

Wigan Transcript

Introduction

Eve: Welcome to series two of the GM Moving podcast where we share with you how we are enabling people to get moving. I'm Eve, Strategic Director at Greater Sport; leading, supporting, and connecting GM Moving, Greater Manchester's movement for movement. Supported by investment from Sport England, Greater Manchester partners have been taking a whole system place-based approach to embed physical activity into everything for happier, healthier, more connected communities and active lives for all.

In each episode, we share stories of what this looks like in action in each of the ten boroughs of Greater Manchester. Today I'm in Manchester Central Library speaking with Chris Essex-Crosby from Wigan, and I'm rejoined by Nicole McKeating-Jones the GM Local Pilot Network Lead.

The latest Active Lives data suggests that over 70% of adults in Wigan are physically active for 30 minutes a week or more. Activity levels in Wigan were hard hit by the Covid pandemic, but are now showing faster signs of recovery than other places, regionally or nationally. There is lots still to be done however to enable active lives for all with 45 to 50% of people with a long-term health condition or disability, or those aged 75 plus moving for less than 30 minutes a week. In today's conversation you'll hear how partners are working and learning together to close these gaps. I start off by asking Chris how he likes to get moving.

Conversation

Chris: I've always been interested in athletics from a very young age, probably more on the performance side. Yeah, running's always been my sport, getting on a bit now so having to pick up other activities like golf and cycling that perhaps don't have as much impact on the joints, but I've always found that it's useful just to switch off. I see lots of people out running with headphones on listening to music, but I like to go out and run, nothing, no sound, no distractions. And recently I was up in the Lake District and ran for about six miles up and down the Langdale Valley and turned around and ran back. Absolutely pouring with rain, and I only saw two people, it was brilliant. One of the best ones I've ever done.

Eve: So where's a daily run go? Where would you go?

Chris: I live just outside Wigan and up onto Rivington Pike and Winter Hill is one of my favourite places to go and get some fresh air and just get off the beaten track a little bit as well.

Eve: Got happy childhood memories flying kites up there, except one of them came down and knocked me on the head. Literally right between the eyes. It's quite impressive to be honest.

Chris: Yeah, a very popular park, especially after Covid as well. I think in fact during Covid a lot of people headed there. So I like to try and get perhaps a little bit further afield than the main tracks, just to keep that peace and tranquillity that I quite like. I've quite often been known to not necessarily have a bad day, but get to something that I'm sort of stuck with or whatever, and think you know what? Go for a run for 20 minutes, come back scribble some quick notes down just in case I forget it while I'm having a shower and something to eat and then, and then get back to whatever it was I was doing and start afresh really.

Eve: So true isn't it. For me it's my bike, and it's like somehow turning my legs on the bike and the cogs start whirring in my head and the things that I was stuck on all of a sudden makes sense. It's amazing. So that's you, and in terms of your work and your role, so what does that look like?

Chris: So I've worked in Wigan for probably about fifteen coming up twenty years now, I lose track of time.

Eve: Newbie.

Chris: Something like that, yeah! Wigan's a funny place in that, there's lots of people come from outside Wigan. And once you get in you can never get back out.

Eve: I was gonna say, you'd have to qualify what a funny place it is.

Chris: It's a really good place to work. Some really nice people to work with some great organisations and things like that. My role specifically, has always been around community engagement, specifically from a sport and physical activity perspective. And as part of that two main elements, one picking up the Local Pilot programme, and I also pick up the holiday activity and food programme delivery as well. The crossover between both of those is that my

remit is around making sure that those people who wouldn't traditionally access sport or physical activity are given that. So it's understanding and breaking down those barriers to help them to do that.

Eve: Great. And within the context of the Local Pilot, I know we want to drop Pilot, but for the sake of this conversation, we're talking about the Local Pilot and the learning from that. What's been a particular focus within Wigan?

Chris: Wigan's taken the view that all three audiences are where we would like to have a look at.

Eve: So in terms of anyone listening who doesn't know what those three audiences are can you just tell us?

