

Changing the physical activity system in Doncaster: Key lessons from the last six months



About the Doncaster LDP

Doncaster is one of 12 Local Delivery Pilots funded by Sport England to develop approaches and solutions to increase physical activity levels in response to the specific needs of their communities.

On a day-to-day basis it is managed by the Get Doncaster Moving (GDM) Team and supported externally by capacity from Sport England. Situated within Public Health, the GDM Team includes staff drawn from different areas of Doncaster Council (the Council) including parks, active travel, communications, and leisure and sport.

The Doncaster LDP seeks to achieve two main outcomes:

1. **Systems change** – Enhancing capacity for the strategic leadership of physical activity across Doncaster. This will be achieved by both strengthening and expanding the physical activity network and challenging stakeholders to proactively and independently consider how they can increase the physical activity levels of residents in their day-to-day work.
2. **Increased physical activity among residents** – By supporting communities to take responsibility for addressing barriers to physical activity in their areas.

The LDP is focused on the whole borough with additional work directed on three target groups.

The three target groups are:

- The physically inactive (those undertaking less than 30 minutes of physical activity per week)
- Families with children and young people
- People living in income deprivation (including low-income or precarious work)

The journey of the LDP

The GDM team played a critical role in the COVID-19 response

COVID-19 challenged the planned work of the LDP during the initial months of the first national lockdown. Many of the GDM Team are part of the public health team in the Council and were temporarily redeployed to support the local emergency response. The remaining team members including the LDP Programme Manager, determined to support residents to be active in these new circumstances, continued to progress the elements they could (as described in the September 2020 process learning report). The GDM Team embraced an agile approach – supported

The 'sprint' approach is an agile methodology that involves focussing exclusively on specified tasks or activities for a set period whilst others are paused.



by their 'sprint' methodology – which enabled them to adapt and evolve their work in response to emerging issues. The first national lockdown brought an element of immediacy and a 'need to do' something to support Doncaster communities. Whilst certain LDP activities were paused (such as the launch of the communications campaign) to be sensitive to the pandemic, other 'new' priorities emerged (such as printed physical activity resources). Activities typically focused on meeting short-term objectives in response to the unknown timeframe of COVID-19. That said, the GDM Team harnessed the opportunities presented through the wider responsibilities assumed in response to the pandemic. They strengthened existing partnerships and developed new ones in their pursuit of working with the 'unusual' suspects to expand the physical activity system and trial new ways of working to achieve some of their longer-term ambitions.

The team are now re-focusing on long-term objectives...

Many of the GDM Team played a central role in setting up and organising the emergency COVID-19 response. Once this work was complete they were slowly released from their responsibilities throughout the first lockdown and returned to the work of the LDP. The team were not redeployed or required to support this effort in the same way during the second and third lockdowns; by this time the infrastructure and processes were already in place in the community and individuals 'used' to responding to crisis management. This meant their time was retained exclusively for the LDP except for a brief period prior to the anticipated floods in January 2021. Over the last six months the team have changed approach and re-focused their attention on the LDP's long-term objectives. Initially the team intended to wait until restrictions were lifted to continue with the majority of planned activities but now recognise that this is infeasible as social distancing requirements will be around for the foreseeable future. They appreciate they must adapt their approach or risk doing very little to contribute to the achievement of their objectives.

...by taking the time to 'pause and reflect' and decide what is important...

The team have utilised time in recent months to 'pause and reflect' and consider what is required to achieve the long-term objectives of the LDP in a manner that aligns with the Mayor's 'Restart, recovery and renewal plan'. This highlights how collaboratively with stakeholders the Council will support families and businesses to recover from COVID-19 and makes specific reference to physical activity. The GDM Team reviewed the plans and proactively engaged the Heads of Service within the Performance Improvement Change Team who were responsible for its development. This engagement was possible due to the relationship the GDM team had already developed with them and highlights the importance of new ways of working for achieving longer-term objectives.

The scale of the growing challenge surrounding physical inactivity in the borough was highlighted in *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on physical activity levels among Doncaster residents* – this output was produced in 2020 and accompanies this report.

