

Theory of Change Descriptor

A Guide to Understand and Fulfil the Theory of Change Requirement

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This document provides guidance for Place Partners on developing your Theory of Change - a requirement of Sport England's Place expansion investment. It is organised into five parts:

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This guide will support local partners to work through the practicalities of commissioning for, or resourcing, the evaluation and learning for their place based systemic work. The guidance has been prepared by colleagues from Sport England, working together with the National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP), and Place Partners to bring together information and experiences.

Part 1: Why Theory of Change supports place-based systemic working

Simple, time-limited projects on their own have not succeeded in narrowing physical activity inequalities or in improving population level physical activity levels. To address this, Place Partners are asked to work collaboratively to co-design, embed, and continually adapt and improve a **place-based systemic approach** to increasing physical activity. The long-term outcomes of the approach should be one or more of: 1. Reducing inactivity levels; 2. Increasing physical activity levels; 3. Narrowing inequalities in physical activity; or 4. Improving positive experiences for children and young people which translates into increasing physical activity levels. Local Places may also identify additional locally relevant outcomes of interest.

A place-based systemic approach is not as simple as developing and implementing a project or programme, which directly results in these types of outcomes occurring. Instead, it focuses on creating the enabling conditions for physical activity across [multiple layers of society in a way that responds to local circumstances](#). This means it is not known at the beginning what actions will be needed, or in what sequence and combination these actions should be taken forward. This will become clearer over time as understanding grows.

A Theory of Change can help Place Partners work through their local place-based systemic approach. It can act as a valuable tool to guide the cycle of developing, embedding, and evaluating and learning about a place-based systemic approach. It involves thinking through (theorising) and making explicit how and why change in outcomes is envisaged to occur, informed by a deep understanding of the *context* (circumstances within a Place). A Theory of Change can also help to clarify the assumptions held between colleagues and partners about what is needed, and why. This can positively contribute to building a shared understanding between partners, and enhance the planning and implementation of the approach taken forward.



Part 2: Defining what Theory of Change means

There are many different ways to define and explain what a Theory of Change is, including the process to develop one, the outputs it produces, and how it is used in practice.

For this Place investment, we start by distinguishing a Theory of Change from a Logic Model (or Theory of Action). A Logic Model maps inputs to activities and outcomes but does not explain how or why these elements are connected. This gap is often called the “black box” in evaluation, where the causal links behind change remains assumed rather than made explicit and explained.

Understanding how and why change happens is crucial, because influences on physical activity within a Place are complex and will be affected by a range of different interacting local circumstances.

Logic Models alone often assume simple, linear relationships and fail to capture these complex interactions. As a result, it becomes difficult to evaluate if, when, how and why the inputs and activities contribute to causing the change in outcomes

A Theory of Change addresses this by explicitly “**filling in the black box.**” It not only maps inputs, activities, and outcomes but also explains **how, why, and under what conditions** these elements interact to produce change within the Place.

In Part 3, we outline the key steps to guide producing a Theory of Change. This involves:

- Identifying the intended changes in outcomes for both the local system and the people within the place.
- Defining the types of activities needed to achieve these changes.
- Determining the resources required and how they need to be deployed to enable activities to be taken forward and contribute to the change in outcomes.

All of this should be tailored to the specific context of the Place.

This results in forming a theory which explains how and why a place-based, systemic approach—led by local partners—can drive sustainable, long-term change in physical activity outcomes for people within a Place.

Part 4 explains the specific requirements for Place Partners in fulfilling Sport England’s Place Investment Theory of Change requirement.

In summary, a Theory of Change is a valuable tool for thinking through and planning your place-based systemic approach. It guides you to clarify what you want to achieve, the intended pathways to achieve that change, and surface the key assumptions about what is needed for this to happen in your Place.



Part 3: How to develop a Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is as only as good as the process you go through to develop it. The best way to ensure it represents local circumstances and priorities is to include partners from communities and across sectors when discussing and deciding on the intended outcomes, and the pathways to achieve them.

Here we suggest some considerations for designing your process:

1. **Take time to understand and build a picture of your place** from a diverse range of perspectives. This could involve bringing local partners together to generate and review local insight, data and experience e.g. about barriers and enablers to activity for local people. You may also use Sport England's Moving Communities service to understand local area data sets in the context of participation data. Build from this and consider factors that can support or inhibit activity within your Place, such as physical infrastructure, locally trusted organisations and leaders, and the relationships between them. Aim to convene spaces that facilitate sharing and learning from each other, enable equal voice and promote reciprocal, trusting relationships between partners, and take time to be present with partners within communities where activities will happen.
2. **Agree on the (long-term) outcome(s) of interest.** Support partners to share, prioritise, and decide on, the outcomes of interest. This should include one or more of the four outcomes identified in Part 1, along with other locally determined outcomes of interest.
3. **Take time to consider what conditions cause inequalities** in your Place and how they impact on key outcomes. Also consider what conditions need to be in place for a change in outcomes to occur. Activities to help develop this understanding could include building insight from within your Place (e.g. using the [System Maturity Matrix](#) as a reflective and developmental tool), utilising insight and learning from other Place Partnerships (e.g. by visiting other Places), through functions of the Moving Communities Platform, accessing information from national evaluation and learning (e.g. within Place cohort/cluster discussions or by reviewing National Evaluation & Learning Partner ([NELP](#)) resources), or by drawing on wider literature or theories.
4. **Start to configure pathways to outcomes.** Think through the combinations of activities needed to positively influence the outcomes of interest and explore how and why you expect they might work. This could involve working with partners to carry out 'outcome mapping' – and then setting out the steps that link activities to short and longer-term outcomes.

