

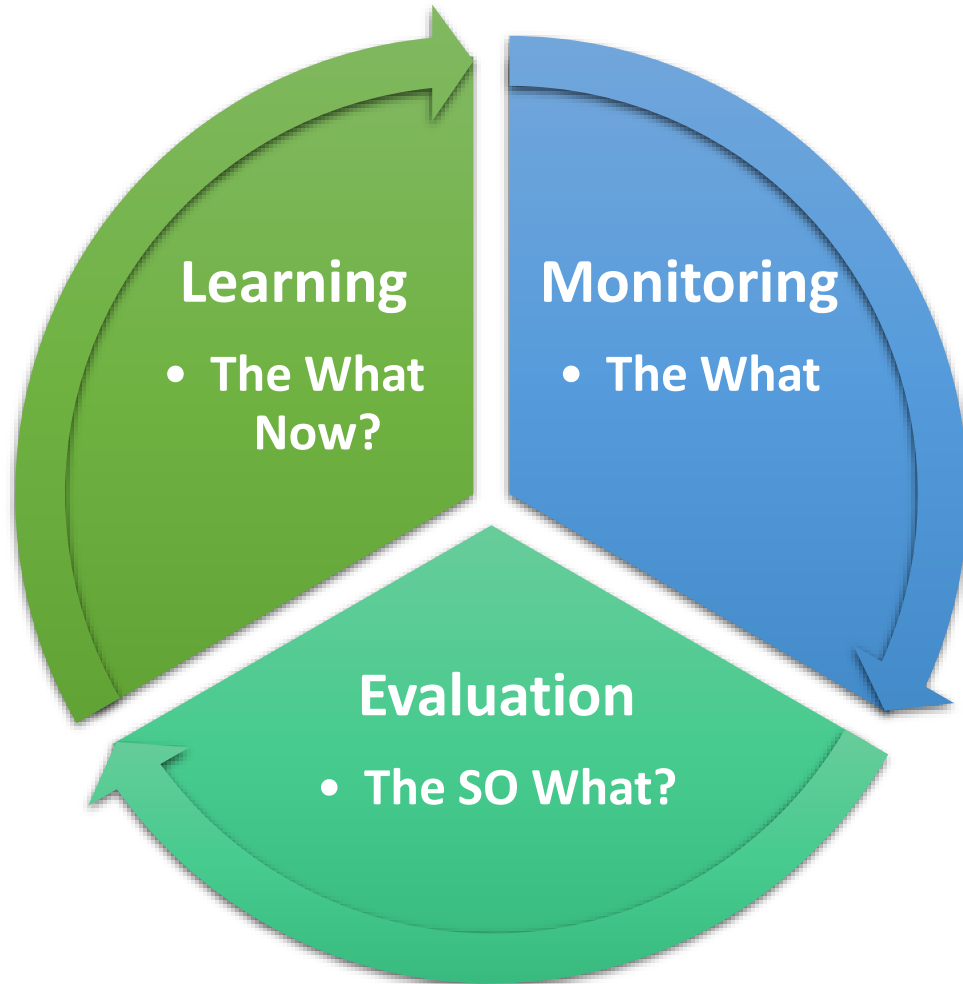
Building Systems for Evidence and Impact

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Understanding MEL



What Meaningful Data Looks Like

Relevant → directly linked to your outcomes

Purposeful → collected for a clear reason

Proportionate → not overly burdensome

Actionable → helps you make decisions or explain impact

Honest → shows successes AND challenges



What's the point?

*“Put simply and curiously, the aim is to make known something previously unknown to human beings. It is to advance human knowledge, to make it more certain or better fitting... the aim is, as I have said, **discovery.**”*

-Elias, 1986; p.20



Mini Discussion:

“What part of MEL do you feel most confident with? Which part feels the most challenging?”

Beyond the Numbers: Why Curiosity Matters

- **Traditional MEL Limitations**

- Focuses on **outputs** (attendance, surveys) rather than **outcomes**.
- Often **static and retrospective**—learning happens too late to adapt.
- Misses **context and complexity** of real community experiences.
- Can feel like a **tick-box exercise**, not a tool for improvement.

- **Why Shift to Creative Curiosity?**

- Encourages **questions, not just counts**—“What’s changing and why?”
- Captures **stories, relationships, and ripple effects** beyond numbers.
- Makes MEL **ongoing and adaptive**, supporting real-time learning.
- Builds **trust and ownership** by involving communities in the process.

