



**active**  
Kent & Medway

# Place Expansion Programme: Thanet

**Project # 2**  
**Thanet Street Sports**

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# Executive Summary

The Thanet Street Sport Sessions Test and Learn project represents a strategic, community-led intervention designed to address entrenched inequalities in physical activity and youth engagement across three high-need areas in Thanet: Dane Valley Recreation Ground, Boundary Road Park, and Newington Green. Building on the success of a 2024 pilot in Cliftonville, the initiative sought to activate underutilised public spaces through inclusive, drop-in physical activity sessions tailored to local needs.

The project was delivered in alignment with Sport England’s *Uniting the Movement* strategy and the *Place Expansion Programme*, which emphasise hyperlocal, co-created solutions to tackle inactivity and deprivation. Thanet, one of the most deprived districts in Kent, faces significant challenges including low physical activity rates among children and young people, elevated levels of youth-related anti-social behaviour, and limited access to safe recreational spaces. The Street Sport Sessions aimed to foster community cohesion, reduce anti-social behaviour, and promote positive youth development through culturally relevant activities such as street football, skateboarding, and dance.

A key feature of the project was its commitment to adaptive learning and participatory evaluation. The initiative employed Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR) to embed community voice throughout the design, delivery, and evaluation process. A Youth Advisory Group, comprised of young leaders aged 11–15, played a significant role in shaping insight tools and supporting session delivery. Innovative methods such as interactive sticker boards and youth-led interviews facilitated inclusive data collection and empowered participants to articulate their experiences and needs.

The evaluation identified four overarching themes: listening and learning from communities, creating safe and inclusive spaces, building trusting relationships, and addressing structural barriers. Youth participants expressed an ardent desire to shape their environments and highlighted issues such as poor infrastructure, lack of seating, and intimidating public spaces. Facilitators emphasised the importance of relational trust and called for further training in trauma-informed care and conflict de-escalation. Structural challenges, including food insecurity, transport limitations, and dispersal orders, were found to undermine participation and safety.

Despite these challenges, the Street Sport Sessions demonstrated the feasibility of replicating the Cliftonville model across diverse contexts. The initiative succeeded in fostering a sense of belonging, increasing youth engagement, and surfacing critical insights for system change. The project underscores the importance of place-based, youth-led programming and offers a compelling model for embedding physical activity within whole system approaches.

Moving forward, the findings from this Test and Learn will inform future practice, including the development of governance structures, targeted facilitator training, and cross-sector collaboration. The Street Sport Sessions have laid a strong foundation for sustainable, inclusive, and community-driven physical activity provision in Thanet.

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# Introduction

## Context, Purpose, and Strategic Fit

Sport England has increasingly recognized that physical inactivity is not evenly distributed across the population, and has steadily recognized the need for targeted, hyperlocal interventions to address entrenched inequalities. The Street Sport project is strategically aligned with Sport England’s *Uniting the Movement* strategy and its *Place Partnerships* approach; focusing on areas of high levels of deprivation and inactivity and championing local systems to co-create solutions that are contextually relevant and community-driven (Sport England, 2025). According to Public Health data, Thanet has significantly lower physical activity rates among children and young people compared to national averages. In 2023, only 45.1% of children aged 5-16 met the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended physical activity levels, compared to 52.6% nationally (Kent Public Health Observatory, 2024).

Moreover, Thanet has experienced persistent challenges related to youth anti-social behaviour. While overall incidents have declined over the years, hotspots including Cliftonville and Dane Valley, continue to report elevated levels of youth-related disturbances (Kent Police, 2024). These behaviours are symptomatic of greater systemic issues, including lack of access to safe recreational spaces, limited youth services, and socio-economic marginalization. The Street Sport Sessions sought to begin a dialogue to address these root causes by aiming to foster positive social interaction, physical activity, and community trust.

The Street Sport Sessions reflects the strategic evolution of a previously successful pilot programme delivered in Cliftonville, Thanet during the summer of 2024. The 2024 initiative intended to activate public spaces through free, inclusive physical activities for young people and families, with the aim to improve community cohesion and reduce anti-social behaviour. Feedback from delivery partners and residents reflected a keen sense of community, shared sense of ownership over local spaces, and a demonstrable reduction in anti-social behaviour. The success of the Cliftonville pilot prompted a test-and-learn expansion into three high-need areas: Dane Valley Recreation Ground, Boundary Road Park, and Newington Green. These areas have been identified based on indicators of social deprivation, youth disengagement, and underutilized green spaces. The Test and Learn sought to replicate the core components of the original initiative, adapting to consider the unique needs and dynamics of each community. The primary objective was to ascertain whether a proven model of youth engagement and public space activation can be sustainably scaled, and whether it can contribute to longer-term system change related to the delivery and experience of physical activity in Thanet.

The approach to this Test and Learn project reflects a commitment to adaptive learning and evidence-based practice. Rather than assuming the Cliftonville success can be replicated elsewhere, this project systematically explored the conditions under which replication was feasible and effective. The Street Sport Sessions were a strategic experiment in system change, community empowerment, and inclusive development. By focusing on the ‘why’ behind youth disengagement, the outcomes of this project are best placed to inform future interventions.

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## Youth, Public Space, and Social Development

Public spaces represent more than physical environments. They are dynamic social arenas where identity, belonging, and community are negotiated. For young people; particularly those 11-16; public spaces offer opportunities to engage in informal socialization, creative exploration, and physical activity outside the constraints of school, home, and adult supervision. However, young people are often overlooked or actively excluded in the planning and design of public spaces.

URBACT (2025) highlights that nearly 80% of youth (11-16) prefer being outdoors, and over 30% were regularly engaging with parks, streets, and squares for socializing. The article: which is a synthesis of various global projects; suggests that youth are vibrant co-creators of public spaces, shaping its meaning and function through everyday practices (URBACT, 2025). This perspective challenges traditional discourses related to teenaged youth, often citing them as problematic or disruptive. Park (2020), an expert in urban design, explains that public spaces are often designed with younger children or adults in mind, leaving older youth with few options that cater to their needs. Additionally, older youth are often subject to restrictive bylaws, surveillance, and social stigma that limit their agency to occupy and enjoy public space. The learnings from these global projects are profound for initiatives like Street Sports. By activating public spaces in ways that resonate with youth culture, the goal is to create spaces where older youth feel seen, valued, and safe.

Thanet faces significant challenges related to young disengagement, social deprivation, and underutilized public space. Older youth lack access to safe, stimulating environments where they can connect with peers and engage in positive activities. This absence contributes to a cycle of isolation, boredom, and risk-taking behaviours. By reclaiming public spaces on behalf of older youth, the Street Sport Sessions sought to activate the transfer of ownership to youth, by fostering social cohesion and community pride. The Cliftonville pilot initialized the power of this approach, including activities that promoted physical activity but were also culturally relevant, such as street football, skateboarding, street dance, and fitness sessions. The presence of trusted adults (i.e. local coaches and community leaders) helped to foster a sense of safety, while the informal nature of the sessions allowed for increased autonomy for the participating young people.

## Health, Physical Activity, and Inequality in Thanet

The health and wellbeing of young people in Thanet is shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic factors, environmental conditions, and access to services. Thanet is one of the most deprived areas in Kent, with elevated levels of unemployment, child poverty, and social exclusion. These challenges are reflected in physical activity levels, mental health outcomes, and behavioural patterns of its youth.

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## Physical activity & inactivity:

According to Sport England’s *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey*, only 47.8% of children across the country are meeting the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day. The survey also identified persistent inequalities in activity levels. Children in school years 3 and 4 from less affluent families and those from Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority backgrounds were significantly less likely to be active. Additionally, children who were in nursery during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated lower levels of confidence and competence related to physical activity. In Thanet, the lack of accessible and youth-friendly public spaces has been identified as a key barrier to physical activity. Many parks, beaches and recreation grounds are underutilized or perceived as unsafe, particularly by youth. The Street Sport Sessions sought to address this gap by activating these spaces through loosely structured, inclusive programming. By offering free, drop-in sessions the project aimed to lower the threshold for participation and create safer and more welcoming environments for young people.

## Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

The mental health of young people is of growing concern in Kent and Thanet. According to the *Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Dynamic Activity Overview*, published by Kent County Council in 2024, mental health conditions for children and young people are rising. This results in an increased demand for specialist and non-specialist services. Hospital admissions for mental health conditions for among those under 18 are 25% higher in East Kent (inclusive of Thanet), than the average in Kent and Medway.

Physical activity has been consistently linked to improved mental health in young people. While mental health outcomes was not a primary focus at this test-and-learn stage of the project, there exists great potential for programmes like Street Sports to prioritize mental health in future iterations.

## Anti-Social Behaviour and Community Safety

Anti-social behaviour (ASB) remains a priority issue in Thanet, particularly in areas such as Cliftonville, Dane Valley, and Ramsgate. While Kent Police reported a reduction in ASB in Thanet between 2022 and 2024, specific hotspots continue to experience high levels of youth-related disturbances, including vandalism, underage drinking, intimidation, and public disorder (Kent Police, 2024).

In response to escalating incidents – particularly in the coastal towns of Broadstairs, Margate, and Ramsgate – Kent Police have implemented dispersal orders under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. These orders give officers the authority to remove individuals aged 10 and above from designated areas if they are involved in nuisance or disorderly behaviour. Risking fines or arrest if they return within a specified time. During a recent weekend operation in June 2025, dispersal orders were enforced across Thanet’s town centres and beaches. The dispersal orders were supported by high-visibility patrols and multi-agency collaboration involving Thanet District Council, British Transport Police, and other

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local services. These measures aim to deter disorder and reassure residents that proactive steps are being taken to maintain public safety.

The Cliftonville pilot demonstrated that targeted, community-based interventions can have tangible impacts on ASB. By providing structured, positive activities in public spaces, the pilot encouraged young people to engage in non-risk-taking behaviours and fostered a sense of community ownership. The expansion into Boundary Road Park, Dane Valley, and Newington Green offered an opportunity to replicate and scale this impact.

## Replication, Scaling, and Learning for System Change

Replicating a successful intervention is beyond straightforward duplication. It requires a nuanced understanding of the original programme’s core components, the contextual factors that contributed to its success, and the adaptability of its design to different environments. The Street Sport Sessions endeavoured to replicate the Cliftonville pilot across three high-need areas, rather than only service one community. This expansion was not only a test of scalability but also an opportunity to explore how place-based interventions can contribute to broader system change. Research on place-based interventions proposes that successful replication must consider fidelity and flexibility (Whitten et al. 2022). Fidelity ensures that the core principle, such as free access, inclusive design, and trusted delivery partners, are maintained. Flexibility allows for adaptation to the unique needs, preferences, and dynamics of each new community. Whitten et al. (2022) suggest that successful replication depends on identifying the “active ingredients” of an intervention; those elements that are essential for achieving desired outcome; and distinguishing them from context-specific features that can be modified. In the case of *Street Sport Sessions*, active ingredients included the informal, drop-in format; the diversity of activities offered; the involvement of local youth workers and coaches; and the emphasis on co-design and community ownership. These components were preserved across sites, allowing for variation in delivery based on local demographics, and infrastructure.

The areas included in this project each present distinct challenges and opportunities. Dane Valley has a high concentration of social housing and limited recreational infrastructure. Boundary Road Park is situated in a densely populated urban area with a diverse population and a history of youth disengagement. Newington Green, while more suburban, has experienced rising levels of anti-social behaviour and declining youth service provision. Understanding these local contexts was essential for tailoring the intervention in ways that resonated with youth and provided significant learnings regarding specific community needs.

The Street Sport sessions also served as a platform for testing how physical activity could be embedded into existing community systems. This involved the delivery of sessions and the creation of conditions for long-term change. Key questions driving this project included: How do we connect communities to opportunities in ways that are sustainable? How do we influence the design and delivery of services to better meet the needs of young people? How do we build capacity within communities to lead and sustain physical activities initiatives? These questions point to the need for system thinking, particularly a

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comprehensive approach that considers the interconnections between people, organizations, policies, and environments.

## Project Design & Delivery

### Community-Based Participatory Action Research

The Street Sport Sessions adopted Community-Based Participatory Action Research Methodology (CBPR) to guide its design, implementation, and evaluation processes. CBPR is increasingly recognized as a transformative methodology for addressing complex social and health inequalities, particularly in marginalized or underserved communities. This methodology is rooted in the principles of co-learning, mutual respect, and shared ownership that are evidence-informed, contextually grounded and socially just.

CBPR challenges the traditional research dichotomy by positioning community members as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge. This shift is particularly important in areas like Boundary Road, Dane Valley, and Newington Green, where community consultation revealed significant distrust in local council and authority organizations. Wallerstein and Duran (2020) propose that CBPR is a *'philosophy of engagement'* that seeks to democratize knowledge production and redistribute power within the insight and evaluation process. This is particularly relevant in youth and physical activity settings, where top-down interventions often fail to resonate with the lived experiences of young people or address the structural determinants of inequality.

CBPR is particularly well-suited to place-based interventions that seek to address complex social issues through locally grounded, co-produced solutions. Much like the ethos of *Sport England's* approach to place-based working, this methodology is an ongoing iterative cycle of planning, action, reflection, and adaptations. A systematic review of CBPR in urban settings reflected that community-led approaches are recognized for their success in generating meaningful, community-driven change (Lee et al. 2024). Gonzalez et al. (2021) propose that this methodology has been shown to enhance trust, build capacity, and foster critical reflection among both researchers and participants. The authors further reflect that CBPR can support critical consciousness and leadership development among youth, particularly when they are involved in shaping the research agenda and interpreting findings (Gonzalez et al. 2021). This is consistent with the goals of Street Sport Sessions, which seeks not only to provide physical activity opportunities but also to empower young people as agents of change in their communities.

Conclusively, this approach was adopted for this the Street Sports Test and Learn because it is well-positioned to evaluate complex, multi-stakeholder interventions. Where traditional evaluation methods struggle to capture the dynamic, relational, and context-dependent nature of community-based programmes. CBPR, by contrast, embraces complexity and values multiple forms of knowledge, including lived experience, stakeholder insight, and local history. This made it an ideal methodology for the test-and-learn project, which aims to understand processes, build capacity, and inform future practice.

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## Embedding CBPR into Street Sports Insight and Evaluation Process

The sections below illustrate how community-based participatory action research was embedded into the Street Sport Insight and Evaluation process. The left side of Figure 1 outlines the process, and the right illustrates the specifics in each phase. The sections that follow will describe each phase in detail and how CBPR was embedded. Phase 4 and 5 will be discussed respectively in the **Results Section** and **Future Directions Section** of this report.

