

A Good Place to Grow



December 2025

Unlimited Potential is a registered society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 (Register number 30669 R at the Financial Conduct Authority).
Registered Office: Innovation Forum, 51 Frederick Road, Salford M6 6FP.



Contents

1. Introduction and context	2
2. Our approach	4
3. What children told us	6
Theme 1: safety and security	7
Theme 2: community and belonging	9
Theme 3: environment and play	11
Theme 4: health, well-being and equality	13
4. Reflections on the process of listening to children	15
5. Recommendations	19
6. Next steps	19

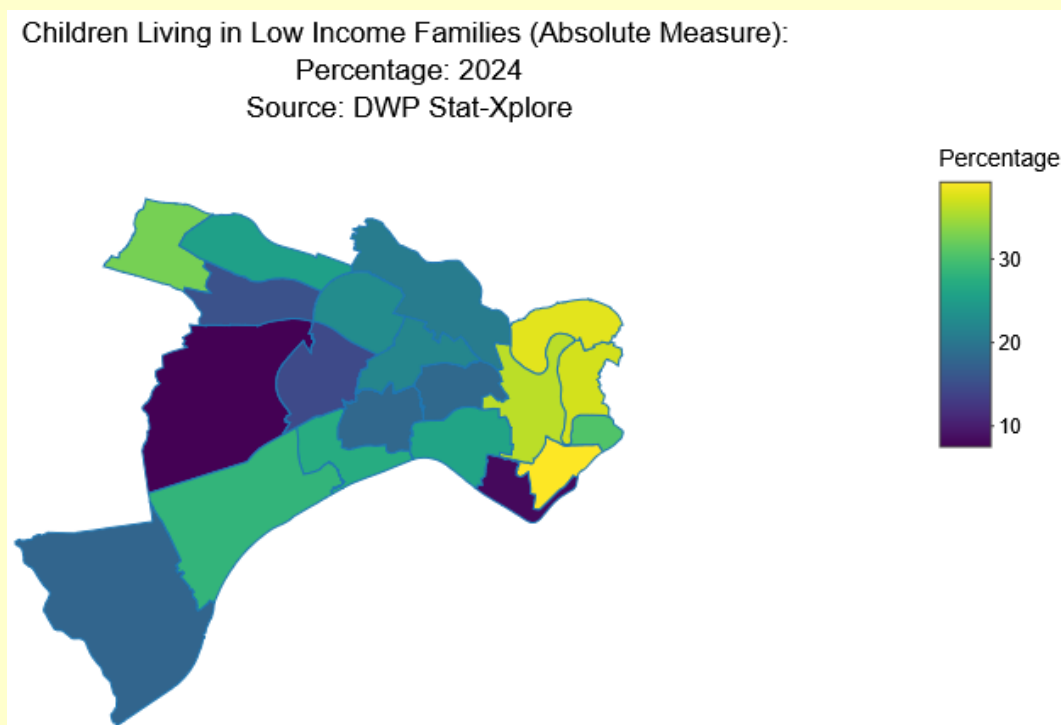
With thanks to CommUNITY Little Hulton, Freccles, Holy Family R.C. Primary School, Lower Kersal Community Primary School, Monton Green Primary School, St Philip's C.E. Primary School, Wharton Primary School and Youth Unity for their participation in the 'A Good Place to Grow' project. Your flexibility, enthusiasm and genuine engagement made a huge difference to the success of this work. It has been inspiring to see how openly you welcomed the opportunity to explore children's ideas and perspectives and how committed you were to creating spaces where their voices could be heard.

Introduction and Context

Far too many children in Salford are prevented from reaching their full potential because of poverty, inequality and marginalisation.

The challenges are reflected in a range of statistics¹, including:

- The rate of children living in low-income families in Salford changed from less than one-in-five to more than one-in-four children over two years and is currently 6.7% above the national figure.
- Poverty rates are higher for larger families, families with young children and single-parent families and, where these factors are combined, the likelihood of a family being in poverty is greater still. Despite this, within Salford, in-work poverty is significant. There are almost twice as many children in low-income working families (9,372) compared to low-income families not in work (4,869).
- There are 25,445 Salford children (40.8%) in poverty after housing costs (analysis by End Child Poverty).
- 44% of all people (not just children) living in socially rented housing are in poverty after housing costs have been accounted for, compared to 35% for private renters, 14% for those in homes owned outright and 10% in homes owned with a mortgage. (Analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation).



