Play Streets: Residents Promote Public Play Space

London, UK
Cities included in this series

Antwerp
Barcelona
London
Melbourne
Paris
Philadelphia
Portland
[...]
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our work is to rapidly convert cities into places whose systems nurture human life. An important facet of this work is to share information and analyses of such experiments with a broad audience, from practitioners, advocates, and zealots, to newcomers who are curious or concerned about the future.

Each case study in this series is analyzed through the lens of how it benefits the health of young children and their caregivers, and details how it was carried out. These cases are one part of “Born Thriving,” a suite of publications created to mainstream infant, toddler, and caregiver-focused neighborhood planning in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving is carried out in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana, with the support of Bernard van Leer Foundation’s Urban95 program. This research benefited from the work of TUT-POL (Transforming Urban Transport Political Strategies and Tactics) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, led by professors Diane E. Davis and Lily Song.

We are also indebted to review from our Bernard van Leer Foundation colleagues, especially Julien Vincelot, Andrea Sansotta-Torres, and Ankita Chachra. As well as Taylor Reich and Iwona Alfred at Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. The cases in this series use comparative city data from ITDPs Pedestrian’s First Tool—specifically, data on weighted population density, people’s proximity to services, and average block size. For more information on the tool’s methodology visit: https://pedestriansfirst.itdp.org/.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to the many people we interviewed for these cases, and their generosity to candidly discuss the challenges in their work from which we can all gain so much.
London, UK
Population: 8,962 million (2019)
Weighted population density: 7,199/km²
People near services: 80%
Avg block size: 48 blocks/km²

Tirana, Albania
Population: 906,166 (2019)
Weighted population density: 10,786/km²
People near services: 63%
Avg block size: 39 blocks/km²

Key Actors: London Play, Playing Out, Reaching Communities organization, residents, local councils

Keywords: resident-led/ground-up initiatives, policy mainstreaming, play streets, open streets/traffic calming

This is a story of a grassroots, parent-led initiative that evolved into a nationwide movement to transform city streets into play spaces. Frequent, resident-led street closures for play streets might be the cheapest and least prohibitive way to open streets for pedestrians and children in Tirana. Across the United Kingdom, the streamlining of street closures for play at the level of federal policy was brought forth through a combination of pressure applied to government and training and engagement with resident groups. These efforts generated widespread public willingness to protect streets and public spaces for children. The play-street movement in the United Kingdom has been successful in using low-cost and simple interventions to impact children’s lives, ensuring that this impact is sustainable by integrating play-street closures into the culture of neighborhood streets and residential communities.
Formal play streets have a long history in Europe that dates back to the 1920s, when a lack of road-safety regulations led to many children being killed by motor vehicles. In the United Kingdom specifically, growing pressure from parents and civil society, already familiar with the common practice of street parties during royal events, caused the first play-street legislation to be passed in 1938. With car ownership continuing to rise during the latter half of the twentieth century, however, play streets declined in popularity.

London Play, a nonprofit organization founded in 1998, unearthed this legislation decades later in order to hold play events across the city between 2008 and 2011. In 2009, a group of parents in Bristol, England, organized a play-street closure that quickly garnered community and municipal support, leading them to cofound Playing Out, a nonprofit organization supporting a growing network of "playing out communities" through engagement with residents, play organizations, and local councils. A play street can accommodate a range of sports, games, and other activities—the key is that it involves a street closure. This allows children of various ages to play freely in their neighborhood, while giving parents and caregivers an opportunity to socialize. In London neighborhoods, play streets are often held at least once a month, typically on the first Sunday of the month. However, the frequency and consistency of the practice depends on the local residents in charge of organization.

The growing popularity of play streets in the United Kingdom, along with the work of advocacy groups like Playing Out, has led to a more streamlined process of applying for street-closure permits. In August 2019, the Department of Transportation announced a change to its policies that allows parents and residents to submit just one application for repeated street closures over a twelve-month period, and that no longer requires them to advertise the street closure, minimizing costs for residents. However, as Fiona Sutherland, Deputy Director and Head of Communications for London Play, notes, the implementation of these new policies has been uneven across councils, as changing practices on the ground within these large bureaucracies is often slower than the change in policy. As of 2020, seventy-four councils have

What makes this project supportive of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers?

