

Title: From Policy to Practice: How Policy Influences Extra-Curricular Provision in the UK

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Abstract

This research investigates the role of national policy and guidance on extra-curricular activities in the UK. Using Oxfordshire as a case study, we want to compare this policy and guidance with its interpretation by local government officials and its implementation by providers. We found that, since records began, no bills have been proposed regarding the provision of extracurricular education, nor concerning after school clubs or other provisions relevant to our scope of inquiry. This is concerning as previous research suggests that extra-curricular activities (ECAs) are crucial for enhancing educational and social outcomes^[6]. Additionally, with no law regarding the provision of ECA's in schools, others have found a disparity between ECA presence and socio-economic status^[2]. Bridging this gap is important for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG4 (Quality Education) and SDG10 (reduced inequalities).

Our research thus aims to identify guidance and policy on the provision of ECAs, and its interpretation by providers and operational stakeholders. We utilised a variety of primary and secondary sources to examine the policy on ECAs in UK state schools, utilising software such as NVivo to identify recurring themes between our sources to conduct desktop research. Triangulation of our scoping review documentation was complemented with a small selection of structured interviews with a range of stakeholders including OFSTED staff, researchers, commissioned operational level staff, and ECA providers. The ultimate goal of our research is to guide policymakers on ECAs and encourages their implementation across UK state schools.

From Policy to Practice: How Policy Influences Extra-Curricular Provision in the UK

Extra-curricular activities (ECAs) are crucial for enhancing educational and social outcomes, however, their presence in UK schools often varies significantly. This disparity reflects broader global and local disparities, such as the North/South Divide or local disparities in postcode affluence. Through examining current national and local policies and recommendations on education and their positive impact, this research seeks to review and understand any differences or disparities between policies on National UK level and the local level. We use Oxfordshire as a case study to better understand the situations in a local context. This is because while Oxford contains one of the world's most prestigious academic institutions, with a vast array of resources available to it, the City of Oxford is still one of the most unequal places in the UK. Through taking this national and local approach, we aim to contribute towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely, SDG 4, Quality Education and SDG 10, Reduced inequalities.

This research has three main objectives. Firstly, to gain a deeper understanding on the current policy and recommendations for extra-curriculars in UK state schools; second drawing upon the existing literature well as conducting our own primary research to create an evidence basis for further investigation into longer-term benefits of delivering. Third, the successful pilot of delivering extracurriculars to schools in Oxford while establishing connections with the local community, breaching the socioeconomic 'town & gown' divides.

In recent years, the benefits of ECAs for young people from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds have become clear - from research on how sport clubs strengthen developing teamwork skills^[38], to how drama and journalism support the development of unique ideas^[39]. Despite their importance, there is a significant disparity in the uptake of ECAs across the UK^[2]. In Oxford, economic inequalities across the city are reflected in school attainment, and a historic disconnect exists between the University of Oxford and local residents.

The case of the city Oxford illustrates this evidence threefold: First, as the second most unequal city in the UK, the city faces a gap in educational attainment for its most disadvantaged children and those with special needs^{[21][40]}. Second, although the university is globally renowned for its world-class resources and plays a central role in the city's culture, it has long been referred to as a city of two halves - where many residents outside the centre feel little connection to it. This disconnect is often attributed to the 'town-and-gown' divide, with locals feeling they benefit minimally from the university's presence. As we will demonstrate below, is finally reflected in Oxford's state schools, where despite national policies recommending ECAs, the presence of ECAs is unequal and varies broadly across schools within Oxford and the wider area of Oxfordshire.

Current National Policy and Government Initiatives

Sustained involvement in ECAs is linked to higher academic achievement, improved school attendance, and reduced behavioural issues. This suggests that long-term policy support is essential for maximising these benefits^[31]. Despite this no UK policies specifically address extracurricular activities (ECAs)^[1], various support mechanisms exist within this sector. Funding initiatives, notably the Government's PE and Sport Premium, subsidise one-third of school-based active clubs, enabling 68% of schools to sustain after-school sports that would otherwise be unfeasible without this premium. A pilot programme has allocated £3.4 million to directly fund ECAs in 200 secondary schools, pending evaluation by the National Foundation for Educational Research^{[7][25]}.

The government also facilitates partnerships between schools and arts organisations to enhance creative opportunities for disadvantaged youth in England. Initiatives like the Ready by 21 Framework aims to improve coordination across ECA providers. Targeted programmes, such as the Department of Education's Essential Life Skills initiative and the Cadet Expansion Programme, further demonstrate the government's commitment to ECA development^{[5][26]}. The inclusion of ECAs in the Ofsted Outstanding criteria underscores their recognized importance, suggesting the government acknowledges the need for such activities, albeit without comprehensive national policy support.

Despite these initiatives, recent budget cuts by the County Council, totalling £8 million, have adversely affected children's services, particularly children's centres and early intervention hubs. These funding reductions reflect a governmental emphasis on academic metrics, evidenced by the introduction of the English Baccalaureate in 2010 and the recent mandate for Maths and English education until age 18, thereby deprioritising ECAs in favour of academic performance metrics.

Need for Policy

Evidence indicates a strong correlation between socio-economic status and access to extracurricular activities (ECAs), which in turn affects long-term educational and employment outcomes^[37]. Participation in ECAs fosters critical non-cognitive skills such as teamwork, resilience, and confidence, leading to immediate improvements in engagement and behaviour, as well as long-term benefits in attendance, academic achievement, employability, and social mobility^[5].

Research indicates that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly underrepresented in ECAs. The Education Policy Institute (2024) reveals that children from the most privileged socio-economic group are 20% more likely to participate in ECAs compared to their most disadvantaged peers (81% vs. 61%)^[4]. Additionally, over 95% of students in mainstream schools are aware of available ECAs, indicating that the primary barriers to participation are financial and structural, rather than a lack of interest or engagement. This is a significant problem as the median cost of community and school-based club sessions is £6.67 and £3.88, respectively, while only 52% of school-based clubs are free to parents^[7]. This financial burden disproportionately impacts children from low-income families, further entrenching socio-economic disparities.

