



# Navigating Local Systems

*Test and Learn approach  
to system change*

November 2023

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## Background

The Navigating Local Systems (NLS) project began in the autumn of 2019 and focused on working with 3 localities (Wakefield, Luton and Liverpool ) to enable people and organisations to better navigate local systems' by developing their knowledge, skills and capacity to drive change in the system. The ultimate aim being to increase physical activity within local communities where need is the greatest.



## Purpose

The purpose was to enable participants to better understand the system they work within; help them to develop strong, resilient and collaborative local partnerships; work collaboratively within the local commissioning and co-production landscape and help drive change across the system and within the place.

## What we did – 2019-21

Working together, Sport England and the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) selected three places and gave each a small amount of investment to work with an expert facilitator who could help them test and learn whether working in this way would allow each place to begin their system change journey. **Take a look at the learning from phase one.**

## What we did – 2022-23

To support the three places continue their system change journey and build on the excellent progress they had made during the initial test and learn phase, a further small investment was made by Sport England.

It was felt that there was rich learning to be gained from supporting further development of their approaches whilst helping to gain a clearer view of whether a small injection of finance to support with capacity and expertise could enable some level of system change within a place.

# HEADLINE LEARNING

Collectively these three localities have learned that it is important to:



Take time to plan



Involve the right people



Work in a different way



Don't be afraid to fail



## Take time to plan

- ▶ **Access support and insight from other places** - immerse yourself in learning from other places, contexts and sectors. Yes, your place is unique but some of the challenges aren't, and you may find some approaches taken elsewhere might just be what you need to help you think through solutions.
- ▶ **Consider your capacity** - don't embark on something without checking capacity first.
- ▶ **Work out the key players before you start** - not initially in terms of job role, but about who might also have enthusiasm and energy for change. You can revisit the 'gaps' later, start where there's energy and build a team first.
- ▶ **Take people with you** - involve team members and key stakeholders on the journey at an early stage. This is a challenge as the work can be iterative and uncertain – it requires courage and faith in the process.



## Involve the right people

- ▶ **Broaden the coalition of support** – include allies from beyond the world of physical activity which will not only provide wider political coverage, but also accelerate the rate of learning.
- ▶ **Find people who can help you hold a mirror up** – a facilitator who can act as an outside observer and critical friend, able to challenge and motivate and bring fresh perspectives.
- ▶ **Get senior buy-in early on** – someone who will champion what you're doing and provide support when you get stuck. You can never go too senior in an organisation.
- ▶ **Involve the communications lead at an early stage** – they'll be better equipped to communicate the value. Accessible and common language is essential.



## Working in a different way

- ▶ **Always be open minded** – about the idea of doing things differently, sometimes it means doing the opposite of what you've done before.
- ▶ **Model behaviours** – Many of the activities required to build strong relationships lie outside the realm of traditional day-to-day working practices, sometimes making it difficult to account for time spent in this way. When senior leaders model spending time listening to communities and developing relationships this legitimises the behaviour for more junior staff.
- ▶ **Build reflective practice into your work** - do it little and often, informally as well as formally, dedicate half days to create space to reflect and learn.
- ▶ **Lead with an offer not an ask** - be clear about what you can do for others and take time to understand those who are also working in the system. Be curious about what others do, and let connections and collaboration grow organically from there if you can.
- ▶ **Listen** – to help communities, listen to them and their ideas. Listen to your heart, and your gut, think with your head.
- ▶ **Building relationships is key** - meeting for coffee and a chat is real work! It's a great way to get to know new people and build relationships based on openness and honesty.



## Don't be afraid to fail

- ▶ **You don't have to be an expert** – view failure as learning.
- ▶ **Be humble, be honest, be brave.**
- ▶ **Lead in the spirit of discovery** - you won't have all of the answers, if you share that understanding from the outset it lets others see where they could have a part to play.



Find people who can help you hold a mirror up – a facilitator who can act as an outside observer and critical friend, able to challenge and motivate and bring fresh perspectives. ”

# Wakefield Story

## What we've been up to and where we have focused our energy

In this phase we focused on working at the neighbourhood layer of the system as we understood that was where the energy was. In Wakefield we've tried different approaches to bring people from different organisations and services together for conversations around connectedness and collaboration and created a strong base to build from.

