

# Transforming the delivery of sport and physical activity in local communities



Impact of the Leadership Essentials programme

# Contents

Introduction	3
The leadership challenge	4
The programme	5
What do previous participants think about the programme?	7
Impact of the programme – testimonies	10
<b>Councillor Paul Moore</b> Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Investment (Former Cabinet Member for Public Health) Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council	11
<b>Councillor Louise Gittins</b> Deputy leader and Cabinet Member for Communities and Wellbeing Cheshire West and Chester Council	12
<b>Councillor Jim Aspinall</b> Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing Ashfield District Council	13
<b>Councillor Daniel Booth</b> Councillor, Amber Valley Borough Council	14
Further information	15

# Introduction

This publication reviews the Leadership Essentials programme for cabinet members/portfolio holders with responsibility for sport and physical activity. It includes four case studies from delegates on how they benefited from the programme and were able to use the learning in their councils.

The programme is free to delegates, thanks to support from Sport England, and offers councillors the opportunity to hear about the latest issues affecting the sector, provides examples of good practice and throughout the two days offers plenty of time for discussions through small group work and personal networking.

It is organised by the Local Government Association (LGA) in partnership with Sport England. At the time of publication, almost 200 councillors have attended sixteen programmes.

---

“Working with councillors on the Leadership Essentials programme has given us valuable insight into the challenges they face in helping everyone in their community to be active or play sport therefore delivering health, social and economic benefits. The forums are excellent in forging partnerships and sharing knowledge, learning and experience to explore practical solutions which work at a local level.”

**Mike Diaper, Executive Director Community Sport, Sport England**



# The leadership challenge

In the current financial climate councils are facing difficult decisions about how to provide their communities with access to sport and physical activity. Budgets are likely to remain the same or reduce, yet increasing participation levels will be a key priority over the next few years. Many are looking to fundamentally change how these services are delivered. This includes working with key commissioners to identify needs and embed physical activity into commissioning approaches alongside rationalising and replacing old facilities, transferring the management to trusts or private operators, and placing assets into the hands of committed community volunteers.

At the same time, the transfer of public health to councils presents councillors with an opportunity to ensure sport and physical activity makes a real and lasting contribution to the health and wellbeing of their communities.

Strong political leadership is needed to respond to these issues, take advantage of the opportunities, and deliver the transformational change that is needed. The Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme is designed to equip councillors with the skills and information they need to rise to the challenge.

This course is a must for all cabinet members with responsibility for sport and leisure

Previous delegate

# The programme



**The Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme** takes place over two days. The programme seeks to enhance members' leadership styles by building skills and confidence to lead across a place. It also offers councillors the opportunity to create a valuable support network among peers in other councils and parties.

The programme includes a range of external speakers from councils and potential partners who have taken on the same challenges and gives ample time and opportunity to share ideas and questions with fellow councillors. Delegates learn about leadership styles, promoting collaborative behaviour, and working with partners in public health.

The agenda also includes senior managers from Sport England, who share the latest insight into sport and physical activity including developing a behaviour change approach, understanding the sport and physical activity needs of communities and the options for delivery, including good practice in facility provision.

After the programme there is an opportunity for delegates to meet with Sport England for advice and ongoing support.

---

“Councillors are continually having to find innovative solutions to delivering effective sport and physical activity services and attending the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme is an excellent way to learn from other councillors as well as hear from leading practitioners across the country. Almost every councillor who has attended the programme has found it a really valuable experience.”

**Councillor Ian Stephens, Chairman, LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board**



## Aims and purpose

The programme aims to develop and strengthen political leadership skills amongst councillors with a portfolio including sport, leisure and physical activity in local government.

It helps participants to:

- understand the role that sport and physical activity can play in helping address health improvement and health inequality within communities
- explore the role sport and physical activity can play in public health, health and social care commissioning and personalisation
- understand and lead the transformation required in the provision, management and development of sport and physical activity services within councils in order to improve efficiency, value for money and increase participation
- understand more about how Sport England and the LGA can help and support councils through change and hear about Sport England's 'Towards an Active Nation Strategy 2016-21'
- become better leaders.

“  
Good knowledge and  
good demonstration  
of practical projects

Previous delegate ”

# What do previous participants think about the programme?

In January 2017, the LGA conducted a short online survey about the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme. It was sent to 84 councillors with responsibility for sport and physical activity who had attended the programme between February 2014 and July 2016.

## Why did they attend?

The most popular reason for attending was to network, learn from other councilors and to raise awareness. Almost four out of five respondents said their objectives in attending had either been fully or largely achieved.

Comments from delegates who attended include:

“Refreshingly good event.”

“Inspiring.”

