

Bristol 'Estates' project 2015-16

Outcomes and Learnings

Introduction and background

Playing Out began in 2009 as a resident-led action to reclaim residential streets for children, through a simple model of short, temporary road closures for free play that has become known as 'play streets' (see www.playingout.net for more info). Playing Out CIC was established in 2011 to support this model across the UK and build a grassroots movement aimed at restoring children's right to play freely and safely on the streets and open spaces where they live.

Over the next few years, we received several enquiries from residents living in high-rise tower block estates, wanting to know how they could support children to play out more in the space around their flats, leading us to realise that the street-based 'playing out' model may not be suitable or sustainable in all areas and types of housing.

Further to this, whilst we believed in the need for ALL children to have the freedom to play independently outside their homes, we also felt that those living in high-rise estates and areas of high deprivation / low social capital had a particular and even more urgent need for this, because:

- Children living in high-rise flats may have even less access to active, outdoor play than other children.
- Alternatives to informal playing out (e.g. paid-for activities, access to good quality parks and green spaces) may not be so readily available to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Whilst physical activity levels are appallingly low for children generally, this is particularly so for those living in poverty and those without gardens.
- Children living in the most disadvantaged areas are up to 21 times more likely to be killed on the road as pedestrians than those from the least disadvantaged areas.
- Social cohesion is positively linked to outdoor play and may be particularly lacking in some high-rise blocks and areas of high deprivation.

As a response to all this, in September 2014, Playing Out organised a one-day seminar on "enabling street play in areas of deprivation", bringing together playworkers, public health and community development experts to share and examine existing models aimed at enabling playing out in estates and areas of deprivation and to consider possible gaps and future steps.

The collective background experience we had to draw on included projects run by play organisations (particularly Play Association Tower Hamlets, Hackney Play Association and London Play) involving playworker-led sessions on streets and estates, and Playing Out's ad-hoc responsive work to support residents in high-rise estates in Bristol.

The main conclusions drawn from this event were:

- In some areas of 'disadvantage', children do still play out as part of normal life (although there may also be some negative issues/perceptions associated with this)
- We could learn from where 'playing out' is occurring more naturally – what are the enabling conditions?

- There is no known working model of sustained proactive resident-led ‘playing out’ activity in non-street settings (e.g. tower blocks) and areas of high deprivation
- More work is needed to understand the issues and barriers around playing out in such settings
- Partnership working in these settings is key to successful engagement with residents
- A more ‘top-down’ approach may be necessary to kick-start community-led action in more deprived and challenged areas

All of this led us to devise the Bristol ‘Estates’ project in order to explore these questions further.

Project overview

Between April 2015 and March 2016, with a grant from Bristol’s ‘Green Capital’ programme, Playing Out facilitated this action-research project across several different geographical and social settings within some of the most deprived wards in the city, where the majority of residents live in council or social housing (residential streets in Hartcliffe and ‘tower block’ council estates in Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe). We worked in close partnership with community-based partner organisations (primarily Knightstone Housing’s Community Empowerment team in Hartcliffe and Up Our Street in Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe), who know and understand the local environment and residents. We seconded, trained, supported and worked alongside experienced workers from these organisations to deliver the projects on the ground. These workers identified, engaged and supported key residents to trial and evaluate new, innovative and sustainable solutions to enabling playing out.

The key *delivery* outcomes have been reported on in our [Bristol 2015-16 report](#). This current report is primarily about collating and sharing the *learning* from this project and informing future work.

Research methodology

With our community partners, Up Our Street and Knightstone Housing, we engaged with residents of on the subject of outdoor play where they live, across **60 different opportunities** (including resident meetings, consultation events, attending other resident events, agency meetings, drop-in sessions, interviews, door-knocking, pop-up and formal playing out sessions). Qualitative information was gathered through both semi-structured interviews and informal conversation at these opportunities, as well as through observation during and outside of organised ‘playing out’ sessions.