We launched the work at a maize maze, using the analogy of whole systems work being like navigating a maze, followed by a series of 'coffee mornings' and then delivered three subject specific events in partnership based on what we heard at the coffee mornings.

### These included:



Growing connections and networks. How does great collaboration grow from small seeds?



Focusing on what's strong not what's wrong. How can working in an asset based way build strong foundations?



Building momentum. How can we rise to the sustainability challenge?

At this stage we reviewed what we had achieved through working with an evaluation partner, using the results to plan the next stage. We held two further events to share our learning to date and we started to discuss potential medium and long term ambitions and **co-design our vision**. We also met with more strategic and senior level system advocates to discuss how our work connects together.

By doing this, we have built relationships with a wider range of organisations for whom physical activity wouldn't have been an organisational priority but who are now well-placed to understand their contribution and feel motivated to act.

“We launched the work at a maize maze, using the analogy of whole systems work being like navigating a maze.”

## A-mazing Wakefield

Let's build on what's strong and make movement belong...

### Our Journey

- 2021
  - Learned about whole systems thinking
  - Discovered more about local networks
- 2022
  - Built a small team to support the work
  - Established partnership networks
  - Creatively explored collaborative approaches
  - Established our way of working ('feels like')
- 2023
  - Join more of our work together
  - Develop systems leadership
  - Embed physical activity in wider projects

### Our Approach

#### Feels like...

- Doing things differently
- Positivity and energy building
- All leading together
- We're more connected
- Learning new skills and approaches
- Collaboration is important

### Our Shared Vision...

A happier, healthier, more active place, particularly where the need is greatest.

### What's coming next...

1. Development sessions throughout the year focussed on practical approaches to leading in complex systems
2. Joining more of our work together and aligning resources across projects
3. Embedding physical activity with our partners and colleagues into more of what we already do

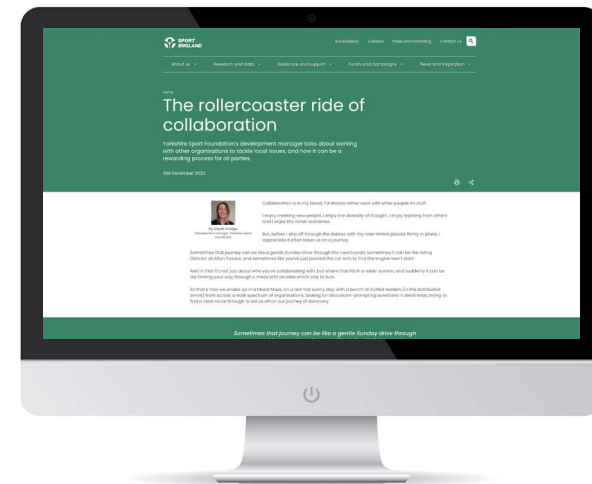


## What change is happening as a result of this work

- ▶ Building a trusted alliance of equal partners across the system (not usual suspects).
- ▶ Developed a more connected network with increased awareness of how aligned agendas already are.
- ▶ Created spaces to think and work differently, challenging norms and learning from each other.
- ▶ Attracted the interest of senior leaders from across the system leading to an informal network of senior level system advocates, with aligned approaches, supporting each others priorities through closer working.
- ▶ Created a buzz and increased energy and positivity about future action, focusing on strengths and assets.
- ▶ Identifying and overcoming barriers to action and collaborating to make best use of resources.
- ▶ Increased engagement of voluntary and community sector organisations who have brought a wealth of knowledge and often a 'reality check' in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the people of Wakefield.
- ▶ Influencing other agendas.
- ▶ Developed a stronger relationship with Sport England colleagues with national recognition for the approach taken.
- ▶ Increased connections across sectors & collaboration beyond the events – ripple effects.
- ▶ Increased awareness of physical activity and motivation to take action.
- ▶ Different ways of working; Involvement in wider strategic level work in the district and involving more people in physical activity conversations.

Please find below a link to some further reading about the work in Wakefield, through the lens of collaboration.

Take a listen to this specially recorded podcast episode that shares Wakefield's journey so far





## What we've learnt along the way

- ▶ **Think creatively when convening meeting spaces: putting people in different spaces and situations puts them in a different mindset.**  
Creating a fun and engaging environment helps to create the conditions to build energy. Bringing interactive and engaging tools, frameworks and ideas through skilled facilitation can help to bring fresh ideas and new ways of looking at things.
- ▶ **Connecting people personally to the work and each other builds a stronger sense of team and commitment to move forward together...**, even if we don't yet know what the end goal looks like.
- ▶ **The quality of the invite and the meeting environment is important**  
just as it is in our social lives (quality doesn't mean expensive!).

