Tackling Loneliness with Resident-Led Play Streets

Professor Alison Stenning
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Contents

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Alison Stenning, Professor of Social and Economic Geography at Newcastle University, on the basis of research developed with Alice Ferguson and Ingrid Skeels, co-directors of Playing Out. We are grateful to the local Playing Out activators, organisers and participants who completed our questionnaire and, especially, to the ten of those who agreed to be interviewed by Alison to expand upon their responses and talk more fully about the potential for resident-led play streets to tackle loneliness in their communities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Loneliness and Playing Out

In the government's 2018 strategy, A Connected Society, loneliness was identified as a growing social injustice with public health impacts equivalent to smoking and obesity. In recent years, loneliness has become the focus of nationwide campaigns to facilitate more connections between people in their everyday lives, in the belief that being more connected alleviates loneliness and its impacts. Research by government departments and by campaign groups suggests that connections between neighbours are important to reduce the experience of loneliness and that the scale of the neighbourhood is a key place for action to tackle loneliness.

Playing Out is a UK-wide grassroots movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out in their neighbourhoods. At the heart of this movement is 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'. Over 1000 streets in nearly 80 UK local authority areas have used this model to play out in their communities. The government's strategy and supporting evidence draw attention to a number of approaches for tackling loneliness, including physical activity, community sharing, and befriending, all of which are integral to this model.

The Research

The research incorporated a survey distributed by Playing Out to all known street organisers and activators, cascaded to neighbours, and promoted on a number of Playing Out Facebook groups, locally and nationally. This resulted in 61 responses, which include not just answers that could be quantified but also extensive narrative comments. In an attempt to explore the experiences of residents who live on streets that play out but who do not participate in playing out sessions, a small-scale survey was distributed to every house on 4 'playing out' streets in North Tyneside; this elicited 8 responses which present a helpful if limited perspective. The questionnaire research was followed up by phone interviews with 10 respondents from 8 UK local authorities; all were active organisers and participants of playing out on their own streets and, in some cases, in their wider communities.

Key Findings

- Respondents were divided as to the impact of play streets on the **alleviation of loneliness**; few (just 8.6%, 5 respondents) disagreed with the statement "Playing out on my street has helped to alleviate loneliness" but more were undecided (46.6%) than in agreement (44.8%).
- Although many respondents noted that they were motivated to get involved in playing out sessions to see children playing safely and freely outside, responses which drew attention to the desire to **meet their neighbours and build a community** were as numerous.
- The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that they **knew more people** because of playing out sessions (95%), that **their street felt friendlier and safer** (86.7%), that **their children had made new friends** (71.7%), and that they felt **they belonged more** on their street (91.7%).
- 96.6% of respondents reported saying **hello to their neighbours** more frequently since their street started playing out and 77.6% also recorded an increase in **stopping to chat** to their neighbours.
- Respondents drew attention to their experiences of **real connections** being created on streets as they started to play out.

- 60-70% of respondents reported that since they started participating in playing out sessions, they had at least one or two more neighbours who they would **trust** to hold spare keys, lend/borrow tools and equipment, feed pets, and look after their children.
- A number of respondents also suggested that new relationships with their neighbours meant that **the street felt safer** as they talked to each other about crimes in their neighbourhood.
- There seemed to be a strong recognition of the **intergenerational nature** of these new relationships, not only between children and parents but also between children, other adults, and older neighbours.
- The types of streets involved in playing out sessions are as varied as Britain's urban landscapes in terms of **built form and social context**: all these features – and many more – shape the scale, scope and nature of connections built between neighbours.
- For some streets, the presence of **other social infrastructures**, such as parks, allotments, halls, and green spaces, facilitated connections between playing out sessions.
- Street spaces were complemented in many instances by **online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp** groups which often expanded well beyond their initial function and beyond the families that regularly play out.
- More than a third of respondents reported that playing out sessions had led them and their neighbours to get involved in **other community activities**.
- The 'core' of playing out participants was largely made up of **families with children under 10**. Almost all respondents reported the presence of children between 3 and 10 years.
- Most streets see **between 10 and 30 children playing out** at each session.
- Asked whether those attending street play sessions were representative of their neighbourhood in terms of **age, ethnicity and gender**, most (around 80% for each category) agreed, at least to some extent.
- **Children of different ages and attending different schools** met and played together as their streets played out.
- These new friendships extended **beyond playing out sessions** and supported a number of **wider connections** in their everyday lives (e.g. at school, in clubs).
- Some respondents also reported cases of **children on their streets who did not seem to be allowed to play out**.
- A handful of respondents noted the **relative absence of men**, including fathers.
- There was a **preponderance of women** amongst respondents and street organisers. This possibly reflected, amongst other things, the continuing dominance of women as primary carers for young children, gendered working patterns, and gendered cultures.
- Some respondents noted the particular value of playing out sessions for **fathers** who often had weaker local connections.
- For **single parents or those often home alone**, the presence of known neighbours was often seen as very important.
- For **new parents**, the proximity and familiarity of neighbours to hang out with seemed to make meeting new friends feel easier and safer.
- Of those **respondents who had lived on their street for less than 2 years**, all felt that playing out sessions had helped them meet their neighbours.
- 59% of respondents reported that **adult neighbours without children** do join in, often taking on stewarding roles or in special sessions.
- Adults in the **35-54** age category were reported to attend by almost all respondents, with significant numbers also reporting those between 18 and 34 and 55 to 74. Just 7 (11.7%) of respondents reported that those over 75 normally took part.
- Respondents gave examples of **older neighbours** who had been regular and active supporters and participants.

- Many recognised the **barriers to participation for older people**; for this reason, many respondents try hard to encourage older people to join.
- Some respondents reported that the participation of older people was sometimes facilitated by visits from **grandchildren**.
- When asked directly in the questionnaire what the **barriers to participation** might be, respondents reiterated many of the same points: for example, that playing out is seen as something for children, that neighbours are wary of and/or daunted by coming out to meet strangers, that some are unaware of the events happening as a result of issues with communication, that for some there may be additional cultural and/or language barriers, and that some residents are house-bound, ill, or struggle with mobility.
- A number of respondents, especially in interview, stressed quite **how much work was involved in setting up playing out sessions** on a street and keeping it going.
- Parents and children are at times **too busy** with other activities to participate.
- For a few, the **issue of stigma and fear** around adults without children was identified as a barrier to participation.
- Some neighbours simply **don't want to participate**.
- Some respondents highlighted examples where residents' non-participation reflected an apparent desire to maintain **a level of privacy and a distance** from their neighbours.
- **Non-participation does not necessarily mean exclusion** from the wider networks and benefits of playing out.
- Playing out sessions enable children who likely did not know each other previously to play together, to connect and to start to develop friendships. **Play**, then, appears to be critical to the relationships children build through playing out.
- There are many examples of **adults playing** during playing out sessions, both with children and without. Respondents highlighted particular examples where those perhaps reticent or unlikely to join in were drawn out by the possibility of play.
- A number of respondents gave examples of **intergenerational conversations around play**; older neighbours share stories and practices of their childhood play.
- Play might also be offputting for some, reflecting the potential for noise and disruption.
- The **Playing Out/play streets model** requires adults to be present and responsible for their children and it relies on volunteer stewards to secure the Road Closed barriers. These two features in particular mean that the model encourages adult presence and adult connections too.
- Most (65.5%) playing out streets organise **frequent and regular sessions**, either monthly or fortnightly. This means that participating neighbours meet and play together regularly, much more than, for example, one-off street parties.
- Some questionnaire respondents acknowledged that they felt lonely and those that reported they sometimes or often felt lonely were more likely to agree that playing out sessions had helped to **alleviate loneliness** on their street.
- Interview respondents were more **reluctant to label their neighbours as lonely**, recognising the stigma and shame sometimes attached to such a label.
- Playing out sessions can allow **connections to flourish** even amongst neighbours who have already rich family and social lives and it seems to complement these.
- The **act of organising** a play street can add a sense of purpose and connection, which may in itself be key to alleviating or even protecting against loneliness

Conclusions

- There is strong evidence that playing out sessions/play streets create new and important connections between neighbours of all ages.
- These connections support everyday contact and conviviality, friendships between adults and children, the exchange of help of all kinds, and a range of other neighbourhood activities.

- The positive impacts of playing out spill over not just into other neighbourly activities but also into times and spaces between playing out sessions.
- These new relationships can connect neighbours in vulnerable situations.
- The connections made are intergenerational and also develop between children of different ages.
- Neighbours say that they feel increasingly at home on their streets and increasingly secure, since they have started playing out sessions.
- Play and playing out are important in shaping these new connections, because of the particular nature and format of the activities that take place.
- The evidence presented here is clear that playing out sessions facilitate regular and multi-stranded connections between neighbours. It is a powerful initiative and there is a strong case for support for resident-led temporary play streets from government, local authorities and campaign groups.
- The value of playing out sessions can not be reduced to making connections, powerful though this is, as opportunities for free play, physical activity, new skills and independence for children are also key drivers for parents and neighbours.
- Much of the work involved in organising play streets rests on the efforts and energy of small groups of neighbours and hardworking activists locally, and also nationally within Playing Out itself, and these groups can not be expected to bear the burden of combatting loneliness.

Recommendations

- For government and national funding bodies to recognise and value the contribution of this bottom-up, resident-led movement in tackling loneliness, isolation and disconnection in neighbourhoods and to provide policy and financial support to local authorities to enable them to better support resident-led play streets/playing out sessions;
- For local authorities, to similarly recognise and value the contribution of playing out sessions and to follow best practice in implementing resident-friendly play street policies;
- For local authorities, housing associations and other local or community groups, to allocate resources (financial and otherwise) to provide the empowering, hands-on support needed for residents to initiate, develop and sustain playing out sessions on their streets or estates;
- For local authorities, housing associations and other local or community groups, to particularly target support to more mixed neighbourhoods (with more socially and ethnically diverse communities) and those living with material disadvantage, where organising play streets may be more demanding and more time-consuming, but all-the-more necessary;
- For the Playing Out movement to communicate to the public and to stakeholders that ‘playing out’ is not just about play and not just for children by highlighting how promoting play on streets is directly associated with an increase in neighbourliness, a sense of belonging, and safer, friendlier streets;
- For the Playing Out movement to lobby local authorities to offer street activators more support in establishing and maintaining playing out sessions on their streets;
- For the Playing Out movement to create a list of ‘top tips’ for residents to support them in overcoming barriers to participation on their streets;
- For researchers and for the Playing Out movement to work to build a stronger evidence base around playing out and men; playing out and single parents; playing out and mixed communities; and playing out and social housing;
- For local residents, to identify other ‘add-on’ activities, such as litter picking, book swaps, plant sales and gardening, that might give neighbours without young children a greater incentive to join.

