

Providing an explanatory account of an area of work or project

1.1 Introduction

Explanation rather than only measurement

NELP want to encourage and support an **explanatory focus** to get the most out of learning around and evaluation of efforts to promote physical activity.

Building on the existing evaluation and learning of pilots, this means providing an explanatory account for any particular piece of work or issue that unpacks **what works for who in what circumstances** rather than ONLY whether something ‘works’, or not.

An explanatory emphasis also means **focusing more on the difference that has been made and how and why that difference has been made**, rather than ONLY the initial project outcomes decided in advance (although the pattern of outcomes is still important).

This also means attending to **how the context has influenced a project or issue** and including this in your account or analysis. Context can include aspects of the setting and factors that have an influence but are not part of the project or intervention being implemented.

In practice, this means **developing a summary of statements/explanations** that try to lay out the core characteristics and dynamics of an issue, how they are influenced by relevant contexts, and lead to patterns of outcomes in a way that can be tested and refined in future.

You may need **several different summary statements/explanations** to capture different parts of the work. And each of these can be used by ‘testing’ them against what your evaluation data and learning processes are finding to refine them over time.

By refining and **linking up explanations** we can start to build an **overall picture** of the circumstances and dynamics of change in the area we are working to support. This provides a framework for evaluating and demonstrating how the work contributes to positive change.

1.2 Developing an explanatory account

In practice developing an explanatory account means attending to:

- the key **dynamics or underlying forces¹** that any project/activity is trying to influence with its activities – whether that be changes in behaviour, relationships, or social practices (use of bicycles, social norms, sense of motivation, feeling of ‘ownership’, ‘joined up working around provision of bike infrastructure’...),
- what **aspects of context may affect how the project/activity plays out** in practice (does the project work better with some groups than others, if so why? Does it work better in neighbourhoods with a sense of community compared to others with less shared identity? With local or central facilities?)
- what **patterns of outcomes it leads to** (some people respond by feeling motivated, others by feeling switched off, still others show a fluctuating commitment)

An **explanatory account** looks at these together: key dynamics being aimed for; influences in the context/setting; the range of different outcomes that come from these combinations of factors.

You can **develop a set of summary statements** to capture different aspects of the issue at hand, and the core dynamics and characteristics and link these together for an overall picture.

Illustrative example of trying to encourage use of bicycles

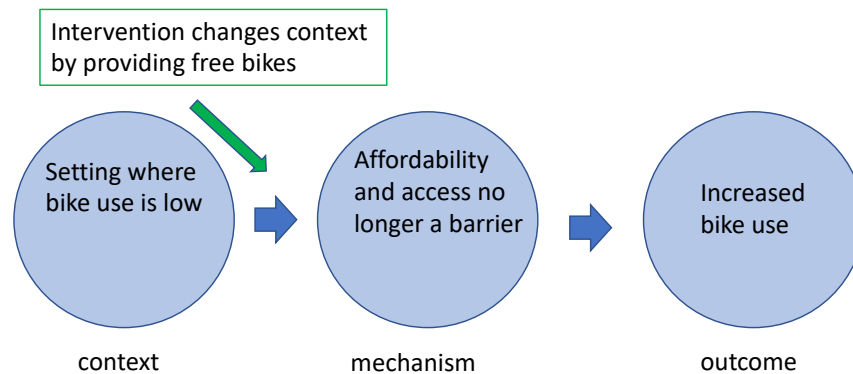
It is important to note that this example may be transferred to other topics – it is not just about bikes! If you are not interested in bicycles, try thinking about the essence of the ideas in the statements and how they might be transferred to ‘leisure activities’ or ‘running shoes’ or anything where assets for community activity might be limited at the moment...

Start with a summary statement of how important factors combine in the work you are doing (if you have developed a ‘theory of change’ for your work you may have some of this already).

“In a setting where bike use is low, providing access to free bikes may increase bike use, because affordability and access is no longer a barrier to people cycling”

¹ Dynamics and underlying forces are sometimes referred to as ‘mechanisms’ in realist research. We have limited our use of the term here because it can be confused with fixed processes.