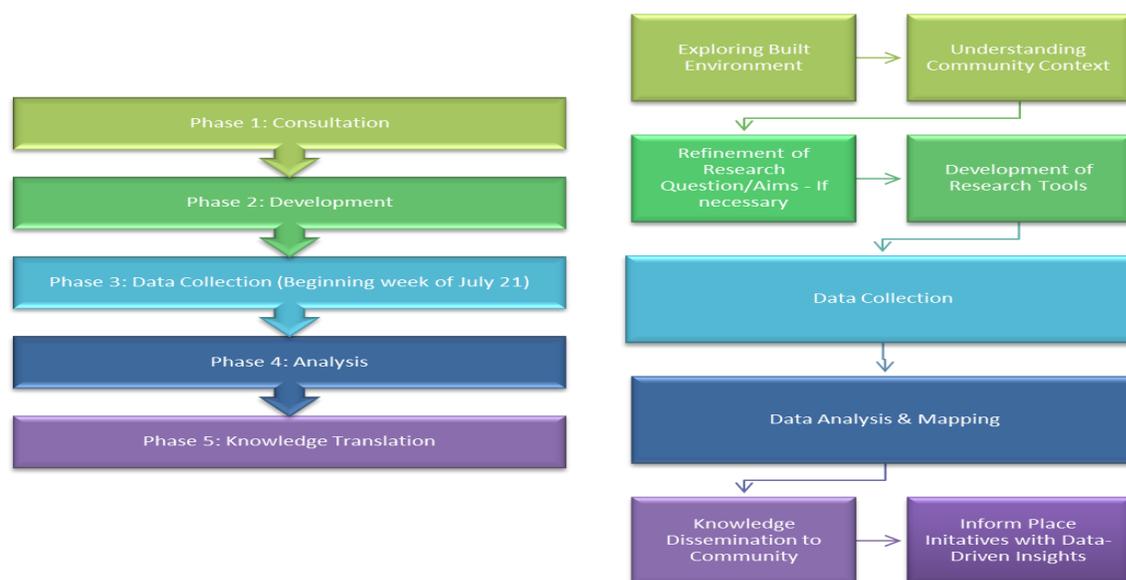


Figure 1: Street Sports Insight and Evaluation Process

### Phase 1: Consultation & Contextual Understanding

The first phase of the Street Sport Project focused on consultation and gathering rich contextual understanding, laying the foundation for a true place-based approach. Site visits were conducted across the three key locations (Boundary Road Park, Dane Valley Park, and Newington Green) as well as Dane Park – a green space location not included in the project but central to the dynamics of the region, particularly Margate and Cliftonville. Site visits were not only observational but dialogic, involving key stakeholders and activity providers, community walks and informal conversations with local community members and youth to understand the built environment, community dynamics, and existing barriers to youth participation.

For example, Dane Valley Park’s proximity to a Family Hub and Age UK facility offered opportunity for intergenerational engagement and possible indoor programming in the colder months. While Boundary Road’s lack of a community hub, toilet facilities, and surrounding busy roads posed potential accessibility challenges. These insights were critical in shaping the programmes logistics and identifying gaps in provision.

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The consultation also included reviewing past programmes (e.g. Cliftonville 2024 project), identifying successful strategies and challenges, and engaging with previous delivery partners who were also engaged in this project. This phase emphasized relationship building and trust development, aligning with CBPR principles that prioritize community voice and lived experience in research design (Jagosh et al.,2020).

## Phase 2: Co-Development and Youth Advisory Group Formation

Building on the consultation, the second phase of this project involved the co-development of insight tools and aims, facilitated through relationships with key delivery stakeholders (e.g. Sport IQ, Thanet District Council, Scorcha Skate School), and the formation of a Youth Advisory Group. The youth advisory group was composed of seven young leaders – aged eleven to fifteen - who were already engaged in the community. This age range was strategically chosen to maximize youth insight related to Street Sports target population of the same age range. In alignment with consent and GDPR considerations, parents and guardians of Youth Advisory Group members were provided with detailed information on the project asked to complete a participant informed consent form.

The Youth Advisory Group played a leading role in refining insight questions, shaping data collection strategies, and contributed to programme delivery. Their involvement ensured that the Test and Learn remained youth-led, culturally relevant, and responsive to community needs (Cargo & Mercer, 2019).

## Phase 3: Participatory Data Collection

Informed by Phase 1 and 2, the data collection strategy was designed to be inclusive, creative, and embedded within programme delivery. The multi-prong approach included both quantitative and qualitative methods, with an emphasis on fun and participatory approaches to reduce hesitancy and increase participation. The use of creative methodologies aligns with recent CBPR literature that advocates for arts-based and participatory techniques to engage marginalized youth (Mitchell & de Lange, 2020). The methods described below were chosen for accessibility and appeal to young participants and were adapted based on feasibility and Youth Advisory Group input. Delivery partners and Youth Advisory Group members were trained to support these methods and assist with data collection, reinforcing the ethos of co-creation.

## Participant Demographic Data

Differing from other physical activity programmes on currently on offer in the region, consultation highlighted that in the three areas of interest, registered programmes were a deterrent for many families, either due to cost or barriers with online booking systems. Considering this and mirroring the drop-in/drop-out design of the Cliftonville project, it was critical to consider how to collect participant demographic data without a parent/guardian providing personal information online during registration. To capture this

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information in a meaningful way, which was GDPR compliant, an interactive sticker board was used at each session. Upon arriving at the park for the Street Sport Session, participants were encouraged to engage with the sticker board by way of ‘signing in’ to the session. Youth became familiar with this process, and those that attended multiple sessions were self-motivated to participate in the board without instruction. As demonstrated in the figure below, the board asked youth to place a sticker in response basic demographic questions related to their age, gender, and ethnic group. Additionally, it was determined important to know how youth were getting to the park locations, how many they had been to, and if they were attending sessions in any of the other three Street Sport locations.

This method addressed barriers associated with formal registration systems and mirrored the drop-in format of the previously delivered programme. The sticker board also included a qualitative component, inviting participants to share their responses to an opened ended question such as, *“what was your favourite part of today’s session?”*, *“what other activities would you like to see at these sessions?”* and *“why do you like coming to these sessions?”*. In a Facebook Forum one community member shared:

“The strengths of this project have been the number of volunteers and paid staff who played with the children. They did not just stand and watch. There was no paperwork to fill in or data collection. We are all fed up with being used for marketing purposes. Children just rocked up and played hard for 2 hours.”

This quote reflects how insight and evaluation strategies were embedded into programme delivery, so to not take away from physical activity, and the key role of engaged facilitators.



Figure 2: Example of Street Sport Sticker Board

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## Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected utilizing a variety of methods across the project. As part of the sticker board, the space to the right under the speech bubble encouraged participants to respond to the question ‘*what was your favourite part of today’s session?*’. Participant responses encouraged informal conversations to discuss responses in further detail. The creative and engaging nature of the sticker board facilitated the building of trust and familiarity between participants and delivery partners. Across the weeks, both the participating youth and their families, established relationships with the delivery partners – truly fostering a community feel in the three park locations.

Valuable information emerged from the regular Youth Advisory Group meetings, which were audio recorded and transcribed. These occurred as full group conversations, including all seven members, or on occasion in smaller groups during Street Sport Sessions. Further, rather than formal interviews, this project relied on informal conversations to capture participants experiences. Most notably, members of the Youth Advisory group were engaged to act as ‘on-pitch sport reporters’. They were provided with loose instruction, so conversations may be more youth-led, to speak to Street Sport participants about what they were enjoying, what could be improved, or any feelings toward the programme. Similarly, conversations with parents, local government representatives, local police, and other community members were captured in a similar fashion. In total, there was over 1000 minutes of meetings and informal conversations in the data collection phase of this project, over 500 of which had been audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

To align with *Sport England’s* and the *National Evaluation and Learning Partnership’s* [9 Conditions for Tackling Inequalities in Physical Activity](#), data analysis adopted a deductive thematic analysis process. The nine conditions were used as a guiding framework to determine four overarching themes in the data.

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## Results

The demographic data from the 6-week Thanet Street Sport Test and Learn provides insight into participant age, ethnicity, weekly attendance and cross-park engagement across Boundary Road Park, Dane Valley Park, and Newington Green. Across the 5 weeks when data collection was possible (week 2 – week 6), there were 444 data points. This suggests that across five weeks the Street Sport Sessions programme engaged 444 participants, not accounting for youth who attended across multiple weeks and locations. Week 3 at Boundary Road had the highest headcount at 46 participants (see Figure 3). Dane Valley and Newington Green showed more moderate and consistent attendance, with a slight drop in weeks 5 and 6, associated with the end of summer holiday.

