



# Process Learning Report

## October 2023 - March 2024

The Essex Local Delivery Pilot (LDP) is an eight-year system change programme, led by Active Essex, to test how to tackle population levels of physical inactivity in our most deprived communities.

The purpose of this report is to showcase some of the work that has been undertaken within the Essex LDP and consider how and why some of the changes we have observed in the last 6 months might have come about. The report includes:

### ***1. What's been happening in Essex? – Pg 2-5***

This section notes key events that have taken place over the past 6 months.

### ***2. Working with the Sustainable Transport Team – Pg 6-28***

Active Essex and Essex County Council's Sustainable Transport Team have worked together to shape active travel and active design policy and to deliver several impactful projects and in recent years. During this time, there has been a gradual journey from a transactional relationship to a range of strong, collaborative relationships.

### ***3. Place Based Working – Pg 29-52***

For Active Essex, Place Based Working is an approach that addresses specific challenges or improves conditions within a particular geographical location or community. It acknowledges that different places have unique characteristics, assets, and needs and so solutions are not "one-size-fits-all" and interventions need to be contextually relevant.

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## 1. What's been happening in Essex?

The infographic below gives an overview of some of the work that Active Essex and the LDP have been undertaking over the past 6 months as part of the journey to hardwire physical activity into the system.



## ELDP System Leaders Video

Over the past 6 years, the Essex LDP has shown success in the hardwiring of physical activity and building connections across the system, to empower communities and ensure that everyone can enjoy the many benefits that an active lifestyle can bring. To truly demonstrate the positive impact that the LDP has had on the physical activity levels of people living in Essex's priority neighbourhoods, Active Essex released an impactful LDP System Impact video in early March 2024:



The video is a development of the previous recording, which launched in May 2022, highlighting the journey that Essex has been on to help create positive lasting change in communities. It includes insightful and powerful interviews from key system leaders representing health, adult social care, community and voluntary services, local government, and Sport England, to highlight how physical activity is being successfully embedded across systems.



### Beat the Street

The Essex LDP has invested in interventions that use gamification on multiple occasions. Most recently, residents in Harwich & Dovercourt have taken part in Beat the Street which engaged 4,794 players who covered 134,269 miles.

The success of this game is partly a result of community engagement work done by a local physical activity coordinator employed by CVS Tendring (and funded by the LDP) who made use of trusted relationships to promote the

game. The six-week Beat the Street game will be followed by Street Tag which is a longer gamification intervention.

Read Active Essex's report on gamification [HERE](#).

### Embedded Roles

Active Essex recently commissioned a piece of evaluation looking at the effectiveness of embedding staff members into other teams, organisations and sectors. This found that progress is being made in these roles but changing attitudes and behaviours is a slow process and more time is needed.

Recently, the LDP has re-funded two the Active Environments Officer and Communication Officer roles in Colchester for a further two years and celebrated that the Active Environment Coordinator role in Basildon has been taken on by Basildon Council.

### Motivated Minds

Motivated Minds is a Community Interest Company (CIC) based in Basildon that designs and facilitates sustainable mental health and wellbeing solutions. In 2020, The Essex LDP invested in Motivated Minds for the recruitment of a Business Development Officer and the delivery of 'Kick Start 360' - a physical activity programme.



In the last six months, the LDP has invested further into this organisation and given £90,000 for the continuation of the Business Development role with a focus on scaling and replicating the Happy Hub model used by Motivated Minds into other areas within Essex.

Read an evaluation report on Motivated Minds [HERE](#).

### ParkPlay



ParkPlay is a national charity that empowers communities to make use of their local parks for free community play every Saturday morning. The sessions are designed to be a safe, welcoming and inclusive way for communities to come together, connect and have fun through active games.

The very first ParkPlay was launched in Basildon in 2021 with the support and guidance of Active Essex and ATF. Following some success in this area, Active Essex committed to replicating this intervention in other areas

of Essex and leveraged an impressive £70,000 from partners.

In the last six months, new ParkPlays have launched in Jaywick and Halstead, taking the total number in Essex to 14, with more planned later in the year. An in-depth evaluation of ParkPlay in Essex has also been undertaken and findings have led to conversations about how to make the delivery of this sustainable.

### Expansion / Deepening

Sport England have announced a major and unprecedented expansion of our investment into local communities across England to ensure those in greatest need are able to be physically active. They are extending their Place Partnership work to help more people to be physically active by breaking down the barriers that get in the way. They have pledged to invest £250m of National Lottery and Exchequer funding into place-based work, with £190m of this focused on an additional 80-100 places which have greatest need, based on a Place Need Classification.

Within Essex, these places include Harlow, Castle Point and Thurrock. Planning for expansion into these areas with the formation of local stakeholder groups and a wider stakeholder workshop being held in each area.

At the stakeholder workshops, attendees were asked for their thoughts on the expansion opportunity and what the priorities should be. These were fed back to the stakeholder groups and informed applications for Development Funding.



Conversations have also begun about Place Based Deepening for existing LDP places with initial workshops being held in Basildon and North Essex (covering both Colchester and Tendring).

## 2. Working with the Sustainable Transport Team

Two Initial Programme Theories (IPTs) about working with Essex County Council’s Sustainable Transport Team were developed collaboratively with stakeholders in May 2022. Since then, the Insight & Evaluation Team have been collecting data (from interviews and a survey) to test and refine these theories.

In this report, we present the first refined theory. While the evidence we collected broadly supported the original theory, we have made some minor changes to create a more accurate explanatory account. These are outlined in the table below, along with a summary of key findings and recommendations.

From	To	Changes
Traditionally, parts of the system operate within their own bubble, leading to less opportunities to work together across the system. If we are able to build a strong working relationship with the Sustainable Transport Team, then we can change these traditional ways of operating. This will allow us to achieve active travel solutions that are not possible when we work alone. As this will allow us to have access to and influence over the resources, funding and expertise at our collective disposal.	Traditionally, parts of the system operate in silos, which can make it difficult to work together across the system. However, we know that working with Essex County Council’s Sustainable Transport Team is important if we want to contribute to the active travel agenda. If we are able to build strong working relationships with members of the Sustainable Transport Team, then we can find new ways of working together. This will allow us to have a greater impact than if we worked alone. This is because we will be able to pool resources and coordinate efforts to deliver better active travel solutions that meet both teams’ shared goals for more active communities.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The new theory adopts the Active Essex team’s language of ‘silos’ rather than ‘bubbles’</li> <li>2. It adds more detail about why a relationship between the teams is important (contribution to the active travel agenda)</li> <li>3. It replaces ‘a strong relationship’ with ‘strong working relationships’ (plural)</li> <li>4. It replaces ‘change traditional ways of operating’ with ‘find new ways of working together’</li> <li>5. It replaces ‘access to and influence over’ resources with ‘pool resources and coordinate efforts’</li> </ol>

### Key findings:

#### 1. Building strong working relationships between teams takes considerable time and effort, but this has been achieved.

Several factors have contributed to this, including: personalities that ‘gel’ and similar team cultures; regular communication that feels ‘worthwhile’; shared goals that also align with national policy priorities and funding opportunities.

#### 2. Once strong foundations are built, new connections come more easily.

This report presents encouraging evidence that new joiners have already built strong cross-team relationships.

#### 3. A popular phrase among Active Essex staff is that relationships move at the speed of trust. The findings of this research suggest that, while this may be true, money helps too.

Funding injections for projects such as Essex Pedal Power periodically revitalised the relationships between

the teams.

**4. Silos can be useful – instead of eradicating them, teams should master them.**

Siloed working is often thought to be the enemy of collaboration, but it can be beneficial to have separate teams who bring distinct skill sets and expertise to the table.

**Recommendations:**

**1. Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team should make time to come together, pause, and reflect on what is working well and what could change.**

**2. Active Essex should use the learnings from this successful cross-team partnership to build more collaborative working relationships with other teams across the Council – and beyond.**

- When scoping potential partnerships, consider shared values and team energy – these can provide a solid foundation for strong working relationships.
- Think about whether the partnership aligns with local and national policy priorities – this makes securing funding to drive projects easier.
- Don't rely on one point of contact: build and nurture relationships with multiple members of a team to create a strong partnership.

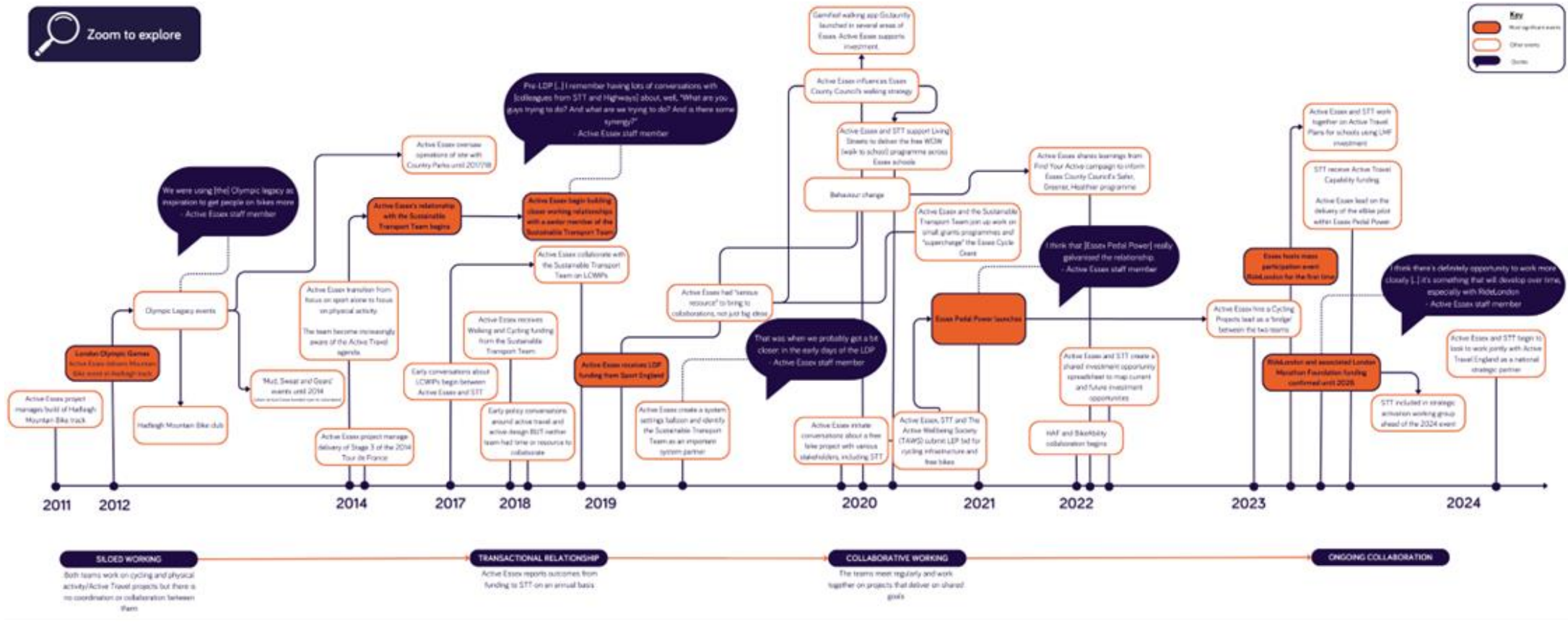
**3. But before embarking on new projects with new teams, Active Essex should be mindful of their capacity to do so.**

It takes a lot of time and energy to build and sustain strong cross-team relationships. When partnerships become particularly successful and generate several projects, as this one has, it may be necessary to bring in new staff to support delivery.

**4. In future, jointly funding embedded roles may make it easier for the post-holders to become fully embedded in both teams.**

Joint-funding embedded roles ensures that parts of the system that benefit from these posts contribute to them. Financial buy-in from all sides may also make embedded roles more sustainable.

# Relationship timeline: Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team





## 1. From transactions to collaborations: a brief history of the relationship between Active Essex and Essex County Council's Sustainable Transport team

Active Essex and Essex County Council's Sustainable Transport Team (STT, or Sustainable Transport) have worked together to shape active travel and active design policy and to deliver several impactful projects and in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In-depth interviews with three Active Essex staff members and a survey of a sample of both teams (Active Essex n=6; Sustainable Transport n=7) has revealed the teams' gradual journey from a transactional relationship to a range of strong, collaborative relationships.

*None of this work has happened [...] quickly. There's been a lot of history to it.*

– Active Essex staff member

Essex County Council, which both teams sit within, is a large organisation that has a history of falling into siloed working. As one Active Essex staff member told us: Both teams sit within Essex County Council (ECC) which, as one Active Essex staff member told us, has “historically” had a reputation for siloed working:

*Essex County Council teams don't always, historically, work very well together or [...] match up and go 'Oh, you know, you've got budget that's going into [that] and so have we!'*

– Active Essex staff member

Our survey findings suggest that parts of Essex County Council are better connected now than this staff member felt them to have been in the past. Survey respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of their interactions with colleagues from other Essex County Council functions on scale from 0 (no interaction) to 5 (frequent interaction).<sup>2</sup> Both teams' connections reached every Essex County Council function. While interaction is not the same as collaboration, these findings suggest that parts of the Council are currently less internally disconnected than several people we spoke to believe it to have been in the past. Indeed, a member of the Sustainable Transport Team told us that their positive experience of working with Active Essex had “confirmed previous experience of cross-departmental working”.

While these findings suggest that cross-function relationships are not unusual within Essex County Council, the relationship between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team is notable. Responses to this question show that Active Essex currently interacts with the Sustainable Transport Team more frequently than any other Essex County Council function (with an average frequency rating of 3), and the Sustainable Transport Team interact with Active Essex more than other functions (with the exception of Climate, Environment & Customer Services – both were given an average frequency rating of 4). These quantitative findings align with insight into the teams' current working relationships offered by Active Essex staff (outlined in Section 2, below). However, as one Active Essex staff member revealed, when Active Essex first identified “the active travel agenda” as “a great opportunity for us to get people physically active”, they did not have the working relationship with ECC's Sustainable Transport Team that they knew they needed to have real, lasting impact in this area. Active Essex “would probably fund a walking programme here [and a cycling project there] but not necessarily link [them] up with anything wider.”

