

TECHNICAL NARRATIVE



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Context and introduction to the evaluation challenge

There is collective agreement that we need systems that support physical activity, and that changing those systems can't be reduced to individual interventions.

In response, there has been a significant policy shift towards whole-systems and place-based approaches, which aim to transform the broader conditions influencing physical activity, whilst tailoring the intensity of investment where there are equity gaps.

Government bodies and funders, including DCMS and Sport England, are committed to evaluating these investments rigorously and demonstrating value for money. And there is a growing recognition that these place-based and systems approaches (PBSAs) are inherently complex and context-dependent. They are not standalone interventions with fixed rules; rather, they evolve in response to local characteristics, assets, challenges, and actors. The context is not a backdrop—it is a dynamic and integral part of what shapes both action and outcome.

For example, Sport England's place-based investment supports locally tailored, multi-sector action that looks very different across areas. It might include community-led initiatives, cross-sector partnerships, investment in active travel infrastructure, or the co-design of inclusive physical activity offers. These are embedded within—and shaped by—the unique political, economic, social, and environmental conditions of each place.

We don't think (quasi) experimental impact evaluation is feasible or desirable here, so we've opted for a different set of methods. In line with recommendations, our approach is theory-driven and involves iterative consideration of supporting (and inhibiting) contextual factors. Theories are based on the practical actions of local actors and the changes they hope to see, through their collective action. For example, how they can broaden and deepen partnerships with aligned interest to support local physical activity. Or how they can sustainably support local communities to contribute to the design and delivery of physical activity opportunities which will be used and owned by residents.

Theories are also generated at a cross-place level based on common patterns of key actions and relational dynamics. Data is collected using a range of appropriate methods, to test and refine these theories - generating a layered understanding of what works, to bring about system change, in what circumstances, and why. This is analysed acknowledging that achievements will vary in their characteristics from place to place. And different combinations of types of contexts and interventions will be found to be good predictors of these achievements.

This layered understanding can support learning for ongoing local delivery. In line with the underpinning rationale for investment in local place-based systemic action, local action can look different in each place but, when aggregated, can lead to population-level change in physical activity, while narrowing inequalities by focusing investment where it is most needed.

The overarching Theory of Change model

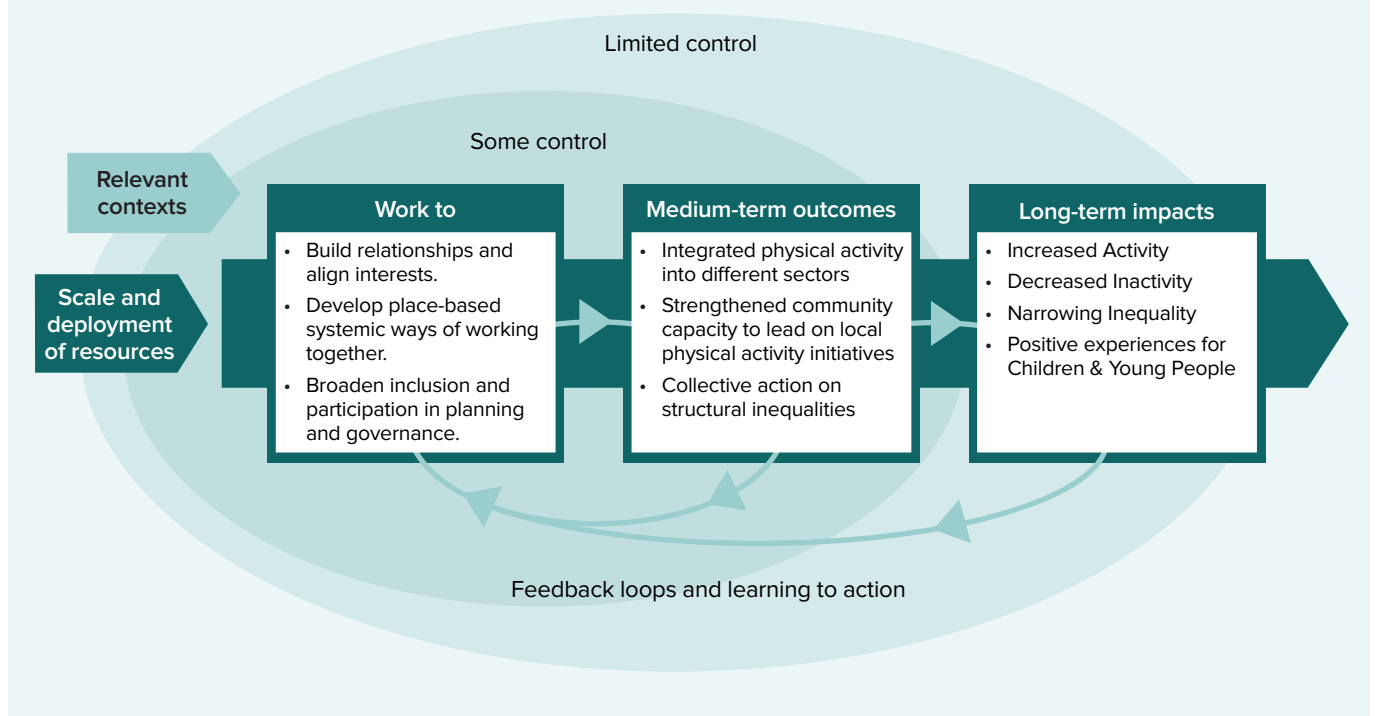
All of Sport England's investment including place-based, systemic approaches to tackling physical inactivity is designed to support long-term population-level impacts:

- Increased levels of physical activity
- Decreased inactivity
- Narrowed inequalities
- Positive experiences for children and young people

While these impacts are the intended destination, the routes to achieving them are non-linear, variable, and influenced by a host of interacting factors within each local system.

While at least three of the four outcomes may be measurable in principle, it will be important to recognise that progress in these areas is likely to be manifested in different ways. In each location different groups of people will become engaged in different forms of activity. And the significance of those changes will vary, both in the eyes of the communities and from independent assessments,

Figure 1: NELP Theory of Action model



such as the health consequences. Imagination will be needed to capture both the changes that have taken place and how they are valued.

Independent measures e.g. national surveys of the currently expected outcomes, could then be best seen as a means of verification of claims by partners about what works, as distinct from primary evidence.

It is not possible to attribute changes in these impacts to the Sport England investment, alone. Instead, we must explore how local efforts, supported by Sport England's investment, plausibly contribute to local change within specific contexts.

The outer oval represents the wider context that significantly affects impacts but lies largely beyond the control of local actors—such as national political, economic, and demographic conditions, or the personal histories and experiences of individuals.

The inner oval depicts the aspects of the system that local actors may be able to influence—such as perceptions of safety in local parks, the availability of inclusive physical activity opportunities, or the walkability of neighbourhoods.

Within this, the active context—illustrated as a rectangle—represents the area of greatest local influence. This is where resources, capacity, and funding are directed toward actions such as building community leadership, brokering partnerships with sectors such as health or education, or mobilising assets to address local barriers to activity.

These actions are designed to generate short-term outcomes—such as increased cross-sector collaboration, enhanced visibility of physical activity in local priorities, and strengthened capacity for co-design. These, in turn, help to create the enabling conditions for longer-term impacts.

Importantly, academic literature provides evidence that such conditions can foster shifts in population-level behaviours over time—though the timelines and pathways will vary. The model acknowledges:

- The presence of long causal chains
- The need to tolerate uncertainty
- The importance of understanding how, for whom, and in what contexts change occurs

Rather than seeking definitive attribution, the goal is to build confidence that actions are plausibly contributing to positive change—evidence of which is beginning to emerge in some areas.

Our evaluation highlights areas of change (in the green dotted circle) that we can be confident are occurring because of Sport England's place-based work. As they emerge, we are also capturing outcomes and impacts that are plausibly influenced by Sport England's place-based work (in the orange dotted circle).

