

Trafford

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. In today's episode I speak with Tom Howarth, Sport and Physical Activity Relationship Manager at Trafford Council, and a welcome back Richard from Greater Sport who is leading on the Local Pilot and place-based work.

Trafford is known for its sporting prowess, to include being home to Manchester United Football Club and to Old Trafford Cricket ground. Active lives data suggests that Trafford has the highest physical activity rates of the ten GM boroughs. However, Active Lives data shows a big gap of almost 30% in people's activity levels across different socioeconomic groups, mirroring local inequalities and gaps in health outcomes.

So let's join Tom and Richard for this episode's conversation to find out how they are making connections, building relationships, and creating energy for change to close the inactivity gap.

Conversation

Eve: Welcome Tom and Richard. Great to have you here. I know we are on Zoom this time today for a number of reasons. So I'm sat here in my garden shed in Whalley Range, and where are you Tom?

Tom: I'm sat here in my office in the often sunny Weston-super-Mare.

Eve: And I have to say it's looking glorious in your picture. I'm quite jealous! Where are you Richard?

Richard: I am at the sunny Etihad in the National Squash Centre and there is the European Championships for Taekwondo taking place. So apologies if there's a lot of noise, but we have spectators wondering in and out the building, and hoards of school children coming to be inspired by a national event, international event actually, European event.

Eve: I look forward to hearing cheers or whatever else is going on. So Tom the focus of this conversation really is your experiences in your work in Trafford as part of the Local Pilot, but I want to start really more personally with you and why moving matters to you and a little bit about your story.

Tom: I'm a sports person. So that's probably one of my immediate links to the power of movement. But more broadly in what will be almost twenty years plus that I've navigated around or bumped around in the sector and various different guise, be those voluntary and paid. It's the impact that physical activity and movement can make on individuals and communities, which is the motivational grease that keeps me going and keeps me advocating for change, despite all of the other pressures, priorities, and challenges that people face in their everyday lives these days.

And probably when it became more pertinent to me is I lost my mother to a heart attack about four years ago. It was one of those situations where advocating for physical activity for pretty much all my life. It wasn't an impact that I can make to an individual in my immediate inner circle. And that brought home how challenging that can be for people. But then also it brought me closer in terms of a lived experience for the communities and individuals we were trying to break ground with.

You get a better sense of the importance of getting those messages across and the importance of making a difference because I know it sounds quite extreme to some people, but it can literally make the difference between life or death for some individuals.

And I've also become much more aware of the importance of physical activity and movement and my own mental health and wellness space, particularly with this day to day stresses of work very much being in this slightly disconnected working pattern where probably 99% of my work is virtual.

Being able to engage in sport and physical activity gives me an opportunity to physically connect with people, physically connect with the environment. I'd probably say it's been a bit of a godsend as I've navigated the move from Manchester to Weston, and continued working in a remote fashion.

Eve: Love this idea of the motivational grease, as we all bump along together just feels like we're probably gonna do in this conversation. So we'll hold on to that.

So how are we most likely to find you moving in Weston-super-Mare? What are you most likely to be doing?

Tom: You are most likely to find me in the local CrossFit affiliate, and alternatively to that you'll find me on a Rugby pitch somewhere in the South West trying to continue my lifelong passion with the Oval ball.

Eve: Fabulous. So back to your professional role within Trafford. Can you just tell us a bit about your job?

Tom: I am a Sport and Physical Activity Relationship Manager at Trafford Council. It's quite a long title and it's suitably long to cover quite a lot of areas, some obvious and some not so obvious in essence, despite the title my role pretty much covers anything to do with sport, physical activity and leisure within the borough. We are leading on coordinating or providing advice and guidance to other stakeholders and partners in Trafford from VCSE and community sport organisations, right through to some of our community sports foundations.

It's an interesting balancing act in terms of the more traditional roles you'd see at a local authority sports development leisure function, looking after our facilities, drawing an investment and supporting our community sports

clubs to the more abstract work around things like trying to understand what motivates people, how we connect the world of sport, physical activity, and leisure to our colleagues in health and social care and create a bit of a united front, a united movement around trying to encourage people to be physically active.

