



Scoping the Potential of Physical Education (PE) as a Core Subject: Challenges, Opportunities and Need for Support



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Scoping the Potential of Physical Education (PE) as a Core Subject: Challenges, Opportunities and Need for Support

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1. Acknowledgements

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2. Executive Summary

2.1 Background context

The place and purpose of physical education (PE) within schools has been the subject of much debate in recent years. Despite research internationally espousing the educative benefits of PE and its potential to support the holistic development of pupils, questions have continued to be raised about the position of the subject within the broader educational landscape. Internationally, there is agreement that the subject is often marginalised within curricula, with greater emphasis being placed on those subjects perceived to have higher academic status. Within England, there have been recent renewed calls for PE to be classified as a core subject, led by the Association for PE (afPE) Taskforce whose 2021 report on the matter was considered by Government. However, while there is enthusiasm for the PE as a core subject, there is less clarity on if/how this will be achieved and what impact such a move may have on practice. Further research is needed, therefore, to explore these issues and evidence the potential of PE as a core subject.

2.2 Overview of project

This report presents the first phase of an ongoing research project being undertaken by researchers from Loughborough University and the University of Edinburgh that examines the concept of PE as a core subject within a large academy trust. This first phase focused on scoping the perspectives of key stakeholders (i.e., PE subject leaders, teachers of PE and school leaders) to ascertain their views on PE as a core subject. It aimed to explore the (potential) impact of making PE a core subject through the following objectives:

1. To identify the position and status of PE within schools
2. To explore the perceived potential of PE as a core subject from different stakeholders' perspectives
3. To map the opportunities and challenges that a move to PE as a core subject might present
4. To identify what support needs might arise from a move to PE as a core subject
5. To gather insight as to what PE as a core subject might 'look like' within schools
6. To examine what might be markers of success of a pilot of PE as a core subject

The research outlined here took place from February to July 2022 and adopted a mixed methods approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data to generate rich insights. Data were generated via online surveys sent to PE subject leaders, teachers of PE and senior leadership teams (SLT) across the academy trust and follow-up online interviews with selected PE subject leaders and teachers of PE. In total, 84 complete survey responses were received from participants (48 male, 36 female, ages 24-47 years). These participants were both PE subject leaders (n=46) and teachers of PE (n=38) and represented both secondary (n=74) and primary (n=10) contexts. In addition, 17 individual interviews were

conducted with participants (10 male, 7 female), with all but one representing secondary contexts. Data analysis followed an iterative process, with quantitative data used to generate descriptive statistics and qualitative data undergoing a thematic analysis.

2.3 Key findings

The research outlined in this report reveals much about the potential of PE as a core subject, with key findings including:

PE valued but not always prioritised: Data highlighted that the majority of survey respondents (83%) felt that PE was valued. However, it also suggested that it was not always prioritised within school practice, and the perceived value of PE could be easily undermined. Nonetheless, participants were largely positive about the idea of PE being a core subject, with survey respondents indicating much support for the idea. Some concern was expressed about being able to achieve this aim though, with less than a third of respondents (29%) indicating their SLT would likely back the idea.

Opportunities and challenges of PE becoming a core subject: Participants identified a range of opportunities that could arise from PE becoming a core subject. These included *benefits for pupils* (e.g., supporting health and wellbeing, attendance, academic achievements), *benefits for staff* (e.g., professional development, specialist training, leadership opportunities) and *benefits for the subject* (e.g., raised status, curriculum time, resourcing). However, various challenges to PE becoming a core subject were identified by participants, many reflecting the perceived low status of the subject within schools. Space in the curriculum was a key issue here, with 75% of survey respondents indicating ‘timetabling’ as a significant challenge and 24% noting that PE had lost time to make space for other subjects. In addition, there were challenges with regard to the availability of facilities, staffing and SLT support.

Support needed to effect change: It was recognised that PE would need significant support from SLT to become a core subject within schools. Linked with this, survey respondents also noted support needs relating to facilities (82%), resourcing (71%) and curriculum time (68%). It was notable that data highlighted both a need for additional support in each of these areas and a greater protection of existing provision. Interestingly, a need for a ‘vision for core PE’ was also highlighted, with interview participants noting that there was potential for confusion with the current conceptualisation of ‘core PE’ within the curriculum.

Envisaging what PE as a core subject will ‘look like’: There was a notable consensus among survey respondents (76%) – in considering a ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject – that this would require PE to be viewed in the same way as other core subjects. Key elements related to PE becoming a core subject included: the protection of facilities, curriculum time and pupil access to PE; ensuring there is no ‘drop-off’ in access at Key Stage 4; and maintaining a focus on quality PE. There were also implications noted for

pupil assessment, although different perspectives were apparent here. Markers of success for participants around a pilot of PE as a core subject were allied closely with their 'vision'. The markers identified around these included: reduced loss of facilities; safeguarding of staff time within PE; reduced removal of pupils from PE lessons; and protecting existing curriculum time. Improved attitudes towards PE – from pupils to parents as well as SLT and wider school staff – was also highlighted as being a potential marker of success.

This research has confirmed that there is significant support for PE to become a core subject. However, there is a lack of clarity around what PE as a core subject might 'look like' and how this will come about. Evidently, clarity in this regard will be key in securing further support for PE as a core subject, advancing this agenda and ultimately being able to evidence to Government what might be achieved from designating PE as a core subject.