This resulted in siloed working, with teams delivering projects independently rather than collaborating for greater impact. Early examples of this include Active Essex's 2012 Olympic legacy work, which one Active Essex staff member described as “the start of our cycling journey”. Active Essex “project managed the delivery of” the Hadleigh Mountain Bike track, delivered the Olympic event the venue hosted, and used the “Olympic legacy as inspiration to get people on bikes more”. Between 2011 and 2014, Active Essex set up Hadleigh Mountain Bike Club and founded a series of cycling events – Mud, Sweat and Gears – for amateur cyclists, young people, and children. At this time, Active Essex's attention was focused on organised sport,

but they were moving towards a more inclusive definition of physical activity. This coincided with a growing awareness of active travel:

*As we transitioned away from doing just sport into more physical activity, it was like [...] ‘Oh, hang on a minute, there’s this thing called active travel ... and a whole team in Essex County Council that [looks] at getting people [...] on bikes’.*

– Active Essex staff member

Early conversations between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team, which began around 2013/2014, focused on Essex County Council’s workplace cycling scheme, cycling infrastructure requirements (conversations which also included colleagues from the Highways team), active design, and the need for a behaviour change campaign to accompany these ambitious projects. While colleagues from Active Essex, the Sustainable Transport Team, and Highways were keen to work together on shared goals, limited resources and capacity were challenging from the start:

*There were probably a few [...] conversations where [we] would get quite excited [...] but [things] probably didn’t go too far, other than plans, because [we didn’t have] the time and resource to do much together.*

– Active Essex staff member

While the teams’ more ambitious plans had to be parked for a while, the Sustainable Transport Team did give Active Essex some funding in 2018. At this point, the teams’ working relationship was friendly but transactional:

*So they [the Sustainable Transport Team] gave us, let’s say £40,000, and we’d split that across the county because they knew that they wanted more walking and cycling groups [...] supported on the ground and we had a [way] of doing that through our Active Networks. [...] They used to give us the money and then [we would transactionally report back at the] end of the year.*

– Active Essex staff member

### Early days of the LDP

A major turning point for the relationship between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team came a year later (2019) when Active Essex received Local Delivery Pilot (LDP) funding from Sport England:

*When the LDP properly kicked off [... we had] some serious resource [...] a bit more momentum, and more profile.*

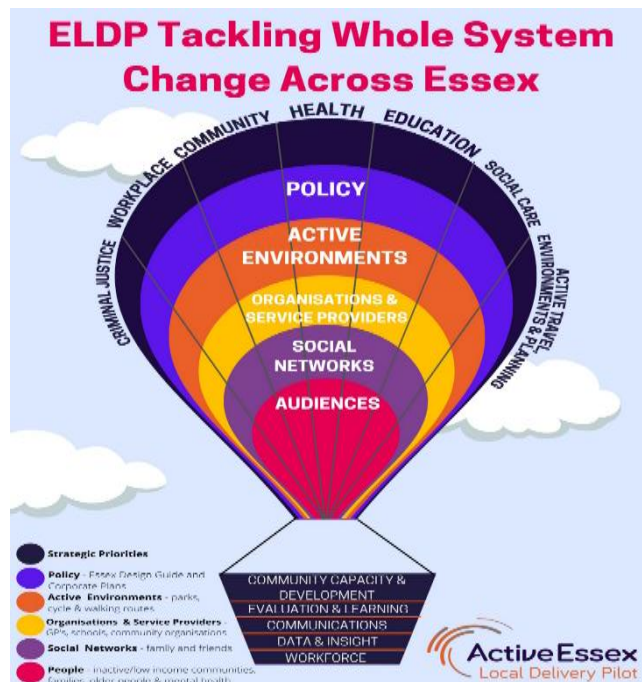
– Active Essex staff member

Active Essex was suddenly able to be more than a friendly sounding board for ideas or a funding recipient: they could be a project partner who would bring energy and, crucially, funding of their own to the table. Active Essex also began to take a more strategic approach. The team developed a System Settings balloon (below), highlighting the importance of active travel as a way to combat physical inactivity and identifying closer collaboration with the Sustainable Transport Team as a way to achieve this work:

*A large part of that work that we could see that we could influence was the active travel agenda [but] we’re never going to achieve all of that on our own. None of our work is ever done by us going and doing it on our own, but [active travel] is a whole new area of work.*

– Active Essex staff member

Around this time, active travel was also becoming increasingly important to central government: in 2020, the Department for Transport launched Gear Change, a “bold new vision for cycling and walking” which sought to encourage “lifestyle changes that keep us more active and fit”, acknowledging that “the way we travel is central to this” aim.<sup>3</sup> The associated newly-available funding cemented Active Essex’s decision to make Active Environments a priority area of focus.



Active Essex's System Settings balloon diagram, created in the early days of the LDP. Active Travel, Environments and Planning is highlighted as one of seven strategic priorities.

### Towards more collaborative working

Building on the transactional relationship between the teams outlined above, Active Essex began making deliberate efforts to work more closely with colleagues in the Sustainable Transport Team:

*We [...] identified that we wanted a stronger relationship with them [STT] and it was probably something that we tasked ourselves to go away and do.*

– Active Essex staff member

The work that Active Essex did to build stronger working relationships with colleagues from the Sustainable Transport Team took various forms, including what one Active Essex staff member summarises as “picking each others’ brains and sharing ideas” about policy and behaviour change. These conversations laid the groundwork for future projects such as ECC’s Safer, Greener, Healthier campaign.

The Walking and Cycling funding illustrates the transformation of the teams’ working relationship from transactional to more collaborative:

*It was just transactional to start off with [...] But we realised [that we could be having a] greater impact [...] if we really started to [discuss what] we were [both] concentrating on. I think once we [started to have] informal [conversations with STT] - ‘What going on? What's on your To Do List? What don't you have funding for right now, but [have identified as] a great opportunity? Where can Active Essex come in and contribute?’ - once we started having those conversations, that's when [the] collaborative working partnership really started.*

– Active Essex staff member

These conversations meant that the teams were interacting much more frequently than annual reporting. Furthermore, the Walking and Cycling work enabled Active Essex to demonstrate what they were uniquely placed to offer the Sustainable Transport Team. Active Essex had built strong relationships with Locally Trusted Organisations (LTOs) across the county through their Active Networks.<sup>4</sup> Through these Networks, Active Essex were able to reach a variety of walking and cycling initiatives. An Active Essex staff member acknowledged that:

*If they [STT] hadn't given us that money, they would have gone away and potentially done that same work, or offered that same money, to the same organisations that we would have potentially been working with.*

– Active Essex staff member

However, they also pointed out that because of Active Essex's pre-existing relationships with the LTOs:

*[W]e've been able to work with some of them in a much more holistic [way] than just, you know, that walking and cycling element. It might have been that we were able to get them along to local events or link them up with another local partner that could support them, mental health services, etc. [W]e have a much wider remit that we were able to bring to the table.*

– Active Essex staff member

In demonstrating that they could help the Sustainable Transport Team to avoid duplication of work and offer broader support to community walking and cycling initiatives and groups, Active Essex were able to prove their value:

*I think when you can prove that [...] they can contribute money to us and we can give them value back and show the impact that we're able to have by them [...] giving us a bit of seed funding [...] once you can show that we've got value in that partnership, that's when it [the working relationship] really starts to build.*

– Active Essex staff member

## Key takeaway

**Building strong relationships takes time, and working towards collaborative working relationships is a multi-year project that requires effort, patience, capacity, and resource. Collaborations benefit if partners on all sides have shared or overlapping aims or agendas (in this example, getting more people to travel more actively). It is also beneficial for partners to have successfully worked together before (e.g. Walking and Cycling funding) and to be independently well—if not equally—financed.**

*Over the past 5 years, [the teams have] definitely created a much stronger working relationship.*

– Active Essex staff member

*[Working with the Sustainable Transport Team] has shown me that you need to work hard to create initial links and trusted relationship[s] [...] Once this is achieved, often numerous opportunities can be capitalised on.*

– Active Essex staff member

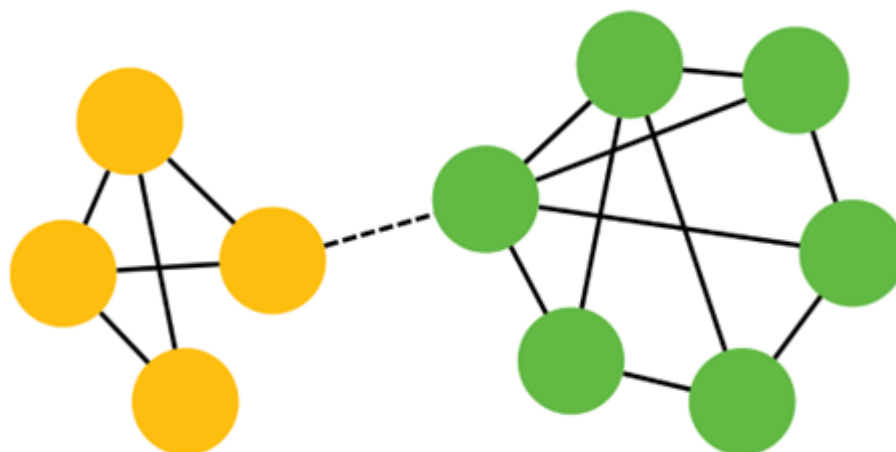
## **2. Where we are now: strong relationships and new ways of working**

While those early conversations that had been hamstrung by capacity included several members of the Sustainable Transport Team (as well as colleagues from the Highways Team), Active Essex’s concerted efforts to collaborate more with STT began with just one colleague:

*[They were] really that person that we’d been trying to link with for a while. [We] didn’t get there too much to start off with but we just started to get a bit of traction, started to have [...] more regular meetings, [and] had something a bit more tangible [...] to work on together. And that really helped build that relationship.*

– Active Essex staff member

Had Active Essex continued to pursue this single contact approach, a diagram of their social network might look something like this:



This diagram shows two teams. The members of each team are represented by coloured dots (‘nodes’) and the relationships between team members are represented by black lines (‘connections’). Each team is well connected internally, with multiple relationships between team members. However, the teams are not well connected to each other: only one relationship connects them (indicated by the dashed line between the teams). In social network terminology, this connection and the connected nodes are known as a bridge. The bridge is a way for information to flow between the teams and can be the basis of a collaborative relationship between the teams. However, the bridge can also become a bottleneck: since there is only one point of contact, the flow of information can be slow. If the bridging colleagues become too busy to keep in touch, take extended absence, or leave their role, the teams risk losing their connection.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, social network analysis revealed that Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team are well connected by multiple cross-team working relationships.

## Method spotlight: Social Network Analysis (SNA)

We know what a good working relationship *feels* like, but this can be hard to quantify or visualise. We used Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map the working relationships between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team in order to understand them better.

We conducted a survey to gather qualitative insight and quantitative data. We used SNA software Kumu (kumu.io) to analyse the anonymised quantitative data and to visualise the relationships between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team.

### Limitations of the methodology:

#### 1. SAMPLING

An initial participant list was drawn up with a member of Active Essex staff who collaborates with the Sustainable Transport Team regularly. We took a snowball sampling approach, sending the survey on to additional colleagues identified in the first wave of responses, though the overall sample size remains small (Active Essex n=6; Sustainable Transport n=7) and not all colleagues who appear as nodes in the network completed the survey themselves (response rate: 76.5%). As a result, the social network analysis offers an incomplete picture. However, the visualisation still provides a good overview of the interconnectedness of the two teams.

#### 2. REPRESENTATIVENESS

Networks are fluid because working relationships between colleagues change constantly. This analysis is only able to represent one moment in time (August-September 2023, when participants completed the survey), but it does illustrate the connections between the two teams at this time. Considered alongside the longer-term relationship timeline (above) and the qualitative insight from the survey and depth interviews that can be found throughout this report, the results of the social network analysis enable us to make observations and recommendations.

Once mapped using Kumu, the working relationships between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team look like this:



Green nodes represent members of the Active Essex Team while yellow nodes represent members of the Sustainable Transport Team.

This diagram reflects what one Active Essex staff member told us works particularly well about their collaborations with colleagues from the Sustainable Transport Team:

*[I have] effective working relationships with multiple members of the [Sustainable Transport Team] – [it's] not just reliant on one person.*

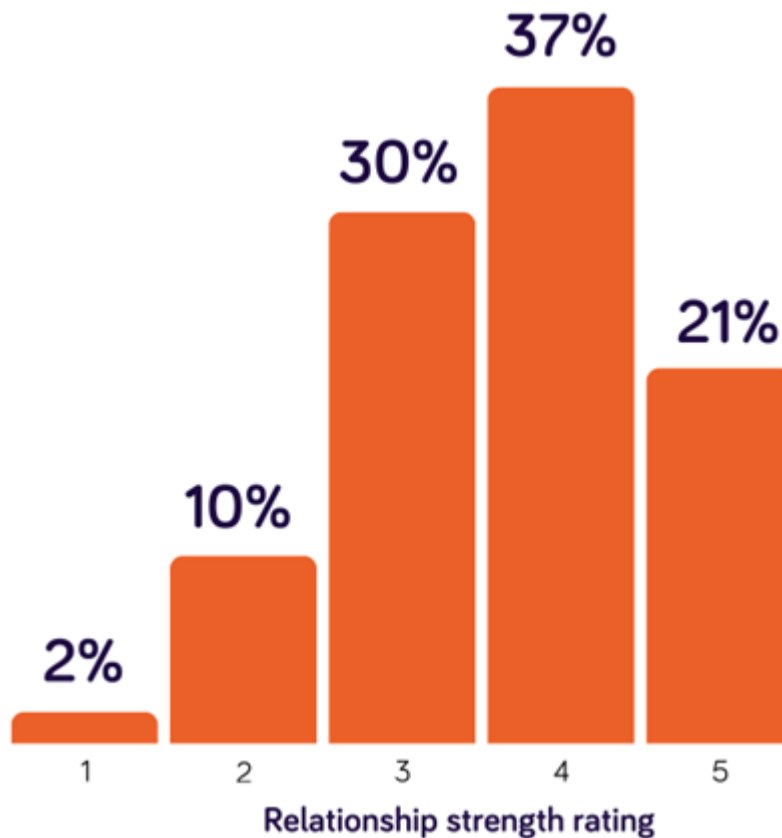
*– Active Essex staff member*

The complex structure of the network should reduce the chances of communication and/or collaboration ending due to personnel change, which was of particular concern to one member of the Active Essex team:

*If the people change, would that [relationship] stay? That'd be a bit of a test, wouldn't it?*

The journey from getting “a bit of traction” with one colleague from the Sustainable Transport Team to building multiple relationships between members of both teams was a shared endeavour. According to one Active Essex staff member, that initial contact “was our in-road” – from there, they worked on sustaining that relationship and “branch[ing] out a bit further” with support from Active Essex colleagues who “hold very strong” cross-team relationships of their own. It is important to note that the first member of the Sustainable Transport Team that Active Essex built a relationship with is a senior member of the team. The “branching out” phase of cross-team relationship building may have been assisted by securing senior buy-in first.

The quantitative data gathered through the survey also revealed that many of the relationships between the teams were felt to be strong. Survey participants were presented with a scale (1-5) and asked: How would you rate the strength of your working relationship with [colleague’s name]? On this scale, 5 represents a 'strong relationship' (this will mean different things to different people, please define 'strong' as you see fit). 21% of the 57 relationships rated using this measure were given a strength rating of 5, 67% were given a strength rating of 3 or 4, and just 12% were rated lower than 3.