Access to resources, such as green spaces, also contributes to inequality in the access to / or enjoyment of ECAs for a number of children and young people. A study found that private school students have access up to ten times more green space than their state school counterparts, with private institutions offering facilities like tennis courts and golf courses^[11]. This disparity limits physical activity opportunities for state school

students, which is crucial for mental and physical well-being (Marmot, UCL Institute of Health Equity). Enhancing access to green spaces, combined with adequate supervision and skill development opportunities, could help mitigate socio-economic barriers and promote equitable development for all children^[4]. Whilst some schools in the HMC (The Heads' Conference, a collection of top private schools) assert that providing green space for less privileged children is a priority, these initiatives may not adequately address the shortage of trained staff necessary to implement effective programmes^[11]. Additionally, should these schools lose charitable tax status, the facilities currently available could be jeopardised. Collaborative efforts between private and state schools, including shared facilities and staff can make ECAs more affordable and accessible.

Furthermore, gender and educational background disparities persist in ECA participation, with girls and children from lower-educated households being less likely to attend active clubs. This is concerning, especially considering the World Health Organisation and UK Chief Medical Officers recommend that children engage in at least an hour of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, a guideline met by only 41% of UK children prior to the pandemic^[7]. To address these challenges, policy interventions are essential.

Perceived Lack of Need for Policy

The rationale behind the absence of robust policy may stem from existing schemes in privately-funded schools that appear to address these gaps.

The Essential Life Skills (ELS) programme, launched by the Department for Education in 2020, aimed to reduce educational disparities by providing disadvantaged students with access to extracurricular activities that build key non-academic skills. The initiative reached over 170,000 participants, with 50% from low-income backgrounds, as shown by their eligibility for free school meals. However, despite its demonstrated successes, there has been no commitment to continue this programme beyond its initial funding period^[30].

Limitations of Policy Improvement

Several limitations hinder successful ECA provision. For example, OFSTED inspectors mandate that school-delivered ECAs promote equality of opportunity, implying they should be free of financial barriers^[3]. However, a study conducted between June 2021 and July 2022 found that less than half of school-based active clubs were free for parents, with only 5-10% externally funded^[7]. Constraints include teachers' capacity to organise and run after-school activities, as they are neither hired nor paid specifically for this purpose^[9]. Although the aforementioned study found that 33% of clubs in the second wave (2022) were funded by school staff and volunteers, this reliance on voluntary participation may itself be a limitation, as teachers are not compensated for ECA provision, and schools lack a direct mandate to offer ECAs, evidenced by the absence of relevant policy and legislation in parliamentary records^[1].

This situation has been exacerbated by austerity measures and the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2009-10 and 2017-18, total school spending per student fell by 8% in real terms, primarily due to a 55% reduction in local authority funding and over 20% cuts to school-based sixth forms (Belfield et al., 2018) [2]. These concerns persist in the current context of the cost-of-living crisis, with senior school leaders reporting cuts to teaching staff (32%), teaching assistants (69%), and support staff (46%), all 4-6% higher than the previous year. Additionally, 27% reported reductions in sports and extracurricular spending, particularly affecting primary schools, while 50% and 51% reported cuts to trips/outings and IT equipment, respectively .

External providers, such as charities and youth centres, have also seen reductions in ECA availability. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) notes that youth services have seen £1 billion less funding compared to a decade ago. Qualitative analysis indicates that the cost-of-living crisis and COVID-19 pandemic have strained family resources, shifting preferences towards more affordable school-based active clubs and leading to decreased participation in externally provided ECAs, which have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels . This trend raises concerns, especially as schools struggle with reduced capacity due to budget and staffing cuts.

Methodology

To examine the policy on ECAs in UK state schools, we use a mixture of primary and secondary sources. Our primary data collection methods will include interviews with senior strategic and operational stakeholders in the education sector. This includes national policy-makers, education ministers and civil servants, as well as those involved with the implementation of policy. We have selected these groups as we believe they will give both insights into current policy across different schools as well as attitudes towards current policy and provision.

Interviews focussed on three areas:

1. What is the current policy or guidance on ECAs in state schools?
2. In the interviewee's opinion, has this been successful?
3. In the interviewee's opinion, what changes in policy could be made to improve the provision of ECAs?

We complement qualitative data from the interviews with selected research papers and government policy and advice on the provision of ECAs which we outlined in the literature review above. Using these sources, we identified the national policy on ECAs, and the attitudes towards it. To research the current policy, we will use government sources such as Ofsted and the UK Parliament website. To locate recommendations for the improvement of extra-curricular policy, we will consider papers from sources including the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and the Social Mobility Commission.

For the analysis, identified recurring themes between our sources. This enabled us to explore the reasons behind current policies and the situation on the ground using our reviews of current government policy papers, guidance and uptake at national and local levels, alongside perspectives uncovered in our interviews of stakeholders within and beyond Oxford.

Throughout we use an analytical framework to aid the systematic capture of key data and to keep the focus on the research enquiry and areas of most interest. Furthermore, we aim to strike a balance between examining national policy and maintaining a focus

on the local Oxford area. Another important factor includes considering when selecting stakeholders to interview are the time restrictions of the project and limited access to national central government stakeholders. Hence, we will attempt to use opportunistic sampling where possible within our sample-frame. While we have limited the scope of our project to policy, we aim to provide depth by speaking to stakeholders that give us insight that adds real value to our secondary data.

I) Ethics

Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form to indicate their preferences. We sought their consent to record the interview, either through Microsoft Teams' integrated recording function or a voice recording app on one of the interviewers' mobile phones. Participants were informed that the recordings would be used solely for the research project and would be destroyed at the end of the study.

We reassured them that all personal data would be stored securely, with access restricted to the research team, and deleted upon completion of the project. The recordings were securely stored and were accessible only to members of the research team. We also informed participants that the results would be presented at conferences and summarised in a report, collating perspectives from all interviews. Additionally, we clarified that specific quotes may be included in the final report or analysis, but anonymity would be maintained. Participants were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide a reason.

