

KEY LEARNING FROM SPORT ENGLAND'S SYSTEM PARTNER PORTFOLIO

**Report 3: How System Partners
are changing the system**

February 2026



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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

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About this document

This is the third report sharing learning from the evaluation of Sport England's system partner portfolio investment. It builds on the [reports published in October 2024](#) and [August 2025](#).

The focus of this report is on our emerging understanding of the different roles that System Partners play to collectively bring about change.

Its purpose is to share a summary of the findings relevant to people working in a range of roles within the system partner organisations. It is designed to:

- **Showcase** our understanding of how System Partners contribute to system-level change.
- **Illustrate** these findings with practical, real-world learning from System Partners.
- **Inspire** reflection on the implication of these findings and encourage partners to apply this learning to their own strategic planning and delivery.

It is based on qualitative data from interviews and workshops with System Partners between August and December 2025 to develop case studies of System Partners evidencing local system collaborative working. It also draws on thematic analysis of the reporting by System Partners to Sport England in October 2025.

Definitions used in this document:

- **'Findings'** examine the system partner portfolio as a whole, to help Sport England better understand how its 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. The learning profiled in this report are based on case studies developed with a sample of System Partners through evaluation interviews and workshops.

Summary: Key findings and learning in this report

Key findings

1. **Change happens through four distinct but interconnected roles.** System partners create impact by acting as Improvers, Influencers, Connectors, and Deliverers.
2. **No organisation plays just one role.** While partners may have a primary function, the majority create change by strategically combining roles.
3. **The investment is working by first changing how organisations operate.** The long-term, flexible funding from Sport England has provided the stability needed for partners to improve their own practices, build stronger relationships, and adopt more collaborative, system-focused approaches.
4. **External factors are critical.** The wider context, including political priorities, funding constraints, and workforce challenges, significantly enables or hinders the ability of partners to perform their roles effectively.

Key learning

1. **Improver: case study of The Angling Trust:** To improve the quality of activities to better meet the needs of potentially vulnerable groups by establishing clear minimum standards (like a checklist) and provide the necessary.
2. **Influencer: case study of The Richmond Group:** A collective voice achieves greater reach and influence than a single organisation. Embedding resources into existing professional systems (for example, clinical tools for GPs) is a powerful way to scale impact.
3. **Deliverer: case study of Chance to Shine:** To effectively reach under-represented communities, use data to target specific areas, recruit coaches from within the community, and empower young people as leaders to ensure programmes are youth-led and community-driven.
4. **Connector: case study of Yorkshire Sport Foundation:** Formal agreements with regional bodies and the use of data-driven insights are effective tools for translating high-level strategy into targeted, place-based action.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE 'SYSTEM PARTNER' PORTFOLIO

02

What does it mean to be a system partner?

- Since 2022, Sport England has invested about **£600 million** into **137 organisations** in the sport and physical activity sector called 'System Partners'. The investment provides **long-term funding** (up to 5 years) for delivery and system change activities. The investment also includes **governance, safeguarding and EDI compliance requirements** that all System Partners have to meet.
- The programme design and reporting expectations are intended to foster an open, trusting, flexible and collaborative relationship between Sport England and System Partners.
- There is incredible **diversity in the type and size of organisation** within the system partner umbrella. Organisations have different geographic footprints, operating structures and remits, and range in size from having three full-time members of staff to large organisations of 500+. The types of organisations funded include:
 - **42 Active Partnerships**, a national network of organisations that take a place-based approach to remove barriers to movement, physical activity and sport within their local communities (average £3.3m per organisation).
 - **52 National Governing Bodies (NGBs)**, the organisations that govern a sport at UK, GB or home country level. They are focused on increasing participation levels in their sports through influencing positive experiences (average £5.4m per organisation).
 - **43 'national partners'**, which encompasses a wide range of organisations including national disability specialist organisations, network, membership and policy influencing organisations that work at different levels and in different collaborations to remove barriers to physical activity (average £4.6m per organisation).

