

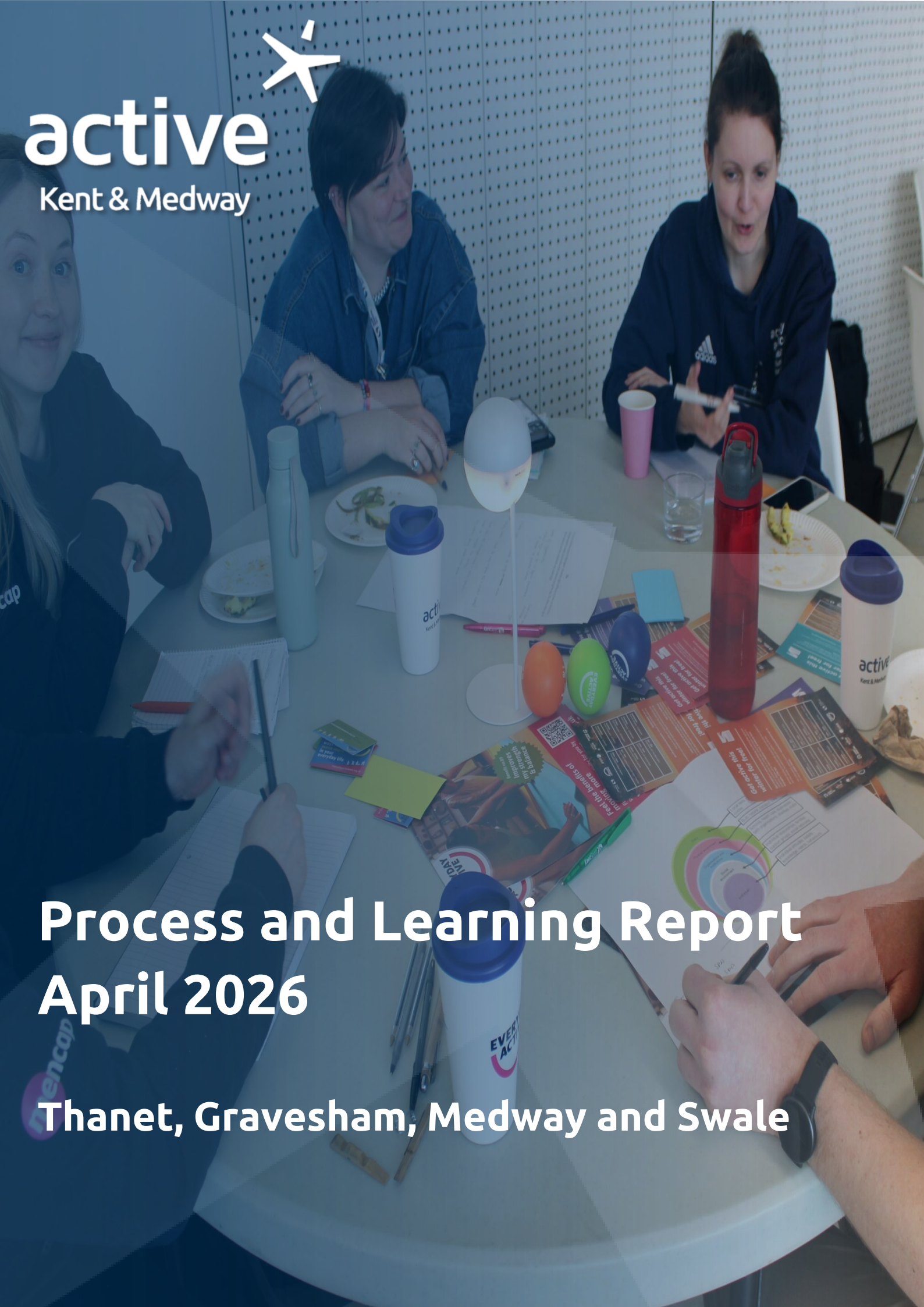


active

Kent & Medway

Process and Learning Report April 2026

Thanet, Gravesham, Medway and Swale



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Executive Summary

Purpose and Scope

This Process and Learning Report documents learning from Active Kent & Medway’s Place Expansion Programme between October 2025 and April 2026, with a focus on understanding how and why change is occurring within local systems rather than solely what activity has been delivered. The report covers four place contexts — Thanet, Gravesham, Medway, and Swale — each at different stages of system readiness and place-based maturity.

The report is designed to support Sport England, the National Evaluation and Learning Partner (NELP), and local system partners to interpret progress realistically, recognise early system signals, and understand how learning is shaping decision-making and future direction.

Key Findings Across Places

1. Place-based system change is emerging through relational and cognitive shifts
 - Across Thanet and Gravesham, the most significant forms of progress are evidenced through changes in system behaviour rather than population-level indicators. Leadership training, stakeholder-led context analysis, and Test & Learn activity have collectively contributed to greater tolerance for complexity, increased shared ownership of outcomes, and improved cross-sector alignment. These relational and cognitive shifts are treated as legitimate precursors to longer-term participation outcomes.

2. Participation is shaped by context, not individual motivation
 - Learning from multiple Test & Learns reinforces that decisions to engage in physical activity are rational responses to system conditions. Safety, belonging, trust, legitimacy of space, cost, transport, and digital access all shape participation. Where these conditions are not present, non-participation functions as a protective strategy. This insight challenges deficit-based assumptions and has influenced how partners frame design, delivery, and evaluation.

3. Lived experience functions as system knowledge
 - A key insight across the reporting period is the repositioning of lived experience as legitimate system intelligence. Creative and participatory methods; including storytelling, observation, facilitated dialogue, and reflective practice; reveal mechanisms that are invisible within quantitative data alone. These insights have informed governance discussions, Test & Learn design, and investment decisions.

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4. Leadership and governance operate as mechanisms for change
 - Leadership training in both Thanet and Gravesham has functioned as a system intervention, enabling partners to reinterpret roles, accountability, and influence. Governance structures are increasingly used as learning and sense-making spaces rather than solely for oversight or compliance. This shift supports adaptive pacing, reduces risk of premature formalisation, and strengthens system maturity.

5. Place sensitivity and local identity matter
 - Learning from Medway and Swale underscores that place cannot be treated as homogeneous. Local identity, geography, and historical patterns of engagement influence willingness to participate in leadership, governance, and delivery spaces. Recognising and working with these dynamics has shaped more nuanced, responsive approaches to engagement and governance design.

Use of Explanatory Accounts

Throughout the report, Explanatory Accounts are used to articulate how change is occurring under specific conditions. These accounts are explicitly labelled and introduced at the start of key sections, including:

1. Our Place Methodology
2. Working Together in Thanet
3. Building a Better Gravesham
4. Strengthening Place-Based Working

Each explanatory account follows a Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) logic and is intended to guide interpretation of the evidence that follows. These accounts should be used as interpretive lenses rather than summaries, supporting understanding of how relational, structural, and contextual factors interact to shape outcomes over time.

Methods and Participant Statements

The breadth of learning presented in this report reflects the use of multiple methods and the involvement of a wide range of participants, including residents, community connectors, practitioners, delivery partners, and system leaders. To support transparency and proportional evaluation, a Methods Statement is provided in Appendix A, outlining:

- Methods used to collect data for this submission
- Rationale for method choice
- Challenges and limitations

- Where each method is discussed within the report

A Participant Statement, describing who contributed to the learning and how participation was approached, is included in Appendix B.

Looking Ahead

This report concludes that while population-level change will require sustained effort beyond the current reporting period, the foundational conditions for long-term place-based system change are increasingly in place. The focus moving forward will be on deepening learning, strengthening system coherence, and supporting partners to continue acting collectively on the conditions that enable equitable participation in physical activity.

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Our Place: Background and Scope

Since October 2025, the scope and focus of the Active Kent & Medway’s (AKM) Place Expansion Programmes have sharpened considerably. Initial phases of work were characterised by exploration, relationship-building, and the establishment of legitimacy within local systems. The current reporting period marks a transition toward greater clarity regarding the where, the how, and the why of place-based interventions. While retaining flexibility and responsiveness to local context, the programme has become more explicit in its intent to act as a catalyst for system alignment, shared ownership, and collective learning. This shift reflects both increased local readiness and accumulated learning from early practice across places.

The programme continues to prioritise communities experiencing multiple layers of disadvantage, where low levels of physical activity intersect with poor health outcomes, economic insecurity, and limited access to safe, welcoming spaces. In these contexts, inactivity is understood not as an individual deficit, but as a rational response to structural and environmental conditions, including constrained public infrastructure, fear of crime, lack of transport, and historical exclusion from decision-making processes. Accordingly, physical activity is positioned not as an end, but as an entry point into wider conversations about wellbeing, safety, belonging, and opportunity.

Delivery to date has focused on four place contexts: Thanet, Gravesham (particularly Westcourt and Northfleet), Medway, and Swale. These areas differ significantly in geography, governance arrangements, population composition, and system readiness. Thanet and Gravesham represent more mature phases of place-based working, with established Test and Learn activity and evolving governance structures. Medway and Swale are at earlier developmental stages, where emphasis has been placed on partnership formation, connector capacity, and system readiness. Rather than viewing this variation as a challenge to consistency, it has been increasingly treated it as a learning asset, enabling comparison across contexts and supporting adaptive approaches tailored to local conditions.

Across all four places, the work has embraced a collaborative, cross-sector model from the outset. While Active Kent & Medway is named as the lead applicant, delivery has been shaped by a broad partnership spanning local authorities, public health, VCSE organisations, leisure providers, housing and community infrastructure, and local residents themselves. This collaborative ethos reflects the understanding that no single organisation can address complex inequalities alone, and that effective place-based working depends on shared leadership and distributed ownership.

The work in Kent is aligned closely with the countywide *Move Together* strategy, which aims to create inclusive, accessible opportunities for all residents to be active, regardless of background or circumstance. At a practical level, this alignment has supported coherence between strategic

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ambition and place-based delivery, enabling local partnerships to situate their work within a wider movement for change rather than as standalone initiatives. Importantly, this alignment has also reinforced the legitimacy of place-based approaches within statutory and commissioning contexts.

A notable development during this reporting period has been the expanded conceptual scope of the work to explicitly include system actors as participants in change, rather than solely as delivery partners. Leadership training, governance development, and targeted Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) capacity-building have been used intentionally to influence how organisations understand their role within place-based systems. This represents a shift from viewing partners primarily as agents of delivery toward recognising them as co-owners of system outcomes, with shared responsibility for shaping the conditions that enable or constrain participation.

The scope of evaluation and learning has evolved in parallel. Early evaluation activity focused predominantly on capturing insight from Test and Learn projects and direct participant engagement. While this remains important, the current phase places greater emphasis on understanding how learning travels through systems; shaping relationships, influencing decision-making, and informing resource allocation. This reflects an emerging focus on system effects rather than solely individual-level outcomes and aligns with Sport England’s emphasis on long-term change through system levers.

This Process and Learning Report therefore serves multiple purposes. It documents progress to date; reflects critically on how and why change is occurring; and surfaces emerging opportunities for strengthening place-based systems going forward. Taken together, the work to date suggests that while population-level change will require sustained effort beyond the current reporting period, the foundations for meaningful, long-term system change across Kent and Medway are increasingly being established.

Place Expansion Areas

Thanet

Place-based work in Thanet focuses on facilitating collaborative system change to address deep-rooted socio-economic and health inequalities. The area; covering Margate, Ramsgate, and Broadstairs; experiences high deprivation, poor health outcomes, and low physical activity levels among children, alongside high rates of unemployment, obesity, and preventable mortality. These challenges are most acute in wards such as Cliftonville West, Margate Central, Dane Valley, Central Harbour, Beacon Road, and Newington. Strengthening partnership networks has been essential, with AKM linking voluntary, community, local authority, and public health stakeholders. Recognising that data alone cannot capture lived experience, Test and Learn projects have

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supported shared governance and revealed the importance of cross-sector collaboration. Trust-building, expanding local capacity, and embedding collaborative practices remain central to the success of the partnership.

Gravesham

Gravesham partners share a strong commitment to addressing entrenched health and social inequalities, particularly in Westcourt and North Northfleet. The borough faces high rates of obesity, cost-of-living pressures, anti-social behaviour, and limited access to services and skills opportunities. AKM has convened a diverse group of stakeholders; including local authorities, health trusts, faith organisations, and voluntary sector partners; to co-develop a shared vision, governance structures, and a Theory of Change aligned with the council’s “Happier and Healthier Gravesham” agenda. Evidence shows that Westcourt and North Northfleet experience significant deprivation, low physical activity, and complex cultural and linguistic needs, requiring tailored and inclusive approaches. The focus on these areas reflects the urgency of reducing systemic disparities through coordinated, community-led, and evidence-based action.

Medway

Place-based work in Medway focuses on strengthening system readiness and collaborative infrastructure to address significant and persistent health and physical activity inequalities. Medway is a large and diverse urban area within the Thames Gateway, comprising multiple distinct neighbourhoods with markedly different social, economic, and health outcomes. Physical inactivity, obesity, long term conditions, and mental health challenges are unevenly distributed across the borough, with some wards experiencing substantially poorer outcomes than others.

AKM’s work in Medway has prioritised establishing the foundations for sustainable place-based system change. This includes convening a broad cross sector partnership spanning local government, public health, the voluntary and community sector, housing providers, education, and sport. The existing Medway Physical Activity Alliance provides a strong platform for system collaboration, bringing together insight, lived experience, and delivery knowledge at scale. During this phase, emphasis has been placed on shared sense making, governance development, and leadership alignment rather than rapid programme delivery. Partners have identified the need to deepen collective understanding of lived experience, particularly in areas of high deprivation and among populations facing compounded barriers to activity, including older adults, economically inactive residents, and those living with long term health conditions. This developmental approach reflects recognition that durable change in Medway will depend on aligning complex systems, redistributing ownership of learning, and embedding place-based ways of working before scaling activity.

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Swale

Swale is shaped by a complex mix of coastal, urban, and rural contexts, with significant inequalities in health, wellbeing, and physical activity outcomes across the district. Areas such as the Isle of Sheppey, parts of Sittingbourne, and East Faversham experience high levels of deprivation, poor health outcomes, and lower rates of physical activity, driven by intersecting social, economic, and environmental factors.