“  
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- ▶ **Suggest practical tools that can support influencing and system working.**  
Ways to interrupt the “hot air” and focus it into practical application of place based approaches. Being “in the room” where things are happening makes it easier to influence from within than trying to create momentum in our own space.
- ▶ **Those who took part valued the neutrality of those running the event and the skills of the facilitator.**  
The feedback also highlighted how these elements combined together to create a unique feeling to the sessions. The fact it was led by someone other than the council provided a neutrality that meant we were equals not in a hierarchy’.
- ▶ **Leadership comes in many forms.**  
Sometimes it's okay to bring people together in a room and then step back and observe what happens. Noticing small shifts is as important as delivering shiny programmes, they often take as much time and effort, but the small shifts are the things that are likely to stand the test of time.

- ▶ **Modelling different approaches that people can take away and try in different contexts builds a movement for change.**  
How we do things - how we frame conversations, and how we explore strengths and opportunities for change - is important.
- ▶ **Making change stick is challenging.**  
Whilst the desire to network is there, it needs the time and effort to ‘nurture’ these to fully develop sustainable opportunities. To turn connections into deeper opportunities for collaboration takes time and effort.
- ▶ **Allowing space for the barriers to be acknowledged and worked through is important.**  
When working collaboratively it is important to acknowledge the way funding is distributed can foster competition, rather than collaboration. The work has helped more people have more conversations about what is happening in the area and the power of collaborative working. However, there is still considerable work that is needed to align organisations priorities and create the conditions for closer working to address levels of inactivity in the district.

## What we've been up to and where we have focused our energy

During this phase of the work we focused on embedding the work within Children's services by ensuring we were represented on various boards and committees, strengthening the understanding of the role and value of physical activity.

We invested time in people – building relationships and strong links with officers and Members in the area of Children's Services and with Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes health services too, by demonstrating the impact and 'shouting' about the added value we bring. Relationships have taken time to develop and every opportunity for coffee has been accepted!

We spent time developing common purpose and understanding of the value of physical activity with a diverse range of individuals and groups working with children in the social care system to share where they see opportunities for more interventions to support their work. This has been at strategic, tactical, and operational level.

By aligning strategic documents to highlight the links and evidencing outcomes and impact we have ensured that the work is explicitly linked to Luton 2040 Vision and Luton as a Marmot Town.

## What change is happening as a result of this work

### ▶ **Links have strengthened across all sections of the network.**

Strong links have been established across senior leaders in public health, physical activity and community development, as well as with Councillors and Portfolio holders associated with public health and children's services.

Links have been developed and are strengthening with colleagues in Children's Commissioning related to health and this is further demonstrated by the subsequent commissioning of elements of the service across the rest of the Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes Integrated Care System, for example social prescription for children and young people.

### ▶ **Working through the development of a value statement.**

This work sought to highlight both the seen and hidden value of this new way of working, which has forced those involved to focus much more on the different approach, the value of thinking time and the strength gained from developing new relationships through the understanding and appreciation of common goals.

### ▶ **Development of safe spaces for collaboration.**

The development of safe reflective spaces where new learning can emerge, not agenda driven, where partners come together, to support, empower and ultimately take responsibility without being fearful of failure. This has helped the work progress by cutting across silos and enhancing relationship structures.

### ▶ **People thinking about how they tackle inactivity in a different way.**

Improved strategic recognition of physical activity in a place, including an embedded strategic methodology that starts to tackle identified blockages and drives new ways of working.

### ▶ **Embedding in the system.**

Over the last two years the Young People Social Prescription team has grown to include two fulltime link workers to support this agenda, along with children in care and care leavers. To date close to 1,000 children and their families have been supported to become more physically active.

In March 2021 Life Hacks (see description below) was the winner of the Social Prescribing Network and College of Medicine Awards for the Best Children and Young People Social Prescribing Project.

Life Hacks – a children and young people social prescribing project focusing on connecting young people with community-based support and services, to help with different aspects of emotional, physical, and social wellbeing, as well as providing training and development opportunities.

