



PLAY STREETS



LEEDS PLAY STREETS ENABLEMENT PROJECT 2021/22 EVALUATION

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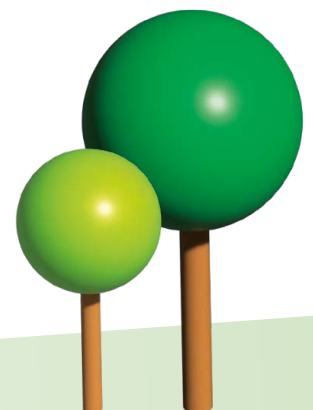
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All photos courtesy of
**Fall into Place, Professor Alison Stenning
and Kidz Klub Leeds**






EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

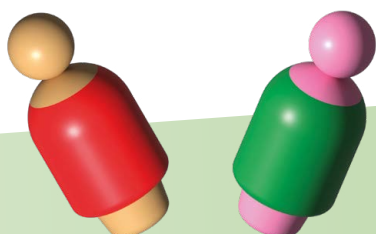
ENABLING PLAY STREETS

This report evaluates the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project developed through 2021 and 2022 *“to inspire, engage and support parents/residents in priority neighbourhoods in Leeds to independently and sustainably host and organise Play Streets on a regular basis”*. The focus of the project was two-fold – to enable residents to establish, and sustain, play streets in their neighbourhoods, and also to engage in action research to document and explore the potential barriers to sustainable play streets, and some means for overcoming these.

Recognising both that *“Play Street sessions are more beneficial in areas which are not within walking distance of green spaces, because there are fewer options available to families for traffic-free outdoor active play”* and *“that greater support is required to facilitate street closures in areas of deprivation”*, the project sought to establish play streets in priority neighbourhoods in Leeds to enable *“improvements in children’s mental and physical health as a result of improved air quality, increased levels of physical activity, enhanced opportunities to play and have fun outdoors, and enhanced social capital through increased engagement with local community assets and within neighbourhoods”*.

In this context, play streets are resident-led, temporary, regular closures of residential streets, driven by a desire to create space for children to play and neighbours to meet. Leeds City Council launched its play streets scheme in 2014. It coordinates one of the most active play streets schemes in the UK and, before the pandemic, there were almost 100 active play streets in the city. Leeds’ work on play streets sits within the context of its wider commitment to be a *“child-friendly city”*.

 **The focus of this project was on six ‘priority neighbourhoods’ in Leeds which represent the highest concentrations of poverty in the city and are among the 1% most deprived communities in England, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation.**



FOCUS ON PRIORITY NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Play Streets Enablement Project was developed following conversations between Leeds City Council's Public Health Children and Families Team and third-sector organisation Fall Into Place, as the UK emerged from the lockdown of early 2021. In total, 12 new play streets have been established in the course of the project, some of which are now held regularly. These include play streets in four of the priority neighbourhoods:

- **The Receptions (Beeston and Holbeck);**
- **The Beverleys and Stratfords (Hunslet and Riverside);**
- **Boggart Hill (Killingbeck and Seacroft);**
- **The Cliftons and Nowells (Burmantofts and Richmond Hill)**

A play street was also established in one additional neighbourhood, **Swarcliffe**, and a neighbourhood event took place in a fifth priority neighbourhood, **Clydes and Holdforth (Armley)**.



Although all the streets involved were located in 'priority neighbourhoods', they varied considerably in terms of location, built form, and the nature of neighbour relationships. All the street activators interviewed had been supported, as was integral to the Play Streets Enablement Project, by community organisations. In addition to the critical role played by key community organisations, another theme that recurred was the relationship between play streets and other community activities, whether those were organised or informal, or focused on children or on the street and neighbours.



*It's just marvellous,
the life it brought to
the street.*



*I've felt myself, and
my kids, grow in
confidence.*

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research and evaluation reported on here reflects an analysis of several forms of data. Most of this data was qualitative. The documents which outlined the project set-up and development have been reviewed and interviews carried out with four community activators and three resident-organisers. Observations and conversations were carried out in person during two play streets events in October 2021, in New Wortley and Seacroft, and an analysis was also undertaken of more than 350 photos and videos taken during play street events.

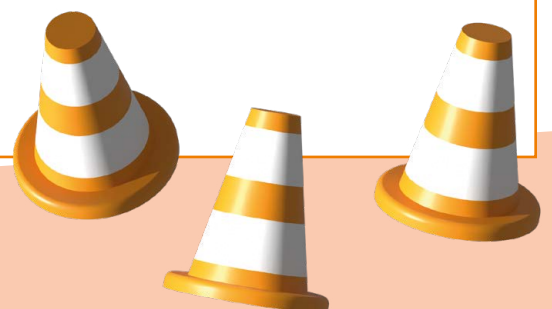


FINDINGS

Interviewees commented most emphatically on what a success their play streets had been, especially the first events, when their expectations had initially been tinged with anxiety. Resident-organisers reported that all sorts of neighbours had attended, of different ethnicities and ages, and with and without children. Cars were moved so that the space of the street seemed vast and offered many opportunities to play. Children played with those they had not previously known, and across age groups. In most instances, resident and community organisers reported continuing positive effects on participating streets.

In addition to the weather and the pandemic, 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**





I didn't know anyone before the summer. I've been to 4 street parties and met about 3 new people at each: That's 12 new mates! It makes a huge difference to how I feel about living here.

Play Streets Resident

Given the contexts, both the complex challenges facing the priority neighbours, and the impact of the pandemic, the achievements of the Play Streets Enablement Project, and the community organisations and residents involved, are significant. More than 25 play street sessions were organised in neighbourhoods across the city, in 12 different locations, drawing in hundreds of children and their families. Neighbours met and engaged with local community organisations and with each other, building on existing relationships and establishing new ones. Children played, actively, creatively, across age groups and ethnicities – and they evidently had fun. Communities reclaimed their doorstep spaces for play, whether through formal road closures or the claiming of neighbourhood green space. Some level of continuity was achieved with most of the neighbourhoods involved maintaining some form of outdoor play in the spaces reclaimed.

The Play Streets Enablement Project was also intended to incorporate action research, allowing the residents and the local organisations to reflect through the process on the ongoing learning around the barriers to establishing play streets. This was perhaps the least successful aspect of the project, a conclusion acknowledged early the process and addressed with the development of an additional participatory action research process, to be reported on separately. A secondary part of the project design was intended to support connections between the resident-organisers in different parts of the city, so that those developing play streets had peers with whom they could share experiences, ideas and troubleshooting. There was some evidence of success in this sphere as several resident organisers discussed the mutual support received and offered.

In the light of these reflections, the **key recommendations** are as follows:

- **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.







PART I: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1. THE PROJECT

This report reflects on research carried out to evaluate the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project.

According to the project documents, the purpose of the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project was:

“To inspire, engage and support parents/residents in priority neighbourhoods in Leeds to independently and sustainably host and organise Play Streets on a regular basis”.

The focus of the project was two-fold – to enable residents to establish, and sustain, play streets in their neighbourhoods, but also to engage in action research to document and explore the potential barriers to sustainable play streets, and some means for overcoming these.

The commitment to play streets in priority neighbourhoods reflected an acknowledgement within the project documents that:

“Play Street sessions are more beneficial in areas which are not within walking distance of green spaces, because there are fewer options available to families for traffic-free outdoor active play. However, an evidence review of Play Streets identified that greater support is required to facilitate street closures in areas of deprivation.”

Specifically, the Play Streets Enablement Project sought to enable “improvements in children’s mental and physical health as a result of

- improved air quality,
- increased levels of physical activity,
- enhanced opportunities to play and have fun outdoors, and
- enhanced social capital through increased engagement with local community assets and within neighbourhoods”



There was also a recognition that play streets, in the aftermath of successive lockdowns, offered the chance to help communities (re)connect.

The project was established by Leeds City Council's Public Health Children and Families Team and rests on funding from the Physical Activity Ambition/Get Set Leeds iBCF Fund. It has been managed on the ground by Fall Into Place, with the involvement of other local third sector organisations.

The key deliverable was identified as:

“At least one active and regular Play Street application in place in each of the priority neighbourhoods (10 applications in total could be a realistic objective).”

The research reported here sought to pursue the following aims:

- 1. To review and evaluate the Play Streets Enablement Project and the action research element against its project aims;**
- 2. To develop an academic analysis of the materials gathered from the review/evaluation.**

This report achieves the first aim; it is addressed to Leeds City Council and other practitioners/activists, with a view to summarising the impacts and achievements of the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project.



2. THE CONTEXT

2.1 PLAY STREETS

In this context, play streets are resident-led, temporary, regular closures of residential streets. They build on a model, developed originally by neighbours on one street in Bristol, which promotes temporary, resident-led residential street closures to enable children to play and neighbours to meet. This model is often referred to as ‘resident-led temporary play streets’ or just ‘play streets’ or, by many residents, as ‘playing out’. It is championed nationally and internationally by Playing Out.¹ Over 1300 streets in more than 90 UK local authority areas have used this model to play out in their communities.

