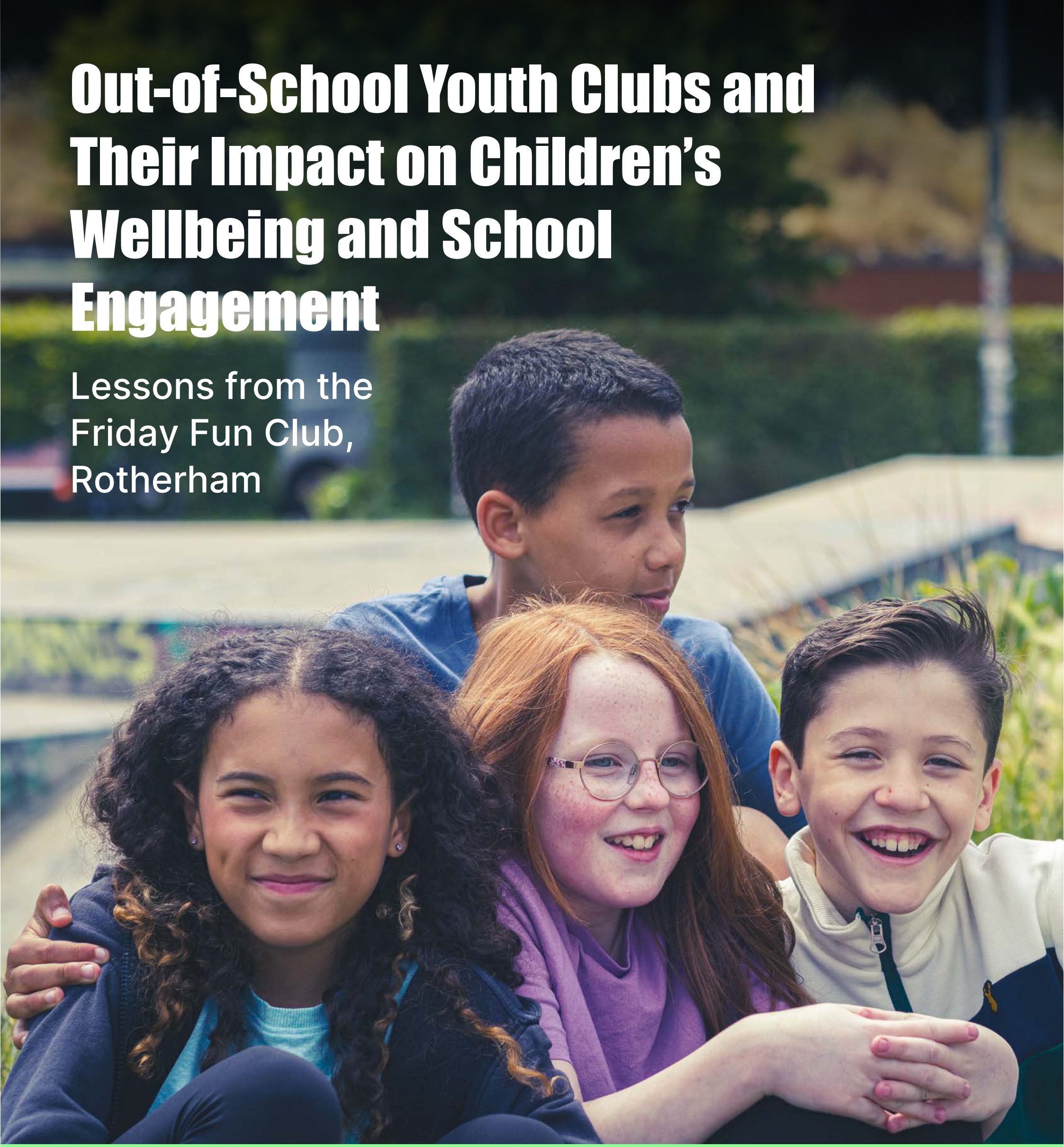
Out-of-School Youth Clubs and Their Impact on Children's Wellbeing and School Engagement

Lessons from the Friday Fun Club, Rotherham



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Executive Summary

The Friday Fun Club (FFC) was created through collaboration between health care and voluntary sector partners. The programme was developed by drawing on local data, national research, stakeholder insights, and informed by the CHEC consultation on the framework, during which mental health, wellbeing, and school attendance were highlighted as key concerns, further affected by the cost-of-living crisis, underfunded youth services, and long waiting times for support. Children consistently said they wanted safe spaces to belong, connect, and feel respected and valued. Evidence shows that educational attainment, attendance and feelings of safety and connection and feeling valued are all important social determinants of health and wellbeing and the programme sought to enhance outcomes in all these areas.

