

Sport England System Partner portfolio: evaluation case study

**Active Essex
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The Active Essex story

Overview

Active Essex is one of the 43 Active Partnerships across England. They are hosted within the public health team of Essex County Council. In 2022 they became one of Sport England's 'System Partners', to contribute to tackling inequalities through sport and physical activities. This case study explores how Active Essex have used their involvement in the System Partner and Place Partnership programmes, and harnessed the long-standing partnership with Sport England, to transform local sport and physical activity provision. In particular, the case study explores how the System Partner investment has enabled Active Essex to collaborate and deliver programmes locally in partnership with locally trusted organisations. This in turn is enabling them to make physical activity more accessible at a community level and strengthen collaboration in a range of local places.

About Active Essex

About Active Essex

As part of the London Olympics legacy, Active Essex was created in 2012, by merging the County Sports Partnership (Sport Essex), Physical Education and School Sport team and ECC Olympic team. They are currently recognised as one of the 43 Active Partnerships across the country and aim to work collaboratively with local places and system partners to transform the lives of people in Essex, Southend and Thurrock through sport and physical activity (SPA).

Active Essex is hosted by Essex County Council, one of the 15 local authorities within the county of Essex. Active Essex work in partnership with various departments but sit within public health function. This close partnership enables Active Essex to effectively connect and collaborate with this top layer of the Essex system, integrate its initiatives, amplifying its influence on the SPA agenda across the diverse scope of the County Council's responsibilities.

The Active Essex Foundation, established in 2016, is a registered charity committed to increasing participation in SPA to engage and support inactive communities and address inequalities in Essex. Although closely aligned with Active Essex, the Active Essex Foundation's distinct structure allows it to secure independent charitable funding. This separation was before the broader scope and goals of Uniting the Movement (UTM) became influential. As Sport England has shifted its focus towards UTM, the work of Active Essex and Active Essex Foundation has become more aligned.

Active Essex's role as a System Partner

Active Essex, in its capacity as a Sport England System Partner (SP), holds both a delivery and systemic role. Active Essex has reported notable achievements in both areas, as evidenced by recent SP reporting outcomes and corroborated by interviews conducted with Active Essex employees and their partners as part of the present case study. Active Essex reports that they

established partnerships within their local system, which helped improve the way they deliver programmes.

Wider involvement in Sport England programmes

In addition to the SP investment, Active Essex have been engaged in multiple other Sport England funds and evaluations including the Place Partnership investment and the Together Fund. Their participation in these various programmes enabled them to be at the frontline of Sport England's new ways of working.

"I think what we've seen particularly, is that working as a local delivery pilot, that relationship has got even deeper, and it's got deeper because the way of working with those 12 pilots was for those team members to immerse themselves into that place, and in this case it was Essex. So, we've built some very strong relationships as a result of the local pilot, that's deepened even further our relationship with Sport England."

Active Essex Director

Multiple touch points across various Sport England investment programmes and their engagement with other Sport England evaluations has supported them to expand and develop their evaluation and learning capabilities. For instance, involvement in the Place Partnership evaluation has provided them with access to experts from Sheffield Hallam University and provided them with additional opportunities to learn from other SPs' evaluation and learning approaches.

The System Partner Investment

The investment provided to Active Essex through the SP funding has allowed them to bolster their capacity to effectively deliver on the aims of UTM and their SP goals. Specifically, this funding has enabled Active Essex to allocate resources towards the recruitment and retention of skilled employees, directly contributing to their achievements as both a programme provider and a system facilitator.

Active Essex now have a dedicated Insight and Evaluation department

The investment from the SP funding has enabled Active Essex to establish a dedicated Insight and Evaluation department. This allows Active Essex to analyse the impact of their programmes and initiatives, ensuring they are effective in promoting physical activity and improving community health. This demonstrates a significant investment in understanding the effectiveness of their work and using data to inform future strategies.

Enabled them to successfully acquire additional investment from other funders

The SP investment has also enabled Active Essex to acquire additional investment from other funders. By demonstrating a strong track record of success and a commitment to data-driven decision-making, Active Essex became an attractive partner for other organisations such as local authorities looking to support physical activity initiatives. This success in attracting additional funding highlights the confidence that other funders have in Active Essex's ability to deliver impactful programmes.