- **Key Idea:**

- ***MEL should be a living practice—curious, creative, and connected to real lives.***



The Skeleton vs. The Story



The Skeleton vs. The Story

The Key Difference

- The story doesn't ask "How many?". It asks "How?" and "Why?"
- Example:
 - The skeleton tells us 10 people completed the physical activity programme out of 12.
 - The story tells us **why** 2 people dropped out (perhaps transport issues) and **how** the other 8 feel more capable now.



Shifting Our Thinking about Learning

Across our place-based work,
learning shifted away from asking:

“How do we motivate people to be more active?”

Towards asking:

“What conditions make participation possible, safe and worth the risk?”



The Power of Story Telling

*“Life is only made sense
of in stories”*

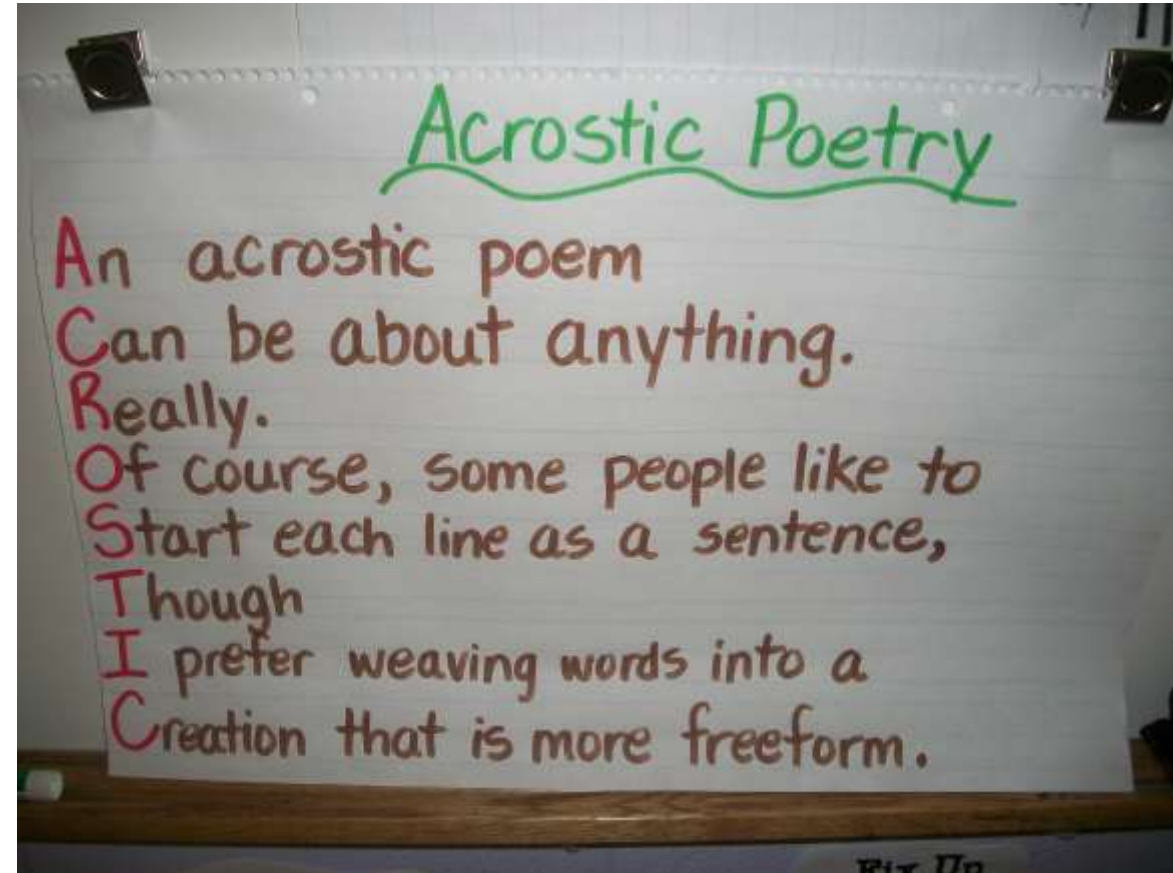


Experimenting with Story-telling

- LET'S WRITE AN ACROSTIC POEM!!