The FFC ran two programmes between September 2024 and July 2025, with a weekly two-hour after-school programme at Rotherham United Football Club. It was delivered in partnership between Rotherham United Community Trust, which has a strong track record in youth engagement, and the Integrated Care System.

It combined fun activities with mentoring and creative health sessions to support emotional wellbeing, confidence, and school engagement. Children co-designed activities at the start of the intervention and each week, to ensure they were meaningful and relevant.

The initiative's main goal was to improve children's mental health and wellbeing by building trust, fostering social connections, and giving them a sense of belonging, agency, and confidence – ultimately supporting better school attendance and engagement in learning. It also aimed to strengthen collaboration across sectors, spark creative solutions to shared challenges, and influence future commissioning models to put children's voices at the centre.

Attendance was consistently high across both cohorts, unusual in programmes of this kind. Parents, youth workers, project staff, and teachers reported that children really enjoyed the club and the friendships they built with peers and youth workers, and the project team indicated that children benefitted from taking part in multiple ways. Participation was linked to improved school engagement and behaviour, alongside gains in confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, and emotional regulation. Children also formed new friendships, strengthened peer relationships, and developed social skills, while becoming more engaged in out-of-school activities. Some children benefitted more than others, depending on the level and complexity of their needs, particularly in their home environment.

Many stakeholders noted that the programme's short timeframe and small group sizes made it difficult to identify clear impacts on school attendance. Overall, early signs suggest encouraging improvements in behaviour and engagement at school. Schools involved in the FFC initiative reported a range of positive outcomes, including enhanced classroom dynamics, pupil behaviour, staff practice, and overall school culture. However, the pilot programme was not extended by the Integrated Care Board following the CHEC, and the end of the initiative was upsetting for the children and other stakeholders.

The Child Health Equity Collaborative (CHEC)

The Children and Young People's Health Equity Collaborative (CHEC) was a three-year partnership which ran from 2022 to 2025 between Barnardo's, the UCL's Institute of Health Equity (IHE), and three ICSs – NHS Birmingham and Solihull, NHS Cheshire and Merseyside and NHS South Yorkshire.

To promote the vision that all children should enjoy good health and positive wellbeing, regardless of circumstance, the CHEC embedded a social determinants of health approach in the health care system, in partnership with the voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, local government, and children and young people themselves.

The CHEC's Goals, Aims and Objectives

Programme Goals

1. To promote the vision for all children and young people (CYP) to enjoy good health and positive wellbeing.
2. To reduce inequalities in CYP's health by acting on the social determinants of health.
3. To improve outcomes for CYP from underserved communities.

Programme Aims

1. ICSs strengthen their focus on the social determinants of child health with the aim of achieving more equitable outcomes for children.
2. To actively involve the VCSE sector in identifying and addressing the social determinants of child health to promote more equitable outcomes for children.
3. To strengthen the embedding of CYP's priorities and insights into ICS strategic planning and decision-making processes.

Programme Objectives

Increase focus within ICSs on the social determinants of child health and child health equity by:

1. Strengthening local partnership working.
2. Delivering an intervention or initiative informed by CYP's insights and that addresses one or more of the social determinants of child health.
3. Improving the monitoring and use of key child health equity data.
4. Actively engaging decision-makers by raising their awareness of child health equity and the social determinants of child health to support informed decision-making.
5. Establishing or strengthening formal mechanisms for capturing, integrating, and acting on CYP's priorities and insights within ICS strategic planning processes.
6. To generate and share learning from the evaluation of interventions and initiatives to inform ICS decision-making, strengthen local system partnerships, and support action on the social determinants of child health.
7. To use programme-level evaluation to understand the overall contribution of the CHEC programme to child health equity, support strategic learning across ICSs, and inform future system-wide approaches

The CHEC programme involved 4 workstreams:

1. The Child Health Equity Framework
2. Data analysis and collation
3. Interventions in the ICS areas
4. Health Equity Champions

This paper evaluates the CHEC intervention in Rotherham, South Yorkshire.

Safe spaces for children and young people

Safe spaces are environments where children and young people feel secure, respected, and able to express themselves without fear of judgement or harm. These settings - including youth clubs, community centres and after-school programmes – aim to provide opportunities to build trusting relationships, develop social and emotional skills, and access early support before difficulties escalate. UK and international research highlights the critical role that safe spaces - both physical and psychological - play in supporting wellbeing, development, and mental health, including reducing stress and anxiety and improving mental wellbeing and interpersonal relationships[1]. The presence of trusted adults, particularly those with lived experience, is identified as a key enabler of positive outcomes[2].

However, there is a persistent lack of accessible, inclusive, and affordable youth-specific spaces where young people feel safe and supported[3]. This gap was echoed by CHEC champions, who emphasised the need for more welcoming spaces that promote wellbeing and social connection[4].

