



Belfast Healthy Cities: Healthy Places, Healthy Children

Impact report

Belfast Healthy Cities: Healthy Places, Healthy Children Impact report

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FOREWORD

“Healthy Places, Healthy Children is an innovative teaching resource that empowers children and young people to reimagine their schools and local areas as healthier, more sustainable and more child-friendly places. Rooted in the WHO Healthy Cities vision, the programme supports Key Stage 2 pupils to understand how the built environment affects their health and wellbeing and gives them a voice in decision-making. Developed in collaboration with education and public health partners, the programme has made a significant impact, with many of the participating schools supported by Groundswell Innovation Fund creating projects such as school gardening clubs and planting boxes for each class. Crucially the programme has provided children with tools and knowledge to develop healthy habits to last a lifetime.”

CHARLENE BROOKS
BELFAST HEALTHY CITIES



“Groundswell’s Innovation Fund was established to support community-led projects that explore how urban green and blue spaces can improve the health and wellbeing of communities. This report highlights the work of Belfast Healthy Cities through their Healthy Places, Healthy Children initiative. By engaging children aged 8 to 11 years old, this programme fosters early awareness of how the built environment shapes health and wellbeing. It encourages critical thinking, problem solving, and advocacy, while integrating core elements of the Northern Ireland Primary School Curriculum. Through hands-on projects, children identified local challenges from growing food to tackling air pollution, and implemented meaningful improvements that promote outdoor activity, social connection, and mental health. The insights and priorities expressed by these young advocates underscore the importance of creating greener, safer, and healthier spaces for all. Healthy Places, Healthy Children educated and empowered the next generation to become champions for positive environmental change, leaving a legacy within their schools and communities. We are proud to share the outcomes of this initiative and its contribution to building healthier, more inclusive urban environments.”

RUTH HUNTER
QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY BELFAST



BELFAST HEALTHY CITIES



Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation that aims to develop Belfast as a **healthy, equitable and sustainable city**, and coordinates action on behalf of Belfast as a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network.

The aim of the Healthy Cities movement is to bring stakeholders across sectors together to create **healthier places**, and its key role is to create tools and models for intersectoral collaboration. The role of Belfast Healthy Cities in Northern Ireland is to support local policy makers, elected representatives and practitioners through collating and sharing evidence on healthy places, building capacity and sharing learning on existing good practice, and piloting innovative concepts and ways of working.

GROUNDSWELL



The GroundsWell Consortium is a team of researchers, local communities, implementers and policymakers who aim to better understand and evidence the role of **green and blue spaces** within wider **social, economic, environmental, cultural and health systems**. GroundsWell's research activity is based in Edinburgh, Liverpool and Belfast, where it is being led by researchers at Queen's University Belfast.

A key aim of GroundsWell is to encourage, enable, and collaborate on community-engagement and community-led research. To facilitate this, GroundsWell launched a **Community Innovation Fund** programme, where community organisations could be supported in implementing programmes and evaluating impact.

HEALTHY PLACES, HEALTHY CHILDREN

Healthy Places, Healthy Children is an innovative teaching resource for Key Stage 2 primary school children (8-11 years). The resource was developed by Belfast Healthy Cities in partnership with; the Education Authority, Public Health Agency (PHA) and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). Using this resource, children are able to **learn about the built environment** and **better understand the relationship between environment and health**.

Developing an early understanding of how our physical environment shapes our lives and health is important in order to enable children to explore and assess the relationship between **public decision making** and **the lives of individual people and families**. It also assists in building skills in critical thinking, problem solving and advocacy, by providing opportunities to analyse the linkages and identify potential solutions. In addition, studying the built environment and architecture offer opportunities to integrate teaching of many key elements of the Northern Ireland Primary School Curriculum, including The World Around Us, Literacy, Numeracy, Science, Arts and Design.