The Swale Place Partnership brings together local government, public health, the voluntary and community sector, education, policing, and health system partners, with a shared commitment to addressing these inequalities through collaborative, place-based approaches. Early work has focused on building governance, clarifying shared purpose, and strengthening system maturity, recognising that effective place-based delivery requires strong relational foundations and agreed ways of working. AKM's role in Swale has been deliberately facilitative, supporting partners to develop a shared picture of need, opportunity, and system capacity. Emphasis has been placed on embedding community voice, identifying local connectors and catalysts for change, and understanding how existing assets; including leisure infrastructure, community organisations, and wider regeneration activity; can be aligned to support physical activity and wellbeing. This early phase reflects an intentional focus on readiness, learning, and trust building, creating the conditions for community led Test and Learn activity and longer-term system transformation.

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Our Place Methodology

The methodological approach underpinning the Active Kent & Medway (AKM) Place Expansion Programme is grounded in Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR) principles and informed by context specific perspectives on place, participation, and knowledge production. Since October 2025, there has been a discernible shift from theory-driven justification toward greater methodological confidence and routine application. Ultimately, reflecting both accumulated practice-based learning and increased partner readiness to engage with system complexity. AKM continues to frame the Place Expansion programme’s understanding of ‘place’ as relational, historically situated, and socially produced. This stance challenges deficit-based narratives of inactivity and enables multiple forms of knowledge (e.g. quantitative data, professional expertise, and lived experience) to coexist without hierarchy.

Understanding how Change Emerges in Complex Place-Based Systems



Context: The Place Expansion Programme operates within complex local systems characterised by unequal access to resources, historical mistrust, fragmented governance, and deeply embedded social norms. Change does not occur through linear delivery or attributable interventions. Instead, outcomes emerge unevenly as a result of interacting structural, relational, and contextual conditions.



Mechanisms: AKM's methodological stance ensures lived experience is treated as a primary source of system knowledge, revealing how policies, spaces, services, and social dynamics are actually encountered in practice. Diverse qualitative, participatory, and reflexive methods are used to surface these mechanisms, alongside quantitative data, without privileging one form of evidence over another.



Outcomes: Rather than producing immediate population-level change, this approach has generated explanatory insight into *why* participation patterns persist or shift. Learning has informed how Test & Learn activity is designed, how governance is sequenced, and how leadership understands responsibility for change. Early outcomes are therefore visible as changes in system behaviour, decision-making, and framing, rather than outputs alone.



Learnings: Methodological rigour in place-based work lies in explanation rather than attribution. By using CRE as an umbrella framework, AKM retains methodological flexibility while strengthening its ability to understand how and why change unfolds differently across places.

Explanatory Account 1: Understanding how change emerges in complex place-based systems

Critical Realist Evaluation as an Umbrella Framework

Within this broader methodological orientation, AKM draws on Critical Realist Evaluation (CRE) principles as a guide to support system-level sense making. As AKM’s Place Expansion Programme has grown, CRE provides a coherent way of understanding how and why change occurs differently across contexts. This aligns closely with NELP and Sport England’s emphasis on learning what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why.

In our work CRE functions as a conceptual lens rather than a prescriptive method, allowing diverse methods to be held together analytically while preserving flexibility and responsiveness to place. Variation across Thanet, Gravesham, Medway and Swale is not seen as inconsistency, rather evidence of contextual influence and system dynamics.

Legitimising Lived Experience as a Form of System Knowledge

A central focus of AKM’s approach is the deliberate legitimisation of lived experience as a form of system knowledge; rather than supplementary, illustrative, or anecdotal. Lived experience is positioned as a critical source of insight into how system conditions are encountered and negotiated in everyday life. This approach reflects a shift viewing lived experience as individual perspective toward recognising it as evidence of underlying system mechanisms operating within specific contexts. From a Critical Realist perspective, community narratives, observations, and creative methods are not valued simply for what they reveal about individual preferences or attitudes, but for what they expose about how structural, social, and environmental conditions shape behaviour. For example, accounts of non-participation are treated not as disengagement, but as rational responses to contextual risk, exclusion, or constraint.

Methodologically, this has led to the intentional use of approaches that surface experience in forms that are accessible, relational, and non-extractive. Stakeholder-led context reports, storytelling, diaries, creative exercises, informal feedback, and facilitated reflection enable insight to emerge in ways that are sensitive to confidence, power dynamics, and trust. These methods are particularly important in contexts where formal consultation, digital tools, or survey-based approaches risk excluding those most affected by inequality.

Crucially, legitimising lived experience extends beyond residents alone. Practitioners, facilitators, and system leaders are also positioned as holders of experiential knowledge, particularly where reflection reveals how organisational norms, policies, and decision-making practices shape participation. Leadership training, governance discussions, and applied MEL workshops create structured spaces where lived experience, professional expertise, and data are held together,

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enabling collective sense making. By treating lived experience as system knowledge, the programme strengthens its capacity to explain why change does or does not occur. This orientation supports more realistic expectations of pace, more equitable design of Test & Learn activity, and more informed system decision making, consistent with NELP’s emphasis on understanding mechanisms and context in complex place-based change.

Test & Learns as System Probes

Within this methodological frame, Test & Learns are explicitly conceptualised as system probes rather than pilot projects. They are designed to test assumptions, explore mechanisms, and generate learning about how systems enable or constrain participation, rather than to prove effectiveness or scale interventions prematurely. Test & Learns vary in form and method; from participatory action research and co-creation (e.g. Westcourt) to phenomenological and narrative inquiry (e.g. Northfleet Diaries), to relational, embedded delivery with iterative reflection (e.g. Street Sports and Orbit Housing). This variation is intentional and reflects AKM’s commitment to methodological fit over uniformity. Across all cases, learning is embedded throughout delivery via observation, facilitator reflection, partner dialogue, and participant narrative, rather than applied retrospectively.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning as Collective Sense-Making

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) within the Place Expansion Programme is framed as collective sense making, not compliance driven reporting. While quantitative data remains important, it is deliberately held alongside qualitative and participatory evidence. Rather than focusing solely on attribution or performance, MEL activity has increasingly centred on surfacing changes in relationships, behaviours, confidence, decision making, and system norms; often treated as early indicators of system change. Applied MEL has been embedded into leadership training and Test & Learn design, enabling partners to actively use evaluative thinking to shape activity, interrogate assumptions, and consider context before committing to delivery.

The Importance of Ongoing Reflexivity

Reflexivity has remained a central methodological principle. AKM staff digital notebooks (covered in detail in Section 8), facilitator reflections, and iterative review points are used to surface assumptions, tensions, unintended consequences, and questions of power and influence. Crucially, these reflections are no longer treated as internal process data alone; they increasingly inform strategic conversations with partners and contribute to shared understanding across the system. AKM’s methodological integrity therefore lies not in strict adherence to a single method, but in maintaining coherence through shared principles: attention to context, centring lived experience,

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interrogating mechanisms, and remaining reflexive about system influence and limits of programme action.

Supporting Long-Term System Change

Taken together, this approach supports an evaluation practice that is explanatory and adaptive, rather than prescriptive, and oriented toward long-term system change. This approach allows the Place Expansion work to legitimise diverse, contextually appropriate methods, while maintaining analytical depth and coherence across places. Coupled with a MEL Framework it ensures place-based work remains credible to partners and collaborators, responsive to lived experience, and aligned with NELP and Sport England’s ambition to understand how place-based systems change over time.

Working Together in Thanet

“Place-based approach is definitely the way forward... it’s all in pride as well, where you live.”
- Delivery Partner

The following explanatory account provides an interpretive lens for understanding how system change is emerging within Thanet. It outlines the contextual factors, mechanisms, and early outcomes that help explain patterns of progress described in this section. The account should be read as an explanation of how and why collaboration, decision-making, and practice are shifting over time, rather than as a record of individual projects.

The Establishment of Relational System Change



Context: Thanet is shaped by long-standing socio-economic inequality, low trust in institutions, and fragmented service structures. Early activity occurred within a system where delivery was often disconnected from lived experience and where organisational priorities were misaligned with community realities.



Mechanisms: Change has emerged through relational and cognitive mechanisms, rather than through projects alone. Stakeholder-led context reporting, Test & Learn activity, leadership training, and reflective governance spaces have functioned as learning interventions, enabling partners to interrogate assumptions and reinterpret their roles within the system.



Outcomes: Capital investment, partner involvement, and political engagement have increasingly aligned with place-based learning. New actors, such as libraries, have been reframed as system enablers rather than peripheral partners. Governance has remained deliberately developmental, prioritising trust and shared language over premature formalisation.



Learnings: progress in Thanet is best understood through shifts in system behaviour rather than delivery metrics. Relational credibility and shared learning are functioning as prerequisites for more durable change.

Explanatory Account 2: Relational System Change in Thanet

Review of System Learning & Developments

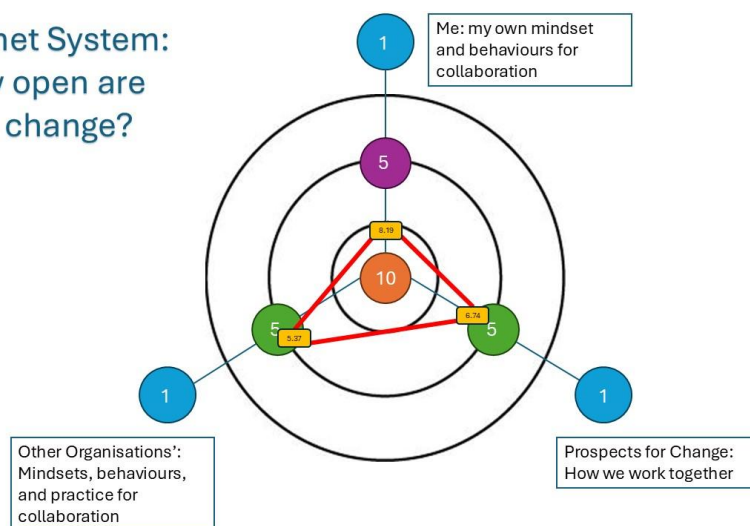
Since October 2025, Thanet is beginning to demonstrate a clear transition from project-level experimentation toward system learning. Early Test and Learn activity provided a relational and evidential base from which wider system conversations have emerged. This period has been characterised by increasing coherence across stakeholders, clearer articulation of shared purpose, and growing confidence in place-based ways of working.

The completion of a Stakeholder-led Context Report marked a significant milestone. The process itself functioned as a system intervention, bringing diverse partners into collective reflection on local conditions, assets, and barriers. This revealed misalignments between organisational priorities and community realities, prompting shifts in emphasis, particularly around safety, trust, and the role of informal spaces. The Thanet Stakeholder-led Context Report is discussed below.

Active Lives data has increasingly been used dialogically. Partners reported greater confidence in interrogating data alongside lived experience, rather than treating it as definitive. This has supported more nuanced discussions about inequality, particularly where headline participation rates obscure deeply unequal patterns of access.

Leadership training has acted as both a capability-building and relationship-building mechanism. Leadership Training has also acted as a mechanism for system influence. The active engagement of local elected councillors and portfolio holders throughout the training and their subsequent request for deeper involvement illustrates how partnership spaces can surface latent alignment and strengthen political ownership of place-based approaches. This development has increased visibility of physical activity and wellbeing considerations within wider civic conversations in Thanet. The Openness to Change exercise from the Thanet Place Leadership Training highlights a growing willingness among partners to move beyond programme-led assumptions and engage with the complexity of place-based work.

**Thanet System:
How open are
we t change?**



As the leadership training progressed, reflection on lived experience, system conditions, and organisational roles began to translate into a clearer sense of collective direction. Rather than generating prescriptive actions, participants articulated a set of shared purposes to guide how place-based working should be approached in Thanet. These statements represent a shift from

individual organisational priorities toward a common framing of responsibility for reducing inequalities and enabling participation.

Shared Purpose Emerging from Leadership Training		
To reduce inequality by supporting and empowering all people to find joy, connection, wellbeing, and activity in shared spaces.	To create inclusive opportunities for all ages to be active, in the right places, based on resident need.	To collaborate across sectors to make places where people feel empowered to access improved health and wellbeing and get active.

Governance in Thanet remains deliberately developmental. Rather than rushing toward formal structures, partners have prioritised trust, clarity of purpose, and shared language. This reflects learning from earlier phases, where premature formalisation risked exclusion and confusion.

Stakeholder-led Context Report

The Stakeholder-Led Context Report for Thanet provides a detailed and analytically rich account of the system conditions shaping physical activity and wellbeing across the district. Drawing on responses from twelve organisations spanning leisure, local government, health, housing, the voluntary and community sector, and cultural institutions, the report offers an understanding of how structural, social, economic, and psychological factors intersect to influence participation. The expanded evidence base builds on earlier exploratory work, moving beyond descriptive insight to support strategic decision-making and the development of place-based Test and Learn activity.

A central finding of the report is that barriers to physical activity in Thanet are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing, rather than isolated or easily addressed through programme delivery alone. Transport emerges as one of the most consistently cited structural barriers. Public transport is widely described as unreliable, costly, and poorly aligned with the location and timing of physical activity opportunities. For residents in outlying villages, deprived wards, and for those with mobility limitations, the requirement to travel to formal facilities represents a significant deterrent. This challenge is compounded by economic pressures. Stakeholders repeatedly highlight that the cumulative costs of participation; including fees, equipment, footwear, and travel; are prohibitive for many residents, particularly in the context of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

Psychological and social barriers were also prominently discussed in stakeholder responses. Low confidence, fear of judgement, anxiety, and a pervasive sense that sport and exercise spaces are “not for people like me” shape engagement decisions across the life course. These experiences are particularly acute among women and girls, individuals experiencing poor mental health, people who have been disconnected from employment, and those with long-term health conditions. Digital exclusion further exacerbates these challenges, with online booking systems, app-based memberships, and digital communication channels unintentionally excluding older adults and those with limited digital literacy. Environmental safety concerns; especially poor lighting, antisocial behaviour, and the perceived unsuitability of public spaces; further restrict opportunities for informal and outdoor activity.