How and why the Friday Fun Club was developed – Background to the programme

The Friday Fun Club was established in South Yorkshire in response to identified gaps in out-of-school provision for children in Years 5 and 6, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. Local and national data indicated rising concerns about children's mental health, wellbeing, and school attendance, with these challenges being most acute during the transition from primary to secondary education. These issues were exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, underfunded youth services, and long waiting times for support.

Development of the programme was led by cross-sector collaboration involving health, education, public health, and voluntary sector partners. The design process was informed by the evidence-based Child Health Equity Collaborative (CHEC) Framework - which highlights educational attainment, attendance, safety, and social connection as key determinants of child health and wellbeing - as well as by national policy directives and local needs assessments. Extensive consultation with over 300 children and young people was central to the process, ensuring that their perspectives directly shaped the priorities and structure of the intervention. Children consistently emphasised the need for safe, accessible spaces where they could belong, form connections, and feel respected and valued.

[1]Meherali, S., et al. (2025) Safe spaces for youth mental health: A scoping review, Public Library of Science (PLos) One; Davies, J., et al. (2024) Shifting the balance towards social interventions: A call for an overhaul of the mental health system (All Party Parliamentary Group [Beyond Pills] report); Raising the Nation Play Commission & Centre for Young Lives (2025) State of Play: An interim report from the Raising the Nation Play Commission

[2]Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Who has access to positive activities, youth clubs and trusted adults?

[3]Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2025) Youth Matters: State of the Nation (Policy Paper); Local Government Association (2025); National Youth Strategy Research Project. (2025). National Youth Strategy research project: Summary report. UK Government

[4]Barnardo's (2024) Children and young people voice their opinions on healthcare in their regions to inform NHS practice and policy

Overview of the Friday Fun Club

The Friday Fun Club ran for 12 months, comprising two six-month interventions for different cohorts (September 2024 – September 2025). It was a weekly, two-hour after-school programme held at Rotherham United Football Club.

The initiative was delivered through a partnership between Rotherham United Community Trust (RUCT), which has a strong track record in youth engagement, and the Integrated Care System (ICS). RUCT led delivery, while the ICS provided initial design support and oversight.

The programme combined fun activities - such as pool, dodgeball, and slime-making - with mentoring and creative health sessions to support emotional wellbeing, confidence, and school engagement. Children co-designed activities at the start of the intervention and on a weekly basis, ensuring that sessions were meaningful and relevant to their interests.

The initiative's main goal was to improve children's mental health and wellbeing by building trust, fostering social connections, and giving them a sense of belonging, agency, and confidence – ultimately supporting better school attendance and engagement in learning. It also aimed to strengthen collaboration across sectors, spark creative solutions to shared challenges among partners, and influence future commissioning models to put children's voices at the centre.

Evaluation approach and limitations

The evaluation primarily drew on qualitative evidence, including 15 interviews with 8 stakeholders (youth workers, project team members, and teachers), 7 of whom were interviewed again in a second phase. Feedback from children and parents was also gathered: the project and delivery team used creative methods such as flashcards and mock press conferences with children, while parents took part in informal 'cake and chat' sessions. Additional evidence came from case studies and project team observations during sessions.

A small number of before-and-after surveys were also completed by children, parents, and teachers, using psychometric tools (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Child & Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM), Children's Motivation Scale (CMS)) alongside a local satisfaction questionnaire. These tools were recommended by the evaluation team to strengthen rigour. However, response rates were low - on average, just over half of pre- and post-surveys were returned - so the data was too limited to draw reliable conclusions.

Who came to the club?

The Friday Fun Club was designed for children aged 9–10 living in Rotherham. The first cohort comprised seven children from the same school (who did not know one another) and was more ethnically diverse than the second cohort. Some had special educational needs or socialisation challenges, but overall, they attended school regularly and were engaged with learning - a mismatch between need and service (this is further explored in the Challenges section).

The second cohort included 8 children from three different schools, many of whom faced barriers to education such as attendance difficulties, behavioural challenges. Many pupils were described as facing a range of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) challenges, and complex Special Educational Needs (SEN), including autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children generally did not participate in other clubs or activities outside school.