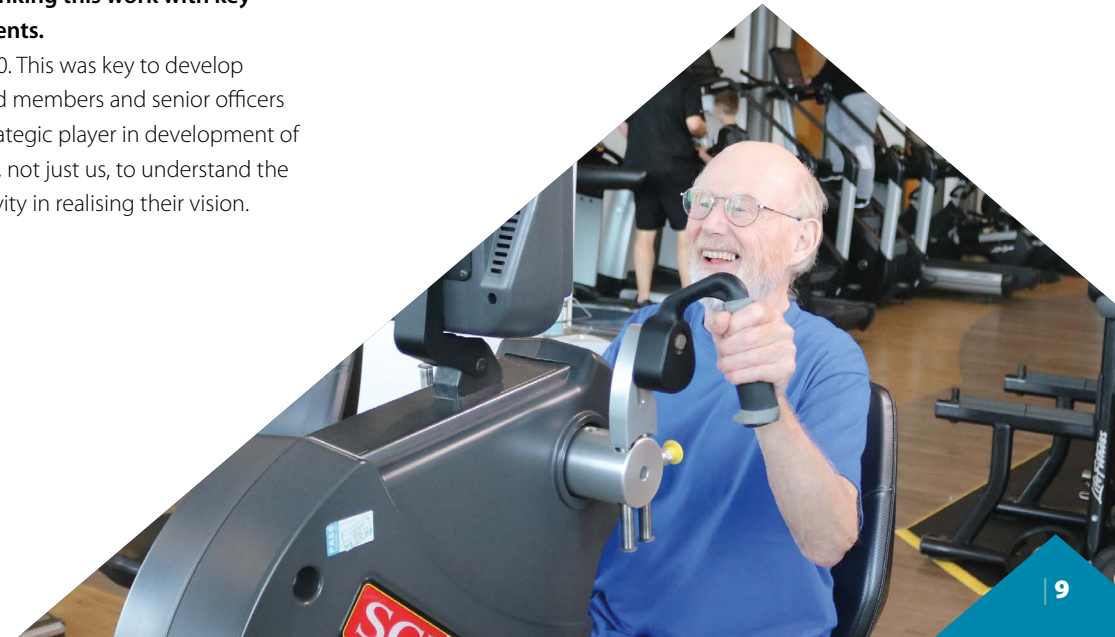


## What we've learnt along the way

- ▶ **'Slower is better'.**  
Individuals have lots of competing priorities and pressurising stakeholders and partners to run when they want to walk is counterproductive and does not support relationships. Provide realistic and achievable timelines.
- ▶ **You don't have to do everything yourself.**  
There are lots of elements to the work, not least understanding and knowledge, so involving key stakeholders and securing buy-in and accountability through actions is really valuable. This is also crucial in terms of long term sustainability and succession planning.

“There are lots of elements to the work, not least understanding and knowledge, so involving key stakeholders and securing buy-in and accountability through actions is really valuable.”

- ▶ **Distributed leadership strengthens an organisation.**  
It supports the development of learning; a broader range of skill sets and knowledge and reduces risks in relation to continuity and reliance on a small number of key individuals. Understanding roles and responsibilities in this scenario is important though.
- ▶ **It's important to engage the comms team in developing a shared language – we did this too late.**  
This highlights the importance of introducing the right skills and experience at the earliest opportunity and using an inclusive language rather than jargon understood only by our sector.
- ▶ **Importance of explicitly linking this work with key Council and Place documents.**  
ie Marmot Town, Luton 2040. This was key to develop and secure buy-in of elected members and senior officers within the council, a key strategic player in development of this work. We needed them, not just us, to understand the importance of physical activity in realising their vision.
- ▶ **Work out the key players before you start and be sure to engage with them early.**  
This avoids duplication of effort and increases the chance of commitment to the work and provision of resources across an organisation.
- ▶ **Members are crucial to unblocking relationships with officers.**  
Officers have many competing commitments and priorities. Gaining the understanding, pressure and support of Members can open doors and show a shared commitment.



# Liverpool Story

## What we've been up to and where we have focused our energy

In this phase we have reinvigorated the work by identifying new partnerships and allies, linking to the development of Liverpool's new neighbourhood model, the new physical activity strategy and the emerging leisure centres as places for social connection, social prescribing, place-based connection, with broader consideration of climate/built environment and active travel agendas.

