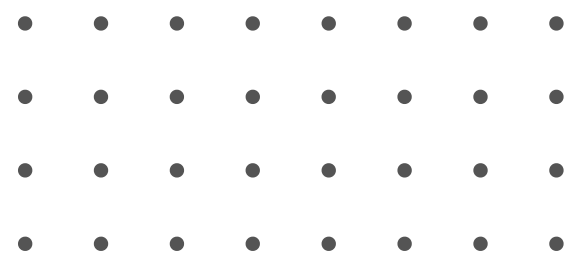


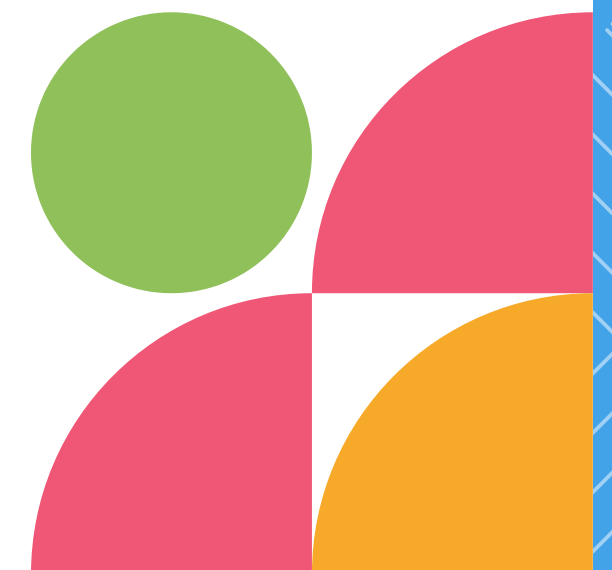


EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GROUP MODEL BUILDING IN CINDERFORD

**Realist Ripple Effects
Mapping findings
2025**



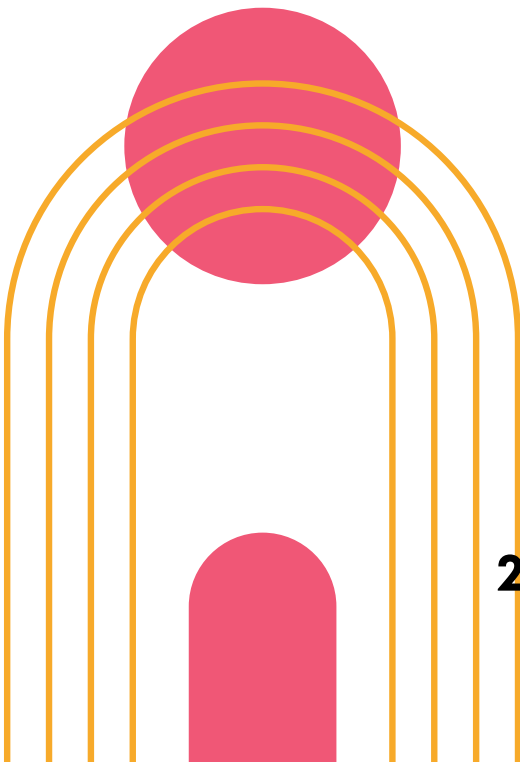
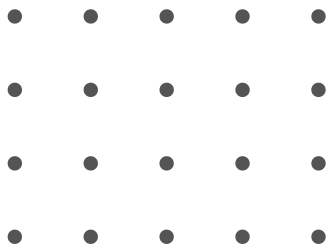
Report produced on behalf of Hartpury University



CONTENTS



3	ABOUT THE EVALUATION
5	EVALUATION PROCESS
7	INITIAL EXPLANATORY STATEMENTS
9	DEEPER FINDINGS
14	KEY SUMMARY
16	RECOMMENDATIONS - REFINED STATEMENTS



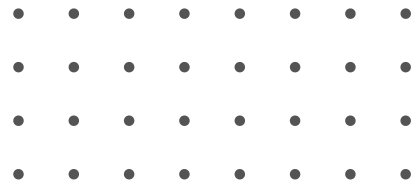
ABOUT THE EVALUATION

In March 2025, Hartpury University were commissioned by Active Gloucestershire to evaluate the Group Model Building Cinderford Place Project. This work has brought together organisations in Cinderford as part of Active Gloucestershire’s place-based investment from Sport England. The work has cultivated in a wide range of organisations, interventions, and projects coming together as part of a Whole Systems Approach to reduce inequalities and tackle physical inactivity across Cinderford.

What is Group Model Building (GMB)?