2.4 Recommendations

The scoping phase of this research has identified five evidence-based recommendations to both inform the subsequent evaluation phase of this research and to support the wider advancement of the PE as a core subject agenda. These include:

- Recommendation 1 – Outlining a 'vision' for PE as a core subject
- Recommendation 2 – Futureproofing the subject of PE
- Recommendation 3 – Continuing to develop the profession
- Recommendation 4 – Promoting the potential of PE to the public at large
- Recommendation 5 – Securing commitments to protect and empower PE

3. Introduction

3.1 Background and context

There has been much debate – both nationally and internationally and over a sustained period of time – about the subject of physical education (PE) and its place and purpose within schools (Kirk, 2010; Ekberg, 2021; Gray et al., 2022a). It has long been recognised by those within the subject that it has much potential for realising learning across multiple domains (Hooper, Sandford & Jarvis, 2020; Lamb et al., 2021) and for supporting the holistic development of young people (Bailey et al., 2009; Luguetti & Oliver, 2020). However, questions have continued to be raised about the educative capacity of the subject and the contribution it makes - or is able to make - to the education of young people (Quennerstedt, 2019). These questions typically stem from what has been considered to be the relatively limited change with regard to how PE has been conceptualised and enacted in practice (Kirk, 2010; Herold, 2020; Gray et al., 2022a) and the continued dominance of particular agendas (e.g., sport, health) within PE (Jung, Pope & Kirk, 2016; Lindsey et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2022b). Nonetheless, advocates of the subject have continued to ‘make the case’ for the subject and to argue its value to and for young people (see UNESCO, 2017; afPE, 2019). Calls for PE to become a core subject are not new, though in England these were formalised by Harris (2018) on behalf of the PE Expert Group who stated that:

[PE should become] a core subject within the National Curriculum in England alongside English, mathematics and science. Core subjects are generally considered to lay the foundation for learning in other subjects and, as a result, are generally advantaged in terms of their status, preparation for teaching, and their time and resource allocation in schools. As a consequence, key foundation subjects such as physical education tend to be marginalised and ‘squeezed’ in terms of time and resource. This has led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Harris, 2018, p. 2)

It is notable that PE is the only foundation subject that is compulsory from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 but while this is somewhat akin to core status it is not an equivalent and interpretations of this in practice have been varied. As such, there has continued to be sustained interest and advocacy – following the formal call from Harris (2018) – in making PE a core subject and momentum has been gained in this regard following the formation of the Association for PE (afPE) Taskforce in 2020. The afPE Taskforce was assembled to consider (and make recommendations on) the future of PE within England and comprised expert representatives from across the PE sector with support from a wider advisory group. As part of their work, the afPE Taskforce published a report on putting PE at ‘The Heart of School Life’. The afPE Taskforce report set out to make recommendations to Government about the subject of PE and of particular note are two of the headline recommendations within it:

9.1 The Taskforce has identified as its core recommendation an **urgent review by Government of the status of PE as a foundation subject**

9.2 It further recommends **PE to be classified a core subject** with clear goals and priorities and assessment, monitoring and reporting around the holistic development of the child (afPE Taskforce, 2021, p. 22)

The final report was considered by Government, with the House of Lords responding positively to the recommendation to make PE a core subject as part of the ‘National Plan for Sport and Recreation’ report published in 2021. Indeed, on this, the House of Lords made a recommendation to the Department for Education to designate PE as a core subject:

... the Department for Education must designate PE as a core subject across all key stages to ensure that it receives adequate time and resource. The Department for Education must establish expected standards for the delivery of PE and school sport. The quality and delivery of PE and school sport must be assessed during Ofsted inspections of schools (House of Lords National Plan for Sport and Recreation Committee, 2021, p. 55)

However, the Government’s official response to the House of Lords report, in 2022, was less positive, affirming that they “do not currently plan to make PE a core subject” (HM Government, 2022, p. 11). As such, despite a strong case being put forward by Harris (2018) and continued interest and advocacy in making PE a core subject, the Government remain unconvinced.

Whilst there is evidently much enthusiasm for making PE a core subject, from a range of stakeholders, there remains a dearth of evidence surrounding the impact such a move would have for pupils, teachers, schools and communities more broadly. There also remains a lack of consensus around what would constitute ‘core PE’ or perhaps rather ‘PE as a core subject’. Therefore, research is needed to explore the (potential) impact of making PE a core subject and to generate evidence that might be used to demonstrate this and ultimately to better make the case for PE being designated as a core subject. As part of this, there is also an opportunity to provide relevant stakeholders (e.g., PE subject leaders and teachers of PE) with the chance to think about what PE could or should be in the future, enabling them to ‘have a voice’ in important conversations about the subject (Gray et al., 2022a). This report presents the first phase of a research project that seeks to do this by evaluating a pilot of PE as a core subject across primary and secondary schools within a large academy trust.

It is important to note that the academy trust supporting this research were aware of the challenges that PE was facing within their schools and – given the value that they attribute to the subject – wished to be ‘part of the solution’. This report details the findings of the scoping phase of the research which explored the practice of PE within the academy trust during the 2021-2022 academic year, prior to the piloting of PE as a core subject during the following academic year. Indeed, from the 2022-2023 academic year, the academy trust has

secured the support of senior leaders to implement new 'Ambitious Minimum Expectations' as part of a pilot of PE as a core subject. The impact of these and the broader move to position PE as a core subject will be evaluated as part of the subsequent phase of the research.

3.2 Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the (potential) impact of making PE a core subject. With this first phase, the focus of the research was on scoping the perspectives of key stakeholders (i.e., PE subject leaders, teachers of PE and school leaders) to ascertain their views on PE as a core subject. It sought to engage with these key stakeholders to consider the position and status of PE, the perceived potential of PE as a core subject as well as the opportunities, challenges and support that would be needed in working towards this. Additionally, it sought to generate ideas about what PE as a core subject might 'look like' and what might be markers of success with regard to the pilot of PE as a core subject.

The key objectives identified for this first scoping phase of the research were:

1. To identify the position and status of PE within schools
2. To explore the perceived potential of PE as a core subject from different stakeholders' perspectives
3. To map the opportunities and challenges that a move to PE as a core subject might present
4. To identify what support needs might arise from a move to PE as a core subject
5. To gather insight as to what PE as a core subject might 'look like' within schools
6. To examine what might be markers of success of a pilot of PE as a core subject

4. Methodology

The scoping phase of this research took place over a period of 6 months from February to July 2022 within a large academy trust in England. It adopted a mixed methods approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data sources to generate rich insights as detailed below.