Richard: Tom can I ask a quick question? You said Relationship Managers where traditionally in councils where there'd be Development Officers or Development Managers. So why a Relationship Manager in Trafford? What is the connotation that you're trying to create with that?

Tom: We are a significantly smaller team compared to some of our colleagues in other local authorities in Greater Manchester. There was an acknowledgement within early stages of our sports and physical activity strategy that people are the things that make things happen. It's not necessarily about the built space or the money that flows into a space or out of space. It's more of the relationships between those stakeholders and individuals and probably the significant proportion of my time is trying to unpick, understand and narrate relationships between partners and individuals, and almost bring people together or suggest opportunities that might bring people together and create a very organic movement within Trafford.

And that's on a practical level because we don't have the capacity to be out and doing and being involved in everything. So we have to do it quite a lot by proxy. And probably because there's a recognition that that's probably a better way to do things in terms of being more relationship focused than necessarily being focused on what would probably be traditionally the more tangible elements of this sector.

Eve: So Trafford, anyone that doesn't know Trafford very well probably thinks well here we go, as you described somewhere that's fairly affluent in comparison to a lot of the other localities in Greater Manchester, has this great sporting identity, home to obviously Old Trafford Cricket Club, home to Man United. But in that context you still have a significant percentage about 30%, maybe a bit or less who are currently defined as inactive, who aren't doing thirty minutes of physical activity a week.

Tom: There are pockets of deprivation that lead to some quite significant health inequalities that are probably hidden behind some of those numbers, which is the area of work and challenge that I find myself dealing with mostly is how we create some parity in the borough in terms of people's access to opportunities to be physically active.

But also empowering people to understand that they have the knowledge and the capability to be active, despite the other priorities that they may face. And to bring that home a little bit more. In terms of the areas, those areas of affluence to those areas where there's more challenges approximately a sixteen year gap in healthy life expectancy between those places, and a significant disproportionate level of outcomes and opportunities, and perceived opportunity as well.

Eve: What role has the Local Pilot then played in your work and in your journey?

Tom: An opportunity to drive and create energy is probably the biggest way I'd describe how the Local Pilot has affected the work that we do in Trafford. It's been an exciting opportunity. It's provided an opportunity for us to do things differently and use it as a point of leverage in terms of that relationship building. Generally speaking, when we're engaging with partners and stakeholders there's this overwhelming sense that people understand that it's positive to be active, to be moving. But in a lot of senses there was always a but or something that sat behind that meant that organisation wasn't necessarily having the traction it wanted to making the connections with local people to move from contemplation to action.

And I think the Local Pilot, because of its less structured approach that we took in terms of it wasn't about specific outputs. It was about almost using it to come back to the test and learn language, to get into place and go, let's see what happens. Let's work with local people and use the means that we have to connect with the motivation that they've got to create some energy in that space enabled us to move into conversations and create opportunities. Whereas normally coming back to the issue of capacity, there'd be a lot of conversations where we would just have to play the role of active listener. We didn't have the capability to go, oh we

can interject there and provide finance or knowledge or connection with another partner to start making things happen in terms of how it's affected me as a practitioner in this space, it's probably, re-energised where that motivational grace was getting a bit too thick and harder to move. It's loosened that up and I think took away some of the constrictive processes and systems around delivering physical activity that I found quite constrictive in terms of delivering. As we would traditionally to fix outcomes, to fix timelines, or to fix budgets, or being a bit a bums on seats exercise.

Whereas this has been very much around putting yourself in situations that you probably wouldn't normally in situations where you're actively engaging people to challenge you and tell you how badly or poorly you're doing things. So you can think about really proactive and innovative solutions to those problems or pebbles in a pond to start a ripple effect and using that, starting somewhere and then just following it everywhere. Yeah took us on some weird and wonderful journeys.

