

PLAIN ENGLISH SUMMARY



MARCH 2026

www.evaluatingcomplexity.org

What Sport England is doing, and why

Helping more people be active can't be done through one-off projects or short-term funding. To make real, lasting change, we need to improve the whole system that affects how people move. From local environments and transport to health services, community groups and schools.

That's why Sport England invests in place-based systemic approaches (PBSAs). These approaches bring together partners in each area to: focus on the conditions that make activity easier or harder; target resources where inequalities are greatest; and to learn together, adapt, and share what works.

Together, we are not just asking 'did it work?' We're asking, 'what worked, for who, in what kind of place and why?'

The evaluation challenge

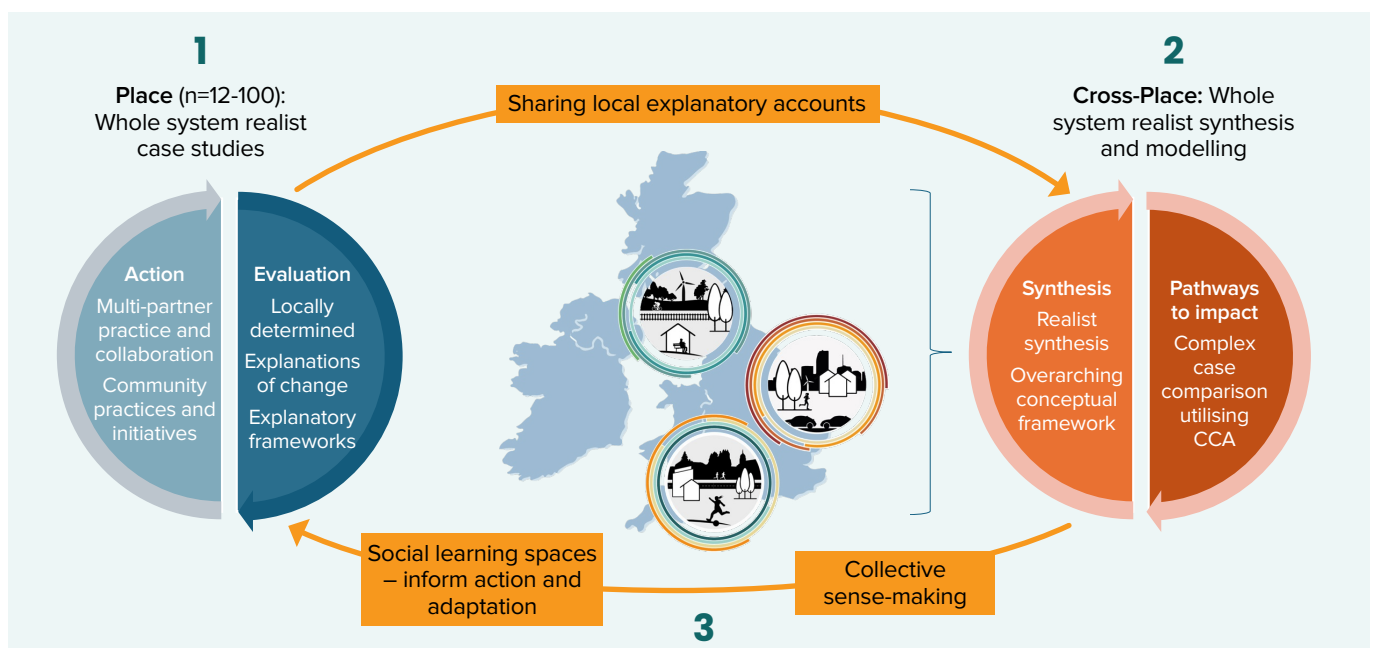
Every place is different. The local economy, transport, housing, and community spirit all shape what's possible. So, a single 'impact measure' won't capture the full picture.

Our National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) uses an approach called whole system realist evaluation. This means we start with what local people and partners are doing and hoping to change. We collect stories, data and evidence about how those changes happen, building knowledge and understanding about what works and doesn't work. And, we compare and connect what's being learned across different places.