Summing up the working relationships between their team and the Sustainable Transport Team, one Active Essex staff member said it was a “good collaboration” with “trusting and effective working relationships”. A member of the Sustainable Transport Team, meanwhile, went as far as to suggest that the teams work “as one team” with “shared priorities and goals”.



## Key ingredients for strong working relationships

This research highlighted several key factors (or ‘ingredients’) in the strong working relationships that have been built between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team. These range from intangible factors like “good energy” to more tangible factors such as communication style and frequency. Working relationships between the teams have been influenced by intrinsic factors like these and extrinsic factors such as injections of fundings and shifts in national policy priorities.

### **Factor 1: Personal relationships and team cultures that “click”**

Colleagues that we spoke to often struggled to find the words to capture the way that the two teams have “gelled” or “clicked” together. One Active Essex colleague acknowledged that it was too simplistic to say that “people get on”, but this was how it felt to them. This is perhaps best articulated by a member of the Sustainable Transport Team:

*After a few years of working together, we’re starting to get to know each other’s personalities, which has made the relationships stronger.*

– Sustainable Transport Team member

The concept of homophily (‘birds of a feather flock together’) is used in social network theory to explain the fact that nodes in networks that are similar in some way are often the best connected.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, similarity breeds connection. Our sample size is too small to draw conclusions about how similarities in demographic factors such as gender, age, or role seniority influence working relationships. However, there was evidence that members of both teams share personal values which may have contributed to their positive working relationships: with the exception of one member of the Sustainable Transport Team, all those who completed the survey said that physical activity was very important or quite important to them personally.<sup>7</sup>

Several members of the Sustainable Transport Team have attended Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) training delivered by Nurture Development on behalf of Active Essex. ABCD is central to Active Essex’s approach to working with communities and, while this training was not mentioned by the Sustainable Transport Team members who completed the survey, we suggest that it may have offered them an insight into how and why Active Essex work in this way and fostered greater understanding between the teams.

Team culture similarity is also likely to have contributed to the strong working relationships between the teams. Previously, Active Essex have struggled to collaborate with other teams within Essex County Council, experiencing what one Active Essex staff member called “blockers” and a “kick-it-into-the-long-grass” mentality. Their experience with the Sustainable Transport Team had been notably different:

*[T]here’s a good energy from their team [...] they’re enthused, they’re engaged [...] We’re really good at making things happen and [...] they’ve also got that kind of attitude, that “Let’s make this happen” [attitude].*

– Active Essex staff member

### **Factor 2: Communication that feels regular and worthwhile**

Several survey respondents highlighted the strong communication between teams as a particular strength of the working relationship. The frequency of interaction was seen as important by many survey respondents, who rated relationships as less strong when interactions were less frequent. This demonstrates

the importance of regular contact between teams (and between individuals) to sustain and grow relationships. Unsurprisingly, the strongest ratings were given to working relationships between those who met and worked together regularly.

The teams take a flexible approach to communication, with a mix of monthly recurring meetings for project catch-ups and other conversations throughout the month with less structured agendas, to keep in touch and build “momentum” (Active Essex staff member). What began as transactional conversations “at the beginning of the year and the end of the year” has become “weekly” connection (Active Essex staff member). One member of the Sustainable Transport Team felt that this communication had been both “regular and worthwhile”.

Another member of the Sustainable Transport Team appreciated the openness of communication between the teams:

*The [Active Essex] team are always approachable and want to make sure each project is as successful as it can be. [They are] always willing to listen to our point of view.*

*– Sustainable Transport Team member*

Communication between the teams is predominantly digital, though the general consensus was that a mixture of both online and in-person collaboration was valuable. This feeling was reflected in the strength ratings of the relationships. Of the twelve relationships given a strength rating of 5 (the highest rating), 75% featured communication via in-person meetings in addition to email, Teams calls, and Teams chat. Those who rated their relationships at a strength rating of 5 were also the most likely to use the phone to communicate. 43% of the 21 relationships with a strength rating of 4 also featured communication via in-person meetings. While it is worth noting that there is a correlation between in-person meetings and perceived relationship strength, it is perfectly possible to cultivate strong working relationships with colleagues using digital channels only: two of the relationships given a strength rating of 4 featured communication via email only. Furthermore, not all colleagues thrive in in-person settings and the necessity of offline meetings should be considered.

Digital modes of communication simplify and accelerate communication between the teams:

*You get easy responses or quick responses and it's easy to get hold of people on email or Teams calls or messenger through Teams. [...] I try to answer something quite quickly [...] And I feel like they do the same back. If I ask a question, it's answered quickly.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

### **Factor 3: External factors e.g. active travel policy priorities**

One of the Active Essex staff members we spoke to suggested that external factors such as the raised “national profile” of active travel had helped to “grease the wheels a bit” when it came to collaborating with the Sustainable Transport Team:

*[I]t's very clear that [central] government wanted [active travel to be a higher priority] and needs [active travel to be a higher priority]. I think it comes from Covid and people being out and about a bit more, and trying to encourage people to take that time to walk [...] and to cycle. I think it's also [the] climate change agenda that's pushing some of this stuff as well, you know – reducing car use, car emissions, all these things.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

The national policy picture that encouraged Active Essex to make Active Environments a strategic priority has opened funding opportunities that have facilitated closer partnership working with the Sustainable Transport Team and contributed to the high profile of projects like Essex Pedal Power. When considering how they might work more closely and impactfully with other ECC teams, Active Essex should prioritise connections which serve local and national policy agendas.

#### **Factor 4: Money**

Many of the events highlighted in orange as ‘most significant’ on the relationship timeline are injections of funding. It is important not to underestimate the impact that funding awards have had on the working relationships between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team. Without the major Local Delivery Pilot investment from Sport England, it is possible that Active Essex would have struggled to move beyond a transactional relationship with the colleagues they now consider collaborators.

Since LDP funding, the relationship has been “galvanised” (Active Essex staff member) by other major funding awards. Securing funding for Essex Pedal Power, for example, resulted in closer and more frequent collaborations between the teams. Progress on behaviour change campaigns to achieve long-term goals such as reducing physical activity (Active Essex) and reducing carbon emissions (Sustainable Transport) can be slow and less visible, so it is perhaps not surprising that Essex Pedal Power (which has been popular within the Council and beyond it, being shortlisted for multiple awards) has been embraced by both teams. It is possible that the perceived successes of Essex Pedal Power have strengthened relationships between the teams. If the project was perceived as less successful, it may have damaged or strained the relationship. From one Active Essex staff member’s point of view, the project boosted the relationship and gave Active Essex an opportunity to demonstrate their worth as a partner:

*I think that [project] really galvanised the relationship and Sustainable Transport were like “Oh, OK, there’s value here in working with the LDP and Active Essex, because we can now do things like Pedal Power.” [... We’ve] showed them the value of what Active Essex can do.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

# Essex Pedal Power

Essex Pedal Power (EPP) is a community-based cycling programme that launched in the Clacton and Jaywick areas of Tendring in Spring 2021. It has since been rolled out to Greenstead (Colchester), Basildon, and Harwich & Dovercourt (Tendring). EPP provides residents with free-high quality bikes to support them to be more physically active and to travel at low cost, financially and environmentally. The programme is delivered by Active Essex, Essex County Council, The Active Wellbeing Society (TAWS) and local stakeholders.

**1,381 bikes**

given to Essex residents so far - 1,140 to adults and 241 to children

**203,690 km**

travelled by bike recipients - equivalent to 5.1 times around the globe



More recently, the teams' working relationship has been boosted by London Marathon Foundation (LMF) funding, which has provided opportunities to collaborate on investing money into cycling initiatives in communities across the county. In the same year (2022) the teams worked together to introduce Bikeability cycle training to children and young people through the county-wide HAF (Holiday Activity and Food) programmes delivered by Active Essex on behalf of Essex County Council. In their survey response, a member of the Sustainable Transport Team highlighted "the pooling of resources to assign money to schools and other organisations" as an element of the teams' partnership working that has been particularly successful. This is another example of where the teams' aims align, which strengthens their partnership working.

At the moment, the Sustainable Transport Team is "helping to drive" the schools work funded through LMF. Active Essex's long-term goal is to pass on the baton:

*Capacity wise, we need them to continue to drive this [work] ... the long-term ambition is [that] we're not driving those active travel plans, they're doing that work ... [and] we all see the benefits ... [of] getting children actively travelling to school.*

– Active Essex staff member

# School Active Travel plans

In 2022, Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team worked together and used London Marathon Foundation investment to encourage children and young people to travel more actively.



73 schools

created Active Travel pledges

£107,803

was awarded to 32 schools as Active Travel grants

## New ways of working

Building strong working relationships has enabled Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team to deliver projects like Essex Pedal Power to residents. It has also enabled them to find new ways of working. The original theory was that building strong relationships would mean that Active Essex could “change [...] traditional ways of operating”. This was amended to “find new ways of working together” in the refined theory to acknowledge the fact that it is not easy to *change* systems. Old ways of operating are persistent, and this research did not find evidence that increased collaboration between Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team has resulted in wider change in ways of working.

The teams may not have eradicated silos across the Council (yet), but they have mastered their own silos.<sup>8</sup> Both teams bring distinct skillsets and expertise to the table and, by working together across silos, have been able to pool various resources to have a greater impact than if they worked alone. The Sustainable Transport Team bring active travel and infrastructure expertise (and the necessarily large budgets for initiatives like new cycle lanes), while Active Essex are able to provide place-based expertise and local connections within communities:

*Active Essex do not have capital [...] to spend on improving cycling infrastructure, so [the Sustainable Transport Team] might concentrate on that aspect of the work, but it's really important that we [...] know where the infrastructure is going in, and then we [can] help activate it [...] and have some of those influential conversations around it to make sure that it is used in the long term. There's no point them building it and then no one knowing it's there and [so] it's not being utilised. [...] We help with that behaviour change and help to get people to engage [with] the infrastructure once it's put in.*

– Active Essex staff member

Active Essex's contribution has been recognised by several members of the Sustainable Transport Team. In response to the survey question “Have you learned anything about partnership working from collaborating with the Active Essex team?”, one colleague from Sustainable Transport answered:

*Yes, especially in terms of relationship building and the importance of having people on the ground to talk to the local communities.*

*– Sustainable Transport Team member*

Another said that they had learned about “building trust and the value of relationships” (Sustainable Transport Team member).

The project case study below gives an example of the teams’ approach to partnership working in action:

### **Case Study: the Essex Cycle Grant**

The Sustainable Transport Team had been running the Essex Cycle Grant for several years before Active Essex came on board as a partner. The scheme, which offers small grants to support local and inclusive organisations that encourage cycling, “had limited reach”, according to one Active Essex staff member who noted that “there was a risk that it would continue to reach the same organisations”. Together, the teams “saw an opportunity for a branding re-jig”.

Active Essex made a “small contribution” (£25,000 out of £170,000 in 2023) to the Essex Cycle Grant pot on the understanding that they would “be involved” and “help drive it” (Active Essex staff member). By sharing learnings from their own small grants programmes (Microgrants and Find Your Active), resources (including evaluation toolkits and funding agreements), and local knowledge and connections, Active Essex was able to reshape the Essex Cycle Grant through partnership working.

*[Active Essex are] ‘willing to share resources (e.g. Monitoring & Evaluation Framework tool) to help make improvements to existing projects.*

*– Sustainable Transport Team member*

*Last time we checked, 60% of the recipients [...] were not known to the Sustainable Transport Team before we [...] came on board. We’ve definitely helped expand their reach.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

*I think that's been a good bit of learning and success from the LDP: where we’ve combined resources, it's improved outcomes that the ECC team were after, and we've been able to contribute, supercharge.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

## Beyond Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team

While the SNA diagram above focuses on the relationships between the teams, our survey also revealed that building these relationships has helped both teams to extend their networks. One member of the Sustainable Transport Team praised Active Essex's willingness to "try to reach across teams and involve the correct people", finding out "who could help with the project rather than guessing". Another said:

*Active Essex has acted as a conduit to bring different services together to solve common problems.*

*– Sustainable Transport Team member*

Active Essex have modelled best practice here, connecting people and bringing the right individuals and organisations to the table when needed. Some Active Essex staff members we spoke to at the start of this piece of research suggested that the sharing of contacts had not always been reciprocated. For example, one staff member wanted "to be a bit more involved in [active travel] conversations" but felt that they did not know "what [STT were] hearing from Active Travel England" (ATE). They identified an opportunity to reach ATE through their strong relationships with colleagues from the Sustainable Travel Team, this member of staff said:

*I know that they have already got that contact with Active Travel England, so I just need to go and ask that person to open the door and maybe see if they would allow me to come in.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

That "door" has opened in the months since we first spoke. Now, this member of Active Essex staff is working with colleagues from Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team to open conversations with Active Travel England with a view to working jointly with ATE as a national strategic partner. This would not have been possible without the strong relationships that have been built between the two teams.

### Key takeaways

- 1. When connecting teams, build multiple relationships rather than relying on a connecting 'bridge'.**
- 2. Old ways of working won't disappear overnight – instead of attempting to eradicate silos, master them.**

### 3. Challenges

The teams' collaborative working relationships seem to be in a good place. The teams have gradually built strong ties and found effective ways of working together.

*[Our working relationship] has definitely improved - in the beginning there was more of a scatter gun approach to working on projects together, whereas now there is much more planning (from both sides) so we can achieve more.*

*– Sustainable Transport Team member*

One example of this evolution from ‘scatter gun approach’ to collaborative planning is the teams’ shared investment opportunity spreadsheet, created in 2022, that enables them to map current and future investment opportunities together. However, the teams face several challenges, both ongoing and new. The first of these challenges is capacity: it takes a lot of time and energy to build and sustain cross-team relationships, and to collaborate on projects with multiple stakeholders. This was a common theme across survey responses and interviews and something that both teams struggle with. We received the following responses to the survey question “What has been challenging?”:

*Time capacity of team members – at time[s] we are all guilty of delayed response, but this very rarely doesn’t get actioned in the end.*

– Active Essex staff member

*Having enough time to do everything we want to do.*

– Sustainable Transport Team member

*It has been hard trying to find times that work for [Active Essex] and [the Sustainable Transport Team].*

– Sustainable Transport Team member

It’s clear that both teams are under-resourced and over-stretched, which is an ECC-wide problem and not unique to this local authority. However, it is important that Active Essex in particular take time to reflect on their capacity challenges, since this issue has arisen in several recent evaluations (see, for example, our findings from research into Place-Based Working in October 2023’s Process Learning Report and this one).

