

What the latest National Evaluation and Learning Partner findings tell us about Sport England's investment in place-based systemic working – April 2026

Key Messages

1. Change is happening in the right direction across Place Partnerships. Across the portfolio of 63 Place Partnerships, more partners from across sectors and communities are becoming involved in place-based systemic work, ways of working are becoming more collaborative, dedicated capacity is increasing beyond Sport England investment, and additional investment is being leveraged (**see Section 1**).

2. Increasing maturity shows that place-based systemic working is becoming more established. Across the 41 Place Partnerships participating in both the 2024 and 2025 System Maturity Assessments, all nine conditions increased in maturity, moving on average from *emerging* to *establishing*, though not yet *embedded*. Cross-place analysis has identified three Conditions which, as they become more established, are contributing to reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity opportunities (**see Section 2**).

3. Five strategic priorities will help place-based systemic working become more embedded. The findings identify priorities for 1. strengthening governance that enables partners to lead, work and learn together, 2. increasing community involvement in decision-making, 3. fostering cultures and practices within workplace and community settings that enable physical activity, 4. investing in dedicated local capacity, and 5. committing to longitudinal evaluation (**see Section 3**).

4. Evaluation evidence increasingly substantiates Sport England's Place Theory of Change. A rigorous evaluation process and growing longitudinal evidence base show that the conditions needed for longer-term change are strengthening in ways that correspond with, and increasingly substantiates, Sport England's Place Theory of Change (**see Section 4**).

In simple terms, this latest evaluation evidence gives confidence that Sport England's investment is contributing to more than direct delivery. It is helping Place Partnerships build the relationships, capacity, ways of working and local commitment needed for place-based systemic working to become more embedded and contribute to reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity levels over time, and at scale.

1. Change is happening in the right direction across place partnerships

In 2025, 63 Place Partnerships participated in the annual [System Maturity Assessment](#) led by the National Evaluation and Learning Partner. The table below summarises the key findings, the evidence that supports them, and why they matter.

Headline finding	What the evidence shows	Why this matters
More Places and partners are involved in place-based systemic working	Participation in the System Maturity Assessment increased from 47 Place Partnerships in 2024 to 63 in 2025. Partner participation increased from 552 to 1,725 partners, with the average number of contributors increasing from 9 to 17 partners per Place.	More Places and a broader range of partners across sectors and communities are engaging in place-based systemic working and collectively making sense of whether, what, and how change is (or is not) happening within their Place.
Maturity is increasing across all nine Conditions for Change	Analysis of the 41 Place Partnerships participating in both 2024 and 2025 shows that maturity has increased across all nine cross-cutting conditions . Moving on average from <i>emerging</i> to <i>establishing</i> , though not <i>embedded</i> yet.	Place-based systemic work is progressing in line with the direction described by the Place Theory of Change. The conditions needed for reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity levels are establishing across more Places.
Place Partnerships are at different stages of system maturity.	Cross-place analysis shows that longer-engaged Places are showing increasing maturity in ways of working, within settings to strengthen cultures and practices, and motivating collective action on structural inequalities . While newer Places are establishing the foundational conditions through understanding barriers and enablers, developing policies, structures, workforce capability, and their cycles of evaluation, learning and action .	The findings show that system maturity develops differently according to local context and how long Place Partnerships have been undertaking place-based systemic work. The cross-place analysis demonstrates that differences in maturity should be understood as a feature of place-based systemic working rather than a single expected pattern of progress.
Sport England's investment is catalysing wider commitment and resourcing to place-based systemic working	Dedicated local capacity for place-based system work increased from an average of 6.6 FTE in 2024 to 9.7 FTE in 2025 . This includes staff beyond Sport England-funded roles. Participating Places also reported leveraging additional investment, an average of £330k per year of internal investment (across 21 Places) and an average of £463k in total of external investment (across 6 Places).	The findings suggest that Sport England's investment is contributing to more than direct programme delivery. It is helping to catalyse wider organisational capacity, resourcing and commitment to place-based systemic working to strengthen collective action for reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity levels over time.

2. What increasing system maturity looks like in practice across places

Cross-place analysis by the National Evaluation and Learning Partner has identified where change is happening across places, and the pathways that lead to it. This section focuses on three Conditions for Change to demonstrate what change is happening, how increasing maturity develops in practice, and why these changes matter for reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity levels over time.

Collaborative practice within and across sectors

What the findings show. Maturity for [collaborative practice within and across sectors](#) has increased more than any other condition. 28 of the 63 Place Partnerships (44.4%) are now strongly establishing or embedded (scoring 5 or above out of 7), compared with 14 of the 47 Place Partnerships (29.8%) participating in 2024.

This Condition becomes more mature when:

- lived experience routinely informs physical activity initiatives and local decision-making;
- partners change organisational practice and adopt more place-based and systemic ways of working;
- partners routinely learn together to adapt and improve policy, practice and partnership working.

