

REPORT:

GATESHEAD EVALUATION AND LEARNING SUBMISSION – APRIL 2026

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RISE.

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BACKGROUND

CONTEXT STATEMENT

This report evaluates the work undertaken towards the Sport England Place Expansion Development Award in the Gateshead local authority area. Within this area, work towards the Award is focused within, but not limited to, the priority localities listed below. These localities correspond to specific Middle-layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) which are indicated in parentheses:

- Dunston and Teams (Gateshead 007)
- Felling (Gateshead 012)
- Beacon Lough and Wrekenton (Gateshead 021)

METHODS STATEMENT

The data supporting this report is drawn from the following sources:

- Rise staff monthly reflection logs.
- Insights gathered from one-to-one meetings between the Rise Active Communities Engagement Lead (Gateshead) and key representatives from a range of local organisations.
- Insights gathered at insight gathering sessions with place network meetings.
- Discussions at, and outputs of, system maturity and theory of change workshops.
- Interviews with place partners.

Reflective interviews with place partners were specifically carried out to support this report; the remaining data sources are either outputs of compulsory Development Award evaluation and learning activities or components of the local evaluation and learning plan. Some sources, such as the monthly reflection logs were chosen because they capture learning over a 12-month period or at specific points in time, while others, such as the outputs of system maturity workshops are especially sensitive to complexity.

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT STATEMENT

This submission was prepared by the Rise Research and Insight Manager (Place) who, in consultation with the Rise Strategic Lead for Place and the Rise Active Communities Engagement Lead (Gateshead), collected the supporting data and developed the explanatory accounts outlined below.

The perspectives of place partners, key local organisations, and residents are represented through direct quotations, reflections and summaries of discussions. A range of place partners from across Gateshead Council, other statutory sector organisations and the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector were invited to be interviewed for this report, but not all were able to do so due to time constraints. Given that the other data sources outlined above capture these

partners' perspectives, however, these gaps should not be considered particularly significant.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS MADE

Since the submission of the April 2025 Evaluation and Learning Report, Rise and its place partners have undertaken the following system activity:

Strengthening strategic partnerships and developing local relationships:

- Participating in the Leading the Movement place-based leadership programme and reflecting on its impact through catch-up meetings.
- Developing a place network from place partnership steering group members, leadership programme participants, and other relevant individuals.
- Drafted a governance structure (see Appendix 1).
- Co-producing a 'common purpose' statement and agreeing shared principles and ways of working.
- Engaging with over 120 key partners from across the local authority, statutory and VCFSE sectors through 1-2-1 meetings, presentations, and public events.

Deepening shared understanding of the local physical activity ecosystem:

- Developing a brief for procuring external branding agency to develop a brand identity for this work in Gateshead.
- Holding regular internal Rise monitoring, learning, and evaluation sessions.
- Producing and sharing quarterly insight packs summarising key learning around physical activity barriers and enablers (the most recent pack, from February 2026, can be [accessed here](#)).
- Sharing and reflecting on feedback provided by the National Evaluation and Learning Partnership (NELP) on the April 2025 Gateshead and South Tyneside evaluation and learning submission.
- Evaluating local system maturity through a place maturity capacity building and support project.
- Participating in the 2025 System Maturity Matrix Survey.
- Producing and sharing an interim evaluation and learning report for place partners in October 2025.
- Co-producing a theory of change with place partners (see Appendix 2).
- Publishing an [interactive map of physical activity assets](#) in Gateshead.
- Participating in System Maturity Matrix Survey moderation session.
- Commissioning trusted local VCFSE organisations to gather insight from their members and/or service users.

For the sake of brevity, this report does not provide detailed individual updates on these activities but rather draws on aspects of them that are relevant to explanatory accounts.

EXPLANATORY ACCOUNTS

Partners' understanding of place-based, whole systems working is deepening

One change that has taken place in Gateshead over the last 12 months is that partners have developed a deeper understanding of place-based, whole systems approaches to addressing physical activity inequalities. This is due to partners' commitment to strengthening strategic relationships in Gateshead through the place expansion work, even at a point at which the conceptual approaches underpinning it did not necessarily appear relevant or applicable to their own context. This commitment to strengthening relationships included a willingness to participate in evaluation and learning activities, which provided partners with opportunities both to reflect on the physical activity ecosystem in Gateshead more deeply and critically explore a whole systems approach to intervening in it. By engaging in these critical discussions and responding to partners' concerns, Rise as lead applicant has supported partners to develop an understanding of a place-based, whole systems approach at their own pace and in their own ways.

