

Meersbrook Park Thursday Sport Session Evaluation



Summary

This project has funded the running of an important community activity, bringing together on average up to 25-30 people per session, including children, younger people, and their parents, alongside the local after school club, developing connections and friendships and helping build and maintain strong relationships in and across the community through weekly free community multi-sport sessions at Meersbrook Park in Sheffield. Activities include football, tennis, archery, volleyball and basketball, alongside litter picking. We also engaged local residents in a Santa Dash and in sporting activities as part of the tour of the UK by Diyar women's football team from Bethlehem – hosting a friendly game with local residents playing against the women's team - meaning in total we engaged around 300 people over the project. In all activities, children and parents were encouraged to play together with some parents also becoming

leading volunteers in the activities with 3 key volunteers helping with the running of the weekly sports session.

The sessions improve local residents' confidence, activity levels, health and fitness, opportunities, and community engagement and help tackle record-high child obesity levels alongside problems with anti-social behaviour. By providing a range of activities for the local community to engage with the park, the sessions improve spaces and places that matter most to local people, especially considering the renovation of the Multi-Use Games Area in 2011 where the sessions take place.

Encouraging activity amongst children is important given recent NHS Digital statistics show that in Sheffield, 21.2 per cent of pupils in year six are now obese, above the national average. It also links into Sheffield's goal to become the country's most active city by 2020 partly through the Move More initiative. Meersbrook Park is within Gleadless Valley Ward, the 8th most deprived ward in Sheffield (out of 28) (IMD 2015), with anti-social behaviour the biggest cause of crime in the area in 2016 (Police UK 2017, in the Gleadless Valley Ward Profile 2017). The Gleadless Valley Ward Councillors' Priorities 2016/2017 included "working with organisations/services to help tackle and reduce anti-social behaviour", "supporting development of a more cohesive community" and "improving and enhancing activities for young people", illustrating demand for the sport sessions given how they engage younger people in the area in community-led activity.



Through this funding we were also able to purchase equipment to help with the running of the sessions, including skipping ropes and bats for street tennis, and we have also purchased branded MPUT hoodies to make it easier for people to see who is there to answer any questions they may have and make it clearer that the activity is taking place. The funding also enabled us

to produce marketing materials regarding the session, which helped engage more people in the activities too.

MPUT Volunteers Feedback

We asked volunteers who help with running the Thursday sport sessions to complete a survey regarding their experiences.

Joy, a regular volunteer, says that she got involved with volunteering at the Thursday sports session after lead organiser “Liz Martinez asked if I had the time to help and also my 3 children used the sports session every week.” Joy stated in her feedback that she thought the Thursday session has helped with encouraging regular exercise, improving mental wellbeing, reducing anti-social behaviour, increasing general use of the park, improving community cohesion, reducing litter and improving confidence of the children engaged – all key objectives of the activity. Explaining this, Joy said:

“The sessions encourage parents/carers and childminders to get together, my children have made new friends and so have I. We have promoted the session at our school which has resulted in the session becoming very popular. Because of the multitude of sports we offer the parents and children can have a go at all different sports. At the end of each session we also do a litter pick which helps keep the park tidy.”

Joy adds that the most enjoyable part of volunteering at the sports session is “getting the children and parents together every week and watching their enthusiasm grow as well their confidence.”



Julie, another regular volunteer, said that she got involved with volunteering at the Thursday sports session because; “my 2 children attend the session and I am keen to support the other

volunteers who regularly attend.” She said she thinks the Thursday session has helped with improving mental wellbeing, increasing general use of the park, improving community cohesion and improving the confidence of the children engaged. She said “maybe” when asked if the activities had reduced anti-social behaviour and reduced litter. Explaining her answer, Julie said:

“It encourages friends to attend. The group is also mixed ages and abilities and is informal and fun but the adult volunteers can promote confidence and participation.”

When asked about her most enjoyable part of volunteering at the sport sessions, Julie said it is: “increasing my level of activity and meeting new people also seeing children attend regularly and enjoy the range of activities.”

