

MORE THAN PLAY

Exploring the social impacts of Shiremoor Adventure Playground

A report by Alison Stenning
on behalf of Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust

June 2026



More than Play:

Exploring the social impacts of Shiremoor Adventure Playground

1.	Shiremoor Adventure Playground.....	3
2.	The Research	7
3.	Social Impact and Social Value	8
4.	Valuing the Playground	9
5.	A Space for Children	10
6.	Expanding Opportunities: Schools	13
7.	Volunteering, Skills and Training	15
8.	Supporting Mental Health, Disability and Neurodiversity	21
9.	Challenging Anti-Social Behaviour	23
10.	Safeguarding and a Safe Space.....	25
11.	Supporting Family Life	26
12.	Connecting Shiremoor	30
13.	Sharing the Value of Play	32
14.	Conclusions.....	34

Shiremoor Adventure Playground

Brenkley Avenue, Shiremoor, NE27 0PR.

More information can be found at

www.shiremoor-adventure-playground-trust.org
and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Shiremoorplaround1

The playground can be contacted on 0191 643 8000 or by email to Keeks McGarry, the team leader (keeks.mcgarry@northtyneside.gov.uk), or Lesli Godfrey, chair of the trustees (kids@shiremoor.onmicrosoft.com).

Acknowledgements

Many people – of all ages – supported the research and writing of this report. Firstly, thanks to all the children and young people who sat and talked to me in the office, and all those who just chatted to me when I was at the playground, expressing a curiosity about what I was doing and showing me, in so many ways, what the playground does. Thanks too to all the playground staff, for talking to me and for facilitating my conversations with children, young people and volunteers. I'm also grateful to the adult interviewees across the organisations with whom the playground works for their willingness to talk and for their support for the playground. And, finally, to my fellow trustees for supporting me in this research, talking through my findings, and sharing their experiences of the playground.

Most of the photos in this report were taken by Ami Crammin, one of the playground's playworkers who is also a photographer and captures the magic and diversity of play at the playground on our social media.

This research was funded by Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust. The author, Alison Stenning, is a researcher and a trustee of Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust.

Shiremoor Adventure Playground

Shiremoor Adventure Playground opened in August 2010, funded by a Play Pathfinder grant, one of 30 awarded to local authorities by the then Labour government to fund the development of adventure playgrounds in disadvantaged communities.¹ It is one of only 126 adventure playgrounds in the UK,² and the only one in the north-east of England.

The playground has a large outdoor play space including zipwires, swings, a big wooden play structure, and lots of 'loose parts', as well as bikes and rollerskates. There are dens, play huts, and other places to hang out, and a fire pit and pizza oven. There's also a big court for ball games, rollerskating, and more and a small allotment where the children can grow vegetables and where the playground's animals (chickens, guinea pigs, and Nancy and Mavis, the Kunekune pigs) live. Towards the back of the site,

there are willow tunnels, quieter spaces, and a wildlife pond. Within the main building, there's space to play, dance, craft, read and hang out, a kitchen and small café, and accessible toilets and changing facilities.

The playground is owned and managed by North Tyneside Council, which maintains the site, covers most operational costs, and employs 2 full-time and 2 part-time playworkers. Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust was first established in 2010, alongside the creation of the playground, and is now a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO, established in 2017), with six trustees. The Trust fundraises to employ additional permanent, sessional, and seasonal playworkers, whilst also supporting the development of the playground. The Trust's patron is author Ann Cleeves, who lives locally.



1. Shiremoor Adventure Playground

The playground is extremely popular with local children, families, and the wider community. Between April 2025 and March 2026, there were a total of 50,754 visits, averaging more than 150 visitors a day, and these visitor numbers reflect an incremental growth since the playground opened in 2010. These visitors include children under 8, children over 8 (who are allowed to come unaccompanied), over 13s, children with additional needs, children visiting with their schools, one-off events, as well as parents, carers, and

volunteers. On a busy day in the school holidays, hundreds of children can visit the playground – on a single day in April 2026, for example, over 700 visitors passed through the playground's doors.

The Playground's Primary Aims

To facilitate and develop opportunities for children and young people to experience adventure, responsibility, new experiences and freedom so that they develop a better understanding of who they are, what they enjoy and what they can achieve.

To sustain, maintain and develop an enriched and adaptive play environment staffed by professional nurturing playworkers who are informed of and work to the playwork principles.³

Key Ingredients of Shiremoor Adventure Playground

As the 'key ingredients' of Shiremoor Adventure Playground note (published in the 2017-18 annual report), provision is free of charge at the point of access and children over the age of 8 are free to come and go as they choose.

- The provision is free of charge at the point of access.
- Children are free to come and go as they choose (eight years of age and over).
- Children choose how and what they play.
- A rich and changing physical environment with access to earth, water, fire and air.
- A welcoming human environment made up of children, young people, qualified playworkers, parents, carers, and volunteers.
- A full programme of on- and off-site adventures for children of all ages and abilities.
- A meaningful relationship with the community that surrounds the Playground.
- Children who are directly involved in the day to day running of the Playground as well as decisions that affect the Playground.

1. Shiremoor Adventure Playground

This all reflects the founding of the playground on the longstanding traditions of playwork and adventure playgrounds. Play England defined adventure playgrounds, as follows:

“An adventure playground can be described as a space dedicated solely to children’s play, where skilled playworkers enable and facilitate the ownership, development and design of that space – physically, socially and culturally – by the children playing there.”⁴

Such a definition underlines the critical importance of a space dedicated to play, the facilitation of playworkers, and the children’s ownership.

The focus on providing a space dedicated to children’s play reflects the critical importance of play in children’s lives and its impact, in ways long-documented by play advocates:

“Play is essential to children’s social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development. We believe that offering children the chance to freely choose self-directed activities supports them to become more resilient and has a beneficial effect on self-esteem. We believe children who have access to regular opportunities to play are happy children.”⁵

Even before we explore everything else that happens at the playground, it is worth restating the extraordinary social impact of play, freely-chosen, self-directed within an enriched and adaptive environment, in the lives of children.

Shiremoor Adventure Playground has also always been seen as a “community-based adventure playground.”⁶ As the playground was established, North Tyneside’s then Play and Urban Games Manager, Keith Hardy, linked “the role of the adventure playground worker and the adventure playground within the context of community development [giving] a rationale for the placing of the playground within the community”. In interview, he explained:

“I think we want to be engaging with some of those children over a number of years ... we’ve put it in the right place to make a difference to young people’s lives ... but also bring the community in ... bring the parents in and let’s work with them as well.”⁷

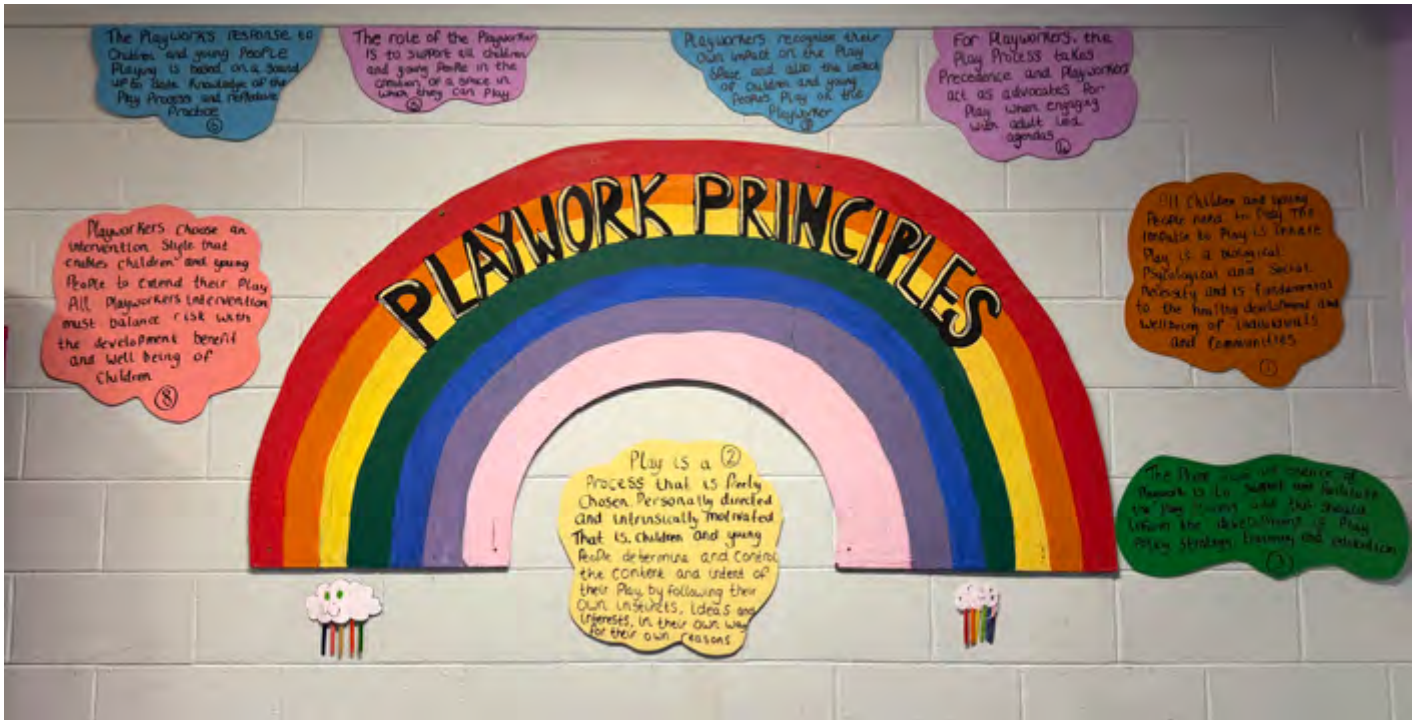
This was explicitly reflected in the early development of the playground, such that it was reported in 2009 that the newly-appointed playworker team:

