

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

EXPLORING THE FREE TIME USE OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER IN LEEDS

Final Research Report

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October 2015



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank many people for their help with this research, including all of the members of the MALAP Enjoyment subgroup for their input in the development and dissemination of the survey, and in particular, to those who took part in the research.

Further thanks also go to Sarah Westaway and Maxine Kelly for their support in disseminating the surveys and continuously promoting the research.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that all children have the right “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities... and to participate fully in cultural life and the arts”. This however, may be particularly problematic for some young people, such as those in care, who face a host of additional issues that may mean their acute needs take precedence over many, free time, leisure activities including play, recreation and the arts.

As such, this report provides an analysis of the free time use of children who are looked after (CLA) in Leeds. The research specifically aimed to:

1. Explore how CLA spend their free time, including what meanings they ascribe to any activities they choose to undertake,
2. Understand what impacts on their use and availability of free time.

These aims were operationalised through the following objectives:

1. Establish a working relationship with the ‘Multi-Agency Looked After Children Partnership’ (MALAP) Enjoyment Subgroup and distribute a survey to CLA regarding their free time use in Leeds.
2. Formulate an understanding of how CLA use their free time and what might impact on their free time through analysis of the qualitative and quantitative survey response data.

The data collection phase of the project ran from May 2015 until August 2015. Online and hard copy surveys were distributed through key networks in an effort to reach to all CLA in Leeds. In total, 85 surveys were returned with boys accounting for over half of those who responded (boys = 63.5%, mean age 10.39; girls = 36.5%, mean age 10.29). Of these, the majority (81%, 69/85) were living with a foster carer at the time of responding. Seven (8%) were living with other family and five respondents (6%) were living with parent(s). Only three (4%) were living in residential care and only one (1%) reported to be a care leaver.

Findings

The most popular type of activity that children who are looked after in Leeds reported engaging in during their free time were sports (boys = 68.5%; girls = 61.3%). Following this boys spent their free time engaged in what could be classed as sedentary activities, watching film (33.3%) and listening to music (22.2%), while girls appear to split their free time more evenly across art (25.8%), dance (29.0%), film (22.6%), music (29.0%) and doing nothing (22.6%).

Content analysis of qualitative responses revealed one of the main reasons identified for their engagement in these types of activities was 'enjoyment' (37%). Following this, many suggested they engaged in these activities for physical activity reasons (18%), with reports about engaging in sporting activities for competition, its cathartic nature, to be active and for a challenge. Some activities also offered young people the opportunity to be creative and express themselves (15%), while lifestyle (11%) and wellbeing (8%) reasons were also reported. Interestingly, fewer chose to engage in activities for the social element (10%).

Despite this, the majority of respondents reported taking part in activities with friends (boys = 53.7%; girls = 71.0%), while just over a third of boys (38.9%) reported engaging in activities with carers in comparison to over half of girls (51.6%). Of concern was that a third of boys (31.5%) and a quarter of girls (25.8%) reported engaging in activities in isolation, on their own. Typically, qualitative responses revealed they tend to engage in activities within a close 'proximity to home' (38%) in the front or back garden, in the street or in a park nearby, or in 'leisure/sport centres' (38%).

The main type of activities that young people in Leeds have recently had to stop doing were sports based (boys = 25.9%; girls = 29.0%) with the majority of responses centred on their disinterest (40%), (e.g. becoming bored and not liking the activities because they were sometimes forced into them by carers). Moreover, some reported their low self-competence and confidence as factors for not doing the activities any more. Another prominent factor for ceasing activities was various limitations (30%); including a lack of finance, their health and individual behaviour. Far fewer reported that transitions (7%) (e.g. moving care home and becoming unsettled) prevented them from continuing activities, while some (7%) also reported that to start a new activity they had to stop an old one.

When consider activities young people would like to try, boys were drawn to adventure activities (29.6%) while girls would like to explore lifetime (activities readily carried over into adulthood) (32.8%) and other physical activities (25.8%). These decisions were driven predominantly by experience (56%); seeking a new challenge and a thrill, looking to broaden their horizons and discover new things. Respondents also reported that they had seen the activities somewhere before, either on TV or online, or heard about it through word of mouth from friends or adults and they had expectations (32%) that the activities would be fun and enjoyable. Finally, participants identifying that the activities would help make them stronger, develop their confidence, help with their self-improvement and aid their health and fitness (21%).

With regard to young people's health and happiness, many reported that engaging in physical activities made them feel healthy, gain fitness, allowed them to exercise and be active. These types of activities also offered a form of stress relief and were inherently relaxing and thus had an impact on their overall wellbeing. As expected, many also reported that being able to have fun and enjoy activities was vital and directly impacted their happiness. However, missing out on activities was reported by some to impact on both their health and their happiness.