II) Interviews

For the interviews, we recognised two stakeholder types: policy-makers and formal institutions. The first type includes interviewees involved in creating either national or local policy, and includes city and county cabinet members, members of parliament and civil servants. The second type of formal institutions is more concerned with the implementation of policy, ranging from researchers from the Social Mobility Commission to activity providers to those involved in evaluating the provision of extra-curriculars such as Ofsted inspectors. We have chosen to focus on strategic

stakeholders as we are interested in the decisions being made surrounding policy and their evaluation.

For both stakeholder types, we compiled six objectives for our interviews. These objectives were chosen in order to better understand three areas: the current policy surrounding ECAs, the interpretation and implementation of this policy (including the discrepancies that arise) and changes to the policy.

1. What is the current provision of extracurriculars in schools? (O1)
2. What is the policy and guidance of the national government regarding extracurricular education? (O2)
3. Has the national policy been implemented successfully in schools? (O3)
4. How have different institutions interpreted this guidance? (O4)
5. What are the reasons for any discrepancies that come up? (O5)
6. What is the political will to change this? (O6)

We then used these objectives to develop research questions. As our stakeholders came from a wide range of backgrounds, it was important to develop different categories of questions for both policy-makers (national or local) and formal institutions (Social Mobility Commission, school/trust management, Ofsted and independent ECA providers).

Within each interview we prioritised organic and original responses to these general questions. We enabled this by asking interviewees to outline their understanding of ECAs and the policy surrounding them. We also included prompts to ask what value they believed ECAs held for different groups involved such as children and parents. We also asked interviewees if they believed that such policies had been overall successful, and further prompting in what ways it has supported social mobility and which areas still require improvement. At the end of the interview, we asked interviewees to suggest and explain a change they would make to the current policy.

In every interview, there were at least two members of the policy research team present. One person would ask the questions as well as introducing/concluding the interview, and the other would take notes and manage recording equipment. The

interviews took around 20 to 30 minutes. Although we would have liked to ask our interviewees more questions, many interviewees had limited time available to speak to us and we had a short timeframe in which to produce and process the interview transcriptions.

a. Policy-Makers

When questioning national policy-makers, we placed a focus on current policy and its enforcement. Our first question aimed to identify any enforced legislation we had missed, and to discuss if schools were obligated to provide ECAs at a certain standard. Our second question focused on guidance, and the aims behind it. In particular, we were interested in whether the guidance was outcome-orientated, and had been developed based on the social or educational outcomes of ECAs.

For local policy-makers investigated both the interpretation of national policy and the creation of local policy in the city of Oxford and Oxfordshire County. For both areas, we wanted to know if and how the council provided schools with guidance for ECAs. Furthermore, we were interested in how the local council develops this guidance, and if they use national policy/guidance to do so. During our desk research, we identified a public database of ECAs available in Oxford and used the interview as an opportunity to discuss the organisation of this further.

b. Formal-institutions

As we were also interested in implementation. Initially we interviewed local schools and multi-academy trusts about their ECA policies and where they receive the guidance upon which these policies are based. To contrast this, we also decided to interview local independent ECA providers (after-school clubs not run by schools or the council). We wished to investigate the discrepancies between independently and school-provided ECAs, and asked about what needs schools succeed and failed to meet for students.

Finally, we identified Ofsted as a source on the topic of how ECAs are evaluated in schools. We were particularly interested in how ECAs are used to judge the school

overall, and if this was in line with government recommendations for ECA provision. Furthermore, our desk review had suggested that ECA provision was overwhelmingly investigated in Outstanding schools. We wanted to use the interviews as an opportunity to confirm whether or not this was true, and the reason behind it.

Table 1: Interview code

Interviewer role	Code
Social Mobility Commission	1*
County Councillor	2*
Ofsted Inspector	3*

c. Miscellaneous

After having identified the Social Mobility Commission’s report titled *An Unequal Playing Field*, we realised that we would benefit from interviewing one or more of the authors. Our questions for these interviews focused on the implementation of the report’s recommendations and what impacts they might have.

III) Secondary Data

Our secondary information source was a literature review of current policy, policy recommendations and papers on the outcomes of and barriers to ECAs. We selected sources from a wide range of backgrounds, ranging from the national government, the local council, the Social Mobility Commission, national newspapers and headteacher unions. We chose this mix to represent the interest in ECAs from both social and educational perspectives.

When analysing and evaluating each source, we considered the reliability and bias of each source, how relevant the source was to our research question, what gaps in past research we could identify, the interpretation of policy by different sources, and the attitudes towards current and possible future policies. These all came together to identify the key emerging themes of the source.

We then used these themes to triangulate the information gained from both the primary

and secondary sources into five different sections:

- Existing national ECA policy
- Current ECA provision/engagement disparities
- Perceived lack of need for policy
- Limitations of policy implementation
- Recommendations for policy improvement

Finally, we used these themes to structure our research results, using information from both our desk review of the available literature and the unique insights we gained from our interviews.

Results

Current ECA provision

Extra-curricular activities refer to activities outside the core school curriculum (the content schools are responsible for teaching). Often, ECAs provide a space in which skills can be developed and young people can socialise. However, there is not a legal requirement for this provision, and clubs are often run by volunteer teachers [3*].

Furthermore, the distinction between core curricular activities and extra-curricular activities can be a difficult decision to make. For example, schools must decide which school trips to fund for students on pupil premium (a fund to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged children). While a school might consider funding a geography trip associated with the curriculum, management may hesitate to pay for a residential trip, which bears no relation to the core curriculum [3*].

In the UK, a large number of state schools provide extra-curriculars such as sports clubs, plays and music groups [2*], [3*], but these are optional for schools to provide. Some schools also provide academic enrichment outside the curriculum, such as science fairs [2*]. Many young people also attend externally organised ECAs, such as uniformed organisations like Scouts [2*]. In Oxfordshire, many children and young people take part in music ECAs [2*]. Alongside the traditional ECAs, there is a growing trend of hobby-based activities, such as video-gaming. It has been suggested that a weekend job could be classed as an ECA [1*].

Existing national ECA policy

Interviewees reported that there was little to no national policy surrounding ECAs, reporting no nationalised frameworks for the provision of ECAs [1*] and no designated funding for ECAs. Funding for state schools is allocated using the dedicated schools grant, which allows local authorities or academy trusts to manage schools. Grants are available for some ECAs, including sports clubs who can receive funding from Sports England [2*]. It has been suggested that ECAs remain non-statutory as the government is not willing to pay for it, preferring to focus on the core curriculum [3*].