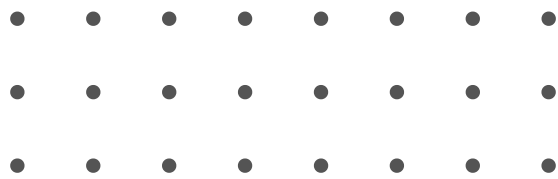
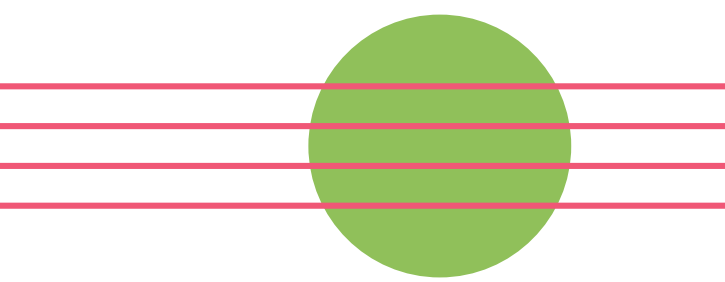
Group Model Building is a collaborative and participatory method that Active Gloucestershire (AG) have been using as part of this project. The method brought local cross sector partners together across a series of workshops to bridge the gaps between systems, and to map out the complex interconnected factors that are affecting access to physical activity across Cinderford. From these workshops, five further action groups were formed to work on actions that aim to create a healthier and more active Cinderford:

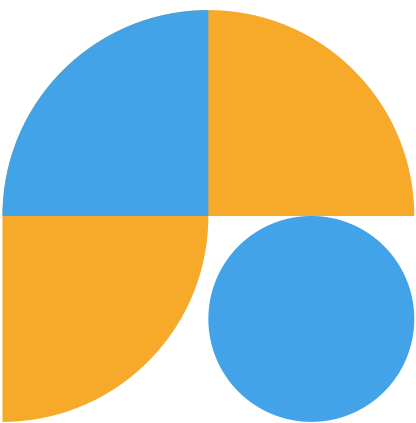
- 1. **Community Activity**
- 2. **Services**
- 3. **Facilities**
- 4. **Communication Information**
- 5. **Transport**



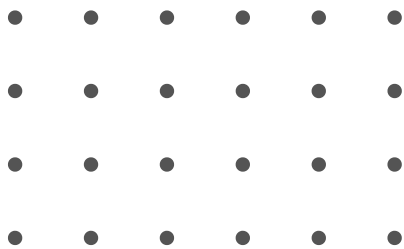
EVALUATION APPROACH - REALIST RIPPLE EFFECTS MAPPING

- This evaluation framework drew upon the implementation of **Realist Evaluation** (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation is becoming routinely used within public health, health, and social care evaluations, and holds significant promise in exploring **how and why programmes work to produce certain outcomes**. This is distinct from conventional outcome focused evaluations that only provide insight into programme outcomes and impact and are unable to link outcomes to the programme itself.
- Realist evaluation holds potential as it takes into consideration the importance of ‘**context**’ (as in the social, environmental, and personal circumstances that may lead and influence people to make certain decisions). This is crucial within any social change programme, which will involve the interaction of human decisions with programme resources (mechanisms of change). Realist evaluation gets to the bottom of how people (stakeholders, system leaders, system architects and communities) respond towards the resources provided in a programme to establish ‘**what works for whom, in what circumstances and why?**’. This is significant, as this understanding can support **learning, improvement, and strategic direction** towards sustainability.
- To further understand and illuminate the key events or impacts that are occurring, whilst still establishing ‘what works for whom, in what circumstances and why’, the evaluation team has been applying **Ripple Effects Mapping** (Nobles et al. 2022) alongside Realist Evaluation to help strengthen the evaluation approach. Ripple Effects Mapping is a **participatory process** of data collection, bringing organisational colleagues together across a series of workshops to reflect on and identify key impacts and effects of their work over a selected period. Participants involved in these workshops are asked to consider how those outcomes influence and produce wider outcomes known as the ‘**ripple effect**’, and this is presented through a visual map following conclusion of the workshop.
- The utilisation of these approaches in cohesion is termed **Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM)** (Harris et al, 2024). This methodology allows for identifying the key events or impacts whilst using Realist evaluation principles to ask implicit questions to understand ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ impacts may or may not be occurring.





EVALUATION PROCESS



PHASE 1: DISCOVERY WORKSHOP

The evaluation team worked collaboratively with AG to map out what was important for the evaluation, who needed to be involved, and agreement of the evaluation approach. This workshop identified 4 key focus areas for the RREM workshop in Cinderford: 1. **Collaboration**, 2. **Workforce Development**, 3. **Community led action** and 4. **System Change**.

PHASE 1: RREM SESSION

A collaborative RREM workshop with **15-20 stakeholders** took Place in Cinderford in April 2025. The stakeholders mapped out the impacts and events emerging from the work along a timeline. The workshop supported the evaluation team to **identify the impacts** that informed the **explanatory statements** that were explored in phase 2 of the evaluation. A snapshot of the map is available on **page 6**.