1. TACKLING LONELINESS WITH RESIDENT-LED PLAY STREETS?

In the government's 2018 strategy, A Connected Society, loneliness was identified as a "growing social injustice which sits alongside childhood obesity and mental wellbeing as one of the greatest public health challenges of our time".[1] The public health impacts of loneliness are seen to be equivalent to the negative impacts of smoking and obesity. In recent years, loneliness has been the focus not only of government strategies but also campaigns by charities and other organisations, such as the Campaign to End Loneliness[2] and the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness,[3] and a whole range of initiatives from chatty buses and friendly benches to talking campaigns such as #BeMoreUs.[4]

Although the government's strategy argues that "loneliness doesn't discriminate", there is considerable evidence[5] that particular populations are more at risk, such as those with disabilities, special needs, or poor physical or mental health (and their families), new parents, carers, and those who have recently moved home (especially if in the context of bereavement or separation). There is also considerable evidence of loneliness amongst children and young people.[6] Many of these are also groups that have been particularly hard-hit by cuts to benefits and to statutory services and for whom access to spaces to meet and find support are likely to have diminished in the context of austerity.[7]

Playing Out is a UK-wide grassroots movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out in their neighbourhoods. At the heart of this movement is 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'. In this report, we use both 'playing out' and 'play streets'. Over 1000 streets in nearly 80 UK local authority areas have used this model to play out in their communities. The government's strategy and supporting evidence draw attention to a number of approaches for tackling loneliness, including physical activity, community sharing, and befriending, all of which are integral to this model.

Play has long been identified as an activity that facilitates connections between people, young and old. Most children make friends through play, of various kinds, and play-like activities (hanging out, chatting, sharing hobbies and interests, for example) are also important sites for friendships and relationships for adults.

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[1] Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DDCMS] (2018) *A Connected Society - A Strategy for Tackling Loneliness* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/750909/6.4882_DCMS_Loneliness_Strategy_web_Update.pdf

[2] The Campaign to End Loneliness (https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/) focuses on connections in older age, in the context of wider research and campaigning around loneliness.

[3] The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, founded in the name of murdered MP Jo Cox, was established to further public understanding of and policy responses to the 'loneliness crisis' https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness_commission.

[4] https://bemoreus.org.uk/

[5] DDCMS (2018); What Works Wellbeing (2018) *What do we know about tackling loneliness?* https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2018/10/briefing-tackling-loneliness-Oct-2018.pdf

[6] Action for Children (2017) *It Starts with Hello: A Report Looking into the Impact of Loneliness in Children, Young People and Families* https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/9724/action_for_children_it_starts_with_hello_report__november_2017_lowres.pdf

[7] Stenning, A. and Hall, S. (2018) Loneliness and the politics of austerity, *Discover Society*, 62, https://discoversociety.org/2018/11/06/on-the-frontline-loneliness-and-the-politics-of-austerity/

The desire to build an evidence base around playing out sessions and loneliness and to identify strategies to develop playing out sessions in particular ways that might alleviate loneliness is at the heart of this research. We do not argue that the primary purpose of playing out sessions is to tackle loneliness nor that it be seen as the solution to neighbourhood loneliness, but that the evidence presented here might highlight the value of everyday, neighbourhood connections and the place of play in connecting communities.

As we discuss in more detail below (see section 5.7), research respondents were reluctant to talk explicitly about loneliness and, particularly, to identify their neighbours as lonely, but they engaged in many ways and in considerable depth with related ideas of connection, belonging and community. For this reason, we explore all these aspects of the developing relationships between neighbours that connect to the experience of playing out.

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2. OUR NEIGHBOURS AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

In 2018, a Skipton Building Society survey[8] concluded that almost three quarters (73%) of respondents didn't know their neighbours' names and half didn't feel part of a 'neighbourly community'. More than half of respondents barely said a word to their neighbours and 68% described them as "strangers". Just over half (51%) of respondents had no idea what the children next door were called.

Recent reviews of related literatures highlight the health, wellbeing and economic benefits of knowing our neighbours. In *Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing*,[9] What Works Wellbeing cite research that demonstrates that knowing your neighbours promotes social cohesion, increases social capital and trust, increases social networks, positively affects sense of belonging and pride in a community, increases physical activity, and improves community members' skills and knowledge. Research published in 2019 by The Big Lunch and Happy City[10] identifies neighbourhood connections as "a protective layer for our collective wellbeing" and drew on the 2017/18 ONS UK Community Life Survey that "found that people who chat to their neighbours on most days are more than three times more likely (89%) to have a strong sense of belonging than those that never speak to their neighbours (23%)".

In 2019, the Office for National Statistics expanded on the 2017/18 Community Life Survey to highlight issues around loneliness and found that lower levels of trust in neighbours were linked to higher levels of reported loneliness.[11] This was also reflected in feelings of belonging: those who report a weaker sense of belonging in their neighbourhood were more likely to say they feel lonely often/always. There was also a relationship between the frequency with which respondents chatted to their neighbours, with 15% of adults who said they never chatted to their neighbours reporting feeling lonely often/always, compared to just 4% and 6% of those who chatted to their neighbours more than once a month or even less

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[8] More than half of Britons describe their neighbours as 'strangers', *The Independent* (29.5.2018) https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/britons-neighbours-strangers-uk-community-a8373761.html

[9] Work Works Wellbeing (2018) *Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing: A Full Review* https://whatworkswellbeing.org/product/places-spaces-people-and-wellbeing/

[10] The Big Lunch/Happy City (2019) *Closing the Distance Between Us* https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/sites/default/files/closing_the_distance_report.pdf

[11] DCMS (2019) *Community Life Survey: Focus on Loneliness 2017-18* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771482/Community_Life_Survey_Focus_on_Loneliness_201718.pdf
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than once a month. The report also highlighted that younger people were less likely to chat to their neighbours than older people.

The Big Lunch and Happy City report noted that the majority of us would like to be involved in neighbourhood projects and build connections to our neighbours, but were reluctant to do so for fear of being seen as intrusive, because we rarely see our neighbours, because we don't have a reason to talk to them, and because we are unsure that we have anything in common with them.

In the context of these reports, the Campaign to End Loneliness and Joseph Rowntree Foundation,[12] amongst others, have highlighted the value of "neighbourhood approaches to loneliness". The neighbourhood is seen as a manageable scale of action and reflects a sense that many people, especially older people, spend a considerable amount of time in their neighbourhoods. The connections between place and loneliness have long been identified as important and recent research underlines the importance of community, the built environment (including the role of the car), and attachment to place in shaping experiences of loneliness[13] and and streets are seen as key spaces of everyday encounter.[14]

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3. PLAY, PLAYING OUT AND LONELINESS

What might the connection between play, neighbourhoods and loneliness be? Much of the thinking that sits behind this project, and the wider research it connects to, engages with the work of Donald Winnicott, who had a deep and longstanding interest in the connections between play, relationships and environments. For Winnicott, play rests on and builds relationships in a 'potential space' in which we can take risks, engage with others, move beyond our comfort zones, and make connections. Play is "an organization for the initiation of relationships, and so enables social contacts to develop"; children, in particular, "do not easily make friends apart from play."[15]

Academic literatures demonstrate, furthermore, that play itself and spending time outdoors are critical for the formation of a sense of belonging and for relationships to wider communities.[16] Play is often the means through which children (and adults) learn to make sense of their environments[17] and play encourages us to take notice and make connections

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[12] See https://campaigntoendloneliness.org/guidance/structural-enablers/ and https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/Loneliness_briefing_SUMMARY.pdf

[13] Corcoran, R. and Marshall, G. (2017) From lonely cities to prosocial places, in Sagan, O. and Miller, E. (eds.) *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, Routledge.

[14] Hubbard, P. and Lyon, D. (2018) Streetlife: the shifting sociologies of the street, *The Sociological Review* 66/5, 937-951; Bornat, D. (2016) *Housing Design for Community Life*, https://issuu.com/zcdarchitects/docs/housingdesignforcommunitylife

[15] Winnicott, D. (1991 [1964]) Why children play, in *The Child, The Family and The Outside World*, Penguin.

[16] Gill, T. (2007) If you go down to the woods today: why nature and adventure matter to children and young people, in Brown, F. and Taylor, C. (eds.) *Foundations of Playwork*, Open UP; Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's Right to Play*, Bernard van Leer Foundation http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/BvLF-IPAWorkingPaper-Childrens-Right-to-Play-Dec2010f.pdf; Prisk, C. and Cusworth, H. 2018 *From Muddy Hands and Dirty Faces to Higher Grades and Happy Places: Outdoor Learning and Play at Schools around the World*, https://outdoorclassroomday.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Muddy-hands-report-full.pdf

[17] Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's Right to Play* Bernard van Leer Foundation.
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to the people and places around us.[18] In all of these ways, play can be seen as catalyst for community, through the importance of space, trust, freedom and, often, intergenerationality.[19] Ongoing research and activism around play argues "that children and their play are not separate from other aspects of community life" and that "more people playing out more of the time in more places can improve community cohesion and strengthen intergenerational relationships".[20]

Playing Out is a national resident-led organisation leading and supporting a campaign for children's freedom to play in the spaces of their everyday lives, on their doorsteps and in their communities. At its heart is a resident-led, bottom-up model for regular, temporary closures of residential streets for neighbours to play and meet. The Playing Out or play streets model rests on a number of principles. Closures usually last between 2 and 3 hours and take place, usually, fortnightly or monthly. Local councils approve closure applications on the basis of a few legislative powers but in most instances residents themselves establish the closures using Road Closed signs, often attached to wheelie bins, and secure them with volunteer stewards drawn from the street. Residents are allowed to drive in and out of the street while it is closed, but must do so at a walking pace and guided by a steward. Through traffic is not permitted and will be diverted. Parents or carers must be present to be responsible for their own children, unless they are of an age where they could play out without supervision. Although some streets sometimes organise games and other activities, most of the time play is child-led and tends to involve bikes, scooters, balls, chalk, running, and all sorts of other imaginative, physical and exploratory play.