Eve: Always love a weird and wonderful journey, it's always good. So there's the energising, there's something about freedom there that you describe. It's less restrictive, and it's enabled things to flow and test and learn as you go along.

Are there any particular capabilities if you want to use that language or skills or learning that you have developed, or that you've seen others in the local workforce in its most holistic paid /non-paid that you think of have been supported through the Local Pilot approach?

Tom: The significant change is probably how organisation and individuals interact with each other and I'm seeing colleagues within our Trafford Moving Partnership, which is a group of organisations and individuals that have motivated to make change through physical activity and movement are being much more broader in terms of their worldview about how that can be delivered.

Whereas I think we were when we first introduced the Local Pilot, we were bumping up against that quite blinkered view there's only a certain number of stakeholders that could really make a difference in this space

and what we realised quite quickly through the Local Pilot and building new and innovative relationships is that anybody can be an advocate for physical activity and movement. And there's lots of brief moments and interventions with the right leverage conversation or the connections of two individuals or two organisations, beautiful things can happen.

We've been able to encourage partners to have patience with the problem. If you understand what I mean. I think ultimately there was very much a sense of that. If we just do this now for this period of time, it'll make all the difference. But what I've actually realised is the stuff we are doing now is the stuff that will be percolating within communities and individuals for years to come. And I think sometimes when you start talking about that temporal side of behaviour change, it can be quite challenging for partners because they can't see the outcome there and then.

That's very difficult for people to plan and prioritise around. But ultimately what we've been able to demonstrate over the last three or four years of doing this work is that's fine, and that's okay. And what I've seen is leaders in that partnership become a lot more comfortable with the messier side of working with communities and co-producing opportunity, and be less focused on that traditional rigid sense of numbers and there's gotta be just the right budget and it's gotta be just the right outcome. Whereas I think there was a greater sense of community. We're all in it together. There's a lot more reassuring, trust is probably what I would say. It's a level of trust. That's flowed out of communities and the level of trust that's flowed into the borough through interrelationships between other individuals that work. Other spaces that are experiencing similar frustrations anxieties, but then also successes as well. This is much everyone's thirsting to connect with each other and share stories and narratives about how their making change.

And there's lots of people better at translating the stuff that's happening into meaning for action locally. That probably sounds quite convoluted and ambiguous to say, but I think probably what I mean by that is that we're all much more willing to listen to much richer stories than that traditional someone just publishes a case study and it's all very good for a little bit and it goes away or it's saved on someone's hard drive and you don't see that case study forever.

Whereas I think now is that you are regularly moving into spaces where people just wanna share stories and share the connection they're making with each other, but then also with the beneficiaries of the services they provide.

Eve: So there's quite a lot to that. There's recognising the different roles that lots of different people can play on this agenda, embracing the mess and the uncertainty in all of it, and getting comfortable with that and building those more trusted relationships and a sense of a trusted community. I mean that sounds like some quite significant shifts in terms of people in the system, in terms of the impact that then has is there a particular example or story you could point to that helps illustrate some of those changes?

Tom: Yeah. I could probably articulate the journey that we've gone on with a specific community in Trafford that's got a lot of challenges as do quite a number of communities. And when we started the conversation with that community, with myself and my colleague Louise, at the time we were very conscious of our role as gatekeepers of information, but also gatekeepers of stories. And we've been in numerous workshops conferences where people they're referring to community's problems and lived experience second-hand, and we challenged ourselves and we said, well how are we gonna bring this community into the room and into the space without physically having to drag people out into lots and lots of meetings. And the solution came through another piece of work that we both attended. We had a piece of training and the thing that stuck with us is a talking head. And basically just gave the story of this individual. And the challenges he faced as he came into conflict with the different parts of the system and how that was solved simply with the bike.