Julie said that the sessions would benefit from “increased publicity for more people to attend.” This is something we have been able to do via the grant but are also looking to develop further.

Julie added, “the park is a great community asset and it’s well used but there is potential to have more activity and sessions open to families and adults.” With this, we are looking at making the session more sustainable with additional funding to introduce circuit training activities and we are also looking into the possibility of having an outside gym, which is something that many of the local residents have expressed an interest in.

Jo, another regular volunteer, said that she became a volunteer at the session “to be more involved in the local community.” Jo stated in her feedback that she thought the Thursday session has helped with encouraging regular exercise, improving mental wellbeing, reducing anti-social behaviour, increasing general use of the park, improving community cohesion, reducing litter and improving confidence of the children engaged – all key objectives of the activity. Explaining this, Jo said: “this is a well attended and much valued session. It’s of benefit to both the children and adults who attend.”

Jo said that the most enjoyable aspect of the session is “being involved in the sports activities and meeting new people from the community.” And that, “the sessions had a significant impact for me when I became a single parent. Volunteering had a huge positive effect on my mental health.”

In terms of things that can be done differently, Jo suggested we “promote the sessions more. Organise more specific or themed days.” Promotion and marketing are things that we are going to look into doing, the concept of themed days is something we can definitely look into too.

MPUT Parents/Childminders/After School Club Feedback

We also gathered feedback from parents, childminders and after school club workers regarding the sessions, with the answers to these questions analysed below.

Why did you get involved with the Thursday sports session?

- “I care for local children after school.” - Sally
- “Healthy outdoor extra curricular fun for my four daughters.” - Jane
- “Children like being in the park and love the opportunity to try new sports.” - Jennifer
- “Community/fitness and friends.” - Tamara
- “Good to get the kids active and encourage them to try new things.” - Laura

- “Because I wanted my children to grow up enjoying sport and feeling like it was something fun. I don't always have the right equipment for what they want. I think it's increasingly important for girls to get into sport when they are young. It looked inspiring to see a big mix of ages and genders enjoying a range of different sports in our local park.” - Rhona
- “We are already a sport family but I wanted to spend time after school with my son outdoors, participating in team games and making use of the facilities with likeminded people and children of the same age as my son. It was also a good opportunity to spend time making the most of facilities in the community.”

As you can see from the answers above, the community aspect of the activities is important as is the increased activity levels in a range of sports of the children engaged in the sessions alongside the ability to meet others in the local area.

Do you think the Thursday session has helped with any of the following things?

	Yes	No	Maybe	Not sure
Encourage regular exercise	100%	0%	0%	0%
Improve mental wellbeing	100%	0%	0%	0%
Reduce antisocial behaviour	57.14%	0%	14.29%	28.57%
Increase general use of the park	100%	0%	0%	0%
Improve community cohesion	100%	0%	0%	0%
Reduce litter	42.86%	0%	28.57%	28.57%
Improve confidence of children engaged	100%	0%	0%	0%

Other answers, included:

“Social skills and learning good behaviour.” - Jane

“Allows an opportunity to see what sports children like or not.” - Jennifer

“Reduce isolation for parents and children.” - Rhona

This shows that the respondents feel the sessions are meeting the intended outcomes. We will look into promoting the litter picking that takes place at the sessions to engage more people to address the relatively lower rating of this. Furthermore, we are looking into obtaining funding that will increase the activities and we will be increasing our engagement of young people as volunteers, which we feel will have a positive impact on younger people – especially teenagers – taking part, and help with reducing anti-social behaviour given the significant problems this causes for the area, with it being the highest cause of crime in the Gleadless ward.

