

Redefining Activity from the Front Door to the System

The Hartlepool Place Expansion Playbook

Join
the Movement



The Exercise Illusion obscures the reality of everyday community movement

 The Exercise Illusion 	 Everyday Movement 
 Core Activity: Gym sessions, organized matches, 10k races.	 Core Activity: Walking the dog, pushing a pram, 13-hour nursing shifts, gardening.
 Location: Gated facilities, specialized sports halls.	 Location: The front door, the walk to the shops, the beach, the park.
 Motivation: Fitness metrics, personal bests, weight loss.	 Motivation: Belonging, routine, mental well-being, family time.
 System View: Residents treated as Participants in a service.	 System View: Residents treated as Citizens shaping their environment.



Environmental and financial friction heavily outweigh the motivation for formal sport

Kids loving school PE & residents wanting to volunteer



Motivation

Residents are already doing their best to move. The barrier isn't a lack of motivation—it's a deficit of time, dignity, and affordable local infrastructure.

Deep Hardship

14.2 million in UK poverty; 72% of children in poverty live in working households



Time Poverty

Nurses working 13-hour shifts; exhausted parents lacking time for exercise.

Environmental Loss

Closure of central facilities forcing expensive travel.

Friction

For teenage girls, emotional safety dictates physical geography

Positive Vibes (Home & Nature)

Headland seafront, swimming pools, and Home.
Insight: Girls prioritize nature, calm, and smaller trusted environments to escape the hustle.

Cry it Out (The Town Centers)

The town center ramp, Burn Valley, and lost social spaces.
Insight: Graffiti, loud music, and intimidating groups result in self-selection out of public space.

We cannot engineer participation without first engineering emotional comfort and visible stewardship

The most powerful interventions happen at the edges, not the center



When we fix the environment—clearing the litter, lighting the paths, adding public bins, slowing down traffic—the activity takes care of itself. Movement is a side-effect of a well-designed community.

Replacing gated hurdles with porous boundaries

Incidental Life

Walking the dog, pushing a stroller, walking to the college. (Unstructured, daily).

Sports clubs must shift from exclusive gatekeepers to friendly guides. The journey from the front door to the sports hall must be a single, unbroken slope.

Informal Play

Throwing a ball in the park, playing on a slide, casual bike rides. (Spontaneous, low-stakes).

Formal Connection

Joining the Huskies Basketball club, Wadokai martial arts, or Star Girls. (Structured, communal).

System governance must shift from compliance to learning

	Broken System	Place Expansion Blueprint
Objective	Prove it (extractive data gathering). 	Improve it (insight as a tool for local adaptation). 
Pace	Rushed, uniform delivery schedules. 	Seasonal reality (respecting winter fatigue and darker evenings). 
Governance	Adult-imposed rules disguised as youth co-design. 	Explicit guardrails with genuine, bounded youth influence. 
Measure of Success	Short-term participation metrics. 	Long-term community trust and stewardship. 

“ Intensified compliance pressure often signals uncertainty upstream, rather than failure downstream. Honest ambiguity is more valuable than false precision. ”

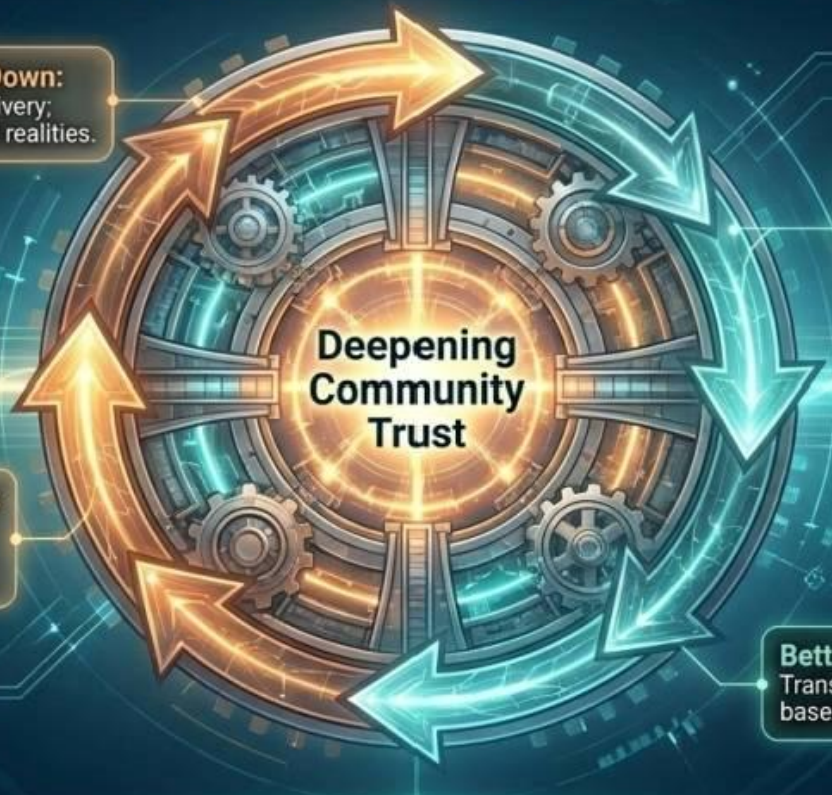
The Trust and Pace Flywheel

Stewardship & Slowing Down:
Resisting the urge to rush delivery;
prioritizing care and seasonal realities.