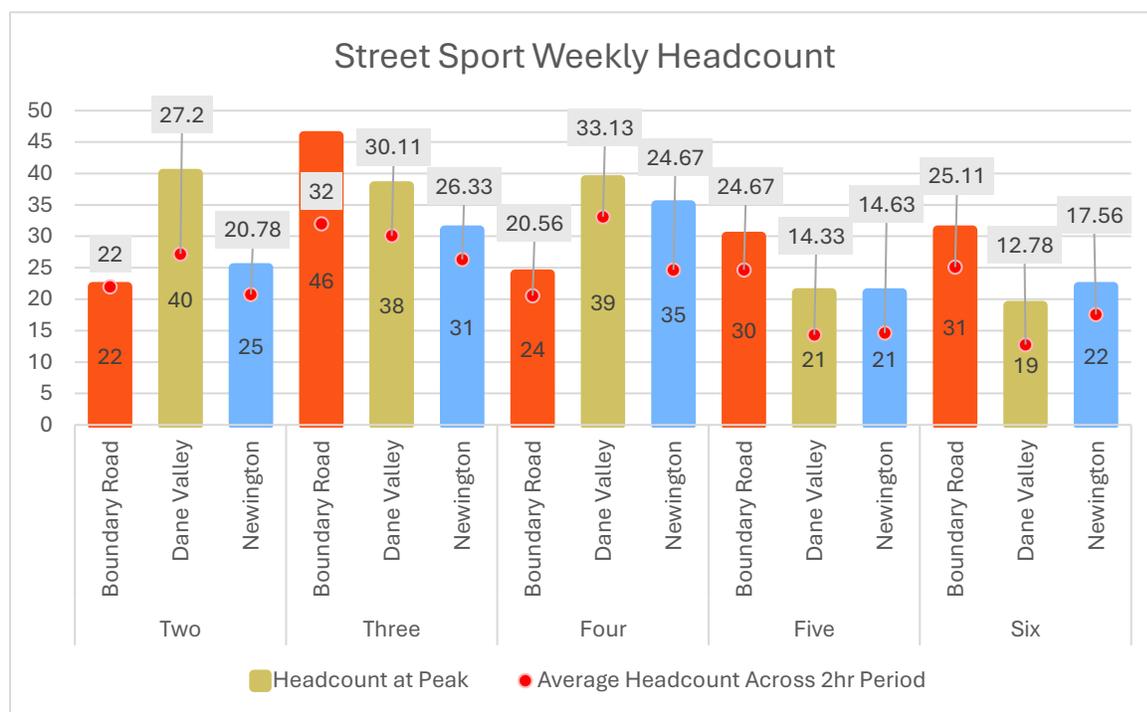


Figure 3: Street Sport Weekly Headcount

The Street Sport Programme was most popular among children aged 9-11 (36%), followed closely by Under 9s (33.6%). There was lower engagement from youth aged 12-15, and particularly low participation from youth 16+.

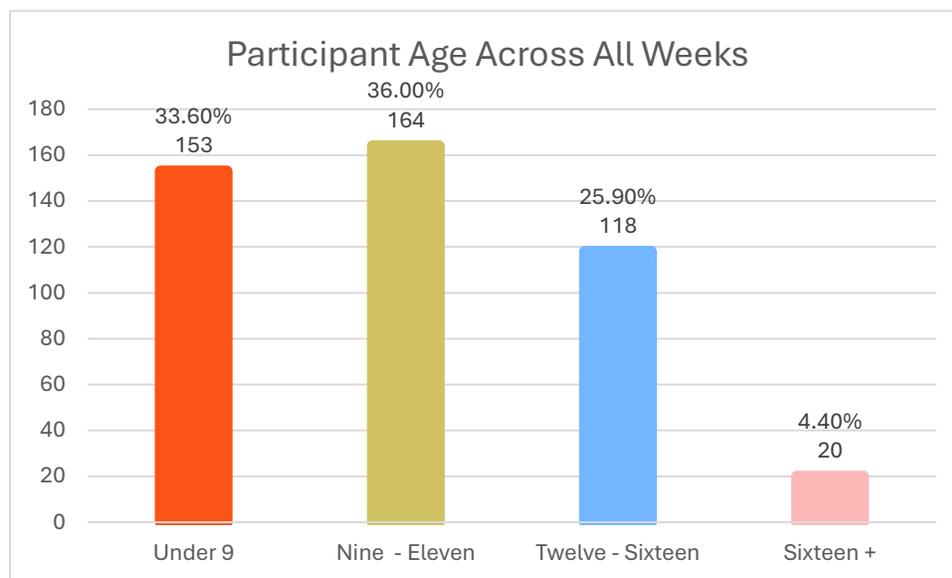


Figure 4: Participant Age Across All Weeks

The majority of participants were White British (50%), but there is a notable presence of ethnically diverse groups, especially Black and Asian communities; 17% and 8.9%, respectively.

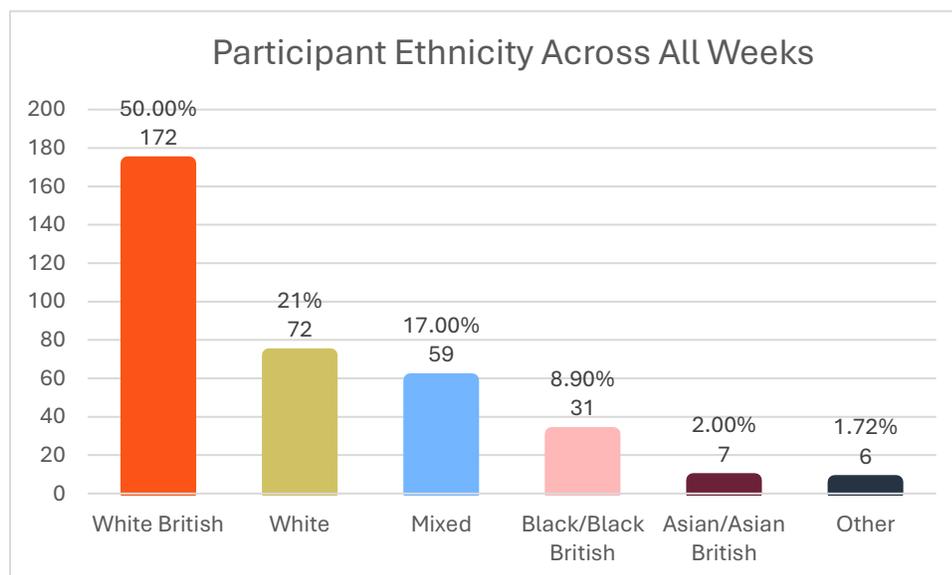


Figure 5: Participant Ethnicity Across All Weeks

Most participants walked to sessions (52.7%), indicating local engagement. Car usage was also relatively high (24.3%), suggesting some participants travelled from further away or travelled to a Street Sport Session outside of their immediate neighbourhood.

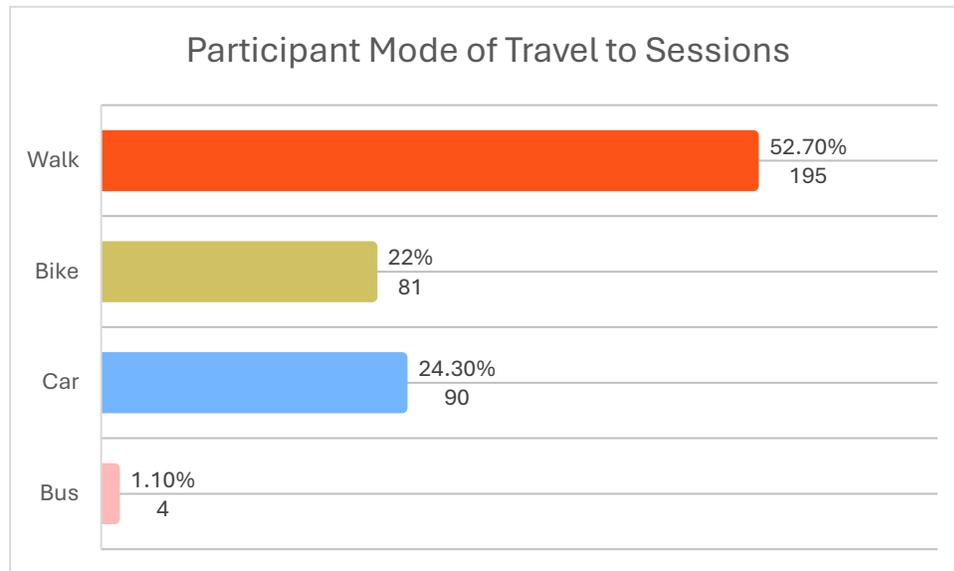


Figure 6: Participant Mode of Travel

Boundary Road consistently had the highest number of repeat attendees. Dane Valley and Newington show more fluctuation week-to-week. There is excellent data to suggest that youth returned week after week, with some indicating attendance at up to 18 sessions.