Chris: Young people, those who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment, and then finally with long-term health conditions. We also have a little bit of an overarching family approach as well. So some might argue that perhaps anybody in Wigan falls into one of those categories somewhere which doesn't necessarily help.

Eve: Well that's a good segway into challenges. But maybe we should start with what's good. I mean have you got any particular stories where it's brought you real joy or things you've seen on this journey?

Chris: I'd like to focus on the successes anyway, I've always been a glass half full type person, so that's always a good place to start. I think for me, we got a couple of early wins, early hits in. Wigan has always had this deal approach, it's been around for about ten years now, the asset based stuff and working with organisations. And while we've struggled because we've not necessarily had the, the voluntary sector, overarching CVS that some of the other areas have had, we've always had a very strong voluntary sector as well. So we were able through that deal approach to make some early quick wins and one in particular working with Groundwork and their 'Reach to wellbeing' programme, it's an employability scheme. They employed a gentleman Neil Rimmer, ex-professional footballer who wanted to give something back to the local community.

And he came in sat almost in those employability schemes. So they'd be discussing CV building, interview techniques, and if Neil spotted that perhaps there was a bit of a lull in the conversation. He'd put his hand up and said alright, let's stop. Let's all go out for a walk and see where we get to and then

we'll come back. And the employability tutors were open to that and allowed him to do that. And there were times he'd grab a bag of sports equipment and he'd take them all onto the local park and they'd be playing tennis and all sorts of things.

So off the back of that he would then talk to those clients on those courses. Signposting them into cycling, walking opportunities. We were able to connect them into a group called 'Gearing Up' we have in Wigan that recycle bikes and get them some support as well to get them back on their bikes. So whilst they didn't necessarily get the employment outcomes that obviously Groundwork had to look at and were working with the DWP for. The benefits from a health and wellbeing point of view for those individuals was noticeable and helped improve their confidence no end in terms of where they go next.

Eve: And you see the ripple effects, don't you of, I think lots of those partners working together in the place. So I saw fantastic pictures and videos over the weekend, one thousand, one hundred people out on bikes at Three Sisters.

Chris: Oh yes there were. I mean the cycling and walking in Wigan has just taken off really. I think that was the largest numbers we've had. We've run that event now for a number of years, it's on a race track that is closed. Great to see all the kids down there everything from balance bikes to those who perhaps want to have a set a time and do a time trial around the track as well.

Bike maintenance alongside it and, and lots of other stuff to go with it. So we were successful in getting some of the funding through The Bee Network for our infrastructure developments. I think we're getting on towards about twenty million, could be slightly wrong there but for some great infrastructure, but it came with an activation manager. Or some resource to support an activation manager. So whilst it was outside directly, I suppose, the Local Pilot in Wigan, the connections that we were able to make the cycling and the planning contacts we had on our Local Pilot steering group at the time, we were able to use some of the learning and share that across. So we've got an activation manager in post now. Our walking and cycling programmes as I say have always been pretty strong, but they've gone up even further.

Eve: I know a lot of the other localities have looked on really curious about the activation role you've got there. And the difference that is making and that spreading of learning really across local areas is about what works and what doesn't work. And that test and learn is the whole premise isn't it of the Local Pilot.

Nicole: It's a really, really important part of the Local Pilot. And we've got a whole comprehensive evaluation. Each of the ten boroughs has an embedded researcher. So a lot of the learning that's come out has been shared across through things like the podcast. We also have process evaluation that comes out every six months and we try and distil those learnings down into bite size pieces and then distribute them throughout the ten boroughs. We try and create a bit of a community of learning. We have a monthly meeting called the Local Pilot forums. We've over the years tried to create it as a space, that's somewhere that you can come, not only talk about your successes, but also your challenges. And some of this work is quite challenging and it can feel like wading through treacle at times!

Chris: So I'm also involved with the holiday activity and food programme and they have their cluster meetings as well. And some of the same faces are on those meetings that are on the Local Pilot meetings, but actually the way those meetings engage and the conversations we have and the shared learning, some of that has come from the conversations we've had at Local Pilot, that the Local Pilot certainly helps us all to get closer, and has brought different people into those conversations as well, not just the traditional ones.

