



National Evaluation & Learning Partnership



Impact Summary Report

National Evaluation and Learning Partnership: Impact Summary Report

March 2026 Edition

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A note on this edition: This is an interim impact summary report. The full impact report for the Sport England investment in place based systemic approaches (PBSA), evaluation cycle wave 3 will be available from September 2026.

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Acronyms

CCA	Configurational Comparative Analysis
IMD	Indices of Multiple Deprivation
NELP	National Evaluation and Learning Partnership
PBSA	Place-based Systemic Approach
SMM	System Maturity Matrix
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise
WSRE	Whole System Realist Evaluation
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Plain English summary

Inequalities in physical activity continue, showing that traditional, short-term programmes are not enough. Although physical activity levels have risen nationally, the gap between the most and least advantaged communities is growing. These differences are shaped by social, economic, cultural and environmental factors.

Sport England's *Uniting the Movement* strategy responds to this by investing long-term in more than 100 place-based partnerships. These partnerships focus on changing the local conditions that make it easier or harder for people to be physically active.

The partnerships are guided by a shared *Theory of Change*, which helps them understand the factors that influence people's behaviour across different places. The focus is on creating the right conditions for change, such as organisations working together, communities leading local action, and cultures that support being active.

This approach is supported by NELP's *Conceptual Model*, which helps partnerships reflect on progress without telling them exactly what to do. The *System Maturity Matrix (SMM)* builds on this model by providing a clear way to track how these conditions for change are developing over time.

Together, these tools support stronger local systems, help address structural inequalities, and enable flexible, community-led action that can lead to lasting improvements in physical activity.

The evaluation and learning approach (*Whole Systems Realist Evaluation*) used in place-based system change focuses on learning and improvement, rather than trying to prove direct cause and effect in complex systems. The emphasis is on using evidence to make ongoing improvements over time.

Learning happens through regular cycles of reflection, adaptation and action. Partners review what is happening, adjust their approaches, and respond in real time as conditions change. This helps them continuously refine their strategies.

Through this process, partners develop and test explanations for what works, for whom, and in what circumstances, based on their local context. They use methods that are appropriate to their place, such as interviews, surveys, and stories of change.

Every six months, learning from across all Places is brought together at a national level. NELP analyses patterns using Configurational Comparative Analysis (CCA) and shares the findings through collective learning sessions.

This participatory and theory-led approach ensures that learning is grounded in local experience, while also building evidence that can be shared and used to inform future policy, investment, and system change.

2. Executive Summary

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.

2.1. 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.

Headline finding	What the evidence shows	Why this matters
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.

2.2. 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.

2.3. 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.

2.4. 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.

3. Background

3.1. Rationale for a place-based systemic approach

Whilst raising physical activity levels has been a key international focus for improving public health, traditional research into interventions and strategies to reduce inactivity has yielded mixed results (Bauman et al., 2012; Kohl et al., 2012). Existing research has identified individual factors that contribute to physical inactivity. However, these approaches have yet to identify links between these correlates and determinants (Ding et al., 2019; Bauman et al., 2012). Physical activity and the factors that enable it are multifaceted, requiring consideration of the socioeconomic, cultural, environmental, and policy factors that influence individual activity levels (Pratt et al., 2012).

To add context, whilst recent Active Lives data released by Sport England has indicated that people are becoming more physically active, gaps across socioeconomic and cultural groups continue to widen (Sport England, 2025). For example, with reference to the Office for National Statistics' Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), Sport England reported that whilst least deprived places (IMD 8-10) have shown increases in activity levels by 2.9% over the last eight years, activity levels in the most deprived places (IMD 1-3) have fallen by 2.4% over the same period (Sport England, 2025). This is important to consider, given that those in more disadvantaged settings may be in environments less conducive to physical activity, with less freedom in their choice of physical activity (Salvo et al., 2023).

Where more traditional methods might focus on a single component that could contribute to individuals being physically active, whole systems approaches (WSA) consider the interrelatedness of factors. Notably, systems that support people being more physically active require commitment and engagement across sectors (Ding et al., 2024; Milton et al., 2021), where partnerships and shared agendas can promote sustainable and healthy environments (Salvo et al., 2021) such that individuals across places are able to be more physically active. WSA are therefore more likely to facilitate long-term sustainable change (Ding et al., 2024; Salvo et al., 2021).

Adoption of place-based approaches in related fields

Place-based systemic approaches (PBSAs), whilst new in name, are not new as ways of addressing public health and physical activity challenges. In 1986, the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed Healthy Cities, which aimed to develop health-supportive environments and infrastructures, targeting and challenging political and socioeconomic norms and practices (WHO, 2020). The Healthy Cities approach has also been used to inform more recent WHO strategies, such as the Urban Governance for Health and Wellbeing (UGHW) (WHO, 2025). Another early example of PBSAs is Transition Towns, piloted in 2006 in Totnes, which targeted climate and the environment by empowering local communities to become more self-sufficient and less dependent on high-carbon systems (Richardson et al., 2012).

Post-COVID, a rapid expansion of policy approaches using PBSAs has been apparent, with an increasing focus on systems, places, communities, and neighbourhoods. Several PBSAs

have been developed around public health, such as Shaping Places for Healthier Lives (SPHL), which focuses on cross-sector partnerships to facilitate local systems change, targeting policy areas including food security, mental health and antisocial behaviour (ref). The development of the 2025 Neighbourhood Health initiative, a partnership of the NHS, local government, and social care partners, is also a recent example of PBSA in public health policy (NHS England, 2026). The pioneering PBSA work led by Sport England has also facilitated the development of PBSAs targeting physical activity, providing key resources, commitment and ambition to drive change.

Where these PBSAs exist, there are further opportunities for more aligned work. Investments in places, whether through Sport England funding or broader place-based initiatives, are paving the way to strengthen approaches to tackling the root causes and structural inequalities of physical inactivity. Funding from Sport England to support PBSAs enables the development of community capacity and empowers community leadership and decision-making, which may also have a knock-on effect of facilitating these wider PBSAs beyond physical activity and public health. Notably, these tend to target root causes of systemic inequalities, including deprivation, place environments and infrastructure, which may lead to cumulative impacts on public health and physical activity.

3.2. Sport England's approach

Sport England's *Uniting the Movement* strategy has been operationalised through sustained investment in over 100 geographically bounded, place-based systemic partnerships. These are locally directed, whole-system interventions, and each respond to the unique set of characteristics that hold inequalities in physical activity in place. This is not a traditional participation strategy, but a systems-change agenda aimed at reshaping environments, relationships, power, and decision-making so that physical activity becomes easier and more equitable over the long term.

3.3. Understanding the theory of change

Investment by Sport England, and other partners, in a PBSA to tackling physical inactivity is hoped to result in long-term population-level changes, namely: increased activity, decreased inactivity, narrowing inequality, and positive experiences for children and young people. Whilst these may be the goals, the complex nature of the systems of influences on these goals means that attributing changes in these outcomes to the investment or the work of the actors within PBSAs is not possible.

Drawing on existing literature, working with Place Partnerships, and using the data collected and shared between 2021 and 2025, NELP has developed an overarching conceptual framework, to enable us to understand how the intended population-level changes might be achieved. This includes a Theory of Change, a conceptual model (described in next section) and a system maturity matrix, which helps us to measure the different elements of the conceptual model. The Theory of Change (Figure 1) illustrates, at a high level, how change may come about and what might be useful to evaluate and learn about as this unfolds.

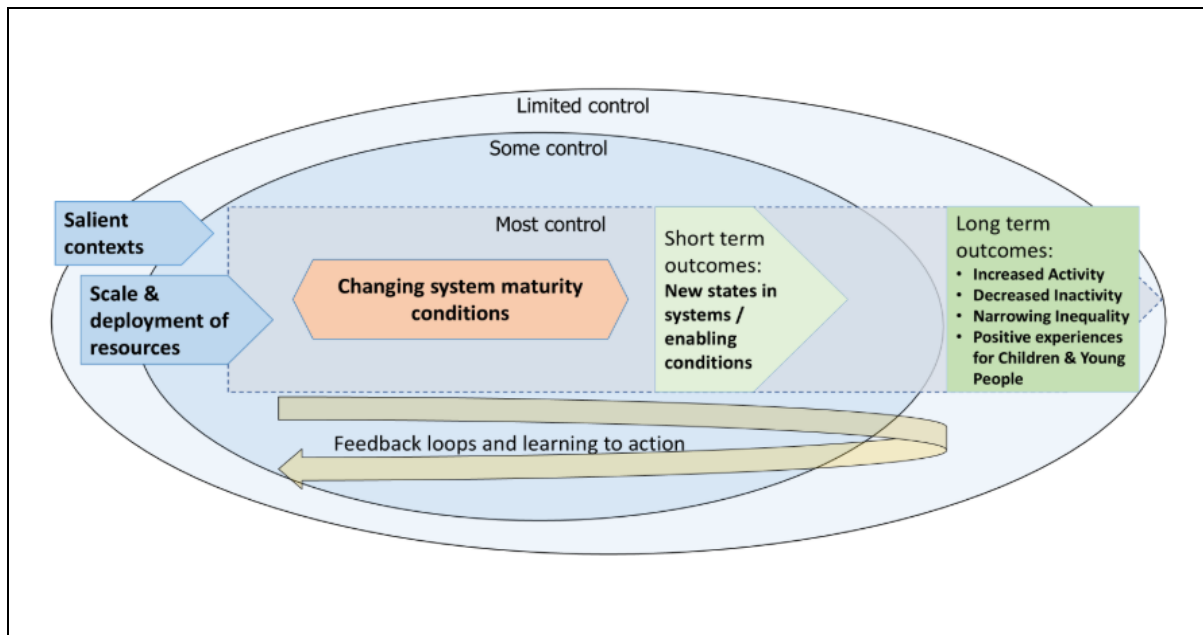


Figure 1. Theory of Change in PBSA

The outside oval represents the context that evidence tells us affects outcomes, but over which we have little control. For example, the political, economic, and sociodemographic context, the social situations affecting local communities, and people’s personal history of physical activity. The inside oval represents the context we may be able to influence with our actions and interventions, over which we may have some control, whilst recognising that our ability to act and the way actions lead to change are subject to other influences. For example, the infrastructure in Place for active travel, the range of opportunities for people to be physically active, or the perceived safety of the local green and blue spaces.

Within the inside oval, the rectangle represents the active context, which is the area we have the most (though not complete) control over, where interventions take place. This rectangle recognises the external inputs (resources, funding, capacity) that are put into the active context, as well as the actions and interventions that Place partnerships are responsible for, such as building capacity within the community or distributing leadership across sectors. These are intended to lead to short-term outcomes such as system change for physical activity (this will be described in greater detail below).

Through achieving the short-term outcomes, for example, strengthened support for a place-based systemic approach, and stronger alliances across sectors and layers of society (grassroots to policymakers/elected officials), this work could plausibly lead to the creation of enabling conditions in which all people can choose to be active in ways that they value. This, in turn, could contribute to the long-term outcomes of increased activity, decreased inactivity, narrowed inequalities, and positive experiences for children and young people.

The Theory of Change implicitly recognises that there are long causal chains between actions now and long-term outcomes and that some degree of uncertainty should be accepted regarding the extent to which these actions lead to the outcomes. A more appropriate approach is to build confidence that actions plausibly contributed to change. It also recognises that there are multiple feedback loops that may reinforce or inhibit changes,

most notably, changes or lack of change in short-term outcomes may positively or negatively impact our actions and interventions.

3.4. What is important in place-based systemic working

The Conceptual Model (Figure 2) identifies key conditions for change in PBSAs and serves as a tool for reflection and dialogue, allowing partners to situate their distinctive mix of activities, rather than representing a rigid blueprint for delivery. It helps partners to refine strategies, learn from each other, and contribute to a growing evidence base on how to reduce physical activity inequalities. As highlighted above, the focus is on achieving change by working differently with partners and residents to create the conditions for more people to be active. This differs from other frameworks that have previously focused on *where*, within social structure, to act. Short summaries of these conditions are provided in Appendix 1, and the full descriptors are available on the [Evaluating Complexity website](#).

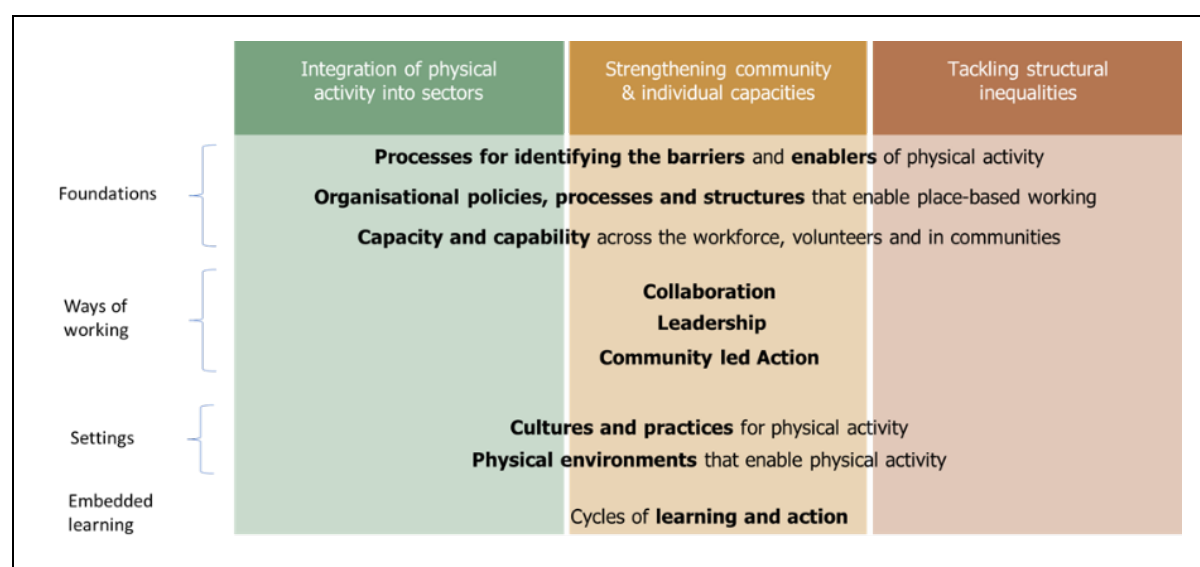


Figure 2. Conceptual model illuminating the important conditions for change in PBSA

Understanding the conceptual model

The model highlights three core areas of action:

- **Integrating physical activity across sectors** refers to promoting physical activity in policy and practice beyond traditional sport and leisure providers, for example, across health, education, and social services.
- **Strengthening community and individual capacities** involves enhancing community assets, including physical, financial, social, and personal resources, to support local people in being physically active.
- **Tackling structural inequalities** refers to differences in power, resources and opportunities related to socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions that create social gradients, with more disadvantaged groups more likely to be inactive.

The model shows the nine cross-cutting conditions applied across the three areas of action. This signifies that they are broadly applicable across all areas, but that how they manifest in each area of action differs.

Foundations: The first three conditions are foundations. Increasingly, we are identifying that where these foundations are in place, other conditions are more mature (see section 5 for an account of this evidence). The foundations are: processes for identifying the barriers and enablers of physical activity, organisational policies processes, and structures that enable place-based working and capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities.

Ways of working: The second grouping of conditions is ways of working. These refer to relational dynamics across places. These are collaboration, leadership, and community-led action. The data shows that Place Partnerships frequently highlight these conditions as important aspects of their work to tackle physical activity inequalities.

Settings: The third grouping of conditions is settings. This specifically recognises cultures for physical activity and built and natural environments for physical activity. These are important contexts for physical activity in any Place, and are potentially modifiable, although this may take time.

Embedded learning: The final condition is cycles of Learning and Action. This recognises that the ability of the Place Partnerships to learn and adapt is, in and of itself, a condition for enabling action to tackle physical activity inequalities.

There are many resources on our website, www.evaluatingcomplexity.org.uk, to support understanding of the Conceptual Model, including videos, one-page essence documents, and webinars explaining the conditions. We have also developed a System Maturity Matrix based on the conceptual model, which provides a way of gauging how the conditions may change over time.

Our theoretical understanding is that as conditions mature, more people will be physically active in ways that they value. We do not know which of the conditions, or indeed what other factors, may contribute most to this change, if change occurs. We recognise that different combinations of these conditions and the broader context may work to create change in some circumstances, but not in others. Section 3 sets out how we will evaluate this.

4. Methods and rationale

4.1. Overview of the evaluation method

Evaluation in PBSAs serves as a tool for learning, adaptation, and strategic decision-making rather than simply measuring success or failure. It can be used to uncover how and why change occurs by examining the interactions between interventions and their unique contexts. Rather than relying on fixed outcome measures, evaluation in this approach is

dynamic and iterative, allowing stakeholders to refine their understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions. By integrating diverse perspectives, evaluation supports the development of shared knowledge, enabling more informed and responsive action. Its role is to facilitate continuous improvement, ensuring that efforts to reduce physical activity inequalities are grounded in evidence and adapted to the evolving needs of communities. Place Partnerships should be accountable to their partners, including Sport England, for adopting a learning-to-action cycle that provides ever more sophisticated evidence-based approaches, whilst accepting uncertainty and acknowledging that not everything is within their control.

The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) has developed a Whole Systems Realist Evaluation (WSRE) approach with Place Partnerships to understand how interventions interact with their contexts, enabling learning and adaptation. By integrating complexity and systems thinking, social learning theory and realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Westhorp, 2013) and whole systems action research (Burns and Worsley, 2015), WSRE can help to identify social drivers of physical activity inequalities and inform evidence-based action.

Below, we outline the core methods and evaluation approaches to facilitate effective evaluation and learning in PBSA. Explanatory thinking is at the heart of this approach, whereby learning is achieved by developing and refining realist explanatory accounts that explore how and why change occurs. Figure 3 offers a working overview of this whole systems evaluation approach for understanding change in physical activity initiatives, as applied by NELP and local Place Partnerships. The following text then explains the diagram.