Healthy Places, Healthy Children was developed in response to KidsSpace, a programme of work to identify and create child friendly, family friendly green and open spaces in Belfast city centre. Over 7,000 people were surveyed and felt a structured programme was needed to allow children to develop an understanding of the links between their health and the places where they live, learn and play. Following this, local government in Northern Ireland had been granted planning powers for the first time and initiated the process of developing a Local Development Plan, setting out a vision for the development and use of land in each council. For Belfast, the Local Development Plan was adopted by Belfast City Council in May 2023 creating a vision for the city until 2035. With a relatively young population, it was imperative that the **voice of young people was included** in both the process and implementation of the Local Development Plan. Healthy Places, Healthy Children provides the framework for children to **develop knowledge and skills** on the links between their health and built environment, **assess their school and neighbourhood** for healthy and unhealthy features and develop a proposal to **create change**.

The teaching resource includes lesson plans, PowerPoints and background information to allow primary teachers to **educate students about the built environment and health**. The resource includes six units: Introducing Place, Exploring Our Environment, Analysing Our Environment, Identifying Change, Planning for Change, and Evaluating the Work.



THE PROJECTS

Following training in May 2024, **ten primary schools in the Greater Belfast area** used the Healthy Places, Healthy Children resource, as part of a small, funded cohort of trained schools for the 2024-2025 academic year. Students worked through the lesson plans in each unit to **understand what makes an environment healthy** versus unhealthy and analyse **their own local area**, including conducting a walk assessment around their local area. Following this learning, the students **developed a project proposal** and case of evidence showing how they would plan to make changes within their school environment to make it healthier. The projects were focused on improving an identified space on the school grounds to foster more opportunities for spending time outdoors to **improve their physical and mental health**. The schools were provided small grants to implement their projects, provided through the GroundsWell Innovation Fund.

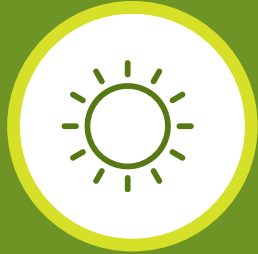
EVALUATION

The impact of the programme was assessed using information provided by the schools regarding their projects, as well as feedback gathered from a selection of teachers who attended a feedback workshop in March 2025. The following sections synthesise impact themes, identified through: i) the school projects which were designed and implemented by the children, and, ii) the class charters which were created by the children, identifying the rights of the child according to them. The evaluation process identified **10 key impact outcomes** from the programme, and the **top 5 priorities** for healthy places, as determined by the children.



Impact

The children created spaces for...



Improving
mental health



Connecting with
nature



Social
connection



Practical
skills



Learning and
improved
knowledge



Growing



Engaging
communities and
supporting local
business



Accessibility and
inclusion



Encouraging
physical activity



Legacy and
advocacy

THE CHILDREN CREATED SPACES FOR...



IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH

Through their projects, many of the schools aimed to create spaces which could be used as **calm and peaceful places to relax** during the school day. One classroom of children specifically wanted an improved space for the children in the school who may become overwhelmed, and those with special education needs.

“ In the long term, the garden will become a peaceful space where pupils can come to read, relax, and enjoy the environment they’ve helped create - something they can be proud of for years to come ”

— teacher



CONNECTING WITH NATURE

In assessing their local area, and designing, developing, and maintaining their projects, the children were able to **spend more time outdoors** during the school day. Through their projects, children were able to **connect with the nature around them, improve biodiversity, and create habitats for wildlife**. Many of the schools installed insect hotels as well as signs to educate themselves and their peers on how to identify different birds, bees, and plants. One teacher appreciated the outdoor learning aspect, and believed that the children being outside was a key benefit of the programme.

“ Students look forward to watching the trees grow ”

— teacher



SOCIAL CONNECTION

Many of the school projects were designed around social connection. One school renovated a space used for outdoor seating so they had somewhere to spend time together during breaks. Another school specifically chose to improve the sitting area within their garden, designating them as “**Friend Benches**”. The delivery of the programme itself, the research and design phase of the project, and the implementation of the plans encouraged teamwork and working together which contributed to the improvement of social skills.



