

Learning from doing: Lessons in place-based change from Essex

A report on the Essex LDPs by Collaborate CIC April 2023

"I think we've got a real moment in time opportunity here to build on the work we've done to deliver a legacy across Essex and hopefully that can be taken across the Country. We've got some really good examples of how it's worked locally where we've been able to build up the capacity, the knowledge, the understanding to encourage and enable communities to come together so that they can be part of the solution."

- Cllr Louise McKinlay, Essex County Council Deputy
Leader and Cabinet Member for Community,
Equality, Partnerships and Performance

"It is like we had a virus contained, and now it is has got out."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Sport England were trying to find the next Park Run. There wasn't another silver bullet. It was old school community development work, done through sport."

- workshop participant, Tendring

*"You can see the actual difference it makes.
Seeing someone cycling on an orange bike in Clacton"*

- workshop participant Tendring

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Learning from doing: Lessons in place-based change from Essex

Introduction

"[The LDP has] rewired the way we work as a system."

- Pam Green, then Chief Operating Officer
for North East Essex CCG

*"The future of partnership working in Basildon has been forever
changed by the LDP"*

- workshop participant, Basildon

It takes a lot to really make change in a place.

Habits die hard, institutions can be resistant, people and organisations become set in their ways. It takes incredible effort to overcome these forces of inertia and bring people together around a shared purpose.

It takes a certain relentlessness to build momentum for change, navigating structures of power and recruiting senior sponsors to become advocates for the work. It takes bravery to try to do things differently, to be willing to be wrong in order to become more right over time, to continue to learn and adapt. It takes humility to understand that broad-based ownership of success is more durable than any narrow claims of credit, that people own what they help to create. And it takes farsightedness to embed progress so that hard won gains become wired into structures and processes and can continue to change ways of working in the future.

This is the story of a group of people who did just this - place-based, whole system change - told from their perspective and told for those who want to learn from their experience. They are the people who worked day-to-day on the Essex Sport England Local Delivery Pilots (LDPs) on new approaches to increasing population levels of physical activity in Colchester, Tendring and Basildon. Their work has transformed how partners think about interventions to increase physical activity, and how they work together with partners and with communities to bring this about.

This report is not an evaluation of the outcomes of their work in terms of its impact on physical activity. There are a series of other reports and evaluation documents which focus on outcomes as well as providing detailed accounts of the chronology of the journey taken. This report has a different focus and purpose:

- Here the *focus* is on how those working on the Essex LDPs day-to-day went about their work. They were the people in engine rooms of change in Basildon, Colchester and Tendring, drawn from a range of public and voluntary sector partners, including from Active Essex and the three district councils and working together across organisational boundaries as a virtual team.
- The *purpose* is to capture what was significant and different in the way they worked to act as a resource to others who wish to follow their path, spreading the approaches across Essex and more widely. Of course, the first lesson of this work for those who seek to follow is that place-based working is necessarily contingent: it depends on the historical, geographical, social, economic and political contours of each place at a particular moment in time. As a result, the report is not intended as a simple 'how-to' guide. Rather, it offers guidance to others who - in other places and other times - can apply these insights to their own contexts.

The central goal of the Essex LDPs in Colchester, Tendring and Basildon was, of course, to increase population levels of physical activity. The work has generated much new insight relevant to this goal along with impacts which are being reported in a separate series of reports. However, the lessons from the Essex LDPs go much wider than this specific purpose and should be absorbed by all who are interested in place-based, whole system change. Already we are starting to see how the new capabilities and ways of working developed through this work are being repurposed for other challenges. In Basildon, for example, they are providing a new model for partnership working across the councils and a template for how to work well with communities. Beyond the three places, there is now interest in the County Council as to how the learning can be more widely applied.

It takes a lot to really make change in a place. But gathering the insights from those who have travelled this path and done so successfully can only help those who follow.

About this report

In 2017, Essex was selected by Sport England as one of 12 areas to run what were termed Local Delivery Pilots. These were to be experiments aimed at finding new and innovative approaches to increasing physical activity at a population level which were effective, sustainable and replicable. The approach was permissive by design, searching for new solutions where so much existing practice was proving insufficiently effective.

Led by Active Essex, the Essex LDPs focused on three areas, Basildon, Tendring and Colchester. They sought to create healthier, more active communities through:

1. *Changing the way local partners worked together* through place-based, whole-system change.
2. *Changing the way local partners worked with communities*. This began as an objective to build a movement for change and, over time, morphed into an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach which became core to the approach.

In 2018, Collaborate worked with Active Essex and other local partners to undertake a whole system diagnostic. This aimed to assess readiness in each place and across Essex as a whole for a whole systems approach to tackling physical inactivity and set out recommendations for progress. Our research focused on the starting conditions in each place - the context, relationships and behaviours, and 'system infrastructure' - partners could build on to work in new ways, as well as a similar assessment for the Essex-wide system overall.

This early work showcased the different strengths and opportunities which existed in each of the three districts, highlighting right from the start the need for tailored approaches which were attuned to the particular needs and assets of each place. For example, the work identified the need for a new relationship between services and communities in Basildon; for stronger links between strategy and delivery in Colchester, building on the strengths of the vibrant voluntary sector and the One Colchester vision and partnership; and the need to channel the energy and commitment in Tendring towards a common set of priorities. You can find a summary of the findings from this work [here](#).

The work which underpins this current report builds on the starting points identified in our 2018 work and looks to understand how the conditions for collaborative working identified at the outset have been developed, strengthened and become embedded through the work of the LDPs.

To gather the insights and stories which form the basis of this report, our approach included:

- Reviewing other reports and evaluations which focus on outcomes for the LDP

- One to one interviews with key Active Essex staff and others in the core LDP team
- Engaging with key stakeholders at the Find Your Active Basildon launch event in Wat Tyler Park on 30 September 2022, and the Share, Connect, Collaborate event at Colchester United FC on 2 November 2022
- An online survey of key stakeholders involved in LDP delivery
- Three online workshops, with each dedicated to one of the three districts, to invite those involved in the work and wider partners tell the story of the LDP in their place
- An online workshop bringing together participants and insights from the three place-based workshops to test and enrich the emerging narratives for each place and the overall learnings.