The report provides an ongoing analysis of underserved and excluded groups, highlighting patterns that are consistent across multiple stakeholders. Older men are repeatedly identified as difficult to engage, with stigma, social isolation, and a lack of culturally resonant offers cited as key factors. Disabled people and individuals with learning disabilities or SEND face disproportionate structural and psychological barriers, including inaccessible facilities, complex transport needs, and environments that lack predictability or appropriate adaptation. Older adults living with frailty, women and girls, young people (particularly those who are NEET or young parents), and Roma communities are also identified as groups whose needs are not adequately met by existing provision. Across these groups, the evidence underscores the importance of relational approaches, co-design, and delivery in trusted, familiar settings.

Despite these challenges, the report identifies a rich landscape of local assets that provide a strong foundation for place-based work. Thanet benefits from established leisure infrastructure, including Hartsdown Leisure Centre, Ramsgate Leisure Centre, and Bluewave Pool and Gym, alongside a diverse ecosystem of specialist and grassroots organisations. Community and voluntary sector networks play a crucial connective role, supporting outreach, coordination, and innovation. Beyond formal infrastructure, Thanet’s natural and heritage environments—most notably its coastline, parks, and heritage gardens—are highlighted as distinctive assets that enable forms of movement that feel accessible, restorative, and non-clinical. These spaces are particularly valuable for individuals who feel alienated by traditional sport settings.

Stakeholders also identify effective and promising practices that align strongly with place-based and preventative principles. Community-led models demonstrate the value of local ownership in fostering engagement and relevance. Gentle and accessible activity offers support in confidence-building and routine formation, particularly for older adults and those recovering from ill health. Green and nature-based wellbeing approaches reduce anxiety and lower the psychological threshold for participation, while primary care and community connector models leverage trusted relationships to support sustained engagement and social connection.

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Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) emerges as both a strength and a constraint within the Thanet system. While most organisations routinely collect attendance data, demographics, and qualitative feedback, capacity limitations significantly restrict analytical depth and consistency. Stakeholders express a strong appetite for shared frameworks, proportionate tools, and training that would enable learning to be aggregated and used strategically without overburdening frontline staff.

Overall, the report concludes that Thanet requires a coordinated, long-term place-based approach that addresses structural barriers, embeds inclusion and co-production, and strengthens system-wide learning. Fragmentation, transport constraints, affordability, safety, and digital exclusion cannot be resolved through isolated interventions. Instead, progress depends on collective action, shared principles, and governance arrangements that prioritise relational depth, hyper-local delivery, and continuous learning.

Strengthening Partnerships for Collective Impact

Partnership working in Thanet has become more outward-looking. Relationships have expanded beyond the immediate place group to include libraries, housing providers, and workforce development organisations. Libraries have emerged as particularly significant partners, valued for their neutrality, accessibility, and alignment with everyday activity.

Test & Learns

Thanet Street Sports

Thanet’s first Test and Learn project, delivered over the six-week 2025 summer holiday represented a strategic intervention designed to address entrenched inequalities in youth engagement within Thanet. The Street Sport Sessions activated underused public spaces and promoted physical activity, social cohesion, and community ownership. Building on the 2024 pilot, the programme expanded into three high-need areas as a deliberate experiment in adaptive learning and system change, testing whether core design principles could be effectively scaled. Guided by a constructivist, place-based approach, the initiative employed Community-Based Participatory Action Research to ensure co-learning, shared ownership, and culturally relevant practice, particularly important in communities with low institutional trust. Insight and evaluation were structured across five phases, beginning with in-depth consultation and the formation of a Youth Advisory Group that co-developed tools, shaped methods, and supported delivery. Participatory data collection incorporated creative and accessible techniques, notably interactive sticker boards and youth-led interviews, generating rich quantitative and qualitative insights without disrupting session flow. Additional data emerged from recorded conversations, community

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feedback, and extensive field notes. A reflexive journaling process embedded continuous learning, ensuring that the project remained responsive, accountable, and grounded in community experience. The full report can be found at: [Thanet Street Sports Test & Learn \(Summer 2025\) - ActiveKent](#).

The place partnership approach enabled the project to tailor its design and delivery to the distinct needs of Dane Valley, Boundary Road Park, and Newington Green. Site visits, community walks, and informal conversations deepened understanding of each area’s socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural context, informing adaptations such as leveraging intergenerational opportunities in Dane Valley and addressing access constraints in Boundary Road. Cross-sector collaboration strengthened learning and capacity, with partners contributing expertise and local knowledge that enriched programme delivery. The Youth Advisory Group played a central role in ensuring cultural relevance, amplifying youth perspectives, and fostering ownership among participants. The Test and Learn also demonstrated the feasibility of adapting the Cliftonville pilot across varied contexts, prioritising fidelity to core principles while allowing flexibility to explore what worked, for whom, and under what conditions.

Street Sports now functions less as a standalone intervention and more as a reference point for shared learning. Insights around safety, youth agency, and workforce support continue to inform wider system discussions.

Supporting Older Adults Living with Frailty

OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

The Orbit Housing Test and Learn represents a significant piece of the Place Expansion work in Thanet since October 2025, focused on understanding how confidence, independence, and belonging are experienced and negotiated by older residents and individuals living with frailty within supported housing settings. Developed as a twelve-week, phased Test and Learn, the initiative sought to explore not only whether participation in physical activity could be increased, but how engagement emerges over time within complex social environments shaped by health, history, and relational dynamics.

This Test and Learn was designed in response to persistent patterns of disengagement among older residents in Thanet, where physical inactivity intersects with loneliness, declining health, fear of risk, and limited access to inclusive activity environments. Rather than approaching these challenges through a deficit-based model of motivation or behaviour change, the Orbit Test and Learn was grounded in a relational and exploratory ethos. Physical activity was positioned as a vehicle for connection and meaning-making, embedded within everyday settings and supported through sustained, trusted relationships.

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The work was delivered across four Orbit Housing schemes in Thanet—Victoria Villas (Margate), Napleton Court (Ramsgate), Cherry Court (Broadstairs), and Craven Court (Garlinge). These schemes differed in size, layout, social dynamics, and resident composition, providing a valuable opportunity to examine how place-based conditions shape engagement in distinct but comparable contexts. Across all schemes, the Test and Learn prioritised gradual progression, consistency of presence, and responsiveness to lived experience, aligning closely with Sport England’s emphasis on long-term, relationship-led system change.

DESIGN, DELIVERY, AND LEARNING APPROACH

The Orbit Test and Learn adopted a phased engagement model, beginning with in-scheme activities to establish familiarity and trust, before progressively introducing mixed-site and community-based opportunities. Activities included chair-based exercise, Pilates, yoga, tai chi, boxing, circus skills, judo, and facilitated visits to local libraries and leisure facilities. Importantly, activity sessions were not treated as isolated interventions, but as relational spaces in which social interaction, informal conversation, and storytelling could occur naturally.

From the outset, learning was embedded within delivery. Community Connectors and facilitators maintained reflective diaries and observational field notes throughout the programme, capturing attendance patterns, informal interactions, expressions of enjoyment or resistance, and subtle behavioural changes over time. These reflections formed the primary data corpus for the preliminary analysis, supplemented by informal resident feedback gathered during and around sessions. Formal narrative interviews with residents, facilitators, and Orbit staff are planned for a subsequent phase, allowing participants to reflect retrospectively on their experiences once relationships are firmly established.

Methodologically, the Test and Learn drew on narrative inquiry, recognising that concepts such as confidence, independence, and belonging are socially constructed, relational, and temporal. This approach was particularly appropriate given the participant group, many of whom live with fluctuating health conditions, mobility limitations, or cognitive change. Rather than seeking to extract outcomes through one-off measures, the programme focused on understanding how residents made sense of participation, change, and identity through stories told in everyday moments.

BELONGING, SOCIAL DYNAMICS, AND THE CONDITIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

One of the most significant insights to emerge relates to the nature of belonging within supported housing schemes. Rather than being an automatic product of shared residence, belonging was revealed as a contested and conditional social process, shaped by long-standing relationships, informal hierarchies, and unspoken norms. In several schemes, tightly bonded social groups

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exerted a strong influence on participation. These groups were not overtly exclusionary, but subtle dynamics of loyalty and conformity shaped residents’ decisions about whether to engage. In some cases, non-participation functioned as a form of social alignment, as residents avoided activities not because of disinterest, but to maintain standing within established groups. This phenomenon challenges simplistic interpretations of disengagement and underscores the importance of understanding social risk alongside physical or logistical barriers.

At the same time, belonging was frequently articulated by residents as a sense of psychological safety rather than active group membership. For some participants, particularly those living with anxiety or neurodegenerative conditions, belonging meant being recognised, welcomed by name, and allowed to participate on their own terms. Small group sizes, predictable formats, and familiar facilitators were crucial in sustaining this sense of safety, while larger or unfamiliar groups could trigger withdrawal even among residents who otherwise expressed enjoyment.

Notably, the presence of external participants in some sessions appeared to disrupt entrenched dynamics in positive ways, softening dominant behaviours and creating new social norms. This suggests that belonging within supported housing settings is not fixed, but responsive to environmental and relational conditions; a critical learning point for future place-based work with older adults.

CONFIDENCE AS AN EMERGENT AND RELATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Confidence emerged consistently as an outcome of participation, rather than a prerequisite for it. Residents often arrived at initial sessions carrying strong narratives of incapacity; often expressed through statements such as *“I can’t do that”* or *“that’s not for me.”* Over time, and through repeated exposure to supportive environments, these narratives began to shift. Confidence was rarely expressed through dramatic change or mastery; instead, it manifested in small but meaningful behavioural indicators: staying for the full session, attempting adapted movements, returning after an uncertain first experience, or expressing willingness to *“give it a go.”*

These shifts were highly sensitive to facilitation style. Facilitators who demonstrated warmth, humour, and adaptability were particularly effective in supporting confidence. Consistency of facilitators across sessions further reinforced this process, enabling trust and familiarity to develop. Conversely, sessions that felt rushed, overly complex, or insufficiently responsive to group needs often undermined confidence, leading residents to disengage or internalise difficulty as personal failure.

Importantly, confidence was also nurtured through informal moments outside structured activity. Personal invitations, reassurance before sessions, or adapting plans to suit individual preferences (for example, choosing a quieter game instead of a planned activity) signalled care and recognition.

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These micro-interactions played a disproportionate role in sustaining engagement, highlighting that confidence-building in this context is deeply relational rather than instructional.

INDEPENDENCE AS SCAFFOLDED AND EMBODIED

The Test and Learn challenged conventional understandings of independence. Rather than equating independence with self-sufficiency, residents’ experiences demonstrated that independence was often scaffolded, negotiated, and embodied. Supported transitions, such as attending first sessions with a companion, learning to navigate transport with assistance, or practising routes together; enabled residents to gradually expand their comfort zones.

Crucially, this support was not experienced as undermining autonomy. On the contrary, it allowed residents to develop practical skills and confidence that later enabled more independent participation. In several cases, residents who initially required significant support went on to drive others to activities, encourage peers to attend, or express interest in volunteering informally. Health conditions shaped what independence looked like in practice. Residents living with Parkinson’s, arthritis, fibromyalgia, anxiety, and learning disabilities described independence through embodied choice, deciding when to leave a session, participating in a seated format, or attending as an observer rather than an active participant. These forms of partial participation were meaningful expressions of agency and autonomy, and their recognition was central to sustaining engagement.

Transport emerged as both a practical and symbolic barrier. Fear of getting lost, embarrassment about asking for help, and anxiety about unfamiliar environments often outweighed logistical challenges. Preliminary learning suggests that transport independence develops alongside social confidence and belonging; as residents felt safer relationally, they became more willing to navigate journeys beyond their immediate environment.

TRUST, CONSISTENCY, AND RELATIONAL LABOUR

Underlying all other dimensions of the project was the central role of trust, consistency, and sustained relational labour. Trust was person-specific rather than organisational. Residents consistently referenced Community Connectors or facilitators as the reason they attended sessions, underscoring the importance of continuity and personal relationship in engagement with older adults living with frailty. Trust was built through repeated presence, follow-through on commitments, and attentiveness to individual circumstances. However, it was also shown to be fragile. Disruptions such as staff absences, session cancellations, venue changes, or access issues frequently resulted in sudden drops in attendance. These effects were particularly pronounced in settings where trust had only recently begun to develop, highlighting the need for system reliability alongside relational effort.

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Storytelling emerged as both a methodological resource and an indicator of success. As trust deepened, residents were more likely to share personal stories during informal moments, often after sessions or over refreshments. These narratives provided insight into identity, loss, resilience, and change that would not have surfaced through formal tools alone. From an evaluative perspective, the emergence of storytelling functioned as evidence that residents were experiencing confidence, independence, and belonging in meaningful ways.

CONTRIBUTION TO PLACE-BASED SYSTEM LEARNING

Taken together, the Orbit Test and Learn offers important learning for place-based work in Thanet and beyond. It demonstrates that participation among older adults living with frailty is socially produced, relationally contingent, and highly sensitive to context. Belonging emerged as a foundational condition upon which confidence and independence depended, while trust and consistency formed the necessary infrastructure for sustained engagement.

For the Place Expansion Programme, this Test project reinforces the importance of long-term, relationship-led approaches; the value of narrative and qualitative insight in understanding system conditions; and the need to recognise partial participation and supported independence as legitimate outcomes. These insights are already informing wider system conversations in Thanet, particularly in relation to workforce development, use of trusted community spaces, and the design of inclusive pathways for older adults.

As the programme moves into subsequent phases, the Orbit Test and Learn provides a strong evidential and conceptual foundation for embedding learning into wider place-based systems, ensuring that future activity is not only accessible, but relationally and socially sustainable.

Exploring Test and Learn Insights within the wider Thanet System

The Orbit Housing and Street Sports Test and Learns represent two contrasting yet complementary strands of place-based experimentation within Thanet. While differing significantly in population focus, delivery context, and activity type, both initiatives were intentionally designed as Test and Learn interventions; exploratory, adaptive, and oriented toward generating system insight rather than proving predetermined outcomes. When considered comparatively, they provide a rich lens through which to examine how the conditions required to reduce inequalities in physical activity manifest differently across life stages, social contexts, and places.

