



Why an active community needs to be at the heart of renewal
Local Government Physical Activity Partnership
June 2020

Introduction

A more active community is a healthier, stronger and more prosperous community. This article highlights why, more than ever before, we need an integrated approach to tackling inactivity. It also illustrates the vital role local government plays in enabling more active communities.

The Local Government Physical Activity Partnership (LGPAP) has produced this article to stimulate debate, share best practice and encourage places to create sustainable solutions that meet the needs of local communities. The partnership is made up of senior leaders from the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA), who took a lead in authoring this article, Community Leisure UK, Sport England, the Local Government Association (LGA), APSE and Active Partnerships. To further strengthen our collaborative approach during the Covid-19 crisis, ukactive have been invited to contribute to discussions.

In 2019 the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership produced a think piece about the positioning of physical activity and its critical role in helping to shape places and contribute to broader social and economic outcomes. The think piece discussed the significant challenges and pressures on local authorities.

We are now in uncharted territory and, as partners, we believe the principles in the think piece have become even more relevant. In particular, we believe there is now a significant opportunity to demonstrate the impact of physical activity (including sport, recreation, active travel, physical education) and show how it can help the long-term recovery by building on the Government's unambiguous support for the physical and mental health benefits of remaining physically active.

The wide-ranging benefits of physical activity are now well known. They include: improved public health (including an improved immune system); rehabilitation; economic and environmental benefits; improved education and social care; alleviating social isolation; and bringing communities together. This package of benefits is going to be vital if we are going to #buildbackbetter.

Need for a collaborative, whole-system approach

We recognise that activity levels are the result of a complex local system and no single intervention, or organisation, can achieve real and lasting change alone. We believe adopting a collaborative, whole-system approach is going to be even more important as we seek to adapt to and influence the 'new normal'.

Understandably, a lot of focus is on public and commercial leisure facilities. Income has been decimated; contracts and partnerships are in jeopardy. We need to remember that facilities are only part of the physical activity offer. The risk is that lots of really positive work to create an integrated offer, such as national campaigns #ThisGirlCan and We Are Undefeatable, and integrated partnership approaches will be lost in a need to focus on the immediate pressures.

How can we reset and take advantage of this opportunity?

Given all the noise, what do we need to think about in order to take this opportunity? How do we reset our approach to meet the needs of the current crisis and the emerging 'new normal'?

We believe the following are the types of things we need to see, or ensure, in order to increase physical activity levels locally:

- Evidence that physical activity is seen as a core contributor to local priorities. All evidence will need to be insight-driven with strong collaborative leadership and a long-term, systems-based approach. This can build on recent statements by the Prime Minister about the need to tackle obesity, and the £2bn investment announced for improvements to support cycling and walking.
- An understanding that physical activity is complex and multidimensional. Driving physical activity levels upwards requires a whole-council and stakeholder approach; it isn't simply "a single-service" in a traditional sense.
- An integrated approach across many disciplines, such as parks and open spaces, transport, health and wellbeing, planning, regeneration, young people, social care, community services, workplaces, etc.
- A focus on where health inequalities are highest, tapping into the inherent strengths of our local communities to help develop opportunities. This will require a detailed understanding of local communities and the stakeholders that already work with them.
- Recognition that, while the challenge is about more than physical infrastructure, the role of local government in the direct provision of facilities and the encouragement of charitable and commercial development and innovation remains vital, perhaps now more than ever. There needs to be continued focus on how councils can reshape and reset; this approach will be led by providers and place-shapers.
- At the heart of this is leadership - our ability to lead collaboratively in complexity. To create the conditions for local people and organisations to develop a shared purpose they value that will help more people be active in ways that work for them. As an example, the LGA and Sport England Leadership Essentials programme has started to grow this leadership capability and is something to build upon.

Given the current crisis and immense strain on resources – including finances and personnel – there is a danger that the ability to discuss and drive the approaches outlined above will be lost. However, now more than ever we need a balance between, on one hand, creative collaborative community development, including influencing and integrated approaches, and, on the other, supporting the future of the assets as part of the wider systems approach. There also needs to be awareness of the impact on those people who already take part in sport (the “core market”) within the overall response, which will also need stimulus and support in order to ensure that participation rates do not fall away.