And it all spiralled out of this individual coming to a crisis point and effectively coming into contact with the criminal justice system and the officers dealing with the situation at the time took a very different approach to probably how they approach it normally. And they wanted to understand why, and they went through this really strong and quite emotive process of asking quite open questions to this individual as to what's going on. Why are you here? What's this all about? And that transpired to then a connection with some local social services that then

unravelling this story of the reason he was rushing around and causing problems is cause he's really frustrated about not getting to all his appointments in time and not being able to access his benefits and all this stuff.

And then somehow the story of this bike got interjected into this conversation. It was like well rather than deal with you in a traditional sense. Let's equip you with something that's going to enable you. And that one bike enabled him to get to all his appointments to the job centre on time. Get to all appointments, to access his benefits, subsequently because he was riding his bike to get to all these appointments and stuff. He wasn't turning up to the GP quite so often to get medicine that he needed.

And it was just one of those moments where the video finished, and you could hear a pin drop in this room of health and social care professionals. And then people like myself and Louise who were just not really sure why we are here, but that was just so powerful. And we were like, we wanna create those moments where people have to stop and really think. What that individual has said, be it true or not, and how they could be part of a solution to answer the issues that that person raised, not hypotheticals, not for instances, not third hand views on lived experience.

So we took it upon ourselves to get out into this community. We worked with local community leaders, social care providers, and VCSE organisations to identify probably about four or five individuals who have very different stories or similar problems in terms that they're all challenged by health inequalities, socioeconomic issues.

We tasked an organisation to go and ask them some questions about what makes them happy and healthy. And I think that's pretty much the question we asked and see what was said, and ultimately that produced a series of talking heads that we then effectively took on the road with us. Whenever we were engaging in meetings and to colleagues and senior leaders and the council. While we've got you here could you spare three minutes? Just to listen to something? And then we are gonna ask you some questions and reflect on the responses.

And for some people it was really hard because these people were saying really tough stuff about the service they provided or people within their service quite specifically, but it was the truth that needed to be heard to then get people interested in. Well we can't just approach the solution in the same way we traditionally do. We can't just provide the same outcome, cause it's clearly not working for those individuals and those individuals aren't just one in a million they're representative of the issues that are being felt by that whole community that took us on a really long journey, engaging with the right people, opening doors, through that being brought into other spaces, which has led us to a situation where now all of that work is effectively underpinning our levelling up fund application that's going in.

So that small investment of a couple of hundred pounds in talking heads is probably, hopefully fingers crossed, touch wood going to deliver several millions pounds worth of investment into that community. We started here and then this is where we're at, then we'll just continue going. So it's from small acorns to great big trees.

Eve: Great example of how if you have just bring different voices and lived experience into the room. The difference that can make, and sometimes that's physically people being in the room and being able to share them, but often just as you said having those talking heads there and those stories that you can share shifts the whole dynamic doesn't it really? And the difference a bike makes, I always like a story about a bike. You knew your audience today!

So in terms of then the real challenges that you've hit against what has been the biggest, hardest challenges in all of this?

Tom: People are still the biggest challenge within this. We still get challenged by people's perceptions of physical activity and movement. And there's been very entrenched and quite traditional identities. It's sport, just sport. It's not a rainbow or a spectrum. It's quite binary in terms of you either do it or you don't. So that that's still a real challenge. We're still learning about how to get to people and through all the noise of different things that challenges people's lives. And I think probably one of the significant challenges that I see when I say 'we' I'm gonna refer to the

council in that sense is that we're still very good at getting in our own way. And feeling the need to be the conduit or control the conversation where they are particularly in the conversations that we've had plenty situations where we've just said, we don't really need to be in this conversation and you don't really need to have this conversation through us. In some cases we've had to do that quite gently because some partners like the comfort of having us in the space, but actually it was much richer to connect people.

Eve: What have you seen Richard in following and being part of the Trafford journey, but then in terms of what's been anything particularly that's been different or the same in terms of some of those key challenges in place?

Richard: Pretty much the same everywhere. Every conversation we have people are people. You need to understand them. You need to understand their backgrounds, their values, their behaviours, and that takes time. And then you build that relationship, you build that trust. And then they move on and then you go through the cycle again.