Learning

Learning from the project is divided into two parts:

1. Children's current access to outdoor play - barriers and enabling factors
2. Engaging and supporting residents to take positive action

I. Children's current access to outdoor play - barriers and enabling factors

We asked four main questions under this heading:

- Where, when and how much do children currently play out?
- What barriers are there to children playing out?
- What positive features or conditions exist to enable playing out?
- What would enable children to play out more?

Where, when and how much do children currently play out?

Families in Lawrence Hill, many of whom are of Somali origin, reported playing outdoors after school, weekends and school holidays, but only when weather conditions are optimum. Most families complained about the difficulties of wind, rain and cold. We found that, on the whole, children are not regularly playing outside close to where they live due to multiple barriers and concerns (see below). In the Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe estates there was a strong feeling amongst parents that they wanted their children to play out far more than they did but, alongside other barriers, there was a lack of safe, accessible and suitable space for them to do so.

In Hartcliffe the situation was very different, with some young children allowed out late at night but others not allowed out at all. In Hartcliffe, where some children play out a lot (but others barely at all), this is often seen both by other residents and agencies as a sign of parental neglect rather than a positive choice. One housing officer said, "*We heard that young kids are out late at night, sometimes 7 and 8 year olds are up to 11pm alone out on the streets*".

In the last few months of the project, we commissioned Room Thirteen Hareclive (an art studio in Hartcliffe run by children) to discuss, plan, develop and carry out deeper research into playing out in the area, particularly with other children. A full report is available separately but some key findings were:

- Although most children had some freedom to play out, **81% of all children asked wanted to play out more.**
- Children described a wide range of experiences they want more of including "seeing more things", playing (on bikes, physically active, imaginative games, with toys outside), wanting to meet up with friends or family
- Children liked to have different kinds of spaces for play: green spaces (nature, free play), 'play park' spaces, 'field' (scraps of land near houses), streets, safe spaces...
- Children were very conscious of and articulate about the barriers to playing out (see below)
- Children had practical and positive ideas about addressing these barriers

What barriers are there to children playing out in these settings?

One tower block (Twinnell House) had a particular problem of long-term building works taking over the usual space used for football, as well as impacting on the (poorly equipped and neglected) play area for younger children. Photo (right) shows the dangerous 'temporary' bulky waste site immediately adjacent to – and taking space away from - this play area. Parents expressed grave concern about their children playing here due to broken glass and other hazards. This situation remained through the duration of the project despite many attempts by residents and those involved in this project to get it resolved by the council.



One mother we spoke to at a meeting at Easton Community Centre said she makes sure her kids stay at after-school club so they can safely run around for a few hours as *“it's not possible for them to play out on the street”* and she doesn't have the time after school to take them to the park. She knows they are not active enough. Similarly, a dad at Twinnell house said, *“I lived with my grandad in St Pauls and our front door was always open. Kids need to grow up outdoors and have some sort of childhood. The kids are desperate to get out”*.

The Knightstone housing officer found that, *“children were often playing out but that a huge concern was speeding traffic in the area. One of the mums...told me she had lost her child. Her son had been killed by a speeding car. This is a real and terrifying reality in a community in Bristol where the 20mph speed limit has still not been instigated”*.

Across the different settings in this project, we identified **29 separate barriers** to children being able to play out freely and independently, mostly reported by residents in conversation. In the Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe (tower-block) estates these included:

Physical/spatial...

1. Lack of safe space for play within estates – cars dominate outdoor space (including speeding cars coming into the car park, parking on double yellow lines)
2. Nearby parks and play areas inaccessible due to busy roads surrounding estates, making residents (particularly children) feel “locked in”.
3. Parental concerns about car fumes from surrounding main roads.
4. Nearby play parks dominated by older kids and teenagers – nowhere for small kids to play
5. Inadequate, old and broken play equipment (particularly Twinnell House) and nowhere suitable for ball games
6. Outdoor space unpleasant/oppressive e.g. design of blocks creating wind-tunnels
7. Health and safety concerns about hazardous waste and rats in designated ‘play’ areas

8. Drinking, drug use and debris and ASB (often from non-residents) making outdoor spaces unfriendly/unsafe for children.
9. Intimidating large/aggressive dogs and dog mess; also cultural taboos around dogs
10. Private housing management unsupportive of play and community use of space (e.g. one developer built 'no outdoor play' clause into tenancy agreement)
11. Lack of open space – accessible/safe green spaces often very small; space reduced further by building works and other uses

Social/attitudinal...