While the sector has responded well with online provision, this has led to an increasing gap between those with digital skills and access, and those without. Public provision and promotion of physical activity will need to ensure that it continues to be accessible to all parts of society. It also needs to consider changes in patterns of behaviour during this time, if it is to turn them into sustained improvements to people’s lifestyles. For instance, many families have begun exercising together, so our future programming and communications needs to include an offer that allows families to participate together.

Further strategic and service considerations

In February 2020 *Michael Marmot’s* report [The Marmot Review – 10 Years On](#) showed that since 2010, while levels of activity have increased, for the first time in 100 years life expectancy has flattened. Marmot’s review showed that over the past ten years health inequalities have got worse and for the poorest 10% of women life expectancy has declined. These statistics mean that we all need to think seriously about the choices we have to make, particularly in relation to the value that is attached to physical activity and to the provision of assets that help localities to be active.

Sport England recently published [Shaping Our Future](#) a framework for its next strategy from April 2021. This has been created to test direction, and generate discussion and feedback that can help shape the new strategy. The content of the framework builds on what partners have been telling Sport England about what matters about its work – in terms of overall ambition, how the organisation works, and where future priorities should lie. We look forward to continuing to engage in these conversations, and working with Sport England and all partners to help shape the active future we want to see for our communities.

Within the context of our current situation, the physical activity challenges and contributions can be significant. Some examples include:

- **Health and economic inequalities**

Without question, the current crisis is going to lead to greater inequalities and, despite superficial evidence of people out walking and cycling under lockdown, it is also evident that those with the least have been impacted the most by lockdown. We need to turn temporary habits gained during lockdown (when normal daily routines have been different) into permanent habits. Targeted work to address gaps is going to be critical if stubborn inequalities associated with physical inactivity are to be tackled.

- **Physical and mental health**
 There is inevitably going to be significant health impacts as a result of this period. There needs to be a real focus on prevention and approaches such as social prescribing, which are likely to be in high demand. They will require a high-quality, population-level response as well as a diverse activity offer to meet individual needs.
- **Active travel in rebooting the economy**
 We need to take advantage of the contribution that active travel can play in meeting ongoing social distancing rules and influence transport planners to ensure this can be embedded in a long-term approach. It is encouraging to see the emphasis placed on active travel by Government, but this can and should go much further.
- **Environmental sustainability and climate change**
 These responses remain vital. Planning services that enable an active environment will help to meet those priorities. We have seen the impact of high-density housing and lack of access to outdoor space. Pressures to kick-start housing construction have to be weighed against any planning requirements and capital receipts. Investing in our outdoor spaces should be a priority.
- **Young and older people**
 The lack of activity among young people and older people during lockdown is going to have immediate physical and mental health impacts. Young people will not have been accessing sufficient levels of activity, while older people might have been unable or unwilling to leave their homes. This is likely to create huge pressure for direct support to help get people moving again.
- **Building stronger communities**
 Strengths-based approaches working with local communities can yield incredibly powerful outcomes. Community sports clubs and associations can help our recovery and local walking and exercise groups can help bring people together; but how do we tap into the new volunteering that has emerged over the past few months and use it to help build a better, kinder society?
- **Service integration**
 The financial challenges facing local authorities and local partners present an opportunity to demonstrate and escalate the integration of services, such as social care and community hubs, to enable better, more financially effective interventions.

Summary

We have challenges to face. Times of crisis require leadership, empathy, and vision. We need to align the benefits of being physically active with local priorities and show how physical activity can be a really effective means of helping the recovery. We need to see ourselves and our work as part of the local ecosystem, working with communities to achieve better outcomes. We must learn from the past to reset the future.

The original Physical Activity Strategic Think Piece can be found [HERE](#)

Signed on behalf of the Local Government Physical Activity Partnership



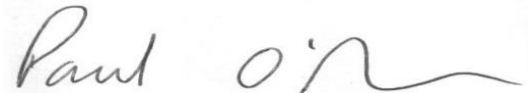
Mark Allman, Past Chair of CLOA and lead author



Ian Brooke, Immediate Past Chair of CLOA



Cate Atwater, Chief Exec, Community Leisure UK



Paul O'Brien, Chief Exec, APSE



Lee Mason, Chief Exec, Active Partnerships