

Hartlepool Sport: Urban Sport, Urban Play, Pride in Place

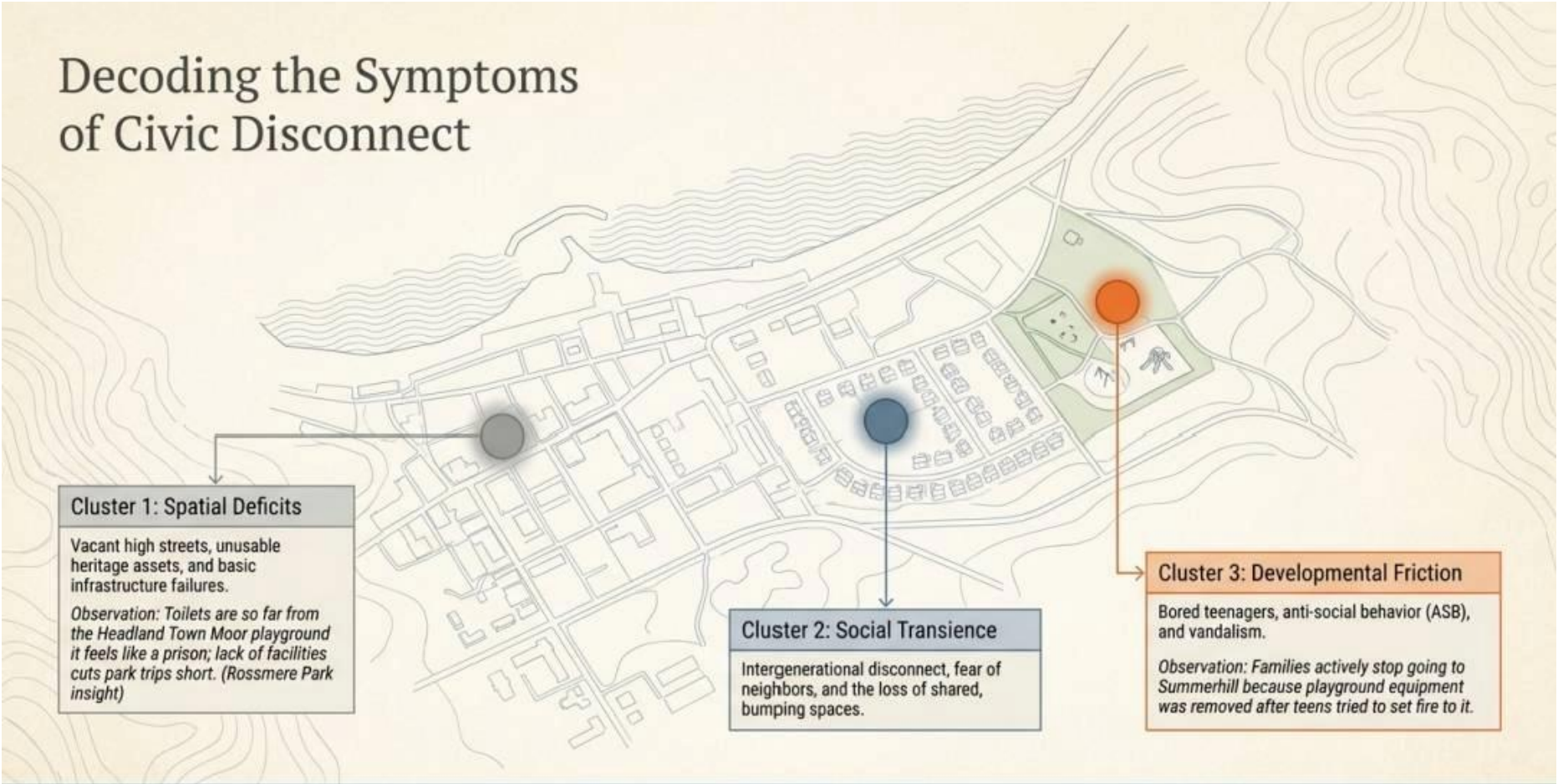
Place Expansion Insight – April 2026

The Topography of Place and Potential

The background of the slide features a stylized topographic map. It consists of numerous thin, grey contour lines that create a sense of depth and terrain. In the center of the map, there is a prominent circular area with concentric orange lines, suggesting a focal point or a specific area of interest. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, oranges, and a light beige background.