This represents a conscious and deliberate decision to move away from responding to the short-term needs of the community. This has led to the team identifying a different set of priorities, with delivery refocused rather than delayed, and approaches revised to accommodate the ongoing restrictions (such as the communications campaign). Taking time to 'scan the horizon' was seen as particularly important by the team due to the more instant endeavours of the stakeholders around them, who were busy supporting the immediate needs of community members, throughout the second and third lockdowns. This 'pause' also allowed time for the team to slow down and reflect,

even if just for a few weeks, as the impact of COVID-19 and an increased workload had taken its toll. Thought was needed about how to move forward in a way that adapted to the 'new normal' but did not compromise on pursuit of the objectives.

The 'sprint' methodology that had previously been deployed to focus energy on specific outputs at pace is being used in a different manner. Collaborative working is more difficult to achieve when working remotely: meetings take longer and informal interactions over a coffee are not possible. 'Sprint weeks' have therefore been used to secure colleagues' time during a given period to reflect on the LDP's longer-term objectives – focusing on one at a time. For example, in January they secured time for members of the team to focus on how best to create the conditions for distributed leadership across the physical activity system. The success of this was variable due to other moderating factors, including the anticipated flooding which affected staff capacity in January 2021 when the sprint week was scheduled. It is a method the team will continue to use; it presents opportunities to bring them together on a focused piece of work which is particularly valuable when working from home.

...and recognising that they are not where they thought they would be – but that's ok...

The activities of the LDP have evolved and in some instances do not reflect what was planned at the outset. In other cases, no format was prescribed to allow flexibility to respond to learning and embrace the 'test and learn' approach integral to the design of the LDP. Considerable progress has nevertheless been made albeit in a different direction to that expected. The team have reflected on their 'journey' and are satisfied with the advancements of the LDP. The team have taken time during their 'pause and reflect' to consider the mechanisms and processes which underpin the work of the LDP, including how the GDM Team operates, the role of the GDM Advisory Board, the purpose of Get Doncaster Moving, the role of evaluation and the engagement of partners. This time has been successfully utilised to plan long-term changes (discussed throughout this briefing) to ensure that future activities are sustainable and a considered approach taken.

...as long as they stay stubborn on the vision, but are flexible about how they get there

The LDP embraces a 'test and learn' approach and so flexibility will always be at the core. COVID-19 could not have been foreseen and has reinforced the importance within the team of learning, taking an iterative approach and being flexible as the environment around you changes. Whilst the LDP is committed to their original vision, the team will continue to work iteratively and embrace agility in their delivery. Flexibility will not only be needed while COVID-19 restrictions are in place but throughout the lifetime of the LDP. External factors will always impact on what the team have planned, as well as the need to adapt activities in line with the community-led model adopted. Adaptability has been a central feature of the LDP since its inception and the experience the team have gained in implementing this approach has equipped them to work in this way, demonstrating its value to varying work during a global pandemic.

The pace may appear slow... but things are about to change

Externally, the progress of the LDP has at times appeared slow due to a lack of 'visible' work. A significant amount of activity has been undertaken behind the scenes to achieve system change and secure funding for capital investment. This includes strategic planning, strengthening existing and developing new relationships, collaboration with stakeholders, and redesign of the communications

campaign. The procurement of external partners and recruitment of new staff during this period has also set up the GDM Team to make substantial changes over coming years.

Across several strands, the work of the GDM Team is about to become more visible as the work undertaken throughout recent months comes to the fore. Additional aspects of the communications campaign are due to be launched¹, parks re-developed and new partners engaged through Doncaster wide events. The team see this as both an opportunity and challenge.

Recognising the importance of distributed leadership

Embedding distributed leadership in the GDM Team and the whole physical activity system

Changing the physical activity system across Doncaster is a complex challenge involving numerous stakeholders and residents. To achieve true system change, the GDM Team believe a distributed leadership model is required where leadership and accountability is shared. This scale of change required to achieve this ambition is vast and requires action across four stakeholder groups: 1. the GDM Team; 2. the GDM Advisory Board; 3. network partners (both strategic and delivery) and stakeholders; and 4. the community – specifically residents in the defined geographical areas. This GDM Team’s ambition is to bring these four groups closer together to foster co-dependency and interconnectivity. Guiding their approach is the steadfast belief that a culture of distributive leadership should be prioritised within the GDM team. This is necessary to not only demonstrate a commitment to the fidelity of the approach but ensure sufficient capacity to progress the activities of the LDP within timescales. This work is progressing in tandem with that associated with embedding distributed leadership amongst the other layers of the system.

When the team was smaller the approach to distributed leadership differed...