In an attempt to inject some capacity following the success and growth of projects such as Essex Pedal Power, the teams discussed hiring a Cycling Projects Lead who would be embedded in both Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team. Although Active Essex know from experience that, often, the most successful joint projects are those that are match-funded (so all partners have buy-in), the budget for the Cycling Lead role came from Active Essex alone. One Active Essex staff member felt that this funding decision had made embedding the role in the Sustainable Transport Team challenging:

*[A] big ambition of [that] role was that [it] would sit within Active Essex, but it would almost bridge the [teams], so [the Cycling Projects Lead] would have just as much knowledge and influence on the work that [the Sustainable Transport Team] were doing as well as [the work that] Active Essex [was doing]. That’s not happening at this moment in time. [The Cycling Projects Lead is perceived as] an Active Essex member of staff [only ...] and there is still a barrier of, you know, trust, a little bit.*

– Active Essex staff member

However, while this member of staff felt that Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team were still working on striking the right “balance” with this role, findings from the social network analysis revealed that the Cycling Projects Lead is very well connected. The diagram above shows the nodes sized by Eigenvector centrality.

*Eigenvector centrality measures how well connected an element is to other well connected elements. In general, elements with high eigenvector centrality are the leaders of the network, though they may not have the strongest local influence.<sup>9</sup>*

The Cycling Projects Lead (node AE2) is the largest node on the map because they have the highest Eigenvector centrality value (0.095). They hold many different cross-team relationships and all of their



working relationships with members of the Sustainable Transport Team are rated strongly (all 3+, with several given a strength rating of 5). The fact that the Cycling Projects Lead has already built many strong relationships despite being in post for a relatively short period of time (six months when the survey responses were collected) demonstrates that while it may take years to build strong relationships between teams, once this foundation is laid it is easier and faster for new staff members to build their own connections.

An additional issue that the teams have faced when working in partnership is that the Sustainable Travel Team have a more traditional, county-wide remit while Active Essex take a place-based approach. This has presented something of a culture clash and the cross-team partnership has benefitted from having the Cycling Projects Lead (who, like the Sustainable Transport Team, has a county-wide focus) in post. This dedicated human resource has, among other things enabled Active Essex to join the Sustainable Transport Team's pre-existing partnership with cycling community platform developer Love to Ride. One Active Essex member of staff we spoke to wondered what more could be achieved if Active Essex had a strategic lead for Active Travel and/or Active Environments who could "just concentrate on that area of work". While this member of staff felt that having a thematic focus rather than a locality focus would enable "expansion" of the collaboration with the Sustainable Transport Team, this member of the Active Essex team acknowledged that it was not achievable "at this moment in time":

*It would add another layer – we would have [a strategic lead] who would then still have to feed everything into locality working [and to each of the Active Essex hub teams].*

*– Active Essex staff member*

Even if parts of the system decide to adopt a place-based approach, the transition away from traditional ways of working will take some time. It is, therefore, important for Active Essex to reflect on what has been learned from working with the Sustainable Transport Team and consider how they might work with non-place-based colleagues most effectively.

High expectations are another ongoing challenge that the teams' working relationships face. Both teams are ambitious and this has, at times, paid off (for example, Essex Pedal Power). However, Active Travel is a complex field rife with political sensitivities and Active Essex's can-do attitude is not always enough to overcome barriers. One member of the Sustainable Transport Team said that "managing expectations" had been challenging, while another suggested that Active Essex could "develop greater awareness of political dynamics in transport and planning".

The teams have successfully delivered many things through partnership working and still have plenty that they want to achieve together. It is to be hoped that challenges on the horizon, such as changes to Active Essex's funding as Sport England's LDP programme enters its new phase, do not negatively impact the partnership. Despite challenges, this research has uncovered strong evidence to support the part of the theory that suggests that working together will "allow [the teams] to have a greater impact than if [they] worked alone":

*I think both [teams] could probably say that those things could be achieved by ourselves, but I just think working together is smarter. We get better reach with it, and, you know, there's sharing of learning and all those things. [...] I think they [the Sustainable Transport team] would confidently say, you know, they were doing the Cycle Grant before us and they were spending the money - maybe not as effectively as they are now, but they were doing it. And same with their [Safer, Greener, Healthier] campaign. They were [going to] go away and do their campaign anyway. But actually the benefit of us working on that together just means that the system is much more joined up and that we're sharing*

*resources, sharing learning and [...] accelerating some of that work much better than if we did it on our own.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

### Key takeaways

- 1. It took the teams a long time to build their strong working relationships but this strong foundation means that new starters are able to build connections quickly.**
- 2. However, there are still learnings to be taken from the challenges Active Essex have faced in embedding this cross-team role.** It may be that, in future, such roles should be jointly funded.

### 4. Where next?

The relationships that have been built between Active Essex staff and members of the Sustainable Transport Team will continue to be valuable in future. This is because active travel remains an important policy focus locally and nationally, and has become increasingly important during the cost of living crisis.<sup>10</sup> Active Travel England have recently celebrated the fact that '[a]ctive travel now accounts for 20% of all minutes of activity taken by adults in England', with 3.2 million more people regularly travelling actively in the year up to November 2022 than they did in the previous 12 months, 'the largest increase in any activity in a given year'.<sup>11</sup> However, damning reports from the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Public Accounts Committee suggest that the government has a long way to go if it is to meet its targets for increasing rates of active travel by 2025.<sup>12</sup>

Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team will be working together on two major projects in the next year: RideLondon and the Essex Pedal Power eBike project. There are promising signs that Active Essex are using learnings from past experience to inform future collaborations with the Sustainable Transport Team, as the case study below demonstrates:

### Case Study: London Marathon Foundation and Ford RideLondon – a lesson from 2023

In May 2023, Essex hosted the Ford RideLondon Classique cycling race (part of the UCI Women's World Tour) and the RideLondon-Essex 100, 60 and 30 mile mass participation rides. Following the success of this event, Essex County Council reached an agreement with the organisers (London Marathon Events) to host the event until 2026.<sup>13</sup> The deal brings with it further funding from the London Marathon Foundation (LMF), bringing the total amount awarded to Essex since May 2022 to £1.75 million. Active Essex will manage the additional £750,000 and use it to continue supporting communities across Essex to lead active and healthy lives.

Active Essex estimate that their existing partnership with LMF has supported more than 15,000 residents to participate in physical activity so far.<sup>14</sup> In 2022-3, Active Essex and partners have:

- Awarded more than 220 small grants through the Find Your Active Programme
- Distributed more than 700 free bikes through Essex Pedal Power
- Supported more than 70 schools to develop Active Travel Plans.

While the Sustainable Transport Team were involved with several of these LMF-funded initiatives, they were less included in the RideLondon events themselves. Active Essex staff have taken a key learning from 2023 that they intend to act upon in future: conversations need to be started earlier.

*Last year was a lot of learning, and I was perhaps maybe a little bit too late to have a meaningful conversation around RideLondon.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

The Ford RideLondon-Essex mass participation rides offer an opportunity to inspire Essex residents to cycle more, delivering on both teams' aims (to increase physical activity and/or active travel). Preparations for RideLondon 2024 began in autumn 2023, and Active Essex initiated conversations with the Sustainable Transport Team much earlier.

*Now [October 2023] we're ... setting up a conversation with the Sustainable Transport Team [...] to then have conversations around how we can work as [...] a wider team to have a bigger impact. Having that time now, before the event, will be really useful. [...] Within the Sustainable Transport Team, there's quite a few different projects going on, some I'm aware of, some I'm not aware of. [In the upcoming meeting we will discuss] how we can crossover with their workstreams and explore opportunities.*

*– Active Essex staff member*

The Sustainable Transport Team are included in the RideLondon activation strategic group for RideLondon-Essex 2024. The working group also includes representatives from London Marathon Events and Ford and first met in November 2023.

This spirit of learning and continuous improvement is encouraging, since it is important that the teams continue to work together well and strengthen some aspects of their working relationships. With the learnings from this report in mind, the Insight and Evaluation Team make the following recommendations:

### **Pause and reflect**

Active Essex have achieved a lot through this collaboration but would benefit from making time to pause, reflect and look forward. It is particularly important to consider the capacity challenges raised by this piece

of research (and others). Another topic to discuss should be how Active Essex, as a place-based team, can work most effectively with parts of the system like the Sustainable Transport Team which have more traditional, county-wide ways of working.

### Organise an in-person sharing session with the Sustainable Transport Team

After several years of collaboration, the teams may benefit from making time to reflect and plan together. The teams should use this session to cultivate space for acknowledging challenges and to learn more about each other's working environments and team structures. This session should be in-person in line with ECC's hybrid Ways of Working guidance, which recommends utilising "face to face meetings as an opportunity to collaborate, be creative, network and socialise."<sup>15</sup> This sharing session would be an ideal opportunity to bring in new colleagues on Active Essex's side, since it has been noted that the relationships with the Sustainable Transport Team "predominantly [sit] with the South West hub team" (Active Essex staff member). This would also help to iron out any uncertainties that colleagues in the Sustainable Transport Team have about "the structure and responsibilities of [Active Essex]" (Sustainable Transport Team member).

This sharing session could be an opportunity to reset and move from a reactive to a proactive mode. This could take the form of an appreciative inquiry approach, with the teams taking time to discover what's working well, dream about what the collaboration could look like in future and what it might focus on, and design the next steps of the teams' working relationships.<sup>16</sup>

### Formalise regular meetings

While the teams' regular but flexible meeting style works well, having a formal agenda for some catch-ups could be beneficial. Survey respondents on both sides indicated that the teams could be better at sharing updates and keeping each other in the loop about outcomes of projects they have worked on together.

### Find a common vocabulary

The Sustainable Transport Team have previously voiced concerns about the corporate jargon used by Active Essex, while Active Essex feel that the Sustainable Transport Team could improve the wording of their public-facing behaviour change messaging. Open conversations between the teams (perhaps including a Marketing and Communications professional) that work towards finding a common vocabulary for external communications may be beneficial.

### Use successes and learnings to build relationships with other Essex County Council teams

The Active Essex colleagues we spoke to during this research expressed interest in building similar collaborative relationships with other teams across the Council including Planning Services, Place Services, Highways, and the Climate Change team. The findings of this report suggest that replicating this cross-team relationship elsewhere will likely take time, but they also demonstrate that truly collaborative working relationships are possible and well worth pursuing. However, before embarking on new projects with new teams, Active Essex should reflect on their capacity to take this on.

## 5. Further research could explore:

- **Whether or not working with a place-based team and attending ABCD training has changed the Sustainable Transport Team's approach to working with communities.** This research found that the Sustainable Transport Team appreciated Active Essex's place-based ethos but did not uncover a shift in their ways of working. Future research could do more to engage the Sustainable Transport Team.

- **Policy influence.** Analysis of the policy influence that has been exerted by Active Essex and the Sustainable Transport Team was beyond the scope of this project. Future research could explore the Active Environments and Active Design work.
- **How the relationships evolve over time.** This research presents a snapshot – it would be valuable to continue to monitor progress and change.

### 3. Place Based Working

For Active Essex, Place Based Working is an approach that addresses specific challenges or improves conditions within a particular geographical location or community. It acknowledges that different places have unique characteristics, assets, and needs and so solutions are not "one-size-fits-all" and interventions need to be contextually relevant.

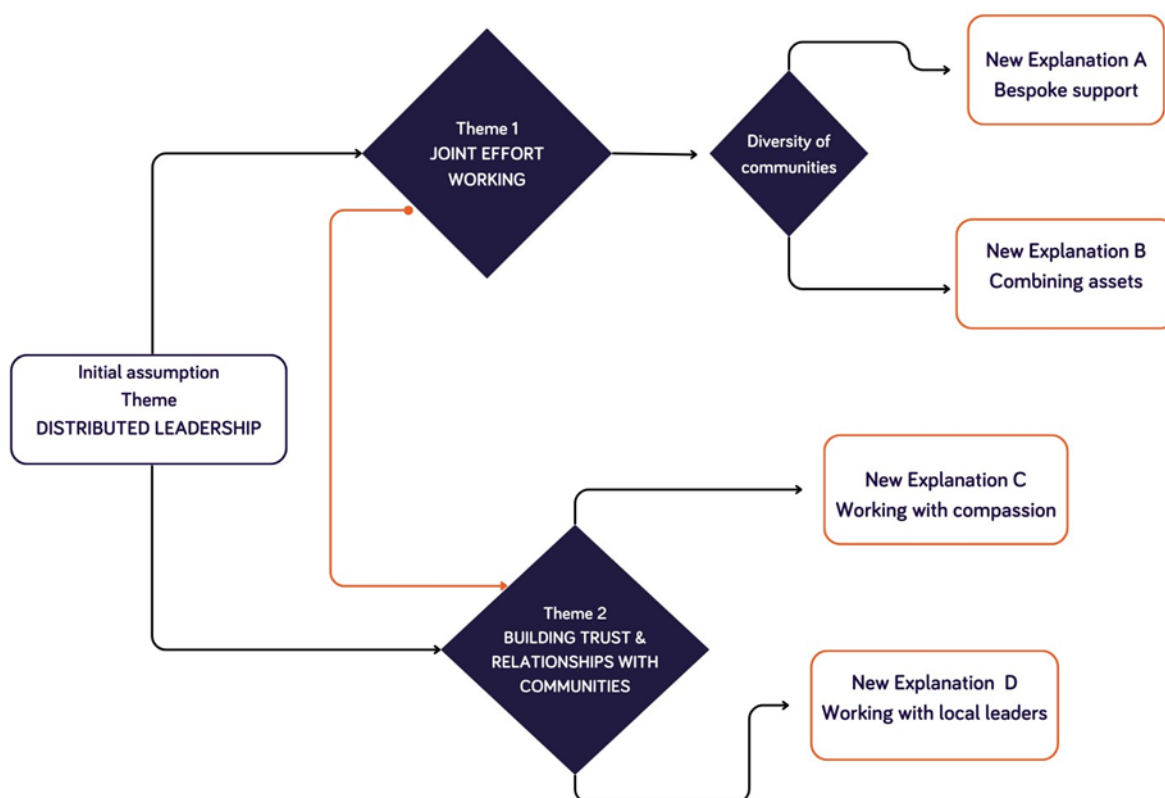
#### Explanatory Accounts of How & Why Place-Based Working works in Essex

Two initial Programme Theories (IPTs) assumptions about Place-Based Working were developed collaboratively with stakeholders in May 2022. Since then, the Insight & Evaluation Team have been collecting data (via a literature review, six interviews with stakeholders, and eight focus groups with Active Essex staff, and Microgrants recipients and decision makers, and two observations of Active Essex staff awaydays) and reviewing literature (grey and academic) to test and refine these theories assumptions. In the previous report, we focused on the first place-based working assumption theory, which relates to making better use of local assets and connectivity. In this report we will focus on the second place-based working theory explanation, which relates to distributed leadership.

