

Sport England System Partner portfolio: evaluation case study

**Intelligent Health
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The Intelligent Health Story

Overview

Intelligent Health was established to improve population health through cross sector collaboration. 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 Intelligent Health experienced the Sport England investment, the difference it made to them, and the change it catalysed for wider partner organisations and the communities they work with. For Intelligent Health, the System Partner investment meant building on their existing insights and connections to influence systemic change, and replicating Sport England's collaborative and flexible ways of working with local partner organisations. This, in turn, contributed to making physical activity more accessible at community level, and building connections or strengthening collaboration in a range of local places.

About Intelligent Health and how they became a System Partner

About Intelligent Health

In 2010 Intelligent Health was established to improve population health through cross sector collaboration at both local and national levels. Today they offer a range of initiatives to improve the health of communities around the world including those that focus on employee wellbeing (Roots Health Academy), eco travel and their flagship offer Beat the Street (BTS).

BTS is a community development tool to build active, resilient communities. Using "Beat Boxes" placed throughout a town, participants tap cards to track their activity, earning points and competing for prizes. This is designed to be a fun, interactive game which aims to encourage physical activity, foster community engagement, and promote healthier habits.

Data provided by Intelligent Health suggests that participation in BTS games is equally split between adults (51%) and children (49%). The greatest impact on inactivity is reported to be seen in those who are disabled, have a long-term condition and/or belong to a minority ethnic group. The BTS campaigns are IH's leading offer and is the focus of this case study.

IH works at both local and national level

The provision of a BTS campaign relies on the wide-reaching involvement of local organisations, national partners and community groups. For instance, on the 2024 Ipswich BTS campaign, Intelligent Health partnered with Suffolk County Council, Ipswich Borough Council, and Ipswich and East Suffolk Alliance. Funding was secured from Suffolk County Council and Sport England via a National Lottery grant. A multi-agency steering group, representing sectors like health, transport, education, culture, and leisure, ensured the programme leveraged local assets and services. This collaborative approach, involving community groups and local authorities, contributed to the game becoming integrated in the local sport and physical activity context in Ipswich.

Nationally, IH also convene an advisory panel connecting them to partners across sectors, to promote national-level collaboration and policy influencing. Organisations in attendance included Youth Sport Trust, National Academy for Social Prescribing, Eden Project, NHS England, Sport England and several more. The most recent event was in May 2024 when the Panel attended a 2-day event to better understand the work they were doing in their respective organisations in relation to SPA and better understand how Beat the Street works. The insights gained from these sessions are used by the IH team to refine BTS as a tool for positive change and to strengthen alignment with Sport England's Uniting the Movement strategy.

Becoming a System Partner

Intelligent Health was initially set up to improve population health through cross sector collaboration at local and national levels. These foundations set them in good stead to become a National Partner under the Sport England System Partner investment.

Prior to the System Partner investment, Intelligent Health was mainly focused on delivering programmes such as the BTS campaigns. Sport England approached Intelligent Health prior to the 2022 investment period and suggested they should take on a systemic role as well as a delivery one.

Initially, Intelligent Health were unsure about this new role so consulted with partners to decide whether it was the right opportunity for them. Their partners supported this shift, and as a result Intelligent Health successfully applied to receive both delivery and systemic funding from Sport England.

Intelligent Health's Relationship Lead at Sport England highlighted the value they bring to the System Partner portfolio and their alignment with Sport England's strategy.

"They held up a mirror to how they were working and the changes they needed to make, and they made some significant transformative changes, no doubt about it. There is something about that which is so attuned to what Uniting the Movement is all about – recognising the role you play, where you want to go and the changes you need to make, rather than trying to fit what you already do into something."

Sport England Relationship Lead

The System Partner investment as an opportunity to play a 'systemic' role

For Intelligent Health, systems thinking was an important consideration in their wider strategic approach to delivering games and working with partners; for instance, the majority of Intelligent Health employees had a good understanding of systems thinking and were able to explain how they

were applying it in their various roles. Intelligent Health reports that the System Partner investment enabled Intelligent Health to use this existing understanding, and the data they had from delivering BTS in multiple locations, to influence system change.

“The systemic role has allowed us to bring metadata together, to really share learning across different places. But our delivery funding has allowed us to test and try and make sure it's adaptable and fits with different priorities and things.”