The LDP focused activities started with a relatively small team of individuals, primarily employed within the Council, which has now expanded both internally and externally to a wider breadth of organisations. Initially, the work of the LDP was only coordinated by the LDP Programme Manager but as the scale of the work has expanded and connected with other funding streams in Doncaster change was required. The LDP Programme Manager now has strategic oversight and facilitation with day-to-day implementation and coordination managed by strand leads.



The LDP is multi-faceted with various interconnecting strands of work – for example, the communications campaign underpins the work of the LDP and influences all aspects of work, whilst active travel links into the work of Well Doncaster Officers in their communities and the redevelopment of local parks. The team agree that one Programme Manager can no longer coordinate all these strands, identify how individuals can all work together, and ‘sign-off’ all actions and outputs; this creates a ‘bottleneck’, significantly slows down the pace of work, stifles innovation and collaboration, and is at odds with the principles of responsibility, accountability and leadership. The first step is helping team members to

¹ <https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/News/lockdown-exposes-health-inequalities-in-doncaster-as-new-campaign-is-launched-to-get-doncaster-moving>

understand how their work connects with other aspects of the LDP. This will enable them to work collaboratively to solve problems without the need for someone to facilitate activity, in addition to facilitating an environment where the team can co-create their own solutions to problems.

...and this realisation may not have happened without COVID-19

A combination of factors coincided and forced the team to reflect on what could be improved within the GDM Team (and the Advisory Board) and the changes needed for a sustainable approach.

COVID-19 caused movement within the team by requiring redeployment of staff to other areas of the Council and accordingly reduced capacity – even if only temporarily. This highlighted opportunities for change in order to do things differently which the team embraced. The pandemic also enforced remote working. This meant nuance got lost and misunderstandings occurred with meetings taking longer to achieve their objectives. The emergency ‘fight or flight’ response of the team has passed and the ongoing impacts of the pandemic – both in a work and home context – are tiring and draining for all. It was vital that the GDM Team considered the work and personal circumstances of individuals and the impact this has on both wellbeing and productivity levels. The GDM Team were no longer just colleagues but peers experiencing a global crisis. This strengthened relationships with empathy and understanding encouraging them to consider some of the challenges they were encountering in their work from a different angle.

The scale of the LDP is expanding. This includes the communications campaign (which has now launched with more elements due to be released), the Future Parks Programme, improvements to active travel and funding for resident engagement as a key mechanism to achieving this, and a renewed focus on stakeholder engagement. This all requires a considerable amount of resource to implement with no one individual able to ‘knit’ it all together. A sustainable approach is reliant on a commitment and willingness from a range of people and stakeholders to work collaboratively and share learning, knowledge and ways of working. The GDM Team need to find a way of convening the space to be able to achieve this. The willingness is there but the practicalities of making it happen remain a focus.

The final, and maybe most critical impetus for change, were several unanticipated staff changes. We have previously highlighted that many of the GDM Team have worked for or with the Council for many years, and the LDP has benefitted from significant added value as a result. This includes two Business Change Managers within the Public Health Team who brought highly developed and trusted relationships and connections with key stakeholders which GDM was able to draw upon and influence. However, in a period of two months, one of the Business Change Managers gained a secondment, with the other taking over responsibility for the strategic leadership of the LDP; two strand leads/managers obtained new jobs and were replaced; the parks manager was recruited; and two Well Doncaster Officers were replaced. The team is now once again running at full capacity. Positively, those no longer with the GDM Team remain working in Doncaster and proving to be an ‘ally’ in other departments of the Council and organisations promoting physical activity.

The GDM Team perceived these developments as an opportunity to understand their capacity requirements and re-align where changes were required to support the achievement of the LDP objectives in the long-term.

Whilst ‘ideally’ the team would have sought to implement distributed leadership sooner, there is an universal acknowledgement that it was necessary to have ‘lived through the process’ in order to

identify the changes required. There is no substitute for this experience and is difficult to accelerate the process of systems change as a result. Had these events not coincided, the team believe they may have created an unsustainable model in the process that would have needed reviewing and adapting later in the life of the LDP.

Distributed leadership is difficult and it takes time to embed...

Those leading the GDM Team have recognised the importance of distributed leadership and have started to take steps to embed this approach across their team. But it is challenging to embed and takes time to implement. The team initially attempted to distribute leadership quickly but soon realised that this was not going to lead to sustainable change: they needed to fully understand their roles, gain confidence in the execution of their tasks, and build trust. All parties need to be ready for distributed leadership to work successfully. The LDP now view distributive leadership as a longer-term process for the LDP. Changes need to be made incrementally, starting with leaders' adapting their own leadership style and behaviours by challenging themselves to work differently. The GDM Team are committed to a capacity building programme that ensures the layers of the system have the skills they need.

