

# Hartlepool Sport: Hartlepool Civic Commons and Youth Engagement

Place Expansion Insight – February 2026

# Animation Over Infrastructure

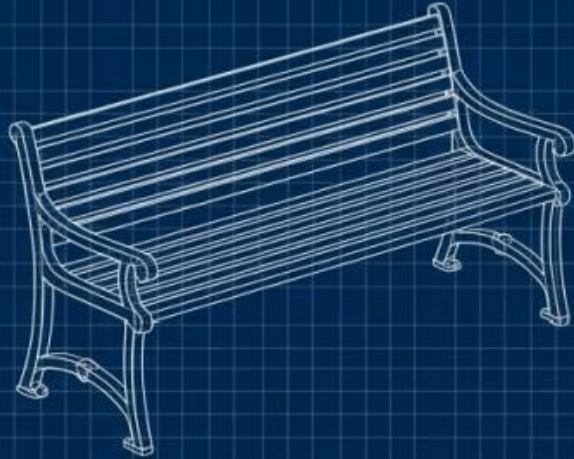
A Strategic Mandate for the Hartlepool Waterfront Masterplan

What do you do there?  
- bought by sword  
- Asldng  
- Saw the Canon

What like about it?  
- liked museum  
- liked making coins

Distilling grassroots insight into civic strategy.

