

Community bike projects creating safety with young people on a local estate

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This article describes how bike sessions have helped create safety with young people living on an estate in Southwark, Southeast London. The design and delivery of the project was a collaboration between the local authority and local people. It responded to residents' complaints about low-level disruption linked to young people and bikes, and concern that this group might also be vulnerable to extra-familial harm.



Connecting young people to bike-related activities that matched their interests helped to nurture relationships with protective adults in safe nearby spaces, with the potential to reduce risks from violence and criminal exploitation.

The origins of the project

Southwark Adolescent Sure Start, of which I am a part, was created in recognition that support options for young people in Southwark were not always accessible, easy to navigate or available early enough. The team offers early support to young people and their parents and carers, with any kind of help needed, via a series of community support hubs.

We opened our pilot youth support hub on a large high-rise residential estate in the west of the borough. Whilst building relationships with residents and voluntary groups, we spent time in community venues, participated in many conversations and gathered community knowledge and insights. We learned about high levels of community organising around the estate and found all kinds of support and opportunities offered to young people, mostly on a voluntary basis.

When some community activists raised concerns about low-level disruption on the estate, we wanted to understand more. They told us about young people on bikes, aged around twelve or thirteen, who were making late-night noise, damaging doors, and throwing bikes off buildings. They thought this group might also be linked to bike thefts. Meanwhile, families told us there were too few things for young people to do. We started to notice a potential mismatch between fact and perception. It seemed that local families were facing barriers to engaging with local provision. Information about opportunities was not always easy to find, and some families believed that getting their young people into activities, such as the local BMX track, would be costly, or simply not open to them.

We started to get excited about the germ of an idea...

What if the young people who were the subject of complaints could be introduced to the BMX track? Offering them an alternative activity involving bikes in a safe and supportive local space.

What if this could help to win the trust of residents, set against the backdrop of some local mistrust in the council?

A strategy meeting about the estate, attended by different professionals, was focused on violence and exploitation. Professionals put forward that the younger group on bikes might be at risk of exploitation in the drug trade. Two neighbourhood police officers were keen to collaborate in reaching that group and offered to donate bikes. Their knowledge of and passion for the community, and perseverance in overcoming red tape, were key to getting things off the ground. Likewise, the enthusiasm and care for young people found in the range of partners who became involved in the project.

We agreed to deliver an early intervention project involving bike-building and BMX taster sessions. We would work with young people in Years 6, 7 and 8 who we thought could be at risk of harm from criminalisation, violence and exploitation, including the young people flagged by residents. We sensed that this age group might also be more open to trying new things.

Involving young people

We had many discussions about the language that we would use when communicating the project to young people and their parents/carers. While it was important to make clear our goals, we recognised the need to use positive, non-judgemental words to avoid stigma. The same was true for newsletters and other communication to reach the community. We had encountered some problematic language – ‘biker gang’, ‘little sh*ts’ and so on – which we had respectfully challenged.

To identify our intended participants, we explored several routes. As well as identifying young people already working with us who met the criteria, we spoke to various local youth workers and visited a particular youth club which residents had identified as a hotspot. We had several meetings at a secondary school next to the estate, as ‘our’ young group had been described as wearing the uniform of that school. We shared concerns about pupils at risk from violence and exploitation, and identified potential participants. We were also able to broker boxing and mentoring for delivery in that school by a local partner, funded by the London Violence Reduction Unit (VRU).

Alongside this, we connected with Youth Justice, Family Early Help and Children’s Social Care practitioners working with families in our postcode, including those supporting young people identified in mapping by the Extra Familial Harm Team.

We encouraged peer advertising, with young people sharing an online event link for the project or bringing friends on the day.

The project as it happened, and anticipated opportunities...

Over three school holidays in 2024, we ran a BMX taster session, a two-day bike-building project and a further BMX session. These were attended by, respectively, thirteen, fourteen and eight young people. Though some attended multiple sessions, we often had different young people attend, with three distinct peer groups present.