So organisationally that's proved a challenge in some places, just because the capacity to build more than one relationship in one organisation isn't there. So you build all of that and funnel a lot of information through one individual, and then that individual moves on and you then have to go through that process again. So there's some sustainability about the relationships in organisations. People in communities, again, you've got a whole spectrum of people who are more willing to have an open conversation about where they are and where they want to get to those who are much more closed and untrusting of authority or where they perceive authority to be. And therefore the people you want to speak to most and more frequently, but they're the hardest to engage.

Tom: And we still face challenges of bureaucracy on a virtually on a daily basis in terms of trying to understand why we have some of the systems that we have and just how practical they are in terms of delivering outcomes for individuals. Why do we have those procure protocols? Why does it have to be that level of funding and not this level of funding? And why does that need to go there and why do we need to engage them and

not this group, but they're positive problems because the challenges are creating opportunities to try and make changes that seem quite small now could be quite significant in the future.

Richard: Absolutely, a round processing governance red tape, and bureaucracy just kills any innovation, any idea, and thinking, and thought, and the ability to act quickly. Cause that's what a lot of people want. They want an immediate reaction to what they're saying. So they say something to you and they want something done within the next 24 hours. They wanna see something happen.

And I think with the Pilot in particular, that's been our biggest challenge, the ability to react to a conversation or react to something and go through and jump through the hoops that if the investment is landed within a local authority is just not the place to do that. The flexibility lies within those community organisations, which are run by community members by and large. They have the same governance, but they don't feel the same risk. They don't feel that weight of statutory obligation on their shoulders. And they're more willing to just push the boat out and try different things. And I think that strength of relationship has been created with the Local Pilot and Trafford, in particular with those community organisations that have enabled that fleet of foot reaction to an action and going through those strategies and where they're looking to go next. I think that's gonna be key to make sure things turn quickly.

Tom: One of the significant journeys that we went on when we were crafting the early stages of how the Local Pilot was gonna be delivered in GM was very much that how we were gonna do things with people and not to people. And we were in a very lucky position in the work that we did in Trafford is that the community we went to work with had a really strong community led partnership. And we could turn up, tell them a Local Pilot story. And they already had plans that they had created and articulated ready to go.

Typically they were looking at us and going, 'well you tell us what to do, you tell us where to put the investment'. And we were like, 'well that's not what we're here for. We're here to listen to you. We're here to be told by you what you want us to invest in'.

And there was this odd, awkward silence, and I could see it. People thinking. This is a trick. This is the sceptics in terms of the people that had a check it past the working with the local authority like they they're trying to catch us out here. And we were genuine in our approach. We're here to work for you tell us what you'd like to do, and we will do it. And that leads back to the conversation Richard was saying, is that we went in with a very much sense that we needed rapport. We needed quick wins. We needed to build trust.

So that meant us probably saying yes to stuff that would wind clock the back eighteen months before that we probably got told off because it was a bit too ambiguous that investment or a bit ambiguous that project. And it's not fully formed, but immediately the energy in that room shifted from probability to possibility. If you understand what I mean, in terms of the energy change in terms of oh that conversation we've been having with XYZ organisation down the road, or with Flo who lives on XYZ High Street we can do some of that now, can't we? And we are like yes, we're in a period where we're learning. We can't really say no, so why don't we all take advantage of this situation? And they did in a positive way, I'll add.

And there were things that we had to say no to, and there were some things that they had to say no to. But it set us on a trajectory where we shifted the concept of what our role would traditionally be in that space in terms of either dictating or 'we're gonna write the theme tune, sing the theme tune, we're gonna issue the theme tune, and then we're gonna go market the theme tune'. We were very much, we wanna sit back, gonna hear from you if we can make it up and we'll make it up. And if we can't, we'll tell you, we'll be honest.