# The Old Assumption



**Capital Investment:** We build the space, assuming they will come.

**Result:** Technically available, practically unused.

# The New Reality

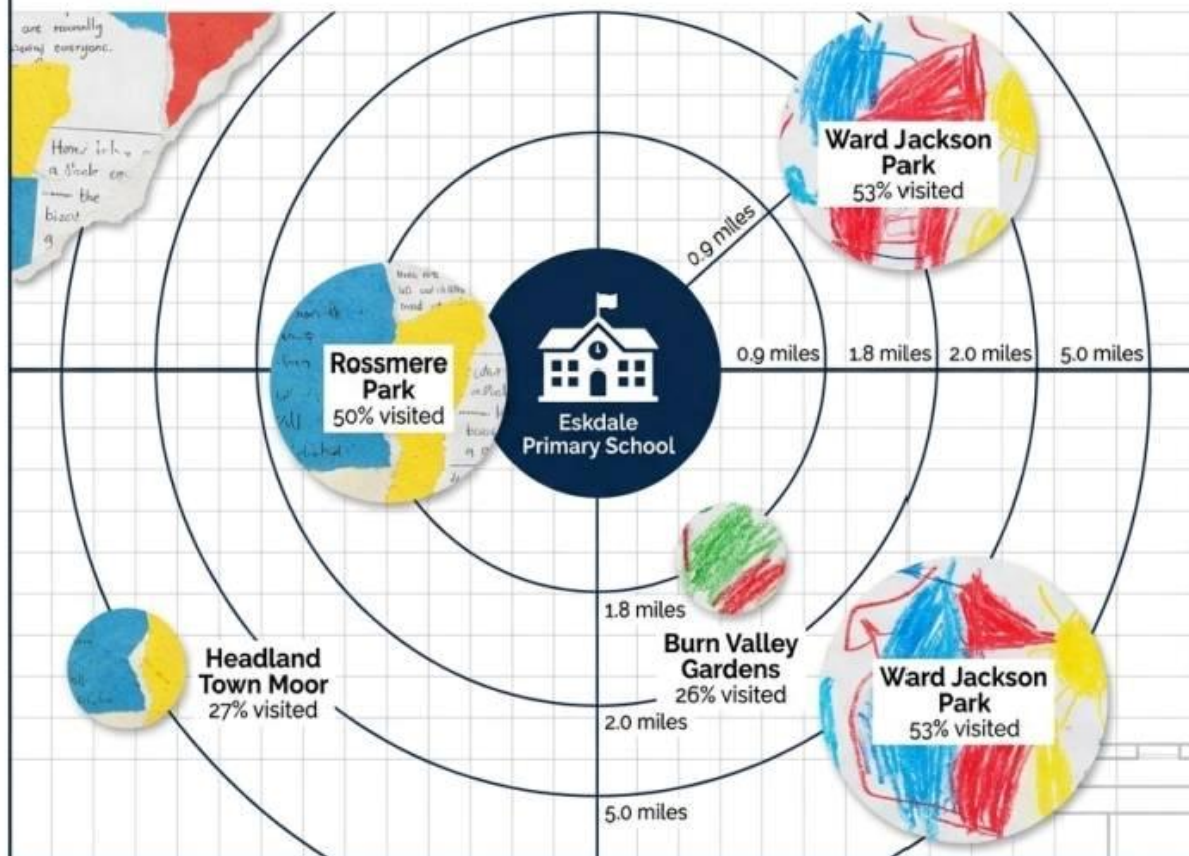


**Revenue Investment:** We activate the place, giving them a reason to stay.

**Result:** Extended dwell time, civic pride, and social connection.

Space is just geography. Place is geography activated by humanity.

# RADAR MAPPING: PROXIMITY vs. ACTIVATION



## Proximity ≠ Access.

The closest park leaves half the children unserved, while a park twice as far sees higher footfall.

Children's mental maps are tiny. Access is dictated by confidence, family habit, and structured animation—not just walking distance.



1 **The Loss:** 18 years of volunteer-led youth provision.

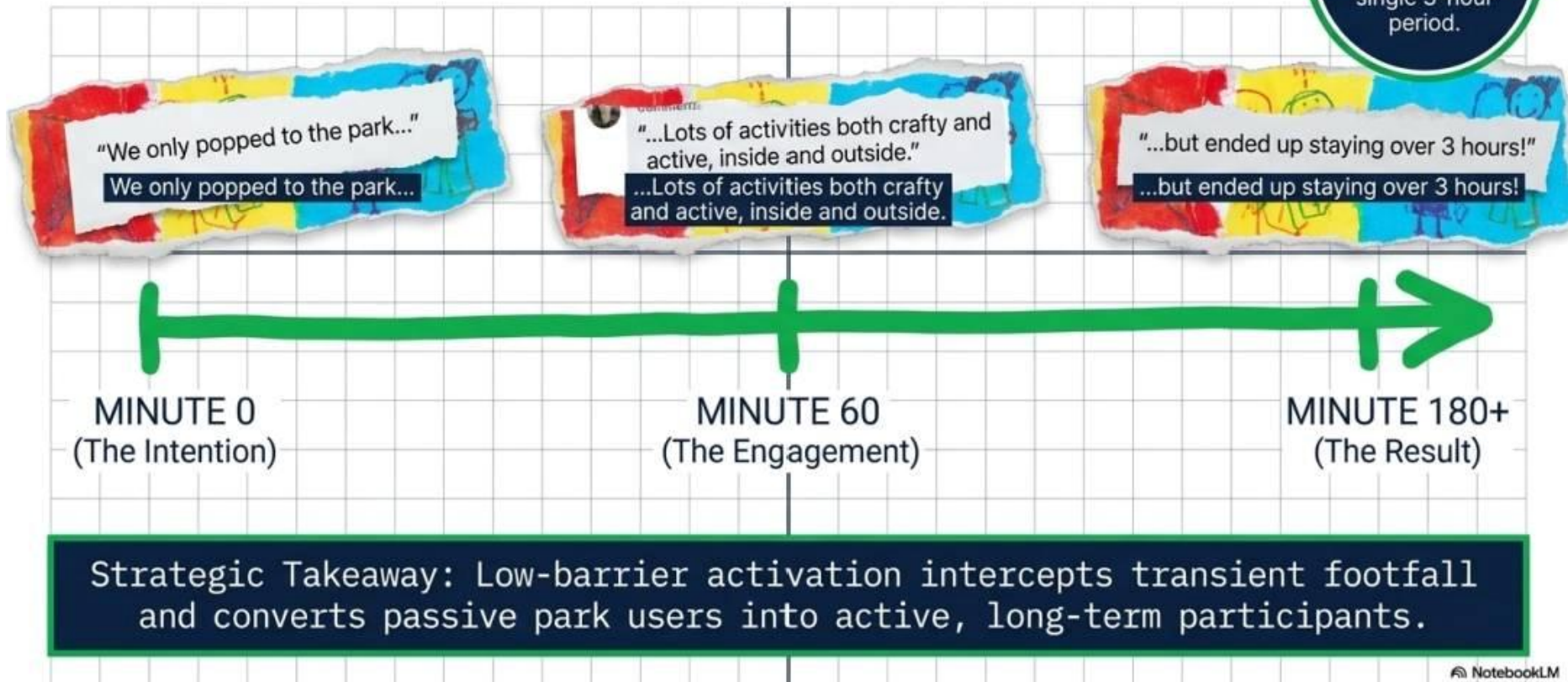
2 **The Cause:** 300% rent increase on the physical space.