Why this matters. Collaborative practice is important because physical activity inequalities are shaped by issues that cut across organisations, sectors and policy areas. This matters because when partners work and learn together, they can develop shared purpose, use resources more effectively, surface contradictions in policy and practice, and align action around the needs and aspirations of less active communities.

Supported community-led initiatives

What the findings show. Maturity for supported [community-led initiatives](#) has increased, with 40 of the 63 Place Partnerships (63%) now establishing or embedded (scoring 4 or above out of 7), compared with 24 of the 47 Place Partnerships (51%) participating in 2024.

This Condition becomes more mature when:

- collaboration within the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) strengthens;
- VCFSE capacity, capability and involvement in local decision-making increases;
- neighbourhood arrangements provide the stability and connections for community-led initiatives to emerge, continue and evolve beyond individual projects, enabling communities to shape and lead action over time.

Why this matters. Supported community-led action develops when communities are not only involved, but are able to influence decisions and shape activity over time. This matters because when community-led action goes beyond consultation it signals a shift towards local people, community organisations and voluntary groups having greater agency in shaping priorities, responding to local need and sustaining activity.

Inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity

What the findings show. Maturity for [inclusive cultures and practices](#) that enable physical activity has increased among the 41 places that participated in CCA in both 2024 and 2025, although it remains the least mature of the three Conditions highlighted. 23 of the 63 Place Partnerships (36.5%) are now establishing or embedded (scoring 4 or above out of 7), with newer places showing progress towards becoming more established in this Condition.

This Condition becomes more mature when:

- community leadership and influence become stronger within local decision-making;
- supported community-led initiatives become established and sustained;
- organisations, workplaces and community settings increasingly embed cultures and practices that enable physical activity as part of everyday life.

Why this matters. Creating more inclusive cultures and everyday practices happens where initiatives are led by and rooted in local communities, where community leadership and influence are visible, and where learning spaces build trust and confidence between communities and local agencies. This matters because when people are more likely to be active when physical activity feels accessible, culturally relevant and connected to their identity, relationships and daily lives.

3. Five strategic priorities for enabling place-based systemic working to become more embedded

The evaluation findings identify five strategic priorities that can help place-based systemic working become more embedded across the Places where Sport England is investing through Place Partnerships.

Strategic priority	Suggested strategic action	This will help...
1. Strengthen collaborative governance and ways of working across sectors	Continue supporting governance arrangements and partnership practices that strengthen shared leadership, collaborative decision-making and collective responsibility for reducing physical activity inequalities.	This will help partners develop shared leadership, pool resources, make collective decisions and coordinate action across organisations and sectors to reduce physical activity inequalities.
2. Increase partner and community involvement in decision-making	Continue supporting approaches that strengthen the capacity, capability and influence of communities and the VCFSE to shape priorities, influence decisions and lead local action.	This will help community-led approaches become more embedded, ensuring local action is shaped by communities and is more relevant, trusted and sustainable.
3. Strengthen cultures and practices that enable physical activity within communities and workplace settings	Continue supporting ways of working that embed physical activity within the everyday cultures, policies and practices of workplaces and community settings.	This will help create more inclusive environments that enable physical activity, reduce barriers and improve opportunities to be active for everyone.
4. Continue investing in dedicated local capacity for place-based systemic working	Continue investing in the people that are leading place-based systemic working within places as conditions continue to mature.	This will help sustain capacity, resourcing and commitment across sectors and communities to take action and continue to increase the maturity of conditions within places, as they are not embedded yet.
5. Continue building the longitudinal evidence base for place-based systemic working	Continue annual System Maturity Assessments and cross-place analysis to strengthen understanding of when, where and how place-based systemic working becomes more embedded, and how it contributes to reducing physical activity inequalities and improving physical activity levels over time.	This will help Sport England continue refining its Place Theory of Change, strengthen strategic decision-making and build confidence in the long-term contribution of place-based systemic working.

4. Evaluation evidence increasingly substantiates Sport England's Place Theory of Change

Confidence in the evaluation findings continues to grow as more Place Partnerships and partners contribute to the annual System Maturity Assessment. In 2025, the findings draw on contributions from 63 Place Partnerships involving 1,725 partners, representing a substantial increase in participation, diversity of perspectives and engagement with the system maturity assessment process. This creates an increasingly valuable evidence base for understanding whether, what, and how change is happening through place-based systemic working across Place Partnerships.

The findings are strengthened by the rigorous evaluation process undertaken by the National Evaluation and Learning Partner. This includes capturing System Maturity Assessment data, moderation with Place Partnerships, conducting cross-place analysis, collective sense-making with partners, and use of wider evaluation and learning evidence. Together, this provides an increasingly valuable evidence base for understanding how change is happening through place-based systemic working across Place Partnerships.

In summary, this growing longitudinal evidence base shows that the conditions needed for longer-term change are strengthening in ways that correspond with, and provide increasing evidence for, Sport England's Place Theory of Change.