Taken together, the two Test and Learns illuminate not only *what* supports engagement in physical activity, but *how* confidence, belonging, independence, and trust are socially produced within specific relational and structural environments. Importantly, the comparative learning strengthens

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the programme’s understanding of the Nine NELP Conditions as dynamic, contextual, and interdependent, rather than universally expressed or linearly achieved.

Participation as a Response to System Context, not Individual Motivation

Across both Test and Learns, decisions about whether and how to participate were shaped far more by system context than by individual attitudes toward physical activity. Engagement emerged as a rational, adaptive response to the social, cultural, and environmental conditions in which participants were embedded.

In Street Sports, young people navigated public spaces characterised by surveillance, dispersal orders, and strained relationships with authority. Participation in visible activity carried social and emotional risks, including potential confrontation with police, negative labelling, or peer judgement. Initial resistance or ambivalence toward sessions therefore reflected an assessment of risk rather than disinterest in being active. Over time, as sessions became consistent and facilitators visibly advocated for young people’s right to occupy space, perceptions of risk began to shift. Similarly, in the Orbit Housing Test and Learn, non-participation often reflected an assessment of social safety within semi-private environments. Supported housing schemes were not socially neutral spaces; they were shaped by established hierarchies, informal gatekeepers, and long histories of relational tension. In some schemes, attending externally facilitated activities carried the risk of social exclusion from dominant groups. Avoidance in these contexts functioned as a protective strategy to maintain psychological safety and social belonging.

Across both projects, this learning challenges deficit-based interpretations of disengagement and aligns with NELP conditions relating to addressing structural barriers and working across systems. This comparative insight reinforces a core system learning: inequality in physical activity is not primarily a behavioural issue, but a situational and relational one, mediated by formal and informal structures, social norms, and environmental conditions. Participation cannot be assumed to increase through persuasion or motivation alone; it requires shifts in the environmental and relational context that currently make non-participation a safer option., the social meaning of public or shared space, and the perceived risks of visibility.

Belonging and Safety as Foundational Conditions for Engagement

Belonging and safety emerged as foundational preconditions for participation in both Test and Learns, though they took different forms depending on context and population. Rather than being outcomes of engagement, these conditions had to be established before sustained participation could occur.

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In Street Sports, belonging developed through the consistent, visible presence of trusted adults who shared space with young people rather than supervising from a distance. Play, informal conversation, and youth-led decision-making gradually reframed parks and recreation grounds from contested or policed spaces into environments of shared ownership. This shift was not immediate; it occurred through repetition, predictability, and the accumulation of small relational cues that signalled safety and respect. In Orbit Housing, belonging was more fragile and uneven. Shared residence did not equate to shared identity or mutual support. Residents often described belonging as feeling comfortable enough to be present without obligation to perform, comply, or socially integrate beyond their capacity. Smaller group sizes, predictable formats, and familiar facilitators were essential in creating this sense of safety. Larger groups, unfamiliar faces, or changes in routine often heightened anxiety, particularly for residents living with cognitive or mobility challenges.

Across both projects, safety was shown to be relational rather than purely physical. It depended on trust, predictability, and respectful interaction rather than infrastructure alone. Crucially, it reinforces that inclusive design must be paired with inclusive relationships if participation is to be sustained. Across both projects, belonging was shown to be conditional and situational, not merely about inclusion in a group, but about feeling safe enough to be visible without judgement. Smaller group sizes, predictable formats, and trusted facilitators were critical in both contexts. This suggests that belonging is not a downstream outcome of successful delivery, but a precondition that must be actively created and protected through design, pacing, and relational attentiveness.

Confidence, Agency, and Independence as Emergent

A further area of convergence concerns how confidence, agency, and independence developed over time. In both Test and Learns, these qualities emerged through participation rather than preceding it and were shaped by relational experience rather than individual capacity.

In Street Sports, confidence was closely linked to agency. Young people gained confidence as they experienced their voices being heard, their preferences shaping activity, and their presence being valued. Confidence manifested not only in physical skill, but in social behaviours. Importantly, confidence grew where facilitators balanced structure with choice, allowing young people to participate at varying intensities. In Orbit Housing, confidence developed far more subtly. Residents often arrived with deeply embedded narratives of incapacity associated with ageing, illness, or frailty. Over time, and within supportive environments, these narratives softened. Confidence was evident in small shifts, such as attending independently, attempting adapted movements, or returning after an uncertain first experience. These changes were highly sensitive to facilitation style and consistency.

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Independence across both projects was supported rather than assumed. In Street Sports, independence was expressed through choice and autonomy within sessions. In Orbit Housing, independence was scaffolded through accompaniment, reassurance, and practical support, particularly around transport and navigating unfamiliar settings. Crucially, partial participation was treated as legitimate in both contexts.

Across both Test and Learns, confidence was destabilised by inconsistency (e.g. staff changes, cancelled sessions, or abrupt shifts in format). Learnings challenge traditional binary notions of participation and independence, highlighting the importance of enabling environments that respect fluctuation, choice, and agency across the life course. This is not an individual trait but a property of the environment and relationships. Systems that value confidence, agency, and independence must therefore invest in continuity, relational skill, and adaptive facilitation, regardless of age group or delivery setting.

Trust, Consistency, and the Centrality of Relational Labour

Perhaps the strongest point of convergence between the two Test and Learns lies in the central role of trust. In Street Sports, trust was built through facilitators’ willingness to show up consistently and “play in” rather than observe from a distance. Trust was embodied and visible, particularly where facilitators shared lived experience or demonstrated long-term commitment to place. In Orbit Housing, trust was intensely person-specific. Residents consistently attended because of key Community Connectors or facilitators, rather than because of the programme itself. Disruptions, even minor, had disproportionate impacts on attendance, illustrating the fragility of trust in contexts shaped by loss, health decline, and long histories of disappointment.

Across both Test and Learns, the significance of relational labour was highlighted and the emotional, social, and temporal work required to build and sustain trust. This labour was essential but often invisible within formal delivery models. Both Test and Learns highlight that relational labour is the infrastructure of change yet remains largely invisible within traditional delivery and funding models. Trust is not scalable through replication alone; it is built through time, presence, and emotional attentiveness. This learning has important implications for workforce development, commissioning timelines, and expectations of pace.

Implications for System Change in Thanet

Viewed together, the Street Sports and Orbit Housing Test and Learns demonstrate the interdependent system dynamics; that despite manifesting differently across contexts remain consistent. Belonging supports confidence; confidence enables agency; agency depends on trust; and trust requires consistent, relational systems.

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Crucially, both Test and Learns demonstrate that system change is experienced first at the relational level. Parks become safe not because of new infrastructure alone, but because trusted adults occupy them differently. Housing schemes become more inclusive not because activities are offered, but because relationships soften social risk.

For the Thanet Place Partnership, the comparative learning underscores the importance of:

- designing for relational safety before scale,
- recognising partial participation as success,
- investing in consistency and workforce capability,
- and treating lived experience as intelligence, not anecdote.

Together, the two Test and Learns strengthen the programme’s confidence that tackling inequalities in physical activity requires not a single model, but a shared set of principles flexibly enacted across population groups and places.

Impact of Place Partnership

The impact of the Thanet Place Partnership during this reporting period is most clearly evidenced through system-level shifts in decision-making, relationships, and shared accountability, rather than immediate population-level change. Since October 2025, the Partnership has increasingly functioned as a convening and sense-making space in which evidence, lived experience, and strategic priorities have been brought into closer alignment.

One tangible outcome of this collaborative approach has been the commitment of capital investment to update the Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) at Dane Valley Park. This decision reflects learning emerging from Test & Learn activity and stakeholder dialogue, particularly insights relating to safety, legitimacy of space, and youth engagement. While the investment itself predates population-level outcomes, its alignment with place-based learning signals a notable shift toward evidence-informed infrastructure decisions.

Discussions reflected increased recognition that participation is shaped by safety, trust, belonging, and access, rather than motivation alone. Participants showed greater comfort with learning-led pacing, ambiguity, and adaptation, alongside acknowledgement that no single organisation can address these conditions in isolation. Importantly, openness was expressed as readiness to reflect, revise assumptions, and prioritise relational approaches, indicating an emerging system culture that values learning and collective responsibility as legitimate forms of progress.

Beyond formal investment, the Place Partnership’s impact is also evident in relationship density and cross-sector engagement. Kent County Council libraries have emerged as significant partners, recognised for their neutrality, accessibility, and ability to host physical activity initiatives, social connection, and workforce development activity. Conversations initiated within partnership spaces

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have led to emerging collaboration around Everyday Active Champions, physical activity promotion, boot donation, and potential use of indoor and outdoor library spaces as community assets.

Less visible, but equally significant, are shifts in how partners understand their role in enabling activity. Feedback from delivery organisations, cultural institutions, and health partners suggests growing confidence in viewing physical activity not as a singular programme outcome, but as a shared system responsibility shaped by environment, trust, and access. These relational and cognitive shifts represent important early signals of place-based system change.

Translating Learning into Action

A defining feature of the Thanet work has been the intentional translation of learning into action, without treating insight generation and delivery as separate stages. Learning from Test & Learn activity, stakeholder-led context analysis, leadership training, and ongoing reflexive practice has increasingly informed *how* activity is designed, sequenced, and embedded within local systems.

The ongoing development of a shared Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework will be central to the translation process. Rather than functioning solely as a reporting tool, the framework is intended to support collective sense-making across partners, enabling learning to be surfaced, tested, and revisited. This will strengthen confidence in recognising early system signals as legitimate forms of progress. Learning has also been operationalised through Theory of Change (ToC) development, which has begun to provide a shared language for articulating assumptions, mechanisms, and intended outcomes. The ToC is in early development and has been used flexibly as a learning instrument, supporting discussion about pacing, readiness, and leverage points.

At a practice level, learning has translated into adaptation of delivery models. Work with the Thanet Health Alliance, particularly within frailty-focused pathways, illustrates how physical activity is increasingly embedded within existing health and care systems rather than delivered as a standalone offer. Similarly, learning from youth-focused Test & Learns has informed workforce development discussions, particularly around facilitation skills, relational continuity, and trauma-aware practice. Overall, the Thanet Place Partnership demonstrates an increasingly coherent feedback loop between learning, decision-making, and action. While outcomes remain emergent, the mechanisms through which learning informs practice and system behaviour are becoming more established and intentional.

Building a Better Gravesham

This section begins with an explanatory account that articulates how system learning in Gravesham has moved from coordination and planning into applied place-based practice. Using a Critical Realist lens, the account clarifies the contextual conditions and mechanisms through which leadership training, governance, and applied learning have shaped subsequent Test & Learn activity. It provides a framework for interpreting the developments and examples that follow.

From Strategic Alignment to Practicing Place-Based Change



Context: Gravesham has strong collaborative intent and established cross-sector relationships, alongside a shared ambition to address persistent inequalities in Westcourt and Northfleet North. These conditions required action that moved beyond coordination and planning toward applied, place-based learning grounded in lived experience.



Mechanisms: Experiential leadership training, combined with applied MEL thinking, provided critical mechanisms for system learning. Grounded engagement with place, alongside collective reflection, enabled partners to surface gaps between policy, infrastructure, and lived experience. Applied evaluative tools shifted MEL from retrospective reporting into a design mechanism.



Outcomes: These mechanisms directly shaped the design and sequencing of Test & Learn activity. Partners demonstrated greater confidence in working without predefined solutions and greater shared ownership of outcomes. Governance and investment decisions began to reflect system learning rather than isolated organisational priorities.



Learnings: Leadership development can function as a system intervention, enabling systems to move from conceptual agreement to altered practice when learning is experiential and shared.

Explanatory Account 3: Strategic Alignment in Gravesham

Review of System Learning & Developments

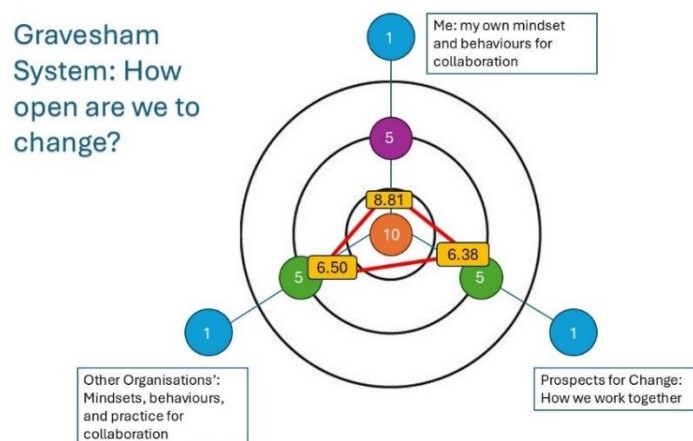
System learning in Gravesham has moved from exploratory and governance-focused activity toward more integrated, delivery-informed understanding of place-based change. While the October report characterised Gravesham as being in a foundational phase; dominated by needs assessment, stakeholder mobilisation, and governance formation; the subsequent six months have seen clearer articulation of shared priorities, increased leadership capability, and improved connectivity between strategic intent and community-level action.

A central development during this period has been the maturation of the Place Partnership Core Group. Whereas earlier meetings focused on establishing legitimacy and shared language, recent sessions have been marked by a greater willingness among partners to engage with complexity, challenge assumptions, and hold collective responsibility for outcomes. This shift reflects growing familiarity with place-based approaches and increased confidence in working without predefined solutions.

Similarly to Thanet, the Stakeholder-led Context Report process has further contributed to this learning. Findings reinforced intelligence already existing; particularly around deprivation, low physical activity levels, and limited access to safe, welcoming spaces; and added depth by foregrounding practitioner insight and community-facing perspectives. Partners reported that the process itself enhanced system awareness, enabling them to situate their organisational remits within a broader ecosystem of influence.

Public Health and Active Lives data have played a complementary role to this work. Data has increasingly been used as a conversation starter rather than a performance benchmark. Partners engaged critically with participation statistics, recognising disparities between headline figures and hyperlocal experience, particularly in Westcourt and Northfleet North. This has supported more nuanced discussions about inequality, including the intersection of physical activity with housing density, transport access, cultural diversity, and perceptions of safety.