Children's engagement and experiences

Overall attendance across both groups was 73.4% (146 out of 199 possible session places). Cohort 1 had higher attendance at 81% (51 out of 63), while Cohort 2 was lower at 69.9% (95 out of 136). The two cohorts had different numbers of sessions, and Cohort 2 missed one week of reporting, which may have affected their results. This level of attendance was described as very good by the youth workers interviewed, who noted that such sustained participation is unusual:

> *"We don't normally see this type of attendance – usually after the first two weeks, it drops off massively."*
>
> **Youth Worker**

> *"I like coming here on a Friday because we get to play dodgeball, and then I work out, and also play with my friends."*
>
> **Child**

Parents, youth workers, project staff, and teachers reported that children really enjoyed the club, often describing Fridays as the highlight of their week. Children particularly valued the creative and physical activities - especially slime-making, cooking, pool, and dodgeball - and the friendships they built with peers and youth workers.

> *"I like to come here because it's very fun, and it warms me quite a lot, to be honest."*
>
> **Child**

Many children developed strong attachments to the club and expressed sadness when it ended. Staff observed that some found it difficult to say goodbye.

> *"We said, this is your last session, and he already knew that ... but he kind of chose to ignore that part, and so he started crying, and was very upset. It took a while for him to stop."*
>
> **Friday Fun Club Project Team**

How the club benefited children

Feedback from children, parents, teachers, youth workers, and the Friday Fun Club project team indicated that children benefited from taking part in the club in multiple ways. Participation was linked to improved school engagement and behaviour, alongside gains in confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, and emotional regulation. Children also formed new friendships, strengthened peer relationships, and developed social skills, while becoming more engaged in out-of-school activities. Some children, however, benefited more than others, depending on the level and complexity of their needs, particularly in their home environment. Individual case studies highlight that children with more complex needs - such as those diagnosed with ASD or ADHD, struggling with peer and family relationships, or experiencing grief - benefited from the club's safe, supportive environment. Improvements included better emotional regulation, increased confidence, enhanced peer relationships, and successful transition to other community activities.

Improved school attendance, engagement, and behaviour

Some parents noticed positive changes in their children's behaviour and engagement at school. For example, one parent described a "massive difference in little ways," sharing that their child was no longer "getting told off each day."

Teachers also highlighted the progress they had seen: one remarked that pupils who took part in the first cohort "really impressed us with their attitudes, it was really noticeable," while another noted that the club had nurtured children's love for sport and physical activity, both at school and beyond the classroom.

Many stakeholders noted, however, that the programme's short timeframe and small group size made it difficult to identify clear impacts on school attendance. Overall, while early signs point to encouraging improvements in behaviour and engagement, it is still too soon to confirm measurable changes in attendance.

Improved confidence, self-esteem, self-expression, and emotional regulation

Many stakeholders reported that children showed signs of increased confidence, self-esteem, and social skills. Some became more talkative and assertive, gradually feeling more comfortable expressing themselves in group settings. As one teacher observed, "Pupils [from cohort 2] showed clear signs of confidence development … and they felt more comfortable expressing themselves."

Youth workers also noted improvements in children's ability to process feelings and express frustrations more constructively. One described how "a child's attitude changed drastically … they were more open about things and talkative … [they] knew how to chat, how to handle [their] emotions a bit better, talking to me [and other youth workers] about things that were annoying or upsetting [them]."

New friendships, strengthened peer relations, and social skills

Most stakeholders reported that children were forming new friendships, improving their interactions with others, and feeling more socially connected. The club created opportunities to build relationships both within sessions and beyond, including at school.

Youth workers and teachers shared examples of this change. One youth worker said, "ten weeks down the line, they were thanking each other for making their Friday nights fun." Another noted that a child "now plays with a new peer group at school, whereas before she would sit alone in the classroom." A teacher from Cohort 2 echoed these positive changes, explaining that many of their pupils formed peer relationships they previously lacked. Another teacher, from Cohort 1, reflected: "The club enabled friendships and social interactions … it helped them develop these relationships, which was then supportive of them transitioning to school."

Youth workers also observed children beginning to show greater empathy, tolerance, and consideration for others: "The friendship thing, that's most obvious to me … they tolerate each other a lot more … conflicts have now gone out of the window."

Taking part in other out-of-school activities and clubs

The Friday Fun Club successfully increased children's engagement in activities beyond school, both in the community and at home. Many children who had not previously joined clubs or groups were now taking part in sports and dance activities locally. Parents also described their children becoming curious about new hobbies and sports, showing more interest in trying things such as table tennis, or enjoying creative activities like making slime together at home.

Improved mental wellbeing

Stakeholders rarely articulated "improved mental health and wellbeing" as a direct benefit for children, and, as noted above, the psychometric data collected was too limited to draw reliable conclusions. However, the Child Health Equity Framework - developed from the latest evidence and children's own insights - shows that many of the benefits reported through the Friday Fun Club, such as forming friendships, feeling part of something, being accepted for who they are, and having safe spaces (explored further in the later section on how the club made a difference to children), are key factors that contribute to children's mental health and wellbeing.