Initially, the conceptual approach underpinning the place expansion work did not always immediately resonate with partners. For example, reflection log entries by the Rise Strategic Lead for Place and Active Communities Engagement Lead in early 2025 demonstrate how partners in the health sector, facing challenges with sustaining physical activity provision due to the prevalence of short-term funding, initially thought that the Development Award and its budgets might sustain some of their direct delivery work. This was a learning point for Rise as lead applicant about the ways in which operational pressures and organisational processes can shape partners' perceptions of the place expansion work, and the need for understanding and patience when building relationships with them around taking a different approach to increasing physical activity. These logs also reflect on some of the challenging discussions at the three-month catch-up meeting of the system leadership programme, at which some partners questioned the relevance to Gateshead of learning from local delivery pilots (LDPs) given the significant differences in timescales and budgets. At the system maturity evaluation sessions in the summer of 2025, some partners, especially those from the VCFSE sector, again shared doubts as to whether a detailed conceptual framework like the system maturity matrix could be of use to overburdened and underfunded grassroots organisations.

Reflecting on these challenges, the Rise Strategic Lead for Place and Active Communities Engagement Lead observed that some of this criticism in fact appeared to reflect a frustration on the part of partners. The functioning of the physical activity ecosystem in Gateshead – particularly the lack of means for organisations and residents to influence decision making – which the Development Award was providing them with a forum to express openly, in some cases for the first time. Upon realising that it was the system, rather than the Development Award and its conceptual approach, that was the source of some partners' frustrations, Rise as lead applicant recognised the importance of validating these frustrations, clarifying the rationale of certain evaluation and learning activities, and continuing to support partners to participate in them. For example, when

partners expressed a desire for quarterly insight packs to be more reciprocal and reflective of insights being gathered across the partnership, the Rise Research and Insight Manager (Place) adapted future packs to include findings of recent reports carried out by partners, such as the Gateshead Council public health team's research into primary and secondary school children health and wellbeing carried out with the Schools Health Education Unit.

A key turning point in partners' adoption and application of place-based, whole systems approaches was the workshop dedicated to co-producing a theory of change, which took place in October 2025. In advance of the workshop, the Research and Insight Manager (Place) asked partners to share the text of any strategic aims, objectives, or goals from respective organisations towards which they believed that the place expansion work was helping them to work. The Research and Insight Manager then analysed these and produced a comprehensive set of shared aims for the place expansion work which could function an initial draft of 'impacts' to include in the final theory of change. At the workshop itself, partners were encouraged to sense-check, amend, and add to this list of impacts. So doing helped partners to clarify the purpose of the place expansion work as it specifically pertained to Gateshead, and the rest of the workshop built on this sense of local purpose, with partners collectively articulating and refining the specific outcomes they wished to see as well as the activities and outputs they believed would bring them about. This involved conversations around how the place expansion work, once it deepened in Gateshead, would reflect the specific characteristics of the borough. Partners discussed the importance of branding and communications taking the language needs of residents into consideration, as well as the role that local heritage, such as oral histories of women's work, might play when telling a story about place and physical activity.

In recent months, the Strategic Lead for Place and Active Communities Engagement Lead's reflection logs record partners discussing challenges through a whole systems, place-based lens. As one partner from Gateshead Council reflects:

“ What's been highlighted for me is that physical inactivity is more complex than just 'we don't have the resource'. There are other factors and that's why it's important to include housing and schools. Child poverty stuff should all be included in the discussion when it comes to physical inactivity, rather than just saying 'we haven't got a play park here. ”

The extent to which partners have deepened their understanding of this approach was illustrated at a recent meeting in the priority Dunston and Teams locality, focusing on the theme of children and young people. A presentation of available data on physical activity levels, childhood obesity, and deprivation led to a wide-ranging discussion in which partners from Gateshead Council and VCFSE organisations explored the

intersecting structural factors such as austerity, unemployment, and social media impacting on young people's ability to be active. For example, partners reflected on how the provision of toilet facilities in Gateshead influences when and where residents will spend their free time and, consequentially, whether this will likely involve being active or being sedentary. Partners explained how some buildings that came into community ownership via community asset transfers no longer have toilets because of unsustainable maintenance and cleaning costs. Partners observed that this, in turn, is likely to drive more residents into commercially managed spaces such as chain pubs which provide toilet facilities, but which are not geared towards physical activity. While this particular discussion did not produce any concrete next steps, other conversations around the topic of children and young people did lead to an agreement to explore potential test-and-learn ideas, demonstrating how adopting a whole systems, place-based approach can encourage a willingness to experiment and learn from interventions in the local system.