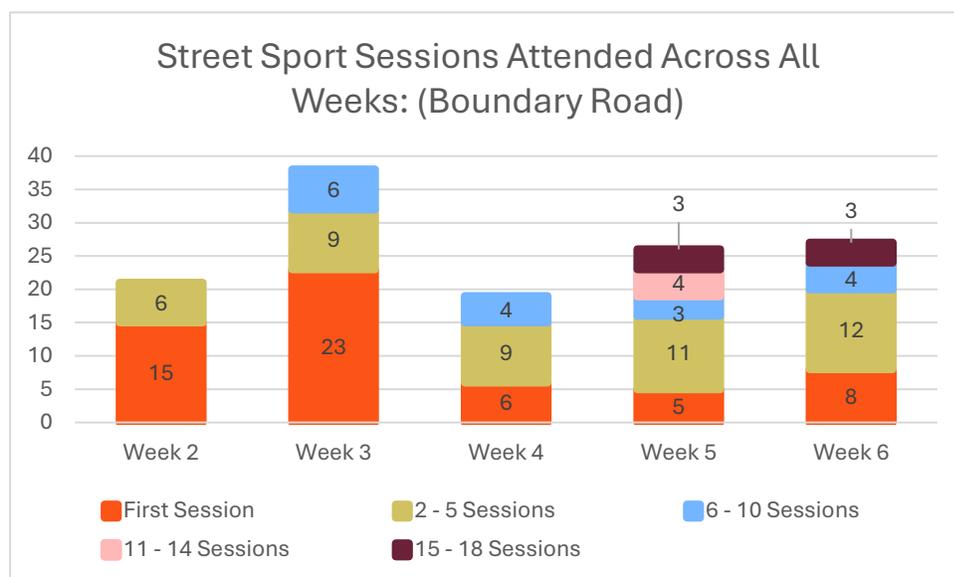


Figure 7: Number of Sessions Attended (Boundary Road)

It should be noted that a drop-in sports session was also held in Dane Park (located in Margate, approximately 1.0 miles from Dane Valley Park) on Tuesday and Thursday evenings with overlapping facilitators and was subsequently represented in the data from the Street Sport Sessions.

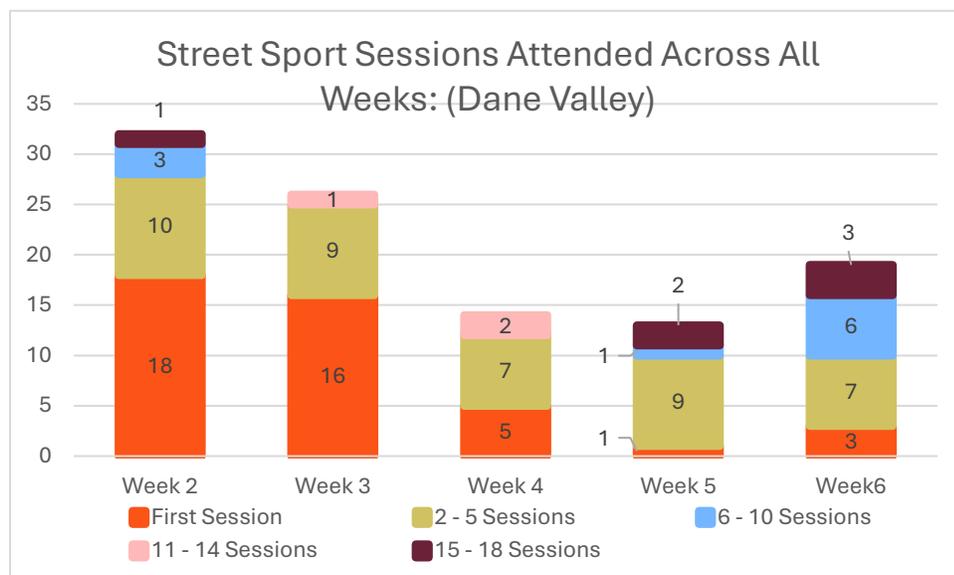


Figure 8: Number of Sessions Attended (Dane Valley)

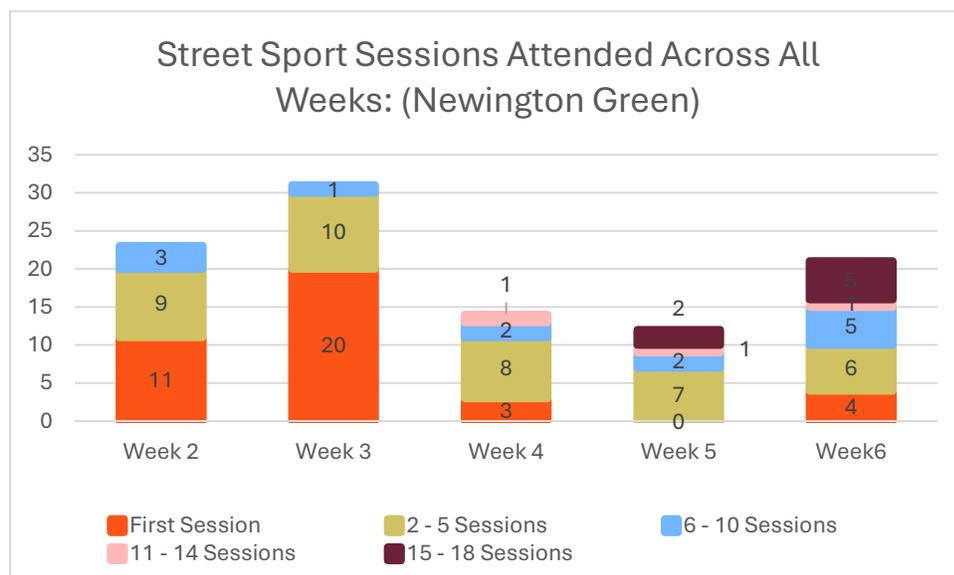


Figure 9: Number of Sessions Attended (Newington Green)

Data also highlights inter-park mobility, especially between Boundary Road and Newington Green, suggesting strong engagement and possibly social connections across locations. For example, in Week 5 21 participants from Boundary Road attended sessions at Newington Green. Dane Valley and Newington also show similar cross over, though less pronounced.

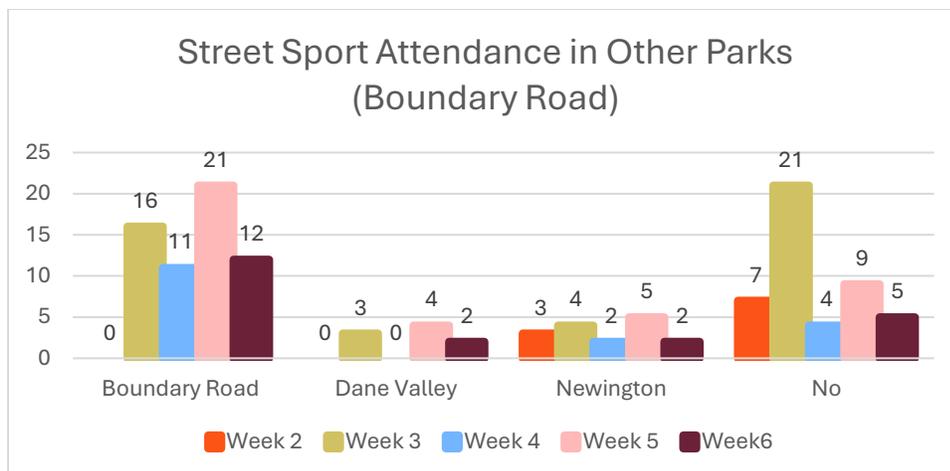


Figure 10: Attendance in other parks (Boundary Road)