PHASE 2: EXPLORING IMPACTS

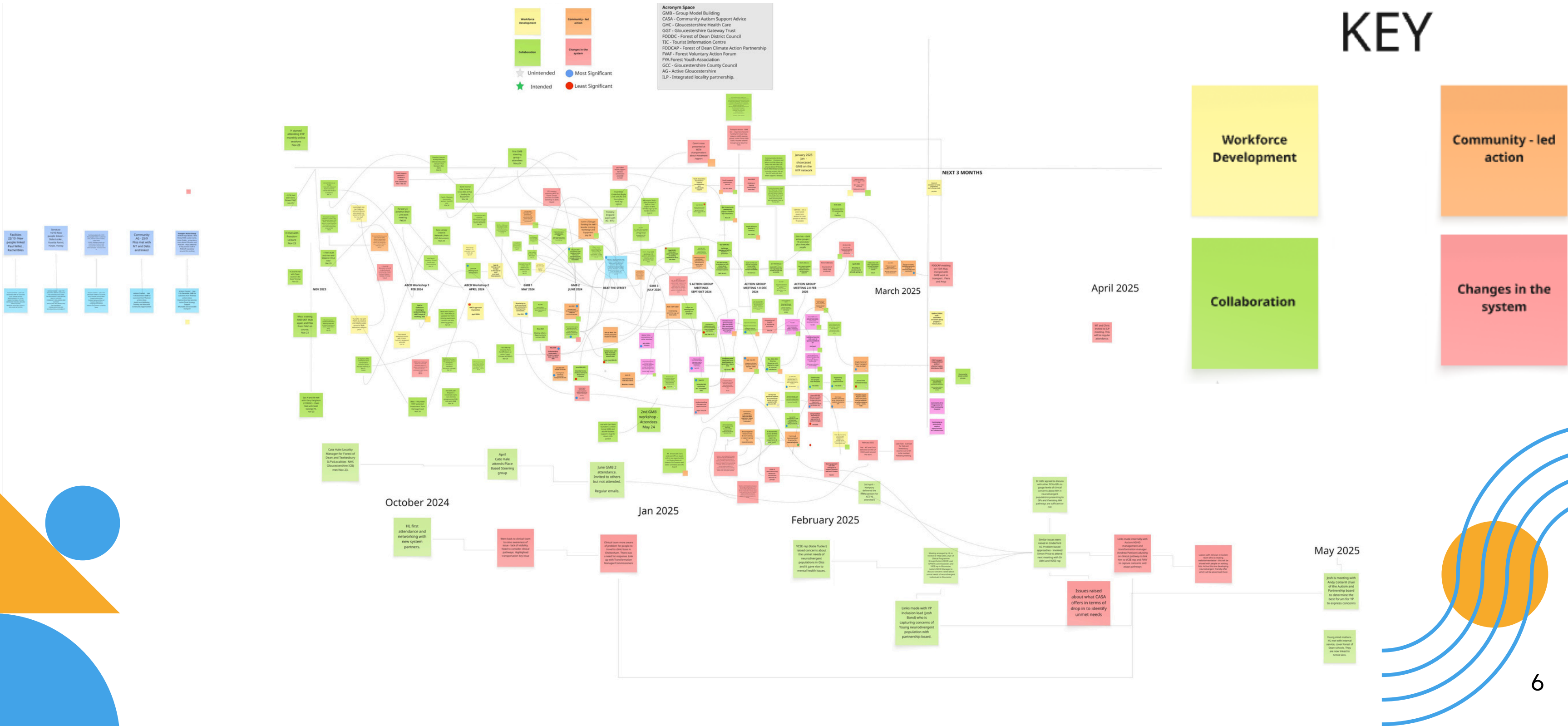
Following the RREM workshop, the evaluation team developed **5 initial explanatory statements** across **3** of the focus areas: **Collaboration**, **Workforce Development**, and **System Change**. Community led action was not chosen as there wasn't as significant impacts to explore. The team tested these explanatory statements with **6 project stakeholders** using **How and Why conversations (Page 7)** to understand what has worked for people across their different contexts,

PHASE 3: REFINING FOR LEARNING

Phase 3 presents the refined explanatory statements after the testing phase. These **statements are refined based on the analysis undertaken in phase 2**. They can be tested in the future to see if they are still reflecting the work going on. To support Active Gloucestershire with understanding the **findings** and what this means for their own **learning**, this evaluation report was developed to bring the findings to life.

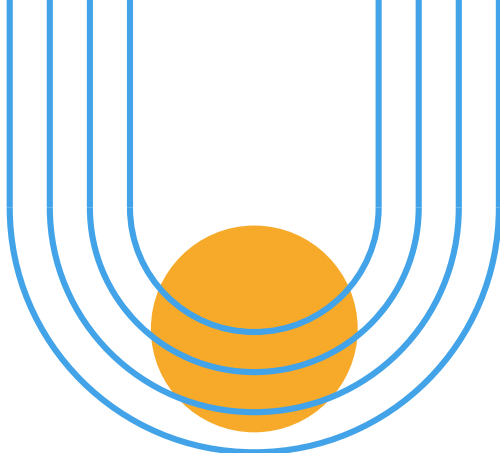
RREM MAP SNAPSHOT

This zoomed out map shows the breadth of work that helped to inform initial explanatory statements for testing in phase of the evaluation. Active Gloucestershire have the latest version of the map as they continue to utilise it to capture future ripples.