Moreover, some place partners report that they are applying this conceptual lens to their own work. A representative from Gateshead Council who leads on children and young people, for example, reflects on how they are using this approach to challenge external partners when reflecting on low engagement with facilities:

“ I think it's helped me be able to challenge those [external] organisations more about the 'why' [engagement is low]. People say, 'oh, well, we funded a skate park, and the kids aren't using it', and you're like, 'but there are deeper reasons why the kids aren't using it'. Just [considering] simple things like the time of day [of the events], what are you providing them with, can they access that? Because you might have an absolutely fantastic facility, but if there's no transport to it, that's going to be a cause of them not coming and things like that. ”

While other partners will also likely be taking this approach, and may have been doing so before their engagement with the place expansion work, it might be useful to undertake ripple effects mapping as the partnership progresses to Full Award in order to capture the impact of this emerging approach across the system.

The partnership has formed a wider range of connections

Another change that has taken place is that the partnership has widened its connections across the physical activity ecosystem in Gateshead. Over the last 12 months, the Active Communities Engagement Lead has engaged with over 120 local partners representing a diverse range of target communities. By the time of the system maturity workshops over the summer of 2025, however, there was a sense both on part of partners and Rise as lead applicant that this diversity of local relationships was not reflected either at the strategic level or in terms of regular participants in key learning

and evaluation activities. Representatives were largely drawn from the Gateshead Council public health and localities teams as well as some of the larger VCFSE organisations in the borough. When partners came to rank the maturity of specific sub-conditions, then, it is unsurprising that these rankings often entailed the caveat that they only reflected a very partial perspective on the system that partners were able to construct together.

In response to these concerns, the Active Communities Engagement Lead formed a place network, the purpose of which was to bring together professionals from different sectors to share insights, build partnerships, and take collective action around physical activity inequalities. The membership of the network includes representatives from the leisure sector, the NHS Foundation Trust and Primary Care Network (PCN), schools, and a range of VCFSE organisations. The key principles of the network, outlined at its first meeting at the end of the summer 2025 are that:

- All sectors should feel valued.
- Meetings lead to ideas, partnerships, or steps forward.
- Meetings highlight what's working and where gaps remain.

At the suggestion of attendees, the Active Communities Engagement Lead and Research and Insight Manager produced a stakeholder map of the wider place partnership to support network members to identify gaps. At the December meeting of the place network, participants undertook a connection activity to map the following considerations across the emerging themes of parks and green spaces, poverty, safety, and children and young people:

- Key organisations or individuals working in this space.
- Existing groups it would be valuable to engage for insight.
- Relevant projects or groups.
- Insights or evidence that already exist.

Participants identified a range of connections (see Fig. 1) which, reassuringly, were largely already known to the Active Communities Engagement Lead. Nevertheless, the activity highlighted new potential connections and sources of insight on which the Active Communities Engagement Lead and Research and Insight Manager were able to follow up.