Leadership Training has been a significant driver of system learning in Gravesham. Delivered as a consecutive two-day programme combining site visits and strategic discussion, the training provided a structured environment for cross-sector reflection. Participants engaged directly with physical environments, such as The Hive, Northfleet Urban Country Park, and Wombwell Park; allowing abstract system conversations to be grounded in lived reality. This experiential learning surfaced practical insights regarding accessibility, signage, lighting, and inclusive design, and prompted new connections between planning, public health, leisure, and community safety agendas. Like in Thanet, The Openness to Change exercise in Gravesham reflects a system increasingly prepared to translate learning into practice.



Participants demonstrated willingness to challenge long-standing assumptions, particularly where place-based observation revealed gaps between infrastructure, policy, and lived experience. The exercise highlighted growing acceptance that addressing inequalities requires cross-sector change rather than additional provision alone. Overall, the exercise suggests a maturing system mindset, characterised by shared ownership of challenges, applied learning, and commitment to adapt practice in response to evidence and experience. Through facilitated discussion, place walks, and applied learning, participants moved beyond identifying challenges toward clarifying how responsibility for change should be held collectively. This resulted in several shared purpose statements that reflect Gravesham’s intent to work differently across organisational and sector boundaries, using place-based learning as a driver for action rather than a precursor to delivery.

Shared Purpose Emerging from Leadership Training		
To connect with trusted organisations to listen, empower, and co-create sustainable wellbeing outcomes.	To collaborate effectively to create safe, shared resources and spaces that are inclusive, accessible, affordable, and sustainable.	To meet diverse community needs across physical and emotional wellbeing through coordinated, cross-sector action.

System learning and development has not been without challenge. The loss of the Community Connector role during this period represented a significant disruption, highlighting workforce fragility as an ongoing system vulnerability. Rather than stalling progress, however, this challenge became a learning opportunity. Partners reflected openly on the reliance on individual roles and the need to strengthen collective ownership and institutional memory within the system.

Overall, the period since October demonstrates a shift in Gravesham from planning for place-based working to practising it, with system learning increasingly embedded within governance structures, leadership behaviours, and delivery experimentation.

Stakeholder-led Context Report

The Gravesham Place Partnership Stakeholder-led Context Report presents a system-level analysis of barriers, assets, and opportunities for promoting physical activity and wellbeing across the borough, with particular attention to Northfleet and Westcourt. Based on input from six key

organisations spanning local government, health, housing, community development, and regeneration, the report provides an evidence-informed foundation for strategic planning and Test and Learn development. The findings highlight the complexity of addressing physical activity inequalities within a context shaped by deprivation, environmental constraints, and diverse population needs.

A dominant theme within the report is the prevalence of structural barriers that constrain participation. Stakeholders consistently identify gaps in accessible infrastructure, particularly the limited availability of sports halls, indoor facilities, and safe green spaces in areas such as Northfleet. Housing conditions; including damp, mould, overcrowding, and antisocial behaviour; are described as having a direct and indirect impact on physical and mental wellbeing, reducing residents’ capacity and motivation to engage in activity. Environmental issues such as fly-tipping, motorbike noise, and poorly maintained public spaces further undermine perceptions of safety and legitimacy. Transport and accessibility challenges compound these issues, with limited access to private vehicles and unreliable public transport disproportionately affecting older adults, disabled people, and families with young children.

Socioeconomic pressures are identified as a critical barrier across all stakeholder responses. Financial constraints limit both direct participation costs and indirect requirements such as equipment, clothing, and childcare. The cost-of-living crisis intensifies these pressures, with residents prioritising essential expenses over health-promoting activities. Time poverty is also significant, particularly for working adults and caregivers. Stakeholders note that childcare responsibilities, especially for young mothers, present a substantial obstacle to engagement in community-based programmes. Knowledge and awareness gaps further restrict participation, as residents may lack trusted, accessible information about how to begin or sustain physical activity, particularly in ways that feel safe and appropriate.

Cultural and psychological barriers add further layers of complexity. Stakeholders describe social norms and beliefs within some communities that discourage participation or frame physical activity as undesirable. Gendered and cultural expectations are particularly salient, with Muslim and Asian women often requiring women-only provision to feel comfortable participating. Anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of judgement are widely reported, especially in relation to public or formal exercise settings. These psychological barriers are reinforced by perceptions that physical activity must involve high-intensity exertion, which alienates individuals who would benefit from gentler or more flexible approaches. Trust in institutions also emerges as a significant factor, with top-down or externally imposed initiatives often viewed with scepticism.

The report identifies several underserved and excluded groups, including Muslim and Asian women, older men, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, disabled and neurodivergent individuals, and low-income families. These groups face intersecting structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that are not adequately addressed by existing provision. Stakeholders also

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highlight gaps in partnership representation, calling for stronger involvement from faith organisations, housing services, community safety teams, social prescribing networks, and young people themselves. Improved transparency regarding who is involved in the Place Partnership is identified as an important enabler of trust and collaboration.

Despite these challenges, the report emphasises Gravesham’s considerable local assets. Physical spaces such as parks, refurbished tennis courts, libraries, Cyclopark, and the National Cycle Path provide important foundations for activity. A range of organisations; including cultural venues, housing hubs, sports trusts, and faith-based centres; play a central role in delivering programmes and engaging diverse communities. Several initiatives are highlighted as effective, including walking sports for older adults, culturally appropriate swimming sessions, and youth-focused creative activities. The use of “health by stealth” approaches, where activity is embedded within social or cultural experiences rather than explicitly framed as exercise, is identified as particularly successful in reducing stigma and increasing engagement.

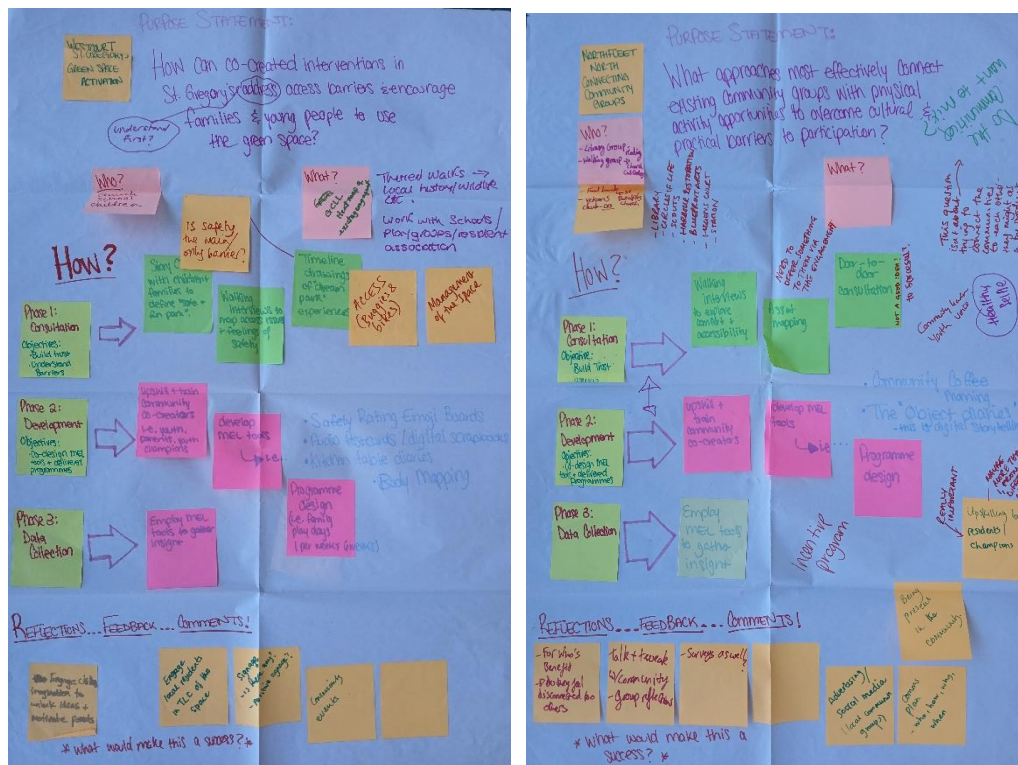
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning practices across Gravesham are variable. While attendance data, surveys, and informal feedback are commonly collected, stakeholders report persistent challenges related to staff capacity, time constraints, digital access, and the absence of shared frameworks. There is a clear appetite for training, peer learning, and improved information sharing to support more meaningful evaluation and collective learning.

In conclusion, the Needs Assessment depicts Gravesham as a place with strong commitment and significant assets yet facing entrenched inequalities that limit participation for many residents. Addressing these challenges requires inclusive, community-led, and cross-sector approaches that align investment, infrastructure, and governance with lived experience. Physical activity is positioned not only as an outcome, but as a lever for improving wellbeing, social connection, and equity across the borough.

Test & Learns

The design and sequencing of Test & Learn activity in Gravesham have been intentionally shaped through Place Leadership Training. Over the two-day programme, participants were introduced to core Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) principles through a practical mini-workshop embedded within the training. Rather than treating MEL as a theoretical or retrospective exercise, partners were supported to apply these principles directly to emerging ideas for place-based activity. In doing so, leadership training functioned as a live design space, enabling participants to test assumptions, identify mechanisms of change, and consider context before committing to delivery (see images below). The Northfleet and Westcourt Test & Learns therefore emerged not as standalone projects, but as system-informed interventions shaped through collective learning, applied evaluation thinking, and cross-sector collaboration.

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Westcourt - St. Gregory's Green Space Activation

The Westcourt Test & Learn is designed as a participatory, mixed-methods system probe examining how under-utilised green space can be experienced, reinterpreted, and activated as a safe, legitimate, and inclusive environment for physical activity. Rather than assuming if availability of green space equates to accessibility or use, the Test & Learn seeks to understand the conditions under which residents choose to occupy, avoid, or re-engage with shared public space, with a particular focus on families and young people.

The Test & Learn adopts a four-phase Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR) design, explicitly linking insight generation to action and reflection. CBPR has been selected to ensure that resident lived experience is not only captured but actively shapes decision-making throughout the process. The approach combines qualitative methods (intercepts, workshops, creative exercises, observation) with light-touch quantitative measures to establish baseline conditions and track perceived change. This design reflects learning from earlier place-based work which demonstrates that traditional infrastructure or programme-led interventions often fail when perceptions of safety, visibility, and legitimacy remain unaddressed. The Westcourt Test & Learn therefore prioritises understanding before permanent change, favouring low-risk, adaptable experimentation over pre-determined delivery.



PHASE 1: RAPID DISCOVERY AND BASELINE INSIGHT

The first phase focuses on generating a rapid but robust understanding of how St Gregory's Green Space is currently perceived and used. This includes a community engagement event within the space itself, and an extensive programme of intercept surveys conducted at high-footfall and trusted locations, including school gates, a local church, a GP surgery, and the green space perimeter. Survey instruments are designed to explore awareness, perceived safety, access routes, amenities, social norms around space use, and practical and psychological barriers. To complement this, a creative "Dream Park" exercise with pupils at Westcourt Primary School enables children to articulate imagined futures for the space, offering insight into aspirational use and latent demand that may not surface through conventional consultation. Outputs from this phase include a baseline dashboard and thematic synthesis that directly informs subsequent co-creation activity.

PHASE 2: CO-CREATION AND COLLECTIVE SENSE-MAKING

Phase 2 centres on two facilitated co-creation workshops with residents, recruited through existing trusted networks such as the school, church, and GP surgery. These workshops are explicitly designed to translate insight from Phase 1 into resident-defined intervention concepts, rather than externally imposed solutions. Participants collectively explore safety perceptions, accessibility challenges, and usage pathways, using participatory tools such as storyboarding, safety-rating activities, and prioritisation grids. The objective is to identify two to three "quick-win" activation prototypes that are feasible, desirable, and perceived as legitimate by the community. This phase also functions as a system learning mechanism, revealing how residents interpret constraints and possibilities within the space.

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PHASE 3: PILOT ACTIVATION AND REAL-TIME FEEDBACK

The third phase involves piloting the co-created activations during peak engagement windows, such as weekends and after-school periods. These events are intentionally framed as experiments rather than programmes, enabling observation of how changes to use, presence, and facilitation influence engagement. Real-time feedback is collected through attendance counts, short intercept interviews, post-event surveys, and creative documentation. This mixed evidence allows the project team to observe both behavioural response and shifts in perception relating to safety, accessibility, and social norms.

PHASE 4: EVALUATION, REFLECTION, AND EMBEDDING

The final phase synthesises qualitative and quantitative evidence to assess what changed, for whom, and under what conditions. Learning is shared back with residents and system partners, and findings are translated into recommendations regarding future infrastructure investment, programming, and governance. At this stage, the emphasis is not on claiming population-level impact, but on reducing risk in future decision-making by grounding action in lived experience. The Test & Learn therefore contributes to place-based system change by informing how multiple sectors collectively shape the usability of shared space.

The Northfleet Diaries

The Northfleet Test & Learn is an insight-led, phenomenological inquiry designed to explore how residents experience physical activity in everyday life, and how those experiences shape connection or disconnection to existing opportunities. The Test & Learn intentionally departs from activity delivery models, instead positioning storytelling and narrative sense-making as primary mechanisms for understanding context, culture, and constraint.

DESIGN RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Test & Learn is grounded in phenomenology, a qualitative approach concerned with understanding the essence of lived experience rather than measuring participation or outcomes. This approach is particularly appropriate within Northfleet North, where dense housing, population churn, and historical mistrust of institutions complicate traditional engagement strategies. By using storytelling; specifically, object- and place-centred narratives; the project enables residents to surface embodied, emotional, and contextual dimensions of physical activity that are often excluded from standard evaluative tools. This method lowers barriers to engagement, supports participation across age groups, and enables indirect expression of sensitive issues such as fear, exclusion, or stigma.

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PHASE 1: PROJECT MOBILISATION AND NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

The first phase focuses on establishing the conditions for meaningful participation. This includes finalising participant guidance, setting up multiple story submission routes (digital, physical, and postal), and installing a PlayMade active equipment pod in a prominent local space to encourage spontaneous play and provide a tangible project anchor. Within this phase, considerable attention is given to access and inclusivity, ensuring that participation is not limited by digital literacy, confidence, or age. Alongside this, extensive partner engagement ensures the project is embedded within existing community networks, including schools, faith settings, Family Hubs, youth groups, and leisure providers.