EXPLORING IMPACTS

Initial explanatory statements



Focus area 1: Collaboration

Statement 1: **IF** we meet people in spaces where they already attend —such as community centres, workplaces, or local events—and introduce GMB/network in a way that feels relevant to their interests and priorities, **THEN** they will be more likely to actively join and engage in GMB/network, **BECAUSE** connecting in familiar environments makes participation feel natural, and framing the group as a meaningful opportunity—rather than just another meeting—helps people see its value in improving their community and work. When people feel listened to and see how their skills and experiences can contribute, they are more likely to commit and take an active role.

Statement 2: **IF** diverse stakeholders engage in sustained dialogue and shared decision-making, **THEN** they will build trust and a unified vision for systemic change, **BECAUSE** building trust is key to collaboration, ensuring partners feel valued, listened to, and empowered. Dialogue aligns priorities, helping the group work together around shared objectives instead of working in silos. A unified vision aligns efforts, reduces duplication and siloed working, and enables more effective collective problem-solving.

Statement 3: **IF** collaboration is structured with transparent governance and clear roles, **THEN** partners will remain engaged and contribute meaningfully, **BECAUSE** lack of clarity leads to disengagement, frustration, or duplication, weakening collaboration. Clear roles create structure where participants understand their role and contribution. Transparency fosters accountability and trust, ensuring all voices are heard and decisions are made fairly, sustaining engagement in the long term

Focus area 2: Workforce development

Statement 4: **IF** workforce development is aligned with place-based and asset-based community principles, **THEN** local professionals and organisations will collaborate more effectively to drive sustainable community improvements, **BECAUSE** investing in local skills and talents strengthens networks, fosters trust, and empowers communities to address challenges collectively rather than relying on external interventions. Equipping individuals with relevant skills enhances their ability to engage in cross-sector collaboration.

Focus area 3: System changes

Statement 5: **IF** different sectors—like health, housing, and education—coordinate their efforts, **THEN** systems will work more smoothly and feel less disconnected, **BECAUSE** breaking down barriers between organisations makes it easier to tackle health inequalities rather than in isolated parts.

HOW WE TESTED THE EXPLANATORY STATEMENTS

The initial explanatory statements (from **pages 9-13**) break down how change was expected to be achieved through the GMB work. From the data explored, we identified **3 focus areas** and **5 explanatory statements** to test.

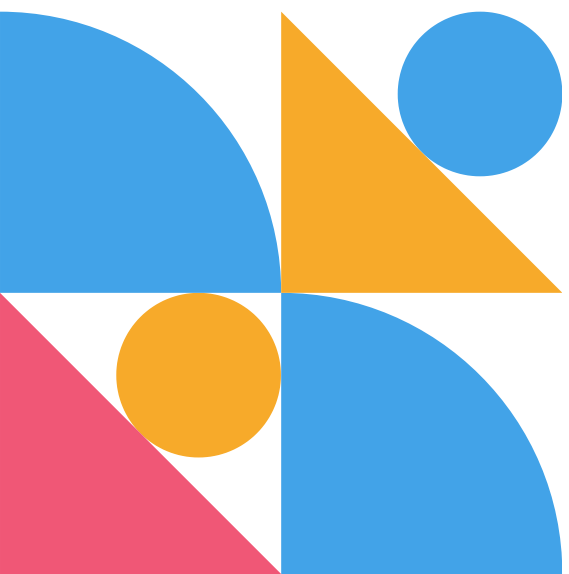
The evaluation team worked with Active Gloucestershire to identify **6-10 participants** to test the explanatory statements with via **How and Why conversations**. The evaluation team also built upon the extensive data previously collected in by the AG team and the RREM workshop.

How and Why Conversations

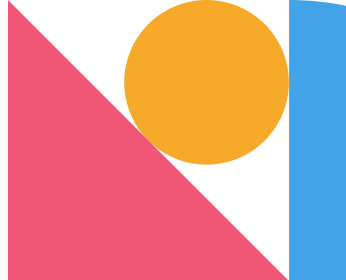
This approach consisted of engaging in discussions, (similar to interviews or focus groups) with people to share and delve into identified **explanatory statements**. The evaluation team developed questions from the explanatory statements to guide the conversation with participants.

Active Gloucestershire facilitated introductions between the evaluation team and potential participants to invite them to take part in online How and Why conversations.

These conversations took place with **6 individuals** who were involved or contributed to the Group Model Building project in and across Cinderford.