The initial assumption (PBW2) was: *Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities [C]. Consequently, if we can distribute leadership to the local community [M-resource], then they will take responsibility for and ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity [O]. This is because they have local experience, meaning they understand the needs and wants of their local community.*

#### Expanding the initial assumption

To see in more detail how Active Essex work with communities, local leaders and partners, it was important to expand the theory explanation further. Following a period of data immersion and reflection (including coding data on nVivo before manually extracting key themes), it was felt that the existing theory explanation was too simplistic to cover all the different ways that Active Essex work. While it would be premature to suggest that Active Essex has 'cracked' place-based working, there has been a move away from the idea of 'distributed leadership' to 'joint effort working'.



## The Benefits of Joint Effort Working – Bespoke support and Combining assets

From	To	Changes
<p>The initial assumption was: <i>Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities. Consequently, IF we can distribute leadership to the local community, THEN they will take responsibility for and ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity. This is BECAUSE they have local experience, meaning they understand the needs and wants of their local community.</i></p>	<p><b>Bespoke support</b> - <i>Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities because they are not context-specific. Not all communities are the same (for example, in terms of demographics, culture, assets, skills, enthusiasm to do things) and consequently need different levels of support to create physical activity opportunities. IF we can work in a 'joint effort' way with communities, with bespoke support (based on their wants and needs), THEN community groups will take ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity by embedding PA in the activities they are already doing BECAUSE there are the right incentives to do this (including but not limited to funding, moral support, resource) and they see that we are recognising their community's unique context.</i></p> <p><b>Combining assets</b> - <i>Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities because they lack the relevance to communities. Not all communities are the same (for example, in terms of demographics, culture, assets, skills, enthusiasm to do things) and therefore have different wants and needs in relation to physical activity opportunities. IF we can work in a 'joint effort' way with communities, making use of our resources, skills &amp; connections, and community's skills, assets, local knowledge and lived experience THEN, the physical activity opportunities created will be more relevant for the community BECAUSE context has been considered.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The new explanation builds on the original assumption acknowledging that top-down working assumes communities are homogenous.</li> <li>• We need to identify what makes a community the way it is and tailor the way we work to them, rather than impose a way of working on them.</li> <li>• Instead of Active Essex 'distributing leadership', the new theory focuses on the idea of 'joint effort' working because both 'top' and 'bottom' have assets they can bring to the table. This is less paternalistic and more collaborative in language.</li> <li>• The new explanation highlights the mutual benefits of working together in addition to the positive impact this would have in engaging the community.</li> </ul>

## Key findings

### 1. The diversity of communities

Much like each human is a unique individual, so too are communities. Consequently, they cannot be perceived as homogenous, particularly with regards to how they approach community development work. There are many reasons why it is important to recognise and even celebrate, where relevant, the differences between communities. Place-based working involves meeting the unique needs of people in one given location by working together to use the best available resources and collaborating to gain local knowledge and insight. As discussed in the previous process learning report, Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is about identifying and mobilising existing, but often unrecognised assets.

Traditional ways of 'doing' community development have approached communities with a paternalistic lens that assumes communities are empty cups to be filled by those in government who hold the jugs of water, thus leaving communities reliant on the government and similar external bodies to quench their thirst. Top-down approaches encourage pre-prepared proposals to be implemented by those higher up and controlled by the professional actors without the communities consulted in the implementation (Larice & Macdonald, 2007). The issue with this blanket approach is that it leads to assumptions being made about communities without considering the differences between their sociocultural and environmental situations. It implies that communities cannot think for themselves and therefore decisions must be placed upon them (Isidiho and Sabran, 2016). This also means that communities are never encouraged to do anything for themselves.

One response to the top-down approach has been the advocacy for bottom-up working, where all power lies with communities themselves to hold resources and make decisions regarding community development. While this sounds appealing in theory, it can also be problematic to assume that communities have all the answers, particularly given that many communities in receipt of support from the government due to them being socioeconomically deprived, face a range of barriers daily that means they may not have the capacity to take full ownership of their place. While this does not mean that socioeconomically deprived communities do not possess any assets, it also does not mean that all responsibility should be imposed on them, especially when they have become accustomed to a top-down approach. Taking away all support could therefore be seen as abandoning communities.

When considering the most appropriate way to work with communities, it is important to acknowledge the differences between them. The boxes below provide a demographic snapshot of Basildon, Colchester and Tendring (ECC Public Health & Public Health Intelligence Team, Oct 2022).

#### Basildon

The Basildon district is situated in the southern part of Essex, 30 miles east of London. Covering some 110 square kilometers, the district includes the towns of Basildon, Billericay and Wickford.

Basildon has the largest population of the Essex districts at 187,558, giving a population density of 1,705 people per square km. 89.5% of the population are White British.

In the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019, Basildon was in the 40% of most deprived Lower Tier Local Authorities (LTLAs) nationally. This contains 110 LSOAs, of which 26 are ranked in the bottom two most deprived deciles nationally; equivalent to 23.6%.

#### Colchester



The borough of Colchester is situated in the North East of Essex and covers an area of approximately 328 square kilometers. The main settlement is Colchester, which was recently granted City-status to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee year, but there are many surrounding small towns and villages of which the largest are Stanway, Tiptree, West Mersea and Wivenhoe.

Colchester district has a population of 197,200 with 601 people living per square km, making it the most populous district in Essex. 87.5% of the population are White British ethnicity. In the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 the Colchester Local Authority area was ranked 181 out of 317 lower tier authorities in England. This places Colchester in the upper 50% of least deprived Lower Tier Local Authorities (LTLAs) nationally.

As of 2019 the Colchester area contains 105 LSOAs of which 11 are ranked in the bottom two most deprived deciles nationally. This is equivalent to 10.5% of LSOAs in the area.

### Tendring

Tendring is located in the Northeastern peninsula of Essex and covers an area of approximately 336 square kilometers. The main populous areas are those on the coastline such as Frinton, Walton, Brightlingsea, Clacton and Harwich.

Tendring is the fifth most populous district in Essex with a population of 147,353, with 438 people per square km. 95.4% of the population are of White British ethnicity.

In the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019 the Tendring Local Authority area was ranked 32 out of 317 lower tier authorities in England. This places Tendring in the bottom 10% of most deprived Lower Tier Local Authorities (LTLAs) nationally. Tendring is ranked as the most deprived area out of 12 districts in the county for overall deprivation. Tendring is the only area in Essex which falls into the 10% of most deprived areas nationally and is 68 places below the next lowest area in the county.

The diversity in communities can be more hyperlocal level than expected with differences existing at street level. This can be a challenge for community development because it can take more time to understand the unique contexts within communities. Those who possess local knowledge and are often working in an ABCD way are doing this alongside their day jobs.

*“When you think of the word ‘community’, you think of it being quite a big thing... but actually I think in terms of ABCD, I think that community is very, very small and you know, kind of street level and you know what's going on in your immediate surroundings, rather than it being, you know, even two roads down. It's that immediate and I think that's because I was with those leaders within the ABCD world. And these are just people, ordinary people with ordinary lives, you know? It isn't their job to do the thing, whatever it is they're doing, and it could very easily get out of control for them. And you know what they're doing is fantastic on their street, in their neighbourhood at that sort of level, but actually it would be quite diluted if it was made to be too big if that makes sense.” [AE staff member]*

The challenges of working Tendring as a whole have been recognised by Active Essex, as areas can also differ in term of the systems and individuals they are governed by. Findings from the 2023 Collaborate CIC report sharing lessons from place-based in Essex showed that 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. As one workshop participant stated- *“So important to have visionaries within the health system”*. 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. Comparatively, it has been more difficult to encourage buy-in from senior leaders in Tendring. The Collaborate report showed that the microgrants programme was more successful as a means to focus on grassroots organisations- *“We can’t get hold of the bigger organisations... with smaller clubs it is easier to build good relationships”* [Collaborate workshop participant]. Interestingly, Collaborate CIC’s Readiness for system change document from 2018 illustrated a similar picture. The document reported that Jaywick had a number of keen and vocal community leaders who stepped in where there were gaps in provision. However, even then, Collaborate suggested an unwillingness from political leaders to champion a long-term systems approach versus the more traditional approach. There were also tensions between some organisations and elected members. This highlights the diversity between areas in Essex, where some are closer to embracing ABCD, while others are much slower in taking on a new approach. This begs the question of whether system change is possible in areas like Tendring without the buy-in of system leaders and a willingness to work collaboratively? Given that Tendring’s position has not come far since 2018 (particularly when compared to the other LDP areas of Basildon and Colchester), this suggests not.

This has led to interest within the Active Essex Insight & Evaluation team as to what it is about Tendring that makes it “different”. The quotes below suggest that this is partly due to a resistance by both the community and local council to work differently due to mistrust.

*“I’m from Harwich, it is very cliquy... If there’s someone from out of town coming in... sometimes it doesn’t get supported... people support people that they know or recognise at least.”* [Microgrants decision panel member]

*“I send people the links all the time. In this area, people don’t like the internet... there was a survey done around Tendring where 70% of people weren’t comfortable to shop online or to go online and look at things...”* [AE staff member]

The observations above support the idea that communities are all different and consequently need to be worked with differently. It is essential to acknowledge the differences and take the time to understand the nuances of a community before imposing a solution. Much of the data we have collected - particularly with successful examples of place-based work and ABCD - illustrates the importance of tailoring support and building on existing assets in a community. The evaluation report of the Basildon Community Involvement Network (CIN), (a sharing and learning network for community development practitioners in Basildon) concluded that were the CIN to be scaled and replicated elsewhere, it would not look the same; nor should this be perceived as negative. Rather, a successful CIN is one that appreciates the assets of each area; what and who it has to offer and adapts to their wants and needs. Those doing community development work in Essex have acknowledged this need to work differently because without it, the community would not be engaged:

*“Every community that we go into has different wants and needs and we are very conscious of that. So, while we have a model, our model is very much to listen, respond and support the groups that we are working with rather than sort of helicoptering in and saying this is how you need to do it.”* [Locally Trusted Organisation]

*“It kind of helps to make activity relevant to individuals and communities lives rather than having a preset idea of activity and exercise, which is then imposed. So it kind of makes it relevant and therefore more possible to develop and sustain.”* [Microgrants decision panel member]

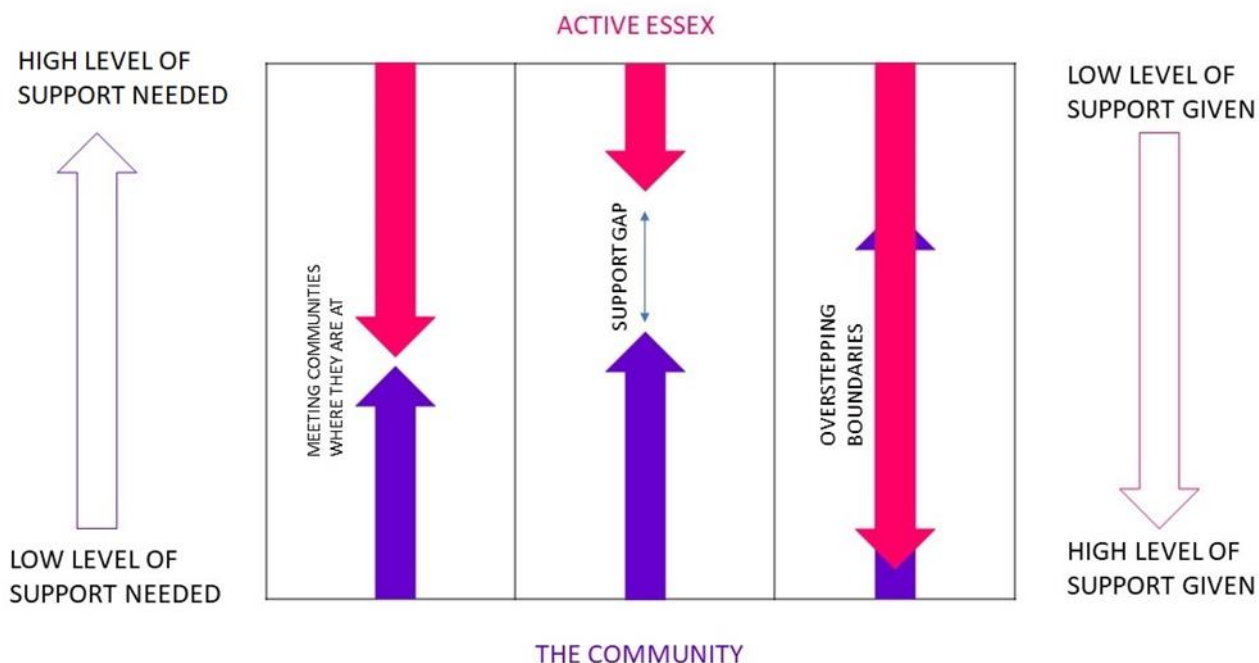
The quotes above suggest that relevance to communities needs to be at the core of all community development work. In fact, one AE staff member shared that if they had worked at a much more hyperlocal level, they would have garnered more trust and information. This again emphasises how complex communities can be and the need to appreciate the barriers faced. While Active Essex focuses on engaging communities in sport and physical activity, they cannot disregard that just because it is a priority for AE, does not mean it's a priority for communities. At times there may be a need to first address barriers wider than physical activity.

The quote from the locally trusted organisation above also indicates the benefits of working together *with* communities, contrary to the traditional helicopter approach.

## 2. What is joint effort working?

Kezar (2012) argues for convergence as opposed to a top-down approach. She defines convergence as “the joining of efforts between grassroots leaders and those in positions of authority and can happen in both directions” (Kezar, 2012 p.726). Kezar notes that an exclusively top-down approach leads to a lack of cognitive complexity in developing solutions, lack of buy-in, and danger of becoming leader dependent by those few in senior positions.

Active Essex frequently talk about “working at the speed of trust” but what does this mean? As discussed in the previous section, communities are not all the same. Consequently, if we are to work in a joint effort way with communities, this will look different for each community (and take different amounts of time and resource). Diagram 1 below aims to illustrate this relationship. As can be seen, the pink arrows within the box going down represent the level of support given by Active Essex to the communities it works with. The longer the arrow, the higher the level of support given (this could include increased time, application



### 3. Joint effort working is mutually beneficial

As discussed previously, in order to conduct effective joint-effort working, there is a need to understand the community in terms of demographics, culture, assets and skills. Two explanatory statements have been constructed that encapsulate both the importance of context-specific and joint effort working. While similar, the first focuses on the importance of being flexible with support offered to enable communities to take control of their opportunities over time. The second explanation recognises that both communities and Active Essex have assets that work better together than separately. Both ideas highlight how joint effort working is mutually beneficial and more effective than both top-down and bottom-up working. These theories also bear similarity with the microgrant explanation presented in the microgrants evaluation report which focused on working together by means of embedding a member of staff in the community. The microgrants programme is an example of a specific project celebrating place-based working and reflects the broader aim of Active Essex' attempts to influence ways of working with communities. However, since the programme has come to an end, Active Essex have taken some of the key learnings towards other work.

