

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Evaluating Place-Based Systemic Approaches to Physical Activity

There is widespread recognition that increasing physical activity requires widespread change—not just isolated interventions. In response, Sport England and other national bodies have adopted place-based systemic approaches (PBSAs), designed to improve the wider social, environmental, and structural conditions for activity, with focussed investment where inequalities are most pronounced. These approaches are dynamic and context-specific, shaped by local actors, assets, and conditions.

Evaluating such complexity requires more than impact measures. The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) uses a theory-driven, realist-informed approach that recognises variation across places while identifying transferable insights. Rather than asking “what works?”, NELP explores what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why.

Local place-based stakeholders co-develop theories of change, grounded in the outcomes they aim to achieve—such as stronger partnerships, greater community ownership, or improved infrastructure. These are tested through a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, social network mapping, and participatory techniques.

A cross-place theory of change model orientates the evaluation. It distinguishes wider socio-demographic conditions and local resources, which provide an “active context” affecting how focussed investment may, or may not influence short and medium-term outcomes like inclusive decision-making, stronger collaboration, and enhanced capacity. These changes potentially lay the groundwork for long-term goals: increased activity, reduced inactivity, narrowed inequalities, and improved experiences for children and young people.

Insights from local evaluations are synthesised using realist and configurational comparative analysis (CCA). This enables us to identify cross-cutting conditions—such as collaboration leadership, culture, and community-led action - that may enable progress, while recognising multiple valid pathways to success. Evidence for maturity of these conditions is collected locally, and verified and moderated centrally, then analysed using specialist software to identify combinations of conditions predicting outcomes. For instance, community leadership might emerge through governance reform in one place, or through direct investment in resident capacity in another. This comparative insight allows learning to be shared without flattening local nuance.

Early evidence shows stronger prioritisation of physical activity, more inclusive governance, and increased investment in enabling environments—signals of system change and potential precursors to long-term population-level impact.

Importantly, this evaluation informs decisions about local adaptation and investment. Moving beyond binary judgments of success or failure, it asks whether the conditions for change are being created. This enables more transparent, equitable, and evidence-informed decision-making.

In sum, the evaluation generates a layered, comparative understanding of how PBSAs contribute to more equitable, sustainable physical activity systems—within and across places.