...culture, definitions and confidence all influence this...

- Distributed leadership has a range of definitions and individuals have a different view about what it means for them and more crucially how this should be applied in their role. Senior staff acknowledge that they have not always been clear about the expectations for individuals although many team members are able to accurately describe what it means to them. The extent to which this is replicated across all team members is unknown and a focus for activity moving forward.
- GDM Team members are from a range of backgrounds and working cultures which brings a mix of skills and experience to the team. Some members are employed in organisations and teams which do not take a distributed leadership approach, requiring them to consciously 'switch' between the different ways of working.
- External perceptions of the public sector are also problematic, with some organisations perceiving the Council to work in an overly bureaucratic and process-driven way. This started to shift during COVID-19 as the Council worked flexibly to respond to the crisis.
- It takes time for individuals to gain the confidence and experience they need to make decisions and fully understand the role they play. Trust also needs to be built across the team (in all directions) to further support this.
- Certain individuals within the GDM Team were previously referred to as the 'Core Team' but this was not considered inclusive and contributing to the challenge of distributive leadership by creating a sense that they were not 'core' to the work of the LDP. 'Putting a ring around a Core Team' blocks the distribution of power across the system.

...but some progress has been made...

The team have started to make changes which they believe have significant potential to fully embed a distributive leadership model. This has involved team members continually assessing their own behaviour to ensure they do not slip back into old habits in terms of more traditional leadership styles (as described below) and take responsibility for their own strands.

A range of different skills are needed across a team. For distributed leadership to be successful team members need to be **passionate** about their role and **committed to making sustainable change in Doncaster.**




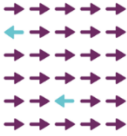


Key steps taken to date include:

- Previously team meetings were structured with the Programme Manager setting the agenda and strand leads ‘reporting in’ during the meeting but this was reinforcing the behaviours they were trying to change. Meeting structures have now been changed with a less formal agenda that seeks to move beyond a transactional approach. The meetings now serve as an open space for team members to ‘bring things to the table’ and drive the discussion themselves.
- Leaders have identified where they can jointly take responsibility for actions or pieces of work alongside team members to not only build their confidence but also reinforce more explicitly their expectations regarding areas of responsibility and accountability.
- Strand leads meet to discuss their areas of work through ‘networking’ style meetings designed to help them understand how they can support each other’s work.
- Historically the Programme Manager was the person invited to attend all meetings relevant to LDP work outside of the GDM Team but this responsibility is now shared amongst the GDM Team. Meetings are assessed and the most appropriate person identified to attend.
- Implementation of a coaching approach to provide staff with confidence and support to undertake their role. This is important to build trust and foster a developmental culture that allows staff autonomy and responsibility but in a supported manner.

...with tangible examples of the impact this has had

Green shoots have already been observed amongst the GDM Team with tangible examples of how the team are working differently and the opportunities this brings. Team members understand more about how the strands of the LDP fit together and are starting to consider how they can support other pieces of work. Some team members are proactively organising meetings with each other outside of the main GDM Team meetings to coordinate their work and work collaboratively. The changes to meeting structures have encouraged a more open and honest discussion between team members; whilst not everything may be covered, the team are having ‘better quality conversations about a smaller number of things’ ensuring the most important things are discussed. Team members are also recognising that the culture of the GDM Team is different to that of a typical public sector organisation and feel more confident in what their role is and the level of autonomy they have.

Emerging reflections

- 1 Agree what distributed leadership means to your team to ensure a shared understanding about the level of responsibility they have and what decisions they can make.
- 2  It impossible to be involved in 'everything' but identify what you can get involved in.
- 3 If you want to be involved in something don't be afraid to ask - be proactive. 
- 4  Get to know your team members. Understand who they are and what they do so you can collaborate and support each other.
- 5 Ensure the team feel supported and know that they may not get everything right the first time. Mistakes will be made but as long as 'the majority of arrows go in the right direction' that's ok! 
- 6 If you invite others to get involved in a meeting or your area of work don't forget to explain why they are important and what you need their support with. Be direct.
- 7 Step back and challenge yourself to not take away all actions from meetings.
- 8 Recognise your own area of expertise and share that with others. 
- 9  Take responsibility for your own area of work and use your initiative.
- 10 Be confident in your abilities, make decisions and take on responsibility.
- 11 Recognise how organisational culture can affect your own and your colleagues' practice.