Leeds City Council launched its play streets scheme in 2014.² It coordinates one of the most active play streets schemes in the UK and, before the pandemic, there were almost 100 active play streets in the city.³

Leeds’ work on play streets sits within the context of its wider commitment to be a “child-friendly city”. Play is at the heart of this commitment, particularly play in public spaces, and the council has recently been working with national and local partners to develop a “play sufficiency” programme, *“an ongoing process of research and action to assess, improve and protect children’s opportunities for play”*.⁴ And unlike many English local authorities, Leeds has a play strategy officer. In all of these ways, the context for the development of play streets in Leeds is quite unique when compared with other similar locations.

2.2 THE CHALLENGES

However, in Leeds, as elsewhere, it has proved easier to establish and sustain active play streets in neighbourhoods where residents have the confidence, time, and resources to liaise with neighbours, apply to the council, and regularly organise road closures for play. This also reflects neighbourhoods where the built form and street space are more amenable to closure.

In neighbourhoods facing greater social and economic challenges, establishing and sustaining play streets has proved more difficult. Research by Playing Out and other researchers and activists has highlighted up to 29 different kinds of barriers.⁵

These are clustered around a number of overlapping spheres, including:

- **physical and spatial barriers (such as the domination of cars, waste hazards, and disinvested public spaces)**
- **social and attitudinal barriers (such as opposition and conflict amongst neighbours, concerns about ‘stranger danger’, no critical mass of children playing out).**

¹ <https://playingout.net/>

² <https://playingout.net/play-streets/info-for-councils/case-studies/local-authority-case-study-leeds-city-council/>

³ <https://childfriendlyleeds.wordpress.com/2021/06/15/play-streets-leeds/>

⁴ <https://childfriendlyleeds.wordpress.com/2022/10/19/how-can-we-support-children-to-play-more-in-leeds/>

⁵ <https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Estates-Project-2015-16-Final-report-1-1.pdf>

These barriers can be both local and more general and the effects can be cumulative, potentially resulting in entrenched obstacles to creating opportunities for play on streets and doorsteps.

Yet, as the Play Streets Enablement Project plans outlined, these neighbourhoods are also often communities with significant numbers of families with young children and limited access to space for safe, child-led outdoor play. In this context, the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project set out to identify what additional forms of support would facilitate play streets in the city's 'priority neighbourhoods'.

2.3 THE 'PRIORITY NEIGHBOURHOODS'

The focus of this project was on six 'priority neighbourhoods' in Leeds (at the scale of Lower Super Output Areas, or LSOAs) which represent the highest concentrations of poverty in the city and are among the 1% most deprived communities in England, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Some play streets were organised in the vicinity of these neighbourhoods, and others within the identified LSOA.

These neighbourhoods are:

- **Recreations (Beeston and Holbeck)**
- **Beverleys and Stratfords (Hunslet and Riverside)**
- **Lincoln Green (Burmantofts and Richmond Hill)**
- **Cliftons and Nowells (Burmantofts and Richmond Hill)**
- **Clydes and Holdforths (Armley/New Wortley)**
- **Boggart Hill (Killingbeck and Seacroft)**

Additional funding was secured to add Harehills into the scope of the project, as this area has a high proportion of families with young children and is geographically well-suited to play streets as there are many back-to-back terraced streets.

As background materials for Get Set Leeds Local suggest, the poverty experienced in these communities is complex and caused by a range of factors and is exacerbated by other social and economic challenges in these communities including:

- **High numbers of privately-rented and housing association/local authority homes**
- **Anti-social behaviour, crime and drugs, sex work**
- **Transient populations, and language barriers within communities**
- **Environmental challenges (e.g. poor housing, low levels of green space, litter and fly-tipping)**
- **Busy roads, with risks to safety, which disconnect adjacent neighbourhoods**
- **Physical and mental health inequalities, including physical inactivity**

At the same time, 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. Neighbourhood refurbishments in some locations have reinvigorated residential areas.

2.4 THE PANDEMIC

The Play Streets Enablement Project was launched in the spring of 2021, as the UK emerged from a national Covid-19 lockdown. This coincided with the launch of a national campaign aimed at promoting a Summer of Play, *“to give children the space, time, and freedom to play ... as the Covid-19 restrictions are eased”*.⁶

Notwithstanding this national, and local, commitment to children’s play, the rest of 2021 and some of 2022 continued to be heavily impacted by successive waves of Covid-19, by frequently changing restrictions, and by families’ continuing and ongoing adjustments to the risks and challenges of life in a pandemic. This context has undoubtedly shaped the rolling out of the Play Streets Enablement Project and participants’ experience of it, as is explored in more detail below.



3. THE RESEARCH

The research and evaluation reported on here reflects an analysis of a number of forms of data. Most of this data was qualitative.

The documents which outlined the project set-up and development have been reviewed, alongside Leeds City Council reports focused on the ‘priority neighbourhoods’ and the city’s approach to enabling physical activity.

Observations and conversations were carried out in person during two play streets events in October 2021, in New Wortley/Armley and Seacroft. At each event, observations focused on recording the space itself, the activities offered, the participants, and the role of local organisations. Informal conversations were initiated with parents, children, other participants, and staff and volunteers from local community groups (both those organising and others).

⁶ <https://www.summerofplay.co.uk/about>

Interviews were carried out with four community activators (two from Fall Into Place and two from Kidz Klub Leeds; with two of these follow-up interviews and additional informal conversations were also carried out) and some email correspondence with a fifth (from New Wortley Community Association). The term activator is used to denote someone working with a local community organisation to support residents to establish play streets; these residents, who take the lead on their own streets, are referred to as resident-organisers. Interviews were also organised with three resident-organisers. Two other resident-organisers were approached for interview, but no response was received. Others were contacted by a local activator but no agreement to be interviewed was achieved. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, was recorded and transcribed, before being analysed.

An analysis was also undertaken of more than 300 photos and videos from five streets supported by Kidz Klub Leeds and of approximately 50 taken during the observations in Seacroft and New Wortley/Armley. All these images were analysed in terms of: the shape and space of the street; the children and adults present; the toys, games, and other equipment visible; and the presence and movement of residents on the street itself.

4. THE PLAY STREETS ENABLEMENT PROJECT

The Play Streets Enablement Project developed through conversations between Leeds City Council's Public Health Children and Families Team and Fall Into Place, as the UK emerged from the lockdown of early 2021. During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Fall Into Place had developed a range of small-scale play activities, in place of the large-scale community events which had been their focus prior to the pandemic. One of these was a model of delivering mini "playboxes" filled with play equipment to residents in the communities in which Fall Into Place worked (in collaboration with LS14 Trust, Playful Anywhere and Seagulls). These small-scale events were seen to have considerable benefits within communities, allowing neighbours to come together on their doorsteps, and empowering residents to take more ownership of the spaces on their streets.

The idea of mini playboxes developed into an idea of "mid-sized" playboxes delivered to streets, rather than individual residents, but it was acknowledged that "giving someone a playbox doesn't necessarily initiate play". Residents need safe, identifiable space to play too, and this was how the idea of playboxes was connected to the idea of play streets.⁷

Rolling out the "playboxes plus play streets" model to different parts of the city required a recognition that the Leeds communities that might benefit most from this (the "priority neighbourhoods") were varied and that one size would not fit all. The project developed to integrate local community organisations which understood their neighbourhoods and what might work in those places.⁸

⁷ This section is based on the project proposal and on notes on the project produced by Naomi Roxby Wardle of Fall Into Place

⁸ These local community organisations fit the description of "locally trusted organisations" identified by the Chiles Baxter Webster Commission on Sport and Low-Income Neighbourhoods which are "critical to the social fabric" of the area and have a unique understanding of the neighbourhood landscape (<https://sportcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CWB-Commission-Summative-Report.pdf>)

Those organisations were tasked with supporting residents to develop play streets in contexts where the relatively simple process of establishing a play street might be complicated by limits on residents' time, capacity, confidence, and language, amongst other factors. The particular ways in which key community organisations supported residents is explored in more detail below.

This approach built on other ongoing work around 'play sufficiency' in Leeds and was intended to rest on action research approach structured around three stages:

- **Look** at the barriers to Play Streets in the local area, the needs and priorities of participants, their thoughts about Play Streets as a way of addressing key issues such as increasing children's physical activity, Covid 19 recovery, air quality, community connectedness, road safety, enabling children's play.
- **Think** about what's needed to enable Play Streets in the local area – who else needs to be involved (organisations or individuals)? What else needs to change (in the physical environment, in terms of support available, in terms of engaging people's interest?) Are the participants willing to run a Play Street, with support? What do they need to help them do this?
- **Act** - encourage participants to agree to lead these actions where possible. This could include involving other community members who might be interested in Play Streets, sharing information about the project in their social media and community networks, or volunteering to host a Play Street on their street, with support. Ideally at least one participant in each area will volunteer to run a Play Street.

As the project was launched and different community organisations got involved, the diversity of the implementation became clear, and perhaps two different forms emerged, reflecting a whole variety of factors (built form, community connections, different community organisations and so on); these are analysed further below and in the report conclusions.