Furthermore, teachers are not responsible for the provision of ECAs in state schools as they are not paid for these hours, according to their pay and conditions, though it does allude to teachers providing support beyond the curriculum. However, Ofsted analyses the provision of ECAs in all schools, within their wider personal development remit [3*], and schools cannot be awarded Outstanding without sufficient ECA provision.

One interview reported that there was a non-statutory requirement for councils to run youth services [2*]. In Oxfordshire, one example of this is the ECA database that is managed by the council, however financial constraints can make it difficult to keep the website accurate. The county council reports that safeguarding is their main involvement with ECAs [2*].

Inconsistencies in policy implementation and ECA provision

Recent national events have negatively affected ECA provision across state schools. The government has shown little interest in ECAs in the past 15-20 years [2*]. During COVID, the provision of many ECAs, in particular external activities such as school trips, was disrupted [3*]. Additionally, the recent strikes over teacher pay has led trade unions to suggest teachers to stop any unpaid work, including voluntary ECA provision [2*]. Furthermore, relying on the voluntary sector is an unsustainable strategy as volunteers are becoming increasingly time poor [2*].

There are also disparities in the provision of ECAs between state schools. One interviewee suggested that school trips could vary between schools from trips abroad to local litter-picking [3*]. Furthermore, constraints on the school day, such as short lunchtimes or students relying on transport that only leaves at the end of the day, means that some schools are unable to offer ECAs at lunch or after school [3*].

Schools in Special Measures also prefer to focus on the core curriculum, rather than investing time and money into extra-curriculars which may not improve their classification. Some schools are able to budget for ECA providers - for example DofE award coordinators, but other schools are limited in the money they are able to spare, or they leave the position unpaid as this may mean paying all staff for time spent running voluntary ECAs.

Participation in ECAs can also vary within schools, often dependent on parental income. In Oxford, for example, it has been found that middle-class parents are more likely to enrol their children in after school clubs such as music [2*]. In one school, an equestrian team was available, but only to students who could provide their own horse [3*]. In addition, underprivileged children may also start working an evening or weekend job after turning fourteen, which can limit the hours in which they can participate in ECAs [1*].

ECA outcomes

ECAs are widely considered to be beneficial for children and young people. One strength of ECAs is the ability to provide a safe space for children in which they can socialise with others their age [3*]. Furthermore, they also allow young people to get involved in their community [2*].

Furthermore, accessible ECAs offer opportunities for social mobility, by offering children and young people new experiences [3*], opportunities to have fun, and supporting them to use their time productively, which can help reduce their involvement with street crime. One example of this is Scouts, which was founded over a century ago and is still a popular ECA today [2*]. However, these benefits cannot be achieved if we do not make ECAs accessible to those in underprivileged sectors [1*].

ECAs also support the development of a wide range of skills. For example, participation in music ECAs suggests education continuation [1*]. Furthermore, ECAs encourage non-cognitive skills: team sports can lead to development of teamwork, discipline and healthy ambition [3*]. ECAs also promote learning new specialised skills, such as chess at a chess club [3*].

Future Policy

The interviews suggested that, although unlikely, more funding would be necessary to improve ECA provision and participation. From one perspective, the council cannot currently improve its support for ECAs without re-budgeting money that is needed to maintain core services [2*]. From another, money would be required for a bursary to

incentivise young adults to attend ECAs rather than to earn money working [1*].

Schools report that while both staff and children feel that ECAs enhance school life, more funding and support is required to maintain and develop services [3*].

To ensure future ECA provision, more national policy and guidance is also required [2*]. However, the interviewees reported that the national government was unlikely to make any policy or funding changes. For example, they are unlikely to change teacher pay conditions so that they are required to provide ECAs [3*]. Another interviewee suggested that policy for ECAs would probably come from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, rather than the Department for Education [2*].

Future education policy changes are overwhelmingly linked to the curriculum offer, although they may also affect ECA provision. For example, the upcoming Ofsted framework and the ongoing curriculum review by Prof Becky Francis may include recommendations regarding ECAs [3*]. However, it has been suggested that a third party bridging researchers and policy-makers is necessary to inform new policies, and to collect long-term evidence in order to fully understand the impact of ECAs [1*].

Wider lifestyle changes are also influencing future ECA provision. The proposed implementation of reduced school working hours (for example, a four-day week) could limit ECA provision in schools [2*]. It has also been suggested that AI could influence schooling, and therefore ECA provision as well [2*].

Analysis

Our primary data gained from interviewing key stakeholders has been consistent with our findings from our secondary data. Firstly, the lack of policy from the national government, indicated by a lack of bills in the Parliamentary records^[1], has been consistent with all of our interviews: OFSTED has no ECA requirements; researchers from the Social Mobility Commission confirmed a lack of nationalised frameworks; and representatives from local government identified a severe lack of policy and guidance from the DfE (Department of Education), with only limited policy coming from DCMS (the Department for Media, Culture and Sport), whose policy may sometime align with external provisions of ECAs. All of our primary data is also congruous about the positivity of the outcomes from ECAs. Themes that came up consistently in this regard include the learning of new skills - and particularly non-cognitive or “soft” skills -; the benefits of social activities, such as teamwork, competition or involvement in the local community; and simply young people’s enjoyment of ECAs. This is mostly in line with our secondary data^{[2][5][12]}, with the fun of ECAs being the main exception, despite Article 31 of the UNCRC clearly stating that “play” is a human right for children and young people^[34]. This finding could be significant in that it could highlight the discrepancy between policy and research approaches – political will for the continued maintenance and improvement of ECAs may not necessarily be completely tied to research-based policy, but instead be based on the principle of children and young people’s rights.