Why has Sport England adopted this approach?

- The investment is designed to support **Uniting the Movement, Sport England's strategy** to support everyone in England to access the **benefits of sport and physical activity**.
- The investment emerged from the context of:
 - **Falling rates of physical activity** attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in physical activity was not spread equally across society, resulting in an increase in inequalities in sport and physical activity participation.
 - **Financial pressures** as a result of falling revenues for many sport organisations and the rising costs of living.
 - A historically **disjointed sector**, with organisations often working in silos and in competition with each other.
 - **Safeguarding crises** in sport, and wider societal concerns about women's safety and racial injustice.
- The investment therefore aimed to **unite and support the sector** through longer-term financial stability, a shared focus on the Uniting the Movement strategy (with four key outcomes focused on tackling inequalities, increasing physical activity, decreasing physical inactivity and positive experiences for children and young people), and a more **collaborative way of working** with and between Sport England and its partners.
- The system partner investment provided an opportunity for Sport England to better align to different funding streams and funding objectives. It encompasses funding for **system change activities** to tackle inequalities; **governing activities** (specifically for NGBs and their partners to improve the governance of their sport); **delivery programmes** that align with UTM and **talent pathways** (which is specific to NGBs).

HOW ARE SYSTEM PARTNER CREATING CHANGE?

03

Key finding: Long-term change starts with changing how Sport England and its funded organisations work

The [theory of change](#) for the investment describes how the investment intends to bring about change for the system, communities and society by **first changing how Sport England and its partners operate.**

- **Sport England's role:** Sport England sets compliance requirements, provides long-term funding and fosters collaboration.
- **Initial change for funded organisations:** System Partners are more financially stable, compete less and are more open with others.
- **Change for organisations:** System Partners' governance, safeguarding and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) standards improve. They have stronger connections with partner organisations.

This creates the conditions for wider change.

- **Change for the system:** System Partners and their partners engage better with under-represented communities and with local or national decision-makers.
- **Change for communities:** Communities have better access to sport and physical activity, and their experiences and perceptions improve.

- **Change for society:** Across England, participation in sport and physical activities improves, and inequalities are reduced.

Insights from the October 2025 reporting to Sport England provides emerging evidence of these changes.

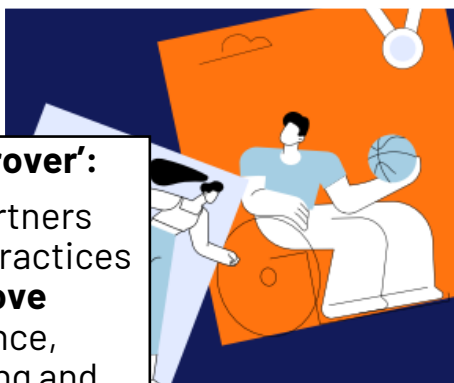
- Many System Partners have made changes within their organisations to embed a culture of learning, enhance governance, and revise strategies. They have made workforce and governance changes by introducing new leadership structures and strengthened boards, with increased use of digital tools to support evidence-based decision making. These changes enable System Partners to prioritise system convening and tackling inequalities.
- Many System Partners report that they are working more collaboratively thanks to place-based models, partnership frameworks and wider use of community insight. This is leading to deeper trust-based relationships with partners across sectors.

Key finding: Funded partners play different roles to create change for organisations and the system

The evaluation findings suggest that there are **four roles** that System Partners play to enable these changes to occur. These roles are examined in more detail in the following pages.