4.1 Data collection

Data collection comprised two key elements, namely, an online survey disseminated to PE subject leaders, teachers of PE and senior leadership teams (SLT) across the academy trust and follow-up interviews with selected PE subject leaders and teachers of PE. The online survey was hosted on Jisc Online Surveys (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>) and comprised a range of open and closed questions. It was disseminated to relevant school staff via the Head of Sport for the academy trust. The survey was initially planned to be live for a period of 6 weeks, though this was subsequently extended by a further 2 weeks, in an effort to generate further responses. Following this 8-week period, there were a total of 84 complete responses to the survey. The responses generated were from PE subject leaders and teachers of PE only, with no responses from members of SLT. However, it must be noted that some challenges were encountered in disseminating the survey to SLT, which will be addressed in the subsequent phase of the research. Of the survey respondents, 48 were male and 36 were female, with ages ranging from 24-47. There were 46 PE subject leaders and 38 teachers of PE within the sample, with 74 representing secondary contexts and 10 representing primary contexts. The number of years participants had been teaching ranged from 3 to 26. At the end of the survey, respondents could indicate their interest in participating in follow-up interviews by providing their contact details, with a total of 26 PE subject leaders and teachers of PE expressing their willingness to do so.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants via Microsoft Teams on an individual basis. This was deemed important in order to capture the unique responses of the participants, acknowledging their context and the role it plays in shaping their experiences and perspectives. Whilst 26 survey respondents initially indicated their interest in participating in these, due to subsequent non-response or withdrawal, a total of 17 interviews were conducted with PE subject leaders and teachers of PE. Of the interview participants, 10 were male and 7 were female. There were 12 PE subject leaders and 5 teachers of PE within the sample, with all but one of these – a PE subject leader – representing secondary contexts. Interviews were generally around 45 minutes in duration and were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams. Recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate data analysis.

4.2 Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative process with each phase of the data collection informing the next. Quantitative data – generated from the survey – were collated and used to

generate descriptive statistics (e.g. frequencies and percentages). Qualitative data – derived from the survey and interviews – were collated before being analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is an inductive (i.e., ‘bottom up’) process where themes are derived from close examination and interpretation of the data itself. Data were firstly read and re-read with codes being assigned to portions of text and memos being noted. Themes were then developed from codes before being reviewed and refined.

4.3 Ethics

Ethical approval for this research project was sought prior to the commencement of any research activities. Following submission of an ethics proposal (Project ID: 7762), the research was granted a favourable ethics decision by the Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee at Loughborough University. The research was also conducted in line with the ‘Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research’ published by the British Educational Research Association (2018). Ethical issues of particular concern within the research related to consent and anonymity, as it was deemed particularly important to ensure that participants were not identifiable in any way through the research (e.g., via contextual information concerning their role or school, shared as part of the findings).

5. Findings

Within this section, the findings from the survey and interviews are presented around key themes generated during the analysis process.

5.1 Position and status of PE: Valued but not always prioritised

Participants were generally positive with regard to the value they perceived the subject of PE to hold within their respective schools, with 83% of survey respondents rating the subject as either somewhat valued (35%), valued (31%) or highly valued (17%). Respondents generally outlined that SLT were supportive of the subject, with some highlighting how SLT were aware of the potential benefits it offers to young people:

Our Head Teacher values PE within the curriculum and beyond it and fully supports our department – I'd say she already views it as a core subject (PE Subject Leader)

SLT get that PE can develop pupils holistically. They know that it can support their physical, mental and social wellbeing like other subjects can't (Teacher of PE)

However, whilst survey data indicated that participants were generally positive with regard to the value they perceived the subject of PE to hold, interviews with PE subject leaders and teachers of PE served to highlight several ways in which this value could be undermined within schools. On this, one participant noted that:

We're really supported by SLT, you know, they value the subject. They always support whatever we want to do... fixtures, trips, awards evenings, all of that, but it's the general day-to-day stuff, it's the actual PE lessons where we need more support. When it comes to those lessons, it's always just "Oh, it's only PE, we'll pull students out of that" or "It's only PE, we'll use those spaces" (PE Subject Leader)

Indeed, the sentiments expressed by this PE subject leader were shared by a majority of participants (n=12) during interviews where they variously recounted the ways in which the value of PE had been undermined. Examples cited by participants included pupils being removed from PE for additional tutoring in other subjects – typically, English or mathematics – or PE facilities being 'taken away' from the subject to facilitate other activities within the school such as examinations. Ultimately, this led to some participants questioning how valued the subject of PE actually was:

I know that SLT value PE, but I think maybe, if we're being honest, it's not a priority for them. They'll support it when they can, especially with wider stuff, but it's just not seen to be as important as other subjects (PE Subject Leader)

PE can just be another subject on the curriculum sometimes. You have your English, maths and science, and then your humanities and languages and then there's everything else, everything that falls underneath... that's where I think PE often sits. They [SLT] recognise the value, but they don't always show it, at least not with how they prioritise other subjects above us (PE Subject Leader)

The perspectives shared by PE subject leaders and teachers of PE during the interviews served to highlight that the perceived value of PE could be easily undermined and that the position of the subject within their schools was often seen to be lower than other subjects, particularly existing core subjects and those associated with school accountability measures (e.g., SATs, GCSEs, EBacc and Progress 8). Such perspectives were perhaps influential in shaping the views of PE subject leaders and teachers of PE in relation to the potential of PE as a core subject.

5.2 Potential of PE as a core subject: Positive for pupils and teachers, but SLT support needed

Despite survey data indicating that participants were generally positive about the perceived value of PE, a third of survey respondents did not feel that their school would be likely to support a move to PE as a core subject with only 29% of respondents rating this as likely or highly likely. Various reasons were cited for this though these largely centred on conflicting priorities within the school – particularly in relation to other core subjects – with respondents noting that there would likely be challenges around curriculum time and facilities, qualification pathways and accountability measures:

There's just so much of a push for the existing core subjects that I don't believe SLT would support it (PE Subject Leader)

From a timetabling perspective, I feel there would be major issues in terms of where we get lesson time from and facilities for these (PE Subject Leader)

I don't think we'd be able to accommodate it within our current qualification pathways, we follow the EBacc (Teacher of PE)

I think they may be reluctant as core PE won't be as important when it comes to performance tables and school outcomes (Teacher of PE)

Whilst many respondents expressed some concern as to whether or not SLT would support a move to PE as a core subject, there remained much enthusiasm for this amongst PE subject leaders and teachers of PE. Indeed, survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive in this regard with 88% indicating that they would fully support a move to PE as a core subject and the remaining 12% indicating that they would support such a move. Respondents cited various reasons for this, though these often related to the value they

perceived the subject to hold and the potential it had for positively impacting on young people's development:

We're passionate about the subject and the value of it. We know how beneficial it can be for students and we want to provide a range of enriching opportunities for them (PE Subject Leader)

PE has such a big role to play in supporting pupils' development. It contributes to their health and wellbeing as well as their academic attainment (PE Subject Leader)

Additionally, survey respondents felt that a move to PE as a core subject might offer wider benefits to them and their departments, mostly in relation to enhancing the profile of the subject of PE and consequentially its perceived status within the school more broadly. Some expressed aspirations that this may lead to additional lesson time being allocated within the curriculum and/or enhanced resourcing (i.e., additional equipment/resources and staffing). Such aspirations were also shared during the interviews, where PE subject leaders and teachers of PE spoke of the various potential opportunities that they perceived a move to PE as a core subject might facilitate.