¹ Source: Salford City Council - <https://www.salford.gov.uk/people-communities-and-local-information/joint-strategic-strengths-and-needs-assessment/core-jssna/population/child-poverty/>

Salford is struggling to shift the dial on poverty, especially child poverty. This is despite all of the work under the auspices of its 'tackling poverty' and other strategies. In short, there is currently a mismatch between system effort, investment and impact. Originally, with a view to work towards a UNICEF accreditation as a Child Friendly City, Salford has started a journey towards becoming a place that children thrive in safety and well-being as they grow.

Anchoring this work within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ensures that it is driven by children's fundamental rights, rather than treated as an optional enhancement. The Convention's general principles - non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and the right of every child to be heard and taken seriously (Article 12) - provide a clear framework for why this focus is essential. These principles act as a constant reminder that creating child-friendly environments is a matter of rights and justice, not merely an additional benefit.

Salford City Council commissioned Unlimited Potential to engage with children aged 5 to 11 years old to listen to their views on what a Child Friendly City means to them. Children were encouraged to share their ideas, experiences and priorities for making their city a better place to grow up. This work aims to ensure that children's perspectives are meaningfully included in shaping local plans and policies that affect their everyday lives.

Our Approach

With the context of increasing child poverty and economic inequality, we had a broad Salford-wide reach but opted to take a particular focus in areas of low wealth or more geographically isolated areas such as Eccles, Little Hulton and Lower Kersal. It is important to engage and listen deeply to seldom-heard children and those facing the sharper end of wealth and health inequalities.



To gather children's views, we adopted a creative and participatory approach. Workshops and interactive activities were delivered across a range of settings, including structured environments such as schools and classrooms, as well as more informal contexts such as community festivals and holiday clubs. This flexible approach ensured that children could engage in ways that felt natural and enjoyable to them. A variety of artistic and playful methods were used including drawing and colouring, storytelling, games and LEGO building to encourage children to express their views, voices, perspectives and experiences openly and confidently.

These principles were applied to plan and prepare for each session:

Child-centred

The approach was grounded in child-centred principles, ensuring that every child regardless of background, confidence level or communication style had the opportunity to contribute. Activities were designed to be inclusive, accessible and responsive to children's interests and energy levels.

Creating safe and trusted spaces

Creating a safe and welcoming environment was central to the approach. Workshops began with icebreaker games and group discussions to help children feel relaxed and valued. Clear boundaries and expectations were set to ensure respectful listening and equal participation.

Adaptability and responsiveness

The approach was intentionally flexible, allowing activities to be adapted to the setting and the needs of each group. For example, more structured discussion prompts were used in classroom settings, while open-ended creative tasks worked best in festival or holiday club environments.



Ethical and safeguarding considerations

All engagement activities were delivered in line with ethical and safeguarding standards, with informed consent from participating schools, groups and parents or guardians, where appropriate. All facilitators were DBS checked.

We listened in depth to approximately 244 children in Salford across a range of ages (between 5-11), sex, disability, race and culture.

What children told us

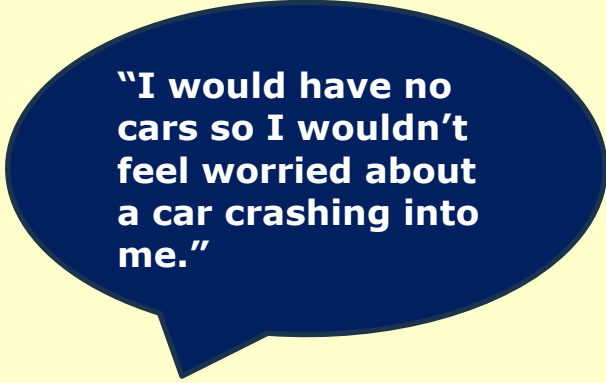
The Themes

Four key themes emerged directly from our engagement and listening activities with children. These themes reflect what children told us matters most to them when thinking about what makes a place truly child-friendly: somewhere they can live, play and grow up feeling safe, supported and included.



Theme 1: Safety and Security

Feeling safe was one of the most important priorities for children. Many spoke about the dangers posed by cars and bikes, describing roads as **"too busy"** and drivers as **"going too fast."** Some children said they would like to cycle to school, but did not feel it was safe enough to do so because of traffic. Those who were already able to walk or cycle valued this independence and the opportunity to see friends on their journey.



"I would have no cars so I wouldn't feel worried about a car crashing into me."