When asked what could make participants feel happier and healthier in the future, many again discussed the desire to remain active, increasing their levels of activity and eating better (31%). Several also discussed developing relationships (20%) and thus, it would appear that maintaining engagement in activities may have the potential to allow individuals to enhance health and build social networks that might increase their happiness.

Recommendations

- **Aim to encourage more parent/carer joint activities** as this may provide a useful time/space to get to know carers or reconnect with parents and would help develop relationships with adults.
- **Ensure carers are aware of activities that children who are looked after enjoy**, since many reported that they used to engage in activities that they never really enjoyed in the first place.
- **Enhance the message regarding the benefits obtained through arts and cultural activities** since these activities are equally as important in helping support young people's positive development.
- **Consider ways of linking the 'Max Card' to arts, music and cultural activities** because not all activities that are prompted by Leeds City Council are currently linked to this venture.
- **Promote the activities available in Leeds within the Independent Visitor Scheme (IVS)** as a means to reinforce available activities and help develop relationships in an informal, enjoyable, activity based context.
- **Provide support for carers and children who are looked after around healthy eating and healthy lifestyles**, as this would reflect their desires reported here to engage in healthier behaviours.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that all children have the right “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities... and to participate fully in cultural life and the arts”. This however, may be particularly problematic for some young people, such as those in care, who face a host of additional issues that may mean their acute needs take precedence over many, free time, leisure activities including play, recreation and the arts.

To date, only one study has explored free time activities of children who are looked after (CLA). In their Norwegian study, Safvenbom and Samdahl (1998) found that adolescents living in residential care engaged in more passive receptive activities and fewer self-involving activities during their free time than their peers. Moreover, Lipscombe et al. (2003) state that young people who spend their time in positive activities have less time to become involved in antisocial behaviour. Hence, Safvenbom and Samdahl (2000) suggest that positive use of free time may be an important pedagogical context for their healthy development, though this depends on the type of activities children who are looked after engage in.

Clearly, this population is a vulnerable group with strong evidence suggesting that children who are looked after (CLA) often present with complex emotional and behavioural issues that may include unresolved trauma from familial abuse and/or neglect, are at higher risk of engaging in self-harm or aggressive or sexualised behaviours, and have higher instances of substance abuse. Childhood trauma and adverse childhood events, particularly abuse and neglect, have numerous pervasive effects on later health and broader social and psychological wellbeing. This is particularly true for those young people who are removed from their family of origin and placed in care (the placement of children and adolescents in the care of a person (foster care) or persons (residential care) who is not their parent). For instance, children in care are four times more likely than their peers to have a mental health problem. This includes conduct and emotional disorders (anxiety and depression), hyperactivity and some less common disorders (including tics and eating disorders) (Meltzer et al. 2004).

Importantly, a variety of activities have been identified as instrumental in fostering positive youth development (PYD) and potentially mediating these effects. Positive youth development is believed to offer preventative protection against young people engaging in delinquent and at risk behaviours (Youth.gov, 2015) and is characterised by the provision of positive experiences and the building of

positive relationships within a safe and positive environment (Youth.gov, 2015); such as through engagement in a variety of positive free time activities.

For instance, competence-building activities through the arts and leisure may be important therapeutic provision for CLA. Indeed, leisure activities may provide enjoyment and relaxation, build resilience and self-esteem and help young people make friends (NSPCC, 2014). Some free time, leisure based activities also have the potential to enhance physical development, helping facilitate normal growth and development in children (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). In addition, the arts and cultural activities (such as visiting museums) may also empower young people to accumulate cultural capital. Moreover, Gilman (2001) has suggested that some activities, such as sports, music and the arts may also foster positive psychological/emotional development. For instance, higher life satisfaction among young people was associated with participation in structured extracurricular activities (Gilman, 2001).

In line with Safvenbom and Samdahl (2000), free time activities can also help foster social development through enhancing positive peer relationships, citizenship and the development of teamwork and leadership skills. Furthermore, Larson (2000) believes that initiative, a key component to young people's positive social development, can also be developed through structured activities (e.g. arts, music, sports). However, caution should be taken here since these findings are not specific to the children in care population.

That said, Larson (2000) believes that three key elements (*intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement, and progressive effort directed towards a goal*) construct initiative. He suggests that structured voluntary activities such as sports, arts, music, and hobbies offer the best contexts for initiative development, as they are voluntary (require young people to be intrinsically motivated), require attention (elements of challenge), and require effort over time. He distinguishes how structured leisure activities such as sport (which requires attention and effort over time, and is voluntary), differs from school (which requires attention and effort over time, but is not voluntary), and television viewing (which is voluntary, but does not require attention or effort over time).

Hence, the opportunity to access leisure, cultural and arts based activities in their free (voluntary) time is therefore vital for children who are looked after, not just to help overcome any earlier disadvantage but for developing a personal narrative, identity and being well adjusted in general.

