

## **Leadership in Action Project: Solidarity Sports Summer Programme**

### **Introduction**

As part of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship, I undertook a six-week Leadership in Action (LIA) project in London, working with Solidarity Sports, a children's charity that supports young people who have experienced complex trauma. The project centred on the charity's annual Summer Programme, which brings together groups of children aged 5–11 for a wide range of activities designed to promote wellbeing, resilience, and social development.

My role was to assist with running these activities, supporting both staff and children throughout the programme, and contributing to the organisation of a week-long residential trip in Turville, Buckinghamshire. While the experience was personally challenging and rewarding, this report focuses primarily on the factual details of the project, its aims, and its outcomes for the children who participated.

### **Background: Solidarity Sports**

Solidarity Sports was founded in 2007 in West London with a clear mission: to support children who have experienced trauma, adversity, or significant challenges in their early lives. The charity began as a small community-based initiative, offering sports activities to disadvantaged children during weekends and school holidays. Over time, its work has expanded to include a broad range of programmes - sports, arts, mentoring, educational support, and residential trips - all rooted in a trauma-informed approach.

The organisation specifically supports children who have faced complex trauma, which may include experiences of neglect, abuse, bereavement, or growing up in families affected by addiction or mental health difficulties. These adverse childhood experiences can have profound and long-lasting effects, shaping how children view themselves, others, and the world around them. Solidarity Sports exists to counteract those effects by providing consistent opportunities for safe play, social connection, and personal growth.

The charity's philosophy emphasises that sports, arts, and adventure are not simply leisure activities but powerful therapeutic tools. Play enables children to process emotions, build resilience, and regain a sense of agency. Structured creative and physical activities create safe spaces where children can express themselves, take healthy risks, and experience joy. At the same time, the charity stresses consistency: children thrive when they can rely on trusted adults and predictable routines.

Solidarity Sports is relatively small compared to national charities, but its size allows for close relationships with each child and family. Staff and volunteers know the children personally, understand their histories, and are able to provide sustained pastoral

support. This individualised approach distinguishes Solidarity Sports from larger organisations and ensures that interventions are tailored to children's needs.

The Summer Programme is one of the organisation's flagship initiatives. Delivered annually during the long school holiday, it provides children with structured, enriching, and safe activities at a time when families often struggle with childcare and when vulnerable children may otherwise face isolation or instability. The Summer Programme is complemented by shorter residential trips, which take children outside their usual environments and provide opportunities for teamwork, independence, and adventure.

### **Goals of the LIA Project**

The goals of my project aligned closely with the mission of Solidarity Sports and with the personal aims I set for myself before starting. They can be summarised as follows:

1. **Supporting children's wellbeing and development** – Providing safe, engaging, and enjoyable activities to promote social interaction, physical health, and emotional resilience.
2. **Strengthening bonds with the children** – Building trust and relationships with participants, particularly through consistent presence across activities.
3. **Contributing to the charity's work** – Supporting staff and volunteers in delivering the Summer Programme, ensuring activities ran smoothly and children felt supported.
4. **Challenging myself through an unfamiliar experience** – Developing leadership skills by working in a pastoral role with children, an environment outside my usual comfort zone.

### **Structure and Scale of the Summer Programme**

The Summer Programme took place over six weeks during July and August. Approximately 70 children participated across the programme, though attendance varied depending on the week, age group, and specific activities.

Children were divided into groups according to age, ranging from 5 to 11 years old. I interacted with children from all age groups but worked most consistently with the oldest cohort, aged 9–11. This allowed me to build stronger and more consistent relationships with these children, supporting them as they tackled new challenges and developed confidence.

On a typical day, I supported 15–20 children in their activities. Staff and volunteers rotated across groups, with usually two adults supporting each session. Each day

followed a broad structure: preparation and setup, morning activities, lunch, afternoon activities, and structured wind-down. The variety of activities ensured balance between high-energy sessions, such as sports, and quieter sessions, such as arts and crafts.

The final stage of the programme was a residential trip to Turville in Buckinghamshire. Twelve children attended this five-day trip, supported by six adults, including myself. This smaller group size created opportunities for more intensive engagement, deeper trust-building, and a wider variety of activities.

## **Activities Delivered**

The activities I supported can be grouped into four broad categories: sports, arts and crafts, drama and performance, and residential experiences.

### **Sports**

Sports were a core feature of the Summer Programme, both for their physical benefits and for the teamwork and resilience they encourage.

- **Football and basketball:** These sessions were among the most popular. I helped set up equipment, referee matches, and encourage fair play. With the older children, matches became opportunities to learn about discipline, cooperation, and respecting rules.
- **Swimming:** Delivered with professional swim coaches, these sessions provided both instruction and play. Many children were initially hesitant in the water, but with encouragement and support, they developed confidence and pride in their progress. I helped prepare children for sessions and provided reassurance to those nervous about swimming.
- **Other games:** Shorter physical activities, from relay races to playground games, provided variety and opportunities for children of all energy levels to participate.

Sports not only improved fitness but also allowed children to practise communication, leadership, and perseverance in a safe environment.

### **Arts and Crafts**

Creative activities offered quieter, reflective time. Sessions included drawing, painting, and group projects. Some children worked independently on detailed drawings, while others collaborated on murals or collages.

Arts and crafts gave children tangible products to take home, which provided a sense of achievement. They also created opportunities for conversation: while drawing or painting, children often shared stories or feelings, providing staff with important pastoral insights.

## **Drama and Performance**

Drama sessions were particularly effective in boosting children's confidence. Activities included role-play, improvisation games, and short performances. I supported by joining in, encouraging shy children, and helping to maintain a positive and playful atmosphere.