12. Opposition and disapproval from neighbours – dominant residents determine what is 'acceptable' in space. Historical friction, particularly over ball games.
13. Lack of community cohesion and sense of belonging
14. Lack of pride/ownership in outdoor space (and residents' attempts to improve it being undermined e.g. by building works)
15. Poor integration between cultures
16. Lack of other children out playing (safety in numbers, interest, normality)
17. Parental worry about playing out in bad weather causing illness
18. Lack of parental prioritisation of free, outdoor play
19. Mixed tenancies creating sense of mistrust/fear of neighbours
20. Parental concerns about 'stranger danger' and paedophiles (and media scaremongering?)
21. No organisation or 'safety in numbers' amongst parents
22. "Nothing to do" – expectation of services being delivered
23. Increased draw of indoor entertainment and screens
24. Children have very poor road sense (observed during playing out sessions)

As well as many of the above, additional barriers identified in Hartcliffe were:

25. Speeding, racing and highly dangerous driving (including illegal use of mini-motorbikes) precluding even pavement play
26. Playing out often associated with perceived or actual parental neglect (belief that 'good' parents keep their children safely indoors).
27. Lack of trusted adult supervision e.g. funding cut for playrangers, park wardens
28. Lack of free facilities and prohibitive costs (e.g. local skate park cost £8 per session)
29. Organised dog-fighting in parks

Quotes from children in Hartcliffe:

"Especially for children in our area, cars are really dangerous"

"Sometimes it's hard to get home from school or meet our friends. It's almost impossible to get past the cars".

"There's a massive bit of green at the bottom of the road but Dad won't let me go there because there are lots of people sneaking around. One of my friends got grabbed"

What positive features or enabling conditions exist to enable playing out?

On the more positive side, we found that, as well as a strong interest amongst parents in the possibility of their children playing out more and (for some) in taking community/personal action to enable this, there were certain existing features of the estates that lent themselves well to playing out. These included:

In Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe:

- More immediately accessible car-free space than most streets.
- Mix of tarmac (good for wheels) and green space
- Some natural and man-made ‘playable features’ - steps, path, grass, balconies, stairs, walls, underpasses, slopes
- Residents see the outdoor space as very important “this is our garden”
- Good visibility of communal activity / overlooking of shared spaces.
- Local community hubs – particularly Faithspace in Redcliffe; Easton Primary and Easton Family Centre are supportive and available for resident meetings.
- Somali families have a good social network within their community and an outdoor culture, so keen to get out, but only in good weather.
- Generally families know each other due to living in such close proximity and low turnover due to challenges of being rehoused with social housing.

In Hartcliffe:

- Dundry Slopes (large natural space) very nearby and Room 13 Hareclive conducting project to encourage greater use.
- Independent playing out is more normal (though according to Knightstone’s officer, “sometimes this represents freedom and is positive, sometimes it can be neglect on the part of the parents”).
- Extended families often live nearby and support each other.

What would enable children to play out more?