Through playing out sessions, streets temporarily become car-free, reducing the role of cars as barriers to connection on residential streets. The dominance of cars continues to "reduce the opportunity for people to get to know each other within their own neighbourhoods"[21] as it did when Donald Appleyard mapped social interactions on streets with different traffic loads forty years ago.[22]

The Playing Out model was created in 2009 by parents on a single street in Bristol and has been developed and promoted by a dedicated social enterprise, Playing Out CIC, and its network of local and national activists, to enable communities in local authorities across the UK to reclaim residential streets as safe spaces to meet and play. In the 10 years that the movement has been in existence, it has grown to involve over 1000 street communities in more than 80 UK local authority areas, drawing in an estimated 30,000 children and 15,000 adults. In the last year, the model has been recognised and promoted by more and more national governmental, community and sporting organisations which acknowledge the value of creating space for play on our doorsteps. In the words of Minister of State for Transport Michael Ellis MP, "play streets offer wonderful opportunities not merely for children, but for families and communities" (13.6.19).[23]

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[18] Play Wales (2015) *Play: Mental Health and Wellbeing* https://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/Play%20-%20mental%20health%20and%20wellbeing.pdf

[19] Play England (2011) *Creating Playful Communities* https://www.playengland.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ecp-final-report-final.pdf

[20] Tawil, B. (2018) Play sufficiency as an organising principle of community development, *Radical Community Work Journal,* 3/2, http://rcwjournal.org/ojs/index.php/radcw/article/view/56

[21] Corcoran, R. and Marshall, G. (2017) From lonely cities to prosocial places, in Sagan, O. and Miller, E. (eds.) *Narratives of Loneliness: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the 21st Century*, Routledge.

[22] Appleyard, D (1980) Livable streets: Protected neighborhoods? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 451/1, 106-117.

[23] https://playingout.net/uk-government-backs-play-streets/

Research by Playing Out in 2017[24] suggested that those involved see real benefits for their communities and their connections to them and in pilot research carried out with streets that play out in North Tyneside, particular forms of sociability that enabled emotional, social, and material flows between neighbours and facilitated a positive reinvigoration of relationships on streets were regularly identified.[25]

If we return to the barriers to neighbourhood connections that The Big Lunch and Happy City identified, we can see how 'playing out' creates a space for us to connect to our neighbours without being intrusive, as we meet on the street in public, enables us to see our neighbours as they emerge from their homes at an agreed time, gives us a playful purpose – or excuse – to spend time with our neighbours and to find out what we have in common with them. The remainder of this report focuses on the extent to which playing out sessions or play streets do indeed offer a means to overcome these barriers.

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4. THE RESEARCH

This research project incorporated a survey distributed by Playing Out, the national organisation, to all known street organisers and activators, cascaded to neighbours, and promoted on a number of Playing Out Facebook groups, locally and nationally. This resulted in 61 responses, which include not just answers that could be quantified but also extensive narrative comments. In an attempt to explore the experiences of residents who live on streets that play out but who do not participate in playing out sessions, a small-scale survey was distributed to every house on 4 'playing out' streets in North Tyneside; this elicited 8 responses which present a helpful if limited perspective. This questionnaire research was followed up by phone interviews with 10 respondents from 8 UK local authorities; all were active organisers and participants of playing out sessions on their own streets and, in some cases, in their wider communities. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 90 minutes, and most lasted around an hour. All were recorded, with consent, and transcribed for analysis.

The plans for the research, including the design of the questionnaires and the themes for the follow-up interviews, were developed collaboratively by the co-directors of Playing Out and Alison Stenning. Alison Stenning conducted all the interviews. The survey results and interview responses were discussed fully and Alison Stenning wrote the first draft of this report. Revisions to the report were made following conversations between Alison and the co-directors of Playing Out, so that this final report is a collaborative product.

This research builds on an earlier questionnaire circulated by Playing Out in 2016/17 and some preliminary research carried out in North Tyneside by Alison Stenning in 2017/18 which sought to explore how playing out participants imagined, understood and experienced ideas of community and neighbouring in the context of their street play sessions.[26]

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[24] https://playingout.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Playing-Out-Survey-Report-2017.pdf
[25] Stenning, A. 2018 *Potential Space? Play, Parents and Streets*, Paper presented at RGS-IBG Conference, Cardiff, https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/potential-space-play-parents-and-streets-a-blog-of-a-preliminary-paper/
[26] See footnotes 24 and 25 above.

5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1 The Experience of Loneliness

The level of reported loneliness was lower amongst the questionnaire respondents than among the general population; in 2017/18 45% of the adult population reported feeling lonely always/often, some of the time or occasionally,[27] but only 26.2% of all respondents reported feeling lonely sometimes or often. Many of these respondents also reported feeling isolated from others, left out and lacking companionship. Those who reported experiencing loneliness sometimes or often were more likely than those who didn't to have recently experienced adverse social circumstances, such as unemployment, ill-health (mental or physical), domestic abuse, or financial struggles, and this reflects the existing evidence about the intersection of these circumstances with the experience of loneliness.

Figure 1: How often do you feel lonely?

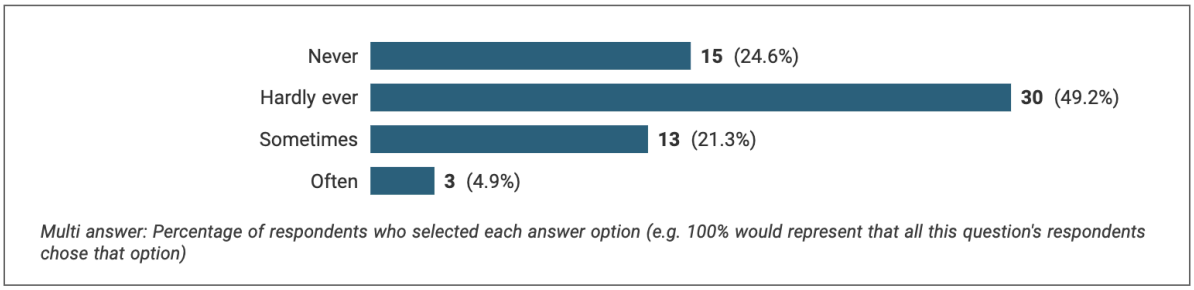
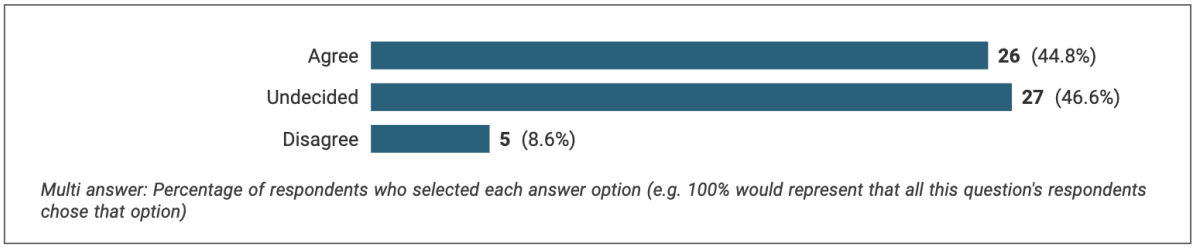


Figure 2: Playing out on my street has helped to alleviate loneliness



Respondents were divided as to the impact of playing out sessions on the alleviation of loneliness; few (just 8.6%, 5 respondents) disagreed with the statement "Playing out on my street has helped to alleviate loneliness" but more were undecided (46.6%) than in agreement (44.8%). The level of indecision may reflect definitional issues around loneliness and a reluctance to identify loneliness amongst neighbours (see section 5.7). Interestingly, those that reported they sometimes or often felt lonely were more likely to agree that playing out had helped to alleviate loneliness on their street (57.1% agreed, 42.9% undecided, 0% disagreed).

5.2 Playing Out and Building Connections

In their 2019 report, The Big Lunch and Happy City concluded that "we have a clear yearning for community". This yearning is evident in respondents' answers to the question "Why did you get involved in playing out?". Although many, as we might expect, noted that they wished to see children playing safely and freely outside, responses which drew attention to the desire to meet their neighbours and build a community were as numerous.

[27] DCMS (2019) *Community Life Survey: Focus on Loneliness 2017-18* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771482/Community_Life_Survey_Focus_on_Loneliness_201718.pdf.

"Because I loved the idea of reclaiming the street for play and meeting other families on the street."
"To meet more neighbours and enliven our street."
"Because I want to foster a community that I want to live in - one that looks out for each other."
"Wanted to play an active part in creating a friendly neighbourhood."
"I wanted to take part in something positive to bring some community cohesion to our street."
"I love bringing the community together. My neighbours are amazing and are close friends. It's great to bring the kids together outside our front door. I love it that there's such enthusiasm to get together as a community."
"I believe in the positive power of connecting as a community"
"To know my community, I was fairly new to the area and so my children can feel safer by recognising neighbours"

This desire to connect seemed to be fulfilled for the majority of respondents. The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that they knew more people because of playing out sessions, that their street felt friendlier and safer, that their children had made new friends, and that they felt they belonged more on their street. Interestingly, although still very positive, fewer respondents agreed that their children had made new friends than with the three other statements (71.7% against more than 86% for the other three). This may be because parents did not feel confident answering on behalf of their children (23.3% were undecided), or because some were friends with their neighbours before they started to play out, or indeed because the benefits of playing out are different for adults and children.