Children also discussed safety in their local neighbourhoods. They shared that they sometimes felt worried when there was **"trouble"** nearby, such as when roads were blocked off or police cars were gathered in one place. Their awareness of local crime often came from overhearing adults'



conversations or witnessing police activity. One child shared that there had been a shooting on her street, which meant she was no longer allowed to nor wanted to play there.

"More police officers so, if anyone commits a crime, it won't go unnoticed."

Some children noticed more safety and surveillance features in their communities, such as ring doorbells and cameras. While they recognised that these could help reduce crime, they also reflected thoughtfully on the downsides. A few children raised concerns about the impact of constant monitoring on people's mental health and behaviour, saying that people might feel anxious or change how they act if they feel they are being watched all the time.

"Cameras will make people do less bad things, but they shouldn't be in toilets or anything."

Busy or noisy places also made some children feel overwhelmed. They suggested that quiet spaces within busier areas would help people feel calmer and safer.

“There’s lots of people on scooters wearing masks going really, really fast everywhere. It’s scary and I don’t like it.”

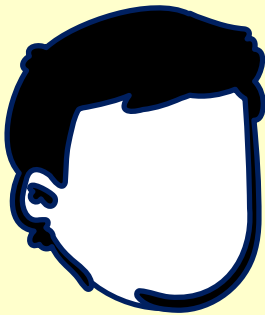
Overall, the children’s views show that safety means more than just protection from harm. It also includes feeling comfortable, calm and confident in the spaces around them.



Theme 2: Community and Belonging

A strong sense of community and belonging was a recurring theme across all groups. Children spoke about the importance of living alongside people from different backgrounds and cultures. Many described this diversity as something to celebrate and learn from. They were curious about other people's customs, languages and foods, seeing this as a way to better understand and live well with others. As one child explained, learning about other cultures **"teaches us to live with others"** and most agreed they would not want to change this about where they live.

**"I'd cook everyone food from my country, Estonia.
They'd really like it."**



Kindness and caring for others featured prominently in the children's discussions about what makes a good place to live. When designing their own ideal communities, they consistently prioritised people who are kind, helpful and respectful. Children described kindness in practical and relational terms such as neighbours who lend things, help with shopping for older or unwell people, smiling and waving to others, or giving money to those who need it.

Many children linked feelings of happiness and safety to living near people they trust and enjoy spending time with. Friendships and family connections within their neighbourhoods were especially valued. Those who had friends nearby often spoke more positively about where they live and about the hobbies and games they share together. Living close to trusted neighbours who **"look out for you"** was also seen as something that made a community feel safe and welcoming.

"Everyone would live close to each other so we could walk to friends' houses and no one would be lonely."

Time with parents and caregivers was another key element of belonging. Children described spending time with their families as one of the most important parts of their lives and often expressed a wish for more of it. Some were able to identify the challenges their parents face when working long hours, recognising the impact that this has on family time.

When imagining their own communities, many envisioned places where **“everyone looks after everyone”**, regardless of age. They spoke about wanting inclusive, caring environments where no one feels lonely and everyone, especially younger children, are cared for and protected.

“I like walking to school because I see my friends on the way.”

Together, these reflections show that for children, belonging is deeply connected to kindness, trust, shared experiences and opportunities to spend time with the people who matter most to them.



Theme 3: Environment and Play

Children spoke passionately about the environments they live and play in. Many expressed a strong sense of responsibility for looking after their local areas. They shared thoughtful ideas for how their communities could be better cared for, including having more bins available, running litter-picking initiatives, educating people about the effects of littering and even introducing fines for those who drop rubbish.

“I see a lot of rubbish on my way to school and I hate it!”

Litter was one of the most frequently mentioned issues across all groups. Many children described seeing rubbish on their streets or on the way to school. Several said this made them feel unhappy or embarrassed about where they live. When asked what they would change, they often said they wanted their neighbourhoods to be cleaner, greener and more colourful, with flowers and plants making spaces look and feel better. As one child put it, **“Everything is really grey and I don’t like it.”**

Children clearly recognised the link between their surroundings and how they feel. Many said that more greenery, plants and outdoor spaces would make them happier and improve the city overall. They valued time spent outdoors, especially in parks, woodlands and natural areas, and wanted more opportunities to do so. However, some noted barriers such as broken play equipment and unsafe or run-down spaces. They also worried about groups of older teenagers they perceived as intimidating.



“Children would feel proud to live somewhere they designed.”

