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 placed-based approaches, enhancing understanding of how to address inequalities in physical activity.

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 approach (PBA) aligns with this idea but places emphasis on **strengthening communities rooted in distinctive local characteristics**. Each WSA and PBA is unique, influenced by its context including setting, socio-demographics, and mix of communities and organisations. 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 introduces two key aspects emerging from NELP's work 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 ten 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 interconnected practices or areas of action (figure 1):

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

This third area could be viewed as addressing the underlying causes of inactivity, which, whilst 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
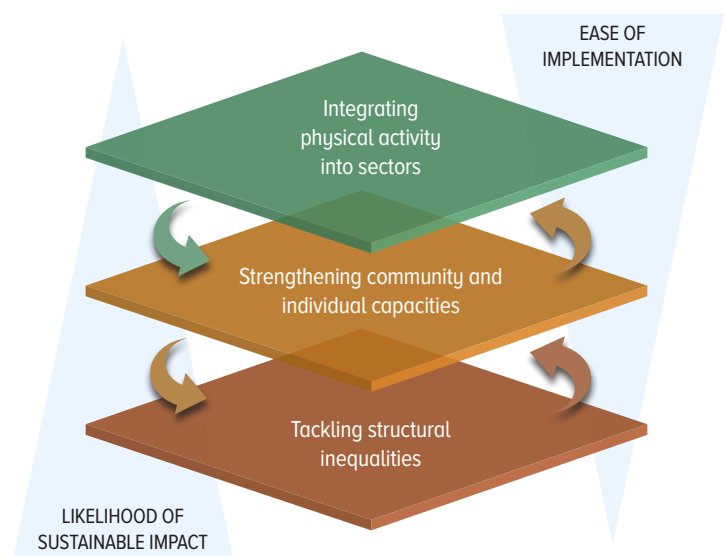

EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Integrating physical activity into sectors

Strengthening community and individual capacities

Tackling structural inequalities

LIKELIHOOD OF SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

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 of synergies and 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, signposting and incentivisation 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 solve collective problems of inactivity to maintain the wellbeing of the community. • Community groups and individuals may be better placed to know and understand what physical activity solutions would resonate most with 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 dismantling 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 ten features or '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 is itself made up of a range of activities and ways of working that combine to contribute to positive change (table 2). 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.

In our upcoming series of *NELP Explainers* and *Learning Seminars*, we delve into each condition, outline its key components, stories and evidence from different places, and highlighting the connections between them.

Further uses of 'conditions' work

Maturity matrix: A maturity matrix survey based on the conditions has helped actors reflect on the extent to which the condition is present in the place in which they work.

Comparative Configurational Analysis: Analysis based on this mix of conditions and local context for each place will contribute to an understanding of patterns of outcomes over time.

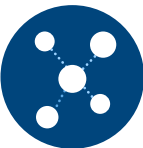**Table 2: Conditions in places necessary to tackle inequalities in physical activity**

Condition	Definition	Rational
Identifying the barriers and enablers of physical activity in the local context	There is process for developing understanding and shared knowledge of what supports 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.
Distributed and collective leadership	People are enabled to act within their sphere of influence, make decisions, and create the conditions for people to be physically active. This occurs across multiple layers of society.	• When decisions making, resource and initiative are less centralised, more people can act to enable active lives. • Everyone has a role to play. 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 make decisions about what works to enable physical activity. This can lead to better strategies and outcomes.
Collaboration within and across organisations	There is productive partnership working around aligned interests and a common purpose.	• Working with different organisations can help to drive innovative physical activity policy and practice by drawing on different skill sets and efficiencies 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.
Capacity and capability across the workforce, volunteers and in communities	There are strategies to recruit, reward or build skills, attributes, values, mindsets, knowledge, networks, and capacity for responsive, place-based systemic, and collaborative working to enable physical activity.	• Specific skill sets and attributes are needed to for this type of responsive working. (E.g. to understand 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.
Facilitative processes for agile collaborative working and proportionate, representative governance	Administrative processes within key public services have been implemented to ensure accountability and support the flow of information, data, power, and resources (including funding) in ways that are equitable, proportionate, agile, and responsive.	• Administrative processes are typically designed to reduce risk to organisations and encourage competition. These purposes can inadvertently prevent collaboration and distribution of resources and decision-making power to people best placed to act to enable physical activity. • Conversely, processes which are flexible, proportionate and responsive to emerging contexts can support and legitimise collaboration, distributed leadership, shared problem solving and reciprocal feedback loops.

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

Condition	Definition	Rational
Co-production, local people-led initiatives (community power)	Physical activity strategies are anchored in community priorities, initiatives, and assets.	• 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, actions that the community has a sense of ownership and control.
Addressing inequality and intersectionality	People develop, deliver, and evaluate policies and practices that take into account and address the power dynamics that disadvantage people with characteristics, identities and/or lived experiences.	• Physical activity inequalities are influenced by the historical and contemporary causes of inequality in wider society and in local contexts. People are differently affected based on intersecting oppressive systems such as racism, ableism, and sexism. • Constant consideration of relations between individuals and institutions in terms of multiple layers of power and inequity are less likely to widen inequalities.
Cultures and practices for wellbeing and physical activity	There is a culturally inclusive social environment for physical activity that enables people to have the freedom to be active in ways that suit them.	• Shared ideas and social influences shape attitudes and involvement in physical activity. Strategies, practices, and communications that consider traditions, customs, values, beliefs, behaviours, and assumptions of groups who are inactive, are more likely to be appropriate and effective.
Physical environments that enable wellbeing and physical activity	The local natural and built environments encourage activities which are appropriate, accessible, affordable, and safe.	• 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. This may include access to blue and green spaces, urban planning, and workplace design.
Cycles of learning and action	There are appropriate methods in place to elicit data and reflections, articulate and frame issues, and improve the design of the systems affecting 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.