System Maturity Survey 2025: Information and guidance

Contents

1. Overview: Assessing System Maturity for Configurational Comparative Analysis: 2025

Introduction: Changes to the process

The System Maturity Matrix (SMM) survey incorporates the SMM in an online format that enables systematic data collection, helping to consistently capture an understanding of the current conditions within Places. This will draw on both perceptions of partners and stakeholders and examples of local contexts and the changes taking place. **This year we have separated the SMM survey from the Resources Survey** (Part One questions in last year's survey – see separate guidance note). NELP will use responses to both of these surveys, together with other data collected, for Configurational Comparative Analysis.

Please note: responses to the Resources survey *will be shared* with Sport England (SE), but the **SMM survey responses will *not be shared* with SE,** without permission of the appropriate Place partnership representative. Aggregated data and patterns of maturity across Places, based on SMM responses will be shared with SE.

Places planning to take part in the survey will be asked to confirm this via a separate short online survey, including advising of any dates to avoid in scheduling moderation meetings. This year we will be undertaking moderation with small groups of three or four Places within a cluster working together. NELP will arrange these meetings in consultation with Places, including any preferences for which other Place you wish to work with.

2. Taking part in the CCA evaluation

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the NELP System Maturity Matrix guidance. Sport England expects all Places in receipt of Full or Deepening funding to participate, but for Places in receipt of a Development award, participation is optional and a decision on whether to participate may be informed by the current level of engagement and understanding of PBSA among key stakeholders in the Place. By participating in the NELP CCA work, you are contributing to an analysis of how system maturity conditions relate to each other, and local contexts, identifying patterns, or configurations, which lead to more effective Place-based working and ultimately to longer-term outcomes. (see CCA explainer).

What are we evaluating?

In summary, the focus of our evaluation is on the complex interacting attributes of the Place (which may impact levels of physical activity), including, but not only, the changes resulting from the programme and its activities. It is important to recognise that the organisational, socio-economic and cultural contexts in which programmes are working are unique to their Places.

A 'Place' for the purposes of this guidance, refers to an individual local authority area in which a Place-based systemic approach to physical activity is being implemented. While specific areas may be targeted within a borough or city, we are looking at the maturity of system conditions across the area as a whole. This enables us to compare Places at a similar scale.

The SMM enables systematic data collection, helping us to consistently capture an understanding of the current conditions within Places. By taking part in the CCA work, you are contributing to an analysis of how these system maturity conditions relate to each other, and local contexts, identifying patterns, or configurations, which lead to more effective Place-based working and ultimately to longer-term outcomes.

What do we mean by contexts?

'Contexts' refers to the circumstances that surround and influence the work being done, including organisational relationships, policies, demographics, socio-economic and geographical aspects of the Place. These contexts can either help or hinder how partners and communities live and work together.

Note: NELP also draws on national data, including measures of deprivation, diversity etc., to build our understanding of the contexts in participating places.

Purpose of the survey

The key purpose of the CCA method is to systematically compare Places, to identify common patterns of conditions that tend to predict the intended outcomes. This survey will help to develop our understandings of:

- the contexts in which whole-system Place-based programmes are operating (see box)

- how the programme activities influence and shape those contexts.

The organisational, socio-economic and cultural contexts in which programmes are working are unique to their Places. Combined with the deeper description and analysis in Evaluation and Learning reports, the survey helps to develop our understandings of the contexts in which Place-based programmes are operating, and the work undertaken as part of the programme. In other words, the focus of our evaluation is on the complex interacting attributes of the Place (which impact levels of physical activity), including, but not only, the changes resulting from the programme and its activities.

The system maturity matrix enables systematic data collection, so we can consistently capture an understanding of the configurations of conditions within Places. This enables us to categorise Places on multiple dimensions, so we can identify patterns, and investigate, with Place partners, how these relate to progress – identifying pathways to outcomes.

Overview of the structure of the survey

The survey provides an online format in which you can record your assessment of the maturity levels in relation to each sub-condition, considering both actions and contexts (see above). There are nine system maturity conditions, made up of 26 sub-conditions in total (see Supporting Information for System Maturity Matrix). For each sub-condition, you are asked to enter a figure from 1-7 to represent the maturity level as described in the matrix, and to explain why you have reached that conclusion, including brief description of local examples to demonstrate the work and challenges described.