Figure 3: I know more people on my street because of playing out

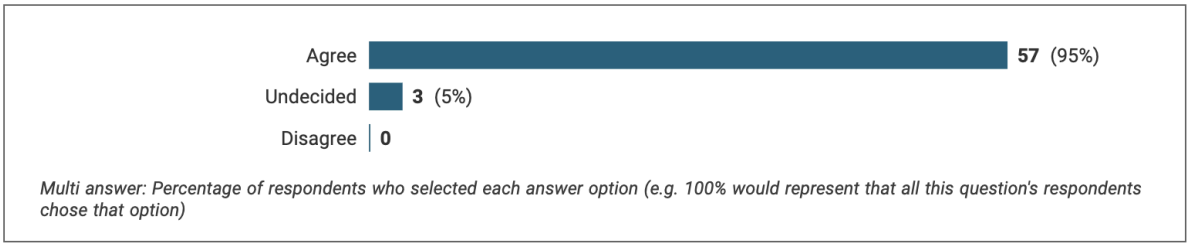


Figure 4: My street feels a friendlier, safer place to live through doing playing out

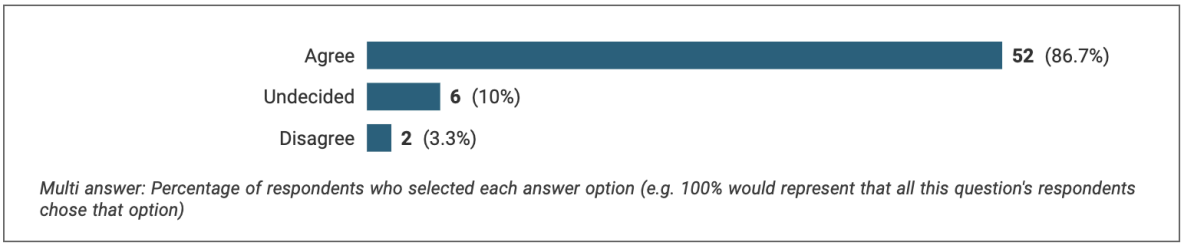


Figure 5: Children on my street have made new friends through doing playing out

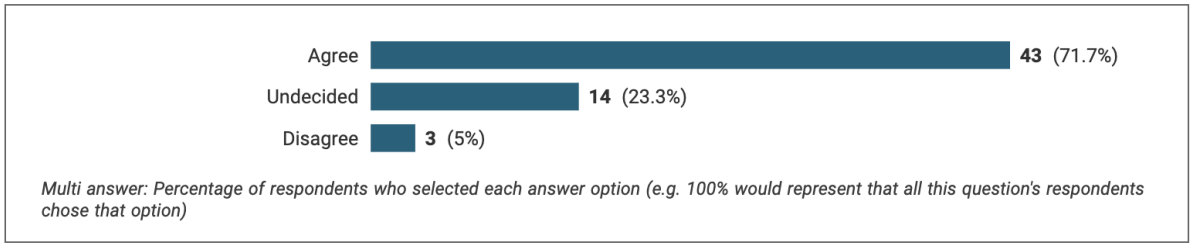
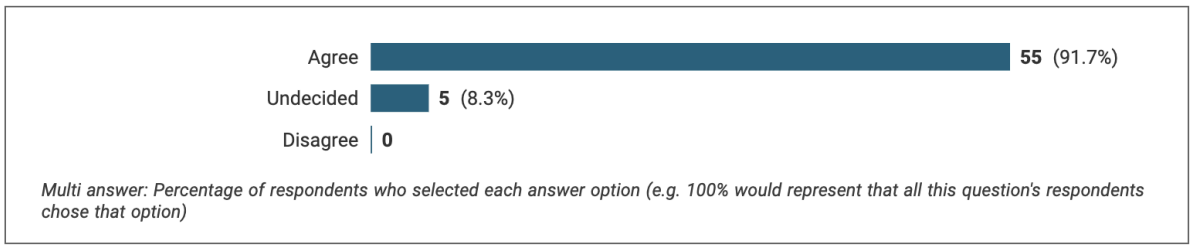


Figure 6: I feel I belong more in my neighbourhood because of playing out



In their text responses to the questions "How have your/your children's relationships with your neighbours changed since playing out started?", respondents offered dozens of examples of knowing more of their neighbours' names, saying hello to each other more often, approaching neighbours more often for chats, and developing friendships. The responses were very similar for children and parents and highlighted the intergenerational nature of these new relationships, as children and adults of varying ages got to know each other.

These experiences were reflected in the responses to the question asking what kinds of interactions had increased since respondents' streets had started playing out. An overwhelming 96.6% of respondents reported saying hello to their neighbours more frequently since their street started playing out; the vast majority (77.6%) also recorded an increase in actually stopping to chat to their neighbours. As we noted above, research from the Office for National Statistics saw a notable decrease in reported loneliness when respondents also reported that they chatted to their neighbours. Other research has concluded that simply recognising more people locally to say hello to has a real impact on wellbeing.[28]

The value of these new and expanded connections was illustrated by stories that emerged in interview and in the text responses in the questionnaire. Repeatedly, respondents drew attention to their experiences of real connections being created on streets as they started to play out. Names were attached to faces and then fleshed out with lives and histories, such that streets became animated by the people living and connecting on them:

> *"just once you get to know a couple of stories about that person suddenly they become a real person that you care about … just the second you know your neighbour's name they become a person, don't they? They become somebody, yeah?"*

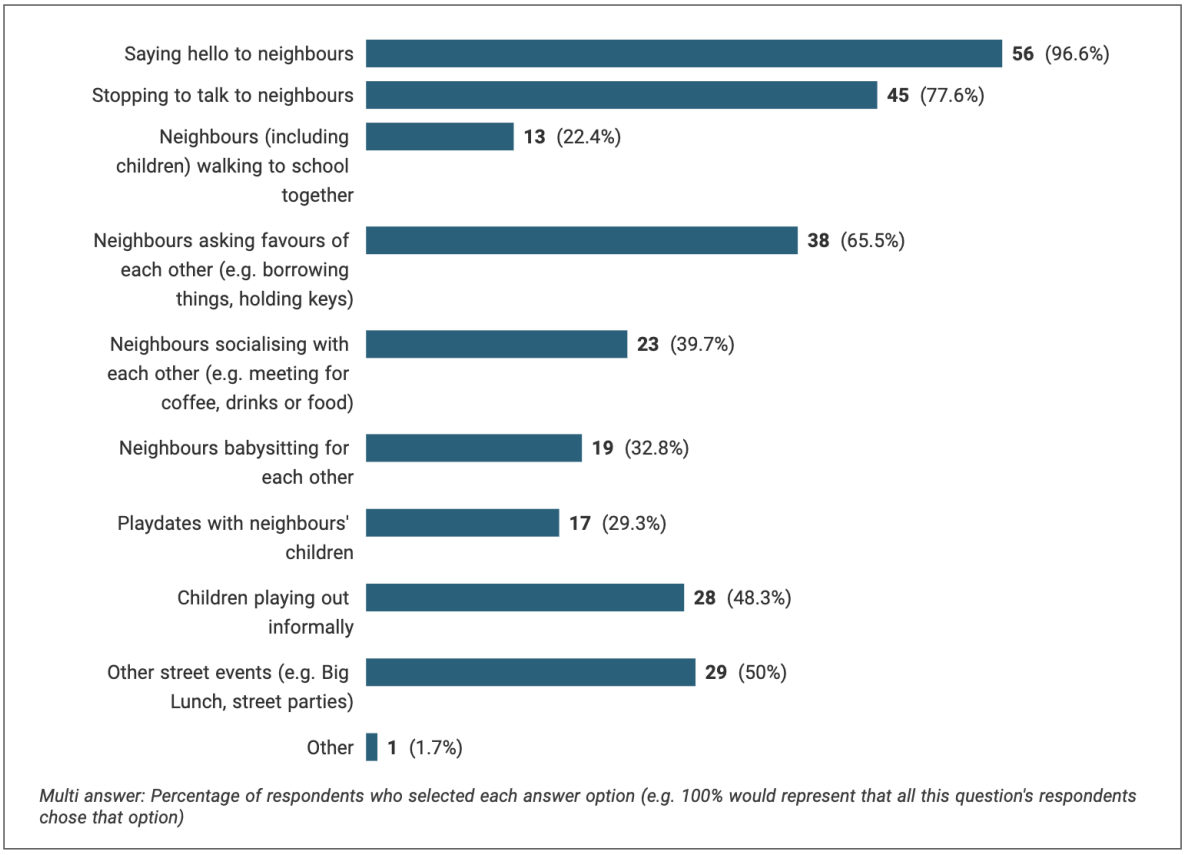
> *"it's become a street where it's natural for people to say hello or wave at each other … it's just normal, to be expected … so people stop being anonymous and the idea*

[28] Pearce, E. (2017) Participants' perspectives on the social bonding and well-being effects of creative arts adult education classes *Arts & Health* 9/1, 42-59.

… that people you know care about the street, erm, and that it's a living thing, it's not … it's not just a bunch of buildings and tarmac and it's, it's a, it's a living community"

"My children feel more like they belong to a community and take pride in where they live"

Figure 7: Have any of the following increased in frequency since your street started playing out? Please select all that apply and add your own examples.



Whilst real value was placed on these connections for themselves, respondents also narrated stories that explored the kinds of things that started to happen once neighbours had made stronger connections. As one respondent noted:

"People who were once acquaintances are now friends. People of all generations going out of their way to help each other with gestures both big and small."

60-70% of respondents reported that since they started playing out, they had at least one or two more neighbours who they would trust to hold spare keys, lend/borrow tools and equipment, feed pets, and look after their children.

Respondents highlighted particular examples of where new relationships between neighbours facilitated practical and diverse forms of help to be offered to each other:

"We share lawnmowers, walk each other's dogs, put out each other's bins when away, check up on older residents if they haven't been seen for a while, unscrew each other's jam jars, lend each other tools, take in postal deliveries for each other, hand down toys and bicycles to younger children in the neighbourhood … go down into neighbours' basements to look at fuse boxes when they are too frightened to…"

Many respondents reported that, much more frequently than before they started playing out, neighbours looked out for each other and looked to each other for help. A typical response was that "We knock on each other's doors when we need anything".

In interview, Fiona[29] explained the changing relationship with a neighbour who lived alone and had health issues, highlighting the particular value of these new connections for more vulnerable neighbours. After one occasion when Fiona's neighbour had been attended by an ambulance:

> *"she said that time, since playing out, I think she had four neighbours knock and check that she was OK, now before playing out that wouldn't have happened and she's only been to two sessions, right at the beginning … I think maybe people felt like since then that maybe it was OK to knock on her door and ask her and … I gave her my mobile number, and she said, you know, that's just made a difference that I now know you … she said before she didn't know anybody in the street and she's a lady living on her own who's poorly … now I just know that I can knock on somebody's door, that has made that big difference"*

This neighbour had lived on the street for more than 20 years yet attending just two playing out sessions had transformed her relationship with her neighbours.