They created an area where the girls can sit and chat and take time to connect with one another

— teacher



LEARNING AND IMPROVED KNOWLEDGE

Teachers reported that the content of the programme aligned well with “**The World Around Us**” part of the curriculum, including ‘the human body’, and fit with the Eco-Schools’ programme. Children also had an opportunity to learn more about **local wildlife** and the **importance of biodiversity**. Beyond “The World Around Us”, teachers believed the programme to be cross-curriculum, and applicable to real life. Children also learned about **governance of their local area** (e.g., understanding councils and who was responsible for bins). Children learned to gain a new perspective and appreciate the world around them. One teacher hoped that this would be a lesson the children would continue to apply in future, and that they would keep looking around them. Regarding the delivery of the educational component of the programme, teachers generally found the programme to be flexible and the materials easy to use.



It helped the children to see the bigger picture, beyond their local environment

— teacher





PRACTICAL SKILLS

Children learned a variety of skills including gardening and repairing. One all-girls' school reported that they linked up with "Women'sTec", a local provider of training for women in non-traditional skills, allowing them to learn skills in how to repair their own area. Another school made connection with Men's Shed to do the same, resulting in the children learning practical building and repair skills. They also learned **how to plan, budget, observe, and research**. Many teachers highlighted that the projects encouraged responsibility and teamwork, with many of the classes reporting adopting a democratic process to choosing their project.



GROWING

Many of the schools chose to focus on growing, including **trees, plants, flowers, fruits, and vegetables**. One teacher reported that the children wanted to plant fruit in the garden that they could then eat as a healthy snack. One school reported that an unexpected outcome of the programme was a new afterschool club, after many of the children took an interest in gardening and requested a club for after hours. Through learning to grow, children were able to gain hands-on experience in caring for their environment and promoting sustainable living.

“

*The programme had links with food and healthy eating
- the children learned how to grow food*

— teacher

”



ENGAGING COMMUNITIES AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES

Teachers reported that the funding process (i.e. being able to invoice rather than going through the procurement process with a limited list of suppliers) meant they could **focus on supporting local** when purchasing hardware and seeds. Some schools also received support from local businesses, with one school reporting that the local Lidl provided planters free of charge, and another school was given free compost by their local council.



ENCOURAGING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Many of the school projects involved the children physically building, planting, and painting areas of their school, encouraging them to be physically active. One teacher said that by improving the outside area, the children in the class hope to encourage others to use these outside spaces more often, which will hopefully lead to **more opportunities for exercise** during the school day. Many of the projects aimed to improve spaces for the purpose of creating positive, safe spaces for exercise and play, with one school also choosing to improve their storage for scooters and bikes, encouraging active travel to and from school.



LEGACY AND ADVOCACY

Teachers believed that the programme was empowering for the children, and helped them feel they were **making a difference**. One school reported that during the assessment phase of their local area, children began to notice and discuss the disparity and inequality of green space, wondering why other areas were greener than theirs. The teacher reported that these children became quite “politically minded” and wondered how they could **advocate for change** in their local area. Many of the schools highlighted that children were keen to improve their school area for all pupils, including those in future, taking pride in the idea of leaving a legacy for future classes.

“

The programme provided an opportunity for pupils to lead and have a voice

— teacher ”



ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

One school wanted to create an improved space not just for themselves but also for their parents and carers, resulting in the creation of a comfortable space for them to wait at the end of the day. One teacher reported that the school has a lot of children with special education needs who will directly benefit from improvements in the spaces, and another school specifically aimed to create a safe space for overwhelmed pupils or those unable to access the playground.

SCHOOL PROJECTS

Eight of the ten schools that participated in the programme provided a case study of their chosen project. When designing their projects, schools were asked to consider whether their project influenced climate, health, and/or place, and these areas are highlighted within the descriptions of the projects.