We recognise that within a Place, there will be variation maturity levels, such as between parts of the borough/city and between organisations, in which case a balanced judgement is required. For each level from Emerging to Embedded you can indicate by the number (e.g. 2 or 3) whether you assess the maturity as being relatively low or high within that level. For example, most of the borough is at this level but there are some instances of progress to the next level you would use the higher figure within the band.

Responding to the survey

Assessing Maturity

It is important to encourage honest, open and reflective responses from those involved, and to emphasise that neither the SMM nor the CCA survey is intended to measure or assess performance of the programme or partner organisations. We recommend that you gather and consider all the evidence available to inform your collective assessment of maturity levels. In practice if consensus is not reached, a smaller group of people, with good understanding of Place-based systemic working, might collate all the information provided and together decide on the maturity rating following the workshop(s).

Engaging and capturing different perspectives

The process you adopt for completing the survey will be determined by the time available, readiness of partners to engage with it and the degree of trust and openness in working relationships within the Place. To ensure that the assessment of system maturity reflects the diversity of experiences within the local area, we recommend involving a range of people with different roles and perspectives when considering the maturity of the conditions in Place. By engaging a diverse range of people, including partners, communities and those directly involved in the Place-based approach, Places will be able to provide a balanced maturity rating for the Local Authority area.

This does not mean that the full matrix or questionnaire should necessarily be shared, as different people may contribute to your assessment of different conditions. Some resources that may be helpful in responding to the survey are included in the appendices:

1. A set of questions developed by Together an Active Future which provide helpful prompts to discussion to help elicit reflection and sharing of examples which demonstrate the current level of maturity in relation to the nine conditions.
2. A quick reference list of the short descriptions of the conditions, including a 'plain English' description
3. Some illustrative examples of how the system maturity conditions might be seen in practice

We have also developed workshop guidance, available on the evaluatingcomplexity.org website which provides some suggestions on how you might engage partners in your response to the survey, including the participant information and consent forms you will need to use. We also encourage Place representatives to draw on existing sources such as evaluation and other reports, as well as stakeholder and community perspectives captured through other engagement processes as part of the partnership's work.

It may be possible to reach consensus on the appropriate score for system maturity conditions in one or more workshops, but this can take a lot of time, and you may find it more useful to use workshops or meetings to capture stories and practice examples that are relevant to understanding the maturity levels. A smaller group of people with good understanding of the work and the conditions may then come together to review the evidence captured and compare with the SMM descriptors to arrive at the final assessments to be submitted.

Collection of data for the SMM survey response is intended to align with and become embedded into existing evaluation and learning practices, including Evaluation and Learning Reports. Some Places have found it helpful to discuss their initial assessments with representatives of other places in a small meeting or workshop. This enables Place leads to compare their interpretations in a mutually supportive setting, with peers involved in the same process.

How to complete the survey

Our data collection software will generate a unique link for the SMM survey, which will be sent to the lead contact for each Place, enabling them to complete the online survey on behalf of the partnership. A separate link will be provided for the Resources survey. Responses are recorded as you progress through the survey, so if you are not completing it in one session, you can use the original unique survey link provided to return to the partially completed survey, from any device. The Place lead may choose to share the link to enable others to contribute to completion, but it is **important to note** that **anyone with the link will be able to see and edit all responses**. Links must not be forwarded to other place partnerships. Once a response has been submitted to the final question, further changes will not be possible using the original link. The NELP team can provide a new link to enable changes if needed, up until the deadline. If you have any problems or questions, please contact the team by email: NELP@shu.ac.uk. **The deadline for submitting your responses is 15th October 2025.**

What happens to our data?

In submitting the survey response, you will be asked to confirm your consent for this data to be shared with the organisations which comprise the NELP. Place responses to the **Resources survey will be shared with SE**. NELP **will not share individual SMM survey responses and scores with SE** without express permission of an appropriate Place representative**,** but we will share information as to which partnerships are participating, and how many organisations, community representatives and other people with lived experience have been engaged in the process. Extracts of individual Place responses may be shared with Sport England in anonymised form and Places are free to share the information submitted as they see appropriate, in keeping with requirements for data protection and confidentiality.

On occasions, Sport England would like to draw examples of Place practice (at different levels of maturity) to bring to life the work, to inform Place-based innovation and learning support or for SE Board, DCMS, consultation responses and policy briefings. The survey questionnaire will ask whether you would like examples from your Place to be considered for this purpose, and if you would like to be named in this response to enable follow up. This is entirely optional and your response to this option will have no bearing on your relationship with NELP or Sport England.