A number of respondents also suggested that new relationships with their neighbours meant that the street felt safer as they talked to each other about crimes committed in their neighbourhood:

> *"Another major benefit of increased communication between residents thanks to Playing Out is that a number of crimes have been solved and we take active steps to communicate to keep our local area as safe as possible in conjunction with the local police"*

Eva explained that on her street:

> *"off the back of playing out, we did a neighbourhood watch group … as well cos you kind of like, you might as well if you're doing one you might as well do the other you're going round seeing everybody anyway."*

They set up a WhatsApp group and, as Eva continued:

> *"we all chat if somebody's looking dodgy coming up the street we'll warn the people further up the street through the group".*

Eva recognised that the use of WhatsApp might exclude older people (see section 5.5), who might feel particularly at risk of crime but she also noted that although her older neighbours might not come out to play, they felt some benefits anyway:

> *"they always say they like seeing them [the kids playing] and the kids make them feel safe because they're kind of protecting the street like a reverse thing like so if somebody's there if the kids are out it means, you know, Billy Burglar's not gonna come down the path because the risk of being seen and stuff, so they kind of see them as a, like a protection"*

Importantly, this 'protection' was mutual; Eva's older neighbours would also watch out, from their windows or gardens, for the children as they played out outwith organised sessions.

Many reported that their children also now knew more neighbours who they could call on: "They [my children] know who to go to for help if I'm not around". There seemed to be a strong recognition of the intergenerational nature of these new relationships, not only between children and parents but also between children, parents, and older neighbours. Respondents noted, for example, that "I have a couple of elderly neighbours who now ask

[29] All names have been changed.

for help when they need it" and "I will drive elderly residents somewhere if they need it". Others noted that these new intergenerational relationships were not just about offering and receiving help, but also shaped respect and care, which in turn enabled growing connections between generations as they began to value each other's contribution to the street:

"My children respect other people's property more now they know who lives there"

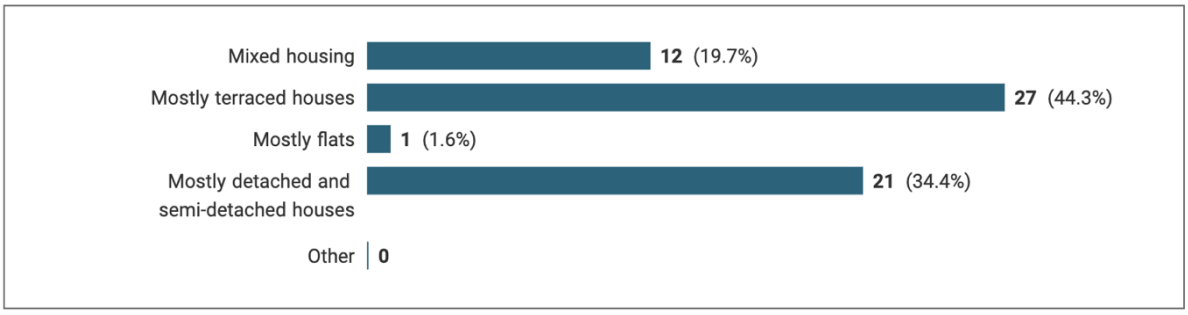
"They are like aunties and uncles to her"

There was considerable evidence, in the questionnaires and in interviews, of new and renewed connections between neighbours, which were multi-stranded, tangible and intangible, intergenerational, social and supportive, and much more. But there also appeared to be considerable variation in the kinds of connections made.

5.3 The Spaces of Connection

The types of streets involved in playing out sessions, and reported on in this research, are as varied as Britain's urban landscapes in terms of built form and social context. Over 90% of respondents (57) were owner-occupiers with just 4 respondents in other housing tenures. The lack of evidence from residents in social housing highlights another area for further research. There are a number of cases nationally where the Playing Out model has been used in neighbourhoods characterised by social housing; further research around play and connections in these sites would be useful.[30] Most respondents (77.1%) had lived on their streets for more than 5 years. The housing form was mixed, with the single largest category "mostly terraced houses" (44.3%). The vast majority of streets were through-roads (83.6%) but almost half (47.5%) were in 20mph zones. Most were characterised by on-street parking.

Figure 8: What is the housing like where you live?

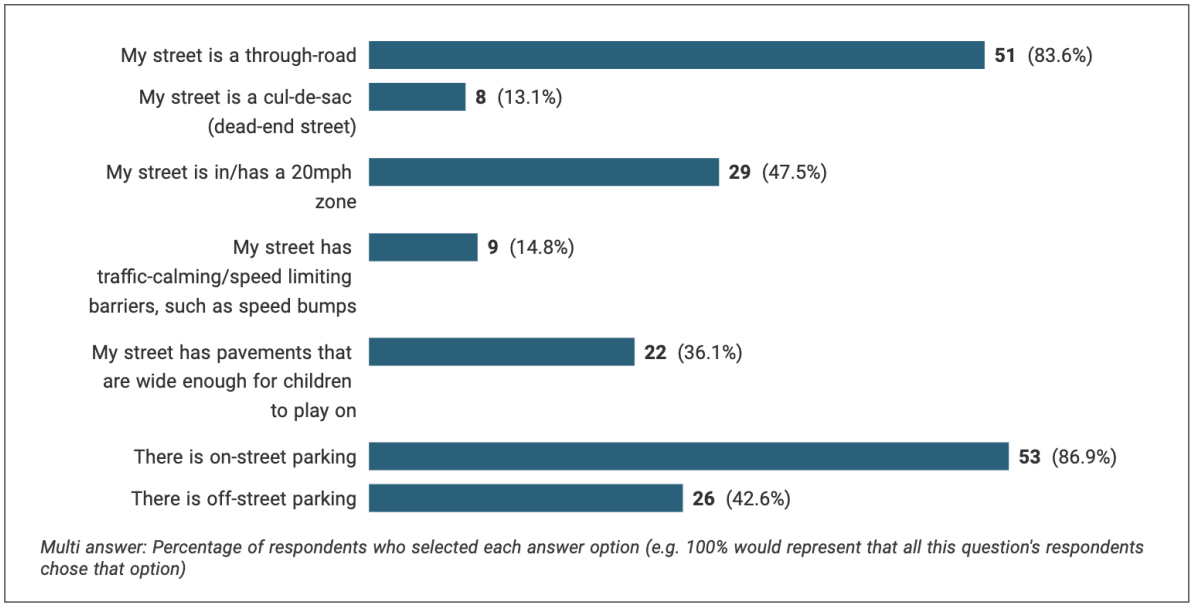


All these features – and many more – shape the scale, scope and nature of connections built between neighbours. In questionnaires, and especially in interview, respondents drew attention to the particularities of their streets and the ways these shaped – positively and negatively – their experience of playing out and developing relationships. These included the length of the street and the number of houses on the street; longer streets sometimes seemed more difficult to connect, but also offered greater opportunities for connection since there were quite simply more neighbours to get involved in playing out. The shape of the street and questions of visibility affected who got involved and made connections – neighbours who were around corners or at a distance from the pavement might be more difficult to integrate. Traffic and parking clearly had an impact – although street play sessions themselves are traffic-free, the ability to maintain and develop connections between sessions was undoubtedly impacted by the heaviness of traffic and by the number of parked cars. This impacted the possibility of playing out outwith a planned session and of cementing

[30] See the Play England report by Tim Gill on *Street Play in Disadvantaged Areas* http://www.playengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/StreetPlayReport2web.pdf.

friendships, for example – quieter streets (8 [13%] were cul-de-sacs) with more pavement and front garden space (22 [36%] had pavements wide enough for children to play on) allowed for more impromptu playing out, without an organised session – but also shaped fleeting social connections. By contrast, if traffic means you and your children can't easily cross the road to say hello or chat to neighbours you've recently met, then strengthening relationships may be more difficult or take longer, as the discussion of car traffic above suggests.

Figure 9: Please tick all boxes that apply to your street:



For some streets, the presence of other social infrastructures[31] facilitated connections between playing out sessions. On one street, a number of neighbours also had allotments on a site at the end of the road, and a scout hut located on the street offered a site for parties and meetings. Some streets had green spaces on the street which allowed for play in the interim and other streets had adjacent parks, which new friends from the street increasingly visited together. All of these, alongside the informal spaces for play, might be seen as 'bumping places'[32] where neighbours can meet.

These street spaces were complemented in many instances by online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups. In most instances, these grew out of the organisation of playing out sessions but often expanded well beyond their initial function and beyond the families that regularly play out. On one street, an estimated half of households have joined the Facebook group as well as neighbours from adjoining streets and, in addition to planning playing out sessions:

> *"people put on if they've got too much milk, if they want, erm, need something like a ladder or something, or recommendations for tradesmen, that's there a lot, and if somebody's been burgled or they've seen somebody looking a bit dodgy"*

On another street, neighbours used Facebook to discuss planning applications, arrange to lend and borrow equipment, acted a kind of online neighbourhood watch, and share

[31] Latham, A. and Layton, J. (2019) Social infrastructure and the public life of cities: Studying urban sociality and public spaces, *Geography Compass* 13/7 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gec3.12444.

[32] What Works Wellbeing (2018) *Places, Spaces, People and Wellbeing: A Full Review* https://whatworkswellbeing.org/product/places-spaces-people-and-wellbeing/

information about local sports clubs, for example. On other streets, as the example from Eva's street above illustrated, WhatsApp groups functioned in similar ways.

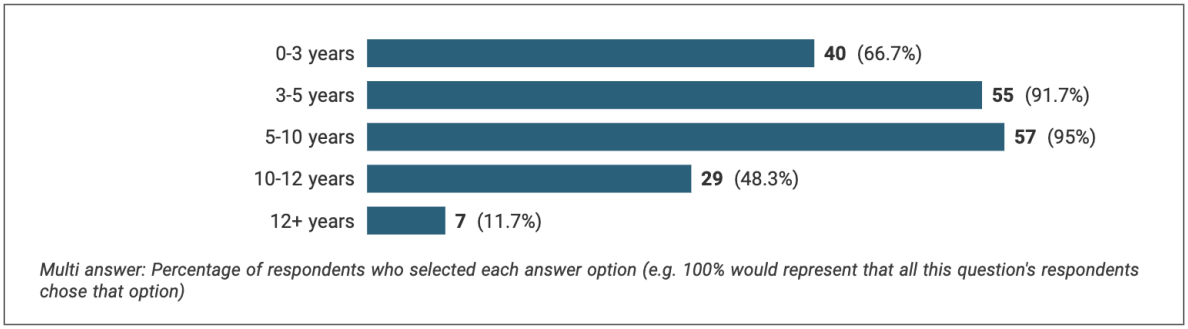
These spaces – on the street and online – also facilitated additional street and neighbourhood activities. More than a third of respondents reported that playing out had led them and their neighbours to get involved in other community activities (and a further third wasn't sure if this had happened). These activities included gardening, open gardens and tree planting, litter picking, on-street cake sales and car-washing for charity, toy, book, plant and clothes swaps, Christmas street decoration, developing parklets[33] and forming local park groups, and connecting to wider cycling/walking/better streets campaigns. The expansion of playing out sessions into a range of other activities not only draws a more diverse range of neighbours in but also potentially creates opportunities for neighbours to extend their social networks and connections beyond their streets and to engage in other forms of community life, all of which may support further the alleviation of loneliness.