How the club benefited schools

Schools involved in the Friday Fun Club initiative reported a range of positive outcomes, including improvements in classroom dynamics, pupil behaviour, staff practice, and overall school culture.

One teacher noted that children who took part in Cohort 1 were often influential within their peer groups. After participating in the club, these pupils showed greater involvement in school activities, such as Sports Day and a karaoke afternoon, and more positive engagement overall, which contributed to a more settled atmosphere for the wider year group. As the teacher explained:

> *"I keep behaviour management records and safeguarding records, and I can honestly tell you that that year group finished the year so well … we had a really settled period of time … the children had a pivotal, fundamental role in the harmony and ambience for everyone else."*
>
> **Friday Fun Club Project Team**

A youth worker described how a pupil had shared a sensory sensitivity during the club, which affected their experience at school. The youth worker liaised with the school to implement a practical adjustment, which helped the pupil feel more comfortable and supported. As a result, the pupil's confidence and engagement increased, leading to new opportunities for leadership and participation in school activities.

Wider benefits – families and system-level impact

The Friday Fun Club initiative generated benefits beyond the children, positively influencing families, partner organisations, and local systems. Practitioners reported strengthened sibling relationships and how they were able to advocate for children by linking families to wider support. For example, a youth worker raised concerns directly with teachers during a Team Around the Family (TAF) meeting, resulting in a child receiving a discrete 'time-out' card at school when additional support was needed. This removed the family as the intermediary, who may not always have the resources, confidence, or skills to advocate for such practical changes.

> *"In the last two or three sessions, they started to share more about school and the barriers they were facing. That led to me getting involved in the TAF, where I could relay their concerns to the teachers directly, rather than it being the parent."*
>
> **Youth Worker**

The programme also enhanced multi-agency collaboration, building stronger relationships between schools, health, social care, and the voluntary sector:

> *"It's certainly built up our relationships with the voluntary sector ... we've got all these contacts now within their schools, within their local areas.... And vice versa, they'd learned a lot from us as well about the health system."*
>
> **Friday Fun Club Project Team**

Friday Fun Club insights have informed service design and commissioning approaches, and the programme has been showcased at forums such as the South Yorkshire Child Health Poverty Summit, highlighting child-led, relationship-focused approaches. While many professional and system-level outcomes were achieved, some were only partially realised. Due to the short timeframe and small scale of the evaluation, sustained multi-agency practice changes and the full integration of children's voices into policy and commissioning decisions were not measurably observed, representing longer-term ambitions for the initiative and ICB.

What made the club work

Several connected factors were key to the Friday Fun Club's success, highlighted by children, parents, teachers, youth workers, and the project team.

Creating a safe, supportive space

A big part of how the club worked was creating a safe, supportive space where children felt secure, could explore their interests, and build trusting relationships. Holding the club at Rotherham United football grounds made it feel special and different from school or home, which encouraged children to value the sessions and look forward to them. Small group sizes helped children with additional needs feel included, reduced stress, and made joining in manageable. A mix of activities - like pool, dodgeball, badminton, cooking, or playing on the PlayStation - gave children choices about how to take part, whether that was burning off energy, calming down, or relaxing. The setting also created quiet opportunities for reflection and conversation, such as canal walks, where children could share personal thoughts in a more relaxed way.

Child-led, flexible approach

The child-led, flexible approach strengthened this safe environment. Children could decide which activities to join, how long to stay with them, and when to use their phones or screens, which helped avoid conflict and built rapport. They also gave feedback and suggested activities for future sessions. Having this choice helped them feel more confident because they could try things at their own pace, while seeing their ideas respected and acted on helped them believe that their opinions mattered. This sense of being heard made it easier for children to trust youth workers and to share their worries and needs.

Relaxed atmosphere

The relaxed, non-judgmental atmosphere - free from school pressures and behaviour rules - meant children could engage at their own pace. Youth workers noticed when something seemed wrong and checked in gently, while giving children the choice to talk when they were ready. They also acted as advocates, for example by working with schools to arrange adjustments for children with sensory needs. This reassured children that someone was on their side. By responding in a respectful, fair way - rather than punishing or excluding - youth workers helped children manage emotions and feel safe to open up. Because they were not in formal roles like teachers or safeguarding leads, children saw them as genuine allies who cared about their wellbeing.

Consistency and diversity among youth workers

A small group of youth workers were able to build trust over time, while a mix of ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds among the team gave children more chances to connect and feel comfortable. Celebrating children's successes further boosted their confidence and motivation.

Club duration

The six-month length of the club gave time for trust and progress to grow, though some people felt even longer would be needed for lasting change.

Partnership-working

Finally, strong partnership working between ICS, VCSE partners, and RUCT enabled the combination of different strengths - research, delivery, and sports- and youth-work- based engagement - and allowed the programme to adapt well to challenges.