Explanation 1

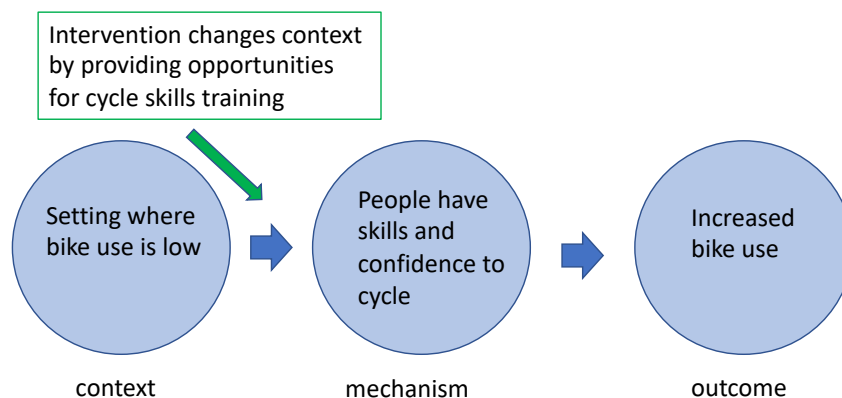


But this may only be part of the picture: It may be that in some cases provision of access to bikes doesn't lead to the outcome of more bike use using and your local inquiry points to this being because some people may lack the skills or confidence to use a bike. It may only be where people have **access to bikes AND the necessary skills** and confidence to use them that bike use goes up – and the combination of explanations helps understand why greater use may be the outcome in some places and not others.

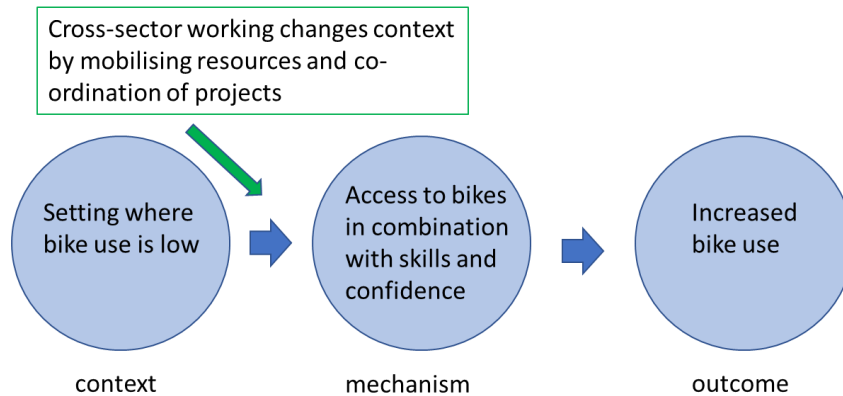
Perhaps this leads a programme to develop another intervention that aims to address this need for skills and confidence, which might be summarized as follows

“where user friendly cycling training opportunities are provided in settings where bike use is low, bike use may increase, because people feel they have the skills and confidence to cycle”.

Explanation 2



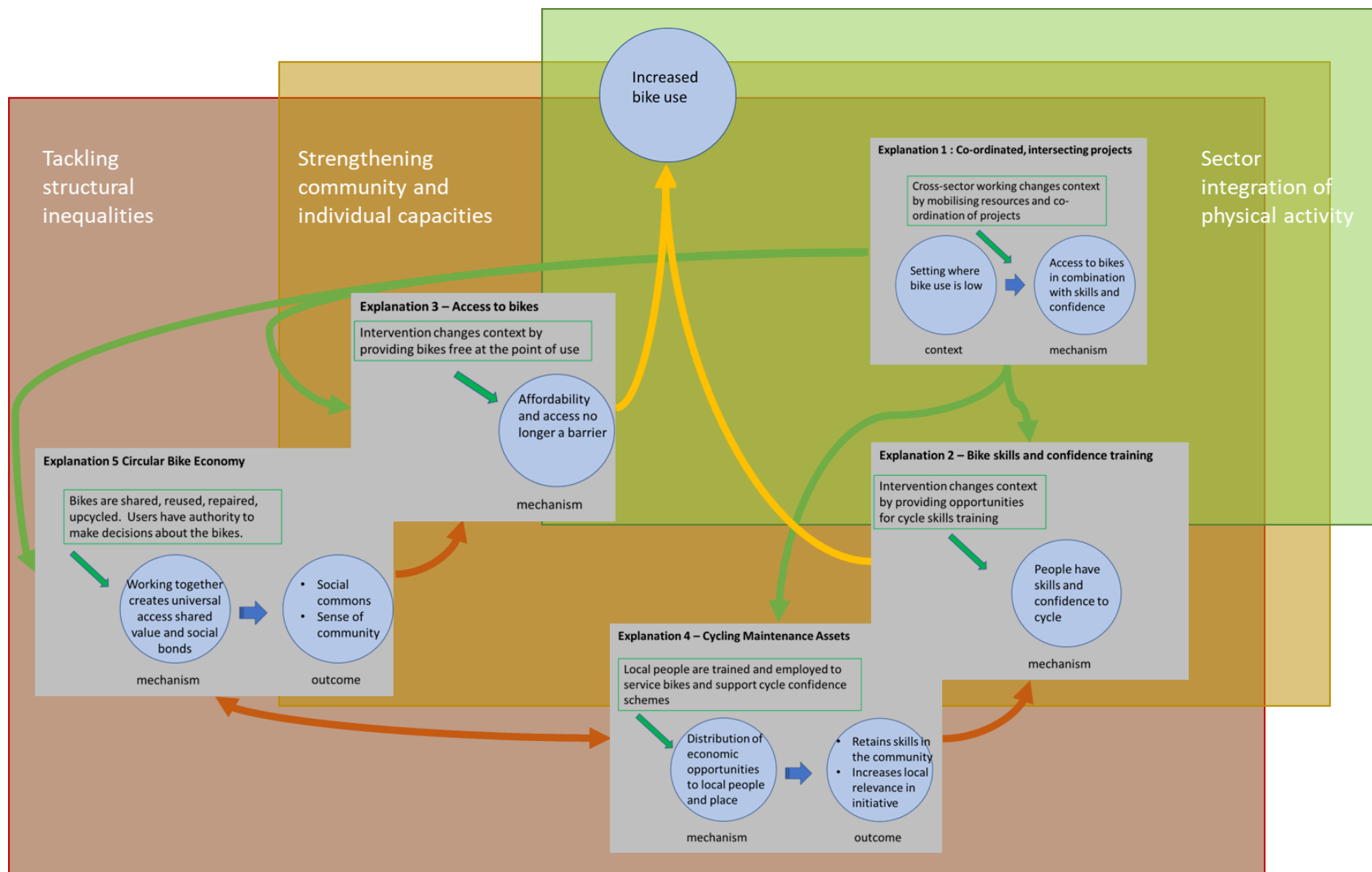
Equally, there may be factors that affect whether or not the interventions are available in the first place – perhaps the combination only comes about because of other local efforts to develop cross sector collaboration and resources and co-ordination so that both projects can be put in place and work to complement one another