1.2. Aims and objectives

The aims of the study were to:

1. Explore how CLA spend their free time, including what meanings they ascribe to any activities they choose to undertake
2. Understand what impacts on their use and availability of free time

These aims were operationalized through the following objectives:

1. Establish a working relationship with the 'Multi-Agency Looked After Children Partnership' (MALAP) Enjoyment Subgroup and distribute a survey to CLA regarding their free time use in Leeds.
2. Formulate an understanding of how CLA use their free time and what might impact on their free time through analysis of the qualitative and quantitative survey response data

2. METHODS

This study drew from a critical realist philosophy in that, given the unique complexities of CLA's lives, one unitary truth about what shapes their engagement in activities is not expected. However, we do believe there are complex and subjective factors existing that may affect their lives in similar ways and while a more accurate and valid truth may be possible, this might better be constructed through dialogue with children in care themselves; activating their stock of knowledge. Hence the focus here is on learning, discovery and interpretation of the reality of being in care and trying to access activities that might be meaningful to them.

In view of the newness of the topic area, there was an interest in gaining a descriptive, quantitative appreciation of the activities CLA like to engage in and what may facilitate or prevent access. However, it was also felt that these young people should be allowed to voice their experiences and so to achieve this, a survey was developed with both closed and open ended questions, to allow young people to articulate their experiences. It is widely accepted that surveys provide a valid method for gathering data from large populations, in a method which is both time and cost effective.

Prior to the survey being distributed, ethical approval was granted by Leeds Beckett University Research Ethics Committee and Leeds City Council.

2.1. Survey Design

Questions for inclusion in the survey were developed by the research team, in line with the project objectives, and in consultation with members of the MALAP enjoyment subgroup. Throughout this process, the survey was reviewed by members of the MALAP enjoyment subgroup who also considered the categories of questions and their appropriateness. In addition, the survey was piloted with five CLA in the West Midlands, with feedback provided to the research team.

In order to ensure the survey gathered responses relevant to the project objectives, the survey captured evidence against four main sections: (1) what participants used to do, (2) do now, (3) would like to do in the future, and (4) their health and happiness. Each section asked participants to articulate in written form their experiences. Each section offered ample space for participants to complete the survey at their convenience and in as much detail as possible. In addition, to understand the characteristics of the CLA sample, respondents were asked to provide anonymous demographic information including details of their age, sex and type of care placement. Carers or key adult allies were asked to help complete the survey to ensure accuracy with the introductory section.

2.2. Survey Dissemination

Distribution of the survey was organised through the MALAP Enjoyment subgroup, whose members share strategic responsibility for CLA in Leeds. The survey was distributed both in hard copy and online in an e-copy (via an editable PDF document). The former was distributed at care leaver events and to a captive audience while traveling, while the latter was distributed to foster carers, residential children's home managers and designated teachers through various email channels. As an incentive to complete the survey, those who responded were entered into a prize draw for the chance to win an Apple iPad Air and gift vouchers. In total, 85 surveys were returned.

2.3. Analysis

Initially, each survey was read in its entirety with responses simultaneously being recorded in an Excel spreadsheet/database, to ensure an overall understanding of each of the participant's responses (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For the quantitative responses, data was transferred to SPSS and analysed, due to the relatively low sample size, using descriptive statistics. Frequency and percentage counts were recorded in cross-tabulations.

For the qualitative responses, each one was subjected to a line by line hierarchical content analysis by the first and second author in line with a method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). This attempted to reveal what this group of young people have in common in relation to certain behaviours and experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). During the first stage of analysis, 'meaning units' were created by identifying statements in the raw data that characterised each participant's responses. These meaning units included the summary of the passage and several keywords, phrases or sentences in the responses that conveyed a specific concept or idea. Each 'meaning unit' was then coded into a first order theme that essentially presented a cluster of similar responses (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The first-order themes emerged from the terms used in the data or corresponded from other literature. A frequency count of representation within each theme was maintained for later percentage comparisons (Harwood & Knight, 2009). The inductive analytical process progressed to a higher thematic level (e.g. higher order themes) before culminating in a final hierarchy of core themes that represented the range and content of responses. The summaries from raw data, first-order themes, higher order themes and core themes were combined to form a hierarchical thematic structure.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Sample Characteristics

Surveys were returned from 85 CLA in Leeds. Of these, the majority (81%, 69/85) were living with a foster carer at the time of responding (see **Table I** below). Seven (8%) were living with other family and five respondents (6%) were living with parent(s). Only three (4%) were living in residential care and only one reported to be a care leaver (1%).

Table I: Sample characteristics split by gender

	Gender				Total Frequency
	Boys		Girls		
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	
<i>Foster Care</i>	40	74.1	29	93.5	69
<i>Parent(s)</i>	4	7.4	1	3.2	5
<i>Other Family</i>	6	11.1	1	3.2	7
<i>Residential Home</i>	3	5.6	0	0.0	3
<i>Alone (Care leaver)</i>	1	1.9	0	0.0	1
Total	54	63.5	31	36.5	85

Over half of those who responded to the survey were boys (boys = 63.5%, girls = 36.5%). The age of respondents ranged between 5-19 years for boys (mean age 10.39) and 6-18 years for girls (mean age 10.29). No data was reported on ethnicity or whether participants had a disability/SEN due to the variation in who was completing surveys with CLA. In addition, due to the low sample size, postcode variation is not reported here.