We identified that building on what's there, and creating stronger links with health and wellbeing improvement work amplifies resources and efforts, taking better advantage of the strengths of partners.

“We need to be more helpful to people. Whatever they need help with, that's our agenda.”

“There's more power starting with one conversation in a place, than there is getting people around the table and trying to contrive something massive to impact across the whole system. Small wins, step-by-step conversations.”

“We need to meet people where they are. Not going in with our agenda, because that isn't genuine enough.”

### Building on the insights from the earlier phase of the work we embarked on three areas of action:

#### ► Internal focus:

work within the Council to build internal capabilities and capacity and strengthen governance to deliver on the City Plan.

#### ► External focus:

establish and nurture coalition of cross-sector leaders.

#### ► Test and learn:

develop a place based intervention in one identified area. Following a period of research we recommended Princes Park as our first choice - 'Princes Park Moving Together'.

We ran two workshops at the Kuumba Imani Centre involving people from a range of local community groups. Each workshop took an asset-based approach, and incorporated movement into workshop activities.



- The first workshop focused on building connections, seeking to reset expectations about how the council engages with communities, as well as understanding collective strengths and collective purpose.
- The second workshop focused on goals and ways of working, generating ideas for ways forward, and principles for success and ways of working.

The focus of the work then shifted to opportunities for the Council to work directly with community groups, invitations generated through these new relationships. For example, we are now engaging directly with the Friends of Princes Park, a volunteer group who improve Princes Park itself.

## What change is happening as a result of this work

- ▶ **Viewing the work through the lens of day to day life** and weaving opportunities for movement into the community, rather than solely through structured activities, projects and physical assets. Focusing on the environment in which people live and the opportunities available to them.
- ▶ **Broadened thinking about the purpose** of the Council's work including re-evaluating existing approaches and the role that existing council assets such as leisure facilities can play.
- ▶ **Developing relationships**, recognising the need to rebuild trust with some communities and acknowledging the imbalances of power implicit within those relationships.
- ▶ **Changing the way we engage with communities**, 'doing with', not 'doing to'. This means being humble and open minded about changing the approach if needed. It also means being flexible, adaptable, and iterative, rather than structured and rigid.
- ▶ **Starting where people are** and listening to the needs of communities instead of coming with a set agenda. The Council role shifts from initiator and implementor to facilitator and enabler. Allow strategy to emerge from the work and the context.
- ▶ **Continuous learning and reflection.** The work has ignited a real commitment to continued reflection and learning, plus convening others to take part in this. The goal is not to start right but - through experimentation, success and failure - to become closer to right over time.



## What we've learnt along the way

- ▶ **Strategies and plans emerge from conversations and relationships, not project plans.**  
Instead of developing new projects and programmes, communities appreciate the idea of building on existing assets and working with partners already trusted within communities. Emerging from behind the laptop and re-engaging with real people living and working in the local area is key.
- ▶ **The biggest learning comes from doing.**  
Using deep reflection to take as much from what goes wrong as what goes right. Sometimes learning is generated through success, sometimes from failure.
- ▶ **Working in this way is difficult and countercultural.**  
It takes time and consistent effort for communities to trust that there is genuine intention in working in a different way. Test and learn models generate failures as well as successes and progress is likely to be non-linear, hard to measure using traditional metrics and not always aligned to the timelines of local authority structures and processes.
- ▶ **It takes courage to act and there are frequently good reasons to delay.**  
Many of the most important leaps forward in thinking came from taking the risk to act. Take time to reflect on the learning from the feedback generated by action.
- ▶ **Sometimes deliberately slowing down can be the fastest way.**  
Allowing specific times and spaces for reflection so insights are given the required time and space to germinate into ideas, and eventually significant shifts in thinking.



# Role of the facilitator

In phase 1 the three places recognised the strength of having a critical friend to 'walk alongside' them in their system change journey. This was a crucial element of moving into this next phase of the work as all three places felt that without the facilitated support they wouldn't progress at the same rate.

