

KEY LEARNING FROM SPORT ENGLAND'S SYSTEM PARTNER PORTFOLIO OF WORK

Key findings and key learning
from the interim evaluation

February 2025

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Background & context (1)

In **2021**, Sport England launched **Uniting the Movement...**

In **2022**, Sport England invested in over 130 **System Partners** for up to 5 years, to realise the Uniting the Movement vision.

In **2023**, Sport England **commissioned an evaluation** of this investment.

In October **2024**, the first **interim evaluation report** was produced.

... its 10-year vision spanning to **2031**.

Background & context (2)

Uniting the Movement

Uniting the Movement (UTM), is Sport England's **10-year vision** to 'transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity'.

UTM aims to **tackle persistent inequalities in sport and physical activity**, by working with others to instigate structural change in the sector.

System Partners

System Partners are **over 130 organisations** that play a key role in shaping the sport and physical activity sector, such as **national governing bodies, active partnerships** and other **national specialist partners** such as national charities.

The System Partner portfolio evaluation

Sport England commissioned **Ipsos**, in consortium with **New Philanthropy Capital** (NPC) and **Sheffield Hallam University** (SHU) to evaluate their System Partner portfolio of work.

Given that the UTM strategy and the System Partners portfolio of work are in their **earlier stages**, the evaluation has focused on the ways in which Sport England has worked with System Partners, and the change it has started to create.

Over time, and in future evaluation cycles, there will be a growing focus on the change that this has contributed to for the wider sector and for communities.

About this document

In October 2024, the first interim **evaluation report** was produced **for Sport England**, based on 52 interviews with System Partners.

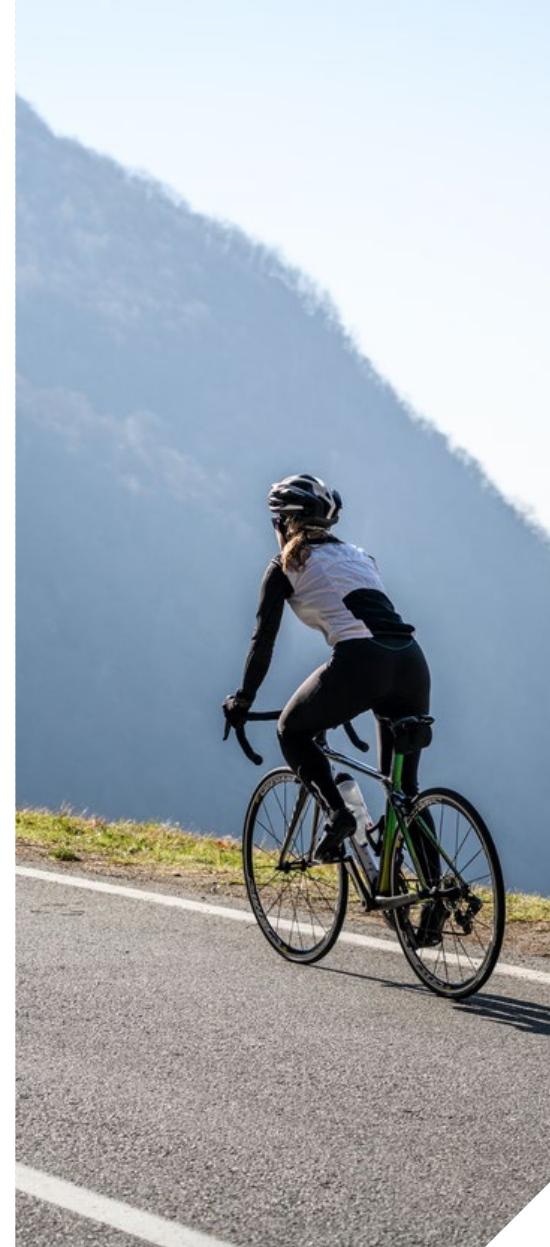
In November 2024, the evaluation team prepared the **present summary, for System Partners**, to share an overview of interim findings and some initial learning from the evaluation with them.