PHASE 2: STORY COLLECTION AND COMMUNITY SENSE-MAKING

Phase 2 constitutes the core data-generation period. Residents are invited to submit stories (or drawings) written from the perspective of an object or place involved in physical activity. This creative constraint enables participants to reflect on how environments, equipment, and spaces enable or inhibit movement. The Test & Learn seeks representation across life stages and communities, with clear intake goals for families, young people, older residents, and minoritised groups. Rather than extracting data, the process is framed as collective storytelling, reinforcing that lived experience is valued as legitimate system knowledge.

PHASE 3: COMMUNITY FUN DAY

The final phase culminates in a community-led Fun Day that functions simultaneously as celebration, exhibition, and learning space. Stories are shared in printed and audio form, local providers host activity zones, and structured feedback mechanisms capture reflections on connection, confidence, and perceived accessibility. This event will also operate as a system interface, allowing residents, partners, and practitioners to engage directly with insight as it emerges, strengthening shared ownership of learning.

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CONTRIBUTION TO SYSTEM LEARNING

While the Northfleet Test & Learn does not seek immediate increases in activity, it is designed to inform future system action by revealing how physical activity is experienced, narrated, and made meaningful within everyday life. Learning will directly shape subsequent initiatives, connection strategies, and workforce development by clarifying where current approaches misalign with lived reality. By sequencing learning before intervention, the project protects against premature delivery and ensures that future action is contextually grounded, culturally relevant, and relationally credible.

Impact of Place Partnership

The impact of the Gravesham Place Partnership during this reporting period is most clearly observed in system-level shifts rather than immediate population outcomes. These shifts are evident in governance alignment, investment decisions, and cross-sector engagement patterns.

One tangible indicator of impact has been the successful alignment between the Place Partnership and wider investment mechanisms. The Health Innovation Fund has been deployed in a way that directly reflects insights from the Stakeholder-led Context Report, indicating stronger coherence between evidence and funding decisions. Similarly, capital funding secured for Cascades Leisure Centre represents a significant infrastructure investment that aligns with the broader ambition to create inclusive, accessible opportunities for activity across the borough.

At a governance level, the integration of Place Partnership representation within the Emerging Local Plan Partial Review Board marks an important system development. This has enabled health and physical activity considerations to inform decision-making beyond the immediate programme, illustrating early evidence of “health in all decisions” thinking taking root.

Leadership engagement has also deepened. The three-month Leadership Training follow-up re-engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including those who had previously been peripheral to place-based discussions. This has strengthened relational density within the system and reduced reliance on bilateral relationships.

Less visible, but equally significant, has been the growing confidence among partners to question established practices. Discussions have increasingly moved beyond “what we deliver” toward “how the system enables or constrains participation.” This reframing represents a meaningful cultural shift and aligns strongly with system change theory.

Translating Learning into Action

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A defining feature of the Gravesham work has been the deliberate effort to translate learning into concrete action, rather than allowing insight to remain abstract or disconnected from delivery. The co-development of a shared Theory of Change has been central to this process. Rather than being treated as a static planning document, the Theory of Change has functioned as a sense-making tool, enabling partners to articulate assumptions, identify leverage points, and track emerging outcomes. The joint development process also reinforced shared ownership of outcomes, reducing the perception of the programme as externally driven. Additionally, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices have further supported translation of learning. Various MEL tools have been used to surface indirect and unintended impacts, particularly those related to relationship-building and changes in professional practice.

The integration of play equipment through the Northfleet Test & Learn and outdoor gym provision in The Hive area exemplifies how learning has informed tangible change. Insights from site visits, community dialogue, and leadership training directly influenced decisions about investment and design, linking learning to action in a visible way. At the system level, learning from Test and Learns will aim to inform strategic conversations around workforce development, use of green space, and coordination between statutory and voluntary sectors. While these conversations remain emergent, the direction of travel suggests increasing system responsiveness.

Connecting Health and Community in Medway

Place Partnership Developments

The development of place-based working in Medway; beginning December 2025 has been characterised by intentional sequencing, cautious pacing, and a strong emphasis on relational groundwork. Unlike Thanet and Gravesham, where Test and Learn activity and governance structure functioned as an early catalyst for system learning; Medway’s progress during this period has focused on establishing the preconditions for sustainable place-based working.

This distinction reflects both contextual realities and deliberate programme learning. Medway operates within a complex and evolving system environment, shaped by large-scale NHS restructuring, multiple overlapping partnerships, and a diverse voluntary and community sector with varying degrees of capacity. In this context, early programme activity has prioritised clarity, alignment, and trust over rapid delivery. A key development has been the establishment of a Core Working Group, bringing together representatives from AKM, Public Health, Medway Voluntary Action (MVA), and other system partners. The formation of this group marks a transition from informal engagement to a more structured partnership space capable of holding shared responsibility for place-based learning. Importantly, the Core Working Group has not functioned solely as a decision-making body. Early meetings have foregrounded sense-making, system mapping, and reflective dialogue, allowing partners to articulate their own positions within the Medway system and surface areas of duplication, tension, or opportunity. This mirrors learning from earlier places that governance structures must serve a learning function before they can effectively coordinate action.

The scheduling of Place Leadership Training represents an important milestone in Medway’s trajectory. While development and delivery of Test & Learn Projects have taken longer to mobilise than initially anticipated, this delay has underscored the importance of readiness and credibility. Partners have shared that the prospect of leadership training has provided a focal point for collaboration and helped to legitimate conversations about system change that might otherwise remain abstract or marginal.

Overall, the early months of work suggest that Medway is moving from engagement to intentional design. While less visible than delivery-heavy approaches, this developmental work is laying a necessary foundation for future Test and Learn activity that is contextually grounded and system-integrated.

Strengthening Partnerships for a Collective Impact

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Strengthening partnerships for collective impact has been both a priority and a challenge within the Medway context. Initial learning has increasingly pointed to the need for alignment rather than addition; recognising that Medway is already rich in initiatives, strategies, and delivery actors, yet often fragmented in practice. Early engagement work has highlighted variability in partners’ familiarity with place-based approaches. While some organisations; particularly within the voluntary sector; exhibited strong alignment with community-led principles, others expressed uncertainty about how place-based working differed from existing models of collaboration. Addressing this variation has required careful translation and shared language-building.

The relationship with Medway Voluntary Action (MVA) has been particularly significant. Through connector-led engagement and community-level insight, MVA has supported improved reach into communities that are often underrepresented in strategic forums. This partnership has illustrated how VCSE infrastructure bodies can function as system enablers, translating between grassroots experience and strategic intent.

At the same time, partners have identified ongoing tensions related to scale and representation. Medway’s size and population diversity raise important questions about what constitutes “place” and how collective impact can realistically be achieved without replicating inequities between neighbourhoods. These conversations have encouraged caution against overly centralised models of governance or delivery. Learning during this period has also reinforced the importance of clarity of purpose, particularly within Test & Learn development and delivery. Early discussions sometimes risked becoming diffused, reflecting the breadth of need within Medway. Recent facilitation has therefore focused on narrowing attention to physical activity as both an outcome and a lever for wider wellbeing, whilst acknowledging the necessity of cross-sector contribution.

While cross-sector partnership working remains emergent, there is growing recognition that collective impact in Medway will depend on:

- shared principles rather than uniform interventions, and
- coordination mechanisms that respect organisational autonomy while enabling mutual accountability.

Growing Capacity Through Community-Led Recruitment

Community-led recruitment has emerged as a central mechanism for building capacity within Medway’s place-based system. Emphasis has been placed less on the number of roles recruited and more on how roles are positioned within the system. Recruitment of two Community Connectors has bolstered capacity and has demonstrated the value of trusted intermediaries who can navigate between formal structures and lived experience. Connector-led engagement has enhanced understanding of local priorities, barriers to participation, and community appetite for involvement in place-based activity.

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Learning from Medway echoes insights from Thanet and Gravesham regarding the relational nature of these roles. Community Connectors are not simply conduits of information; they actively shape how systems perceive communities and vice versa. This has reinforced the importance of hosting arrangements, support structures, and realistic expectations around scope and influence. Importantly, the slower pace of Test and Learn activity in Medway has allowed space to critically examine the conditions required for connector roles to be effective.

Test & Learns

Medway is currently in discussion around mobilising formal Test and Learn activity. Current Test and Learn activities have primarily taken the form of exploratory alignment with existing initiatives, including work connected to:

- Medway Voluntary Action
- Medway Public Health
- Kent & Medway Cancer Alliance

These have functioned as key learning sites, enabling place partners to observe how physical activity, health, and community engagement intersect within existing system architecture. Learning from initial planning meetings suggests that premature introduction of new delivery models risks duplication and confusion. Instead, Test and Learn activity in Medway is increasingly understood as working *with* existing programmes to test different ways of framing, connecting, or amplifying impact. This approach aligns with broader programme learning that Test and Learns do not require novelty of activity, but novelty of relationship, framing, or system response.

Translating Learning into Action

The translation of learning into action in Medway is currently more prospective than realised, yet significant progress has been made in establishing the pathways through which translation will occur. The expression of interest to joint work on Theory of Change developments has provided an anchoring mechanism, enabling partners to articulate shared ambitions while acknowledging uncertainty. Rather than asserting linear impact, discussions have focused on identifying leverage points, such as trusted settings, life-course transitions, and connector roles; through which physical activity can be embedded within everyday life.

Learning from other places has been actively transferred into Medway, particularly around governance design, leadership development, and MEL practice. Partners report greater confidence in “not rushing” and in valuing learning work as legitimate system activity. While tangible delivery outcomes remain limited at this stage, the groundwork laid between December and April suggests that Medway is positioned to move into Test and Learn delivery with stronger alignment, clearer purpose, and reduced risk of fragmentation.

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Linking Action Across Swale

Place Partnership Developments

Like Medway place-based working in Swale is in its early stages and has progressed from exploratory engagement toward more formalised partnership development, with an increasing emphasis on governance, infrastructure, and readiness for delivery. While Swale remains at an earlier stage of maturity than Thanet or Gravesham, developments during this period indicate growing system confidence and intentional alignment with place-based principles.

A key milestone has been the establishment of the Swale Place Partnership Board. This development represents a significant shift from informal networking toward a structured forum capable of holding strategic direction, shared accountability, and learning. Importantly, the formation of the Board has been informed by learning from other places, particularly the risks associated with premature formalisation. As such, early Board activity has prioritised relationship-building, clarity of purpose, and collective sense-making over rapid decision-making. Swale’s context presents distinct system challenges that have shaped the pace and focus of development. Ongoing uncertainty within NHS structures, including changes to Health Care Partnerships and Health Alliance arrangements, has created a fluid environment in which traditional system anchors are less stable. Rather than stalling progress, this uncertainty has reinforced the importance of creating place-led structures that are resilient to organisational change.

Partners have engaged in early discussions about how physical activity, wellbeing, and community development intersect within Swale’s diverse localities. These conversations have highlighted variation across the borough, including rural-urban differences, transport constraints, and disparities in access to community infrastructure. As in Medway, this has prompted reflection on what “place” means in practice and how governance structures can accommodate diversity without becoming fragmented.

AKM’s role within Swale has been deliberately facilitative. Rather than introducing predefined processes and structures, AKM has supported place partners to explore alignment between existing investments; most notably Pride in Place funding; and emerging place-based ambitions. This approach reflects a growing emphasis on system coherence, ensuring that new activity complements rather than competes with existing priorities. Learning from Thanet and Gravesham has been actively shared within Swale discussions, particularly regarding governance design, leadership engagement, and the role of Community Connectors. Partners have expressed appreciation for this cross-place learning, noting that it has helped to normalise uncertainty and frame developmental work as legitimate progress.

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Impact of Place Partnership

At this stage, the impact of the Swale Place Partnership is best understood as process-oriented and capacity-building, rather than outcome-driven. Early impact has primarily been observed in the creation of conditions necessary for future system change, including improved coordination, shared understanding, and emerging collective identity. One of the most significant impacts during this period has been the alignment of Pride in Place investment with place-based working ambitions. This alignment represents an early example of how the Place Partnership can influence resource deployment, ensuring that investment decisions are informed by system-level learning rather than isolated organisational priorities.

The establishment of the Place Partnership Board and a Place Partnership Delivery Group has also begun to influence how partners perceive their role within the wider system. Initial reflections demonstrate that participation in the Board or the Delivery Group has encouraged organisations to think beyond their immediate remits and consider how their actions contribute to collective outcomes. While still emergent, this shift in mindset is a critical precursor to longer-term system change.

Importantly, Swale partners have demonstrated a cautious approach to claiming impact. There is a shared recognition that visible delivery outcomes are premature at this stage and that overstating progress risks undermining trust. This reflective stance mirrors learning from earlier places, where early enthusiasm sometimes created unrealistic expectations. Impact has also been observed in the quality of dialogue within partnership spaces. Discussions have increasingly moved away from activity lists toward questions of governance, sustainability, and equity. Partners are beginning to ask not only “what should we do?” but “how should the system enable this to happen?”—a subtle but meaningful shift in orientation.

While community-level impact remains limited during this period, early engagement suggests appetite for involvement, particularly where place-based working is framed as an opportunity to strengthen existing community assets rather than introduce external programmes.

Structured Governance for A Stronger Swale

Governance development has been a defining feature of Swale’s progress since October 2025. Learning from other place contexts has informed a deliberate, phased approach to governance design; one that seeks to balance inclusivity, clarity, and sustainability. The creation of the Place Partnership Board represents an important structural anchor, providing a forum through which partners can collectively hold place-based ambitions. Early governance discussions have focused on defining the Board’s purpose, scope, and relationship to existing system structures. Rather than

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positioning the Board as an additional layer of bureaucracy, partners have emphasised its role as a connector and coordinator.

A key learning during this period has been the importance of governance as a learning space. Initial Board meetings have been challenging but highlight the prioritisation of a shared understanding of place-based principles, processes and the way forward. This will help to establish common language and reduce the risk of misaligned expectations. Partners have also engaged in reflective dialogue about representation and voice. Questions regarding community involvement, VCSE participation, and links to statutory decision-making structures have been surfaced early, allowing governance design to remain adaptable. This contrasts with more traditional models where governance structures are fixed before such questions are fully explored.