“spends a year working in Shiremoor to develop relationships with children, parents, carers, neighbours and other professionals. There is a lot of consultation with children and stakeholders to ensure that there is community ownership of the Playground.”⁸

In this sense, an adventure playground – and specifically Shiremoor Adventure Playground – is always more than “a space dedicated solely to children’s play”; it is a playful, safe, supportive space, embedded within a community, with a diverse and evolving network of relationships within and beyond the playground. None of this could happen without play; the qualities of play – and of playworkers – are central to the nature and value of the playground, enabling the wider activities, connections and relationships to develop and be sustained.



1. Shiremoor Adventure Playground



The Playwork Principles, on the wall of Shiremoor Adventure Playground

Playwork Principle 5⁹ states: “The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play”, but playworkers create a space in which children, young people, their families, and members of the wider community can grow, connect, develop, feel safe, challenge themselves, seek all kinds of support, be signposted to other spaces and services, and much more.

It is these ‘more than play’ aspects of Shiremoor Adventure Playground that are the focus of this report. This report is a snapshot of activities and relationships in 2025/26, but builds on, reflects and acknowledges that this work

has always been part of the day-to-day life of the playground. Annual Reports produced by Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust since 2010 document the activities, relationships, programmes, events, and moments that extend from the playground’s core mission into children’s wider lives, their families, the community, and more distant spaces and relationships, working with parents, carers, schools, children’s centres, local charities, other providers, and the council. This report focuses on documenting and exploring these activities and relationships.

2 The Research

This research has been focused on answering the following question, and associated aims.

What is the social impact of Shiremoor Adventure Playground, in the present and, on reflection, over the past 15 years?

Aims:

1. To define social impact and identify the spheres of social impact relevant for Shiremoor Adventure Playground;
2. To research, qualitatively and with additional supporting evidence, the social impact of the playground, in Shiremoor and beyond, over the last 15 years;
3. To document the social impact of the playground in a report to share with the community and with stakeholders.

To this end, the research design included:

- interviews with key stakeholders in a range of organisations with which the playground has a relationship (e.g. North Tyneside Council officers, ward councillors, local schools, local employers, other charitable and community organisations in Shiremoor and beyond);
- interviews with playground staff and volunteers;
- interviews with children, including especially those working as Helping Hands and Young Volunteers;
- conversations with parents and carers during visits to the playground;
- a review of relevant documents, including past annual reports, funding reports, and Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust minutes;
- time spent at the playground, both as a researcher and as a trustee.

3 Social Impact and Social Value

The focus of this research connects to wider work around social value and social impact. These overlapping terms seek to document and draw attention to organisations' activities that extend beyond their core functions and focus. For social value, these are often oriented towards a sense of giving back or improving the worlds around the organisation, and can be seen as complementing a commercial organisation's "financial bottom line."¹⁰

Social impact is defined more broadly as:

*"the change that individuals or organisations bring about through their activities ... Social impact can be intentional or unintentional, as well as both positive or negative. Social impact is not a state, but a process by which people and communities respond to engagement, participation or support"*¹¹

For many businesses and organisations, social impact assessments are now a routine part of their regular, formal reporting, taking into account an ever-increasing range of relationships and commitments, but for smaller, local organisations social impact can be seen more loosely as "tracking the 'outcomes' of activities", outcomes which "can be felt at individual or community/societal levels and can be short or long term".¹²

It is this approach that is taken here, seeking to map the activities that have emerged alongside, and as a result of, the core mission, and to document the impacts of those activities. It is worth noting that this report focuses on qualitative evidence of the playground's social impact and does not seek to quantify this. Research by Matrix for Play England in 2010 concluded that every £1 invested in an adventure playground generates an estimated £1.32 in social benefits over a 20-year period, and every £1 invested in qualified playwork staff generates an estimated £200 in social benefits over the same period.¹³



4 Valuing the Playground

One of the most striking aspects of the interviews conducted was the very high regard in which the playground is held. All interviewees – from children, to parents and carers, volunteers, council officers, corporate and community partners – enthusiastically talked of the playground's value. Four interviewees described the playground as a "hidden gem", alongside other effusive evaluations of the playground:

"I've never had anything but positive experiences there, like as a school, as a parent, and as a teacher" (Connie Stamp, classroom teacher, Appletree Gardens First School) ¹⁴

"everyone's always so happy when they're there" (Katie Lawson, team manager, community protection team at North Tyneside Council)

As well as the recurring description of a 'hidden gem', two of the interviewees also described the playground as an umbrella. As local councillor, Tommy Mulvenna, explained:

"it's an umbrella, I mean, people don't realise what it actually does. I mean everything from health and wellbeing, anti-social behaviour, peer groups, support mechanisms, you know"

This is a metaphor that works well as a framing for this research, highlighting how the playground facilitates a wide range of activities and relationships, beyond play, that are often not recognised (the 'hidden gem') but that draw people, of all ages, in to create a supportive and safe environment.



5 A Space for Children

An adventure playground is a space dedicated to children's play, but even for those children who play at the playground regularly, it is much more than this. Emerging from the permissions and affordances for play, children build multifaceted relationships with the playground, the staff, the other children and the wider community, and with themselves.

This section relates to the children who spend considerable amounts of time at the playground, visiting most days, after school, and at weekends, as well as during the school holidays. According to a 2022 survey, 33% of visitors visited the playground more than once a week, with a further 19% visiting weekly. The 2022 survey reported that 42% of children visiting lived in NE27, the playground's own postcode and covering Shiremoor, West Allotment, Backworth, Holystone, and Murton Village. Playground staff confirm that a significant proportion of the playground's most local children visit most days.

Importantly, the playground feels like home to many of the children who attend regularly. As well as simply reflecting an ease and a familiarity, this sense of home was felt in particular ways. One 10-year-old boy pointed to a photo of himself as a toddler on the office wall, highlighting not only the length of his relationship with the playground, but that he had grown up in it, alongside, as he explained in interview, his cousins. A 10-year-old girl who'd recently moved away from Shiremoor explained how she felt when she came to the playground, having not been for a while; as other children excitedly welcomed her back, she told us "It's literally my home". Grace, a 19-year-old who had also grown up at the playground, looked back and described how:

"coming here I felt like I had brothers and sisters, you'd constantly have people to be with and then you'd play with them outside the park ... like it would feel like you had siblings because we were all so close as a group."



Other children and young people also highlighted how the mix of ages playing and hanging out together meant that the relationships that developed felt like sibling relationships, with different kinds of fun, help, skills, and advice flowing between the children. The staff, too, reinforced this sense of family, with children and young people describing how the staff – of different ages, with different experiences – felt like older siblings, aunts or uncles, or father figures. Lesli Godfrey, chair of the trust, noted: “When children say ‘the playground is home’ they really mean it - the playworkers are, at times, the best parent they could have.”

The sense of home was felt strongly by children with busy or challenging home lives; as trustee Ingrid Wilkinson notes, many develop “a sense of belonging that may be unavailable to them at home”. For some, the playground functions as an in-between space, providing care – of various kinds – after school and before the return home.

As Barbara Middleton, headteacher at neighbouring Shiremoor Primary School, explained:

“some of our children wouldn’t necessarily go home and have a conventional evening of like, you know, tea and then doing other things, whereas they can go there, can have food there; it costs them absolutely nothing¹⁵ ... and then it’s a safe place to be there is adult supervision, but they can also have fun ... So it’s a really important resource for some of our children.”