**Bespoke support** - *Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities because they are not context-specific. Not all communities are the same (for example, in terms of demographics, culture, assets, skills, enthusiasm to do things) and consequently need different levels of support to create physical activity opportunities. IF we can work in a 'joint effort' way with communities, with bespoke support (based on their wants and needs), THEN community groups will take ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity by embedding PA in the activities they are already doing BECAUSE there are the right incentives to do this (including but not limited to funding, moral support, resource) and they see that we are recognising their community's unique context.*

**Combining assets** - *Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities because they lack the relevance to communities. Not all communities are the same (for example, in terms of demographics, culture, assets, skills, enthusiasm to do things) and therefore have different wants and needs in relation to physical activity opportunities. IF we can work in a 'joint effort' way with communities, making use of our resources, skills & connections, and community's skills, assets, local knowledge and lived experience THEN, the physical activity opportunities created will be more relevant for the community BECAUSE context has been considered.*

Below are some examples of how joint effort working is working in Essex:

#### Working well

As discussed in Diagram 1, the ideal scenario of joint effort working is where Active Essex is able to fill in the gaps where communities need support, while also influencing communities to promote physical activity and provide opportunities for people to be active. Through working collaboratively and aligning the objectives of both AE and the community, it is possible to achieve positive outcomes, with the intention that community capacity would be built during this time. Active Essex would then be able to decrease or cease providing support because the community would be able to work together amongst themselves and have the knowledge and skills to know what to do if they needed further support. Although this is evidently a considerable task, there have been cases of success.

#### ➤ Microgrants Programme

The importance and impact of connectivity was explored in detail in the previous Process Learning Report so won't be focused on here, rather the focus is on what Active Essex brings to the table through influence. The ability to facilitate dialogue and connection highlights the social capital (a set of shared values or resources that allows people to work together, and the potential to obtain resources, favours or information through personal connections) that Active Essex possess and share. Kezar (2012) discusses the role of 'translators' as a means of presenting information which could be comparable to community-based roles within Active Essex (FYA Community Connectors, LDP Coordinators). Kezar's (2012) paper on types of leadership in a higher education setting found that translators played a key role in helping bottom-up leaders understand how to present ideas to leaders in positions of authority. Translators also communicated information up from the bottom and down from the top, this helped to facilitate dialogue that does not usually occur. We see this top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top communication in the microgrants programme where LDP Coordinators represented community projects to local decision panels and Sport England. We also see similar elements in ParkPlay and Essex Pedal Power (EPP) which have recruited knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and well-connected local experts into paid positions. Joint effort working works well because communities may not necessarily possess the ability or resources to act individually or collectively. In this case those higher up would need to take responsibility whilst also carrying the community with it (Kezar, 2012). This brokering of relationships between community members/Locally Trusted Organisations and other organisations and funders means that communities have someone on their side to advocate for them.

The Active Essex LDP Coordinator role was created to embed themselves in the communities they were working in (Colchester, Basildon and Tendring) to share the word of the LDP and work collaboratively with the community whilst leading the Microgrants Programme. The embedding began with a year of 'discovery' work which was central to build this understanding of the community.

*"You know you're not gonna get your results straight away because what you need to do is be on site, be facilitat[ing] all of that stuff to co-produce a project until you make it happen. And the only way that's going to be successful is if they're involved in that process. And you know, you're not flying in... but I think there are just different ways of doing it and it works."*  
[AE staff member]

As mentioned previously, it was also acknowledged that working with some groups and communities required a more top-down approach to begin with, particularly with those not used to being consulted with. The intention was to build capacity over time. This can be seen as a more flexible way of working and in theory more tailored to a community's knowledge, skills, needs and capacity. The Microgrants Programme is a good example of this flexibility. The emphasis on listening and understanding highlights the bespoke way that staff needed to work with community groups to provide the most appropriate support for them. The data collected showed that effective joint effort working was mutually beneficial for both Active Essex and communities, however it was acknowledged that this required a certain 'balance' that needed to be held or the relationship could fall apart:

*"It's a challenge because coproduction is a balance of dialogue and conversation and ideas shared between that party. I'll use Clarion Futures as an example where I have to make sure as a coproducer, I'm really representing their idea, but also carrying it in a way that fits with us, it's collaboration at its finest. And yes, you can hand that over to someone else, but a collaboration is chosen between the two parties, that's the working relationship, so if you change something, you can lose a dynamic."* [AE staff member]

Working together in this way means that both parties have their own responsibilities which need to be met to achieve outcomes. There was also a need to value what the other party had to offer. For example, Locally

Trusted Organisations identified that being associated with Active Essex helped to increase their influence, legitimacy, and awareness in the area.

*“It was quite nice as well to have another agency involved, which almost gave us a bit more clout when we were asking people to partner with us. It was nice to be able to say an independent agency that they've probably heard of as well was on board...”* [Locally Trusted Organisation]

In these cases, Active Essex was able to offer a level of support to Locally Trusted Organisation's (influence by association and the ability to share the word about Locally Trusted Organisation work) that they wanted or needed but did not have. This requires a level of trust and openness from the community. In some cases, the ability to connect people through influence was more important than the funding itself.

*“One person in particular who just needed permission to do her thing that she wanted to do, which was a community choir and working with people who had, like, COPD and breathing difficulties and things like that. And she didn't need money, she just needed somebody to say to her, you know, you could just go and do this... And I put her in touch with the Salvation Army and a different place to venue and things like that. So it was just about kind of connecting people... even though we didn't have any funding, none of that was wasted time.”* [AE Staff member]

### ➤ ParkPlay

ParkPlay is advertised as being run by the local community for the local community and is a good example of 'joint effort' working. In Basildon it has worked successfully due to the partnership between the Active Partnership, the Local Authority and a Locally Trusted Organisation who are embedded in the community and have been able to identify the 'right' people as PlayLeaders.

PlayLeaders are supported by the central team with necessary governance such as DBS checks, insurance, safeguarding and permissions. It is hard to see how local people would be able to operate in such a safe way if they were not associated with ParkPlay or perhaps some other organisation willing to do these things. They are also offered training to build both their capacity and confidence. Since the inception of ParkPlay, the central team have learned that there is a need to be flexible for it to work:

*“We've realised too that we need to have some red lines but they need to be quite wide – so as long as ParkPlay is safe and welcoming it looks very different in different places. So as an organisation we have to be quite hands off and allow that to flourish.”* [ParkPlay Staff Member]

They now aim to consider at the beginning what is going to work in that community and be sustainable, as well as what the assets and resources are. As with other Active Essex interventions, we have seen that it is not possible to 'scale & replicate' without thought for the context. For example, the positive working relationship with ATF as a delivery partner was identified as a success and this model was used in other areas. However, even when the organisations chosen were embedded in the community as ATF is, they saw it more as any other paid opportunity, taking the money and using a portion of it to pay a young sports coach to deliver a session on a Saturday morning. In contrast, ATF had embedded ParkPlay into their wider work, and encourage their PlayLeaders to take ownership by delivering sessions in a way that suits and responds to the needs of those who are attending. (Please see ParkPlay evaluation report for further detail).

### ➤ Basildon Community Involvement Network (CIN)

The Basildon CIN is another successful example of joint effort working well. It was funded to bring together community development practitioners twice a year. Active Essex supported by spreading the word of the network and helping to arrange and invite people to events. Since LDP funding came to an end last year, the chair of the network decided that the group would continue to meet and procure funding from elsewhere because they found benefit in getting together. The chair also shared that they would continue to feature organisations promoting physical activity - despite no longer being required to. The CIN has proved to be a successful example of joint effort working for Active Essex, however, this is largely due to the working group having the capacity, knowledge and skills already and the support required from Active Essex was used and built on to the point where it is no longer necessary. An evaluation report for the network concluded that if the CIN were to be replicated it would look different in other areas depending on who and what assets the community possessed.

### Support Gap

A key finding from evaluation work regarding joint effort working is that it only works if both sides are willing partners and see the value of working together. A support gap may present itself if communities refuse to accept support. Not all those that Active Essex offered support to were open to accepting it, with some preferring to take a more independent or bottom-up approach. While it is not necessary for all bottom-up efforts to fail, Baxter (2019) notes that advocates of bottom-up heavy approaches may not be acknowledging that communities may not have the capacity or power to influence factors contributing to improving their resilience. Refusing to accept support while lacking certain skills, knowledge and experience however can result in unsuccessful outcomes for both. The most extreme example of this was seen at the Jaywick Sands community forum.

### ➤ Jaywick Sands Community Forum

As part of the LDP initiative, AE trialled a small grants programme with Jaywick Sands Community Forum where the forum was given full control of allocating funds to the community to conduct physical activity projects following completion of applications - which the forum were also able to design. This was working successfully until the chair of the forum sadly passed away. This led to another individual taking her place (without an AGM taking place) and making his wife treasurer. An AE staff member engaged in discussion with the new chair, to decide how they would like to use the money, when it was decided to invest it in gardening equipment that could be lent out to the community. The staff member recognised that the applications submitted were of low quality while requesting the maximum amount of funding. The staff member offered advice but was dismissed.

*“... it just seemed to be the forum constantly applying for everything for themselves... Fast forward to January of last year and he applied for some boxing equipment again through the forum and I encouraged him to apply through the Together Fund to have some free sessions for people to come along to take part in these boxing... so night one of the boxing... Loads of kids there, loads of parents. There [was a] really great buzz from this boxing that was happening... And I've been saying to [the new chair] that he needed to think about how he was going to make this sustainable... either a pay what you can, have a donation thing... he did not take the advice. The boxing equipment then got stolen, but it didn't actually get stolen and they were kicked out of the pub because they didn't pay the fee for renting the room. So that fee that we'd covered as part of our funding and which [new chair] said that*

*he'd given the money to the guy... [he] hadn't paid it... Boxing equipment then turned up in somebody's lock up somewhere and has then since been in somebody else's garage ever since. Just sat there doing nothing... I've since found out through the lottery that [new chair] was transferring money from the forum into his own bank account to be able to buy things because the bank account [was] cheque book only and he needed to buy things online..."*  
[AE Staff member]

The same individual was then elected local councillor and was keen to attribute success in local projects to himself.

*"...he was doing all that stuff to say, look at me I'm amazing. And you know, it was all about a shiny photograph for him next to the gardening equipment that nobody ever saw or is all about the boxing was really successful..."* [AE Staff member]

While extreme, the example shows how simply distributing leadership, (particularly to those who do not have good intentions) is not always the answer and how a joint effort approach would have been more appropriate. This however would require both sides to be engaged and willing, which can be a challenge. The resulting support gap means that the broader community misses out.

### ➤ **Microgrants programme**

Although the Microgrants programme has been praised for the high level of bespoke support to applicants, there is also evidence to suggest that communities are facing a support gap which is not being filled by Active Essex. This can be explained by our lack of capacity which results in only being able to offer 'kick-starter' support. As one AE staff member stated:

*"I think it's very difficult for things that are around the £2,500 mark to become sustainable unless we really label it as a Kickstarter fund, that's all it is. I think a lot of the time it's kind of fingers crossed that you'll be able to catalyse a group. But most recently I have been going back to Sport England, saying, you know, once funding has finished, they're either gonna have to seek other funding because there's no way that you can ask to charge, you know, you're looking at moving something that is subsidised to having some kind of income or profit base, even if it's kind of just breaking even..."* [AE staff member]

This suggests a need for more clarity around expectations about what is reasonably achievable through microgrants given the small amount of funding, as well as general Active expectations from a community perspective. Locally Trusted Organisations and community members running projects can struggle to ask for money from fellow community members to take part. Sustainability potential of projects is more likely when the money is used as a one-time purchase, for instance for tools or equipment to support physical activity. This is convenient because funding is no longer needed for maintenance. Comparatively, examples where funding is needed for regular upkeep, maintenance or rent is less likely to last.

However, as discussed earlier, at times, some groups may value ongoing support more than ongoing funding. In this instance, one-off funding may be manageable if funding is not the only requirement of the groups. All microgrant recipients that were spoken to spoke highly of LDP Coordinators who introduced and supported them to acquire microgrant funding. The support provided was hugely appreciated on a personal and professional level. Consequently, when this support was taken away following acquirement of the funding, the absence was felt, with many recipients reporting that they would have appreciated ongoing support or frequent check-ins. As there was only one LDP Coordinator per allocated area, this limited capacity prevented



them from providing continued support because the focus was on introducing the microgrant opportunity to more individuals and groups. For many microgrants recipients, this was their first attempt at offering a service for fellow community members, as such they did not possess the skills, knowledge, or experience to know what it takes to do it until they found themselves in this position.

*“Once I got the money... I wished I'd had more help from someone that understood money more than I did... it worked alright in the end, but I really could have done with some support at that point. Just business support, just how to make things work, you know?” [Microgrant Recipient]*

Although recipients learned how to manage their projects through “trial and error”, pulling away this support can risk the project falling apart entirely. As noted in the quote below, AE staff acknowledged that capacity was a barrier. Despite attempts to reach out to recipients, evidently there was a gap in what support recipients needed and what AE had the capacity to offer. Both staff and microgrant recipients alike referred to the importance of having business knowledge and the awareness of how to market a project.

*“I suppose the biggest barrier to that is just my capacity. Three weeks ago I sent out a checkout e-mail to everybody saying just finding out where you're at... what's happening? Have you got any more funding needs? If you got any more ideas based on what you've learned from this?” [AE staff member]*

*“Anybody that gets a grant should do a how to promote themselves course because people don't know... whether that's on social media or wherever, and if they don't understand that, you know, and the basics of the marketing.” [AE staff member]*

AE do not claim to have the answer to sustainability; however, it was recognised that it was a big challenge for community groups, with some not knowing how to achieve this without frequently returning to AE for more funding. This reliance on AE for multiple small pots of funding would inevitably cause issues for community groups when AE is unable to support.

