



Play Streets for Community Development: A Toolkit

www.playingout.net



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Introduction

Play streets - or “playing out sessions” - create space for children to play freely together and for neighbours to meet outside their homes. On a residential street, this can involve a regular road closure to make the space safe. Other “doorstep spaces” such as car parks, patches of land and the space around tower blocks can also be reclaimed in this way.

This **simple, low-cost model** has been shown to positively impact children and communities in many ways, including:

- * Children’s physical activity and physical literacy
- * Developmental benefits of free play
- * Socialisation and friendship for children
- * Mental wellbeing
- * Community cohesion
- * Sense of belonging
- * Decreased loneliness and isolation
- * Active citizenship
- * Safer, more ‘liveable’ streets
- * Normalising “playing out” near home

Since 2009, over 1,500 communities across the UK have organised play streets, mostly initiated and co-organised by residents on their own street or estate. That’s around 45,000 children playing and being active and 22,500 adults making change happen. Over one million extra ‘play hours’ have happened due to play streets.

The Playing Out website has lots of resources to support people who have the time, capacity and confidence to make this happen in their own community, with just light-touch support from the council or a local group.

However, we know that this is not the case for everyone. Where the need **(for children to have safe, playable space and for communities to come together)** is greater, the barriers for residents to take action can also be greater.

We have therefore developed this toolkit for anyone in a role - paid or unpaid - that involves working with “communities facing greater disadvantage”. By this we mean not just economic disadvantage (e.g. low incomes, insecure employment) but also social disadvantage (e.g. discrimination, racism, crime) and environmental disadvantage (e.g. heavy traffic, disinvested public spaces). We are aware that these disadvantages are complex and intersecting – and that **powerful advantages and opportunities** may exist.

“These neighbourhoods are often rich in community pride and in resources, such as active and engaged community groups, including health, youth, faith and other local organisations”

(Leeds play street enablement project report)

The content of this toolkit is based on a combination of our own direct work in Bristol and of groups across the UK; academic research, and outcomes from our “Community of Learning” – a group of 50+ practitioners supporting play streets in more disadvantaged communities.

Photo by Martin Mayer
Children play on a Brixton Housing Estate. Summer, 1970.



Why Playing Out Matters

Until a few decades ago, playing out with friends - on or around your own street or estate - was a normal part of everyday life for children across the UK. It provided daily physical activity, social contact, friendship (often across different ages, cultures or backgrounds), learning, skills, independence, belonging and fun.

It didn't matter what your family situation was, how much money you had, or whether your parents could take you to places. If you could play out, you had all this for free. And playing out is not only important for children - it can also act as a 'glue' in communities helping adults to connect and making shared outdoor spaces feel safer and more lived in.

But whilst children can and do still play out in some places, that freedom has been hugely eroded over the decades and the barriers to children playing out have become greater. The negative impact of this for children's health and wellbeing has been enormous, especially for those already disadvantaged in other ways.

The Covid-19 pandemic response unfairly impacted children in many ways, including their ability to play outside and be active. This not only worsened an existing crisis in children's physical and mental health, it both increased and highlighted inequalities, especially in terms of access to space. We must now do all we can to give children what they need: time and freedom to play outside with their friends, every day.



Barriers To Playing Out

Even pre-pandemic, children's freedom had been shrinking. As Tim Gill said in 2021, "children have been in a kind of creeping lock-down for decades". A large part of the reason for this is the way the outdoor environment has changed. Find out more [here](#):

Traffic has doubled since the 1980s and residential streets have become more car-dominated and less child-friendly. Alongside this, other informal spaces that were used by children for play have been built on, privatised, or made out of bounds – the 'No Ball Games' sign is still prevalent on housing estates.

All of this – as well as media-fuelled parental concerns about personal safety and the rise of technology aimed at keeping children glued to a screen – has contributed to a decline in the culture of children playing out near home.

Reduced numbers of children playing out creates a vicious cycle, as children don't want to play out alone and parents also want 'safety in numbers'. The less children are seen and heard outside, the less tolerance and understanding there is and the more children are pushed out of spaces.



Additional Barriers

In many places, parents report specific or additional factors impacting children's ability to play out near home, including:

- * Speeding, racing and dangerous driving
- * Parking and driving on pavements
- * No sense of belonging/ownership in outdoor space
- * Presence of "tough kids", intimidating older teens or gangs
- * Parental concerns about being judged "neglectful"
- * Drinking, drug use and ASB
- * Knife crime and drug-dealing

"How can I let my kids out at night when wrong people are there doing wrong things?"

(Somali mum, Bristol)

- * Hazardous waste, fly-tipping
- * Neighbour friction/conflict
- * Bad street lighting on dark evenings
- * Concerns about air quality and pollution

- * Few communal spaces/seating for parents to meet and connect
- * Transient populations
- * Dangerous dogs, dog-fighting and dog mess
- * Old and broken play equipment
- * Not much for children to do"
- * Limited and poor-quality green space
- * Not enough support/response from police when concerns reported

And on high-rise estates:

- * Too many doors / physical barriers to get outside
- * Lack of overlooking outdoor/playable space
- * Bad urban design e.g. play areas right next to busy roads
- * Shared spaces outside flats not safe or welcoming: parked cars, litter, 'bulky waste' etc.
- * Council using outdoor/green space for their own works/storage
- * Doors locked to residents so lack of connection between indoors and out (e.g. from laundry room to outside play area)

Residents have also talked about the issue of busy/dangerous main roads

surrounding their estates, preventing children from getting to nearby parks and playgrounds and making them feel "locked in". This is something that children themselves also voice, as in this call for safer streets by children on the Hartcliffe estate, south Bristol.

Racism can be another huge issue in some communities. At a coffee-morning we organised for Somali mums to talk about issues related to playing out, a facilitator reported that for one parent:

"THE biggest barrier, "a massive number shining above everything else", is racism and Islamophobia. People judging you on your colour, your dress, your religion. Making assumptions. There is blatant racism where people say horrible things - there was a recent incident at the park - and also hidden racism where they are judging you all the time."

These are massive, complex social/environmental issues which need a whole country approach to solving. In the face of all this, it can feel impossible for children to play out.



"Have you seen the park near us? It is not a nice place for children to go"

(Somali mum, Bristol).

The good news is that play streets are a proven, low-cost way to make playing out possible, with the right support. And more! They are also a first step towards many other positive community impacts and benefits. Reclaiming your outdoor space for children, play and community can be very empowering. It can help break down barriers, build a sense of ownership, belonging, trust and neighbourhood safety. It can also be a step towards other collective action such as campaigning for safer streets or improved outdoor space.

“Following our play street, a community was formed and now people on the road regularly support each other. Following conversations at play streets, elderly residents decided that we would like more flowers on the road. After a quick collection we raised money for 4 planters which now bloom and are regularly tended”

- (Play Street Organiser, London, 2022)

“After coming together around play streets], the community became interested in safeguarding and developing an area of green space directly behind their properties”

- (Community Development Officer, Wolverhampton Council)

There is also good evidence of playing out helping to build friendships across ethnic groups, helping to prevent racism. Some feedback from our Bristol tower blocks project in 2016 included:

“Children learn from other children. They learn about diversity.”
-(Rahma)

“They meet new children from different backgrounds. They learn new games. “
-(Raltun)

“My kids learn to respect by spending time with children from different backgrounds. We learn that we are all human. “
-(Ashraf)

This film, made by The African Pot Project in Manchester, also talks about how playing out helps bring children of all backgrounds together, breaking down barriers.