Please explain your answers to question 3:

- “The Thursday session is a great way for me to encourage children to go to the park as there are always lots of other children there and interesting activities going on. When we try to go on other days, there may be no other children there and we never end up staying as long or having as much fun.” - Sally
- “My daughters benefited from being with other role models i.e. Older children and adults who were engaged in healthy social activity.” - Jane
- “Some of my children rarely walk to school much less play out and even if they only initially observe it's a step closer to taking part. They might create their own race challenges or practice their gymnastic skills. Even the walk to the park is an achievement. In the main all children take part in something. Skipping, tennis, hockey and football are the most popular. The children can see their skills improve week by week, developing a deeper appreciation of what they're doing and increasing their confidence as they challenge themselves and are encouraged to keep getting better. There is always a good number of children from the surrounding schools and wider community that take part. It's also a place where information is shared about wider community events. The organisers have welcoming all inclusive attitude, which makes you want to keep coming back to support their efforts to provide such a fantastic opportunity. The team work in some sports and seeing children achievements in others, can allow them to put aside differences that may have had during the day to support each other. At the beginning and end of each session the organisers clear the MUGA of litter.” - Jennifer
- “My children were able to be active in a social space - play with other children, make friends with new children and all parents usually got active as well - I couldn't have imagined playing hockey/uni hoc for any other reason (!) and it encouraged me to become more active when playing with my kids. Good opportunity for parents to meet and discuss and just a brilliant session all round.” - Tamara
- “I can only really comment on the impact on my children and other children I've looked after, but these are the effects I have seen.” - Laura
- “I have seen how much of a lifeline the Thursday sessions can be to single parents who struggle to occupy energetic children after school. It is really important for the children involved to help build relationships and a sense of a community with those who may go to a different school.” - Rhona
- “All in all, Thursday sessions were very positive for many reasons.”

These answers show how important the sport sessions are for encouraging local residents to make use of the park, bringing the community together in having fun and getting active. The mix in age range is cited as a positive, with the encouraged interaction between children seen as a significant benefit of the sessions, with their fitness, activity levels, wellbeing and confidence all improving. Also the opportunity for parents to get involved is something that is spoken of positively.

What has been the most enjoyable part of attending the sport sessions?

- “I've made very useful links with other childminders and local families. I've also done some networking with the after school club who always come out and join the Thursday session.” - Sally
- “Social aspect and doing things they wouldn't normally do outdoors.” - Jane
- “The games such as hockey can be great fun as adults and children get very involved. Skipping and football are always a great success too.” - Jennifer

- “Talking to such a range of parents and having a lot of fun with parents and children.” - Tamara
- “Seeing my daughter loving learning a new skill (skipping). Playing team games with my children.” - Laura
- “Seeing my children enjoy sport and being able to meet and get to know other parents in the community.” - Rhona
- “Watching my son play a sport (hockey) that he might not have otherwise have had the chance to engage with in school or via other routes. Useful, too, for adults (parents) in terms of socialising and keeping fit. Good to have the opportunity to play sports other than the typical options, i.e football.”

Being able to network, getting to know others in the local community and the social aspect of the sessions are a really important aspect of what makes these sessions enjoyable and so popular. The benefit these sessions have on the children in terms of skill and confidence development, alongside the positive health effects are importantly stressed as well.

Do you have any stories regarding the Thursday sport sessions and the impact they have on people engaged? If yes, please outline below.

- “I care for two boys who have recently started secondary school and it is getting harder and harder to get them interested in being outdoors and away from screens. The Thursday session is much more likely to tempt them out for some much needed exercise.” - Sally
- “My girls have made good friends and now enjoy ball games where as before they were typically scared of the ball and joining in.” - Jane
- “A couple of my girls were not able to skip before they started going and can now jump in turn around and skip at length. One 4year old discovered a love and skill for hockey. A number of my boys have honed their footballing skills and have been selected to play for various football teams. Even I have developed a love for hockey, which I had never previously liked.” - Jennifer
- “My daughter became much more confident and began to play games like tennis or skipping which she'd been very reluctant to do before.” - Tamara
- “My family take playing hockey wonderfully seriously and my husband and son are significantly better than I am at it (and I'm the most sporty in the family)!”

As these stories show, the sessions have a significant impact on encouraging younger people to get active outside, try new sports, meet new people, learn new skills, develop their confidence and also positively impact the whole family through community involvement and increased community cohesion.

Do you think there is anything we can do differently? If yes, please state what.

