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# **Active Through Football: National evaluation and learning partner interim report**

April 2025



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# Overview

- Evaluation and learning partner brief
- Realist-informed ripple effects mapping (RiREM)
- The key processes of place-based working within ATF
- Key learning summaries



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*Sport should be for all, not a privileged few. We lead research that identifies the root causes of injustices in sport with the purpose of driving social change*

The Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society is the first of its kind in the UK.

The Centre is built on a rich history of critical research in sport and social issues here in the Carnegie School of Sport.

We have a long legacy of collaborative and transformative research that has improved individual experiences of sport, brought diverse communities closer together, and enabled organisations to rethink and reshape their policies and programmes.

We are committed to research that has real-world impact.

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# About the work

## Active Through Football is...

### Evaluation and learning partner brief:

**Objective 1:** To demonstrate the outcomes and impact of ATF at the level of individuals, place/community, programme, and national

**Objective 2:** To facilitate and enable the sharing, exchange and use of learning from evaluation to improve the effectiveness of ATF



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# The challenge...

- SfD literature providing justification of approach



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# Realist-informed Ripple Effects Mapping

Harris et al table  
Jase suggested reading



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# In practice...

Practicalities of approach



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# So far...Key findings

Reflection on method  
Reflection on REM through a realist lens  
Key findings on programme CMOs



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# ATF's place-based approach: headline learning

ATF's approach enables sustained and immersive community engagement to identify existing and potential local community assets, working co-productively within communities to better meet the sporting and social needs of local people.

The success of ATF's place-based is built on:

- Adapting to local needs through responsive and flexible project design
- Focusing on building trust and social connections locally
- Recruiting staff and project champions who can connect and empathise with people who are not physically active
- Viewing places for their strengths (e.g. culture and community assets) and harness these as building blocks for change and development
- Emphasising locally defined success rather than predetermined (i.e. 'top-down') outcomes and KPIs
- Pursuing empowerment and increased decision-making capacity at a local level
- Pursuing action that is 'locally intelligent' and contextualised to the specific community
- Incorporating multiple perspectives and multiple voices in decision making at different levels.
- Embedding learning and systems change as a programme function



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# What are community assets?

ATF's place-based approach builds on the **social** and **material** assets within a community.

A **social asset** could be a local champion, friendship circles, existing community groups and clubs, VCSE networks, local culture

A **material assets** could be a community building, local green space, sport and leisure facilities, places of worship



*You see a lot of programmes...They'll just drop in, they deliver the session for how many weeks or months and then that's it, they're done and they go away.*

*This project is different compared to other programmes  
(Josh, Project Manager, Gateshead).*



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# Key processes within an ATF place-based project:



# Example of consortium working: AVFC Foundation

## Context

In the past, AVFC Foundation predominantly saw themselves as a delivery focused organisation. Active Through Football was their first experience at consortium working.

## What did they do?

After three years of gaining experience and building momentum, AVFC Foundation is now seen as a leader locally in place-based, consortium working. This led to the formation of their Community Relations Department in 2024 which oversees place-based consortium projects.

## What was the impact?

AVFC have now onboarded three new consortium-based projects and are acting as leaders across this portfolio of work.

## What can we learn from this example?

The ATF investment focus on place-based practice has changed how organisations work and their future strategic vision.

The consensus among projects is that consortium working that includes well-connected and culturally appropriate local partners has enabled them to engage previously hard to reach groups.