This, however, does not diminish the necessity for furthering research and legislating to create an environment in which research is easier to conduct to better inform policy in the future. This was highlighted by our primary data gained by interviewing a researcher from the University of Bath, who identified a feedback loop within policy and research, which, according to them, requires both policy and research to be approached with each other in mind to ensure both fields are able to subsequently support one another in the future. Our interview also revealed the difficulties of collecting data created by a lack of national policy and framework, which was consistent with the Social Mobility Commission report coauthored by said researcher^[2]. The policy recommendations from this report included a proposition for a ECA database that would reduce information

gaps, facilitate research, and naturally increase uptake. This has been attempted by some local authorities in the UK^[8], however it has not been particularly successful, with our primary data confirming our worries of missing or out-of-date data. We found that our suspicions that the lack of clear mandate for schools to provide current information, as they do in Singapore^[10], impacts the quality of the database were correct, with our primary data supporting this as we came to know that the local council was solely responsible for collecting this information; something that they struggle with due to a lack of funding.

This leads to the next common theme found between both our primary and secondary data – a severe lack of capacity and funding. The aforementioned lack of policy and guidance, and thus funding, from the national government results in the responsibility for the provision of ECAs falling to the providers themselves. This means that schools must provide ECAs on their own accord, utilising their own funding and resources. Schools receive their funding from the dedicated schools grant, with local authorities acting as bankers by dedicating these funds to schools, primarily using the national formula; this money comprises the vast majority of a school's budget and therefore heavily dictates the capacity of the school. As our literature review highlights, schools have been seeing an increase in staffing and spending cuts^[28] alongside youth services^[4], with the impacts of fiscal austerity^[2] still being relevant with the context of the cost of living crisis and budgetary “black hole”, even though the new Labour government has expressed a desire to not fall back into austerity. Our primary data found that this correlates with the experiences of local authorities, with our data showing a lack of funding and lack of interest from the central government in the last 15-20 years. The timeline stated for lack of interest seems to be consistent with our findings from secondary data about the impacts of austerity on spending for local councils and education. These factors also affect external providers, such as youth centres^[4], with our primary data also confirming our findings in our secondary data.

The mix of these staffing cuts, alongside budget cuts, and the reliance on teachers to voluntarily run school ECAs without compensation^{[7][9]} results in significant pressures on the provision of ECAs. Our primary data showed that a prominent example of how these factors interact would be the way teachers' unions actions correspond to the

provision of ECAs – when unions advise teachers to drop non-essential tasks, ECAs are often the first to go.

Our secondary data outlining the disparities in uptake^[2] was also in line with our primary data, which claimed that many children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have the same access to ECAs as others due to a need for working a part-time job and/or not having the resources to participate in certain activities offered in the local area. For example, one of interviews highlighted the large disparity between uptake in music related ECAs between young people from middle class backgrounds and those from working class backgrounds, whilst another interview underlined the lack of accessibility from ECAs, such as equestrianism, which are costly and require support from parents.

One interesting finding from our primary data that we did not come across in our literature, was the potential impact of the new Labour government's plans of introducing a "flexi" working week or four day working week. Our data suggests that this could have multiple impacts on future policy surrounding ECAs, as it would have a wider impact on education as a whole, alongside teacher capacity. For example, the introduction of a four day working week, according to interviews with the local government, may result in schools doing the same thing, as parents seek to spend more time with their children. What effects this may have on the uptake of ECAs is yet to be known and will require more research – will it reverse the reduction of uptake of externally provide ECAs since the COVID19 Pandemic^[7], or will that stay ceteris paribus, leading to a general decrease in the uptake of ECAs due to their sudden reduction in schools? With teachers working flexi weeks, schools' capacities for providing ECAs may also change. We can conclude that more research needs to be done surrounding this area of enquiry, as the potential effects are yet to be speculated.

Recommendations

Our recommendations aim to address difficulties providers of ECAs face in successfully delivering them, the disparities in uptake between young people from different backgrounds, and information gaps, whilst laying foundations for further research and actionable policy in the future. These recommendations will also take into account the context of budgetary difficulties the current government, and thus providers, are facing.

1. Mandating the creation of extracurricular databases within local authorities.

Previous policy recommendations assessed in our literature review recommended the creation of an ECA database, to combat information gaps preventing researchers from accessing valuable data, and increase uptake as parents and young people learn about the ECAs available in their local area, potentially relieving overextended providers. Our research discovered that the creation of such a database is more complicated than one may predict. Whilst the database we reviewed did list a certain number of ECAs available in the local constituency, it was severely outdated, and our primary data confirmed it as such, highlighting the lack of resources the local authority faced when ensuring the information is up-to-date. Our policy solution to this problem is the mandating of national government requirements for ECA providers to submit up-to-date information to the local council – this is a fairly simple administrative task that would take pressure off the local authority, which lacks the capacity to coordinate mass information gathering. This can be enforced in schools by adding ECA information dispersal to the OFSTED requirements list. This way, each local authority should have an up-to-date database available to parents/young people and researchers alike, successfully achieving the aims of previous policy recommendations. Adding information dispersal to the already existing safeguarding guidelines from the national government and making it a requirement alongside DBS forms and other procedures can also ensure external providers are also included. The largest difficulty we can predict with the application of this policy, would be ensuring external providers submit their data regularly enough for it to be up-to-date; this can be solved by random, regular audits, however this may be a strain on local authority budgets.

2. Creating an annual extracurricular report reviewing the changes to the disparity in uptake, general level of availability of and newly published research surrounding the outcomes of ECAs.

Our own experiences researching ECAs and primary data from interviewing researchers highlighted the need for a research-policy feedback loop – a system in which research would inform policy, and policy would enable research, creating an environment where progress can be achieved. Our primary data identified a lack of ‘middle-men’ in this process, individuals or systems which would be able to condense and effectively disseminate information gathered from research to policymakers. Creating a report that would consolidate findings about ECAs and changes in their provision and uptake, which would then be reviewed by the DfE, would effectively construct a system by which researchers can directly lobby strategic policymakers through their research. We hope this solution would raise awareness of the importance of ECAs, which we found to be viewed as generally positive by all of our identified stakeholders, and reduce information gaps leading to actionable change in policy makers' focuses. This would also incentivise further research.

It is clear that, improving data collection is vital for further research into ECA significance and benefits. Establishing a local database documenting available extracurricular activities could bridge information gaps for stakeholders, facilitate research, and naturally increase uptake. Such a database has proven effective in Singapore^[10], where schools are obligated to maintain current information, contrasting with UK efforts, such as those in Oxford^[35], where schools and external providers may be reluctant to share up-to-date information due to a lack of official mandate.