A significant learning from delivery to date has been the strength of local identity and geography within Swale, particularly the distinct identities of Sittingbourne and the Isle of Sheppey. Through early partnership work, it has become increasingly clear that there is likely resistance from both organisations and individuals due to the particularities of the regions in Swale. This has reinforced learning that Swale cannot be treated as a single, homogenous place, and that place-based working; including governance and leadership structures; must be highly sensitive to local identity, perceptions of travel, and historical patterns of engagement. At the same time, this has surfaced an important opportunity for the Place Partnership to deepen understanding of these historic patterns, test different governance and engagement models, and explore how perceptions and behaviours across the borough may evolve over time. Rather than being viewed as a barrier, this learning is shaping a more nuanced, locally responsive approach to governance that balances hyper-local relevance with opportunities for wider system coherence over the longer term.

The uncertainty within NHS and health system arrangements has further reinforced the need for governance that is flexible and locally grounded. Rather than waiting for system clarity, Swale partners have begun to explore how the Place Partnership can provide continuity and stability amidst wider change.

Growing Capacity Through Community Led-Recruitment

Community-led recruitment has been identified as a strategic priority within Swale, informed by learning from other places regarding the importance of trusted, locally embedded roles. During this reporting period, Swale CVS has been confirmed as the host organisation for Community Connector recruitment, marking a significant step toward building local capacity. The decision to host Community Connectors within Swale CVS reflects an understanding of the relational nature of place-based work. By situating roles within a trusted VCSE infrastructure body, partners aim to enhance legitimacy, reach, and sustainability. This approach aligns with programme-wide learning

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that connector roles are most effective when embedded within existing community networks rather than positioned as standalone posts.

Learning from Thanet and Gravesham has informed more realistic expectations regarding timescales and outcomes. Rather than expecting immediate delivery impact, Swale partners are framing Connector roles as enablers of learning, relationship-building, and co-design.

Translating Learning into Action

The translation of learning into action within Swale is currently at an early but promising stage. Rather than rushing into Test and Learn activity, Swale has prioritised establishing clear pathways for translation, including governance forums, shared priorities, and alignment with existing investment streams. This reflects a growing understanding that effective translation requires infrastructure as well as insight.

Discussions around future Test and Learn activity have been informed by learning from other places, particularly the importance of starting with low-risk, adaptable interventions that generate learning without over-committing resources. There is also recognition that Test and Learn in Swale may look different to other contexts, reflecting rural-urban dynamics and existing community capacity. While tangible action remains limited at this stage, the groundwork laid during this period suggests that Swale is developing a strong platform for responsive, learning-led delivery. The emphasis on governance, community-led recruitment, and system alignment positions Swale to move into the next phase with clarity and confidence.

Strengthening Place-Based Working

Across the reporting period from October 2025 to April 2026, strengthening place-based working has emerged as a central organising principle of the Active Kent & Medway (AKM) Place Expansion Programme. While earlier phases of the programme focused on establishing legitimacy, relationships, and proof of concept, this period has been characterised by a more explicit articulation of what place-based working looks like in practice, and what conditions are required for it to function effectively within complex local systems.

How Pace, Governance, and Learning Enable Sustainability



Context: Places are at different stages of readiness for place-based system change. Early pressure for visible delivery risked reinforcing short-termism and fragmentation.



Mechanisms: Key mechanisms supporting place-based working have included deliberate pacing, governance as a learning space, and cross-place knowledge transfer. Learning from more mature contexts legitimised slower sequencing in others. Governance structures were designed to hold reflection, uncertainty, and shared accountability rather than control.



Outcomes: Outcomes at this stage are primarily process-oriented: clearer shared purpose, improved alignment, stronger relational density, and increased confidence to challenge established practices. These conditions form the groundwork for future population-level change.



Learnings: Strengthening place-based working is about enabling systems to act differently over time. Sustainable change depends not on replicating interventions, but on embedding ways of learning, deciding, and collaborating that persist beyond individual projects.

Explanatory Account 4: How pace, governance, & learning enable sustainability

A key learning across all four places has been that place-based working is not synonymous with geographical targeting alone. Rather, it is a way of working that privileges relational depth, contextual understanding, and collective accountability. This distinction has become increasingly important as partnerships have matured and moved from exploratory to implementation phases. Partners have reported greater clarity in differentiating place-based activity from traditional, programme-driven delivery models, particularly where these models previously focused on isolated outcomes rather than system conditions.

One of the most significant developments during this period has been the recognition of pace as a critical variable in place-based work. Learning from Thanet and Gravesham, where early delivery activity generated rich insight but also revealed risks associated with speed and expectation, has informed more measured approaches in Medway and Swale. This cross-place learning has reinforced the legitimacy of slower, preparatory work where system readiness is limited, and has challenged deficit-based perceptions of progress. Governance has increasingly been understood as a foundational enabler of place-based working rather than a technical requirement. Across places, governance structures are evolving to support learning, reflection, and shared responsibility. Importantly, these structures are not uniform. Instead, their design reflects local context, partner composition, and system maturity. This adaptive approach contrasts with more rigid governance models and represents a meaningful shift in system logic.

Another cross-cutting insight relates to imbalances and influence. Since October 2025, there is evidence that partners are becoming more comfortable acknowledging imbalances within local systems and exploring how these can be addressed through place-based approaches. This has included deliberate efforts to elevate lived experience, to create safer spaces for challenge, and to involve community actors earlier in decision-making processes. While this work remains incomplete, the shift in discourse itself represents an important cultural change. AKM’s role in strengthening place-based working has continued to evolve. Rather than acting primarily as a delivery lead or fund manager, AKM has increasingly functioned as a system steward, supporting alignment, facilitating learning, and translating insight across organisational and sectoral boundaries. This role has required a high degree of reflexivity, particularly in balancing support and challenge, and in resisting pressure to over-specify outcomes prematurely.

Taken together, these developments suggest that strengthening place-based working is as much about unlearning established practices as it is about introducing new ones. The period since October 2025 has therefore been marked by a gradual but discernible shift in mindset across partnerships; from delivery optimisation toward system enablement.

Supporting Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) has increasingly functioned as a strategic enabler within the Place Expansion Programme, rather than a retrospective or compliance-driven activity. Since October 2025, considerable progress has been made in strengthening MEL capability across places, improving consistency of approach while preserving local flexibility. Early phases of the this work highlighted variability in partners’ familiarity and confidence with evaluation, particularly where system change outcomes were concerned. The introduction of a shared MEL framework and accompanying learning series has supported a shift from narrow performance metrics toward a more reflective and developmental understanding of evidence.

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A central learning has been that traditional evaluation approaches are often poorly suited to capturing place-based and system-level change. Population-level indicators, while valuable, frequently lag behind practice and risk obscuring early signals of progress. In response, the programme has increasingly drawn on qualitative, participatory, and reflexive methods to capture change processes as they unfold. Tools such as stakeholder-led context reports, reflective staff notebooks, facilitated learning sessions, and various Test & Learn methodologies have been used to surface changes in relationships, behaviours, and decision-making. These methods have helped to make visible forms of impact that are typically under-recognised, including shifts in trust, confidence, and cross-sector understanding.

An important development during this period has been the growing confidence of partners to use learning, not simply generate it. Learning is increasingly informing decisions about pacing, investment, and focus. Examples include the adaptation of Test and Learn approaches, the sequencing of governance development, and the framing of leadership training content. This suggests that MEL is beginning to function as a feedback mechanism within systems rather than an external reporting requirement.

AKM’s internal learning has also deepened. The organisation has continued to use reflexive practice to interrogate its own assumptions and influence. Insights from staff reflections have highlighted tensions between funder expectations, partner readiness, and community priorities, prompting ongoing recalibration of approach.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Partners continue to express uncertainty about how to evidence long-term system change within short funding cycles, and there is recognition that MEL capacity varies significantly across organisations. Addressing these challenges will require sustained investment in skills development and continued advocacy for learning-led practice within commissioning and funding structures.

Organisational Learning

Organisational learning within AKM has been both a product of, and a contributor to, the Place Expansion Programme’s evolution. AKM has increasingly positioned itself as a learning organisation, recognising that its own practices, structures, and behaviours significantly shape the effectiveness of place-based work. A key strand of organisational learning has related to role clarity. Early phases of delivery revealed ambiguity regarding whether AKM was perceived primarily as a funder, coordinator, delivery partner, or system leader. AKM has worked intentionally to clarify its position as a facilitator and steward of place-based systems, while retaining accountability for programme delivery and learning.

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Internal reflections have highlighted the emotional labour associated with place-based roles, particularly in managing competing expectations and holding uncertainty on behalf of partners. Organisational learning has therefore focused not only on technical competence, but also on relational capability, boundary-setting, and resilience. Another area of learning has concerned scaling and transferability. While early success in Thanet and progress in Gravesham generated interest in replication, AKM has learned to resist simplistic scaling narratives. Instead, learning has been transferred through principles, questions, and shared reflection rather than prescriptive models. This has informed how Medway and Swale have approached development.

AKM has also learned to value process indicators as legitimate measures of progress. Internal reporting and reflection increasingly emphasise changes in system behaviour, such as improved collaboration, shared ownership, and learning orientation, alongside delivery outputs. This shift mirrors the broader programme learning around system change. Organisational challenges remain, particularly in relation to capacity, role stretch, and workforce sustainability. However, the period since October suggests increasing organisational alignment with the demands of place-based system change work.

Synthesising AKM Practice and Reflection Through the Conditions for Tackling Inequalities in Physical Activity

Between October 2025 and April 2026, organisational learning has become an increasingly explicit and strategic function of AKM’s role within the Place Expansion Programme. As the programme has matured across Thanet, Gravesham, Medway, and Swale, AKM has moved beyond early mobilisation and legitimacy-building toward a more developed posture as a place-based system steward. The AKM Staff Notebook Reflections, captured through structured journalling, reflective dialogue, and embedded (MEL) processes, offer rich evidence base for understanding this shift.

When synthesised through the lens of the *Nine NELP Conditions for Tackling Inequalities in Physical Activity*; these reflections illuminate not isolated lessons, but a coherent pattern of organisational adaptation. Taken together, they demonstrate AKM’s increasing alignment with the principles set out in *Uniting the Movement*.

This section therefore does not attempt to evidence performance against individual conditions. Instead, it uses the conditions as a shared conceptual compass to articulate how AKM’s organisational practice has evolved in response to the realities of place-based working. Four interrelated dimensions of learning are explored: (1) listening and relational credibility; (2) safety, inclusion, and the lived realities of participation; (3) structural constraint and system responsibility; and (4) AKM’s evolving identity as a connector, enabler, and steward of long-term change.

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Listening, Lived Experience, and Relational Credibility as System Infrastructure

A dominant theme across staff reflections during this reporting period is the repositioning of listening as a core organisational capability, rather than an early-stage engagement technique. AKM staff increasingly describe listening as fundamental system infrastructure; an ongoing practice that shapes how priorities are set, how pace is managed, and how legitimacy is built within local systems.

Engagement across libraries, youth-focused Street Sports sessions, Family Hubs, informal community groups, and Test and Learn environments consistently reinforced that lived experience offers insight that cannot be accessed through population-level data alone. While datasets such as Active Lives remain central to understanding patterns of inequality, staff reflections show growing confidence in holding quantitative evidence alongside community narrative, rather than privileging one over the other. This dual-evidence approach aligns closely with Sport England’s emphasis on combining national insight with hyperlocal understanding.

Notably, AKM staff reflections reveal how listening often disrupted established assumptions; for example, where spaces deemed “accessible” in planning terms were experienced as unsafe or unwelcoming; or where activity branded through statutory systems deterred participation among communities with historically low levels of institutional trust. These insights prompted adaptive shifts in practice, including greater use of trusted community venues, community-led promotion, and peer-to-peer advocacy.

Relational credibility emerged as a key organisational asset. Staff consistently observed that trust was built not through programme visibility, but through consistency, humility, and transparency—returning to spaces over time, being honest about constraints, and responding visibly to feedback. In areas where mistrust of statutory services was pronounced, AKM increasingly functioned as an intermediary, supporting dialogue between communities and system actors rather than acting as a proxy voice.

Organisational learning here reflects a deeper alignment with Sport England’s framing of place-based work as long-term, relational, and values-led. Listening is no longer positioned as a means to an end (e.g. informing delivery), but as a prerequisite for shifting power and enabling system change.

Reframing Safety, Inclusion, and the Emotional Dimensions of Participation

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A second area of significant organisational learning concerns AKM’s evolving understanding of safety and inclusion. Staff reflections from across places—particularly Thanet and Gravesham—illustrate a movement away from narrow interpretations of safety as merely physical or procedural, toward a more holistic appreciation of emotional, cultural, and relational safety as fundamental conditions for participation.

Libraries, faith-linked spaces, and informal community settings repeatedly emerged as environments where these conditions were present. Participants described these spaces as neutral, non-stigmatising, and safe to “enter without explanation,” particularly for older adults, women, and young people wary of enforcement-oriented public space. This learning has reinforced AKM’s strategic emphasis on embedding physical activity within trusted, everyday environments, consistent with Sport England’s focus on making activity part of daily life.

Staff reflections also brought into sharp focus the emotional labour inherent in place-based facilitation. Facilitators and delivery partners were frequently navigating complex relational contexts: bullying among young people; fear of crime; inter-community tension; and, in some settings, the wider impacts of domestic abuse and trauma. AKM staff recognised that while partners demonstrated skill and care in these situations, expectations often outpaced available training, supervision, and support.

This insight has shaped emerging organisational thinking around workforce development. Inclusion is now increasingly understood not only as equitable access to activity, but as investment in the people and systems that hold safe spaces over time. This aligns with Sport England’s recognition of workforce and volunteer development as a critical enabler of system change, and with the NELP Conditions that emphasise safe, welcoming environments as socially produced rather than simply designed.