- **Accessibility:** This intervention has the potential to give all children access to safe play directly outside their door or within a short walk from home.
- **Environmental health:** Play streets reduce neighborhood noise and air pollution, particularly when enacted frequently.
- **Street reclamation:** Expresses a larger need to reclaim streets and public spaces from cars and repurpose them for play and other activities of daily life.
- **Community building:** Play streets are grassroots initiatives that give neighborhood residents a sense of ownership over their streets, leading to greater social cohesion and participation.
- **Streamlined implementation:** The policy streamlining of street closures as well as their inexpensive and easy implementation mean that they can recur at least once a month.
a play-street policy. However, some of the main challenges of this renewed engagement with play streets has been increasing the frequency and consistency of the practice across different councils and neighborhoods.

**PROCESS**

National and local NGOs work on various scales to incentivize the implementation of play streets, from state departments to neighborhood communities. National-level NGOs, like Playing Out, operate at the policy level. These organizations lobby state departments to upgrade their regulations concerning street closures by addressing obstacles that residents face in implementing them, and by making evidence-based arguments for the benefits of such closures. On a municipal level, organizations more focused on implementation—like London Play—have utilized initiatives such as Car Free Days in order to facilitate up to four hundred play-street events. London Play simultaneously campaigned for various local councils to sign a play-street pledge. Sutherland describes this process of gaining political support: “It created a lot of competition between the local authorities to be the ones seen signing up for this. Then there were the others that were really worried about doing it, I suppose for fear of alienating drivers in their boroughs.”

The organization also identifies target neighborhoods where a play street might be particularly impactful, and collaborates with willing residents to provide support, guidance, and training in order to help in the process. Through engaging with residents at libraries or community centers, they are able to recruit interested people and support them in obtaining signatures, printing flyers, and submitting the street-closure application to their local council. Councils provide residents with equipment

Timeline of Play Streets in the United Kingdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>First play-street legislation in the United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>London Play play events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Bristol parents found Playing Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Bristol parents’ first play street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Department of Health funds three-year project with Play England, London Play, University of Bristol, and Playing Out to support residents in growing national movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Department of Transportation issues widespread guidance for councils to make play streets easier to establish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
like road barriers and signage to block motor traffic, and no longer require residents to pay for advertising the street closure. The “steward” in charge of managing the street on the day of the event may allow residents to leave the street or return to park during the event, as long as they drive below five miles per hour. Common concerns of residents include damage to cars and the safety of children. In response, London Play organizes community meetings to resolve any issues before submitting the application to the local council, provides toys for children, and highlights the role of caregivers in the organic surveillance of the play street.

Ultimately it is the local organizations that do the heavy lifting. The Hackney Play Association assists in the organizing of resident meetings, photocopying and printing application forms, door knocking, resolving objections, and providing safety equipment for volunteer stewards. The Hackney Council has funded the Hackney Play Association since 2013 to implement outdoor-play initiatives across the borough as part of the local public-health effort to tackle high rates of childhood obesity, and low rates available of green space for the densely populated borough.

Residents who are interested in starting a play street must prove community support through a petition; though there is no required number of signatures, it is necessary to demonstrate “strong support.” Residents then apply for the road-closure permission using a standard application form and confirm that they have sent a letter of notice to all residents on that street. This and all other documents are provided as templates on the council’s website. The application typically takes eight to ten weeks to process, but once approved it can run indefinitely according to the proposed schedule (e.g., the third Sunday of each month). All streets are eligible so long as the closure would not disturb a major bus route. An evaluation of the initiative, conducted in 2015 by Tim Gill, analyzed the number and reach of every Hackney play-street event between October 2013 and September 2014. One street, Templecombe Road, did not have the highest number of sessions, but it had the third-highest child reach, engaging forty-eight children. The street was described as having a high proportion of social housing compared to the other play streets. According to the Hackney