To request access to the full evaluation report, please email:

SPEvaluationLearning@Ipsos.com

Definitions used in this document:

- **‘Findings’** examine the System Partner portfolio as a whole, to help Sport England better understand how their investment has worked, and what could be improved.
- **‘Learning’** presents lessons learnt by some System Partners when delivering their work, to help others reflect on their approaches.



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Key findings

1. [System Partners are part of a diverse portfolio of organisations that have unique and shared characteristics.](#)
2. [Different System Partners have reacted differently to the investment. Three pen portraits illustrate these differences.](#)
3. [System Partners operate in different contexts. Yet across the portfolio, some common factors have helped or slowed down efforts to deliver system change to tackle inequalities.](#)
4. [System Partners and Sport England are working more collaboratively.](#)
5. [Beyond the benefits of collaboration, System Partners identified other advantages to the investment, such as its duration or the status it gave them.](#)
6. [System Partners also identified several challenges with the investment, including the fast pace of change, relationships sometimes inconsistent with Sport England, or onerous compliance requirements.](#)

Key learning

1. [Changing systems is about partnering with a wide range of stakeholders.](#)
2. [Changing systems is also about engaging with change 'champions'.](#)
3. [Collaboration between different types of System Partners can benefit communities.](#)
4. [Moving beyond quantitative data can help capture the impact of your work on system change.](#)
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MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE INTERIM EVALUATION

*A summary of key findings emerging
from the evaluation so far*

System Partners are part of a diverse portfolio of organisations that have unique and shared characteristics.



Beyond the 'families' they belong to – Active Partnerships (APs), National Partners (NPs) and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) – a range of distinctions affect how System Partners **interact with the investment**, including:

- Their **role** within the investment (whether systemic, delivery, talent or governing focused),
- Their **size**,
- Their **share of income** that comes from Sport England, and
- The **alignment** of their sport or organisation to the Uniting the Movement strategy.



Capacity is an issue across the portfolio, particularly for smaller organisations, who typically find it harder to deliver system change.



Different System Partners have reacted differently to the investment.

The three pen portraits below illustrate how the Sport England investment has impacted different System Partners to date, given some of their characteristics and the context they operate in.

These are not case studies of one specific System Partner, but rather drawn from interviews with multiple System Partners.



System Partners operate in different contexts. Yet across the portfolio, some common factors have helped or slowed down efforts to deliver system change to tackle inequalities.

Challenging socio-economic context	Changing political context	Uniting the Movement strategy	Recruitment challenges	Cultural barriers
This includes financial constraints faced by local authorities, limited ability to generate income through memberships fees (for NGBs), and a challenging fundraising landscape (for NPs).	Changes in local political leadership requires creating connections with new political stakeholders, who often lack time.	The Uniting the Movement strategy provides a unifying framework, which can help reach common ground when navigating local decision-making dynamics.	Some System Partners faced challenges attracting and retaining staff with the right skills. NGBs face these difficulties with volunteers as well.	It can be challenging to attract new people to a sport that is perceived as lacking diversity.

	Barriers
	Enablers

System Partners and Sport England are working more collaboratively.



System Partners found that their relationship with Sport England had evolved away from a transactional relationship and towards **greater collaboration**.



Most described their relationship with Sport England as **open, trusting, flexible and collaborative**.



Many System Partners felt a change in their relationship with SE **when the investment started** in 2022, **or slightly before** that.

"My previous experience [...] was much more punitive and much more performance oriented around hitting certain numbers. There's a much more partnership approach to working towards achieving the wider aims and objectives of Uniting the Movement which I think is beneficial."

National Governing Body

System Partners identified several benefits to the investment.



The collaborative relationship with Sport England has meant that System Partners felt **less fear** and were **more open** to sharing what was working less well. It also allowed them to **design and adapt approaches** as needed over time.



Many System Partners shared that 5-year / **longer term funding** gave them greater **financial stability** and **longer-term visibility**. This has allowed them to make longer term strategic plans and convey more stability to others.



Many System Partners felt that the investment gave them a particular **status**, more **credibility and visibility** in their sector or place, allowing for more connections, and facilitating fundraising.