5.3 Opportunities arising from PE as a core subject: Enhanced resourcing, enhanced outcomes

Survey respondents identified many potential opportunities of making PE a core subject and these ranged from raising the profile of the subject – and its position and status within schools – through to enhanced outcomes for pupils. Respondents made many references to additional lesson time being allocated to PE within the curriculum, as well as enhanced resourcing in terms of equipment/resources and staffing (which was often associated with increased funding for the subject). Within the context of primary schools, specifically, there was also reference to the potential for more PE specialists in relation to staffing.

Interviewees also expressed similar views in relation to curriculum time and resourcing, particularly around staffing, but also with regard to opportunities for professional development:

It would give us the opportunity to bring in more staff because, you know, I'd expect that we'd have more lessons to cover, and I think there'd probably be more opportunities to upskill existing staff (PE Subject Leader)

From a staffing point of view, you'd have to increase the size of the department and that would hopefully broaden what we could offer. You'd like to think there'd also be more CPD (Continuing Professional Development) opportunities for staff, if it were a core subject too (PE Subject Leader)

Participants often linked these perceived enhancements to curriculum time and resourcing – if PE were to become a core subject – with enhanced outcomes for pupils. On this, various references were made to the opportunities PE becoming a core subject would have for broadening (as well as deepening) the curriculum and enhancing teaching quality. These were considered by participants to be key to enhancing outcomes for pupils and, in turn, their health and wellbeing. Indeed, a significant proportion of survey respondents (68%) expressed that PE becoming a core subject would serve to promote pupils' health and wellbeing, not just physically, but also mentally, socially and emotionally:

There are so many physical, mental and social health benefits associated with PE, if it were a core subject, you'd really be able to maximise that (Teacher of PE)

It would support overall pupil development, holistically... they'd have better physical health but also improved social and emotional wellbeing (PE Subject Leader)

Allied to this, there were suggestions from respondents that there may also be improvements in relation to pupils' attendance, behaviour and academic attainment – both within PE and beyond – as well as around wellbeing referrals. Indeed, one participant noted during their interview that:

It's just got so much potential, hasn't it? Students getting more PE can only be a good thing. We know there's various health benefits, but that will also impact more widely on, like, their attendance and behaviour, because they might be less stressed or able to deal with it better, because they're getting more time to be physically active in PE, and we know that that helps their concentration too, so think about the impact that could have on their (academic) results (PE Subject Leader)

Participants also noted that PE becoming a core subject might also present an opportunity to improve attitudes towards, or gain greater buy-in for, the subject of PE. Perhaps associated to some extent with the potential for the value of PE to be undermined, survey respondents reported that the associated status that becoming a core subject would bring may serve to enhance perceptions of the subject across the school community – for pupils, SLT as well as wider colleagues in other departments – and beyond. On this, improving the attitudes of wider colleagues in other departments was noted as being particularly important as was gaining buy-in from parents. Indeed, perceived negative attitudes towards the subject, and a lack of buy-in from various stakeholders, was considered to be but one of the many challenges to making PE a core subject.

5.4 Challenges to making PE a core subject: Managing space, time, resources and (negative) attitudes

Survey respondents identified many potential challenges to making PE a core subject but one of the most significant of these – reported by three quarters of respondents – was perceived to be timetabling. It was variously noted by respondents that their respective school curriculum was already ‘full’, with some (24%) even noting that they had lost time from PE in recent years to make space for other subjects. As such, concerns were expressed with regard to where any additional curriculum time that might be associated with the status of being a core subject would come from:

Timetabling issues would be huge. I push every year for more time for PE, but they say there isn’t any and that none of the other subjects could lose it. (PE Subject Leader)

We’ve actually lost PE time in recent years, so I just don’t know where you’d find that from, what does it replace? (Teacher of PE)

Facilities were another significant challenge noted by survey respondents (71%). Whilst many reported that they had good facilities within their schools to support their pupils’ learning in PE, it was the loss of these that was problematic. Indeed, it was highlighted that PE departments were often losing access to key indoor facilities such as sports halls and dance studios, which impacted on what they could offer as part of their curricula. Participants reported significant disruption in this respect due to examinations, with many noting that – whilst this was often anticipated – it was particularly difficult to manage at certain points in the year (i.e., during the Autumn and Spring terms) where alternatives (i.e., outdoor grass pitches and hard courts) were not always ideal:

Losing our facilities has such a big impact. I get that we need somewhere to hold exams, but I don’t think SLT realise how much disruption it causes to us and often at difficult times in the year. It’s not so bad during the summer months, but during winter ones... (PE Subject Leader)

It’s when we lose the sports hall that it gets difficult. There’s only so much you can do when the weather is bad and we’re forced to teach PE outdoors (Teacher of PE)

Such perspectives were shared by the PE subject leaders and teachers of PE who participated in interviews with one highlighting how, as noted earlier, this could be seen to be one of the ways in which the value of PE could be undermined:

The biggest hindrance for us this year has been access to facilities due to examinations. I actually worked it out, we’ve lost the sports hall one (school) day out

of every three this year, which is huge... You know, you expect some disruption and we're fully in support of students having the opportunity to sit mock exams, for example, but when you're trying to deliver a curriculum and realise positive outcomes for students, it can feel like you're being worked against... it's just another way PE gets undermined (PE Subject Leader)

Staffing was another challenge perceived by survey respondents (68%) to be significant. While for many it was a case of noting that there would need to be additional staff to support PE as a core subject, there were several other staffing-related concerns/challenges raised. Indeed, it was felt that there would need to be greater provision for the professional development of staff, particularly within the context of primary schools, with several respondents noting that there were too few accredited opportunities at present. A particularly interesting finding in relation to staffing concerned the wider roles that PE staff held within the school and the consequent impact this could have on PE. Within the interviews with PE subject leaders and teachers of PE, it became apparent that these wider roles – such as Head of Year or Assistant Head Teacher – could mean that staff were being ‘pulled away’ from PE, as one participant notes:

So, we've got, within our department, five members of our team are, you know, Heads of Year, or they have those wider pastoral roles. But that means you get staff being taken out of PE, for those roles and it's just like "They can double up, because it's PE"... It's difficult, because it's other people's career paths, but I do think you find a lot PE teachers taking on these kind of roles, and it can mean they're pulled in all different directions... and away from PE. It can make my job difficult (PE Subject Leader)

It was not only staff that were being ‘pulled away’ from PE, but also pupils. For example, several PE subject leaders and teachers of PE (n=11) noted how pupils were removed from PE lessons in order to attend additional tutoring, revision sessions or interventions, often in support of pupils’ attainment in existing core subjects. This was particularly the case at Key Stage 4, where it was noted that some pupils did not take part in PE for the whole of Year 11, so as to ‘free up’ space on the timetable for such activities to be scheduled:

You get a bit tired of having those conversations like "Can this student miss PE to do this today?" and, it's always for English or maths. I get they're important, but so is PE (Teacher of PE)

Students get taken out of PE for interventions, or something like that, all the time... especially our Year 11s. It just devalues the subject, you wouldn't get a PE teacher taking a student out of English or maths or science for PE, and so it shouldn't work the other way either (PE Subject Leader)

As evidenced above, the removal of pupils from PE lessons was perceived to be one of several ways in which the value of the subject could be undermined. This was associated with another major challenge that participants felt would need to be overcome, namely, (negative) attitudes toward the subject. Over half of survey respondents (56%) reported perceived negative attitudes across various stakeholders, from pupils, to parents and wider school staff. Interestingly, it was the attitudes of wider school staff – such as teachers of other subjects – that were considered by participants to potentially be one of the more difficult ones to change:

Other teachers' attitudes to PE can be poor. I'll be in the staff room and they'll be talking about something and if I make a comment, they'll say things like "Oh, you're just a PE teacher, what would you know about that?" It doesn't bother me, like it's never bothered me to the point where it upsets me, but now, in my position (as a PE subject leader), for the sake of other teachers in my department, I say something, I make sure I challenge them (PE Subject Leader)

Whilst survey respondents generally outlined that SLT were supportive of the subject, there were also some (21%) who felt that SLT did not have particularly positive attitudes towards PE, and although these were in the minority, this was perceived to be challenging given that SLT support (or the lack thereof) can be highly influential with regard to what happens (or does not) within PE. This became more apparent in the interviews where one PE subject leader, for example, explained:

SLT often want to be seen to be supportive, and they often are, but their actions don't always demonstrate that... things like taking away our facilities for exams, allowing students to be removed from lessons for interventions... that doesn't show they value the subject. I don't think they always get PE, like they think it's 'just' PE, they don't realise the impact their actions can have on us (PE Subject Leader)

Evidently, PE subject leaders and teachers of PE identified many challenges that they felt would be encountered if PE were to become a core subject, with some being perceived to be easier to overcome than others. However, it was noted that, to overcome these challenges, a significant level of support would be necessary.

5.5 Support needs for PE to become a core subject: Overcoming challenges and developing a 'vision'

It is perhaps unsurprising that the various support measures participants stated would be needed to make PE core a subject were closely allied to the aforementioned challenges they felt the subject might face. SLT support featured prominently, with respondents noting that

they would need to be fully 'on board' with PE becoming a core subject for this to be successful. Indeed, 94% of survey respondents identified SLT support as a key need in the move to make PE a core subject. Such perspectives were also shared during the interviews with one PE subject leader noting:

You'd need that buy-in from the top, SLT would have to be completely on board, because even if the Government were to mandate this, you could just treat it like a tick box exercise if you wanted. They'd need to be totally on board (PE Subject Leader)

Support from SLT was often associated with other perceived support needs relating to: facilities (82%), resourcing (i.e., additional equipment/resources and staffing) (71%) and curriculum time (68%):

We'd need commitments around facilities, that we'd have these, and they wouldn't be taken away for exams (PE Subject Leader)

There would need to be more resources, more staff to deliver PE across the school (PE Subject Leader)

More time allocated in the timetable, so you'd have to consider timetabling in all of this (Teacher of PE)

Facilities were of particular concern to survey respondents and, for the most part, this related not to the need for additional facilities, but rather to protecting existing ones. As noted above, the loss of facilities was reported to be problematic for a significant number of respondents. Therefore, a commitment from schools (and SLT) to not taking these away for the purposes of other school activities was a frequently cited requirement. These concerns were also shared by those who took part in the interviews with one PE subject leader noting:

Not to go on about this but, you know, we'd need our facilities to be protected, not using them for lunchtimes or exams. PE spaces need to be kept for PE activities (PE Subject Leader)

Survey respondents also made various references to resourcing when considering support needs and these predominantly related to the provision of additional staff within PE (to support what was perceived to be an increase in the amount of time allotted within the curriculum). Interestingly, however, what was of particular concern to those within the interviews was protecting staff. Indeed, several participants (n=10) highlighted the need to ensure that staff were not 'taken away' unduly from their PE commitments to fulfil wider responsibilities within the school. Whilst it was acknowledged that this might be

unavoidable under certain circumstances, it was felt by the PE subject leaders that wider pastoral roles, for example, could lead to excessive loss of staff time within PE – which had consequences for pupils' experiences within the subject. Allied to this notion of protecting staff was that of protecting pupils. It was noted across both the survey and the interviews that, if PE were to become a core subject, there would need to be expectations around what was permissible (or not) with regard to removing pupils from PE lessons. Indeed, as one teacher of PE noted within the interviews:

You'd have to be really clear about not removing students from PE for other subjects... taking students out of PE still, to catch up on maths or English, would just completely undermine that core status (Teacher of PE)

The notion of protecting also extended to curriculum time, with various survey respondents noting that curriculum time had been 'lost' in recent years. This was especially the case within secondary contexts where respondents felt that time for PE at Key Stage 4 was particularly 'at risk'. On this, it was generally felt that, if PE were to become a core subject, there would need to be a commitment from schools (and SLT) to provide a minimum number of hours for PE per week and that this should be maintained across Key Stages.

