



Andrew Wilesmith

Operations Manager, Sport and Leisure

Ipswich Borough Council

“It isn’t rocket science, it’s having a conversation, building a relationship, and trusting that someone knows more than you do about it.”

Andrew was on the Leadership Essentials programme in March 2020 and recalled that he got the train back home just four days before the first national lockdown. Before the pandemic started, Andrew and his line manager, the Head of Sport and Programmes, had already been building relationships with the wider system and health partners.

Andrew described gradually developing a strategic partnership with the Head of Transformation and Alliance at the Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group (the CCG), explaining how they had spent time developing a shared purpose “We didn’t dive straight into action but spent time sounding each other out, exploring our priorities and whether we could work together”.

During lockdown, a Covid Response hub was quickly set up to bring strategic partners together and coordinate emergency measures and Andrew became Ipswich Borough Council’s hub lead. With systems thinking at the front of his mind and part of a coalition of willing people, he knew this was an opportunity to engage with people and organisations he would not usually meet. By the summer, this early alliance with key health and public sector partners gave Andrew the opportunity to have a leading role in the internal Borough-wide Community Response Recovery Group.

He was strongly committed to tackling health inequalities, a key theme running throughout Leadership Essentials, and he used the role to start to talk about health inequalities and develop a broader understanding about how different groups of people were impacted by Covid, particularly those most disadvantaged. This set the blueprint for a way forward.

As relationships strengthened with key strategic leaders in the CCG, Andrew was invited to participate in the One Team Leadership programme, developed by the Ipswich and East Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group and consisting of partners from ESNEFT; Suffolk County Council; Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust and Suffolk GP Federation, working with Ipswich and East Suffolk CCG.

He was the only local authority person on the leadership programme with senior health colleagues and a few voluntary sector leaders. This experience opened a whole set of new doors, creating links and partnership across the system for example with hospital teams and mental health services. It also built on the learning from Leadership Essentials with a strong focus on system leadership.

The funding gave the Council the freedom and flexibility to design a multi-year health and wellbeing programme which will respond to health needs, tackle health inequalities, and help Covid recovery.

Front and centre is the principle of proportionate universalism, a principle explored in Leadership Essentials

In 2021 the CCG made a significant funding award using Section 75 of the NHS Act 2006 which allows partners (NHS bodies and councils) to contribute to a common fund which can be used to commission health or social care related services. This power allows a local authority to commission health services and NHS commissioners to commission social care. The funding gave the Council the freedom and flexibility to design a multi-year health and wellbeing programme which will respond to health needs, tackle health inequalities, and help Covid recovery.

The focus is multi-disciplinary encompassing physical activity, mental health, homelessness, skills for employment, children and young people, community development and capacity building in the community sector, using the community intelligence gained through the hub work. Andrew explained "This is not only about loneliness, many people are more worried generally or fearful of going out" and many people are worse off in different ways because of the pandemic.

Andrew wrote the delivery plan and explained that it started with the question 'who should be involved to help us deliver this and what are we going to achieve as a result?'. The focus is on co-design and co-production, explored in detail in the Leadership Essentials focus on community development.

Andrew said that in the past, the default position across the sector would have been to deliver everything within each organisation and asking the question 'who is best placed to deliver' has led to collaboration with partners such as Suffolk Mind, and the Ipswich and Suffolk Racial Equality Council as well as public sector partners.

Front and centre is the principle of proportionate universalism, a principle explored in Leadership Essentials, i.e that the resourcing and delivery of universal services should be at a scale and intensity proportionate to the degree of need.

Andrew emphasised that built in from the start is a research focus as experience has shown him that one of the biggest failures in the sport and physical activity sector has been in demonstrating impact to make the case for sport and physical activity. One of the new relationships being explored is with the newly Integrated Care Academy at University of Suffolk.

Andrew reflected on the way he now works "It isn't rocket science, it's having a conversation, building a relationship, and trusting that someone knows more than you do about it. It takes time to influence and time to embed, this is a long-term approach".

He noted that he hadn't always understood the importance of working in the wider system. Some years ago, he joined a working group and took his place at the table without really engaging or seeing how the issues discussed were relevant to his work in sport. He said "I didn't get it, I didn't have the knowledge and understanding, I wasn't open to it, and I missed the opportunity, if I had taken it, I could have accelerated all of this by a year or more. I did myself and my organisation a disservice - if only I had known then what I know now about system working".

Andrew uses a good analogy about the importance of system leadership in tackling 'wicked' or intractable societal problems; "What I learned a huge amount about on the Leadership Essentials programme is that the system is very complex. As I see it now, systems are like a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle, with each person and organisation a jigsaw piece. I've learned that it's slow finding the first few pieces that go together but you can then put part of the puzzle in place quickly, but it takes time to complete the rest, and it's important not just pack to up and put it all back in the box before it is finished. Sometimes you only have 800 pieces when actually the other 200 are essential".



He is in regular contact with programme alumni on a one-to-one level and through the alumni network

Andrew and his team have been seeking to future proof their leisure offer, recognising the need to drive internal change to adapt to a changing external context and engage with more empathy with communities. They are changing from a traditional leisure offer focused on running leisure centres with some complementary services.

Now the delivery plan is focused firmly on communities, adapting the business model, and responding to changing needs and demand, developing staff skills and capacity through the recruitment of new health and wellbeing engagement officers and apprentices, and ensuring a more holistic approach is embedded when the initial CCG funding comes to an end. The leisure operations side of the business is still crucial but the future market looks different now.

Andrew reflected that the cohort approach to Leadership Essentials has been highly valuable, and he is in regular contact with programme alumni on a one-to-one level and through the alumni network.

He said "The WhatsApp group is a different level, it's fantastic. I can put something on WhatsApp, and I know I have a network of people who will respond, share insight and ideas. We have been on a journey together and we are invested in each other and what we are trying to do, with shared values, and a common goal".

Andrew summarised his views on the network he has built up with the help of Leadership Essentials: "Sport England call this uniting the movement and that's a really good term, it does feel like it is a movement, and more and more people are joining the conversation".