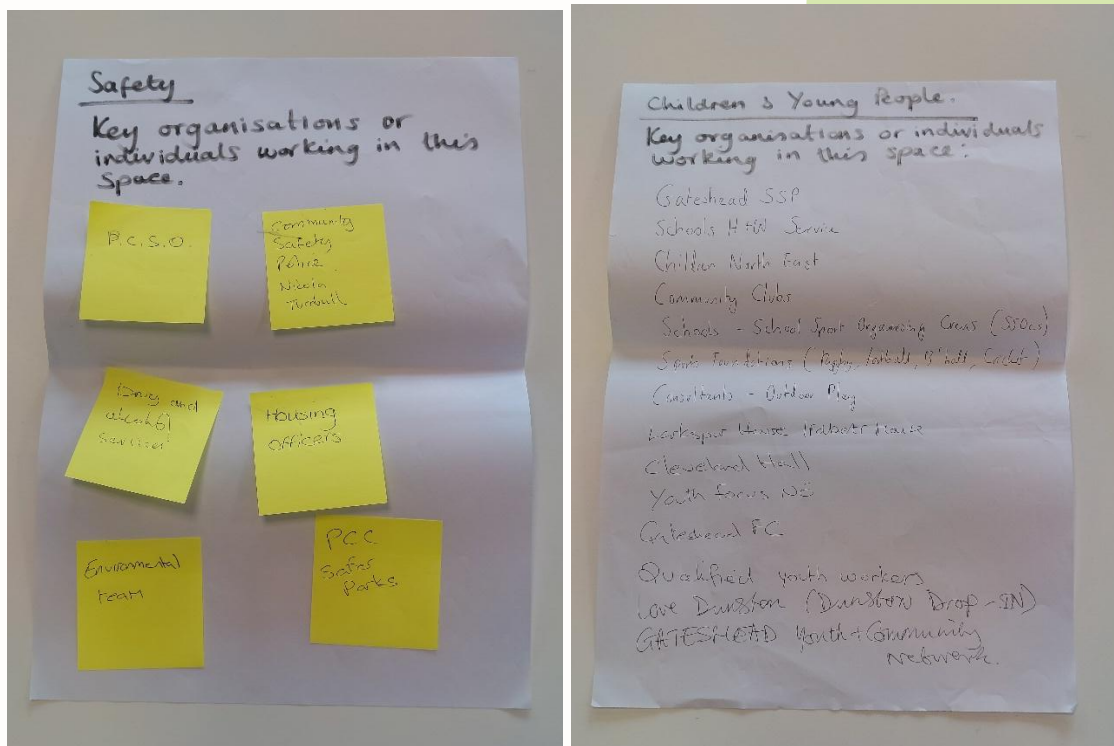


Figure 1 - mapping exercise from place network meeting, December 2025.

As a result of these collaborative efforts to identify gaps in connections across Gateshead, the membership of the steering group has widened to include a representative of a local youth organisation and a Gateshead Council Community Development Officer who works with residents living in high rises. The place network is also experimenting with working groups focused within specific localities and/or key themes in order to further deepen insight and understanding and identify opportunities for test-and-learn initiatives.

Members of this widened partnership are now taking part in a new phase of insight gathering and reflection. In March 2026, for example, the expanded steering group met to discuss the overall themes and sub-themes that have emerged over the last 12 months and to indicate informally the issues that resonate most with their individual and organisational priorities (see Fig. 2). Rise plans to undertake the same exercise with place network members and reflect on where these priorities align and diverge. Elsewhere, local community organisations with whom the Active Communities Engagement Lead has developed relationships are participating a commissions-based community insight gathering initiative; for example, a community centre in Teams has identified a local artist who will facilitate a zine-making session with members of their youth group to explore their experiences of local parks and green spaces. The findings of these initiatives, built upon widened partnerships, will also be considered when the partnership comes to review its theory of change and refine its priority themes.

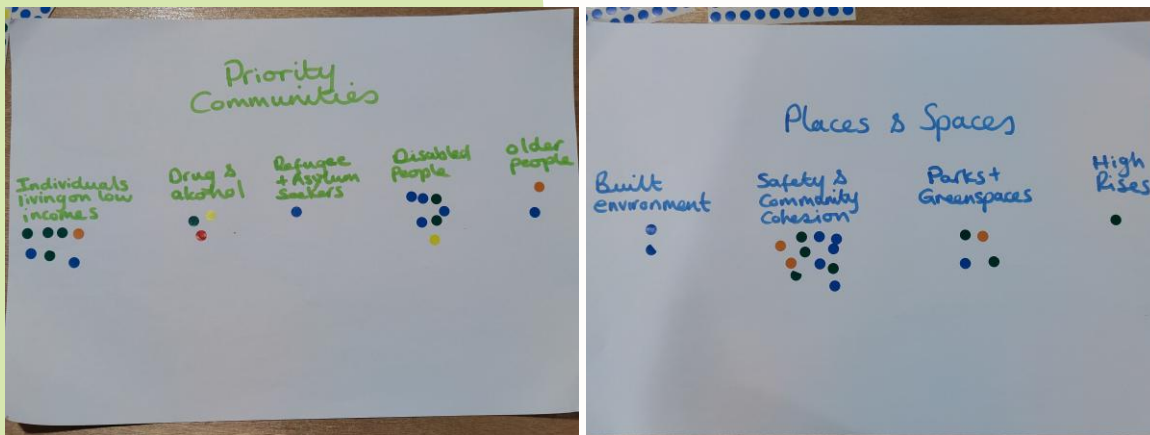


Figure 2 - 'Sticky dot' voting on themes at the Gateshead steering group, March 2026.