*ATF has led to a huge mindset shift in our organisation and its really impacted our whole strategy as a foundation for future years.*

(James, Strategic Lead, AVFC Foundation)



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# Consortium Working

## Key learning from ATF:

- Consortium membership should be 'place-specific' and built around meeting the needs of the local community
- A clear alignment of priorities and goals between organisations needs to be established from the outset
- An effective consortium can act as a 'boundary spanner' and an effective bridge between strategic organisations and local delivery partners.
- The 'information relay' between the 'layers' (grassroots to strategic) needs to be efficient to ensure Project Managers are fully supported in their role
- Evolve membership: remain flexible and responsive to changing community needs and the local context
- Beware stagnation and consortium members pursuit of narrow organisational self-interest

*We've kept the core consortium the same but added people in and moved people out as well if they weren't quite the right fit or if the programmer has just slightly outgrown them.*  
(Rob, Project Manager, Newcastle)



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# Example of community engagement: DE23 in Derby

## Context

The target audience of Muslim women were initially reluctant to take part in physical activity; *"They told us they thought it was embarrassing"* (Aliyah, delivery staff, DE23 Active)

## What did they do?

Over a period of six months the project continually sustained engagement by providing 'chai and chill' social sessions at the Pakistani Community Centre in Normanton. Slowly, they introduced chair-based exercises, and other physical activities.

## What was the impact?

In response to demand, they now provide an array of different activities such as swimming, Yoga, Boxercise, Zumba, and crucially: football.

## What can we learn from this example?

Community engagement that is culturally sensitive, occurs in a trusted and familiar space, and focuses on 'moving at the speed of trust' enables delivery staff to develop responsive provision

Prioritising and building trust takes time but has led to much more substantial longer-term outcomes.

*When we first started this project, no way did we think that we would ever get these ladies to play football. But when we started, they absolutely loved it!*  
(Aliyah, delivery staff, DE23 Active)



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# Community Engagement

## Key learning from ATF:

- Community engagement requires staff to get out into the community, build relationships, and be active listeners.
- It can be planned (e.g. invited coffee mornings), but is more likely to be unstructured and opportunistic (informal conversations, dropping into existing groups).
- Community engagement is about learning and becoming trusted within a Place
- Community engagement and trust building takes time. Be ready to justify a slower start to project development to others less familiar with Place-based working.
- Rushing towards delivery can be counter-productive in the long term as it may undermine efforts to demonstrate responsive community engagement
- Local community champions are often essential gatekeepers, and can be influential in how the programme is perceived locally
- Over time, and as delivery staff become more immersed and trusted in the community, community engagement often becomes more ad hoc and informal. Community engagement can happen anytime and any place.



*Our engagement doesn't have a start and a stop. It's just continuous because it is about building relationships...We talk about working at the speed of trust. You never know, it could take two months, six months, or two years. (Pritesh, Strategic Lead, Oldham)*



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# Example of programme design and development: Wolverhampton



## Context

*"We had originally intended to use Eastfield Park as a hub to do outdoor exercise with Mums who were dropping their kids off at nursery. One of the things we found was we had real difficulty with getting consistent engagement... with either half-full sessions or no shows. We trialed this over the space of four to five months"*

## What did they do?

*"We decided to use the flexibility we had to pivot to a different group, over 50s... So our target audience, location and timings all changed. But right away after making these tweaks the numbers picked up and we've had sustained engagement"*

## What was the impact?

*"As we got more known in the area, because we had those trusted relationships with the Centre manager, we were able to engage more with Mums, our original audience...we were able to talk with them and understand more about what they wanted. Turns out they were really keen on dance-based exercise...All of the sudden we have great engagement from our original audience, and really good numbers. So we feel like we've come full circle."*

(Liam, Project Manager, Wolverhampton)

## What can we learn from this example?

Over time, ATF project managers have felt increasingly comfortable with the 'test and learn' culture and not shied away from speaking about failure as many have learned *more* from this to compared to only talking about success



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# Programme Design and Development

## Key learning from ATF:

Place-based physical activity delivery typically requires:

- Flexible and responsive project planning
- An emphasis on fun and social opportunities rather than health benefits: 'health by stealth'
- The first step is often to 'get people more socially active to help them become more physically active'
- Cultural suitable and sensitive delivery staff
- The use or creation of safe physical and social spaces
- A commitment to finding creative solutions to overcome local and individual barriers to participation: there is no 'one size fits all'
- A move away from the formality, structure, and facilities often associated with competitive sport, which can be daunting and inappropriate for those who do not consider themselves 'sporty'
- An ongoing commitment to relationships and trust building
- Active listening, empathy, and an openness to new ideas are all important professional traits for project managers when programming within a place-based approach
- Understanding that failure is still an opportunity to learn and adapt: embrace a 'test and learn' culture



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# Example of workforce development: DE23 Derby

## Context

*"We have to be really conscious of who we work with, it can't just be anyone from a personal training background...it's not always who you think that might be the best person for the job"*

## What did they do?

*"It's just so important we have the right person engaging with our community. For example, we have Nadhira. When participants first meet here they say "Are you really the coach!?" Because she doesn't look like a sporty person. But then her response is, "Yeah, so if I can do it, you have no excuse!"*

## What was the impact?

*"We've been able to support 12 women and 6 men from our community to become activity leaders for us. We've helped them with qualifications in chair-based exercises, but also things like being able to take blood pressure readings, or the 'Stepping Over the Sidelines' courses from Derbyshire FA".*

(Nosheen, Programme Coordinator, Derby)

## What can we learn from this example?

Recruiting community staff and volunteers who are culturally representative the target audience has been one of the most significantly mechanisms to engagement within underrepresented and reluctant communities.



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# Workforce Development

## Key learning from ATF:

- Workforce development is often a significant point of pride for many ATF Project Managers
- Finding, recruiting, and developing 'the right local person' is fundamental to the reach and impact of community engagement and delivery, and ultimately programme success
- Existing recruitment systems and policies, organisational training material, and delivery expectations can create challenges during recruitment (e.g. minimum sport qualification requirements not being met)
- Sometimes recruiting the 'right person' is not who sport-based organisations would typically appoint. Being comfortable with a degree of (perceived) risk to move away from the convention sport workforce is required
- When staff move on, there is a risk that the relationships and trust within the community goes with them. This 'hub and spoke' issue, whereby all the connections are lost if the central point disappears, can be mitigated against by other members of the team are also embedded and trusted within the community

*Workforce development is probably what I'll be most proud of in the end. Where we have come from, to where we are now, its progressed massively.*  
(Josh, Project Manager, Gateshead)



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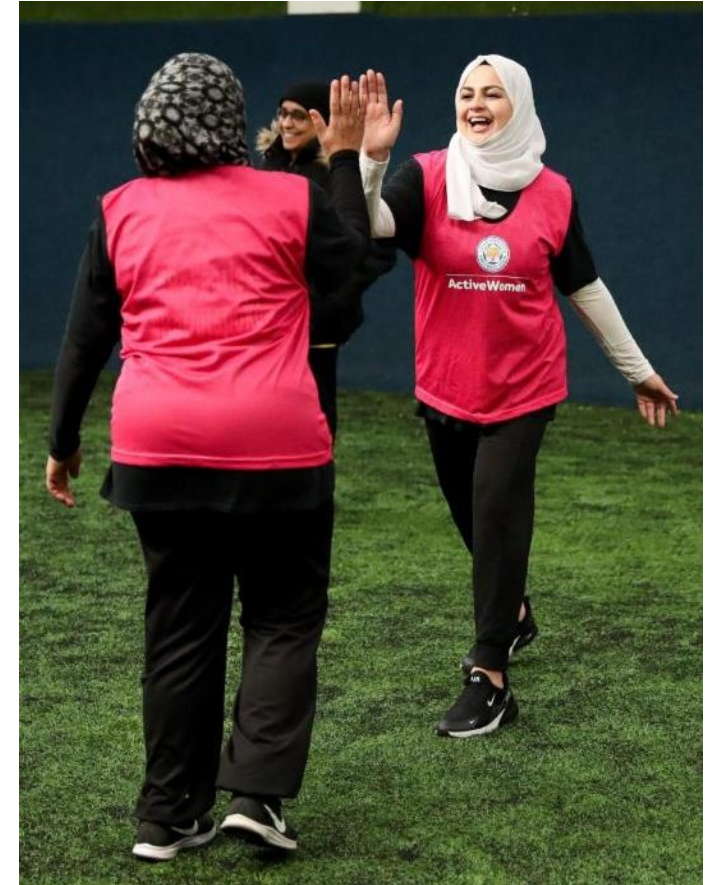
# Workforce Development