3. Ring-fencing funding for extracurricular provisions within the dedicated school's grant.

The lack of policy and mandate surrounding ECA has resulted in them being underfunded within schools, as budgetary cuts resulted in a reduction in capacity. Whilst this may place additional strains on schools in the short run, as funds are diverted from discretionary budgets, we believe ring-fencing resources necessary for the effective

provision of extracurriculars – including some money for subsidising individuals from lower socioeconomic background that experience a disparity in the uptake of ECAs – would help schools and the DfE plan more effectively for the future. Furthermore, whilst we do take into account the context of the fiscal “black hole” and history of budget cuts over the last two decades, we also understand that the new labour government has declared that we will not be returning to austerity, which indicates a significant level of political will in ensuring further cuts in real spending are not as severe as they were in the past.

4. Legislating young people’s access to ECAs as a requirement for schools and local authorities, based on their right to play.

Our research identifies several policy recommendations to enhance ECA provision in schools and externally while laying the groundwork for future policy development. For instance, a national extracurricular bursary scheme could target students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may struggle to afford ECAs or need to work part-time. Additionally, providing funding to expand third-party initiatives can alleviate pressure on schools unable to meet demand, especially in communities experiencing significant disparities in ECA uptake. Increasing schools' organisational capacity to provide ECAs and improving information dissemination about external substitutes could also mitigate barriers; allocating teacher workloads to include ECA responsibilities and enhancing coordination between schools and local authorities are potential strategies.

This legislation would be based on Article 31 of the UNCRC, which classifies access to recreation, play, and cultural activities as a children’s right. As per our analysis, we identified a potential discrepancy between policy and research approaches, with our primary data highlighting a theme of fun and satisfaction as a key component of the importance of ECAs, whilst our secondary data did not include this. This could mean that young people’s satisfaction with ECAs may be a more effective driver of political will than researched-based findings and policy proposals. It is often easier to find political will through emotion, and most individuals can relate to wishing for children and young people to have fun. Including the right to play in British law, whilst without any significant

necessary contributions from other stakeholders, would generate a lot of publicity, increasing awareness about ECAs and motivating policymakers and researchers alike.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the policies and recommendations surrounding extra-curricular activities in the UK. Additionally, this research was undertaken to form a basis of existing literature and primary data for a future longitudinal study by Laidlaw scholars at the University of Oxford. Finally, the present study was designed with the aim of establishing stronger connections between the University of Oxford, local schools, and the communities they serve.

This research found that there was no legal requirement for schools to offer ECAs. Although schools do provide them; quality, accessibility and student involvement is affected by several factors, including school type and resources, as well as its students' socioeconomic background. Many schools are overly reliant on the voluntary work of teachers as they lack the budget to fund external providers. In addition, students and their guardians may be limited by the price and location of ECAs both in schools and their local communities.

This study has identified several government programmes that aim to mitigate these differences. A good example was the PE and Sport Premium funds a third of school sports clubs in the UK, providing equipment and coaches where schools may not be able to. In addition, the Enrichment Partnership Pilot demonstrated efforts to pair state schools with external extra-curricular providers, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, in order to offer opportunities that schools alone cannot provide.

The investigation also found there was a lack of intermediary within the researcher-policy feedback loop, resulting in lower effectiveness of the policy implemented. We believe increased communication between the two groups would ensure that policy was developed with an improved understanding of possible outcomes.

Limitations

It proved challenging to sample a wide range of interviewees, particularly given a short time span. Requests were successful when there was a pre-existing relationship between the participant and the research team. In future studies, it would be

recommended to utilise the SDG Impact Lab and Laidlaw's connections with policy-makers and strategic education professionals.

The Future: Policy Changes and Research

While the current government programmes do mitigate the differences in ECA provision to an extent, there is nevertheless a great reliance on voluntary work, which threatens the reliability and stability of provision for many schools. Therefore, there is a definite need for policy to ensure the provision, quality and student involvement of ECAs is maintained and improved. These findings suggest several courses of action for this, meanwhile minimising the responsibility for schools and other already strained ECA providers.

This research found that the provision of ECAs can vary both in location and over time (for example, during periods of austerity or the COVID-19 pandemic). Therefore, a key policy priority should be an annual review of the provision, quality and uptake of ECAs. Furthermore, information about ECAs is not only essential to policy-makers and researchers, but families too: the creation and moderation of local databases detailing available activities should also be mandated by a national policy to improve awareness, and therefore accessibility of ECAs, for children and their families.

Continued efforts are necessary to ensure that the duty of providing accessible, high quality ECAs is embedded in the responsibility of government and schools. One necessary structural change is to earmark funding for ECAs within the dedicated schools grant. This would mean that schools have funding available for ECA provision, rather than sacrificing the quality of ECAs for other purposes, such as increased funding for the core curriculum. In addition, accessibility of ECAs for young people should be legislated, in order to legally recognise the importance of ECAs for all children and young people. This is in line with the United Nations Convention on Rights of a Child, which outlines a child's right to relax and play (Article 31).

In the future, policy should be influenced by past successful outcomes to ensure that time and money are spent effectively. One way these outcome-oriented policies can be developed is by researching past policies and initiatives to evaluate their strengths. In

addition, future policy and research would benefit from an intermediary who can use the research to make policy recommendations. This work could involve reviewing different policies and pilots and determining their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, it could enable increased cooperation between scholars, as well as foster a connection between government and researchers.

The education and social long-term effects of different ECAs should be studied to determine where funding can be most effective - for example, for different activities or age groups. If used to influence national policy, this research should also be expanded beyond Oxfordshire. In particular, in regions with low ECA provision and participation and enable further research.

Implications

The study contributes to the broader understanding of the discrepancies in ECA provision and the current government programmes in place attempting to mitigate these differences. Our findings suggest multiple policy improvements can be made to improve the provision and quality of ECAs, including mandating ECA provision on the basis of international law to ensure that all children and young adults have access to high-quality ECAs.

