



Nurturing Local Leadership

Learning about the impact of the Sport England
and Local Government Association
Leadership Essentials Programme for officers

Why this matters

Tackling inequalities and creating **positive change in our communities** requires **leadership at every level of the system.**

During 2017 it became increasingly clear that nurturing and developing the collaborative leadership skills of people in places was going to be fundamental in helping to position sport and physical activity as part of transformational change agendas taking place across councils and places.



In response we developed our **Leadership Essentials** programme which has supported leaders and aspiring leaders in places to **challenge their thinking, practices and create change.**



Since this work began the world has changed because of the global pandemic, and the work of local councils and its partners has probably never been so challenged. As a result, the programme changed too.

During this time Sport England published **'Uniting the Movement'** its 10-year strategy that aims to work with communities and partners to transform lives through sport and physical activity and **tackle the inequalities we've seen for far too long.**



All participants have experienced their own **personal leadership journeys** as part of this programme and this resource is designed to **share some of the impact** this has had at an individual, organisational and system level.

Learning from their stories and experiences we know that this is a continuing journey and **there is more to do to** - more widely through increasing the numbers of people who have access to leadership development and linking to more sectors, such as health, the environment, and to go deeper through more localised activity in places.



Providing opportunities to people and communities that have traditionally been left behind, and helping to remove the barriers to activity, has never been more important. We know that leadership at all levels will be key to realising this ambition.

That is why the findings in this resource are so important to helping identify what is done next to nurture and develop current and future leaders.

What we did

In February 2018, Sport England and the LGA developed and piloted a Leadership Essentials - Sport and Physical Activity programme for officers who are leaders and aspiring leaders from local authorities, leisure trusts and Active Partnerships. This built on the leadership work the LGA and Sport England had developed for councillors.

The **successful pilot** has been followed by **thirteen**

further programmes which were followed up by supporting alumni activities.



After each programme a feedback survey sought immediate opinion and comment on the participants' experience of the programme. However as the programme was based on personal development it was also important to understand the **impact on participants working practice.**



In May 2021 Sport England and the LGA commissioned the LGA research and information team to evaluate the impact of the programme, in order to help them consider how any future leadership development activity could most effectively support local sport and physical activity leadership capacity.

200 
participants

seven 

**facilitated
group
discussions.**



All participants

have experienced **their own personal leadership journeys** as part of this programme and this resource is **designed to share some of the impact** this has had at an individual, organisational and system level.

The research focused on delegates who took part in the Leadership Essentials programmes between **February 2018 and December 2020** as well as the related alumni sessions. The methodology was comprised of a survey to all participants that took part (200) and seven facilitated group discussions (37)

What we did

To date, 247 officers who are leaders and aspiring leaders from local authorities, leisure trusts and Active Partnerships have taken part in the programme. Facilitated by Martyn Allison and Liz Blyth, LGA Associates and Debbie Sorkin, National Director of Systems Leadership at The Leadership Centre.

The programme is based on a cohort approach of up to 20 people per programme and was face-to-face over a couple of days until the pandemic when it was moved online as ten 2/3 hour sessions over a month.

The programme content was co-designed across the following themes:

- Understanding the new context
- Understanding system thinking and system change
- Changing the system to change lives.

Take a look at the full course content on the following page.

The programme aims to support participants to:

- Engage and influence the changes that will now need to take place in their organisations and the wider sector.
- Develop and enhance their collaborative leadership skills so they can support and influence the delivery of whole system change.
- Interact better with other service areas which include, but are not limited to, adult social care, public health, health and wellbeing.
- Engage with and better influence local political leadership.
- Better articulate and evidence their value and importance in a new and challenging environment.



- 72 > Active Partnership
- 115 > Local Authority
- 11 > Other
- 49 > Trust

For the programme alumni



DEEP DIVE SESSIONS

were organised when face to face was possible.



ONLINE SESSIONS

were organised when face to face wasn't possible due to the pandemic.



ACTION LEARNING SETS

sets took place.

Programme Content

Understanding the new context

The pandemic has changed everything, and leaders need to understand the new context they are now working in to make good decisions. In these sessions, we look at how public opinion is changing, how national government policy is changing, how local government is changing, how the health and social care sector is changing and what this means for the direction of the new Sport England strategy 'Uniting the Movement'.