A spatial and social blueprint for Hartlepool. Moving from bubble-wrapped safety to supported independence to unlock civic regeneration.

Decoding the Symptoms of Civic Disconnect



Cluster 1: Spatial Deficits
Vacant high streets, unusable heritage assets, and basic infrastructure failures.
Observation: Toilets are so far from the Headland Town Moor playground it feels like a prison; lack of facilities cuts park trips short. (Rossmere Park insight)

Cluster 2: Social Transience
Intergenerational disconnect, fear of neighbors, and the loss of shared, bumping spaces.

Cluster 3: Developmental Friction
Bored teenagers, anti-social behavior (ASB), and vandalism.
Observation: Families actively stop going to Summerhill because playground equipment was removed after teens tried to set fire to it.

Core Insight: Traditional interventions treat these as isolated issues. They are actually interconnected symptoms of a population that has lost agency over its physical environment.

The Contraction of Physical Autonomy

The 1971 Boundary
~80% of UK 7-8 year olds traveled to school independently. Fostered unstructured navigation and independent resolution.

The Modern Boundary
Only ~9% travel independently today.

The Fading Waypoints



1
Vertical Exploration
testing limits



2
Unstructured Navigation
exploring local spaces



3
Independent Resolution
settling disputes without adults
directing every step

The Anatomy of Modern Environments

	The Screen Environment	The Physical Environment
Feedback Loop	Algorithmically curated, predictable, engineered to satisfy.	Organic, unpredictable, requires adaptation.
Risk Profile	Zero physical risk, high emotional/attention risk.	Natural physical hazards, requiring managed risk assessment.
Primary Skill Developed	Dopaminergic response and passive consumption.	Resilience, spatial judgment, and physical confidence.

Risk isn't the opposite of safety. It's one of the ways children learn how to keep themselves safe.

The Safety Spectrum Framework



We must intentionally design spaces that force young people out of the bubble wrap and into the center zone.

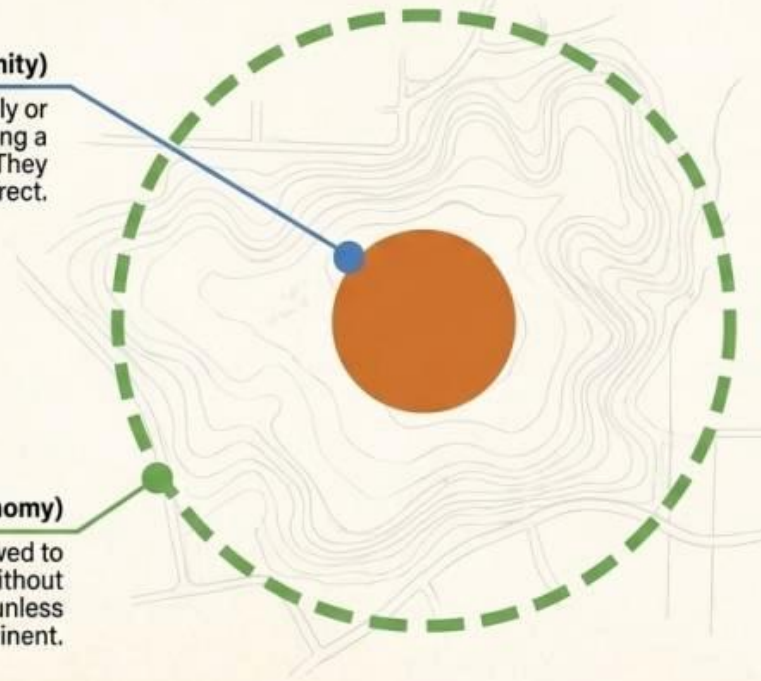
Operationalizing Supported Independence

The Anchor (Adult Proximity)

The adult remains visually or audibly accessible, providing a psychological safety net. They observe rather than direct.

