



SUMMARY

We are aiming to shift an entire narrative about what physical activity and movement means for people in Cornwall by taking a more long-term view, rooted in a belief that people are prevented from being active more often than not by the hidden barriers within the system – barriers that are often unseen, misunderstood and have thus, in past, been largely ignored by policy makers and funders alike.

Physical Activity In and For Cornwall

| Overview and history

Describe your context and the work that your organisation/partnership does.

This case study focuses on the early stages of exploration of how we could approach the complex issue of physical inactivity differently in Cornwall. At a national level there was a growing awareness that current approaches to getting the nation more active were not delivering against the outcomes we were seeking. An outdated delivery model with a focus on individualised interventions was failing to improve population levels of physical activity. Inequalities in participation and access to opportunities to be active were widening and the cost of inactivity to society was worsening. Complex structural and societal issues around inequality, climate change, obesity, social and economic injustice were also worsening and serving to compound the issue.

In 2017, Sport England began to lead a sector-wide move towards a whole system, place-based approach, tested through 12 selected places and commonly referred to as the Local Delivery Pilots. This approach is now being rolled out to more places as part of Sport England's latest 10 year strategy (Uniting the Movement) as a commitment to their unwavering focus on tackling deep rooted inequalities that exist everywhere in places across the country ([Place partnerships](#) | [Sport England](#)).



At the same time, Cornwall started its own journey of change. Also published in 2017, our first Physical Activity Strategy for Cornwall made an ambitious start at outlining the sociological, environmental and economic factors that are at play that influence people's ability to be active.

Taking inspiration from the Public Health England national framework for Physical Activity ([Everybody active, every day: framework for physical activity - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)) it called for action in 3 key areas: Active Environments, Active Society and Active Professionals. This strategy laid the foundations for helping to re-frame our thinking locally about the problems we were trying to solve and, more importantly, how to go about 'solving' those problems. And perhaps that our role in this work was not about solving the problem at all but in fact equipping those who stand to gain the most to seek the right solutions for themselves and for their communities.

Overview

Change in complex environments is at the heart of our work. We are aiming to shift an entire narrative about what physical activity and movement means for people in Cornwall by taking a more long-term view, rooted in a belief that people are prevented from being active more often than not by the hidden barriers within the system – barriers that are often unseen, misunderstood and have thus, in past, been largely ignored by policy makers and funders alike.



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Our brief is county-wide, system-wide and holds inequality in access to and participation in physical activity and movement at the core. Our first, key deliverable is to create an overarching strategic framework for Cornwall. What became apparent very quickly was a need to inform our work through insight, evidence, knowledge and an in depth understanding of what the real and perceived barriers were to people being able to move more in the places they lived their lives. Much of our work to date has focussed on the top part of the Human Learning Systems learning cycle – Understanding our System(s).

We created an initial Theory of Change (see attachment 1) to help plan our work and are using Human Learning Systems principles and practices to inform how we do our work. We found that retrospectively fitting our initial work on creating the overarching strategic framework into 3 separate phases helpful:



At the time of writing this case study, we find ourselves coming towards the end of phase 2 of the work.

| HLS Approach

| Human

What is 'Human' about how you work ?

Reflecting on our previous physical activity strategy some key things emerged including:

- **The breadth and enormity of the task** – physical activity is arguably everywhere but nowhere. It adds depth and meaning to so many of the outcomes everyone from across the whole system in Cornwall is striving for yet is often at best invisible.
- **The lack of human voice in the work from those who stand to gain the most** – the work was well informed by the stakeholders we assumed were the most important to connect our work into but lacked insight from those with actual lived experience.
- **A difficulty in connecting the strategy with actual work on the ground** – no real alignment of resources to make or contribute to any significant change.
- **The unhelpful success measure of the strategy:** 50,000 people more active in Cornwall within a 5-year timeframe. Although this could be measured at a top line level, we would never know what the contributing and/or causal factors and actors were in achieving the target, nor who had grown the number and whether it was sustainable.

This key learning coupled with a shift in focus at national policy level and an increasing interest locally in becoming more community led have helped this refreshed strategic process acknowledge that how we approach this work, who we involve and how we create the conditions to learn are just as important, if not more important, than the 'what' of what we actually do. The human learning systems approach has helped us to ground our work within a framework and guide our overall process.



| Governance/Accountability

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How is this work being governed? How have your governance or accountability processes changed to work in a Human Learning Systems way?

This is not something we are finding easy. There is no formal accountability for the work and thus no need to report back through in a prescribed way. This has many advantages including a sense of permission to explore how to work in this way, but it also comes with many disadvantages (frustration around lack of clarity of what the work is, will deliver and by when; lower levels of accountability; lack of visibility of the work across the system).