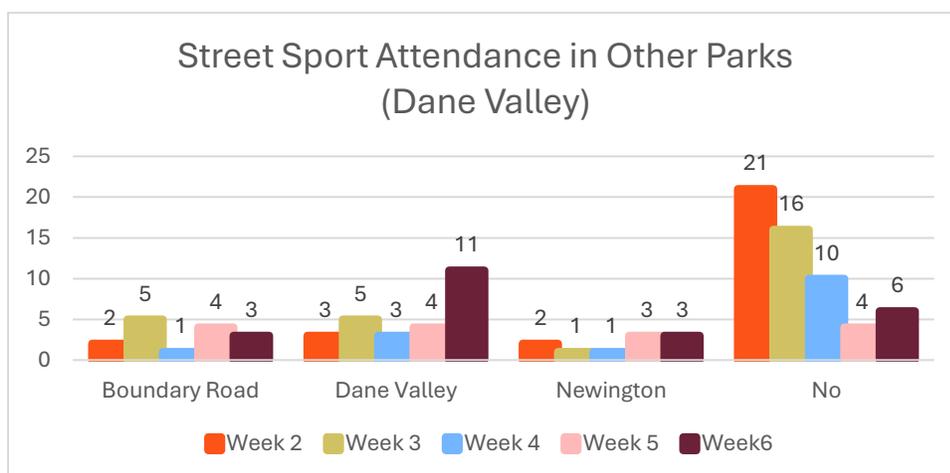


Figure 11: Attendance in other parks (Dane Valley)

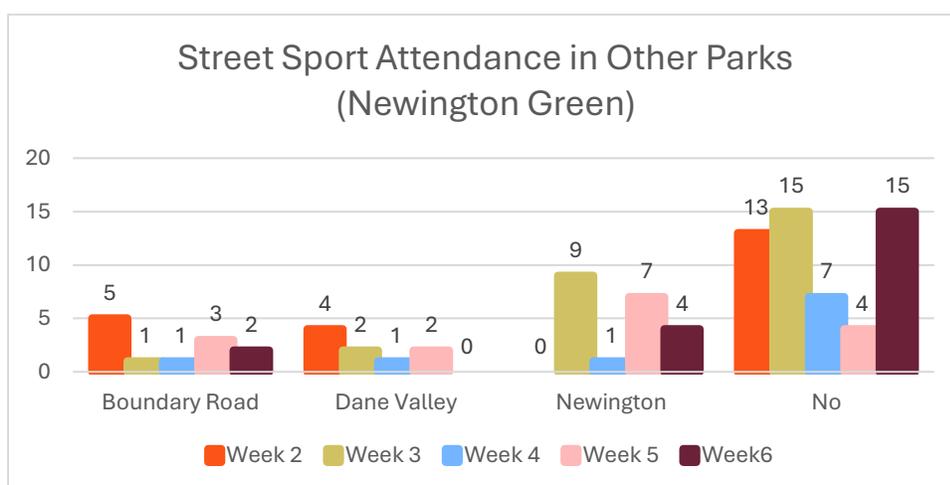


Figure 52: Attendance in other parks (Newington Green)

Results also offer insight into four main themes: 1) Listening and Learning from Communities, 2) Creating Safe, Inclusive, and Welcoming Spaces, 3) Building Trusting Relationships, and 4) Addressing Structural Barriers. Each theme is presented in turn.

## Listening and learning from Communities

Listening and learning from communities is a foundational principle in addressing inequalities in physical activity. It involves actively engaging with local voices, valuing lived experiences, and co-producing solutions that reflect community needs. For the Street Sports Test and Learn, this condition was not only present but central to its ethos and delivery. Conversations with community members exhibited a consistent emphasis on youth voice, co-creation, and responsiveness. Facilitators remained engaged with the young people throughout the six weeks and adapted sessions based on feedback and observations.

This approach aligns with participatory models of community sport, where the community is not merely a recipient but a co-designer of interventions. Youth participants expressed a desire to shape their environment, from suggesting new activities to advocating for infrastructure improvements. Their engagement went beyond passive participation; youth was vocal about their concerns for their communities.

“I think we need to ask the kids what they want. So, if they want dodgeball or any other sport that they like, then we can bring it to the park. It’s not just about what we think they’ll enjoy, it’s about actually asking them and letting them shape it. That way, they feel like it’s theirs.” - Youth Advisory Group member

“I want to make a difference... there isn’t much to do. Like obviously you can go to the park, you can go to the beach, but there’s nothing to really do there. You can chill, you can hang, but let’s say if your friends are busy then you’ve got nothing really to go to. This kind of makes change for everyone. I want to kind of make that change.”- Youth Advisory Group member

“If you showed up and you showed that you actually care about getting it done and sorting it out and being present, then it will encourage them to be there more. Because they’ll see that you care, and so they’ll come more. But if you’re just there sometimes or not really trying or listening to them, then they won’t turn up and it won’t really work.”- Youth participant

Recent literature strongly supports the value of listening and learning from communities in sport-for-development and physical activity interventions. Harris et al. (2021) pose that co-production with youth enhances relevance, ownership, and sustainability. Their study found that programmes designed with youth input had higher retention and deeper engagement. Sport England’s *Uniting the Movement* strategy places community voice at the heart of its 10-year vision, emphasising that reducing inequalities requires understanding the barriers and aspirations of those most affected. Further, participatory approaches in youth sport foster a sense of belonging and increase motivation, particularly among equity-deserving groups (Casey et al., 2020 & Youth Sport Trust, 2022).

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While the Street Sports programme demonstrated strong listening and collaborative practices some challenges emerged related to *listening and learning from communities* – namely time and structural limitations and representation gaps. The rapid rollout and start of the programme to align with the school holiday limited pre-engagement and deeper consultation. As one facilitator notes,

“We didn’t promote prior to this starting...we saw our best numbers in week 3. It just shows how important it is to actually engage the community before launching something. If we had more time to listen and build relationships, we could have reached even more young people.”- Facilitator

Further, even when youth voiced their needs (e.g. better courts, food provision), facilities were constrained by funding, planning and infrastructure resources. Despite efforts to widely promote Street Sports, the time constraints surrounding promotion and need for deeper consultation could reflect the underrepresentation of teen-aged youth, particularly girls. As one participant noted, *“She just came and she was like, ‘where’s all the girls’.”* These challenges reflect broader challenges in community-based participatory work. Future place-initiatives should include youth in the design phase, continuing to include youth on advisory boards, co-design workshops, or peer-led consultations. The feedback mechanisms used (e.g. regular check-ins, sticker board, and reflective conversations) in the Street Sport sessions were determined to be effective tools for capturing the evolving needs of the community. The Street Sport Sessions Test and Learn exemplified the power of listening and learning from communities. By centering youth voice, it was possible to create a responsive, relevant, and empowering environment. However, sustaining such an approach requires structural support, time, and a commitment to equity. As literature affirms, participatory practice is a necessity for addressing inequalities in physical activity.

## Creating Safe, Inclusive, and Welcoming Spaces

Creating safe, inclusive, and welcoming spaces is a critical condition for addressing inequalities in physical activity. It encompasses both physical safety (e.g. infrastructure, lighting, supervision) and psychological safety (e.g. feeling respected, free from discrimination, and emotionally supported). For many equity-deserving groups, particularly young people from low-income backgrounds or minoritised communities, the perception of safety and inclusion directly influences their willingness to engage in physical activity. The Street Sport Sessions highlighted this as a central concern voiced by youth participants and facilitators. Data reveals how environmental factors, social dynamics, and institutional responses shaped young people's experiences of safety and inclusion.

Youth repeatedly mentioned poor lighting, unsafe surface, and inadequate facilities as barriers to feeling safe. For example, basketball courts and Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs) were described as hazardous, with broken rims, hard concrete surfaces, broken glass, and discarded cigarettes and cannabis use posing potential risks to health.

