

Street play – local authorities improving health outcomes for children at minimal cost

This is a practical briefing for local authorities on how to work with local parents and other residents to use existing legal powers to make it easy for parents and other residents to let their children play out on their doorsteps where they live.

‘Many Islington families don’t have access to gardens, so creating a safe, fun play area on their doorstep is a great idea. We want to support these play streets and encourage communities to imagine what they could do in their road without cars. We are making it easy to close your street without too much paperwork or any cost – while keeping children safe.’

Cllr Andy Hull (Executive member for Finance and Performance, Islington)

What is street play?

Quite simply it is helping parents and other residents to reactivate a culture of children playing out in the streets where they live. Sometimes known as ‘playing out sessions’ – after the Playing Out model¹ developed by two parents in Bristol – or ‘play streets’ local authorities can support parents and local residents by using their existing powers under road traffic legislation to allow temporary street closures at regular weekly or monthly intervals, typically for three hours at a time. Local parents and other residents act as marshals, allowing their neighbours to drive to and from their homes at walking pace, while through traffic is re-directed. The result tends to be a huge increase in children playing out and making friends they didn’t know lived in their street. In turn adult neighbours get to know each other and community spirit grows.

‘I love the way street play brings together children of different age groups. At our first session, some 10-11 year old boys sat down on the pavement helping two toddlers with Brio. Likewise my daughter learnt to rollerblade by hanging out with the cool older girl up the street; although they go to the same school, they’d never played together before that day. Parents also join in the fun, taking part in group skipping, offering a steadying hand to learner-cyclers or helping with some street art. It’s been great to see people who don’t have children also getting involved. The older residents also enjoy the chance to get out and chat, I was fascinated to hear one lady in her 80s talk about her wartime memories growing up here.’

Local parent organiser - Hackney

Benefits of street play

Street play supports local residents to create the conditions where children and young people can improve their confidence, self-esteem and resilience by having opportunities to play on their own street, make friends and engage in physically active play.

'We know a lot about how health behaviours can have lasting positive effects on individuals, families and communities throughout their lives. Being physically active is one of those good habits that we encourage and support, and often the best ideas of how to achieve this come from the communities themselves, because making the most of where people live and the places they like can be the key to success. Playing Out is one of these kind of community ideas – designed as a way to give children the space, time and safety to play actively right outside their front doors.'

Claire Lowman, Public Health Service Lead for Bristol City Council

The 2013 Playday poll of 3,000 children, parents and adults shows that they support children playing outdoors more:

- 59% of parents would let their children play out – if other children were playing out
- 45% of adults say that children playing outside can help families get to know each other and 41% agree it can help to improve community spirit

Bristol University used accelerometry and GPS data in a pilot street play scheme to measure changes. Children were outside 70% of the time during the street closures compared to less than 20% on an average school day. 30% of their time was spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) compared to 5% for children of a similar age.

The role of the local authority

No new structures or powers are needed, just an element of coordination between local public health, highways and transport functions. Local authorities all over England have used powers under a range of legislation to enable street play models that work best for them.

Islington

Islington uses Section 29 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to grant Temporary Play Street Orders (TPSO). In return for the local authority making no charge for the application and street closure order process, local parents and other residents carry out the initial consultation, get agreement from neighbours and manage the closures on the day. The order is valid for a year and allows for closures up to once a week for a maximum of three hours. Residents are allowed access by vehicle at all times but through traffic is redirected. Advice and information for residents is published on the council website. ⁱⁱ

Bristol

Bristol uses the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 to grant the TPSO. Here again the local parents and other residents initiate and manage the closures on the day, using simple kit such as PVC road closed sign, road cones and hi-visibility vests for stewards. ⁱⁱⁱ

The city council works closely with Playing Out – the organisation set up by two parents helping individuals in Bristol and now helping people across the UK to develop street play. ^{iv} The council has provided funding for road closure kits and other support to residents.

Adur and Worthing

Adur and Worthing District Councils support play streets as 'an easy and manageable project for small communities to do' through their Get Up & Active programme. As with Islington and Bristol they make no charge to residents for the street closures. ^v

These models build in sustainability from the beginning because each partner does what they do best while meeting their particular objectives. Local parents take responsibility for getting resident

agreement, deciding when and how often the sessions run and marshalling the play street sessions. This enables the local authority to make the process simple and minimise bureaucracy so it does not need to charge residents a fee. Community or other organisations with interests ranging from play to public health to safer streets find it a great way to provide their expertise and support right where children and families live.

Making it happen

Ingredients for the success and sustainability of street play initiatives include:

- A coordinated local area policy across public health, transport, planning and children's services to make street play an easy option
- Local parents and other residents are supported to take the lead – they know best what will work where they live
- Minimise bureaucracy to keep costs low for everyone concerned – local people and the local authority
- Work with locally based voluntary organisations that can support resident-led street play
- Understand that the play resources are already there – children will bring them out of their homes

Further information

For more information about the Department of Health funded street play project visit:

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/our-work/projects/street-play.aspx>

For a step-by-step guide and practical advice for residents:

<http://playingout.net/>

For more information and advice on street play in London:

http://www.londonplay.org.uk/content/30290/our_work/recent_work/play_streets

Or join the conversation:

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/playengland>

Twitter: @playengland #streetplay

Or follow the blogs:

<http://loveoutdoorplay.net/category/street-play/>

<http://playingout.net/blog/>

ⁱ The Playing Out story. Available at <http://playingout.net/about/playing-story/>

ⁱⁱ LB Islington <http://www.islington.gov.uk/services/parking-roads/roadmaintenance/Pages/Play-Streets.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bristol City Council <http://www.bristol.gov.uk/page/transport-and-streets/playing-outtemporary-playstreet-order-tps>

^{iv} Playing Out <http://playingout.net/>

^v Adur & Worthing Councils <http://www.adur-worthing.gov.uk/get-up-and-active/activities-andevents/playing-out/>