Play Streets

The temporary play street model

This idea was started by parents on a residential street in Bristol in 2009. With agreement from neighbours and legal permission from the council, residents came together to close their street to through traffic for a couple of hours, allowing residents car access at walking pace.

In 2011, Bristol City Council was the first to bring in a 'temporary play street' policy, allowing street communities to apply for a regular (up to weekly) road closure over a whole year. Around 90 other UK councils have now followed suit.

This original model has some key features that make it 'do-able', impactful and sustainable:

- * Resident-led and owned/organised
- * Parents are responsible for their own children
- * Just for neighbours: not public event
- * Very low/no cost to residents
- * Inclusive to whole community
- * Reclaiming shared "doorstep" space
- * Free, unstructured, child-led play
- * Low key, simple
- * Short, regular sessions
- * A safe space

Supporting Children's Right To Play Out

Beyond supporting play streets as a temporary measure, councils and housing providers can play a huge part in supporting and enabling children to play out near home on an everyday basis. Increasingly, housing providers are realising that a "No Ball Games" culture is unfair and harmful for children's wellbeing – and that estates where children feel safe and welcome in outside space are generally good places for everyone. Some are taking action to change things, and we are supporting them to do so., find out more [here](#).

If you work for a council or housing association who want to support play streets, this is an ideal opportunity to also look at your organisation's overall approach to children and play. Do they have a play policy? Does the outside space feel safe and welcoming to children? Do residents have 'ownership' of their outside space? How are complaints about children playing out dealt with?

We also have template letters for tenants and those supporting them to use/adapt for responding to 'play bans'. See [here](#).



Playing out on high-rise estates

In Bristol, we have also supported regular playing out sessions with communities living in council-owned high-rise tower blocks, with the aim of increasing use and ownership of the outside space for children and residents. Many of the above features of play streets (e.g. free play, resident owned, doorstep space) can still apply in these settings, with the benefit that often a road closure is not needed.

Read more [here](#).

There are very real and serious challenges for families living in council and social housing tower blocks. We have spoken to parents who, through years of raising concerns and battling to be heard by authorities, feel disempowered and despairing. Grenfell Tower was the tragic and shameful end result of this culture and highlighted the societal sea-change that needs to happen to make tenants feel safe and respected.

Within this often overwhelming context, playing out can be a small but very positive step that residents can make happen for themselves, with the right support. Along with all the benefits for children, playing out brings the community together to connect, share and develop a stronger voice.



And in terms of the physical space, tower-blocks often have features that lend themselves well to the model (and to playing out more generally) including:

- * More traffic-free space on the doorstep
- * Mix of tarmac and green space – good for different types of play
- * More ‘playable features’ - steps, path, grass, balconies, stairs, walls, underpasses, slopes
- * (Sometimes) good overlooking of outdoor space
- * (Sometimes) shared community space for storing “stuff”
- * (Sometimes) paid housing or community support workers
- * (Sometimes) dedicated play areas

Read [Samira’s play street story](#).



The role of the council

Where a legal road closure is needed, the council has an important role to play in providing a simple, accessible, no-cost application process for this. Lots of information for councils can be found on our website and we are also happy to talk to anyone interested. Some councils have started with a year-long trial allowing closures on a few streets before making their policy permanent and LA-wide. The less risk-averse have been happy to launch straight in, seeing how well it is already working in other areas. A small amount of officer time is needed to process the applications, but some councils have committed extra resources to supporting communities where more help is needed, and many also provide road closure kit/ signs for free.

If councils want all demographics to benefit from play streets, it is even more important that their application process is accessible and cost-free for residents, with no unnecessary hoops to jump through.

“Streamlining local authority application procedures and removing cost barriers should improve the prospects for street play initiatives in disadvantaged areas”
[\(Tim Gill, 2015\)](#)

[Click here to find out more](#)



A growing movement

As of January 2023, over 1,500 street communities have now taken up different versions of this model across the UK, sometimes with ‘light-touch’ or more hands-on support from a local organisation or group – or peer support from another play street organiser.

But although play streets are successfully happening in many different areas/demographics, the resident-led model does take a certain amount of time, confidence, capacity and local support. We know that where people face greater disadvantage, there may also be far greater barriers to taking action.

Barriers to community-led organising

Through our Community of Learning and other work, we’ve found that extra barriers for some people being able to self-organise play streets include:

- * Negative perceptions and attitudes of local area
- * Unsafe environments (see barriers to playing out above)
- * Not knowing or believing that things can be different
- * Transient populations, get relationships going and then people leave the area
- * Not feeling that you have permission to claim the space



- * Not feeling you have the right to play
- * Isolated parents / families
- * Bigger, more urgent life problems (poverty, unemployment, ill-health...)
- * Opposition from neighbours / historical conflict
- * Lack of time
- * Lack of confidence and experience
- * Lack of resources (e.g. access to computer)
- * Lack of agency and mistrust of authorities
- * Fatigue - efforts not getting anywhere or being told ‘no’
- * Lack of ‘social capital’ and pre-existing networks

- * Lack of support / encouragement (from neighbours &/ or authorities)
- * Lack of knowledge of structures / processes (e.g. who to ask for permission)
- * Lack of awareness of possibilities / examples of community action
- * Stigma of being seen as a 'leader' or 'organiser' within your community
- * Concerns about responsibility (for the required bureaucracy, for safety, for anti-social behaviour)
- * Language and cultural barriers
- * In high-rise - so many more people to consult with / speak to

“Four interviewees mentioned that some parents in poverty may have other more pressing priorities and concerns around money, housing, health and other personal circumstances.” - (Tim Gill, 2015)

However! It is important to remember there may also be very positive or enabling factors within these same communities, such as extended family living nearby, supportive friendship networks and a resilient 'can do' attitude.

“These neighbourhoods are often rich in community pride and in resources, such as active and engaged community groups, including health, youth, faith and other local organisations”- (Leeds enablement project report)

Because of this, some communities facing greater disadvantage have successfully self-organised play streets or playing out sessions with very light-touch support, despite the challenges. But others may need more hand-holding to get things started, and sometimes longer term.



“Our main community leaders in the area often have complex circumstances that need to be respected – many people don't have capacity to take on the responsibility of coordinating or organising a session, when the more important matters of family circumstances, illness, debt, rent arrears and problems with kids at school take priority. The main leader of the Playing Out project on one street eventually needed to hand over due to multiple personal and health problems”.

- (Hartcliffe project 2015)

Supporting Play Streets

Who is best placed to do this work?

Supporting residents in these contexts can be done by a wide range of people with different kinds of backgrounds and training. In our experience it is usually best done by experienced community workers who already know the community and have built strong trust and relationships there. Ideally they would be trained in empowering methods such as Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). It's essential to understand the importance of involving people and giving them ownership over what is happening.

In some cases, a local resident might even be in a position to take on this work, such as in the case of Kidz Klub in Leeds [[link to case study](#)]. This can be really powerful because people are more likely to respond positively to a neighbour than someone who is perceived as a 'professional', especially if they have experienced being let down by organisations in the past.

Challenges for practitioners

Even experienced community workers can face challenges in getting things started in some areas. Some of the challenges practitioners have talked about include:

- * It can be daunting going into places you don't know/ don't live/ people are facing big challenges in life
- * It can be very difficult to find people who want to take anything on for variety of reasons
- * It can be more difficult to get people to imagine something different
- * People have little sense of ownership over the space
- * Entrenched issues, tension between neighbours and with the local authority
- * Parents not engaging or taking responsibility. This ranges from children coming unaccompanied, to parents coming but not wanting / having capacity to commit to being involved
- * Scepticism / wariness about new ideas / outsiders



The best starting point is finding out what people want, and what their issues are. Then, if it feels appropriate, you can offer or suggest play streets as a positive action. Be very clear about what support you can offer – and make sure you follow through!