Authentic Insight:
Gathering unforced, relational
data from children and informal
micro-associations.

Increased Everyday Movement:
People move naturally when the
environment feels safe and
welcoming.

Better Environment Design:
Translating insight into tangible place-
based actions (lighting, park safety).



Trust is the currency of Place Expansion. Moving at the speed of trust creates sustainable, self-perpetuating activity.

Building the Infrastructure: The FE College Talent Engine



Young people are **not** participants or service users; they are **community assets and co-creators.**

The Hartlepool Sport Theory of Change



www.hartlepoolsport.co.uk

Legitimizing every step, every space, and every voice

Three Closing Mandates

1. **Support what already exists:** Stop building new programs to fix people. Start fixing the environments where people already live.
2. **Translate insight into action:** Small visible care—clearing litter, fixing lights—builds more trust than abstract strategy.
3. **Move at the speed of trust:** Legitimacy is earned through long-term stewardship, not granted by program funding.

*The opportunity is not to activate people from zero.
It is to recognize, support, and legitimize the movement already
happening right outside their front doors.*



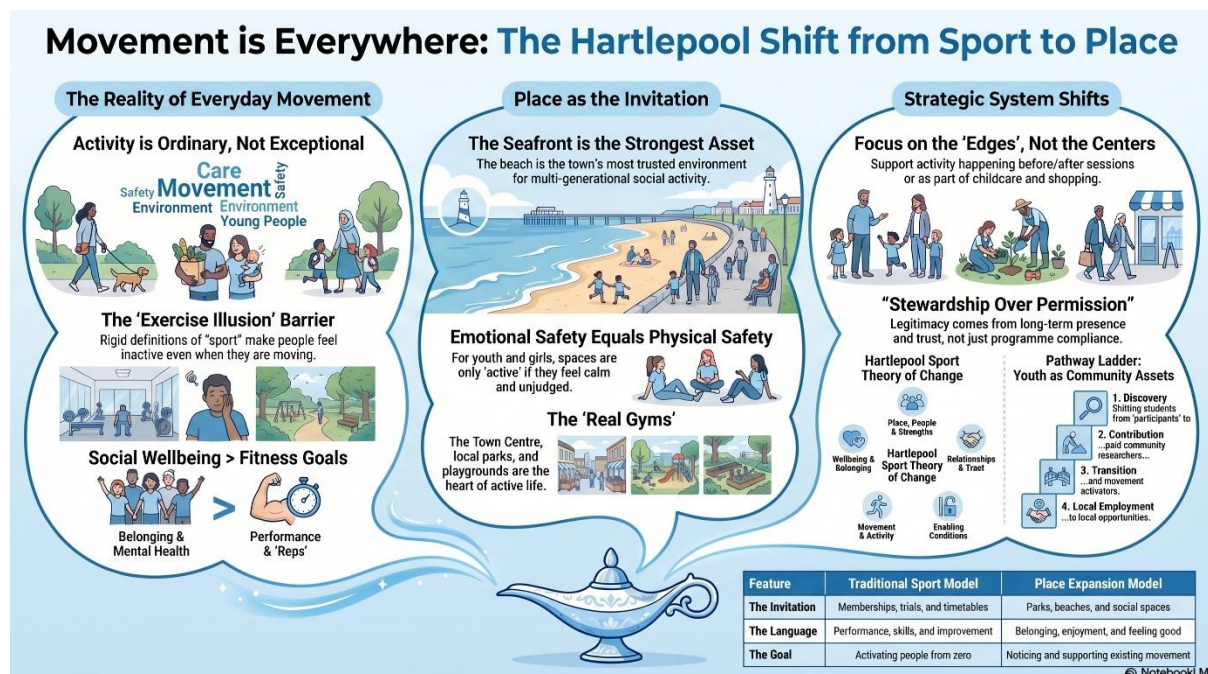
Place-Based Insight and Community Strategy Briefing

Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes strategic recommendations and community insights gathered in Hartlepool during late 2025 and early 2026. The central thesis of the provided research is a paradigm shift from "sport-led" interventions to "place-led" engagement, termed **Place Expansion**.

Key findings indicate that traditional "exercise" is often viewed as a chore or an exclusive "illusion" confined to gyms, whereas residents are frequently active through "ordinary" movement such as dog walking, school runs, and gardening. However, this natural activity is constrained by significant system frictions: deepening economic hardship, the loss of central community hubs (e.g., the Mill House closure), and perceived safety risks in public parks.

The strategy advocates for anchoring the Hartlepool College of FE as a "talent engine" for the community, shifting the role of young people from "service users" to "community assets." It further challenges programme leadership to move away from extractive, compliance-focused data collection toward a stewardship model that prioritizes long-term trust, ethical research, and "learning as delivery."



1. Redefining Activity: The "Exercise Illusion" vs. Everyday Movement

Data from the Eskdale Academy and various insight logs suggest that the current perception of activity is often limited by a narrow definition of "sport."