Session 01

Building a shared purpose

Introduction to the programme, and each other. Undertaking activities to build a shared sense of purpose over the coming weeks.

Session 02

National and local perspectives

Featuring leaders giving their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities.

Session 03

Addressing Health Inequalities

Understanding health and social care – landscape, language and relationships.

Understanding system thinking and system change

Before the pandemic, systems thinking and whole system change was already being recognised as the means of addressing the stubborn social, environmental and economic challenges we all face.

These challenges, particularly the challenge of health inequality, have now been intensified by the pandemic and so system change will grow in importance over the next few years.

As part of system change it's important that we develop different collaborative leadership skills and behaviours and new approaches to leadership to strengthen our ability to work with and influence others by working better at the political interface and across organisational boundaries.

Session 04

Session 05

Session 06

Systems thinking, system change and collaborative leadership

Changing the system to change lives

Focusing on the practical changes required with a central focus on addressing inequality. This theme involves four interrelated sessions looking at:

Session 07

Who are we providing for?

How we understand behaviour change for the audiences we want to reach.

Session 08

Places and Spaces

Looking at the future role of council infrastructure, including active environments, in supporting the delivery of local outcomes.

Session 09

Understanding and engaging with communities

New ways of thinking about engaging with communities - co-design, co-production and empowerment.

Session 10

Learning and influencing

A final session bringing the learning together, hearing from others about their leadership experience and action planning.

Impact of the programme - **On performance in role**

The three aspects of their leadership role that participants said the programme had helped them improve the most, were:

01

Their ability to understand the changing context within which they work.

02

Their ability to build relationships with a coalition of willing people and develop a common purpose.

03

Their ability to reframe their message and case/arguments in a way that influences those who can facilitate change.

Additional
positive
experiences and
impact shared
by participants included:

- >> A new-found confidence.
- >> A fresh perspective both on their role, the challenges they face and how they could work more effectively with others, gained through engaging with participants from different organisations and areas of the country.
- >> A new style of leadership, enhanced listening skills, increased empathy and understanding of inclusivity and the co-production approach.
- >> A better understanding of the wider context within which their work is based.
- >> The skills to take a systems-based approach, interacting meaningfully with different parts of the system.
- >> Increased empathy and understanding, for example, acknowledging that change within various organisations is developing at different rates.

Impact of the programme - **On the wider organisation**

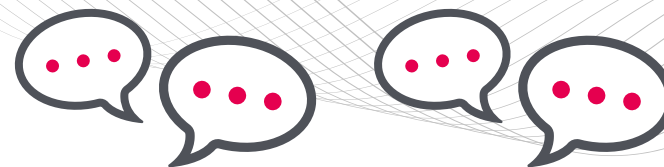
Participants reflected on the extent to which what they learned through the programme had enabled them to have a positive impact on the work of their organisation, department or team.

Areas where impact was most commonly identified were:

Understanding of system thinking and system change : **Ability to work towards increasing physical activity for those in most need**

“ I have applied this learning [from the programme] to my role and to projects I am working on. I have tried to identify key community contacts that can help us engage target audiences to be physically active, a great example of this is the Active Sussex Crawley Workforce Project. We have identified several members of the South Asian community (in line with a ‘person like me’ approach) to receive funding to access additional training/ qualifications, to enable them to deliver high quality sport and physical activity to identified target audiences. ”

Active Sussex



Participants shared examples of where they, their organisation or team were now doing things differently as a result of going through the programme.

Examples included:

- **Partnership working**, for example some participants noted that relationships with health and public health professionals were now stronger strategically and operationally, and that they now had strengthened links with active partnerships and leisure providers.
- **Community engagement**, for example engaging at the local level, looking outwards and adopting a more locally focused approach than previously, had allowed some participants to understand and provide more effectively for the needs of their residents.
- **Understanding and influencing the wider context**, for example a developing awareness at a corporate level of the impact that sport and physical activity could have across a range of different areas and the role of physical activity within wider health and well-being agendas.
- **Evolving their leaderships style**, for example, adopting a more facilitative approach and being better able to influence discussions when engaging with a wider range of partners.

