







East and North Hertfordshire

UKRI Enhancing Place-Based Partnerships in Public Engagement Programme

Final Report

Building a health and wellbeing research partnership with children and their families in deprived neighbourhoods in Stevenage

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This is a summary of a project funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) that created a new research partnership between the University of Hertfordshire, Healthwatch Hertfordshire, Stevenage Borough Council, East and North Hertfordshire NHS Foundation Trust, the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England and the NIHR Research Design Service (RDS), East of England.

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1. Overview of project

Supporting the health and wellbeing of children and families is a national public health priority. Rates of child poverty in the UK are increasing and families on low incomes and living in areas of relative socio-economic deprivation experience poor health and social outcomes ⁽¹⁾. Public engagement and research activities often fail to hear the voices of children and families from deprived communities about their 'lived experience' of health and wellbeing. This collaborative, place-based community engagement project aimed to bridge this gap and to create awareness and understanding of what is important to children and families in Stevenage, Hertfordshire.

This project involved creating a new research partnership between the University of Hertfordshire, Healthwatch Hertfordshire, Stevenage Borough Council, East and North Hertfordshire NHS Foundation Trust, the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England and the NIHR Research Design Service (RDS), East of England.

Our original aims (detailed below) did not change during the project. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was not completed as intended. We had to pause the project in March 2020 and change to remote data collection methods for the evaluation. This is addressed in Appendix i.

Project Aims:

- To build a sustainable multi-agency research partnership between regional and local statutory and community organisations who support vulnerable children and their families in Stevenage;
- 2) To engage and listen to the health and wellbeing experiences and priorities of children and their families living in the most deprived neighbourhoods of Bedwell and Bandley Hill wards in Stevenage, which rank within the lowest two fifths of Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation;
- 3) To involve children and their families as equal partners to co-design innovative and appropriate ways to talk about their health and wellbeing experiences and priorities;
- 4) To create awareness and understanding among children and their families in Stevenage about the opportunities related to participation and involvement in health and social care research.

Our approach:

Our project has been informed by:

- <u>The literature</u>: We know from research and policy literature that children living in deprived areas in the UK, such as Stevenage, have poorer health and social outcomes compared to children in more affluent places ^(2, 3).
- <u>Our partners</u>: Our approach was strongly shaped by the expertise in community engagement and co-production among our collaborators: Healthwatch Hertfordshire, Stevenage Borough Council, East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust and the NIHR Research Design Service (RDS) East of England. Our focus on children aged 5-14 years and their families was influenced by the long history of play provision in Stevenage (<u>http://www.stevenageplay.org/history.html</u>).
- <u>Previous experience</u>: An earlier engagement project with young people in Stevenage, carried out by members of our team at the University of Hertfordshire and Hertfordshire County Council Public Health Team (<u>Hamilton et al, 2019</u>), made us aware of particular

public health challenges for young people in Stevenage around the affordability of healthy food, transport, opportunities for physical activity, anti-social behaviour and crime and a lack of safe places to 'hang out'. We wanted to build on this activity with younger children (5-14 years) and their families from deprived neighbourhoods in Stevenage, who are a 'seldom heard' group in research and public engagement. We also drew on the approaches undertaken in previous community engagement projects, led by members of the project team, including the (<u>NIHR Reaching Out Project</u>) and a community art counselling programme for children in South Africa (<u>https://lefikalaphodiso.co.za/</u>).

Main engagement activities:

The project was planned in four stages: 1) Form and build the partnership; 2) Listen and learn from lived experience; 3) Feedback and community celebrations; and 4) Reflect, share learning and plans for partnership. We achieved stages one and two as face to face activities, before the project was paused in March 2020. Here, we describe the main face to face engagement activities involving children and parents/carers, undertaken at the Bandley Hill Playcentre in February 2020.

Five creative play sessions (mornings and afternoons) were run over three days during half term in February 2020. Four researchers from the University and three researchers from Healthwatch Hertfordshire facilitated the play activities in collaboration with the Playcentre staff. At each session, tables were set up in the Playcentre with activities for the children to choose (journaling, newspaper dolls, clay, play dough) which facilitated informal conversations between the children and the researchers.