Map of NE27, with Shiremoor and the adventure playground, marked by an **X**



5. A Space for Children

The sense of belonging and value felt by the children in the space of the playground, the opportunities offered to them, and the relationships nurtured means that they are enabled and encouraged to grow in all sorts of ways, including with confidence, with skills and with behaviour, as Barbara Middleton continued:

“And just to develop confidence and independence because a lot of the activities they do over there require them to be a bit braver than they might otherwise be, and resilience and all of that kind of thing ... But what they also do with them is they take them camping and do different kinds of trips that the children wouldn't necessarily have the opportunity to do ... they definitely teach them skills over there. So they do even the camping skills and things, things that will stand them in good stead for trades and things like that, because they're quite keen for them just to get tools and muck in ... where we do find children with behaviour problems, often they'll do brilliantly ... get them outside with tools and woodwork and do all of that, and they just absolutely love it.”

All of this reflects the playground staff's commitment to getting to know the children, building relationships with them, and responding to their needs. As Keeks McGarry, the playground's team leader, explained:

“that's why our relationships are very specific, and that's why I've always said from the start of the playground, the relationships that the playworkers have with the kids ... it's above everything else, the structures, the activities, the sort of programmes, the animals, the relationships that the playworkers have with the kids is the paramount thing”.



Expanding Opportunities: Schools

Many of these themes echo through the accounts of teachers from other North Tyneside schools, who visit regularly with their children. These children rarely see the playground as home (unless, as some do, they start to visit more and develop a stronger relationship) but they do experience it as a space that facilitates relationships with classmates and the wider school community, and one in which they can develop skills and confidence. Although many of these children's experiences at the playground reflect the core focus on providing a rich and supported play environment, the schools' visits demonstrate the playground's wider relationships and its contribution to the lives of children across North Tyneside and beyond.

Between April 2025 and March 2026, there were 80 hours of school visits, from 13 different schools, with a total of 1105 child-visitors. The playground has a particular relationship with its neighbour, Shiremoor Primary School, and this relationship is integrated throughout this report. Here we reflect on the accounts of regular visitors, Appletree Gardens First School in Whitley Bay and Christ Church Primary School in North Shields.

Connie Stamp, classroom teacher from Appletree Gardens who leads the majority of their trips to the playground, explained that they initiated their visits over 10 years ago to enable the school to observe and evidence the Reception children's physical development. They had little space on site to be able to ascertain whether children were meeting their physical development targets:

"we didn't really have the provision here to see children freely moving across apparatus and climbing and taking all those risks."

Even though they have since developed their onsite playground to afford more physical play (influenced by their visits to the playground; see section 13 below), Connie Stamp explained:

"we still go back because we still find that it offers us a wonderful insight into the way that our children are, especially when we've nurtured or fostered this risk-taking and how different they are."

Christ Church Primary School's headteacher, Louise Bradford, reiterated this, highlighting how days at the playground enabled the development of children's resilience, and their language, communication, and gross motor skills, by nudging them "just a little bit out of their comfort zone, just to push them that little bit more". She continued to explain how "it really reinforces all of those things we're trying to establish".

These teachers also underlined how the playground was a space where all kinds of children with all kinds of interests, and of diverse ages, could find opportunities to play, explore and grow:

"I mean, it caters for a wide range of needs, doesn't it? You know, you've got the forever footballers catered for. The thrill seekers are catered for, and the ones who are quite happy making up a little role play game are catered for. So it does provide them with so many different opportunities."

6. Expanding Opportunities: Schools

This not only served individual children but also facilitated the development of relationships within class groups and across the school. Christ Church Primary School visits most terms with the children who have won the house-point competition and with multiple year groups for summer trips. This means the children visiting are of different ages and do not necessarily know each other well. As Louise Bradford explained:

“I think it’s for us, it’s somewhere we’re going to take a big group of them across the school, but it’s somewhere that they’ll all enjoy and I think it enhances that family-friendly feeling that we try and put into Christ Church because they all work together.”



7 Volunteering, Skills and Training

Creating opportunities for children to get involved in the day-to-day running of the playground is part of its core mission, to afford the children responsibility and new experiences, which extend their ideas about what they can achieve. Yet this reflects a broader sense of opportunity and development than many might imagine, and it is, importantly,

extended to young people as they 'age out' of the playground, to adult playground volunteers, and to volunteers from the wider community. These opportunities to develop volunteer experience, identify and develop new skills, and undertake training, formally and informally, are discussed here.

For children and young people

Above and beyond general support for children's developing skills, confidence and relationships, from an early age, children who regularly visit the playground are encouraged to apply to become Helping Hands. These children, amongst many tasks, buddy new visitors to support them as they get to know the playground, help with the café, learn to look after the animals, staff the office to record arrivals, support the organised activities

(e.g. crafts, football tournaments), and help to tidy the playground, inside and out. Helping Hands are recruited through an application and an interview, and rewarded not just with valued responsibilities, but also a red hoodie, worn with pride. The formal, structured application process reinforces children's sense of achievement and success.



7. Volunteering, Skills and Training

The children working as Helping Hands in February 2026 half-term (as presumably all those who had come before) demonstrated a real sense of pride and investment in their roles. They felt valued and could see that they would learn to become more independent, to contribute to the smooth running of the playground, to support and deepen their relationships with the playground staff, to develop new skills – and pass them on – and to work with each other. They also recognised that taking on these roles allowed them to feel still more attached to and responsible for the playground and to see their place in the playground developing. For many, becoming Helping Hands also coincided with permission to come to the playground without an adult, underlining their families' and the playworkers' confidence in them. One Helping Hand talked proudly of helping out around the playground, with the animals, in the café and in the office. When asked what it's like to wear the red hoodie, she answered:

"Rewarding. It feels like I'm more confident. Feels like I'm more strong. Feels like I have the courage to speak up ... It's just because I've been coming here so long and I've just become attached to it so much."

Grace, now 19 and a part-time member of staff supporting the over 13s sessions, reflected back on her time as a Helping Hand. She explained that the staff "would make you feel like you're actually like a playworker", that the hoodie was so valued "you'd think you were actually wearing like some designer hoodie". Even a job as mundane (and unpleasant) as emptying the bins was experienced as a sign of their importance in their playground:

"there was this key and you used to walk around with this key to open up all the bins and take the rubbish out, but this key was like gold ... you just had all the power."



Advert for Helping Hands, February 2026

Grace underlined how becoming a Helping Hand reinforced children's sense of value, within the playground and beyond: "you feel like, oh, actually, you must be doing something right".

Grace was one of three young people interviewed who had made the transition from playing child to paid staff; Ryan and Grace both work with the over 13 sessions, and Mia with the additional needs sessions. Ryan was 12 when the playground opened and he quickly built a strong relationship with the staff, as they explained:

"we had an understanding of Ryan's needs as well. so Ryan was sort of going through quite a difficult time ... and as a team we understood, we knew what Ryan sort of needed ... we kind of funnelled him into interests that suited him, like giving him the responsibility of starting parkour groups with the younger kids, and I think that sort of responsibility did him the world of good."

7. Volunteering, Skills and Training

As he developed his relationship with the playground and the staff, Ryan remembers then doing a period of work experience in Year 10 and realising “actually this is quite good”. He started to do more voluntary work at the playground and then “moved up to the youth work”, alongside running his own business. Grace had been visiting the playground for as long as she could remember and had long known she wanted to work with children, but “just didn’t really know if it was babies, toddlers, 10 to 12, 12 to 15”. She started working the youth sessions and noted:

“I thought right this might be my age range ... I’ve been picking up a lot more hours here and then I’ve just applied for the Playwork Level 3 course ... I think once I’ve got my playwork course behind us, then I can maybe pursue something in that, but I think work in the youth sessions has definitely pinpointed what I want to do and what age range I would work with”.



Mia, now 19, started volunteering with the sessions for children with additional needs in summer 2022, after first helping out in the kitchen and café. Realising that she wanted to work with children and, diagnosed with autism herself, Mia started to engage with the specialist sessions. She saw that she was good at working with children with additional needs, learnt a lot more skills, and built relationships with the children and their parents and carers, and was taken on as a paid member of staff in 2024. She now also works in an early years setting, is taking a Level 2 training course in Understanding Autism and hopes to have a career working with children with additional needs.

As Keeks, the team leader, noted, “when the Helping Hands pull on the jumpers, I can see the continuum from the beginning to the end here”. For all these children and young people, as for so many others, the playground offered more than play; it offered them an insight into – and support for – their developing skills and aspirations, opening up career paths and opportunities.