The model also highlights the presence of feedback loops—where progress (or lack of it) on short-term outcomes can reinforce or undermine future action.

How the National Evaluation and Learning Partnership evaluate Sport England's Place Based Systemic Approach

To evaluate these complex, adaptive systems, we have adopted an evaluation approach that provides a foundation for learning, knowledge accumulation, and adaptive action (Figure 2). This is based on established methodologies for complex interventions: realist evaluation and qualitative comparative analysis.

1. Action and Local Evaluation

On the left of the model, “action” refers to the diverse, multi-partner initiatives taking place across localities in England. These are led by the stakeholders in each place, are context-specific and are grounded in local systems, communities, and priorities.

Evaluation is embedded within the action itself. Local teams generate explanatory accounts of change using realist principles, focusing not only on whether change happens, but how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances. These insights surface the mechanisms and conditions that influence outcomes at a local level.

Data is collected locally according to the priorities identified by local partners. This may come from a range of sources, including observations, interviews, documentary evidence, frequency counts, participatory methods such as group consensus-making, ripple effects mapping, and social network analysis.

2. Synthesis and Theory-Building

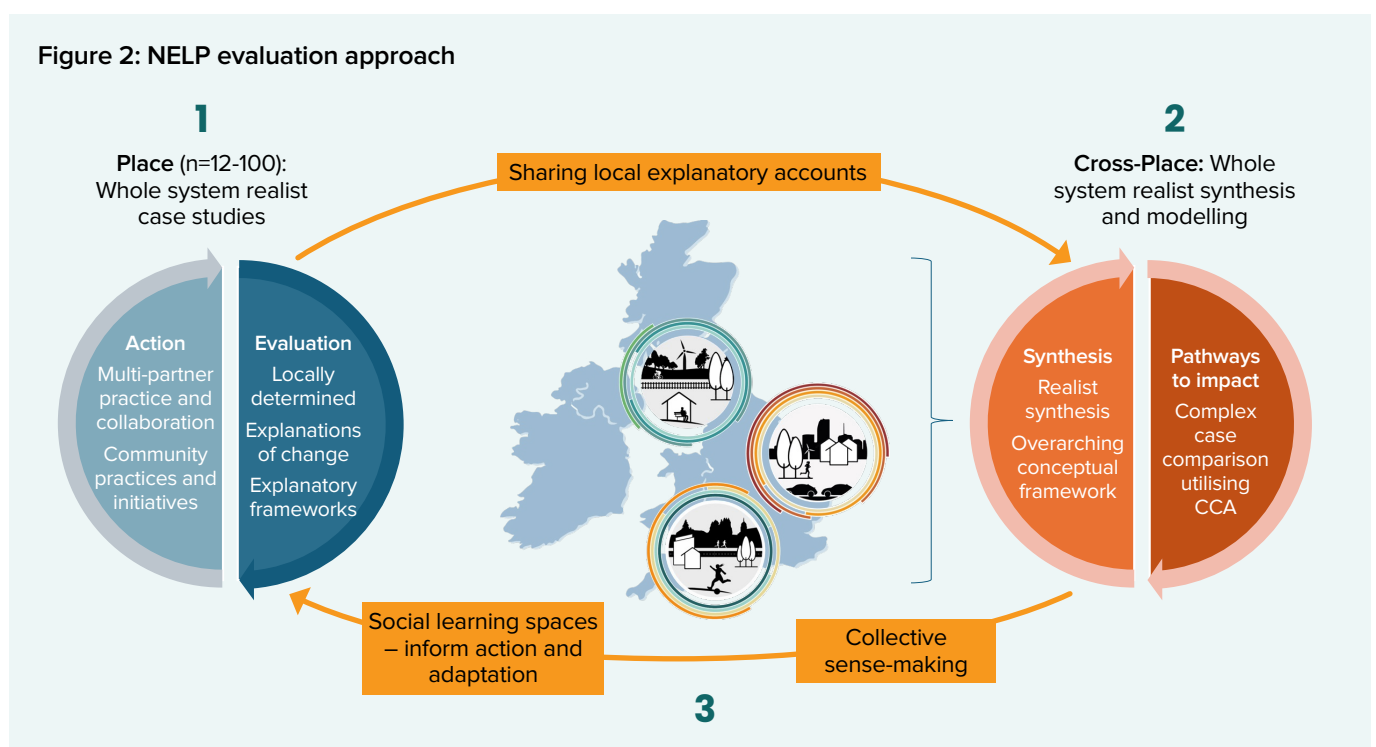
On the right, local data and summaries of lessons learned are synthesised using realist synthesis methods. This occurs at two levels – at a place-level, and at the cross-place level. This has identified common patterns across cases. In sum, these refer to:

- Three key areas of action to reach the medium-term outcomes, and:
- Nine cross-cutting conditions in the structures, cultures and ways of working that support system change.

This framework is not a prescriptive model, but a tool to make visible the system behaviours, mechanisms, and processes that enable (or inhibit) change across diverse places.

Cross-place data about these areas of action, and cross-cutting conditions, feeds into a configurational comparative analysis (CCA), which identifies different combinations of factors—such as system maturity, enabling contexts, and resource inputs—that contribute to progress. This approach values multiple, equally valid pathways to impact, rather than seeking one-size-fits-all solutions. For example, in some places, a local governance system where the voluntary sector organisations are involved in decision making is leading to more mature community-led action on physical activity inequalities. In other places, strengthening residents' leadership capacity directly, through training and providing paid and volunteer roles has led to community-led action.

Figure 2: NELP evaluation approach



3. Social Learning Spaces

Across all phases, social learning spaces support collective sense-making. These forums enable stakeholders to reflect on emerging evidence from their locally commissioned evaluation, as well as the cross-place evaluation, share learning, and adjust local strategies and actions as needed. This helps to build more effective, equitable, and context-sensitive strategies for promoting physical activity.

At its core, the model is about tackling inequalities. By working with complexity, embracing local specificity, and identifying transferable insights without flattening nuance, we are building a cumulative, practice-informed evidence base to inform future policy and investment.

What are we seeing so far?

It takes time to work differently in place, but we are beginning to see important signs of progress towards the short- and medium-term outcomes:

- Stronger prioritisation of physical activity across a wider range of partners
- More inclusive, participatory approaches to decision-making
- New investments in built and natural environments to support safe, accessible activity opportunities
- Change in language – wider lens on movement, physical activity and sport (and within that a more inclusive sport system).
- Change in mindsets, behaviours and ways of working across national and local systems. More collaborative, aligned interests, shared language, deeper trust.

Our approach keeps physical activity inequalities at the centre of the evaluation —just as tackling entrenched inequalities is at the heart of Uniting the Movement. It acknowledges that while Sport England and local efforts play an important role, they are only one part of the broader system influencing inequality. It helps wider system partners, working on other agendas to see the relevance and interrelationship between this agenda and the issues that matters to them. It also helps those working in the physical activity mission to understand and articulate how and their contribution to—and need for—health and wealth equity, a social model of health, integrated public transport systems, good homes, safer communities and economic inclusion. This all helps to develop a powerful coalition of people working towards shared missions and outcomes.

This opens up space for wider collaboration with those who share a commitment to reducing inequalities—whether in health, housing, education, or economic development. The academic evidence is clear: physical

activity inequalities are deeply intertwined with wider social and economic inequalities. By embedding work in a broader place-based agenda, Sport England and colleagues can contribute to more joined-up, sustainable solutions.

Evaluation as a learning practice

Ultimately, this evaluation is not just about proving impact—it is about improving practice towards achieving the outcomes and impacts. Wider academic literature suggests that where the outcomes are present, there is a corresponding presence of the longer-term outcomes. The evaluation effort is orientated towards developing and strengthening evidence-based theories about how, where and in what circumstances we can intervene to generate more of the outcomes in local systems.

We also accept that we do not have full control. Accordingly, in complex systems, where change is emergent and contested, a learning-oriented approach is essential.