3 **The Impact:** Volunteers lack the capacity to continue.

**Core Thesis: Physical space is a liability without the revenue to sustain the human infrastructure. When trusted adults are priced out, a vital community anchor reverts back to an empty room.**

# DWELL TIME TIMELINE: TRANSFORMING TRANSIENT FOOTFALL INTO ENGAGEMENT

**Data Highlight:**  
130 residents  
engaged over a  
single 3-hour  
period.



# THE BEHAVIORAL CHANGE CYCLE: FROM PLAY TO PRIDE



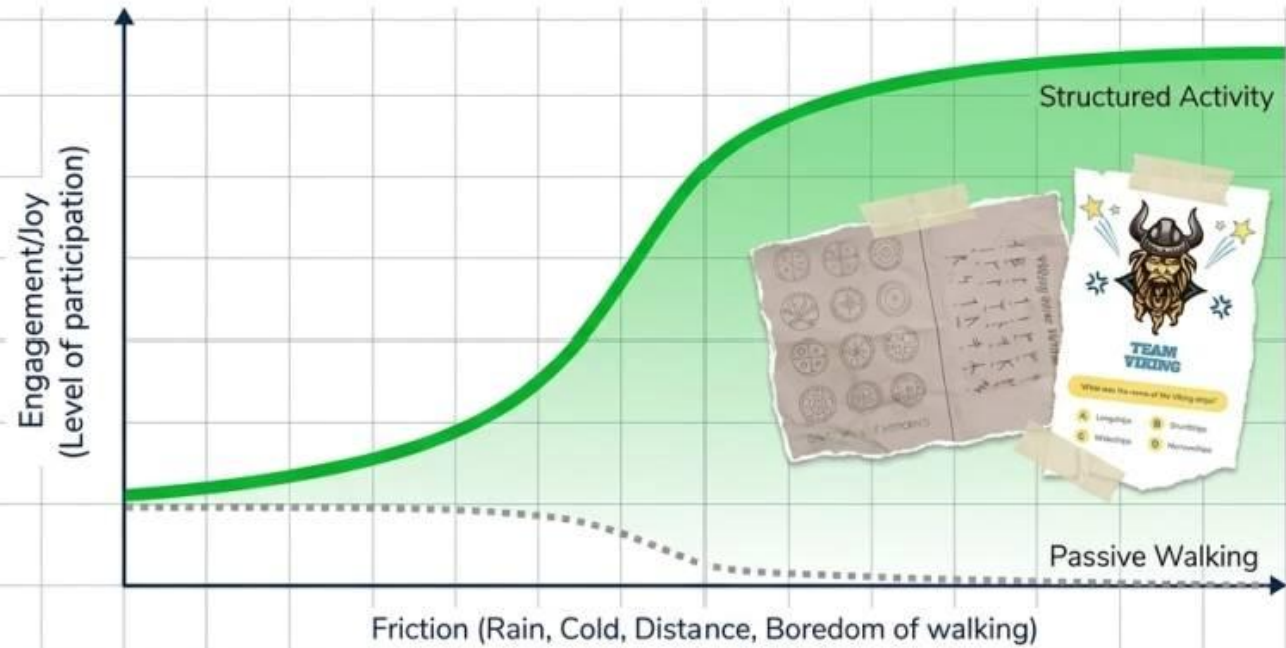
**Insight:** Pride is not a starting condition; it is the output of participation. When people play in a space, they naturally want to protect it.