## The role played by the facilitator/mentor



Individualised mentoring



Mentoring of key networks and wider stakeholder networks



Planning and facilitating engagement events and activities



Mapping appropriate processes and timescales for development



Interpreting feedback to shaping action planning



Identifying and interpreting best practice across the system

## Value of working with a facilitator/mentor

- ▶ Relevant hands-on experience of applying theory in real work, being able to share ideas and approaches
- ▶ An innate understanding of the complexity and context of working in system change in a hierarchical and political environment
- ▶ Someone outside of local politics, able to question established cultures and long-held beliefs at all layers. And more importantly, able to bring these into conversations more readily in the role of 'consultant/facilitator'
- ▶ The ability brought by their role to not get bogged down in the day to day work and to remain focused on the bigger picture
- ▶ Having someone externally involved really allows everyone to share their challenges and questions around the way of working with honesty and openness
- ▶ Experience outside of the area which is valuable to the group in terms of wider learning
- ▶ Gaining an understanding of the approach taken by the facilitator has now allowed those involved to follow a similar way of working across other parts of the system.

## Evolution of the support needed

At what point is the place ready for the facilitator to step back and to start to 'go it alone'? It is important to consider as the work evolves how a facilitator can bring extra capacity to the work, for example, through delivering learning sessions at pace and scale in the system, and also how a facilitator can take a more 'behind the scenes' role, to act as more of a mentor in the work



## Tools and Techniques

These are some of the tools and techniques the facilitators introduced to the three places.

“The ultimate goal is to develop competent thinkers and doers who can not only use knowledge in new ways but also construct their own ways of working.”

## Scaffold questions

Scaffolding is a term used in education to describe the process by which people learn by building their knowledge and understanding and then applying it to problems. Psychologist and instructional designer Jerome Bruner first used the term in this context back in the 1960s.

Scaffolding questions enhance learning and aids in the mastery of concepts by systematically building on knowledge and relevance. The ultimate goal is to develop competent thinkers and doers who can not only use knowledge in new ways but also construct their own ways of working.

Myron Rogers took the concept of using questions to help people to work in groups to discuss and share ideas in a more structured way.

Scaffolding is often used in education settings, and so this article relates the practice to working with students. However it splits the information into 3 steps that might help you apply the technique to your work.



## Myron's Maxims



On page 13 of Total Place: A Practitioner's guide to doing things differently has an overview of each of Myron's maxims, and includes information on how the Leadership Centre developed Total Place using the maxims.



Myron Rogers has written pages 22 and 23 of The Art of Change Making about his ways of understanding the ways in which social organisations work, and part of this are his 5 maxims. There is also a case study from the Leadership Centre about how helpful they found using the maxims in their work.

## Cynefin framework



A comprehensive guide to the Cynefin Framework that has been synthesised from this academic paper on decision making.



This is a brief guide to the Cynefin framework, but you are able to use a template of the framework to put it into practice.

## Affinity mapping



This is a blog with a 5-minute read on affinity mapping. It has a good overview on the best practices, and some examples of how it can be used. As you scroll further down there are also three examples of different kinds of affinity maps you can use.



This is another good overview of affinity mapping, or an affinity diagram as it's called in this article. Again there is a template that you're able to use by signing up.



## World Café



This was developed as an approach by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs. Drawing on seven integrated design principles, the World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. Each element of the method has a specific purpose and corresponds to one or more of the design principles.



Page 126 of Total Place: a practitioner's guide to doing things differently talks you through the process of how to run your own World Café.



As well as a good overview, pages 263 and 264 of The Art of Change Making also includes some case studies of people using the World Café themselves.

## Adaptive Action



This outlines some of the reasons to use the method's three key questions.

## Design Thinking



This article gives an introduction to the practice of Design Thinking, and its five stages. **There are also links to further reading.**

## Local Delivery Pilot – People and Places The story of doing it differently



Navigating Local Systems is a further way we have been exploring systems change with other places in addition to the Local Delivery Pilots (LDPs). Read more about the journey of the LDPs and the emerging principles and practicalities that have helped to unlock progress along the way.

## Putting it into practice



This resource brings to life some of the approaches, models, and tools that have been used by places to:

- identify relationships, map progress and identify gaps
- embed sport and physical activity in the system and identify change
- develop community insight and understanding.

## Thankyou

### Place leads

#### Luton

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#### Liverpool

**Nicky Yates,**

Strategic Physical Activity and Sport Development Manager, Liverpool City Council

**David Jacobs,**

Liverpool City Council

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Development Manager, Yorkshire Sport Foundation

**Amy Sharp,**

Healthy Policy and Places Manager, Wakefield Council

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**Thank  
you**





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