3.2. Current activities

3.2.1. Free time outside of school

Table II overleaf identified the types of activities CLA engage in during their free time, outside of school. As identified in the table, the most popular activities engaged in during free time for both boys and girls are sports activities (boys = 68.5%; girls = 61.3%). After this, boys enjoy film (33.3%) and music (22.2%), though arguably these activities could be have been interpreted as sedentary in nature (e.g. sitting and watching film and listening to music). In contrast, after sports based activities, girls appear to split their free time more evenly across art (25.8%), dance (29.0%), film (22.6%), music (29.0%) and doing nothing (22.6%). No one who responded reported engaging in any disability arts activities.

Table II: Cross-tabulation of activity types conducted in free time, split by care type and gender

Gender

				Art	Dance	Film	Music	Drama	Sport	Museums	Nothing	
Boys	Care type	Foster care	Count	4	5	14	8	5	27	4	9	
			% within care type	10.0	12.5	35.0	20.0	12.5	67.5	10.0	22.5	
	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	2	2	0	3	0	0		
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	50.0	50.0	0.0	75.0	0.0	0.0		
	Other family	Count	2	0	2	0	0	4	1	0		
		% within care type	33.3	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	66.7	16.7	0.0		
	Residential home	Count	1	0	0	2	0	2	1	0		
		% within care type	33.3	0.0	0.0	66.7	0.0	66.7	33.3	0.0		
	Alone (Care leaver)	Count	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0		
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0		
Total			Count	7	5	18	12	5	37	6	9	
			% within care type	13.0	9.3	33.3	22.2	9.3	68.5	11.1	16.7	
Girls	Care type	Foster care	Count	8	9	6	8	4	17	4	7	
			% within care type	27.6	31.0	20.7	27.6	13.8	58.6	13.8	24.1	
	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0		
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0		
	Other family	Count	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0		
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0		
	Total			Count	8	9	7	9	4	19	4	7
				% within care type	25.8%	29.0%	22.6%	29.0%	12.9%	61.3%	12.9%	22.6%

*No one identified Disability Arts

3.2.2 Reasons for engaging in free time activities

Content analysis of the qualitative responses revealed six higher order core themes and 17 sub themes. By far the most prominent reason for engaging in free time activities was 'enjoyment' (37%) with many respondents highlighting how much fun they have engaging in their chosen activities. This main theme spanned the range of activities with participants frequently reporting enjoyment as the main reasons why they engaged in their favourite activities.

Following this, the next strongest theme was 'physical activity' (18%) with reports about engaging in activities for competition and its cathartic nature: *"Rugby is aggressive and I like to tackle people"*. Within this theme, participants also reported they engage in activities to be active, for a challenge and for the opportunity to showcase their ability. For example, *"Because I am good at it [football]. I did swimming and got my gold in stage 8 and I was really proud of myself"*.

"Expressivity" (15%) was another common theme amongst respondents; particularly those who engaged in arts based activities. The opportunity to be creative and express themselves during these types of activities was a key driver behind their engagement as the quotes below demonstrate:

"Art is my favourite by far because I can design anything anywhere. Drawing because I can express my imagination"

"Building model aeroplane kits and then going to fly them"

Engaging in activities for 'lifestyle' (11%) and 'wellbeing' (8%) reasons were also commonly reported by respondents. For the former, CLA reported engaging in activities because they were often healthy, while the latter consisted of responses concerning the ability of activities to calm them down, be relaxing and offer a form of escapism, e.g. *"singing calms me down"*

The final theme to emerge was 'social' with far fewer respondents reporting that the reason they engage in their favourite activities was because it allowed them to spend time with friends (10%):

"Youth clubs are my favourite because I can meet my friends"

"Football because I am good at it and it is really fun because it lets you play with your friends"

In contrast, fewer suggested that they engaged in activities because it allowed them to spend time with members of their family (e.g. siblings or grandparents).

3.2.3. Who children looked after in Leeds, engage in activities with

As **Table III** overleaf shows, the majority of respondents reported engaging in activities with friends (boys = 53.7%; girls = 71.0%). Both boys (53.7%) and girls (48.4%) also reported engaging in activities with siblings. Although they engage in activities with friends and siblings, as discussed above (3.2.2) this doesn't appear to be a primary reasons for their engagement. While many may not engage in activities with their parent(s) for valid reasons (care orders for abuse/neglect), just over a third of boys (38.9%) reported engaging in activities with carers in comparison to over half of girls (51.6%).

