

## Managing Streets During Lockdown (Part 3): Playing Out

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Third in our series on streets during the pandemic. After an update on government guidance and policy, we looked at the importance of play for children and exercise at this time, and consider how streets can be managed to support this, particularly during lock down release phases.

### Main points:

- The Government has changed it's attitude. It now sees streets as being about more than travel – and is calling on pavement widening, closures to motor vehicles and much more so they are welcoming and safe for pedestrians and cyclists.
- The Covid-19 recovery needs to be achieved without an increase in carbon emissions. This means less motorised travel.
- Streets can acknowledge that they exist for children simply by looking less like they are designed for cars. But children do not need a lot of fancy equipment and physical changes to the street in order to play, they just need the space to be free from fast moving through traffic.
- Seeing children playing and others using a street for non travel will encourage the fearful to emerge from lockdown and re-join their communities. The street can provide a space for healing, for turning once again towards hopefully, active lives.
- Play Streets use people to keep moving vehicles out or slow, they do not physically change the street. School Streets and wider neighbourhood initiatives use signs and physical changes such as bollards or barriers rather than people to manage through traffic. Both can help change attitudes to the legitimate use of streets.
- People can exercise in the street without relying on expensive gyms or home equipment. Creative approaches to risk management and promotion of street exercise could help many more people to health and fitness. Gareth Jones' idea that street furniture or features of buildings/slopes can also be used for exercise and even play if risk assessed – potential for 'activating' an area for use in this way. Idea of ensuring design of streets can acknowledge their use by children. All those white lines down the middle of the road are very car oriented but could they have a dual use when roads are used as play streets...?

### Notes from speaker presentations:

#### Dan Johnson, Placemaking

The risk of a second peak is a constant challenge that policy makers and those involved in the design and use of public space face. There is less money for investment both in the public and private sectors, and public realm schemes are likely to need to be jointly funded by both sectors going forward.

Whenever there has been a crisis – the Spanish flu, Great Depression, World War, carbon emissions have continued to rise during recovery without general concern about this. The crises today is exceptional. There is more willingness to tackle climate change and the economy will need to recover without increasing carbon use. This presents potential to use space differently and carry out more trips by cycling or walking. Time has given people the opportunity to reassess their life and lifestyles.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has updated the Traffic Management Act 2004 in light of COVID-19. It now clearly supports the use of public space to encourage a healthy and active lifestyle. This is a huge opportunity for road space to be reallocated for active travel. It also expects measures to be implemented swiftly, within weeks, not years as we are more used to. There is now a real opportunity to test these ideas and bring forward such schemes.

The list of things Government says it want us to deliver in the Act is similar to things many session participants have been wanting to do for years such as widening footways, pop up cycle facilities, 20mph speed limits, pedestrian and cycle zones, closing roads to motor traffic, additional cycle parking, bringing forward permanent public realm improvements. This is hugely helpful update.

The Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has also published guidance on temporary changes for high streets and town centres. Again this calls for footways to be widening, reducing traffic speeds, suspending parking, minimising pinch points etc.

Lots of projects to change streets are being implemented now. For example, the City of London is applying time closures on most key routes to create space for cycling and walking. Changes are being proposed for local streets too, coming forward from councils, consultants and communities.

### **Dinah Bornat, ZCD Architects**

Six months ago a council highway officer said to Dinah – I don't understand what play and child friendly streets had to do with me. Perceptions have changed now and street play really is seen as relevant for all.

Children's independent mobility has been massively curtailed by this crisis. This comes on top of historical problems of thinking of play as something that has to happen in a specific, designated place – the playground, unsafe links to these and schools reducing independent travel and streets which are thought of by all as the prevail of the motor vehicle.

Children through play, for example the learn to cycle by having space to test out turns and stops, they don't naturally cycle in straight lines. They need freedom to use streets to practice so they can look around and balance – this will make them better cyclists for life.

There is now an opportunity for streets to help people heel, gain confidence and transition back to non-lockdown lives. If cars don't dominate, if restrictions on use and freedom to use streets for more than travel is increased, streets can provide space without conflict to aid children and adults to cope and recover.

Walking freely down the middle of streets has been a novel and enlightening experience for many. Policy and guidance needs to be reassessed and highlight how young children can move safely and

easily around the public realm, even if not independently. It is unfair that even the few cars around feel and act as if they own the street, taking away opportunities for children to experience of freedom and fun. Things are not going to be the same for children once they go back to school and space at home is massively constricted – hence the space in between i.e. streets is critical for them.