1. The 'Improver':

System partners foster good practices to **improve** governance, safeguarding and workforce



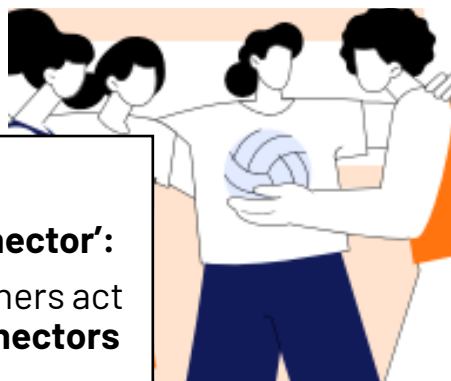
2. The 'Influencer':

System partners **influence** others



3. The 'Connector':

System partners act as local **connectors**



4. The 'Deliverer':

System partners **deliver** sport and physical activity programmes



Key finding: Improvers raise standards of governance, safeguarding, EDI and workforce (the 'Improver' role)

What is this role?

- **Improving your own organisation's standards in governance, safeguarding, and EDI.** This applies to all System Partners, who are expected to improve their own organisation's standards in governance, safeguarding, and EDI policies and practices. This is done in line with the compliance requirements set by Sport England.
- **Supporting and equipping other organisations to raise their standards.** Some System Partners have a specific remit to support and equip other organisations to raise their standards. They act as the experts and infrastructure providers for the rest of the sector.
- **Ensuring the networks you govern or fund (such as local clubs and regional bodies) adhere to best practices.** This applies particularly to NGBs, who are responsible for ensuring that the networks they govern or fund (like regional bodies and local clubs) adhere to best practices.

Why it matters

This role is the foundation of a safe, inclusive, and professional sector. It directly contributes to:

- improved safeguarding and diversity
- creating a recognised and professional workforce, and
- building confidence and skills across the sector.

This builds trust and ensures everyone can have a **positive and secure experience** with sport and physical activity to reduce inequalities in physical activity.

Learning from System Partners: The 'Improver'

System Partners ensuring the networks they govern or fund adhere to best practices

The Angling Trust, the NGB for angling, illustrates the 'Improver' role through its 'Get Fishing for Wellbeing' initiative. This work was driven by a surge in demand during the Covid-19 pandemic, as **more people turned to angling for its therapeutic benefits**, and NHS social prescribing services began referring people to the sport. The Trust identified a skills gap among its local delivery partners, many of whom **lacked the necessary qualifications** to ensure safe and effective activities for vulnerable groups. In response, the Angling Trust took direct action to raise standards across its network. This included:

- Introducing a 21-point **checklist to ensure minimum standards of delivery** were met by all partners, which included requirements for DBS checks.
- Offering **targeted training opportunities** to upskill delivery partners, helping them achieve a Level 2 Coaching Qualification in Angling.
- Launching a new platform called 'Marketplace' to better **monitor and embed minimum standards** for safeguarding, qualified coaching, and risk assessment across all delivery partners.

This work, reinforced by Sport England's investment requirements for safeguarding, directly led to **safer, more consistent delivery**. It ensures that vulnerable people being referred to angling for their mental health have a **high-quality experience** led by qualified coaches who meet clear safeguarding standards.

Key finding: Influencers shape the conversation and conditions for change (the 'Influencer' role)

What is this role?

This role is about shaping the conversations and conditions for change. It can include:

- **Issue-based influencing:** championing the needs of a specific group (such as disabled people or older adults) and using their organisation's expertise to support other organisations.
- **Policy influencing:** advocating for sport and physical activity and campaigning for change at a national level.
- **Place-based influencing:** influencing local decision-making (such as in health or planning) to influence local organisations and policies embed physical activity in their strategies.

Why it matters

By shaping policies and shifting perceptions, System Partners influence the conditions for change to make it easier for people to be more active. The goal of this influencing work is to enable sport and physical activity providers to better engage with under-represented communities and to collaborate with decision-makers to shape the policies and decisions that reduce barriers to participation in sport and physical activity.