After the first day it was decided to refine the activities to try to focus more on eliciting conversations about well-being, such as creating 'food plates' from play dough of favourite meals or food eaten the previous day. Conversations arose from children telling the researchers they had not eaten the night before and imagining what they might like to eat.







As the week progressed, the team re-evaluated the activities on offer to try and facilitate conversations more focussed on 'well-being'. Two post boxes were created; "I am good at..." and "what I want to do in the future". The children could post anonymous comments in the box. The children wrote a range of things they were good at, from I am good at "being kind", "being a big sister", "helping and caring", "helping sad people" to "swimming", "football", "riding bikes" and "Fortnite" (on-line game). Plans for the future included "be a footballer", "fireman", "have a family and kids", "go bowling everyday", "be a teacher", "live in a mansion", "own my own chip shop", "own my own MacDonalds" and "I would like to live in Mexico and learn how to speak Spanish".





Another activity suggested by the Playcentre staff involved drawing round their hand and identifying (and writing) individuals who made them feel 'safe/happy' and also who they would go to for support or help. They also drew round their other hand and wrote on each of the fingers where they liked to go. This activity was easy to complete and promoted lots of conversations about families and hobbies. It also demonstrated the central role of the playcentre staff who in addition to parents, were named

as making the children feel safe. Another activity was a graffiti wall (photo on the right) which again gave the opportunity for children to display their work.





Hand Activity "who makes you feel safe?"

Who was involved?

Our project was based in two play centres provided by Stevenage Borough Council, located in two socioeconomically deprived wards in urban Stevenage - Bedwell and Bandley Hill – which rank within the lowest two fifths of LSOAs according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. In 2019-2020, the playcentres were attended by 150 children aged 5-14 years

and their families, including many marginalised and 'hard to reach' groups: low-income families, single-parent families, refugee families, looked after children, and young carers. During the engagement activities in February 2020, there were between 8-28 children, with 2-4 parents/carers, at each creative play session held over three days.

2. Overview of the evaluation approach

We were guided by the UKRI programme evaluation questions (NCCPE 2020) when developing our project evaluation. Our aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement activities in the playcentres in Stevenage. Specifically, we wanted to identify what went well, identify challenges and how these can be overcome in the future and to explore people's experiences of the public engagement activities and partnership working. We adopted a mixed methods approach which included the following methods and sources: minutes from steering group meetings, reflective diaries, interviews, a focus group and questionnaires. Table 2 shows our evaluation questions, the methods used and the people we collected the information from.

The participants involved in this evaluation included: Playcentre staff who hosted and helped facilitate the engagement activities; members of the steering group who were involved in the planning and conduct of the project; parents/carers of children who attend the Playcentres; and members of the research team who wrote reflective notes and fieldnotes from their involvement in the engagement activities. The evaluation of the project was approved by the University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority (Protocol number HSK/SF/UH/04157). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to utilise remote methods of data collection, to avoid any face to face contact with participants. The evaluation was conducted between May 2020 and April 2021 by an NIHR ARC East of England Senior Research Fellow, who is not part of the project team (full report is available).

Evaluation questions	Methods	People (with numbers)
1. What are the expectations of community partners involved in the engagement project.	 Review of steering group minutes Remote (by zoom) focus group with members of the steering group 	 Members of the steering group who attended steering group meetings (14) Members of the steering group who participated in the focus group (8)
2. What are the experiences of community partners and researchers involved in the engagement project and the shared learning experience.	 Remote focus group with members of the steering group Researchers' reflective notes and fieldnotes Telephone interviews with playcentre staff 	 Members of the steering group who attended the focus group (8) Researchers who facilitated engagement activities (7) Playcentre staff (4)