- “My boys love to play football but prefer to use the all weather pitch than the tarmac one. This is because it is much softer for the inevitable falls, so less likely to cause injury. But the fabric surface of the all weather pitch is very prone to weeds and this makes it slippery and harder to play on. It would be fantastic to have a better, knee friendly surface for them to play on.” - Sally
- “No I enjoy the open aspect of it. Maybe get some [more] coaches in once in a while but I like the informality of the sessions and the lack of pressure on the children.” - Jane

- “The organisers are flexible and try and meet the requests of the children where possible.” - Jennifer
- “I think it would be great to have some more coaches.” - Tamara
- “Possibly make it clearer to those who are in the park or are passing or who don't know about it that it is free, you don't need to book and you can just turn up. It seems incredible that this is the case when most after school activities are monetised that new people to the area or people who aren't involved might not know.” - Rhona

We are looking into engaging more volunteers to create more structure, which would help us respond to some of these points and we are also in the process of creating more marketing so more people know that the session is taking place.

Do you have any further comments? If so, please write them below.

- “The Thursday session is a brilliant resource for families and I feel that any extra equipment would be very well used.” - Sally
- “I love the sessions and the volunteers it's has enhanced the park and the community in general.” - Jane
- “This is a valuable event for the children in this community. It pulls all ages of the community together. There is a lovely fun atmosphere at this event. I try to attend each week it is on.” - Jennifer
- “It's a great community facility and I'm so grateful to Liz for facilitating this for our children (and us!)” - Laura

Evaluation with Children Attending

We also conducted evaluation with some of the children attending the weekly sport session to gain a better understanding about why they take part in the session and also if they have any ideas for how the session can be improved. To do this, we used foam boards and colour pens for them to draw and write on, which made the activity engaging and enjoyable for those that took part. Here are photos of the feedback we got:

Some of the key points that came from the consultation included:

- The children really enjoyed the activities that were available for them to take part in, drawing pictures of their favourite ones, which included skipping, hockey and football.
- There was a preference for more girl only activities – especially football – and whilst it was mainly girls that took part in the activity, that in itself is telling with boys more focussed on the activities and therefore this feedback is really important to take on board to engage girls in more activities.
- The children mentioned how the basketball activities need to happen more, with there being less resources and time dedicated to that – and also a preference for nets that were smaller for them to reach. More investment in this area would be beneficial.
- The children mentioned how one of the areas that older boys were climbing on had previously been very nicely decorated and they said it had been destroyed by graffiti and mentioned it would be good to have a graffiti wall. This is definitely something that is worth looking into, and also might mitigate graffiti problems by giving people somewhere dedicated to have graffiti. This also links into tackling anti-social behaviour.
- In a similar vein, the children mentioned the problem with older children climbing on the walls and on things they shouldn't and said that a climbing area would be good so they could safely climb.
- The children also mentioned having nets in the football goals on the MUGA which is something else that we can look into. There was also a discussion regarding the floor being too hard and the need for more football bibs.
- Several of the children said they would like more field games too, such as rounders, which is also something that can be explored.
- The younger children discussed how it was difficult to play in the skating bowl and so mentioned having a smaller area more suited for them that they can play on – the potential for ramps on the floor was suggested so that the children can play on their scooters and bikes, away from the bigger bowl, is also something that can be explored with there being a clear preference for a bike and scooter area.
- Children also included feedback such as “I love this place”, “I love it” and “I like to play”, indicating their love for the sessions, whilst stating that attending the sessions meant they were able to make friends, play with their friends and keep active.





Whilst there were ideas that were great but wouldn't be realistic – such as a free/cheap shoe shop! Or a swimming pool! - the children thought of some fantastic things that could really help add to the activity and engagement of the sessions. The children were also really positive about the sessions and talking to them about why they take part and what they get from the sessions really illustrated how beneficial these sessions are to those taking part in terms of health, fitness, wellbeing and social interaction and community development. It demonstrates how valuable it is to gather feedback from the children involved and make sure their thoughts and opinions regarding the sessions are at the centre of analysis on how well the activities are meeting their intended aims. Acting on this feedback is therefore important, as shown by how one child put “become true”, regarding the children's suggestions, as her final piece of feedback on the foam board before leaving.