Eve: And that generation of energy that you refer to, cause that's come up so many times of how it leads to this generation of what feels like new energy is created for change and how powerful that is. And my goodness don't we need that as a system. I think after two years of Global Pandemic, anything that we can do, and sometimes you start at a point that might feel a long way from where you're trying to get to, but that creates energy and enables people to feel that they can do something that's gonna lead to change and agency. And that in itself is phenomenal and worthwhile.

Looking ahead, taking all the learning you've got so far and that building energy. What for you do you think the future looks like? What would be your key indicators that you're making progress over the next few years?

Tom: For me, the success is more local people leading physical activity. We've landed on the strap line, 'move more every day.' And if we can just have a little bit more, so one extra volunteer, one extra activity, one extra pound of investment, one extra hour of activity. The sum of all that activity will make a significant ... We've not come out with 'we want to be the most fittest and healthiest borough in the whole of the UK'. We've been quite mindful in the sense that we want more of those things to happen on a local level, but we're being quite specific that we're not interested in what's happening across the whole borough. We've got seven communities that we've said that's where we want to be, and we want to be there to make the biggest difference we can for the people that live there.

So that's quite a focused approach, which I think is probably a little bit different to probably how sport and physical activity from a strategic sense is sometimes positioned. Sometimes it can be a bit beige, a bit of a need to be something for everybody, but we recognise not everybody needs us. And there's some people that need us a lot more than others. So we need to be in those spaces and need to be working with those people. So success for me is more communities understanding what we've learned through the Local Pilot, so they can go on the same journey that we've been through and maintain and sustain the same level of energy that we've managed to sustain as a group of professionals since we started this conversation.

By now you just start thinking some people started to lose interest in the conversations that we have around the Local Pilot. And we started getting a bit drained by the whole journey that we've been on, but every time we get together the sense of energy, motivation, possibility, and opportunity is still as vibrant as that first meeting we had way back when.

Eve: And Richard, so for you knowing where Tom hopes to go, what do you think could be the biggest thing that's likely to get, or could get in the way of that in Trafford?

Richard: I think the biggest danger to Trafford is Trafford. It's getting themselves, getting in the way of themselves and Tom and the team have done really well to connect across the council, connect in other parts of the system.

I think the biggest challenge I see is that connection falling down and it reverting back to silos and therefore those conversations have no traction. And therefore the promises or the conversations with the community become stuck. And then you get back into that cycle of distrust and nothing's ever gonna change et cetera. And that's gonna be even more important as they go into these new communities cause these new communities don't know Tom and the team and what's going on from anything. They don't know anything different to what they've always experienced. So they're learning from where they've tested and learned is to go in going quick and get things going, get things moving, build up the trust and to do that.

They need to ensure that those connections in the council are there and they are strong and everyone is on the same side of the equation and the approach. Cause it'll only take one person to step outside, and then it starts to all slow down. So I think there's energy, there's energy across Greater Manchester's, energy in Trafford. There's a lot of infrastructure and asset there, both in community and in facility that can get things moving. So just get out the way and allow it to flourish. Allow it to grow.

Eve: I can see lots of nodding.

Tom: There are circumstances outside of our sector's control, which could be both a significant boom, but could also be the very reason why people go 'a bit too difficult that issue.' So I'm gonna go back to what I know and what I know is this silo of traditionally delivering sport and physical activity, because it's safe, it's controllable. I think people are challenged by the narratives around cost of living and the other significant challenges and priorities that people have to juggle on an everyday basis. We still need to be strong and brave with the message that we're conveying despite those things. I think the easy thing is to be like, well we don't wanna get in the way of these bigger issues, but what we've been able to demonstrate is that physical activity, because of it's quite fluid capability

to connect and bring people together and provide solutions can actually be an opportunity to challenge some of these things that are keeping people up at night and keeping people worried.

We've talked quite a lot in terms of the principle of bravery as a collective. And I think now we probably need to be a bit more braver than we are usually to check and challenge ourselves and check and challenge the people and the communities we work with to ensure that we cannot fall backwards and continue moving forwards.

Eve: Bravery. Seems like a good note to end on. Yeah, thank you. It's a really honest and open conversation.

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 the 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.