"We feel that the 5-year funding patch really is ground-breaking, because it allows you to develop things, move on, learn, find out what worked, find out what didn't work, for what reason, and just keep moving on."

National Partner

System Partners also identified several challenges with the investment.



While most System Partners understood and supported the Uniting the Movement strategy and Sport England's new ways of working, some mentioned challenges with the **pace of change**, the **cultural shift** it represented or with **bringing colleagues on the journey**.



While System Partners' relationship with Sport England has been positive overall, it has also been **inconsistent**, depending on which Relationship Lead or team(s) they worked with.



System Partners found reporting and compliance requirements **onerous and transactional**, and wanted more feedback from Sport England.

"I'd like to know in a timely fashion what Sport England's overall observations are before we start planning for the next funding cycle."

National Partner

KEY LEARNING FROM THE INTERIM EVALUATION

Some initial insights derived from the evaluation, to help System Partners learn from others, and reflect on their approach

About

- The main purpose of the interim evaluation was to explore key questions posed by Sport England about the System Partner investment.
- Some learning, directly relevant to System Partners, emerged from the evaluation. They are presented in the following slides.
- However, those are some pieces of a larger puzzle, and not a comprehensive account of all learning across the portfolio.
- They are included here to spark System Partners' thoughts, and help them reflect on their own work. They are presented in 'speech bubbles' to emphasise the importance of reflections and conversations to foster learning.



Changing systems is about partnering with a wide range of stakeholders

It is important to build partnerships, not only with traditional power-holders (e.g., with the local Councils), but throughout **entire places and communities**; with individual schools, community groups, or local businesses.

Widespread partnership building can allow System Partners to create a **more integrated and cohesive approach** to delivering system change and achieving their goals.



Thought-starters

- Who are your key stakeholders across the places, audiences and sports you work with?
- Who haven't you engaged with yet?
- How could you build partnerships with them?

Changing systems is also about engaging with change 'champions'

Some System Partners **think strategically** about how they can influence system change.

Some reflect critically **about who** to engage or partner with. They aim, for instance, to identify the parts of the local authority they should engage with, the local 'champions' or the 'right leaders' locally who can facilitate system change.



Thought-starters

- Who are the 'champions' for change in your system or place?
- Do you already work with them? If not, how could you engage them going forward?

Collaboration between different types of System Partners can benefit communities

Collaboration between National Governing Bodies and National Partners can help System Partners **reach new communities** or **better engage with them**.

For example, a National disability Partner partnered with a National Governing Body aiming to engage more disabled people in para-sport. They fed into the National Governing Body's coaching resources to ensure they were inclusive of disabled people.



Thought-starters

- Are you familiar with the roles that other families of System Partners play?
- Could collaborating with other families of System Partners help you achieve your goals?

Moving beyond quantitative data can help capture the impact of your work on system change

Many System Partners spoke of the value and benefit of using **local stories, creating case studies, and capturing testimonials** to showcase the impact of their work.

Others however, believed it was **harder to demonstrate their impact** with qualitative data alone.

Combining qualitative insights with quantitative data can offer a holistic and impactful representation of System Partners' achievements.



Thought-starters

- What type of data do you collect – qualitative, quantitative or both?
- Should you explore ways to capture different type of data to capture and showcase your impact?
- And if so, how could you go about it?

System Partners can learn from the challenges they have faced with system change

- **Language and terminology** can be a barrier to understanding what 'systems thinking' means in theory and in practice.
- System change takes **time and resource**.
- System change can be challenging to **track or evaluate**, given change can happen unintentionally or cascade into other parts of the system.
- **Staff turnover** can come in the way of system change – within an organisation or when working with partners.



Thought-starters

- What can you do to create shared language with your partners?
- How can you plan for and communicate about system change, given the time and resources it takes?
- What can you realistically start tracking or evaluating, given how complex change can be?
- What can you do to sustain your system change efforts over time despite potential staff changes?

Please share your feedback on this report or ask any questions.

You can contact us via: SPEvaluationLearning@Ipsos.com