From this process we derived much rich insight which can be of great value to those who seek to follow. This is a story of a group of people working together with extraordinary effectiveness and achieving a scale of change which is uncommon. The lessons from their experience are invaluable. However, our telling comes with some important caveats:

- *This is the story told largely from the perspective of those driving the work day-to-day.* It is therefore the story of those most invested in the success of the programme. While this is relevant to note, it should not diminish the importance of what is said in the report. The subjective experiences of participants - what motivated them to do the work, how they felt as they did it, and the meaning it held for them - are all critical dimensions to understand for those who want to apply the learning to their own contexts.
- *It is a story told in retrospect, not based on contemporaneous accounts as decisions were made in real time.* This can create the illusion of clarity, linear progress and inevitability which didn't necessarily exist for those who experienced the work step-by-forward-step. Indeed, many of the most important lessons from the work have only become visible when seen through the rear view mirror. As a result, the sense of worry and the doubt that made 'holding your nerve' such an important mantra to the team has given way to greater confidence about the choices made, if only because the outcomes of those choices are now known.
- *While the lessons from the work can be abstracted - and we hope we have done so faithfully - it was the process of learning these lessons which made them so valuable to the people involved.* The key learning from this report for others is not so much to do the same things as were done in Essex, but rather to approach the work with the same sense of common purpose and spirit of inquiry.

This report follows two narrative structures:

- First, we draw out the key lessons to emerge from the three pilots taken as a whole.
- Second, we look in more detail at the learning to emerge from each of the three pilots in turn.

General lessons for place-based change from the Essex LDPs

1. Know your place:

- Build on strengths
- Work with the particularities of context

2. Build a culture:

- Focus on ways of being and doing
- Start as you mean to go on
- Put purpose at the centre
- Invest in relationships
- Learn together
- Expect the best from everyone
- Spread ownership and enable others to do
- Try, learn, try again
- Make connections
- Share credit
- Model behaviours
- Find fellow travellers
- Share the approach
- Make strategy consistent with culture
- Protect the space

3. Navigate structures of power

- Share ownership: get partners in on the ground floor
- Start where partners are
- Create momentum
- Deliver for your advocates, and to their timelines.
- Give credit where credit is needed
- Spread the love

4. Hardwire progress

- Be deliberate in strengthening the foundations for collaboration
- Bake progress into systems and processes
- The wider the ownership, the more sustainable the change

General lessons for place-based change from the Essex LDPs

The stories of progress emerging from each of the three districts are distinct, and will continue to evolve and change as this work continues. Recognising the importance of place to the shape of the work, our report includes a focus on each of three places individuals. However, looking across the three places, there are powerful lessons which can be drawn from the work of the LDP teams as a whole.

These lessons - about place, culture, power and sustainability - are powerful truths which can guide Active Essex as it seeks to spread the approach across Essex and Sport England as it shares the learning more widely. They are also valuable to others interested in place-based change whose work might be completely unrelated to efforts to increase population levels of physical activity. As noted above, these lessons are obviously contingent, derived from the context in which the work was done. They do, however, offer a great starting point for anyone wanting to learn from the work.

1. Know your place

Paradoxically, the first general lesson is about the importance of focusing on the particular:

- *Build on strengths and work with the particularities of context.* Start with the place and what is distinctive about it. Remain attuned to this in everything that follows.

In all three districts, developing a deep understanding of - and connection to - the place was foundational for the team. Initial work by Collaborate helped the teams in each place to understand these starting conditions, focused especially relationships and overall conditions for collaboration between partners. It identified strengths to build on as well as areas of focus to strengthen collaborative capacity within each place. This provided a golden thread running throughout all of the work which followed, shaping each team's understanding of what was possible in their place and allowing them to think, act and deliver in ways which were truly grounded in their local communities.

"Know your people and place before starting a conversation. What are the conditions? Who are the people?"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"The importance of physical activity is absolutely central, it's the core of what we're doing to break down barriers with our communities

and also starting to use local assets, the beaches, the green space make people feel much more connected as a community, so it's critical to what we're doing"

- Pam Green, then Chief Operating Officer for North East Essex CCG

Understanding of place was not limited to practical or professional considerations, it went deeper than that. The stories we heard played out within the geography and history of each place and those things were significant in framing the choices made in each area, and to an extent that was more clearly understood in retrospect. From the opportunity to build deeper community connections within Basildon and its history as a post-war 'new town', to the rich cultural identity of Colchester with its thriving and well-connected voluntary and community sector, to the natural resources of the coastal area of Tendring which provided a backdrop for the launch and success of Essex Pedal Power the unique characteristics and identity of each place has a central role within the stories of the LDPs in each place.

"Ensure that the local place is always at the heart of wider - and Essex-wide - projects and plans"

- workshop participant

"Make the best of the resources you have. Don't think about the ones you might have"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

2. Build a culture

The significance of team culture to the success of the work cannot be overstated, and especially by comparison with the relative importance of strategy. Strategy was obviously important in understanding and framing the choices for each team and especially in communicating a story of progress to stakeholders within Essex and beyond. But the culture the place teams and the overall team built was so much more important. If there is a single lesson to draw from this work about how to navigate through and make progress on complex challenges like physical activity, it is the paramount importance of team culture to the success of the work. *Focus on ways of being and doing: this will be the best guide to what needs to be done.*

"We got away from policy and strategy and money. We shortened the chain to impact."

- Essex-wide workshop participant

The reason the LDPs were set up was because of the recognition by Sport England that existing approaches to increasing physical activity at a population level were inadequate to the task. It is a complex issue, with a very wider range of personal, social, gendered, economic and environmental factors shaping outcomes. It is why analogous complex problems are sometimes described as 'wicked issues'. This can lead to fatalism: the idea that nothing - or at least not enough - can be done. Countering this requires those working on the issue to see possibility and to understand their own *agency: the things they could do*. The reason why the culture of the Essex LDP team and place-based teams was so important to the progress they made in changing local systems was because so much reinforced the idea that team members had *agency: they felt they could do*.