The schools represented in the following section include:

- 1) Ballycraigy Primary School, Antrim
- 2) Euston Street Primary School, Belfast
- 3) Holy Cross Girls' School, Belfast
- 4) Knockmore Primary School, Lisburn
- 5) Springhill Primary School, Belfast
- 6) Mercy Primary School, Belfast
- 7) Knocknagoney Primary School, Belfast
- 8) St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff



1) BALLYCRAIGY PRIMARY SCHOOL, ANTRIM

The students decided to design a project that would improve both their health and the school environment. Students from the social communication classrooms were chosen to lead the initiative. The school is a “Take 5” school, recognised for its commitments to improving mental and physical health by implementing the 5 Steps to Wellbeing (Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, Give). The class wanted to **make their playground a more enjoyable space** and encourage everyone to spend more time outdoors, knowing how important fresh air and physical activity are for wellbeing. However, they recognised that this is not always pleasant during cold or wet weather. They also wanted to **create a comfortable space for parents** and grandparents to wait at the end of the school day.

Younger students completed the site walk and identified potential locations for the project, using tools such as Google Earth and doing online research to gather ideas and inspiration. Once the site was chosen, they explored different designs and identified the key areas they wanted to develop. Older students took the lead in sourcing suitable equipment, such as a fire pit and seating. They researched suppliers online, compared prices, considered delivery options, and aimed to **support local businesses**. They learned valuable lessons about teamwork, budgeting, and practical planning. The older students also created drawings to illustrate the project’s benefits and helped develop the class community charter.

Project aims:



2) EUSTON STREET PRIMARY SCHOOL, BELFAST

Project aims:



Located in inner east Belfast, the school has limited green space, with most of its playground covered in tarmac. The school recently added trees in pots, which the pupils enjoyed, however, they felt that more more plants, trees and flowers are needed to truly make the space one that feels part of nature. The students decided that using funding to **purchase additional trees and plants** in pots would make their playground a healthier and happier place to be. It would benefit the students to have **a more attractive play area**, they could observe the changing appearance of the trees and the trees would play a role in helping our climate.

The primary 5 class led the project, they enthusiastically explored the school and local community to identify what made their environment healthy and what could be improved. They took photographs and created collages to share their ideas, They hared their thoughts as a class and worked hard to listen to other people. After thoughtful conversations and prioritising their ideas, the class agreed that investing in more trees would have the greatest impact. They were proud to contribute to improving their school grounds and excited about **leaving a lasting legacy** for future year groups. The students look forward to watching the trees grow, knowing they have helped create a greener, healthier space for generations to come.

3) HOLY CROSS GIRLS' SCHOOL, BELFAST

At Holy Cross Girls' School the class decided to create an **outdoor meditative garden space** which would be accessible to primary 4, 5, 6, and 7 every break and lunch time. The students identified a lack of outdoor green space in the local area. They wanted to create **a space outside that can be used regularly** by as many girls as possible.

Students in key stage two spend breaktimes and lunchtimes outside on the MUGA (multi-use games area). This space, while bordered by trees, is a flat play space with some limited seating. The site has a small, paved area and a small grass area. The school had a mud kitchen and some wooden seating which had become run down and broken in parts, through weathering and misuse. As part of this project the class has renovated this space and created **an area where girls can sit and chat and take time to connect with one another**. They can use the mud kitchen and **enjoy nature and wildlife**. This will benefit the mental health of the students, most of whom come from the very urban surrounding community.

Project aims:



HEALTH

CLIMATE



PLACE



4) KNOCKMORE PRIMARY SCHOOL, LISBURN

At Knockmore Primary School, after working through the teaching resource units the thread that was coming through from all of the children was that they wanted **more trees and green space**. They decided upon a Community Charter reflecting that children should have access to green, safe and clean environments, this charter inspired other schools in the project to create their own. The students then thought about where and how they could create this type of environment, an area for everyone to benefit from and they decided they would like to transform what was a “Fairy Garden” in an area of the school grounds into a “Forest Area.” They also thought something they would like to include in the forest were **woodland steps for safe access, more trees and forest plants**.