A chance to engage young people via something they were interested in, to reach young people early and get them into positive activities and safe spaces.

Engagement was high: almost all the young people that we invited turned up, often bringing friends, and participation was active and enthusiastic. Young people were also encouraging and supportive of each other. BMX offered an exciting, risk-taking activity with peers, which could be continued in a safe, enclosed, staffed space. Young people found the taster sessions enjoyable and stimulating, and most said they wanted to return. Some of the most daring and talented participants were from our main target group. Nice moments included a young person with low self-esteem singled out for praise by the coach, having listened well and performed the best.

Stories of success and transformation at the BMX track shared by the coach made a big impression on the young people. This included Olympic medal-winning riders who train at the club and opportunities to travel nationally to compete, as well as stories of young people who had previously been involved in 'street life' finding community and safety at the track.

The community bike workshop, operating out of garages on the estate, hosted the bike-building sessions, and young people were warmly invited to return to the workshop whenever they liked, to use the tools, get advice, or just to spend time. One young person chose to arrive a few hours early on the second day of bike-building to help and has recently requested work experience at the workshop. Participants completed questionnaires about what else they were interested in and were linked into activities ranging from football and basketball to gardening and community arts. This drew on the detailed mapping the Adolescent Sure Start team had done of what is available locally, sometimes advertised only via posters and community WhatsApp groups.



An opportunity to have informal conversations about safety and exploitation.

Group discussions led by Adolescent Sure Start staff during bike-building sessions included safety, past violence on the estate and different views of disruptive behaviour - seen as 'anti-social' by some adults or 'just silly fun' by young people themselves. There was a perceived lack of local activities, recognition of bike thefts, and an exchange of knowledge about grooming and exploitation. There were also opportunities for individual conversations, for instance about a past attempted grooming situation, and a young person's feelings about whether he wanted to return to school.

A chance for protective adults to build relationships with individual young people and an opportunity to reach parents and carers

The BMX track offers informal mentoring from coaches and volunteers. Young people responded positively to the no-nonsense attitude of their BMX coach, who emphasised respect, discipline and not bringing 'street life' or 'street language' to the track. He interspersed coaching with 'life lessons' on various topics.

Young people connected with the bike enthusiast who led bike-building sessions and had friendly interactions with neighbourhood police officers, who came to offer bike marking. A youth worker from the Adventure Playground also unexpectedly joined a session alongside the young people he had connected with our project. A positive presence, he also encouraged people to use the Adventure Playground.

Adolescent Sure Start built relationships with young people and with parents, and several connected with longer-term support offered via our support hub on the estate. Support themes included safety, peer group concerns, school difficulties, special educational needs, housing and parental isolation.



A practitioner's view: time, freedom and experiential solutions

As a social worker with a decade-long background in Youth Justice in the same borough, the project represented a real shift, moving away from office-based 1:1 casework toward something more systemic, experiential and creative.

Though just one small example, it has provoked a lot of reflection. One big piece of learning for me was how fruitful, as well as professionally satisfying, it is to be given the time and freedom to let work like this develop organically. We had already been physically present on the estate for nearly a year before we ran this project. It takes time and effort to build hyper-local knowledge, which I realise I lacked in my previous role. Relationships need time to develop, and trust is neither instant nor a given. T

he legwork and thought that went into just this small sub-project was huge, down to all the encouraging calls and texts to young people in the run-up to sessions, and personalised follow-up afterwards. That time and effort does pay off. For instance, one young person recently dropped into our support hub to request support, nine months after participating in the project. He has suggested bringing in his peer group to access activities and support.

I now have a real passion for experiential, community-based solutions, which can only emerge from collaboration and deep local insight. Though there is a clear place for talking-based support, I have reflected that previously I focused much more on the internal resources and responsibilities of young people and their families, largely unaware of the rich opportunities that people, in collaboration with practitioners, can tap into within the community, which may prove much more impactful. I am keen to share the potential of community-embedded work with colleagues from youth justice, children's social care, and our wider adolescent support system.