“The system partner money has allowed us to put in more resources to Active Essex, it's also grown us as an organisation and allowed us to work with other parts of the system to effect change and to put resource that's not coming to us but goes into the system.”

Active Essex Strategic Lead

Supported them to deliver locally in partnership with Locally Trusted Organisations

The SP funding has also enabled Active Essex to deliver programmes locally in partnership with Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs). Active Essex developed these partnerships to leverage the expertise and community connections of local organisations, ensuring that programmes are tailored to the specific needs of the community. Using funding from the National Lottery, Active Essex work with their LTOs to bring them up to a level where they are able to function with independence and provide SPA provisions to the local communities in Essex. This collaborative approach strengthens Active Essex's reach and impact, using a system change approach to strengthen collaboration.

Sport England's relationship with Active Essex and its implications

Sport England's view on working with Active Essex

Sport England clearly places significant value on their partnership with Active Essex, viewing them as a key collaborator in achieving the goals set out in UTM. This was evidenced in the interview with the Active Essex Relationship Lead who highlighted that Active Essex are held in high regard by Sport England who recognise their capacity to generate impactful and replicable solutions for nationwide implementation.

The Relationship Lead acknowledged that Active Essex holds a strong relationship with Sport England as a result of the multiple touch points Active Essex have with multiple teams within Sport England as a result of their involvement with programmes including the Place Partnership programme.

Furthermore, the Relationship Lead at Sport England acknowledged the distinctiveness of their partnership, highlighting the additional contact Active Essex has with various teams within Sport England. This multifaceted engagement and close collaboration across multiple programmes underscores Sport England's recognition of Active Essex's expertise and their commitment to working together to achieve shared objectives.

"It's quite different because we have a very long-established relationship through our local delivery team and Essex has been a priority place for a long time. So, an awful lot of their day-to-day questions would go through that because they have much more daily contact with that team. And then twice a year I would meet with them to just review their progress and how things are going for them as an organisation."

Active Essex Relationship Lead (Sport England)

Active Essex view on working with Sport England

It is apparent that Active Essex also value the partnership with Sport England, recognising the benefits extend beyond financial support. For instance, the Insight and Evaluation Lead at Active Essex highlighted the collaborative partnership with the Sport England Place Evaluation team as having been instrumental in guiding Active Essex to better understand and effectively address Sport England's needs, ultimately enhancing their ability to deliver on shared objectives.

"We have an evaluation group, which is almost like our steering group, for insight and evaluation activities at Active Essex and we have a [Sport England Place Evaluation colleague] who comes along to that, which is really useful and, kind of, gives us a steer of what's coming next for Sport England."

Active Essex Insight and Evaluation Lead

Strong senior stakeholder connections within the Active Essex system

Active Essex benefits from strong leadership with well-established connections across the sport and health sectors. Their senior stakeholders maintain strong relationships with key figures across a variety of key organisations including Sport England, Intelligent Health, and local public health bodies. For example, an Active Essex representative is part of the Sport England board, and another Active Essex representative is on the board of a National Partnership. This

interconnectedness fosters a cohesive network that facilitates effective communication, collaboration, and shared understanding. This ultimately strengthens the overall system's ability to promote physical activity and improve community health outcomes.

The ripple effects of collaboration on Active Essex's partners and local communities

Active Essex's commitment to fostering strong relationships extends beyond its senior leadership

The commitment to collaboration is encouraged and evident across all levels of the organisation. For example, staff across Active Essex have cultivated strong working relationships with their counterparts in various partnerships. For instance, Active Essex shared that they dedicated significant time and resources to bolstering partnerships at the LTO level. This has been instrumental in Active Essex's ability to not only deliver programmes, but it also enables them to connect with local communities and facilitate change to the SPA system in Essex. These strong relationships showcase Active Essex's dedication to building a cohesive and effective network for promoting physical activity.

"We're building relationships, we're understanding what their needs are, we run workshops, we can be the link between them and public health, or them and their local ICB, or their local doctor's surgery, because we're in a position to be able to have those relationships and with trusted partners, with system partners that maybe a locally-trusted organisation wouldn't be."