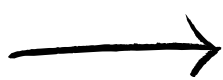
DEEPER FINDINGS - COLLABORATION



Statement 1: **IF** we meet people in spaces where they already attend —such as community centres, workplaces, or local events—and introduce GMB/network in a way that feels relevant to their interests and priorities, **THEN** they will be more likely to actively join and engage in GMB/network, **BECAUSE** connecting in familiar environments makes participation feel natural, and framing the group as a meaningful opportunity—rather than just another meeting—helps people see its value in improving their community and work. When people feel listened to and see how their skills and experiences can contribute, they are more likely to commit and take an active role.

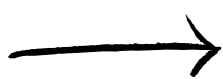
What we discovered

The sessions provided a trusted environments where familiar settings made it easier for people to attend workshops and sessions. Having a familiar facilitator helped to enable a trusted environment.



“It was familiar, it was local, it was easy to attend.
(Participant 6)”

When priorities align and are strategically relevant, participants are more likely to be part of the GMB work because it makes sense to collaborate.



“It kind of felt like it was silly to have two things going on in parallel... We might as well join forces.
(Participant 3)”

It was felt that conversations focused on actions that would benefit the communities that attendees are serving was a motivation for people to be part of this work and continue contributing in the future.



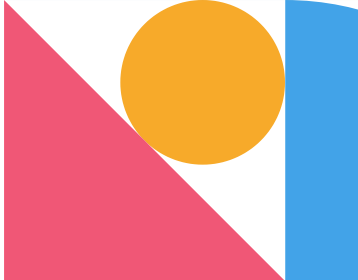
“We can move forward in something that actually makes a real benefit for everyone. (Participant 6)”

The spaces provided are seen as non-hierarchical. This helped to foster an open space where people felt they can contribute to the work.



“You go to some meetings and it's just people who maybe are like the gatekeepers to money... this meeting was people like me. (Participant 5)”

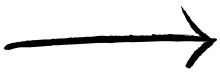
DEEPER FINDINGS - COLLABORATION



Statement 2: IF diverse stakeholders engage in sustained dialogue and shared decision-making, **THEN** they will build trust and a unified vision for systemic change, **BECAUSE** building trust is key to collaboration, ensuring partners feel valued, listened to, and empowered. Dialogue aligns priorities, helping the group work together around shared objectives instead of working in silos. A unified vision aligns efforts, reduces duplication and siloed working, and enables more effective collective problem-solving.

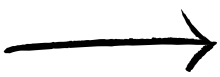
What we discovered

Open conversations helped to develop empathy and strengthen relationships that were built on mutual understanding. This is notably with a focus on participants supporting their community.



“We ended up talking together and working through a mutual understanding... We get on really well now.
(Participant 4)”

Collaborative planning was important to align goals and actions. This helped to make conversations and actions more efficient where people have knowledge of the topic. For example, it was discussed how Dial-a-ride was identified as a key transport asset within the local area to utilise better instead of potentially setting up a transport focused CIC.



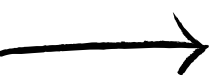
“[Action] was really simple but something that... we couldn't have done alone. **(Participant 6)**”

Creating open and inclusive spaces allowed unexpected voices to emerge. This helped to broaden engagement and create new connections.



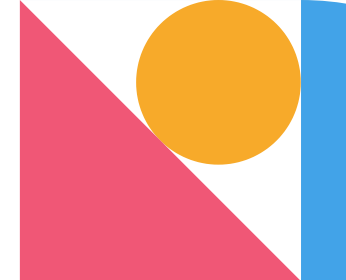
“We've seen a real diverse selection of people [who were] given the opportunity to show what they can do.
(Participant 6)”

It is important to have clarity and leadership to sustain trust in this approach. Without clear goals and ownership there is a risk of losing momentum.



“It just felt like it was hollow at times and a lack of definite goals and ways to get there. **(Participant 2).**”

DEEPER FINDINGS - COLLABORATION



Statement 3: IF collaboration is structured with transparent governance and clear roles, **THEN** partners will remain engaged and contribute meaningfully, **BECAUSE** lack of clarity leads to disengagement, frustration, or duplication, weakening collaboration. Clear roles create structure where participants understand their role and contribution. Transparency fosters accountability and trust, ensuring all voices are heard and decisions are made fairly, sustaining engagement in the long term

What we discovered

Defining the expertise of those involved in the work helped participants to understand their value and engage confidently and meaningfully.



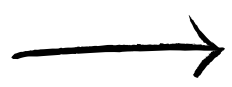
“ We’ve been able to draw on what we can offer... I was given a fair chance to show my opinion and hopefully give some advice. **(Participant 6)** ”

Open dialogue and inclusive facilitation helped to build psychological safety and confidence for participants to engage and contribute.



“ Everybody has a chance to share their ideas and concerns. **(Participant 6)** ”

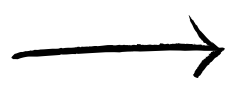
There is ambiguity around the purpose, leadership, and process of the GMB for some which may lead to disengagement...