3.What are the key factors that have influenced the effectiveness of the engagement activities	 Remote focus group with members of the steering group Telephon interviews wi playcentre staff Posta questionnaire w parents/carers 	ith - Parents/carers of children involved in engagement activities (5)
4.What are the opportunities and challenges of conducting engagement activities with children and families living in areas of deprivation in Stevenage	 Remote focus group with members of the steering group Researchers' reflective notes and fieldnotes Telephone interviews with playcentre staff Postal questionnaire wi parents/carers 	 Members of the steering group who attended the focus group (8) Researchers who facilitated engagement activities (7) Playcentre staff (4) Parents/carers of children involved in engagement activities (5)
5.What is the legacy from the project, including what has worked in terms of sustainability of the partnership working	 Review of steeri group meetings Remote focus group with members of the steering group Researchers' reflective notes and fieldnotes 	 ng - Members of the steering group who attended steering group who group meetings (14) - Members of the steering group who participated in the focus group (8) - Researchers who facilitated engagement activities (7)
6.How can we co-create future engagement and research opportunities, in terms of timescale, ambition, outcomes and funding	 Review of steeri group meetings Remote focu group wi members of t steering group 	steering group who attended steering t h group meetings (14)

3. Process

In this section, we outline what went well with the engagement activities and what went less well, with examples of our shared learning from working together. There were no major

changes made to the project that impacted on its ability to achieve its original aims, apart from the COVID-19 outbreak (see section 7).

What worked well

Getting to know each other:

During the first stage of the project 'Form and build the partnership', the project team visited the Bandley Hill Playcentre to meet the staff, children and some parents. From the interviews with playcentre staff, they reported having positive expectations about the engagement project and liked the idea of working with a University:

I thought it was really, it was actually really good. It was nice to sort of interact with someone outside the play centre, sort of a different organisation and what they wanted [...] what we discussed was ... it sounded absolutely brilliant and I knew it'd be something that the kids would like to get involved in. (Playworker 3, interview)

Before the first engagement activities, we held a joint training session that was facilitated by an experienced Art Psychotherapist. Members of the project team and playcentre staff spent a morning together trying out different creative play methods to identify suitable ways to engage the children. The session helped us to get to know each other and importantly, provided an 'open space' to glean some local context from the playworkers about the local community, the children and what sort of engagement activities might be successful.

Working together:

The playcentre staff appreciated that when the researchers came into the playcentres, they stayed the whole day and wanted to get involved with other activities:

I know we had the odd people that come in and do table tennis or something like that with them, but not someone that was there for the whole day and they could sit and talk to you and things like that and it was really interesting to see ... Yeah, none of them seemed to back away. They all seemed to want to get involved with everything that was going on. (Playworker 3, interview)

The researchers reflected on how helpful the guidance was from playcentre staff regarding how to engage in conversations with the children:

Initially there was discussion about introducing ourselves to all the children in a 'formalised' way but [playworker] said that this would not work. Different children come and go throughout the day and they often have negative experiences with social

workers and similar. We are going into 'their space' so we should not impose formalities (Researcher 2, fieldwork notes)

Positive engagement with the children and parents/carers:

Playcentre staff spoke very highly of the engagement project and reported that both they and the children enjoyed it a great deal, with university staff getting '*really involved*.' Findings from the questionnaires, completed by five parents and carers, also shows that the activities worked well. One parent said that their children were "*excited to try new activities*'.

Another parent of six children responded:

"It worked well for my children, all the age differences and additional needs" and "I was with them taking part, so we got to enjoy the session together which was nice".

The approaches that worked less well

Some of the craft activities we tried on the first day did not prompt conversations about wellbeing, although they did enable us to get to know the children and worked well as an 'ice breaker'. It became clear during the week that the engagement activities were more successful if they were short in length and resulted in a sense of 'completion' with a finished item that the children could take home. Our shared reflections following the February 2020 engagement activities about what did not work so well, enabled us to adapt the engagement activities planned for April 2020, that unfortunately had to be cancelled (see Appendix i).