This in itself has to be operationalised and all actors, including those in Sport England, in local places, and in the National Evaluation and Learning Partnership, are becoming more explicit about who is doing what kind of learning about what.

In sum, by supporting collective inquiry, surfacing mechanisms, and recognising multiple pathways to progress, we are helping to build the conditions for more equitable physical activity systems—now and in the future.

What is the economic value of this?

We know from a robust body of international evidence that increasing physical activity has substantial economic benefits—including reductions in healthcare expenditure, improved mental wellbeing, greater workforce participation, and enhanced educational outcomes.

We also know that a focus on individual and/or targeted community behaviour change interventions are insufficient for population level changes in physical activity, and can reinforce silos or unintentionally imply that disparities in physical activity are due to the characteristics of the group, rather than the conditions they live in.

As a result, efforts are now being placed to operationalise a place-based systemic approach, but the routes to these benefits in complex systems are indirect and often take time to materialise.

Our evaluation focuses on contribution, not attribution—building a cumulative picture of how local actions plausibly lead to the kind of system shifts that underpin long-term value for money. We also capture intermediate

indicators (e.g., stronger partnerships, increased reach to underserved populations, changes in local investment patterns) that are potential precursors to economic impact.

The economic value of place-based, whole-system approaches lies not just in direct returns on investment, but in their ability to shift the underlying conditions that drive demand for public services over the long term. While it's difficult to attribute changes in outcomes like reduced healthcare costs or increased productivity directly to specific activities, we can build confidence that local actions are contributing to these changes by creating the enabling conditions for more active, healthy lives.

In short, the economic value is both short term AND long-term, individual and collective and distributed—and this kind of systemic, place-based working may be the only sustainable route to achieving it at population level.

How would we know when to disinvest?

The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership's guidance is that disinvestment decisions in complex systems need to move away from simple success/failure binaries. Instead, we need to ask: Is this work enabling system change? Are we seeing the early signals of conditions shifting in ways that matter?

Rather than disinvesting because change hasn't yet occurred, the better question is whether the foundations for change are being laid. For example, are alliances strengthening? Are communities becoming more engaged in shaping solutions? Are new sectors coming to the table? These are leading indicators of potential long-term impact.

However, course-correction/steering or disinvestment may be appropriate when:

- There is sustained evidence of stagnation or regression in short-term outcomes despite tailored support and capacity building.
- The local system shows low readiness or persistent resistance to change, and efforts to unlock progress have been exhausted.
- Resources could demonstrably achieve more in another context with stronger preconditions for change.
- To respond to changes in the active context at local or national levels e.g. political or economic changes.
- Partners receiving investment are not working in ways that are aligned to this mission, the Movement or the challenge of addressing inactivity and inequity.

Locally, places are managing these decisions by reviewing their locally gathered evidence about what is changing, or not, and why. For example, they

- Test and learn what is working locally and reprofile according to emerging evidence
- Align investment from one organisation or another depending on reach
- Disinvest as local partners embed roles/responsibilities following a pump-priming, etc.

Crucially, this is not about penalising complexity or slow progress—it's about continuously learning, adapting, and re-allocating resources in ways that support the greatest possible system impact. It is also about reviewing and challenging the levels of commitment to the approach and strategy – and supporting partners to learn, adapt and align. Our realist-informed approach gives us the tools to make these judgements more transparently and equitably.

APPENDIX

Understanding Change in Place

Each place is different, but our conceptual framework—shaped by academic theory, local data, and co-produced knowledge—offers a structured way of understanding how change happens.

The maturity matrix, developed with local partners, enables a systematic assessment of how embedded and developed each place's approach is. Combined with local data, it helps us identify what combinations of conditions, contexts, and inputs support progress—recognising that different places may follow different routes to impact.

We apply configurational comparative analysis (CCA), a close relative of qualitative comparative analysis, using specialist software (EvalC3) to identify and interpret these patterns. Importantly, this analysis does not aim to rank places by success or failure—it seeks to deepen our understanding of how change happens, so that everyone can learn and adapt.