For playground volunteers and staff

The trajectory from visiting the playground, as a child or as an adult, to volunteering, paid work, and further training is not an unusual one. Most of the playground’s playworkers developed their relationship with and their role at the playground from volunteers to paid staff, taking on relevant training as they progressed. Justine, Matty and Ami all followed routes like this to their present roles as playworkers. Justine first started coming with her daughter, built relationships with the then playworkers, started volunteering in the café, and was then offered the opportunity complete Level 2 Playwork training at college. As Keeks, team leader, reflected:

“the two first playworkers ... kind of gravitated towards Justine ... drew her in as a volunteer and then sort of that gave us the chance to give her opportunities ... that’s the kind of organic thing that I just love and then Justine showed potential straight away.”

The local headteacher, who witnessed Justine’s journey, explained:

“it’s definitely been life-changing ... it’s been a brilliant opportunity for her to develop a career ... And I think a lot of that was the opportunities that she was given there to develop herself in terms of, you know, confidence.”

7. Volunteering, Skills and Training

For Ami, visits with her two sons led to conversations about using her photography skills to capture the magic of the playground for the trust's website, and, as she spent more time volunteering at the playground, her involvement developed into a paid role and the completion of a Level 3 Playwork qualification, alongside her continuing passion for photography; Ami takes all the photos for the playground's social media platforms and also works on films that capture what the playground does. For Matty, his mam suggested he have a look at the playground when he was considering going into teaching,

“And that kind of evolved into voluntary opportunities, which then evolved into paid opportunities ... and it kind of evolved to the point of where I am today really, which is I've learned all of these skills and techniques of working with children ... I've learned a lot along the way.”

A newer volunteer, Kat, started visiting the playground when her daughter was young, and Kat herself was struggling a bit with her mental health (a theme we return to below). She started spending increasing amounts of time at the playground, helping out with tidying and cleaning while her daughter played. Gradually, she began to volunteer in more roles, including in the additional needs and the over 13s sessions, working a couple of days a week, and more in the school holidays. Kat reflected on how she'd changed:

“So I've progressed from a year ago and I just feel like there's just more coming from it. My confidence has just grown, which I never thought would ... you know, just finding me and what I can do, what my ability is and stuff like that.”

Like Grace, she's now registered for her Level 3 Playwork qualification and is hoping for “a pass, and a job ... being an actual, you know, member of staff now and things like that ... I'm curious of what the future holds for us in this place, and I'm really looking forward to it.”

These long-term volunteering roles are complemented by other work experience and placement opportunities offered by the playground, both informally and formally (including Ryan, as discussed above). In the past year, the playground has hosted eight secondary school students for a week's work experience, one Duke of Edinburgh volunteer for a six-month placement, an undergraduate playwork student on a three-month placement, and a health and social care college student as a regular volunteer.

The role of the trust also creates volunteering opportunities at the playground offering the six trustees the chance to use their professional and personal skills to champion and develop the potential for play to shape children and young people's lives and to support the wider community. Between them, the trustees volunteer hundreds of hours a year (varying from around 5-15 hours a month) and feel a real sense of value and achievement in working to promote play and secure the sustainability of the playground. They also benefit from being engaged in activities beyond work, both in their working lives and in retirement, and staying connected to children and young people.

It is not just the staff themselves that benefit from this supportive process of skills and employment development, but the playground and its people; as Keeks, the team leader, noted,

“having local people from the local community involved in the team kind of sort of gives it that sort of sense where people do feel safe”.

Explicitly, the way that the staff team grows and develops with parents, carers, and young people progressing through roles and responsibilities at the playground enables the playground to be the kind of space it needs to be, rooted in the community and built on strong relationships. It also means that the playworkers and volunteers are seen not as distant authority figures, but positive and relatable role models for the children and young people.

7. Volunteering, Skills and Training

For local organisations

A number of local organisations and workplaces visit the playground as volunteers, completing tasks such as maintenance, gardening, painting, and woodwork. This voluntary work meets various needs for those organisations, including fulfilling social responsibility and sustainability goals, but also offers something very particular to the volunteers, which echoes much of what the children, young people, and adults who regularly volunteer at the playground acquire: new and developed skills, relationship-building, and a sense of value and confidence.

Newcastle United Foundation has been bringing cohorts of around 15 young people, aged 16-25, on Universal Credit, and not in education, employment or training, to the playground since May 2025. Each cohort volunteers at the playground for 3 days, as part of a 12-week programme (King's Trust TEAM)¹⁶ to support resilience and employability. As Kenny Lyon, the project manager explained:

"the group are unskilled, so we will turn our hands to pretty much anything ... so we'll do a bit of gardening, we'll move a bit of rubbish, we'll dig plants, we'll do painting, we'll do decorating, we'll do putting things together, general light maintenance."

Not only do the young people learn resilience ("if it was pouring down, the job wouldn't get cancelled. We would still go out and do it because this is what might happen in real life") and "the skills that they would get from a working environment", but they are also get to see "an industry they might be interested in, like landscape or garden work". For an especially-interested young person, a two-week work placement at the playground might also be possible within the programme, opening up an opportunity to explore employment in playwork, youth work, maintenance, or gardening, for example.

The central customer services team at Greggs are currently involved in a volunteering programme at the playground, linked to Biffa's Sustainability Challenge. This involves repeated visits over a period of five or six months to the playground with a group of staff (and family members) to construct a mud kitchen and wooden fortress. As they prepare for the construction work, they've been doing more general voluntary work on site, and "learning to use drills and hammers and paint". Vicki, the team manager, explained:

"I think we live in a society now where doing something simple like putting a fence up or fixing something or painting something or using the drill are not necessarily skills that everybody gets taught, and I think that was a really good thing about it."

As with the Helping Hands and the playground volunteers, local businesses and organisations also identified the playground as a space where relationships were developed and deepened. For Greggs, building "team spirit" was a key aim of the Biffa Sustainability Challenge they were involved in at the playground, and this was facilitated by the nature of the playground – staff members brought their partners and children to the volunteer days to help out and have fun together. Vicki, the team leader, stressed the significant positive impact this volunteering had on the team who, despite being in sometimes tough customer service roles, recorded high employment engagement scores. This was echoed by the manager at EE Tyneside reflecting on their voluntary work at the playground:

"It's really good team bonding as well because they're always getting to know new people and stuff like that. So it really benefits them that way as well."

7. Volunteering, Skills and Training

Whilst many volunteering projects might offer teambuilding opportunities, Vicki at Greggs was clear that the sense of freedom and the playful atmosphere at the playground facilitated this all the more:

“And I think because there’s no rules as such at Shiremoor, that’s probably why it went really well.”

Hand in hand with the developing relationships within the volunteer teams, the opportunity to dig in – sometimes quite literally – and give something back resonated in all the experiences explored here. This was not simply about doing something for the community, but also about a sense of value, and of confidence, developed through seeing the real impact and importance of the voluntary work, in making a significant contribution to the running of the playground and its capacity to support children and young people.

Kenny Lyon, from Newcastle United Foundation, explained:

“I suppose the main focus is giving something back to the community, realising what a community is, giving something back, realising how much their help is worth ... like last summer, we’ve done all the hedge cutting and all that ... and if they had got somebody in to do it, it would have cost them thousands.”

For a group of young people out of education, employment and training, and often struggling with anxiety, low confidence and low self-esteem, seeing the value of their work in this way was extraordinarily powerful. Moreover, the capacity for these benefits to be achieved was shaped directly by space created at the playground:

“It’s a nice place to take them. You’re all enclosed, so you know you’re going to be safe.”

For staff from EE Tyneside, the sense of value, of achievement, was also something identified and reflected on by volunteers:

“Yeah, well like a lot of them will come back and they’ll be like I can’t believe how grateful they were. But then they realise how precious what they’re actually doing is. So they just say I’ve just gone in, I’ve just like weeded, and I’ve just pulled this out, pulled that out. But then like the people that are running the place will say that it would have been months for us to do that. We could never have done that by ourselves, what you’ve done in a few hours, we could never have done and then it’s like it’s like a sense of achievement as well and it’s yeah, feeling like you have actually done something good.”

For these volunteers, the value also reflected their existing connections within the community and with North Tyneside; EE Tyneside is based about a mile from the playground, and they explained:

“I think mainly the reason why we choose this is a lot of us that work here are local, so there’s a lot of them whose children actually go there so they are they’re happier to go there to volunteer because they know that their children can benefit from it too.”

And, for all the volunteers, it was clear that getting involved in the playground nurtured a strength of feeling for the playground and its communities and commitment to continuing collaboration, as Vicki at Greggs confirmed:

“I feel like we’ve got a connection with Shiremoor now. I feel like I want to keep that going.”

8 Supporting Mental Health, Disability and Neurodiversity

One of the themes has been touched on throughout the discussions above, reflecting the experiences of the diverse volunteers and visitors, is the connection to supporting those struggling with their mental health and living with disability or neurodiversity. As an accepting and supportive environment, the playground affords those who volunteer and visit an opportunity to experience a sense of escape, to be seen and understood, and to feel valued. The playground is also an accessible space, with accessible parking bays, step-free access, and Changing Places toilets and changing facilities, which include a hoist, shower, and changing bed.

