

ESSENCE

One page overview of each 'condition' for addressing inequalities in physical activity

SEPTEMBER 2026



Organisational policies, processes, and structures enable place-based working



Policies, administrative systems, structures and processes effectively enable and encourage place-based ways of working to address inequalities.

What does this mean and why is it important?

The ways organisations work together and engage with communities are often shaped by their structures, policies, and practices. This covers how resources are managed, how information is shared, how teams align with communities, how success is measured and who can influence decisions. These processes influence how we view and relate to people and communities, often affecting lives in unnoticed ways. Effective place-based working requires us to proactively identify, challenge and change these systemic factors.

Sector integration of physical activity:

Place-based, systemic ways of working can be enabled or obstructed by information and financial systems, team structures, commissioning and decision-making processes, job descriptions and performance measures. Systems and processes – such as assessments, referral forms, or data collection tools – can be (re-)designed to support person-centred, strengths-based approaches. A risk-aware rather than risk-averse mindset enables change at both organisational and individual levels.

Existing policies and communication methods often reflect the experiences and world-views of those planning and delivering services. Working in ways that align with the traditions, values, beliefs, language, and accessibility needs of less active communities is likely to mean changing existing practices. By identifying and challenging assumptions and stereotypes, often reflected in the language and imagery used, we can improve communication with disadvantaged communities, and better align with people's concerns and opportunities.

Tackling structural inequalities:

By recognising how societal inequalities are reflected in organisations policies and processes, we can challenge practices that inadvertently reinforce them. This requires systematically addressing discrimination and prejudice across policies and learning from the lived experiences of people and communities. This helps uncover implicit assumptions and biases that disadvantage certain groups. For example, processes for funding, commissioning and performance management can hinder community-led action and result in inequitable distribution of resources.

How can we change processes and governance to facilitate collaborative, agile ways of working?

1. Recognise that the way many organisations are traditionally organised do not facilitate place-based systemic approaches, and that this needs to change.
2. Systematically assess and redesign existing policies and processes to build in place-based, systemic and equitable ways of working.
3. Ensure policies and processes enable distributed responsibility for decision-making within and across organisations, to enable proportionate and rapid responses to emerging issues and opportunities.
4. Move to collaborative and 'compassionate' commissioning of services, with a focus on what matters to people, where commissioners and providers share responsibility for creating conditions for positive change.

Reflection questions

- How can some of our processes facilitate or inhibit our ability to work in collaborative and agile ways with communities and partners?
- What does it feel like for people experiencing inequalities when they interact with our processes for allocating resources?
- Are we ready to share resources and decision-making power with communities?