“As Cabinet Member for Public Health, Parks and Leisure, it exceeded my expectations.”

“The overall course content and presentation is one of the best courses I have ever attended. Coupled with the diversity of the fellow attendees, it has been a joy to participate.”

## What did they learn?

Over four fifths of respondents indicated that a main learning point was the way the LGA and Sport England can support them and the council, whilst two-thirds identified how participation in sport/physical activity contributes to other council priorities. Four-fifths said that what they learnt had informed discussions about their council’s sport and physical activity strategy/plans to a great extent.

Comments from attendees included:

“I learned a lot, provided more than expected.”

“Real value based examples/most examples based on experience.”

“Good for thoughts and different ways other authorities operate.”

“Very well informed and on point. Relevant.”

“The event was invaluable in ensuring I was up-to-date in terms of current and future thinking. I came away enthused and motivated to implement some of the great ideas I had an insight into.”



## What did they do as a result of attending?

Over half of the respondents indicated that it had helped them to make the case for continued support and investment in their councils' sport and physical activity services with fellow councillors.

Three fifths of respondents said that they now work more closely with public health colleagues as a result of the event, and just over half said they had now examined and considered different delivery models for the provision of sport and physical activity. About half the respondents had taken up the opportunity of a follow up meeting with Sport England staff.

Comments from delegates who attended include:

“The start of a journey.”  
.....

“Really informative, new ideas, things to go back and ask about!”  
.....

## What difference did the programme make to them as leaders?

Most respondents focused on having more confidence with regards to delivering their portfolio.

“It assisted with my confidence, both in terms of me as an individual and in terms of how my council was, to some extent, taking forward a health-based sports agenda. It also opened up the potential for me of what I could achieve”.  
.....





The speakers were high calibre, insightful and gave some inspiring presentations

Previous delegate

Others highlighted the impact of the programme on their role as a ward councillor outside of the portfolio holder role.

“As a ward councillor, I have found that I am more pro-active in encouraging and promoting both outdoor and indoor activities in my local area. I have found an increase in the use of village halls by local groups offering a variety of activities across the age range.”

Another key theme emerging from the comments was the networking benefits provided by the event and opportunities for sharing best practice. Networking was a big part of the event for most participants.

Finally, 93 per cent of respondents said it would provide them with a basis for further improvement.

“I’ll be more determined to lead and change our offer.”

“Generally a very enjoyable and thought provoking course that has helped me going forward.”

“As always with these events the networking and learning from others was useful as was the opportunity to follow up. Came away with new ideas and contacts which will contribute to what we deliver.”

“Critical that I persuade my lead officer to view physical activity as central to the health and wellbeing agenda.”



# Impact of the programme – testimonies

We talked to four councillors in more detail about the impact of the programme and how they have made use of the learning.

---

**Councillor Paul Moore**

Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Investment  
(Former Cabinet Member for Public Health)  
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

---

**Councillor Louise Gittins**

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for  
Communities and Wellbeing  
Cheshire West and Chester Council

---

**Councillor Jim Aspinall**

Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing  
Ashfield District Council

---

**Councillor Daniel Booth**

Councillor  
Amber Valley Borough Council

---



## Councillor Paul Moore

Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Investment  
(Former Cabinet Member for Public Health)  
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

“ The programme gave me the knowledge and confidence to build a strategic relationship with Sport England to drive through a facilities renewal and improvement strategy which has resulted in new build centres across the different towns in Sandwell with just one project in Smethwick outstanding. This final project, currently out for public consultation, will potentially see four out-dated facilities rationalised into one new centre.

In terms of my personal learning and development the programme showed me the importance and value of partnership working and since attending I have focused far more outside the council looking for alliances and support from outside agencies including the ‘Black Country Be Active Partnership’ where I was able to network across the region. ”

Councillor Moore attended following a suggestion from a fellow councillor, but with no specific expectations other than a desire to understand better how Sport England worked and how they could assist the council. However he “left with far more than I expected”.

Councillor Moore left the programme with a clear desire to build an on-going working relationship with Sport England which he has done very successfully and, even though he has now taken over responsibility for regeneration and investment, he remains committed and involved in many of the initiatives that emerged out of attending the programme.

The other key learning he took from the programme was the facilities improvement process which he has subsequently applied to enable the council improve both the quality and viability of their sport and leisure facilities.

He now sees Sport England as a key strategic partner and the advice, guidance, and evidence they provided helped him better make the case for investment and hold off major budget reductions to services.

Councillor Moore also brought back learning about the emerging relationships in other councils with health, and public health, in particular. Subsequently to the programme visited the ‘Be Active’ project in Birmingham and was then able to facilitate similar local initiatives. These included: free swimming, the introduction of health and physical activity development officers in each town across Sandwell, a new small grants fund to invest in local clubs and help them deliver the councils strategic physical activity and health improvement priorities and the establishment of a Physical Activity Board made up of local partners, including health. This has broken down silos between public health and sport.