5.4 Who is Connected, and Who Isn't?

Of course, not all neighbours are involved in playing out sessions or the wider connections that seem to develop from these and it is to these patterns that we now turn.

Most of those who participated in follow-up interviews acknowledged that there was a 'core' of neighbours who regularly participated in street play sessions and who were also more likely to be involved in other related activities. This core was largely made up of families with children under 10. Almost all questionnaire respondents reported the presence of children between 3 and 10 years; many reported 10-12 year olds participating but fewer recorded teenagers. In interview, respondents also reported that the core group was sometimes centred on those living near each other on the street, perhaps on the part of the street that closed or near where chairs and tables were routinely set up during street play sessions.

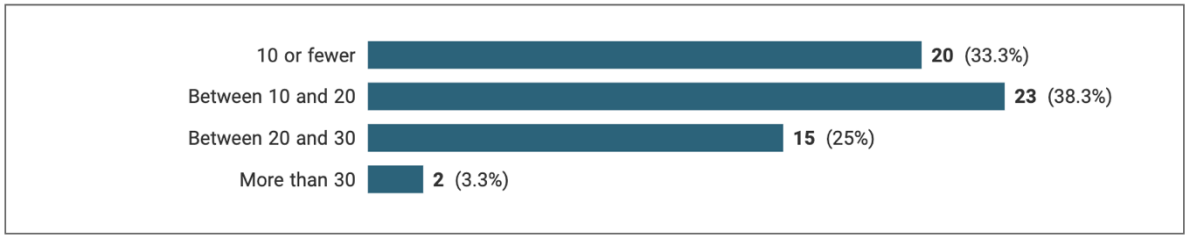
Figure 10: Roughly what ages are the children who normally take part during playing out sessions? Please tick all boxes that apply.



The number of children participating varies quite considerably, and will depend on many things including the length of street and density of housing, the timing of the sessions, how long playing out has been established on the street, and much more. It will also vary from session to session, depending on the weather, other commitments and varying family circumstances. Most streets see between 10 and 30 children playing out.

[33] Parklets are very small parks or pockets of green space on residential streets and are often created out of parking spaces transformed into community spaces; for more on the campaign for parklets, see https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/about-us/our-work-in-action/campaigning-for-parklets.

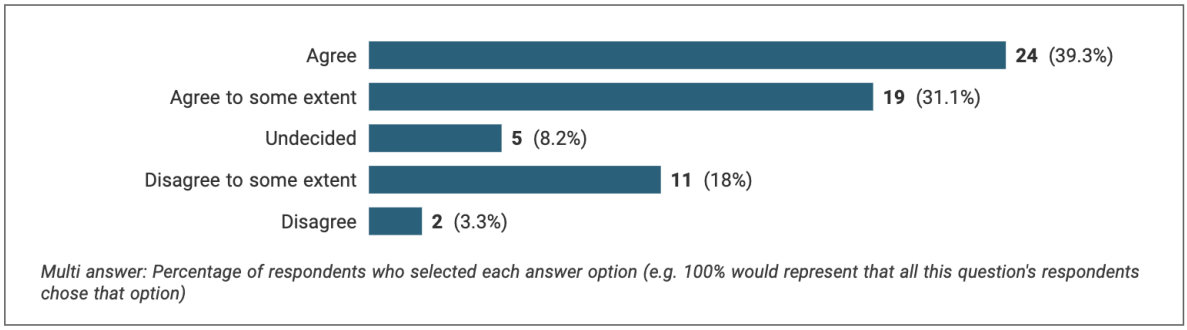
Figure 11: Roughly how many children normally take part during playing out sessions?



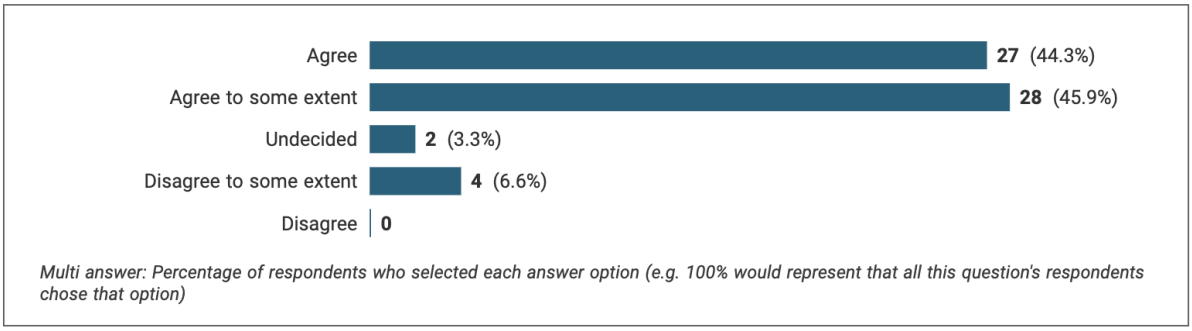
Asked whether those attending street play sessions were representative of their neighbourhood in terms of age, ethnicity and gender, the responses were mixed. Most (around 80% for each category) agreed, at least to some extent, that those attending were representative, but for many, especially for ethnicity and age, this agreement was partial.

Figure 12: Please say whether you think the people (adults, children, families) who take part in playing out on your street are representative of your neighbourhood as a whole, in terms of:

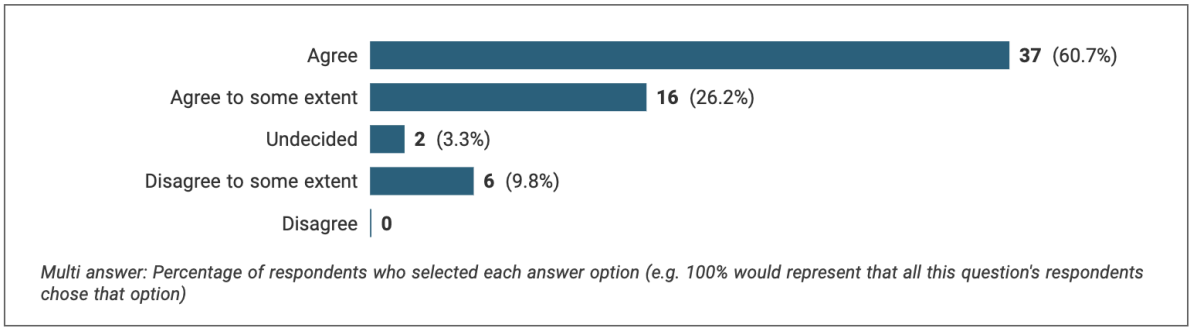
a) Age



b) Ethnicity



c) Gender



In the narrative responses, respondents provided detail to explain these positions, which we explore in more detail below. A couple of respondents noted that their streets were very white, like the wider area, meaning that though few people with BME backgrounds participated that did reflect the neighbourhood's demography. The following sections explore the particular evidence relating to certain categories and their participation in playing out sessions.

Children

The 'core' of playing out sessions tends to be made up, as we suggest above, of families with (roughly) primary-age children. Given this is the core group, it is worth reflecting on how they seem to connect to each other in the context of playing out. Often these children do not know each other when playing out starts. Some may be pre-school children who have largely played with other children at play groups and other activities beyond the home. School children increasingly attend a number of different local schools, reflecting the nature of the school admissions process. Across the survey and interview responses, it was not unusual to find primary school children living on the same street but attending up to 7 different schools. Resident children also vary considerably in age, meaning that there are opportunities to play with and connect to older and younger children. These were all experiences identified by research respondents:

> *"They have formed friendships that span different schools and age groups and find other common interests."*
> *"My children also know children from other schools that they would not have known before."*
> *"They know loads more children on the street. They have made friends who go to different schools. They hang about at sessions in mixed age groups (in a way they don't normally)."*

These new connections were not just limited to primary-age children; one respondent noted that:

> *"new friendships have formed between teenagers who go to different schools but live in the same the neighbourhood but would otherwise not have met"*

In interview, Eva expanded on the presence of teenagers on her street, and in particular on the way in which play emerged between older and younger children:

> *"the teenage ones, they don't come out all the time but they do appear now and again if it's a particular sort of sunny day they're out there and they're like 15, 16. With, like, mixing with the little kids, it's brilliant, they'll go for the little tiny ones, it's funny how you watch sort of like the dynamics of it all and they'll, they'll go to like kick a ball with the little, little ones it's brilliant"*

As these quotes emphasise, these new friendships and connections between children of different ages are unlikely to have developed without playing out sessions. As the adults reported, children who had been neighbours for years had not previously met or played together.

(Credit: Alison Stenning)

There is also some evidence that playing out on the immediate spaces of their street is particularly accessible for children with disabilities and allows for children who may be educated at home, at special schools, or in alternative provision to meet and play with their neighbours.[34] One respondent discussed the case of her own teenage son who experiences anxiety and struggles to go with his friends beyond the street to the local park or town centre, but, through playing out, had "just created this absolutely safe place that he wants to play in". This respondent was, however, concerned that her son was so secure on his street and had built such strong relationships with his friends there that he now seemed reluctant to go "out in the big wide world", despite being of an age where exploring the wider neighbourhood would be expected. There is a question here, then, about the extent to which playing out sessions enable children's independent mobility, by giving them a sense of confidence and a secure base, or restrict it by creating safe, secure spaces for play and connection on their doorsteps.

Within the street, these new friendships extended beyond playing out sessions, in play dates, invitations to birthday parties, and in 'independent' playing out, as children called for each other and played out together on the street. For older children and on safer streets, this manifested in free play on the road itself, with careful self-monitoring; for younger children on busier streets, this often meant they played on the pavements, on driveways, and in front gardens. In some instances, mixed age groups enabled younger children to play out when they might otherwise have been unable to do so.