A community empowerment approach

Even if you don't have specific training or background in community work, the main thing is to work alongside people who live there and always ensure that they are involved in decision-making, so they don't feel 'done to'. If residents start to feel that things are happening to them without their permission or active involvement, you risk losing trust fast.

If residents want play streets to happen but lack the confidence or time to take the lead, you may need to do the majority of the legwork at the beginning, whilst

checking in and ensuring that what you do fits what people want. Over time, you can try giving people small tasks to build up confidence with the aim to make it more sustainable and locally owned.

Timescales

These will vary enormously depending on your community. If you find keen residents fairly quickly, you might expect it to take 3-4 months to set up – or less if you don't need a road closure. In other areas, it may take longer to build up trust and find the right opportunity.

A year is probably too short a time-frame to establish meaningful and sustainable change in a community – ideally you want to be thinking at least 2 years ahead.

Funding

A huge positive of play streets is that they are very low-cost. For residents, there should be little to no cost involved. And even for those supporting them, including the council, the costs are far less than any delivered service or infrastructure project. Sometimes play streets are supported in an area by a local voluntary group or resident 'activator'.

But to provide proper support for communities facing disadvantage or other challenges, a paid role is usually needed, and you will need a budget for promotion and kit.

The good news is that play streets are a proven, high-impact intervention that fit with the aims of many funding bodies, so finding funding should be possible.

We've put together this page on our website to help, linking to current [funding opportunities](#).

[Contact us](#) for a template Play Street Support Worker job description and outline budget and plan for a local project.

How much funding you need very much depends on the scale and context of what you want to do.

As a very rough guide, grants of between £5k-30k per year have enabled play streets to be supported within a neighbourhood or local authority area.



Getting things started

Finding communities: targeted or responsive?

Play streets work best where residents want it to happen. Over the years, we have seen many examples of well-meaning organisations trying to “do” play streets in a particular street or estate identified as being in need of a positive intervention. This tends to backfire.

Play streets are challenging the norm (ie. streets are for cars and children should only play in playgrounds). So even where play streets are entirely resident-led, it can be tricky to get consensus and some people may strongly oppose the idea. This negative reaction is far more likely where residents feel the idea is being imposed on them from the outside.

In general, a better approach is to offer or suggest the idea more widely across the area you are working in, alongside an offer of practical support to make it happen, and to go where the interest and energy is. The more a community feels ownership of the idea, the more likely it is to be successful and, ideally, to become sustainable and eventually resident-led.

Another approach is to find out if any parents/carers have already raised issues related to children and play – for example,

lack of playable space; safety concerns; conflict with neighbours around play. There may be interest from these communities in the idea of playing out sessions as a way to start a conversation, build consensus, kickstart action and reclaim children’s right to use the space outside their homes.

You may well find there is a particularly motivated individual – often a parent of young children – who wants to make things happen and just needs support and encouragement. We cannot stress enough the importance of looking out for these ‘sparks’ and fanning the flame. Amazing things can happen when people are enabled to make change happen in their own communities.

Read some inspiring stories [here](#).

Finding the ‘spark’

There are lots of ways to introduce the play street idea and find out where the interest lies.

Keep your message simple to start with. Ask parents whether they would like their children to be able to play out more. Ask about people’s own play memories. Explain the play street model with emphasis on low/no-cost and simply making a safe space for free play and community on the doorstep.

It’s really important to tap into well-connected, active parents locally - they are gold dust.

Use places where parents get information: local newsletters, council newsletters, school newsletters, noticeboards (in schools, libraries, community centres, GPs surgeries), councillors and their networks.

See more tips on promotion, with free downloadable assets.

This short film from Leeds demonstrates play streets beautifully – you could share this on relevant local social media. It shows that:

- * Play streets work in all kinds of diverse locations, not just ‘leafy’ streets;
- * Leeds City Council recognises the value of play streets;
- * Play streets in Leeds and supported in different ways, including peer support;

These ITV films are another brilliant promotional tool showing play streets in 10 different regions of England.

Local partners

If you’re not already well connected in the area, explore what’s already happening and who is working there. It’s important to work with what already exists in terms of networks, spaces, activists (at least to start with), as trying to go in ‘cold’ will be very difficult. Ideally, you will find the leaders in the local community and start building relationships, to help you identify residents who may be interested in play streets.

Existing, long-term relationships between community organisations and residents work really well to support the development of play streets (e.g. Leeds case study). Try to strike up relationships with any that you find in your area and see if the play street idea appeals to them.

Schools, children’s centres, community spaces, places of worship, cafes and parks are all places you could go to, check out their noticeboards, chat to their receptionists, have a look at their social media or websites. You could also start with your local voluntary sector organisation who usually will have an idea of which community organisations are working where. Just type “voluntary sector/ service [name of town/ district/ county]” into google and you should find something to get you started.

If you have community development workers in your local authority, speak to them about your ideas. They will know their ‘patch’ well and be able to advise, or possibly partner with you. Sometimes there is faith-based community organising going on, from within a local place of worship. There may be migrant communities self-organising, or who have local organisations set up to support them.

See if there are other forms of local activism happening, like park groups, active travel campaigns or parent groups. Play street leaders often arise out of those already involved in local activism. You could reach out to Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) providers who are often embedded in communities, committed to play, community, activity and comfortable with council procedures. Youth organisations might also be interested in the play streets concept.

Pop-up play (or "Just Do Something")

Many of the communities we're trying to reach have been badly let down for years. They are constantly 'consulted' but never see any change. It is understandable that they may not wish to engage with something new. In these cases, we have found that there is a simple power in Just Doing Something positive – which can help people imagine or realise that change is possible.

Bristol Playing Out activator Kate Staniforth started by doing playing out on her own street and now has years of experience in helping others to get play streets up and running, including in tower block estates and very disadvantaged communities.

One approach she uses to spark interest is 'pop-up' play - turning up in a shared space as families are coming back from school, with lots of pavement chalk, a long skipping rope and some hula hoops. Kate is not a play worker and her role is simply to create a space where she can chat to parents whilst their children play.

Kate's tips for pop-up play sessions include:

- * Link up with community development workers to identify potential locations and who are known.
- * Connect to groups of residents, either formally through residents' associations or informally through groups of parents (usually mothers)
- * Work with on-site caretakers/managers to identify and secure a suitable space
- * Connect residents across neighbouring blocks to share experiences of reclaiming space for play
- * Care for shared community or play space (litter-picking, bulb-planting) to create space for conversations.
- * Bring your own children along to break the ice
- * Provide simple play equipment and keep play child-led: chalking, skipping, hopscotch, putting up a swing-ball or basketball hoop

- * Offer tea and biscuits as an encouragement for adult participants too
- * Once the concept and value of reclaiming a space for play is established (by demonstration), you can work on the relationships and trying to make it more community owned.



School play streets

School play streets are an adaptation of residential play streets; short temporary road closures outside a school gate at the start and end of the school day, with volunteer stewards looking after the closure points. If you're working in an area where it is more challenging to engage parents, a school play street can be:

- * A really good way of demonstrating the feel of a road closure for free play
- * A chance to build relationships with local families
- * Read more about School play streets, and [download our free guide](#) to organising one, written with Sustrans.
- * School play streets are also a great step towards permanent school streets

Street parties

An annual or one-off street party is more of an 'event' than a regular play street session, often involving completely closing the road for a whole day, shared food, music and other organised activities. As mentioned earlier, street parties often happen around a cultural 'hook' such as a jubilee/coronation, Eid or Diwali – but they can just happen for their own sake! They are a brilliant way to bring the whole community together and can also kick-start play streets – giving people a taste of their street free from traffic.