“ People have been a bit like... there’s this project...they don’t really know what it’s for or what it’s about. **(Participant 3)** ”

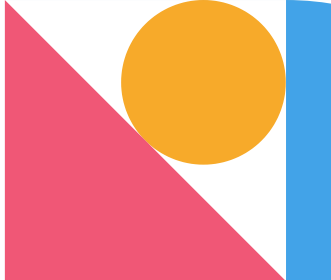
However...

There was some demand to embed this model into routine practice because of the value and potential in bringing people together working towards the same goal.



“ I just hope this way of working becomes routine... how do we support this? **(Participant 4)** ”

DEEPER FINDINGS - WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



Statement 4: IF workforce development is aligned with place-based and asset-based community principles, **THEN** local professionals and organisations will collaborate more effectively to drive sustainable community improvements, **BECAUSE** investing in local skills and talents strengthens networks, fosters trust, and empowers communities to address challenges collectively rather than relying on external interventions. Equipping individuals with relevant skills enhances their ability to engage in cross-sector collaboration.

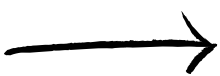
What we discovered

The GMB sessions have provided a deliberate space for professionals to come together, discover shared goals and build relationships cross-sector and cross-organisation.



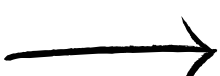
“ [The sessions] get everybody together... [it] had a whole load of benefits.... [we're] better connected. **(Participant 3)** ”

The sessions provided a space for professionals to step outside of their organisational silos and see how their role fits into a broader picture with other professionals.



“ [The sessions are] getting you out, talking to others... it shows that we're all overcoming problems. **(Participant 6)** ”

For some attendees with greater experience in working this way, they felt benefit in the networking aspect of the GMB sessions but they did not feel they were developing professionally because it was not new information to them.



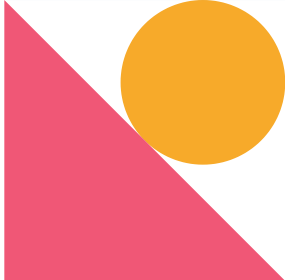
“ I wouldn't say it particularly helped me professionally... it was a refresher. **(Participant 1)** ”

The design and timing of the sessions does not currently emphasise the importance of the community as part of this workforce. The sessions are tailored to organisations working with the community.



“ Was this about community? In which case why was it taking place during the day? **(Participant 3)** ”

DEEPER FINDINGS - SYSTEM CHANGE



Statement 5: IF different sectors—like health, housing, and education—coordinate their efforts, **THEN** systems will work more smoothly and feel less disconnected, **BECAUSE** breaking down barriers between organisations makes it easier to tackle health inequalities rather than in isolated parts.

What we discovered

Participants were consistent in affirming that knowing people cross-sector and from other organisations can help to reduce silo working. This is reliant on interpersonal relationships to overcome organisational barriers in the short term.

Those in senior roles described how stepping outside of their organisational silo was not simple or easy but helped reconnect them with broader community challenges. Leadership visibility and participation can help to legitimise the approach taken.

There is an acceptance and understanding that change can be gradual and dependent on the context of their Place whether recent actions have produced visible shifts or not.

→

“ We very rarely cross paths... it's a chance to become a melting pot. **(Participant 6)** ”

→

“ If you have relationships between different people in different sectors, then you're way more likely to reduce silo working. **(Participant 3)** ”

→

“ It's difficult as a [senior leader] to give up and morning and [participate in the sessions]... it reminds you there is a lot going on elsewhere. **(Participant 6)** ”

→

“ I think we are making a very gentle shift. This is the very first step in people's minds that physical activity is there and it's really important. **(Participant 2)** ”

KEY SUMMARY - COLLABORATION

What do these findings mean for collaboration?

Trust and inclusion are key foundations

Familiar settings, inclusive facilitation and open conversations help to develop trust and empathy. This provides a safe space for participants to meaningfully participate.

Clarity over roles and leadership sustain engagement

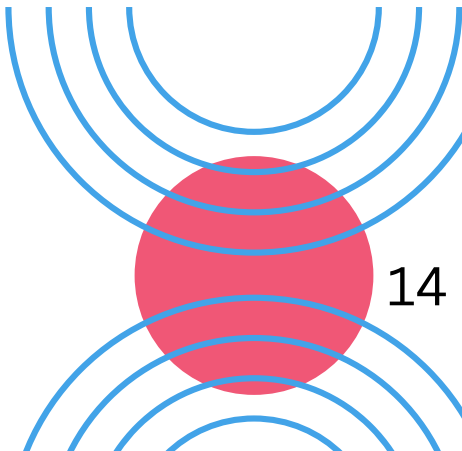
Having a clear purpose, defined roles and visible leadership are important to sustain engagement from a broad range of participants. This helps to address ambiguity and continue to foster trust between all involved in this approach.