Research literature would suggest that younger children who engage in activities with parents or other adult role models are more likely to sustain interest in those activities later. Hence these relatively low percentages may have implications for developing sustained interest in activities given the low mean age for both boys and girls and that 71.7% of respondents were aged 12 or below. Moreover, a third of boys (31.5%) and a quarter of girls (25.8%) reported engaging in activities in isolation, on their own.

3.2.4. Where they engage in activities

Two of the higher order core themes to emerge from the qualitative responses revealed most participants engaged in activities within a close 'proximity to home' (38%) or in 'leisure/sport centres' (38%). For instance, for the former, many reported engaging in activities at home, in the front or back garden, in the street or in a park nearby.

"In the front garden because it's the only place to play football"

"In my garden or in my street"

"We go to the woods because it's safe and there's lots of things to do"

Access to facilities was a key determinant to where they participated with many citing a lack of facilities or that the facilities were too far away for them to travel to and thus the need to engage in activities in or around the home. Undoubtedly the local surroundings appear to determine where they engaged and what activities they engaged in.

While roughly an equal proportion of responses suggest activities are carried out in leisure/sport centres, these were often still determined by the proximity to where they live:

"I go to Kippax because it's at the end of my street".

Importantly, very few responses identified finance, neither access nor influence of friends as determinants to activities for CLA, instead suggesting it is proximity that determines where and what activities they do. Finally, far fewer responses suggested they engage in activities in school or after school clubs (14%).

3.2.5. Support for activities

When asked who helps them get to their activities, 65% of boys and 62% girls in foster care reported that their carers help them by taking them directly, walking with them or providing a taxi. In contrast for those in foster care, only 20% of boys and 14% of girls reported they don't get any support for accessing activities and they have to make their own way there.

Table III: Cross-tabulation of who participants engage in activities with, split by care type and gender

Gender				Friends	Siblings	Parent(s)	Carers	Alone	Other
Boy	Care type	Foster care	Count	22	25	3	18	12	3
			% within care type	55.0	62.5	7.5	45.0	30.0	7.5
	Parent(s)	Count	3	1	2	0	1	0	
		% within care type	75.0	25.0	50.0	0.0	25.0	0.0	
	Other family	Count	3	2	1	2	0	5	
		% within care type	50.0	33.3	16.7	33.3	0.0	83.3	
	Residential home	Count	1	1	0	1	3	1	
		% within care type	33.3	33.3	0.0	33.3	100.0	33.3	
	Alone (Care leaver)	Count	0	0	0	0	1	0	
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	
Total			Count	29	29	6	21	17	9
			% within care type	53.7	53.7	11.1	38.9	31.5	16.7
Girl	Care type	Foster care	Count	20	15	2	15	7	1
			% within care type	69.0	51.7	6.9	51.7	24.1	3.4
	Parent(s)	Count	1	0	0	0	0	0	
		% within care type	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
	Other family	Count	1	0	0	1	1	1	
		% within care type	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
	Total			Count	22	15	2	16	8
			% within care type	71.0	48.4	6.5	51.6	25.8	6.5

3.3. Previous activities

3.3.1. Previous activities they now don't engage in

Encouragingly, the number of responses for this question was less than for the first question surrounding what activities children looked after in Leeds currently do. **Table IV** overleaf highlights that sporting activities for both boys (25.9%) and girls (29.0%) formed the main activities they now don't engage in. After this, activities tend to be more traditionally gender orientated, with girls stating they now don't engage in drama (25.8%) and dance based activities (19.4%) like they used to. However, it should be noted that these frequencies and percentages are relatively low for boys and girls.

3.3.2. Reasons for non-engagement

Again, the content analysis of responses for participants' reasons for not engaging in these activities any longer revealed three core themes and 18 sub themes. The majority of responses (40%) centred on participants 'disinterest'. For instance, many reported never or now not liking the activities because they were sometimes forced into them by carers. In addition, many were bored with the activities:

"I used to do drumming but stopped as I had done it for long enough and was bored"

Moreover, some reported their low self-competence and confidence as factors for not doing the activities any more:

"I was no good at guitar"

"I lost my confidence due to bullying and just didn't want to be in front of people because they will make fun of me"

The case of bullying listed above was one of the few explicit references made by participants to reasons for low self-confidence however.

Another prominent theme was 'limitations' (30%). This theme included the activities ceasing, a lack of finance, health reasons and individual behaviour. For a lack of finance, participants reported that their carers may have struggled to pay for access to activities: *"I don't do these things anymore because [name of carer] can't pay for them and has to look after my two cousins"*. In many cases the activities were reported to have ceased and in some instances CLA's own behaviour was reported as the reasons for not engaging in those activities any more:

"I was asked to leave swimming because I was not safe as I don't listen to instructions"

A far less common theme only reported a few times was 'transitions' (7%). Here participants reported moving care home and becoming unsettled prevented them from continuing activities while one instance identified being placed in care as a reason for having to stop activities.