Distributed leadership extends beyond the GDM Team

The GDM Team recognise the important role the GDM Advisory Board can play in influencing the physical activity system across Doncaster. Comprising senior representatives from the public, private and voluntary sector, they share a common vision to tackle physical inactivity and are central to the Get Doncaster Moving strategy² by overseeing its delivery. The GDM Team work closely with the Advisory Board who have played a role in LDP activities since its inception although there is agreement that their role needs to be developed further.

COVID-19 presented the opportunity to consider the role of the board...

Following the first national lockdown engagement with the Board was paused (until September 2020). Although there is agreement that some work could have continued, the GDM Team wished to ensure that Board members had the time to focus on other, rapidly emerging priorities during

² <https://getdoncastermoving.org/strategy>

this unprecedented situation. The team instead took the opportunity to reflect on the Board, its purpose and the role they would like members to play in the future.

The GDM Advisory Board was initially developed to provide governance to the LDP. The resulting model was prescriptive in nature and involved the GDM Team presenting strategies to the Board for ratification. The Board made decisions about the future direction of the LDP.

COVID-19 gave the GDM Team time to consider how to achieve distributed leadership – not only internally within the team but externally with Board members. The Board purpose and structure has evolved in response to the ‘journey’ towards system change. The Board is committed to a particular way of working, and the GDM Team sourcing the support that they need to be able to achieve that.

... and COVID-19 provided the Board with the opportunity to reflect on the importance of tackling physical inactivity

Physical activity has received unprecedented attention nationally from Government and partners alike as a way to improve individual’s physical and mental health during COVID-19. At the local level physical activity as one of the ‘5 Ways to Wellbeing’³ promoted by the Council during the pandemic and subsequently incorporated in the Mayor’s ‘Restart, recovery and renewal plan’. This represents a political commitment – with the portfolio held by Councillor Nigel Ball who also leads the GDM Advisory Board – about the importance of physical activity in Doncaster in the future. The pandemic has also reiterated the significance of key LDP activities overseen by the Board to improve infrastructure to support physical activity, such as active travel and the use of parks.

It follows that there was renewed energy for tackling physical inactivity following the pause in the Board, with members perceiving it as increasingly critical and united for this common purpose. Changes to meeting structures have been introduced in support of a more open dialogue and to harness the expertise of the Board in problem-solving. Meetings are more regular to maintain this renewed momentum. One development considered critical in energising the Board and maximising its value moving forward is the inclusion of an open space format where members have the opportunity to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on themselves and their organisation. This has led to individuals sharing their experiences more openly and a new dynamic between members emerging.

Some signs of distributed leadership are starting to be seen...

Alongside changes to meeting structures, the GDM Board and Team are seeking to enhance distributed leadership in other ways. Adopting a similar process to that undertaken with the wider GDM Team actions are shared across the Board. Previously the Council took forward these.

There are mixed views about the extent to which this shift in approach has worked so far, with the perception that Board meetings remain largely discursive in nature prevailing for some. However, there is consensus that it represents the first critical step to achieving system change.

...but further support is needed to make this happen for both the Board...

The role of the Board is changing, with greater expectations about the role they can play in the system recognised by both the GDM Team and the Board themselves. There is agreement that members need to play an important role in system change and the GDM team and Board are jointly

³ <https://www.doncaster.gov.uk/services/health-wellbeing/ideas-to-stay-well-5-ways-to-wellbeing>

responsible for pushing work forward. They need to have ownership over the work of the GDM and champion physical activity outside of Board meetings with new partners. This involves them becoming system change leaders and having greater connectivity with the GDM Team and wider stakeholders.

To support the Board in their work, the GDM Team are in the process of appointing a facilitator to ensure the Board have the requisite leadership skills to make this happen. This involves working with them to develop a clear understanding of the approaches and actions that are required individually and collectively to achieve transformational change in Doncaster.

To ensure stakeholders understand the role of the Board and its priorities for change, their visibility needs to be increased. One method for achieving this being considered is using the website as a platform for board engagement hosting meeting minutes and updates.