A Gateshead-wide sense of place is yet to emerge

One change that has not taken place, despite the place expansion work in Gateshead being led by an engaged steering group with membership drawn from across the borough, is the development of a shared sense of Gateshead as a single place in which to take a whole-systems approach. Instead, and as the preceding explanatory accounts have outlined, it is within the three priority localities that clearer visions of place are emerging.

This can be explained in part by the fact that visible, Gateshead-wide leadership for place-based systemic approaches to tackling physical activity is only beginning to emerge. Indeed, at the system maturity workshops, participants concluded that there are physical activity leaders in the borough that are not yet promoting place-based systemic approaches. Moreover, discussions at the system maturity evaluation found that distribution of decision-making across the borough is inconsistent and limited and that, where individuals are taking on more responsibility and acting autonomously to address physical inactivity, this is sometimes limited by a lack of capacity and/or strategic influence.

This lack of change can also be explained by the fact that, as the system maturity evaluation workshops also concluded, there is at this stage only an emerging and largely inconsistent recognition in Gateshead of the need to change organisational structures, policies, and processes in to support place-based systemic working across the borough. As the same partner from Gateshead Council reflects:

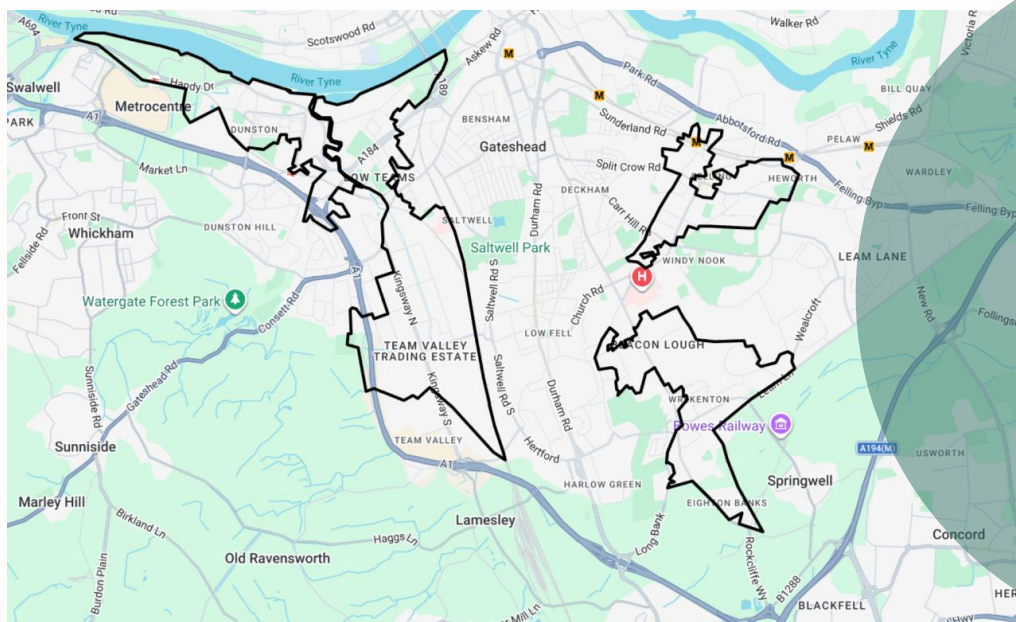
“Gateshead is fragmented. There are lots of leaders delivering various aspects of that wellbeing agenda [...] and some of this work is contested: different silos, different opinions.”

Reflecting on this, it is encouraging that the partners who met to co-produce a theory of change for Gateshead, which included representatives from both the Council's public health team and the Integrated Care Board, identified the alignment of health and

physical activity policies as key long-term outcome for the project. The theory of change in its current form, however, does not outline how this policy alignment is expected to happen. Relevant place partners will need to reflect further on the potential actions that could bring about this change, as well as who will be responsible for driving it forward and any foreseeable risks or unintended consequences it might entail.

