



Physical Activity Strategic Think Piece

Local Government Physical Activity Partnership

March 2019

Introduction

For many people working within local councils, physical activity related service areas (which includes sport) can feel both exciting, frustrating and daunting right now. However the role and impact of these services is often needed more than ever. We believe there is a growing need for strategic support, reassurance and challenge in the sector.

Managing change is part of everyday life, but this has all too often manifested itself as crisis management rather than a strategically planned response. There is acceptance of the importance of being physically active. However, there remain huge challenges in bringing about systemic change in order to support more people to become active; with local councils' capacity to effect the required change having weakened through years of austerity. Uncertainty is something we have just become accustomed to.

Driving better outcomes through increased levels of physical activity is incredibly difficult. It will challenge local councils not simply because it cuts across so many traditional service or directorate structures (or silos), but also because it can lead to questions about where the leadership and ownership actually comes from. So for example - does leadership and ownership come from traditional leisure and sports development services or does it come from elsewhere e.g. public health or health and wellbeing based services or beyond the council through collaborative approaches and partnerships? And does this matter? Much depends on the existing strengths of the council to drive the agenda for change.

The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership is a collective body of organisations who are either responsible for or have an interest in the provision of local services and opportunities to enable individuals and communities to become more physically active. This partnership is passionate about the development of opportunities and the critical role that the public sector needs to play alongside other partners in driving better local outcomes through physical activity.

- The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) includes: CLOA, Community Leisure UK, Sport England, the Local Government Association, APSE and Active Partnerships. It has come together with the purpose: *to create a collective voice that represents, improves and articulates the social and economic value of physical activity and the important role the public sector plays in this.*
- We will do this by helping local authorities across England to find solutions to challenges by emphasising and supporting independent, transparent and informed long-term decisions.

- Working collaboratively, this voice has significant reach and influence, with the ability to make a real difference to the future role of local councils in supporting their citizens to be physically active.

Developing a helpful conversation within the sector

The group wants to create an environment for positive debate and discussion about the key strategic issues facing local councils focussed on supporting physical activity. Equally to provide reflective and perhaps at times provocative think pieces for the wider sector to consider.

The group, established in 2018, has brought forward thoughts from its round table conversations about the challenges the sector faces and how the sector might position itself to drive better outcomes. These think pieces are not about providing definitive answers or official positions by any of the partners, but instead about amplifying points and raising key questions for discussion in the sector. Ways forward are likely to develop iteratively over time and are likely to look different in each area. It is vital that every locality has thought about what those issues mean to them and how they should respond.

In addition to this wider think piece about the strategic positioning of physical activity services, the group has also considered producing future think pieces (e.g. Leisure Management, Systems-based Approaches, Asset Based Community Development, Co-Production). We would welcome hearing about the key strategic issues that you would like debating.

How should local council's best approach increasing levels of physical activity?

The group considered what factors are important. Typically what things would you expect to see for success to follow?

Headline thoughts and observations

1. Is there a good understanding about the **needs of local communities** and what the potential barriers and opportunities might be to increase levels of physical activity?
2. Is there the drive, determination and desire to really make a difference? Are there enough people who **really care** and can see the bigger picture?
3. Is there a **strong overarching policy position** on physical activity and sport within the local council area and/or within key organisations that have a leadership role in this area?
4. **Leadership is vital.** Is there evidence of leadership at the highest levels possible from officers and elected members? Does it matter which service leads as it will require a whole council approach? There also needs to be evidence of strong leadership with partner agencies and communities. This may require councils 'letting go' and encouraging local communities to take the lead (Asset Based Community Development).
5. Is there an accepted understanding about the need for **long term systems based approaches** and alignment across a wide range of council departments and partner organisations? Systemic solutions won't be delivered in the short

term and need a strong collaborative approach across a place, based on shared purpose and values.

6. Local authorities will demonstrate a strong understanding of **commissioning** and the value of implementing the processes that underpin that approach, focussing on wider outcomes.

Further considerations and issues for councils

What is the council's role in driving physical activity?