The Testing Ground (Child Autonomy)

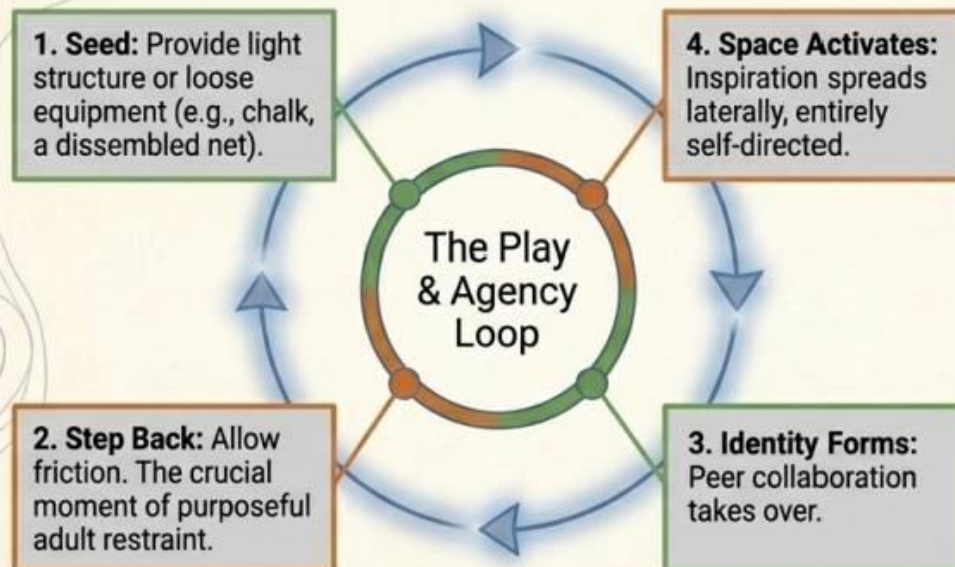
The space where the child is allowed to try, fail, adjust, and try again without immediate adult intervention unless severe injury is imminent.



The Core Rule

The goal is not the absence of adults, but the purposeful restraint of adult interference.

Designing for Agency, Not Control



Observations from Headland Event

The Pickleball Net

Kids were handed a net and left alone. Mild friction led to collaboration.

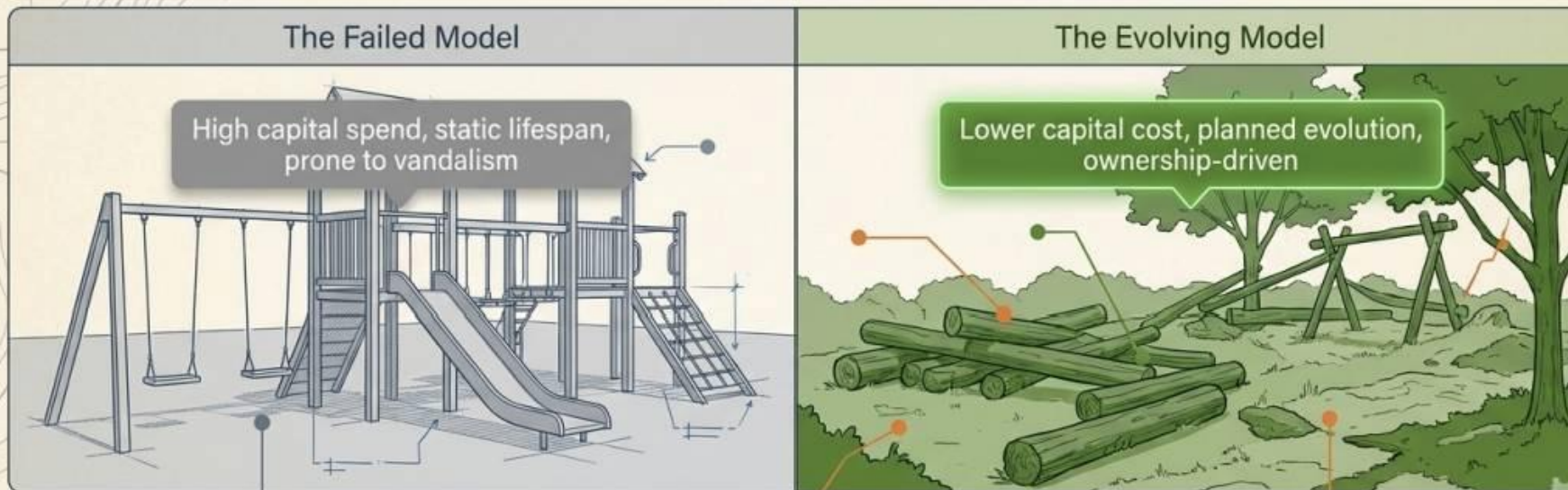
Overheard: We're Sports Leaders, we should be able to work it out.

