

Impact case study: place-based leadership programme



About the place-based leadership programme

From April 2024 to March 2025, the Local Government Association (LGA), in partnership with Sport England, coordinated a pilot place-based leadership programme. During this period, 26 two-day courses were delivered in new [Sport England Place Expansion Partnership areas](#).

Insight, learning and feedback from this pilot year have all shaped the ongoing design of this programme, which will now be delivered across all 80 Place Expansion Partnership areas.

Since April 2025, the place-based leadership programme has been fully embedded within Sport England's wider Leading the Movement work, ensuring its long-term integration and impact.

This case study outlines the Stockton-on-Tees Place Partnership's experience of the training, learning that it yielded, outcomes achieved so far and future intentions of the Place Partnership in terms of systems leadership.

Stockton-on-Tees Place Partnership

In 2024, Sport England chose Stockton-on-Tees as a new Place Partnership. It is jointly led by Tees Valley Sport, an Active Partnership focused on improving physical and mental health through physical activity, alongside the Local Authority, and local Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise organisations.

The Stockton-on-Tees place lead had prior knowledge and experience of systems approaches, gained through previous roles and involvement in relevant projects. However, other key stakeholders, such as managers within Stockton Borough

Council and local charities, had limited understanding of systems approaches and concepts. While some had unknowingly applied aspects of these approaches in their day-to-day roles, they lacked awareness of the underlying theory and how to implement it in a way that enables measurable impact and shared learning across organisations.

Prior to the training the Place Partnership had already established a physical activity steering group that brought together teams from across the physical activity sector, primarily representatives from Stockton Borough Council. However, a strong and collaborative relationship with the VCSE sector was lacking. The place-based leadership training was an opportunity to establish those connections.

The training was co-designed by the Facilitator, the Co Facilitator, the Place Partnership lead and key staff from the Council's Public Health and the Sport and Active Life teams. Attendees included strategic and operational staff from local council, health, leisure, and the voluntary sector.

The Stockton-on-Tees Place Partnership wanted to achieve the following:



Develop understanding of systems approaches and systems leadership principles.



Establish relationships and encourage collaboration between local organisations involved in physical activity.

Outcomes and impacts



The training provided participants with the opportunity to **engage in meaningful conversations, learn about each other's organisations, and develop a deeper understanding of the challenges** they face, as well as how these challenges could be addressed through collaboration and systems working. Participants described the two-day training as a good mix of presentations and interactive hands-on activities.

Participant conversations and learning were enabled by exercises done during the two-day training. For example, **developing and discussing common shared purpose** was impactful and memorable for all interviewees. Having time dedicated to establishing a common shared purpose and ‘seeing’ it visualised and mapped by the Facilitator **deepened participants’ understanding of their role** in the system and how their own activities can impact levels of physical activity amongst the local population.

Another element that contributed to participants’ learning about systems approaches is the experience and **practical examples** that the Facilitator and Co Facilitator shared with participants from their own places. Participants had a chance to see how place-based working has been implemented in Doncaster and how it changed the local organisations’ approach to tackling physical inactivity over the years.



“Some of the examples they were able to share helped bring things to life for people and that was really helpful. That knowledge and expertise of the Facilitators I think was really important.” – **Place lead, Stockton Borough Council**



A greater understanding of systems working encouraged participants, especially those who are in senior leadership positions, to incorporate systems language in their day-to-day jobs, teams and wider organisations. This suggests that systems thinking is becoming embedded in their work and is likely to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of systems approaches across their organisations. The training also **motivated participants to explore Sport England’s tools and resources**, such as the maturity matrix, which supports organisations in self-assessing their transformation journey. In Stockton-on-Tees, completing the maturity matrix has been used to assess the extent of collaborative working across organisations and to identify opportunities to strengthen these relationships further.

Interviewees noted that the place-based leadership **training played a valuable role in kick-starting collaboration** and relationship-building. They also highlighted that over the past 12 months the Stockton-on-Tees Place Partnership has increasingly focused on systems working and collaborative projects, making it difficult to attribute specific outcomes to any single intervention. One participant emphasised that the training had certainly contributed to the development of wider collaborations, as it raised local organisations' awareness of place-based working and highlighted how systems approaches could benefit both their own organisations and the wider Stockton-on-Tees area.



The knowledge and understanding gained through the training, along with newly established relationships between local organisations, motivated the Place Partnership to continue their transformation journey. This includes **gathering insight** to better understand the barriers to physical activity for residents and identifying what might encourage them to become more active. Building on this learning, the Place Partnership has planned to deliver **small-scale 'test and learn' projects**, which will serve as a foundation for larger, more collaborative initiatives.

Future intentions

The three month and six month check-in sessions were successful for the Stockton-on-Tees Place Partnership. These follow up sessions were well attended, engaging and participants welcomed additional opportunities to build relationships with local organisations. Participants demonstrated robust understanding of system approaches, and they had discussions which led on to greater interest for place-based leadership training.

“After spending a couple of hours online with them on our three month check in, there was definitely a more mature discussion in the room.” – **Lead Facilitator, City of Doncaster Council**

The Place Partnership is now focused on setting their priorities in terms of addressing physical inactivity and inequality, developing their theory of change, and facilitating further training for key staff in local organisations.

For further information about Sport England's Leading the Movement place-based and national programmes and online support resources, visit leadingthemovement.org.