"Get stuck in. Balance outreach with project working."
- workshop participant, Colchester

"It's made me more confident because I had the backing and support of Active Essex colleagues and have been trusted to get on with things. The outside support from Active Essex has been really important."
- workshop participant, Tendring

"I felt a fraud as I felt I wasn't really doing my 'proper job'. But in the end I realised it was my job. I had too narrow a lens of what my work was. I realised I needed to have a much broader lens. To try more and do more."
- workshop participant, Tendring

The culture among the LDP team and place-based teams was both distinctive and strong, but was also specific to the culture of the places and of Essex overall. In trying to understand what made it such a powerful guide, driver and wellspring for change, we observed the following lessons related to ways of being and doing:

- *Put purpose at the centre.* Purpose was the starting point and the ending point that everyone understood and could navigate by when facing a difficult choice or decision. The purpose driven nature of the work was also what motivated many people to become involved, and maintain their enthusiasm, often finding greater meaning in the work than they had experienced in other parts of their careers.

"The LDP has been one of the best things I've worked on...I don't know what it is about this group of people...it's gone beyond a job...you really want it to succeed"
- workshop participant, Tendring

"Working in this way is liberating and feels sincere. It has made those involved agents for wider change."

- Essex wide workshop participant

- *Invest in relationships.* Time spent getting to know others on the team and among partners paid back many times over. Building high levels of trust and mutual understanding enabled quicker progress to be made subsequently. The importance of relationships is so obvious it might seem strange to highlight as a distinctive characteristic. This would be to underplay how building relationships was a central and deliberate *practice* of the team, with time and effort devoted to this purpose expected, encouraged and supported. It was a central feature of the wider shift away from engaging with partners transactionally and towards genuine collaborative partnership. It is a Sport England and Essex LDP mantra that 'progress moves at the speed of trust', and here this truism was put into deliberate action.

"Progress moves at speed of trust so take time to build the team and equip the team with skills to own a common purpose to work across a place and system settings"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"Link up with as many people as possible, find out what they do and tell others, give your time"

- workshop participant, Tendring

"Don't be afraid. Listen to one another"

- workshop participant, Tendring

"Spending time together at the start, builds trust and shows we're all in it for the right reason. It builds common purpose, and if you don't have that you can't keep it going."

- workshop participant, Basildon

- *Learn together.* Right from the start Active Essex invited partners from the three places to learn together with them, as participants on the collaborative leadership programme Collaborate ran. Learning together in this way puts people in a position of mutual vulnerability, which builds trust. This approach of mutual learning and discovery set the tone and embedded a learning approach which remained strong subsequently.

"Collaborate's training was a pivotal moment – doing it together, and with colleagues from neighbouring Colchester too. Plus with insights from Basildon too."

- workshop participant, Tendring

"It's about real time learning, not waiting until the end of the journey, but applying it in real time. We've all grown in the skill set and abilities because we are always learning and applying."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Be inquisitive, ask lots of questions to take on as much learning opportunities as possible and to put yourself in the right space for collaborative introductions to other partners"

- workshop participant, Colchester

"I'm learning all the time. I needed to go through the journey of learning to be able to make better decisions now."

- workshop participant, Colchester

- **Expect the best from everyone.** A common theme from those involved in the work was how the trust they felt others in the team had in them was uncommon and extremely liberating. It motivated them to be more and do more, to live up to the trust placed in them. This didn't always work out, and the team learned early lessons about the need to find partners who shared their sense of purpose about the work. Despite this, choosing the path of trust - and it was an explicit and positive choice - was transformational to the work. At root, the high trust environment gave everyone involved a greater sense of their own agency. With more people able to each do more in the knowledge decisions they made would be supported had the effect of multiplying the capacity of the team.

"Understand the importance of the empathy gap and work with as many people as possible who have a close empathy with the people you are trying to reach."

- workshop participant, Tendring

"At the start when you have money everyone flocks to you. We made some early mistakes. We weren't asset based. We weren't local enough. Some of the people we were working with could have been from anywhere. We fell flat on our face but learned some emotional intelligence. We gradually built an eco-system of collaborative organisations who aren't competing for our attention. They are not all easy people to work with – so not just mirroring back."

- workshop participant, Basildon

- *Spread ownership and enable others to do.* Just as people in the LDP teams were given the confidence to understand their own agency and to act, so they also extended that approach to the way they worked, seeking to enable others to also act. The approach was to embrace the messiness, and only try to coordinate not control activity by others. By mobilising others to act, this multiplied capacity and spread ownership of the work well beyond the team.

"Don't be a gatekeeper"

- workshop participant, Colchester

"Believe that the community knows best"

- workshop participant, Colchester

"Take a community focussed approach. Ensure that efforts and investments (financial or otherwise) are community backed."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Coordinate, not do-ordinate. Don't do for community groups what they can do for themselves."

- workshop participant, Colchester

"Know when to get out of the way and create the conditions for life on earth to flourish."

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"When I was unwell, I expected relationships to fall apart but found that groups started connecting with each other. It was a pivotal moment when ABCD started to gain momentum. It was realising communities can change and do for themselves, and money's not always necessary."

- workshop participant, Colchester

- *Try, learn, try again.* Intrinsic to the permissive and experimental model of the LDPs established by Sport England is that teams might have had to get some things wrong before they find approaches which work. If there is no failure, there is no real experimentation. So the question is not *whether* teams will sometimes fail, but *how* they fail and how they *respond* to that failure. Failure can be debilitating and scarring for those involved. The Essex teams managed this in two ways:
 - First, instead of viewing experimentation through a lens of failure or success they viewed it as an opportunity to generate data about what worked in a given context. Where the indications were

positive, teams built on this learning. Where indications were negative, they quickly cut their losses and tried something else. This 'fail fast' mentality took courage, and an ability to write off sunk costs, both real and psychological.

- Second, just as successes were acknowledged as a product of collective endeavour (see next point) so failures were too. Maintaining a sense of collective endeavour, a commitment to trying, and a spirit of forgiveness when things did not work out as intended appeared to avoid scarring individuals. It remained more important to try and to fail than not to try. This maintained the sense of agency individuals felt - the 'can do' attitude - which was intrinsic to collective success.

"Don't be afraid to fail - it removes a lot of pressure!"

