



Active Wellbeing, Rewiring the Systems and Transforming Communities

Rewiring the State – Rewiring the Sector

Derek Senior's Memorandum of Dissent might seem like an odd starting point for a review of the UK Government Cabinet Paper on Rewiring the State. Partly because many readers will say, "who on earth is Derek Senior", and "what was he dissenting about"?

Derek Senior was a member of The Royal Commission on Local Government in England chaired by Lord Redcliffe-Maud. The 1969 Redcliffe-Maud report recommended sweeping changes to the structure of local government in England, based on the creation of 58 new unitary authorities, to replace the network of county, county borough, urban and rural district councils that had characterised English Local Government throughout the 20th century to that point.

Senior, a renowned planning professional, dissented entirely from the report and his subsequent memorandum was longer than the report itself. Senior put forward a detailed alternative set of recommendations based on creation of five provinces in England, 35 city regions, 148 local authorities and a network of 'common councils', effectively providing neighbourhood and place based democratic governance for towns and rural communities.

In the event, after many twists and turns, neither set of recommendations were implemented. The structure of local government for the last half century emanates

from the 1974 creation of county, district and metropolitan councils and the 50-year piecemeal reorganisations of health, local government and other public services in large areas of England.

Derek Senior's memorandum was an attempt to rewire public service delivery to reflect economic geography, demographic change, scale and systems related to public service delivery and democratic accountability.

Half a century down the road, and the Cabinet Statement published by the new Andy Burnham led government echo's similar themes, with a focus on "good growth in every postcode" and significant devolution from Whitehall to localities. The paper anticipates new structures for effective delivery of central and local priorities alongside a radical devolution of power and resources. With its focus on the whole state apparatus, central and local, it hints at a much more far-reaching agenda for change than at any point over the past 50 years.

The statement is a welcome, much needed stimulus to a critical conversation – how do we organise ourselves to deliver good economic outcomes everywhere and to promote the environmental sustainability and wellbeing of all communities within a framework of local, place based democratic accountability?

In this paper, we explore five key themes evident within the Cabinet Statement: **ambition; assets; alignment; accountability; action**. Our aim is to highlight the key features of the statement, with reference to implications and potential directions for active wellbeing. The paper builds on conversations through the summer involving: Martyn Allison, Mark Allman, Karen Creavin, Ian Fytche, John Oxley and Julie Russell. It forms part of the backdrop for the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network event scheduled for 7 October.

Some of the comments in "quotes" flow from those summer conversations and background papers we have prepared to inform them, plus direct quotes from the Cabinet Statement.

The implications explored, and the recommendations on possible actions and directions are designed as a provocation, a positive contribution to stimulate debate on solving some big challenges for the sector. They may or may not hint at the right solutions and are intended to focus discussion within the spirit of appreciative enquiry, recognising the pace of the timelines set within the Cabinet Statement. The time to explore what the future looks like is now.

Ambition: Purpose, Vision and Values

The Cabinet statement frames “rewiring the state” as a fundamental shift of power, funding and accountability from Whitehall to local leaders, to “drive growth, improve public services and give communities greater control over their future.” It explicitly links economic progress with social progress, underpinned by democratic accountability, and positions good growth as growth that tackles inequalities and integrates services around people and place.

This represents an opportunity for active wellbeing and place-based system development centred around prevention, active citizenship and health creation. However, alongside opportunity, there is a significant challenge, which might be summarised thus: **“our failure to tackle inequality in sport and activity still remains our biggest challenge and unless we can address this, we are in danger of limiting our role in these latest reforms designed in part to support our most disadvantaged communities.”** This is the crux – active wellbeing can either be a core vehicle for “good growth” or a peripheral nice to have.

Implications for Active Wellbeing

Inequality is the test, the challenge at the heart of place-based working for active wellbeing.

The Cabinet ambition is explicitly about “addressing inequalities in their area” as a core outcome for mayors. The opportunity to reframe active wellbeing at the heart of health creation systems locally is built around the ability to show credible impact on inactivity and health inequalities.

Place based integration is the new normal.

The statement emphasises integrating public services to prevent “the rising costs of failure” and improve outcomes. Sport and physical activity have aligned with health before (Best Value, health improvement), but arguably without the necessary steps at sufficient scale to devolve power and resources to communities.

Recommendations

Reframe the sector’s core narrative.