Similarly, a small number of participants also comments about 'alternative activities' (7%); that is the activities they did were sometimes quite restrictive and therefore didn't allow them to do other things. As such, to start a new activity they had to stop an old one:

"I don't do football anymore because I started doing drama"

Table IV: Cross-tabulation of activities participants used to do split by care type and gender

Gender

				Art	Dance	Film	Music	Drama	Sport	Museums
Boys	Care type	Foster care	Count	7	5	2	5	4	8	1
			% within care type	17.5	12.5	5.0	12.5	10.0	20.0	2.5
	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	
	Other family	Count	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	
	Residential home	Count	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	
		% within care type	66.7	33.3	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	33.3	
	Alone (Care leaver)	Count	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	
Total			Count	9	6	4	8	4	14	2
			% within care type	16.7	11.1	7.4	14.8	7.4	25.9	3.7
Girls	Care type	Foster care	Count	5	5	2	4	7	9	3
			% within care type	17.2	17.2	6.9	13.8	24.1	31.0	10.3
	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
		% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
	Other family	Count	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	
		% within care type	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	
Total			Count	5	6	2	5	8	9	4
			% within care type	16.1	19.4	6.5	16.1	25.8	29.0	12.9

*No one identified Disability Arts

3.4. Future activities

3.4.1. Activities they would like to try

Responses to the question “are there any activities that you have never done but would like to try?” were categorised into different types of activities for ease of comparison. **Table V** below identifies all the different activities that children looked after in Leeds would like to try.

Table V: Survey activity categories

Lifetime Activities	Games Activities	Partner Activities	Other Physical Activities	Adventure Activities	Drama based activities	Trips
Swimming	Football	Golf	Athletics	Rock climbing	Drama	Visiting theme parks
Cycling	Basketball	Rowing	Gymnastics	Skateboarding	Singing	Holidays
Jogging	Rugby	Tennis	Horse riding	Surfing	Visiting theatres	Visiting museums
Dancing	Netball	Boxing	Trampolining	Skiing	Film	
Martial Arts	Dodge ball			Sky diving	Arts	
Fishing	Rounders			Mountain biking		
	Volleyball			Diving		
				Sailing		

As a result of categorising these activities, comparisons between boys and girls can be found in **Table VI** overleaf. For boys, across care types, the majority of responses centred on adventure activities (29.6%). In contrast girls’ responses indicated that lifetime activities (32.8%) – those that most readily carry over into adulthood – and other physical activities (25.8%) were the type of activities they might most like to try.

3.4.2. Reasons for future activities

Content analysis of why participants would like to try these activities mentioned above (3.4.1) highlights three common higher order themes and 14 sub themes. By far the most prominent theme was ‘experience’ (56%). Here participants highlighted that a previous experience was a key driver for wanting to try those activities mentioned above or that they were simply seeking out new experiences altogether:

“Because it looks good and something I have never done before”

“Because it’s something different to do than sport activities”

Table VI: Activities participants would like to do in the future split by care type and gender

Gender

				Lifetime Activities	Games Activities	Partner Activities	Adventure Activities	Other Physical Activities	Drama Activities	Trips
Boys	Care type	Foster care	Count	4	9	2	12	9	2	3
			% within care type	10.0	22.5	5.0	30.0	22.5	5.0	7.5
	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
			% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	0.0
	Other family	Other family	Count	3	2	1	2	0	1	0
			% within care type	50.0	33.3	16.7	33.3	0.0	16.7	0.0
	Residential home	Residential home	Count	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
			% within care type	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Alone (Care leaver)	Alone (Care leaver)	Count	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
			% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total			Count	7	12	3	16	10	3	3
			% within care type	13.0	22.2	5.6	29.6	18.5	5.6	5.6
Girls	Care type	Foster care	Count	10	3	0	5	8	5	5
			% within care type	34.5	10.3	0.0	17.2	27.6	17.2	17.2
	Parent(s)	Parent(s)	Count	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
			% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0
	Other family	Other family	Count	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
			% within care type	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total			Count	10	3	0	5	8	6	5
			% within care type	32.3	9.7	0.0	16.1	25.8	19.4	16.1

There were also responses within this core theme that suggest participants are seeking a new challenge and a thrill, looking to broaden their horizons and discover new things as identified in the quotations below:

“I would like to try these activities because I think they will encourage me to do other things and they will be fun”

“I’m an adventurous person that likes to experience new things and discover new things”

After this, ‘expectations’ (32%) was the next largest theme. Here participants reported that they had seen the activities somewhere before, either on TV or online, or heard about it through word of mouth from friends or adults and they had expectations that the activities would be fun and enjoyable.

The final core theme was ‘personal development’ (21%) with many participants identifying that the activities would help make them stronger, develop their confidence, help with their self-improvement and aid their health and fitness. For instance, participants reported:

“I am really good drama and I would like to do better. I can nearly do the splits and I want to get better by going to gymnastics. I’ve wanted to do cheerleading since I was little but I’ve never got a chance. I want to go to majorettes because I can already do stuff with the stick but if I go to it I will be even better”.