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Create space, time and give permission to innovate"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"Don't be afraid to try something new"

- workshop participant, Colchester

- **Make connections.** We have already talked about the importance of human connections - relationships - to the work. These human connections were also supplemented by actions to strengthen local place-based systems, but creating new connections where none existed. Posts were created specifically to create these connections based on thoughtful analysis of where the gaps were.

"A pivotal moment was the realisation it's not all about money but the connectivity."

- workshop participant, Colchester

"'Capacity posts' - people - have been more value than spending on projects."

- workshop participant, Tendring

- **Share credit - there's more than enough to go around.** For a team that is rightly proud of what they have achieved and not shy about letting others know, it was notable how within the team credit was shared generously. In fact, while success was acknowledged and celebrated we observed a reluctance on the part of team members to claim individual credit, emphasising the contributions of others to this or that success. This ability to see the bigger picture - what gets done is more important than

who gets credit for it - was so important. Within the team it maintained the sense of common endeavour, a real sense that 'we all succeed when we all succeed'. It took a certain *humility*, a word choice those familiar with Essex culture and how it sometimes plays outside county borders might find surprising. But within the culture of the team, it is the right word. It also meant it allowed credit to be shared strategically with those outside the team in positions of power who created the political space for the team to thrive. This is an important theme we develop further in the next big lesson about how the team navigated power.

"The council couldn't be successful if we tried to take the credit. It's so much better to work through others."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"We've all seen what hasn't worked [in the past] when people seek to claim credit. No one has done that."

- workshop participant, Tendring

"It is notable in this conversation how many organisations are referring to the work of other organisations. We are all working together and sharing credit."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Personalities and relationships made a massive difference. There were no egos - we all worked collaboratively. These relationships were not pre-existing - they were built through the LDP. There were no egos, because it was done on respect, based on the common goal."

- workshop participant, Tendring

Once this culture was established it became self-sustaining. It was noticeable that people who joined the LDP core team and place-teams later observed the distinctiveness of team culture. As they were swept into its path they assimilated to the culture, adopting its ways of being and doing, and feeling a similar sense of purpose, urgency and personal agency. \

"We built a culture of trust which had a legacy. It continued as people moved in and out."

- Essex wide workshop participant

A question here is whether this was by luck or design?

"I wonder if we are lucky or are really good at this? A bit by design, but also a bit by chance...being opportunistic and ready to play"

- workshop participant, Tendring

"There are too many coincidences – right people, right place, right time – for it to be a coincidence."

- workshop participant, Basildon

Although some luck can't be discounted, we can observe valuable lessons in how the team culture was established and maintained by design:

- *Start as you mean to go on.* Beginnings matter, and all of the distinctive characteristics of team culture noted above were in evidence right from the start. These characteristics had antecedents in the prior culture of Active Essex, which itself has antecedents in the culture of elite sport that many of its leaders came from and the wider culture of Essex. They were reinforced by early choices made by Active Essex, such as the decision to learn with partners on the collaborative leadership programme noted above, and in balancing authoritative direction setting with an inclusive approach to decision-making.
- *Model behaviours.* Those in positions of greater authority within the LDP team consistently modelled behaviours which positively reinforced the culture and ensured others modelled the behaviours too. This was observable in, for example, a willingness to show vulnerability by learning together, modelling a can-do attitude combined with a willingness to acknowledge mistakes when experiments didn't work, following through on commitments and being accountable, and a willingness to share credit when progress was being made.

"How you behave does matter. Always be kind to others – particularly those starting out in their careers"

- workshop participant, Tendring

"Turn up, give time, be present and consistent"

- workshop participant, Tendring

- *Find fellow travellers:* A key approach across all places was to 'go where the energy is', nurturing relationships with partners most aligned with the emerging culture rather than pursuing connections with people and places less aligned or less ready to embrace new ways of working. Similarly, in recruiting new team members, the teams made deliberate choices to ensure new people would fit into the team culture.

"Be patient. Persevere. Trust the people you are working with and go where the energy is. Also...BE KIND!"

- workshop participant, Tendring

- *Share the approach.* When a new person joined one of the place-based teams, existing members of that team - as well as those in related roles in other place-based teams - went out of their way to model the shared approach to learning implicit within the culture. This was one important way in which the existing culture was maintained through changes in personnel.
- *Make strategy consistent with culture.* While we have highlighted the relative importance of team culture over strategy, strategy has obviously played a huge role. Decisions such as to embrace Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) as *the* approach for working with communities were extremely consequential. And here strategy and culture were aligned. The strengths-based at the heart ABCD was not only consistent with, but actively reinforcing of the affirming, trust-based team culture.

"Take a community focussed approach. Ensure that our efforts and investments (financial or otherwise) are effectively community backed"

- workshop participant

- *Protect the space.* This is last in our list, but perhaps most important. There is an interesting contrast between the experimental internal LDP team culture and the more assertive external advocacy by LDP leaders concerning progress. As team members navigated uncertainty and tried to find new solutions to enduring problems, the culture strongly encouraged experimentation, risk taking and the generous sharing of credit. This was a fluid and fertile space, like the inside of an egg. By contrast, much of the external advocacy to partners within Essex and beyond about progress conveyed a much greater sense of confidence and certainty. This protective wrapper was more like the shell of an egg. This duality reflects an awareness of the needs of different groups, which - in relation to those in positions of leadership - we will talk about more in the next section on navigating power. A key part of the lexicon of the group referenced the need to "hold your nerve": to keep going and trust the process even if results were not yet readily apparent. Here *assertive external advocacy* played a critical role in buying time and space for experimentation. This effective use of authority protected the nascent and experimental substance of the work and gave the team freedom to keep experimenting, learning and iterating together. This approach to holding fast to what mattered most instilled a sense of confidence amongst the team to value learning in all its forms, including when that learning came from failure. The team were empowered to try things out,

to talk about and reflect on failures, and to celebrate and amplify successes.

"Create space, time and give permission to innovate"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"Be comfortable with the complexity and hold your nerve"

- workshop participant, Basildon

"Be comfortable with this work feeling messy and at times a little abstract - push back when people question the need for early [evidence of] impact"

- Essex-wide workshop participant

Finally, given that the strength of team culture was so critical to the progress of the work it is also important to note some downsides of this approach.