The NELP team will undertake a moderation process in the months following submission, to ensure consistency in the interpretation of maturity levels between different Places, as far as possible. This will involve contacting and/or meeting with Place representatives or their nominated deputy to ask for clarification or further information to demonstrate the maturity level in the Place. We will share our finalised assessments individually with each Place, so you are aware of any changes made, and the reasons for these changes.

Following this, the data will be used in our CCA process, in which Places will be provisionally allocated a 'higher or lower' level in relatoin to each sub-condition, to enable the configurational analysis to identify patterns across multiple Places (see CCA explainer). An example of the presentation of the configurational analysis is shown in figure 2.

Figure1: example CCA decision tree model
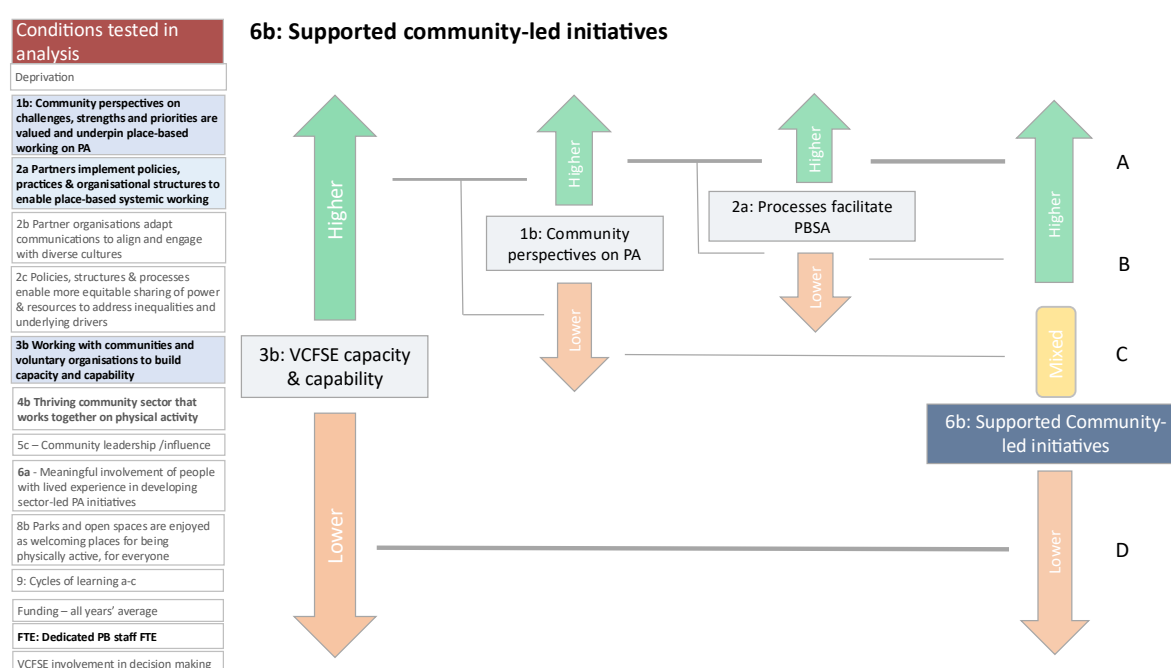
A selection of configurational models showing strong patterns will be shared with participating Places and representatives of SE, at regional sense-making workshops, including identifying which Places fall into which configuration. In other words, we may share whether each Place was assessed as 'higher' or lower' on each condition, but not individual scores. As stated earlier, this is **not an assessment of the performance of the programme**, but a description of conditions in the Place at a point in time, and these are shaped by many factors beyond the control of the programme. The sense making workshops provide the means to explore with Place representatives how and why we might be seeing these patterns, drawing on experiences in practice.

Key findings based on the 2024 CCA data collection, have been shared in a series of online seminars, available online here. The findings of the analysis, including the sense-making workshops will be made publicly available in summary report form and in academic research papers.

Any questions or problems – please contact NELP@shu.ac.uk

How you might use the data locally

You can retain a copy of the data submitted, and this may be used within your Place Partnership to inform your plans for further development and priorities. NELP can provide a PDF copy of your completed survey if required – please email NELP@shu.ac.uk . We believe that the SSM is a valuable tool to prompt reflection and learning within the Place, so engaging with it will be valuable regardless of whether you are participating in the CCA survey. The process of engaging with partners and other interested people to complete the assessment of maturity levels will help develop insight, understanding and relationships within the Place.