*“I know there are some that started off with only £2000 and they're still going to this day and this was like a year and a half ago. So, there are some that are sustaining in terms of their physical activity [the] difference that they've made, there are some that have done their 12 weeks completed that, that project ended. They then wanted to get to another funding pot from an AE funding pot to continue it... you see a lot of organisations doing a lot of good work with only a small budget, whether that's sustaining, I'm not sure.” [AE staff member]*

## Over-stepping boundaries

### ➤ Sport England's role in the Microgrants Programme

The purpose of joint effort working with community members and groups is to build capacity in the community to the point where they can take full ownership themselves. This is a considerable expectation, particularly from socioeconomically deprived communities and does not always work out. AE needs community engagement in the form of ideas, local knowledge, and experience. Without engagement, the relationship would be one-sided. More importantly, communities themselves know what they need more than those more detached. This is why local leaders and Locally Trusted Organisation's play such a crucial role as 'cultural intermediaries' (this will be further explored later in the report). The LDP-funded Microgrants Programme involved AE staff identifying community members with ideas, coproducing applications for small

amount of funding, before submitting applications to a local decision-making panel, made up of local people, who then submitted successful applications to Sport England. *In theory*, having a local decision-making panel puts local people in a position of control and responsibility. The quotes below are from various microgrants decision-making panel members:

*“So when I look at applications, I'm looking at it in two different ways really. And I look at it as a local Harwich resident and then I also look at it as in a work head as well, so obviously I work for Family Solutions. We work with a lot of vulnerable families, and I always think, OK, what is it that our families need? Will they go to this?”*

*“There are certain things you just [know] that wouldn't work here, and certain things that could work here and things that you know will work here...”*

However, despite the work and time that panel members put towards the programme, and despite the perception that this way of working allowed local people to have a say in their community, their role was not always adding anything to the process and was arguably tokenistic.

*“I think the whole thing is that, that they're (applications) coproduced, you know with [AE staff] they don't kind of get too many that get rejected if that makes sense because they've been if you like probably sifted at the point of talking to (AE staff member) before they get to that point.”* [Microgrants decision making panel member]

*“In Colchester, we are an investment panel made-up of representatives from our priority audiences... we will collectively discuss the microgrant... But ultimately whether it succeeds or not will sit with Sport England... it might as well just go straight to Sport England.”* [Microgrants decision making panel member]

The quotes above suggest that decisions are largely already made before reaching the panel because AE staff would only put forward applications that would be taken well by the panel. If AE staff are already doing this, then what is the purpose of the panel? In addition to this, the role of the panel is further minimised when forwarding the applications to Sport England. Despite Active Essex's intention to work in a joint effort way, Sport England still possesses the most control and final say on whether a project is worthy of funding. This means that if Sport England do not see the benefit of a project, even if the community does, then it will not be taken forward. For example, Sport England does not agree with food or gardening initiatives due to the inability to see the link between food, sport and overall wellbeing. This limits the funding of projects to what Sport England deem acceptable; *“We are gatekeeping somehow, in Essex, a particular type of project”* [AE staff member]. Several microgrant recipients and AE staff alike felt the Microgrants Programme was unnecessarily convoluted by having a “two tier sign off process”.

*“If I realised it would take this long and was so convoluted with, you know, the backwards and forwards process, I probably would have applied to another pot.”* [MG recipient]

The evidence suggests that the process was still facilitating a top-down way of working. While the applications were coproduced, the extra layer of the decision panel was not useful. This also illustrates the limit to which joint effort working is possible if the funder is not part of it. This led to AE creating their own small grants programme in the form of Find Your Active (FYA), with the aim of getting money out faster with simpler application forms. While this has indeed made the process less complicated, it no longer includes the aspect of coproduction which allowed non-traditional applicants to apply because staff were seeking them out.

### ➤ Trust Links' Greening Basildon project

Working within a top-down context has offered challenges where local councils were not on board. As can be seen in the final panel in Diagram 1, individuals in senior leadership positions have prevented communities from reaching their full potential by overstepping boundaries. This suggests that the power and influence that AE possess may not, in some cases, be sufficient to convince senior leadership to let go of control and highlights the challenges of working in a political environment.

A recent evaluation of Basildon based Locally Trusted Organisation- Trust Link's Greening Basildon project encapsulates some of the challenges Locally Trusted Organisation's can come up against (NSMC, October 2023). The objective of the project is for Trust Links to work with local residents to improve the street scene and biodiversity of Basildon's most deprived estates. By doing so, it aims to improve community cohesion, reducing loneliness, and improving both the mental and physical health of participants.

This has involved working with the Parks division of Basildon Council to develop a project where the local community restores the neglected Mediterranean Garden in Northlands Park next to the Felmores Estate.



Since it launched in October 2022, the project has faced the major challenge of agreeing suitable locations on the three estates for the greening work to take place. By July 2023 only one site had been identified and a project launched in the Felmores Estate. This delay is mainly down to uncertainty over the land ownership of possible greening sites and means that sites owned by Essex County Council cannot be used. Basildon Council has also raised concerns about the ongoing maintenance costs of any new green areas.

Overall, Trust Links has found handling the delay very challenging, and although formal agreements with Basildon Council have now been established, they believe that these should have been in place before the launch, and note this has delayed the project by around six months. Trust Links also believes that despite reporting these challenges to funders, they have not been well supported in dealing with them.

The project has suffered from insufficient stakeholder engagement with the key players (especially certain sectors within Basildon Council), prior to its approval. The land ownership issues along with the higher costs that Basildon Council may face in maintaining the green spaces make this a more complex project than originally envisaged and it is surprising that these issues were not identified during project inception and flagged as a risk.

### Recommendations

1. AE should **recognise and celebrate the differences between communities** in order to offer more tailored support. As evidenced in the paper, tailored support would look different for different communities and groups, whether they require more intensive (including frequent check-ins, application feedback, business support and advice etc.) or light-touch support (such as infrequent check-ins). This allows communities to receive the support that they want and need with the intention that over time their capacity would be built to the point where external support is no longer needed or needed less.

2. AE should **engage in genuine joint-effort working and demonstrate this intention to communities** so that communities see the benefits in engaging and working together towards a common goal.

3. AE should consider **facilitating business support (such as marketing, governance) to alongside small grants funding**, this could be using skillsets within the team if there is capacity and the skills exist, or with external support. This would help funding recipients to feel more confident and increase the chances of project sustainability.

4. External bodies such as SE should **avoid unnecessary 'red tape' on offers to the community** as this can waste time and effort and prevent future engagement

5. AE should provide support to communities by **liaising with funders/senior leadership regarding community project intentions** sooner to prevent delays and challenge down the line.

### Working with compassion

From	To	Changes
<p>The initial assumption was: <i>Top-down approaches have no been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities.</i>  <i>Consequently, IF we can distribute leadership to the local community, THEN they will take responsibility for an ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity. This is BECAUSE they have local experience, meaning they understand the needs and wants of their local community.</i></p>	<p><b>Working with compassion</b> - Traditional ways of working have led to transactional working relationships between those in power and communities. We need to work differently to increase understanding and awareness of PA and its benefits. IF we can embed staff into communities who work with patience and compassion by first looking to understand communities THEN we will have a more trusting and genuine relationship with the community and increase the chances of embedding PA into the community. This is BECAUSE communities require compassion, and we need to prove that we understand and appreciate their lived experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The new explanation recognises that the importance of quality of relationships is key to engaging communities.</li> <li>• The original assumption did not state what AE's role would be in achieving outcomes, whereas the new explanation acknowledges what action needs to take place and why this is effective.</li> <li>• The new explanation focuses on the importance of kindness and compassion and challenges traditional ways of working.</li> </ul>

### Working with local leaders

From	To	Changes
<p>The initial assumption was: <i>Top-down approaches have no been successful in encouraging physical activity in local communities.</i>  <i>Consequently, IF we can</i></p>	<p><b>Working with local leaders</b> - Neither top-down or bottom-up working have been successful in encouraging PA in the communities we work with. As a result of this history, there is a lack of trust on both sides: those in power are hesitant to let go of control, and communities may lack the capacity to take control.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The new explanation acknowledges that neither top-down or bottom-up working is right for community development and the reasons for this.</li> </ul>

<p><i>distribute leadership to the local community, THEN they will take responsibility for an ownership of creating opportunities to reduce physical inactivity. This is BECAUSE they have local experience, meaning they understand the needs and wants of their local community.</i></p>	<p>However, there is trust and respect for local leaders and organisations. IF we can identify &amp; invest in local leaders and organisations, and work collaboratively with them as cultural intermediaries who have access to a diversity of groups, THEN by extension we too will have access to more of the community. We will be able to build trust and influence more of the community, creating a ripple effect. This is BECAUSE local leaders are keyholders to the community. Working with them makes it easier for the community to trust us by extension because reputation is important to communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The original assumption did not recognise the importance of trust between local government and communities.</li> <li>• The new explanation recognises the importance of working with local leaders and how this can benefit AE due to the importance of trust and reputation in communities.</li> <li>• This takes away the pressure of relinquishing full responsibility to communities and a focus on working together.</li> </ul>
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## Key findings

### 1. Building trust and relationships

The concept of trust and the importance of building it regularly comes up in discourse surrounding community development. Trust is closely linked to the tension working in both top-down and bottom-up ways. Part of this tension is over what is the right way to work and whether AE is achieving this. Historically top-down working has been most prevalent, with some elements of this still existing in current work, particularly with larger projects (e.g. Essex Pedal Power). Traditional ways of working present a distant, impersonal relationship between communities and funders, with most communication taking place over email and phone. It is likely that over time this has developed an ‘us Vs them’ mentality with neither side being empathetic or trusting to the other due to lack of understanding of how they work and the challenges they face. Transitioning to a more equal level between AE and the community is challenging due to the history because many community members have not been asked for their opinion before and therefore are unsure how to navigate a different way of working.

*“... some people in the community still want somebody to be accountable to or get permission from that this is OK and that I can apply for this, that I'm worthy of applying for this because if we're looking at our priority audiences, many of them have never been given that voice before...” [AE staff member]*

In cases where communities have not been asked for their opinion before, there is a need for those in positions of authority to show compassion. In many cases, imposing a full bottom-up approach on communities may be beyond their capacity. Bottom-up approaches tend to be locally focused efforts by members and groups to influence policy and practice. This collective community action involves relatively small-scale local attempts to negotiate with authority figures and initiate what they feel would be beneficial to the community. In this case, the community tends to be more responsive and active in participation and completion of the projects (Isidiho and Sabran, 2016). However, as noted by Baxter (2019), advocates of bottom-up heavy approaches may not be acknowledging that communities may not have the capacity or power to influence factors contributing to improving their resilience.

The role of LDP Coordinators has been key to developing closer relationships and trust with communities. Coordinators introduced and embedded themselves in communities by asking what they want and showing

interest in their needs and aspirations before offering support if relevant. The discovery phase was effective in gaining an understanding of what each area offered. Joint effort working enhanced the relationship between AE and community groups during the Microgrants Programme rather than being seen as “just another consultation”.

To enable a more authentic relationship it is necessary to not hold expectations from every meeting nor rush communities to come to decisions to meet AE objectives. Staff acknowledged that this kind of relationship building takes time and effort that could be seen as “disproportionate for the amount of money given”, but essential to build capacity and confidence.

*“...it could take up to six, you know, meetings over a coffee at first sight and before that person was ready to submit... It's not about us hurrying it through and making sure that it's done by month end. It's actually working with that person to get their ideas out into the community, so it takes time.”* [AE staff member]

Part of the reason it can take as long as it does to persuade communities to take responsibility is due to a fear that communities cannot be trusted or do not have the knowledge to know what to do with responsibility. This may be due to lack of trust and faith in the community, there have been mixed experiences with how communities have dealt with responsibility. Equally, some in communities may not think themselves to be capable of either.

*“Handing over almost the keys to the community, that's really difficult because you don't know whether they have the expertise. You don't know whether they have the knowledge, they don't know what they're actually gonna do to that money because they won't have a bank account that's not attached to themselves as a person... I don't know whether anybody has completely cracked that to my knowledge, I know there are a few funds out there that do that and I think obviously it just follows the traditional funding model of funding sort of constituted groups which is fine, that's not a negative tool.”* [Microgrants decision making panel member]

As mentioned in the quote above, one way of getting around the difficulties transferring funds to single individuals is by working with and through formally constituted groups. While there are many successful examples of this (to be explored in the following section), even this requires a level of trust. Examples such as the Jaywick Sands Community Forum feed into the idea that community members cannot be trusted. Similarly, due the negative perception of ‘council workers’ as being untrustworthy, unrelatable, and unable to commit to their word, AE staff reported being viewed with suspicion initially. Recipients (and potential recipients) were open to listening to what LDP Coordinators had to offer because Coordinators had proved themselves by investing time getting to know the community.

*“[I] think if I was an outsider, an unknown, they'd probably be really suspicious, but because I've done the legwork in the area, they were aware of who I was”* [AE staff member]

This discovery phase also allowed AE to determine who they could trust based on “local knowledge”. Staff stated that the knowledge gained during this time has been used to contribute to decisions for FYA applications. Applications from “people we don’t know or never heard of” are less likely to be approved as quickly as those who are well known to AE. The disadvantage of this approach is that lesser-known individuals may miss out on the opportunity to receive funding.

*“I wish that we could have taken a bit more of a risk with some of them [microgrant applications] as well. And as I say, funded, Dave, I don't know who Dave is, as an example funded Dave down the pub to do something...”* [AE staff member]

There is a clear conflict between investing in trustworthy community initiatives while ensuring community input is not excluded in the process. Given that an aim of the LDP is to test and learn, there is evidently a level of resistance (perhaps for good reason) to fully trusting the community to do as they please.

Krabbe (2015) conducted a case study investigating the use of ambivalent trust via negotiated exchange in a community exchange programme. The study found that trust was essential for sustainability since it was the only way humans can interact to ensure basic needs are met. Reputation can help to build generalised trust using third-party verification of trustworthiness. Krabbe notes that the fundamental requirement in any currency system is to assure reciprocity, where participants must provide as much value to the community as they take (Krabbe, 2015). This emphasises how mutually necessary the discovery phase was for AE's understanding of the communities they worked with and who they can trust, as well as working to reassure the community that AE is supportive, trustworthy, and accessible.

AE staff identified the importance of face-to-face interaction to build trust and relationships. This allowed them to become "familiar faces" on the ground that community members felt comfortable approaching with ideas. Krabbe (2015) notes that face-to-face relationships are at the core of developing interpersonal trust in communities, and taking part in social interaction based activities can also increase trust levels between people and increase their ability to integrate for a shared purpose (Bachmann, 2001; Hall, 1999). Working in this way meant that recipients felt understood and made them consider incorporating physical activity into their work when they otherwise may not have.

*"... by making the process so easy, I just think that the people involved in Active Essex and the LDP, they just seem to get it, get what's kind of needed on the front line. So, before that we [weren't] looking to perhaps actively put exercise programs... we probably [weren't] going down that road but suddenly now we're researching..." [Microgrant recipient]*

Encouraging communities who did not participate in traditional physical activity opportunities to incorporate physical activity into their work worked particularly effectively when physical activity was not imposed by AE staff to be the main outcome of community projects. For example, after achieving success with her first microgrant, Elizabeth from the Divine Ministries church approached Active Essex with another microgrant idea to facilitate social connection between women who felt isolated following lockdown. Elizabeth was able to start a running group for the women which met both hers and AE objectives. If she had not had a good relationship with AE, she would not have returned with an idea. Elizabeth is one of many examples who successfully incorporated physical activity in their work and experienced positive outcomes to justify keeping it going.