“They would be new things to try and can build strength and confidence”

“Because it will help build my confidence”

This indicates an awareness by respondents of how certain activities may lead to positive youth development (PYD) and a desire to tap into this.

Surprisingly, very few mentioned wanting “to meet new people” (3%) as a driving reason for wanting to try new activities and even fewer reported the influence of carers or family on the activities they want to try (1%).

3.5. Health and happiness

3.5.1. Why the activities make them feel happy and healthy

Many of the themes that emerged here are common in earlier responses to survey questions. Hence, six core themes emerged with 19 sub themes as evident in **Table VII** below. Undoubtedly, the most prominent theme to emerge was ‘lifestyle’ with many respondents reporting that the physical activities they engage in make them feel healthy: *“Playing tennis because it keeps me healthy”* and

“Running because it keeps you healthy”. There was also recognition by participants that particular activities helped them gain fitness, allowed them to exercise and be active.

Table VII: Content analysis of responses for why activities make CLA feel happy and healthy

Core Theme	Sub Theme
Lifestyle (45%)	Fitness Relaxation Wellbeing Health Exercise Feeling active
Enjoyment (22%)	Fun
Type of activity (17%)	Variety Sport Competition Outdoors Learning
Social (7%)	Peers Family
Imagination (5%)	Creativity Fantasy Expression
Personal development (4%)	Skill development Self-improvement

Moreover, there were several instances where participants reported that activities offered a form of stress relief and were inherently relaxing and thus had an impact on their overall wellbeing. For instance, participants said:

“Gardening, I find it very relaxing”

“Playing GTA, it is a form of stress relief”

“Fitness training is good for me physically and emotionally”

“Art helps me let out my negative feelings”

As was to be expected and in line with responses from earlier (3.2.2) fun and enjoyment remain a prominent theme and thus allowing participants to enjoy themselves has a direct impact on their happiness.

Again a small percentage of responses were centred on the social side of engaging in activities with participants reporting that meeting and making friends during activities aided their happiness: *“I enjoy swimming because I have made a new friend”*. Only a few responses touched on how activities might allow them to have contact with members of their family.

3.5.2. What prevents them feeling happy and healthy

When asked what stops children who are looked after in Leeds feeling happy and healthy, five main themes emerged from the content analysis with 14 sub themes though unsurprisingly, only one main theme could be directly related to their engagement in activities (see **table VIII** below). It should however be noted that fewer participants provided full responses to this question.

Core Theme	Sub Theme
Health (25%)	Injury Diet Weight Illness
Disputes (21%)	Fighting Fallouts
Relatives (21%)	Family Separation
Engagement in activity (14%)	Disliking activity Missing sessions
Current situation (11%)	Life Money

Those who discussed health were particularly concerned with their diet, reporting that eating unhealthy, sugary foods may prevent them being healthy (and potentially happy). They identified that eating *“unhealthy foods such as pizza and other junk foods”* was not conducive to good health. Linked with this were responses related to weight and being ill.

The only theme that was directly related to the activities they discussed throughout the survey was ‘engagement in activity’. Hence, some spoke about how missing (sport based) sessions had an impact on both their health and their happiness:

“Because I used to enjoy these sports due to I used to play them back home and they were a lot of fun and team work”

“It’s sad when I can’t get to do my activities”

Given their current situations, it was perhaps expected that responses here centred on family, and disputes with people they know or their friends as having a direct impact on their happiness.

3.5.3. What would make them happier and healthier

The final survey question asked participants what could make them feel happier and healthier in the future with many responses mirroring those of the previous section. For instance four core themes emerged with 10 sub themes. The most prominent theme was ‘lifestyle’ (31%) whereby participants

spoke of remaining active, increasing their levels of activity and eating better: *“Eating more fruit and vegetables”*.

‘Developing relationships’ (20%) was a second theme to emerge that explored seeing family members more often, not falling out with friends and building more friendships in general. It would appear that maintaining engagement in some activities, as touched on above, could allow individuals to enhance health and build social networks that might increase their happiness.

The final two themes include ‘travel’ (14%) and ‘activities’ (11%). While the former theme suggested more day trips and holidays within and beyond the UK might improve happiness, the latter explored being able to maintain the activities they currently do and providing improved access to facilities.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings from the survey data provide one of the first insights into the free time activity choices of children who are looked after in Leeds, and perhaps England more broadly. For this particular population, the response rate is probably reflective of the amount of surveys and interviews these young people may be subject to. There is also a chance the response rate may have led to bias within the sample, possibly towards those children who are more actively engaged in activities in their free time. Further qualitative research would develop additional insights into the barriers and motivations for the hardest to reach CLA.