What can we do to improve things now? We need to ensure people see others in the street, playing, being calm and relaxed. This will help the most fearful move out of lockdown. We should use street closures to experiment and learn how things work. Play might be a good way of orchestrating communities meeting up again as lockdown relaxes. Better than alcohol fuelled street parties?

### **Alice Ferguson, Playing Out**

The lockdown has had a major impact on children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who don't have private space such as back gardens. Playing Out is campaigning for clearer messaging from the government on guidelines for children, as all current guidance on being out and exercising has been very adult focused.

Children exercise through play. They were not getting enough exercise before lockdown, only 1 in 5 achieving the minimum 1 hour a day as recommended by the government. They certainly are not exercising enough now because they don't have space for unorganised play. Play has become shrunk down and contained to playgrounds, which they often cannot get to, and which are now out of bounds. Children's space should be outside their front doors – the space they can reach immediately, which should not be dominated by traffic.

Play Streets were a response to these historic problems. They simply took away the fast through traffic and children had space to play. Slow cars accessing buildings on the street and parked cars could stay. Children did not need lots of equipment or organising. They want to play out, the only thing stopping them is traffic.

Play Streets started in Bristol, was then taken up by Hackney and are now over 70 in the country. They are a flexible, simple way for communities to reclaim space for themselves. They have the immediate benefit of increasing play, but can also bring communities together, increases trust and confidence.

The temporary changes introduced by Play Streets can be a catalyst for larger cultural and physical changes. Hopefully the Government announcements and funding will help local authorities make changes including filtered streets and low traffic neighbourhoods. But these are not going to happen overnight or equally in all areas. So it is very important that we also find ways to change driver behaviour, to tackle speeding and say 'drivers should give way to pedestrians and children playing' not think they own the road and have priority rights over it. Politicians should feel more confident to do this now. Playing Out running a [petition](#) calling for this.

The School Street model in UK has been inspired by Play Streets. Play Streets are a great way of getting people to see streets in a different way and school started asking if they could run Play Streets after schools. Playing Out and Sustrans have published guidance on relationship between school streets and play streets.

What is the difference between play streets, school streets, low traffic neighbourhoods, filtered permeability? Do they all simply redistributing priority, space, time and given to through motor traffic and other uses including children. Maybe one of the differences is that the Play Street is resident led, School Streets led by schools and wider area projects wider community and local authority led.

Play Streets don't involve physical changes but can help change attitudes and understanding. They use people at the ends of the play street to stop or slow vehicles. School Streets and other neighbourhood projects may use physical elements to take the place of the people and manage access and driver behaviour.

Changing behaviours in a neighbourhood, for example through a cluster of play streets and physical changes in low traffic neighbourhoods needs to relate to good network management, so the whole area works with better conditions everywhere, whether a street can be closed or not.

There needs to be a mental shift in who streets are for. There is opportunity now to hold onto the good things we are experiencing to make our streets safer in the long term.

### **John Allison, StreetGym**

We don't need special spaces for exercise, nor do we need to buy home exercise equipment that we then do not use. We can use the street and street furniture to help keep fit. Ensuring we are using clean air areas and are safe, and will not block others using the street, we can climb walls, balance on lines, swing under cycle stands, run up stairs etc.

Some street elements could be tweaked, retrofitted, to make them more useful for exercise. Worries over insurance, safety and damage prevent people from using the built environment for exercise. But a more pragmatic attitude could help make the most of our public spaces and support people to be healthier. We need a shift in thinking, a bit of imagination and creativity to help us move away from focusing on risk and liability.

Local authorities could usefully identify areas with less pollutions and provide clean air tags for these zones. They could then look for bits of street furniture in these areas to turn into fitness work stations and promote their use through videos, QR codes etc. this kind of imaginative approach could change attitudes to what streets are for and acceptance of a range of active uses.

### **Resources mentioned:**

1 DfT Guidance <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19>

2 MHCLG Guidance <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safer-public-places-urban-centres-and-green-spaces-covid-19/3-identification-of-issues-in-urban-centres-and-green-spaces>

3 Guide to school play streets [https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Step-by-step-guide\\_final-screen.pdf](https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Step-by-step-guide_final-screen.pdf)

4 How to reduce commercial traffic <https://www.newwestend.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/East-Mayfair-Commercial-Vehicle-Reduction-Programme-Evaluation-Report.pdf>