- Councils should have clarity about their particular leadership role and ownership in driving forward physical activity. This will include the enablement and development of policy and the direct delivery of related services. Does your council have a clear policy position? Is the case for physical activity and sport effectively made? Is it crowded out by debates about statutory services with a lack of understanding of the role physical activity and sport play in delivering these broader agendas?
- Tackling inactivity is a multidimensional and complex problem and should not be seen as the sole domain of the traditional leisure/sport services department. It is much more complex and the outcomes will be more effective if a whole council approach is adopted. This in turn will be part of a whole area approach in driving improved outcomes, working with key stakeholders. (Admittedly this is more challenging for two tier authorities). In many areas a whole council approach isn't in place and leadership still disproportionately rests in leisure and sport services, which are often not strategically connected to the council's priorities. In some cases there might not even be a senior dedicated leisure or sport strategic lead, which further compounds the problem.
- Step change in activity levels will only come about through better integrated working and behaviour change and community led approaches. This creates challenges for local councils as traditional responses are likely to be less effective. This could be illustrated by the thinking about where else physical activity leadership can emerge e.g. public health, transport, climate (green travel/air quality), community development, social care and young people's services.
- Is your approach dominated by physical asset considerations? The role and cost of physical assets play (e.g. leisure centres/playing pitches/open space) are important, but they are only part of the solution. Increasing levels of physical activity at scale is likely to come by engaging local communities and demographics that are inactive and understanding where community strengths can be tapped into to drive behaviour change.
- Is your local council really clear about the role of its assets? For example, the provision of swimming pools helps people to be active (and deliver targeted health programmes) but in reality the primary driver is about learning to swim. Would we now build swimming pools to solve the inactivity challenge? Probably not, but we do need pools to help the population to learn to swim.

There are potentially three other areas to think about in relation to this work.

Is the approach insight driven?

- The group all agreed that services should be driven by evidence and insight about the local population with priorities determined by social demographics

and geographies and determined by agreed strategies (e.g. Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Health and Wellbeing Strategy).

- Does your council effectively use data to show impact?
- Social value as a concept needs to be the bedrock of service delivery, but models of social value are not well developed and more work is needed in this area.

Is there evidence of influence and integration?

- The group agreed that there has to be evidence of ongoing and strong high level leadership and influence. This leadership and influence needs to generate accountability and drive physical activity policy, demonstrating the value and contribution of those services to wider policy and strategic outcomes.
- Connections need to be made across areas like housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing, social care, planning, regeneration, economic policy, highways/transportation and community services.
- Councils need to evaluate whether they have a strong enough understanding about who to influence, key connections, the strength of the wider system (planning/highways/local community strengths etc.). This pre-systems type work is essential.

Does your council display positive behaviours?

It is critical that services can work **collaboratively** and respond quickly to policy changes or partnering opportunities. The way the service works is essential in responding to driving;

- Better outcomes - in this sense it heightens the need for services to be **agile and responsive**.
- **Values driven** approaches should be evident and those leading the creation of physical activity and sport opportunities will be very clear about the **outcomes** to be achieved overall.

Above all councils need to move away from an over reliance on deficit models of delivery (i.e. provision led) as it simply creates dependency and is ultimately not sustainable.

Asset or strengths based approaches will have more lasting and powerful outcomes, but will require a shift in thinking and approach.

Summary

We are working in increasingly complex environments, which is why this think piece has posed questions that place leaders need to consider within their local context.

This requires a robust understanding of place and the communities that live there, having the skills and capacity to influence the local system and the ability to demonstrate the value of the services provided and how they are an integral part of the solution to local priorities.

As a partnership we have a strong common purpose in supporting the sector to achieve this and will continue to work collaboratively to do so.

Signed



Mark Allman, Past Chair of CLOA



Ian Brooke, Chair of CLOA



Cate Atwater, Chief Exec, Community Leisure UK



Paul O'Brien, Chief Exec, APSE



Lee Mason, Chief Exec, Active Partnerships

Need support?

[Meeting the needs of Commissioners](#) - CLOA and Sport England have developed a number of learning resources to prompt thinking about how your service can engage with commissioners locally.

[Ensuring action on health and wellbeing](#) – APSE’s exploration of the national framework for public health in England, the responsibilities of local authorities and the opportunities for sport and leisure services.

[Local Delivery Pilots Sport England](#) - Join the Community of Learning from the local delivery pilots. This brings together what is being discovered by the 12 place pilots as they develop whole systems approaches to tackling inactivity and how it can be of use to all localities.

[Strategic Outcomes Planning Guidance](#) - This Sport England guidance is designed to support Local Authorities through the stages and approach needed to ensure investment best meets local strategic outcomes informed by the needs of the community to deliver appropriate interventions, whilst recognising the challenges faced by Local Authorities.

[Support for local leaders](#) – The LGA and Sport England offer programmes to assist Cabinet members/portfolio holders with the responsibility for sport and physical activity to lead transformational change in their service.