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

## 1   **Introduction**

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

19           A WSA “considers an entire system as a whole, from  
20 multiple perspectives to understand how its parts can work  
21 together to create synergies and solve multiple design  
22 problems simultaneously. It is an interdisciplinary,  
23 collaborative, and iterative process”<sup>4</sup>. Central to this  
24 approach is to work with local people (WwLP) to co-create  
25 meaningful solutions, challenge societal structures (including  
26 cross-sector politics, policy and practice), and cultural

norms for long-lasting change<sup>3, 5</sup>. Commitment to WwLP, for example through co-production, can address power imbalances for designing and delivering impact<sup>6</sup> and is central to effective health promotion<sup>7</sup>. Whilst user engagement in design of PA interventions is becoming more common<sup>8</sup> to date, these interventions have not resided within a WSA.

This article aims to provide reflections from researchers embedded within two LDPs, Calderdale (Active Calderdale) and Greater Manchester (GM Local Pilot), around efforts to WwLP as part of a WSA to enable active lives. While LDPs have approached WwLP differently, the main premise and underlying goals remain the same. For the LDPs to be successful, local people must be involved in the process and trust and respect must be built through ongoing interactions<sup>9</sup>. This approach may enable feelings of ownership over change, glean insight to focus efforts and resources, and can help implement successful and sustained change.

## **In Practice**

### *LDP "Engagement" Overview*

Across and within the LDPs approaches to WwLP differ based on a range of factors related to historical relationships, pilot design, local skills, knowledge, and capacity. It is out of scope for this article to debate the strengths of each approach. Active Calderdale's pilot involves housing two embedded community engagement coordinators (CECs) as part of the core programme team. The CECs are from two of

Active Calderdale's priority areas, North and Central Halifax, they have a paid role, and provide integrated insight and understanding, consultation, and delivery with local communities. GM Moving in Greater Manchester has 10 individual boroughs under the umbrella and principles of one pilot. Each of the 10 boroughs have a different approach for WwLP. For example, community workers who are networked into local areas and provide insight; those who facilitate constructive conversations between users to co-produce activities; and direct investment into local voluntary and community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations. These organisations often have pre-existing relationships with community groups, and facilitate them to come together, self-organise, engage with local people, and co-produce solutions to enable active lives utilising the local assets. We drew on activities in these two LDPs in our reflections.

### *Reflections*

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

- **Building new relationships:** ongoing engagement with communities, where their voices can be influential across multiple spheres of influence reduces cynicism and builds trust between local residents and local services. This opens the possibility of greater reciprocity and engagement with a wider network of local residents, in

particular, residents who are seldom heard. Greater trust and understanding between the public sector and those in the community supports the transfer of power, around decision making and use of funds to those in local areas who may best know how to use it.

- **Building local capacity:** communities consider how PA opportunities should be built into existing assets to unlock skills, capabilities, and networks situated within the community, which can lead to sustainable change. Furthermore, embedding capacity within existing assets can help mobilise the integration of PA as part of their offer. Investment at a local community level based on collaborative partnerships may facilitate diverse groups coming together to overcome previous rivalry and entrenched ways of working for the benefit of the local population. This may demonstrate the benefit of shifting from funding small siloed programmes to collaborative investments in a place.
- **Generating insight:** having regular and ongoing input from the community, who are also involved in collective sense-making, may serve as an opportunity to *understand* what the community wants, social norms, and to identify system blockages. Actively listening to the voice of the community may lead to those engaged in governance, policy, and practice to change their established approaches to better meet the needs and aspirations of

local people. Furthermore, commitment to ongoing dialogue between local communities and those who work with them may encourage changes to the system which, over time, work to address the myriad components which interact to constrain individual choices.

## **Conclusion**

Locations are different and accordingly approaches to WwLP may differ.

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

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