Councillor Moore believes that his council undertaking a sport peer challenge before he attended the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme provided the impetus to drive the changes he was keen to see happen, but he is also very clear that it was the on-going relationship he built with Sport England as a result of attending that was key to the overall impact. Sport England have often been key in helping him move things on with help on advocacy, advice and sometimes small amounts of funding. He feels that having ‘buy-in’ from Sport England to an idea or project can be hugely helpful in removing blockages and generating pace.

Councillor Moore would ask LGA and Sport England to “keep doing them but keep them relevant to the current issues members are facing”. He would also recommend all cabinet members responsible for these services to attend the programme to expand their understanding and see just what is possible. He concludes by saying that “the programme inspired me to keep pushing my agenda but also opened me up to many other good ideas”.



## **Councillor Louise Gittins**

Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for  
Communities and Wellbeing  
Cheshire West and Chester Council

“ The big message I brought back from the discussions with other councillors was ‘be bold and don’t let people stop you’. As a result I was able to quickly become a champion and catalyst of change. I was able to take the lead in creating a new vision and in doing so politically legitimised the views and opinions of other officers in leisure and public health and other members who were looking for things to change. The new knowledge and understanding gained from the programme gave me the confidence and the excuse to challenge what was happening and stimulate new thinking. My association with the programme and the people who delivered it and attended has also legitimised my own opinions and ideas. ”

Councillor Gittins visited the Birmingham ‘Be Active’ project and wanted to build on what she had seen in Birmingham, network to get more ideas from the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme, but above all, develop the confidence that her thinking was right. At the time the council’s focus was on leisure being ‘all about the buildings’ and leisure and health were not aligned and joined-up. The production of a new council plan was about to present the opportunity to challenge this thinking and bring these services closer together.

Shortly after attending the programme her portfolio was expanded to include communities as well as culture leisure and public health and she now sits on the health and wellbeing board. She also joined and chaired the ‘Eat Well Be Active’ working group involving the council, health partners, Active Cheshire, schools and Brio Leisure, the council’s leisure provider. This group was tasked, and has produced, a strategy including a physical activity growth strategy. At the same time Brio

Leisure appointed a new chair that triggered a transformational shift in relationships and resulted in a new shared agenda with the council around health, wellbeing and physical activity.

Emerging from these new relationships have been numerous projects and initiatives aimed at improving physical activity. ‘Smile for a mile’ encourages children (and their teachers) in schools to run or walk a mile every day. A new children’s play strategy will focus on encouraging children to be more active when they play. Recently a walking festival will also promote physical activity across communities.

However there have also been other significant cultural changes. The council is now not frightened to talk about their statistics even if they highlight problems with inactivity or obesity, or highlight major issues of inequality.

Going forward Councillor Gittins acknowledges that working with the harder to reach sections of the community will be a major challenge, particularly as resources continue to reduce. Doing more with less is becoming a major leadership challenge but not the only one. Some people remain frightened by partnership working yet going forward “partnership is the only way” so establishing and sustaining partnership arrangements remains a challenge.

Councillor Gittins admits she wants to see things done immediately and remembers that a fellow councillor on the programme reminded her that she might only have four years to put the changes she wants to see in place. The same councillor emphasised the need to maintain the stamina and determination and not to give up, but above all else ‘believe in yourself’.



## Councillor Jim Aspinall

Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing  
Ashfield District Council

“ By attending the programme I gained a better understanding of the policy framework and evidence to underpin my personal ambitions and my existing leadership skills. It provided me with the knowledge and understanding, and also practical solutions, to the challenges I was facing.

The process triggered by attending the leadership programme has enabled other elected members and officers to get involved and has helped stimulate many new and interesting ideas. I have been able to go on and use my increased confidence to put new impetus into the prevention agenda because I can now talk to health colleagues as an equal. A recent report by Nottingham University has provided me with further evidence that by investing in prevention some £3.5 million of savings can be generated in local health budgets, which I hope will give further impetus to the council.

Having attended many courses I feel that the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme is the one course I have really benefited from and I would encourage other councillors to take the opportunity to attend, especially those who are already portfolio holders, but also those aspiring to take on this portfolio. ”

Councillor Aspinall has been a longstanding advocate of improvements in health and wellbeing in Ashfield and had for some time been promoting the prevention agenda to council and health colleagues. When he was considering attending the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme a new cabinet and chief executive had created a more welcoming climate for new ideas and he was already facing a major review of the council’s leisure centres.