Intelligent Health Director

BTS enables them to generate data and insight at the local level

Initially they were predominantly measuring the effectiveness of BTS as a behaviour change intervention using indicators such as physical activity levels. Whilst they continue to monitor these types of indicators – in order to have a level of continuity in their measures – they also offer space for bespoke data collection to suit the needs of their partners and co-funders.

Intelligent Health utilise the local-level data gathered through various BTS programmes to inform national-level policy discussions and influence decision-making. By analysing data on participation rates, health outcomes, and community engagement from locally implemented programmes they have been able to identify trends and patterns related to physical activity and health inequalities. This local data is then used to provide evidence-based insights to policymakers and stakeholders at the national level, demonstrating the effectiveness of their approaches and advocating for policies that support wider implementation of successful strategies. This process of linking local-level data to national-level discussions allows IH to ensure that policy decisions are grounded in real-world evidence and have the potential to create positive change on a larger scale.

At a systemic level, they strive to illustrate the mechanisms by which BTS works and demonstrate impact more widely

“Our role as a system partner is to work in a place to help them maximise the opportunity that's created through Beat the Street to effect system change, and help illustrate the mechanisms by which that works.”

Head of Insight

When Intelligent Health considered accepting the systemic role offered through System Partner funding, consultations with stakeholders revealed numerous untapped opportunities BTS presented for positive impact. For example, they identified commonalities between different locations where BTS was implemented which highlighted an opportunity to proactively share learnings between local areas, maximising the programme's value-add.

The mass engagement generated through BTS has also opened up opportunities for collaboration with the wider system. Through the System Partner investment, Intelligent Health were able to appoint a Head of External Affairs who leads on their policy influencing activity. As a result, the wealth of data collected from BTS has proven valuable to Intelligent Health in understanding population health trends and informing healthcare initiatives within the NHS, bridging the gap between community-based programmes and healthcare systems.

Sport England's collaborative relationship with Intelligent Health and its implications

Sport England has adopted a collaborative and flexible approach to working with Intelligent Health

Sport England's move away from a traditional focus on participation numbers aligns with Intelligent Health's approach to system-wide change. It recognises that sustainable impact requires tailored approaches and a focus on long-term outcomes beyond immediate participation figures. Intelligent Health reported that this way of working has enabled them to prioritise understanding and responding to the unique needs of each community they work with.

“[After the System Partner investment] It wasn't just about bums on seats, it was also about seeing the bigger picture and seeing that it was more than that. It was about the relationships that had formed. It was about the system change as well, and bringing those partners together and bringing together the insight that we could provide as well.”

Business Development & Partnerships Manager

Intelligent Health's partnership with Sport England has fostered a more flexible and empowering approach to implementing BTS campaigns

Intelligent Health reported that Sport England's trust in their expertise has allowed them to move away from rigid, pre-determined plans, embracing a more adaptable and responsive approach. This shift has empowered them to work collaboratively with local partners, tailoring the BTS programme to each community's unique needs and assets. This participatory approach ensures that the programme is truly community-driven, fostering a sense of ownership and maximising its long-term impact.

"I think now our thinking has maybe changed insomuch that we want that to be really embedded in the system and really embedded in it being a much longer term, and us really understanding what that community needs and really listening to what those partners want and what those partners need."

Business Development and Partnership Manager

Credibility within the sector

Being recognised as a System Partner has bolstered Intelligent Health's credibility within the sector and their Business Development and Partnership Manager notes that this recognition has fostered respect and trust from other stakeholders, enhancing their ability to influence positive change. Consequently, they are perceived as a more valuable and reliable partner, leading to increased opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

Despite the positive impact of the System Partner funding, some Intelligent Health employees expressed that there have been missed opportunities to fully leverage the network's potential. Specifically, Intelligent Health felt that Sport England could more proactively bring System Partners together to share learnings and foster collaboration.

The ripple effects of collaboration on Intelligent Health's partners and local communities

Intelligent Health nurture strong partnerships with a variety of organisations which in turn contribute to improved opportunities for physical activity in local communities. For example, the partnership between Burnley Leisure Trust (BLT) and Intelligent Health began in 2021 and what started as a funding proposal quickly blossomed into a strong, two-way partnership. The partners involved felt this collaborative spirit led to the successful implementation of BTS in both 2021 and 2023, with a commitment to running the programme every two years.