Residents told us that the following would enable children to play out more regularly:

- More / better play equipment in immediate vicinity (swings and slide)
- Access to car-free space so kids can practice with scooters and bikes
- Fencing to separate green space from road
- Somewhere for parents/carers to sit
- Bins (and education in using them!)
- ‘DIY’ activities (e.g. tree swing)
- More children playing out – no one wants to play out alone
- Training / workshop for parents to support outdoor free play
- Feeling safer in their immediate environment (parents and children)
- Neighbours getting to know each other better
- Parents actively engaging in play
- Keeping football and smaller children separate

- Organised ‘playing out’ sessions
- Good visibility of play session / space from flats and houses

Some residents recognised the importance of setting up a group of residents that would like to see improvements where they live (although this took months of facilitated discussion at Twinnell and stalled at Redcliffe). Access to a community room / space to meet, plan and hold activities was also raised as an issue to be addressed in some places.

2. Engaging and supporting residents to take action

Barriers to community-led action

In her final report for the project, one of the Knightstone Housing officers summed up the difficulty of bringing a resident-led model like ‘playing out’ into an area like Hartcliffe:

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

Any successful approaches to resident engagement?

“I found it was good to create different listening environments - setting up tables and seats in the streets works well for its openness and limits many of the barriers people may have with engaging”.
(Knightstone Housing community engagement officer)

General principles:

- Listening and dialogue
- Finding out what matters to people
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Resident Meetings:

- Making them relatively informal (lots of ‘talking at’ people didn’t work. People switched off)
- Visual aids (pictures etc)
- Allowing resident-led discussion in small groups
- Meetings with a very clear specific focus

Speaking with people generally about playing out:

- Visiting local play groups
- Chalk and chats (often low numbers but good quality conversation as children are playing)
- Seeking out existing social and community groups (i.e. tenant groups)
- Door knocking produced good quality information, but time consuming. Residents in blocks are also frequently consulted about issues, so questions need to be specific, relevant and short.
- Creative consultation events – people responded well to an ‘event’ specifically for their area
- At playing out sessions – some of the best conversations were had when parents could see how happily the children play.

- Food and open forums on the street

Working with agencies:

- Talk with housing officers, community workers, children's centre staff, police etc to find out about existing work being done in the area and if there's the opportunity for joint working (especially in 'hard to reach' areas)
- Local practical staff like caretakers and cleaners will know lots too.

Other:

- Leaflets and posters drew residents out but time consuming
- Texting reminders very effective
- Chatting to people (while putting posters up for example) in the local area was very useful for building trust and support
- Taking up people's offer to come in for a drink / chat
- Building a close relationship with one family appears to win the support of the rest of the social group.

Successful ideas/approaches for enabling play or shifting attitudes?

"Across the board we learnt that the most important priority that motivated (mainly women) to want to get involved with community action were more positive activities for children". (Knightstone)

"65% of those asked on Fulford Road said they wanted more activities for children and 50% were most concerned by speeding traffic. This was the starting-point for talking about Playing Out sessions" (Knightstone)

Within this project we have only scratched the surface of how to enable play and shift attitudes. The project has seen improvements in terms of parents' attitude to play, developing a culture of empowerment and making play feel a more natural part of the landscape.

- Speaking one to one appeared more successful than as a group (in terms of ensuring the message had been received)
- Providing equipment was important – skipping, chalking and hula hooping was immediately popular but children did not have these things at home. Footballs are commonplace, however the children or parents often don't see any alternative to this.
- Resident meeting were useful, if they had a specific focus and were well advertised (with text reminders)
- Helping residents identify the barriers and asking them to come up with the solution
- Spending enough time to listen for deeper issues to come to the surface. Negative attitudes towards play can be historical and deep rooted, with a number of other influencing factors (i.e. racial tension)
- Visuals were very effective (videos, pictures, projector, laptop) – helped keep focus and clearly get the message across.
- Shifting attitude cannot come through an external organization – needs to come from within – i.e. Residents speaking with other residents.
- Making sure someone can translate at a meeting, if needed.
- Working with council staff such as caretakers that know the issues in a particular area as well as signposting to locally active residents.

Variations on the ‘playing out’ model

The ‘playing out’ - or temporary play street - model originated on streets in Bristol where neighbours took the initiative to apply to the council for a road closure and organise the stewarding of sessions. This project saw two variations of the model tested.