Impact of the programme – **On system leadership**

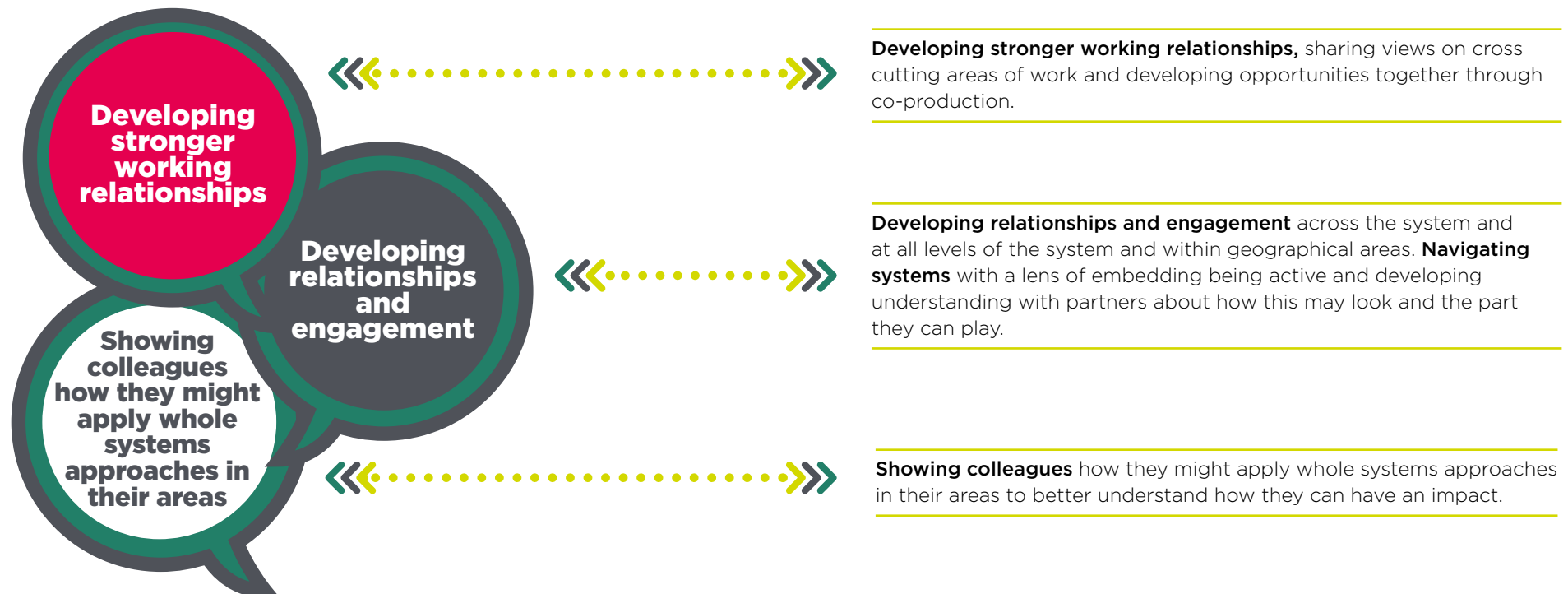
Many participants have said that they are engaging or have attempted to engage with other service areas, in order to seek mutual support between their outcomes and those for local sport and physical activity. Most commonly mentioned were **public health, adult social care, transport, planning, children's services, parks, leisure** and **housing**.

Challenges that respondents had encountered when engaging with other service areas included issues around the different priorities/focus and understanding of other services, convincing others that physical activity can link into and enhance their agendas and challenges moving positive conversations into tangible action.

“ I have engaged with colleagues in planning and as a result they have offered to include me in the planning applications consultation group so I can influence decisions that may affect citizen movement. ”