Action: co-create a shared “active wellbeing and good growth” proposition that explicitly positions physical activity as a preventative, inequality reducing public service or intervention, not just leisure. Build strategy linked to concepts within the Cabinet paper – “good growth”, “integrated public services”, “preventing rising costs of failure” – and centre inequality as the biggest challenge.

Make disadvantaged communities the organising principle.

Action: build purpose, vision and strategy positioning active wellbeing as a significant contributor to addressing health inequalities and build systems for health creation, within principles linked to asset-based community development, active citizenship and deep democracy.

Assets: Finance, Buildings and People

The Cabinet paper promises to “shift power, funding and accountability” to local leaders, including:

- Ensuring every area in England has a strategic authority by 2027/28, with greater powers where there is a directly elected mayor.
- Retention of more locally raised business rates and reforms to high-cost services to support local authority financial sustainability.
- Considering transfer of arm’s length body responsibilities and funding to local leaders and reducing duplicative policy/strategy teams.
- Giving local people “greater control of how cultural and sporting investment is decided in their regions. This could include funding currently controlled by Arts Council England and Sport England...”

This leads to a key question: **“should all these (Sport England and Arts Council England) capital funds now be transferred into the devolution pot and if so, how should they be allocated?”** Recent initiatives within DCMS demonstrate that capital funding programmes have been “very top down and separated from Sport England’s place work.” The current Lottery Review also poses questions: “are we prepared to see some of our specific funding streams devolved to the growing budgets of the combined and strategic authorities.”

Implications for Active Wellbeing

- **Funding flows will be re plumbed.** There is a real prospect that Sport England/Arts Council controlled investment becomes part of mayoral/strategic authority budgets, with stronger local democratic control.
- **Councils remain pivotal funders.** “Councils will remain the biggest funders of our services,” but with potential new levers – business rates retention, tourist taxes, possibly local income tax.
- **Arm’s length bodies may lose direct control.** The Cabinet paper’s “serious look” at arm’s length bodies’ responsibilities and funding creates risk and opportunity for Sport England’s current model via Active Partnerships.
- **Citizens continue to be on the edge of decision making.** Without deliberate actions to weave in expectations of collaboration and co-creation with those right on the ground, power could pass from Whitehall to regions but still the voices of those least heard go unnoticed.

Recommendations

- **Shape a devolution ready funding model for active wellbeing.** Action: Develop options for how Lottery, DCMS capital and Sport England place funding could be devolved while protecting inequality focused outcomes—e.g. ring fenced “active wellbeing and prevention” blocks within strategic authority budgets, co designed with mayors and communities.
- **Advocate for community influenced allocation, not just mayoral control.** Action: our conversations highlighted a key question, “do communities really have any influence on how these funds are spent?”. Potential solutions could explore, for example, participatory budgeting models for sport/active wellbeing within combined authorities, especially in priority places.
- **Position facilities as part of a wider wellbeing estate.** Action: position leisure centres, parks, active travel infrastructure, community hubs and municipal open spaces like beaches, rivers and the “in between spaces” (areas often mown but not included as formal parks and open spaces) into a broader health creation strategy for “thriving places to live as well as work”, so capital investment in buildings is justified as health, cohesion and economic assets, not just sport facilities.

Alignment: Future Public Service Structures in a Place

The Cabinet statement is explicit about structural alignment:

- Aligning “new local police units” with local authorities, and regional police, fire and rescue, and Integrated Care Boards with strategic authority boundaries by the end of the Parliament.
- Allowing “greater alignment and pooling of funding for preventative services by devolving funding, where possible...this will enable a place-based approach to budgeting that better meets local priorities.”

Across local and active wellbeing systems, there has long been an argument, supported by evidence, that lack of alignment across public service geography is a serious constraint to strategy making and effective delivery: “we have in the past highlighted the difficulty with working with misaligned public service boundaries”.

This raises practical questions: Active Partnership footprints, health, mayoral strategic authorities and local government boundaries are rarely aligned at present. New structures for health predate and sit alongside the rewiring agenda. Local Government Reorganisation has been

paused and is under review, with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government headlining her statement on the review by referencing the Cabinet Statement on rewiring as an important context for the review.

Alongside the uncertainty caused by the review and in advance of detailed plans for rewiring, there are also questions for leisure and active wellbeing, linked to procurement of leisure contracts aligned to existing and/or new geography; aggregation and/or disaggregation of services; building local systems, relationships and resilience with changing partners in local government, health and mayoral strategic authorities.