1.3 Linking up and nesting different explanations

There may be other aspects of the issue that need to be included in your account, such as availability of safe cycling infrastructure, awareness of the interventions, constraints on time; availability of role models, or cultural or class-based expectations affecting whether people see cycling as desirable. There may be a need for initiatives addressing these factors, and you can develop short summary statements/explanations for these areas too. Over time and as your understanding deepens, it becomes clear that there **may be more than one key dynamic** that we need to understand at different levels, influencing the issue at hand.

In the diagram below we have linked up the three initial explanations with further initiatives and explanations which may support a sustainable legacy of the bike scheme but creating a circular bike economy and ensuring the skills for bike maintenance and cycling confidence training reside in the local community.



These different dynamics **may be nested within one another** – providing either **wider context** OR **internal influences** on the main thing we are focused on trying to understand or measure. In the above example, efforts to increase cross-sector working that were an important part of the context in which it was possible to put in place interventions to increase access to bike and provide cycle training.

By developing a linked set of explanatory statements, you can give an account most of the important aspects of the work. These summary statements also provide some ‘testable’ propositions for evaluation or learning activities to focus on. These explanatory statements can be refined over time in dialogue with the evidence gathered. They can be looked at together to see where they overlap and link up to provide an increasingly evidence informed account of the changes your work is leading to.

1.4 Explanatory questions to draw on

The following questions can help develop summary statements/explanations - with answers to the first eight questions feeding into developing some summary statements along the lines outlined above. The remaining questions help to build on and further develop the explanatory account where there are gaps in the understanding or evidence. These questions can be used to structure regular reflection and learning, as well as more formal evaluation activities, and both can contribute to a refined picture of what it is your work is attempting and achieving.

Explanatory questions	
Immediate aim	What are we trying to do?
Overall aim	How does it fit into the overall picture of desired change?
Is change happening	Is the project/activity contributing to change?
Assessing change	How do we know? (Sources of data, indicator/benchmarks of change)
Patterns of change	Is change happening in some circumstances and not others? For some people/groups not others? In some settings and not others?
Unanticipated changes	Are other things changing (positive or negative) which we were not expecting, or as a result of initial changes?
Influential context	Are there important influences in the immediate and wider context that affect the core dynamics and need to be taken into account?
Explanation	Can we identify what mix of things is enabling or constraining change (which combination of settings, people, factors, dynamics lead to change or lack of it)
Alternative explanations	Could anything else explain the change we are seeing
What is this an example of?	What is the core of what we are trying to understand (motivation, peer influence, wellbeing, collaborative working....)?
Time	How is this changing over time? Are you noticing ripple effects? Are you seeing positive (reinforcing) or negative feedback loops?
Supporting explanations and related evidence	What does existing knowledge and evidence tell us about what is going on in this example?
Further inquiry	What else do we need to know to better understand this?
Adapting and acting	How can we adapt our plans to respond to what we have learned and to learn more about how and why things are/aren't changing?
Transferring ideas	Is our understanding of how this works in this place transferrable to other actions we are taking elsewhere?