

ESSENCE

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

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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 and partial knowledge. Nevertheless, over time, we can enhance our understanding of how particular actions and ideas work, and the contexts in which they tend to succeed or fail. Participatory learning activities create value in the processes as well as the learning and its wider impacts, enabling adaptive ways of working in complex systems. Gathering and applying this information can provide support to decision making, guiding future actions to tackle inequalities within specific contexts. This ongoing process works best in environments where individuals and partners foster a culture of regular reflection and learning.

Learning culture

Building a culture of learning requires collective commitment, modelled by senior staff. It involves becoming comfortable with accepting uncertainty, and seeing initiatives that have not gone to plan as learning opportunities. It also means broadening perspectives and paying attention to different kinds of value that the work may bring about.

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 systematic approach. Processes are in a continuous cycle where actions are reviewed, and insights gained are fed back 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.

Evaluation uses appropriate methods for place-based working.

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

How can we adopt cycles of learning to action?

1. **Develop a culture of learning.** A key aspect of learning involves engaging with uncertainty and not being frightened to learn when things don't turn out as planned. Teams need to be supported to value and develop a learning orientation in their own work.
2. **Embed learning processes into work.** Regular and practical learning and reflection processes are important. These processes should document insights and inform changes in activities and ways of working. They should also be light touch and manageable.
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 be helpful to be intentional about what is being learned, and to understand what can be learned from different people, sources, and settings.

Reflection questions

- Do you have simple tools to regularly reflect on your experience and are the insights gathered systematically used to adapt your work?
- Can your evaluation approaches address the complexity of place based systemic working and provide actionable insights?
- Are you intentional about your learning processes? Can you see how they contribute different types of value?