For playing children, the relationships developed with the playground and the playground staff facilitate an environment in which they are seen, particularly when they are negotiating neurodiversity or episodes of poor mental health, as Justine explained:

“We know some of our kids we work with, they need a little bit extra nurturing or they need a little bit more attention ... and sort of give them safe spaces or giving them time out.”

For Mia, Grace and Ryan, their relationships with the playground significantly shaped their experiences with autism and ADHD. For Grace and Ryan, both diagnosed with ADHD, the playground was a space in which they were accepted and understood, supporting through their process of learning about their ADHD and finding ways to feel better, but also a space where they could just let off steam, as Ryan remembered:

“Yeah, it was like ... coming home from school, hyper and then coming in and running for hours and hours and then going home and being like, I’ve done it, I’ve solved the day, got tired.”

This was enabled both by the space and freedom of the playground, but also by the supportive and engaged relationships they quickly developed with playground staff. For Mia, diagnosed with autism, the playground offered a space of respite from a busy family home, but also a sense that she could be herself:

“it was time to run around without feeling that everyone was watching me ... it felt easier to be kind of accepted here.”

For Appletree Gardens First School and Christ Church Primary School, the playground offers an environment, both social and physical, where their diverse cohorts of children could all be accommodated. The playground staff and the many difference spaces in the playground (spaces for letting off steam and being physical, spaces to sit with nature, spaces to read and draw, spaces to create dens, for example) allow visiting children to find a place that works for them, often enabling them to manage a full day at the playground, sometimes to the surprise of their teachers and parents, as Connie Stamp from Appletree Gardens explained:

“I think on this particular trip [we had] two very neurodivergent little girls. And we were able to have that flexibility to say, come, enjoy the area, if it becomes too much, there’s this room that you can go in ... and actually they stayed for the full day, enjoyed every little moment of it and they were able to manage.”

8. Supporting Mental Health, Disability and Neurodiversity

For both schools, the safety of the site and the support from playground staff meant that, in contrast to visits to, for example, museums or libraries, trips to the playground felt much more manageable, especially in relation to neurodiverse children. Louise Bradford, from Christ Church Primary, noted:

“It’s just dead easy especially with the level of SEND across school ... like, you don’t have to worry about if you’re taking some of those children who are maybe flight risks and things like that, taking them to like the Centre for Life or the Hancock or the Discovery Museum, it’s quite stressful getting them there. And then you’ve got to be on them all the time. But when you’re going to Shiremoor, yes, you’ve got to monitor and keep them safe and things, but there’s a huge level of that removed. Which I think benefits the child as well, knowing that they can just go free rein and they won’t necessarily have an adult on their shoulder all the time.”

All of this work extends into the sessions dedicated to children with additional needs (and siblings), run each Sunday and Monday. Sessions designed for children with disabilities and additional needs have been a part of the playground’s offer since it opened, initially in partnership with local charity Pathways for All. Supported since 2023 by the Ballinger Charitable Trust, these sessions attracted 3,950 visitors between April 2024 and February 2025 and 6,869 between March 2025 and February 2026 (children and adults), including children with, for example, Down Syndrome, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, autism, and ADHD). Reflecting the ethos of the playground, the children and their families choose their own forms of play, supported by the playworkers and by the diverse affordances of the playground; one parent described how her daughter “is at her happiest in the playground ... the playground is able to offer [her daughter] this space for her to play freely, whilst the chaos of the other children’s play unfolds around her”. The supportive and inclusive playground environment offers not only a ‘haven’ for children to play, but also a



space “where parents have an opportunity to share their stories, support one another and offer advice to one another” (connecting to the themes explored in section 11). As one parent noted, “We have never been anywhere like this, where we do not feel judged”.¹⁷

For volunteers, the kinds of engagement we outlined in section 7 offered those struggling with their mental health, in particular, a gentle, supported means to do something new and connect with peers and colleagues. The teams the Newcastle United Foundation bring to the playground range “from a young 16 year old who’s just left school, who’s never experienced anything in the world before, to somebody who’s been to university and fell off and just struggled to get a job, or somebody who suffers from anxiety or depression or low self-esteem, low confidence”. Supporting these young people to connect with each other, develop skills and grow their confidence is at the heart of the TEAM project, and the choice of the playground for their voluntary placements is not incidental.

Greggs team leader Vicki underlined the broader mental health benefits of volunteering at the playground for young people, stressing how the playground’s ethos and space enabled something many had lost in their day-to-day lives:

8. Supporting Mental Health, Disability and Neurodiversity

“But for a lot of the people ... their day consists of getting up, coming to work, sitting at a desk in an office, going home, going on their phones. So, I think whether you are 8, 10 or 21, that could, can be a reality of your life ... people suffering from mental health issues is a thing that I see daily, I've got wellness action plans with I would say a quarter of the team who are really struggling. And yet you would look at them and think you're young, you live at home, you've got no responsibilities, you know, you've got disposable income. So, the reality is perhaps you would assume they would be feeling better, but they don't. And I genuinely believe it's because they live in the society where exercise, going outdoors, getting some fresh air, putting your phone down, enjoying what's around you is a rare thing.”

For Kat, as noted above, starting to volunteer coincided with mental health struggles, and she explained carefully how the very nature of the playground enabled her to take small steps to get involved:

“I'd worked as a cleaner, so that's why when I came in, I

just thought, potter about just take me mind off it, you know? Because even though if I come with the children and I was sitting there, I would get anxiety because I feel like people were looking at us and I felt like I was sitting there and people were going, Oh, what are you sitting for? So I would just get up and just, you know, just start cleaning.”

In starting to do bits of cleaning, she felt less awkward and anxious, but also started to see the contribution she could make to the playground and how her relationship with it might develop:

“from then it just got bigger for us, you know, coming to volunteer a bit more and again it kept me out of that house, you know, and helped me. I mean the park's been absolute wonders, absolutely wonders for us.”

Her developing relationships with the children and with the other staff allowed Kat to get more and more involved, to develop her skills and confidence, and see that was good at the varied work she took on, such that, as we saw, she's now undertaking playwork training.

9 Challenging Anti-Social Behaviour

Many of the interviewees highlighted the playground's contribution to tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB), especially, but not only, in Shiremoor. Whilst there has been concern that the presence of the playground might attract anti-social behaviour, the interviewees were clear that any signs of trouble were not caused by the playground and, in fact, that the presence of the playground meant its staff were in a position to deal quickly and successfully with any issues,

reflecting their relationships with local children and young people. There was a general sense that the playground had helped many children and young people “stay out of bother”, as a local councillor suggested. Without the playground, the local headteacher felt that “some children probably would have gone off the straight and narrow.”

9. Challenging Anti-Social Behaviour

The strongest evidence for the playground's value in reducing anti-social behaviour came from Katie Lawson, team manager in the community protection team at North Tyneside Council, tasked with dealing with anti-social behaviour in open spaces, among other things. Katie manages a pot of money to support "alternative diversionary activities for youth that were perceived to be engaged in anti-social behaviour". Recognising some evidence of ASB in Shiremoor, in October 2022 Katie approached the playground to ask if they could trial additional hours for older children (13+).¹⁸ Katie supported the playground in promoting the extra sessions, to schools and the youth offending team, and had seen the first trial session "just go from strength to strength", such that a second evening session for over 13s has now been added.

Katie described how the 13+ sessions are "an opportunity for youth that really are just bored and they've got nothing and it's great and it's just a hangout point and it's safe environment for them". She has witnessed "youth travelling from across the borough to use the facility", from Killingworth and North Shields, for example, facilitated by the good metro and bus links. Katie reports that, as a result of the sessions, "we now have very little, if any, to be honest, youth-related anti-social behaviour in Shiremoor itself". This success, Katie feels, reflects the very down-to-earth and approachable attitude of the staff who deal with issues as they arise:

"the staff have got eyes and ears and they hear and see quite a lot ... and they're also, you know, looking after the community as well ... they've got their safeguarding hat on and if there's any worries, that's all shared"

She explained:

"I think it's a great use of the facility ... I just think the whole team invests so much for the young people and they give them so much, you know, they can give them responsibility for, you know, running the office or the tuck shop or the kitchen."

Ryan, who works these sessions, reflected on his own experience with the young people attending, exploring how they create a space to for "getting away from like the drugs, the alcohol, everyone who's out there who you don't want to be hanging around with", and, importantly, facilitate new kinds of friendships – and new life skills – for the young people:

"there's people who come into the park on the youth session who you wouldn't think would hang around with each other, so getting them to be with each other and make new friends and stuff, that's kind of life skills because you need that in life."

