

Our journey into realist evaluation so far

Initial Steps

At the start of the year, we began a journey with a new evaluation partner, taking a collaborative approach to evaluation that utilises realist methodology.

Our evaluation partner is a consortium led by Hartpury University and including members from Sheffield Hallam University and Durham University whose role is to support, guide and challenge the evaluation process, provide learning and reflection spaces and provide capacity building around evaluation methods for all those interested in evaluative thinking. Our internal evaluation team is now made up of a new Active Essex Intelligence Manager, a Senior Researcher, two new embedded Researchers and an Analyst. This team will take main responsibility for data collection, analysis and sharing evaluation findings.

The aim of a realist approach is not just to determine if an intervention or programme works but also to identify how and why it works, for who, where and under what circumstances. Typically, the 'realist cycle' has 3 phases; develop assumptions and beliefs, test our ideas, and refine assumptions and beliefs.

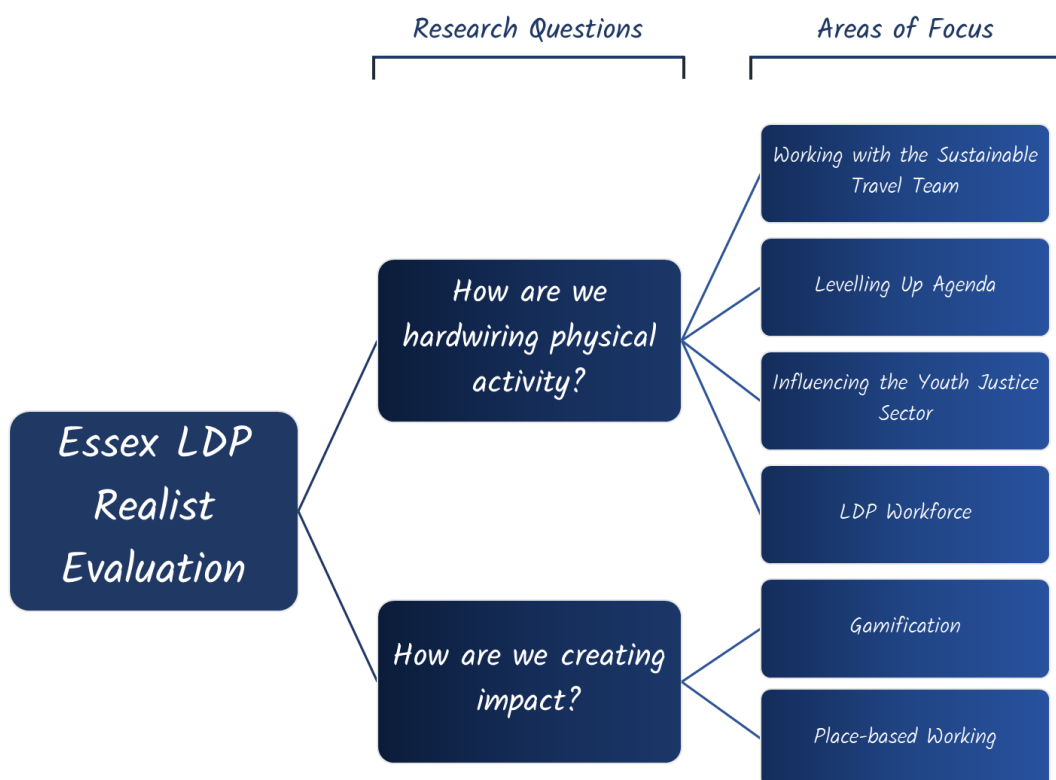
The first task for the evaluation team was to work together to develop an evaluation framework that would help us explore "system change" and "impact" (Figure 1). This led to the formulation of the two main research questions:

- I. How and under what circumstances is the Essex LDP hardwiring physical activity into the system?
- II. How and why is Essex LDP contributing to their impact priorities?

The second task was to identify the evaluation areas of focus, which can be used as *examples* of how the LDP is hardwiring physical activity and creating impact in practice. The learning from these areas are likely to be transferrable to other areas of delivery, something which will be tested as we move through the evaluation.

Our initial focus areas are:

- 1) **Gamification** - How the LDP is using an emerging concept to promote physical activity and connect people and their place.
- 2) **Place-based Working** - Understanding how and why place is important to how we work, in order to empower communities to reduce physical inactivity.
- 3) **Working with the ECC Sustainable Travel Team** - How & why the LDP has developed a working relationship with the Essex County Council Sustainable Travel Team towards a shared common purpose and understanding.
- 4) **ECC Levelling Up Agenda** - Understanding how the LDP is positioning itself to align objectives and demonstrate how PA can be used to achieve Essex County Council Levelling Up outcomes.
- 5) **Influencing the Youth Justice Sector** - How the LDP can demonstrate the importance of using physical activity as a catalyst to reduce youth violence and youth crime.
- 6) **LDP Workforce** - How the LDP is increasing capacity within key organisations and upskilling the workforce to incorporate physical and/or ways of working into daily practice.



Developing Assumptions & Beliefs

A key part of developing our assumptions and beliefs was having conversations with relevant stakeholders (internal and external) whose work centred around our areas of focus in addition to reviewing previous conversation transcripts about how and why the LDP works as it does. Based on this, we wrote assumptions & beliefs in the form of “If, Then, Because” statements. It was important for the assumptions & beliefs to be broad and all-encompassing, capturing ways of working, as opposed to project specific.

We used the opportunity of an evaluation awayday to present these assumptions & belief statements to a group of stakeholders so they could be ‘checked and challenged’. Attendees included members of the LDP core team and our partners from all levels of delivery; from delivery partners working directly with the community, to community coordinators working with local community groups and organisations, to senior stakeholders working within Active Essex and the local councils involved in the LDP.