“Let’s reflect on what meaningful data looks like in learning or insight. Using the word MEDWAY write an acrostic poem where each letter begins a line that expresses a need, a priority, or a feeling related to physical activity and wellbeing in Medway.”

- Acrostic poems don't need to rhyme



Why Test & Learn?

Building Better Decisions Through Learning in Place

Why Traditional Approaches Aren't Working

- Inequalities persist despite years of investment
- We often scale activities, not what makes them work
- Interventions succeed in one place, fail in another
- Systems are complex: health, transport, housing, culture all interact

Bottom line: 🙅 We don't have a delivery challenge 🙅 We have a learning barrier

What do we mean by “Test & Learn”?

- A Test & Learn approach means:
 - Trying small, localised changes
 - Learning quickly what works and what doesn't
 - Adapting before scaling

Key Shift: From → “Did this project work?” ; To → “What needs to be true for this to work here?”

What the National Evidence Shows

- Change comes from trust, relationships and local ownership
- Communities must shape solutions — not just receive them
- Systems need time, flexibility and shared learning
- Traditional evaluation (outputs, numbers) misses what matters

Key insight: The “intervention” is the system, not the activity

Common Questions (Honest Answers)

- **“Why not just do what already works?”**
 - Because what works depends on context, not just activity
- **“Isn’t this just trial and error?”**
 - No, Test & Learns are structured learning opportunities with clear questions
- **“Where’s the evidence?”**
 - This approach creates the evidence needed to make better long-term decisions



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Co-creating Insights with Young People: Thanet Street Sports