Diverse voices strengthen the approach

Recognising expertise and creating non-hierarchical spaces provides an opportunity for unexpected voices to be heard. This broadens the engagement in GMB and reinforces the value of embedding this approach within routine practice.

Strategic alignment helps drive purposeful collaboration

Initiatives are more efficient and relevant when they align with participants strategic priorities and the knowledge and expertise of the collaborators.



PHASE 3: KEY SUMMARY - WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SYSTEM CHANGE.

What do these findings mean for workforce development?

Cross Sector collaboration strengthens local work

The GMB sessions provide a valuable space for professionals to connect cross sector and cross organisation, discover shared goals and build relationships that improve collective efforts towards sustained community development.

Opportunity for community integration and professional development

While networking benefits are evident, there is opportunity for sessions to better support the professional development of participants through inclusive design and skill building for long term value. There is also scope to consider how the community is considered part of the workforce through this and potential involvement to align to community development principles.

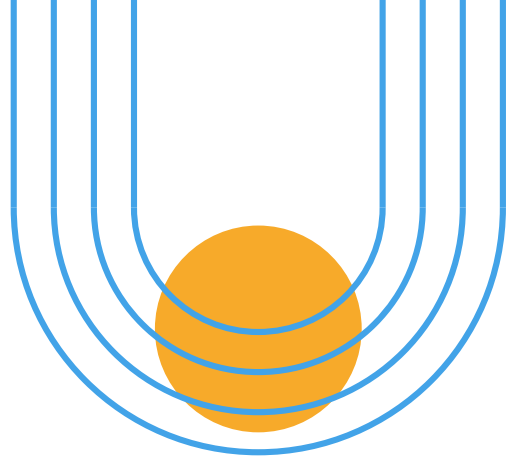
What do these findings mean for system change?

Interpersonal relationships help to reduce silos

Building interpersonal connections across sectors and organisations helps to overcome barriers to enable smoother collaboration and coordination in efforts to address health inequalities.

Leadership influences progress but so does the local context

Senior leaders play a key role in legitimising collaboration across sectors and organisations however it is not a simple process to work outside of silos. There is wide recognition that change is often gradual and not always visible, such as peoples mindsets towards health inequalities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Refined explanatory statements

Focus area 1: Collaboration

Statement 1: IF people are invited into familiar, inclusive, and strategically relevant spaces that reflect their values and offer relational and practical benefits, **THEN** they are more likely to engage actively and meaningfully, **BECAUSE** the environment feels natural, purposeful, and aligned with their personal or strategic goals as well as offering emotional and social value.

Statement 2: IF diverse stakeholders are invited into inclusive, emotionally safe, and spaces to have conversations that support shared decision-making, **THEN** they will build trust, align priorities, and co-create a unified vision for systemic change **BECAUSE** trust builds when people are open and united by a common purpose. Talking together helps uncover shared goals, with strong leadership and a willingness to participant, everyone can work together more effectively.

Statement 3: IF collaboration is structured through inclusive, transparent governance with clear roles, realistic expectations, and appropriate accountability, **THEN** partners will remain engaged, contribute meaningfully, and advocate for sustaining the model, **BECAUSE** clarity enables confident participation and transparency promotes trust, ensuring collaboration is perceived as legitimate, inclusive, and worth investing time in.

Focus area 2: Workforce development

Statement 4: IF workforce development is designed and delivered in ways that reflect place-based and asset based community principles, including leadership engagement, **THEN** local professionals and organisations will build stronger networks, collaborate more effectively, and contribute to sustainable community improvements. This is **BECAUSE** investing in local skills and relationships fosters trust, shared purpose and cross sector empathy, while supporting individuals to act collectively. This impact depends on sustained engagement, inclusive design and translating networking into structured collaboration.

