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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[1]. 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[1]. 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[2]. 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[3]. 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"[3]. 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"[4].

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[3, 5]. Commitment to WwLP, for example

20   through co-production, can address power imbalances for designing and delivering impact[6]

21   and is central to effective health promotion[7]. Whilst user engagement in design of PA

22   interventions is becoming more common[8] 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[9]. 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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