The playground's neighbour, Reverend Rae Caro at St Mark's Church, also talked about anti-social behaviour in Shiremoor. When she arrived in Shiremoor, in June 2021 in the midst of the challenges of covid-19, it was a real concern:

"at the time, we were having horrendous problems here [at the church] with vandalism, like kids climbing on the roof, like we would get our windows smashed on a weekly basis. It was horrendous and I really thought that the best way to deal with that would be to engage with the young people who were doing it"

As a result, she worked to explore the possibilities of a joint youth project with the playground, plans that faltered when trying to bring in additional collaborators, but nevertheless speak to the potential for the playground to act as a hub for managing partnerships around anti-social behaviour.

10 Safeguarding and a Safe Space

As Katie Lawson highlighted, there are links between work on anti-social behaviour and safeguarding, with the playground playing an important role in identifying how concerns around children and young people's behaviour connect to experiences of harm, risk, abuse and neglect in their everyday lives, at home and elsewhere.

The playground staff prioritise a system of safeguarding that differs from that encountered elsewhere. For the children who play regularly at the playground, the relationships the playground staff nurture enable them to "know straight away when something's wrong", but also to create an environment in which children will confide in them. Staff will firstly support the child or young person, by checking in and inviting them to talk. In some instances, this results in conversations with parents, and situations that exceed the threshold for reporting will be shared immediately with Children's Services and other partners. In instances where staff identify potential issues at home, with parents, they would work to monitor the situation, find out more, and act appropriately.

The head at Shiremoor Primary explained how closely she, and her staff, work with the playground to meet the safeguarding needs of their children:

"they're very good at communicating any issues. So, if they had concerns, and we obviously don't swap lots of confidential information, but equally, we're professionals, we're serving the same community with children. And if we had concerns, we might say we really need a particular eye on what's going on here ... So being able to support one another in terms of understanding information that's required to safeguard children ... together you're picking up probably more information and more kind of, you know, things that you need perhaps to act on than you might be if you didn't know what was happening to the children after three o'clock or whatever."

The real value of these kinds of intersecting relationships with children in a community underline the wider social impacts of the playground and its staff. The playground staff work consistently everyday to create an environment in which children's safety is prioritised; their capacity to act on safeguarding issues reflects their relationships with the children, but also with parents, carers and other local organisations.

These foundations mean that, beyond formal safeguarding roles, the playground acts as a 'safe haven' or a safe space, for children, young people, and the wider community, offering both respite from and active support for those trying to find paths through challenging personal circumstances and difficult socio-economic environments. That the playground is accessible and staffed everyday (with Sundays and Mondays dedicated to children with additional needs) means that it is a constant in many children's lives; they know they can come and play, find a playworker, chat and seek support, if needed. As playworker Ami noted, the doors are open and the staff are available.



11 Supporting Family Life

The playground's support for family life extends beyond safeguarding, into a range of everyday activities, including making space for families, offering formal and informal opportunities for parental support, and helping families navigate cost of living crises.



Space for Families

On a very simple level, the playground creates a space for families to meet and play together. This can just be nuclear families, but often particularly enables extended and blended families to spend time together. That the playground affords many different kinds of play means that families with children and young people of all ages, from toddlers to teens, can enjoy the playground, and spend considerable amounts of time there. A number of the parents, grandparents and other carers interviewed testified to choosing the playground as it enabled, for example, groups of cousins and step-siblings to play together.

The opportunities created for families to play together also resonated with local schools. The teacher from Appletree Gardens explained that the accessibility and low cost of school trips to the playground meant that:

"It's lovely with parents, because we can take more parents than other trips where you pay per adults, so we invite as many adults as can possibly come, and the parents love it"

This was also something echoed by North Tyneside's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) team, discussed in more detail below; unlike many other providers, parents and carers can stay at the playground when their children have a HAF place, enabling those families to see the playground, but also to spend time with other parents while their children play.

The playground is also a space used for contact for children in care. Adopt North East visited the playground every fortnight for just under a year, to engage in group activities for young people and to offer an informal supportive space for parents and carers. Some children visit from local children's homes, with the playground affording an important chance to play, connect to other children, and find some space beyond the limits of their homes. Foster carers also use the playground, to facilitate parental and sibling contact. Some of this involves children from Shiremoor Primary, and the headteacher explained:

"Yeah, contact with siblings and for parents, especially if they're doing supervised contact, because then it's an easy place to take the parents to, for the social workers to manage the supervision, but also ... then it's a positive association. If you're just doing contact in school, it's not quite the same as being able to go over there and have a bit of a fun time."

Support for Parenting

The playground also enables informal support for parenting. That children can play freely and safely at the playground, supported by the playground staff, means that parents and carers, including those managing complex family situations, can also find time to hang out and connect, while their children play, as one mother explained:

“it was one of those you know golden finds when I had my kids and I was like, oh my gosh, this is amazing here. I come and I can let them go, you know ... they can go and I can sit and have a coffee with my friend.”

The headteacher at Shiremoor Primary built on this reflection to identify the important ways that the playground supports parents, and particularly mothers:

“for families, it’s a very good place for them to meet. Some of my, you know, mums might struggle socially and then if they can go there and they have a bit of support with the adults there to kind of, you know, mediate and support in terms of those social kind of relationships, that’s a positive as well. And a lot of them find parenting a bit overwhelming. And if you can take your children somewhere where somebody helps you to supervise them for a period of time, then that’s really helpful as well.”

The playground and its staff create a supportive environment for mothers to meet and connect, to ask for help, and to get a bit of respite from parenting.

For some parents, growing up themselves with the playground, and experiencing all the kinds of support explore here, was a key factor in them establishing families of their own, as a local councillor suggested:

“Looking at some of them now who are parents, you know, when you’re talking to them, like they’ll say, you know, if I hadn’t went there, I probably wouldn’t be doing this now you know ... they’ve got a family you know and they’re working with that”.

The playground also facilitates family life in ways which connect both to parenting and other everyday challenges. It acts, at times, as informal childcare, for those over 8 who are able to attend without parents or carers. For those with parents working or with busy homes, for example, as the headteacher of Shiremoor Primary explained:

“Some of them will use it and some of them use it a bit more actually, yes ... and rather than go home, they’ll go there. Also, parents could meet them there, or they get a time when they’ve got to be home and they’ll go there and then head home. Because they can go, the older children, you can just go there and their parents can pick them up at 5 rather than half three or whatever. It works around working hours ... They have the tea, play, and then they’ll go, they’ll head home when they’re ready to do that.”

11. Supporting Family Life

Holiday Activities and Food

The playground is a key provider of North Tyneside's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, offering the single largest number of HAF places throughout the school holidays and half-terms. The national, government-funded Holiday Activities and Food programme "provides healthy meals, enriching activities, and free childcare places to children from low-income families, benefiting their health, wellbeing and learning."¹⁹ Between summer 2025 and Easter 2026, the playground provided 175 HAF places to North Tyneside children, from Shiremoor and beyond, over 50 days.

Beyond the numbers, the council's HAF team see the playground's value in a number of aspects: it is already an inclusive environment that welcomes children of all ages and backgrounds, and can integrate HAF and non-HAF children; its location in Shiremoor means it is on the doorstep of many eligible children and accessible for many more by public transport; and children who get HAF places can come to the playground freely and easily at other times too (in contrast to many other HAF providers). As the HAF team noted:

"I think the value from my point of view is the fact that it is one of the rare ones ... that they can continue afterwards as well. It's got that longevity that some of the others don't because some of them just literally pop up in a half-term period and then they disappear."

That HAF introduces local families to the playground is an added bonus:

"I think it's really nice to offer the playground for the whole borough and new people to see it ... because when they possibly realise it's free anyway, then hopefully they'll come back. And that's how I think it's important."

Because the playground is free to access for all children, it is also available for children without HAF places throughout the school holidays. Many of the regular children do attend through HAF, but others can attend anyway, benefitting the children themselves but also their families. The headteacher at Shiremoor Primary recognised that

"parents would struggle to pay for children to do activities during the holidays, whereas actually that's an affordable resource for them. It's free and they can get in there during the holidays. So, supporting parents' mental health through school holidays and things and keeping the children entertained".

This continuous provision is supported by another partner, The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT, see below), who complement the playground's HAF provision, funding 20 additional places, with no eligibility criteria, enabling more local children to access a parallel offer. TBBT also gives families free vouchers for food bags, providing them with additional food support during the holidays.



11. Supporting Family Life

Additional Support and Signposting

Many interviewees identified the playground as a hub, offering all kinds of support directly, signposting children and families to other sources of support, and welcoming other support providers on site. As local councillor, Tommy Mulvenna, noted, "it's an ideal hub ... it's unbelievable what happens here, you know, and I mean this organisation has helped other organisations over the years with little bits and pieces".