One huge benefit of street parties is that most local authorities permit one-off street parties (sometimes limited to one a year) even if they don't have a play street policy in place. Playing Out actually began in Bristol with neighbours applying to the council for a one-off 'street party' and using

the road closure to do a much simpler play street session.

Sustainable St Albans started by supporting street parties to build up a mailing list of residents who were likely to be interested in and have the time and energy to organise - play streets. This meant that when a play streets scheme was established in St Albans, there were dozens of organisers who could be approached to pilot play streets.

On the back of this experience, they set up a website - [Our Street Party](#) - to help people 'start with a street party' before considering a more regular play street. A local pub chain gave in-kind support (kit, signs, etc.) as well as venues for information events.



More street party resources:

www.streetparty.org.uk/

www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-big-lunch

www.playingout.net/blog/jubilee-2022-a-platinum-opportunity-for-street-communities/

Four steps to organising a play street

Hopefully having done some of the work above, you will find a few residents who are interested - or even enthusiastic - about starting a play street. Once you have at least one person who wants this to happen, you can start supporting them through the steps of organising playing out sessions on their street or estate. It's worth familiarising yourself with the process from a resident's viewpoint before starting to help others. [Read our manual](#) and [watch the four steps videos](#). The guidance below is based on learning about specific support people might need at each step.

Remember to be led by what people want and need don't impose your support and do encourage residents to do as much as they are able and willing to do themselves. For an overview of the 'spectrum' of support needed, [see here](#)

Before you start

It's important not to rush the process. Time spent building relationships and getting it right at the beginning is time well spent.

Questions to ask now might be:

- * What issues are they facing (in relation to children playing out)
- * What are their hopes for playing out/play streets?
- * What fears or concerns do they have?
- * Does the play street model make sense for their street/estate (or is something else needed)?
- * How much time and energy do they have to help make it happen?
- * What specific support (if any) would they want/need –and from whom?
- * What would help to make it inclusive for all neighbours?
- * Are there key people it would be good to get on side?

Step 1: Talk to your neighbours

Play streets / playing out sessions should be as inclusive as possible. As an opportunity to meet neighbours for a cup of tea and a chat, they are for the whole community, not just parents and children. The whole thing will go better if it is a collective community effort from the outset and, at the very least, those who don't want to be actively involved should be properly consulted and have a chance to ask questions/raise concerns.

This is why we strongly advise starting with an informal conversation between neighbours, before making any definite plans or applying for a road closure.

This first step usually involves door-knocking and/or leafletting all neighbours, letting them know about the play street idea, inviting them to an informal meeting and/or giving them a chance to respond via phone/email.

Encourage a keen resident to start by talking to the neighbours they know already, to 'buddy up' with one or two other neighbours and share the (emotional and practical) labour. They could also hang around outside the front after school (maybe drinking tea and whilst their children play close to home) and strike up conversation with other parents.

[Use our template neighbour invitation.](#)

This step can be much harder for people who don't have much contact with their neighbours, are less confident for any reason or just don't want to be 'visible' as a community organiser. Some ways that you can help with this include:

- * Remind resident organisers that most neighbours are supportive, or disinterested, rather than actively objecting; it's extremely rare to get abuse or anger from neighbours when door-knocking.
- * Door-knock and/or leaflet alongside residents – or offer to do it for them
- * Get children involved in leafletting alongside parents
- * If residents are worried about a particular household, they can just flyer without door-knocking
- * If existing WhatsApp or Facebook groups exist, use these alongside face-to-face contact (e.g. to let people know when you might be door-knocking, to share extra info)



Finding space to meet

Having a comfortable, cost-free, local, neutral, safe space to meet is very important for communities to make things happen. Sadly it's often not obvious where that space is, so have a think about this in advance.

Talk to residents about where might be good to hold a get together for people to discuss the playing out idea. Ideally it would be inside where it's warm/dry, adults can have a cuppa and children can play freely. Also:

- * Try to ensure any space you choose is on people's doorstep and easy to get to by foot.
- * If there's a community space, can you help negotiate for residents to use it for free? Try to involve key residents in this, so that they will hold the relationship going forward.

- * Use your/organisational contact details on flyers if residents are concerned about including their own
- * Include FAQs on flyers to pre-empt recurring questions (e.g. about car access, damage, what play streets are, etc.)
- * Where language may be a barrier, use Playing Out simple flyers available in Urdu, Arabic, Polish and Sylheti. Crowdfunder and/or talk to residents about translating into other languages
- * Use forms of information which are not so heavily language-dependent – images, infographics with fewer words may be more accessible and can be easily shared via social media/WhatsApp/etc.

* Think about whether the space will feel comfortable for everyone (e.g. a pub or place of worship may not).

* Children's centres or schools are good, child-friendly spaces. Wherever you choose, let people know children can come and that you will provide colouring or indoor games.

* If getting people out is a challenge, offer hot drinks / refreshments as an incentive

* If you have a budget, you could suggest a local café that residents feel comfortable in and pay for a round of hot drinks

We've found that sometimes communal spaces or community centres aren't very accessible for one reason or another (e.g. council or housing provider keeps it locked) – this is something you might help to change.

If no suitable indoor space exists, consider meeting outside on the street or another safe shared space where playing out could happen. The benefit of this is it's neutral, accessible and can get people thinking about how to reclaim or use the space.

A first neighbours' meeting

The purpose of this meeting is to bring residents together, give people more info about the play street idea and find out how much interest there is. It is also an important space for anyone to raise questions or concerns and for those to be heard and discussed.

The idea of a meeting can put people off, so keep it informal. "A cuppa and chat" might be more inviting and inclusive. Check if the residents want you to be there and in what capacity (e.g. facilitator, listening in, making tea, providing information, taking notes). Remember you are there to support them so try to let them set the agenda.

Before the meeting:

- * Look at the street/estate to check the layout, identify a suitable space and note any particular issues or hazards.
- * Get advice from the council on the best way of closing the road if needed.

* Take Playing Out leaflets and "manual for organisers" (aimed at residents).

* Print out and take a council application form and any guidance available.

* Print out a map of the street/estate to look at together.

At the meeting:

Show our Playing Out intro film.

* Gather views. Encourage people to think about their own memories of playing out. Listen to any concerns or objections and try to reassure.

* Find out what has happened already. Have they had a street party or anything similar? If so, draw similarities and differences with the 'playing out' model.

If there is general agreement to go ahead, find out:

- * Who is willing to do what (designing flyers, leafletting, stewarding?). Collect contact details.
- * What dates/times would work best for sessions
- * Which part of the street/estate would be used? Keep it simple and manageable.
- * Talk through next steps. How will the meeting outcomes be communicated to neighbours? Is further consultation needed? Help sketch out a rough timetable.
- * Do they need printing done or any other materials sent to them? Do they want help with door-knocking?

If a road closure is needed, you could offer to help them fill out the application form there and then or at another time. Make sure there is ample time for the council to process the application before the first session. Offer to be the named person on the form.

Identifying a Space for Play

Where is the best place for a play street or playing out session? Ideally, it's the closest space to where people live: their street or other space immediately outside their homes (green spaces, car parks, courtyards). The shared outside space on residential streets and estates is neither private nor public, but somewhere in between. This is the space most valuable for children to be able to access for everyday play and to feel part of their community.

Closing a street to cars is very empowering (and is often the only option for 'doorstep space') but can be extra work - both practical and emotional - so non-street space can be an easier first step. If a street is too busy or difficult to close, see if there's a quieter side street where residents are happy to host.