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“Because it is just concrete. And if someone goes over and we're not here with like first aid people and stuff, that could be bad. So maybe like... floors. Yeah. Something softer or safer.” - Facilitator

In addition, participants expressed discomfort in certain areas due to the presence of intimidating individuals. One youth participant shared,

“Sometimes you have like the odd few people who are walking around who are drunk or something. So it might feel a bit... obviously my mum don't want me near the tree kind of thing. It's really dark over there. There's no lighting. It's only like the play park and the basketball court that's actually lit up. So like the rest of the park is just dark.” - Youth participant

In discussing belonging, youth participants, especially those 11-16 years of age expressed a lack of seating and feeling as though they did not have a space to take ownership over. Older youth in particular shared this sentiment. They expressed the desire for a place to gather and come together.

“I think it needs more seating. That's one thing. Because like you kind of got nowhere to kind of like sit in general... if you're in a bigger group. Some people have to sit over there and some all the way over there and then it's just like... you're not really together.” - Youth participant

Physical activity and sport were not the draw for this older group but rather the social element. Older youth were more inclined and likely to self-organize into an activity if equipment was available.

In discussing the creation of safe spaces, facilitators acknowledged the need for training in trauma-informed care, conflict de-escalation, and cultural competence. They encountered situations involving bullying and anti-social behaviour and expressed a personal desire for supplemental training to best support and guide the youth involved. Reflecting on an instance of youth anti-social behaviour a facilitator said:

“I am just a small woman. I didn't know how to deal with it. I just took a step back. I feel like I need training in how to handle these situations. It's not just about sport—it's about being able to support these kids when things get tough.” - Facilitator

Linked to the instances of anti-social behaviour during the Street Sport Sessions, the presence of dispersal orders in place at the time and police interventions created tension between local youth and law enforcement. While some officers were known and trusted, others were perceived as disruptive or intimidating, undermining the sense of safety. Discussing their response should there be another instance of anti-social behaviour, a facilitator said,

“I wouldn't have called again. I wouldn't call the police because of what happened last time. It made things worse. They came in and escalated it. The kids were already on edge, and it just made them feel unsafe.” - Facilitator

This was a shared sentiment amongst the facilitators as in previous weeks it was perceived that police instigated and antagonized the disruptive youth, resulting in a diminished sense of safety at the session.

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Participant quotes highlight the multi-faceted nature of safety and inclusion. It is not just about avoiding harm but about creating environments where young people feel seen, respected and empowered. The importance of safe and inclusive spaces is well documented. Allen et al. (2020) emphasise the need for trauma-informed approaches in youth sport, arguing that many young people carry the burden of adverse and challenging experiences that ultimately affect engagement. Thus, creating an emotionally safe environment is essential for participation and wellbeing. Sport England’s *Active Lives* survey (2023) found perceived safety was one of the strongest predictors of physical activity in children and young people. Those who felt unsafe in parks and public spaces were significantly less likely to be active. Further and directly linked to the previous theme of listening and learning from communities, literature promotes the co-design of sport, physical activity and community spaces to include accessible and well-maintained infrastructure, culturally competent programming and community-centric design (The Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022; Public Health England, 2021; Youth Sport Trust, 2022). Public Health England (2021) specifically notes the increase usage and reduction of anti-social behaviour when the above conditions are present.

Despite the community-based participatory approach to this project, challenges emerged directly related to creating safe and inclusive spaces. Interestingly, the use of dispersal orders to break up groups of teens contradicted the programme’s overarching goal of activating public spaces. Facilitators expressed concern that such measures deterred participation and caused youth to convene in other locations that were potentially increasingly precarious and away from the public eye. Additionally, as discussed, facilitators felt ill-equipped at times to manage complex situations and conflict, highlighting the need for professional development in conflict management, safeguarding and inclusive practices. Creating safe, inclusive, and welcoming spaces is central to equity in physical activity. The Street Sport Sessions demonstrated a strong commitment to this condition, but also revealed the complexities and contradictions involved. Safety is not simply about avoiding harm, but working intentionally to foster belonging, dignity, and joy. Safe and inclusive spaces are not accidental; they are designed, nurtured, and sustained through intentional practice.

## Building Trusting Relationships

Trust is a cornerstone of effective community engagement and a critical condition for addressing inequalities in physical activity. Building trusting relationships involves sustained, respectful, and reciprocal interactions between facilitators, participants, and the wider community. In contexts where young people may have experienced exclusion, marginalization, or surveillance; trust becomes not just a relational asset but a mechanism for inclusion and empowerment. In the Street Sport Sessions, trust was a key priority. Facilitators worked to establish rapport, youth participants responded with openness, and the programme’s success was largely built on the strength of these relationships. Relational consistency and presence were significant to trust-building. Facilitators emphasized the importance of being consistently present, showing up energised week after week, and being emotionally available. This consistency ensured that youth felt seen, heard, and that their contributions mattered and not tokenised.

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“I think there has to be consistency, yes, because I think one thing that kids lack now in life around social stuff is consistency. So they might come down here and do this programme, but then the funding stops and they never do socialising ever again.”- Facilitator

Additionally, facilitators who shared lived experiences, demonstrated empathy, or had local knowledge were more readily trusted.

“There was a few kids that came to a lot of them, which I really enjoyed. They travelled and stayed with us for the six weeks. That shows they’re enjoying it and want to do it more. That kind of consistency builds trust.” - Facilitator

“Same children coming back... they naturally know where they fit in. They go straight to volleyball or football and kind of know their space. That’s what you want to see—kids feeling comfortable and confident in their environment.” - Facilitator

Youth responded positively to facilitators who understood and shared their realities. Trust was shown to be a gateway to participation, enabling deeper engagement with physical activity. Youth who felt safe and respected were more likely to try new activities, share feedback, and take on leadership roles.

Finally, it was noted that a key motivator for participating in the Street Sport Sessions was social connectedness. Youth participants often joined to make friends, connect with others outside of school, and build social networks. These peer relationships were foundational to their continued engagement.

“Josh’s <sup>1</sup>like a low-key celebrity out here. The one-time Josh was late, I saw a bunch of people go ‘Where’s Josh?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t know where he is,’ and they went off leaving. I had to convince them he was gonna come at some point. That’s the kind of connection that keeps kids coming back.” - Youth Advisory Group Member

Participant conversations reflect a relational ecosystem where trust was built on presence, empathy, and shared purpose; thus, trust was not assumed but earned. Contemporary literature actively underscores the centrality of trust in youth sport and physical activity; aligning with Sport England’s *Uniting the Movement* initiative that includes trust-building as a key strategy for reducing inequalities. Coalter (2020) argues that relational approaches are essential for sport-for-development programmes. Outlining that trust between facilitators and participants leads to higher retention, deeper engagement (Coalter, 2020; Youth Sport Trust, 2022). Further, Holt et al. (2021) emphasize trust as being particularly important for marginalised youth, who may have experienced exclusion or surveillance in other institutional settings; linking to Allen et al.’s work proposing that facilitators must have the creation of safe and trusting relationships at the forefront of their programming to support youth with varying lived experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed

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## Addressing Structural Barriers

Structural barriers are systemic obstacles that prevent equitable access to physical activity. These include economic hardship, lack of transport, inadequate facilities, food insecurity, and exclusionary policies. Addressing these barriers is essential for reducing inequalities and ensuring that all young people can participate and benefit from physical activity. Structural barriers highlighted by participants and facilitators in the Street Sport Sessions were daily lived realities related to deprivation, infrastructure, and policy.

Data revealed a rich and complex picture of these structural barriers. Beginning with inadequate facilities and infrastructure. Many parks lacked basic amenities such as toilets, lighting, seating, and safe playing surfaces. Youth, facilitators, and parents described parks as having broken equipment, hard concrete flooring, and at times unsafe surroundings. These conditions not only discouraged participation but also posed potential physical risks. As demonstrated in the sticker board data, several participants noted that they could not travel to other parks due to lack of public transport or maintained biking or walking paths.