The children worked together to plant ferns, bluebells and snowdrops. The children purchased den building equipment with the funding, a bird and leaf identification board for the woodland, “Bugsville” (a bug hotel), logs to make a campfire, tree stumps to sit on and a couple of hammocks. The children **enjoyed watching the area come to life** and have suggested things they could do to enhance the area further and the class is hopeful to implement more of these ideas. The bluebells came up well this year and the children now hope to plant more next year as they have named the space “Bluebell Woods.” The next step is to problem-solve together how best to maintain the space so it can be used year after year to benefit the school community.



5) SPRINGHILL PRIMARY SCHOOL, BELFAST

Springhill Primary School created and set up a new **growing and sensory garden**. This space allows children to **grow their own fruit and vegetables**, which can be used in school or potentially taken home. The garden helps pupils develop a deeper understanding of how food grows, encourages healthy eating, and promotes sustainable living through hands-on learning and care for the environment.

The garden will be a lasting, shared space where pupils across all year groups can continue to grow and care for their own plants and vegetables, **encouraging responsibility, teamwork, and a connection to nature**. It will also open the door for an after-school gardening club and a pupil-led gardening team, giving children further opportunities to develop leadership and practical skills.

Project aims:



6) MERCY PRIMARY SCHOOL, BELFAST

The students identified the need for **cleaner footpaths** outside their school and dog fouling had been identified as a major issue. Their project was based on creating posters and signs encouraging people to pick up dog poo and rubbish and also increasing the number of bins in the vicinity, as well as adding planters and flowers to their green space. They also spoke about the use of their space inside of the school and the need for **better storage for their scooters and bikes**. Primary 5 students discussed the need for more awareness of the dangers of dog poo gathering on the road outside of the school. After taking part in their walk around their local area, it was obvious that this was a serious issue that needed addressed.

The class designed posters, encouraging people to pick up dog poo, reminding them of potential fines and the dangers it poses to children. They also discussed what was needed for play equipment and making sure their bikes and scooters were well looked after. The class researched several scooter storage units and decided on the design that would best fit their playground. The children agreed that their green space would benefit from additional plants and flowers, making it **a more enjoyable place for them to play and relax**.



7) KNOCKNAGONEY PRIMARY SCHOOL, BELFAST

Project aims:



Students set out to transform the small, underdeveloped garden into **an inclusive space for pupils, parents, and the community**. Located beside the school's side entrance, the L-shaped area was mainly used for bins. The project aimed to create a space for growing vegetables, multisensory flower beds, and improved access. Trellis panels and planters were used to shield the bin area, and to enhance the look of their sitting area within the garden the class painted these items in their school colours and named these "**Friend Benches**". The students purchased bird tables, an "insect hotel" and fantastic wildlife signs to identify different types of birds and bees.

The students have enjoyed **growing their own vegetables**, linking perfectly to the Human Body World Around Us topic by encouraging healthy eating, and they have increased their knowledge of wildlife and increased biodiversity within the ECO garden. This project will **make a significant difference to pupils with disabilities** and support neurodiversity/Special Educational Needs pupils, providing a safe space for overwhelmed students or those unable to access the playground for various reasons, including disability. The students will promote the development of this space through word of mouth, the school website, and social media. The school has recently established a Families & Tots group and this space will aid the promotion and increased use of the space within the local community.

8) ST JOSEPH'S PRIMARY SCHOOL, CARRYDUFF

Project aims:



HEALTH

CLIMATE



PLACE

At St Joseph's Primary School, the children decided to **plant spring bulbs in the eco garden**, which should grow back year after year. The children recognised that over the summer break, a lot of the plants died, but every year, the bulbs return. The children **have distributed bulbs to all classes**, to give them experience planting and looking after plants, and to help improve the number of pollinators that come to their school. The children also ordered some signage for the garden, to give more information to classes about the different plants and animals that they have within the grounds. This will hopefully make the eco garden a more interactive and more effective space for learning.

By improving the raised beds and signage in the eco garden, the school hopes to **encourage classes to use this area more often**. This will encourage more time spent outdoors in the fresh air and will hopefully lead to more opportunities for exercise during the school day. Increased time in nature should hopefully also lead to benefits for children's mental health and wellbeing.