Finally, this lack of change can be explained partially in terms of the challenges associated with working within the structures of the Development Award itself. The three priority localities identified using the [Sport England Place Need Classification tool](#) (see Fig. 3) are non-contiguous; the boundaries of Dunston and Teams, for example, are a mile from both those of Felling and Beacon Lough and Wrekenton at their closest points.

This sense, of there being three discrete localities in which the place expansion work in Gateshead is taking place, has shaped the local relationship building and insight gathering that is then fed back to the level of strategic partnership. Moreover, as previously stated, the strategic partnership is working in the context of emerging and uneven borough-wide leadership and organisational policies, processes, and structures. As such, it is unsurprising that place identifies have thus far emerged more clearly at the locality level than the borough level.



It is worth reflecting, however, as to whether a lack of a clear borough-wide sense of place is necessarily problematic at this stage in the expansion work, given the evaluation and learning that is underway and the next steps that this report has identified. Indeed, working with partners to fill some of the gaps in the theory of change, as well as widening participation in the 2026 system maturity evaluation cycle, may help to develop a clearer sense of place when it comes to tackling inequalities in physical activity across Gateshead. Likewise, findings from community insight gathering and test-and-learn initiatives, along with some established priority themes, a brand identity, and common principles may further contribute to developing a sense of place for Gateshead as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The work carried out in Gateshead over the last 12 months by Rise and place partners has led to a deeper shared understanding of place-based, whole systems approaches as well as a wider network of partners working towards supporting residents in Gateshead to be more physically active.

Partners have deepened their understanding through a commitment to strengthening strategic relationships and through participating in evaluation and learning activities, particularly a session to co-produce a theory of change. The creation of a place network has helped to widen connections across the physical activity ecosystem in Gateshead and has led both to new partners joining the steering group and further, deeper insight gathering.

What has not yet changed over the last 12 months is how the physical activity ecosystem in Gateshead overall is perceived among place partners, which is less clear than at the level of priority localities. This is because visible leadership is still emerging at the borough-level and because the three priority localities themselves are non-contiguous.

Next steps

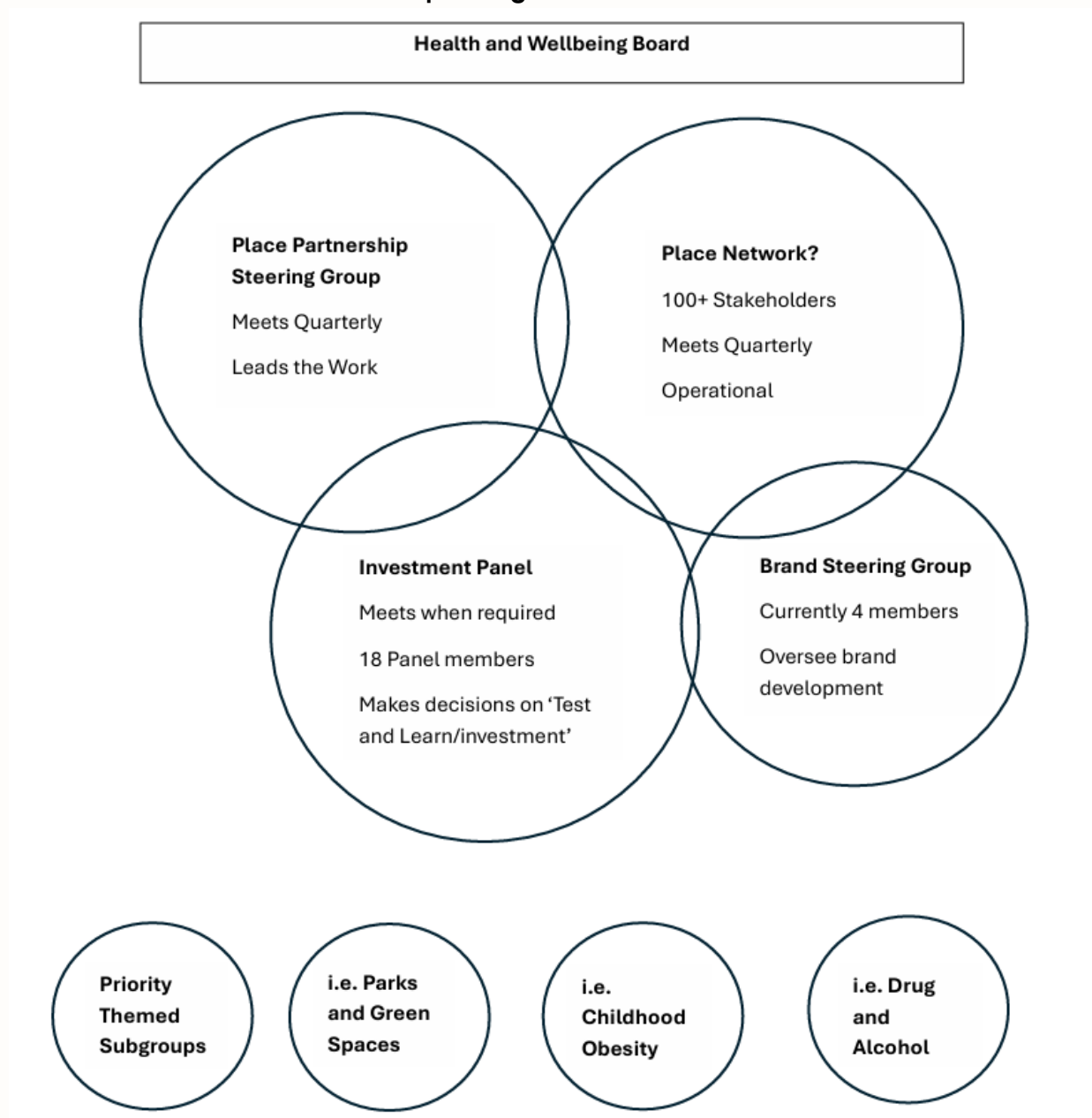
To build on the work of the last 12 months and address some of the challenges that have emerged, Rise as lead applicant will work with partners to:

- Reflect further on the potential actions that could help to align the place expansion work with other priorities in Gateshead such as health and Pride in Place.
- Revise the theory of change in relation to the findings of community insight gathering initiatives.
- Adapt the format of the system maturity evaluation to make it more accessible for a wider range of partners.



APPENDICES

1. Gateshead Place Partnership draft governance structure




2. Gateshead theory of change

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Place partnership steering group. o Leadership programme attendees. o Local area networks (Felling, Dunston and Teams, Beacon Lough and Wrekenton). o Sport England investment. o Existing physical activity programmes and services. o Community assets. o Community organisations (VCFSE sector). o Residents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Branding/comms project. o Developing a theory of change. o Evaluating system maturity. o Producing 6-monthly evaluation and learning reports. o Compiling quarterly insight packs. o Stakeholder mapping to widen the steering group. o Research to identify groups in target areas from non-engagement communities. o Micro commissioning project. o Asset mapping. o Data sharing between organisations. o Establish accountability structures for physical activity decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Brand identity for project. o Theory of change diagram and narrative. o System maturity packs and rankings. o 6-monthly evaluation and learning reports. o Quarterly insight packs. o Stakeholder map. o Asset map. o Insight into groups in target areas. o Micro commissioning process. o Data sharing agreement/process. o Accountability structures. 	<p>SHORT-TERM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Increased participation in project and steering group from residents and communities. o Improved relationships across project. o Improved understanding of local diversity of attitudes towards physical activity. o Improved communications (i.e. more accessible, inclusive and relevant language). o Greater reach into communities. <p>MEDIUM-TERM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Pooled resources and learning. o Co-production of physical activity interventions. o Physical activity behaviour change embedded in NHS support for weight loss. o Engagement of less 'obvious' sectors in promoting physical activity, i.e. heritage and arts. <p>LONG-TERM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Improved communication and trust across all sectors. o Alignment of health and physical activity policies. o Accessible provision in a variety of spaces. o Affordable and needs-led opportunities to be physically active where and when people want. 	<p>HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Residents live healthier and more active lives. o Inequalities in physical activity are reduced. o Children and young people are supported to be physically active. o Children and young people live longer and healthier lives. <p>CULTURAL/SOCIAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Residents live more connected and fulfilling lives. o Residents feel safe to be active in the spaces around them. o Residents are empowered to participate in shared decision making. o Increased representation of diverse and marginalised voices in local decision making. <p>ENVIRONMENTAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o More appropriate and affordable opportunities for residents to be active in the spaces around them.

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