This enduring partnership has yielded significant benefits for the local ecosystem, fostering greater collaboration between BLT, local authorities, and health partners. BTS, alongside initiatives like Outdoor Town, has been instrumental in shaping a new, cross-sector strategy for the community. This integrated approach exemplifies how a shared commitment to health and wellbeing can create a more vibrant and connected community.

"We are literally less than a 10 minutes walk from the canal and seldom spend time here. Now with coming to the boxes we are here all the time doing nature/wildlife walks."

BTS player Burnley

Similarly, Intelligent Health demonstrates a strong partnership with the Canal and River Trust. This relationship grew from an existing connection between colleagues who subsequently kept connected following a change in roles. Intelligent Health and Canal and River Trust have been collaborating on BTS campaigns for several years to kick start and transform change in local areas, including the games in Burnley.

“We've got a fantastic relationship. They are very open to learning and aware [of] we need or want to achieve from the game as well.”

Canal & River Trust

Intelligent Health prioritises collaboration with partners when developing data monitoring plans, recognising that each location has unique needs and goals. To facilitate this, they conduct workshops with lead partners to collaboratively define their specific requirements and aspirations for the programme. This collaborative approach ensures that data collection is tailored to address the partners' priorities and provides meaningful insights for programme improvement. This represents a shift from previous approaches, demonstrating their commitment to a more inclusive and partner-driven model. Their open and trusting partnerships also facilitates valuable learning experiences for all engaged partners. For example, when Canal and River Trust spearheaded a BTS game in Bootle and encountered challenges, including a lack of local authority engagement, Intelligent Health provided crucial support. This challenging experience highlighted the importance of strong local authority leadership in ensuring the programme's success. As the Canal and River Trust representative emphasised, while they are a key partner, infrastructure changes and broader community buy-in necessitate active council involvement. As a result, Intelligent Health actively used this feedback loop to diligently work behind the scenes to ensure the Bootle game's success and integrate this learning into future partnership approaches.

In Maldon, Intelligent Health contributed to a collaborative approach which led to the Maldon District Council, the Essex County Council and Sport England match-funding the delivery of BTS.

“We regularly kept in touch and emails were always responded to, which was really useful because, from the Essex County Council and District Council, there were regular questions [...] it was a major project for the Council so they were [regularly asking for updates]”.

Maldon District Council

The process of planning and preparing for the games helped build new connections in Maldon between the District Council and other organisations and community groups. It gave the Council a

better understanding of the more grassroots community groups operating locally, and an opportunity to better support them in the future.

“BTS did form more connections with some of the smaller groups that perhaps don't show up on the radar immediately. [...] And through that, we heard a bit more about what they were doing and looking at how we can support them, both through the legacy work of BTS but also longer term and afterwards”.

Maldon District Council

BTS also had an impact on people living in Maldon, with the Council Officer describing a ‘community feeling’ and ‘community cohesion’ as a result of it, greater social connections between residents, and people being more active and spending more time in the local green and outdoor spaces.

Learning & considerations

Learning to date from Intelligent Health's System Partner role

Intelligent Health's approach to continuous learning is fundamental of their approach to being a System Partner and is reflected in the way they navigate challenges and work collaboratively and openly with Sport England and other partners.

"I've really enjoyed working with Intelligent Health because of their relentless drive to improve themselves."

Sport England Relationship Lead

Challenging economic contexts at local level can be a barrier to collaboration

Securing funding presents a significant challenge for Intelligent Health as they frequently rely on a match funding model, which depends on contributions from public health departments and local authorities. Many local authorities across England are under significant financial strain at present and Intelligent Health are seeing this impact on the provision of games. It was noted that it is particularly difficult to establish campaigns in new areas because there is a reluctance in some local authorities to use their limited funding for something new.

"It's very challenging for them to look at putting on anything additional, or anything new, when they're really stretched."

Business Development and Partnership Manager

This reliance on external partner funding necessitates Intelligent Health to consistently demonstrate a strong return on investment, highlighting the long-term cost savings and societal benefits associated with improved community health outcomes.