CCA Timeline

`	Responsible	Activity
w/c 18/08/25	NELP team	Updated System Maturity Matrix circulated, with guidance and timeline Participation survey circulated
August	Place leads	Preparing to respond, including: • Confirming participation and availability for moderation meetings (via online survey) • Briefing partners and colleagues • Scheduling time, including meetings and workshops • Assembling existing data – reports etc.
w/c 1/9/25	NELP/SE	Resources and SMM surveys circulated
5/9/25	Place leads	Respond to participation survey
8/9/25	NELP & Place leads	NELP online Drop-in: 2.00-3.30pm – opportunity to clarify the process and expectations of Places
29/9/25	NELP & Place leads	NELP online Drop-in: 2.00-3.30pm – opportunity to clarify the process and expectations of Places
1/9/25 to 15/10/25	Place leads	Gathering information and evidence, including workshops, meetings. Completing survey responses
15/10/25	Place leads	Deadline for submission of survey responses
16/10/25 – 12/12/25	NELP team / Place leads	Moderation process – including follow-up calls/meetings with Place representatives where needed
22/12/25	NELP team	Share moderated scores with participating Places
December – January	NELP team	Configurational analysis of data
February 2026	NELP team & Place leads	Sense-making workshops delivered
Summer 2026	NELP team	Integrated CCA & Evaluation and Learning reports findings shared

Appendices

Appendix 1: Systems Maturity Discussion Questions – developed by Together an Active Future[1].

Consider **you** and how **others** (council, leisure, health, schools, VCSF, other community organisations across your patch do these):

1. Process for Identifying the Barriers and Enablers of Physical Activity

- How do you gather and use data related to barriers and enablers of physical activity in your local context?
- How frequently is the data shared among stakeholders, and who is involved in interpreting it?
- How do you ensure that community perspectives on barriers and enablers are integrated into your approach?
- How do you address gaps in data, particularly regarding the experiences of marginalised groups?

2. Organisational Policies, Processes, and Structures that Enable Place-Based Working

- To what extent have your organisational structures been adapted to support place-based working?
- How do your policies and practices support or hinder collaboration across different sectors?
- What measures have you taken to ensure that your decision-making processes are inclusive and proportionate?
- How do you balance the need for flexibility and the necessity of long-term planning in place-based work?

3. Capacity and Capability Across the Workforce, Volunteers, and Communities

- How do you assess the current capacity and capability of your workforce and volunteers to engage in place-based working?
- What training and support mechanisms are in place to enhance skills and knowledge for systemic, place-based approaches?
- How do you ensure that local communities are equipped to take part in physical activity initiatives?
- In what ways do you evaluate and address any skill gaps or barriers to participation for marginalised community members?

4. Collaboration

- How do you build and maintain relationships across different sectors to promote physical activity?
- What shared goals or strategies are in place for partners to work together effectively on physical activity inequalities?
- How do you resolve conflicting priorities or competition between organisations that may affect collaborative efforts?

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[1] Thanks to Rachel McHugh and Emily Brady-Young for permission to share these

- How is decision-making shared between different sectors, and how do you ensure that all voices are heard?

5. Leadership

- What leadership structures are in place to support physical activity initiatives at different levels (local, organisational, sector-wide)?
- How are leaders across sectors encouraged to collaborate and promote physical activity inequality solutions?
- How do leaders challenge existing policies or practices that may hinder physical activity promotion?
- What strategies are in place to ensure that leadership is distributed across all levels of the organisation and community?

6. Community-Led Action

- How do you support and enable local people to take a lead in designing and implementing physical activity programmes?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that local people, especially those who are typically excluded, have a meaningful influence on decisions?
- How do you ensure that community-led initiatives are adequately supported by local agencies and partners?
- How do you create an environment where local communities feel empowered to address physical activity inequalities?

7. Cultures and Practices for Physical Activity

- What are the cultural and social factors in your community that influence attitudes toward physical activity?
- How do you create an environment where physical activity is perceived as inclusive and accessible to all individuals, regardless of background?
- How do you ensure that workplace or institutional settings support and encourage regular physical activity for staff and participants?
- In what ways do you address barriers within communities that prevent full participation in physical activity?