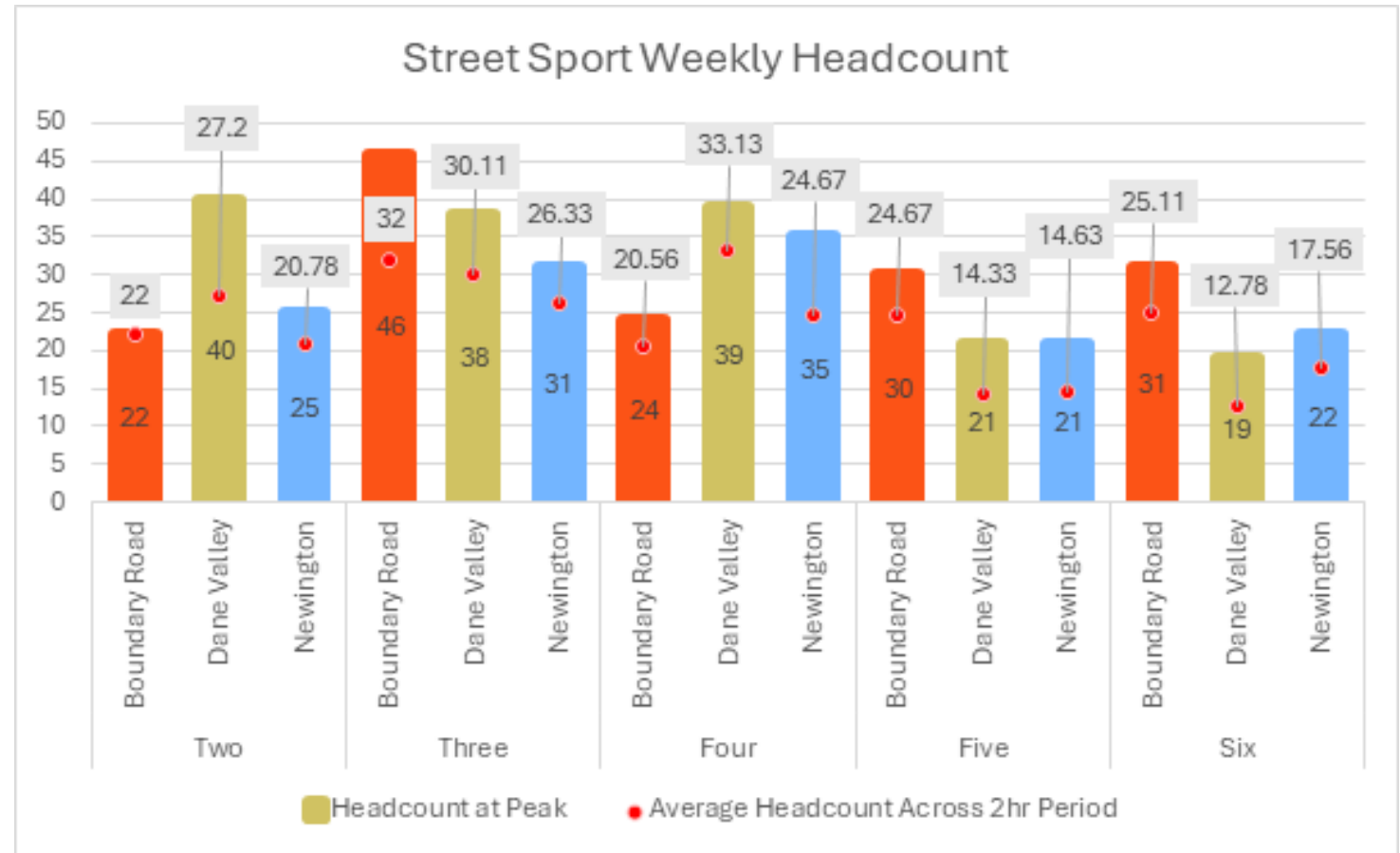
Introducing Thanet Street Sports

- **Locations:** Boundary Road Park, Dane Valley Recreation Ground, and Newington Green.
- **Format:** Free, drop-in, inclusive sessions featuring street football, skateboarding, dance, and fitness.
- **Duration:** 6 weeks during summer 2025.
- **Youth Advisory Group:** 7 young people (ages 11–15) co-developed insight tools and supported delivery.
- **Creative MEL tools:** Sticker boards, informal interviews, and youth-led “on-pitch sport reporters.”



Thanet Street Sports – Key Outcomes

- **455 data points** collected across 5 weeks
- **High engagement** from children aged 9–11 (36%) and under 9s (33.6%)
- **Repeat attendance** and cross-park mobility showed strong community engagement.



Key Take-Aways

- **Youth-Led MEL Enhances Engagement**
 - Involving young people in the design and delivery of MEL tools increased participation and ownership.
- **Creative, Informal Methods Work**
 - These methods reduced barriers to participation, especially in a drop-in, non-registered format.
- **CBPR Supports Trust and Relevance**
 - It helped build trust in communities with historic distrust of authorities and positioned youth as co-researchers.
- **Listening and Adapting in Real Time**
 - Facilitators adapted sessions based on ongoing feedback, demonstrating the value of embedded, responsive MEL.
- **MEL as a Tool for System Change**
 - The project used MEL not just to measure outcomes, but to explore conditions for replication and long-term change.
 - Insights informed broader questions about sustainability, equity, and community capacity





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Supporting Older People Living with Frailty to be More Active



Understanding, Confidence, Independence and Belonging

•What was the project?

- A 12-week Test & Learn programme across 4 Orbit Housing schemes in Thanet
- Focused on older residents and those living with frailty
- Combined physical activity + social engagement
- Explored confidence, independence and belonging

•How it worked?

- Started with in-scheme activities (building familiarity)
- Progressed to community-based participation
- Included activities such as chair-based exercise, yoga, tai chi, boxing, circus skills, judo
- Visits to libraries and leisure centres



How We Learned – Narrative & Relational Evaluation

- **Methodology**
 - Used narrative inquiry
 - Focused on people's stories, not just attendance or outcomes
- **Data Sources**
 - Community Connector reflective diaries
 - Observational field notes
 - Resident conversations
 - Participation patterns over time
- **How Insight was Generated**
 - Captured:
 - Real interactions
 - Emotional responses
 - Moments of change or resistance
 - Stories emerged:
 - Before/after sessions
 - During activities
 - Through everyday conversation



Emergent Learnings

Belonging Drives
Everything

Confidence
Develops Through
Relationships

Independence is
Supported, Not
Individual

Trust &
Consistency are
the Foundation



Key Takeaway: Change is not driven by activities alone. It is driven by relationships, trust, and environment

Test & Learns in National Place-Based Work

Bradford (Active Bradford / JU:MP Local Delivery Pilot)

- **What was it?**
 - A multi-year, whole-system programme to test what helps 5–14 year olds and families be active in a disadvantaged, multi-ethnic area; delivered via multiple workstreams.
- **How did they test & learn?**
 - Multiple workstreams used as “tests” (Active Faith Settings, Active Travel, Active Playful Parks, Creating Active Schools, etc.).
 - Evaluation embedded
 - Reported “world-leading research programme” including a control trial and measured population-level changes.
- **What did they learn?**
 - Children wanted fun, informal activity close to home; parks/greenspaces were key sites for change.
 - Schools, faith settings, travel routes and parks all interact – change depends on the system mix, not a single intervention.
- **How did it inform place work?**
 - Learning shaped ongoing workstreams and local planning/partnership priorities (e.g., parks activation with connectors; faith-setting workforce approaches).