Learning from System Partners: The 'Influencer'

System Partners championing the needs of a specific group

The **Richmond Group** is a coalition of 15 national health charities. They use their **collective voice to influence health and social care policy and practice**, aiming to improve care and support for the millions of people they represent with long-term conditions. The Sport England System Partner investment funds the Programme Team based within the coalition's secretariat which plays an influencing role and fosters collaboration between the charity partners. The Richmond Group's influencing role within the sport and physical activity sector is strengthened because:

- **The coalition can act as a collective.** By pooling their audiences and expertise, the 15 charities can do more and add value to their own work. This unified voice allows them to engage with government, the public, and the wider health sector, using evidence-based advocacy like the Millions More Moving report to shape national strategy.
- They can influence the health system by **embedding resources into trusted professional channels**. By integrating campaign resources and training into clinical tools used by NHS England, the Royal College of GPs, and Moving Medicine, they make it easier for healthcare professionals to discuss physical activity with patients.
- Hosting webinars, featuring in podcasts and attending sector conferences has **broadened the Group's collective reach and credibility within the sport and physical activity sector**. It has enabled connections to be made, for example, between lived experience insights and initiatives and networks within the sport and physical activity sector.

This multi-level approach changes the national conversation. It demonstrates how **issue-based influencing can shift perceptions** and embed physical activity within the health and care system.

Key finding: Deliverers enable growth of a sport or programme to reach under-represented communities (the 'Deliverer' role)

What is this role?

This role is the interface between the system and the community, creating the on-the-ground opportunities for people to get active. This involves growing programmes to reach under-represented groups and adapting delivery to better serve local populations. It includes:

- **Growing a sport or programme to reach under-represented communities**, expanding the reach of activities to groups and areas that have traditionally had fewer opportunities.
- **Adapting and innovating delivery to meet the specific needs of different groups**, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and tailoring activities to fit the needs of specific communities. This can involve changing how, where, and when a sport is offered.
- **Diversifying and strengthening talent pathways to be more inclusive**. This focuses on making the routes into high-level sport more inclusive and ensuring that talent from all backgrounds is identified and supported.

Why it matters

This is where people connect directly with the benefits of being active. It's where the high-level strategies of Uniting the Movement are translated into actual experiences for people. Effective delivery ensures that the investment leads to more people, particularly from under-represented groups, participating in sport and physical activity.

Learning from System Partners: The 'Deliverer'

System Partners creating opportunities in their communities

Chance to Shine is a national charity focused on supporting young people to play, learn and develop through cricket. Its 'Street' programme, run through a diversity of local delivery partners, offers a **free, accessible, and inclusive version of cricket** directly to young people in under-represented communities. The programme has grown significantly, expanding from 100 clubs in 2022 to 302 in 2024/25. This programme is targeted to the top 30% most deprived areas, focusing on communities with low activity levels and high ethnic diversity.

The programme **recruits its coaching workforce from within the community and trains young participants to become 'Street Leaders'**. They report that, by equipping young people with the tools and confidence to lead, they are **strengthening local delivery capacity** and ensuring that Street remains youth-led and community-driven. They recognise that not all delivery partners and coaches are equipped to understand or respond to community needs so are developing new resources, training and prompts to support more **community-led approaches**.

They also have a **Youth Advisory Board** providing input on design of their delivery programmes: this directly influenced changes to girls-only sessions to better meet their needs.

Key finding: Connectors bring the system together in a place (the 'Connector' role)

What is this role?

- **Developing a deep understanding of a local area.** This involves improving their understanding of local population needs, existing provision, assets, facilities and gaps.
- **Building strong, collaborative relationships.** This means making or building stronger connections with a wide range of organisations across their local place, including those outside the traditional sports sector.
- **Guiding activities and funding.** This involves directing resources and efforts to where they are most needed to tackle inactivity and address inequalities.

Why it matters

This role ensures that investments and activities are efficient, effective, and responsive to community needs. By weaving the system together locally, System Partners are better positioned to collaborate to meet the needs of different communities. This role allows System Partners to move away from generic delivery and instead influence a more strategic, targeted approach that responds to the unique context of their area. As one Active Partner stated, their role is about "looking for opportunities to make the system more efficient and effective at a local level".