Every space has different qualities, challenges and benefits. Ensure that you are seeing a place for all its unique aspects and potential. Keep things simple. Reclaiming a space for play is mainly about making it safe.



Step 2: Get permission and support

This stage is particularly important if you are planning to close a road, but you may also need to get permission to use another space for example, from the housing provider or council.

This is also the time to do a more formal consultation with residents.

Applying for a road closure

If you are closing a road, either for a one-off or regular play street session, you first need to check whether your council has a policy or process in place to allow this. Ideally they will have a play street policy, allowing residents to apply for a regular closure – usually up to a few hours a week – over a whole year. [See our directory here to find out.](#)

If your council doesn't yet have a play street policy, they may well allow a one-off closure using a street party application. This is a good way to get started and demonstrate the benefit of play streets. [You can then ask your council to implement a play street policy](#)

You should find all the information you need about applying for a road closure on

our website, in our manual and on your own council's website. Do get in touch with us if you get stuck.

Our top tips are:

- * Check the council's requirements for community consultation. Ideally this is simply giving everyone the opportunity to raise any concerns, rather than proving a percentage in favour.
- * Check the council's processing time – this varies from 3 to 8 weeks. Shorter is better.
- * Apply for more sessions than you think you need it gives flexibility and you don't have to use them all.
- * Keep it small and simple – you don't need to close the whole length of a road.
- * Go for a time when most families will be around: after-school, weekends or holidays.

Remember that, especially in places with neighbour conflict, residents may not want to “put their head above the parapet” and liability might also be a legitimate concern, so offer to use your name and organisational contact details on the form and consultation letter.

[A template neighbour consultation letter is available here](#)

Getting support

Support for play streets can come from anyone who ‘gets it’, or where it fits with what they are trying to achieve. This could include council officers, councillors,

housing associations, community groups, police, tenants' and residents' associations, other organisations, local businesses, community activists and – most importantly neighbours of all ages. The more support you can generate at this stage the better.

Ideally, play streets are organised and stewarded by residents themselves and it is good to try and make this happen at least to some extent from the beginning, so encourage people to get involved in whatever way they can. The key role is stewarding you need to make sure at this stage that there will be enough responsible adults present on the day to make it safe. [See much more detail on the stewarding role here.](#)

People offering to leaflet, bring out games or make cups of tea are also very valuable – take them up on it! The more people can be and feel involved, the better.

Step 3: Tell everyone and get ready

Tell everyone

Once you've set a time and place for the play street, you need to let people know and invite them to come out. Remember that generally play streets are not public events and shouldn't be advertised beyond the



street/estate itself. They are simply a space for neighbours to get together and for children to play freely.

Hopefully the keen residents will already be telling their neighbours about playing out by this stage. It's good to check they have leaflets to distribute and posters to put up in windows, noticeboards or stairwells. All publicity should clearly explain what the session involves (access for drivers; parental responsibility) and also makes it clear that everyone is welcome not only those with young children. [See here for templates and ideas](#)

[Download Poster Above](#)

You may be able to get a budget for printing from your local councillor or another local community organisation. If a local business offers to ‘sponsor’ the play street, make sure you are getting proper support and it's not just free advertising for them!

You can also use social media to let people know about it if there is already a Whatsapp or Facebook group for the street/estate (lots of communities set these up for support during covid) that is a great start. Regular reminders are a good way to make sure people know about it and turn up on the day!

Get ready

Residents may need reassuring at this stage often people worry about attendance, whether there will be enough for the kids to do, what drivers will be like, how the neighbours will react, what happens if something goes wrong. Some answers to these questions are in our manual and FAQs. In general, based on our combined experience of 1,000s of sessions over 13 years, you can give reassurance that:

- * There have only been a few incidents of minor damage to cars and all have been dealt with between neighbours.
- * Children love the chance to play out freely on their street/estate, with just some simple equipment provided if needed.
- * Even if turnout is low, the chances are that interest and support will build.
- * If there are not enough stewards, or if for any other reason it doesn't feel safe, you do not have to go ahead.
- * The vast majority of drivers are understanding and considerate.
- * You or another experienced playing out organiser can be there.
- * They can ask their local police to come along for added support.
- * People can bring out their own cups of tea.

If closing a road, you'll need to provide or access legal Road Closed signs and any

other equipment stipulated by the council. This varies from council to council. Some, like Leeds City Council, are happy for you to use wheelie bins with 'play street' stickers and others require you to use official traffic cones or barriers. Our general advice is to make sure it's legally compliant and safe, ensuring no cars are able to drive through the closure unless stewarded. Ideally, the council's 'kit' requirements are a sensible balance of ensuring clarity for drivers, safety for children and keeping it low-cost and easy for residents to manage.

We can sometimes help with the cost of kit. See [this page](#) for more info and links to order via our partner Brightwayz.

We would also advise doing a simple risk assessment at least a week beforehand (download a template [here](#)) and doing a litter-pick/check just before the session starts.

Step 4: Play Out

Stewarding

The role of stewards is to keep the space safe. See our manual, steward briefing and Step 4 film to get really clear about the role of stewards and how to manage cars during a play street. This is the most important aspect of the model. As long as the road is closed and stewarded safely you

can more or less let everything else take care of itself – children will make their own fun and adults will make their own tea!

Stewarding is an opportunity for inclusion (older neighbours, those without children, older teenagers) but anyone in this role needs confidence to deal with angry drivers (especially in areas new to play streets).

Top tips:

- * Make sure stewards are in pairs, both for company and safety
- * Keep the play street contained to a reasonably small area so stewards don't feel too isolated
- * Minimise the number of closure/access points
- * Meet and brief your stewards at least 15 minutes before the road is due to close so that they are clear about their role.
- * Have a plan for dealing with angry drivers and share experience so that stewards feel more confident;
- * Recognise that the need for stewards to commit to a rota might be off-putting – you may need inventive ways to deal with this until more neighbours are committed to the play street;
- * For initial sessions, maybe draw on local community groups, ward councillors, friends from existing play streets etc as reliable stewards/helpers until there are more volunteers on the street;
- * Consider 'floating stewards' who can

keep an eye on cars wanting to move out of the play street.

- * Make sure stewards are looked after and protected from the weather!

Make it inclusive

- * Residents and children with complex needs are part of the community. Play can be organised so that it is driven by those with complex needs leading to positive interactions within the community and a deeper sense of ownership of activities and spaces.
- * Think about older residents. Make sure there is somewhere to sit and ask them to share their play memories. If they want a role, invite them to help steward or bring biscuits.
- * Provide some simple play equipment like chalk, elastics, skipping ropes, hula hoops, swing-ball, soft balls or other outdoor games so nobody is left out through not having their own stuff. You may decide to organise some communal storage or nominate a trusted person to stash it in their house/flat.



“How can we meet our neighbours? The street closure is good but it’s mainly people we know from the Somali community. We often do not know our neighbours. We have a Whatsapp group and know names – but not faces. We need opportunities to all meet and come together but there are not many. It would be good if different neighbours of different ages, backgrounds, children, no children, could come together and get to know each other more”.

-(Somali mum, Bristol)

Pros and cons of organised activities

Children are completely capable of playing freely and happily without any organised activities or fancy equipment. So long as they have a safe space and permission to play (and ideally other children), they will use their imagination and respond to their surroundings. In fact, ‘free play’ is considered the best kind of play for children’s development and wellbeing.

However, sometimes there are cultural barriers to this happening, because of the way society has structured our ideas about play and the use of outdoor space: “children can only play in playgrounds” or “streets are for cars”.