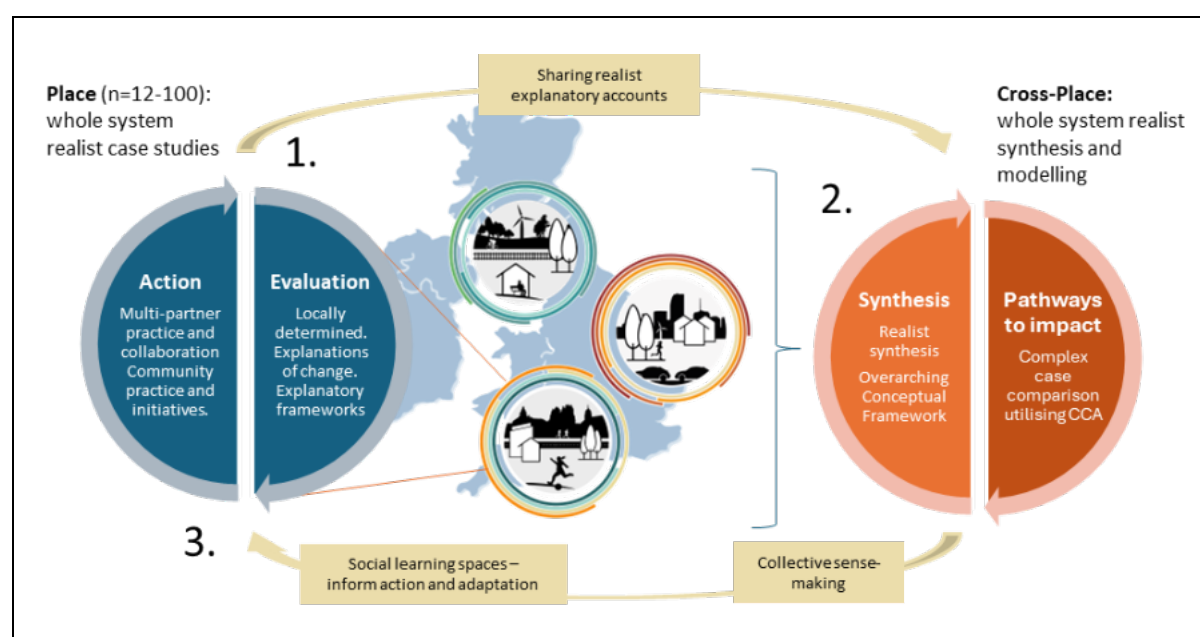


Figure 3. Place Evaluation and Learning Approach

This model illustrates how locally led action in diverse English localities is paired with embedded realist evaluation to understand how, why, for whom, and under what conditions change occurs. Locally generated data – from interviews and observations to participatory methods and social network analysis – feeds into place-level and cross-place realist synthesis, identifying shared areas of action and nine cross-cutting conditions that shape

system change. These insights support configurational comparative analysis to explore multiple pathways to impact. Throughout, social learning spaces enable collective sense-making and adaptation. The model foregrounds tackling inequalities by embracing local specificity while building transferable, practice-informed evidence for future policy and investment.

4.1.1 Locally determined evaluation, supported with explanatory accounts of change

This iterative approach enables places to first identify and create explanatory assumptions and beliefs surrounding their work (see point 1 of Figure 3). Each Place develops explanatory accounts comprising detailed narratives that describe how specific actions lead to change, considering social, psychological, and structural influences.

Secondly, places are then able to choose specific evaluation methods (e.g. Ripple Effects Mapping, interviews, surveys and stories of change) to assess and explore these accounts, which informs refinements to support learning and action. These accounts provide a structured way to test assumptions, gather insights from multiple perspectives, and adapt strategies accordingly.

4.1.2 Cross-case synthesis and modelling pathways to impact

At the national level, NELP collects and synthesises these local evaluations every six months through reporting submissions (see point 2 of Figure 3). NELP performs cross-place analysis using Configurational Comparative Analysis (CCA) to identify common patterns, pathways to impact, and broader system-wide insights. These findings are then shared back with Places through collective sense-making sessions to ensure resonance and gather data to explain the broader patterns.

The pathways to impact are discussed further in section 5 of this report.

4.1.3 Social Learning and Action Research

Learning is embedded in cycles of evaluation, reflection, and action, recognising that both interventions and their contexts evolve. Social learning spaces, whether facilitated discussions, peer reflections, or structured inquiries, enable stakeholders to share insights and adapt approaches (see point 3 of Figure 3). In these spaces, data is collected, analysed, and presented in accessible formats (reports, infographics, videos) to support decision-making. In essence, by prioritising learning as an ongoing process rather than a static outcome, WSRE strengthens place-based efforts to reduce physical activity inequalities through adaptive, evidence-informed decision-making.

4.1.4 Why evaluation and learning in this way is appropriate

NELP places great value in a participatory approach with Place Partnerships to collaboratively generate learning. The emphasis on building and refining explanatory accounts is to accumulate local and national understanding of the circumstances in which

things tend to change, or not, to provide ongoing decision support. Approaching learning in this participatory way is appropriate as it not only enables us to generate insights but also facilitates structured reflection, helping Place Partners refine their strategies in real time. This participatory approach is critical in place-based evaluation, where local actors hold valuable implicit knowledge that may not have been visible to those designing or funding an intervention at the outset.

4.1.5 Longer-term impacts

The ultimate purpose of this work is to bring about sustained positive changes in the levels, patterns and experiences of physical activity, to reduce inequalities. However, we face some limitations, first in measuring the extent of any change, and then in attributing cause and effect. The Active Lives survey provides our best available measure of physical activity levels in places across England, but there are limitations to this data. Firstly, the sample size means that while it provides a reliable measure of physical activity levels across the country and at Local Authority level, it is not large enough to yield credible data on patterns within Places, such as inequalities across demographic groups or neighbourhoods. Even at the Local Authority level, there is a margin of error, which means we cannot distinguish small changes in physical activity levels from random fluctuations in the data. There is also a time-lag between collection and publication, meaning changes can only be observed retrospectively, which limits the value of such data in informing agile and adaptive 'test and learn' approaches.

To provide an indicator of the programme's long-term impacts, these and other data sources, such as the Moving Communities platform, could be combined and weighted according to locally determined stakeholder priorities to produce a composite measure or index. We have suggested that developing a weighted composite measure may be a developmental priority over the next three years, albeit with some concerns about the broad applicability of this approach, given what we know now about local data and evaluation capacity across many of the Place Partnerships.

4.2. Data sources included in this report

Data sources included in this edition of the interim impact summary include:

- System maturity matrix submissions, moderation meeting field notes, sense-making sessions: Autumn 2024 (cases=47)
- System maturity matrix submissions, moderation meeting field notes, sense-making sessions: Autumn 2025 (cases=63)
- Evaluation and Learning Submissions, Spring 2025 (n=35)
- Examples of emerging best practice, Spring 2025 (n=33)

5.Portfolio trends

This section summarises the key trends across the Place investment (Deepening and Expansion only). It highlights what is happening across the Place Investment and whether progress in operationalising a PBSA is being made or not.

Summary headlines and key messages

- More places are doing place-based systemic work to tackle physical activity inequalities (92 Place Partnerships covering 111 local authority areas at the end of March 2026).
- Those taking part in our cross-place national evaluation report an increased number of partner organisations (an average of 12 partners per place).
- The diversity of organisations involved has broadened and includes Local Authorities, VCFSEs, schools, the NHS, business and commercial partners, housing and children's services.
- Leveraging match-funding, significant funds, in the millions.
 - From internal place partners (21 places average £330k per year) and external place partners (6 places average £463k)¹.
- There is a shift in ways of working from competitive to collaborative – from delivery only to relational, challenging, innovative work to unlearn and rewrite the processes and practices that have held this problem of inactivity in place.
- Place-based systemic approaches are maturing. Year on year we are seeing the conditions for change mature.

5.1.Growth in place-based systemic approaches

5.1.1 Increase in volume

There is an increase in the number of Place Partnerships involved in PBSAs driven by the roll out of Sport England's Place Investment. This is reflected in an increase in those participating in the system maturity assessment year by year.

Number of Places taking part in the maturity assessment (2023-2025)

Year	2023	2024	2025
Places participating in maturity assessment	34	47	63

Note: A Place (or case) is defined as a Place Partnership operating within a Local Authority boundary.

1. Data was not provided for all participating Places

5.1.2 Increase and diversification in contributing organisations

The number of Places completing the system maturity assessment collaboratively has increased from 83% in 2024 to 93% in 2025. The total number of individual representatives of local organisations reported to have contributed to system maturity assessments has increased from 552 in 2024 to 1725 in 2025, with the median number per Place increasing from 9 to 17 individual contributors. This may be an indication of increasing engagement in the PBSA work more broadly.

When we look at the diversity of organisations participating, we find the average (mean) number of sectors represented² has increased from 3.4 (of ten listed) in 2024 to 5.8 (of 13 listed) between 2024 and 2025. While Local Authority Partners, in addition to Active Partnerships and the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Sector organisations, contribute most frequently to maturity assessments, across Places there is deeper representation from community members, schools, NHS/Clinical Commissioning, Leisure Trust, business and commercial partners, housing, and wider Children and Young People services.

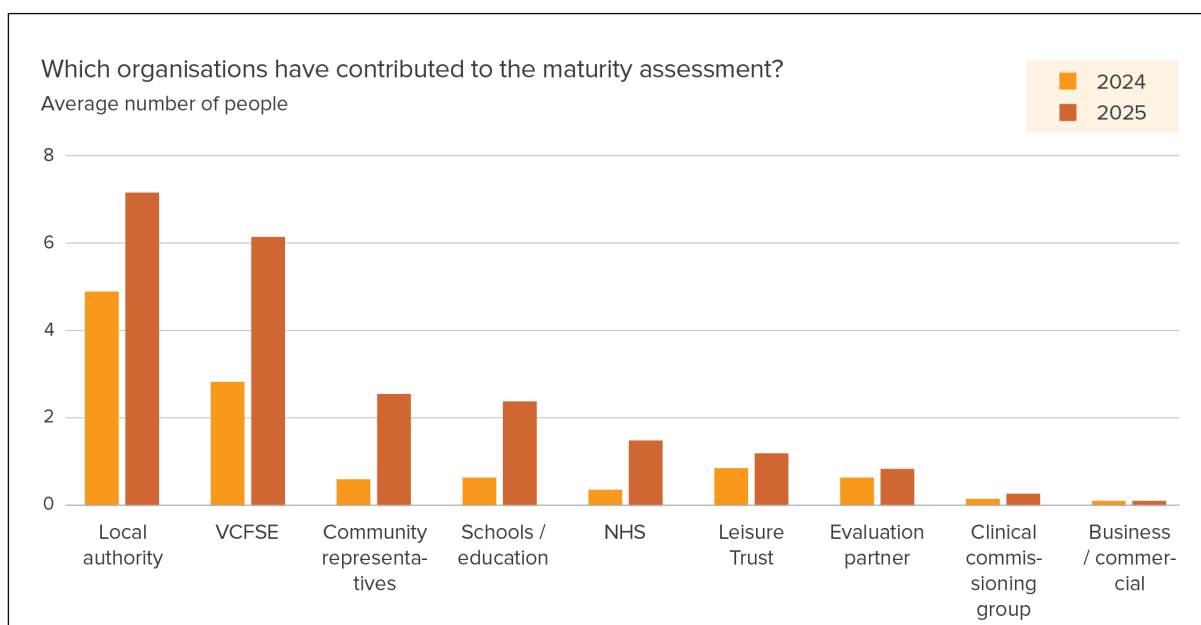


Figure 4. Organisations that contributed to the maturity assessment

5.2. Workforce, capacity, governance and decision making for place-based systemic approaches

Collaborative decision-making on funding has increased from 45% of Places in 2024 to 62% in 2025, returning to a level similar to that seen in 2023, when the sample consisted mostly of Deepening Place Partners (with relatively well-established Partnerships). This is indicative of deepening governance processes in new Place Partnerships.

2. The terms sectors is used here to include both large organisations such as LA, NHS as well as sectors such as VCFSE, housing or leisure.

Approach to funding decisions within Place Partnerships (% collaborative)

Year	2023	2024	2025
% collaborative processes	62%	45%	62%

VCFSE organisations are increasingly consulted in decision-making but are directly involved in making decisions in fewer than 3 in 10 Places.

Are any VCFSE organisations and/or people with lived experience involved in funding decision-making? (full cohorts)

	2024	2025
No involvement in decision-making	13%	3%
Consulted in decision-making	51%	68%
Joint / collaborative decision maker / delegated	36%	29%

Given the potential role of VCFSE organisations in driving progress in certain contexts, this may be an area to improve in the coming years. (See section 5.2 on community-led action for more details).

This also remains true for the smaller longitudinal cohort with data from both years 2 and 3 (n=41). The table below shows an increase in Places that consult VCFSE organisations in decision-making, but the share of Places directly involving them remains the same.

Are any VCFSE organisations and/or people with lived experience involved in funding decision-making? (Longitudinal cohort)

	2024	2025
No involvement in decision-making	15%	2%
Consulted in decision-making	49%	61%
Joint / collaborative decision maker / delegated	37%	37%

The number of full-time (or equivalent) individuals specifically working on “place-based approaches to tackle physical activity inequalities”, within the place, as opposed to working in sport or physical activity per se, has risen, with an average of 10 people (9.7 in 2025) per place compared to less than 7 people previously (6.6 in 2024)³. This includes people who are not directly employed because of Sport England funding. The biggest increase is shown in Local Authorities, perhaps suggesting a cultural and structural shift to this way of working more generally, as described in the next sections.

3. Sample cases in 2024 =42 and in 2025 =60. Outlier cases have been removed.

5.3. Leveraged investment

The 2025 System Maturity survey asked Place respondents whether, and to what extent, their additional internal and external funding over the last 5 years was conditional or dependent on receiving funding from Sport England (e.g. through match-funding requirements). Based on indicative responses from a subset of places, the Sport England place support leveraged the following additional investment.

Indicative leveraged investment dependent on Sport England award (last 5 years)		
	Internal to place	External to place
Total indicative amount (over last 5 years)	£6.94m	£2.78m
Places leveraging investment	21	6
Average per place	£330k	£463k

Note: these amounts may be higher, as some respondents did not have the information ready in the 2025 survey round.

5.4. Contribution modelling estimate of people impacted through Sport England's place investment

Background: As part of another Sport England contract, our consortium partner, Substance, worked with Sport England and partners, including NELP, to explore ways of estimating Sport England's potential contribution to its strategy, *Uniting the Movement*. The contribution estimates are divided across Sport England's four main investment areas, one of which is Place. The main unit of analysis is the estimated number of people positively impacted by Sport England's contribution. The wording of "positively impacted" assumes a broader view of Sport England's contribution, acknowledging that most investment evaluations were not designed to collect specific data on increases in activity levels.

Limitations: This caveat also applies to the Place investment. Its data capture methods do not – and were not expected to – directly capture individual-level impacts in the shorter-term. Instead, the focus is on understanding how longer-term systemic and place-based approaches might lead to sustainable changes in local systems that may, over time, impact deep-seated inequalities related to physical activity.

As a result, modelling Sport England's and the Place investments' potential contribution to positive impacts on people involves an important abstract assumption or conceptual shift from system-level information captured through the SMM to an approximation of the number of people positively impacted. This assumes that the extent to which funded places mature across all the elements crucial for systemic change – captured by the SMM conditions – reflects Places' potential to positively impact the people living in these places.

Indicative results: The contribution modelling work involved multiple steps of summarising, weighting and discounting data on NELP's SMM Year 2 (2024) and places'

estimated populations. Indicative results suggest that Sport England's investment in 40 places included in this estimation may have positively impacted around 970,000 people.

This number is tentative and a work in progress. In addition to the conceptual caveat above – that there is no direct measurement of individual-level impacts, as the data speak to systemic changes – there are further data recommendations and limitations that SE and partners aim to address over the course of this year.

5.5. Co-occurrence of Place-Based Systemic Approaches for other aligned policy initiatives

We have examined the extent to which other PBSAs are being implemented in the Places (Local Authority areas) alongside Sport England's investments in these approaches. Most places reported a limited adoption in certain fields (N=43), but for some, this is widespread (N=18). Only two places report that such approaches are solely adopted in the field of physical activity inequalities.

How widely are place-based systemic approaches being adopted in policies and practice within the Place, beyond the Physical Activity field?

Solely in relation to physical activity inequalities	2 (3%)
Some adoption of PBSA in particular fields/work areas	43 (68%)
Widespread adoption of PBSA to address complex issues within the Place (e.g. inequalities, poverty, population health & wellbeing, climate change etc.)	18 (29%)

Note: In the following summary, places with some (43) and no (2) adoption of PBSA approaches were grouped together as 'limited'.

It is worth noting that the widespread adoption of PBSA beyond physical activity was more commonly recognised by 'Deepening' Place Partnerships than by Expansion⁴ Places. Places with 'widespread' adoption of PBSA (and 'Deepening' Place Partnerships) also showed, on average, higher maturity on the conditions of the System Maturity Matrix.

PBSA adoption beyond physical activity, investment type, and total average maturity (2025)

PBSA adoption beyond PA	Investment type (column %)		Total average SSM score	
	Place partnership	Expansion place	Mean	Median
Limited (n=45)	62%	79%	3.41	3.42
Widespread (n=18)	38%	21%	4.16	3.98

4. For this current analysis, we have grouped former Expansion and Transition places together under this label. Note that data points relating to Transition Places frequently look more similar to Deepening Places.

5.6. System maturity (2025)

5.6.1 Changes in system maturity

Average maturity of system conditions, across all cases of PBSAs, ranges from 'emerging' to 'establishing' (3-4 on the 7-point scale), rather than 'embedded' (the more mature end of the scale) (Figure 5). The median score is 3 (emerging) for 13 of the 26 sub-conditions and 4 (establishing) for the remaining 13.

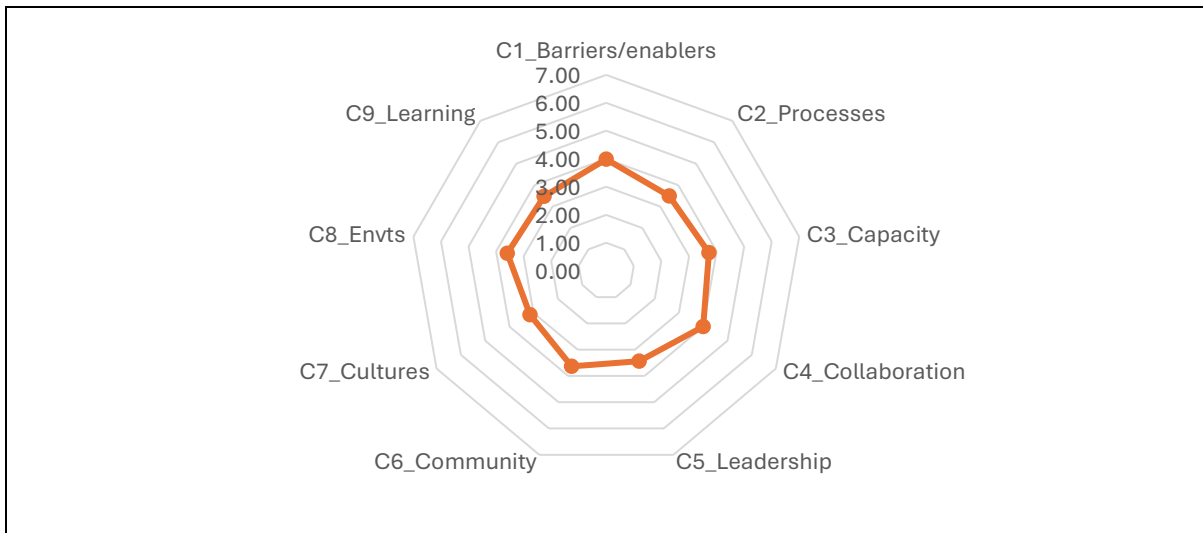


Figure 5. Spider web chart of average SSM scores per condition, 2025

Year on year, however, local place conditions for enabling physical activity and narrowing inequalities have matured. Looking at all PBSA Places with data for both 2024 and 2025 (n=41), these conditions are 'establishing' rather than 'emerging' (less mature) or 'embedded' (more mature).