It was the programme and the range of interesting speakers that first encouraged him to put his name forward, but it was also the chance to hear what others were doing and “pinch some of their ideas”.

What stood out for him in terms of learning were two things. Firstly the very different approaches to providing leisure facilities that were emerging across the country where some councils were now receiving an income from their contracts rather than having to subsidise them. Secondly how these new facilities and some of the savings could then be used to improve people’s health.

He was able to bring back these ideas and sow them into what was already fertile ground by using the knowledge, understanding and the evidence learnt on the programme in order to help him argue and justify his case.

Although selling the ideas was relatively easy the positive reaction he got from colleagues quickly encouraged him to drive the agenda along with new confidence and energy.

At the same time the follow-up meeting with Sport England officers offered on the programme enabled him to establish a new and on-going relationship with Sport England that is now leading to other initiatives, projects and funding.

The leisure facilities review is now complete and, following extensive public consultation, a new vision to provide three high quality facilities across the district will be considered by the cabinet in the summer and will hopefully lead to a considerable saving to the council. The single new centre will reflect the desire to provide an integrated range of health and wellbeing services alongside traditional sport and leisure. Councillor Aspinall believes that nothing will now stand in the way of successfully implementing this new vision.



## Councillor Daniel Booth

Councillor

Amber Valley Borough Council

“ Attending the programme helped me to improve my approach to leadership. I am now much more aware about advocating the case for investment in ways that stakeholders recognise and support and have the skills to understanding stakeholders better and adapt my presentation to their needs. Above all, however, the programme has improved my confidence to make the case. The increased confidence has come from improved knowledge and understanding and a better use of evidence which in turn has improved my status and respect among colleagues. People now recognise I know what I’m talking about.

Having access to senior Sport England officers and being able to bring them to Amber Valley and discuss possible projects has also raised my confidence and my level of influence in the council. None of this would have been possible without being involved in the programme.

I have also been able to play a more influential role on the County Sport Partnership where many other members have also been on the programme and therefore share a common level of understanding.

I would definitely recommend the programme to other councillors. An opportunity to learn from others and build a network are key benefits but also the opportunity to build a relationship with Sport England and the LGA. The personal follow up with Sport England has been invaluable to me and not achievable without being involved in the programme. ”

Councillor Booth chose to attend the Leadership Essentials Sport and Physical Activity programme as a relatively new councillor. He was keen to hear the experiences from other councils who had been dealing with similar issues to his own. He was looking for different perspectives on common problems and ‘what not to do’ as much as what to do.

He took back two key learning points. Firstly, how by investing in leisure facilities and improving the quality of experience you can improve their performance to a degree whereby they are capable of generating income and not demanding a subsidy. He highlighted the experience of Councillor Jonathon Owen and East Riding Council as central to this learning. The second was about understanding better how Sport England seeks to work in partnership to achieve shared objectives and the importance of this relationship. Sharing common challenges of two-tier working was also beneficial to him.

Since returning Councillor Booth has focused on applying the learning to the council’s own leisure centres. Amber Valley has three centres all under public finance initiative (PFI) contracts and a fourth provided by a trust jointly funded with Derbyshire County Council with services delivered through a service level agreement.

Using the East Riding examples he has encouraged the council to provide additional financial investment in a new gym at one centre, which is now showing both increased use and a better financial performance that benefits the council and the contractor. In the fourth centre he has facilitated a revision to the service level agreement that will improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of the service over the next two years. The changes will reduce the subsidy and refocus the council’s requirements to attracting new participants.

Councillor Booth has also developed the relationship made on the programme with Sport England and commenced discussions with them about a potential new centre. He notes that access to this level of senior support and advice would not have been feasible without the contacts made through the programme.

However he acknowledges that there are significant on-going challenges to improving the services provided locally through the facilities that will take some time to resolve. He highlights the challenges of two tier working where it is difficult to make the case for investing in physical activity locally when the financial benefits in terms of health and social care are generally felt in the county council. Engaging health providers in this debate remains an opportunity to be addressed.

## Further information

The Leadership Essentials Sport programme will continue to be run in 2017/18.

To find out when the next event will take place and to book a place, please contact:

**Grace Collins**

Adviser, Leadership and Localism

020 7664 3054

[grace.collins@local.gov.uk](mailto:grace.collins@local.gov.uk)

---

**Local Government Association**

Local Government House  
Smith Square  
London SW1P 3HZ

© Local Government Association  
REF 12.5 June 2017

Telephone 020 7664 3000  
Facsimile 020 7664 3030  
Email [info@local.gov.uk](mailto:info@local.gov.uk)

**[www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)**

For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio, please contact us on 020 7664 3000. We consider requests on an individual basis.