In some locations, the successful events took place in non-street locations, which rarely necessitated road closures, but focused on 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. These events were advertised widely within neighbourhoods (beyond the street or block itself), were integrated into broader programmes of family events, and often incorporated specific organised activities such as sport, craft or dance.



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, were focused primarily on the residents of those streets, and were dominated by 'free play', where children played with their own toys and the equipment provided by the enablement project.

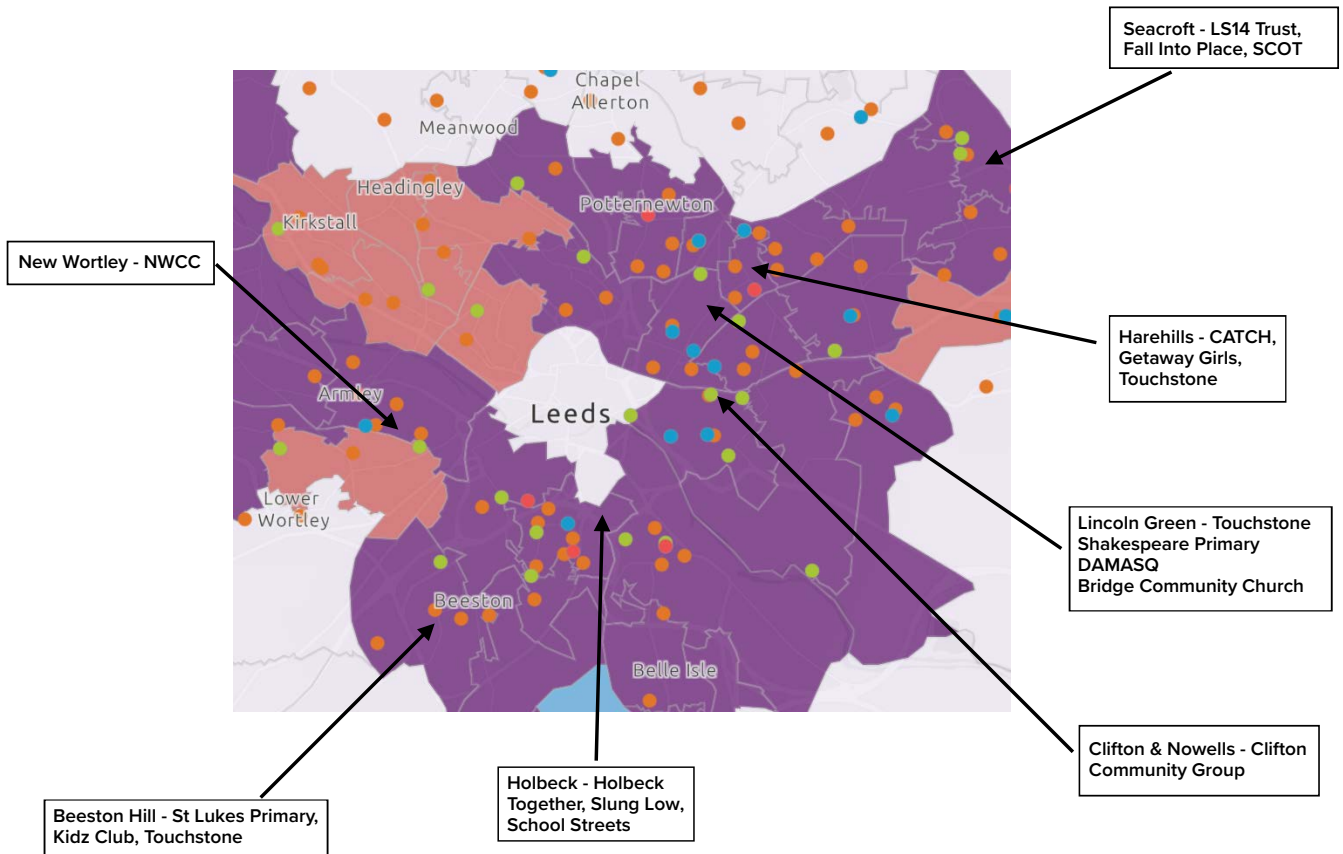


This distinction will be reviewed throughout this report and in its conclusions.

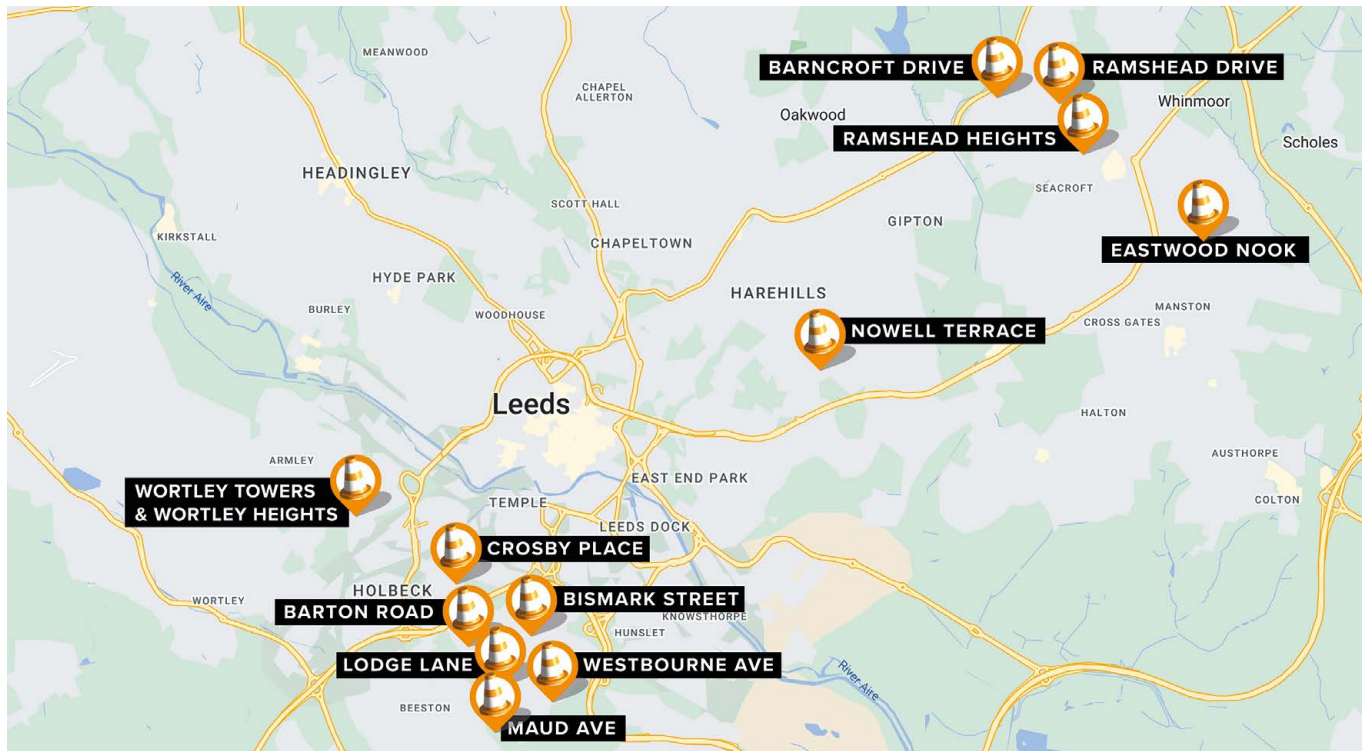
In total, 12 new play streets have been established in the course of the project. These include play streets in four of the priority neighbourhoods (Recreations; Beverleys and Stratfords; Boggart Hill; Cliftons and Nowells) and in one additional neighbourhood, Swarcliffe. A neighbourhood event took place in a fifth priority neighbourhood, Clydes and Holdforths.

STREET	PATTERN	TYPE OF PLAY STREET
Barton Road (Recreations)	Relatively frequent play streets in 2021 and 2022	Formal road closure
Maud Avenue (Beverleys and Stratfords)	2 play streets, one in 2021 and one in 2022	Formal road closure
Westbourne Avenue (Beverleys and Stratfords)	A number of play streets in 2021 and 2022	Formal road closure
Lodge Lane (Beverleys and Stratfords)	1 play street in 2021; another on an adjoining street in 2022	Formal road closure
Bismarck Street (Beverleys and Stratford or Beeston Hill)	1 play street in 2021	Formal road closure
Crosby Place (Recreations)	Play streets in 2021 and ongoing in 2022	Formal road closure
Nowell Terrace (Cliftons and Nowells)	2 or 3 play streets in 2021 and 2022	Formal road closure
Barncroft Drive (Boggart Hill)	3 play streets in 2021	Formal road closure for 2nd and 3rd
Ramshead Drive (Boggart Hill)	3 play streets in 2021	In the grounds surrounding a high-rise block
Ramshead Heights (Boggart Hill)	1 play street in 2021	Formal road closure
Eastwood Nook (Swarcliffe)	1 play street	On 'nook' – grassy area adjacent to street Aimed at children with complex needs
Wortley Towers & Wortley Heights (Clydes and Holdforths)	Neighbourhood event	On green space adjacent to two high-rise blocks

This map shows the project locations in the priority neighbourhoods, with the local project partners identified.