What we have learned from working together

The researchers learned to follow the lead from the playcentre staff about how to engage with the children:

[names of playworkers] shared a lot about the children and gave us a lot of background, about how to approach the children, or not approach, let them come to you, and that really started me getting, to get in the right mindset I think when for when we started the engagement activities (Participant 3, focus group)

A researcher from a partner organisation reflected on how different organisations approach engagement with children and young people, and that at times we may have lost focus as a team, as we were coming from different perspectives. It was discussed that the learning from this was to take more time to reflect together, outside of the actual engagement activities:

Having more time to test things out and work out what was working and what wasn't, and then maybe having more time away from that as a team, to then talk it through [...]

I guess just more time to be able to reflect, it could be something that we could build in (Participant 7, focus group)

4. Outcomes and impact

Key outcomes and impact:

A sustainable multi-agency research partnership, between regional and local statutory and community organisations who support vulnerable children and their families in Stevenage. We have strengthened existing relationships between the organisations and developed new ones. This has been evidenced in a number of ways:

- a) For the very first time, researchers from the University of Hertfordshire and Healthwatch Hertfordshire have worked together as a team, developing, planning and conducting a community engagement project.
- b) A strong research partnership between the different organisations was established during the first three months of the project, which was sustained and strengthened during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the research team unable to engage, face to face, with the children and families from March 2020, remote partnership working with staff at Stevenage Borough Council led to new ways of working, with innovative new methods of engagement (see Appendix i).
- c) The research partnership has extended within the partner organisations beyond the individuals named on the original research application. For example, people in Stevenage Borough Council whose roles are community-based, such as the Playworkers, became pivotal in supporting the engagement activities before, and during the Coronavirus outbreak.
- d) The research partnership has extended beyond the named partner organisations, with the development of a UKRI Citizen Science research application in September 2020, led by Professor Jones. Members of the existing research partnership collaborated with new partners from University of Bath, University College London and the University of Sydney. The NIHR ARC East of England has also provided an extended network of researchers and community partners to support the development of the application. Unfortunately, this application was unsuccessful, but another collaborative research application is planned for the end of 2021.

Development of new knowledge and skills in community engagement: The University researchers have gained new knowledge and skills in community engagement from our close working with Healthwatch Hertfordshire and Stevenage Borough Council. From this project, we have enhanced our understanding of the key components of place-based public engagement; to go to the local communities and conduct engagement in their familiar places, supported by familiar people, such as the playcentre staff.

Learning to engage with young children: Some of the project team had not previously conducted research or engagement activities with young children. This project has enhanced their understanding and confidence to work with this age group. The creative play-based activities worked well to build rapport with the children and gain their trust. We learned that with this age group (5-14 years) engagement activities need to be short in time, focused and to provide something at the end, like a journal, doll or play doh model, to provide a sense of completion.

New understanding about engaging communities living in areas of socio-economic deprivation: Some of the research team had prior assumptions, based on national and local

public health data, that children living in deprived areas are more likely to experience obesity. However, the playcentre staff explained early on that families who attended the playcentres struggled to afford food and the issues for the children were malnutrition not obesity. The Playcentre staff were keen to focus on emotional well-being and resilience rather than healthy eating. They support the families by providing emotional support, clothing, food to the children at the playcentre.

Unexpected outcomes and impact

Enhancing awareness and opportunities for learning among children in Stevenage: As a legacy of this project, we plan to invite some of the older playcentre children and families to the University, once COVID restrictions allow. We plan to hold an exhibition of the creative artwork produced by the children on a 'community wall' at the School for Creative Arts at the University. The playcentre staff have been enthusiastic about an on-going relationship with the University, with plans for how to enable the children and families to 'set foot' on a University campus and be aware of the study and career opportunities available to them at their local University.

Student placements at the playcentres: Another legacy of this project is the potential for establishing student placements in the playcentre services for art psychotherapy and clinical psychology students from the University of Hertfordshire. This development has been delayed during the COVID-19 outbreak, but discussions have re-commenced recently.