Low-Barrier Animation.  
(Creative play, and  
informal sports,  
zero cost).



INPUT	
CONVOIT	
OSIS	
GROOK	
INSIGHT	
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PEHRS	
BEHOP	

# THE FRICTION VS. MOTIVATION CURVE



**Takeaway:** Weather is a comfort barrier, not a fun barrier. Physical movement alone is not intrinsically motivating for children; gamification and creative tasks make the journey 'worth it'.

# What We Build vs. What They Want

## Connective Infrastructure (Low Priority)

- **Float Walkways:** 1 vote
- **Bridges:** 3 votes
- **Cycling paths:** 6 votes

## Lived Experiences (High Priority)

- **Outdoor Cinema:** 10 votes
- **Historic Ships:** 11/16 votes
- **Art/Culture/Festivals:** 12/16 votes

**Children do not care** about connective infrastructure unless it enables something fun. Connectivity does not drive footfall; programming creates the reason to travel.





Swimming



Running



Climbing



Jumping



Football



Walking

# Movement is Play, Not Sport.

Families and children are not seeking heavily structured, highly regulated sports sessions. They want playable landscapes that allow for free, imaginative, and multi-generational movement.

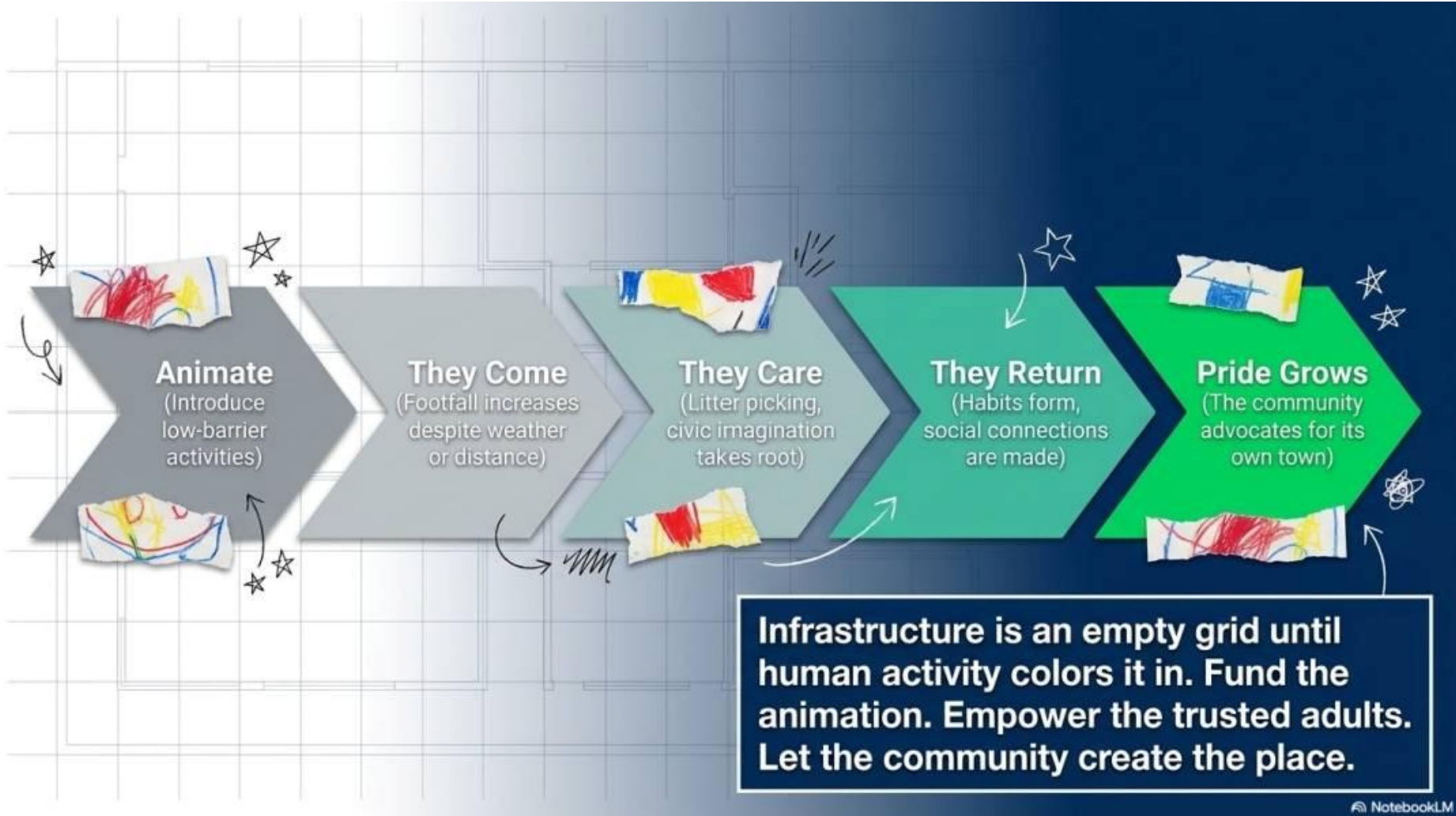
# THE SPACE VS. PLACE MATRIX

	Action	Outcome
<b>Capital Investment</b> (Focus on SPACE)	New equipment, resurfacing, ornamental landscaping, empty green patches.	Technically available. Practically unused. High risk of vandalism due to zero ownership.

	Action	Outcome
<b>Revenue Investment</b> (Focus on PLACE)	Staffed sessions, trusted adults, community events, light programming.	Extended dwell time, cross-generational social connection, natural environmental stewardship.

**Core Mandate:** You cannot build a community with concrete alone. Revenue is the catalyst that turns an empty space into a thriving place.





# Hartlepool Civic Commons and Youth Engagement: February 2026 Briefing

## Executive Summary

Analysis of community engagement events and school-based research conducted in February 2026 reveals a critical distinction between public "space" and "civic commons." Data from the Ward Jackson Park activation and the Marina "Walking Quest" demonstrate that while infrastructure is necessary, it is **activation**—low-barrier, creative, and social programming—that converts passive users into active participants.