Key challenges and lessons learned

Despite its successes, the evaluation also surfaced some delivery challenges.

Structured activities were less engaging for children

Children across both cohorts often pushed back against structured activities like the memory box or feelings thermometer, which were designed to explore school engagement and emotional wellbeing. Many children expected the club to be mostly about sport and games, and some didn't understand why school had picked them to attend. For others, especially the boys, creative tasks simply did not resonate. In practice, children opened up far more through informal chats and relaxed activities. These gave youth workers the clearest insight into their wellbeing and school lives, even though the outcomes were harder to measure. The structured activities also served as a useful framework, helping delivery teams maintain the club's intended outcomes as a guiding focus, even as they prioritised more relaxed and informal approaches that better engaged the children.

Differences in approaches

Partnership working was a real strength, though not always straightforward. The ICB tended to prioritise structured, measurable, screen-free activities, while youth workers favoured flexible, relationship-based approaches. These differing priorities sometimes created tension, with the project team feeling the need to step in more than anticipated to ensure activities remained linked to outcomes and evaluation. At times, they also felt constrained in raising concerns, particularly as they did not have direct management responsibility for delivery staff.

Engaging schools

Engaging schools proved difficult. After initial enthusiasm, some schools struggled to follow through on commitments such as contacting parents or returning evaluation data. Eligibility was also sometimes unclear: in the first cohort, teachers misunderstood the criteria and selected children who did not have problems with attendance (although they did have other needs). This caused confusion for parents and reduced the club's impact. We heard conflicting accounts from schools and the delivery team. Schools said they would have welcomed more communication from the ICB and more opportunities to visit the club, while some youth workers said they had offered additional engagement opportunities that schools did not take up.

Gaps in information sharing

Youth workers reported instances where they were not fully informed about children's complex backgrounds - such as SEND needs or experiences of recent trauma - before beginning their work with them. This was attributed to limited time during the planning and delivery of the pilot initiative, which also limited the full and timely implementation of formal processes and protocols for information sharing. Without this context, youth workers sometimes misinterpreted children's behaviour and were less able to provide effective, tailored support from the outset.

Endings were hard

Some children found it hard and were visibly upset when the club came to an end, but there was no clear or consistent plan for managing this transition. Youth workers tried to ease the process by linking children into other clubs or sports teams, but much of this relied on goodwill and personal contacts rather than formal referral pathways. Stakeholders reflected on how challenging endings can be: for some children, the Friday Fun Club provided sufficient support, while others still needed help and found the ending sudden and unsettling.

Because many interventions are short-term, practitioner relationships are often transient, which can compound vulnerable children's difficulties in developing trust in adults. Although the Friday Fun Club ran for longer than many comparable initiatives (six months, rather than the more typical six to twelve weeks), children's visible sadness at its conclusion suggests a need for more sustained, longer-term provision. Without this continuity, there is a risk that endings may inadvertently compound vulnerability and undermine the trust and stability that programmes like this work hard to build[5].

Evaluation struggles

Evaluation proved challenging. Standardised, paper-based tools recommended by the evaluation team for rigour, were often burdensome, culturally or linguistically inappropriate, and produced limited or unreliable data. Creative, child-friendly approaches designed and implemented by the project and delivery teams - like flashcards and interactive games - were more engaging and gave richer insights but didn't allow precise measurement of outcomes. Schools and families were also often unable or unwilling to complete evaluation forms due to workload pressures, language barriers, or concerns about being judged.

Peer-support component didn't happen as planned

Finally, the peer-support element of the programme did not develop as intended. While strong friendships formed within the first cohort, children were reluctant to integrate or mentor participants from subsequent cohorts. This reflected their desire for a safe and consistent group but limited opportunities to extend peer support benefits.

[5]Early Intervention Foundation (2018) Building trusted relationships for vulnerable children and young people with public services

Recommendations for future delivery

The evaluation findings point to important things for South Yorkshire ICS and other health and care systems to consider when running similar initiatives in the future.

- Prioritise child-led goal setting and co-design, giving children opportunities to choose activities, provide feedback, and shape sessions. This helps ensure interventions reflect children's priorities, build confidence, and foster a sense of being heard and respected.

- Recognise and value the different strengths partners bring. Youth workers' relational expertise is balanced and strengthened by the outcomes-focused approach of health and care systems. Clear roles, co-designed activities, regular communication, and mutual understanding of each other's methods can help ensure these approaches complement each other, improving programme coherence and effectiveness.