Place Partners use various tools to explain how activities lead to outcomes, including **What, So What, Now What, Context + Mechanism = Outcome (CMO)**, and **IF-THEN-BECAUSE** frameworks. These tools help break down and clarify the steps and reasoning behind change.

Below is an example using the **IF-THEN-BECAUSE** format:

- **IF** we support community-led physical activity by introducing Asset-Based Community Development and shifting resources and decision-making to community leaders,
- **THEN** more inclusive cultures for physical activities with places which facilitate physical activity will occur,
- **BECAUSE** communities feel trusted, equipped, and enabled to make decisions and act on inequalities that increase opportunities for physical activity.



This process should be collaborative, interactive, and engaging. Reflecting together helps partners find shared agreement and better understand each other's perspectives, which is often one of the most valuable parts of developing a Theory of Change.

5. **Produce a visual/graphical articulation of your Theory of Change**, once you get to a shared view between partners on the expected pathways to outcomes. Try to produce a visual representation in a format that resonates with partners. Alongside this, produce a shared narrative that aids the interpretation of the visual/graphical representation by explaining your Theory of Change. This helps to make explicit how and why change is envisaged to occur.
6. **Review and refine your draft Theory of Change** against a key set of considerations:
 - Whose views are reflected within the Theory of Change and have any important voices been left out?
 - What evidence, insight, learning, theories or practical examples support your Theory of Change?
 - Is it plausible that the combination of activities you have identified could contribute to the outcomes? Is it logical and realistic?
 - Is it doable based on the resources available? Can resources be deployed as the Theory of Change suggests?

Additional guidance and support on Theory of Change is available to Places through the [National Evaluation & Learning Partner resources](#).

In summary, the Theory of Change process guides the planning and implementation of a place-based systemic approach. It should involve a diverse group of partners working together to build a shared vision and understanding for how they will work together. This collaborative process helps strengthen relationships between partners, along with commitment and engagement from partners' and their role and responsibilities in taking forward a place-based systemic approach as represented by the Theory of Change.



Part 4: The key asks of Places when developing and sharing your Theory of Change

This section sets out what we are asking of Place Partners in line with the Place Funding Award Agreement with Sport England.

1. **Process:** We are asking Place Partners to refer to the guidance suggested in Part 3, and co-design a process to collaboratively develop a Theory of Change. Support will be available via your Place Relationship Manager, Sport England's Moving Communities team, other Places within your cluster or cohort, with resources and supports from the National Evaluation and Learning Partner website.
2. **Product:** We are asking Place Partners to refer to the guidance suggested in Part 3, along with resources and support accessed from the National Evaluation and Learning Partner, to produce a visual/graphical representation of the Theory of Change in a format that works for Place Partners. This should be accompanied by a narrative that articulates how and why the activities will contribute to a change in outcomes.

We are asking Place Partners to not rush this process, and to plan and integrate developing the Theory of Change as part of developing your place-based systemic work.



Part 5: How Theory of Change forms part of the Place Evaluation & Learning Approach

Developing a Theory of Change is the starting point for informing the design, planning and implementation of the other evaluation and learning arrangements. The Theory of Change should be iteratively tested and refined through the evaluation.

The sections below set out the connection between Theory of Change and the other components of Sport England's Place Evaluation and Learning Approach.

System Maturity Matrix: Using the System Maturity Matrix as a reflective and developmental tool with partners to explore the cross-cutting conditions in their Place can help to generate valuable insights, identify priorities and the types of actions needed to narrow physical activity inequalities.

Evaluation and Learning Plan: The Theory of Change sets the scope of what can be evaluated and learnt about. This then informs Identifying the evaluation and learning questions, key priorities and the selection of evaluation methods to capture relevant data. In this way, the Theory of Change informs the Evaluation and Learning Plan. The data captured and analysis and synthesis that happens should be used to test and refine the Theory of Change. This can help to establish and explain if, when, how, and why, change is occurring.

Evaluation and Learning Submission: Focusing on articulating how and why change is envisaged to occur as part of your Theory of Change process is good practice for producing explanatory accounts as part of the Evaluation and Learning Submission shared with Sport England. See more on NELP Explanatory frameworks and accounts [here](#). The explanatory accounts can be used to reflect on your Theory of Change and what is it about the place-based systemic approach that is contributing to that.

Configurational Comparative Analysis (Full Award and Deepening): Participating in CCA on an annual basis, supports bringing data together in a case-study. Analyses are undertaken by the National Evaluation and Learning Partner and shared with Place Partners through a local sense-making session. This can contribute to 'testing' a Theory of Change through evidencing pathways to impact. It can also provide a basis for reflecting on and reviewing your Theory of Change and updating evaluation priorities and needs.

Moving Communities Place: Moving Communities Place can contribute to the local data, insight, and understanding of physical activity. The structured and collaborative approach supports Place Partners to identify the long-term outcomes of interest, and then how Moving Communities Place can help to collate and use location of physical activity and participation data to inform planning and action, as well as track changes in physical activity and update the Theory of Change, over time.

Midpoint and End of Award Impact Reporting (Full Award and Deepening): Through this form of Impact reporting, Place Partners are asked to bring together the data they have (data synthesis) and reflect on it in relation to the Theory of Change, and use that to produce a summary of the progress and change in outcomes (impact) that has occurred during that time. This can then be used as an input to iteratively review and update the Theory of Change and Evaluation and Learning Plan.