On average, all 9 conditions have matured for the 41 places with Y2 and Y3 data. Particularly strong average change was visible for:

- Organisational policies, processes, and structures enable place-based working (C2)
- Capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities (C3)
- Collaboration (C4)
- Community-led action (C6)
- Cycles of learning and action (C9)

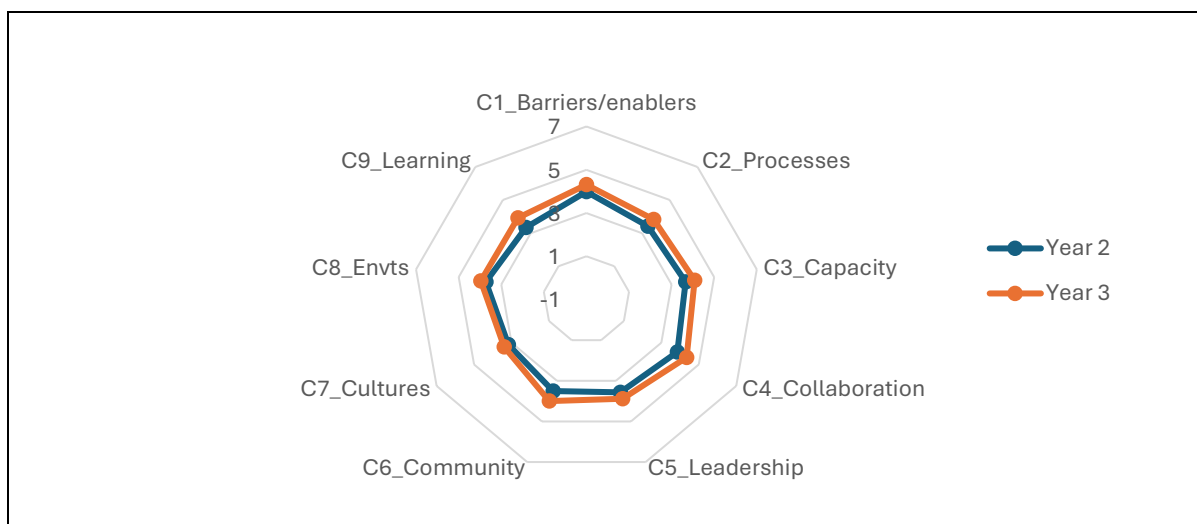


Figure 6. Average SSM scores per condition, 2024 & 2025 (longitudinal sample, n=41)

5.6.2 Change in system maturity by investment type

Sport England’s “Deepening Places” had, in 2025, a consistently higher average maturity across conditions than “Expansion Places”. Within the longitudinal sample with 2024 and 2025 data, Deepening Places also matured, on average, as much as Expansion Places. This may indicate that these places continue to progress due to ongoing investment, which appears to support system change over time.

There were subtle differences in maturity change over time between Deepening Places and Expansion Places (including former Transition Places) across composite groups of conditions. Deepening Places matured on average slightly more strongly in ‘ways of working’, ‘settings’, and ‘collective action on inequalities’.

Expansion Places appeared to show stronger growth in maturity in ‘foundations’ and ‘embedded learning cycles’ (at least when comparing median average values). It is worth noting that the difference from Deepening Places was more pronounced when looking only at Expansion places (without places previously known as Transition).

Average absolute change in maturity between 2024 and 2025 (composite groups) *(based on the longitudinal sample with data in Y2 and Y3 (n=41)).*

SMM condition composite groups (see figure 2)	Deepening (n=25)		Expansion (n=16)	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Foundations ⁵	0.44	0.33	0.39	0.50
Ways of working ⁶	0.51	0.43	0.30	0.29
Settings ⁷	0.33	0.25	0.08	0.13
Embedded learning cycles ⁸	0.60	0.33	0.56	0.67
Collective action on inequalities ⁹	0.44	0.33	0.21	0.25

This may suggest that more recently funded places tend to make stronger progress on foundational conditions, such as processes for identifying barriers and enablers or organisational policies, processes and structures, and growing a learning culture and evaluation methods. More longstanding places, however, continued to build on their existing processes to mature in the later stages of PBSA work.

A similar picture emerges when grouping conditions into composite measures of the three 'Areas of Action' identified in the NELP conceptual model.¹⁰ In 2025, Deepening Places were, on average, more mature than Expansion Places (again, including former Transition) across all three Areas of Action. Analysis of the year 2 and 3 longitudinal sample (n=41) showed that Deepening Places also reported a higher average increase in maturity scores on sector integration and tackling structural inequalities. However, the median increase for the strengthening community and individual capacities area of action was the same for Deepening and Expansion Places (table below).

Average absolute change in maturity between 2024 and 2025 (Areas of Action)¹¹

SMM condition Areas of action	Deepening (n=25)		Expansion (n=16)	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Integration of physical activity into sectors	0.48	0.40	0.31	0.30
Strengthening community & individual capacities	0.38	0.33	0.32	0.33
Tackling structural inequalities	0.44	0.33	0.21	0.25

5. Foundations are C1-3 a&b (but not c)

6. Ways of working are C 4 a and b; 5 a, b and c; 6a and b

7. Settings are 7a and b, 8 a and b

8. 9 a, b and c "embedded learning cycles"

9. All of c, except for 5c (leadership) and not condition 9 at all.

10. See e.g. [Conceptual model overview September 2024 a36c6201d3.pdf](#)

11 Note: based on the longitudinal sample with data in Y2 and Y3 (N=41).

6. Pathways to impact and explanations of change

Selection of interim outcomes

The NELP [Theory of Change](#) identifies nine aspects of systemic ways of working (system maturity conditions) that may be important for bringing about sustainable positive change in patterns of physical activity among less active population groups (see section 2.4).

NELP, informed by discussion with Sport England senior colleagues and Place Partnerships has selected three system maturity conditions as key interim outcomes for this work:

- Collaborative practice within and across sectors (4a)
- Supported community-led initiatives (6b)
- Inclusive cultures encourage and facilitate participation in movement / physical activity (7b)

Higher maturity in these conditions may be seen as indicative of tangible and sustainable change in the structures, processes, relationships, beliefs, and power dynamics that underpin patterns of behaviour. Our rationale for how and why these conditions may be key to the delivery of long-term sustainable change in physical activity inequalities is explained below, along with our analysis of configurations found to be associated with higher maturity in these conditions. Examples of places showing embedded maturity in these conditions are provided in Appendix 2.

To support understanding of the value of investment in leadership development for PBSA we have also investigated the conditions that are associated with high or increasing maturity in strategic leadership (5a).

How we identify pathways to impact

NELP collects data from Place Partnerships in the autumn of each year, including information on the resources available and how they are used, as well as an assessment of 'maturity' of system conditions within each Place. We also collate a set of contextual measures, including demographics, place characteristics and Active Lives survey data for each Place. In 2025, 63 places participated in the CCA. CCA provides a means to compare places across these multiple measures and identify common patterns associated with intended outcomes. CCA helps us to identify patterns based on difference between cases (Places) by dividing the Places into a 'higher' and a 'lower' group for each measure (System Maturity sub-condition, resources and context indicators, e.g. maturity level, funding level or average age of the population). System maturity is measured using a descriptive rubric, scored on a scale from 1-7 to indicate maturity level (1: no change; 2-3: emerging; 4-5: establishing; 6-7: embedded).

The decision about where to set the threshold to divide Places into a 'higher' or 'lower' set for each dimension involves considerations of the spread and pattern of the data, and some

judgement about the potential implications in practice¹². We are using innovative software, [EvalC3](#), developed by one of the NELP consortium partners, Dr Rick Davies, and available under a Creative Commons license and online. This creates 'decision tree' models that show which conditions and configurations of conditions best predict an identified outcome. A decision tree is a way of presenting patterns found in the data, made of several different 'branches', each of which represents a different combination (configuration) of conditions. Outcomes may be intermediate or longer term, as described in the [theory of change](#). Based on these outputs we have selected the strongest patterns (configurations) emerging in our analysis of the data and present these as individual models, indicating the number of Places with the outcome where we found this combination.

Making sense of the configurations

As described above, we have selected specific system maturity sub-conditions as meaningful outcomes, based on our Theory of Change. We then selected several measures that may plausibly affect whether the outcome (higher maturity) is achieved. The CCA tells us which of these conditions are most predictive of the selected outcome being found – in other words, where we find the outcome, we also find these conditions, or where these conditions are not found, we tend not to find the outcome. We can assess the strength of the association using measures of accuracy, as well as the proportion of Places with the outcome that also have this configuration (coverage).

In the following sections, we present this analysis in simplified form to show which conditions are strongly associated with the outcome. This does not prove a causal relationship, and we therefore investigate the qualitative data relating to the places that fall into this configuration to understand how and why these conditions are interrelated. These findings and explanations are provisional and will be further explored through analysis of Evaluation and Learning submissions in spring 2026.

12. For example, for deprivation levels, using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, all but a few cases were well above the national average, so we chose a point that represents deprivation significantly above national average. In effect this means we are comparing places with high deprivation against those with closer to the average levels.

6.1. Collaborative practice within and across sectors

Summary headlines and key messages

- Maturity for *collaborative practice within and across sectors* (4a) has increased more than in any other condition, with 28 of the 63 Places (44.4%) now 'establishing' or 'embedded' (scoring five or above) indicating a 'strongly establishing' level of maturity, compared to 14 Places in 2024.
- Higher maturity (strongly establishing) in this condition is predicted where we find higher maturity in *lived experience informs physical activity initiatives* (6a) and *partner capacity and capability* (3a).
- Most of these Places also show high maturity in *cycles of learning and action* (9a-c) and *strategic leadership* (5a).
- Increasing maturity in this condition (found in 20 of the 41 Places participating in both years) is associated with *lived experience informing physical activity initiatives* (6a) and *partner capacity and capability* (3a), and *cycles of learning and action* (9a-c).
- **Explanation:** The progress shown in building partner capacity and capability emphasises the value of partners learning together and shared reflection spaces as a means to developing a common sense of purpose and collaboration in practice across sectors. The investment in collective capacity building activities also promotes recognition of the value of lived experience informing physical activity initiatives to ensure actions address the real needs and aspirations of less active communities.

6.1.1 Importance of collaborative practice to enabling population-level change

Collaborative practice within and across sectors (4a) is widely recognised as a fundamental requirement for achieving changes in outcomes in complex systems. Working with different organisations can help to drive innovative physical activity policy and practice and address inequalities by drawing on different skill sets and networks. By reducing duplication and pooling resources, collaborative efforts can amplify impact. Working with organisations and different departments within larger institutions can support shared problem-solving and help unravel contradictions in local settings that may inhibit physical activity or exacerbate inequalities.

How this outcome may impact physical activity – our working theory

Place Partnerships are intended to deliver positive change through increased cooperation and communication, underpinned by a recognised shared interest in improving physical activity and broader health outcomes for people in Place. This shared purpose facilitates development of mutual trust across sectors, building a collective sense of responsibility and

alignment, leading to shared decision-making and motivating partners to incorporate physical activity into wider agendas.

Where this practice is fully mature ('embedded') we would expect to find:

- Organisations work together within and across policy areas to tackle systemic barriers and/or create more comprehensive physical activity opportunities.
- A shared purpose is clearly described and widely owned across place-based partners.
- Shared decision-making is routine and equitable across partners.
- Contradictions in policy and practice are surfaced and resolved.
- Collaborative practice across and within organisations is the norm and persists beyond individual relationships.

Collaborative practice within and across sectors may enable impact on physical activity inequalities through:

- More efficient, equitable and effective use of resources and insight.
- Alignment of policy priorities addressing the obstacles caused by conflicting objectives.
- Improved clarity and coherence in communications with wider stakeholders, including local communities.
- Mutual accountability, which reinforces commitment to achieve shared objectives.

Such collaborative practice may lead to a system that is easier for individuals to navigate and engage with. As such, it creates a more supportive context in which partner organisations and communities can co-produce real change in people's day-to-day lives.

6.1.2. Change in maturity levels for collaborative practice 2024–2025

In 2025, the average score for all Places increased from 'emerging' (3.96 in 2024) to 'establishing' (4.25 in 2025), with 28 of the 63 Places now (44.4%) scoring 5 or above. Among the 41 places participating in both years, it increased more than any other condition, to 4.68. Figure 7 shows the distribution of moderated maturity levels for this condition.

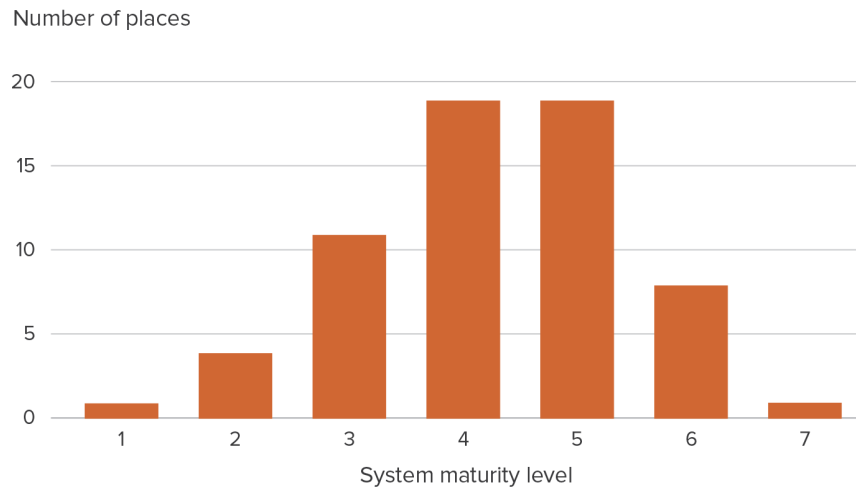


Figure 7. Collaborative practice (4a) distribution of cases, 2025

6.1.3 Configurational analysis and interpretation for collaborative practice 2025

What predicts higher maturity?

When we look at the 2025 data (63 Places), we find that higher maturity in collaboration within and across sectors, (defined as scoring 5+) is strongly associated with higher maturity in *lived experience informs physical activity initiatives* (6a), present in 26 of the 28 Places with the outcome. This is combined with *partner capacity and capability* (3a) and *cycles of learning and action* (9a-c) in 22 of these 28 Places. More mature *strategic leadership* is also present in most (19) of these Places, combined with *data capture* (1a) in 16 of these.

While some places achieve the outcome without these conditions, there are no strong patterns observed among them.

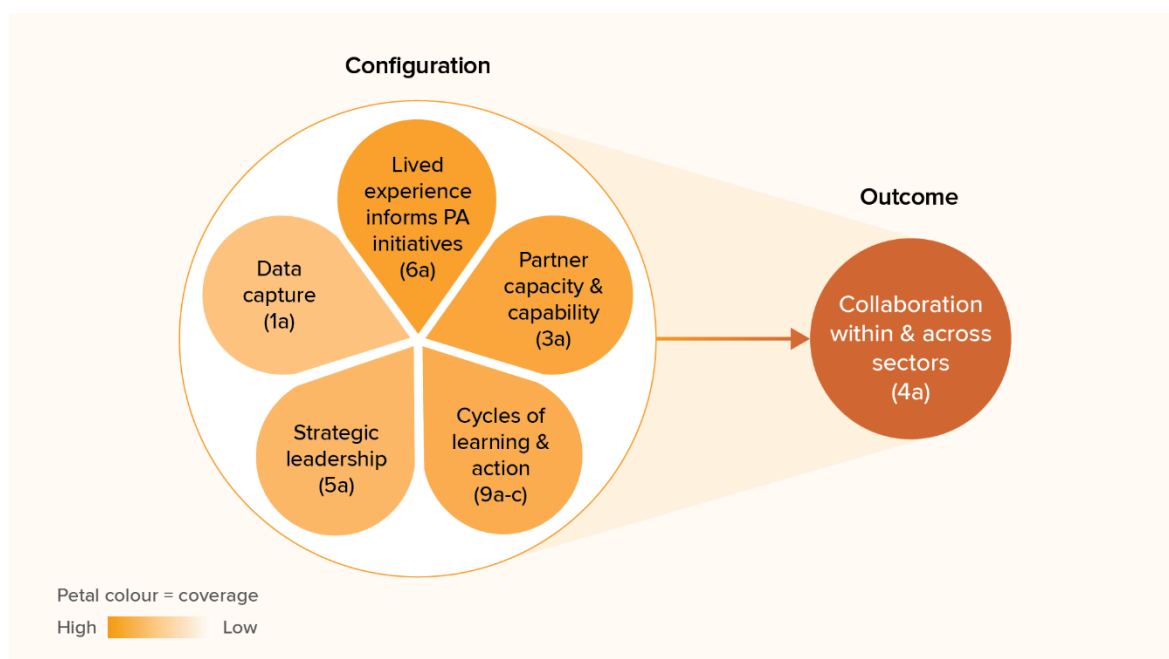


Figure 8. Collaboration within and across sectors (4a): Maturity 2025, 16 Places

What predicts a change in maturity?

When we look at positive change in maturity of collaborative practice as an outcome, we find it in 20 of the 41 Places that participated in 2024 and 2025, and it shows a similar pattern to that in the single-year 2025 data. The strongest single predictor of positive change in *collaboration within and across sectors* is *lived experience informs physical activity initiatives* (6a), present in 16 of the 20 Places, and in most of these (11 Places) it occurs with both *partner capacity and capability* (3a) and *cycles of learning and action* (9a-c). High maturity in *data capture* (1a) is also present in 9 of these Places.