PRIORITIES FOR HEALTHY PLACES

Each of the school classrooms participating in Healthy Places, Healthy Children were tasked with creating a **Community Charter**. The Community Charters demonstrate the **priorities of the students**, and what they want for themselves and their peers in a Healthy Place. Prompts were used to encourage young people to highlight these priorities, for example, “children should have access to...” or “every child has a right to...”. The students decided as a group what they would put on the Charter, and then designed their own Charter. Whilst each school’s Charter was unique, some key themes emerged across the schools. The top five common themes identified can be found overleaf.

One example Community Charter can be seen below, but more of the Charters can be found in the Appendix.



Holy Cross Primary School

Priorities for healthy places according to young people

Five emerging themes were identified across the school's Community Charters:



More green space



**Clean and safe places to play,
explore, and learn**



Healthy food environments



**Clean air, with less pollution
and traffic**



Wildlife

CONCLUSION

The Healthy Places, Healthy Children programme engaged **ten primary schools** across the greater Belfast area, educating classrooms of children on the link between health and the built environment, empowering them to **create change in their own local environment**, and encouraging them to become advocates for **greener, healthier, and more inclusive environments**.

From growing food to dog fouling campaigns and improved storage for bikes and scooters, the children across the schools identified challenges in their local environment that they wanted to address, and **improved the spaces around them**, thus increasing time spent outdoors, encouraging physical activity, and improving mental health through social connection and the creation of calm and relaxing spaces. Furthermore, the children learned practical skills in bringing these spaces to life – not only building and gardening, but research and observation skills, as well as planning, budgeting, and decision making. Teachers believed that these projects would have a lasting impact on the schools, **leaving a legacy behind** for the children of the classrooms.

The themes identified in the schools' Community Charters highlight **emerging priorities for healthy places according to young people**: i) more green space, ii) clean and safe places to play, explore, and learn, iii) healthy food environments, iv) clean air with less pollution and traffic, and v) wildlife. The priorities identified by the children, as well as the challenges addressed in their projects, provide insight into what improvements children would like to see in their local built environment.

Healthy Places, Healthy Children had a positive impact on the classrooms that participated, and on the wider school community who will benefit from the improved spaces. The programme succeeded in its aim of educating young people, and also created an **empowered next generation of children** equipped with the knowledge and the passion to advocate for healthy places.

APPENDIX



More examples of the Community Charters can be found overleaf.

Family



All children should have the right to be loved and have a family

Open Space

Every child should have an open space within walking distance of their home.



A Child's Rights

All children should have Nurturing fresh and healthy food.