4.1. Current activities

It was evident from the survey data that sports based activities appear the most popular free time activity for both boys and girls. This may be due to the unstructured nature of many sports activities and the fact they can be carried out without much planning or equipment in easily accessible, local spaces. Following this, boys reported engaging in film and music (though these may be sedentary activities at home rather than structured activities elsewhere), while girls also included dance.

The overarching reasons behind engagement in their chosen activities was enjoyment. The fact some activities were seen to be quite cathartic, providing psychological relief, and allowed for expression were also prominent reasons for choosing to engage in some activities. Interestingly, the social element was mentioned only briefly, which challenges previous literature about why they engage in some activities (e.g. Gilligan, 1999; Safvenbom & Samdahl, 2000; Quarmby, 2014) and also contradicts findings about who they engage in activities with. Most tend to engage in activities with friends while very few engage in activities with parents or carers (and this is something that may need further exploration).

4.2. Previous activities

Pleasingly, the percentage responses for activities they don't engage in any more is relatively low, however sporting activities appear most for boys and girls. Interestingly, the main reasons for non-engagement is disinterest with many reporting they never liked the activities in the first place. This raises questions about who chooses the activities they used to engage in. Unsurprisingly, low self-competence and confidence were raised as important factors, along with a host of limitations (including lack of finance, their own health and behaviour). The effect of transitions appears minimal.

4.3. Future activities

Responses from boys suggest they would like to try adventure based activities, while girls would like to engage in more lifetime orientated activities. For boys this may reflect the cathartic nature of these activities and been seen as an activity that offers a release. Most of these activities for boys and girls are shaped by previous experiences and expectations that they would enjoy them. Importantly, there were some who recognised that any activities they would like to do in the future might have direct impact on their positive development (building resilience, developing confidence, aiding health and fitness). This also reflects the literature about the use of certain activities to enhance positive youth development (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2005).

4.4. Health and Happiness

Prominent among the responses was the notion of health and how various activities aid their healthy development. However, few responses actually mentioned their happiness. A central theme here was how activities enhance their lifestyle (akin to the literature around PYD), help them feel healthy and offer a form of stress relief and relaxation. Only a small proportion reported that engaging in activities helped them make friends which directly impacted on their happiness.

Unsurprisingly, factors not directly related to activities have an impact on their health and happiness (e.g. family, separation, disputes). Interestingly though, their own health including their diet and weight were reported strongly as impacting on their health and happiness. In fact, continuing to engage in activity and eating better were reported as central to improving their health and happiness. Finally, the survey data revealed that developing relationships was also central to them enhancing their health and happiness.

4.5. Limitations

A self-report survey was deemed the most appropriate method for collecting baseline data on the free time activities of CLA in Leeds. However, self-report surveys rely on respondent's understanding and interpretation of questions, and on their ability to accurately recall previous activities. Given that they also completed the survey with a key adult ally (parent/carer/teacher), they may have provided socially desirable responses and hidden true feelings or events. These factors need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings from this survey. Due to the relatively small sample sizes and response rates, it is important to note that the findings from this survey are not considered to be representative of all CLA in Leeds.

4.6. Recommendations

- **Aim to encourage more parent/carer joint activities.** In other literature, this has been reported by children who are looked after to be a useful time/space to get to know carers or reconnect with parents and would help develop relationships with adults. Moreover, the research literature suggests that younger children who engage in activities with parents or other adult role models (carers) are more likely to develop lasting activity dispositions and sustain interest in those activities later.
- **Ensure carers are aware of activities that children who are looked after enjoy,** since many reported that they used to engage in activities that they never really enjoyed in the first place. Ensuring carers are aware of the activities young people enjoy and can continue to engage in, may help to develop and maintain some form of continuity in their lives that may otherwise be missing through changes in care placement.
- **Enhance the message regarding the benefits obtained through arts and cultural activities.** With the health and physical activity agenda prominent in Leeds, these messages were clearly evident in young people's responses and reasoning. However, as the literature suggests, arts and cultural activities (such as visiting museums) can empower young people to accumulate cultural capital, which has benefits across different spheres of life. As such, there is a need to better communicate the benefits of these activities to young people and carers.
- **Consider ways of linking the 'Max Card' to arts, music and cultural activities.** While the 'Max Card' is designed to make days out more financially accessible for children who are looked after in Leeds, not all activities that are prompted by Leeds City Council are currently linked to this venture. Ensure arts, music and cultural activities are, may help increase uptake of these beneficial activities.
- **Promote the activities available in Leeds within the Independent Visitor Scheme (IVS).** This may serve two purposes: (1) ensuring activities are promoted to young people through additional avenues and (2) enabling a key adult (who may act as a role model to a young person in care) to develop relationships with young people in an informal, enjoyable, activity based context.
- **Provide support for carers and children who are looked after around healthy eating and healthy lifestyles,** as this would reflect their desires reported here to engage in healthier behaviours. It would also have a direct impact on children's health and happiness and therefore ensuring all parties are aware of what constitutes healthy eating may impact on their overall sense of wellbeing.

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