Our Theory of Change

This document describes the latest version of the Live and Move *Theory of Change*, which was updated in 2026 with involvement from partners (Exeter City Council, East Devon District Council, Wellbeing Exeter, Inclusive Exeter, Move More Cranbrook, Public Health, NHS, Active Devon, Exeter Leisure, Exeter City Community Trust, Sport England and NELP).

But first, what is a theory of change?

For many people, keeping active and healthy is getting harder as they are under pressure on lots of fronts. But through Live and Move and its brilliant group of partner organisations, people's lives can change.

A theory of change describes how we think the activities we do together can lead to outcomes and change. It illustrates how one thing leads to another to make an impact. The process of developing and revisiting a theory of change encourages us to reflect on why we think it's worth doing what we're doing.

So, what *isn't* a theory of change? Something that we don't understand because it's complicated to read. Something that predicts the future as though we have complete control over the results of what we do. Something that we have to stick to 100% as though we can't deviate from it.

Let's get started: why is a theory of change important? →

Why is a theory of change important?

Developing a theory of change encourages us to discuss our hopes with others and to make them clear. A theory of change is one part of evaluation and learning – things that everyone should be involved in because we are all part of making change and so we all need to think about whether we're putting our energy into the best things.

A whole systems approach means looking at many different things together, seeing the big picture by bringing our many perspectives together and closing the gap between them – perspectives of people funding, organising and participating in activities. Theories of change for systems change programmes reflect that nobody has complete control over bigger outcomes, and encourage adaptive rather than linear approaches.

What can the Theory of Change be used for?

Whether you're involved in reflective conversations about what you've been doing, or you're collecting stories about people's experiences of activities, or you're producing reports for funders and other people who are interested in what you do, you can refer back to the Theory of Change as a guide. It can also be a tool for onboarding new team members because it describes the change we want to bring about and how we think we can get there.

What are the parts of the Theory of Change?

The National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP), which has been working with Sport England and communities to learn what works when it comes to tackling inequalities in physical activity, created nine enabling conditions for change across multiple layers of society that make systemic changes in physical activity levels more likely.

As part of the overall Live and Move vision to narrow health inequalities and change the systems that don't work, so that everyone has the same opportunities to be healthier and more active every day, we are building these conditions for change. We know that physical (in)activity is about more than individual choice; it's about systems. These conditions show that we are interested in reducing inequalities, not just tracking how many people participate in activities. They also show that we are interested in physical activity as well as wellbeing (it's live *and* move after all).

While we work across all the conditions, we are currently focusing on four of the nine conditions that as a partnership we are doing the most/best work on. The four conditions we are doing the most/best work on in Exeter and Cranbrook currently are Conditions 1, 4, 6 and 8:

Condition 1: Finding out what makes it hard or easy for people to be active in our area

Condition 4: Groups and organisations work together to achieve more

Condition 6: Local people are leading initiatives and work together to achieve goals

Condition 8: Physical environments that make it easier and attractive for people to be active

For each condition for change, we think: **if** we build this enabling condition by doing certain activities – and learn and reflect as we go –, then certain outcomes will emerge. Eventually things will change in a way that has a lasting impact.

We build the enabling conditions for change **by** doing activities. Some of these activities are things we've been doing for a long time. Others are new ideas because we want to try different approaches to making change. Partner organisations across Live and Move host different activities.

When we do activities, **then** we expect to see outcomes in the short term. We have an evaluation framework that helps us measure and understand to what extent we are actually achieving these outcomes.

We hold certain assumptions right now about why our activities should lead to particular outcomes based on our experiences and understanding of the local context we're operating in now. We take account of what's happening and changing in our environment and allow our assumptions to change over time.

Contextual assumptions

The political climate and actual climate are changing.

- Community tensions are rising and there's political division and polarisation, which sometimes creates fear. There are also divides between rural and urban communities and demographics are changing, too.
    - **We think that activities need to be relevant and inclusive so that everyone feels safe and welcome. We work with well-connected, culturally aware project managers who can help connect with people, which we think can build credibility for this programme.**
- There are lots of changes happening in the public sector like local government reorganisation, the NHS' 10-Year Plan, and rulings on transgender people's rights.
    - **We influence at strategic/policy level to make the best of policy changes and ensure physical activity and wellbeing are focused on. Exeter City Council and other key partners can help to 'smooth the way'.**
- The impacts of climate change like flooding are already being felt and reshaping outdoor environments like fields.
    - **We collaborate with strategic partners and landowners to ensure that green spaces (such as The Green Circle), are protected, and remain at the forefront of initiatives that will help Exeter and Cranbrook to understand and combat the negative effects of climate change. We improve access to green spaces with an awareness of climate change adaptation and seek to make a positive environmental impact.**

People and organisations are struggling to make ends meet.

- There is still a cost of living crisis causing petrol, food and other costs to go up and access to facilities where people can be active, such as leisure centres, to become less accessible.
    - **We build partnerships, particularly with services supporting disadvantaged communities, to increase knowledge about the benefits of physical activity as well as locally-specific enablers and inequalities/barriers. We think that with our approach to**

building shared understanding, communities can feel listened to and understood.