Ideally, play streets are very simple and ‘low-key’ - just a safe space where people can bring out their own ‘stuff’ from home. Bikes, roller-skates and scooters are a very common sight on play streets. But it’s important to remember some families won’t have these things.

So, especially at the beginning, providing activities or equipment can help communities to feel safe and equally able to participate because there is a clear structure, ‘hook’, or reason to be outside in the street. This is the ‘pro’

The ‘con’ is that people may see the play street as a delivered activity rather than a community-led reclaiming of space. They may also expect these things to happen every time, which is not sustainable. You might also have additional costs and liability to think about.

Examples of organised activities:

- * Organising a play street on cultural holidays (Halloween, Eid, Jubilee, Divali, Easter), with fancy-dress or special food. Ask the community what days chime with them the most.
- * Sourcing ‘loose parts’ such as cardboard boxes/tubes or other (safe) ‘scrap’. Using [childrens scrapstore](#) and [scrap stuff](#).
- * Providing bikes and scooters and possibly some organised activity like obstacle courses or skills sessions. You may need to find a local partner to do this [e.g. Sustrans](#)
- * A tea & cake table, a book or plant-swap
- * Asking local play workers to attend and support play
- * Organising a circus skills or hula-hooping workshop for all ages
- * Inter-generational /cultural sharing of games and rhymes

You will need to decide with residents what might work (if anything), according to their needs and preferences. But don’t be afraid to do very little! Children are amazingly resourceful and inventive.

Making it sustainable and resident-owned

So you've successfully got a play street started, with support and involvement from the community. Well done!! Now, how do you step away and 'hand back' responsibility to residents to keep it going?

The first thing to say is that this is not always easy. It can take a long time and sometimes, due to the barriers and challenges being too big, is just not possible. But in most cases, it should be the aim.

At a session on sustaining activity, our Community of Learning raised questions about how community organisations withdraw from projects and the importance of doing this carefully and responsibly.



Top tips included:

- * Focus on building up skills, agency and confidence
 - * Start small: asking residents to take on small but increasing tasks (e.g. storing kit, getting biscuits, speaking to a few neighbours)
 - * Gradually reduce 'hand-holding'
 - * Put effort into building a group of residents who can work together – one person alone will not be able to sustain it
 - * Create networks (Facebook, WhatsApp, Signal) for peer support amongst resident activators
 - * Find ways to create a community of activators within neighbourhoods/towns/cities and at a national level (e.g. PO activators' FB group, [Leeds Play Streets Network](#) [and elsewhere]) – you may need someone to set up/coordinate/animate these networks
 - * Enable residents to do things their own way, rather than expecting them to take on an existing model or approach
 - * Remember, play streets themselves help to build confidence and capacity
 - * See if there could be ongoing light-touch support from elsewhere – e.g. link to an active travel initiative
- The conclusion was that many pieces of the jigsaw need to be in place for play streets to be sustainable: engaged residents, time/skills/confidence, an easy council process, funding for kit and support where needed and “avenues for troubleshooting”.
- Making play streets completely resident-led where communities face greater challenges is not quick, easy or straightforward but the aim should be to get as close to this as possible, as the benefits in terms of empowerment, ownership and community cohesion will be huge.

Evaluation & Impact

These are notes from a talk given by Playing Out co-founder Alice Ferguson at one of our Community of Learning sessions.

The “Why, What, How?” of Impact

These are the three main questions that should guide any gathering of impact.

Why?

This should always be starting point / first question. Need to be clear what purpose you are measuring impact for.

Who do you need to convince? Funders? Decision-makers? Community? Public?

What are you trying to show? What particular outcomes are they/you interested in demonstrating?

Example: After doing the [Playing Out pilot in 2010](#), we quickly found that if we wanted to be able to do it on regular basis, we needed to convince local policy-makers to put the right process in place, enabling people to close streets on a regular basis.

Then, when we wanted to help the idea to grow beyond our own street/neighbourhood, we needed to convince funders to give us some money to be able to support streets and share the model more widely.

Other reasons for measuring impact might be convincing people in your own organisation, reporting to funders or simply knowing that your work is benefitting the communities you work with.

What?

What outcomes do you want to measure/demonstrate?

Depends on why! i.e. who do you need to convince? What are their interests/aims/policy-drivers?

What do you want to know?

Also think about involving the community in setting evaluation aims – what does success look like for them?

Play streets appear simple but are complex – there are many different ways they can impact children/communities/individuals. Both immediate and long-term impact. Tangible/measurable and more subtle/subjective.

Over 13 years of play streets, Playing Out has identified 5 main areas of impact - and lots of sub-areas within each of these! You can read more about each of these and the evidence behind them [here](#):

1. Children’s health and wellbeing (physical activity/literacy, mental health etc)
2. Stronger communities (belonging, connection, trust, reducing isolation etc)
3. Active Citizenship (taking action to change things locally)
4. Culture change (normalising children playing out)
5. Active Travel (learning to cycle, streets not just for cars)

Positives of a model that is ‘multi-impact’. Hits many different policy/funding aims, so you can go to many different places for support/funding. Ideally cross-departmental support within council (public health, sustainable transport, children’s services, community development, housing...)

Challenges. People/orgs might only see one angle and not how it meets ‘their’ aims. Need to be careful it doesn’t get simplified into being “a physical activity intervention” or “a play intervention” – or passed around between departments. Keep talking about it in the round – including how it changes culture of a street, gets people thinking differently. Also a risk of being too led by funding opportunities that don’t actually fit with your aims or needs of community

Good news is - We’ve done hard work so you don’t have to! The basic case for play streets and all the areas of impact is made. We have v clear [resources and infographics](#) to share. You can use this to make your case locally. This should be helpful to at least get initial interest/support, for example to do a play street pilot.

In theory, a local play street project could simply document the number of streets/sessions and refer to our general impact data to show what that means for children and communities. See more here on [how we calculate our numbers](#).

Even though numbers are important to show impact/reach, make sure:

- a) You are clear that 'one street' is in fact a whole street community – lots of children/adults
- b) And 'one child' is a whole child, being impacted and benefitted in many ways
- c) Stories and 'deep' impact are just as important

But you may find there are either specific areas of impact that you need to make a stronger case for, or where we have 'gaps' in the evidence (for example impact on driver behaviour). Or perhaps your model/approach is a bit different from the basic play street model and there are other things you are looking to achieve (for example HAF). Or it might just be that funders/decision-makers really want to see the specific outcomes from your work/project.

Don't overcomplicate it.

See what evidence already exists and use that to make the case where you can.

Focus on local/specific outcomes or those where there are 'gaps'.

How?

There are loads of different ways you could gather in data and evidence of impact – both qualitative (numbers) and quantitative (not numbers!)

First thing to think about is making sure whatever you do to evaluate play streets fits with the model – resident-led, community-owned, simple, low-key, low-cost, free play etc.

So e.g. don't want to ask people to fill in big forms with loads of personal questions, or to give up lots of their time outside of the sessions. Nor interrupting the flow of activity (play, chatting) or sense of 'ownership' – people being in their own shared space.

So methods need to be: Appropriate, accessible/simple, respectful, proportionate, unobtrusive.

Ideally community-led / co-developed – and creative / playful

Specific methods again depend on what you want to measure/demonstrate.

Qualitative methods we have used: surveys, interviews, stories, film/photo, observation
e.g. Playing Out pilot 2010 - interviews and observation.

Quantitative methods: head-counts, surveys, measuring using accelerometers/step counters e.g. University of Bristol evaluation 2015.