- **The Exercise Illusion:** Many residents feel they are "failing" at being active because they do not attend gyms or participate in formal sessions. However, researcher observations reveal that Hartlepool is more active than formal data suggests.
- **Invisible Activity:** Movement is woven into the "fabric of daily life" through:
 - Dog walking (typically 15–60 minutes, once or twice daily).

- Active commuting (walking to shops, school runs, and manual labor).
- Parental/grandparental care routines (picking up children, pushing prams).
- Social/seasonal activities (beach visits, gardening, "messaging about" in parks).
- **Motivation vs. Reality:** Motivation is rarely the primary barrier. Instead, residents cite "time poverty" due to intense work schedules (e.g., 13-hour shifts for nurses/cleaners) and childcare responsibilities.
- **Legitimization:** The strategic goal is not to "sell" new activities but to legitimize and support existing ones. This requires shifting the "invitation" from a rigid, schedule-based demand to a relaxed, place-based opportunity.

2. Strategic Framework: Place Expansion and "Common Ground"

The research emphasizes that physical environments—beaches, parks, and town centers—are the "beating heart" of community activity.

- **The Three Key Hubs:** The beach/seafront, the town center, and local parks are the most trusted and utilized environments.
- **Place Expansion Model:** This approach meets people where they already are. It suggests:
 - Treating "accompanying adults" (parents/carers waiting for children) as participants by designing "walk-and-talk" circuits.
 - Focusing on "the edges" (activity happening before/after formal sessions) rather than just the session itself.
 - Creating "porous boundaries" where a casual park visit can gently transition into a game or a club interest.
- **Social Cohesion (The Belong Model):** Effective place-based work relies on five pillars: Participation, Belonging, Democracy, Trust, and Safety. Preventative investment in these areas is estimated to save £3.17 for every £1 spent.

3. Barriers to Participation and System Frictions

Significant obstacles prevent residents, particularly young people, from utilizing public spaces effectively.

Safety and Anti-Social Behavior (ASB)

- **Age Gaps in Provision:** Parks often cater to children under 8. Teenagers often "take over" remaining spaces. This leaves the 8–12 age group underserved and feeling "squeezed out."
- **Perception of Danger:** Concerns regarding "teenagers, drunks, and attacks" in play parks are common. For girls aged 10–14, "emotional safety equals physical safety." They report avoidance of areas with graffiti, loud music, and intimidating groups.
- **Environmental Cues:** Litter, broken glass, used nappies, and poor lighting signal neglect and reduce "Pride in Place."

Economic and Infrastructure Loss

- **Deepening Poverty:** 14.2 million people in the UK are in poverty, with 72% of children in poverty living in working households.
- **The Millhouse Closure:** The loss of this central hub has forced families to travel across town for activities, making sport less accessible and more expensive due to transport costs.
- **Cost Barriers:** Families consistently request "summer clubs people can actually afford" and free or low-cost "open access" sessions.

4. Young People as Community Assets

A core strategic recommendation is to reposition students and young people within the local ecosystem.

- **Hartlepool College of FE Strategy:** The College aims to "anchor" young people to the town through:
 - **Talent Pipeline:** Creating a paid progression route from student to volunteer to paid role to local leader.
 - **Pathways, Not Placements:** Moving away from "free labor" to structured, credited, and paid sessional work.
 - **Curriculum Integration:** Using live briefs from "Place Expansion" projects for student assessments.
- **Youth Governance Principles:** To avoid tokenism, adults must design systems "worthy of young people's participation." The Youth Advisory Board principles aim to:
 - Make power and accountability explicit.
 - Ensure feedback loops are clear (avoiding "consultation fatigue").
 - Avoid placing the burden of system design on the young people themselves.

5. System Stewardship and Ethical Learning

Leadership reflections highlight a tension between "compliance-first" models and "learning-led" approaches.

- **Stewardship over Permission:** Place-based legitimacy is earned through consistency and care, not conferred by programme structures.
- **The Ethics of Research:** Researchers advocate for "slow, ethical, community-owned research" over extractive data collection. They argue that "retrospective neatness" can distort learning and that "honest ambiguity" is more valuable than "false precision."
- **The Role of Sports Clubs:** Clubs must shift from "exclusive gatekeepers" to "friendly guides."
- **Infrastructure as Delivery:** Building a "defensible, honest Insight Log" and developing "Principles of Community-Owned Learning" are considered primary delivery outcomes, not just administrative overheads.

6. Conclusions: What Success Looks Like

The strategy outlines a 3–5 year vision for Hartlepool's sport and community system:

- **Integrated Workforce:** The College of FE becomes the primary feeder for the local sport and health workforce.
- **Visible Youth Pipeline:** Young people are co-creators of their environment, leading to increased "Pride in Place."
- **System Resilience:** Decision-making is rooted in place-based insight rather than centralized compliance metrics.
- **Inclusive Environments:** Public spaces feel welcoming, safe, and "normal" rather than "targeted" or "surveilled."

**"If measurement drives the wrong behavior, it's the measurement that needs to change." —
*Sport England 'Leading the Movement' Perspective***