8. Built and Natural Environments that Enable Physical Activity

- How do your built and natural environments (e.g., parks, transportation infrastructure) support or inhibit physical activity?
- What steps are being taken to improve access to safe, welcoming spaces for physical activity in disadvantaged communities?
- How do you involve local communities in the design and management of public spaces to promote physical activity?
- What measures are in place to ensure that infrastructure and spaces are designed to be accessible to all, including marginalised groups?

9. Cycles of Learning and Action

- How do you foster a culture of continuous learning within your organisation and community?

- What processes do you have in place to reflect on and adapt your approach based on what works or doesn't?
- How do you ensure that learning from failures or setbacks is integrated into future actions?
- How is evaluation embedded into your physical activity initiatives, and how do you use findings to inform future strategies?

Appendix 2: System Maturity Conditions Quick Reference List

Condition name	Plain English description	No.	Area of action	Short label	Summary description
Identifying Barriers & Enablers	Finding out what makes it hard or easy for people to be active in your area	1a	SIPA	Data capture	Effective capture and use of data and insight
		1b	SCIC	Community perspectives on PA	Community perspectives on challenges, strengths and priorities are valued and underpin place-based working on PA
		1c	TSI	Consistent understanding of root causes	Consistent understanding of how social, cultural, and economic constraints may affect physical activity levels
Organisational policies, processes, and structures	Organisations are set up to work in a flexible and collaborative way	2a	SIPA	Processes facilitate PBSA	Partners implement policies, practices and organisational structures to enable place-based systemic working
		2b	SIPA	Inclusive communications practices	Partner organisations adapt communications to align and engage with diverse cultures
		2c	TSI	Changing processes to address structural inequalities	Policies, administrative systems, structures and processes enable more equitable sharing of power and resources to address inequalities and their underlying drivers
Capacity & Capability	Workers, volunteers and communities have the time, space, knowledge and skills to work together	3a	SIPA	Partner capacity & capability	Partners are investing in building capacity and capability for place-based systemic working
		3b	SCIC	VCFSE capacity & capability	Working with communities and voluntary organisations to build capacity and capability
		3c	TSI	Community capacity to	Support and resources for communities to build the capacities and capabilities to advocate and act to address inequalities

Condition name	Plain English description	No.	Area of action	Short label	Summary description
				address inequalities	
Collaboration	Groups and organisations are working together to achieve more	4a	SIPA	Collaboration within & across sectors	Collaborative practice within and across sectors
		4b	SCIC	Collaboration in the community sector	Thriving community sector that works together on physical activity
		4c	TSI	Collective impact on inequalities	Collective impact on inequalities
Leadership	Everyone has a say, and leads and shape action in their work area or community, not just one person in charge	5a	SIPA	Strategic leadership	Strategic leaders, across sectors, promote place-based systemic approaches to tackle physical activity inequalities
		5b	SIPA	Shared Leadership across all levels	People at all levels take on roles and responsibility to tackle physical activity inequalities and can act autonomously
		5c	SCIC	Community leadership & influence	Community leadership and influence
Community-led Action	Local people leading initiatives and working together to achieve their goals	6a	SIPA	Lived experience informs PA initiatives	Meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in developing sector-led PA initiatives
		6b	SCIC	Supported community-led initiatives	Supported community-led initiatives

Condition name	Plain English description	No.	Area of action	Short label	Summary description
		6c	TSI	Local people influence on their lives	Local people's influence on decisions about things that affect their lives
Cultures & Practices	Cultures in organisations and in communities where everyone values being active	7a	SIPA	PA culture & practices in organisational settings	Cultures and practices in workplaces enable and support physical activity/moving more in daily work routines
		7b	SCIC	Inclusive cultures for PA in communities	Inclusive cultures encourage and facilitate participation in movement / physical activity
Built & Natural Environments	Physical environments that make it easier and attractive for people to be active	8a	SIPA	Shaping spaces for active living	Design and management of built and natural environments to promote interaction and physical activity
		8b	Gen	Parks & open spaces for PA	Parks and open spaces are enjoyed as welcoming places for being physically active, for everyone
		8c	TSI	Addressing inequalities in living environments.	Action to address structural inequalities reflected in living environments
Cycles of Learning & Action	Learning about what works and adapting as we go	9a	Gen	Learning Culture	Learning culture
		9b	Gen	Embedded learning processes	Embedded learning processes
		9c	Gen	Appropriate Place-based evaluation methods	Evaluation uses appropriate methods for place-based working