- Evaluation should use light-touch, child-friendly, and creative approaches, embedded within activities rather than imposed as formal tasks. Wherever possible, children and families should be involved in designing the evaluation methods to ensure they are acceptable and easily understood. While quantitative measures can be useful, and necessary, for larger-scale interventions, this small pilot clearly benefited more from qualitative feedback, observation, and case studies.

- Systematic and timely information sharing between schools, ICBs, and VCSE partners is critical, and adequate time for this should be built into the planning stage of any initiative. Access to relevant information about children's backgrounds – including SEND, mental health, and family circumstances – enables practitioners to tailor interventions effectively and prevent misunderstandings. Information sharing should follow agreed protocols, use secure digital systems, and include regular briefings or handovers between partners before sessions begin. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly understood by all partners, and information should be shared in a way that maintains children's trust, with safeguarding concerns always prioritised.

- Youth workers should also have formal mechanisms to share relevant information with schools in a way that maintains children's trust - the Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings were an effective way of doing this during the initiative, but not all children will have this support. Non-safeguarding information should only be shared with the child's knowledge, while safeguarding concerns must always be disclosed, and agreed protocols and secure systems should be used.

- Work closely with schools from the outset to clarify eligibility, align expectations, and co-design activities. This helps ensure the right children are selected, reduces confusion for families, and maximises programme impact.

- Endings should be planned and handled sensitively, with clear, repeated communication with children and their families, and coordinated transition plans across agencies, including schools, to help children adjust and maintain the benefits of the programme. Abrupt or poorly managed endings can be especially distressing for children who have experienced loss or instability. Programmes should aim for longer-term, consistent support and tailor the duration and closure of interventions to each child's needs. Where ongoing support is needed, continuity should be ensured through extended involvement or clear links to other services. This flexible approach helps sustain children's trust and stability and protects the progress they have made.

Conclusion

The Friday Fun Club was built around children's voices and priorities. Local children and young people shaped its design, identifying the need and wish for a consistent, safe space – both physically and emotionally – close to home, where they had choice, autonomy, and felt respected. Trusted relationships were formed with adults outside formal teaching or safeguarding roles, who offered tailored, non-judgemental support.

The initiative successfully engaged children who had not previously taken part in out-of-school activities or interventions. Although there were challenges with structured activities, participant selection, endings, and evaluation, children enjoyed attending the club, and many were upset when it ended. The project supported improvements in children's school engagement, behaviour, confidence, self-expression, emotional regulation, and social skills – factors that contribute to positive mental health and wellbeing. It also brought wider benefits for schools, families, and cross-system collaboration.

The positive reception and promising outcomes from this pilot suggest that South Yorkshire ICB could build on this model to create more safe, child-led spaces that promote children's mental health, wellbeing, and engagement with school. There is also potential to embed future delivery across South Yorkshire and beyond within existing frameworks, such as Mental Health Support Teams or neighbourhood health models.

Future initiatives should continue to prioritise co-design with children, support systematic information sharing between schools and delivery partners, manage endings carefully, and use creative, proportionate approaches to evaluation. Any expansion should be supported by a larger, mixed-methods evaluation to capture both outcomes and experiences.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Evaluation methods used

The evaluation of the Friday Fun Club utilised a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies. Methods were selected to capture changes in mental health and wellbeing, school engagement, and participant experiences across the intervention period.

Quantitative methods

Standardised wellbeing and motivation measures

- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ): Used to assess children's overall mental health and wellbeing at the start and end of the intervention. Completed by either parents or teachers (to be consistent across participants), requiring approximately 5–10 minutes per child, available in paper or online format.
- Child & Youth Resilience Measure – Revised (CYRM-R): Used to measure aspects of children's resilience and wellbeing at the start and end of the intervention, completed by the child. The adapted version used a 3-point scale to suit age and feedback from university partners; the impact of this adaptation on scoring was noted.
- Children's Motivation Scale: Used to assess motivation and social drive, administered at the start of the intervention and then monthly. Completed by parents, with results scored on a scaled system.

School and intervention engagement data

- Attendance and engagement data: School data sheets were created to record attendance, lateness, reasons for absence, homework completion, and behaviour records. However, this data was not available within the timeframe of the CHEC intervention evaluation.
- Intervention attendance and engagement tracking: Weekly attendance and participation in intervention activities were tracked by RUCT staff. Tools to monitor participation and engagement levels were discussed and developed in collaboration with delivery partners.
- User demographics: Registration forms were created to capture demographic information for all participants.

Qualitative Methods

Observational data and staff reflections

Youth workers and delivery staff recorded detailed observations of each session, documenting individual and group engagement, participation in activities, and behavioural responses. Staff reflections included notes on the effectiveness of specific activities, the level of resistance or enthusiasm among participants, and adaptations made to suit individual needs.