Or you can use a mix of survey data, observation and interviews – e.g. Alison Stenning's research:

LaTrobe University report on play streets and physical literacy:

Note: Working with academic or other evaluation partners can be brilliant (as all of the above were/are!) but you need to make sure they understand all of the above – especially appropriate methodology and approach for working with communities. And, especially if you are asked to participate in funded academic research, make sure the community and project/organisation is getting enough out of it – including funding!

Communicating impact

As important as gathering impact – need to share it in a way that convinces people!

Make it: Clear, engaging, audience-appropriate (both style and content)

Be creative!

Lots of different ways to communicate impact. Some examples:

Written reports
Infographics
Drawings
Film, photos
Quotes and anecdotes
Children/adult/different voices



Case studies shared with our Community of Learning



Barton Hill Activity Club

Presented by Samira Musse, parent and community activist

Samira Musse is a Somali parent who lives on a council estate of 8 high-rise tower blocks in Barton Hill, Bristol. The estate is mainly Somali families but there are also families from other backgrounds. There are around 2000 school aged children on the estate.

In 2017, Samira and Dr Tom Allport (a Bristol paediatrician and academic) produced a film entitled “Find Your Village” which looked at how Somali parenting and community practices and more western experiences might work together in these Bristol neighbourhoods. The film showcases the “stay & play”, after-school, and holiday activities Samira and her neighbours developed and is available to view [here](#):

The film emphasises the power of play in bringing mothers, families and wider communities together. The group - established primarily for children and play - developed into a well-functioning network of support for mothers and the wider community.

Key points from the film, and from Samira’s talk, included:

- * The limits of formal playgrounds, in terms of space/size, safety, quality and maintenance, the needs of older children, and especially in areas where people face more disadvantage (Samira pointed out their playground was tiny with drug litter etc whereas playgrounds in more affluent areas seem very different)
- * The value of play activities in creating a space for parents to meet to combat isolation and build support networks.
- * The lack of shared, social space in tower blocks, where family flats can seem very separate and isolated with families stuck behind many layers of closed doors.
- * The particular risks in some streets, not only from traffic, but also crime, drugs, unsafe adults and racism; making outside play feel unsafe for parents and children.
- * The need for a ‘trusted adult’ to be around if children are out, and connecting parents and families so there is a bigger network of these.
- * The importance of social networks such as WhatsApp to connect neighbours and provide channels of communication to establish and maintain play activities. Samira also mentioned using WhatsApp groups to coordinate complaints to the council about the state of the playgrounds or lifts (lobbying the council to get things changed /done), to share ideas for pandemic walks and explorations, and to consult neighbours about play street plans.

- * Whilst the barriers can all seem overwhelming when you focus on them, the first step for nearly all of them is bringing people together. If you can bring people together, it starts to change everything. And that is why access to space is so important, for parents, children, play, activism and changing things.

In 2021, coming out of Covid restrictions, Samira and her neighbours decided to organise a play street next to her tower block, having heard about the idea on social media. She contacted Playing Out, who offered support around the planning and application stage. Lucy gave advice about which road to close (the smaller one) and suggested applying for the maximum number of road closures - every Sunday all year round - giving parents flexibility to move sessions or change their minds; Lucy also helped with the Council application. Once the road closure was approved, the community no longer needed that level of support.

For Samira, a play street offered something BHAC's previous activities hadn't – respite from the noise and traffic on the street – and an opportunity to create space on the doorstep for lots of children to play together safely. To get the play street up and running, Samira:

- * Had to develop ways of consulting with residents in 87 flats and used WhatsApp and some door-knocking to speak to about 80% of residents.
- * Chose a Sunday so that the play street would not inconvenience patients to the GP surgery or parents/children using the specialist school, both on the street.

Some ideas that emerged from the discussion with Samira included:

- * Value of starting small, maybe a pop-up play space, a table, drinks and biscuits/fruit, some play equipment (bubbles, chalk) to make children and parents visible and start a conversation. This could be just a few parents and children organising to get together. Once visible, other families can be invited to come, and it can grow.
- * Starting in a nearby space (such as a corner of a park, or a bit of neighbourhood green/grey space) which doesn't need to be 'reclaimed', since reclaiming is extra work.
- * Play streets and activism developing out of other forms of community organising.
- * Outdoor space can offer a communal, accessible, social space which might not exist inside tower blocks. Even where blocks have a "community room", these might not be widely accessible and/or may be controlled by landlords/management, or by a particular group of residents.

- * People often feel they can't change or do anything, and nothing can ever be different. But once you start to do something small, things can grow, and people start to see that change is possible. Many of the parents who initially felt like this now organise things that Samira doesn't even know about!

We discussed the different forms of racism that can be experienced and Samira's perspective on where those attitudes stem from and how to engage or combat them. Overt racism – where people are openly angry at her community for existing and being who they are, people who are just afraid of difference and react to that and finally people who are angry and struggling in their own lives and looking for someone to blame. So much could be done to make all this better, starting with bringing children together (as Samira said, it is often adults who have the problem, not children) and also challenging the attitudes they echo at moments without understanding, and bringing people of all ages together so that they understand and respect difference.

Samira's experience echoed many of the discussions we've had at the Community of Learning which have underlined that it is essential to understand the wider contexts and environments of potential play street neighbourhoods to make sense of the particular challenges faced in trying to establish play streets. These might include:

- * Built environment (housing type, outdoor space, other play spaces)
- * Racism and other forms of discrimination
- * Crimes, drugs, unsafe adults
- * Family histories and cultures, including trauma
- * Links to other forms of community activism
- * Relationships with authorities

And also being aware of particular needs and opportunities to create play opportunities, bring the community together and start to change things. Play streets may not necessarily be the starting point, but something that might develop along the way. Another starting point may be common cultural experiences (e.g memory of how community/play and life outside are in Somalia; 'takes a village to raise a child.')

Samira's story also shows the "gold-dust" that exists within communities: key individuals who have ideas and energy to get things started. A key question is, how do we find the Samiras of the world and support them to bring about change?

With huge thanks to Samira for sharing with us all. You can read more about Samira's play street experiences [here](#). And her wider activism [here](#).



Hartcliffe and Room13

Presented by Ingrid Skeels, Co-Director of Playing Out and Development Worker for Room13 Hareclive since 2008.

Room 13 Hareclive is an artist studio based within a primary school in Hartcliffe, one of the most disadvantaged wards in the country. The studio is co-run by adults and children together.

Hartcliffe context:

- * Large estate on outskirts of Bristol, population 11K, built in 1950s then 8 tower blocks added.
- * Lots of children, bringing huge amounts of potential to the community.
- * Strong sense of community as families have lived there for up to four generations.

- * Very poor public transport to Bristol city centre, resulting in an isolated and marginalised community.
- * High levels of unemployment as can't access opportunities in city centre.
- * Children raised within 15 minutes of Bristol city centre who have never been there.
- * Low social mobility.
- * High levels of poverty, leading to use of food banks, issues with crime, health and unsafe homelives for children.
- * Poor perception of Hartcliffe community from people who live in Bristol (leading to Hartcliffe community not feeling confident in engaging with their city).
- * Influx of new residents into established community makes it hard to form societal connections and raises feelings of suspicion of neighbours.
- * All compounded by Covid19.

In 2015-16, Playing Out commissioned Room13 to conduct a community research project, engaging their school, families and the wider community about the barriers to playing out near home. Several issues were identified, including parental fear of strangers (not 'stranger danger' fear, more a fear of children interacting with vulnerable or intoxicated and unpredictable adults in the community) and greenspaces containing needles/litter/dog mess

However, the key barrier identified was traffic danger and speeding in the area. The resulting films were premiered at a large public meeting, with local councillors and police attending.

