System Partners becoming 'System Convenors', strategically influencing and building partnerships to embed physical activity across sectors

Sport England's c£700 million investment over 5-years into its partner organisations (called System Partners). The investment aims to reshape the sector and support the ambitions of its 10-year strategy, Uniting the Movement (UTM). The strategy seeks to improve Sport and Physical Activity (SPA) levels and reduce inequalities, whilst ensuring safe and positive experiences for children and young people. This diagram visually represents the story of System Partners' journeys since the beginning of the investment, based on data collected from several System Partners.

CONTEXT AND CONSIDERATIONS

System Partners, including Active Partnerships, now work to connect national policy with hyper-local community needs, a shift from their historical role of project delivery.

This change is driven by both internal strategic shifts and external policy priorities from sectors like health and local government, which aim to reduce inactivity.

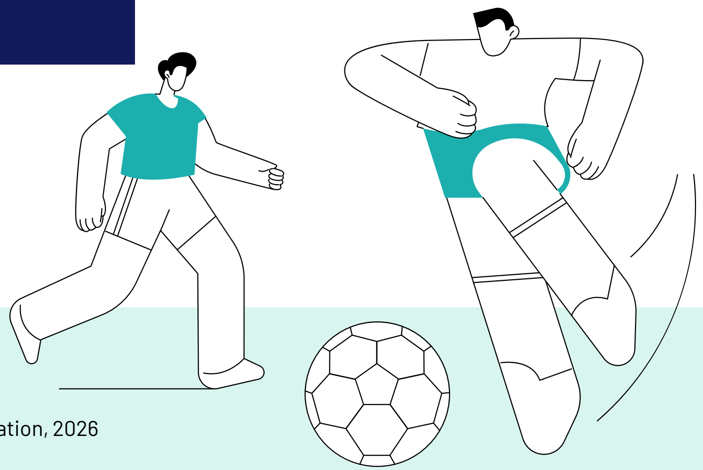
Other influential factors

- Senior policymakers, like mayors or public health directors, championing the importance of physical activity.
- Building trust with both strategic partners and local communities over time is essential for identifying shared opportunities.

There is a concern that the political will required for this long-term work may fade before its impact is evidenced. Articulating the value of convening work is difficult, as its impact is often qualitative and long-term, clashing with the demand for quantitative data.

It takes time to shift partners accustomed to transactional relationships and overcome institutional barriers, such as risk aversion in health organisations.

Physical activity is often not a high priority for communities facing more immediate challenges like food and housing insecurity.



SP INVESTMENT

Long-term, flexible funding from Sport England provided the necessary "breathing space" and a clear mandate for organisations to move away from short-term delivery targets.

This investment allowed them to focus on longer-term, relationship-based work and influencing systemic change. They are no longer competing with local partners for funding.

MECHANISM(S) OF CHANGE

Organisations developed new strategies and Theories of Change, repositioning themselves as connectors and enablers rather than deliverers.

The organisations have shifted approach from transactional (funding projects) to transformational (building long-term partnerships with shared priorities).

Funding used to build internal staff skills in systems thinking, policy influence, and partnership management.

SHORT TERM OUTCOME

For organisations: they are now perceived as trusted, neutral connectors, which has given them greater access to strategic conversations and increased their ability to influence policy.

For the system: there are clearer roles for organisations, reduced duplication of effort, and fostered a less competitive environment.

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