Eve: So we know learning often comes from what doesn't work, from the failures. Which is why it's been so important to create that space that you describe for safe and honest conversations around what is hard, what's challenging, what's not working.

So go on then we've done the good stuff. What's been really hard?

Chris: The challenges then, so how long have you got? No, I was having this conversation with my line manager the other week. I had my annual appraisal as you do. And obviously there's a question on there about challenges, and I said, there aren't really challenges. It's more frustrations I think. Everything is there to be broken down. I've always looked to try and break down barriers in everything that I've done and, and what have you. So it might take a little bit longer and it'll be a bit harder to break down than others. There's always a solution somewhere.

So for me it's the frustrations in that Wigan was in a good place. We had the deal, we'd had all the networks, we had the steering group, everything was there. We had a couple of really good starting points. We had Reach to Wellbeing as I mentioned, Rebooted who were redistributing kit to people who couldn't necessarily afford it to get them going. And they were helping out the

homeless and refugees and you name it. They were doing all that great stuff as well. And I think maybe we thought it was gonna be easy that we were quite a large pot of money, there's lots of people around the table. We're gonna do some really great stuff and we're gonna crack on and brilliant. And obviously don't like to mention the Covid word and use that as an excuse, but what we were able to do off the back of that was then to reevaluate where we were.

So previous to Covid my role sat within Leisure Trust in Wigan. And then as a result of Covid we came back in house and actually the last twelve months have been really good. We've made some fantastic connections internally that perhaps we were trying to make beforehand became a little easier being on the inside. And we were able to get a bit more access to, to some of those senior leaders who were able to unblock some of those conversations for us.

One of the projects we agreed on about six, seven months ago. And I remember the final conversation at the steering group, whatever happens we must make sure that we get on with this and we get cracking and what have you. And we can't let time be the reason for this not happening and what have you. And six months later, we finally got the person in post. In fact I went to meet her for her induction this week! So, which is great that she's now there and we can move on, but it, it was just a little bit frustrating that everyone talks this good game we need to get on with this, we need to get cracking, but it's taken six months and it's no one's fault, it's just the reality of the system and there's so many different people in there that you wanna get opinions and what have you, and obviously then recruitment isn't there and all the things that go with that take time I suppose.

That just highlights some of the frustrations I suppose we have rather than the challenges.

Eve: There's something about pace, who sets the pace?

Chris: Yes. Prior to the Local Pilot work coming on, I suppose at that stage I was a little bit more at the grassroots cold face level. And, one of the conversations I remember having in a community safety meeting once I was sat next to the Borough Commander for the fire service. And he jokingly said, 'oh, we could put climbing walls up our training towers in the yards here. And you could have a youth club running here.' And I said, 'oh, great idea. Yeah. Yeah. Thanks Steve. I'll let you know', and then I went away.

We came back together three months later and I said, 'Steve, you know you mentioned those climbing towers?' I said 'I've had a word with Sport England I've bid for some money. And I've got three hundred thousand pounds.' And he went, 'oh what about the health and safety?' I said, 'don't worry about that.' I said, 'I've got the money, we can do it now.'

And it was things like that where I suppose probably I was on the ground, it was a lot easier to do stuff when you're there isn't it. You can go and just make things happen. And yeah, frustrations, hopefully we're in a good place now to move forward, now the person's in place.

Eve: And like you said the conditions in Wigan in many ways there's a maturity in the system and a ripeness in terms of really thinking about involving local people, growing local assets, changing governance and processes, so that you really are sharing, there's a flow of resources and power to people in communities. Cause that's at the heart of the deal isn't it and its approach.

So how is that translated in the Local Pilot and in terms of your other work that you've been doing alongside us and getting funding to where it's absolutely needed and at pace?

Chris: There's three areas, firstly we tried initially with Local Pilot to seek applications from the local community. Previously we're gonna probably about last six, seven years prior to the Local Pilot, we had a community investment fund, which gave a million, two million pounds a year to local groups. And we used their application process to try and get some of this Local Pilot money out. And some of the applications that were coming in weren't necessarily the right ones that we were looking at.

