

From questions to cartoons: sharing research with young voices in Newcastle



To accompany the PHIRST webinar on evaluations with children and young people (May 2025) Dr Yvanna Todorova (PHIRST Light) blogs about making an animation for the Newcastle School Streets evaluation.

As part of our evaluation of the School Streets scheme in Newcastle, our research team had the fantastic opportunity to hear directly from the children most affected by the initiative. School Streets aims to make areas around schools safer and healthier by limiting car traffic at drop-off and pick-up times. The idea is to encourage more families to walk, cycle, or scoot to school—and who better to weigh in on how it's working than the pupils themselves?

The pupils offered unique insights and expressed genuine curiosity about the research process. They were excited to contribute to the work through the focus groups, so it only made sense to share the findings with them once the project was complete. One of the standout insights from the research was just how much pupils valued the scheme—not just for their own health, but for the health of the environment too. They understood the bigger picture: fewer cars meant cleaner air, safer streets, and more opportunities to be active.

But there was a catch. Despite their enthusiasm, pupils often have limited say in how they travel to school. So, while they might love walking or scooting, it's usually up to parents or carers to decide. That's why we saw a key opportunity: if we could amplify children's positive views on the scheme, perhaps we could help influence the grown-ups too.

Together with our public advisory members at PHIRST Light, we explored fun and creative ways to present the research in a child-friendly way. Should we go for a



colouring book? A comic strip? Or maybe something more dynamic like an animated video? Ultimately, we decided to go with a short, animated video that could be shared with the pupils at assemblies and at the start of the new school year. The pupils can then share this video with their parents or carers to facilitate a conversation about how they can also participate in this scheme that they love.

First, we had to decide what exactly we wanted to highlight. We had a mountain of interesting data, but not everything was going to make sense in a 3-minute video. After several team discussions and a few rounds of revisions, we agreed to focus on three key things: what School Streets is, why it matters, and how families can help make them more effective by following the rules.

Next, we dove into storyboarding and scripting. Our goal was to create a video that felt natural and relatable. To help bring our vision to life, we tried out a video animation tool called Vyond. It uses AI to generate animated content, which sounded like a cost effective way to speed things up.

While it offered helpful features, we soon discovered a few hiccups. First off, the platform is based in the U.S., so the animated cars drove on the wrong side of the road! The school buildings didn't quite look like anything in the Northeast of England either. Cue many hours of manual tweaking to make the visuals more regionally accurate.

One of the biggest limitations was the lack of suitable voice options. There were very few children's voices to choose from, and none sounded like they were from Newcastle—or even the UK, for that matter.



But with every challenge comes an opportunity. We decided to go straight to the source and asked pupils from one of the participating schools to help record the voiceover. The result? A total game-changer. The video went from sounding robotic and generic to feeling authentic and rooted in the local community. This was also highlighted in the pupil feedback we received prior to launching the video. The video was posted on YouTube and shared directly with the local government and school partners.

It wasn't a quick process—storyboarding, editing, learning the software, and recording the voices took nearly six months. But every bit of it was worth it.

The [finished video](#) isn't just a summary of our findings—it's a celebration of young voices in research. By sharing the results directly with the pupils who helped shape them, we showed them that their opinions matter and their voices can help bring about real change. And who knows? Maybe some of those curious minds will decide to follow their interests even further—asking questions, exploring ideas, and maybe one day becoming researchers themselves.

In the end, this project was about more than just evaluating a transport scheme. It was about co-creating something meaningful with the very people it affects. When children feel heard, valued, and involved, we don't just improve outcomes for them—we empower them to shape the future.

Dr Yvanna Todorova is a Research Associate with PHIRST Light based at Loughborough University

- Watch the Newcastle School Streets animation on [YouTube](#)
- Read about the Newcastle School Streets evaluation on the [PHIRST website](#)