Appendix 3: Examples of Tangible Changes relating to System Maturity

Condition	Sub-Condition	Examples of tangible changes that could be 'evidenced'
1a	Data capture	Regular insights inform PA approaches, Documented insight-led approaches - e.g. in strategies/implementation plan. Partners working from shared data insights.
1b	Community Perspectives on PA	Programme designs shaped by local perspectives; regularity enables resident input into strategic planning.
1c	Consistent understanding of root causes	Place Partnerships aligning, liaising, lending capacity to wider efforts on tackling root causes e.g. Health Determinants Research Collaborations, working alongside other social issues e.g. mental health/housing. Strategic placement of facilities and Wellbeing Hubs.
2a	Processes that facilitate PBSA	New procurement processes, commissioning, new cross-boundary job roles, job descriptions.
2b	Inclusive communication practices	Outcomes communication working groups, resonant campaigns, accessible and appropriate comms. (neurodivergence, different languages, disabilities).
2c	Changing processes to address structural inequalities	Examples include changed policies, organisational structures/integration, more equitable decision-making processes, working practices adapted to flex in response to individual needs.
3a	Partners capacity and capability	Fair and proportionate allocation of resources for capacity building, growing workforce with the skills, knowledge and attributes for PBSA.
3b	VCSFE and community capacity and capability.	Network of community partners, new bids, new capacity to collaborate. Training and mentorship for (young) people; Paid sessional work enhances community contribution.
3c	Community capacity and capability to address inequalities.	Investment in marginalised youth. Outcomes people are broadly engaged in democratic processes in a range of localities.
4a	Collaboration within and across sectors.	Increasing numbers of collaborative productive partnerships, pooling of resources, investment for PA from broader sources, broader sector involvement (participation in CCA), e.g. shared decision-making improves service delivery and integrates PA into mental health pathways. Evidence of policy change
4b	Community Sector Collaboration	Anchor Organisations strengthen local networks and make PA more accessible. Partnerships are self-sustaining based on experience of working together.
4c	Collective impact on inequalities	Health and Wellbeing Board facilitates coordinated action on inequalities.

Condition	Sub-Condition	Examples of tangible changes that could be 'evidenced'
5a	Strategic leadership	Short-term outcomes - behavioural i.e. traditional leaders ceding power e.g. rotating chair...Long-term outcomes - PA in policy, PA in practice, changes to policies that limit PA (e.g. planning), independent championing of PA and PBSW e.g. in social media/press releases.
5b	Leadership across all levels.	Short-term outcomes - independent actions, wide range of people advocate for PA. Momentum is maintained organically. Long-term outcomes - PA in policy, PA in practice, changes to policies that limit PA (e.g. planning), independent championing of PA and PBSW e.g. in social media/press releases.
5c	Community leadership and influence	Representatives of less active communities and people with relevant lived experience participating in partnership decision making. Examples of change in policy/practice in response to this input.
6a	Lived experience informs PA initiatives.	Co-designed Health & Wellbeing Hub; Family Stay & Play scheme co-designed with families.
6b	Supported community led initiatives.	Community groups supported to deliver initiatives.
6c	Local people influence on their lives.	Residents shape Locality Plans and infrastructure decisions
7a	PA culture and practices in organisational settings	PA in good employment charters, wellness breaks, cycle to work schemes promoted and supported (and made accessible to all salary ranges). Walking meetings/planned breaks etc. Active soles / appropriate clothing for being active encouraged; Comfortable, accessible environments normalize PA.
7b	Inclusive culture for PA in communities	Behavioural responses (COM-B?). Campaigns resonate with local people. Higher footfall in the local green and blue environments/facilities generally. People feel safe on the streets around them they may be more inclined to walk or cycle rather than drive. Stories of change highlighting people expressing that they can be active in ways that they choose to value - e.g. Muslim women being accepted and 'allowed' to ride bikes.
8a	Shaping spaces for active living.	Health impact assessment in planning.
8b	Addressing inequalities in living environments.	DFP investments improve access points, lighting, seating; Parks become well-used community assets.
8c	Regeneration	Investments in deprived areas shaped by community input; Active travel improvements address structural inequalities.

Condition	Sub-Condition	Examples of tangible changes that could be 'evidenced'
9a	Learning culture	Attitudinal reflections of the value and priority of learning.
9b	Embedded learning processes	Learning processes are visible and routine. People across places have protected learning time.
9c	Appropriate Place Based evaluation methods.	(a range) of complexity sensitive methods are routinely deployed and valued. Equitable evaluation principles are upheld. We would see this in their methods statements.