For some children, in addition to animating relationships on the street, playing out supported a number of wider connections in their everyday lives. Respondents reported, for example, children meeting others who would be in their Reception class at school before they started, children befriending neighbours in other school years at their school and playing and chatting to those children at school, children attending the same clubs (e.g. Cubs and Brownies), and their parents sometimes developing lift shares. As those who met and played

[34] See https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155508415547217 for a BBC World Hacks film from 2018 on how one young girl with autism and anxiety connected with her neighbours through playing out.

together on their streets grow older, move to secondary school and start to engage in independent mobility, it will be interesting to see how their experiences of playing out facilitate (or otherwise) ongoing and extended connections that might mitigate isolation and disconnection in young adult life.[35]

Some interview respondents also, however, reported cases of children on their streets who did not seem to be allowed to play out. Some had witnessed children going into their homes with adults during playing out sessions, apparently not being permitted to stay out and join in. Others knew there were houses in which children lived who had never or rarely been seen playing out. It is difficult to know the reasons for this but we can highlight some possibilities. For some, playing out closures might take place on a different part of the street meaning that participation and parental supervision might not be as easy as it would be right outside their front doors. For others, cultural and/or language barriers and varied parenting practices might mean that children are not permitted to participate. Barriers to participation might be especially high for children at risk of loneliness, such as those who are carers, or those with more complex family situations (for example, who live between two homes and are less likely to be at home on the street when during playing out sessions).

In this context, Eva talked about one of her teenage neighbours, recognising the barriers to his participation, the efforts the other children on the street will go to encourage him to join in, and the value of these brief moments of play in his life:

> *"there's a lad that lives with his nan he's a teen, he's fourteen or fifteen now, erm, and his nana breeds labradors and he has to walk the dogs, he just, he just walks the dogs all the time and it's really sad to see it's like awful … but if he walks down with the dogs they [the other children] will be like, come on, come and play, and they'll hold the dogs while he like kicks a ball for ten minutes and stuff, which is that they really want him to be out playing cos the kids recognise that he's got a really sad life so they kind of like you know trying to get him out and, and he came out to the big play but then his nana calls him in and then that's it he can't come out again, they don't regularly play but it's that sort of five minutes walking back with the dogs down the street that he gets like a childhood for five minutes and then it's back to the jobs"*

Because this research was not based on interviews with children, all these benefits and barriers are reported by adults so it is difficult to confidently conclude that playing out makes a contribution to tackling loneliness amongst children. However, the depth and density of the connections reported and their flow into other spheres of children's lives suggests that they are significant in reshaping children's social worlds.

Mothers and Fathers

The focus on families with children has not differentiated between the role of mothers and fathers, and other adult men and women. A handful of respondents noted the relative absence of men, including fathers, despite the fact that over 60% of questionnaire respondents felt their playing out sessions were representative of their streets in terms of gender:

> *"We do get a lot of dads joining us and have made it on a Friday for that purpose – but for the younger kids it tends to be mums only still."*
>
> *"We could encourage more men to get involved"*

[35] These questions about the 'legacies' of playing out and how they shape children's (and adults') connection to and confidence in their everyday worlds is part of Alison Stenning's ongoing research (https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/potential-space-and-playing-out-exploring-play-neighbours-and-streets/).

"Most of the parents there (but not all) were mums because it was after school time on a Friday."

Just 6 of the 61 questionnaire respondents identified as men. We picked up this issue in interview and respondents suggested that the preponderance of women possibly reflected, amongst other things, the continuing dominance of women as primary carers for young children, gendered working patterns, and gendered cultures. In interview, Theresa noted:

"They [men] do appear, no they do appear, but they don't run it … they, I mean, erm two or three men appear and some of them, my husband and a couple of others, do stewarding, erm, and there are a couple, a couple of husbands who err will do who do either steward or will be playing with their children absolutely, but not, not many, I'd say certainly no more than 60/40 and possibly 75/25"

She continued:

"the chaps will, you know, for instance, my husband will come out and he'll do his 45 minutes [stewarding] and then he'll go away and watch football or whatever, I mean you know he doesn't hang around, a lot of chaps are not really hangers around and chatters"

Imogen expanded on her experience on her street:

"for sure, we have maybe I don't know, mmm, about two in ten men, something like that, so yeah, so it's not, yeah, it's not a massive number and of course that doesn't help it then because, you know, you do have a few men but if they, if they then come out and think ooh, this is just like a kind of a mums' thing, erm, then they're less likely to come out … like they [the mums] already know each other maybe … and they're just generally I guess, unfortunately, still the ones that take the part-time job and spend a lot more time with their kids, so they're, they, you know, we have it at after school erm between 3 and 5 so it's generally more likely to be the woman doing the childcare at that time"

A questionnaire respondent picked up too on the sense that the mothers generally already had more local contacts and that, in this context, playing out had been extremely important for her husband:

"More importantly for me, my husband has got to know people in our street. He commutes to London and has little in the way of a connection to our area - he could probably live anywhere. Now he has stewarded regularly with a variety of other people and knows (and likes) people that live near us. It's fantastic!"

This too was an experience echoed by others ("good for dads to be out talking to each other"), that mothers often had richer local connections as a result of pre-school activities and the school run and that fathers, in particular, benefitted from the potential for connection on the street, especially at weekends.

Simon, the one male interviewee, who has played out on his street for 7 years, addressed the question of gender directly, but struggled to find an explanation for the marked difference. Interestingly, he noted that playing out generally has often been seen as more acceptable for boys:

"actually typically slightly, I think, traditionally if you look at it, typically, and still now, that boys traditionally been allowed a little more freedom to play outside than girls"

and it is true that boys (and men) frequently report in wider research a higher level of comfort in public space than girls and women.[36] Both Simon and a couple of the other interviewees noted that voluntary and community activities in general tend to be dominated

[36] See, for example, Karsten, L. (2003) Children's use of public space: the gendered world of the playground, *Childhood*, 10/4, 457-473.

by women and this may just be a manifestation of that. Moreover, the association of playing out with children and with domestic and residential space might reinforce this.

(Credit: Playing Out)

After she talked about her own experience of loneliness, Dawn, a young mother who had built a strong network amongst her neighbours (see *New Parents* below), expanded to talk about the particular experience of one of her neighbours who was a single father:

> *Q: Have you seen other evidence kind of amongst other neighbours of that, of there being kind of connections to loneliness or alleviating loneliness?*
> *A: I think definitely with the single dad and his daughter, err cos, erm, you know, so he lost his wife two years ago, which has been really hard and I think having playing out and subsequently the relationship that kind of we've built up together as friends but also our kids have built up has really, really helped that, erm, and that's been really lovely you know and he, he said it's, erm, it's a bit of a hark back to his childhood when he would literally just turn up on a friend's door and knock you know that our kids can do that now which is lovely but I think yeah that's, that's made a real difference, erm, to, to the two of them which has been lovely.*

Few respondents talked at all about single parent families so this evidence addresses both the value of playing out sessions to single parent families in general but also specifically to single fathers.[37] Similar sentiments were also echoed by parents whose partners worked long hours or travelled regularly for work. In previous research, Anna, a mother of small children who organised playing out on her street, noted that the connections made were especially important to her as she was often home alone:

[37] On a personal note, I became a single parent during the course of this research, which led me to reflect on how playing out had mediated my experience. To give just a couple of examples, one neighbour who lives around the corner brought me some Calpol late at night after I posted on our street Facebook group when my daughter was poorly and I couldn't get out to buy some, and I've borrowed at least two tins of tomatoes from my next-door neighbour when I was halfway through cooking and it was just too complicated to get my daughter out to the shops. I know too that my daughter would feel comfortable knocking on the doors of any of our immediate neighbours if something happened to me. The support offered by my neighbours, all of whom I have met and got to know through playing out, has helped me at key moments when I have been negotiating being at home alone with my daughter.

"I like to know that if anybody needed, you know, help, you can go and call on anybody, my husband works long hours, I like to know that, you know, if we had some sort of emergency, I might just run down or across the street, give them a call"

There is important evidence here of positive benefits of playing out sessions for men, but the issue of men's participation is one that needs continuing attention to maximise the impact of playing out and its potential to alleviate of loneliness. As we have suggested, there is a similar need for further reflection on the value of playing out for single parents in particular.

New Parents

As we mentioned above, new parents can be particularly at risk of loneliness as they face a major life event and major changes to their routines and everyday connections.[38] Dawn, a mother of primary and pre-school children, reflected candidly on her own experiences of loneliness:

"I think if you're thinking in terms of loneliness, that's been, my the time of day I found as a mum the most difficult is between half past three when I pick the kids up and kind of half past five, six o'clock when my husband gets home from work, erm, on the days that I don't work, erm, and that's the loneliest time so I'm tired, the kids are tired I have to get tea ready, I've got a two year old as well so the last two years of that trying to juggle cooking tea with a baby on your hip those have been the most difficult times and actually with one family in particular we've just hung out at each other's houses for those hours and that's that's made a huge difference the last few months"

The family Dawn had started hanging out with after-school were one of the other families that had been at the 'core' of their playing out sessions but that had not been known to them previously.

In interview, Sandra explained that it felt less risky to develop friendships with other mothers amongst her immediate neighbours than those she met elsewhere:

"yeah, on my street now we have a [street] Facebook group, erm, so I've met, erm, various other people on maternity leave through that, so, erm, yeah that you know it's sort of it was quite easy to network in and again I think it's that demographic you know there's a lot of people in similar situations, erm, with similar backgrounds and so it's quite easy just to sort of invite them over for coffee cos it doesn't feel like a risk … if, erm, something that's based on your street can work for you then that sort of alleviates that risk doesn't it."

All three other new mothers who responded to the questionnaire reported that their involvement in playing out was driven by a desire to meet their neighbours and create opportunities for their child(ren) to play with other local children. More generally, the potential to build friendships with other very local parents, especially mothers, with whom you could hang out, attend playgroups etc. with, and go on child-focused trips with (e.g. museums, soft play) was something highlighted by a number of respondents.