Initiating trusting relationships with local people and groups as opposed to transactional ways of working has resulted in being seen as "not like a council worker" suggesting that 'council worker' has certain negative connotations.

*"People tell me off record that myself and colleagues are visible, we're accessible. I've had somebody say to me you're not like other council workers where you're sat behind a desk and you know, it's like almost like a firewall. Before we get through to you, you are somebody who, if we pick up the phone or drop an e-mail, you're there. You're one of us. And I think that's what makes LDP microgrants different." [AE staff member]*

As one recipient stated, "you feel like you have a relationship with your funder". Recipients reported feeling a new sense of confidence and inspiration with the support and funding received to think about their projects long term.

## 2. Working with compassion

As discussed, there is a need to acknowledge that people living in deprived areas often live multifaceted lives. Physically activity may not be a priority for them, particularly traditional sport and physical activity opportunities. Consequently, there is a need to work more compassionately. One microgrants recipient shared her experience working with AE staff:

*"... it was just complete understanding. And I think for me as a one-woman organisation with a huge passion to improve outcomes for children to have somebody go; you know what? That's fine, I can't compete with the big guns.... If every funder provided a level of support to such a high standard that was non-intrusive, I would apply for a lot more."*  
[Microgrants recipient]

*"I could meet with an unusual suspect, half a dozen or more times before they actually put anything on paper for a number of reasons. And they may not feel they're eligible or worthy of an investment or why would you fund an organization like mine...."* [AE staff member]

The quotes above display the reassurance and patience shown by the LDP coordinator. Showing compassion for people and seeing them as living, breathing individuals with multifaceted lives as opposed to simply a recipient of funding has helped to foster a different kind of relationship that has resulted in the recipient feeling more willing to take up future opportunities.

Part of embodying a kind and compassionate way of working is accepting that physical activity is not the answer to all the problems communities face and therefore cannot be imposed, nor would others feel as inclined to work with AE if this was the case. It is important to appreciate what else communities offer. The Basildon CIN is a good example of this.

*"I also don't think we'd get all the partners in the room if it was just physical activity either. So I think it's a fine balance that we've always had to play. I think we started off really physical activity and then we've started to embed other things, but I think that's been a positive... if we were just harping on about physical activity day in, day out, they'll just say, well, you know that's not our remit or we can't do this cause you have funding, they'll just find the barriers to it. So, I think it's enabled us to be a bit more sustained."* [AE staff member]

In part, this reflects an ability to work smarter to support sustainability of the network but also a level of openness and understanding to what the community wants and needs. CIN events consist of presentations from a range of community development organisations, charities and housing associations. Given the wide range of attendees at the CIN, it is reasonable that if physical activity was imposed more strongly, then the turnout would be different. The agendas showed many examples of physical activity being spoken about directly, for example, The Working Well Programme (Physical and Mental Health & Fitness in the Workplace), Dance on Prescription, and ParkPlay. Physical activity could also be presented in more subtle, indirect ways, for example, BOSP (Brighter Opportunities for Special People) a special needs charity presented at a CIN event about the work they do providing fun activities for children and young people with disabilities/life limiting conditions. At first glance, this would not be immediately associated with physical activity. However, listening to the work they do, it could be argued that they are offering fun physical activity opportunities for a group that may be unable to access more traditional physical activity opportunities. In such cases, physical activity may be a secondary outcome but potentially a more effective way to work with those facing barriers to being active. This more compassionate approach could be seen as more sustainably incorporating physical activity into deprived communities by introducing them to the benefits of physical activity in a more 'light



touch' way. Collaborate CIC (2023) state that spreading practice beyond its original intended purpose makes it useful for other purposes as well as securing a legacy for efforts to increase physical activity.

Willingness to progress with the microgrants application was also increased with the hand-held support offered by LDP coordinators through the process.

*"She was just engaging. She automatically said, you know, this may be right up your path. I will support you any way that I can. She gave feedback on [the application] before I submitted it, she gave me ideas of other areas that I could probably think of as well. And she was just a supportive network. And, you know, even now we still have that contact and that detail from her. And she emails me about other bits and pieces of monies that are coming through. So, she just built up that rapport in a really gentle, unassuming way that was really supportive. It was lovely, she was brilliant at it."* [Microgrant recipient]

The quote above emphasises how crucial the LDP Coordinator role was to the Microgrants Programme because of how they chose to work. The quote also suggests that some level of communication between the Coordinators and microgrant recipients continues beyond receipt of funds. For many, the Coordinators served as an external voice of support, someone to turn to.

LDP Coordinators supported potential microgrant recipients by nurturing and helping make sense of ideas so they could be fully realised. They worked in a judgement-free way and allowed recipients to present themselves in a way that was comfortable for them and brought out the best in them. A good example of this is allowing a potential recipient to apply via video because she was dyslexic and did not feel as comfortable writing. Staff contrasted their slow and steady approach with the alternative, or more traditional helicopter approach where relationships were more transactional. Without compassion, many in the community with knowledge, skills and expertise in delivery would miss out, as would AE. It is also a more inclusive approach.

Despite the value in embedding staff into communities to foster relationships, the Microgrants Programme and LDP Coordinator contract came to an end in March 2023. This was a very time intensive role for a relatively small amount of money. Before the programme had come to an end, AE's Find Your Active (FYA) grant programme was already in place, which had contributed to the decrease in Microgrant applications because FYA was seen as easier to apply to. At this point, some felt that the loss of the programme had limited impact because FYA was able to take its place, *without* the red tape applied by Sport England. This allows AE more control in deciding who is approved for funding. FYA has a shorter, simpler application form without submission to a panel or support from dedicated AE staff such as the LDP Coordinators. This has led to concern by some that there is a lack of local support for who need it, and whether the missing compassion and kindness would mean a return to transactional ways of working where community members who would not apply without support, no longer apply. The majority of FYA applications have been received by those already known to AE.

*"I really don't think we've given enough thought over taking this role away. And I understand in principle why they want to take it away and put it more in Basildon because they don't want there to be a reliance on that role is going to end in it either now or 2025, but I do think the one thing that we're gonna really struggle at support is microgrants going forward. I think between like the rest of the LDP working group I think we can pick up some of the bigger investments, but they're not gonna be a dealt with as quickly as [LDP Coordinator] has been able to do it. I do really feel that we're just gonna go back to transactional conversation with microgrants application[s], we say yay, nay, and that's all it is. And I think [LDP Coordinator] [has] given a lot more."* [AE staff member]

### 3. Working through local leaders

We have already discussed the benefits of joint effort working as opposed to top-down, and even bottom-up working. Kezar (2012) noted that a broader leadership approach can lead to unique solutions and ideas due to the increased expertise at hand, improved buy-in and consensus and a greater passion for change. To achieve the best of both worlds in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities of both AE and communities, AE has recognised the benefits to working through local leaders and locally trusted organisations. Due to AE's desire to focus energy and investment on local leaders or 'cultural intermediaries', they purposefully chose not to widely advertise the microgrants offer, but rather to embed staff in the community to identify potential recipients first hand. AE did not want already wealthy clubs in the areas to apply for this funding. Part of the justification for working with untapped local leaders and organisations is to have access to marginalised or vulnerable groups that would not ordinarily have access to funding opportunities.

*"... the coproduction element really increases the accessibility to wider audience from people who may not have moved forward towards any form of funding. And in terms of the inclusivity of the various different areas of the community, who would probably find even greater difficulty without that coproduction."* [Microgrant decision making panel member]

*"... it's the diversity of the leaders that you work with... Finding trusted voices in the communities we're calling those people sticky people as well because you're using their expertise for particular key population groups or, you know, physical assets as well..."* [AE staff member]

AE have identified that cultural intermediaries (more casually referred to as 'sticky people' within AE) can attract people. While these individuals were not aligned to the LDP agenda, it made sense for AE to make connections with them to capitalise on their potential as keyholders or gatekeepers to the communities they live in. Consequently, staff locate themselves where they expect local leaders to be before striking up a conversation, looking for room for collaboration- *"I piggyback on their events to meet those people"*. Staff found that these local leaders were either already doing work that AE could easily align itself with, or they wanted to but lacked the resources to realise their ideas. As representatives of the people who live in their communities, supporting the local leaders to realise their ideas encapsulates the ABCD message. We see this with Essex Pedal Power Coordinators and Find Your Active Community Connectors who live and breathe with the communities they work with and may be seen as more approachable because they do not represent the council.

Speaking to some of the local leaders who had received microgrant funding, it was clear that they understood their 'clientele' very well in terms of barriers and were aware of why they did or did not have good engagements in their projects. The knowledge they had is not a resource that could have been gained by helicoptering in to offer support to the community.

***"Interviewer: Do you think Microgrants helps to engage groups we might call the unusual suspects? So essentially, people who don't engage with traditional types of physical activity or sport?"***

*"Our session is for those with dementia and their carers... [community] are saying that there's not many sessions for both the carer and the person with dementia. So, it's quite a niche thing. ... I don't think they would be accessing exercise in any other format. Probably purely from the logistics of things. There's one couple who come the gentleman got dementia and his wife has also got cancer. So, their life revolves around hospital*

*appointments and things like that. And I think coming into the library for our guided session is accessible to them, whereas they would never go to the gym or maybe not even go for a walk.” [Microgrant recipient]*

Local leaders have already made the time and effort to understand their communities and offer services to them. Consequently, they have already built trusting relationships. It is in AE’s best interests to work with and through these people to reach AE objectives. We have discussed the lack of trust that communities can have for those outside of their community and even within communities there can be tension. It appears that the default position, in some communities, is distrust, unless they know of you already. This highlights the importance of reputation and image in communities.

*“I think those people [are] trusted and recognised by the local community so it's not somebody they don't know. I think that's really important for a lot of projects and rather than somebody coming from outside of community and saying, come on, we're gonna do this. If you've got somebody who's already well known and trusted, recognized, respected and so on, which is the whole ethos of the ABCD approach.” [Microgrants decision panel member]*

AE LDP Coordinators working collaboratively with trusted local leaders helps to create a positive image of AE, by extension, to the community. This in addition to the time invested in the discovery phase tells the community that AE is not interested in helicopter support but is genuinely interested in knowing and understanding the communities needs and wants by supporting those who know it best - local leaders. In theory it makes more sense to invest in local leaders rather than embedding staff from the outside who will be pulled away.

There was evidence to suggest that if a project was successful in engaging people, this contributed to positive reputation and the potential to create a ripple effect in the community and beyond. Microgrant recipients and decision maker panel members noted that a microgrant could be seen as a form of inspiration to push other community members to not only start similar initiatives in their own communities but also to motivate them to realise their own ideas.

*“There's almost a domino effect... from my own experience, I was given a microgrant, I learned how to deliver yoga to children, I built that into my sessions. Those sessions have become popular and have received exposure in other areas and potentially inspired other people to do the same...they take that experience, or perhaps somebody even somewhere like on another part of the country or somewhere else in the world. I've been messaged, oh, how do you do this? What do you do? So then I'm delivering that knowledge sharing that knowledge and experience with other people and it's gone further than just.” [Microgrants decision panel member]*

As discussed earlier in the report, this helps to raise Locally Trusted Organisation awareness in the area, and more local leaders coming forward helps to “underpin the whole area”. This benefits AE, Sport England and other external bodies because it means the community will take care of itself by turning to their own leaders rather than relying on or burdening external bodies.

A key observation and benefit of working with local leaders is how much they care about their communities, arguably more than anyone who would come from outside the community. The level of passion and care displayed suggests that communities are in good hands.

*“She just has the energy that is needed for an event like that, she galvanises people together and without [her], it wouldn't have been the success it has.” [AE staff member]*

*"I think community development practitioners always have the community at heart."* [CIN working group member]

While AE works with local leaders as a means of conducting joint-effort work in the community, this is limited to formally constituted groups. This limits the level of genuine grassroots leadership taking place because people in this position would not be supported. To ensure AE's safety, there is a preference for working with "the middle level".

*"... if we're talking about sort of real grassroots community leadership, I don't think the ELDP microgrant particularly achieves that and it's understandable because it's not that risk positive and I don't think potentially any grant possibly could ever be."* [Microgrants decision panel member]

This begs the question of whether grassroots voices are being heard at all, particularly when AE focus on "where the energy is" as opposed to perhaps where it is needed but does not currently exist. The assumption is the local leaders are representatives of their communities as cultural intermediaries, however, we cannot guarantee that those seldom heard are being acknowledged. The requirement of being attached to a constituted group may be argued as being too restrictive and consequently deter people from working with AE. AE staff who work closely with communities may also seek out some of these individuals to hear their voices and take the cultural intermediary role. However, staff reported not having the opportunity to "internally feed those conversations back up". If staff do not feel they have the opportunity to have their voices heard, this makes it harder to consider that those in the grassroots would. Due to the desire to stick to the "middle level", local residents are not being invited into spaces where their voices can be heard. While the microgrants programme worked harder to bring these voices out, restrictions remained. The FYA programme not working with the community to seek out lesser heard voices (via LDP Coordinators) provides further restrictions.

There was also evidence to show where investing in local people did not result in a ripple effect. It is possible a local leader's success at leading could be their own downfall, where the community becomes so reliant on the leader that when the leader is not there, then neither is the project. In such cases, the "change" starts and ends with the local leader. This presents a genuine challenge for communities, particularly if external bodies such as AE begin to reduce support because they feel investing in local leaders and organisations is sufficient.

## Recommendations

1. AE should continue positive examples of working with the community by investing time in **working with kindness and compassion**. This is essential to engaging those who would not engage in traditional PA opportunities.
2. AE should **engage local people by offering more than just opportunities to increase physical activity**; ideally other purposes they are also interested in to increase the chances of a physical activity legacy.
4. AE and other external bodies should **recognise that building trust takes time but is worth the effort** when approaching new areas. Embedding staff in areas is a great way to do this.
5. AE should continue to **build relationships with and make use of cultural intermediaries** to build a positive reputation with the community

6. AE should **create safe spaces for staff to share, reflect and feedback on learning** they have gained from communities and ensure this feedback is acted on where appropriate. These spaces should provide a judgement-free zone with trusted team members.

7. AE should seek out and **create safe spaces to amplify local voices** who are already doing good work and learn from their experiences.

8. AE should **consider how to work communities and local voices who are seldom heard**. Going “where the energy is” is great for areas already doing good work, but how can we support those risks neglecting those who may not have the “energy” but are in more need of support. This could involve embedding staff in areas and identifying and working with local leaders (those willing) to understand what would work best for those seldom heard.