questionnaire sent to all schools in Oxfordshire asked teachers for information on their awareness of the public health guidance, as well as questions about barriers to implementing the guidance, levels of physical activity, out of hours sports clubs and competitive sports.

Only half of the recommendations aimed at schools in the NICE guidance on promoting physical activity in children and young people were met by primary and secondary schools in Oxfordshire. This ranged from an average of 43% of recommendations being met in Oxford City schools to 57% in the Vale. No strong associations were found between number of NICE recommendations met and deprivation and rurality.

Two thirds of schools had developed a school travel plan; part of the active travel recommendations, but only a quarter had integrated the plan with those of other schools. The majority of primary schools provided the national cycling proficiency scheme. Schools performed well at meeting recommendations on promoting activity in the curriculum, for example in promoting girls to participate in PE in secondary schools.

Recommendations for promoting physical activity

The audit results have shown that more can be done to promote physical activity in schools, and provides information on what NICE and other organisations can do to help achieve this. It has also provided a useful baseline by which to measure improvements.

The main barrier faced by schools in implementing the NICE guidance was unawareness of the guidance with 70% of schools responding to the questionnaire stating that this was a barrier. The second biggest barrier was time constraints with 61% of schools stating that this was a barrier, followed by monetary constraints (57%), schools having no statutory responsibility to carry out NICE guidance (43%) and complicated and lengthy guidance (41%).

Locally, support and assistance could be given to schools, to raise awareness of the NICE guidance, and to encourage schools to develop action plans. Local examples could be provided to demonstrate how to meet recommendations, and demonstrate the benefits of doing so – improving the health and wellbeing of pupils, meeting government targets and saving money.

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