Focus area 3: System changes

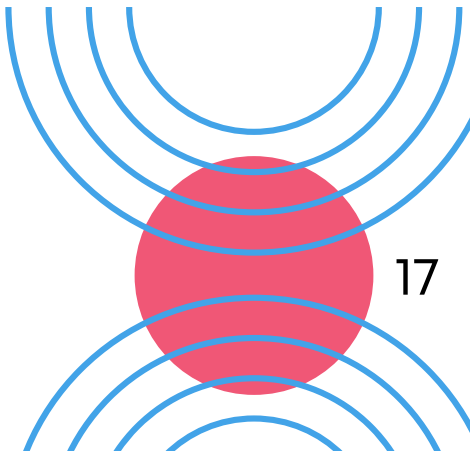
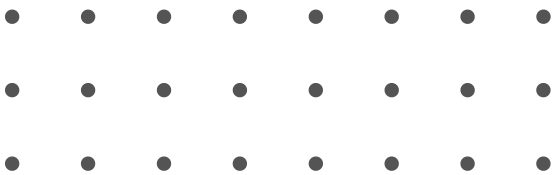
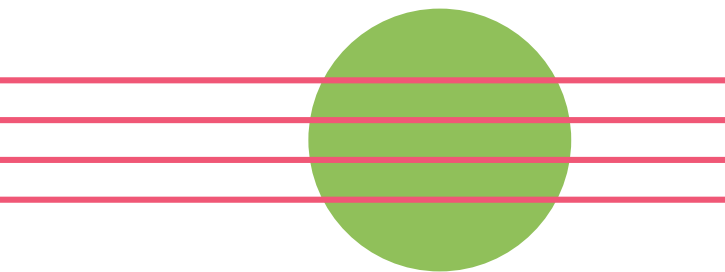
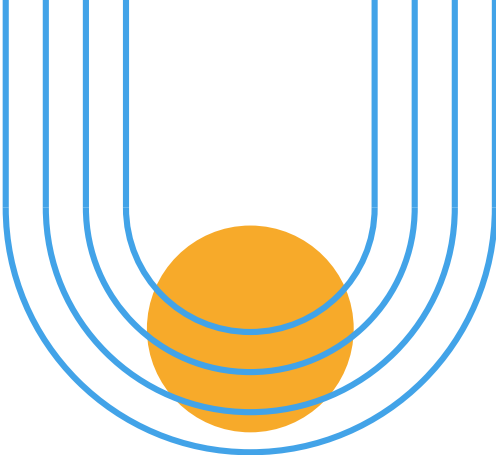
Statement 5: IF different sectors — such as health, housing, education, and transport — coordinate their efforts through clearly designed, inclusive, and relational approaches, with leadership engagement, **THEN** the system will feel more coherent, responsive, and capable of tackling health inequalities holistically, **BECAUSE** breaking down organisational silos fosters trust, shared purpose, and cross-sector empathy.

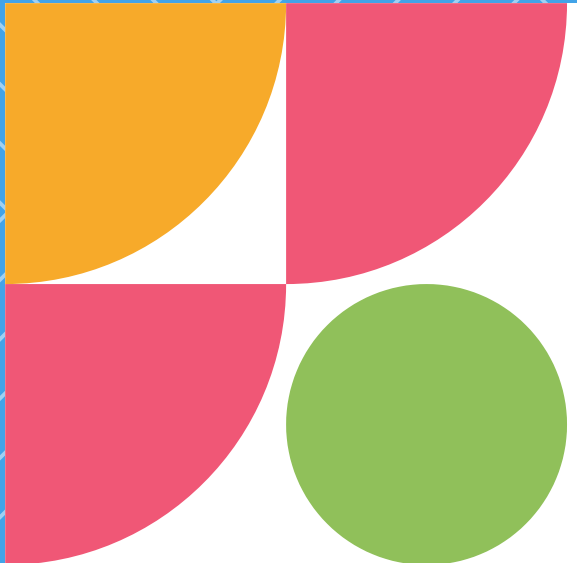
REFERENCES

Harris, K., Nobles, J., Ryan, L., Szedlak, C., Taylor, H., Hawkins, R., Cline, A., Smith, E., & Hall, A. (2024) ‘Towards realist-informed ripple effects mapping (RREM): positioning the approach’, *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 24(1), pp. 1–17.

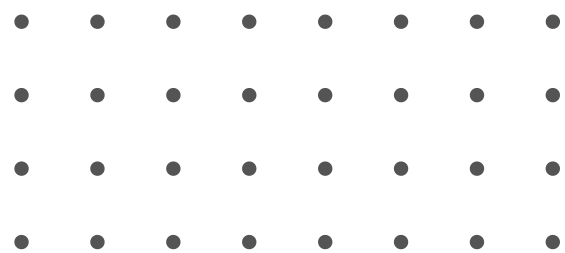
Nobles, J., Fox, C., Inman-Ward, A., Beasley, T., Redwood, S., Jago, R., et al. (2022) ‘Navigating the river(s) of systems change: a multi-methods, qualitative evaluation exploring the implementation of a systems approach to physical activity in Gloucestershire, England’, *BMJ Open*, 12(8)

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: SAGE.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

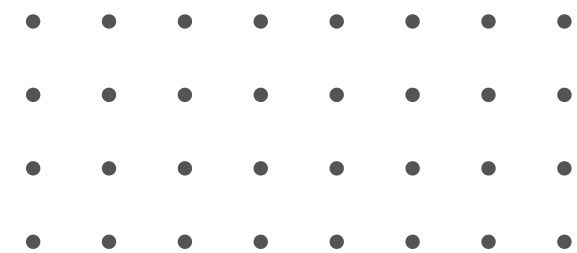


This evaluation and report was conducted by Louis Ryan, Dr Kev Harris, and Richard Whincup.

Special thanks to Active Gloucestershire Colleagues, Michael Thurlow and Matt Williams, as well as Group Model Building participants.



Contact:
Kev.harris@hartpury.ac.uk



HARTPURY