One of the other organisations that delivers services at the playground is The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT),²⁰ which organises "mobile food clubs [to] give access to nutritious and affordable food taken into the heart of communities starved of money, food and resources". It offers not only affordable food (£35 worth of food for £7.50), but also community and connection.²¹ The Shiremoor hub meets at the playground every Wednesday (except in school holidays, when it meets at St Mark's Church next door). Each week between 50 and 80 members receive a bag of food, delivered by local volunteers who pack, organise and hand over the bags. Most of these members are local, with TBBT suggesting that most travel less than 2 miles to the hubs, and many in walking distance. Certainly not all the members at Shiremoor will be families who attend the playground, but many are, and the TBBT volunteer team work with the playground staff to ensure that families that do need food support can access it. Not only can playground staff signpost families to TBBT, but they can also identify families who might benefit from leftover bags and distribute vouchers to families in need to access TBBT for free.

TBBT volunteers recognise the particular value of the playground as a food hub and that the additional support the playground can offer in distributing food bags to families that need them is "all part of knowing your community". Playground staff also support the TBBT volunteers in setting up and supporting families, during the hub sessions.

The partnership between the playground, TBBT and other local organisations opens the playground's doors to others in the community who may need support and company. An older woman came first to the playground as a TBBT member to collect a food bag, but now pops in regularly to ask for the brakes on her walker to be tightened, to have a cup of tea, or just to spend the afternoon with people. Playworker Justine noted:

"not that we can give her the time she needs all of the time, but just her being here, she knows she's in a place she can just come in, make herself a cup of tea, feed the pigs, have a bit of a chat."

The playground staff noted that "being where we are, it sort of goes beyond children ... it does seep out into the community" and explained how not only the staff themselves but sometimes also the children will support local residents with visits and errands, with another older neighbour who "would phone up weekly and ask the kids to go and get bread for her". For the children, this reinforces the sense that they are trusted to help their neighbours and that they are part of a community. In many other ways, the staff regularly help families by signposting them to other spaces and services, for financial, mental health or other sources of support. The staff are seen to represent both the formal status of the council but also the more approachable qualities of a community space, finding a balance between these to gain the trust of local residents, of all ages.

12

Connecting Shiremoor

Whilst many of the activities and impacts explored above benefit Shiremoor particularly, there are aspects of the playground's work which focus directly on its connections with Shiremoor; as local councillor, Tommy Mulvenna, noted, "we're very lucky to have this ... I think the playground's enhanced the offer that the ward has."

Amongst the Shiremoor children and the wider community, the playground engenders a sense of pride; those at Shiremoor Primary "certainly love it. And yeah, they talk about it a lot ... I think it's a really big thing for them", and those interviewed for this report talked excitedly and enthusiastically about how special the playground is. Children and families alike see the playground as a positive for Shiremoor, something the whole community can be proud of.

Residents' attachment to the playground can be seen in the support they give it. This includes volunteering at events at the playground such as the regular Blasting Out of Summer, when, as Grace explained, "the parents all come together, chip in, give a helping hand and stuff", and also donating equipment and materials, such as wood, bark, toys, bikes, and treats for the children. When there was an arson attack on the playground in April 2012, "community-spirited parents ... pulled together to help raise funds", organising a sponsored fancy dress walk for children and adults. This response reflected the way that the playground had galvanized around "a facility which is so well used and liked."²²

These relationships reflect "the way that the playground involves the residents as well", as Katie Lawson, from North Tyneside Council's community protection team noted, in all the ways we have seen through this report. Reflecting the early

representations of the playground as community-based, Keeks explained "I've always been a big believer that if you want to work in a community, you need to get your feet dirty, you need to be a part of that community, you need to be there for a long time ... otherwise you can't develop the trust you need."





There is also a sense that the playground facilitates relationships across Shiremoor, creating a space through which children and their families get to know families across the neighbourhood. In part this reflects the playground enabling children of all ages to play together and get to know each other in ways they might not at school, but also through its work to bring in and connect to parents, carers and other residents, creating a community space that engenders familiarity; as Grace noted, "it just brings the community even closer really." The playground's engagement with the Shiremoor Treat, an annual event established by the community's miners in 1906,²³ is indicative of this, as the playground's children and their families would regularly walk together to the treat field, as "a community kind of thing".

These familial relationships are reinforced by the partnerships between the playground and its institutional neighbours. As Reverend Rae at St Mark's Church noted, "Shiremoor is pretty well-served actually for community space and different organisations". Shiremoor Community Centre, the Shiremoor Treat, the Salvation Army, St John's Ambulance, the church, and, previously, the Shiremoor Health and Resource Project, suggest a fairly dense network of local groups supporting residents. Reverend Rae suggested "that previously there was much more of a sense of what all of the different bits were doing and how they fit together. And I think that maybe that's been lost". Current plans for these local organisations to cooperate again to revive the street parties that used to be a regular summer fixture are "a good opportunity for us all to be working together".

13

Sharing the Value of Play

The final theme developed here circles back to the playground's core mission around play, but extends beyond the child playing in the playground to reflect on the other ways the playground shares the value of play, to parents, local schools, other partners.

In the playground's early years, explaining to parents and other residents the value of play and of the particular approach to play employed by adventure playgrounds was a key part of relationship-building, and in many ways this continues, especially as the place of play within local authorities, and not just North Tyneside, and in public and policy spheres more widely is diminished. The playground continues to advocate for and model the importance of play for parents and carers, gently challenging them to think about the benefits, as Keeks suggests, "if children are allowed to manage their own behaviour ... they sometimes get like a little bit messy and a little bit sort of dirty". Because parents trust the playground staff, conversations about managing boundaries, behaviour, and play become possible.

The trust's social media, especially its Facebook page,²⁴ are key sites for the dissemination of ideas about adventure playgrounds and play, with playworker Ami regularly sharing photos and videos of children using tools, getting wet and muddy, helping out, lighting fires, tending the animals, and much more, to over 10,000 followers. Playworkers engage sometimes with comments on the posts, nudging parents and carers to see the value in adventure play and in risk. These representations of adventure play not only depict the diversity and value of play and playing children, but also the role of the playworker, and the importance of the site itself. They also demonstrate the longer-term impacts of the playground, as the stories of young people who grew up

with the playground are also shared, and its community connections, reporting on voluntary work, partnerships with other organisations, and the contributions of parents and carers.

These stories echo too through the work with schools, when teachers sometimes feel they have to impose more limits on children's play than the playworkers would. Engaging with the playground regularly can result in school staff shifting their perspectives and increasingly advocating for free and risky play; Connie Stamp at Appletree Gardens Primary School explained how they had sought to take the "ethos of the site [playground] back to school and introduce a bit of risky play, within our control". Appletree Gardens had "fostered this kind of risky play, we've got forest school provision" and allowed staff to give space to children to play. When teachers from Shiremoor Primary come to the playground with their children, they too learn more about free and risky play. And at Christ Church, now an OPAL school committed to supporting play, the headteacher noted:

"And I think as well, sometimes some of the staff will come back and say, oh, we could easily do that here ... And sometimes you see the way that the children use the equipment. They might not, we might have that equipment here, but it's maybe not used in the way that they've used it there. And then you can see the opportunities to do different stuff."

OPAL – Outdoor Play and Learning – and its north-east provider OPAL North East²⁵ is another of the playground's collaborators. OPAL seeks to support schools and school staff to change culture and practice around play and playtimes, and has used the playground to deliver

events and training in recent years. OPAL NE actively promotes the playground and encourages schools to become involved. Schools who visit the playground acquire a deeper understanding of the importance of risk and adventure in children's lives, which gives schools the confidence to create spaces within their school grounds to enable risky play, a core part of being on the OPAL Programme.

This work echoes the playwork training periodically offered by Shiremoor's playworkers and trustees: in 2024, the trust accessed funding to offer the Level 3 Award in Transition to Playwork qualification for staff from childcare and youth work settings, schools, voluntary organisations and local businesses, developing perspectives on play and its value for children and young people. External evaluation of the delivery found it to be outstanding, offering a "high quality, well delivered course".

The ethos of play was also celebrated, perhaps unexpectedly, by adult visitors too. Interviewees from both Greggs and Newcastle United Foundation noted that their volunteers had played on the equipment, especially the zipwire, during their volunteer days. Vicki from Greggs described how "seeing them laughing and smiling was just amazing as well, because of course they had to go on the zipwire." Vicki, however, moved beyond this to describe a recent trip to the playground:

"So, we got some of the team using the wood and using some tools and things. Then some of us dug some big holes because I think they're putting a big swing up ... Some of the ladies were raking. We fixed the big fence at the back where there's a little den. So we did all of that. Then some of them just took it upon themselves to start repairing the den and then they wanted to paint it and then they wanted to build a bench. And I think because there's no rules as such at Shiremoor, that's probably why it went really well also. So, they were encouraged by [a playworker], like if you want to do something, you can do it. It's like, just go off and do what takes your fancy."