Active Essex Relationship Manager

Supported them to enhance collaboration locally

Active Essex recognises the importance of collaboration and has taken proactive steps to foster a strong LTO network. They achieve this by bringing LTOs together in workshops and other forums designed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the diverse needs within the community. These initiatives encourage a collaborative approach, shifting the focus from competition for funding to a shared vision of improving the community's health and wellbeing. By working together, LTOs can leverage their collective strengths and resources to create a more significant impact.

"The great thing that they've done is the LTO network, which has been locally trusted organisation across Essex, before that we didn't have that. So everybody was competitive against each other within, you know, that restricted funding."

Achieve Thrive Flourish Representative

Empowered trusting partnerships

The trusting, collaborative, flexible and open way of working with Sport England across investment programmes contributed to Active Essex working in a more participatory and empowering way with partners. Using the SP investment Active Essex have funded LTOs to deliver SPA programmes. However, instead of funding short term programmes Active Essex has invested in some LTOs using a longer investment period of around three years. This has been beneficial to LTOs as it has given them the time and space to test and learn from their programmes and make improvements.

This is showcased in their partnership with Achieve Thrive Flourish (ATF). Active Essex have worked with them on a number of small projects historically and in 2021 Active Essex approached them to participate in the Local Delivery Pilot programme. Through these various pieces of work, they developed a strong working relationship and as a result ATF felt they have a trusting partnership which is evidenced in the three years of investment they received from Active Essex.

Bringing partners on the systemic journey

Active Essex's partnerships with LTOs go beyond delivering programmes. Active Essex is empowering LTOs and actively involve them in system improvement efforts through targeted training and ongoing support. As a result of this collaborative approach, LTOs like ATF have gained a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness within the system and can effectively communicate its importance to the organisations they work with at a grassroots level. Furthermore, this enhanced understanding enables LTOs to provide valuable insights to Active Essex, helping them to communicate the impact of their work to policymakers and advocate for change at a higher level.

"[We] quite often now present to organisations jointly about how the system aligns from national policy coming down to Active Essex then us as a partnership, that golden thread if you like. And then, turning policy into reality, and obviously that wouldn't have happened at first."

Achieve Thrive Flourish Representative

Working flexibly with partners

Active Essex demonstrate flexibility in its approach to partnerships, understanding that a one-size-fits-all model does not work. Partners feel comfortable approaching Active Essex with both opportunities and challenges as they emerge, confident in receiving the necessary support. This flexible and responsive approach empowers LTOs to address the specific needs of their communities, ultimately contributing to the overarching aims of Uniting the Movement.

"When we went back to Active Essex and said, 'Look, we're happy to work with you, wanting to grow and reach more communities in this way.' So, they supported us with further funding to develop, sort of, a train a trainer model, I guess, to enable us as an organisation to bring on more staff, effectively, and develop and streamline our evaluation processes"

Project ME Representative

Actively support partners to learn and improve

Active Essex demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement by actively seeking and responding to feedback from its partners. For example, Project ME highlighted Active Essex's dedication to supporting the growth of LTOs like themselves. In response to this feedback, Active Essex has provided relevant training opportunities that equip LTOs with the skills and knowledge needed to enhance their work. This commitment to addressing partner feedback ensures that LTOs feel heard and supported, fostering a stronger and more effective network.

Active Essex empowers local authorities through collaborative learning initiatives

Active Essex recognises the importance of supporting the local authorities they partner with in their efforts to promote physical activity and has taken a collaborative approach to capacity building. Specifically, Active Essex has been instrumental in providing learning and development opportunities for local authorities like Basildon, co-ordinating system leadership and asset-based community development training programmes. This support has been well-received by local authorities who often face capacity and funding constraints that hinder their ability to initiate such learning initiatives. Importantly, Active Essex has worked in partnership with local authorities and Sport England to develop and deliver these learning opportunities, ensuring a collaborative and supportive approach rather than a top-down directive.