- *It wasn't for everyone.* The centrality of purpose bound the team together and was a strong motivator for people to become involved and to go above and beyond. Overall, this proved to be an overwhelmingly positive feature of the approach taken. However, the very strength of the internal culture - with purpose at its core - did not make it such a hospitable working environment for those who saw their work as a job rather than a mission. Some who did not share such a strong belief in the purpose were lost along the way and their stories do not feature in this report. This is the corollary to a strong purpose driven culture, with the risk that in binding 'insiders' - those who share a fervent belief in the purpose - it risks creating 'outsiders' who are unable to find their place within the work.
- *It is vulnerable to 'group-think'.* A strong, self reinforcing, purpose driven culture has many benefits as set out above, but its main vulnerability can be if its axioms become theological beliefs and impervious to constructive challenge or positive deviance. Within the Essex LDPs the presence of this risk might be inferred from the above point about people for whom the mission and the culture did not resonate in the same way and left the team. But there were also ways in which this risk was mitigated. The overall approach to experimentation and learning, for example, encouraged diversity of thought and action. Similarly, active oversight by Sport England provided objectivity and challenge, as well as external evaluation. These balancing forces were structural, designed-in to the approach and therefore acted as important mitigations to this risk. The lesson for those who follow is not that strong team culture is a bad

thing, but to be alive to the risks of group-think and to design-in equivalent countervailing forces which encourage challenge.

- *It was specific to context.* We have already noted the antecedents in the culture of Active Essex, in the professional backgrounds of those who led it, and within the wider context of the strength of Essex culture. While many of the features of the culture noted above are applicable to teams in other places, the particular way they came together in this work was specific to this context. To apply the lessons from the Essex LDPs does not have to mean replicating this specific culture. More important is the recognition that a strong internal culture was of critical importance to the progress of the work, and much more important than strategy or anything else.

3. Navigate structures of power

The third key to the success Essex LDP teams had in changing local place-based systems relates to their skill in navigating structures of power, both in the three places and at the Essex-wide level. As noted above, the LDP leadership managed to create protected space for experimentation while also meeting the needs of outside stakeholders, patrons and advocates with a different set of needs and expectations.

Some general lessons emerged from how they achieved this crucial balance:

- *Share ownership: get partners in on the ground floor.* Prior to the start of the LDPs Active Essex secured strong local support among a broad range of partners for the initial proposal, giving legitimacy to the work in each place and making partners as invested as Active Essex in the success of the pilots. This network of champions in each place allowed ways of working to permeate broad strategic discussions locally and opened doors to collaboration, innovation and wider investment.

"Senior buy in is really important in terms of driving the culture and ensuring you are able to stick to the core values when things develop."

- workshop participant, Basildon

"The leadership within the place has been so important. The corporate leadership team within the council have really grabbed this. It's now embedded at senior level. You can't underestimate the importance of this, especially for sustainability and in the agenda in the longer term."

- workshop participant, Basildon

- *Start where partners are.* While the LDP teams were clear in their own purpose, they recognised that partners had other priorities. Rather than leading with physical activity, they focused on the things which mattered most to partners and the places in which they were working. This enabled the LDP teams to recruit a wide range of senior advocates in, for example, health who saw how their own agendas could be advanced through the LDP.

"There has been a lot of investment from health into physical activity because of the LDP. This was because they could see we were hitting a lot of their health outcomes. Their investment really built momentum."

- workshop participant, Tendring

- *Create momentum.* The LDP team were adept at communicating early stories of progress or leveraging new money into areas. This created a justified impression that the work of the LDP teams was worth paying attention to and supporting. By creating a buzz about the work, early progress laid the foundations for future success.

"It was a lot about momentum. Success got attention. People then wanted to know more and built on it. It was not just senior leadership talking about it – everyone was at all levels."

- workshop participant, Tendring

- *Deliver for your advocates, and to their timelines.* Maintaining the patronage of senior advocates required the teams to deliver on their early promises, and on the timelines useful to their patrons. This was challenging because the goals of the LDPs are long-term and the process towards getting there non-linear and slow, whereas many senior advocates were working to much shorter and politically driven timelines based on continued stories of success. To balance these competing timelines and notions of how innovation happens, the team used shorter term, intermediate indicators of progress - such as new money leveraged into an area - to maintain support. They also engaged senior leaders with qualitative stories of progress, highlighting the impact on individuals to humanise the approach and create emotional connections.

"With political leaders, strong lines of communication were required. We had to be honest about the journey and that it may take longer than their term of office, but it was still important to do it. Being able to demonstrate some 'quick wins' really helped."

- workshop participant, Tendring

"We took a video of some of the people who had benefited. The senior leaders loved it. They could see the impact on people. We gave money to a lady from Walton to do some drumming and the video of it is great. Everyone's in unison and smiling their heads off."

- workshop participant, Tendring

"There was a moment where our CEO said he was worried that the work was moving away from an ABCD approach, and we needed to return to our roots. It was so great to have the CEO tell us we weren't being ABCD enough! It liberated us to Be More Basildon."

- workshop participant, Basildon

- *Give credit where credit is needed.* The collective approach to success (and failure) which was such a key feature of the internal team culture meant that there was plenty of credit which could be deployed strategically. In particular, it made it easier to associate senior advocates with success, which in turn helped buy time and space in which more progress could be made.
- *Spread the love.* The LDP teams have been generous in recognising where the new capabilities and ways of working they have developed could have wider application beyond physical activity to other challenges facing Essex and have proactively shared the learning.

"We can claim that the LDPs have been the catalyst for ABCD thinking across Essex. We have trained over 250 people."

- Essex-wide workshop participant

"We are now at a point where language has become infectious. Physical activity has led the way, but it is not being picked up in other settings such as community safety."

- workshop participant, Basildon

Whilst this approach to navigating power worked well in building momentum for the LDP in Essex, it's worth noting that this style may not always travel. What works well to build and maintain internal culture and secure political coverage in Essex might be different from elsewhere, again highlighting the importance of really and deeply knowing your place before setting out on this type of work.