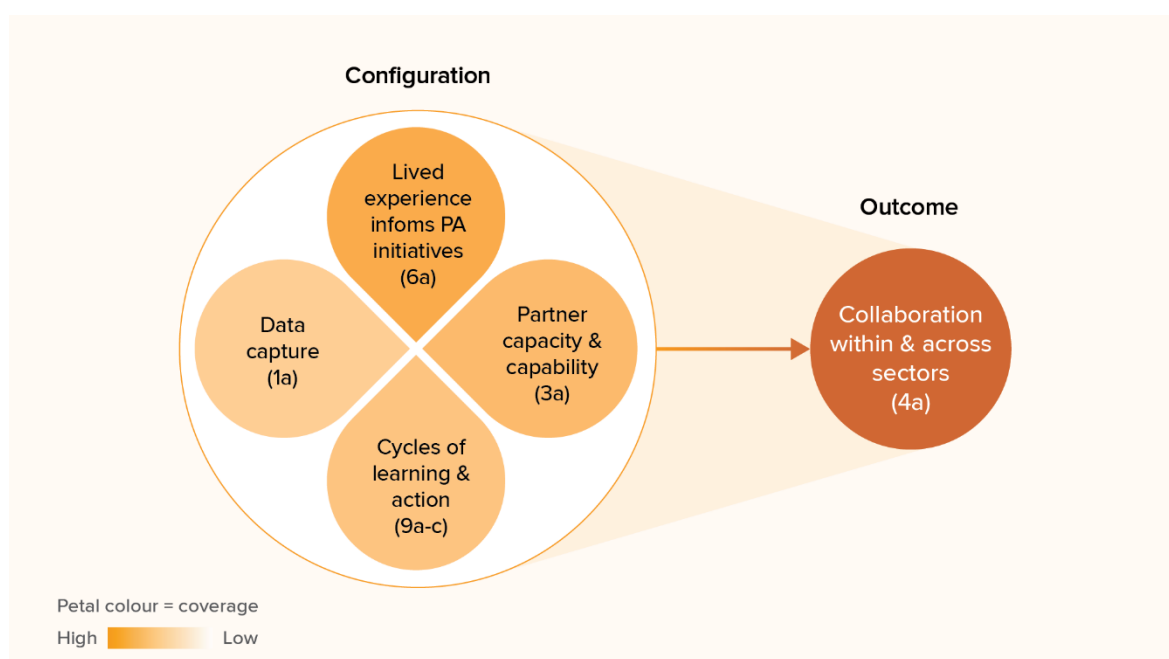


Figure 9. Collaboration within and across sectors (4a) change in maturity 2024-5: 9 Places

Case-based interpretation

When we look at the qualitative data (including moderation meetings and follow-up data) for the 11 Places showing increased maturity across *lived experience informs PA* (6a), *partner capacity & capability* (3a) and *cycles of learning and action* (9(a-c)), we can identify a common pattern in their responses.

The progress shown in building *partner capacity & capability* emphasises the value of shared learning and reflection spaces as a means of developing shared purpose and collaboration in practice. This understanding also includes recognition of the value of collaborative working with communities to ensure actions address real needs and aspirations.

Case Study: Pendle

In Pendle the progress in building capacity (3a) is driven through shared learning and reflection spaces (9a-c), helping to develop shared purpose and collaboration in practice. This understanding also recognises the value of collaborative working with communities to ensure actions address real needs and aspirations (6a). Recent developments have seen an increase in time dedicated to Active Practice Lead (1 day/week to 2.5 days/week), facilitating the convening of Physical Activity Clinical Champions, design PLT and co-production of community offers. Their capacity for place-based working (3a) has also increased through bridges made across sectors and an influx of staff being introduced to this way of working.

Throughout their work, meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in developing sector led physical activity initiatives is apparent (6a). Pendle partners have been bringing residents' lived experience to the fore of design and system practice. Shared ambition workshops enabled the co-delivery and development of around 30 community events, surfacing local priorities and challenges. All this was underpinned by more effective capture and use of data and insight (1a), identifying the need for translated materials and accessibility information for parks. This highlighted existing gaps where previously data had been collected but were not reaching all groups or decision-makers. The increasing maturity is evident through the recognition of these gaps and the beginnings of sharing insights across wider groups of stakeholders.

Pendle also describe how through the adoption of new ideas and reflections cycles have facilitated shifts in narratives from "deliver the plan" to relationship-first adaptation, using reflective practice to highlight blockers, in order to learn and change. An adopted cycle of learning to action (9a) through a culture of "Probe/Sense/Respond" is a default culture within place, reframing uncertainty from risk to fuel for learning. The TaAF organisation identified this reflection and social learning as a top enabler of systems change.

This example suggests that developing capacity in terms of dedicated staff alongside capability, building skills and understanding for PBSA can facilitate and motivate change in ways of working, by creating spaces for reflection and learning in which collaboration is cultivated. This understanding also means centring communities and peoples' lived experience in shaping action on PA inequalities.

Sense-making responses

Place representatives interpreted this model as demonstrating how capacity and capability building enables collaboration by building skills, motivation and relationships. This also

increases recognition of the central need to understand lived experience, and that, in order to understand lived experience, we need to further build capacity and collaboration with VCFSE, suggesting a two-way dynamic between capacity and co-productive ways of working.

Intentional cycles of learning and action enable the development of trust through creating safe spaces, enabling honesty, openness and shared vulnerability. Growing trust and a focus on 'real people' help build connections and collaboration.

6.2. Supported community-led initiatives

Summary headlines and key messages

- Maturity for *supported community-led initiatives* (6b), is increasing, with 40 of the 63 Places (63%) now 'establishing' or 'embedded' scoring 4 or above, compared to 24 of 47 Places (51%) in 2024. For places participating in both years, the average score has increased by 0.49 to 4.22.
- Higher maturity (4+) in this condition is predicted by a combination (configuration) of:
 - VCFSE capacity and capability (3b)
 - community perspectives on physical activity (1b)
 - inclusive communications practices (2b)
 - processes that facilitate place-based systemic approaches (2a)
 - community voice and influence (5c)
- Increasing maturity in this condition (found in 22 of the 41 Places participating in both years) is associated with:
 - stronger collaboration within the VCFSE sector (4b), and/or
 - growth in VCFSE capacity and capability (3b) or VCFSE involvement in decision-making, and/or
 - processes that facilitate place-based systemic approaches (2a) where Sport England funding makes up more than 50% of the total available for this work, and/or
 - community voice and influence (5c), (where there is no change in collaboration with the community sector or VCFSE capacity and capability (3b).
- **Explanation:** Supported community-led action develops when communities are not only involved but are able to influence decisions and shape activity over time. It grows as local people's experiences inform planning, as voluntary and community organisations strengthen their capacity, and as organisations work in ways that enable place-based systemic approaches rather than constrain them.

Implications for practice

- Make visible the role of community leadership, relational working, and locally shaped activity.
- Maintain continuity through trusted organisations, brokerage roles, and flexible working arrangements, enabling local leadership to shape action even where capacity is uneven.
- Frame progress in terms of strengthening local capability and influence rather than short-term delivery to support more coherent system narratives and reduce pressure to demonstrate impact solely through programme outputs.

6.2.1 Importance of community-led initiatives to enabling population level change

Supported community-led action refers to the extent to which communities are enabled to initiate, shape, and sustain physical activity-related action and initiatives over time, with appropriate and ongoing support from local systems. This condition goes beyond participation, consultation, or co-delivery, and instead captures whether communities can exercise agency, influence priorities, and lead action in ways that reflect local context, lived experience, and need. Policy and research evidence consistently highlights that persistent inequalities in physical activity are unlikely to be reduced through short-term, intervention-led approaches alone (Marmot et al., 2020; Rutter et al., 2017). Place-based and systems-oriented approaches instead emphasise the importance of community-led capacity as a pathway to longer-term change, particularly in contexts shaped by structural disadvantage and cumulative barriers (Buck et al., 2018; WHO, 2014).

Within Uniting the Movement, Sport England positions community-led action as a central route through which systems can adapt to lived experience, redistribute power, and support locally relevant responses. Crucially, policy does not assume that community-led action will emerge spontaneously. Rather, it recognises that such action requires investment, trust, institutional flexibility, and enabling leadership if it is to be sustained over time (Sport England, 2021; Sport England, 2023; Local Trust, 2022).

Efforts to address physical activity inequalities that are led by and respond to community priorities, actions, and assets are more likely to be effective. Community organisations bring the deep knowledge and motivation, rooted in lived experiences, which can enable them to engage with and respond to the needs and aspirations of their communities. They may also bring wider value by increasing the collective agency of communities to bring positive change, improving relationships and increasing trust. By supporting these activities when needed, with resources such as access to facilities, training or funding, local agencies may help extend their reach and sustainability. Working to nurture and connect these efforts can contribute to building confidence, networks, and capacity.

Where this condition is embedded, we would expect to find:

- Communities regularly work together to develop and deliver a wide range of physical activity initiatives. These are made accessible and promoted with the active involvement of people with lived experience of physical activity inequalities.
- Community-led initiatives are responsively supported by local agencies and partners when needed, without undermining the community's autonomy.
- Local people and/or community-led initiatives for physical activity build confidence and connections in communities, leading to greater innovation, investment and independence from sector-led initiatives.

How this outcome may impact on physical activity – our working theory

When individuals and organisations rooted in less active communities are appropriately supported by partners in a coordinated, systemic way, this can impact on inequalities because:

- Community-led organisations are best-placed to meaningfully engage with and respond to the wishes and needs of their communities.
- Agencies can offer responsive support to such organisations, which may involve access to resources, such as training, spaces, or funding, as well as addressing barriers, such as inflexible policies and processes.
- When local agencies empower communities to take action on what is important to them, this builds trust, capacity and resilience within communities, enabling them to adapt to future challenges and opportunities.

Together, this creates and nurtures sustainable interventions capable of bringing long-term increases to physical activity levels in disadvantaged communities.

6.2.2 Change in maturity levels for community-led initiatives 2024-2025

The average score for *supported community-led initiatives* (6b) is 3.77 (63 Places), with 40 places assessed as 4 or above. This is compared to an average of 3.70 in 2024 (47 Places), with 24 places scoring 4 or above. For places participating in both years, the average score has increased by 0.49 to 4.22. This difference reflects the fact that most of the Places taking part for the first time tend to be earlier in their implementation of a PBSA and therefore show lower maturity in this condition. This reflects wider evidence that community leadership and locally led action tend to strengthen later as relationships, confidence and enabling conditions develop.

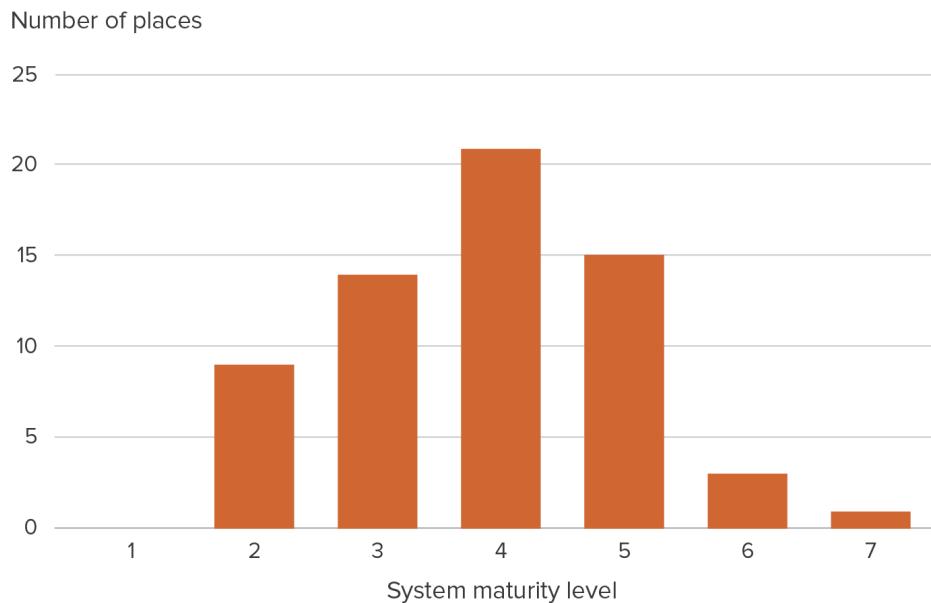


Figure 10. Supported community-led initiatives (6b) distribution of cases, 2025

6.2.3 Configurational analysis and interpretation for community-led initiatives 2025

What predicts higher maturity?

Our analysis of the 2025 data identifies the configuration of conditions associated with higher maturity in *supported community-led action* (6b) at a given point in time. Higher maturity is most consistently associated with stronger *VCFSE capacity and capability* (3b), *community perspectives on PA* (1b), *processes facilitate PBSA* (2a), *inclusive communications practices* (2b) and *community leadership & influence* (5c). This combination is found in 17 places, all of which show a positive outcome.

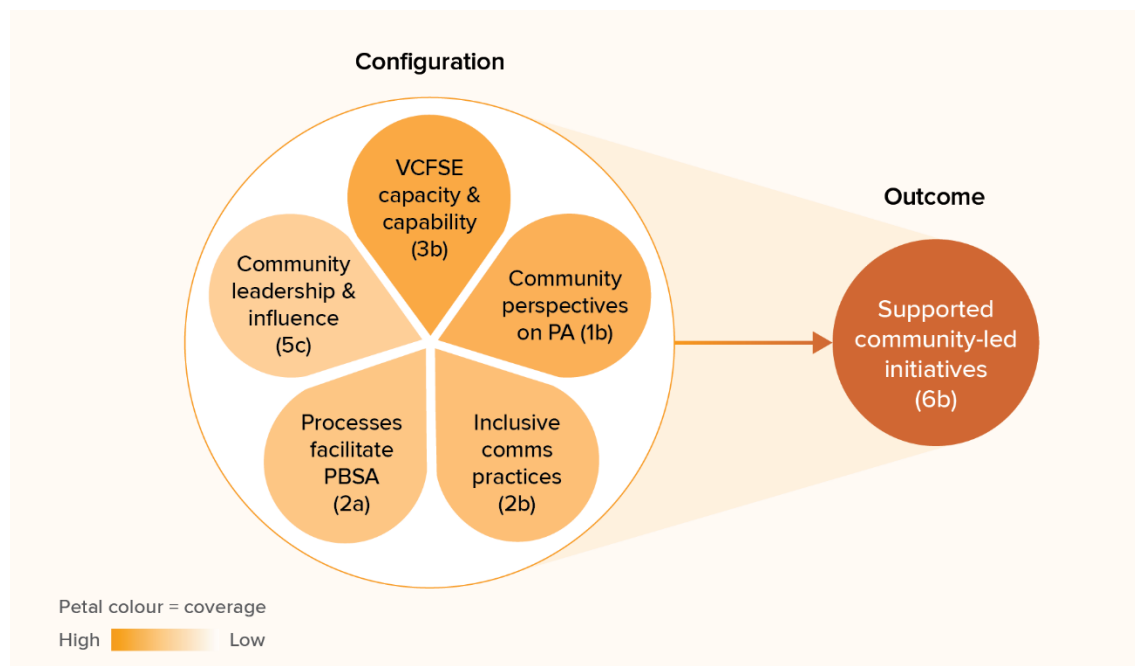


Figure 11. Supported community-led initiatives (6b): Maturity, 2025: 17 Places

The model indicates that supported community-led action is more likely where these enabling conditions are aligned, suggesting that the outcome reflects broader system coherence rather than discrete activity. This analysis, therefore, provides a view of what more established maturity tends to look like, while the change-over-time model highlights how places begin to move towards this alignment through incremental improvements in key conditions.¹³

Across places with stronger cross-sectional maturity in supported community-led action, neighbourhood arrangements provide the stability and connections that enable community-led initiatives to emerge, continue, and evolve beyond individual projects. While these arrangements vary, they consistently support communities to shape and lead action over time.

In Rochdale, neighbourhood partnerships enable residents to take increasing ownership of decisions, with support from Place Partnership leads and local organisations. This creates conditions in which community-led initiatives can develop through sustained relational support rather than formal programmes.

Rossendale and Hyndburn show a similar pattern. Despite uneven VCFSE capacity, trusted local organisations and ongoing officer engagement provide enough stability for community-led initiatives to persist, illustrating how continuity of relationships supports local leadership.

In Exeter, coordination through Wellbeing Exeter and Community Physical Activity Organisers connects a distributed network of hubs and groups, enabling community-led initiatives across neighbourhoods without reliance on a single organisation.

More formal structures are evident in Burnley and Barnsley. Burnley's working groups create clear interfaces between communities and partners, while Barnsley's Anchor Providers are commissioned to maintain neighbourhood capacity over time. Both approaches support community-led initiatives by providing stable support while allowing local leadership to shape action.

Birmingham's spring reporting highlights how responding to community demand for culturally sensitive provision led not only to the installation of power-assisted exercise equipment but also to the co-location of the Saheli Hub organisation, transforming the centre into a 'home at the heart of the community', securing long-term ownership of the space. Similarly, Doncaster had established a 'Friends of' group following large-scale engagement, which is now independently running physical activity events in the park.

Across the cross-sectional evidence, higher maturity is associated with neighbourhood conditions that sustain community-led initiatives regardless of whether support is informal or formally structured.

13. Case examples referenced in this section are drawn from places that sit at the higher-maturity end of the cross-sectional (Model 1) analysis, where supported community-led action is observed alongside alignment across relevant sub-conditions. These examples illustrate how supported community-led action is expressed where enabling factors are present together.

What predicts a change in maturity?

The change-over-time model, based on 41 Places with two consecutive years of data, addresses a different question: under what conditions does increasing maturity lead to improvement in this interim outcome? Maturation is defined as any positive shift in maturity year to year.