In response to interest from parents, Playing Out then worked in partnership with the local housing association to support play streets on a busy residential street and, with Room13, outside the school.

Residential play street project learning:

- * Providing food at events and meetings increased engagement. Provided a 'valid' reason for people to come out. This was possible due to the involvement of known and trusted community engagement workers.
- * Themes for some play streets (eg. Halloween, or special bikes) increased attendance and interest from residents. (A theme for each session would be too much, free play was used majority of time).

- * Perfect combination of a motivated parent leading the project and support from the housing association. Project came from within the community and used community assets.
- * Providing training for residents in stewarding and traffic management, allowing them to steward confidently led to a huge increase in overall confidence. This was one of the major positive impacts of the project.
- * Project wasn't sustainable as lead resident had complex pressures from her personal life and no longer had time/resource to hold the responsibility. Important to spread the responsibility for play street process across several people as early as possible, so one person doesn't hold it all.
- * The street the sessions were held on (where the lead resident lived) was extremely busy, with speeding cars and reckless drivers mounting the pavement. The play street was intended as a step towards trying to make it safer but this did prove a challenge and the number/aggression of drivers trying to come through made the sessions quite stressful for stewards.

School play street project learning:

- * Despite advertising through the school, community, word of mouth and PTA, not many people on the day knew the play street would be happening.
- * Food donated from local supermarkets was a good 'draw'.
- * Children wanted to stay but most adults seemed embarrassed or unsure, perhaps feeling it wasn't socially acceptable for them to stay and allow the children to play.
- * Those who did stay loved it.
- * Second session was better attended. This is because the second session was a known entity by then and news had spread amongst adults and children that it was a good thing. Good opinion of play streets spreading within the community itself is important for trust.
- * Sessions themselves offered a great opportunity to hold conversations with adults as the children played.
- * Little uptake from the PTA to carry on the scheme.
- * Holding more sessions (with external support) would have been better. Regular sessions would allow deeper connections to form between the adults and could have slowly introduced the idea of them stewarding or taking on roles of responsibility.

- * Ingrid was a known person within the school community due to her work with Room13. This was important in people engaging with the play street.

Other learning:

- * Barriers are there but when play streets happen gold appears. Bringing people together is the solution to so many issues.
- * Needs support from someone who knows the area and is of the area. Could be an activist or an organisation.
- * Children are a great way to reach their parents.
- * For these projects to be sustainable many 'jigsaw pieces' (council, community organisations, residents, funding, schools etc) need to be involved - remove one and it can fall apart.
- * Short term funding may not provide enough resource for sustained engagement but the positive impacts of short-term projects are still worth it.
- * A community-led approach is essential. Not top-down but supporting what already exists.

Q: Play streets are meant to be low-key, simple and easy, as a step towards normalising children playing out. If additional resources or organised activities are required, do they become more like an 'event', or delivered play provision? How far does this matter?

Hartcliffe Safer Streets [project and films](#):



Leeds Play Street Enablement Project

Case study based on sharing in the Community of Learning by Catherine Peacock ([Kidz Club Leeds](#)) and an Evaluation study by Alison Stenning (Newcastle University)

Play streets in Leeds started in 2011, when a resident heard about the idea and approached the council for permission to do it on her street. Leeds City Council responded positively, allowing a few individual streets to regularly open for play.

In 2014, Better Leeds Communities trialled a more delivered version of play streets in communities experiencing high levels of childhood deprivation. Playworkers were present and organised games and activities. Sadly, the project ran out of funding so did not last long but had some lasting positive impact for communities:

“We have seen a difference for communities experiencing fractions [sic] between different groups. Play is a positive shared experience which brings people together from all cultures and backgrounds. An example of this has been a parent showing a group how to play Ethiopian hopscotch. Throughout the project parents have shared their own experiences and been inspired to value the importance of play for children’s experience of childhood”.

The project report also noted that:

“There have been some challenges along the way. Closing off streets is currently challenging in Leeds. Work is being done by Leeds City Council’s Children’s Services, Highways and the Play Network to develop a simpler way to close off streets for children’s play”.

In 2015, Leeds City Council put a city-wide play street policy in place as part of their Child Friendly City aspiration. By 2020, at least 60 street communities across Leeds had ‘played out’, mostly in more affluent areas and self-organised by residents, with some peer-support from resident “activators”.

The Play Streets Enablement Project emerged from the lockdown of early 2021. During the first months of the pandemic, community organisation [Fall Into Place](#) began delivering “playboxes” to residents in the communities in which they worked. But it was acknowledged that “giving someone a playbox doesn’t necessarily initiate play” - residents needed safe, accessible space to play too. This led to the idea of linking playboxes with play streets.

The project developed to involve local community organisations that understood their neighbourhoods, including Kidz Club Leeds.

Some sessions took place in non-street locations where a road closure wasn’t needed, enabling play in spaces which were on children’s doorsteps but rarely used for play, such as neighbourhood green spaces, the grounds of flats, and car parks.

In other locations, the events looked much more like the standard play streets model. They took place on streets that were closed to through-traffic. Both and were dominated by ‘free play’, where children played with their own toys and the equipment provided by the enablement project.

The primary obstacles to establishing and sustaining play streets in the priority neighbourhoods included:

- * Questions of responsibility (for the required bureaucracy, for safety, for anti-social behaviour).
- * Resident anxieties about the ‘right to play’.
- * Negotiating with institutional neighbours.
- * Conflict between neighbours.
- * Challenging contexts (anti-social behaviour, risky environments, and socio-economic pressures).
- * Drivers and the presence of motor vehicles.
- * Finding a time.
- * Language and ethnicity.

Many of these obstacles were successfully negotiated by resident-organisers, residents and local community organisations in a variety of different ways. These usually involved resident-organisers working with their neighbours and the local community organisations to navigate a solution to their specific street context, but also included:

Local community organisations taking on responsibility for bureaucracies to reduce the burden on residents and shield them from fears of backlash and complaint;

- * working with those neighbours who were engaged and gradually seeking to develop relationships with others to overcome reluctance, opposition, and cultural difference, through continuing attention to these contexts;
- * creating opportunities (within local community organisations and in neighbourhood spaces) to manage local conflict;
- * using the play streets themselves to develop capacity in neighbourhoods and counter anxieties about the right to play.

In the light of these reflections, the **key recommendations** were:

- * A funded network of experienced individuals (within the council or within local community organisations) to support and enable resident-organisers as they establish and work to maintain play streets (including navigating conflicts and negotiating cultural difference);
- * A peer support network, on Facebook or through WhatsApp, for resident-organisers to opt into to share concerns, experiences and ideas, in addition to any informal networks established by individual resident-organisers;
- * Smooth and swift procedures for processing applications – delays increase barriers for busy, burdened parents and increase concerns about their ability to manage traffic on the street.

References & Further Reading

[Why Playing Out is a Social Justice Issue for Children \(Ingrid Skeels, 2022\)](#)

[Why temporary street closures for play make sense for public health \(Angie Page, 2017\)](#)

[Bristol tower blocks project: Outcomes and Learnings \(Playing Out, 2016\)](#)

[Playing Out in Hartcliffe project report \(Playing Out, 2016\)](#)

[Street Play Initiatives in Disadvantaged Areas \(Tim Gill, 2014\)](#)

Leeds play street enablement project report (Alison Stenning, 2023) - link to follow



Last Word

This is guidance based on what's already been done and learning we've gathered, but we strongly encourage creativity and experimentation - that's how play streets got started!

There may well be other things you want to do to enable children to play out and communities to reclaim space, either instead of or building on play streets. We would love to hear about this and support where we can.

Get in touch, let us know what you're doing and join our community.

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