

**Working with Local People as Part of a Whole-systems  
Approach to Physical Activity: Reflections from Local  
Delivery Pilots**

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**Working with Local People as Part of a Whole-systems Approach to Physical Activity:  
Reflections from Local Delivery Pilots**

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## 1 **Introduction**

2 Over 11 million people in the United Kingdom are physically inactive; engaging in  
3 less than 30 minutes of physical activity (PA) per week, despite overwhelming physical and  
4 mental health benefits of regular PA<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, those from lower socio-economic  
5 backgrounds, ethnically diverse communities (e.g., Black, Asian), and those with a disability  
6 or long-term health condition are less likely to engage in PA<sup>1</sup>. Raising PA levels and gaining  
7 equity amongst these groups represents a major challenge for public health policy and  
8 practice both in the UK and globally<sup>2</sup>. Sport England have recognised that to tackle inactivity  
9 we must understand that individuals “do not live in a vacuum” and changes are be needed  
10 across policy, infrastructure, culture and communities<sup>3</sup>. They invested in 12 Local Delivery  
11 Pilots (LDPs) to “use local identities and structures to deliver sustainable increases in activity  
12 levels across the country”<sup>3</sup>. This has been described by some LDPs as a whole of systems  
13 (WSA) approach.

14 A WSA “considers an entire system as a whole, from multiple perspectives to  
15 understand how its parts can work together to create synergies and solve multiple design  
16 problems simultaneously. It is an interdisciplinary, collaborative, and iterative process”<sup>4</sup>.  
17 Central to this approach is to work with local people (WwLP) to co-create solutions that are  
18 meaningful, challenge societal structures (including cross-sector politics, policy and  
19 practice), and cultural norms for long-lasting change<sup>3, 5</sup>. Commitment to WwLP, for example  
20 through co-production, can address power imbalances for designing and delivering impact<sup>6</sup>  
21 and is central to effective health promotion<sup>7</sup>. Whilst user engagement in design of PA  
22 interventions is becoming more common<sup>8</sup> to date, these interventions have not resided within  
23 a WSA.

24 This article aims to provide reflections from researchers embedded within two LDPs,  
25 Calderdale (Active Calderdale) and Greater Manchester (GM Local Pilot), around efforts to

26 WwLP as part of a WSA to enable active lives. While LDPs have approached WwLP  
27 differently, the main premise and underlying goals remain the same. For the LDPs to be  
28 successful, local people must be involved in the process and trust and respect must be built  
29 through ongoing interactions<sup>9</sup>. This approach may enable feelings of ownership over change,  
30 glean insight to focus efforts and resources, and can help implement successful and sustained  
31 change.

## 32 **In Practice**

### 33 *LDP “Engagement” Overview*

34 Across and within the LDPs approaches to WwLP differ based on a range of factors  
35 related to historical relationships, pilot design, local skills, knowledge, and capacity. It is out  
36 of scope for this article to debate the strengths of each approach. Active Calderdale’s pilot  
37 involves housing two embedded community engagement coordinators (CECs) as part of the  
38 core programme team. The CECs are from two of Active Calderdale’s priority areas, North  
39 and Central Halifax, they have a paid role, and provide integrated insight and understanding,  
40 consultation, and delivery with local communities. GM Moving in Greater Manchester has 10  
41 individual boroughs under the umbrella and principles of one pilot. Each of the 10 boroughs  
42 have a different approach for WwLP. For example, community workers who are networked  
43 into local areas and provide insight; those who facilitate constructive conversations between  
44 users to co-produce activities; and direct investment into local voluntary and community and  
45 social enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations. These organisations often have pre-existing  
46 relationships with community groups, and facilitate them to come together, self-organise,  
47 engage with local people, and co-produce solutions to enable active lives utilising the local  
48 assets. We drew on activities in these two LDPs in our reflections.

### 49 *Reflections*

50           The process of WwLP within the LDPs has led to key insights about the potential  
51    additionality of these processes within a WSA as outlined below:

- 52       • **Building new relationships:** ongoing engagement with communities, where their  
53        voices can be influential across multiple spheres of influence reduces cynicism and  
54        builds trust between local residents and local services. This opens the possibility of  
55        greater reciprocity, engagement with a wider network of local residents, in particular,  
56        residents who are seldom heard. Greater trust and understanding between the public  
57        sector and those in the community supports the transfer of power, around decision  
58        making and use of funds to those in local areas who may best know how to use it.
- 59       • **Building local capacity:** communities consider how PA opportunities should be built  
60        into existing assets to unlock skills, capabilities, and networks situated within the  
61        community, which can lead to sustainable change. Furthermore, embedding capacity  
62        within existing assets can help mobilise the integration of PA as part of their offer.  
63        Investment at a local community level based on collaborative partnerships may  
64        facilitate diverse groups coming together to overcome previous rivalry and entrenched  
65        ways of working for the benefit of the local population. This may demonstrate the  
66        benefit of shifting from funding small siloed programmes to collaborative investments  
67        in a place.
- 68       • **Generating insight:** having regular and ongoing input from the community, who are  
69        also involved in collective sense-making, may serve as an opportunity to *understand*  
70        what the community wants, social norms, and to identify system blockages. Actively  
71        listening to the voice of the community may lead to those engaged in governance,  
72        policy, and practice to change their established approaches to better meet the needs  
73        and aspirations of local people. Furthermore, commitment to ongoing dialogue  
74        between local communities and those who work with them may encourage changes to

75 the system which, over time, work to address the myriad components which interact  
76 to constrain individual choices.

## 77 **Conclusion**

78 Locations are different and accordingly approaches to WwLP may differ. Emerging  
79 patterns are appearing whereby concerted efforts to WwLP within a WSA create superior  
80 value added relative to stand-alone co-production projects that are not embedded in the wider  
81 system. The benefits include building new relationships and local capacity, as well as  
82 generating insight that has greater reach and inspires structural and governance changes  
83 which currently inhibit progress. These LDPs and evaluations are ongoing and we will  
84 continue to investigate the development of WwLP, within a WSA, and ascertain if, how,  
85 when, and why they contribute to reducing inactivity.

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