This second map shows the location of the play streets established through this project.



Source: Leeds Play Street Network Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/927564211120581>)



PART II: EVALUATION OF PROJECT

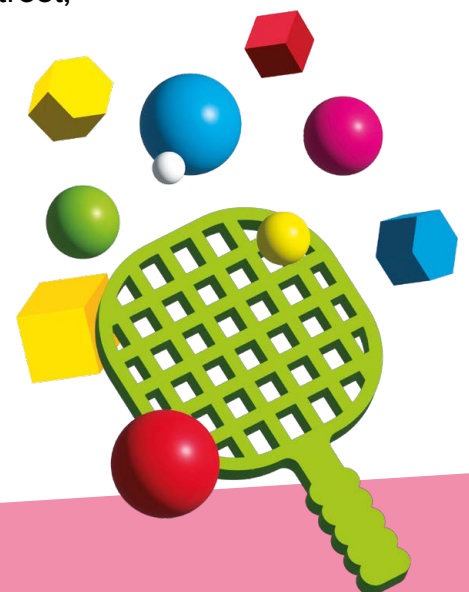
5. WHO WAS INVOLVED

As is outlined above and explored in more detail below, local community organisations were central to the rolling-out of the Leeds Play Streets Enablement Project, and as a result of this, many of the organisers on individual streets were connected through friendship and informal community networks. This was particularly the case in Beeston Hill where many were known to the local activator working with Kidz Klub Leeds and were engaged, at least loosely, in other community or youth projects. All the street organisers interviewed were women.

The women interviewed all possessed the skills, resources and experiences to establish play streets (such as access to PC and printer, experience of form filling, willingness to door-knock neighbours etc.), with the support of the local activator at key stages of the process. Some of these women also supported each other on the basis of their existing connections, informally advising on door-knocking etc. and helping out on the day (more on this developing network below). None described the process as tricky or onerous (though see below for obstacles). Each of these women also already had some connections to their neighbours, knew a few to say hello to, or knew a 'key neighbour' who themselves had strong relationships, either through friendship or family, to others on the street. In part, this reflects the social and cultural make-up of the streets, as we describe below.

One resident-organiser was a relatively recent migrant to Leeds (and the UK) and had less 'social capital' to draw on in order to set up a play street, but had recently campaigned for a local park, an experience that had put her in contact with other engaged local women and given her valuable experience in approaching and engaging neighbours, local councillors and council officers, and other local community organisations.

It is likely that the resident-organisers who chose not to be interviewed possessed fewer of these resources, broadly defined, and local activators describe more challenges on other streets, some of which are explored in more detail below.



The participation of local residents was different in Seacroft where the events, though reflecting a considerable amount of buy-in from those living locally, were organised more directly by Fall Into Place. Nevertheless, a number of local residents were increasingly involved in supporting Fall Into Place to spread the word about the play street events within their social networks and in setting up and coordinating activities on the day.

Local activators reported that there were some women who attended some of the project meetings (see below), possibly persuaded by friends or family attending, but who felt that they would not be able to set up a play street on their street, primarily because they felt their neighbours were not supportive of children playing out.

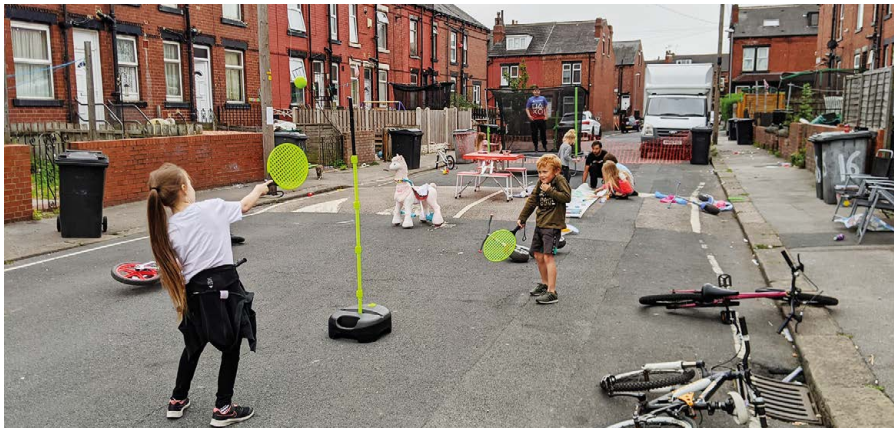
6. THE STREETS AND SPACES

Despite the fact that all the streets involved were located in 'priority neighbourhoods', they varied considerably in terms of location, built form, and the nature of neighbour relationships.

The streets varied, amongst other things, by:

- **Their width and length**
- **The volume of traffic, especially through-traffic**
- **The proximity of other public space (green spaces, verges, car parks) where neighbours could play or hang out**
- **The presence of key local buildings (such as a mosque or school)**
- **The presence of front yards/gardens (which in some instances offered a space for children to play and connect before the play street process was established)**
- **Car ownership, though many tended to low levels of resident car ownership**
- **The orientation to front or back lane (including back-to-back terraces)**
- **The diversity of residents, in terms of ethnicity (White British, British Asian, African, East European), age, and family status, some of which was reflected in the diversity of housing stock (large terraced homes, flats, etc.)**
- **Noise and other ordinary disturbances, including anti-social behaviour.**

In Beeston Hill and Holbeck, most of the organised sessions took place on streets, mostly terraced, which were managed with temporary road closures, following the standard play streets model. In Seacroft, most took place in non-street spaces, such as green spaces, the grounds of flats, or car parks. One street was closed to through traffic, but much of the activity took place on the green spaces adjacent to the road, with the road closed for the safety of children and their families moving between the green spaces.



**BEVERLEYS AND
STRATFORDS
(Beeston Hill)**

**RECREATIONS
(Holbeck)**



**BOGGART HILL
(Seacroft)**

**CLYDES AND
HOLDFORTHS
(New Wortley/Armley)**



7. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

All of the street activators interviewed had been supported, as was integral to the Play Streets Enablement Project, by community organisations.

Fall Into Place was primarily involved in supporting events in Seacroft (Boggart Hill), where it focused on giving a “green light for play”, giving time, space and permission for local families to play in locations that were not usually played in; residents “almost needed to see that they were allowed to do this”. At times, the biggest barrier seemed to be uncertainty: “is this something that I can do?”. Sometimes these were spaces that weren’t deemed safe for play (because they were unfamiliar, or seen to be dominated by unruly children, or where some residents had made their objections to children playing out clear) and sometimes they were simply places where local residents didn’t imagine they could play.

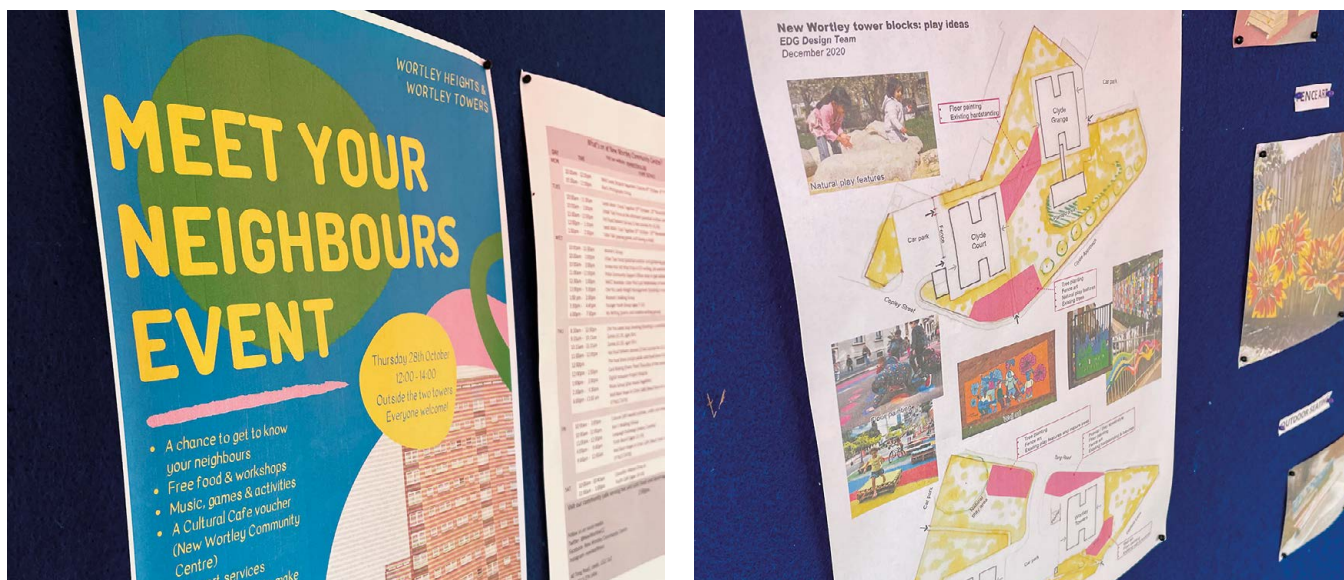
Fall Into Place organised these events with local residents, providing the kit and additional activities, and working to shield residents somewhat from the objections of other local residents, and took on a fair amount of responsibility for the events and their smooth running (including handling council road closure applications where relevant).