The Active Essex brand brings value to local authorities

The Active Essex brand holds significant value for local authorities like Basildon, enhancing their influence in both programme delivery and shaping the local system. The established brand recognition associated with Active Essex provides a platform for local authorities to leverage in

their efforts to promote physical activity and wellbeing. This association with a trusted and recognised organisation can enhance the credibility and visibility of local initiatives, making them more appealing to potential participants and funders. This, in turn, strengthens the local authority's ability to support their programmes, ultimately contributing to a more active and healthier community.

Learning & considerations

Learning from other Sport England programmes and applying to their SP role

Active Essex has demonstrated a commitment to continuous learning and improvement, actively incorporating lessons learned from broader Sport England programmes like the Place Evaluation programme. The opportunities to learn from programmes such as this has provided them with the capability to apply these valuable insights and learning techniques to enhance their role as a System Partner. This includes adopting a more data-driven approach to understanding local needs and evaluating the effectiveness of their initiatives, as well as fostering stronger partnerships and collaboration within the system.

Learning to date from Active Essex's SP role and intentions to improve the system

Active Essex is actively working to foster a culture of learning and development within its organisation. Recognising the importance of first establishing a strong internal foundation, Active Essex has implemented several initiatives to enhance learning among its staff. For example, they have created "learning huddles," which bring together individuals passionate about learning to share knowledge and best practices. Additionally, Active Essex has revamped its approach to away days, optimising these events as valuable learning opportunities. By prioritising internal learning and development, Active Essex aims to create a solid base from which to expand its learning culture to external partners in the future.

"We've changed our away days so that, instead of, again, kind of, lots of information being shared with people, we turn them into genuine learning environments and have space for people to reflect on what's not working."

Active Essex Head of Insight and Evaluation

Supporting LTOs to evaluate and learn from their work

Active Essex is committed to supporting the growth and development of the LTOs it partners with beyond programme delivery. For instance, Active Essex provided funding to ATF for a small bespoke evaluation project. This funding allowed ATF to gain firsthand experience of the evaluation process and integrate evaluation strategies into their organisational practices. This demonstrates Active Essex's dedication to building the capacity of LTOs and equipping them with valuable skills and knowledge.

Balancing national objectives with local needs

Active Essex has established a balanced working relationship with Essex County Council. This is demonstrated through their ability to maintain a focus on progressing the aims of UTM, while also operating effectively within the political landscape of a hosted organisation. This careful balance

allows Active Essex to leverage the benefits of being hosted by the council, such as access to resources and networks, without compromising their ability to make objective decisions and prioritise the goals of Uniting the Movement.

“Keeping politics out of it I think is quite important. And, therefore, I think, again one of the real assets of Active Essex, is they're hosted by the county council rather than of the county council.”

Basildon County Council Representative

Considerations for Sport England

Provide other SPs with the level of support they need to mature in the system

This case study shows that Sport England should consider the importance of providing tailored support to all SPs, enabling them to effectively mature within the system. For example, some SPs, such as Active Essex, have demonstrated significant progress in their ability to deliver on the aims of UTM. This success can be partly attributed to the high level of support and collaboration they have received from Sport England. Providing other SPs with a comparable level of support, tailored to their specific needs and context, could help unlock their potential and drive progress towards achieving the shared goals of UTM.

Leverage System Partner learning

Sport England should consider how they can better use the valuable learning being generated by SPs and their partner organisations, particularly regarding systems approaches to increasing physical activity. As SPs deepen their understanding and application of systems thinking, they are developing insights and practical knowledge that could benefit other organisations working within the sport and physical activity sector. By implementing a robust system for capturing and disseminating these learnings, Sport England can facilitate knowledge sharing and support the wider adoption of effective systems-based approaches.

“Sport England perhaps haven't done enough to utilise us to expose what works and what's been a challenge [in regard to systems thinking], I would say. And, when I say us, I mean, us smaller councils operating in this space.”

Basildon County Council Representative

More information

More information about Sport England's System Partner portfolio is available on their [website](#).

Ipsos UK are leading a consortium with NPC (New Philanthropy Capital) and Sheffield Hallam's Advanced Wellbeing Research Centre (AWRC) to evaluate and learn from Sport England's long-term partnership and investment into its System Partners. You can contact the evaluation team by emailing spevaluationlearning@ipsos-research.com

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