"We want to shape the future we want, not be shaped by it"

Sport England and Local Government Association’s (LGA) leadership programme – coronavirus reflections

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As we bumped elbows and liberally used hand sanitiser at the 10th Sport England/LGA leadership programme for councils, trusts and Active Partnerships, we’re not sure any of us could have foreseen what was about to unfold – two weeks before lockdown – the pandemic bringing about unbelievable change to everyone’s lives, as well as major systemic change.

For the programme’s participants, the last few months have brought physical and emotional change and challenge, including redeployment to food banks, giving support to crisis hubs, providing connections to wider networks, supporting those being shielded and having to furlough staff. To provide further support to the leadership programme’s participants, who we’ve been working with over the last two years, we’ve held a series of online discussions talking about the ‘here and now’ and exploring what we all want for the future.

Based on their experiences, we heard a real sense of optimism and desire not just to do things differently but to do them fundamentally differently. They talked about:

The value of physical activity and sport being recognised and promoted both nationally and locally for its relationship to mental health and overall wellbeing. How playing pivotal roles in their communities, linking up with food banks, PPE distributors and a host of voluntary and community organisations has brought new relationships. That they’ve experienced a real ‘can do’ and positive attitude across public services, charities and communities interconnecting and coming together so that, in the words of one participant, there was “collective effort for collective impact”.

However, they also expressed strong fears for inequalities and wellbeing. Fears of entrenching social inequalities – one participant asked if we’d been seeing “lockdown through the eyes of privilege”?

There are also concerns about a digital divide and in light of the local government funding situation there are questions about how difficult it will be to find sustainable financial solutions which do not widen equality gaps.

The programme’s participants believe now is the time to reconfigure how we all connect, to position the idea, and role, of physical activity in society before the old patterns of thinking and working become re-established.

They’re clear that leadership skills are a vital ingredient in helping them not only make decisions day to day but also to build a sustainable future, helping all partners re-imagine their part in the future.

The visual attached gives an overview of the discussions that took place.
Sport England LGA Leadership Essentials
May 2020

Over the past month, during the Covid 19 pandemic, previous participants from the leadership essentials programme have engaged in discussions navigating the ‘here and now’ and sharing learning to explore what we want for the future. This document frames a collective conversation that will continue to grow and change as we work together into the future, and we work toward systems change through systems leadership.

At every level of our work, from our system leadership behaviours to our common purpose, how can we ensure we are investing in the necessary mutual relationships (both new and existing) to do this work?

- Staff Teams
- Individuals and Communities
- Partners and Stakeholders
- Political and Corporate Decision Makers

What might we need to help us do this work?
- Safe space
- Thinking time
- Sharing
- Learning
- New Techniques
- Challenges
- Advice
- Action
- Learning Sets
- Mentoring
- Partners

The [1] System Leadership Behaviours that we want to sustain and amplify will begin to shape the [2] Future Nature of the System we are working in, which therefore allows us to explore multiple shared [3] System Challenges, and this exploration hopefully brings us closer to, and expands our understanding of, our [4] Common Purpose.

[1] System Leadership Behaviours
- Resilience, weathering change and adapting ourselves
- We trust others and delegate responsibility
- We work flexibly and adaptively to meet needs and opportunities
- We value emotional intelligence and human connection, aiming to increase our sense of community
- Remote and agile working to connect better to how we work best
- We aim to cut through red tape, be nimble and fleet of foot


Collaboration
We need to sustain an accessible and open way of working with other organisations, with both new and existing relationships, collectively learn and move toward our purpose. At every level, we can create the space for collaboration. We need to work with the energy and power of communities to unify our efforts and create lasting change.

Old Behaviours
How might we ensure old behaviours stay in the past? Can we reduce competitive working and silos, expand our understanding of people’s resistance to change to understand our leadership role further?

Inequality and Wellbeing
Partners working together on a shared cross-system priority that influences the rest of our work, and collectively exploring multi-faceted, complex and urgent inequalities and aiming to increase social impact of wellbeing with collective work.

[3] System Challenges (e.g.)

Old Behaviours
How might we ensure old behaviours stay in the past? Can we reduce competitive working and silos, expand our understanding of people’s resistance to change to understand our leadership role further?

Urgent Present vs Important Future
How might we make decisions that help us now, and build a sustainable future? For example, framing our relationships with health partners, balancing income and public health, and exploring activity in relation to health inequality.

Enriched Value of Physical Activity
Physical activity positively influences other sectors’ outcomes, such as health and social care. Investing in place based working to deeply collaborate with other organisations can enhance change around outcomes for communities, yet requires a deep connection and understanding of people’s experiences.

The energy and mobilisation of an increased public narrative of physical activity can galvanise collective strategic work toward purpose. To do this, we need to ensure we are creating the right value for people, where wellbeing and inequality is the focus, and ensure activity remains a priority into the future; from communities to political agendas.

Financial Sustainability
Collectively, how can we be strategic with our financial planning over different time periods (immediate strategies to long term strategies) with an uncertain future? And, how can connecting to purpose help us do this?


*Continually exploring and expanding insights into our common purpose

*Exploring wellbeing and health inequality across ages, from older people to young families and children.

*Exploring sustainable investment in sport and activity services and active environments, including the value they create for people right now.

*Exploring social inequalities; from race to wealth to poverty, and those living with multiple deprivation.

*Exploring how the digital divide and limited access to digital offers for people with a disability will impact wellbeing and health inequalities.

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