4. Hardwire progress

The fourth key lesson from the Essex LDPs is about making change sustainable. The LDPs began with work to understand the 'system conditions' existing in

each place and across Essex, and particularly the foundations for ongoing collaboration between partners. Through the work the teams built on these foundations to strengthen the capacity for sustainable collaboration. Here, three key lessons emerged:

- *Be deliberate in strengthening the foundations for collaboration.* The strong team culture ensured a consistent way of working between team members even when employed by different organisations. But to ensure collaboration at an organisational level required a more intentional approach to strengthening collaborative infrastructure. For example, it required common purpose to be formalised into a shared vision all partners had ownership of, mechanisms for mutual accountability to hold partners to the commitments they had made, and alignment of budgets towards shared outcomes.
- *Bake progress into systems and processes.* Experimentation requires an opening up, a fluidity which creates the freedom and flexibility to operate outside of everyday norms. By contrast, sustainability requires a locking in, hardwiring change into everyday systems and processes so there can be no slipping back. When the time was right and based on the collection of ongoing evidence to determine what was working, the team were deliberate about making the transition from experimentation to embedding effective practice. From embedding ABCD as a core way of working in Basildon, to the development of the One Colchester Funding Panel, to embedding LDP ways of working across local authority and health partners, the Essex LDPs have managed this transition intentionally and well, locking in progress and spreading practice.
- *The wider the ownership, the more sustainable the change.* Although the reason for the work was physical activity, the impact of the innovations in practice which emerged has gone much wider. New capabilities have been developed in, for example, ABCD practice and new approaches to partnership working, which are valuable new assets for the whole of Essex. This spreading of practice beyond the purpose for which it was developed not only makes it useful for other purposes but it also secures its legacy for efforts to increase physical activity. There can be no slipping back.

"Our holiday activity food programme that's taking place across the whole of the county has been delivered by our partners in the LDP and without them we simply wouldn't have been able to have reached as many vulnerable families and working families as we have been able to."

- Cllr Louise McKinlay, Essex County Council Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance

"Sometimes the line of sight to physical activity has been strong, sometimes less clear. But it doesn't matter. We are building strong communities."

- Essex wide workshop participant

"In terms of partnership working there's a much much stronger sense of partnership working particularly between the districts and boroughs and the county council which we've never seen before, and between our communities and the county council and districts which we've never really seen before either."

- Dr Mike Gogarty, formerly Essex County Council, Director of Public Health

Key lessons from the places: Colchester, Tendring and Basildon

Framing the insights

In each of the three Essex LDP districts we saw strong evidence of place-based change, evidenced in stronger relationships, deeper foundations for collaborative working, and in changes in practice. But there were substantial differences in how these changes were manifested, reflecting important differences in context and starting positions. This demonstrates the important lesson that the nature of change is always context dependent, and there is no single right way to make place-based change.

In this part of the report we look at the distinctions between the paths taken in each place. To do so we use a narrative device which emerged from our observations about the differences in emphasis in each place. To capture these distinctions we have chosen a 'head, heart, hands' framing, with 'head' symbolising analysis and strategy, 'heart' enthusiasm and passion' and 'hands' ideas in action. To be clear, in Colchester, Tendring and Basildon the work of the place-based teams combined thought, passion and action - we are using this device only to emphasise the differences in emphasis we observed as the stories of each place began to take shape.

We found this a helpful way of characterising the nature of progress in each place. When we shared this framing with those working in each place it resonated with them too, with people embracing the analysis of the dominant characteristic for each area and feeling that it rang true with their own experience.



Head: Colchester



Heart: Tendring



Hands: Basildon

With this in mind, we will tell the stories of each place through these lenses, highlighting the commonalities across them all, but more importantly, drawing out the distinctions which emphasise the importance of understanding place as a key driver for the success of the LDP across Essex.

Colchester

Context

In Colchester, and by comparison with the stories from Tendring and Basildon, the dominant theme of the story we heard was analytical, a 'head' story. This was particularly seen in the deliberate approach taken in Colchester to connecting the local system and considering how to hardwire ways of working for the longer term to ensure sustainability beyond the life of the LDP.

As an old Roman town, one with a rich military history and a strong sense of cultural identity, Colchester is a district with a well established and well connected voluntary and community sector. In the early stages of the LDP, Colchester demonstrated a strong sense of shared vision and governance, with the One Colchester Partnership being central to this. These characteristics provided a strong foundation on which to build, with people recognising the potential to further mature and connect the system, and look to sustainable approaches to shift the ways in which organisations, including the voluntary and community sector, work to provide the fabric for a long term social movement for Colchester.

Reaching out beyond physical activity

The team in Colchester recognised and built on opportunities which sat outside of a traditional physical activity space to think broadly and creatively about building connections across the system and embedding LDP ways of working. Covid was one such example of this.

"As a result of getting more involved in the work to deliver the Covid response, the work of the LDP became more embedded. Covid pushed people to become more collaborative...the day job went out of the window and opened up new ways of working"

- workshop participant, Colchester

Thinking broadly about the system they were working within and the opportunity to influence broadly was a particular strength of the team working in Colchester. People in LDP-funded roles were given the freedom and autonomy to think broadly about their work and not be limited to physical activity. Working in this way was described by some as feeling uncomfortable at first as it was experienced as different to usual ways of working. The team however, were supported to be curious and to lean into uncertainty and complexity to explore the possibilities that opened up as a result. Opportunities were seized which opened doors to collaboration which might not otherwise have been available had the focus solely been on physical activity.

"I'm in a new role... I'm now starting to understand that whatever I do within the system is already part of the LDP as that is how my role is funded... it doesn't have to be physical activity specific to be part of the LDP.. I'm starting to see the possibilities this gives me"

- workshop participant, Colchester

Funding as an enabler for collaboration

In the early stages of LDP working, many in the team felt a pressure to get "money out of the door", but by holding fast and focusing on building relationships and culture, Colchester have been able to take a strategic approach to funding, including through their alignment with the One Colchester Funding panel. Working in this way has had the benefit of hardwiring an approach to funding, working collaboratively with other partners who are able to leverage other sources of funding, and creating a sustainable approach which places the LDP way of working at the heart of partnership funding in the local area.