Learning from System Partners: The 'Connector'

System Partners guiding activities and funding

Yorkshire Sport Foundation (YSF), the Active Partnership working across South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, exemplifies the local connector role, acting as a link between high-level national and regional policy and on-the-ground community action.

YSF works collaboratively with many agencies, organisations and communities to take a 'whole systems' approach, aligning action across different sectors. Their approach ensures that strategy is translated into meaningful, locally-led change. YSF's role is formalised through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between Sport England and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) and Sport England, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYCMA) and South Yorkshire ICB. These agreements provide a **framework for collaboration**, where YSF can connect, influence and support using local knowledge to embed physical activity into wider strategic policy around health, skills, regeneration and transport. For example, the MoU in South Yorkshire has led to the creation of a core group to develop a strategic plan, while in West Yorkshire, YSF's influence has helped shape physical activity referral services.

YSF's collaboration with WYCA has accelerated **relationship-building efforts among local partners**, utilising its broad network from the System Partner investment, the Active Partnership network, local place connections and Sport England to introduce WYCA to new networks and partners, further enhancing engagement and collaboration across the sub-region. Pilot initiatives like the Sport for Good programme, which supports grassroots clubs, to guide investments from WYCA funding programmes to new audiences with greatest needs. This support involves bringing together the VCSE partners and offering guidance on the tender requirements during the set-up phases, to ensure that the initiative better meets local needs and supports local grassroots sports clubs.

The investment from Sport England funds people, programmes and convening power, allowing **YSF to connect, support and influence on a broader scale** (locally, regionally, nationally). This funding also empowers them to act strategically without a reliance on local funding sources (e.g. WYCA), thus **preserving organisational independence** to operate in a strategic connector role.

Key finding: The roles interconnect and individual organisations may play different roles.

No System Partners play a single role.