Kidz Klub Leeds was involved in supporting play streets in Receptions, Beverleys and Stratfords, and Clifton and Nowells (Beeston, Beeston Hill and Holbeck). Its role in developing play streets started from the initial identification of possible streets, based on its very long and deep history of youth and family work across Leeds. Streets were identified where Kidz Klub knew key residents and knew that there were children and families who might be interested in getting involved, where the Kidz Klub staff knew there was potential to support a play street. The relationship of trust between Kidz Klub and resident-organisers was identified as critical, enabling residents to imagine that a play street might be possible and to trust Kidz Klub to legitimise the process, and help at every stage. Play streets were seen as part of Kidz Klub and of their rich offer in the communities in which they work. This was absolutely critical for the success of the new play streets.

In a practical sense, Kidz Klub offered support with door-knocking and communicating with neighbours, paperwork and printing, council bureaucracies, trouble-shooting, and setting up/stewarding/managing the street on the day. They also provided “playboxes” (bubbles, chalk, ramps, ropes, etc.) and delivered these to the street. This practical work was shared, to varying extents, between the resident-organisers and Kidz Klub.

In New Wortley/Armley (Clydes and Holdforths), New Wortley Community Association were tasked with seeding and supporting new play streets. In October, they organised a ‘meet your neighbours’ event in the grounds of two tower blocks adjacent to the community association’s premises, with the aim of opening up conversations about space for play around the high-rise blocks (see below). The community association set up a range of activities to invite children and their families to play (e.g. pumpkin carving, making bird feeders), with the help of other local organisations. The event was also attended by staff from various council and other local programmes. Very few local residents participated, with just a small handful of children, and the event was badly disrupted by urgent sewage problems in one of the two tower blocks.

New Wortley's Meet Your Neighbours Event



After the initial event New Wortley Community Association “decided to hold off the play streets project due to the poor weather”, with a view to picking it up in the new year, by which point the primary organiser had started a new employment contract.

In New Wortley, the successful launch of the play streets project was undermined by capacity issues in the host organisation. In other locations too (such as Burmantofts), the partner organisations were very small and resident-led; in principle, this kind of set-up was ideal to support residents on the ground, with profoundly local knowledge and experience, but in practice, these organisations had minimal capacity to support new projects and few staff that were able to actively support the play streets initiative.

In Harehills, a youth worker from the Leeds Muslim Youth Forum and the Bilal Centre worked with young people to try to establish a play street, but faced difficulties around timings and the capacity of young people (especially around exams) and around language with older residents.

Where it worked, the level of support from community organisations was very well-received by street organisers and seen to be key to the success of the play streets, especially when there were obstacles to overcome or difficulties to negotiate (see more below).

This raises two questions:

- **Is this level of support essential, and, therefore, is it sustainable?**
- **What happens when community organisation have weaker connections and less capacity in communities?**

We will return to the question of sustainability below.

On the question of connections and capacity, Kidz Klub staff felt that this resulted in a slower process, with more relationship- and trust-building necessary as part of the play streets process, but that this was not an insurmountable obstacle.

8. CONNECTIONS TO OTHER COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

In addition to the critical role played by key community organisations, another theme that recurred was the relationship between play streets and other community activities, whether those were organised or informal, or focused on children or on the street and neighbours.

A number of the interviewees noted how their interest in play streets developed during the pandemic as connections, albeit often small, developed between neighbours when so many were working/schooling at home. On one street, children had been playing in their front yards, not with each other but near each other, and this had started to build connections between neighbours. Small gifts were then shared at Eid, and other small acts strengthened the developing relationship between some neighbours.

On another street, neighbours had been involved in installing and maintaining planters before the residents organised their first play street, even though it was “hard to do stuff together”.

On other streets, a local charity DAZL (Dance Action Zone Leeds) had organised socially-distanced dances – “Garden Groovers” – through the summer of 2020, as the UK emerged from the first Covid lockdown. On one new play street, these continued between the organised play street sessions, and on others, DAZL led dance workouts during play street sessions.

As well as Kidz Klub’s longstanding relationships with residents on the new play streets, other specific projects (such as one focused on rollerskating) also enabled and enriched the planned play street sessions.

In Seacroft, families attending the observed play street made repeated connections between the play street and other local play/youth offers, such as the local youth club, events at the community centre, and the Playful Anywhere pop-up Playbox that was sited nearby at Rein Park. Those I spoke to clearly associated play streets with the wider offer delivered to them during the school holidays; this was positive in as much as play streets were seen as something familiar and known, but more concerning in that they were seen as something delivered to them, not produced from the bottom-up.

In these ways, at a variety of scales, and through formal and informal activity, play streets were identified as part of a wider ecology of playful activities within Leeds (in which Fall Into Place and Kidz Klub were a key part).



9. WHAT HAPPENED ON THE PLAY STREETS ORGANISED – AND AFTER...

Interviewees commented most emphatically on what a success their play streets had been, especially the first events, when their expectations had initially been tinged with anxiety.

Comments from resident-organisers and local organisation staff included:



These echoed responses gathered by Fall Into Place (and reported in their presentation to Playing Out's Community of Learning on 22.9.21).

One mother noted:



Others noted:



More generally, resident-organisers reported that all sorts of neighbours had attended, of different ethnicities and ages, and with and without children. Cars were moved so that the space of the street seemed vast and offered many opportunities to play. Children played with those they had not previously known, and across age groups. Whilst some felt that the focus was on younger children, others noted that older children took on roles such as stewarding, watching smaller children, and supporting their play.

Some noted that certain groups of neighbours didn't come, perhaps those from ethnic groups that were not involved in the organisation (such as those with east European backgrounds). With some other neighbours, the play street was seen to break down barriers; for example, on streets where some anxiety had developed about some residents (e.g. more transient residents or those stereotypically associated with anti-social behaviour), the play street created opportunities for neighbours to meet, if only briefly, and prejudices to be challenged by conversations, gifts of food, or other exchanges. On one street, a local organiser noted: "Neighbours had been living

in fear of that house [a house where sex work was known to occur], [The play street] really makes a difference [to] seeing that lady in a kind of more human way”.

Several interviewees noted that passers-by seemed to be interested and intrigued, apparently asking “could this happen on my street?”. The visibility of play streets creates a potential ‘contagion effect’ as it creates possibility; by seeing a play street in their neighbourhood, on a street like theirs, other local residents imagine that they can do it too. Indeed, one of the streets involved in the Play Streets Enablement Project (Lodge Lane) was inspired by another (Maud Avenue).



In most instances, resident and community organisers reported continuing positive effects on participating streets. Children were seen to be playing with each other in doorstep spaces between organised sessions, where this was possible in terms of traffic and safety. On one street, the play street event was seen by the street organiser to “change the dynamics of who played with whom, including those previously confined by gender”. Extended connections were also developed between families and other adults on the street, including new friendships, mutual support, gift-giving and more.

In Seacroft, the doorstep spaces were “lit up and filled with children playing again, after such a hard year” (activator). Children engaged enthusiastically with the play equipment provided, and the more organised activities. Parents were seen to be connecting with each other, and stronger links were forged with Fall Into Place and its other offers. In this sense the play streets sessions also acted as ‘outreach’ to draw children into the range of other play opportunities provided by Fall Into Place.

The Seacroft events were deliberately shaped to be “neighbourly”, focused not only on children but also their parents and other adults. Food was often offered to draw people in. Residents often attended a number of the play streets events, not just those on their immediate doorsteps, as they were advertised relatively widely. Because few of these events took place on closed streets, play often continued beyond the advertised times, as children just carried on having fun: “every single one was fun” (activator).

On one street in Swarcliffe, Eastwood Nook, a ‘sensory street’ was organised, reflecting the presence of children with additional and complex needs and adapting the model to reduce the noise and busyness of a typical play street session. This was organised on a grass ‘nook’ with children invited to play in a calmer, quieter environment. This event was planned as a one-off but can be seen as an example of making play streets more accessible to neurodivergent children and their families.

A fuller picture of what happened on the streets as they played out can be drawn from a review of the photos and videos captured, and of the observations from Seacroft.⁹

⁹ Photos and videos were collated, by the Kidz Klub Leeds activator, at five play streets in Beeston Hill and Holbeck, and observation took place at a further event on Seacroft (the event in New Wortley didn’t function as a play street so is not reviewed here). These give an additional layer of material to reflect on what happened on the play streets organised, in terms of participation, activity, the use of street space and so on.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF THE PLAY STREETS IN LEEDS

In many ways, the visual record of the different play streets is quite similar. Most of the sessions were supported by KidzKlub Leeds so the road closures, signage and play equipment were held in common. Roads were closed with handmade signs attached to wheelie bins, with mesh fencing strung between the bins, and a “Playstreet today” sign attached to a wall. These secured the street from through-traffic, but maintained an informal, resident-led atmosphere. In each instance, the full length of the closure was visible along the street so marshals/stewards could oversee the closures from the middle of the street. On each street, children (and adults) played with equipment such as skate ramps, chalk, swingball, bubbles, ropes, ribbons, “soaker balls” (in place of water balloons), and spacehoppers, provided by KidzKlub.