"£750k for physical activity through the LDP which enabled me to lever in loads more money... suddenly had a lot of cash to think bigger"

- workshop participant Colchester

"There's been a realignment of budgets and systems. It has helped that there were good advocates for the LDP within the CCG."

- workshop participant Colchester

Connecting the system beyond individuals

Colchester saw very strong alignment between the council and health partners, with both partners embedding the LDP and the associated ways of working such as ABCD into job descriptions so that they have become part of core delivery. Creating roles which specifically focus on connecting the system rather than just funding projects or products was a key part of the story in Colchester.

"We've created roles that connect across the system. Not just funding projects and products. It's both though: projects and products are only as good as the people involved, but the people depend on having good projects and products to work on."

- workshop participant, Colchester

This focus on connectivity was driven by strong advocates working at a strategic level across the local system. One such advocate was Pam Green from the CCG who played a pivotal role in leveraging health funding into the LDP, but also

acted as a champion for the approach, ensuring the ways of working taken forward by the LDP were seen in the context of their links to and their impact on the wider determinants of health.

"So important to have visionaries within the health system... so much resource there and so many opportunities to focus on healthy living"
- workshop participant, Colchester

"As people focus more on the wider determinants of health... physical activity is seen to be a bigger part of the solution"
- workshop participant, Colchester

Individuals in positions of authority played an important role as advocates for the LDP in Colchester. They raised its profile amongst partners, championed its ways of working, and supported the embedding of new ways of working. Although advocacy by individuals created space for progress, the work to embed new connections across the local system and build ways of working into structures and processes means that future progress is not dependent on these individuals, despite the crucial role they played.

"For Colchester, the LDP isn't just about one person... take people out and the whole thing isn't going to collapse"
- workshop participant, Colchester

System impact and next steps

Among those invited to the Colchester workshop the LDP was seen to have had the biggest impact on:

- The relationships between partners
- The way partners think about how to increase physical activity
- The working practices of partners
- The way resources are allocated locally

They considered that the priorities for the future should include

- Further changes to the way resources are allocated locally
- Policy changes by the Council and other public sector partners
- Changes to the build environment

Tendring

Context

For Tendring, and again in contrast with the stories of Colchester and Basildon, the dominant theme of the story we heard was heart shaped: focused on building a team culture and a sense of purpose which all of those working in the area felt they had a stake in and ownership of.

Intrinsic to the work in Tendring was the history, geography and demographics of the place itself. Using the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, Tendring is ranked as the most deprived of all Essex districts. Twenty three of Tendring's 90 LSOA areas are in the 10% most deprived in Essex, and a part of Jaywick is the most deprived area in Essex, and the 3rd most deprived area in the country. An understanding of this and the impact poverty and deprivation has on physical activity and the experience of those living in communities more broadly served as a motivating factor in developing the sense of purpose which underpins the culture of LDP working in Tendring. Alongside this, the natural assets and resources present in Tendring as a coastal district offered real opportunities to embed physical activity for all communities in a sustainable way.

One example of this was Essex Pedal Power which launched in Clacton and Jaywick in June 2021. As part of the scheme, hundreds of bikes have been given away to local residents, encouraging them to make use of the natural assets along the seafront in their local community, taking up cycling as a way to become more physically active. The success of the programme in Tendring has led to Active Essex and their partners rolling out Essex Pedal Power to other areas across the county over Spring 2023.

Relationships as a driver for cultural change

Right from the outset, the LDP team in Tendring started as they meant to go on with a relentless focus on building relationships and the development of culture. This approach built on the strong foundations of collaboration which existed in Tendring before the pilot began. The team worked to ensure the culture ran through all levels of the work; from relationships with senior stakeholders, between staff in public facing roles, with grassroots organisations, and with community members themselves. Developing, modelling and sustaining culture was at the heart of driving forward progress and developing a real sense of what those working in the area characterised as "Team Tendring".

*"We've got away from policy, strategy and money...
shortened the chain to impact"*

- workshop participant, Tendring

In practice, this culture played out in a number of ways. At its heart was a relentless focus on purpose, and people being acknowledged as the biggest assets of the LDP. People were given time to develop relationships which were founded on trust. They were given space to focus on learning and doing together by “going where the energy is” and seizing opportunities to work with “fellow travellers” who could actively contribute to shared aims and further the work of the LDP collectively.

As in Basildon, in Tendring people were quick to give rather than claim credit and recognise the value that each partner brought to the LDP.

“At Active Essex we know we can’t do it alone... we want to give and share credit with others”
- workshop participant, Tendring

Cementing a culture of trust throughout the Tendring approach has given people the confidence and ability to try things out, knowing there is a recognition that there is learning to be found when things don’t quite go to plan and a culture of forgiveness and no-blame running throughout “Team Tendring”.

“I said yes initially because I wanted to be useful... before I knew what I was signing up for or how I was going to do it. I have then said ‘yes’ to lots of other things with a lot more confidence. Before I would have thought of all the reasons why something might not work”
- workshop participant, Tendring

Funding as the seeds for something greater

For Tendring, the absence of funding in the very early days of the LDP was seen as an opportunity rather than an inhibitor. It allowed relationships to be formed and trust and honesty to be established across the team. What was observed was the fact that it was very often the case that it was connection rather than funding which allowed new ways of working to flourish.

“Not everything needed money in the early days... it needed people with community connections to really listen”
- workshop participant, Tendring

With trust having been established, the micro grants scheme appeared to resonate with colleagues in Tendring specifically and helped to cement relationships with grassroots organisations.

“Micro grants planted a seed... allowing awesome ideas to grow”

- workshop participant, Tendring

For Tendring, it was the smaller amounts of funding which made the greatest difference. Rather than looking to larger, single contracts which often attract big providers with less local connections and can move delivery further away from communities and those who need support, the micro grants in Tendring offered a way to centre grassroots organisations and further develop a culture which valued the role and contribution of everyone within the local system.

"We can't get hold of the bigger organisations... with smaller clubs it is easier to build good relationships... we can call or text anytime"

- workshop participant, Tendring

As the end of the micro grants scheme draws closer, there is a need to reflect on the impact it has had in Tendring and across Essex more broadly and consider how that impact and the learning from the ways of working it fostered can be sustained in the longer term.