Levels of maturity or readiness to engage in system change vary across stakeholders

The systemic maturity of the partner organisations they collaborate with can vary substantially. For instance, as the Head of Programmes at Intelligent Health explained, they have worked with local authorities who have well established connections with local community groups and others who have minimal networks to connect to the public. Where their partners are well connected to these local groups, community engagement can happen at a much earlier stage of game planning and can be better tailored to the needs of these groups.

Some local authorities were also noted as being more 'traditional' in their approach to providing a BTS programme. For instance, some co-funders simply want to commission a game and have Intelligent Health facilitate the full programme (partly as a result of limited resource). However,

Intelligent Health actively encourage commissioners to engage with every stage of the campaigns as they felt this generally leads to better outcomes.

System change means working around siloes

One persistent obstacle is the siloed nature of partner organisations. Different groups, such as those focused on active travel and those concerned with mental wellbeing, often operate independently, hindering a holistic approach to community health. This lack of coordination requires Intelligent Health to bridge these gaps and emphasise the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate health factors.

“You're still working alongside people who do have very siloed funding, do have very siloed roles and you have to understand that as well and work within that.”

Intelligent Health Director

Using data as an instrument for change

Intelligent Health's ability to tailor their data collection methods to meet the needs of their partners has enabled them to support learning at a local level. For instance, in Maldon there was a desire from the local authority to understand rural accessibility and social isolation. They were able to tap into the population of carers that participated in the BTS game and ask them some bespoke questions. As a result, they have learnt that this group are typically less physically active and not as well connected to community institutions. This approach prioritises the voices of community members, ensuring that their perspectives shape programme development and implementation.

At an organisational level, they have also demonstrated a commitment to continuous learning and improvement, actively analysing the outcomes of their BTS campaigns. For example, they conduct thorough "wash-up" sessions after each programme to discuss learnings and identify areas for enhancement. Furthermore, Intelligent Health hold regular, organisation-wide meetings where team members, particularly those working directly on BTS implementation, share their experiences, insights, and success stories. This practice of consistent reflection and knowledge sharing ensures that Intelligent Health remains adaptable, responsive, and able to maximise the positive impact of BTS.

Learning from local places to enable systemic change

Intelligent Health recognise that the delivery of impactful programmes like BTS games is intrinsically linked to broader systemic change. The programme can act as a catalyst for place-based system change, either by forging new connections or strengthening existing ones. This ongoing analysis and information sharing is key to ensuring that BTS is not just a standalone initiative but a stimulus for creating healthier and more connected communities. By systematically gathering and disseminating this knowledge, Intelligent Health ensures that both successes and

challenges inform future programme development and implementation, ultimately leading to more effective and impactful initiatives.

“So, give them that data, give them that learning, so then, when they're thinking about policy and strategy forming going forward, they can, hopefully, use some of that, yes, to help shape that.”

Head of Programmes

Furthermore, Intelligent Health has utilised the flexible nature of the System Partner investment to pilot innovative approaches and test new models of community engagement. For instance, they piloted a small scale BTS for a community who requested it following a larger scale game in their locality. This commitment to evidence-based learning and continuous improvement enables Intelligent Health to maximise the impact of its programmes and contribute to lasting positive change within communities.

Considerations for Sport England

Intelligent Health considered Sport England's approach to be bold and innovative, and important to push forward.

“I genuinely think that they're doing something quite extraordinary that I'm not seeing replicated in sport and physical activity sectors elsewhere in the world.”

Intelligent Health Director

They felt that Sport England should continue to empower its partners by trusting their expertise and allowing for flexibility in programme adaptation. Intelligent Health's positive experience with a less prescriptive approach highlights the effectiveness of tailoring initiatives to local needs. By encouraging this adaptability, Sport England can facilitate more impactful and sustainable change within communities. This approach aligns with the Uniting the Movement principle of investing in those who need it most by ensuring programmes are responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities present in different locations.

While Intelligent Health felt like the relationship with Sport England was collaborative, they also recognised that more could be done to strengthen collaboration across the investment going forward. For instance, facilitating greater connection between System Partners in the network and connecting System Partners to appropriate experts within Sport England, as well as clear and joined up communication about upcoming plans and events would also help.

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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