Key findings indicate that proximity does not guarantee access; 50% of children living less than a mile from their local park have never visited. Furthermore, children and families prioritize "playable landscapes" and environmental stewardship over structured sport or ornamental infrastructure. The recent closure of long-standing community assets like the Rifty Youth Project due to financial pressures underscores the increasing importance of these free, open-access public spaces in maintaining social cohesion and youth engagement.



## 1. The Paradox of Access: Proximity vs. Participation

Research conducted with 73 Key Stage 2 pupils at Eskdale Primary School highlights a significant gap between the physical availability of parks and their actual use by local children.

### Park Attendance Data (Eskdale KS2 Sample)

Park	Distance from School	% of Children Visited
<b>Rossmere Park</b>	0.9 miles	50%
<b>Ward Jackson Park</b>	2.0 miles	53%
<b>Burn Valley Gardens</b>	1.8 miles	26%
<b>Headland Town Moor</b>	5.0 miles	27%

## Key Barriers to Access

- **Mental Maps:** For many children, their "world" is limited to a handful of streets. Proximity (under 1 mile) still resulted in a 50% non-attendance rate.
  - **Safety and Reputation:** Burn Valley Gardens saw significantly lower engagement (26%) than Ward Jackson Park (53%), despite being similar distances from the school, suggesting that perceived safety and family habits outweigh geography.
  - **The "Free" Barrier:** Findings suggest that "free isn't really free." Access requires social permission, confidence, and familiarity, which are often absent without organized intervention.
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## 2. Transforming Space into "Civic Commons"

The Urban Sport & Urban Play event at Ward Jackson Park (27 February 2026) demonstrated how light-touch activation can shift the function of a public space.