System impact and next steps

Among those invited to the Tendring workshop the LDP was seen to have had the biggest impact on:

- The way partners think about how to increase physical activity
- The relationships between partners
- The working practices of partners
- The way resources are allocated locally

They considered that the priorities for the future should include

- Policy changes by the Council and other public sector partners
- Changes to the build environment

Basildon

Context

The dominant story of Basildon, and again by contrast with Colchester and Tendring, is one focused on hands: a strong focus on developing and embedding practice, creating a legacy which goes beyond the work of the LDP to influence collaborative working more broadly across Basildon as a place.

As a new town which was created to accommodate the population overspill from London, the influence of the planners has cast a long shadow. At the start of LDP, Basildon was identified as a place with limited community participation and siloed working between organisations and services. The planned nature of the district along with the paternalistic social-engineering which is often associated with post-war new towns created perceptions of Basildon as a place with pockets of connection rather than an area which had a strong sense of community across the board.

Rather than limiting progress within Basildon, these challenging starting conditions were reframed as foundations on which to build. Reframing in this way, allowed these starting conditions to be ones which encouraged those working locally to see the potential for collaboration as a means of joining up fragmented activity across the local area, ensuring activity taken forward by the pilot was genuinely owned by all stakeholders, including local communities.

ABCD for all

The roll out of ABCD harnessed the potential of these starting conditions and demonstrated clearly the impact taking a place-wide approach can have.

"Everybody is involved with ABCD... we're all on the train together and pulling people along with us"
- workshop participant, Basildon

Across Essex, ABCD is at the centre of increasing physical activity amongst residents. In Basildon however, ABCD has been woven into the wider fabric of local delivery, starting with physical activity, but now extending way beyond sports and active lifestyles, and becoming embedded as a foundational approach to working alongside local communities, empowering them to take a lead on the things which matter most to them. In this sense, physical activity has led the way, with other areas such as community safety taking a lead from the approach and building on the learning and innovation which has emerged to create something which is unique to Basildon.

"... Sport England have funded a massive community development movement, done through

*the lens of physical activity” - workshop participant,
Basildon*

The approach to training for ABCD has been broad and inclusive, ensuring people at all levels of the local system understand and are able to embed ABCD as a way of working. This has helped build trust with local communities, with a genuine sense of doing with, rather than doing to, underpinning the approach. In Basildon, the practice of ABCD is now so embedded it has reached a point where people feel confident in challenging approaches which don't align, serving as a clear and lasting legacy of the LDP in Basildon.

Permission to learn, fail and experiment together

A key part of looking to embed practice within Basildon has been developing a culture which values and embraces learning. Those working in the area described feeling that they had permission to try things out without a fear that something not playing out as hoped or intended would be regarded as individual or organisational failure.

*“There is opportunity to try things out and see what
you can learn from it... not always successful, but
that's ok. That feels different, not everywhere allows
that learning... as long as you can look at why, and
build on it, it's received positively” - workshop
participant, Basildon*

Like Tendring, Basildon has also felt the benefit of the micro grants scheme in providing opportunities for small community and grassroots organisations to come to the fore to try out new ways of working and to share their learning with others working in the local area.

*“Micro grants have made a big difference...
exciting concept. The point is that they're a spark, a
small injection of money to get things off the
ground to pilot and test things out. If it fails, it fails.
Learning is what matters” - workshop participant,
Basildon*

The sense of collective endeavour for Basildon stemmed from those working in the area building real trust in and amongst each other. In the stories we heard, people spoke of good people coming together to share their collective skills and knowledge, aligning that with community need and doing so without ego.

*“The lack of ego was really refreshing... I want to
go above and beyond to share the credit” -
workshop participant, Basildon*

Although individuals were highlighted as having played a significant role, they were spoken about as having shown real systems leadership rather than being organisationally or individually focused. Those working in this way were not purely focused on outputs, but placed significance on process and relationships as a way of truly embedding practice across Basildon through co-design and shared accountability. Stakeholders were given space to really play to their strengths within the local system, recognising that by working collaboratively and towards common goals, a lot more can be achieved.

“The future of partnership working in Basildon has been forever changed by the LDP” - workshop participant, Basildon

System impact and next steps

Among those invited to the Basildon workshop the LDP was seen to have had the biggest impact on:

- The relationships between partners
- The way partners think about how to increase physical activity
- The working practices of partners
- Policy by the Council and other public sector partners

They considered that the priorities for the future should include

- Changes to the build environment
- Further changes to the way partners think about how to increase physical activity
- Further policy changes by the Council and other public sector partners

Looking to the future

"The local delivery pilot has enabled us to see that there is truly a community-based model where we merely catalyse the activity with communities and they build it up and as such. And it has given us the learning that we will then be able to apply and work with other communities in other places across this great county... The true measure of success will be that the Local Delivery Pilot becomes part of mainstream Essex because it's owned in all its different manifestations by groups, communities, societies, schools or whatever and out of that you truly have an Active Essex."

- Cllr John Spence, Essex County Council, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

The purpose of the Essex LDPs was to increase population levels of physical activity in Colchester, Tendring and Basildon, and to do so by fundamentally changing the way partners worked together and with communities. The outcomes from this work in relation to physical activity are being published in a separate set of reports. This report has looked at how the central LDP team and place-based teams changed the way partners worked together.

Here the impact has been substantial, and not only for efforts to increase physical activity. In developing new ways of working and rewiring local systems to strengthen collaboration the impact of this work goes well beyond its initial purpose. It has built new capabilities within each of the places and for Essex overall which can be deployed for any number of other purposes, and gained advocates at all levels for this different way of working.

Active Essex wants to take the learning from the LDP and use it to increase levels of physical activity right across Greater Essex. Sport England is keen to apply the lessons to other parts of the country. And within Essex County Council there is growing interest in applying the insights from the LDPs to challenges well beyond physical activity. The stories told in this report - and the key lessons we have abstracted about place, culture, power and sustainability - can provide insights to support the Active Essex team and others who are interested in spreading the practice. As we have emphasised, while we think these lessons can be valuable to all, the way they have been applied here is particular to the context of the work. They are, we hope, a helpful guide to those who follow, though not a recipe.