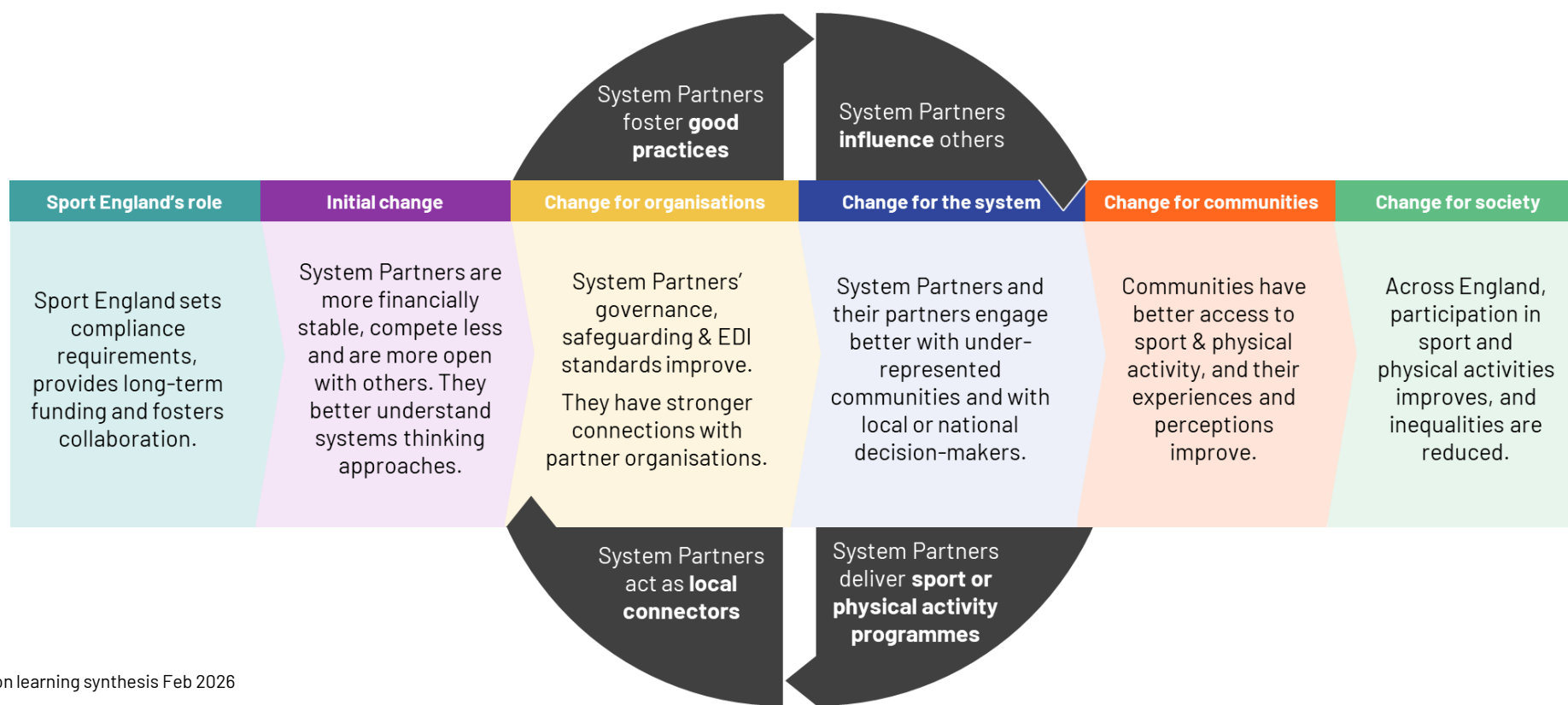
- There are some System Partners that have a **clear primary role**. This includes organisations like Ann Craft Trust who provide expertise on safeguarding adults, or the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMPSA) who are the professional development body for the sector. Although they are funded as System Partners specifically to play an **improver** role, they also use their expertise and capacity to **influence** and **connect** others.
- The majority of System Partners take on these roles simultaneously as they reinforce each other to create the conditions for change. For example, the case study of Chance to Shine focuses on their **delivery** role. But they also engage nationally through conferences, roundtables, and select committee sessions to **influence** system-wide policies and **connect** with other organisations to improve and expand their programme delivery.

The system partner investment prompted many organisations to develop new organisational strategies, processes and internal structures **to better enable them to take on these different roles**.

- The case study of YSF illustrates how it acts as a **connector** at the community level, bringing organisations together and translating high-level priorities into action. It also uses its connections and insight on the local contexts to influence policy and funding decisions, as well as acting as an **improver** by working directly with organisations to raise the standards and capabilities of grassroots sports clubs.
- The case study of the Angling Trust focuses on its **improver** role, but this was driven by its ambition to **deliver** the 'Get Fishing for Wellbeing' programme to new, vulnerable audiences. To do this effectively, the Trust also had to act as a **connector**, building relationships between its delivery partners and the complex world of local health services and social prescribing networks.

Key finding: These roles collectively create change for organisations and the system, which aim to lead to change for communities and society

Adopting these roles enables System Partners to drive change within the system, benefiting communities and society. The image illustrates how the roles interconnect and reinforce each other, enabling the type of relationships and interactions necessary for longer-term change.



Key finding: Factors in the wider context influence the roles that System Partners play (Part one: enablers)

The context System Partners work in can both enable and hinder what they do and what they can achieve.

External enablers and barriers apply differently to different organisations, and evolve over time, playing an important role in how and what change happens. This context can either accelerate their work, or act as a barrier that can constrain System Partners to perform their roles effectively.

Enablers System Partners have reported include:

1. When **local or national political priorities align**.

This supports System Partners in all roles, in particular the influencing role. For example, YSF's collaboration with WYCA was enabled by the Mayor's strong interest in culture and community collaboration. This political will created a receptive environment for YSF's 'influencer' role, allowing them to more easily integrate sport into regional policy. The MoU signed between Sport England and the Mayor further solidified this, providing structure and accountability.