Structural Barriers, System Accountability, and the Limits of Programme Action

Staff Notebook Reflections consistently highlight the persistence of structural barriers to participation: transport limitations, cost-of-living pressures, inadequate infrastructure, digital exclusion, and constrained local workforce capacity. However, the organisational learning evident during this period lies not in the identification of these barriers—which are well documented—but in how AKM staff have recontextualised responsibility for addressing them.

Earlier phases of the work sometimes revealed a tendency for projects to absorb or compensate for structural deficits, risking the implicit framing of inactivity as an individual or community issue. During this reporting period, staff reflections show a growing organisational confidence in naming

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structural constraints explicitly and resisting the expectation that place-based programmes can resolve them in isolation.

This has facilitated a subtle but important shift in AKM’s strategic posture: from delivering around the edges of system failure toward advocating for alignment across policy domains. Staff increasingly described engagement with planning, housing, transport, community safety, and health partners as essential to enabling physical activity, even when activity was not the primary focus of those systems.

The willingness to surface tensions—such as enforcement approaches that undermine youth engagement, or short funding cycles that conflict with long-term trust-building—signals a maturation of AKM’s system leadership role. Rather than positioning opposition as risk, staff reflections suggest that constructive challenge, grounded in lived experience, has become an accepted and valued part of partnership working.

This learning resonates strongly with Sport England’s emphasis on tackling inequalities by influencing the wider system, not simply by extending provision. It also reframes success in place-based work as the extent to which systems adapt their behaviour, policies, and investments—not solely the volume of activity delivered.

AKM as System Steward: Identity, Influence, and Sustainability

The most integrative strand of organisational learning emerging from staff reflections concerns AKM’s evolving identity within local systems. Over the reporting period, staff increasingly articulated AKM’s role as that of connector, translator, and steward of place-based system change, rather than solely programme manager or delivery partner.

This evolution has been driven by practice. As AKM staff navigated relationships across health, local government, VCSE organisations, leisure providers, libraries, housing associations, and community groups, their work increasingly involved aligning perspectives, facilitating shared understanding, and creating conditions for collaboration. This brokerage function required high levels of relational competence, political awareness, and tolerance for ambiguity.

Staff reflections also surfaced the emotional complexity of this role. Holding space between communities and institutions; often with unequal representation, differing timescales, and competing priorities; placed significant demands on staff capacity and resilience. Organisational learning has therefore increasingly focused on internal support, peer reflection, and clarity of role as prerequisites for effective system stewardship.

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Workforce development emerged as a related priority. Reflections consistently demonstrated that sustainable place-based change depends on people; connectors, facilitators, champions; who are trusted, skilled, and supported. AKM’s growing emphasis on training pathways, connector models, and locally hosted roles reflects learning that workforce capacity is itself a system condition, not an implementation detail.

Concerns about sustainability also featured prominently. Communities regularly asked what would remain once external funding ended. Organisational learning in response has been cautious and aligned with Sport England’s long-term outlook: sustainability is framed not as continuation of projects, but as embedding ways of working within local institutions, governance structures, and social norms. This includes shifts in leadership practice, investment decisions, and cross-sector collaboration that persist beyond the programme lifecycle.

Organisational Learning as a Condition for Long-Term System Change

Synthesised through the analytical lens of the Nine NELP Conditions and articulated in language consistent with Sport England’s place-based system change framework, the AKM Staff Notebook Reflections point to an organisation undergoing meaningful learning and adaptation. Over the last six months, AKM has deepened its understanding of what it means to contribute to long-term change: listening as infrastructure; safety as relational; inequality as structural; and leadership as stewardship rather than control.

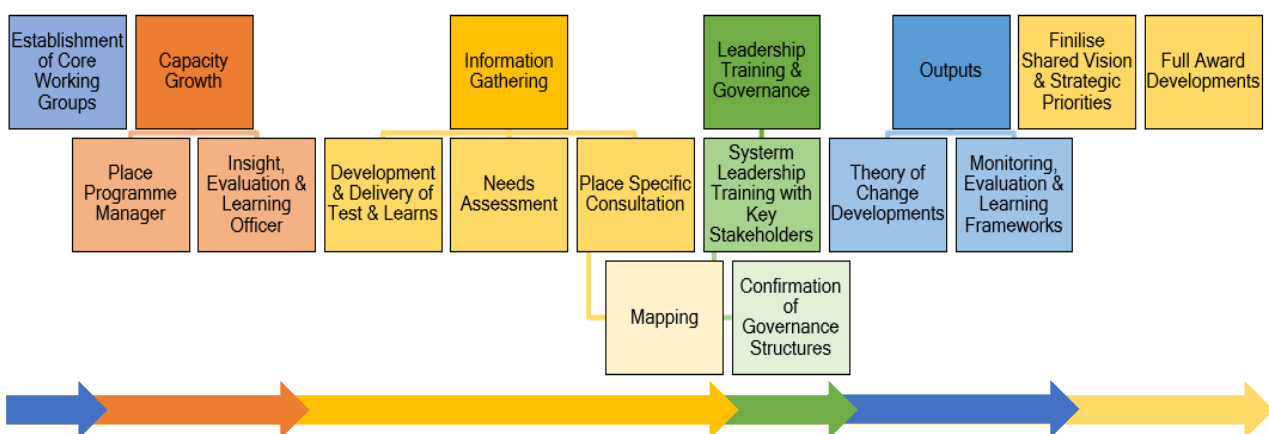
This organisational learning does not signal completion, but maturation. AKM is increasingly positioned to support place partnerships not by prescribing solutions, but by enabling conditions in which communities, partners, and systems can act differently over time. As the Place Expansion Programme moves into its next phase, the capacity of AKM to remain reflective, adaptive, and values-led will be as critical to impact as any individual Test and Learn or investment decision.

Our Way Forward

The period from October 2025 to April 2026 represents a critical consolidation phase for the Place Expansion Programme in Kent and Medway. Looking forward, the programme’s direction is shaped less by the introduction of new activity and more by the deepening and embedding of ways of working that have demonstrated early promise. Across all places, the immediate priority is to continue strengthening governance arrangements so that they are capable of holding long term ambition, learning, and accountability. This includes ensuring meaningful community representation, clear links to statutory decision making, and sufficient flexibility to adapt to system change.

Leadership development will remain a central lever. Experiences in Thanet and Gravesham have demonstrated the value of leadership spaces that combine experiential learning with strategic reflection. Future training will build on this learning, with greater emphasis on political engagement, cross sector leadership, and sustaining momentum beyond programme milestones. Test and Learn activity will continue to play an important role, but with increased intentionality regarding purpose and sequencing. Rather than being viewed primarily as delivery pilots, Test and Learns will increasingly function as system probes designed to generate insight, challenge assumptions, and inform strategic decisions. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning will remain core to the programme’s approach. The next phase will focus on strengthening partners’ confidence in evidencing system change and supporting longitudinal learning that extends beyond the current funding period. Finally, AKM will continue to reflect critically on its own role, capacity, and influence. Sustaining place-based system change requires not only strong local partnerships, but also organisations willing to adapt, learn, and share ownership over time.

In summary, the programme’s way forward is defined not by certainty of outcome, but by commitment to process, learning, and equity. The foundations laid since October 2025 suggest that the conditions for meaningful, long term system change are increasingly in place.



Conclusion

This Process and Learning Report captures a period of significant consolidation and maturation in Active Kent & Medway’s place-based work across Thanet, Gravesham, Medway, and Swale. While population-level outcomes in physical activity and health remain long-term ambitions, the reporting period provides compelling evidence that the conditions required for sustainable system change are increasingly being established.

Across more mature places, Test & Learn activity, leadership development, and stakeholder-led insight have contributed to measurable shifts in how systems understand and respond to inequality in physical activity. These shifts are evident not in isolated delivery outputs, but in changes to language, behaviour, governance, and decision-making. Participation is increasingly understood as a rational response to context, shaped by safety, trust, belonging, access, and legitimacy rather than individual motivation alone. Lived experience has been repositioned as system intelligence, influencing how partners identify priorities, design interventions, and interpret progress.

In Medway and Swale, early-stage developmental work has reinforced the importance of readiness, pace, and place sensitivity. Learning from these contexts highlights that place cannot be treated as homogeneous, and that governance, leadership, and engagement models must respond to local identity, geography, and historical patterns of interaction. Taken together, this learning strengthens confidence that adaptive, learning-led approaches are essential for equity-focused place-based work.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning is increasingly functioning as a system enabler rather than a reporting requirement. Explanatory accounts, reflective practice, and participatory methods allow AKM and partners to better understand how change is emerging and where further effort is required. While challenges remain; particularly in addressing structural constraints beyond the control of individual programmes; the foundations laid during this period position the partnership well to deepen impact, strengthen system coherence, and sustain change over the longer term.

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Appendix A: Method Statement

The Place Expansion Programme in Kent and Medway draws on a mixed-methods, learning-led approach to evaluation. Rather than relying on a single method or dataset, AKM has combined qualitative, participatory, and reflective methods with routine quantitative insight to understand how and why change is occurring across places. Methods have been selected to ensure that lived experience, practitioner insight, and system-level learning are all treated as legitimate forms of evidence. This approach aligns with the programme’s methodological orientation and Sport England’s emphasis on understanding context, mechanisms, and outcomes in complex systems.

Methods used to collect data for this submission	Rationale for method choice	Challenges in approach	Where to find further detail
Reflection notes / staff notebooks	To capture reflexive insight on relationships, assumptions, and system behaviour throughout delivery.	Time-intensive and subjective; mitigated via structured prompts and triangulation.	AKM Staff Notebook Reflections; Synthesising AKM Practice and Reflection sections
Stakeholder-led Context Reports	To create shared understanding of system barriers and assets across sectors.	Variable partner capacity; addressed through proportionate tools and iterative engagement.	Stakeholder-Led Context Report sections for Thanet and Gravesham
Sticker board feedback	Accessible way to capture rapid insight in Test & Learn settings, particularly with young people.	Limited depth per response; paired with observation and conversation.	Thanet Street Sports Test & Learn – Design, Delivery and Learning
Youth Advisory Group	To ensure youth voice shaped programme design and interpretation of learning.	Requires sustained facilitation; addressed through consistent engagement.	Thanet Street Sports Test & Learn; Listening and Learning from Communities
Semi-structured interviews	To explore mechanisms such as trust, legitimacy, and confidence in depth.	Scheduling constraints; mitigated by integrating into existing meetings; and required increased AKM staff capacity	Review of System Learning and Developments; Building Trusting Relationships
Story writing contest (Northfleet Diaries)	Creative method to surface lived experience among underrepresented groups.	Potential interpretive complexity; will be addressed through thematic analysis and sense-making	The Northfleet Diaries – Design Rationale and System Learning

		workshops.	
Facilitated workshops (leadership training, co-design)	To support experiential learning, shared purpose, and system reflection.	Risk of dominant voices; mitigated through skilled facilitation.	Gravesham and Thanet Place Leadership Training sections
Observation and field notes	To capture contextual and relational dynamics not easily articulated by participants.	Risk of interpretation bias; mitigated through triangulation.	Street Sports, Orbit Housing, and Westcourt Test & Learn sections
Routine quantitative data (Active Lives, local datasets)	Used to provide population-level context and highlight inequality patterns.	Data lag and limited sensitivity to early change; used dialogically rather than attributively.	Active Lives references across place sections

Appendix B: Participant Statement

This Participant Statement outlines who was involved in the development of this Process and Learning submission, the roles they played, whose perspectives are represented across the report, and where there are gaps or opportunities to strengthen participation in future learning. The Place Expansion Programme spans multiple places and system levels, and this submission reflects learning generated through engagement with a wide range of practitioners, partners, residents, and system leaders over time.

AKM recognises participation as an ongoing process rather than a fixed input. As such, this statement is intended to be transparent about both the breadth of engagement achieved to date and the limitations encountered during this reporting period, including learning about how participation and reflection methods can be improved in future submissions.

Methods used to collect data for this submission	Response	Reflections/ Learnings	Opportunities to Strengthen Participation
Who was involved in preparing this submission?	This submission was prepared by AKM, led by the Insight, Evaluation and Learning Officer, with contributions from AKM’s place team. Input was drawn from Core Working Groups in Thanet, Gravesham, Medway, and Swale, delivery partners involved in Test &	Preparation relied on synthesising learning from multiple processes rather than direct co-authoring by all partners. While many voices informed the learning, fewer	Explore ways to involve place partners more explicitly in sense-making and validation stages prior to submission, for example through facilitated reflection sessions.

	Learn activity, and system partners across local government, public health, VCSE, leisure, housing, and faith sectors.	were directly involved in drafting the submission.	
What roles did they have in the process?	AKM staff designed the learning focus, facilitated reflection and MEL processes, collated and analysed data, and authored the submission. Core Working Groups contributed strategic insight on place context, governance, system conditions, and next steps. Delivery partners provided practice-based reflections. Community connectors, young people, and residents contributed lived experience through Test & Learns and participatory methods.	Roles were differentiated across strategy, delivery, and lived experience, supporting triangulation but resulting in varied levels of engagement with the learning process.	Create clearer role pathways for partners and residents to engage in reflection and learning beyond delivery activity, including co-interpretation of findings.
Who is represented in this submission?	The submission represents place partners, delivery organisations, community groups, residents, children and young people, and system leaders across all four places. Thanet has stronger representation of resident and youth voice due to established Test & Learn activity. Gravesham, Medway, and Swale representation reflects earlier-stage engagement through needs assessments, governance, and partnership development.	Representation varies across places, reflecting different stages of place-based readiness. Some community voices are represented indirectly through partner interpretation rather than direct contribution.	As Test & Learn activity develops in Gravesham, Medway, and Swale, future submissions will seek to strengthen direct resident and community voice.
Are any voices missing, and what are the opportunities for future learning?	Some voices are underrepresented, particularly partners who were unable to engage with written reflection processes and residents who have not yet participated in Test & Learn activity. Uptake of a Microsoft Form used to capture Core Working Group reflections across all four places was lower than anticipated.	This highlighted that asynchronous reflection tools alone are insufficient for capturing rich system insight, particularly for busy system partners.	Build designated reflection time into Core Working Group meetings using facilitated workshop-style methods; expand creative and participatory approaches; use this report in forthcoming meetings to sense-check and refine learning collaboratively.

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