The implementation of our recommendations and research in improving ECAs could have positive impacts on the social and educational outcomes of children who have not historically had the same access to ECAs as that of their peers, as suggested by pre-existing research. Furthermore, improved access to ECAs for these young people can improve social mobility, by increasing access to opportunities and life skills that past research has found ECAs offer.

Finally, this study lays the groundwork for future cohorts of Laidlaw scholars in this subject area, facilitating a long-term study of ECAs and policy surrounding them. Furthermore, through improving the aforementioned policy-research feedback loop, our research alongside pre-existing literature and future studies can effectively inform research, improving outcomes for children and young people across the UK.

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Topic Guide: Policy-Makers

Interviewee name:

Interview date:

Interview and Stakeholder Information:

Stakeholder Type:	Location of interview:	Date and time:	Interviewers/ Note-takers
Local Authority, Senior decision-maker, heads up department	Address and room agreed with interviewee	Booked time, also useful if using digital recorder	Names and roles
About Stakeholder			
X			
X			
X			
Any information you think is useful to have in summary form ahead of the interview, may help with prompts and show you know about their role, expertise, history, publications, etc			

Practicalities:

- Confirmed RSVP
- Room booked/Teams invite sent
- General consent form
- Recording consent

Interview Format: SDG Impact Lab/Teams meeting/Interviewee Office/Other_

Topic Guide Introduction

X Intro text:

Hello my name is, X I am joined today by my colleague/ fellow researcher X ...

Who you are, role as researchers at SDG Lab, OU etc

I am a researcher at the SDG Impact Lab and a student at Oxford University.

Acknowledge they are busy, thank for time, will keep the interview qu short to max of 30 mins (if they are really senior and/or keep checking their watch you can ask if they have a follow up appointment you have to ensure they leave this call/ interview by)

Thank you for taking some time out of your day to meet with us. We believe that your expertise/experience in X will support our research of UK policy on extra-curriculars.

This interview should take around thirty to forty minutes.

About the research

Confirm they have received and read both the Information Sheet and Consent form, ask if they have any questions?

Just before we begin, I would like to confirm that you have read the Information Sheet and Consent Form? I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Couple of sentences overview- reiterating from the Info Sheet

Research you are conducting- aim/purpose

We are researching national and local policy surrounding extra-curricular activities as well as its presence in schools. We hope that this will help to develop a better understanding of the current policy and recommendations for extra-curriculars in UK state schools, and will support the improvement of such policy, therefore improving access to extracurriculars for children across the UK

Why you are interested in speaking with this stakeholder – their role , position at x organisation,

expertise in x area etc. Read any of their work/policies they are involved in

Essential / ethics

Reiterate purpose of the research, what its use is for, will only be used for this purpose. No publication or external circulation of the raw data. Content from this interview today will be incorporated with other interview data, wider desk review work, no attribution directly to them. Non-identifiable, anonymity remained, any quotes used will not include your name, just broader reference.

X Data protection,

If recording – ask for their consent to record, inform data will be stored carefully, password protected, deleted at the end of this research

XX Do you have any questions, and are you happy to proceed on that basis?

Topic Guide Questions (depending on if this is formal, informal or semi-structured style)

Question no.	Question + Response	Objective
1.1	Could you please give us an outline of <u>your understanding</u> of extracurricular education - what does the term mean? If/why is it valuable for the groups involved? Children, parents, schools etc?	1/6
1.2	What is <u>your understanding</u> of the guidance and requirements for extracurricular education provided by the national government?	2/4

1.3	<p>In your view, has the government’s policy been successful? If so, in what ways has it improved opportunities for state school students? In your view, what are the obstacles faced?</p>	3/5/6
2.1 (National)	<p>To our knowledge, the publicly available parliamentary bill registry does not contain any proposed bill or enacted law surrounding the provision of extracurricular education. If this is the case, would this mean there is no mandate for providing extracurricular education in schools? If not, could you please identify the piece of legislation in question?</p>	2
2.2	<p>In our desk research we identified several pieces of guidance(DoE safeguarding guidance, Ofsted handbook) on the running of after-school clubs or extracurricular activities in schools, however none of them are concerned with the social or educational outcomes of the provision of such activities (such as student attainment or development of soft skills). Are you aware of any result-orientated guidance for schools on the provision of extracurricular activities? If so, please tell us about it.</p>	3/5
2.3	<p>Do you foresee any change in the guidance and/or law pertaining to the provision of extracurricular education in schools? If you could make any change to the current policy, what would it be?</p>	6

3.1 (Local)	Does the County/City Council provide schools with guidance for the provision of extracurricular education? If so, could you please share some examples?	4
3.2	Does the County/City Council produce any of its own materials on the provision of extracurricular education, or does it mostly utilise guidance provided by the national government?	2/4
3.3	We identified a publicly available database of after-school clubs available in Oxford. Would you happen to know how this information is gathered? Do the schools submit a list, or is it collected by the Council/a third party? How often is it collated? Which team has responsibility for this?	5
3.4	Do you foresee any changes to the County/City Council's or national policy regarding extracurricular education? If you could make any change to the current policy, what would it be?	6
4	Do you have anything else you would like to share with us? Are there any documents you believe we would benefit from reading? Furthermore, is there anyone else you believe might be interested in an interview with us?	

Why have we asked these questions (objectives):

O1: What is the current provision of extracurriculars in schools?

O2: What is the policy and guidance of the national government regarding extracurricular education?

O3: Has the national policy been implemented successfully in schools?

O4: How have different institutions interpreted this guidance?

O5: What are the reasons for any discrepancies that come up?

O6: What is the political will to change this?

End – bringing interview to a close

“Do you have anything else you would like to share with us?”

“Thank you very much for your time. Are there any documents that you believe we would benefit from reading? Furthermore, is there anyone else who you believe would be interested in an interview with us?”

- At the end, close off the interview, thank them for their time. Stop the recorder
- You may want to ask their recommendations on further reading (names of documents, where to find - i.e. sources) . And anyone else they recommend you speak with (snowball sampling)
- If they mention any useful names/info/ initiatives during the interview then here is also the point at which you can ask for that information- the note-taker should lead on this.