Capacity building among Playcentre staff: The introductory workshop held at the beginning of the project, facilitated by an art psychotherapist based at the University of Hertfordshire, has potential to be developed and rolled out for playworkers, parents/carers and local volunteers. Furthermore, from their involvement in the project, one member of Playcentre staff is now thinking about undertaking further study themselves and reflecting on their Continued Professional Development (CPD).

5. Implications for policy and practice

What worked well in terms of engaging communities living in areas of deprivation

Engagement in a 'safe' place: Carrying out the engagement activities in the Playcentre - a place where the children and families were already familiar and had strong relationships with staff - had a positive effect on the children's engagement with the activities and acceptance of the research team. We have learned that it is essential to work closely with community partners who have the knowledge, experience, networks and trust in a local community to gain entry and acceptance for research and engagement work.

A better understanding of the lives of children living in areas of socioeconomic deprivation: Spending time with the children in a comfortable environment enabled the children to talk openly about their families and helped the researchers to understand more about what is like being a child living in Stevenage. This helped to challenge some prior assumptions among the team. For example, about their family lives, the food they eat, the places and people that help them feel happy and safe.

Influencing local policies around health and wellbeing: The findings from this project are being used to shape new policies for children and young people in Stevenage, including the development of a Healthy Hub for young people. This is part of the Stevenage Town regeneration plan to relaunch the play service following the pandemic.

Challenges experienced in engaging communities living in areas of deprivation

Engagement with parents/carers: We had hoped to involve some parents in the project steering group, but we were not able to achieve this. First, we were informed by playcentre staff that parents/carers did not routinely attend the playcentre, with children often walking to the playcentre alone. This was because often the parents were juggling more than one job and were not around after school or at the weekends. Two parents had expressed interest in joining the steering group, but their availability to attend the meetings was limited. We then planned to hold a steering group meeting at the Playcentre, so that they could attend. But this meeting had to be cancelled, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, and they could not attend the meetings once they moved on-line.

Lessons for the UKRI from this project in designing future phases of this programme

More time needed for community engagement: Six months is a very short timeframe to build relationships and engage with communities living in areas of deprivation. We were fortunate in this project to build on some existing relationships between partner organisations, which enabled us to arrange the first two stages of the project within the first three months of the project. Following the Coronavirus outbreak, we certainly benefited from the extended time provided with no-cost extensions, as this enabled us to continue to build our research partnership and develop new ways of working together, with innovative methods of engagement activities delivered by Playcentre staff in Stevenage throughout 2020.

6. What's next?

We have carried out a number of dissemination activities with our partners about the project at regional (East of England) and national events, including:

 Community Engagement and Inclusion of Under-represented Groups in Research: A Virtual Seminar. A national event with 180 delegates, organised by the NIHR ARC East Midlands. 2/2/2021. <u>https://arc-em.nihr.ac.uk/clahrcs-store/community-engagementand-inclusion-under-represented-groups-research-virtual-seminar</u>

- Inclusive Involvement in Research Post COVID-19: Making it Different. NIHR ARC
 National virtual workshop hosted by ARC East of England with 60 delegates. 2/3/2021.
 https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/events/inclusive-research-post-covid-19-making-it-different
- Annual Showcase Event. NIHR ARC East of England regional event with over 100
 delegates. 26.3.21. <u>https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/events/nihr-arc-east-england-showcase</u>

Short film: A film has been made about the project, produced by a local Stevenage film maker. Three researchers (one from Healthwatch Hertfordshire, and two from the University of Hertfordshire) and the Playcentre Manager, representing Stevenage Borough Council, appear in the film. Photos of the Stevenage Playcentre, the creative activities that took place as part of the project and the children involved are also included in the film. The film will be disseminated through the University of Hertfordshire and the NIHR ARC, East of England websites, Hertfordshire Healthwatch and Stevenage Borough Council Health. We will also promote the film through social media.