- **Dwell Time:** Families who "only popped to the park" reported staying for over three hours due to the presence of welcoming, informal activities.
  - **Social Infrastructure:** The event functioned as a community meeting point, facilitating connections between residents, volunteers, and local businesses (e.g., The Place in the Park Coffee Shop).
  - **Intergenerational Interaction:** Participation spanned ages 4 to 78, creating rare opportunities for multi-generational social cohesion.
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## 3. Youth Perspectives on Movement and Environment

Direct consultation with Year 4 pupils during the Marina Walking Quest and the Ward Jackson Park event reveals a distinct preference for informal, creative play over structured sport.

### Redefining Movement

Children do not view "sport" and "movement" as synonymous. In creative exercises, children identified their favorite forms of movement as:

- **Exploration:** Climbing, jumping, and running.
- **Creative Play:** Making clay "coins," treasure hunts, and "eco warrior" activities.
- **Waterfront Attractions:** Seeing boats, the Museum of Hartlepool, and the historic quay.

### Waterfront Development Priorities

When asked to vote on features for the Hartlepool Waterfront Masterplan, youth priorities focused on experiences rather than connective infrastructure:

- **High Priority:** Ships (11/16), Outdoor Cinema (10), Art/Sculpture (12/16), Park (10), Museum Upgrades (9).
- **Low Priority:** Bridges (3), Float walkways (1), Cycling (6).

- **Insight:** Children prioritize "playable landscapes" over "ornamental landscaping." They care about what they can *do* in a space rather than how they move across it.

#### 4. Environmental Stewardship and Civic Pride

A recurring theme across all demographics is a desire for cleaner, better-maintained spaces and a willingness to contribute to that improvement.

- **Stewardship as Entry Point:** Litter picking activities were highly successful with children ("eco warriors"). Residents expressed a strong connection between environmental quality (cleaning up "dog dirt" and litter) and pride in their town.
- **"Talk Up the Town":** Community feedback boards showed a clear desire for a positive narrative. One resident noted the importance of "talking up the town, not down."
- **Participatory Improvement:** Residents indicated a preference for "joining in" and "helping everyone" rather than merely receiving services.

#### 5. Strategic Risks and Implications

##### Fragility of Community Provision

The permanent closure of the **Rifty Youth Project** on 10 February 2026 serves as a critical warning. Despite operating for 18 years, the project became unsustainable following a **300% rent increase** by the Council. This highlights the vulnerability of volunteer-led provision and increases the strategic importance of free, open-access park activities as a safety net for youth engagement.

##### Revenue vs. Capital Investment

The data suggests a strong case for shifting focus from capital builds to revenue-supported animation:

- **Revenue Turns Space into Place:** Staffed sessions, school walks, and community events are more effective at "expanding the sense of place" for children than new equipment or resurfacing.
- **Comfort vs. Motivation:** While weather (rain/cold) is a comfort barrier, it is not a fun barrier if the activity is engaging. However, the lack of seating and basic facilities (toilets, heaters, benches) was cited by children as a primary reason for not staying in certain areas.

##### Summary of Strategic Patterns

Theme	Resident/Youth Sentiment	Strategic Implication
<b>Pride in Place</b>	High attachment to local landmarks and nature.	Amplify existing pride rather than focusing on deficits.
<b>Activity Preferences</b>	Experience-led (festivals, ships, play).	Prioritize "playable" over "ornamental" design.

<b>Barriers</b>	Confined "mental maps" and safety fears.	Use "trusted adults" and school partnerships to expand horizons.
<b>Participation</b>	Desire to help and improve the town.	Create clear volunteering and stewardship pathways.