Analysis shows one configuration accounts for 10 of the 22 Places showing increase in this outcome, while another eight are accounted for by another three configurations. While these patterns are each found in only two or three Places, they demonstrate that there are other potential ways of achieving the same outcome.¹⁴

Case-based interpretation

Pathway A: Strengthening VCFSE collaboration and collective capacity

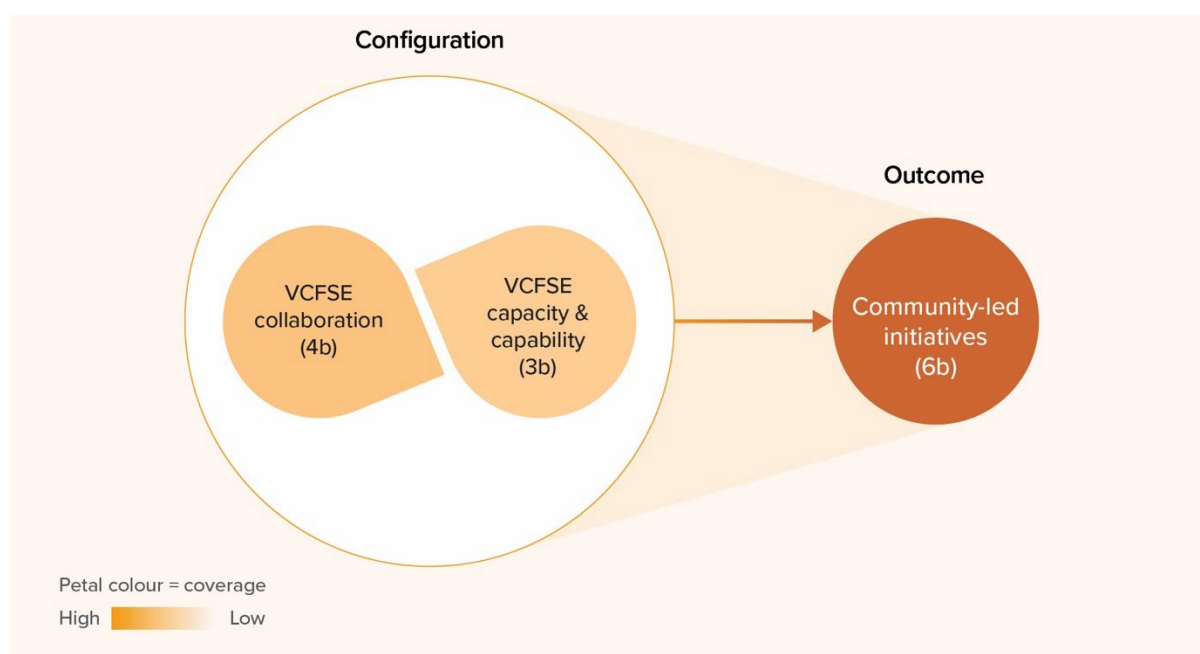


Figure 12. Community-led initiatives (6b) change in maturity 2024-25: Model A: 10 cases

This is the strongest pathway, accounting for 10 of the 22 Places in which maturity in the outcome increased over this period. In this pathway, progression is associated with increasing collaboration within the community and voluntary sector alongside strengthening VCFSE capacity and capability.

Across these places, progression reflects the gradual consolidation of networks, shared learning and organisational confidence, consistent with evidence that community action depends on investment in social infrastructure (Taylor, 2011; Local Trust, 2022).

14. Case examples referenced in this section are drawn from places identified within Developmental Pathways A, B or C in the change-over-time analysis. They illustrate configurations associated with progression in supported community-led action between reporting periods, rather than fully embedded maturity.

Case Study: Rossendale

In Rossendale, developments made in maturing community-led initiatives are largely driven by maturing *collaboration in the community sector* (4b) which is enabling more *VCFSE capacity and capability* (3b). Rossendale describes their community sector as “thriving and self-organising” utilising Rossendale Connected, a network of 200+ organisations and residents. This is used as a core platform linking voluntary groups, small businesses, clubs and formal agencies. Community organisations are working together to align offers, pool resources and refer participants across different offered programmes. For example, Rossendale describe the collaboration between Wave Adventure, RLT and RBC’s Parks Team, who have co-developed Crashawbooth Pump Track, repurposing disused land. Small businesses and voluntary organisations are working together to host events as well as identify participation gaps and look to co-produce more inclusive physical activity offers. These groups connect through a “no logs, no ToRs” ethos, where the relationships built between them are largely maintained through Rossendale Connected as opposed to contracts.

Underpinning their ability to develop the collaborations across the community sector is a model built to grow capacity and capability within the community and VCFSE partners in Rossendale. VCFSE organisations and community-led groups collaborate on training coaches to sustain activities, develop leadership and volunteering capability and capacities. These networks are also expanding, with RLT and local partners co-delivering joint funding bids and regular network events to generate connections. Whilst maturing, Rossendale reflect on opportunities for growth through more formalised volunteer support, recognition and remuneration. They also recognise where capacity can be further developed through funded community structure, rather than goodwill and individual champions.

Pathway B: Strengthening community leadership and influence through shared decision-making

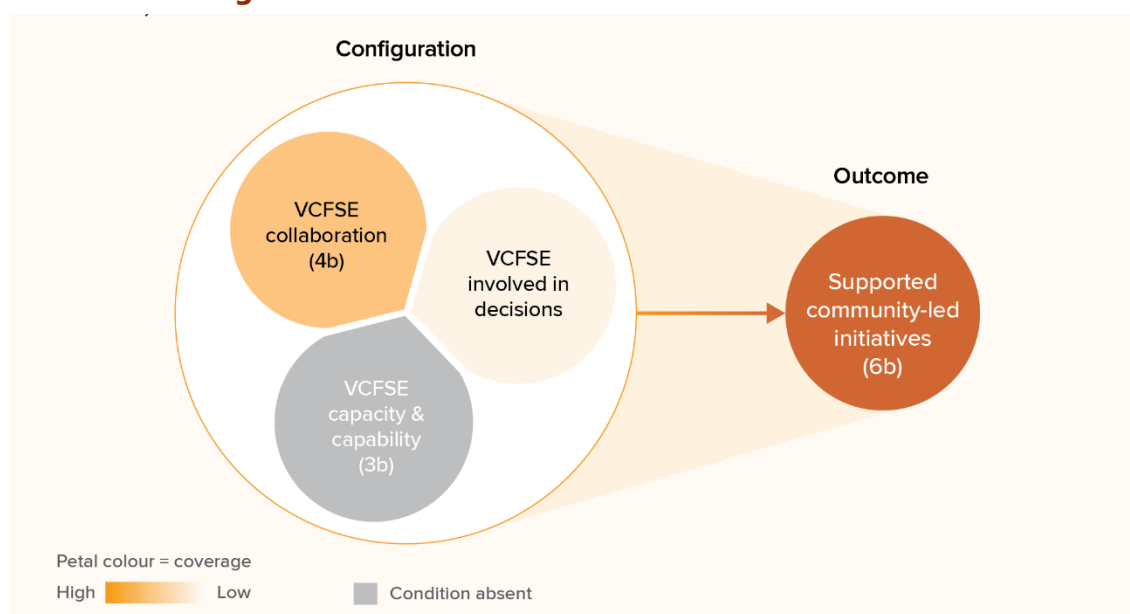


Figure 13. Community-led initiatives (6b) change in maturity 2024-25: Model B: 2 cases

In this pathway, accounting for a further two of the 22 Places with the outcome, where VCFSE capacity and capability has not changed (shown as grey in the visualisation)

described as absent), progression is associated with strengthening collaboration alongside the active involvement of (VCFSE) organisations in shared decision-making. Rather than leadership sitting solely within institutions, influence is distributed across partners, enabling community perspectives to shape priorities and support community-led action. This aligns with wider evidence that shared leadership and collaborative governance can strengthen the conditions under which communities are able to shape and sustain change (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Case Study: Doncaster

In Doncaster, collaborative arrangements across partners, including the Wellbeing Doncaster partnership and wider networks, demonstrate how VCFSE organisations play a visible role in connecting community insight to system activity. Whilst the capacity and capability of the VCFSE sector has not matured from 2024, this remains an area of priority for Doncaster and is likely to improve over time. VCFSE partners contribute to shaping priorities and approaches, ensuring that community perspectives are reflected in planning and delivery. Doncaster describe this as a growing and strengthening network through Get Doncaster Moving (GDM), where in recent network meetings, over 70 VCFSE organisations were represented.

Doncaster has focused on the development of the Team Doncaster partnership to strengthen cultures of collaboration, identifying 8 key priorities ('Great 8') as part of their Doncaster Delivering Together Strategy. There are VCFSE representatives across each of the 8 priority themes who are chosen by their peers to represent local communities. This shared leadership dynamic in place supports the conditions for community voice to influence decisions and for locally led initiatives to emerge. For example, the VCFSE representative for the theme of Children and Families has collaborated with 12 community organisations across Doncaster, identifying and addressing key local needs using existing data. Furthermore, the Spring reporting submission from Doncaster highlights engagement with over 2,500 residents as part of a systems approach to parks, leading to the formation of a new 'Friends of' group that now independently runs physical activity events. This demonstrates local influence translating into community-led action.

Across these examples, progression reflects a shift towards more distributed leadership, where collaboration and VCFSE involvement create pathways for community insight to inform decisions and translate into action. This aligns with wider evidence that shared leadership and collaborative governance can strengthen the conditions under which communities are able to shape and sustain change (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Pathway C: Emerging leadership ahead of institutional consolidation

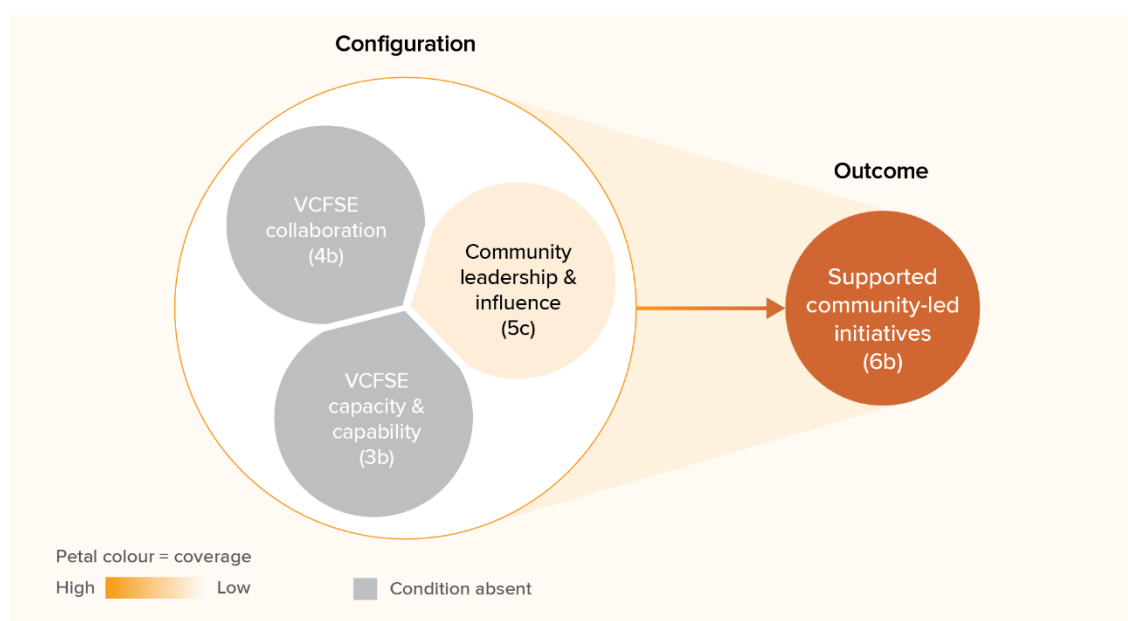


Figure 14. Community-led initiatives (6b) Change in maturity 2024-25: Model C: 3 cases

A third pathway identified in three Places reflects contexts where *community leadership and influence* are 'establishing', while maturity in *collaboration within the community sector* and *partner capacity and capability* have not increased. In these settings, *community leadership and influence* is evident and shaping activity, but formal coordination and system support may still be developing. These contexts illustrate how community leadership can emerge ahead of institutional consolidation, with community voice acting as the primary driver of change where collaboration and workforce capacity are not yet in place. Such patterns align with research suggesting that community leadership often develops through informal networks before being formalised within systems (Foot and Hopkins, 2010).

Case Study: Bolton

Where places have become more mature in community-led initiatives, collaboration across the community sector (4b) and improvements in the VCFSE sector's capacity and capability (3b) have not matured further between 2024 and 2025, reflecting an alternative path to maturity of community-led initiatives (6b).

In Bolton, for example, maturing community-led initiatives are underpinned by increasing community voice and influence in partnership decision-making (5c). Community insight and neighbourhood leadership are becoming more visible in shaping local activity, with residents and community organisations initiating and influencing work. This is facilitated through programmes such as Live Well Bolton, where community voice is placed more centrally to co-create programme priorities and direct funding for local prevention projects. Bolton describe how integrated neighbourhood models such as Public Health Bolton promote co-production enabling communities to shape services and strategies. Insights from community voice are amplified through a Voice and Influence model led by Bolton CVS, ensuring decisions reflect lived experience. However, collaboration remains uneven and formal support structures are still consolidating, meaning that momentum is largely sustained through local relationships rather than through established partnership arrangements.

Pathway D: Organisational processes supporting community-led action

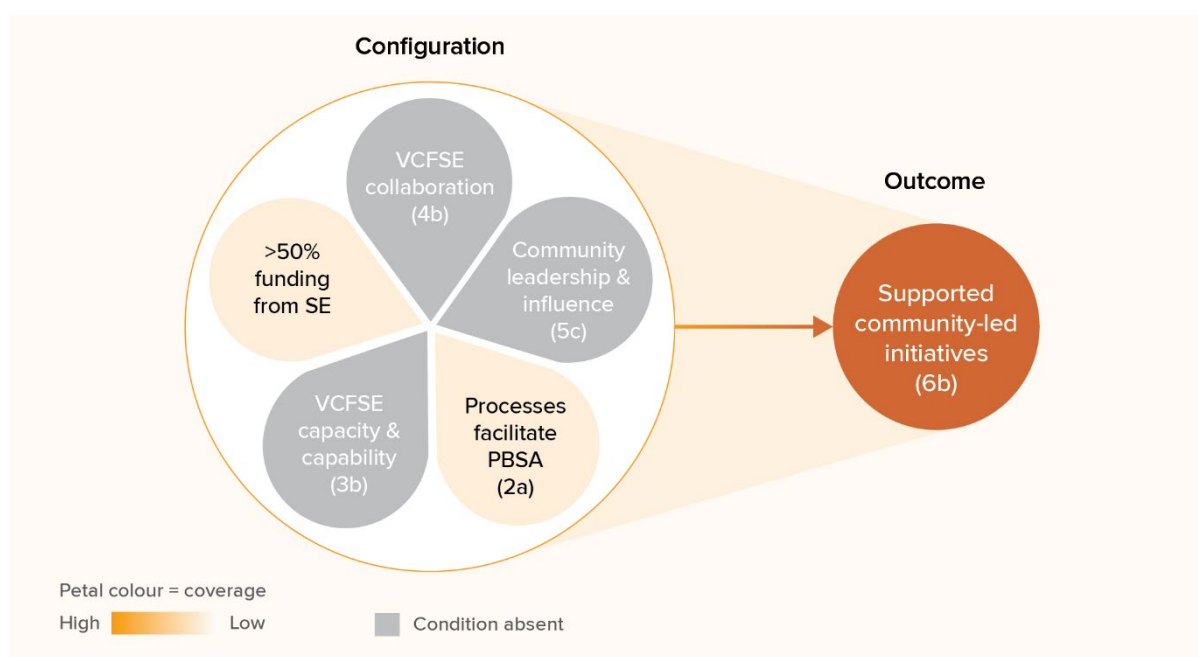


Figure 15. Community-led initiatives (6b): Model D: 3 cases

A fourth pathway, representing three places, reflects contexts where the Places are reliant on Sport England for most of their funding, and addressing organisational policies, processes and structures that enable place-based working provides a foundation for progression towards supported community-led action. In this group of places, collaboration in the community sector, community leadership and influence, and VCFSE capacity & capability have not changed.

In these places, enabling organisational arrangements and aligned resourcing create conditions for community initiatives to emerge through sustained support rather than through strong collective leadership alone. Across these places, Pathway D shows how progression towards supported community-led action can occur through strong organisational enablement and sustained alignment. Community-led initiatives emerge through consistent processes and long-term engagement that reduce barriers and provide continuity, creating foundations for collaboration, leadership and capacity to develop. However, we need to investigate further whether and how the reliance on Sport England funding plays a part in enabling supported community-led initiatives.

Case Example: Exeter

Evidence from Exeter illustrates how organisational alignment across partners has created a platform for community-led initiatives to develop over time. Work through Live and Move, Wellbeing Exeter, and neighbourhood programmes shows how sustained engagement enables activity to be shaped with communities while leadership continues to develop. Spring 2025 reporting reinforces this, noting the establishment of a community board of trustees to co-design governance of a shared community and sports hub, providing continuity for locally shaped activity.

Sense-making responses

Place representatives reflected that different pathways may reflect different starting points and how long they have been working to develop PBSA, as well as whether there is wider investment in PBSA, determining whether the approach is bottom-up or top-down. It is therefore important that Place Partnerships respond to the diversity of needs for support across VCFSE.

Pathway A: We need both capacity and capability and collaboration within the VCFSE to deliver such community-led initiatives, while noting that collaboration may also be dependent on wider community cohesion contexts. VCFSE organisations coming together to evaluate and learn may recognise shared interests and challenges leading to opportunities to work together and create opportunities for community-led action.

Pathways A&B: Investment in VCFSE capacity & capability may help enable VCFSE involvement in decision-making and the generation of genuinely community-led initiatives.

Pathway B: Existing processes may work against VCFSE collaboration. A strong VCFSE voice and influence can challenge these and address systemic barriers to collaboration, which in turn facilitates community-led action.

Pathway C: Where there are already high levels of community-led action, they may not need the support of agencies, and this may be associated with greater community influence. Strong community leadership and voice within the system create new connections and opportunities for community-led initiatives with partner agencies. Leadership and capacity within communities should be recognised rather than assuming a deficit exists that we need to address.

Workshop participants did not address pathway D.

6.3. Cultures and practices that enable physical activity

Summary headlines and key messages

- Maturity for inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity is 'emerging' (3.25 average n=63).
- Higher maturity in community leadership and influence and supported community-led initiatives predict higher maturity inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity in both 2024 and 2025 data.
- Maturity is growing in places that have been participating in the CCA evaluation in both 2024 & 2025 (3.56 average, n=41).
- Increasing maturity of inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity (found in 12 of the 41 Places participating in both years) is predicted by increasing maturity of community leadership and influence and supported community-led initiatives.
- Most of these Places also show improvement in cycles of learning and action and collaboration within the community sector.
- **Explanation:** Where initiatives are led by and rooted in local communities, people in those communities are more likely to participate and sustain such activity because it aligns with their cultures, needs and aspirations, leading to increase in maturity inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity.

Implications for practice

- Ensure less-active communities are represented and able to participate equally in shaping Place Partnerships' direction and priorities.
- Support and enable community and voluntary organisations to act for and with their communities to facilitate physical activity.
- Create social or participatory learning spaces that build confidence within community organisations as well as mutual trust between communities and local agencies.
- Strengthen collaboration among VCFSE organisations to help community organisations access resources and support needed to successfully deliver community-led action.

6.3.1 Importance of inclusive cultures and practices that enable physical activity in influencing population-level change

How physically active we are in our lives is shaped by what we intuitively feel is normal and expected for 'people like us'. This may vary with the contexts of our lives, whether we are at

work or school, with family or engaging with wider interest groups and communities around us, as we tend to take our cues from the actions and attitudes of those around us.

