

OVERVIEW

Overview of NELP conceptual model and conditions for tackling inequalities in physical activity

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What works in tackling inequalities in physical activity?

The Sport England Strategy *Uniting the Movement* emphasises the need to **tackle stubborn inequalities in physical activity**. Currently, being active relies too much on “a person’s background, gender, bank balance and postcode”. Sport England, along with many other national and local organisations, groups and individuals are working to address this issue. There is a growing recognition there are **no simple fixes**, and addressing inequalities requires residents and workers to take **coordinated action across multiple influences**.

The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) has been working with Sport England and local communities to support learning and evaluation of whole systems and place-based approaches, enhancing understanding of how to address inequalities in physical activity.¹ [NELP](#) defines a whole systems approach (WSA) as an effort to **create enabling conditions** for physical activity across multiple layers of society, from individuals to communities, organisational policy and practice, and the natural and physical environment. A place-based systemic approach (PBA) aligns with this idea but places emphasis on **strengthening communities and rooted in distinctive local characteristics**. Each WSA and PBA is unique, influenced by its context including setting, socio-demographics, and mix of communities and organizations. Efforts to drive change in WSAs and PBAs are not isolated but aligned, achieving outcomes that are often ‘more than the sum of their parts’.

This brief explainer introduces two key aspects emerging from NELP which, together, contribute to a better understanding of what works in tackling inequalities in physical activity. The first outlines three interconnected practices – or areas of action – where efforts to tackle inequalities may take place. The second sets out nine features or characteristics of systems – conditions – that may be necessary for tackling these inequalities.

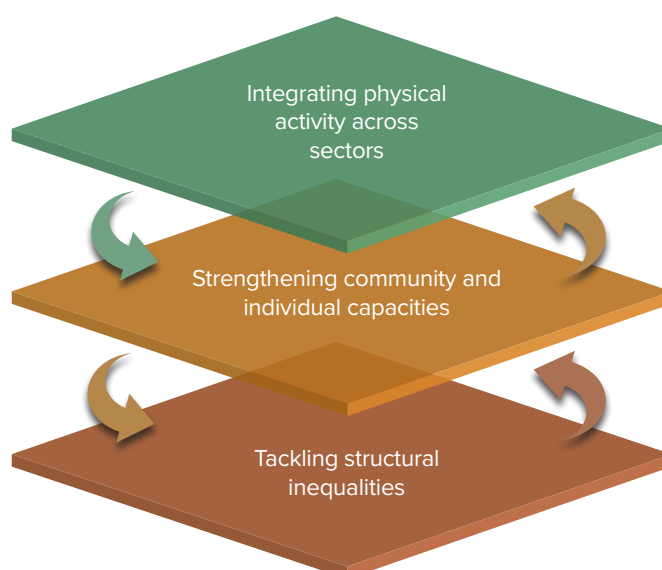
Practices and areas of action

Evidence and insights from those involved in addressing the challenge of inequalities in physical activity have revealed commonalities across places, rooted in where people choose to make interventions. These shared patterns manifest as three interlinked practices or *areas of action*:

- Integrating physical activity across sectors
- Strengthening community and individual capacities
- Tackling structural inequalities

This third area could be viewed as addressing the underlying causes of inactivity. However, whilst it is most likely to achieve sustainable impact, is often most difficult to implement. Table 1 provides a detailed description of these three areas, their definitions, and the rationale for why each is an important area for action.

Figure 1: NELP conceptual framework showing interconnected areas where action to address inequalities often takes place



1. Based on academic literature, observations and discussion with local collaborative groups who are trying to operationalise WSAs and/or PBAs.

Table 1: Practices and areas of action

Area of action	Definition	Rational
Integrating physical activity across sectors	Promotion of physical activity on agendas including, but beyond, traditional sport and leisure sector providers, for example health, education, and social services.	• Signals priorities and the value placed on being active, both as an end in itself and as a means of tackling other policy priorities. • Economy and synergies of scale, by pooling resources to create more comprehensive physical activity opportunities. • Individuals who experience physical inactivity inequalities may not use traditional sport and physical activity sector facilities, but may meet with other professionals, for example, in health, education, and social services. These interactions could provide teachable moments, motivation, signposting and support to be physically active.
Strengthening community and individual capacities	Enhancing and building community strengths, encompassing natural, financial, social, and human resources, to support local people in being physically active.	• Based on a belief that communities, groups, and individuals have the skills, strengths and capacities to address collective problems of inactivity and to maintain the wellbeing of the community. • Community groups and individuals may be better placed to know and understand the barriers and enablers of physical activity for them and their friends/family. • Over time, higher social capital may lead to increased social cohesion, greater trust in institutions, and improved problem-solving abilities, creating reinforcing benefits
Tackling structural inequalities	Differences in power, resources and opportunities related to socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions bring about social gradients with more disadvantaged groups more likely to be inactive.	• A more challenging, but ultimately more sustainable approach would be to address/tackle systemic disadvantages relating to gender, social class, ethnicity, disability, and poverty. This will support individuals and communities to thrive, as well as be physically active. • Working to alleviate these vulnerabilities is often perceived to be beyond the scope and reach of individual agencies or organisations. Taking a WSA or PBA means there may be an opportunity to align and synchronise efforts across networks and institutions, to take structural inequalities seriously and begin to tackle them.