The Chalk Art

An adult drew Sonic the Hedgehog and stepped away. Kids immediately copied it. Permission was granted through visibility, not instruction.

Core Insight: Places become safer and more active when people are allowed to shape them, not just use them.

From Static Equipment to Evolving Environments



The Teen Provision Principle

If it's built explicitly for them, they are significantly less likely to destroy it. (Insight from Hertfordshire comparison).

Refresh Cycles

Spaces must be refreshed and enhanced every few years to prevent staleness. Capital spend must account for planned evolution, not just build once and walk away.

Natural Play Integration

Moving away from static structures toward environments that require self-directed navigation (loose wood, climbing trees).

Working with Fascination, Not Against It



■ **The Current Reality:** Young people in Hartlepool are drawn to fire-setting due to a toxic mix of boredom, lack of teen-specific spaces, and raw curiosity (e.g., the destruction of Summerhill equipment).

■ **The Traditional Response:** Shut down the fascination, police the parks, and remove amenities. Result: Further alienation.



■ **The Spatial Intervention:** Create psychologically safe, managed environments to explore that curiosity responsibly. Turning the ultimate unmanaged risk into the ultimate tool for engagement.

The Hearth: Turning Space into Place



The Anchor

Fire naturally slows the conversation down. Instead of formal answers, it elicits personal stories and emotional connections.

Voices from the Fire

"I've never felt safe sharing like this before."

"This corner used to feel so forgotten."

The Output

It reveals local knowledge and validates the need for adaptable spaces.

The Anatomy of a Hearth Session

6–12 young people

60–90 minutes

Outdoor, hyper-local setting.

Step 1: Optional Lead-in

Walking Quest to explore the area, gather questions, and notice notice place.

Step 2: Arrival

Fire is lit safely; informal welcome to the space.

Step 3: Engagement

Shared responsibility around the fire (safe handling, maintaining the burn).

Step 4: Conversation

Prompted, but not directed. Stories take precedence over answers.

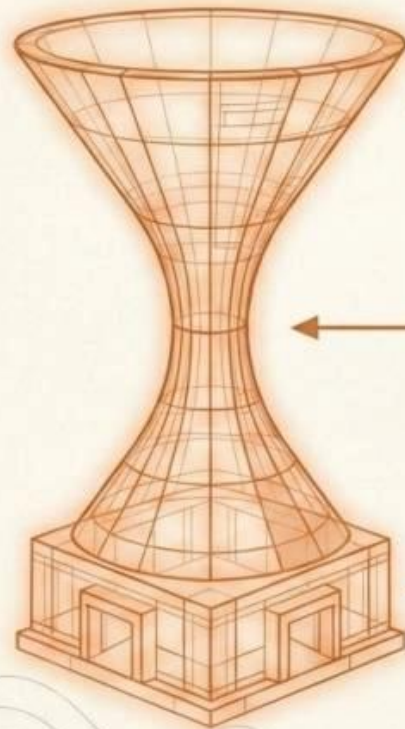
Step 5: Reflection

Discovering what matters and what should change in their community.