...and members of the GDM Team and network

There is agreement that the GDM Team need to fully understand the role the Board play – and an acknowledgement that this could be developed further amongst some members of the GDM Team and network. A traditional governance model was easy to understand but the ongoing evolution of the Board's purpose has brought, at times, a lack of clarity about its remit.

All boards are different and whilst guided by Terms of Reference they are defined by the personalities involved, the approach they assume to meetings and the culture they adopt. They are often seen as governance structures which can be daunting to members of staff who are new into role. Team members and the wider network need to understand how the GDM Board operates so they can identify ways to work effectively with them. Those in the team who have had first-hand experience of attending meetings describe this as important. They recommend allowing other team members to sit in meetings and observe as a relatively straightforward way of allowing others to gain experience and a better understanding to support future work. Some members of the team have experience of 'presenting' their work to the Board which has greatly enhanced their understanding despite being intimidating. More experienced team members could mentor staff ahead of the opportunities to ensure staff are supported to thrive in this environment.

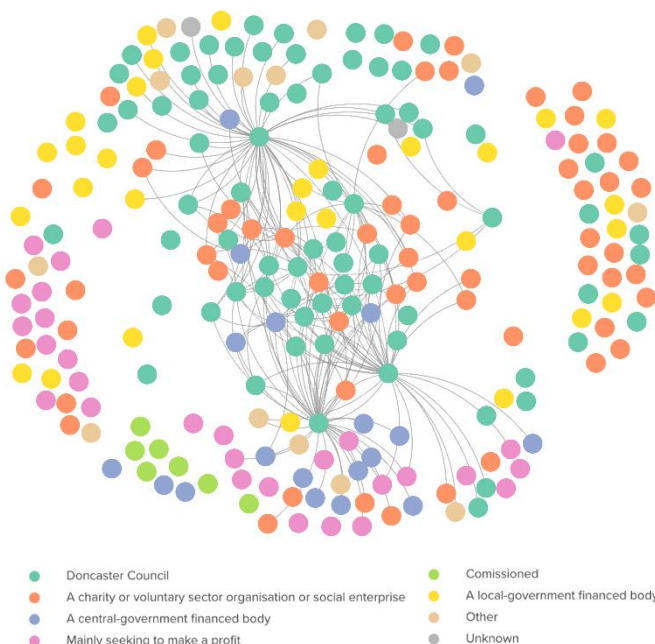
Once the wider GDM Team fully understand the role and remit of the Board there will be more opportunities to 'go to the Board' for decision-making, problem-solving, updating and help with local problems. The team are eager to present issues to the Board to not only gain their advice but ensure they are part of co-producing solutions – which will be a new way of working for all. The team believe a closer working relationship with the GDM Team will enable increased links between the Board and the community, ensuring the community voice is heard at the highest levels – for example, by Well Doncaster Officers highlighting solutions and challenges directly from residents.

The GDM Team cannot change the physical activity system alone

The GDM Team and Advisory Board are committed to changing the physical activity system in Doncaster – but they are unable to do this alone. It requires stakeholders to influence their ‘part’ of the system and distributed leadership is critical to this. It brings a collective vision and sustainable approach in addition to new skills and perspectives and enhanced capacity.

There is clear evidence that the GDM Team have engaged a wide range of stakeholders through their work to expand the network (Figure 1) although it is acknowledged that previous work focused on those who already understand the importance of physical activity, making sure this work ‘started somewhere’. Less progress made with the ‘unusual suspects’ and gaps in coverage remain amongst certain groups.

Figure 1: The physical activity network in 2020
Each dot represents a person. Those without lines were new to the physical activity network since July 2018.



COVID-19 has made engaging new partners even more challenging...

Engaging new partners during the pandemic has been difficult. There have been fewer opportunities for the GDM Team to make connections and build relationships with colleagues from other Council departments and organisations as a result of remote working and limited capacity. Virtual working has reduced the opportunity for ‘paths to cross’ and informal discussions.

Many partner organisations have been focused on responding to the urgent needs of the community, especially in local areas, such as foodbank provision. Others have been trying to ensure the future of their organisations and navigate furlough. Despite hopes, Well Doncaster Officers in recent weeks reported a sense of lockdown weariness amongst some community groups when approached about restarting their delivery. Organisations appear frustrated with continually having to adapt their offer or service and the impact of constantly changing restrictions and parameters. Although the GDM Team are refocusing their delivery to take account of the pandemic, others would prefer to wait until all restrictions are lifted before they restart to connect with the Well Doncaster Team to prepare for their post-COVID-19 delivery.