Conditions for tackling inequalities in physical activity

Another outcome of NELP's work is the identification of nine 'conditions' that may be necessary for place-based approaches to address inequalities. Our understanding of these 'conditions' is built on existing literature and the explanations of change developed by those working across Place Partnerships, as reflected in their process evaluations. Each condition represents aspects of context as well as actions taking place that may combine to contribute to positive change. The conditions are broken down into logical groupings, to help make clearer how they relate to each other.

- Foundations to enable Place-based systemic working
- Place-based systemic ways of working together
- Responding to the settings for Place-based systemic working
- Embedded learning processes informing action

A series of guidance documents and recorded Learning Seminars available on the [Evaluating Complexity](#) website, describe and explain each condition, including real-life examples and stories related to these conditions.

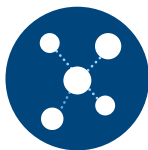
System Maturity Matrix

The [System Maturity Matrix](#) provides descriptors of different levels of maturity in relation to these nine conditions and this has helped actors reflect on the extent to which the condition is present in the place-based system in which they are working. Analysis based on this mix of conditions and local context for each place will contribute to an understanding of patterns of outcomes over time.

Table 2: Conditions in places necessary to tackle inequalities in physical activity

Condition	Definition	Rational
Foundations		
 Identifying the barriers and enablers of physical activity	There is process for developing a deep understanding and (shared) knowledge of what supports and/or prevents people being physically active, within the local context.	Actions which are based on a deep understanding of the barriers and enablers of physical activity are more likely to lead to effective and sustainable outcomes. Actions which are based on shallow or skewed understanding of the barriers and enablers of physical activity could inadvertently widen inequalities. Sharing knowledge of barriers and enablers can help drive a common purpose and common strategy - increasing likelihood of collective impact on what matters most.
 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.	The ways in which organisations work together, and how they engage with communities, are often shaped by their organisational structures, policies, and practices. This includes the ways in which information is captured, used, and shared, or not. For example, how team structures align with communities and partners, the ways in which success is measured, and who is able to make or influence decisions. These processes affect how we view and relate to people and communities, with real impacts in people's lives, but they often go unnoticed or taken for granted. Effective Place-based working requires us to proactively identify, challenge and change these systemic factors.
 Capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities	Action to develop capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers, and communities to work in a place-based systemic approach to enable physical activity.	Specific skill sets and attributes are needed to for this type of responsive working (e.g. to identify barriers and enablers, distribute leadership and collaborate). These skill sets and attributes are not inherently present amongst the existing workforce, volunteers, and communities. Alternative skill sets and attributes can actively block progress. Strategies for building capacity and capability, tailored to the local context, can increase competence and motivation to act in ways which are conducive to tackling physical activity inequalities.
Embedded learning		
 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.	Physical inactivity inequalities are the result of multiple interacting influences, which makes it difficult to understand cause and effect in simple terms. We have to accept that some degree of uncertainty and partial knowledge. We can, however, build better understanding of how particular actions and ideas work and the contexts in which they typically do or do not. Gathering and apply this information can provide 'decision support' to guide future actions in context.
Ways of working		
 Collaboration	There is productive partnership working around a common purpose.	Working with different organisations can help to drive innovative physical activity policy and practice by drawing on different skill sets, and increase impact by reducing duplication and/or pooling resources. Working with different organisations can support shared problem solving and unravel contradictions in local systems which prevent physical activity or contribute to inequalities.

Table 2 continued: Conditions in places necessary to tackle inequalities in physical activity

Condition	Definition	Rational
 Leadership	Policy makers, workforce, volunteers and local people act, and make decisions, both independently and together, to tackle physical activity inequalities.	When decision making, resources and initiatives are less centralised, people in all roles can contribute towards enabling active lives. Everyone's contribution is equally valued. Established leaders can use their power to legitimise physical activity (alone or as a recognised aspect of wellbeing/thriving/prevention), challenge prevailing views and structures which create inequalities, and prioritise whole system and place-based ways of working. Individuals across multiple layers of society, including people who are inactive, can shape decisions about what works to enable physical activity; this can lead to better strategies and outcomes.
 Community-led action	Action is shaped and led by communities and supported by community-focused strategies.	When community members engage at their pace and in spaces that they can shape, they are more likely to engage and collaborate. This approach often leads to more appropriate actions that enable physical activity. Where there is community-led action on wider inequalities then this may contribute to a sense of ownership and control over their own lives.
Settings		
 Physically active cultures in local settings	Active cultures create a social environment for physical activity, encouraging people to move more in ways that suit them.	How physically active we are is shaped by the cultural contexts of our lives; what behaviours we intuitively feel are normal and expected for 'people like us'. This may vary with the contexts of our lives, whether we are at work or school, with family or engaging with wider interest groups and communities around us. People may not relate to those they see engaging in physical activity, due to identity or culturally based differences, including gender, (dis)ability, social class, sexual orientation or ethnicity. These feelings may be reinforced by practical barriers, such as clothing or equipment needed, or past experiences of exclusion, humiliation or shame. By working respectfully and constructively with people within less active communities and groups, we may find ways to enable changes in perceptions, beliefs, practices and values.
 Built and natural environments that enable physical activity	Local natural and built environments are attractive, accessible and safe, encouraging movement and physical activity.	Actual and perceived characteristics of the natural and built environment affect physical activity behaviours. Accessible, appropriate, affordable and safe environments are unequally distributed in society, but appropriate design and/or management of such spaces can help to address this. This may include access to blue and green spaces, urban planning, and workplace design.

These conditions represent our current understanding, based on existing theory and emerging evidence; however, they may be refined as our understanding of systemic transformation grows.