Active Black Country (Building learning into place-based delivery)

- **What was it?**
 - Active Black Country formalised learning capacity as part of place-based investment (Learning Lead roles).
- **How did they test & learn?**
 - Explicit job purpose: capture and apply strategic learning; create place learning plans; share learning across partners; embed community engagement in decision-making.
- **How did it inform place work?**
 - The design explicitly aims to help partners cascade learning into organisations and integrate across themes like transport, health and housing (system integration).



Active Cumbria (Place Expansion – “Let’s Move!”)

- **What was it?**
 - Three selected places in Cumbria (Maryport, Workington, Whitehaven areas) for long-term place-based work under Place Expansion; local working groups set priorities and created a shared brand.
- **How did they test & learn?**
 - Launch event convening cross-system partners; local working groups exploring issues and assets; leadership training for members to support change
- **What did they learn?**
 - Early model emphasises shared priorities, asset mapping, and leadership capability as “conditions” for later interventions.
- **How did it inform place work?**
 - Established a structure (groups + staff time + shared identity) to guide what gets tested next, rather than jumping straight to delivery.



Test & Learns in Medway

Project 1: Empowering Communities (MVA)

Aim:

Test how a Community Power & Self-Organisation model can empower residents in Luton & Wayfield to design and lead their own physical-activity initiatives.

What the project will do:

- Use CPSOS (Community Power & Self-Organisation Sessions) to bring residents, community leaders and statutory partners together as equals.
- Facilitate exploration of local barriers to activity and co-design community-owned solutions.
- Run structured sessions using tools like Open Space, Design Lab, Wicked Questions, etc.
- Generate “quick-win” ideas while also shaping a fully community-led proposal for the investment programme.

What it will deliver:

- A 100% community-led proposal for improving physical activity in Luton & Wayfield.
- Learning on how to scale the CPSOS model across Medway.
- Immediate small community-initiated ideas supported by MVA.



Project 2: Broadening 'Let's Get Active' to New Audiences

Aim:

Test whether the Let's Get Active brand can successfully engage teenage girls and families in low socio-economic groups (LSEGs) across five priority neighbourhoods.

What the project will do:

- Partner with trusted anchor organisations in each neighbourhood (e.g., Family Hubs, schools, leisure centres).
- Run listening and engagement sessions to understand barriers and inform programme design.
- Co-create 6–8 week activity programmes using local assets and green spaces.
- Assess whether the Medway Physical Activity Alliance can expand its reach to these groups.

What it will deliver:

- Insight into physical-activity barriers/enablers for teenage girls and families.
- Redesigned or new provision shaped directly by those audiences.
- Co-created pilot programmes in each of the 5 areas.
- Learning on whether the Let's Get Active brand can appeal to wider demographics.



Project 3: Embedding P.A. in Clinical Pathways

Aim:

Strengthen integration of physical activity within cancer care pathways and understand what support people with cancer need to be active.

What the project will do:

- Gather insight from people at various stages of cancer diagnosis (barriers, needs, preferences).
- Test different methods of connecting cancer patients to local physical activity offers (e.g., Joy Marketplace, Everyday Active, Explore Medway).
- Co-create activity opportunities and explore models for different tumour groups.
- Upskill staff and deliverers, including cancer rehab training and Everyday Active workshops.
- Evaluate impact on workforce confidence, assessment quality, and patients' ability to access activity.

What it will deliver:

- Clear understanding of what patients need and prefer during/after treatment.
- Evidence on the best referral routes and support models.
- Sustainable pilot classes supporting cancer patients.
- A more confident, better-equipped clinical and VCS workforce.



Your role in Test & Learn Work

Co-own learning questions (what are we trying to understand?)

Share data/insight where it exists (and name gaps honestly)

Participate in short reflection loops (what changed? why?)

Help convert learning into decisions (policy, pathways, funding, workforce, environments)

Any Questions

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