Croydon House: A group of Somali mums got together to organise playing out sessions on the green space outside their block of flats, supported by a local Playing Out activator. The model was very similar to the street-based model in that it was resident-led, creating a safe space for children to play freely on their doorstep, with no organised activities. The main difference was no need for a formal road closure, although the sessions were stewarded to make sure children could safely use the space where cars had access.

Hartcliffe: Off the back of a successful supported street party in 2014, Knightstone officers supported four local mums to put in applications for temporary playing out street closures and to organise several sessions during 2015. This was done in a very “asset-based”, empowering way, with the residents doing much of the work themselves but with housing officers providing a lot of “hand-holding” support and being present at each session to help with stewarding.

How well did it work?

By the end of the project, it seemed that, whilst there was a high level of interest and enthusiasm for ‘playing out’ sessions to happen, especially from women and children, it was difficult to see how the communities could organise and sustain the model for themselves, without ongoing support.

“We often found that parents would express interest in supporting/getting involved or attending training but then would not turn up so whilst the playing out sessions themselves are creative and innovative solutions to the kids’ needs for outdoor play, the model has not yet worked as a community owned and parent-led initiative. It has relied heavily on the support of Knightstone’s community empowerment team to catalyse, provide hands on support at sessions, fundraise and bring in other partnerships”.

“This model is only sustainable with more than one committed adult prepared to steward, coordinate and manage the process. We have found this a tall order in this community”

*[One of the resident street organisers in Hartcliffe] managed to catalyse and coordinate over 12 months of street activities and playing out on her street. Knightstone’s community empowerment team largely supported this. Without this input it is unlikely that momentum would have continued. In January 2016 due to health problems, [she] has had to step down from continuing [her street’s] playing out. Following some door-knocking [housing officers] gained interest from two dads on the street who may want to take over because they don’t want the playing out to stop. **This is a strong and positive indicator that the project has had lasting and empowering benefits on the street, the children and its sense of community.** We are hopeful that with more than one adult on board, this second round of playing out interest may become sustainable beyond 2016 without relying on the support of Knightstone. We can also see that the interest from other streets and residents proves that this model is something that parents are wanting to find more about – the obvious lack of kids activities and safe spaces to play is calling for a solution”. (Knightstone officer)*

Positive outcomes for children

- More ownership of their space – the children have loved playing out where they live.
- Increased care of the environment (litter picking)
- Access to more play space (especially being able to cycle/scoot on road)
- Mixing with other children outside of social and cultural group
- Learning new games
- More physical exercise
- Increased road sense
- Children were modelling / leading the way on integration – forcing parents to talk / mix



“On Fulford Road it was really fun to go out and play on the street. There was a bike carousel one time, a get fit session, and also I really enjoyed the Halloween session.” – Charlie Year 6, following a street party

Positive outcomes for parents

- Residents at Croydon feel more empowered by organising a playing out session and increased confidence demonstrated by publicising the event widely and speaking at a local meeting about it.
- Parents in Hartcliffe also felt a sense of achievement and pride: *“I’d never done anything like it before but the applications for street closures were really easy and I’d be happy to show other people how to do it”*
- Increased confidence. Another Hartcliffe parent, *“enjoyed doing her bit for the community” and hadn’t before had the confidence to “talk to drivers and ask them to slow down but now I do”*.
- Residents engaging in wider issues locally (Twinnell residents website, parents group, more residents attending tenants forum at Croydon house)
- Taking some responsibility for playing out sessions (from storing kit, putting up posters, word of mouth publicity to organising and stewarding a whole session)
- More opportunities for socialization
- Feeling a bit more significant (people felt that events did not happen close to where they live)
- Parents seeing what they could potentially do as a group (not needing services to deliver – they can do this themselves!)
- Feeling valued. Parents of Twinnell House have recognised how hard others are working to try and increase play and improve the space.
- Increased sense of belonging in outdoor space: *“We now know we have the right to play outside our building – we have the courage” (Somali mother, Croydon House)*
- Increased representation. As a direct result of organising playing out sessions, Somali women now represented on residents’ committee at Croydon House. One mother said, *“It is good – they now listen”*.