People may not relate to those they see engaging in physical activity due to identity or culturally based differences, including gender, (dis)ability, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. These feelings may be reinforced by practical barriers, such as clothing or equipment needed, or past experiences of exclusion, humiliation, or shame. By valuing diversity and working in equitable partnership with communities, we may realise the potential of resources and opportunities within those communities, including institutions, organisations, cultures, and traditions.

Where cultures and practices for physical activity are 'embedded', we would expect to find:

- Physical activity is widely valued and increasingly the norm throughout communities in the place. Social environments are culturally inclusive and encourage and facilitate physical activity for everyone.
- Everyone in the community, including those with experience of barriers to participation, can experience the freedom and confidence to be active in ways that suit them and that they enjoy.

Higher maturity in this condition enables positive change in physical activity inequalities because:

- Within historically less active communities, more inclusive access to opportunities to be active can help change people's feelings and attitudes towards physical activity.
- When people increasingly recognise physical activity as an integral part of their daily lives, aligning with their collective and individual identities (sense of who they are), this can lead to sustained increases in movement and physical activity.

Inclusive cultures and practices for physical activity are seen as a sign of changing norms and attitudes among less active communities, which, if sustained over time, may contribute to quantifiable reductions in physical activity inequalities.

6.3.2 Change in maturity levels for cultures and practices 2024–2025

When we look at all participating places in 2025, 23 of the 63 Places scored 4 or above, and the average score is 3.25.

If we compare the 41 places participating in both years, the average maturity has increased slightly to 3.56, and eight places scored 5 or 6.

The difference in average scores is not unexpected, as most new Places are at an earlier point in their adoption of a PBSA to physical activity. Figure 16 shows the spread of maturity levels for this condition.

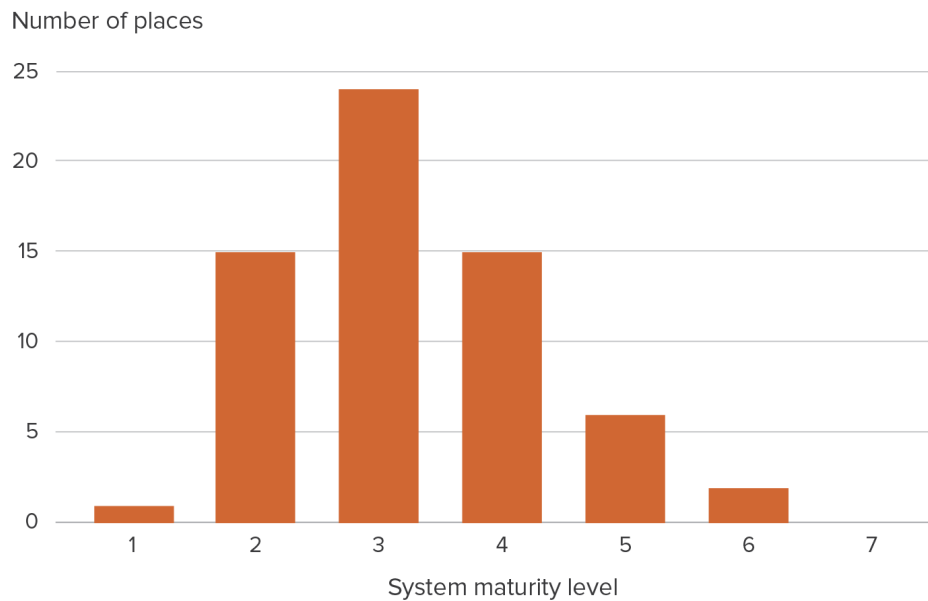


Figure 16. Inclusive cultures facilitate participation in PA: distribution of cases 2025

6.3.3 Configurational analysis and interpretation for inclusive cultures for PA: 2025 data

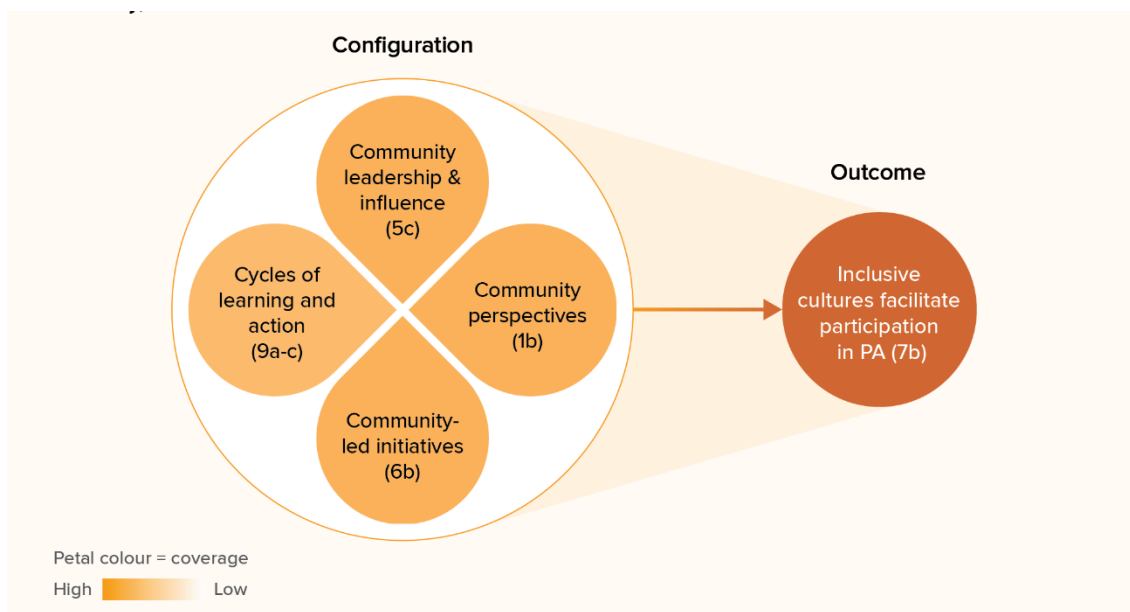


Figure 17. Inclusive cultures encourage and facilitate participation in physical activity (7b), Maturity, 2025: 15 cases

What predicts higher maturity?

Higher maturity for Inclusive cultures and practices for physical activity (7b) ($n=63$) tends to be found where we see higher maturity in:

- Community leadership & influence (5c) (17:8)¹⁵
- Community perspectives on physical activity (1b) (17:7)
- Supported community-led initiatives (6b) (17:6)
- Cycles of learning and action (9a-c) (15:5)

What predicts a change in maturity?

When we look at positive change in maturity, we find increased maturity in this outcome in 12 of the 41 places. This is predicted by the configuration of:

- Community leadership and influence (5c) (8:6)
- Supported Community-led initiatives (6b) (7:3)
- Cycles of learning and action (9a-c) (6:1)
- Collaboration in the community sector (4b) (5:1)

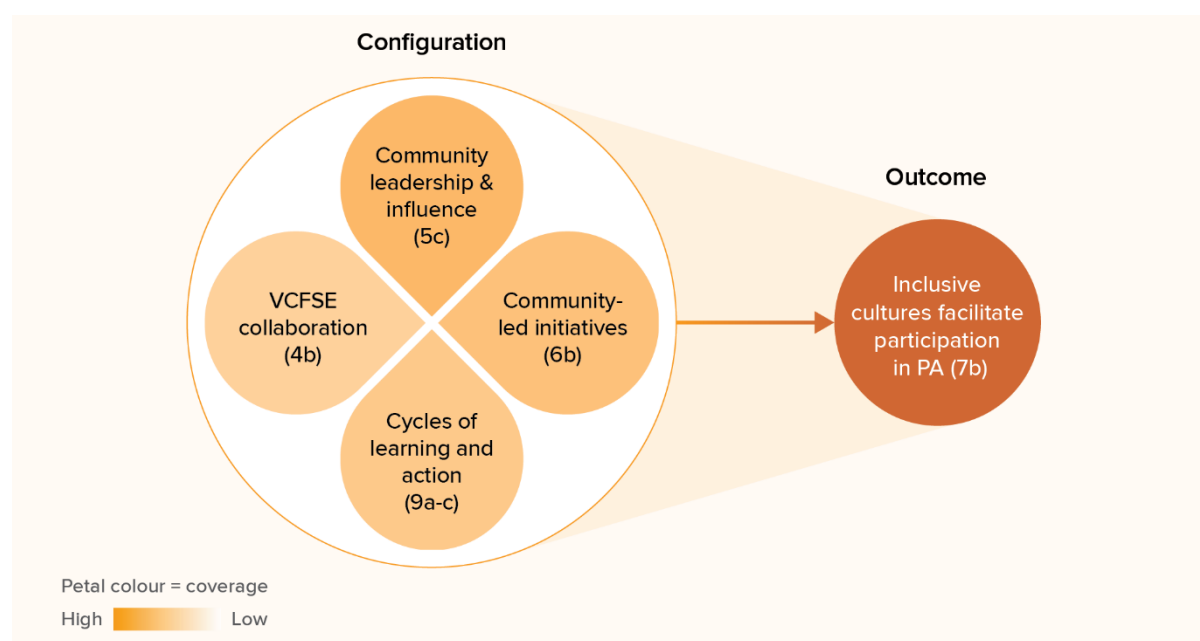


Figure 18. Inclusive cultures encourage and facilitate participation in physical activity (7b), Change in maturity, 5 cases

Where *community leadership and influence* had not increased, only 4 of 27 Places showed an increase in this outcome, suggesting this is an important enabler or driver of this outcome in many Places.

15. The figures represent the number of cases with this configuration showing the outcome and those with the configuration not showing the outcome. For example, 15:5 means 20 places show higher maturity in all four of these conditions, and 15 of these also show higher maturity in the outcome, compared to five with lower maturity in the outcome.

Case-based interpretation

Our review of survey responses for places showing increasing maturity in inclusive cultures and practices for physical activity (7b) in this configuration, suggests that development of cycles of learning and action for systemic place-based working (9a-c) may align with and facilitate growing community leadership and influence by creating social or participatory learning spaces which may build confidence within community organisations as well as local agencies' trust in such community organisations.

We can see how this creates conditions in which communities are enabled to take a lead in action on physical activity (Supported Community-led initiatives (6b)) because they have both confidence and the active support of local agencies to act.

Strengthening collaboration among VCFSE organisations (Collaboration in the community sector (4b)) may also help community organisations to access the resources and support needed to deliver community-led action successfully.

As observed in the 2024 analysis and sense-making, where activities are led by and rooted in local communities, people in those communities are more likely to participate and sustain such activity because it aligns with their cultures, needs and aspirations, leading to an increase in maturity in inclusive cultures and practices for physical activity (7b).

Case Study: Ribble Valley

In Ribble Valley, maturing inclusive cultures and practice are underpinned by increases in maturity across community voice and influence in partnership decision making (5c), supported community-led initiatives (6b), maturing thriving community sector that works together on physical activity (4b) and cycles of learning to action (9a-c).

Community perspectives shape decision-making and enable community-led initiatives to be supported and developed in Ribble Valley, where they gave examples of the Farming Stronger for Longer (FS4L) initiative, co-produced and delivered by farmers. They describe how community influence is becoming increasingly visible at the village level, where residents now promote activities peer-to-peer, shaping how services and offers fit into those spaces. Additionally, processes to develop community-led initiatives are being simplified, describing a relationship of "communities lead while systems support" resulting in a diverse range of communities reclaiming spaces with a focus on their lived experiences at the heart of this work.

Sense-making responses

Sharing power with communities and working together to mutual objectives may be key to this outcome. Creation of space for reflective practice (CoLA), which includes community leadership, increases the visibility of community leaders, enhances their potential influence, and could facilitate community-led initiatives that lead to change in communities.

Real community voice and influence within the partnership are key to genuine co-production (6b), which is important for achieving change in community cultures and practices, and this may require agencies to give up some power. Community leadership and influence need to be inclusive of underrepresented groups, look beyond the loudest voices, and channel resources to communities that lack capacity due to chronic underfunding. Where

communities have influence in the local partnership structures, they can challenge inequalities, including in funding distribution.

6.4. Strategic leadership

Summary headlines and key messages

- Maturity for **strategic leadership** (5a), shows an increase with 30 of the 63 Places (44.4%) now scoring 4 or above. For places participating in both years, the average score has increased by 0.49 to 4.22.
- Higher maturity (4+) in this condition is predicted by a combination (configuration) of:
 - cycles of learning & action (9(a-c))
 - collaboration across sectors (4a)
 - understanding root causes (1c)
 - partner capacity & capability (3a)
 - community influence (5c)
- Increasing maturity in this condition (found in 20 of the 41 Places participating in both years) is associated with:
 - partner capacity & capability (3a)
 - cycles of learning & action (9(a-c))
 - community influence (5c)
- **Explanation:** Investment in partner capacity and capability, including systems leadership training may help to cultivate systemic approaches to strategic leadership as well as promoting the value of cycles of learning and action. It may also be that strong strategic leadership drives investment in building capacity and capability and cycles of learning and action. Similarly strong community influence may be enabled through strategic leadership actions, while strategic leaders may be persuaded to work in a more place-based and community-oriented way when community influence is present within the power structures. It is likely that these effects work in both directions.

6.4.1 Importance of strategic leadership to enabling population-level change

The way we create the conditions for physical activity in a place is often shaped by who makes decisions and who can act to enable people to be more physically active. Systemic change to reduce inequalities in physical activity is likely to involve leadership and action that is joined up, less centralised, and involves a broad range of people at different levels, including strategic leaders, the workforce and local people. This enables a diverse range of

people to act in ways that strengthen each other's work, bringing the value of different perspectives, knowledge, and skills for a greater combined impact. We can create ways to equitably share or transfer decision-making power to those who experience physical activity inequalities.

Place based systemic working is supported where strategic leaders use their influence and platform both individually and collectively to, change policy and practices to build on strengths, support innovations and action from people across the system, dismantle processes which are counterproductive for systemic work and physical activity, and demonstrate how physical activity can support broader social outcomes. Strategic leaders can cultivate a culture shift to foster distributed leadership and creative ways of working by holding accountability and protecting, trusting and enabling others to act.

How this outcome may impact physical activity – our working theory

Where strategic leaders adopt and promote place-based systemic approaches to address physical activity inequalities, they not only recognise and prioritise the value of PA in their work but also use their influence to protect spaces for this way of working. They use their agency and influence to promote diverse contributions to decision making and enable others to act in their respective fields of activity. They act to change policies and practices where necessary, to facilitate the place-based systemic ways of working.

Where this practice is fully mature ('embedded') we would expect to find:

- There is widespread, sustained visible leadership and long-term commitment, within the place, for place-based systemic approaches to tackle physical activity inequalities. Policy and practice support commitments to prioritise physical activity.
- Leaders use their influence and facilitate diverse contribution to decision making and enable others to act.
- Leaders use their positions to effectively challenge contradictory policies and practices.

6.1.2. Change in maturity levels for strategic leadership 2024–2025

The average score for all Places increased from 3.47 in 2024 to 3.57 in 2025, which is borderline 'establishing', with 30 of the 63 Places now (44.4%) scoring 4 or above.

Among the 41 places participating in both years, average maturity increased from 3.44 to 4.02. Figure 6 shows the distribution of moderated maturity levels for this condition.

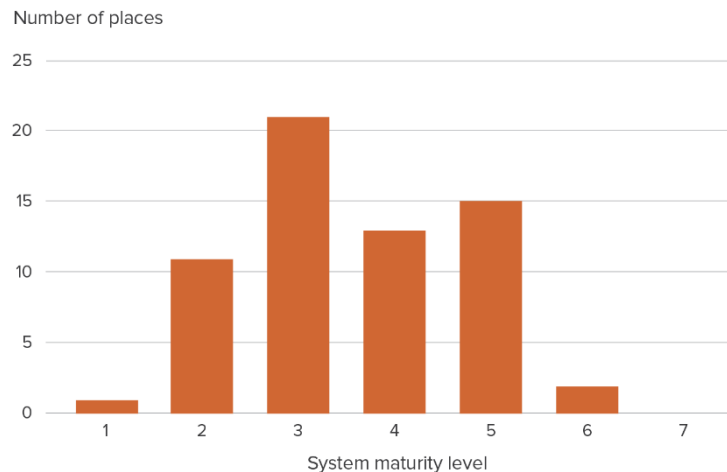


Figure 19. Strategic Leadership (5a) distribution of cases 2025

6.4.3 Configurational analysis and interpretation for strategic leadership 2025

What predicts higher maturity?

Looking at 2025 data (63 Places), we find higher maturity is associated with *cycles of learning & action* (9(a-c)) (higher in 26/30 Places) together with *collaboration within and across sectors* (4a), *consistent understanding of root causes* (1c), *partner capacity & capability* (3a) and *community leadership and influence* (5c). All 14 Places with this configuration of conditions also show higher maturity in strategic leadership.

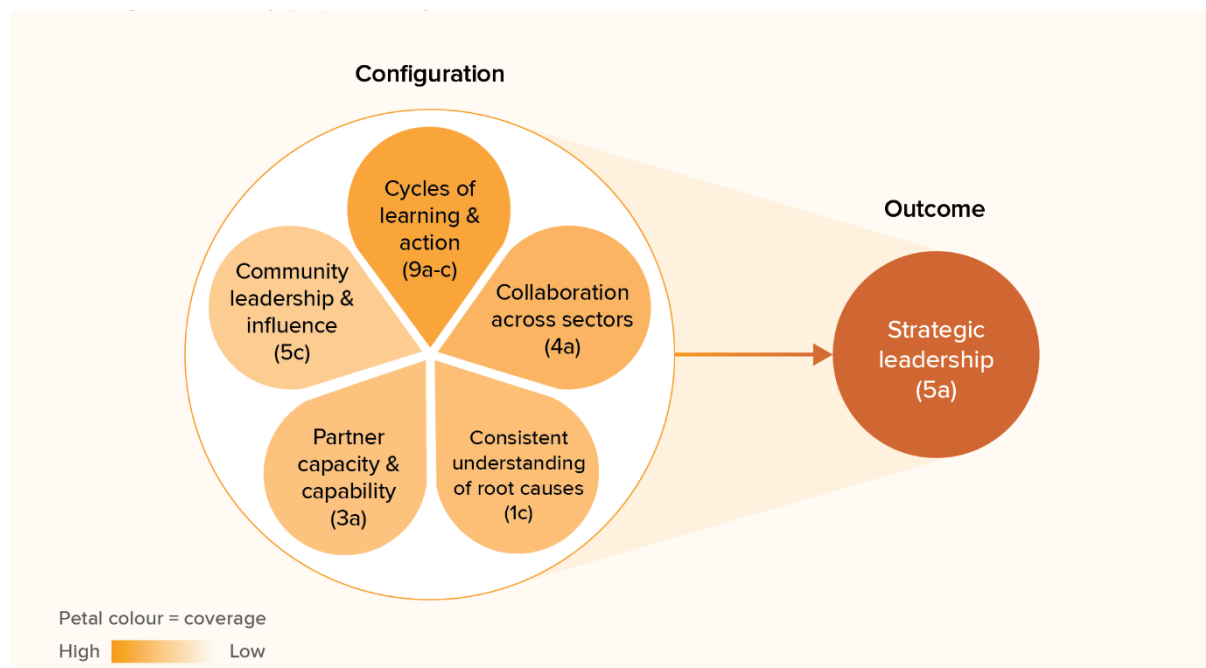


Figure 20. Strategic Leadership (5a): Maturity 2025: 14 cases

What predicts increasing maturity?