## Key learning from ATF:

The recruitment of local staff and/or volunteers has been central to the success of many ATF projects.

‘The right person’ is typically someone who:

- Has lived experience of that Place
- Can empathise with individuals who experience barriers to participation
- Has a willingness and passion to engage with participants
- Is dedicated to building a sense of belonging and trust among participants
- Is committed to developing their ability to deliver and lead sessions
- Has personal qualities such as charisma, listening and communication skills, honesty, transparency, consistency, reliability, credibility with local people, and authenticity.



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# Example of sustainability: Hull

## Context

In Hull, the ATF team learned of the work the Thorpe Park Rangers (TPR) were pursuing in the Orchard Park estate (an area of high deprivation) on a community asset transfer. Visiting the site, the ATF team found two high quality grass pitches with room to expand, but an awkward lease problem prevented development.

## What did they do?

Through their ATF engagement work Gavin and Anthony supported TPR in the asset transfer process and helped them to set up a charity to run the site whilst also, crucially, linking in ATF delivery and other local physical activity programmes.

## What was the impact?

*"This site is an ideal base for the ATF Hull project going forward as it is a safe location by nature of where it is located and has a huge potential to be developed as a valuable community asset for the future in an area where there are no available community sports facilities" (Anthony, Project Manager, Hull Community and Leisure)*

## What can we learn from this example?

While sustainability is typically thought of as the ability to continue session delivery beyond the initial five years of investment in ATF, we also see examples of work that will support long term changes to local systems.



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# Sustainability

## Key learning from ATF:

There are typically two ways that ATF projects are approaching the challenge of sustaining delivery after year 5:

- Introducing a small charge to participants. Unsurprisingly, given that ATF focuses on areas of high deprivation, this approach is viewed by many local programmes as problematic
- Sessions become dependent on the goodwill of volunteers and/or investment from other local organisations for their continued delivery, thereby significantly reducing running costs.

However sustainable change can also be identified through the legacy of ATF:

- The reclaiming of community assets, or the creation of new safe spaces
- Increasing the knowledge and capacity of the existing local services to adopt a place-based approach
- The upskilling and experience of individuals in place-based working to be employed in the sport and physical activity workforce in the future



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# What next?: Evaluation and learning activities – years 4-5

## **March - Aug 2025**

- Ripple Effects Mapping workshops across all ATF projects
- Survey data collection and analysis
- Building of project specific collaborative Miro spaces (online) to co-create evidence of impact
- National ATF partner 'sense making' workshop + 26th case workshop to examine national level insights
- Collaborate with ATF national team to design and deliver July 2025 'community of learning event' (COL)

## **September - Dec 2025:**

- REM follow-up data collection (online) – interview work with all project managers + key local stakeholders
- Scheduling In-person project site visits planned for early 2026
- Collaborate with ATF national team to plan January 2026 COL event

## **Jan - May 2026:**

- Delivery of January 2026 COL event
- Additional survey data collection and analysis
- Conduct final in-person data collection with each Place

## **June 2026 – March 2027:**

- Final online follow-up data collection
- Final registration and survey data analysis and presentation
- Final report drafting, collaborate with national partners to plan communication strategy for final reporting
- Submission of final report by March 2027



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# Find out more

**Contact the evaluation and learning lead:**

Dr Dan Bates

[D.J.Bates@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:D.J.Bates@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

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