In Seacroft, the closed road was straddled by two large green spaces and much of the play took place in these areas, with children and their carers crossing regularly between the two. For much of the session, the closure of the road enabled it to be crossed safely rather than played on. However, towards the end of the session, as the organised activities ended, more and more children started to play on the road, with cycles, scooters, and footballs, for example.

Each street appeared to be relatively low-car; there were very few cars parked on each street (but it's not, of course, clear how many had been moved prior to the street closing for play). Some streets were relatively wide, at times with junctions offering a pretty vast space to play. Some had small front gardens or yards between the houses and the street; some had homes opening straight on to the street. In Seacroft, the layout of the road meant the play space was at a distance from the nearest homes, though they were close enough that carers could monitor their children playing from their front gates.



There were tables and chairs set out on most streets, with drinks and snacks available, creating a space for children to be “in charge” and for neighbours to gather and chat. In most streets, the children present were Asian, Black, and white, of all ages from babies in buggies, to crawling and toddling children, to primary-aged children and to younger teenagers, and both girls and boys. In their play and in other activities (such as eating/drinking), the children seemed to be mixing across the ages. Lots of the photographs show children helping each other skate, cycle, make bubbles and chalk, for example, but also simply playing together across age groups. It has been suggested that play streets offer less to older children (of secondary school age), but on many of these streets there were teenage children present and joining in the play.

The adult participants were predominantly women, mothers and older women (grandmothers and/or older residents from the street). There were far fewer adult men, with none visible on some streets, but on other streets maybe one or two fathers or older adult men. The adults



too reflected the ethnic diversity of the children present. In some instances, the older women, as well as some of the mothers, took on stewarding roles with hi-vis vests. In Seacroft, many residents had invited family members and friends from other parts of the neighbourhood and other parts of Leeds. There were a number of three-generation families present, including grandparents, parents, siblings and cousins. At the end of the session, groups of children and adults were observed to be leaving in groups, to homes on the street and beyond.

One of the most striking aspects of all the photographs is how the families – children and adults – fill their streets; they occupy the spaces with their play, their “stuff”, their movements, the traces of their play, and with just hanging around. Children are sitting, crawling, drawing, picnicking on the road itself; parents are sitting on kerbs, on picnic chairs, on garden walls. There are bicycles and scooters lying around, all over each street. The streets are full; the spaces left behind by cars have been filled by people.



In Seacroft, the two green spaces were themselves filled with children playing, while the street itself was used primarily for cycling and scooting. Pumpkin carving and other craft activities were set up on one part of the green space, and an egg-and-spoon race was organised. Around these activities, parents and other adults milled around chatting to family members and neighbours.

In part, the children are filling the space through the movement and activity. In many of the photos, children are moving along and across the street space – running, scooting, rollerskating, cycling, walking, skipping. In Seacroft, children were running up and down the small bank on one side of the road, playing football up the bank, skidding about on wet grass, and climbing on and hanging off the rails on the stairs and the barriers along the road. On every street, in different ways, the children were using the affordances of the street to find varied ways to play, and to connect with the street.

As mentioned above, there are moments when children are sitting, but, if the photos are an accurate record, most of the time, children are moving. In some pictures, children were shifting and placing the skate ramps, creating their own combinations of obstacles together to create playful challenges. The photos show the children being very physically active and engaging in a very varied range of play. In a couple of images, children are also present but engaged in other activities, such as sitting on a garden wall reading, or tending to babies in buggies.

There is some evidence of passers-by showing an interest in what was happening, adults with shopping bags walking along the pavements watching the children playing and noticing the makeshift closures. In other photos, adults were standing and watching from their doorsteps, with cups of tea, possibly supervising their children at a distance, possibly joining in from the margins.

10. OBSTACLES IDENTIFIED/RESOLVED

Section 2.1 above highlighted some of the common ‘barriers’ to play streets in areas of greater deprivation and disadvantage and many of these were echoed on the streets reported on here.

The ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic affected a number of streets, as organising events was delayed by illness in some instances and in others, attendance was lower than expected as a result of families having to isolate.

Another general issue related to the weather – months of planning and coordinating was on occasion undone by poor weather on the day of the planned play street. Although no street abandoned their plans, a few noted lower attendance and played out for less time than originally planned. The approach of autumn and winter, and the wet and cold weather expected, also impacted on the momentum and continuity of new play streets, as is explored further in the section on sustainability below.

Other concerns can be clustered around a few themes:

1. *The question of responsibility*

Although most interviewees emphasised how straightforward the process of application had been, with the support of local activators, on some streets local activators were called on to take more responsibility for the application process, to shield local residents from perceived fears. For example, where residents were unsure of the response of their neighbours in general, or anxious about particular neighbours, they were reluctant to put their names, addresses and contact details on the letters and flyers delivered to neighbours. In every case, local activators stepped in and used organisational contact details, shifting the weight of responsibility away from the resident-organisers. One local activator highlighted how acting as an intermediary in this way allowed residents to benefit from an “organisational thick skin” and the authority associated with the community organisation. This was an important concern, and a successful resolution, but the resolution often rested on strong and longstanding relationships between local organisations and resident organisers through which fears and vulnerabilities could be negotiated. This raises questions about the continuity and sustainability of this organisational input, and about the possibility of resolution when such longstanding relationships are absent.

At other times, in other places, the authority of the local organisation supporting residents blurred questions of collective responsibility on streets. For example, during an organised play event run formally by a local organisation, their staff (playworkers or youth workers) would take at least partial responsibility for dealing with bad behaviour, or conflict between children or between families to ensure the space remained safe. On another play street, despite being supported by and associated with the local organisation, responsibility for handling conflict and bad behaviour rested with residents. On a couple of streets, resident-organisers reported conflict between adults and bad language, tricky to resolve in an informal, resident-led space where “no one was in charge”.

2. *Anxiety about the ‘right to play’*

In some neighbourhoods, there was a strong sense that play was neither safe nor appropriate in the spaces identified, even if these were not streets that required formal closure. Sometimes this

was seen to be about stigma associated with certain streets and spaces, even from those who lived just a few metres or a street away; for example, responses from within Seacroft, as Fall Into Place started to organise an event adjacent to a particular high-rise block, illustrate some of the concerns around these contexts, with residents reiterating stigmas about certain sites (e.g. risk of theft and drugs, risky environments).¹⁰ Sometimes, however, the reluctance was identified as a more general anxiety about whether or not children, their families and their wider communities had the right to claim these spaces for play.

Two different local activators felt that this issue might be exacerbated by the idea of a 'play street' since this might not be something that resonated for those living in neighbourhoods without traditional streets (e.g. on blocks of flats, or estates).

3. Negotiating with 'institutional' neighbours

One new play street was located adjacent to a mosque. It was hoped that the resident-organiser, a Muslim woman, would liaise with the mosque leaders to handle the situation, coordinate access at prayer time, and the needs of the play street. In practice, this didn't happen and this remained a source of difficulty.

Another street led to the entrance to a park which resulted in lots of additional parked cars at weekends, when play streets were likely to take place.

On a third street, one house was identified as a site of sex work, engendering some anxieties on the street in terms of informing those working there and navigating its presence on the street during a play street session. This was one of the streets where the resident-organiser asked the local activator to use an organisational email address on the letters delivered, to manage some of these fears. As it happened on the day, one of the sex workers brought some cakes out for the children playing and some significant barriers were eased.

4. Neighbour conflict

Both resident-organisers and local activators reported fluctuating levels of conflict between neighbours. This affected willingness to organise play streets and the smooth running of the application process, as well as at times the event itself. This is a tricky obstacle to manage as no local organisation can really intervene in the fluctuating relationships between neighbours, though they can sometimes offer a space or frame within which conflict can be resolved. Local activators noted that "some levels of conflict between neighbours just can't be overcome".

5. Challenging contexts

One resident-organiser noted that it is "not always just as easy as having fun on streets, when the contexts aren't fun". As the descriptions and responses above suggest, play streets can feel amazing, but in organising the play streets described in this report, residents had to negotiate, amongst other events and incidents: fights, the traces of drug use and the presence of known dealers, arson attacks on the street, and drivers speeding.

¹⁰ Cited in Fall Into Place's presentation to the Playing Out Community of Learning on 22.9.21.

One resident-organiser explained how, after saying she would try to set up a play street on her street, she was put off by the work needed to secure her street from anti-social behaviour and dangerous driving (largely committed by those living elsewhere). She only kept going because the children on the street were excited and looking forward to the play street. In the end, she was pleasantly surprised by how well it went on the day and is happy to keep going, with the support of other neighbours. The challenges she faced, however, should not be underestimated.

Another example of this was the sewage leak in one of the high-rise blocks at New Wortley, during the planned 'meet your neighbours' event. This urgent housing issue demanded the attention of not only residents, who might otherwise have joined in, but also community workers and council officers who were present to support the event. The need to resolve this issue understandably overrode the attempt to engage residents around play.