When we look at positive change in maturity for the 41 places participating in 2024 and 2025, we find 20 Places showed an increase in maturity in *strategic leadership* (5a) and this is predicted by increasing maturity in *partner capacity and capability* (3a) combined with *cycles of learning and action* (9(a-c)) and *community leadership and influence* (5c). The model is less strong than that for 2025 single-year data, but all six Places with this combination showed increased maturity in *strategic leadership*.

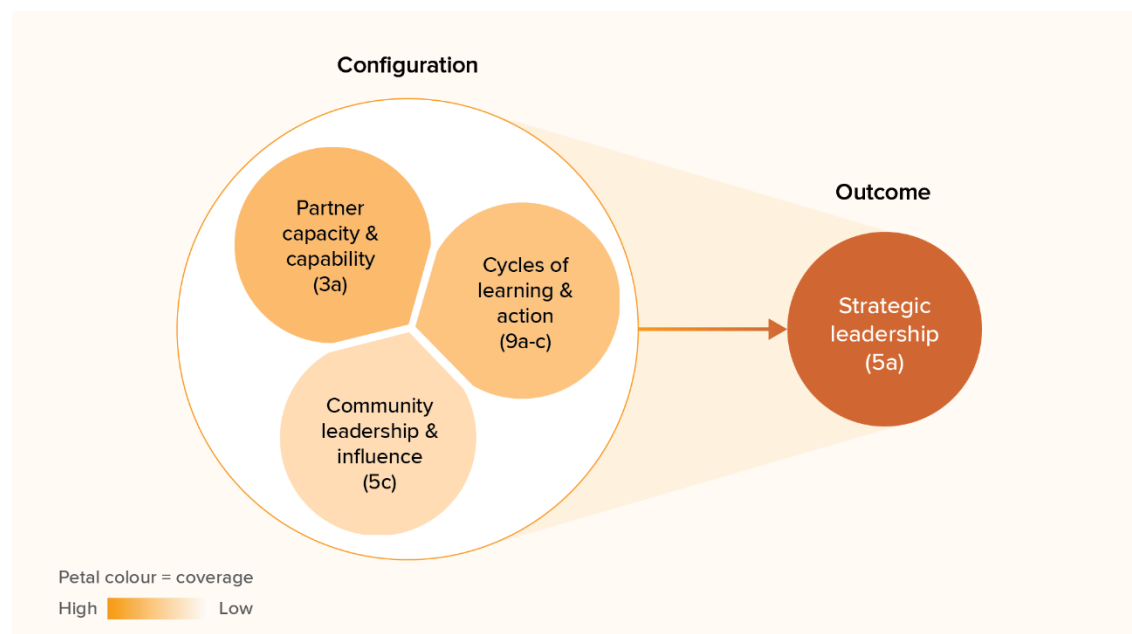


Figure 21. Strategic Leadership (5a) change in maturity 2025-26: 6 Places

Case-based interpretation

When we look at the qualitative data (including moderation meetings and follow-up data) for the six Places showing increased maturity in this configuration, it suggests that investment in *partner capacity and capability*, including systems leadership training may help to cultivate systemic approaches to *strategic leadership* as we understand them, and this also promotes integration of evaluative practice described in *cycles of learning and action*. Direction of causality is uncertain in such configurations, and it may also be that strong *strategic leadership* drives investment in *building capacity and capability* and *cycles of learning and action*. Similarly, *strong community leadership and influence* may be enabled through strategic leaders changing policies and practices, and/or strategic leaders may be persuaded to work in a more place-based and community-oriented way when communities have such influence within the power structures. It is likely that these effects work in both directions.

Case Study: Hyndburn

In Hyndburn, the progress in maturing strategic leadership for PBSA to physical activity inequalities is driven through partner capacity and capability (3a) as well as through shared learning and reflection spaces (9a-c). This pathway to change also recognises the increasing value of community leadership and influence, to ensure local people and advocates are involved in decision-making processes (5c).

Hyndburn's maturing strategic leadership has been linked to increased visibility and collaboration, shaped by Hyndburn Borough Council, Hyndburn Leisure, the PCN, CVS and community organisations. Specific members of the Council have championed key initiatives, such as the Active Environment Strategy, which was co-produced by partners and is now adopted in place as a formal policy framework for tackling the roots of physical activity inequalities. Furthermore, communities have increasing influence over strategy, though formal decision-making power remains limited.

Hyndburn describe how training through the Together an Active Future (TaAF) Systems Leadership Programmes have promoted more adaptive leadership and collaborative mindsets. Whilst the system is still reliant on key influencers within the Council and Leisure Trust, it is hoped that opportunities to invest in and develop leadership will facilitate further change.

Alongside this, partners across Hyndburn are investing more time, funding and workforce energy into local capacity for collaborative ways of working. Shifting mindsets underpins this transition, from "service delivery to collaboration", which have facilitated the development of practice networks. Structures and systems are also adapting to align community engagement, marketing and delivery teams, freeing up staff to co-design events, host community meetings and attend partnership forums. This has facilitated a maturing place-based approach through a shift in mindset from "add-on" work to "protected capacity inside organisations".

Supporting the development of capacity, capability and strategic leadership are cycles of learning and action that have matured across place. Hyndburn reflected on how continuous learning cultures are one of "Hyndburn's strongest systems features", where partners have moved away from just "reporting and delivery" towards "reflection, experimentation and shared sense-making". Evaluation and reflection are increasingly built into programme delivery. For example, the Active Environment Strategy utilises live feedback loops formed of short learning cycles within council, leisure and community teams, which feed into adaption and planning. Tools such as Ripple Effects Mapping and Stories of Change are increasingly embedded into networks and forums, where people across the system increasingly view learning as "part of their role". Evaluation methods are supported with participation data, health indicators and partner reflections which contribute towards refining and adjusting initiatives.

7. Building capacity of evaluation and learning and impacts of evaluation approach

This section explores how NELP has supported Place Partnerships to build capacity for complexity-informed evaluation, drawing on triangulated evidence from stakeholder surveys, interviews, and SMM.

Summary headlines and key messages

- NELP's capacity building role is underpinned by the assumptions that places undergo a developmental journey: first by shifting their thinking to appreciate complexity, which creates readiness to work differently, enabling them to develop local explanatory theories, build the confidence to test new methods, and embed continuous cycles of learning.
- Places are embracing evaluation as a proactive tool to navigate complexity and improve practice.
- Places have started to actively use tools such as the SMM to redesign job descriptions, shape procurement, and secure investments.
- Psychological safety withing Social Learning Spaces and validation from credible voices such as NELP Cluster leads are mechanisms for sustaining morale and overcoming resistance.
- Places are embedding resident-led learning cycles that translate community insights into tangible changes.
- **Lessons learned and next steps:** The use of academic language is still seen as a barrier for Places in embracing this new way of working. There is an opportunity to improve navigation of resources, share peer-led translations, and continue to prioritise Social Learning Spaces that give Places the confidence to embrace complexity.

7.1. Introduction

In the last four years that NELP have been working with Sport England and respective Place Partnerships across the country. A key feature of our work has comprised building capacity and capability across the workforce through cycles of learning and action. Through our Place Support System, we have forged close relationships with places to enable them to:

- Develop a deeper understanding of the 3 areas of action and 9 conditions of change underpinning the System Maturity Matrix.
- Apply the conditions of change into their respective places based on local determination.
- Utilise the conditions as a reflexive tool to help facilitate sense-making and guide further operationalising of place-based systemic working through completion of the survey.

- As part of this understanding, mobilise approaches to evaluation and learning that help (through an explanatory lens) develop, test and refine their approaches to place-based systemic working.

To build capacity and capability in these areas, we have developed the following support offerings to cultivate greater awareness and move beyond transactional relationships. This Place Support System has been shaped by a range of participatory evaluation approaches and principles (notably Patton's *Developmental Evaluation* (1994), Shulha and colleagues' *Collaborative Approaches to Evaluation* Framework (2016), and Fetterman's *Empowerment Evaluation* (1994):

- Social learning spaces (learning seminars, methods labs)
- Co-designed resources with Sport England
- Place support check-ins with Place Relationship Managers
- Place support check-ins with regional clusters and bespoke drop-ins
- Place-led seminars and talking heads approaches sharing learning
- NELP Ambassador training
- NELP Cohort training
- Evaluation and Learning Asset Mapping exercise

A key drive for us is to help Sport England and their invested Places develop a deeper understanding of the impact of their work in place in respect of what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why, drawing on the established school of *Realist Evaluation*.

Through the production of some of our earlier resources (public narrative, etc.), we have advocated for the need to embrace complexity in this area of work, and, as such, our evaluation and learning practices should follow suit.

7.2. Theory of change to build capacity and capability for evaluation

To make sense of and deepen our understanding of the impact of this work on capacity and capability, we have developed a theory of change.

Table 1 brings to life the assumptions and beliefs that are underpinning the work:

Aim: To understand what features are necessary (and why) to shift to more mature, whole-system, place-based evaluative practices.

Secondary aim: To test ideas about how NELPs work influences how stakeholders make sense of, use, and react to resources, and whether this supports their engagement with, and transition to whole-systems place-based explanatory practice.

Table 1. Assumptions underpinning NELP’s capacity-building role

Key features and mindsets	Impactful assumptions	Key questions / reflections
1. Thinking and practices, and appreciating the need to work differently <i>Understanding how people change their mindsets in evaluation practices, how they view complexity and the way recognition in this can drive learning</i>	Places and their partners appreciate the importance of the complexity that surrounds their work, this is because they accept that there is more than one answer, and things are often messy.	▪ How have things changed in evaluation practice if at all? ▪ What supports changes in eureka moments and why? ▪ How do places view complexity? ▪ How does increasing recognition about complexity drive greater value in learning about complexity? ▪ Is this an essential step before practice can alter? ▪ What has NELP’s role been in this?
2. Readiness for learning <i>From understanding complexity to initiating new ways of working and evaluating in specific ways</i>	Within a position of understanding and embracing the complexity of their work, places consider evaluation as a continuous process and cycle drawing on key conditions that underpin the system maturity matrix for establishing pathways to impact. They establish a culture and approach to learning valuing the role of evaluation because it can support learning and use. They accept uncertainty and never know the answer. They appreciate that there is an opportunity	▪ How are the conditions helping places to ‘better’ operationalise place-based systemic work in their respective area. ▪ How do places go from understanding complexity to initiating new ways of working? ▪ What shifts thinking to embrace evaluation in a new way? ▪ Are there any key things that help accelerate changes in thinking (matrix, sense making, process reports, training, CCA)?

Key features and mindsets	Impactful assumptions	Key questions / reflections
	for collective decision making to inform action rather than simply showing accountability.	
3. Developing learning (assumptions and beliefs that underpin the work) <i>Supporting the capacity and capability of places to work in a more explanatory and whole systems manner.</i>	Places see the value in theorising how, why and for whom (explanatory accounts) to WSA to physical activity work in practice, because they know that there is no one size all approach to facilitating PBA to PA, and because thinking in an explanatory way can bring to life how and why their work can come to fruition. Places create focused explanations about key areas of place-based work, comprising of 'explanatory accounts', or case-studies from places, making use of the SSM conditions drawing together different experiences of physical activity interventions to identify the key ingredients of interventions, and how and why they interact with context. This is done in a collective and collaborative way within place but also across places to create a network of learning and support where places learn from one another to inform action. In some cases, this draws upon the SMM conditions for change.	- How has the capacity of places been supported if at all, to work in a more explanatory and whole systems manner? - What resources help shift the culture to embrace learning about new evaluative approaches?
4. Testing and implementing new ways of working / evaluation	Places explore and test explanations of change through their evaluation activities / methods and approaches sensitive to the conditions of their place. They do this because they are curious and conscious	How are places able to evaluate and learn about the conditions in their place.

Key features and mindsets	Impactful assumptions	Key questions / reflections
<i>Helping places to implement and mobilise new, complexity-sensitive ways of evaluation.</i>	about discovering how and why to what extent this (change they are looking to see) unfolds. This may draw upon the SMM conditions to build reflexivity and inform their maturity in relation to that condition. Places build confidence and morale from the developmental / participatory support through the social learning spaces and links they have made (NELP and other places).	▪ How are the conditions helping places to 'better' operationalise place-based systemic work in their respective area. ▪ How are places able to evaluate and learn about the conditions in their place and distribute this into other layers in their place. ▪ What things lead to place trying our new ways of evaluation? ▪ Why are places testing in this way, how are they doing it and overcoming challenges? ▪ How do the social learning space and/or NELP impact practices? Why?
5. Cycles of learning <i>The process of building cycles of learning, reflection, and action into a place's work to refine and inform their Place-Based Systemic Work.</i>	Places critically scrutinise the validity of their WSA because of this explanatory thinking and seek to build this into their work within a reflexive way. Places develop a holistic understanding of what these findings mean and establish translational methods for developing understanding around what is important to their place in light of the conditions for change. Across all of these points places communicate and consider the value of this work for engaging decision makers and disseminating the learning to decision makers. Places then synthesise the learning and consider what this means for place-based working.	▪ What place has <u>cycles of learning</u> and reflexivity have in the work of a place and how? ▪ Do places now regard cycles of learning as routine evaluation, and what changed for this to become the case? ▪ When in the journey does this become commonplace, if at all?

7.3. Methods for developing an understanding of capacity and capability

To explore and answer the assumptions, over the last 3 years, we have begun to capture instances of impact within the workforce to evidence how the work is changing mindsets and influencing thinking in place-based working and evaluative practices.

We have developed a data map that has helped us navigate to the key sources we hold to bring these instances of impact to life.

Data source	Date	Nature of the Data	What insights does this provide
How & why conversation (Stakeholder interviews)	2024-2026	Transcripts from 11-15 realist interviews on building capacity in a complex system.	Narratives on how specific conditions enabled changes in operational delivery. Shift in consciousness; why and how evaluative consciousness grows. Role of NELP's support and resources
SMM process reflections	2025/2026	Data from 63 places (Questions asked: Has the process of reflecting on the SMM conditions in your Place this year led to any changes in your practices, plans or decision-making? Please indicate briefly what has changed and why).	How the conditions are helping places to 'better' operationalise place-based systemic work in their respective area. Insights into how places use the SMM conditions to justify resource allocation, funding bids, and strategic focus. Insights into the value of the tool, how the process of scoring creates a moment for reflection.
Moderation meeting feedback	2025/2026	Feedback survey from X number of attendees. Data on whether the meeting clarified understanding and prompted revisions of SMM scores.	Whether the <i>facilitated discussion</i> improved stakeholders' understanding of the SM conditions. Insights into reflexivity, specifically if the peer-challenge process caused places to reflect on and change their original scores (validating the

Data source	Date	Nature of the Data	What insights does this provide
			moderation process as a learning intervention).
Stakeholder feedback survey	2024/2025	Feedback from 38 Stakeholders including Place partnership colleagues, Active Partnerships, Sport England staff, and National Partners; quantitative and qualitative data	Feedback on the NELP tools, resources, and support General evidence of the extent to which NELP support has enabled places to take relevant local action Broad insights into the shift in stakeholders' mindset (thinking) versus their practice (doing), and identification of barriers like language/ accessibility.
SMM data set	2025/2026	Data from 63 Places; Specifically attributes for Condition 3 (Capacity) and Condition 9 (COLA).	Examples emerging from these conditions
Sense-making sessions feedback	2024	Padlet reflections	Insights into the cultural aspect of evaluation, specifically the value of "Social Learning Spaces" in validating the messiness of the work and reducing isolation.

7.4. Our successes and lessons learned

From this, we have systematically organised the data into a coherent database to capture key themes related to our assumptions and beliefs. Below, we illustrate and bring to life a snapshot of this evidence.

7.4.1 Thinking and practices

The data indicates a distinct shift in evaluative consciousness across the network, suggesting that stakeholders are moving away from viewing evaluation solely as a mechanism for accountability through linear metrics, towards an appreciation of complexity.

Feedback suggests that, because place-based work is often intangible, stakeholders value the Conceptual Framework and Place Evaluation and Learning Approach (PELA) that allow them to evaluate the “approach” rather than just the “outcome”. This suggests that NELP tools are helping stakeholders articulate the nuances of their work in ways that traditional metrics could not.

Alongside this cognitive shift, there is evidence of a changing culture regarding uncertainty and the acceptance of “messiness.” Places are increasingly willing to accept that working in complex systems involves non-linear change. For instance, SMM data highlights that *“missteps are seen as opportunities for learning, not failure.”* This indicates a move towards a culture of openness rather than self-preservation. Further evidence reports a shift in focus from “how much” to “why and how,” reflecting a growing awareness that outcomes are shaped by relationships and local context.

While data from our interviews suggests this transition is not always linear, particularly in environments with dominant views on evaluation for proving success prevail, the framework appears to provide a necessary scaffold to challenge traditional performance narratives and validate a complexity-informed mindset.

“There is a noticeable shift in culture across the partnership, with a growing recognition of the complexity of the environments we’re working within. This has led to a stronger emphasis on learning from practice, understanding not just what we do, but how and why we do it, and using that insight to shape future approaches.” (SMM data 2025)

7.4.2 Readiness for learning

Once stakeholders develop an appreciation for complexity, this readiness translates into tangible operational changes in how work is structured, resourced, and planned.

Rather than being abstract concepts, the three areas for action, nine conditions, and the SMM function as practical scaffolds for strategic decision-making. This has been demonstrated where conditions have been formally integrated into organisational structures, with capacity roles created based on cross-cutting conditions and explicitly referenced in job descriptions.

This indicates that readiness has moved beyond theoretical acceptance to become a driver for workforce design. Places are beginning to leverage the conditions to secure investment and align partnerships. For example, some areas report that the SMM has influenced the procurement of evaluation partners to focus specifically on systemic change rather than programme delivery.