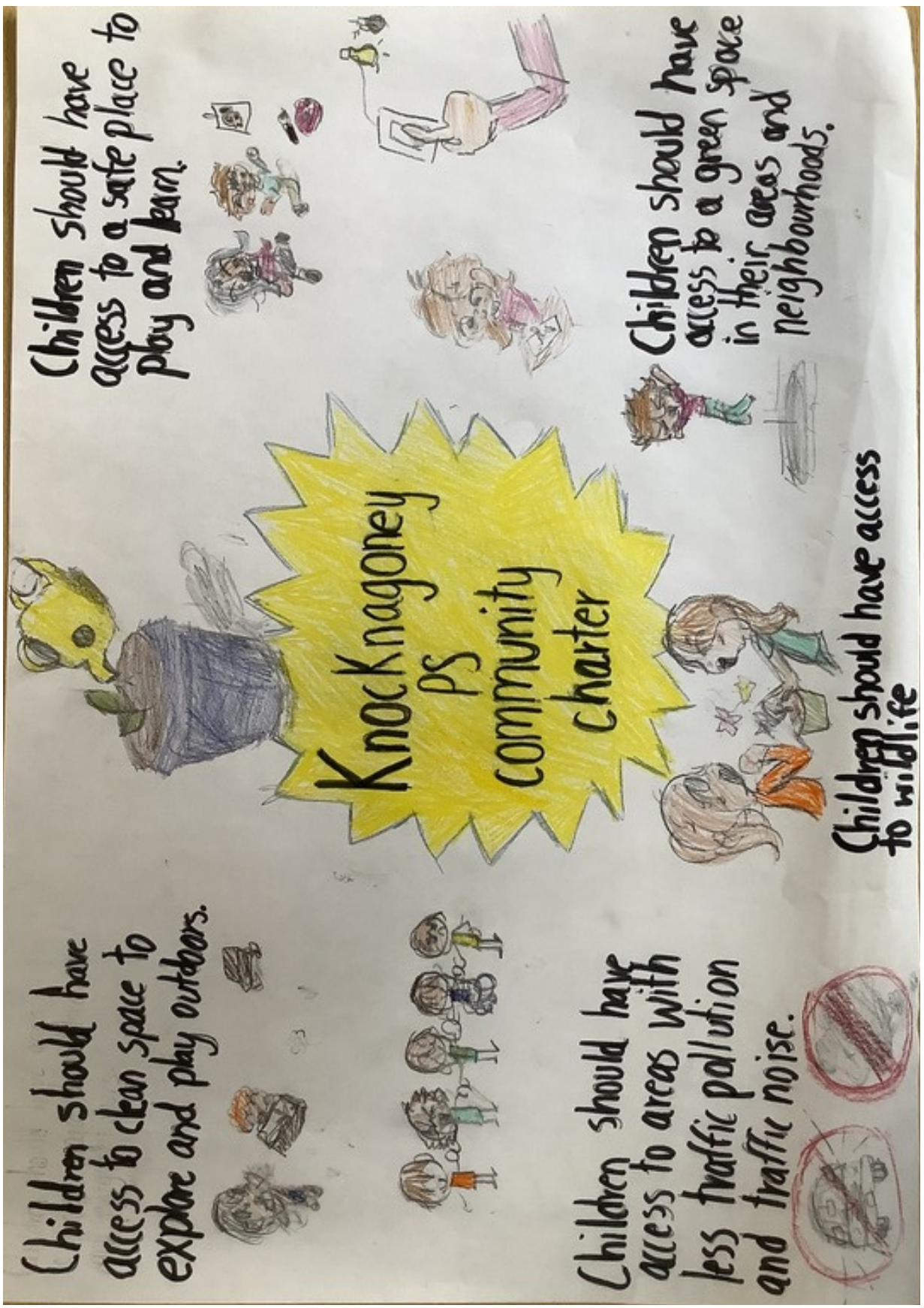


Good Food

Every child should be able to go to school and learn.



Education



Knocknagoney Primary School

Mercy Primary Community Charter

Mercy

Children Should have access to
Clean Water and nice Streets.



NO LITTERING!



Children Should have access to
Parks and open Spaces that are
accessible by foot and bike.



Children Should have access to a safe
place to walk, cycle or play in their area,
with limited traffic.



Children Should have access to Clean streets
and foot paths.





Children
have the right
to less
traffic.



Children have a
right to more
green spaces.



**Euston Street Primary
School Charter
Our Rights**

Children have a
right to Clean Spaces
and Clean air.



Children have a right
to Safe Parks.



Children have a
right to safe
streets.

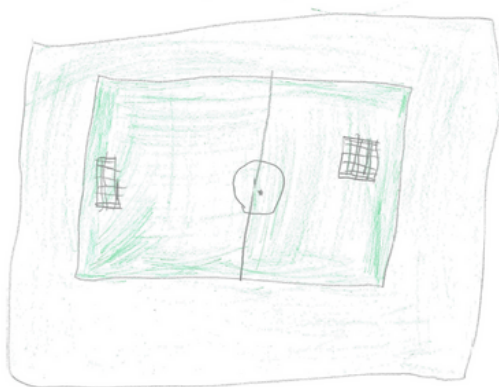
Liveable communities



Community



Open Space



Clean safe environments



Ballycraigy Primary School



Springhill Primary School

LEARN MORE



Learn more about the programme and hear from the young people themselves [in our video](#).



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