Local authority

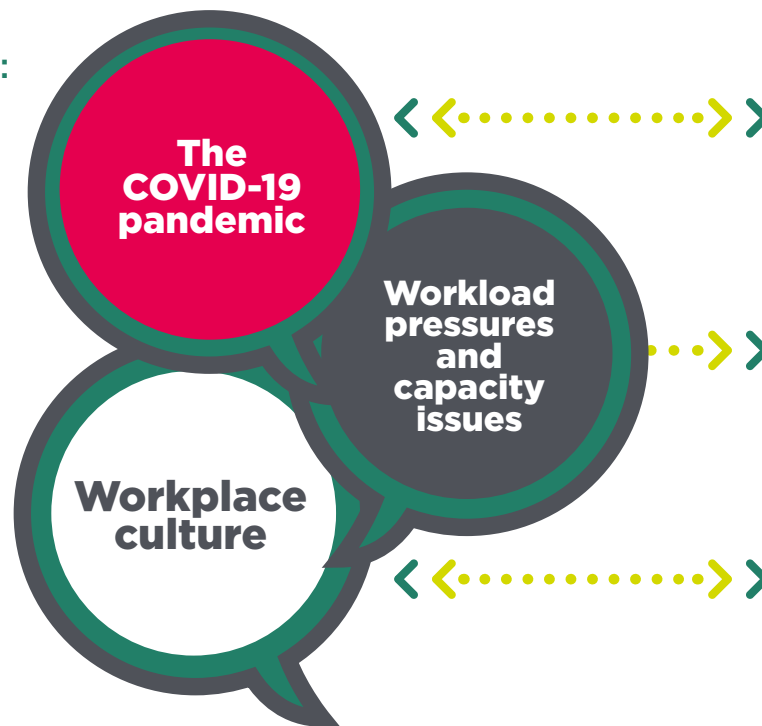
Positives coming out of this engagement included:



Impact of the programme – **Challenges of applying the learning**

Participants shared information about the reasons why they had not been able to make as much progress as they would have liked in using the learning following the programme (either in terms of their own leadership or the wider impact on their organisation or others).

These included:



The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, some respondents said this had hindered their ability to expand their work as planned and to find time to engage with alumni activities, with others saying that their organisations were working in a 'survival' mode.

Workplace culture, for example, difficulty finding common purpose, a lack of opportunity to engage, pockets of resistance to change, and some departments not recognising the value of physical activity to their work.

Workload pressures and capacity issues, with some saying that large workloads allowed them little time for personal development, reflection or planning and it was difficult to carve out time for this.

The future - **Leadership to enable place-based working**

Looking to the future, participants were asked what they thought leadership should look like in the sector going forward, to enable place-based working. Participants were clear that leadership in the future should look different from that in the past or currently in place.

Generally, it was suggested that there should be a move away from territorial or individual leadership to a more

modern, facilitative, empathetic, inclusive and collaborative approach

which would reflect the need for future provision to be co-designed and co-developed with residents and communities.

Examples given of skills that would be needed for this were wide ranging and included:



The ability to develop a sense of a shared purpose and vision.



The ability to define and measure success in a complex and shifting policy and practice landscape.



To embrace change and challenge.



Strong influencing and listening skills with the ability to connect and build trust.

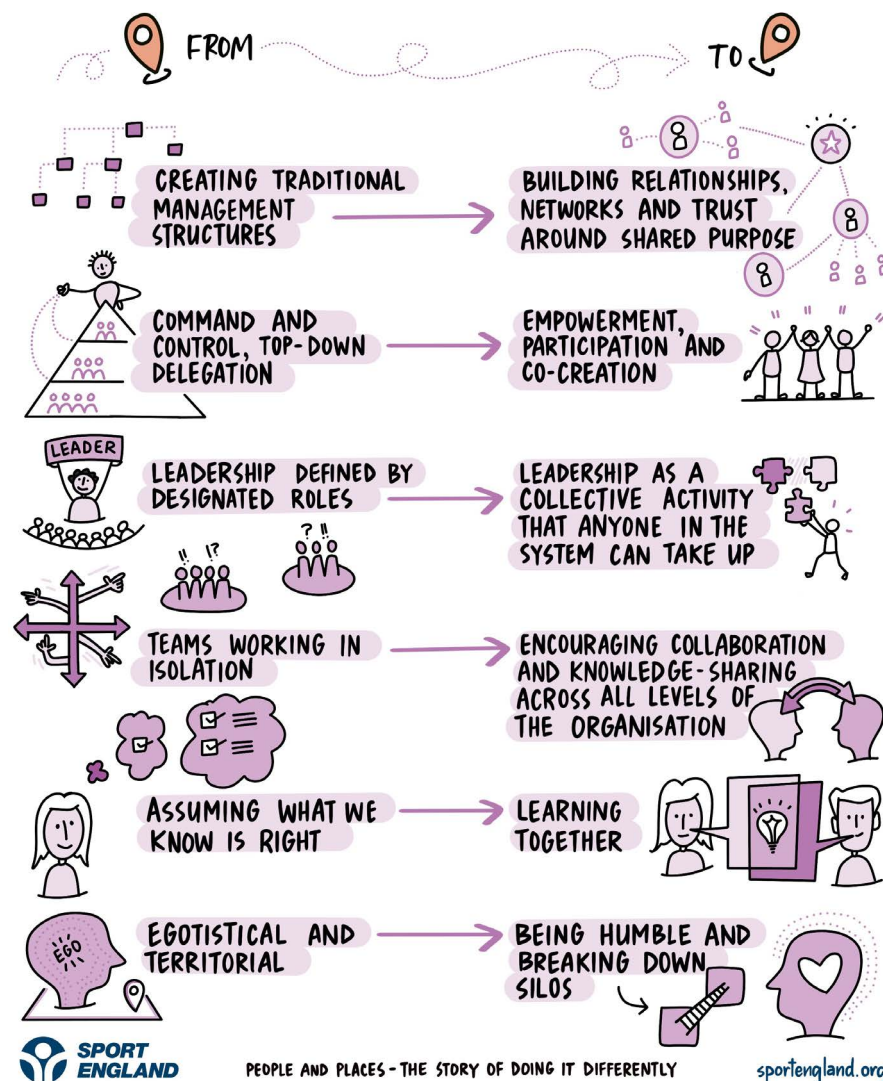
The future - Leadership to enable place-based working