A recurring idea was the importance of protecting nature and wildlife. Several children said that people should **“stop cutting down trees”**. Others explained that more trees would give animals places to live and make neighbourhoods smell nicer and look more attractive.

When asked to imagine their ideal environments, children often designed colourful, vibrant places filled with plants, animals and opportunities to play.

“I would have more plants everywhere because it would make it smell nicer.”

They envisioned communities where people worked together to take care of shared spaces and one another. Kindness and co-operation continued to be central values in their thinking, even when discussing environmental issues.

Their creative ideas included:

- **Community gardens where people could grow food, relax and play together.**
- **Brightly painted houses and buildings that make places more cheerful.**
- **More animals in communities that everyone helps to look after.**
- **Shared toy boxes on each street so that every child can borrow and play with toys, ensuring no one is left out.**

Overall, children demonstrated a strong awareness of how their physical environment shapes their well-being. They want cleaner, greener and more colourful places to live and play spaces that encourage kindness, care and pride in where they live.



Theme 4: Health, Well-being and Equality

Children's reflections on health and well-being covered a broad range of physical, emotional and social factors that contribute to feeling happy and cared for. They shared clear ideas about what helps people live well and what changes could make life fairer and healthier for everyone, not just themselves as children.

Food and nutrition were strong themes across discussions. Many children talked about the importance of eating healthy foods and suggested growing their own fruit and vegetables as a fun and educational way to do this. They also felt strongly that everyone should have access to enough food, calling for free school meals for all children and free or low-cost food for families who are struggling. At the same time, they wanted balance and joy in their diets, emphasising that **"fun foods"** and treats should still have a place.



"I would eat more and more sweets, but I would eat vegetables and fruit too because it is good for me and we should have to eat them, but I would eat whatever I wanted too."

Access to healthcare was another key concern. Children were already able to express frustration about long waiting times to see doctors when they or someone they know is sick. They shared a strong belief that medicine and healthcare should always be free for everyone, particularly for children and older people. Some also suggested bigger hospitals and more space so that patients could be seen more quickly.

Play and physical activity were closely linked to well-being in children's views. Swimming was one of the most popular activities mentioned, but many explained that barriers such as cost, lack of transport and not having the right equipment made it difficult to take part regularly. Their ideas for change included building more swimming pools and ensuring every child has access to swimming lessons. They also highlighted the need for affordable indoor spaces for play when it rains, as **"soft play and the cinema is too expensive"** for some families to visit on a regular basis.

"I don't have a garden but I go to my granny's garden and it's really nice with lots of trees and places to run and even hide."

School life featured positively in most conversations. The majority of children said they enjoyed school and recognised its importance for making friends, learning new things and preparing for the future. However, some suggested that having fewer school days could give them more time for other enriching activities like sports, family time and day trips.

Technology and global issues also emerged in their discussions. Many children enjoy using devices and playing games as part of their daily lives and would not change this. However, they were also aware of wider technological developments such as artificial intelligence (A.I.). Some saw potential benefits in making tasks faster or easier, while others voiced concerns that it might replace jobs their parents or relatives did.

Children demonstrated a striking awareness of fairness and global equality. They expressed a wish for **“a world with no war”** and some specifically mentioned places such as Iran, showing an awareness of international issues already at a young age. Children had both insightful and curious interest and concern about many topics from which they are usually excluded, such as artificial intelligence (A.I.), war and conflict, immigration and crime. By providing age appropriate information and discussion on these subjects, they are more likely to feel respected and reassured by the adults around them.

Children believed that everyone should have a home and a bed, that vaping should be banned, and that sports and activities should be free and available for all children.

Overall, children showed that health and well-being, in their eyes, are about far more than individual choices. They want communities where everyone has access to good food, healthcare, safe play and fairness, where people are cared for equally and supported to live happy, healthy lives.



Reflections on the process of listening to children

Why listening to children matters

Children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child (article 12 - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Listening to children is therefore not a favour to them. Children deserve to be involved in matters that affect them, just as young people and adults do.

Children see things that adults miss due to their unique view of the world. What is central to their world will not always be central to the lives of adults. Their insights will be different to adults and can help to create more equity in the design of places and services.

Participation can empower children, validating that their ideas matter. If children feel listened to and respected at a young age, they are more likely to become active citizens as they grow and strengthen local democracy.

Participating in such activities through their lives helps children build confidence in speaking up and being part of decision-making. This has a positive impact on their overall health and well-being and strengthens aspects of their identity as equal stakeholders in local decision-making.