These are stark reminders that residents in Leeds' 'priority neighbourhoods' are often having to negotiate much more challenging everyday contexts than those in other parts of the city. That these play streets succeeded as they did is a huge achievement for those involved.

6. Drivers and motor vehicles

On some streets, drivers remained a problem, with some attempting to speed through. On one street, workmen in particular were identified as believing they had a "god-given right" to drive through a legally-closed road. This reflected a lot of ongoing maintenance and development work on one play street, where the drivers of vans and lorries were extremely reluctant to find another route through.

Delays to the processing of play street applications were also reported, creating additional concerns around managing motor traffic and securing streets for play.

7. Finding a time

On streets with diverse ethnicities, the varying commitments of children and their families (e.g. to mosque school, after-school clubs, family events) meant that finding a time when the majority of neighbours, and especially those key neighbours who would work to make the event a success, could participate has proved tricky. This has been exacerbated on streets where through traffic is higher at certain times of the week (e.g. to access a local park, to attend the local mosque; see above). In some instances, identifying ongoing dates and times for regular play streets has been a significant barrier.

These issues were echoed in Harehills in the work of the Leeds Muslim Youth Forum, where time pressures on the young people who might potentially have been involved in helping to organise a play street proved to be a significant barrier.

8. Language and ethnicity

Ethnic diversity also shaped communication between neighbours when some were using English as an additional language and struggled to understand the idea of play streets or the procedures involved. In almost all instances, however, on the day neighbours from a range of ethnic backgrounds played out. A few resident-organisers noticed the relative absence of neighbours

from east European backgrounds; this may have been a language and/or cultural issue, but also may simply have reflected the fact that these neighbours didn't live with young children.

Similar issues arose in Harehills in the context of attempts to organise through the Leeds Muslim Youth Forum, but a potential solution was sought through working directly with young people, rather than with parents.

In many instances, when these barriers had been overcome enough for the play street to take place, the play street itself then became part of the solution.

11. SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUITY

One of the key aims of the Play Streets Enablement Project was that resident-organisers would be in a position to *“independently and sustainably host and organise play streets on a regular basis”*. Some of the obstacles and concerns outlined above signal potential issues with sustainability, in a number of ways.

Firstly, it is clear that the central role of local organisations was absolutely key to the success of the play streets explored here. This is a real strength of the Play Streets Enablement Project but it opens up questions about the gradual withdrawal of organisational support and the sustainability of the play streets established. The support of the organisations was so key in some instances that considerable scaffolding, by way of concrete plans to overcome the perceived obstacles, will need to be in place.

Both Fall Into Place and Kidz Klub believe that the high levels of support can be withdrawn – and that resident-organisers can continue, but also acknowledge that ongoing, if lower level, support will be essential, with the organisations acting as back-up, a source of advice, and potentially a framework for managing conflict. Moreover, new play streets will often require the same levels of support at start-up. Even if play streets become a more familiar and accepted practice in the priority neighbourhoods – and therefore some of the general obstacles diminish – specific obstacles (social, physical, attitudinal) will remain, meaning that aspiring resident-organisers will continue to require support.

For resident-organisers, much depends on the capacity and willingness of some of their neighbours to help out. On some streets, there were relatively few parents present throughout, and even those who did turn up were not explicitly committed to doing more than participating. Most noted that although the first session took “quite a lot of time and effort”, they felt that subsequent sessions would be a lot easier. Others flagged issues with the availability and storage of the playboxes, which for the first sessions were delivered to the street by the local activator.

As suggested above, the timing of the first sessions in late summer and early autumn meant that some of the new play streets struggled to maintain momentum through worse weather. Struggles with scheduling (as outlined above) meant there were big gaps between the first and subsequent events. Many resident-organisers had high hopes of restarting and organising regular, monthly play streets from the spring and many streets did in fact organise play streets throughout the spring and summer of 2022.

Many of these recurring play streets have been very successful and created space for children to play and neighbours to connect, with some drawing in more participants each time. The continuity of these sessions underlines a number of themes already highlighted, both positive and negative:

- **The critical role of individual resident-organisers in sustaining play streets, and the negative impact of them disengaging or moving off the street;**
- **The supporting role of local community organisations and their related activities in these neighbourhoods, in terms of building interest and relationships, offering practical support (stewarding etc.) and representing some ‘external’ authority around conflict and anti-social behaviour;**
- **The value of drawing in residents from adjoining and adjacent streets to form a critical mass;**
- **Relatively high turnover of residents on streets with significant levels of housing transience can undermine continuity.**

In Seacroft, the hope (in early 2022) was that residents around the most successful play streets events might be enabled to run sessions themselves through the spring and summer. The plan was to work with a small number of local residents to enable them to manage the process themselves and to take ownership of the playboxes. Fall Into Place aimed to focus on “reminding people that they don’t need us”, while remaining close enough to back residents up and support them when necessary. Some of the identified barriers – other parental commitments, tough economic circumstances, and fluctuating relationships between neighbours – remained, so it was recognised that there was still work to do.

In Seacroft, because a number of the locations did not require a formal road closure and were focused on animating play in public spaces, there is evidence of children using these spaces in an informal and unstructured way between and after the organised sessions. This includes children playing football, but perhaps raises questions about which children have been enabled to play and which remain absent.

12. WHAT WAS ACHIEVED

The Play Streets Enablement Project had a number of further aims, focused on:

“Improvements in children’s mental and physical health as a result of

- ***improved air quality,***
- ***increased levels of physical activity,***
- ***enhanced opportunities to play and have fun outdoors, and***
- ***enhanced social capital through increased engagement with local community assets and within neighbourhoods”***

This report had no access to data about improved air quality, but there is considerable qualitative evidence around the other measures.

As the description of the play streets events, from the interviews and from the photos, videos and observations analysed suggests, it is clear that children living on the streets and in the neighbourhoods where these new play streets took place did experience *“enhanced opportunities to play and have fun outdoors”*; in each instance, children of all ages, from a range of ethnic and social backgrounds, were observed to be playing out in spaces (either on streets or on other incidental neighbourhood public spaces) where they would not previously have played. The play streets gave them “time, space and permission” to play, with each other, with the play equipment provided and their own toys. All the reports from resident-organisers and local activators confirmed that the children and their families had fun, notwithstanding some of the challenges of organisation and on the day.

Observations also confirmed that much of this play was physical – running, scooting, cycling, skipping, climbing, jumping, dancing, rollerskating – and much more. No accelerometers or other quantitative measures were used to record children’s movement or to compare it to the rest of these children’s lives to prove that they achieved *“increased levels of physical activity”*, but the qualitative evidence certainly suggests that the children took the opportunities provided by the play streets to engage in high levels of physical activity.

Again, while no quantitative measures of *“enhanced social capital”* were recorded, there is considerable qualitative evidence of *“increased engagement with local community assets and within neighbourhoods”*.

The play streets connected neighbours, from the process of door-knocking to the time spent playing out and hanging out together, and there are a few key examples of where these new connections eased perceived fears between neighbours. In some instances, illustrated above, the play streets reinforced existing social networks, giving neighbours more reasons to spend time together and an opportunity to deepen relationships. These achievements varied from street to street, and there were some where the play streets “didn’t feel very satisfying in terms of relationship building” (activator); this seemed to reflect a lack of engagement from a wider group of neighbours (though it’s important to note that in this case the views of the resident-organiser – who felt that the event had been a great success in terms of connecting with neighbours – and the local activator diverged).

The play streets also enabled residents to claim doorstep spaces, whether their streets or other local spaces, such as green spaces, the grounds of their block of flats, or car parks. As one local activator noted “parents are taking ownership of their spaces, because they’re their streets”. In some instances, this was a hard-won reclaiming with real obstacles to the residents believing they could do so, but every resident-organiser reflected on how they felt more connected to their street, and their neighbours, as a result of the play street.

13. EVALUATION OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACH AND A SENSE OF INCLUSION WITHIN A WIDER PROJECT

The Play Streets Enablement Project was also intended to incorporate action research, allowing the residents and the local organisations to reflect through the process on the ongoing learning around the barriers to establishing play streets.

This was perhaps the least successful aspect of the project, a conclusion acknowledged early in the process and addressed with the development of an additional participatory action research process, to be reported on separately.

A secondary part of the project design was intended to support connections between the resident-organisers in different parts of the city, so that those developing play streets had peers with whom they could share experiences, ideas and trouble-shooting. This aspect is integral to the sustainability and continuity of the project, as peers can offer more support as local organisations gradually withdraw.

There was some evidence of success in this sphere as a number of resident organisers discussed the mutual support received and offered. Most of the resident-organisers in Beeston Hill had visited other play streets as they initiated their own application, and many had also acted as stewards or additional, supportive adults on other streets too. Resident-organisers gathered ideas and inspiration from each other and one remarked that she felt there was “little bit of a network”. Another met other organisers, some of whom she recognised from other community activities, but who had she not known were also organising play streets. Kidz Klub did work to arrange meetings with local resident-organisers and these seemed to be appreciated by all involved, but there was a concern that the work that went into organising these meetings and encouraging participation outweighed the benefits. In Harehills, an engaged and successful resident-organiser was identified as someone who could support others in Harehills to establish play streets, as she possesses not only the skills to support others but also a profound knowledge of the local community, key elements of successful peer support.