The resonances between this description and the foundations of the adventure playground movement – making, playing, self-direction, permission and relationships – are striking, and evidence that time spent at the playground can be as valuable and impactful for adults as for children.



14 Conclusions

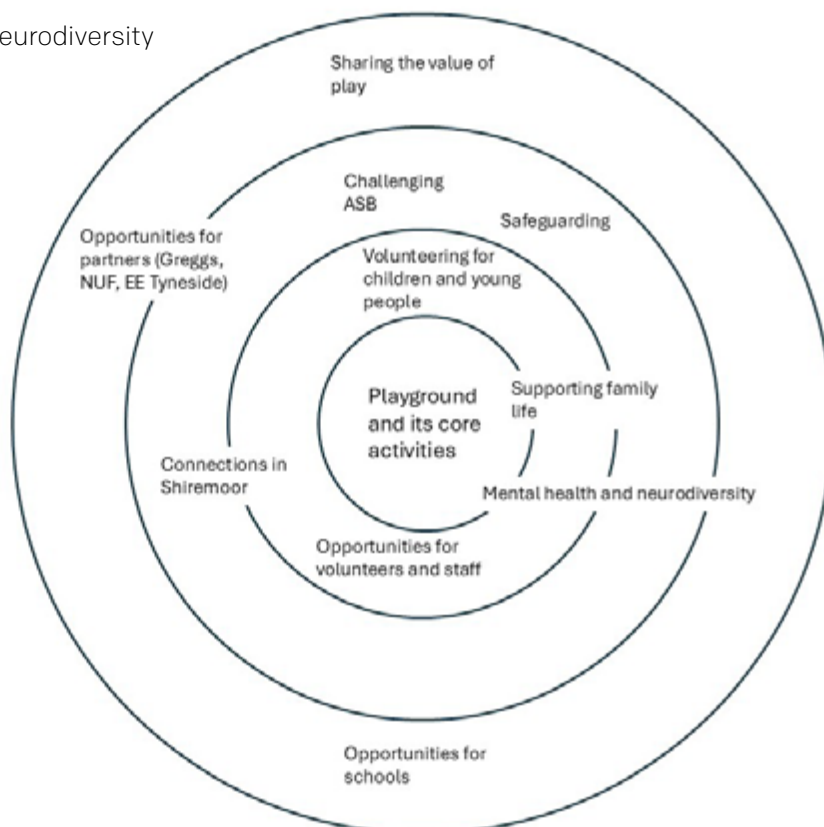
This report has documented the social impacts of Shiremoor Adventure Playground, building on and extending from its core mission. These are not activities added on or delivered in an attempt to diversify the playground's functions, but which emerge from

the playground's – and playwork's – foundational commitments, and from the space created by the children and young people, the playworkers, and the wider community.


As the diagram here suggests, these impacts extend functionally and geographically, from the playground's core activities and from the site of the playground into a range of spheres.

These include, as we have seen:

- Creating a space where children feel a strong sense of belonging and to develop relationships
- Expanding opportunities for local schools
- Building skills, responsibilities, confidence, value, relationships and opportunities through volunteering, for children and adults
- Supporting mental health, disability and neurodiversity
- Challenging anti-social behaviour
- Safeguarding and creating a safe space
- Supporting family life
- Connecting Shiremoor, and
- Sharing the value of play



The Spheres of Activity at Shiremoor Adventure Playground²⁶



These activities emerge and become possible as a result of the playground's defining characteristics, with play at its heart, affording the relationships nurtured by staff, volunteers, and children, a safe, inclusive and permissive space, and its embeddedness within the local community. Together, they demonstrate the extraordinary impact of the playground, in Shiremoor, North Tyneside, and beyond.

In part, the playground's success reflects the hybrid model of governance, within which North Tyneside Council and Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust work together to support and develop the playground's impacts in both its core activities and beyond. This ensures a comprehensive and sustainable offer.

This report highlights some opportunities for further reflection and development. Reviews of social impact generally also include negative impacts; this report includes no detailed reflection on these as the only such impacts mentioned, briefly, in interviews were occasional noise with big events at the playground and pressures on parking at busy times. Managing parking pressures is an area of constant attention, but its impacts are not severe. Other themes for reflection include the possibility of trying to quantify the social impacts reported here, but also to 1) formalise and accredit some of the voluntary work undertaken by children, young people, parents, and the wider community, 2) develop new areas of activity (such as supporting families with opportunities for alternative education), and 3) to extend further work around environmental sustainability and citizenship.

Since opening in 2010, Shiremoor Adventure Playground has positively impacted the lives of thousands of children, through the provision of a space dedicated to children's play, affording hours of fun and freedom, but also through the relationships nurtured, the skills developed, the trust and responsibility fostered, and the support offered. As this research reports, however, these impacts extend well beyond the playing child, to draw in, support, enable, and connect families, the wider community, and local organisations, in spheres that extend from play into so many aspects of everyday life. The playground sits at the centre of a set of relationships, activities, values, and opportunities that emerge from its dedication to creating a space for play, and its impacts are all the more valuable in the face of contemporary social challenges, from the scale of the neighbourhood to the nation.

Endnotes and references

- 1 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d831740f0b64a5813f756/2007-childrens-plan.pdf>.
- 2 Adventure playgrounds were first created in the UK in the postwar period and had their heyday in the 1970s, with 253 recorded across the UK in 1980 (Whewey, R., 2023, Play in peril: charting the decline of playgrounds across 40 years, <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/content/analysis/play-in-peril-charting-the-decline-of-playgrounds-across-40-years>). Numbers have declined, such that in 2021, there were just 126 (see report by trustee Lesli Godfrey at <https://www.playengland.org.uk/s/Play-England-Report-into-Adventure-Playgrounds-in-England-Winter-2021.pdf>).
- 3 Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust, Annual Report, 2017-18.
- 4 Play England (2009) Practice Briefing 1: Developing an Adventure Playground: The Essential Elements, <https://playwork.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/adventure-playground-briefing.pdf>.
- 5 <https://www.shiremoor-adventure-playground-trust.org/adventure-play/>
- 6 McGarry, K., 2010, What is an adventure playground? School of Health, Community and Education Studies, Northumbria University.
- 7 Interviewed in March 2010 for Keeks McGarry's BA dissertation (McGarry, 2010).
- 8 <https://www.shiremoor-adventure-playground-trust.org/about-us/>
- 9 <https://play.wales/playwork/the-playwork-principles/>
- 10 <https://www.socialvalueportal.com/news-and-insights/what-is-social-value-definitions-examples-and-how-to-create-it>
- 11 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/22291/download?attachment>
- 12 Heslop, J. et al (2025) Listening and Learning: The New Bridge Project: A Social Impact Report (https://issuu.com/thenewbridgeproject/docs/listening_and_learning)
- 13 Matrix, 2010, An Economic Evaluation of Play Provision: Final Report, cited in <https://www.playengland.org.uk/appg/feb2026>.
- 14 Adult interviewees are named, where permission has been given, and their roles indicated. Individual children are not named, but their age and relationship to the playground is outlined.
- 15 The playground's café is very low cost, but not free.
- 16 <https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/how-we-can-help/grow-skills-and-confidence/team>
- 17 Report on Shiremoor Adventure Playground's Additional Needs Sessions (2025) by Ashleigh Langlands.
- 18 The playground has run youth (13+) sessions at various points over the last 15 years, reflecting need, funding, and partnerships with other organisations.
- 19 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2025>
- 20 <https://www.breadandbutterthing.org/>
- 21 There are six hubs in North Tyneside (Tynemouth, Longbenton, Fordley, Howdon, Whitley Bay, and Shiremoor), with almost 5000 local members and over 7000 volunteer hours (<https://www.northtyneside.gov.uk/news/2026/affordable-food-scheme-supports-thousands-north-tyneside-households>).
- 22 <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/shiremoor-parents-raise-funds-arson-hit-1363939>
- 23 <http://shiremoortreat.org/>
- 24 <https://www.facebook.com/Shiremoorplauround1>
- 25 For more on OPAL North East, see <https://playfulschools.co.uk/>
- 26 This diagram bears a resemblance to the Manchester Circles, created by Wendy Russell and Stuart Lester to depict the organisational and environmental contexts of the playing child. The diagram here is used slightly differently, to map and reflect on the playground's relationships beyond its core activities (the playing child), both organisationally and geographically.

More than Play:

Exploring the social impacts of Shiremoor Adventure Playground

A report by Alison Stenning
on behalf of Shiremoor Adventure Playground Trust

June 2026