Challenges and risks if we do not listen to children

Children might feel their voices do not count if input is not acted upon. Children may grow up feeling excluded from civic life, reducing long-term trust and engagement in the governance of where they live.



Adults design policies and environments that do not reflect lived realities of children and so places lack what they need to allow children to live a happy and healthy life into adulthood.

Accessibility and Inclusion

We listened to children from a variety of backgrounds, ensuring we heard from children with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, physical disability, neurodivergence and learning difficulties, as well as focusing on lower-wealth areas of the city where more children experience poverty and inequality.

We adapted all of the planned activities depending on the age group, group dynamics, environment and learning needs where we knew of these.

Engagement

Children largely responded enthusiastically to the process and participating in the workshops and activities. As expected, there were children in most of the groups who participated less or differently than others but could still provide their views in an adapted way, such as a one-to-one conversation with the facilitator.

Most of the children felt comfortable and confident to share their views. They were often excited by the prospect of having their views listened to and used.

The children engaged best with the creative elements of the workshops, such as drawing, storytelling and building. They spoke more freely during these activities, which often helped to keep the conversations flowing or to raise new ideas.

Approximately 250 children participated in the workshops and activities. This was a realistic and useful number for the length and size of the project, but hearing from more children would strengthen the data and insights collected.

Facilitation

The facilitator began each session by introducing herself and explaining her purpose for being there in an age-appropriate way. The children were given the choice to participate and the activities were set up in a way that they could adjust their participation with their levels of comfort.

The facilitator avoided using language which indicated a judgement of the children's opinions and ideas, as this was not the purpose of the

workshops and activities. Open-ended questions were used to assist greater discussion and encourage greater detail behind views. This helped to create trust and openness with the children.

There were some limitations with engagement including factors in the environment, room set-up, group dynamic and presence of other staff. For example, in structured settings like schools, children were more likely to engage with a teacher present and follow the instructions, whereas the more unstructured nature of holiday clubs meant children were moving around freely, with more distractions present. Effective consultation can take place in both settings, but awareness, planning and adaptability is important.



Social, Economic and Environmental Context

Creating a child-friendly Salford is a priority. The rate of children living in low-income families in Salford changed from less than one-in-five to more than one-in-four children over two years and is currently 6.7% above the national figure.² The economic context in which the children in Salford exist matters most to their current and future health and well-being. We need to ensure that the work with child-friendly Salford aligns to the city's agenda for a fairer, greener and healthier economy and for tackling poverty. The priorities from the child-friendly Salford work should be reflected in these policies, so that a commitment is made to changing the levels of poverty both for children and for future generations. Without a change in the economic design of Salford, we will continue to have a high proportion of children who are born into and then live in poverty.



Salford has exciting and ambitious plans to make the city a welcoming, safe and enjoyable place to live for everyone. Hearing from children to add to this is an essential element to success. We need to commit to ensuring that all of the benefits are felt by all Salford residents and wealth is spread evenly across the city, giving everyone a chance to live a healthy, happy life and Salford's children a good place to grow.

To meet this challenge, local policymakers must adopt an approach rooted in Marmot's principle of **Proportionate Universalism**: "support for all children, with greater investment and intensity for

those facing greater disadvantage."³

This ensures that universal services are strengthened for every child while recognising that children in low-wealth neighbourhoods often need more targeted action to enjoy the same opportunities.

² source: <https://www.salford.gov.uk/people-communities-and-local-information/joint-strategic-strengths-and-needs-assessment/core-jssna/population/child-poverty>

³ <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/towards-health-equity-a-framework-for-the-application-of-proportionate-universalism/towards-health-equity-a-framework-for-the-application-of-proportionate-universalism.pdf>

Recommendations

1. Embed all-age children's voice and influence into economic and strategic decision-making around a child-friendly city.
2. Commit to long-term, cross-sector and partnership working to achieve a truly child-friendly Salford.
3. Commit to changes in the social, economic and environmental design of Salford, so that the future prosperity of Salford's children changes.

Next Steps

- Listen to and gain insights from babies and children aged 0-4.
- Formalise participation and co-production structures for children.
- Map investment opportunities with current gaps and recommendations on what will achieve a child-friendly Salford.
- Provide detailed and age-appropriate feedback to children on the decisions made and action taken from what they prioritised and recommended.

Children as the cornerstone of a fairer, more prosperous and inclusive Salford.