In Seacroft, few of the residents involved knew that they were part of a city-wide project, but most were aware of a developing network in Seacroft. Existing relationships within the community, supported by recurring participation in the events organised, meant that there was the potential for this very local network of support to develop, if spaces to allow this to happen were facilitated.

Some concerns were raised by local activators about the value and appropriateness of group meetings as a setting for the Participatory Action Research approach. It was felt that some residents, who were interested in setting up play streets, didn't really understand the meetings and felt uncomfortable during the meetings. This was not helped by Covid-19-related cancellations and postponements, meaning that little momentum developed around the meetings and the potential community engendered. It was recognised that organising meetings was the “right thing” in theory, in terms of engaging potential organisers and interested residents, but not perhaps entirely appropriate in practice.

It should also be noted that there is a Leeds Play Streets Network on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/927564211120581>), which was set up as part of the project, where community and resident organisers share pictures and stories about their recent play streets.



PART III: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the contexts, both of the complex challenges facing the priority neighbours and of the pandemic, the achievements of the Play Streets Enablement Project, and the community organisations and residents involved, are significant. More than 25 play street sessions were organised in neighbourhoods across the city, drawing in hundreds of children and their families.

Neighbours met and engaged with local community organisations and with each other, building on existing relationships and establishing new ones.

Children played, actively, creatively, across age groups and ethnicities – and they evidently had fun.

Communities reclaimed their doorstep spaces for play, whether through formal road closures or the claiming of neighbourhood green space.

Some level of continuity was achieved with most of the neighbourhoods involved maintaining some form of outdoor play in the spaces reclaimed.

The project certainly achieved its aim *“to inspire, engage and support parents/residents in priority neighbourhoods in Leeds to independently and sustainably host and organise Play Streets on a regular basis”*.

In terms of the key deliverable, not every priority neighbourhood was involved (there were no play streets in Lincoln Green or New Wortley), but there were applications from more than 10 different streets or spaces in total.

As this report has outlined, the play streets took two reasonably distinct forms. Some reflected the ‘playing out’ model closely, with residential streets being legally closed to through traffic for a few hours. Others involved a more informal but nevertheless structured reclaiming of doorstep space (such as green spaces, car parks).



The action research element was less successful, though some sense of connection between some of the resident-organisers was achieved, and a number of the different community and resident organisers have engaged in this research and evaluation process to reflect explicitly on the potential barriers to sustainable play streets, and possible ways of overcoming these.

As this report suggests, there were a number of obstacles to establishing and sustaining play streets in the priority neighbourhoods, but identifying these was one aim of the project and these therefore can not be deemed evidence of failure. of which are explored in more detail below.

In addition to the weather and the pandemic, 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 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.**

As this last point suggests, in many instances, the play streets were the means to overcome identified obstacles, but for this to happen, play streets must be able to progress, even if all the local issues have not been resolved.

There is a key role here for local community organisations, and other identified authorities (the council, council officers and councillors, local faith leaders, for example), to support resident-organisers.

What these findings underline is how much work was invested to achieve the considerable successes outlined here. Resident-organisers and local activators worked extremely hard, and committed significant time and energy, to establish and sustain play streets in these neighbourhoods. The outcomes were extremely positive, for children and the wider community, in terms of physical activity, fun, and neighbourhood engagement, such that all believed the work involved was necessary and valued.

As the project documents set out initially, “greater support is required to facilitate street closures in areas of deprivation”, and, even though all those interviewed believe support can gradually be withdrawn from play streets as they become established, high levels of support will continue to be required on new streets in new neighbourhoods.

If Leeds City Council wishes to continue to extend the documented benefits of play streets to new streets and new neighbourhoods, then something like the support offered in this enablement project needs to continue.

In the light of these reflections, the key recommendations are as follows:

- **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.**

To conclude with the words of one resident-organiser:



Play streets get people involved, help them to act locally to make good things happen and empower people.

They can seem like a small thing but an important one, especially for children, and can lead to other things.

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APPENDIX

PLAY STREETS IN AREAS OF DEPRIVATION: PREVIOUS RESEARCH



Although the issue of play streets in areas of deprivation has attracted considerable attention amongst UK activists and practitioners in recent years, there has been relatively little UK-based research on interventions in support of play streets in these communities.

In North and South America and in other European contexts, there have been a number of research and intervention programmes, led from a public health perspective, to explore how play streets can be developed in targeted neighbourhoods, and how such schemes might support a range of public health and related goals.

In these studies, targeted neighbourhoods are identified as ones with high levels of poverty, poor amenities (in terms of play space and equipment and of community facilities), traffic violence, and other forms of crime. These features result in a reluctance on the part of parents to permit their children to play outside in their neighbourhoods, which in turn, it is argued, results in low levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) and limited community connections, trust and vigilance.

Programmes to establish play streets in these contexts are aimed at enabling an activity which is seen to have multiple, beneficial impacts at family, community and city scales and, in particular, offering the levels of support – from councils and/or community organisations – necessary to overcome potential barriers.

In almost all reported examples, these were active, top-down interventions to set up play streets, in a manner which might be seen to sit uncomfortably with the resident-led, child-led, bottom-up ethos of play streets in the UK.

These interventions included pop-up, supervised play events in school playgrounds and local parks, the provision of play boxes on temporarily-closed roads, the provision of food and drinks, appearances from local emergency services (e.g. fire trucks and police cars) to entertain children, large-scale play equipment such as climbing walls and table tennis tables

The City of Philadelphia runs a very large-scale play streets programme through the summer holidays as a primary means of providing children not only with safe space to play and play equipment, but also food, in the absence of school meals.¹¹

¹¹ <https://www.phila.gov/programs/playstreets/>

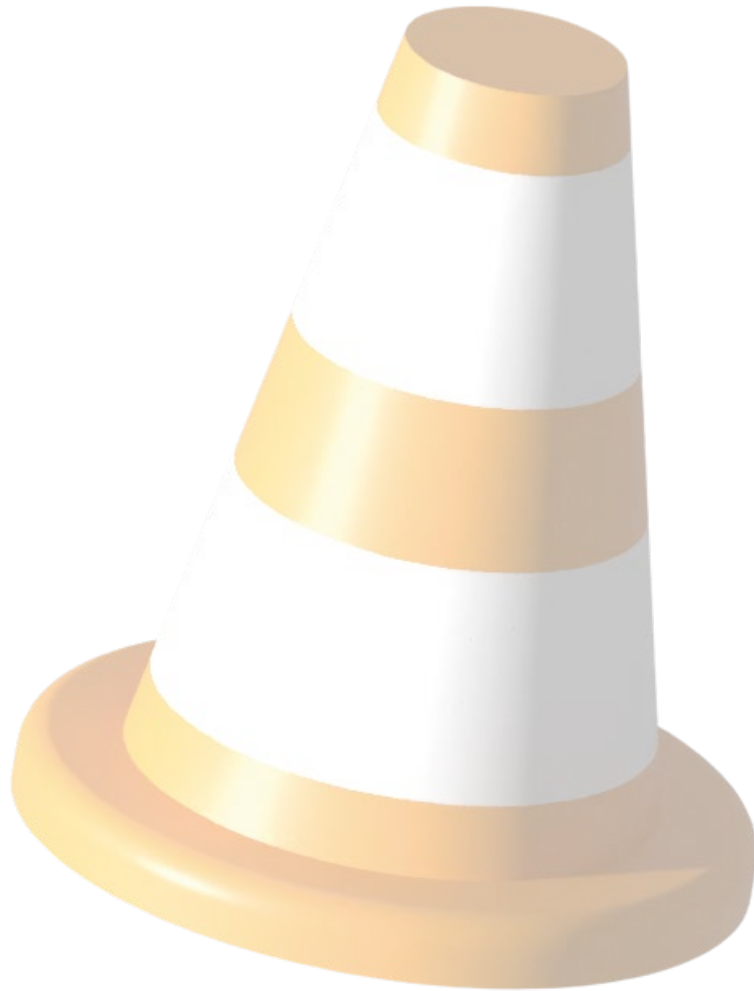
There are echoes here with the Holiday, Activity and Food (HAF) schemes piloted in the UK from 2018 and rolled out nationally from 2021 to support children in receipt of free school meals to enjoy healthy, active holidays.¹²

Some key conclusions from this work highlight:

- **how streets not always the right place for ‘play streets’, since other neighbourhood spaces (school playgrounds, green spaces etc.) are more appropriate spaces for play in some communities.**
- **how organised activities and events, including the provision of food can incentivise participation**
- **moderate to vigorous physical activity did increase during and sometimes after the organised play streets**
- **some evidence confirmed that community connections and trust increased.**

However, in very few of these reviewed examples were play streets sustained beyond the intervention without the levels of support offered.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2021>



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