Leadership skills participants identified as important for the future also align to the learning from Sport England's collaboration with the Local Delivery Pilots. Places are helping to empower distributed leadership and change behaviours, some of which are shared in the image opposite.

More information on the learning from the Local Delivery Pilots (LDPs) can be accessed in **'People and Places - the story of doing it differently'** together with more detail on the approaches used such as developing common purpose in **'Putting it into Practice- tools to support tackling inactivity through system change'**

Programme participants experiences of navigating systems also resonates with the work Sport England has undertaken with three places to further explore how to support places to work in a whole system way, **'Navigating Local Systems'** This involved supporting places to better understand the system they work within and drive change through collaborative working.

HELPING TO EMPOWER DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP



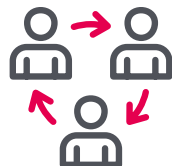
The Future - **Challenges for leaders of the future**

Participants have highlighted a wide range of potential barriers and challenges that future leaders may face, and which future support could helpfully address.

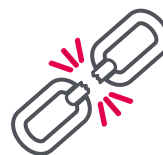
These included:



Partnership working, for example, it was noted that bringing new partners on board and developing new operating models whilst dealing with limited funding and resource could be challenging, but there was a clear need to avoid silo working.



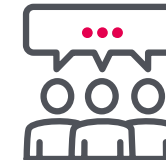
Collaboration for example, some participants suggested that it may be challenging to overcome the urge to take personal and immediate action when what is actually needed is a collaborative approach.



Embracing failure and systems change, for example, it was noted that systems change takes time and there needs to be an understanding and an acknowledgement of this and that progress is not always linear – there may well be setbacks before goals are achieved.



Funding, with some participants anticipating future funding challenges and that the sector has not yet seen the full funding effects of COVID-19.



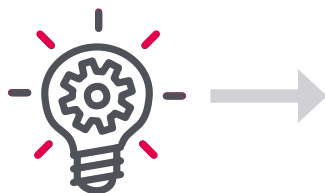
Working in a political environment, for example, working with politicians at a local level where lead members may not have in-depth knowledge about the sector. At a national level issues around influencing government and messaging to increase understanding of the importance of physical activity were also highlighted.

Future Support

Participants highlighted the complex 'ecosystem' that exists at both a national and local level. Primarily, it was noted that there is considerable impact of the national on the local but that what is needed is a more enabling approach where both parts of the 'system' equally impact on each other. In this way, the national system would benefit from learning about the practice and approaches at a local level and could then, for example, disseminate these more widely.

Many participants raised the idea of expanding the Sport England and LGA programme more widely:

- Both within the sector e.g. National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and more widely with other sectors such as health, transport, environment etc.
- To more people at all levels.
- Possibly with a local place based 'offer'.
- And/or linking this with training or leadership development offered by other organisations and sectors. Again both within the sector with organisations such as CIMPSA; UKActive and more widely e.g. health, social care.