How the evaluation works

The work moves through three iterative and continuous steps as illustrated in the figure below:

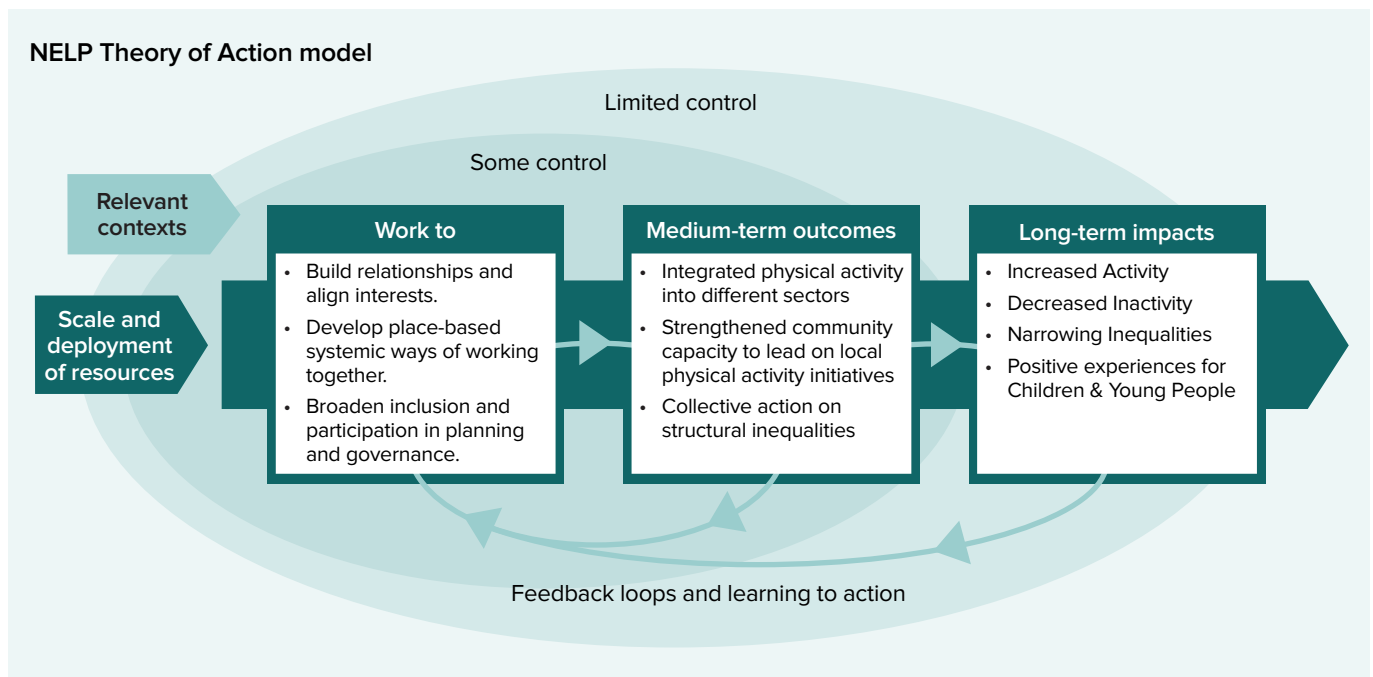
1. Local Action and Evaluation – Local partners collect evidence through interviews, mapping, and group discussions.
2. National Synthesis and Theory Building – NELP compares data from all areas to find combinations of actions that lead to progress.
3. Social Learning Spaces – Regular forums where local and national teams reflect and adapt together.



Our shared model for change

All our work aims for four long-term outcomes for Uniting the Movement: more people active; fewer inactive people; narrower inequalities; better experiences for children and young people.

We focus on plausible contribution not attribution, building confidence that our actions are part of the positive change we're seeing.



What we're learning so far

We're beginning to see early signs of system change:

- Physical activity is a clearer local priority.
- Decision-making is more inclusive and community-led.
- Local investment is improving environments.
- Partnerships and trust are growing.
- Language and mindsets are shifting — more people now talk about movement and wellbeing.

This evaluation connects physical activity with wider agendas like health, housing, transport, education, and economic inclusion.

What this means for Sport England and our partners

This evaluation approach is world-leading because it:

- Builds evidence with places, not about them.
- Recognises multiple routes to success.
- Connects local learning to national policy.
- Keeps equality and inclusion at the centre.
- Turns evaluation into a learning practice, helping us act on what matters most.

Sport England's place-based evaluation gives us a fairer, smarter way to understand and grow system change. It helps us use evidence to guide decisions and build confidence that our work is making a real difference for communities today and in the future.