Funding was also referenced by a considerable number of survey respondents (56%), generally in relation to meeting the various needs noted above, though also in relation to enhancing facilities and enabling staff to engage in relevant professional development. Whilst it was acknowledged that school budgets are under pressure generally, it was felt by some PE subject leaders that existing budgets were only just sufficient to support PE activities at present, let alone if PE were to become a core subject and (potentially) have greater expectations placed upon it. As one PE subject leader noted during their interview:

Our school isn't badly resourced, but our budgets are tight. It hasn't gone up in years. I get the same amount and I'm expected to do the same with it, but it costs more and more. I'm meticulous with my budget, and I always use companies where they have offers to get the most for students, but it's tough as it is, it'd be even tougher if I had to do even more with the same (budget) (PE Subject Leader)

Participants also felt that support would be required with regard to changing (negative) attitudes toward the subject. As noted, survey respondents reported perceived negative attitudes across various stakeholders, from pupils, to parents and wider school staff, as well as some SLT. It was felt by many (54%), therefore, that work would need to be done to garner support for PE as a core subject if it were to be successful. Within the interviews, PE subject leaders and teachers of PE were of similar opinions, expressing that:

Parents sometimes think all we do is give out bibs and balls and that PE is just getting their kids running around, but as we know, it's so much more than that. You'd need

to communicate that to them though, you'd need to change their attitudes to PE to have their support, and a lot of them might have had bad experiences of PE themselves (PE Subject Leader)

I think you'd need to do something to make people aware of the importance of PE... like a campaign or something... even if just to get other curriculum areas within the school on board (Teacher of PE)

We'd need support in convincing SLT to support making PE a core subject. They make decisions based on evidence, so you've got to evidence the benefits to them (PE Subject Leader)

Allied to changing attitudes toward PE, concern was also expressed by some participants (n=8) within the interviews about the need to avoid confusion around PE as a core subject and how this might be communicated (clearly) if this change were to be effected. It was noted that there was much scope for confusion between what currently exists as 'core PE' – taken to mean mandatory PE that all pupils take part in (regardless of whether or not they take part in examination PE, in the secondary context) – and what would be 'PE as a core subject', akin to the status presently held by English and maths, for example.

PE subject leaders and teachers of PE who participated in the interviews also highlighted a particularly interesting support need around developing a 'vision for core PE'. They expressed that, at present, they were somewhat unclear as to what expectations might be placed on the subject if it were to become core and what they would need to do differently with regard to delivering the subject. As one PE subject leader noted:

I'm not entirely sure what's expected of us, like, what will be fundamentally different in how we go about delivering PE if it's core... I think we need to work that out (PE Subject Leader)

The need for a 'vision for core PE', or perhaps rather 'vision for PE as a core subject', became apparent across both the survey and the interviews, with PE subject leaders and teachers of PE expressing uncertainty as to what this might 'look like' in practice.

5.6 Envisaging PE as a core subject: Consensus needed

Survey respondents variously described what PE as a core subject might 'look like' with there being both similarities and differences in relation to their expectations and aspirations for the subject. Notably, a key point of consensus – identified by a significant proportion of respondents (76%) – related to the importance of PE being recognised as having parity with other existing core subjects if it were to become a core subject itself:

PE as a core subject would mean PE being viewed as just as important as English, maths and science (Teacher of PE)

PE would have equal importance and value as other core subjects. SLT will speak about it as something that is just as important as these when making decisions about the school (PE Subject Leader)

The profile of PE is equal to that of other core subjects, on a par with English and maths, so it gets the same benefits from that core status (Teacher of PE)

Whilst this might be considered to be a given, a few PE subject leaders and teachers of PE (n=4) who participated in the interviews expressed quiet concern that if PE were to be made a core subject that it still would not be perceived as being on a par with existing core subjects. As one explained:

I'd want assurances that PE genuinely, like, genuinely would be treated the same as other core subjects. My worry would be that it gets that status, but it's still not viewed as important (PE Subject Leader)

There were further similarities regarding what PE as a core subject might 'look like' in relation to what PE subject leaders and teachers of PE felt might be reasonable expectations of schools (and SLT). On this, there was much reference to 'protection' in relation to facilities, staff, pupils and curriculum time as participants described what they might expect in this regard:

We'd retain our facilities to enable us to deliver our curriculum as planned, these wouldn't be taken away for exams (PE Subject Leader)

Staff time in PE would be safeguarded to enable consistency of learning for students (PE Subject Leader)

Students would have guaranteed lesson time and wouldn't be removed for revision for other subjects (PE Subject Leader)

A minimum expectation in terms of time per week, maybe 2 hours per week of core PE across [Key Stages] 3 and 4 (Teacher of PE)

Curriculum time expectations varied broadly though there was a general consensus that pupils should have multiple opportunities to take part in PE per week (typically, a minimum of 2) and that these should span all Key Stages. Notably, there was some emphasis here that there should not be a 'drop-off' at Key Stage 4. Within the interviews, participants were equally supportive of there being increments to curriculum time, however, caution was expressed with regard to ensuring that this was appropriately resourced. Indeed, several

participants (n=9) noted that there would be a need to focus on delivering quality PE experiences. As one PE subject leader noted:

You'd want to make sure that it was good provision though... it'd have to be properly resourced... it's better, it's better not to do it at all than to do it badly in my opinion. You know, like, and I'm not saying this is how it happens in any schools I know, but if you just had 60 kids outside kicking a ball around, then that's probably not going to be a positive experience... you're just continuing that cycle of negative attitudes (PE Subject Leader)

There were also some differences with regard to what survey respondents thought PE as a core subject might 'look like'. Of particular note, in this respect, are the expectations that PE subject leaders and teachers of PE felt could and should be placed on the subject in relation to monitoring and assessment and wider school accountability measures. While some teachers felt that PE becoming a core subject would warrant more monitoring and assessment of pupils, others advocated against this. Indeed, within the interviews, it became apparent that this was of particular concern for some, with one PE subject leader expressing:

I do wonder if we'd be expected to monitor students more closely, and have more oversight as a subject from SLT, because I know, you know, the Heads of Department from maths and science, they have so much going on like that, and they have a lot of marking. I mean, I'm not sure whether it'd be the same for us, but I'd worry about the additional demands placed on us... It's not like we've got anything to hide but just, sometimes, it just becomes a hindrance, all that monitoring (PE Subject Leader)

Allied to monitoring and assessment, some participants also expressed concern with regard to the National Curriculum for PE (NCPE) and whether it was 'fit for purpose' for PE as a core subject. On this, it was felt that if PE were to become a core subject, and if there were to be additional expectations around monitoring and assessment, that further curricular guidance would be needed to support PE teachers, particularly within the primary context.