2. A strong, **pre-existing demand or a unique local context**.

This support System Partners, particularly in the delivery role. The Angling Trust's 'Get Fishing for Wellbeing' initiative was enabled by increased demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more people turned to angling for their mental health and wellbeing.

3. **High-profile events or news stories** that put a spotlight on an issue, creating an opportunity to grow a sport or advocate for change.

YSF recognised that sporting events like the Tour de France passing through the region and a racism scandal in Yorkshire Cricket helped to put sport and tackling inequalities on the political and social agenda. These external events created a window of opportunity for YSF to influence the conversation.

4. **Uniting the Movement providing a mandate for change**

The strategy provides System Partners with a 'mandate' to prioritise inequalities. This is particularly powerful for issue-based influencers who were already focused on disadvantaged groups. As one National Partner described: "We've moved a step forward where we're not in the case of having to sell the reasons you should be doing this [including disabled people in sport and physical activity]. What we're now in the territory of is what's the best ways of doing this?".

Key finding: Factors in the wider context influence the roles that System Partners play (Part two: barriers)

Barriers reported by System Partners include:

1. A lack of **stable, long-term funding for partner organisations** undermining sustainability. The difficult economic climate means partners like local authorities, healthcare providers, and charities are facing financial pressures.

For example, the influencing work of the Richmond Group is limited by partner capacity constraints, where funding and staff time limit partner charities' ability to fully engage with the campaign.

2. Navigating complex systems, and restructures affecting health and local government organisations, slowing down the pace of change.

For example, the Angling Trust and its partners like Tackling Minds found that communication with NHS and social prescribing networks is complex and inconsistent across local areas. This makes referral management a challenge, especially when referrals require more specialist support than delivery partners can provide, affecting the delivery of their wellbeing programme.

3. Misaligned organisational cultures, resulting in a clash between system, learning-led approaches and traditional output-focused cultures. This influences 'buy-in' for new ways of working internally and with local partners.

This is particularly present for organisations seeking to develop projects that don't have an immediate, quantifiable return. As one system partner explained, "it's really hard [to sell an exploratory project] for people who live in a [how many people are coming through the door] mentality."

4. Workforce challenges as a result of high staff turnover and funding constraints. This affects the ability of partners to achieve strategic objectives.

Some System Partners report a risk of "losing good people" due to low pay; others highlight challenges recruiting qualified coaches, and others report that their reliance on volunteers risks the sustainability of delivery.

5. Access to appropriate and affordable facilities.

Access to appropriate and affordable facilities is a major barrier to growing participation. The accessibility of facilities and other costs for participation affects partners' ability to diversify their sport for people with disabilities or financial constraints.

REFLECTING AND ACTING ON THE LEARNING

04

Looking ahead: Questions for reflection

This report is designed to be a tool for conversation. As you plan your next steps, consider the following questions with your team:

Understanding our role

- Which of the four roles (Improver, Influencer, Connector, or Deliverer) is our primary function? Which are our secondary roles?
- How can we be more intentional and strategic in how we perform these roles?
- What skills, resources, or capacity do we need to develop to be more effective in our roles?

Strengthening collaboration

- Looking at our key partners, what roles do they play? Where are there complementary strengths or overlaps we can leverage?
- Who could we collaborate with to amplify our impact? For example, which 'Connector' could help our 'Deliverer' programme reach the right communities? Which 'Influencer' could champion the issues our work highlights?

Navigating the context

- Which of the barriers identified in this report resonate most with our experience?
- How can we work with Sport England and other partners to collectively mitigate these challenges (e.g. workforce development, making the case for investment)?
- What emerging opportunities (for example, new political priorities, public awareness) can we harness to advance our work?

Taking action

- What is one practical action we can take in the next few months to strengthen our impact, based on the learning from this report?

FURTHER RESOURCES

05

Detailed Theory of Change