The system group has evolved to become a 'system steward group' as part of transitioning between phase 1 and phase 2 of the work but how it operates largely remains unchanged. For individuals within the group, their day job (and thus the system) still demands proof of success by things that can be counted, seen and easily understood. A shift of emphasis towards valuing working more relationally, collaborative and without a fixed end goal in mind can be difficult to grasp, let alone implement in a time poor, resource low system. The group meets fortnightly to share briefly what we are seeing, doing and hearing and where there might be energy for this agenda – a space for reflection and an opportunity to connect strands of work together. It lacks the time, space and commitment to share deep and meaningful learning. Most of the initial 8 people we began with remain the same although some are able to contribute more than others, largely due to the nature of their substantive roles.

What is does give permission for is for individuals to act as advocates for movement and advocates for change. The individuals in the group are fully enabled to hold this work in whatever way suits them and use the power of the group to try and bring influence to bear on other parts of the system. The group have also made collective decisions about where to invest our limited time and resources into experiments that have helped us to better understand what is going on across Cornwall that limits people's ability to be more active.

| Story of Change

How did you go about adopting an HLS approach? What was the spark for change? Where did you start? Who was involved?

Describing our Learning Cycles: Phase One: Approach, Framing & Advocacy

Our Learning Partner helped us to create a Learning Framework (see attachment 2) which consolidated both thoughts from the system group and insight from stakeholder interviews. They helped us to map the questions into learning at different system levels and also against the work we had identified needed to happen within our Theory of Change. Questions were categorised into 'things we wanted to know more about now' (practical, knowledge-based questions) and 'so what does that mean' (reflective, considered questions).



For the first phase, we chose to focus our learning question at the Cornwall system-wide level (Place Scale) as this felt the most important to most people in the system steward group and the thing that, if we could unblock a little, would release more appetite and energy to work elsewhere in different parts of the system. It took us into a place of advocacy and influence as, alongside running learning experiments, it felt like something everyone could hold as an individual member of the group and test and trial in a variety of settings.

Our Learning Question at this time was:

*How do we put Physical Activity on the **agenda**?*

*How do we get **commitment** for change?*

*How do we get people to **care enough** to **shift resources** now to **prevent** future harm?*

As a group, we chose to run one experiment in phase 1. Our Learning Experiment was our 'Movers and Shakers' work. At its core, the Movers and Shakers experiment was about testing what might happen if we convened a group of innovators, system thinkers, boundary breakers and change agents from across Cornwall to explore the 'art of the possible' when thinking about the role of physical activity in a multitude of settings and guises. This experiment allowed us to both simultaneously continue to inform our Understanding of the System (knowledge held, identify actors, build trust) and help us to understand whether advocating for activity and movement in this way would have any on-going ripple impact across the system. We were also keen to understand whether, by bringing people together in this way, we would help to build connections and knowledge held by the system group and between the attendees themselves.

The original intention behind the pilot was to run 2 face to face creative and engaging sessions designed to build relationships, strengthen networks and foster innovation and creativity. Due to the timing of the work and recognising that many people found themselves still in a post covid response situation we decided to move to a series of shorter, on-line café style drop-in sessions where people could come along and openly share their perspectives. Sessions were effectively a set of facilitated conversations, lightly scripted and designed to respond to those who turned up on the day. Learning was captured in an informal, non-prescriptive way and sense-making took place after all 6 conversations were completed.



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Alongside the experiment, we were also able to bring our advocacy role to bear in other ways during this first phase:

- **influence the agenda and messaging** at a Cornwall-wide Healthy Aging Conference. (One member of the System Group was part of the steering group who ran the Healthy Active Aging conference and was able to bring questions around the design of the day back to the System Group for comment).
- **lead a specific piece of research** into the emerging new structures and governance of our local Integrated Care System (ICS). The whole group were able to help design the programme and questions which were posed at different levels of the system, aligned to the overall Learning Framework. The outputs from this work have helped us to connect further and deeper into our local ICS linking evidence and insight into our overall narrative and messaging.

All of our Learning from the first phase of the work was brought together into a Learning Event that focussed on Advocacy, Influence and Change involving actors from across the system (see attachment 3).

Describing our Learning Cycles: Phase Two: Evidence, Engagement & Governance

From the outset and as set out upfront in this case study, we have been very intentional to learn from both our previous local experiences of strategy development and from what was changing in our national landscape and put human voice front and centre of all of our thinking. This is where we placed the lion's share of our resources.

We had generated **several learning questions** from the initial bank of questions that were relevant to this phase of the work including:

- How do we work in/with communities?
- How do we best listen to communities?
- What is happening in Communities?
- What assets exist in communities that we can we build on?
- How do we reach beyond those we always engage with?



In phase 2 of our work, our Learning Experiment became one of Collaborative Commissioning, albeit we did not set off from the outset to make it thus. As with many times in this work, it simply became the right thing to do at the time when presented with the opportunity. Making it happen was more challenging but with lots of tenacity, trust and patience on all sides we navigated our way through and brought together a partnership of 3 different organisations (who did not previously know each other) to work together on what we termed an 'Integrated evidence base for Cornwall for Physical Activity'.