Within the secondary context, specifically, there was also some uncertainty around what implications a move to PE as a core subject might have in relation to qualifications and the need for pupils to study for a qualification in PE (or not) as a mandatory part of their schooling (as is the case for existing core subjects). Whether or not pupils should be expected to study for a qualification in PE was a particular 'talking point' in some of the interviews with two PE subject leaders noting:

It's difficult, isn't it, because do we say that have to get a qualification? I don't know the answer to that, but we probably need to know... I think making all students do a qualification in PE could be tricky (PE Subject Leader)

If PE became a core subject, I think the aspiration would be every single student leaving Year 11 with some sort of PE-related qualification... It wouldn't necessarily need to be GCSE PE... I don't know if you'd want it to be... it could be a BTEC or Sports Leaders qualification, or something else entirely, but you'd want them to leave with something (PE Subject Leader)

While there were perhaps differences in what PE subject leaders and teachers of PE felt PE as a core subject would 'look like', there was much enthusiasm for working towards this, with almost all participants (98%) feeling that achieving core status would be beneficial for the subject. Accordingly, there was considerable support for piloting PE as a core subject, although PE subject leaders and teachers of PE did express some difficulty in determining what the outcomes of a successful pilot might be.

5.7 Markers of success of a pilot of PE a core subject: Protection and parity

Within the interviews, participants were asked to consider what might be markers of success in a pilot of PE as a core subject. Many – understandably – had some difficulty in articulating what success might involve, but there were some areas of agreement in this respect. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given earlier discussion, there was a particular focus on the 'protection' of facilities, staff, pupils and curriculum time. The markers identified around these included: reduced loss of facilities (particularly indoor ones); safeguarding of staff when timetabled to have PE responsibilities; reduced removal of pupils from PE lessons; and protecting existing curriculum time, potentially increasing this. PE subject leaders and teachers of PE often linked these markers to enhanced outcomes for pupils in relation to attendance, behaviour and academic attainment – both within PE and beyond – as well as around wellbeing referrals. However, as one PE subject leader noted:

It would be hard to attribute that to PE alone... We've got more PE, and grades have been boosted, PE might have helped but you can't say that for sure, and you don't know what else has been going on (PE Subject Leader)

A further marker of success identified by PE subject leaders and teachers of PE within the interviews was improved attitudes towards – and support of – the subject of PE. This was from pupils to parents as well as SLT and wider school staff. It was suggested by some that these improved attitudes towards PE may lead to enhanced appreciation for the subject, its particular needs and requirements, and also its (considerable) potential for positively influencing pupil outcomes. On this, it was interesting to note that several PE subject leaders and teachers of PE (n=8) expressed their desire for the subject of PE to receive

better professional recognition within the school context. As noted earlier, there were concerns that teachers of other subjects (and some SLT) thought of the subject as 'just PE', and for some participants this led them to feel that their positions in the school were not as well respected. This was made particularly evident by one PE subject leader who noted differences in their working conditions, relative to those of other subjects:

You know, I have less time allocated to me as a Head of Department in PE than in other subjects... they might have more marking or whatever, but we have after-school clubs and fixtures to sort out too... It's subtle, you know, but again, it's just one of the ways in which you come to think the subject is valued less than others (PE Subject Leader)

Comments such as this highlight the positive aspirations of many participants with regard to PE. Indeed, there was a notable desire for the subject to receive more recognition, so that staff can be better positioned to provide the best possible learning experiences – and to realise the most positive outcomes – for their pupils. A move towards PE as a core subject may have the potential to facilitate this, but there remains much to be determined regarding the practicalities of PE as a core subject.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, a summary of the key findings across this scoping phase of the research are presented below in relation to the key objectives driving the study. This is followed by some concluding remarks, before recommendations are made as to how to advance the agenda of PE as a core subject.

6.1 Objective 1 - Identifying the position and status of PE within schools

Data highlighted that the majority of survey respondents (83%) felt that PE was valued. However, it also suggested that it was not always prioritised within school practice. Participants noted that support from SLT for specific PE activities (e.g., fixtures, trips, awards evenings) did not always extend to 'day-to-day' practices. Frequent references were made here to pupils being removed from PE to 'catch up' on existing core subjects (often English or mathematics), or to PE spaces being requisitioned for broader school activities (e.g., examinations). As such, the perceived value of PE could be easily undermined.

6.2 Objective 2 – Exploring the perceived potential of PE as a core subject from different stakeholders' perspectives

Participants were largely positive about the idea of PE being a core subject, with survey respondents indicating either full support (88%) or support (12%) for the idea. However, concern was expressed about being able to achieve this aim, with less than a third of respondents (29%) indicating their SLT would likely back the idea.

6.3 Objective 3 – Mapping the opportunities and challenges that a move to PE as a core subject might present

Participants identified a range of opportunities that could arise from PE becoming a core subject within the curriculum. These included *benefits for pupils* (e.g., supporting health and wellbeing, attendance, academic achievements), *benefits for staff* (e.g., professional development, specialist training, leadership opportunities) and *benefits for the subject* (e.g., raised status, curriculum time, resourcing).

Various challenges to PE becoming a core subject were identified by participants, many reflecting the perceived low status of the subject within schools. Space in the curriculum was a key issue here, with 75% of survey respondents indicating 'timetabling' as a significant challenge and 24% noting that PE had lost time to make space for other subjects. In addition, there were challenges with regard to the availability of facilities (particularly indoor spaces), staffing (sufficient staff and specialist expertise) and SLT support (or the lack thereof).