We realised that we needed to have a lot more conversation and discussion with these people and great that we had some new people come forward, but it was then just raising their understanding of what we were trying to do. So we got the paperwork in place, the legal stuff, and we had a system that was perhaps a little bit quicker than the community investment fund, it wasn't the two stages process. So we've obviously gone back now to the not the old way of working, but the getting out there into the community, talking to those assets, and understanding what they wanted to do before then saying, 'right, well come to us and ask for some funding.'

During Covid tackling inequalities fund money was on offer. And one of the things in Wigan we said was we've got our seven service delivery footprints, or

our community areas, neighbourhood areas, as other boroughs might call them. And we were like well if we give a little pot of money from the big pot to each of these seven areas they know who they're working with. They can go out and distribute this fund and that'd be great. And in a couple of areas that work really well the money was given a couple of thousand pounds was given to a few groups within a matter of days, weeks, and they cracked on with some delivery.

But actually there was still a reasonably large pot left. Whether it was a timing thing, capacity thing at those local levels that didn't quite work. So what's happened is that's come back into Wigan's Local Pilot, and specifically to myself to then go and have a few conversations.

I've just had some emails today that finally that money has now been allocated. And some of it is for that Covid recovery. And perhaps is a little bit late given where we are now and having come back out.

I mentioned previously before as well coming back into Wigan council as well, whilst it's been really good from a conversation point of view has just thrown a couple of delays into a few things as well and connections into a few things just because we were sorting out all the HR and the finance and all that stuff that comes with it. We've got the processes in place now. We are able to do it and our community investment fund continues to run in Wigan council and our holiday activity and food programme. We distribute money to about fifty to sixty providers in the borough. And we're able to do that within a couple of weeks of one holiday finishing, so they know what they're getting for the next holiday.

Eve: Common challenge in all this is then how you measure success and the metrics and how we can talk about feeding the beast you often get those different fund incomes and there's always criteria. And often it can feel like a very tick box and doesn't necessarily marry with the approach that you are taking there.

So how are you measuring success on all these projects? And have you seen some progress really in thinking differently about what success looks like?

Chris: I think when we talk to the community groups and some of our other providers we have that conversation with them about we've got this pot of money that I think really fits that project. And their first reaction is, 'so right, what hoops do I have to jump through to get the money?'. And then the second one is, 'well, once we've got the money what reporting do we have to do back?'

But, when you sit there and you say, ‘well I’m not really that bothered about numbers.’ They pause and I think they think we are taking the mickey a little bit. No, it’s genuine! And I suppose sometimes as well you throw in, ‘It doesn’t necessarily have to be sport as well. If it’s a knitting group and someone actually gets off their couch and makes their way to that venue to do some knitting, that also counts as physical activity.’ ‘What has Sport England changed its name to just England?!’.

It’s that conversation that you end up having for a few minutes. No, for me, it’s is welcome. Obviously we do still keep an eye on the numbers. And we have invested in DataHub in Wigan, which is 4global’s package where we try and bring all of the data together from all of our providers around physical activity and, and obviously look at patterns and then look to try and explain those patterns. We know that just because someone’s maybe using one of our gyms, it doesn’t mean to so they’re not walking as well and something else or taking part in a football session with Wigan Athletic or rugby with Wigan Warriors, or something like that. So we we’re looking at those patterns.

Nicole: When we talk about the Local Pilot giving us space to do things differently, I think that really does link into what you’re saying and almost that suspicion not just from local residents, but also the partners that we work with we are looking at what actual difference is it making to them putting these things on before. What barriers is it helping communities and people to overcome? But it doesn’t necessarily mean that we don’t care about the numbers and the data as well. It all has a part to play to tell the story of what’s happening in a specific neighbourhood, to a specific person. Within the evaluation I’ve touched on before we have an opportunity for each locality to do a deep dive within a particular area.

So the embedded researcher will really dig into what’s happened. What has contributed to that success or that challenge, and really pick into the nitty gritty of it. So that’s another way that we can really demonstrate the successes that we are seeing as well, and be able to tell that story and give it that real context.