In addition, a wide range of further suggestions were given, and some examples are summarised below:

- Continuing to **maintain the alumni groups** and ensuring the provision of resources to do so was key for many participants. Linked to this, some participants suggested the development of more geographical local support networks.
- More encouragement for **buddying** or structuring pairing opportunities to enable more sharing across the network.
- Addressing the lack of existing **continued professional development** (CPD): Some participants noted that providing training and leadership development at a lower level and earlier point in their career pathway would have benefitted them.
- Bringing in **talent from other sectors**: some participants noted that creating a more varied workforce, not necessarily just individuals with a sports background, may benefit the sector.

In conclusion

The Sport England and LGA officer Leadership programme has been highly valued by the participants enabling them to be more confident in their leadership approach in what they do and importantly 'how' they do it.



Based on **using the behaviours and skills of collaborative leadership they have been enhancing the relationships** they have with communities, partners and within their organisation, understanding and being empathetic to what matters to them and having a better comprehension of the wider strategic context that impacts on the system around them.

This isn't without its challenges and participants have recognised **it takes time to build trusting relationships** and find the ways of framing their message. In addition, making time and space to reflect and share learning is considered important but not always easy and more opportunities nationally and locally to do that would be welcomed.

In the future participants **wanted to see leadership which is more modern, facilitative, empathetic, inclusive and collaborative in approach** which would reflect the need for future provision to be co-designed and co-developed with residents and communities.

They suggested that to **continue to encourage this leadership approach that the programme and any future leadership activities could be taken forward in a wider and deeper way**. More widely through increasing the numbers of people who have access and linking to more sectors, such as health, the environment, and deeper through more localised activity in places.

Final thoughts

“ I would just like to say thank you for a brilliant programme and that I would recommend it to anyone working in the sector! It has been the best CPD that I have accessed in my career by far!

The content, speakers, facilitators and guest speakers were excellent, and there were plenty of opportunities to engage in discussions and to speak to colleagues across the sector.

Completing the programme has improved my knowledge and understanding of systems leadership and systems leadership behaviours, which will continue to benefit me in my current role and my career in the future ”

Local authority

“ I have loved this programme and have found it so useful in terms of building my leadership skills and confidence. The ongoing support through the WhatsApp group and the alumni session has been unbelievably helpful to know others in the country are facing the same difficulties and challenges as you are and it is also a [great] forum for sharing information and new ideas too ”

Local authority

Participants' stories

Four colleagues tell their story on using the learning from the programme to create impact in their place.

Andy King

Chief Executive
of Your Trust
(Formerly Link for
Life) in Rochdale
and chair of Greater
Manchester Active (a collaboration
of twelve operators across Greater
Manchester)



Andy really valued his attendance on the programme and acknowledges how his own leadership behaviours have changed as a result.

He is he says more collaborative, more likely to be last to speak and take a back seat, more inclined to delegate and more likely to encourage people who think differently and have different passions and feels that now the job title matters less. He also feels he understands people better and although just as passionate he is more relaxed, almost laid back.

Andrew Wilesmith

Operations
Manager,
Sport and Leisure,
Ipswich Borough
Council



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 "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"... "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".

Laura Kerrigan

Formerly Senior
Business Manager,
Energize Shropshire,
Telford and Wrekin
(Active Partnership)



Laura found the networking and connections created by Leadership Essentials highly valuable.

She reflected that "I hadn't come from a traditional sports background, and I hadn't always it easy to find others to connect with... in Leadership Essentials I felt like I went into a space where there were different voices talking about leadership and I could focus on the issues I was facing and learn from others, share a problem and hear other people's ideas.

Some of the people who attended were more senior and I got such a lot from talking to other people, seeing the challenges they faced and learning how they see and think".

Warren Smyth

Chief Executive.
Abbeycroft Leisure



For Warren the pandemic was simply 'madness' but helping communities he believes forced greater empathy to emerge throughout the system. This also brought him closer to his partners who he was already working with before the pandemic, but it brought a significant shift in their relationships. The partners started to see the Trust differently, not just a leisure operator but as the charity it was.

The risk that the service provided and which they helped fund could be lost stimulated a desire to help them survive. Warren believes that this sense of potential loss raised the perceived value of the facilities and the activities provided, with this increased positivity continuing.

This publication is a summary of research commissioned by Sport England and the LGA in July 2021.