"This (SMM) has influenced our approach to the procurement of our evaluation partner (has led decision making). Evaluation approach has changed significantly (spec and process) focus on systemic change and condition, rather than programmes and what is being delivered on the ground." (SMM process reflections 2025)

Similarly, stakeholders noted that the conditions acted as a precursor for collaboration, stating: *"If those conditions weren't driving the conversation, I don't think some of our partners would even be around the table."* (SMM process reflections 2025)

7.4.3 Developing learning

Evidence suggests that places are actively using explanatory accounts to deepen their understanding of local interventions, moving beyond descriptive reporting to theorise about the mechanisms of change.

"We're using explanatory accounts to check and challenge every decision that is done in plan. For example, the tactics/methods for community engagement." (Stakeholder feedback survey 2025)

Tools and resources are helping places to identify and articulate the specific conditions required for success. For instance, partners have reported using explanatory accounts as a "check and challenge" mechanism for decisions in their plans, ensuring that tactics for community engagement are grounded in theory rather than assumption.

This capacity to theorise is also enabling places to clarify the distinction between programme delivery and systemic change. In some Places, the SMM prompted internal conversations that clarified system leadership gaps and assumptions the team had not previously articulated.

In others, the SMM provided a "common framework and language" that allowed diverse partners, including schools, to engage in collective sense-making rather than viewing evaluation as a performance matrix.

NELP has supported this development through Sense Making workshops, which provided stakeholders with a structured way to bridge the gap between theory and practical steps. A tangible example of this is the move beyond traditional reporting to develop "Learning Casts" (podcasts), demonstrating how places are evolving their methods to ensure complex theories are digestible and usable for wider partners.

7.4.4 Testing and implementing new ways of working

The implementation of new evaluation practices is heavily reliant on the psychological safety and collective confidence built through social learning spaces.

Stakeholders consistently report that using unfamiliar methods (such as building explanatory accounts or completing the SMM) requires overcoming a fear of failure. In a stakeholder interview, a senior leader described these spaces as critical for resilience, noting *"they were probably one of the only spaces where I get to be honest about my struggles."* (Stakeholder interviews 2025)

This sentiment is reinforced by feedback from the Sense Making workshops, where participants expressed reassurance in realising that "others are facing challenges also," validating that their "messy" reality was a shared systemic issue rather than a local failure. The stakeholder feedback survey highlights that practical support is a key enabler for mobilising these new ways of working. Feedback noted that NELP cohort sessions *"unlocked ways for us to collect stories... and really helped demystify CCA."*

This suggests that hands-on guidance is essential for moving from theory to implementation. Data also reveals that this testing phase is often relational. Interviews highlight that ongoing support from a credible external voice was essential for reaffirming that the place was "doing the right thing" when facing internal resistance. This suggests that successfully implementing complexity-sensitive evaluation is not just a technical task but a social process that requires external validation to sustain momentum.

"We could always be really honest with the challenges... he [NELP regional lead] always reinforced that we were doing the right thing... That was helpful for me to reaffirm... [and] realize other people were struggling on similar things. Because when you're struggling in isolation... you can kind of go, 'Wow, I'm not alone.'" (Stakeholder interviews 2025)

7.4.5 Cycles of learning

Places are increasingly embedding cycles of learning and action into their routine operations, shifting evaluation from static reporting to a dynamic driver of scrutiny and adaptation. SMM reflections show processes evolving from "tick-box" submissions into monthly "Systems Mashups" that link findings directly back to future planning. Similarly, stakeholders report that *"the conditions are much more embedded in what we're doing and how we're doing it as a whole,"* with frequent check-ins replacing end-of-year reports (SMM process reflections 2025).

This continuous scrutiny enables places to identify and address "blind spots"; for example, one Place mentioned that they used the cycle to realise they were too insular, which prompted them to engage the wider community to validate their self-assessment.

Additionally, the data shows that these cycles are translating into granular, real-world applications. SMM data illustrates how feedback loops from tools like the Place Standard Tool are being used to prioritise physical environment improvements, effectively closing the loop between resident insight and infrastructure investment.

In other areas, this cycle is described as a "genuine resident-led learning loop," where insights from residents shape the local narrative.

"The culture of learning is now evolving from reflection to co-creation and system-wide capability building. Learning is intentionally shared across sectors through

Curiosity Club, Curiosity Cafés, and the Curiosity Conference... The council's internal systems are increasingly aligned around shared data and iterative learning, for instance, Active Environments uses community feedback from the Place Standard Tool to prioritise physical-environment improvements, closing the loop between resident insight and infrastructure decisions." (SMM data 2025).

7.5. Feeding forward

While the evidence demonstrates progress in building evaluative capacity, the data also highlights areas for improvement, particularly regarding the accessibility of the approach. A recurring theme across the stakeholder survey and interviews is the challenge posed by the use of academic language, which creates a barrier to the necessary shift in Thinking and Practices. Qualitative insights highlight that this is not merely a communication issue but an engagement one; the barrier can trigger a sense of "intellectual exclusion," potentially leading to early disengagement or resistance before the work has begun. Stakeholders also noted that while core concepts are valued, the terminology often requires significant "translation" before it can be operationalised locally.

There is an opportunity to leverage this peer-led translation by sharing examples of how different places have articulated the SMM to bridge the gap between academic theory and local practice without diluting the approach's rigour. There is also scope to improve how existing resources are signposted, ensuring partners can identify the right support for their current stage.

The data indicates that social learning spaces function as a critical mechanism for resilience, allowing stakeholders to navigate the uncertainty inherent in systems change. As the programme evolves, prioritising these relational spaces will be vital to support stakeholders and leaders in maintaining a learning orientation amidst external pressures.

The SMM has demonstrated utility beyond assessment, serving as a diagnostic lever for strategic planning, workforce design, and resource allocation. Future engagement should encourage places to explicitly integrate these conditions into their operational infrastructure – such as job descriptions and funding frameworks, to embed systemic principles into the fabric of delivery.

There is a clear indication that external validation plays a key role in empowering places to embrace non-linear progress. Continued advocacy for complexity-informed reporting, where challenges are framed as learning opportunities rather than failures, will be essential in countering traditional performance management cultures.

The transition from reflection to action is most evident where feedback loops are granular and community-led. Continuing to support places to establish clear mechanisms that link community insight directly to decision-making will help ensure that evaluative consciousness translates into tangible environmental and systemic changes.

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9. Appendices

9.1. 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 & insight capture	Effective capture and use of data and insight
		1b	SCIC	Community perspectives	Community perspectives on challenges, strengths and priorities are valued and underpin place-based working on physical activity
		1c	TSI	Understanding 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 & practices for PBSA	Partners implement policies, practices and organisational structures to enable place-based systemic working
		2b	SIPA	Inclusive comms practices	Partner organisations adapt communications to align and engage with diverse cultures
		2c	TSI	Processes address causes	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	3a	SIPA	Partner capacity & capability	Partners are investing in building capacity and capability for place-based systemic working

Condition name	Plain english description	No.	Area of action	Short label	Summary description
	skills to work together	3b	SCIC	VCFSE capacity & capability	Working with communities and voluntary organisations to build capacity and capability
		3c	TSI	Community empowerment	Support and resources for communities to build the capacities and capabilities to advocate and act to address inequalities
Collaboration	Groups and organisations are working together to achieve more	4a	SIPA	Collaboration across sectors	Collaborative practice within and across sectors
		4b	SCIC	VCFSE Collaboration	Thriving community sector that works together on physical activity
		4c	TSI	Collective action on inequalities	Collective action to address 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	People at all levels take on roles and responsibility to tackle physical activity inequalities and can act autonomously
		5c	SCIC	Community influence	Community leadership and influence
Community-led Action	Local people leading initiatives and working together to achieve their goals	6a	SIPA	Lived experience informs physical activity initiatives	Meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in developing sector-led physical activity initiatives
		6b	SCIC	Community-led initiatives	Supported community-led initiatives

Condition name	Plain english description	No.	Area of action	Short label	Summary description
		6c	TSI	Community influence	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	Active organisational settings	Cultures and practices in workplaces enable and support physical activity/moving more in daily work routines
		7b	SCIC	Inclusive cultures for physical activity	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	Equity-oriented regeneration	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 methods	Evaluation uses appropriate methods for place-based working

9.2. Examples of embedded maturity in key outcome conditions

CCA decision tree models

Collaborative practice within & across sectors (4a): 2025 data

Model set on accuracy, with all data (2025/6)									
	Accuracy: 92.06%	True Positive: 44.44%	True Negative: 47.62%	False Positive: 7.94%	False Negative: 4.94%				
6a									
1 26:7	3a								
	1 24:5	9a-9c							
		1 22:5	5a						
			1 19:4	1a					
				1 16:3					
				0 3:1					
			0 3:1	5b					
				1 00:00					
				0 3:1					
			0 2:0	58.73%					
		0 02:02	5a						
			1 2:0	58.73%					
			0 00:02						
0 02:28	8a								
	1 01:01	3a							
		1 00:01							
			0 1:0	57.14%					
		0 01:27	7a						
		1 01:01	2a						
			1 1:0	57.14%					
			0 00:01						
			0 00:26						

Collaborative practice within & across sectors (4a): Change in maturity 2024-25

Model set on accuracy, where attributes dichotomy is 'any increase in maturity for that variable' and outcome is 'any increase in maturity for that variable'						
	Accuracy: 95.12%	True Positive: 45.12%	True Negative: 50.00%	False Positive: 1.22%	False Negativity: 0.86%	
6a						
	1 16:4	3a	A			
		1 13:1	9a-9c			
			1 11:1	1a		
				1 9:0	73.17%	
				0 2:1	53.66%	
			0 2:0		56.10%	
		0 03:03	5b			
			1 01:02			
			0 2:1	51a		
				1 00:01		
				0 2:0	56.10%	B
	0 04:17					

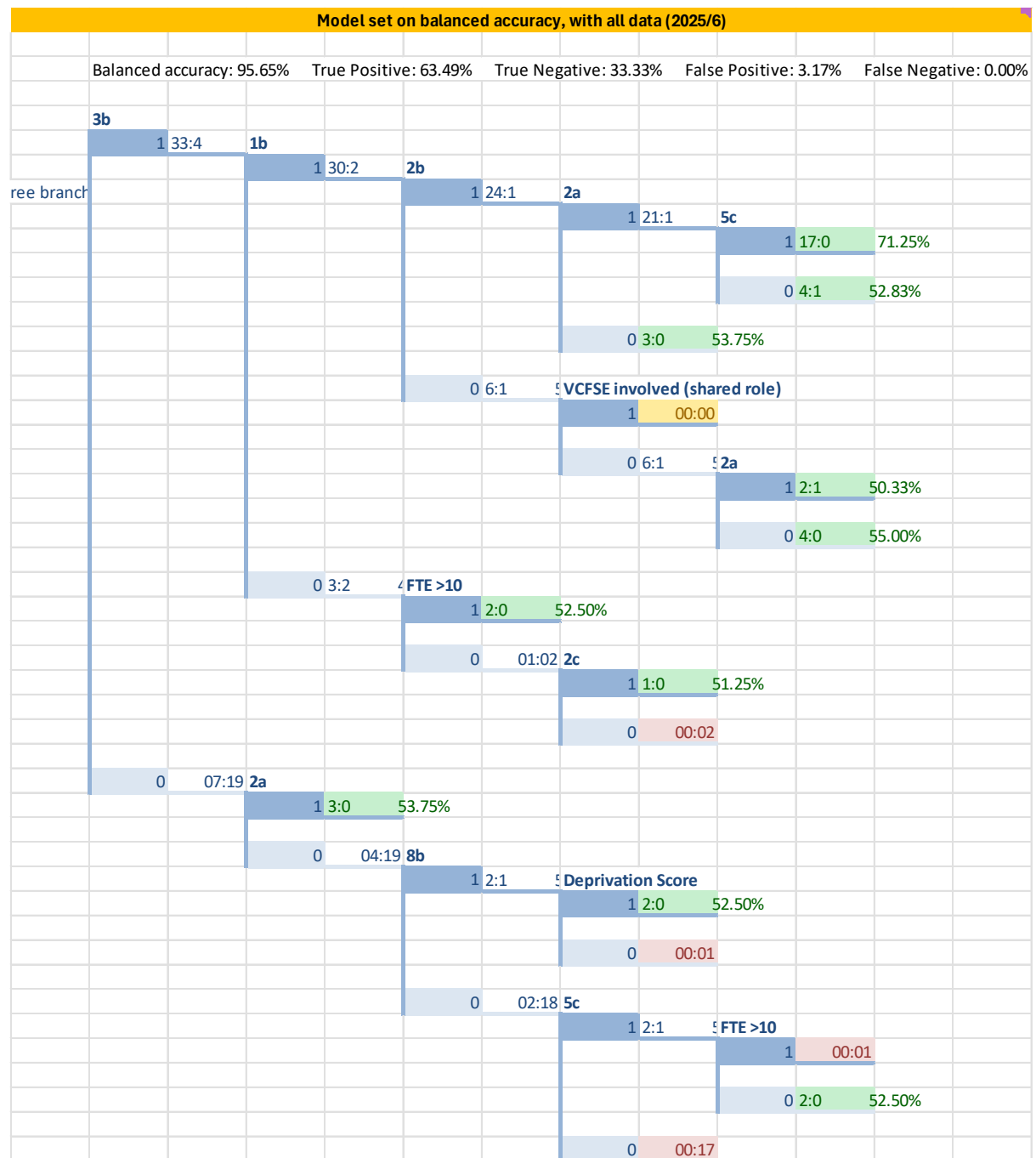
Strategic leadership (5a): 2025 data

Condition Model:	5a (static 2025)			Included Attributes:	1c (static 2025)	3a (static 2025)	Wider adoption PBSA (static 2025)	9a-c (static 2025)			
Set on:	Accuracy				2a (static 2025)	5c (static 2025)	Motivation, Understanding, Values (static 2025)				
Number of Cases:	63				4a (static 2025)	Sufficient Capacity (static 2025)					
NO EXCLUDED CASES		NONE		Outcome Variable		5a >3					
MODEL (FULL)											
	Accuracy: 95.24%	True Positive: 46.03%	True Negative: 49.21%	False Positive: 3.17%	False Negative: 1.59%						
	9(a-c)										
	1 26:8	4a									
		1 21:4	1c								
			1 18:2	77. 3a			1 17:2	76.19%	5c		
									1 14:0	74.60%	A
									0 3:2	53.97%	B
							0 1:0	53.97%	C		
			0 3:2	53.9 MUV			1 1:0	53.97%	D		
							0		02:02 Sufficient capacity		
									1 1:0	53.97%	E
									0	01:02	
		0 5:4									
			0 5:0	60.32%							
	0 04:25	4a									
		1 2:1									
			1	00:01							
			0 2:0	55.56%							
		0 02:24	3a								
			1	02:04 Wider adoption PBSA			1 1:0	53.97%	H		
							0		01:04 MUV		
									1 1:0	53.97%	I
									0	00:04	
			0	00:20							

Strategic leadership (5a): Change in maturity 2024-25

Condition Model:	5a (increase in maturity)	Included Attributes:	1c (increase) 2a (increase) 4a (increase)	3a (increase) 5c (increase) Sufficient Capacity (static 2025)	Wider adoption PBSA (static 2025) Motivation, Understanding, Values (static 2025)	9a-c (increase)			
Set on:	Accuracy								
Number of Cases:	41								
Excluded cases:	Where no data for last year exists IE only places from Y2->Y3	Outcome Variable	5a increase in maturity						
MODEL (FULL)	Accuracy: 85.37%	True Positive: 39.02%	True Negative: 46.34%	False Positive: 4.88%	False Negative: 9.76%				
	3a	1 13:7	9(a-c)	1 11:4	5c	1 6:0 65.85%	A		
					0 5:4 53.6 MUV				
						1	01:02 Wider adoption PBSA	1 00:01	
								0 01:01	
						0 4:2 56.10%	4a	1 02:02	
								0 2:0 56.10%	B
			0 02:03 1c	1 1:0 53.66%	C				
				0 01:03 Sufficient capacity		1 00:00			
						0 01:03 5c		1 01:01	
								0 00:02	
		0 07:14 9(a-c)	1 03:10 5c	1 01:02 Wider adoption PBSA		1 00:02			
						0 1:0 53.66%	D		
			0 02:08 2a	1 01:01 Sufficient capacity		1 1:0 53.66%	E		
						0 00:01			
						0 01:07 Wider adoption PBSA		1 00:01	
								0 01:06	
		0 04:04 Wider adoption PBSA	1 01:04 2a	1 00:00					
						0 01:04 Sufficient capacity		1 00:00	
								0 01:04	
				0 3:0 58.54%	F				

Supported community-led initiatives (6b): 2025 data



Supported community-led initiatives (6b); Change in Maturity 2024-25

Model set on balanced accuracy, where attributes dichotomy is 'any increase in maturity for that variable' and outcome is 'any increase in maturity for that variable'									
Balanced accuracy: 92.82%		True Positive: 48.78%		True Negative: 43.90%		False Positive: 2.44%		False Negative: 4.88%	
4b									
1 12:2		3b		1 10:0		72.73%		A	
		0 02:02		VCFSE involved (shared role)		1 2:0		54.55%	
						0 00:02		B	
0 10:17		5c		1 3:2		53b		1 00:02	
						0 3:0		56.82%	
		0 07:15		2a		1 03:03		3b	
						0 3:1		Proportion £SE (>50%) average	
						1 3:0		56.82%	
						0 00:01		D	
		0 04:12		8b		1 02:03		2c	
						1 2:1		51.91%	
						0 00:02			
		0 02:09		2c		1 01:03			
						0 01:06			

Cultures and practices that enable physical activity (7b): 2025 data

Model set on balanced accuracy (5 branches), with all data (2025/6)										
Balanced accuracy: 87.09%		True Positive: 29.37%		True Negative: 59.52%		False Positive: 3.97%		False Negative: 7.14%		
5c										
1 17:8		1b								
		1 17:7		6b		1 17:6		9a-c		
						1 15:5		8b		
								1 13:2		75.76%
								0 02:03		
						0 2:1		3b		
								1 00:01		
								0 2:0		54.35%
				0 00:01						
		0 00:01								
0 06:32		4b								
		1 2:0		54.35%						
		0 04:32		9a-c		1 03:07		1b		
						1 02:06		2b		
								1 01:05		
								0 01:01		
						0 01:01		6b		
								1 1:0		52.17%
								0 00:01		
				0 01:25		8a				
						1 00:01				
						0 01:24		8b		
								1 00:03		
								0 01:21		

Cultures and practices that enable physical activity (7b): Change in Maturity 2024-25