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The learning both from working in this way and what we have discovered about the reality of lives in Cornwall is available to read as a separate document as it has a richness and depth that we cannot do justice to here (see attachment 4). Suffice to say that yet again, being open and curious to where this might take us has opened up many more avenues and possibilities that we had not asked or indeed imagined at the start alongside helping to change us all as people as we have journeyed along the work together. This work represents perhaps the most comprehensive and in-depth analysis we have ever undertaken in Cornwall to really understand our system – the actors and the factors – to help paint a true picture of the knotty, engrained and pervasive issue of physical inactivity in lives in Cornwall today.

What have we Learnt?

There are many things we have learnt on many different levels, from practical learning about trying to develop strategy in this way, what it means to try new approaches and the learning from the experiments themselves, both process and outputs. Below are eight summarised learning highlights that capture what could be perhaps reapplied:

Paying attention to the environments we create are extremely important. Creating psychological safety, promoting creativity, removing all hierarchies and treating all actors as equal are universally important truths in this type of work. Spending time focussing on the 'who' and making the most of any face-to-face opportunities will help move the work along in more and different ways.

People welcome bringing their whole selves into spaces. Current norms and practices seem to almost discourage this – and yet it seems to be a really welcomed and valuable difference that working in this way can bring. As it applies to everyone in the system it's also a great leveller.



It is worth spending time up front on designing the experiments from start to finish and finding ways to capture and measure what feels important. Much of our learning has felt quite organic and retrospective – we could have better thought through all the possible impacts of our work and been more intentional about capturing the value.

Translating the theory into actual practice can be hard. Following the learning cycles process at different levels of the system felt like a step too far for our first experiment. It was enough for people to hold the initial theory and concepts behind Human Learning Systems and to pivot towards learning in general.

Distributing leadership of the work allowed system steward group members to come into the work with what was in front of them and with what they felt able to do in the time they had available. This was not a concept that sat comfortably with everyone in the group. Where it works, it's an empowering way of working and as a leader, you have to learn to let go to allow others to flourish.

We need a simple, consistent and relatable way of telling our story that helps people see the connections between where physical activity has a role in helping to change outcomes and how we approach long term systemic change. The theory behind the change is unimportant to the vast majority of people. People want to practically experience what working in this way looks and feels like.

It takes time to develop a Human Learning Systems Approach to strategic development and all of our experiments around doing things differently have been far more resource intensive than planned (time, money, people). The benefits we have gained collectively from the approach arguably outweigh the resource implications, but we do appreciate that working on an agenda like physical activity is perhaps less pressurised than in other complex issues. Where it has been really helpful is to inform how to approach our Theory of Change in a way that sets up future deployment of the strategy aligned to a strong yet flexible framing. Human Learning Systems is also very aligned to Myron's maxims (Myron's Maxims – Heart of the Art) which is guiding our work.

Focussing on the things that bind us together, our commonalities and shared aspirations are more important than focussing on what makes us different. Diversity of opinion and voice is to be welcomed as a mechanism for building stronger and more lasting relationships over the long term. Being open and curious about where a personal journey of change might take you is far more likely to add an unexpected richness to the overall learning.



| What have you achieved?

What has adopting an HLS approach enabled you to do?

Adopting a Human Learning Systems approach has enabled us to:

1. Reframe the way we think about activity and movement locally and given us a platform to start sharing and engaging our way of working with others.
2. Do things really differently and be open and curious to where it might take us.
3. Build capacity and interest around the approaches and ideas we have tested.
4. Be a part of something bigger in Cornwall – connect with other organisations and teams working in similar ways to help build connections and relationships system-wide.
5. Start work from different places and in different ways

| Your artefacts

What 'artefacts' have you created that help you to work in this way?

1. Theory of Change
2. Learning Questions: Framework
3. Learning Event. Output from Phase One
4. The outputs from our Integrated Evidence base work: Activity & Inequality_Consolidated Learning

| What next?

As we start to wrap up on phase 2 of our work, we are consolidating our learning and reflecting on what has gone well and what could be improved, recognising that all learning is good learning. Our original plan for this third and final phase of work – effectively pulling all the work together into an overarching strategic framework for Physical Activity and Movement for Cornwall and starting to run very real-life experiments to test what changes in the system might be the more effective – might still be the direction of travel. Getting the work this far has also opened up new and different possibilities that could be more meaningful and we remain open and curious as to where we head next, welcoming inputs to this from all parts of the system.

We also recognise that our work has not taken place in a vacuum. There are many projects, programs and interventions running simultaneously that feature physical activity as part of the solution. Some, such as the work led by Active Cornwall around maternity and early years, have started from scratch and looked at how to build a system around specific cohorts of people. Other work such as the Argyle Fit and Time 2 Move Holiday Activity Programmes start with a funded program and look at how to make them more sustainable, systemic and targeted at those who stand to gain the most. It is all valuable and relevant to the bigger goal of change.



To the best of our knowledge, most if not all of the work tries to integrate some form of learning as part of how it works. The way in which the learning is being generated and captured differs by project and we are beginning to think about how to share all of our learning more collectively and collaboratively and build more systemic ways for capturing this.

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