“It’s actually a money thing... you need a car to get to all three parks. Walking and cycling is quite important, but not everyone can do that. Some grandparents were dropping kids off and driving between parks. That’s not sustainable for everyone.”- Facilitator

“They won’t do it because it’s not within the boundary of their 15-minute corner. Even if it’s just a short walk, they won’t go. That’s why we need to bring the activities to them, not expect them to come to us.” - Facilitator

This limits youths access to a boarder range of activities and peers. Additionally, food insecurities and basic needs were recurrently addressed by facilitators as a barrier to many programmes within the Thanet area. Facilitators observed that many youths arrived hungry or asked for food. Snacks, fruit, and water were provided by local community champions at some sessions and was well received by the youth and their families.

“If we had food at these events, it would be just that game changer. Food brings them in and we all sit down at the floor. You eat with them and that’s when you get to talk to them. It’s not just about sport. It’s about nourishment and connection.”- Facilitator

Interestingly, in speaking with youth, it is apparent that a digital and informational divide exists. Youth shared they often did not know about local activities unless someone told them directly. A lack of accessible, youth-friendly communication channels meant that many opportunities continued to be underutilized in Thanet. Finally, the policing practices in place conflict with the programme’s goal. While the Street Sport Sessions aimed to activate currently underutilized public spaces and hoped youth would continue to self-activate the space at the end of the programme; the dispersal orders discouraged the gathering of youth.

Participant quotes illustrate how structural barriers are experienced on the ground, not as abstract policy issues, rather as daily limitations on movement, safety, nourishment, and opportunity. Contemporary literature strongly supports the need to address structural barriers in physical activity. Sport England’s

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*Tacking Inequalities Fund Evaluation* (2021) found that food insecurity, poor infrastructure, and lack of transport were among the top barriers to participation for low-income families. Importantly, existing resources call place-based approaches to be integral to the promotion of physical activity (Holt et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2021; Youth Sport Trust, 2022). Place-based approaches require multi-sector collaboration that include education, housing, built environment, transport systems, and health (Holt et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2021). The Youth Sport Trust (2022) specifically calls for integrated approaches that combine physical activity with wraparound support services, including food provision, mental health support, and career development.

Despite the programme’s efforts, several structural challenges persisted. The six-week duration of the Street Sport Sessions limited its ability to address long-term structural barriers. Facilitators expressed concern about what would happen when the programme ended. Linked to programme duration and funding, facilitators also discussed that some deprived areas are at times overlooked for funding due to postcode-based eligibility. For example, one facilitator suggested, *“Broadstairs doesn’t qualify for funding, but there are kids there who need it.”* Importantly, a persistent barrier and recurrent conversation related to the Street Sport Sessions was a lack of cross-sector coordination. While needs related to food, transport, infrastructure, and safety were identified, they lacked the partnerships or resources to address them comprehensively.

Structural barriers require structural solutions. This means fostering collaboration across sectors that intersect to limit young people’s access to physical activity. As literature and existing resources affirm, equity in sport is not just about what happens within programmes but also what happens around it.

## Considering Street Sport Sessions Within Whole Systems Approaches

The Test and Learn Street Sport Sessions in Thanet represent more than a standalone intervention, exemplify a strategic attempt in embedding physical activity into broader community systems. When considered within a whole systems approach, these sessions illuminated how hyperlocal, youth-informed programming can catalyse relational, structural, and cultural change. Whole systems approach recognize that physical inactivity is a symptom of deeper systemic inequalities. In Thanet, these included entrenched deprivation, underutilized public spaces, fragmented youth services, and limited cross-sector coordination. The Street Sport Sessions further highlighted these challenges and clearly illuminated key priorities for future initiatives.

Based on the outcomes from this Test and Learn, central to whole system framing is the integration of Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPR). This framework enabled the project to centre lived experiences, foster co-learning, and democratize knowledge production. Youth were not passive recipients but co-researchers, shaping evaluation tools, leading peer interviews, and contributing to

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programme delivery. This participatory ethos reflects a shift away from top-down service provision and toward relational accountability and community ownership. The iterative nature of the Test and Learn model allowed for real-time adaptation based on ongoing feedback and observations.

The Street Sport Sessions also served as a platform for testing system readiness. By embedding physical activity into everyday community life, the enablers and barriers to sustained engagement were made apparent. For example, facilitators noted that while youth were eager to participate, structural issues such as poor lighting, broken equipment, and dispersal orders undermined safety and autonomy. These insights underscore the need for multi-sector collaboration between public health, local authorities, policing, housing, and youth services to create environments conducive to wellbeing. Moreover, the sessions highlighted the importance of relational infrastructure. Already well understood and adopted across delivery partners in Thanet, facilitators who share lived experience with participants were more readily trusted, and their consistent presence fostered a sense of safety. This relational trust is a critical ingredient with whole system change.

Whole system change in Thanet requires governance development, stakeholder alignment, and capacity building in ways that continues to call upon the fundamentals of CBPR. The formation of the Youth Advisory Group, the engagement of delivery partners, and the use of creative insight tools all contribute to a growing ecosystem of collaborative practice. The Street Sport Sessions should not be considered as an isolated project, rather as an intersection within a larger system of community. The success of the Street Sport Sessions lies in the activation of public spaces, fostering relational trust, and acknowledgement of structural barriers.

## Implications For Practice

The Thanet Street Sport Sessions have depicted a compelling model for inclusive, community-led physical activity programming, while also revealing critical insights into the conditions necessary for sustainable impact. The implications for practice should be considered in terms of future programme delivery and how learnings are embedded into broader systems of governance, capacity building, and strategic alignment.

At the heart of the Street Sport Sessions was a commitment to participatory practice. This participatory ethos should remain central to future work. Central to Place Expansion work, participants must be empowered as co-creators, with opportunities to lead, reflect, and influence decisions. Doing so not only enhances programme relevance but also fosters a sense of agency and leadership among participants. Equally important is the role of facilitators, whose relational presence and shared-lived experiences were instrumental in building trust and sustaining participation. The sessions also exposed gaps in training and support. Moving forward, investment in professional development should be provided where possible. Training in trauma-informed care, conflict de-escalation, and inclusive engagement will ensure facilitators are equipped to navigate the relational and emotional complexities of community-based work.

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The need for robust governance structures also emerged as a key learning. Future work in Thanet would benefit from the development of collaborative governance models that reflect local contexts and priorities. Governance, particularly in Thanet, should not be viewed as merely administrative, rather as a relational and strategic tool to provide scaffolding for shared decision-making, accountability, and long-term planning. The recruitment of Community Connectors in Thanet offers a promising model for embedding lived experience into programme delivery. These roles, hosted by trusted local organisations, are designed to bridge strategic intent with community-level impact. Community Connectors can amplify underrepresented voices, facilitate co-creation, and ensure that interventions are grounded in local realities. Their presence will be vital in sustaining momentum, deepening engagement, and fostering relational accountability.

Sustainability remains a pressing concern. The six-week duration of the Street Sport Sessions limited the ability to address long-term barriers and build enduring relationships. Future iterations should consider extended timelines, seasonal programming, and integration with existing services. Scaling impact will require fidelity to core principles, such as free access, informal formats, trusted adults, while allowing flexibility in delivery. Adaptive learning must remain central, with regular reflection and feedback loops informing programme evolution.

Finally, the insights generated through the Test and Learn must be embedded into broader system change efforts. This includes informing local policy, shaping funding priorities, and guiding strategic planning. The co-development of a Theory of Change provides a framework for aligning activities with long-term outcomes. Monitoring tools should be developed to track progress, capture impact, and adapt to emerging needs. By integrating learning into system design, we can move beyond isolated interventions and toward a resilient, responsive ecosystem of community wellbeing.

In conclusion, the Street Sport Sessions have laid a solid foundation for inclusive, place-based physical activity programming. The path forward requires a commitment to participatory practice, facilitator development, strategic governance, and structural responsiveness. By embedding these principles into future work, we can build a system that not only activates public spaces but transforms them into sites of equity, belonging, and collective care.

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