Semi-structured interviews and feedback conversations

Interviews were conducted with staff, parents, and children to gather feedback on experiences, barriers to engagement, and perceived impacts of the programme. Feedback tools were developed for children (administered every third session), parents (mid-point and end), and professionals (at key points). Adaptations to feedback tools were made to ensure appropriateness for each group.

Case studies and individual mentorship reports

Case studies were developed for selected children, describing the content and outcomes of 1:1 mentorship sessions. These included interventions such as the introduction of sleep hygiene routines, mindfulness and regulation techniques, and conflict management strategies. Case studies also noted the uptake of suggested activities by children and families.

Creative and experiential activities

Participation in creative activities

Engagement rates were recorded for structured activities such as the memory box, obstacle course, and school superhero activity. Participation was variable, with some children expressing reluctance or resistance. Individual and group responses were documented, and activities were adapted or replaced as needed.

Group discussions and experiential learning

Facilitators led group discussions on factors affecting school engagement, including hunger, digital device use, and aspirations. Experiential activities such as nature walks and cooking sessions were implemented to promote wellbeing and healthy routines. Participation and reported enjoyment were documented, and facilitators followed up with parents to assess uptake of activities at home.

Data management and administration

Evaluation activities were scheduled at multiple time points: baseline (start of intervention), mid-point (for some feedback), monthly (for motivation scale), and end of intervention. Data collection responsibilities were shared across RUCT staff, school key persons, and parents or teachers, as appropriate. The evaluation team also discussed the need for consistency in administration and the impact of tool adaptations on results.

Appendix 2: Creative wellbeing activities

A diverse range of creative wellbeing activities was implemented as part of the Friday Fun Club intervention, designed to support emotional regulation, social connection, and healthy routines. Activities were adapted in response to group dynamics, individual preferences, and identified needs.

Group and individual wellbeing activities

Feelings thermometer

A visual tool introduced to help children identify and communicate their emotional state at the start of each session. This approach draws on emotion check-in and self-regulation strategies from social and emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, which emphasise the importance of recognising and naming emotions as a foundation for wellbeing and classroom engagement. Children were invited to place a sticker with their name next to the feeling that best represented their school day. While initial group participation was limited, some children engaged individually, which facilitated follow-up conversations about managing feelings such as tiredness, boredom, and anxiety. Individual strategies discussed included sleep hygiene routines and mindfulness techniques (e.g., use of the Headspace app, breathing exercises).

Memory box activity

Participants were invited to design personal memory boxes and use them to store notes about feelings or experiences at school. This creative approach is informed by trauma-informed and narrative practices, which use tangible objects and storytelling to help children process and express emotions. The activity prompted discussions about bullying, conflict management, and peer support strategies. One participant repurposed her box for imaginative play, demonstrating flexibility in use.

Obstacle course and school superhero activity

These structured activities were designed to prompt reflection on barriers to school engagement and personal strengths. Such activities are inspired by solution-focused and strengths-based approaches, which encourage children to identify challenges and recognise their own resources. Group participation was limited, with feedback indicating a lack of perceived relevance for this cohort.

One-to-one mentorship and bespoke support

Some children responded more positively to individual mentorship sessions, which provided opportunities for tailored support and guidance. One-to-one approaches are supported by research on the effectiveness of mentoring relationships in promoting resilience, emotional regulation, and school engagement. These sessions addressed a range of topics, including attention and focus strategies, managing relationships with teachers, and future aspirations. Interventions included introducing fidget/sensory tools (evidence-based for supporting children with additional needs), discussing subject preferences, and supporting family engagement with recommended routines.

Group discussions

Facilitators led group discussions on factors affecting school experience, such as morning hunger and excessive screen time. Group discussions as a method are grounded in participatory and restorative practice literature, which highlights the value of peer dialogue in building social skills and shared understanding.

Experiential and practical activities

Nature walk and scavenger hunt

In response to high levels of screen use and limited outdoor activity, a group nature walk along the local canal was organised. The activity included a scavenger hunt and discussion of the benefits of nature and exercise for wellbeing. Nature-based interventions are supported by research demonstrating positive effects on mood, stress, and social connection in children and young people.

Cooking and breakfast sessions

Recognising that most participants did not eat breakfast before school, facilitators organised a cooking session focused on preparing pancakes with healthy and preferred toppings. The session was preceded by a lesson on kitchen safety and the importance of breakfast. Cooking and shared meals are widely used in youth work and health promotion to foster life skills, healthy routines, and social bonding.

Participation and engagement

Engagement with creative wellbeing activities varied by individual and cohort. While some children were reluctant to participate in structured group activities, most responded positively to experiential, practical, and one-to-one approaches. Activities were continually adapted in response to feedback and observed needs.