We used the feedback received on the assumptions & beliefs to inform and refine them, while also being careful not to dismiss data and information that was collected prior to the awayday.

Below are our finalised initial assumptions & beliefs:

Area of focus	Assumptions & Beliefs
Gamification (1/3)	In recent years using gamification to promote PA has increased greatly in popularity. If we embrace this popular social movement, then people will want to be part of this, as it embraces what people are currently doing. This will promote people getting out and about in the local community and create opportunities to reduce physical inactivity. As it will provide incentives (intrinsic & extrinsic) to take part (fun, low cost, rewarding, competition, connections, quality time) and be flexible to individual routines.
Gamification (2/3)	The gamification of PA is a relatively novel concept that has emerged and grown over the last few years. This has occurred with little evidence to support its effectiveness in reducing physical

	<p>inactivity in our target audience, individuals who live in the most deprived communities of Essex. If we can convince people that the gamification of PA is a good idea, then we can implement it more widely across the system. This will increase our ability to capture evidence around who it works for, where it works and why. This will be possible as we will have more support to do so (funding, political will, visibility/positive image).</p>
<p>Gamification (3/3)</p>	<p>How individuals perceive their local area and the connection they hold with it, is important for engaging them in PA. If we use gamification to encourage people to go out and explore their local place, then we will create connections with people and places in the local area. As this will create positive experiences with new areas (and change previous negative perceptions) and form healthy habits.</p>
<p>Place-Based (1/3)</p>	<p>We know that even the most deprived and disadvantaged communities contain a range of assets (i.e. people ...). If we can build trust and relationships within communities and encourage local community members and groups to connect to each other. As a result, we will be able to build community resilience by empowering the community to identify and make better use of local assets because they will have an understanding of what their community already has.</p>
<p>Place-Based (2/3)</p>	<p>Top-down approaches have not been successful in encouraging PA 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.</p>

<p>Place-Based (3/3)</p>	<p>Communities already possess a wealth of assets and knowledge that can help tackle physical activity in their local place. If we can support, guide and fund local individuals and/or groups to galvanise and realise their own ideas, then we will catalyse small scale community projects which respond to the individual needs of that place. This will create more opportunities to be physically active because we will be helping to remove current barriers to these types of initiatives (funding, knowledge gap, capacity).</p>
<p>Working with the Sustainable Travel Team (1/2)</p>	<p>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 travel 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.</p>
<p>Working with the Sustainable Travel Team (2/2)</p>	<p>Traditional ways of working have involved a disjointed system, which creates a knowledge gap around the “bigger picture” and what we are all trying to achieve. If we can align our objectives with those of the sustainable travel team, we can develop a shared common purpose around what we are both looking to achieve. This will widen our collective sphere of influence, connect infrastructure and increase passion, creating additional opportunities to be physically active that meet both our desired outcomes. In doing so we will be adaptable and flexible in understanding and co-designing solutions, while collectively being more than the sum of our individual parts.</p>
<p>Levelling Up Agenda (1/3)</p>	<p>Levelling up is about tackling inequalities, therefore, everyone should have access to opportunities to take part in sport/PA and it should not be exclusive to for those that have more. If we position PA as an important part of the levelling up agenda, then we can use</p>

	<p>sport/PA to tackle inequalities. As this will increase the access individuals in disadvantaged areas have to sport/PA opportunities.</p>
<p>Levelling Up Agenda (2/3)</p>	<p>Levelling up is trying to reduce inequalities across a number of key areas within the system (i.e., economy, environment, health, family). If we can ensure PA is part of the levelling up agenda, this can provide a vehicle by which levelling up can achieve its priorities, helping to tackle inequalities and embed PA into the fabric of life. As PA will be part of the levelling up strategy and its associated actions.</p>
<p>Levelling Up Agenda (3/3)</p>	<p>The Essex LDP has been developing core principles and changing ways of working across the county, with the purpose of tackling inequalities. If we align ourselves with the levelling up agenda, then this will provide opportunities to collaborate and share learning. Enabling us to continue to advocate for and grow the ethos, principles and ways of working of the Essex LDP and influence system change across Essex (health, social care, transport, education, employment, economy etc.). This will occur as we will provide stories and evidence which will support taking this approach.</p>
<p>Youth Justice (1/2)</p>	<p>There is a lack of evidence available to convince the YJ system to use PA. If we build evidence/recognition of the benefits of using PA as a catalyst to reduce crime & anti-social behaviour, then we can influence the youth justice system to utilise and invest in PA interventions, embedding PA as part of a package of support. This is because confidence in the effectiveness of PA as a catalyst to reducing crime & anti-social behaviour in young people will be increased</p>
<p>Youth Justice (2/2)</p>	<p>We know that there is a relationship between crime & anti-social behaviour and living in deprived areas and sport alone is not enough to engage young people. If we create an incentive to engage in positive behaviours, then we will increase PA and associated</p>

	benefits in young people less likely to engage with traditional sport and PA opportunities. This is because peer to peer influence in a fun and social environment is key to engaging these young people.
LDP Workforce (1/1)	The benefits of PA are well known but it is not currently embedded well in day-to-day practice. If we upskill the current workforce, ensuring we have the right people and the right skills, then they will have the confidence to use PA in day-to-day practice. This is because people will have the capability, opportunity and motivation to do so.

Testing and Refining Our Assumptions & Beliefs

We have started to gather data to test some of our assumptions and beliefs, focussing initially on gamification and place-based working. We intend to use a range of methods to do this including analysing project data, secondary research, documentary analysis, community engagement, stakeholder interviews and staff reflection sessions.

Following this, we will be able to start using the data we have gathered to support or oppose our assumptions and beliefs so that we can refine them.