6.4 Objective 4 – Identifying what support needs might arise from a move to PE as a core subject

It was recognised that PE would need significant support from SLT to become a core subject within schools. Linked with this, survey respondents also noted support needs relating to facilities (82%), resourcing (71%) and curriculum time (68%). It was notable that data highlighted both a need for additional support in each of these areas and a greater protection of existing provision. Interestingly, interview participants also highlighted a need for a ‘vision for core PE’, noting that there was potential for confusion with the current conceptualisation of ‘core PE’ within the curriculum.

6.5 Objective 5 – Gathering insight as to what PE as a core subject might ‘look like’ within schools

There was a notable consensus among survey respondents (76%) – in considering a ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject – that this would require PE to be viewed in the same way as other core subjects. Key elements related to PE becoming a core subject included: the protection of facilities, curriculum time and pupil access to PE; ensuring there is no ‘drop-off’ in access at Key Stage 4; and maintaining a focus on quality PE. There were also implications noted for pupil assessment, although different perspectives were apparent here.

6.6 Objective 6 – Examining what might be markers of success of a pilot of PE as a core subject within schools

Markers of success for participants were allied closely with their ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject. The markers identified around these included: reduced loss of facilities; safeguarding of staff time within PE; reduced removal of pupils from PE lessons; and protecting existing curriculum time. Improved attitudes towards PE – from pupils to parents as well as SLT and wider school staff – was also highlighted as being a potential marker of success.

6.7 Concluding remarks

This scoping research has confirmed that there is significant support for PE to become a core subject among PE subject leaders and teachers of PE. Participants noted the potential that this move would have with regard to enhancing pupil experience, supporting staff development and raising the status of the subject within the broader curriculum. However, participants also perceived some challenges in this respect, and noted that commitments around sufficient resourcing, curriculum time and SLT ‘buy-in’ would be key to effecting such a change. It is also important to note the clear need for a ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject. Whilst there may be much support for this amongst the profession, there is a lack of clarity around what PE as a core subject might ‘look like’ and how this will come about. Evidently, clarity in this regard will be key in securing further support for PE as a core

subject, advancing this agenda and ultimately being able to evidence to Government what might be achieved from designating PE as a core subject. It is for this reason that one of the key recommendations arising from this research is that further work be done to determine what PE as a core subject might, could and should 'look like' with the intention of outlining a vision for PE as a core subject.

7. Recommendations

The scoping phase of this research sought to identify evidence-based recommendations moving forwards to both inform the subsequent evaluation phase of this research and to support the wider advancement of the PE as a core subject agenda. These are outlined below and have implications for both policy and practice as well as future research in this area.

7.1 Recommendation 1 – Outlining a ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject

A clear ‘vision’ for PE as core subject is needed to advance this agenda. Whilst this research has identified some consensus as to what might constitute PE as a core subject, there remains a lack of clarity (and some areas of disagreement) within the profession. Moreover, a vision for PE as a core subject must be informed by wider stakeholders. It is recommended, therefore, that work be done to co-construct a ‘vision’ for PE as a core subject alongside multiple stakeholder groups including existing ones (i.e., PE subject leaders and teachers of PE) and new ones (i.e., SLT, pupils and parents). Such work must also take due account of the contextual differences between PE in primary and secondary schools and how this might play out in relation to PE as a core subject. This co-construction work should lead to a clearer consensus as to what constitutes PE as a core subject, potentially resulting in a model, framework and/or guidelines around this.

7.2 Recommendation 2 – Futureproofing the subject of PE

Allied to recommendation 1, consideration needs to be given as to how the subject of PE might be futureproofed, particularly if it is to be designated a core subject. In particular, questions must be asked as to whether or not the current National Curriculum for PE would adequately support PE as a core subject, or whether this might need revising as a result. Attention should also be paid to qualifications in – and related to – the subject of PE. Questions must be asked as to whether or not these are ‘fit for purpose’, particularly if an expectation of PE becoming a core subject might be that all pupils will study for a qualification in it. This may present a unique opportunity to explore what could be a more diverse and inclusive PE qualification suite for pupils.

7.3 Recommendation 3 – Continuing to develop the profession

Whilst there may be some existing CPD opportunities for the profession – such as through the Professional Institute for Accredited Physical Education – further opportunities may need to be provided to support PE subject leaders and teachers of PE, particularly if PE were to be designated a core subject. This research has identified a perceived lack in this regard and a desire for further accredited opportunities which may relate specifically to context (i.e., primary or secondary) or role (e.g., PE subject leader). Moreover, such opportunities may also develop teachers’ knowledge and capacities to think more broadly, differently and

critically about the subject of PE, which may be important in futureproofing the subject. Additionally, consideration needs to be given to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and what implications a move to PE as a core subject might have for this space. Indeed, the involvement of ITE professionals may be useful as part of the co-constructing of a 'vision' for PE as a core subject.

7.4 Recommendation 4 – Promoting the potential of PE to the public at large

The potential of PE to support the holistic development of young people is widely accepted within the profession, but it is evident that this is not the case more broadly, even within some school communities. This, coupled with negative attitudes towards the subject, poses a significant barrier to the advancement of the PE as a core subject agenda. As such, there may be a need to develop a campaign which seeks to demonstrate publicly the potential of PE and to highlight what PE 'looks like' in the here and now as well as what it can offer. Such a campaign may draw on advocacy from relevant celebrities and athletes who could share their positive experiences of the subject, promoting this through various forms of media. However, caution would be needed here so as to not reinforce negative perceptions (i.e., of who PE is for or what PE is about) and there must be diverse representation as part of this.

7.5 Recommendation 5 – Securing commitments to protect and empower PE

Although PE subject leaders and teachers of PE would clearly be committed to supporting PE as a core subject, this research has demonstrated that their efforts will be constrained if these commitments are not echoed more broadly. To advance this agenda, efforts need to be directed to securing commitments from those at all levels, particularly SLT, Government and wider stakeholders. Whilst commitments from Government may remain aspirational at this stage, commitments from SLT remain very much possible. These commitments should be around protecting PE facilities, staff and pupil time within PE as well as curriculum time for the subject. However, to truly support this agenda SLT ought to seek not only to protect the subject of PE, but also to empower it, to support those within the profession to deliver the best possible outcomes for pupils. To do so, SLT may seek to provide additional funding and/or resourcing to the subject. It is acknowledged that this may be difficult – particularly in light of the challenging financial climate within which schools are operating – but doing so would certainly help PE to better position itself as a subject with core potential.

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