The GDM Team have made a conscious decision to tread carefully since the start of the pandemic and be empathetic to the situation partners are in – but that does not mean partnership work has stopped. They have taken the opportunities when presented to ‘push at open doors’.

And pushing at open doors has been successful

Engaging with stakeholders who proactively contacted the GDM Team has been successful and allowed the team to continue working toward their system change objectives. Examples include:

- Accepting an invitation to present at the Health and Wellbeing Board resulted in the GDM Team being invited to approach each of the Directors in the council and challenge them on what they were doing to tackle physical inactivity. This led to the Director for Adult Social Care questioning his directorate's approach and assuming responsibility for changing future ways of working.
- Working with B:friend to develop printed resources to support those who were shielding to be physically active at home. The team were involved in supporting the dissemination of 200 copies of the printed resource to their service users and promoted it on social media.
- Developing new partnerships with mental health charities through Well Doncaster Officers to support walking groups (when lockdown restrictions allowed) by directly supporting COVID-19 response efforts, such as foodbanks. The Well Doncaster Officers believe this demonstration of support has cemented their position as trusted points of contact in their localities and increased their visibility. It has also enabled them to increase the reach of their activities. For instance, groups linked to the COVID-19 response which previously were unaware of the Well Doncaster Team have since submitted applications for the Active Communities Grant.

There are also partners within communities who are ready to start supporting residents to be active and receiving their Active Communities Grants award once the current lockdown ends. Ensuring they do not get forgotten is at the forefront of Well Doncaster Officers' minds.

Re-engaging partners is the first step to distributed leadership...

As with the GDM Advisory Board, the GDM Team did not push or ask anything of existing partners during the early stages of the pandemic. The GDM Team wish to understand more about the role partners wish to play. Some will inevitably want to remain engaged, whilst others may wish to continue to pause whilst they appraise the situation. It follows that the ways in which the GDM Team have sought to re-engage partners has embraced new approaches.

The virtual network meeting was focused on re-engaging partners already part of the GDM network by sharing updates and more importantly convening a space where partners could be heard and GDM could listen. They were unsure how many people would attend but over 80 partners took part in the event – showing their continued support to tackle physical inactivity. GDM Advisory Board members took a lead role in the event, chairing and leading breakout sessions to increase their visibility and challenge the perception of the Council leading the work. They were also careful to avoid language which created a 'us and them' narrative to show that this as a collective problem which needs a collective solution. Throughout the event, there were numerous examples of partners describing how they are seeking to tackle physical inactivity with others identifying opportunities for collaboration to broaden their scope in future. For example, in one group a partner was talking about their plans to set up a walking group and asked others to collaborate. This led to partners broadening the discussion to focus on sharing training, promoting each other's work, and thinking about how they could jointly work with the same community groups and organisations.

....but more work is needed to new engage partners...

There is widespread agreement that whilst some partners may be championing physical activity, it is limited to those who are already engaged in the network. There is work to be done to involve the 'unusual suspects' by capitalising on the momentum brought about by recent successes.

The team will continue to use a range of methods to engage partners. Both opportunistic and planned engagement with partners and stakeholders are valuable to the GDM. By building relationships which might initially address alternative issues, such as the response to COVID-19, the

GDM Team are playing the 'long game'; building trust with partners over time and seeking opportunities, where possible, to influence change. Whilst this approach is not guaranteed to result in success in all instances, it has the potential to increase the number of partners aware of the physical inactivity challenges in Doncaster and grow the system trying to address these.

More planned methods include the launch of the communications campaign which will support the engagement of partners and stakeholders in the physical activity network in Doncaster and ensure consistency of messaging about the role of GDM. The team have frequently referenced the need for a stakeholder engagement plan to engage those not already in the network. In recent months this has gained prominence with its importance being re-ignited within the team. This plan will be informed by discussions at the virtual network meeting, the GDM partner survey⁴ and depth interviews⁵ and developed with the GDM Advisory Board – ensuring a joint plan. At this stage its full remit has not been decided, but it will include how to engage both current and new partners. Consideration will also be given to the individual best positioned to engage organisations/individuals to minimise duplication across team members and the Board. This will influence the GDM Summit planned for summer 2021 and build on the platform established by the virtual partner networking event.