Eve: So having experienced having that space and time for that reflection can almost make the invisible more visible in the storytelling and recognise what’s happened and why and what are those indicators.

So what does the future look like and what will be the key indicators of progress you’ll be looking for?

Chris: Okay. So we've got one member of staff I've already alluded to who started this week with Groundwork looking at community health building. And we also invested in a youth hub in Leigh.

More specifically from a Local Pilot point of view we've invested in a partnership manager to explore how that youth hub now looks. We're lucky enough to have Wigan Youth Zone, a massive facility in Wigan town centre. But for those who know Wigan will know that people from the Leigh side won't necessarily travel across to Wigan and want something similar on Leigh sports village on that site. We've got a sports centre, we've got a college, we've got a number of sports clubs. There's a stadium, within the stadium you've got Manchester United ladies, you've got Leigh Centurions playing out of there. Adjacent to it we've got Pennington Flash country parks, there's a whole host of opportunities there. And then you don't have to go too much further into Leigh town centre using some of the network of footpaths and cycle paths. A whole host of cultural and other opportunities out there as well. So I suppose from that point of view with the youth hub stuff, it's looking at a new model of how our youth work programme would work. And youth work across the country has been obliterated hasn't it in the last ten years. So it's what does that look like, and where can those young people go?

And then from a community health point of view again recruited someone new this week. Her remit is to look particularly at where the voluntary sector fits into that community link worker process. Really we're very strong on investing in our community link workers in the borough. Our staff are very well trained up through the deal and more recently through some Local Pilot stuff to have those different asset based conversations. But it's just making sure now that the voluntary sector can receive those referrals as and when they come through.

And as part of that work we've connected into the Pivot to Wellness that's been talked about nationally. Howe Bridge Leisure Centre is one area we are looking at. We have four disused squash courts, and some other space within the building. As well as then a reasonable amount of green space surrounding it, that can be used as a little bit of capital money in the area for us to make some changes to that. And we've got a number of those partners around the table, including our community link workers and GP's asking us for what we need to have a sink and we need to have a bed in the corner of the room if we're gonna do consultations. But for the time being what we can do is we can have our community link workers there doing a drop in session one day a week.

What we now need to do, and using our community health building investment is make sure that then the voluntary sector groups are in there at the same time. So if we've got a diabetes clinic in or a musculoskeletal group in or whatever, that that musculoskeletal group can be shown the swimming pool and there's water based aerobics on perhaps and off the back of that they might go, 'well, actually, I thought that was all for people who were over eighteen and female, And actually, no it's not because there's lots of other people in there. I will go and give that a go.' Well, here you go, here's a free voucher, go and try that. So for us that's the two areas that we're looking at. We still have a little bit of money left over if anyone does have any bright ideas out there.

Eve: There you go, leave your contact details.

Chris: Of course. Yeah. But yeah for us now we've got two people in posting those two specific projects. I would like to hope that some of the timescale frustrations certainly won't be mine anymore. That'll be passed on to somebody else I would think. But, we can get things moving and have another good conversation like this maybe in 12 months time and see where we're at.

Eve: Great. Well, talking about getting moving I know you've got a train to catch.

Chris: I have yeah.

Eve: And I know you're good at running and you're fast, but I don't want to push you too much. So, I think we'll call it a day, but it's been a pleasure Chris, thank you.

Chris: No, thanks very much.

Eve: So thank you.

Chris: Thanks Nicole, as well.

Eve: Enjoy some headspace

Chris: I will do. Yes. Oh God. Thanks very much.

Nicole: No, it's a pleasure. Thank you.

Eve: Thank you.

Outro

Eve: We've heard how moving matters to everybody and how we can all play a role to design moving back into everyday life. Now we'd love to hear how you keep moving, and the ways you are supporting others to live an active life. You contact us on our socials. We are on Facebook and Twitter, just search Greater Sport, and don't forget the #GMMovingInAction.

Please do share this episode to people and organisations who will find it useful and join the movement for movement. A big thank you to everyone who's investing in this work and playing their part to test, to learn and to make this happen. This series is a MIC Media production.