- Some people feel lost and lack trust in each other and in systems. People may feel less altruistic – we are seeing fewer volunteers.
    - **We work with partners to create co-designed, co-produced activities, which we think can foster ownership, trust, capacity and capability and improve people's connections, enabling engagement/change-making. We do 'with' not 'to' communities, with advocates from communities leading change.**
- Many sectors including the public and charity sectors are struggling with funding, and some community assets are at risk as a result.
    - **We influence more inclusive access to community facilities and leisure centres to generate awareness and increase use of green and civic spaces/community assets.**

Trends and media are influencing people's relationship with physical activity.

- Young people are spending a lot of time in front of screens.
- Weight loss injections have become more popular.
- Media narratives and algorithms shape how people feel about roads/cars versus active travel (walking and cycling).
- The uptake of AI is changing many things.

And **eventually**, we would expect to see some larger, longer term impacts. Our evaluation framework also helps us measure and understand to what extent we are actually achieving this impact. These are the things that motivate us to do what we do.

We think the activities we do are worth doing **because** of specific reasons. These reasons come from two places: NELP's rationales behind each condition, which draw on research; and also what we know from past experience.

How do we reflect on and adapt our Theory of Change?

Since we are working to change things on a systemic level for Exeter and Cranbrook, we prioritise learning, not just evaluation. This includes reflecting on things like how we are encountering and navigating things like cultural norms and gender roles, and what specific things are relevant at a hyperlocal level and within the least active communities of Exeter and Cranbrook.

What can we identify about how we do the work that makes a difference? Is there something important about the combinations of activities or approaches that work well together? We can use the Theory of Change to be reflective in general, and we can also adapt it according to what we're learning about where we have got to, where we're going and where we think we should go next to make sure it's a living document. We cannot be specific about the precise route to change in advance.

Adapting the Theory of Change

We can also use reflective learning questions to guide our review and adaptation of the Theory of Change itself to make sure it remains a living document that is relevant and representative of what we're doing and why.

1. ***Are our activities in alignment with/reflective of the condition for change we're trying to build?***
2. ***Are we taking account of the context we're working in to make sure our approach to activities makes sense and will generate the outcomes we want?***
3. ***Are outcomes leading to bigger impact over time? Does the rationale (the "because") need updating?***

Our Theory of Change

The overall vision of Live and Move is to narrow health inequalities and change the systems that don't work, so that everyone has the same opportunities to be healthier and more active, every day.

	FINDING OUT IF PEOPLE ARE LIVING WELL AND MOVING	WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE MORE	SUPPORTING LOCAL PEOPLE TO LEAD CHANGE	INFLUENCING ACCESS TO FACILITIES, SPACES AND INFRASTRUCTURE
If we build conditions for change, including...				
by doing things like...	building stronger partnerships, particularly with those supporting disadvantaged communities, to find out what makes it easier or harder for them	employing and supporting a well-connected, culturally aware workforce doing joint influencing at a strategic/policy level creating spaces to nurture and grow networks, collaborations and partnerships e.g. steering groups	creating co-designed, co-produced activities developing capability and capacity in local communities having improved, supported relationships with partner organisations	influencing planning policy and masterplanning exercises, strategies, and plans promoting active travel infrastructure: connecting communities to work and leisure through accessible walking and cycling routes influencing more inclusive access to community facilities and leisure centres improving access to green and civic spaces
and...	ENGAGING IN CYCLES OF LEARNING & GATHERING AND SHARING DATA TOGETHER			
then outcomes will include...	communities feeling listened to and understood more knowledge about the benefits of increasing physical activity and locally-specific enablers and inequalities/barriers more collective understanding	grasp of priority areas better coordinated efforts more credibility for this work more opportunities	more ownership more trust community resilience improved connections enabling engagement/change-making more capacity and capability	more use of active travel sense of greater safety sense of acceptance and enjoyment greater awareness and use of green and civic spaces/community assets positive environmental impact greater connectivity between indoor and outdoor spaces
and eventually we will see...	increased physical activity and decreased inactivity in Exeter and Cranbrook	reduced inequalities; more people from marginalised groups supported to be active	residents in Exeter and Cranbrook saying that they are more satisfied, happier and find life more worthwhile because they find it easier to be active	communities having ownership of resources and decision making	there will be reduced burden on the NHS	places and spaces to be active will become more attractive and accessible to people
because	actions which are based on understanding the barriers and enablers of physical activity and wellbeing are more likely to lead to effective and sustainable outcomes. Actions which are based on shallow or skewed understanding could inadvertently widen inequalities. & sharing knowledge of barriers and enablers can help drive a common purpose and common strategy–increasing likelihood of collective impact on what matters most.	working with different organisations can help to drive innovative physical activity and wellbeing policy and practice and support shared problem solving.	community-led change, while slower and potentially more resource-intensive, generates greater impact and sustainable outcomes. & when community members engage at their pace and in spaces they can shape, they are more likely to engage and collaborate, leading to more appropriate actions–and this may contribute to a sense of ownership and control over their own lives.	actual and perceived characteristics of the built and natural environments can affect physical activity behaviours, and we've seen that free and low-cost activities embedded in familiar built and green spaces and offered at minimum cost have had the highest participation. By supporting residents to access green spaces, we can create healthier, more active communities where being physically active feels simple, enjoyable, and part of everyday life.