A conversation doesn't have to start with physical activity

When engaging with partner organisations the conversation does not always have to start with physical activity. Successful partnership work can come about by engaging with organisations about other topics pertinent to them. This has been showcased successfully during COVID-19 where support was given by Well Doncaster Officers to the emergency response.

Team members from all levels and roles within the GDM Team have come to realise that engaging a resident, community group or organisation in discussions about ways to improve physical activity opportunities can often result from a conversation with a different focus.

Even where physical activity is the subject being discussed, it is important to be flexible about what needs to be achieved. Identifying a shared purpose is important with flexibility being at the heart of the work – team members cannot dictate what 'success' looks like. This approach however, does take time and one meeting or conversation is rarely enough.

The important thing to unlocking relationships is to:

- Introduce yourself and what you and your organisation can do
- Understand their perspective and focus, and what they want to gain from the conversation. This involves active listening to ensure rapport and relationships can be built. Identify ways you can work together to support the community, including opportunities to address physical inactivity
- Supporting them with what they want to achieve first can gain 'buy in' and build trust – they are then more likely to work to consider supporting wider objectives.

⁴ The GDM partner survey – including Social Network Analysis – designed by CFE is currently in field and was launched at the GDM virtual network.

⁵ Depth interviews will be undertaken by CFE as part of the evaluation to inform this.

...but challenges persist

Amongst some partners the perception that the Council should be leading the work remains and is difficult to overcome. This makes distributed leadership difficult and there is work to do to support partners to recognise the role they can play.

This was more prevalent amongst community organisations who Well Doncaster Officers were working with – but not all. For example, whilst support to groups with the COVID-19 response established new relationships it also required some action to manage expectations.

Concluding comments

The LDP has continued to adapt and evolve its approach throughout the past six months. This has been a feature since its inception; ongoing reflection is at the core of GDM's work with learning directly informing next steps and the design of work strands throughout its operation. However, what sets this period apart from those that precede it are the significant foundations laid for the distributive leadership of the physical activity system in the future. Prompted by COVID-19 and wider staffing developments, the GDM Team have paused to reflect on what is and is not working and modified their approach to implement ways of working that will enhance their ability to achieve the objectives of the LDP in the future. This is not to suggest that the GDM Team have 'cracked' the problem of distributive leadership; the ambitions of the LDP are vast and it will take years for stakeholders to proactively consider how they can increase the physical activity levels of residents in their day-to-day work. It is rather that they have identified some initial tangible solutions from which they can build to some of the identified areas for improvement experienced internally within the GDM Team. Adaptability and flexibility will always be required and the job of the GDM Team is far from done. They will need to continue to reflect on the measures implemented and evolve them in response to learning to ensure a sustainable approach. There is no substitute for this journey, and it is difficult to accelerate the pace of change without this experience. All stakeholders need to be ready for change and baby steps maybe required initially in the short to medium-term.

However, with this also comes a note of caution: the GDM Team can only 'pause and reflect' for so long. The GDM Team now need to harness this momentum to progress activities although plan to create space for further 'pauses' in the future as they saw huge value in this approach. Externally, progress may appear slow but should change now that elements are coming to the fore.

Key learning throughout this period centres upon the importance of good communication and relationship building for distributive leadership. This starts within the GDM Team but extends to all layers of the physical activity system. The GDM Team and Advisory Board need to harness the opportunity to articulate their vision for the LDP and distributive leadership in particular.

Key priorities for exploration as part of the process learning moving forward include the ongoing development and implementation of the communications campaign; the evolving nature of the connections emerging between the four layers of the system; and progress towards the alignment of the strands of the LDP and other activities to address physical inactivity in Doncaster.

Method Note

The authors of this report are Sarah Leonardi, Hayley Lamb, Rachael Archer.

This report summarises the key process learning emerging from the implementation of the LDP over the period September 2020 to February 2021. It is informed by reflective learning activity led by CFE with the GDM Team (including representatives of Sport England).

The report involves analysis of two rounds of process learning proformas completed individually; these are disseminated by CFE and designed to encourage individuals to reflect on the progress, challenges and solutions encountered both overall and in relation to specific strands of activity in the intervening period. In total, 25 proformas were submitted. Two rounds of bespoke individual and group interviews with identified sub-teams of up to two hours in duration were then undertaken during December, January, February and March to further explore the findings emerging from the proformas alongside over-arching key themes. This was supported by a reflective learning session facilitated by CFE. At this session CFE presented the key findings and encouraged the team to reflect on the learning and how this will influence their practice in the future.

