

ESSENCE

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

SEPTEMBER 2026



Cycles of learning and action



There are appropriate methods in place to learn from experience and, over time, improve place-based working to address physical inactivity.

What does this mean and why is it important?

Inequalities in physical activity are the result of multiple interacting influences, which makes it difficult to understand cause and effect. Acknowledging this complexity, we must accept some degree of uncertainty. Nevertheless, over time, we can enhance our understanding of how particular actions and ideas work, and the contexts in which they succeed or fail. Participatory learning activities create value in the processes as well as the learning, enabling adaptive ways of working in complex systems. Gathering and applying this information can support decision-making, guiding future actions to tackle inequalities within specific contexts. This ongoing process works best where individuals and partners support a culture of regular reflection and learning.

Learning culture

Building a culture of learning requires collective commitment, modelled by senior staff. It involves accepting uncertainty and seeing initiatives that have not gone to plan as learning opportunities. This is realised through regular, practical habits of reflection, creating space for people to pause and consider what is being learned. It also means broadening perspectives and paying attention to different kinds of value that the work may create. Evaluative thinking should be accessible to everyone, not just specialists. A culture of curiosity, not fear of failure, should prevail, underpinned by trust that enables openness and constructive criticism.

Embedded learning processes

Learning processes require dedicated time and energy and should be prioritised and supported by all involved as a core tool in a place-based systems approach. Processes form a continuous cycle where actions are reviewed, and insights fed back to enable adaptation and improve ongoing work. Attention is given to local people's emerging understandings of how things may be changing or not and this is routinely used to inform future actions and decisions. This includes permission to stop doing things that are not working.

Evaluation uses appropriate methods for place-based working

The evaluation methods are well-suited to the complex and sensitive nature of a place-based approach. They use a variety of information sources, consider dynamic relationships and contexts, and avoid reliance on narrowly defined outcomes. Participatory evaluation methods enable those with lived experience to shape evaluation design and delivery, and to reflect on and share insights to support organisational change. Shared learning can help those involved make sense of findings, informing decisions and action.

How can we adopt cycles of learning and action?

1. **Develop a culture of learning.** A key aspect of learning involves engaging with uncertainty and not being afraid to learn when things do not go as planned. Teams need support to value and develop a learning orientation in their own work.
2. **Embed learning processes into work.** Regular and practical reflection processes are important. These should document insights and inform changes in activities and ways of working. They should also be light touch and manageable, including permission to stop doing things that are not working.
3. **Use complexity sensitive evaluation approaches.** It is useful to draw on evaluation tools and techniques that have been specifically developed to work with complexity.
4. **Draw on diverse sources of learning.** It can help to be intentional about what can be learned from different people, sources, and settings.

Reflection questions

- Do you have simple tools to reflect on your experience, and are the insights systematically used to adapt your work?
- Can your evaluation approaches address the complexity of place-based working and provide actionable insights?
- Are you intentional about your learning processes? Can you see how they contribute different types of value?
- Are people with lived experience actively involved in designing and shaping your evaluation, not just contributing insights after activities have taken place?