

26th March 2021

Keeping sport surfaces safe... and on budget.

Many primary, secondary, and further educational establishments need safe, cost-reducing flooring solutions that can help lower the risk of injury to pupils says Wayne Andrews, Sports Specialist, Gerflor.

The dilemma for many educational establishments is the need to encourage safe participation in physical education to improve physical and physiological well-being and reduce obesity. This now needs to be done against a backdrop of ever decreasing budgets. School sports facilities are used to deliver the formal curriculum, increase participation levels, and provide facilities for the wider community. Managing, and where possible, developing school sports facilities forms a specialist area within the premises management function and covers planning maintenance, handling budgets and finance, and dealing with new capital development.

In February 2021, the Government announced more money to help children and young people be physically active during evenings and weekends. As part of this tranche of cash Sport England have said that they are investing £10.1 million of this government money to help more schools open their facilities to the public once the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic is over. The funding, which has been provided by the Department for Education, is in addition to the £1.5m awarded as part of the School Sport and Activity Action Plan that was announced in 2019 and will help schools deliver extra-curricular activities and open their facilities outside of the school day during evenings, weekends, and school holidays.

Tim Hollingsworth, the Sport England Chief Executive, said, "the money would help more children and young people return to sport and physical activity as soon as it's safe to do so. Schools play a vital role in keeping young people active and the pandemic has had a huge impact on their ability to open up their facilities," he explained.

Schools Minister Nick Gibb said the Government recognised the impact the pandemic has had on children's health and wellbeing saying, "keeping children and young people active has never mattered more," he said. "This £10.1 million investment in school sport and swimming facilities will boost the opportunities for pupils to stay physically active."

Where sport is played there can be the risk of injury. There has been much press coverage recently about the risk to young people of head injuries associated with sports like rugby union, although now that focus is starting to move towards sports where it is not as obvious that head trauma may be an issue.

However, study results first published in 2018 by 'The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine' revealed that children and adolescents aged 0-19 years represented almost 50% of the sports injury-related A&E attendances.

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The two-year ecological study used the emergency care dataset from the pilot site of two Oxfordshire NHS England hospitals. Two of its three authors, Professor Allyson Pollock, and Graham Kirkwood, commented, "while the benefits of sport are often over-emphasised, the risk of injury is usually ignored".

The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine' also highlighted other that, 'children are particularly affected by sports injuries; a six-month study in an Irish emergency department found that 40% of sports injury-related attendances were in children aged 4-16 years, despite this age group comprising only 18% of the general population'. Football, rugby, trampolining, netball, and horse riding statistically account for the largest number of UK sports injuries in boys and girls. However, now the government has introduced the NHS Emergency Care Data Set (ECDS,) which potentially can provide data on all sports-related injuries requiring emergency treatment in England, it is possible that a wider picture may emerge concerning child and adolescent NHS attendances.

With the statistics from the Oxfordshire study making headlines, sports injuries in children and adolescents may come under greater scrutiny against a backdrop of schools remaining eager to promote sport and encourage children to become more active. There is therefore a need to emphasise how important the right flooring surface is to both performance and safety in sport and multi-use school halls and the role flooring can play in reducing impact injuries.

Schools have a duty of care to ensure the playing surface they provide is as safe as possible. The European standard BS EN14904 covers the flooring qualities required in dedicated sports areas but it applies only where there is more than one set of game lines on a court. And it does not cover multi-use halls without multiple game lines where PE and other physical activities take place, for example in primary schools. It also only applies if facility make changes to the flooring, it could be argued that schools should be pro-active in ensuring the facility is safe, regardless of its age.

Timber floors are present in as much as 60% of the UK's educational establishments' sport hall facilities and remain popular in multi-use halls where a variety of activities, some physical, take place. All sports floors give shock absorption. Naturally, children do not need as much shock absorption as the initial force that they exert is significantly lower than that of an adult.

Also, as younger children have less developed motor skills, they are more likely to trip and tumble in day-to-day activities. Impact injury can therefore happen as easily as when a child falls running into a hall. Young children also lack the technique that older children have gained through coaching, although the risk continues into secondary schools and further education establishments as boisterous and competitive play increases. Point elastic vinyl floorings have been designed by flooring manufacturers to provide shock absorbency but perhaps more importantly impact protection. Both need to be considered ensuring that they act accordingly for all users, not just specific groups such as Elite Athletes.

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P1, P2 and P3 point elastic floorings offer appropriate protection levels for different sport and physical activities. For example, a P1 flooring is ideal for multi-use halls with levels of impact protection, whilst a P2 and P3 flooring can further help prevent impact injuries where faster-paced sports are played. The inclusion of special surface treatments on some materials gives added protection from friction burns. These surface treatments can also make a significant difference to cleaning and maintenance both in time and cost.

Education budgets continue to be tight and with fewer new schools being built despite there being more students. Schools that are being built tend to be in accordance with a standard Department of Education template. The notion of every sports hall design being based on its needs is eliminated by having standard specifications copied and pasted from previous projects.

Point elastic floorings are well suited to both the new building and refurbishment of educational facilities. However, as specialists in flooring for education, we are seeing a great deal more refurbishment with safe, yet cost-effective solutions being needed. These solutions need to be fit for purpose and help to deliver lower whole life cycle costs to benefit the operator.

Over-laying an existing sport or multi-use hall flooring is naturally highly attractive to educational specifiers as it's possible to shave as much as 40% off the cost of removing an old floor and installing a new one. It can also save fitters half the time. In addition, dust and mess can be substantially reduced and the environmental considerations about the disposal of some old floorings that can't be recycled are eliminated.

But first there is one vital question to be asked... can the existing sports floor be over-laid? Yes, in some cases it can as the availability of technically advanced flooring products can make refurbishment easier and the over-laying of some floors possible providing the site conditions can be met. Where a suitable flooring is identified, a pure sheet vinyl isolating membrane that is designed to sit proud of the existing floor to allow for ventilation can be used with a point elastic vinyl flooring laid on top, which provides the correct safety performance levels. The isolator will also give a compatible base to which a suitable vinyl flooring adhesive can bond. An isolator membrane can only be used with vinyl floorings of a certain thickness. We therefore advise a joint approach between the product manufacturer and fitter to check that all site conditions and technicalities are fully met before the best possible solution is put forward.

In cases where over-laying is not possible, the only solution will be to remove the existing floor. If this is the case, then the same due diligence should be shown to ensure the right sports flooring is chosen. It's worth noting that Sport England maintain that the floor is the most important part of any facility.

Learn more about Gerflor solutions, ask for a free sample or contact us to speak to a specialist today by calling 03332 412901, emailing contractuk@gerflor.com, or visiting gerflor.co.uk for the latest innovations.

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