Matrix: Shifting the Engagement Paradigm

	Traditional	The Hearth
Mechanism	Uses structured insight (School deep dives) and formal voice mechanisms.	Provides a slower, relational, unstructured space.
Output	Seeks formal answers and survey data.	Surfaces authentic, place-based stories and memories.
Environment	Occurs in indoor, institutional settings.	Outdoor and hyper-local.
Accessibility	Caters to highly engaged youth.	Serves as an entry point for disengaged young people who actively avoid formal settings.

The Fire Responsibility Funnel



Top: Misuse, Risk-taking, and raw Curiosity. Capturing the energy currently driving ASB in parks.

Middle: The Managed Fire Space. Understanding how fire works. Learning safe handling, physical boundaries, and emotional regulation.

Bottom: Experiencing Trust. Reframing the relationship with the environment from destruction and misuse to respect, stewardship, and pride.

The Civic Ripple Effect



Immediate: More open, honest conversations. Calm engagement from young people who typically avoid formal settings.

Short-term: Rich, grounded insights linked to real places. Improved behaviors in parks and public spaces. A drop in vandalism as ownership ownership takes root.

Long-term: Increased civic agency. Stronger pathways into leadership and community roles. A cultural shift in how town space is used, valued, and maintained.

Synthesis Statement:
Fixing the high street starts by trusting the youth in the park.

Rebuilding the Radius



We cannot return to 1971, nor should we ignore the reality of today.
But we can deliberately architect environments that demand physical engagement,
introduce manageable risk, and gradually expand the boundaries of childhood.

Resilience is built in the spaces where adults step back.

Hartlepool Pride in Place: Regeneration and Community Innovation Briefing

Executive Summary

The Hartlepool Pride in Place (PiP) Programme is a comprehensive regeneration initiative focused on high streets, heritage, and green spaces. Its central objective is to move from traditional "top-down" provision to a model of **community agency and stewardship**. Analysis of recent Innovation Days and stakeholder workshops reveals that Hartlepool's residents and partners prioritize the activation of existing assets over the creation of new ones.

Critical insights include the necessity of "managed risk" in youth development—specifically through initiatives like "The Hearth"—to counteract the "shrinking radius" of modern childhood. Furthermore, there is a clear consensus that public spaces must be designed for agency, requiring a shift in local authority roles from "controllers" to "enablers." Addressing fundamental barriers—such as safety concerns, maintenance gaps (e.g., public toilets and lighting), and the "poverty premium"—is essential for fostering long-term civic pride and sustainable community ownership.



Strategic Framework: The Four Interventions

The programme is structured around four primary interventions designed to drive regeneration and cultural growth:

Intervention	Focus Areas
Intervention 1	Funding for improvements to town centres, neighbourhoods, and high streets. Includes public realm repairs, shop-front design guides, and disability accessibility.
Intervention 2	Creating and improving green spaces. Focuses on parks, community gardens, urban tree planting, and managing natural features in public spaces.

Intervention 3	Funding for local arts, cultural, heritage, and creative initiatives. Supports artist showcases, maker spaces, and collaborative networks.
Intervention 4	Place-based opportunities in Hartlepool, emphasizing strategic alignment, deliverability, and long-term impact for residents.

Re-imagining Youth Engagement: The Hearth and Managed Risk

A central theme emerging from the research is the need to reframe how the town engages with its youth, particularly regarding anti-social behavior and physical autonomy.

The Hearth: Youth Fire Circles

This project aims to turn "risk into responsibility" by bringing young people together around a managed fire.

- **Primal Social Anchor:** Fire acts as a mechanism to slow down conversation, eliciting personal stories and emotional connections to place rather than formal answers.
- **Psychological Safety:** Provides a "slower, relational space" for disengaged youth who typically avoid formal settings like youth forums.
- **Mechanism:** A 5-step process (Lead-in, Arrival, Engagement, Conversation, Reflection) designed to build trust over extracting data.
- **Philosophy:** "Working with fascination, not against it." Instead of shutting down curiosities (like fire-setting), it provides a safe environment to explore them responsibly.