The LGR pause also presents an opportunity: to reframe the future of local government in relation to the shift to the preventative state; to centre public service geography on people, place and planet; to co-create local public service architecture through active citizenship, deep democracy and community participation. Place shaped neighbourhood and community governance could also be explored alongside the review.

Implications for Active Wellbeing

- **Active wellbeing structures will need to match new geographies.** Active Partnerships, NGB local structures, and leisure contracts may no longer map neatly onto strategic authorities and unitary councils.
- **Prevention budgets will be pooled.** Physical activity sits squarely in “preventative services”; if the sector is not at the table when pooled budgets are designed, it risks being squeezed out by statutory pressures.
- **No.10 North and strategic authorities will be the new convening centres.** Policy integration will be driven from a place based engine room, not from multiple departmental silos.

Recommendations

- **Proactively redesign the sector’s geography.** Action: Convene a collaborative, rapid mapping exercise of Active Partnerships, unitary councils, strategic/combined authorities and priority places. Identify misalignments and co-create a proposal for a future footprint that allows active wellbeing to plug directly into strategic authorities’ prevention and outcomes frameworks.
- **Use LGR or whatever replaces LGR as a lever, not just a disruption.** Action: In areas potentially moving to unitary status, argue for integrated “active wellbeing systems” that bring together leisure contracts, community sport, active travel and social prescribing under a single strategic framework.
- **Clarify the role of NGBs in a devolved landscape.** Action: Develop scenarios for NGB funding – remaining national via Sport England, moving to UK Sport, or partial devolution – and test their impact on local club provision and priority places. There is a key question to explore: “should NGB funding be devolved and if so, how?”. These issues are not without complexity and challenge, and careful collaborative consideration of options will be needed to inform an inclusive, transparent debate to determine the best way forward.

Accountability: Local and National

The Cabinet paper tightens and localises accountability:

- Chief executives of mayoral strategic authorities become Local Accounting Officers, accountable for use of public money.
- Stronger roles for the Local Audit Office and National Audit Office; streamlined outcomes frameworks so government and public can hold mayors to account for “good growth and addressing inequalities.”
- A “strengthened focus on timely and accurate place-based data” from ONS and others to support outcomes-based decision making.
- Replacing “consultation by default” with “new and modern forms of public participation,” revoking performative duties and actively bringing the public into policy making.

The sport and physical activity sector has a significant challenge: “there is no national cross sector implementation arrangement for Uniting the Movement” and the National Sector Partners Group has “failed to go beyond campaigning and hold the ring.” There are also limitations within Active Lives and the emerging role of Moving Communities and State of Life. At the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network conference in Wakefield in June, the idea of PACE was explored – “Physical Activity Centre for Evidence and innovation... Using consistent data, standards of evidence to measure the social and economic value of physical activity using the WELLBY and the QALY.”

Implications for Active Wellbeing

- **Data and outcomes will be the currency of influence.** If active wellbeing cannot plug into mayoral outcomes frameworks with robust, place based data, it will be invisible in accountability conversations.
- **National coordination may weaken further.** In a strongly devolved model, the absence of a national implementation mechanism for Uniting the Movement becomes more problematic – localities will improvise, and the sector risks fragmentation.
- **Community participation will be redefined.** The move away from “performative statutory duties to consult” opens space for genuine co production – but only if sectors like active wellbeing bring methods and scaffolding, not just rhetoric. There is an inherent danger that those communities with the capacity to contribute and collaborate will help to shape their place, while those in the most need and often with less social capacity, will be unable to exert the same influence and this could further widen existing inequalities.

Recommendations

- **Back a sector wide evidence and improvement function.** Action: Use innovations such as the PACE idea as the nucleus of a “Physical Activity Evidence and Improvement Unit” that can (a) provide consistent WELLBY/QALY based valuation, (b) support Moving Communities as a place based performance system, and (c) help mayors include active wellbeing in their outcomes frameworks. Tie this explicitly to the Cabinet’s call for “timely and accurate place-based data.”
- **Design an accountability offer for mayors.** Action: Develop a template “active wellbeing outcomes and accountability framework” that strategic authorities can adopt – linking participation, inactivity, health, social value and inequality metrics to the good growth narrative.
- **Make community power real, not performative.** Action: Pilot “modern forms of public participation” in active wellbeing – citizens’ panels on physical activity, participatory budgeting for local sport investment, neighbourhood level co design of active spaces – and then offer these models to mayors as practical scaffolding for their wider participation agenda. Evidence from the Sport England early adopter LDP pilots shows the scope for Physically Active behaviours to contribute to active citizenship and great social engagement. Sport and Physical Activity can drive social connections. Lean into this and demonstrate the additional value that moving together can have for communities and their sense of agency. This speaks directly to a key question: “Do we want to advocate for this and demonstrate how it can be done?”