- Reassurance children are getting more exercise and outdoor play: *“It’s a massive relief for children to be outside. We now know that children are happier where they live, joining in, feeling together”*. (Somali dad, Twinnell House)
- Feeling a bit more significant (people felt before that events did not happen close to where they live)
- More parents starting to think about the importance of free outdoor play: *“Before this [Playing Out], I didn’t know how important it was for children to play outside. Most of the mums, they don’t know it’s important”* (Croydon House resident). Parents seeing children play for 3 hours and still wanting more, without equipment
- Feeling that someone cares and is fighting their corner (e.g. for improved play space at Twinnell House).
- Linking parents with other services such as public health outreach team.

Positive outcomes for wider community

There is evidence of the following:

- Some evidence of cultural/racial barriers starting to be broken down
- Stronger links have been made with local community hubs
- Visitors to the area have seen playing out in action and even joined in
- Inadequate play facilities at Twinnell House have been highlighted to Bristol City Council and Mears, and pressure has been put on these organisations to improve this.

One of the Knightstone community empowerment officers in Hartcliffe said, *“Certainly this project – in partnership with the Sustrans Street Pockets project – has had a positive impact on building community cohesion and a sense of empowerment (and provided an inspiring demonstration of hopeful possibility) for residents in Fulford Rd. The stories of this have had a positive impact across the Hartcliffe area”*. During the project, three further streets in Hartcliffe have shown an interest in starting their own sessions.

Conclusions

1. Residents in areas of severe deprivation are likely to need good, empowering, sustained practical support from locally-based, trusted organisations.

“Resilience and sustainability are closely linked and it is vital that Playing Out is integrated with partners that are locally embedded in the community in order to ensure its principles and values can inspire and motivate local residents”.

“Often residents in the community of Hartcliffe have a lot on their plates. They are often dealing with challenging family circumstances, ongoing health issues, debt or money concerns, lack of basic shelter or facilities. If we look at Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, we can identify that if a community is functioning largely from the lowest level, it is unlikely that everyday life will facilitate space or capacity to organise Playing Out sessions”.

2. There are very positive outcomes for communities, even from a more supported version of ‘playing out’.

Certainly this project – in partnership with the Sustrans Street Pockets project - has had a positive impact on building community cohesion and a sense of empowerment (and provided an inspiring demonstration of hopeful possibility) for residents in Fulford Road. The stories of this have had a positive impact across the Hartcliffe area: “I want to do what they did down Fulford” (Local Mum, Tewther Road).

3. The ‘playing out’ model cannot address the serious barriers to children’s everyday freedom that exist, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

“Until the area sees the introduction of the 20mph speed limit, and some serious speeding interventions it is unlikely that attitudes to play will be able to dramatically shift from the current fear based perspective. There are still a lot of barriers that do not enable safe playing out, which must be addressed”.
(Knightstone officer)

Future plans for estates project

Whilst not the long-term answer, it does look like the ‘playing out’ model (or an adaptation of it) could help provide a temporary solution and start to address many of these social and attitudinal barriers in estates, in the same way it does on residential streets. We found that the idea of ‘playing out’ sessions appealed because people like the idea of the space being safe from cars and showing that the session is organized and supervised. A bonus to the layout of the estates was that, when a session happened, those indoors could easily hear/see it happening and come out to join in.

However, in order to enable children to play out safely as part of their normal lives, a joined-up approach is needed - including investment in spaces and vast reduction in traffic speeds - to ensure all children in the city have safe access to suitable play space on their doorstep.

During 2016-18 we will build on this project with funding secured from the People’s Health Trust to enable more playing out in Lawrence Hill and Redcliffe. We will also continue to share the learning from this work nationally, Bristol-wide and locally between residents.