---

**Play-Street Process**

1. Resident/parent groups organize for play street with support of NGOs
2. Obtain signatures for petition in favor of play street
3. Submit petitions and application form to local council
4. Council approves and provides barriers to close street
5. Organizing group notifies residents on that street
6. If successful, repeat on a regular schedule
Council it is still active on a monthly basis, one of forty currently active play streets in the borough.\(^8\)

The long-term success of implementing play streets across cities in the United Kingdom is contingent on both a politically supportive council that maintains a clear play-street policy and application process, as well as engaged groups of local residents. One challenge for NGOs is figuring out how to support residents to effectively organize play streets, while also encouraging them to lead such initiatives independent of any external organization. As Sutherland describes: “We focus our efforts on places in which childhood obesity is a problem, where we know there is a lower socioeconomic status, highly transient populations, often with lots of newer communities, lots of different languages spoken. They do tend to need more supports. Part of that is confidence building.

It’s the soft skills that people need that we help develop.”\(^9\)

The effort to reach out to communities that are already deprived of adequate play space to foster a truly resident-led process is an equity issue. A progress report published by the Hackney Play Association in 2017 presented three estates within the borough that had adopted a different model where children regularly play outside in amenity spaces within the estate, though this model has proven harder to sustain.\(^10\) Although sustaining the resident-led model in some neighborhoods has proven a challenge, ensuring that at least three individuals sign on to the play-street application has been a tactic used by London Play to ensure that a rotating group of people can manage the play streets going forward, as opposed to relying on a single individual’s commitment.
Frequent, resident-led street closures for play streets might be the cheapest and least prohibitive way to open streets for pedestrians and children in Tirana. The United Kingdom play-streets movement is an instructive example of mobilizing government policy and local capacity-building to create a sustainable model of recurring street play.

A legal provision had existed previously and had been forgotten until an organization and a few motivated parents took the initiative to make use of it. In Tirana, play streets have a precedent in high-profile street closures such as car-free days, Children’s Day, and other similar events. If a main boulevard of car traffic can be closed to give children room to play, there is no reason why smaller-scale and more local closures cannot take place regularly and comprehensively throughout all neighborhoods.

By setting up a similarly streamlined process of permit approval, the municipality can make it easier for neighborhood communities to spearhead street closures that they otherwise might not feel they have the capacity to do.

At the same time, the success of the UK play-streets model is the initiative of the grassroots individuals who are dedicated to sustaining projects. Creating a low barrier for access is key. In order for play streets to be sustainable and recurring, it is important to stimulate demand among residents rather than rely on a solely top-down approach from the city. Just like in the United Kingdom, residents will feel more empowered to partake in and support play streets if the barriers to access them are minimal, and the costs and materials required for street closures are taken on by the municipality.
NOTES


2 Fiona Sutherland, interview by Helen Ketema, May 6, 2020.


4 Sutherland, interview by Ketema.


8 Hackney Council, Play Streets.

9 Sutherland, interview by Ketema.

10 Gill, Hackney Play Streets.
CASE STUDIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

Play Streets: Residents Promote Public Play Space

Publisher Qendra Marrëdhënëie
QM Director Simon Battisti
Case Study Authors Helen Ketema, Lorina Hoxha
Additional Research Emily Jacobi
Editor Raphael Wolf
Design Jolin Matraku, Alesia Drazhi

These case studies are part of “Born Thriving,” a multi-year program to mainstream neighborhood planning principles focused on the needs of young children and their caregivers in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving’s written guidance consists of three volumes: neighborhood design guidelines (vol. 1); the neighborhood indicator baseline (vol. 2), and neighborhood planning case studies (vol. 3).

Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International Public License
Qendra Marrëdhënëie, 2020

Qendra Marrëdhënëie (Relationship Center) collaborates with local institutions to build just spaces for children and those who care for them.

www.qendra-m.org