Topic Guide: Formal Institutions

Interviewee name:

Interview date:

Interview and Stakeholder Information:

Stakeholder Type:	Location of interview:	Date and time:	Interviewers/ Note-takers
Local Authority, Senior decision-maker, heads up department	Address and room agreed with interviewee	Booked time, also useful if using digital recorder	Names and roles
About Stakeholder			
X			
X			
X			
Any information you think is useful to have in summary form ahead of the interview, may help with prompts and show you know about their role, expertise, history, publications, etc			

Practicalities:

- Confirmed RSVP
- Room booked/Teams invite sent
- General consent form
- Recording consent

Interview Format: SDG Impact Lab/Teams meeting/Interviewee Office/Other

Topic Guide Introduction

X Intro text:

Hello my name is, X I am joined today by my colleague/ fellow researcher X ...

Who you are, role as researchers at SDG Lab, OU etc

I am a researcher at the SDG Impact Lab and a student at Oxford University.

Acknowledge they are busy, thank for time, will keep the interview questions short to max of 30 mins (if they are really senior and/or keep checking their watch you can ask if they have a follow up appointment you have to ensure they leave this call/ interview by)

Thank you for taking some time out of your day to meet with us. We believe that your expertise/experience in X will support our research of UK policy on extra-curriculars.

This interview should take around thirty to forty minutes.

About the research

Confirm they have received and read both the Information Sheet and Consent form, ask if they have any questions?

Just before we begin, I would like to confirm that you have read the Information Sheet and Consent Form? I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Couple of sentences overview- reiterating from the Info Sheet

Research you are conducting- aim/purpose

We are researching national and local policy surrounding extra-curricular activities as well as its presence in schools. We hope that this will help to develop a better understanding of the current policy and recommendations for extra-curriculars in UK state schools, and will support the improvement of such policy, therefore improving access to extracurriculars for children across the UK

Why you are interested in speaking with this stakeholder – their role , position at x organisation,

expertise in x area etc. Read any of their work/policies they are involved in

Essential / ethics

Reiterate purpose of the research, what its use is for, will only be used for this purpose. No publication or external circulation of the raw data. Content from this interview today will be incorporated with other interview data, wider desk review work, no attribution directly to them. Non-identifiable, anonymity remained, any quotes used will not include your name, just broader reference.

X Data protection,

If recording – ask for their consent to record, inform data will be stored carefully, password protected, deleted at the end of this research

XX *Do you have any questions, and are you happy to proceed on that basis?*

Topic Guide Questions (depending on if this is formal, informal or semi-structured style)

Question no.	Question + Response	Objective
1.1	Could you please give us an outline of your understanding of extracurricular education - what does the term mean? If/why is it valuable for the groups involved? Children, parents, schools etc?	1/6
1.2	What is your understanding of the guidance and requirements for extracurricular education provided by the national government?	2/4
1.3	Do you believe that the government's existing guidance (DoE safeguarding guidance/Ofsted) has been successful? If so, in what ways has it improved	3/5/6

	opportunities for state school students? In your view, what are the obstacles faced?	
2.1 (Social Mobility Commission)	To what extent have the report's recommendations been implemented?	3
2.2	What impact do you believe the recommendations would have on outcomes for underprivileged students?	3/5
3.1 (Academy Trust Management)	Does your Trust have a policy on extracurricular education? Where can it be found?	4
3.2	Do the schools in your Trust provide extracurricular education? Could you please provide some examples? Why were these activities chosen?	3/4
3.3	During our research, we have yet to come across current national or local policies on extra-curricular activities. Do you know if this information is publicly available? Where do you receive your guidance on the provision of extracurricular education?	2/3
3.4	We have identified a publicly available database of after-school clubs available in Oxford. Would you happen to know how this information is gathered? Do the schools submit a list, or is it collected by the Council/a third party?	5

3.5	Do you foresee any changes to the school's policy regarding extracurricular education? If you could make any change to the current policy, what would it be?	6
4.1 (Ofsted)	Does Ofsted judge schools on the provision of extracurricular education? If so, what aspects of extracurriculars are evaluated?	3/5
4.2	How does Ofsted decide how to judge the provision of extracurricular education? Do they evaluate schools against the recommendations provided by the national government?	4
5.1 (Independent Providers)	Please could you give a short summary of the extra-curricular you are involved in? What soft-skills are developed? Which age groups are involved? What are the backgrounds of those involved?	1
5.2	Do you believe that the current provision of extra-curriculars in state schools is sufficient? What needs of children and young people do they succeed or fail to meet?	1/3
5.3	What differences are there in the provision of school extra-curriculars and external extra-curriculars? What are the reasons behind this? Do these differences mean that school extra-curriculars are more educationally-oriented, for example prioritising activities like debate clubs?	5

5.4	In your opinion, what are the advantages of external extra-curriculars? Are external extra-curriculars a sufficient substitute for school-run extra-curriculars?	5
5.5	Do external extra-curriculars implement government advice on extra-curriculars? If so, which policies/recommendations? If not, where else do you source your guidance?	2/4
6.1 (All)	Do you foresee any changes to the government's policy regarding extracurricular education?	6
6.2	Do you have anything else you would like to share with us? Are there any documents you believe we would benefit from reading? Furthermore, is there anyone else you believe might be interested in an interview with us?	

Why have we asked these questions (objectives):

O1: What is the current provision of extracurriculars in schools?

O2: What is the policy and guidance of the national government regarding extracurricular education?

O3: Has the national policy been implemented successfully in schools?

O4: How have different institutions interpreted this guidance?

O5: What are the reasons for any discrepancies that come up?

O6: What is the political will to change this?

End – bringing interview to a close

“Do you have anything else you would like to share with us?”

“Thank you very much for your time. Are there any documents that you believe we would benefit from reading? Furthermore, is there anyone else who you believe would be interested in an interview with us?”

- At the end, close off the interview, thank them for their time. Stop the recorder
- You may want to ask their recommendations on further reading (names of documents, where to find - i.e. sources) . And anyone else they recommend you speak with (snowball sampling)
- If they mention any useful names/info/ initiatives during the interview then here is also the point at which you can ask for that information- the note-taker should lead on this.