Action: Likely Next Steps and Timelines

The Cabinet statement is unusually time bound:

- Strategic authorities in every area of England “by the end of 2028,” with all areas having or establishing one by end 2027.
- Alignment of key public service boundaries (police, fire, ICBs) with strategic authorities “by the end of the Parliament.”
- A programme of reform to support local authority financial sustainability, including business rates retention and reforms to high-cost services.
- Development of a “blueprint for the capacity and capabilities strategic authorities need, and a strategy for delivering that blueprint,” including leadership development and secondments.

There are risks and potential for delay, the pause on local government reorganisation perhaps bringing that risk to life. However, at face value, there is an urgent need to rewire the sector: “things are certainly happening at speed and with a clarity of purpose perhaps last seen under Tony Blair in 1997,” with an opportunity to “take a lead in influencing how the sector is represented and promoted in the devolution process... or do a bit of both.”

Implications for Active Wellbeing

- **The window is short.** By 2027–28, the new wiring could be largely in place. If active wellbeing waits to see what emerges, it will be retrofitting itself into a system designed without it.
- **Capacity and leadership are recognised as prerequisites.** The Cabinet paper promises capability support and a jointly designed leadership development offer for strategic authorities. Sport England’s leadership and skills programmes are “in need of further development, scaling up and speeding up if we are to match the scale and speed of the devolution agenda.”
- **No.10 North will be a key interlocutor.** The new “engine room” for place based policy will be looking for sectors that can credibly contribute to integrated, preventative systems.

Recommendations

- **Move from commentary to co design—now. Action (next 6–12 months):**
 - A key question: does the sector have the means and ambition to engage directly with No.10 North, the Cabinet Office team and early adopter mayors to offer active wellbeing as a test bed for integrated, preventative, community powered services.
 - Position the sector, through a single joined up network and voice, as a partner in designing the “blueprint for capacity and capabilities” for strategic authorities, specifically on active wellbeing.
- **Scale leadership and skills in lockstep with devolution. Action:** Propose a joint “Active Wellbeing Leadership and Capability Programme” aligned with the government’s leadership development offer—drawing on Sport England’s existing programmes, and CIMSPA pathways. Perhaps the mandate for this could be built around this question: “is this the moment to trigger a wider debate on the grounds that we too need the right skills and expertise and leadership development to respond to devolution?”
- **Set a sector timeline that matches that of the UK Government. Action:**
 - By end 2026: could the sector agree a sector position on funding devolution, evidence/measurement, and structural alignment (Active Partnerships, NGBs, contracts).
 - By end 2027: could active wellbeing be embedded in at least a first wave of strategic authority outcomes frameworks and prevention budgets.
 - By end 2028: could the sector ensure every strategic authority has a recognised “active wellbeing system” with clear community participation mechanisms and data/evidence flows.

Conclusions: Back to the Future

The Cabinet Statement on Rewiring the State stimulates a critical debate, with devolution, place-based working and aligned local systems at the centre of its argument. It represents an opportunity for the active wellbeing system to build a future at the heart of local place-based systems for prevention and health creation.

The time to explore options and design the future is now, as a constructive partner locally and nationally. There are significant challenges, highlighted in this paper. Upcoming discussions within the Active Wellbeing Leadership Network create the space and the

opportunity to further shape the thinking, the questions, explore the potential answers and design pathways into the future.

Local historian Neil R Wright observed: “local authorities had been created to deal with health, highways, burials, education, poor law and the police. Their boundaries often overlapped and local government represented a chaos of areas, functions, authorities and rates.” The year he was exploring was 1885! The debates of the 1880s led to the creation of county councils, plus urban and rural district councils, a structure which remained largely intact for eight

decades until Lord Redcliffe-Maud and Derek Senior entered the debate.

Update the language and Wright’s observations could apply to 2026. The solutions we develop now could frame the economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and social wellbeing of our communities for many decades ahead. The Cabinet Statement creates the opportunity to build a more integrated, more local, more place-based agenda for local services, prevention and health creation. The time to shape the future for active wellbeing at the heart of that agenda is now.



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