Future plans

New research: The collaboration between members of this research partnership has led to the development of new research ideas and plans. In 2020 the project partners worked together to submit a research proposal to a research call from the UKRI on Citizen Science. *New collaborative engagement project*: A project partner (NIHR RDS East of England) has invited Stevenage Borough Council to participate in a short film for a new piece of work about how community groups have adapted during COVID-19. This project is being led by project co-applicant Tracey Johns, from the University of Essex and the NIHR Research Design Service, East of England and funded by the NIHR Centre for Engagement and Dissemination (CED). It is anticipated that when completed, the film will be widely available on a national website, possibly the NIHR Research Design Service.

Important factors in ensuring sustainable relationships between research organisations and community organisations

From our evaluation, we consider the important factors to be:

- Flexibility, open and honest reciprocal relationships between research and community organisations
- Building in adequate time to reflect as a team
- Building in adequate time for meaningful engagement with local communities
- To go to the local communities and conduct engagement activities in familiar places, supported by familiar people.

7. References

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2. Watson MC, Lloyd J. Child health in the UK: we need to help children survive and thrive. *BMJ*. 2020;369:m1412.

3. Wright J, Hayward A, West J, Pickett K, McEachan RM, Mon-Williams M, et al. ActEarly: a City Collaboratory approach to early promotion of good health and wellbeing. *Wellcome Open Research.* 2019;4.

Appendix i: Coronavirus outbreak impact

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been significant, as we had to pause the project half-way through and were unable to complete the project as intended. The announcement of lockdown on the 23rd March 2020, meant that our engagement activities planned for Easter 2020 had to be put on hold. We had hoped to re-arrange during May half term and then summer 2020. However, by this time the Bandley Hill playcentre had been repurposed as a Food distribution centre and many of the staff were redeployed. Stevenage Borough Council had different priorities during this time, supporting the health and wellbeing of the local population. During 2020, the project team kept in regular touch with the Playcentre staff. The project supported the purchase of arts and play items for engagement activities held in various locations around Stevenage during summer 2020 and also at Christmas 2020 (see photos). Unfortunately, the project team were unable to attend these events due to social distancing and COVID-19 University guidance. At the University, all research and engagement activities were transferred to remote methods and staff had to work from home. At the end of the project in May 2021, the Playcentres remain closed and the project team were still working from home.

New methods of engagement during a pandemic

During 2020, the project team supported Stevenage Borough Council by providing on-line health and wellbeing resources to be shared with families who used the playcentres. The project also provided funds to help to buy the items for the takeaway play packs distributed at outdoor events. A message from the University was added to the Christmas play packs

that we hoped to be able to resume activities in the February half term 2021. However, the opportunity for the researchers to re-engage with the children and families, face to face, was not possible within the time frame of the project.









Appendix ii. Participant perspectives

How children and families found out about and got involved in the project



The project was advertised to children and families by posters displayed at the Playcentre and by word of mouth. The posters were designed by the Playcentre staff, who added the different organisation logos to the poster.

Their motivations for being involved

"To take some of the learning and replicate across the other play centres" (Playcentre Staff)

"Building on knowledge/methods on best to engage with young people and children. Also sustainability and continuing after the project is finished" (Hertfordshire Healthwatch)

"Co-production and extrapolate voices of children and

learning about their needs. Workshop/activities for parents/teachers/play staff to continue the activities and engaging parents" (Stevenage Borough Council)

What they got out of the project

One parent said that their children were "excited to try new activities'.

Another parent said: *"It worked well for my children, all the age differences and additional needs" and "I was with them taking part, so we got to enjoy the session together which was nice".*

"I just think it went down really well and the children really enjoyed it … and yeah and it was good communication and imagination and yeah so it just used everything, yeah". (Playworker)

"From the point of view of the National Institute of Health Research, there's an awful lot that we can learn from your project, and from the playcentre, and Stevenage Borough Council team around how we can better engage, you know, make sure we involve the voices of the people that you work with in the community" (Project partner).

"We haven't necessarily done a lot of specific work within Stevenage, so just to understand Stevenage as a community a bit better, and the kind of key players ... that is just really positive for us and we want to definitely continue work there ... you can already see some future work that could happen" (Project partner)