The "Shrinking Radius" of Childhood

Data indicates a severe contraction in physical autonomy for Hartlepool's youth:

- **Autonomy Loss:** In 1971, ~80% of 7-8 year olds traveled to school independently; today, that figure has dropped to ~9%.
- **Digital Encroachment:** Typical screen use for ages 5-15 is 3-5 hours per day (30-40+ hours per week), far exceeding WHO guidelines.
- **The Paradox of Safety:** By removing all physical hazards, the "exact mechanism through which young people develop internal risk assessment" is also removed. Resilience is built when adults step back and allow for "Supported Independence."

Community Stewardship and Public Realm Design

Stakeholders emphasize that for regeneration to be successful, residents must transition from being "users" of space to "shapers" of it.

Principles of Design for Agency

- **Seed and Step Back:** Effective engagement occurs when a light structure is provided (e.g., a pickleball net or chalk for drawing) and adults allow friction to happen. This leads to identity formation (e.g., "We're Sports Leaders") and ownership.

- **Teen-Specific Zones:** Feedback indicates anti-social behavior is often "misdiagnosed boredom and exclusion." Teens require spaces explicitly designed for them (skate/BMX/scooter zones) rather than child-centric spaces they have aged out of.
- **Natural Play:** Stakeholders advocate for "natural play parks" with trees to climb and "loose parts" rather than static, built structures that never change.

Maintenance and Infrastructure Barriers

Significant barriers to usage of public spaces were identified:

- **The "Toilet Priority":** Parents report cutting trips short or avoiding parks entirely if facilities are closed or of poor quality (compared by one resident to "prison toilets").
- **Maintenance Decay:** The removal of playground equipment (often due to vandalism/fire-setting) prevents regular usage.
- **Connectivity:** Poor transport links (e.g., the train station not being connected by bus) and a lack of cycleways/footpaths hinder access to assets like the Marina or Headland.

Key Challenges and System Gaps

Category	Identified Issues
Governance	Lack of transparency in council spending; 90% of decision-makers do not live in the town; "risk mitigation culture" limits innovation.
Economic	The "poverty premium"; cost-of-living pressures; vacant shops and empty buildings within communities.
Social	"Online scaremongering" and trauma-driven narratives; fear/mistrust of neighbours; loss of shared spaces (e.g., removed benches).
Systemic	"Over-structured" environments for children; difficulty navigating insurance for community land use; lack of a central directory for activities.

Actionable Opportunities and Ideas

Synthesis of workshop feedback yielded several high-priority opportunities for innovation:

Asset Repurposing and Activation

- **Creative Hubs:** Using vacant shops and buildings for community use, startups, or "Creative Zones."
- **Town Hall Hub:** Converting the Town Hall into a cultural hub with an engaging cafe space.
- **Pop-ups:** Using shipping containers for shared community equipment in parks and pop-up coffee carts to encourage meeting.

Heritage and Communication

- **History Walks:** Developing entertaining talks and storyboards to celebrate local history.
- **Non-Digital Comms:** Using "Welcome Packs" or books in simple language to reach those not engaged online.
- **Visual Wayfinding:** Using ground signs and clever signage to highlight points of interest.

Environmental Stewardship

- **Community Orchards:** Establishing mini-allotments in unused land or alleyways.
- **Linear Forests:** Implementing "linear forest" models (e.g., Milton Keynes model) to increase tree canopy.
- **Litter Incentives:** Creating a reward system for litter picking to build on the "Big Town Tidy Up."

Important Quotes and Stakeholder Insights

"Risk isn't the opposite of safety. It's one of the ways children learn how to keep themselves safe." — *The Shrinking Radius Presentation*

"If it's built for them [teens], they won't destroy it." — *Resident Feedback on Teen Provision*

"Places become safer, more active, and more valued when people are allowed to shape them — not just use them." — *Innovation Day Workshop Synthesis*

"We're Sports Leaders, we should be able to work it out." — *Observed youth interaction during an unstructured challenge*

"I've never felt safe sharing like this before... This corner used to feel so forgotten." — *Youth participant in a "Hearth" session*