Children who were quiet or withdrawn in other contexts often flourished in drama workshops. The chance to act out roles or express themselves creatively gave them new ways to communicate and to develop a sense of agency.

## **Residential Trip to Turville**

The residential trip was a highlight of the programme. For many children, this was their first time spending several days away from home.

Activities included:

- **Trampolining:** Children learned to push their boundaries in a controlled environment, building confidence through physical challenge.
- **Boating:** Steering a boat required responsibility and cooperation, giving children a sense of independence and achievement.
- **Swimming:** Reinforcing skills developed earlier in the summer, swimming in a new environment boosted confidence further.
- **Campfire activities:** Children learned to start a fire safely, cook simple meals, and share stories in a communal setting.
- **Nature walks and outdoor games:** Exploring fields and woodlands introduced children to new environments and encouraged group cohesion.

Meals were also an important part of the residential. I helped prepare dishes such as salmon, stir fry, couscous, and fruit salad. For some children, these foods were unfamiliar and trying them became a valuable part of the trip. Shared mealtimes reinforced routines, encouraged positive social interaction, and created moments of bonding.

## **Role Within the Team**

Throughout the Summer Programme, I worked closely with staff and other volunteers. On most days, two adults supported activities, while the residential trip required a larger team of six.

My responsibilities included:

- Preparing equipment and materials for activities.
- Assisting in planning daily schedules.
- Leading games and supporting facilitators.
- Providing pastoral care for children struggling with behaviour or emotions.
- Supporting external partners such as swim coaches.
- Cooking and meal preparation on the residential trip.
- Reading bedtime stories and settling children at night.

A key responsibility was supporting children who displayed challenging behaviour, often linked to their experiences of trauma. This required calm, empathetic responses and consistency. By modelling patience and providing reassurance, I contributed to creating a safe and nurturing environment.

I also engaged with external partners, including coaches and charity trustees. This collaboration highlighted how community organisations, volunteers, and specialists can work together effectively to support children.

### **Safeguarding and Training**

Before the project began, I underwent safeguarding training and received an enhanced DBS check, allowing me to work with children. Safeguarding was a central focus throughout the programme, with staff and volunteers trained to monitor behaviour, respond to concerns, and maintain clear boundaries.

Although I did not receive formal training in first aid or conflict management, I benefited from observing experienced staff and facilitators. Their expertise provided guidance in managing difficult situations and reinforced the importance of professional knowledge in working with vulnerable children.

### **Outcomes of the Project**

#### **Outcomes for the Children**

The Summer Programme achieved several outcomes for participants:

1. **Improved social skills:** Group activities required cooperation, listening, and compromise. Children became more adept at working together and resolving conflicts.

2. **Increased confidence:** Many overcame fears - such as entering a swimming pool or performing in drama - leading to visible boosts in self-esteem.
3. **Emotional expression:** Creative activities gave children safe outlets for processing and sharing feelings.
4. **Sense of belonging:** Consistent adult support fostered trust and reinforced that each child was valued.
5. **New experiences:** The residential trip introduced children to environments and activities beyond their daily lives, broadening horizons.

### **Outcomes for Solidarity Sports**

For the charity, the Summer Programme advanced its mission by:

- Reaching around 70 children during the summer holidays.
- Demonstrating the effectiveness of play and creativity as therapeutic tools.
- Strengthening partnerships with external facilitators.
- Providing a showcase of its trauma-informed approach to trustees and stakeholders.

### **Outcomes for Staff and Volunteers**

The programme also benefited adults involved:

- Staff were able to extend their reach with volunteer support.
- Volunteers, including myself, developed skills in facilitation, teamwork, and safeguarding.
- The collaborative environment highlighted best practices for trauma-informed care.

### **Reflections**

This project held deep personal significance for me as an adult who used to be supported by the charity when I was younger. The project pushed me far beyond the environments in which I usually operate and required me to develop new dimensions of leadership, empathy, and resilience. I came into it with limited experience working directly with children, let alone those affected by trauma, and quickly realised that technical competence alone was not enough - what mattered most was patience, consistency, and the ability to remain calm under pressure. This challenged me to slow down, listen more carefully, and respond with compassion rather than instinct.

I also learned the importance of building trust in small but meaningful ways: remembering a child's preferences, noticing when they were struggling, and showing up

reliably each day. These seemingly minor gestures became the foundation of genuine relationships and reminded me that leadership is often exercised quietly, through presence and example rather than authority. On a personal level, I was struck by the children's resilience and joy despite the challenges they faced, which reshaped my own understanding of what it means to persevere. Their openness encouraged me to reflect on my own values and the kind of leader I want to become - one who combines ambition with humility, drive with compassion. Ultimately, this experience taught me that effective leadership is not about imposing direction but about creating the conditions in which others can flourish. That lesson is something I will carry with me long after the programme, shaping both my professional journey and my personal outlook.

## **Conclusion**

My six-week Leadership in Action project with Solidarity Sports was an opportunity to contribute to the charity's mission of supporting children affected by trauma through play, creativity, and adventure. With around 70 children participating in the Summer Programme, and 12 taking part in a residential trip to Turville, the project provided structured activities that promoted wellbeing, resilience, and social connection.

My role within the team involved assisting with preparation, facilitation, and pastoral care, as well as cooking, meal preparation, and supporting external partners. The outcomes of the project were significant: children developed social skills, confidence, and resilience; the charity fulfilled its mission; and staff and volunteers gained valuable skills.

While this essay has focused on descriptive and factual aspects of the project, it also demonstrates the wider importance of charities like Solidarity Sports. By providing consistent, safe, and creative environments, such organisations help children to flourish in spite of trauma. The Summer Programme exemplifies how targeted community initiatives can have transformative effects, both in the short term and in laying foundations for long-term wellbeing.