The period of new parenthood is also a period when people may have more time at home/away from work and sometimes also changed priorities. These all came together for one respondent:

"I believe in community, street calming, tackling clean air and tree planting. I care about providing a safe space for children to play and for adults young and old to come together. I'm a parent and wanted to get to know my neighbours and make

[38] Research by the Coop and British Red Cross found that 82% of mothers under 30 feel lonely some of the time, with 43% often or always lonely (https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed).

friends for my child and for myself as a new mum. Having no immediate family around to help, and having a lull in my work I had time to do something for the community. Wanting to make a better place for my son. In parallel, I am still having conversations with the council on how to improve street planning. I would like to see more pedestrianization and tree planting to tackle air pollution, and enable social connection."

In these ways, the value of new relationships on the street and their role in building connections, mitigating a sense of loneliness and/or vulnerability, and rethinking relationships to the street was clear.

New Neighbours

Of those respondents who had lived on their street for less than 2 years (there were just 4), all felt that playing out sessions had helped them meet their neighbours, all had small children who they felt had also benefitted from playing out, and all appeared to have integrated into the street's networks of support and friendship as much as longstanding residents. Again, since moving house (especially when it coincides with having small children) can be identified as a potential loneliness risk, it is important to document these impacts.

In interview, Simon presented two stories of new neighbours integrating rapidly into the street because of playing out, highlighting their astonishment at the kind of community they had moved into:

"a regular steward who moved in from B_____ … he said things like, you know, we know more people than here within a month of meeting you than living twenty years in B_____, you know, and err another family moved in, they moved in on a playing out session so of course there's like everyone was saying hello to them as they moved in and they met the entire street in one afternoon, and it's something that would've taken them years if … they'd never managed to do it … and other people they move in, they kind of, if they move in and it's a first playing out session they're kind of often bowled over [and say] this is incredible, we had no idea"

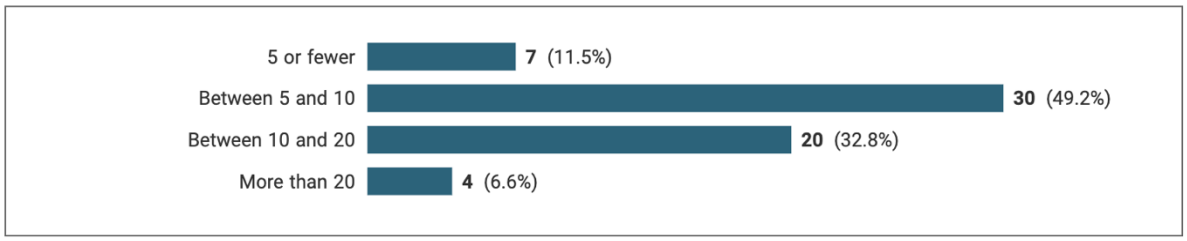
Imogen narrated a similar experience:

"a couple moved here from London and they were straight into the neighbourhood network because they came to the playing out session then they came to the [fundraising] car wash and I suppose that facilitated a, a very quick kind of, erm err friendship group for them"

Adults without Children

In general, the number of adults regularly participating was lower than the number of children, as we might expect; almost half of respondents reported that between 5 and 10 adults normally took part, though almost 40% of respondents recorded over 10 adult participants.

Figure 13: Approximately how many adults normally take part during playing out sessions? "Taking part" may be by stewarding, being out on the street, making cups of tea for others, etc.

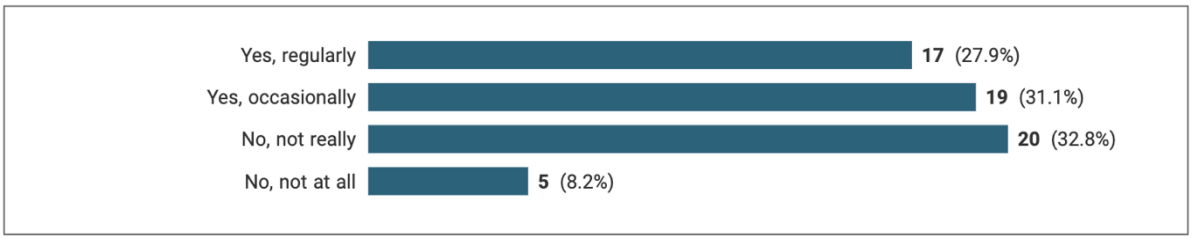


59% of respondents did report that adult neighbours without children do join in, often taking on stewarding roles (that is, securing the street closures and dealing with any cars that need to be guided safely down the street or re-directed). On some streets, adults without children would tend only to participate in 'special' sessions, such as Christmas events with mulled wine and mince pies, or to help out with mending bikes, for example. One responded noted, echoing the issues raised above gender above:

> *"Another neighbour would come out if he saw us doing something he could help with, e.g. building a sign or mending a bike."*

A number of respondents noted, in questionnaire and interview responses, that adults without children came out to join in during the street's first few playing out sessions, but then seemed less likely to do so, perhaps then only coming out for special events or in particularly good weather. However, respondents seemed to believe, as we discuss in more detail below, that for these neighbours coming out just a few times was enough for them to gain many of the benefits of playing out – recognising more neighbours, putting names to faces, joining the street's Facebook or WhatsApp group, and being aware of future street events.

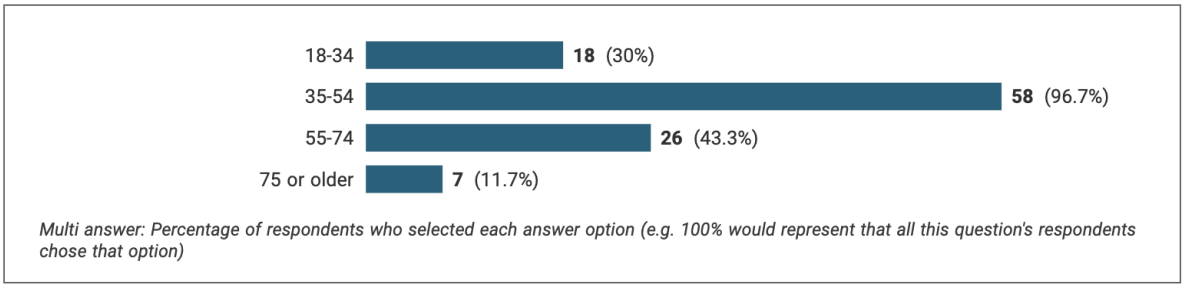
Figure 14: Do adult neighbours without young children join in your street's playing out sessions?



Older Adults

Adults in the 35-54 age category were reported to attend by almost all respondents, with significant numbers also reporting those between 18 and 34 and 55 to 74. Just 7 (11.7%) of respondents reported that those over 75 normally took part.

Figure 15: Approximately what age are the adults who normally take part during playing out sessions? Please tick all boxes that apply.



Importantly, however, in both narrative comments and in interview, respondents gave examples of older neighbours who had been regular and active supporters and participants.

> *"The older women who live on our street, in their 80s, who were here when the houses were first built, come out for tea and cake, and it's wonderful!"*

> *"We have an elderly couple who have never missed a session!"*

(Credit: Playing Out)

As we suggest above, some older neighbours routinely act as stewards for playing out sessions, but others just come for a cup of tea and some cake. In a number of instances, organisers have brought out chairs for older neighbours to encourage their participation. Many recognised the barriers to participation for older people, recognising as above that older people may see playing out as something 'not for them', even if they wish to join in. For this reason, many respondents try hard to encourage older people to join.

> *"We would love for the older residents in the street to come out and have a cup of tea with us too but they are hard to persuade (we make a point when we see them in the street and making the point that Playing Out is not just for kids is top of our leaflet)."*

> *"This is something we actively encourage. We have some that want to steward (to have some role for being there) and others that come for a cup of tea. But we appreciate it is daunting to walk out onto the pavement on your own and start talking to a bunch of strangers. So, we try to personally invite individuals to come out to make them feel welcome."*

As the second respondent here notes, the act of walking on to the street alone can be daunting and many residents had sought ways to facilitate this:

> *"Our neighbour (divorced, 70ish lady, lives alone) always goes on holiday for our street party. When we started playing out she made her excuses but she offered to bake a cake for the tea table (but not come). The second closure was outside her house. Again, she made a cake. She offered to deliver it the night before but I asked her to deliver it herself during the session. Just to pop out and put it on the table. She did so and we got chatting. Then she started to chat to other people. She stayed the full two hours. Now she wants to steward when the closures occur outside her house. She's not lonely but she wasn't connected to her neighbours. Now she says what a lovely street we live in and what nice people we have around us. Makes it all worthwhile!"*

A number of respondents gave examples of the close relationships that had developed, in the course of playing out, with older neighbours:

"We close our street every other weekend and we have two elderly couples who have rarely missed a session, before we started the only words we had said to each other was hello! My eldest son who's 10 has become great friends with them and as the year before we started playing out we lost all our great grandparents having that connection again has been wonderful! We recently attended a local event with them for the elderly and my son asked to come. I had to go early to set up so he said I'm waiting and going with W____ and B____ I have just been round and asked them to "call for me" when they are ready then I will knock and get B____ and I____ and get the bus! It was lovely to see him walk up with them all chatting and smiling! Playing out is not just about children making new friends all kinds of friendships can be created!"

Some respondents reported that the participation of older people was sometimes facilitated by visits from grandchildren. Older neighbours seemed to feel it was more appropriate to play out, especially for the first time, with their grandchildren. Sometimes, this then seemed to enable them to come out on other occasions, without their grandchildren, as initial connections had been made and they had a better sense of how the sessions worked and what they felt like; coming out was no longer so daunting.

We return to the question of intergenerational participation below when we consider the particular role of play in building connections on streets.

5.5 Barriers to Participation

The discussions above point to some barriers to participation, both perceived and experienced. When asked directly in the questionnaire what the barriers to participation might be, respondents reiterated many of the same points: for example, that playing out is seen as something for children, that neighbours are wary of and/or daunted by coming out to meet strangers, that some are unaware of the events happening as a result of issues with communication, that for some there may be additional cultural and/or language barriers, and that some residents are house-bound, ill, or struggle with mobility. Some of these barriers are mediated, as we have seen, by organisers doorknocking neighbours and inviting them personally, by helping less mobile neighbours to come out and providing chairs for them, and by emphasising in all communication that all are welcome and enticing them out with tea and cake.

Of the 8 respondents to the questionnaire directed to residents on playing out streets who do not participate, 7 had no particular desire to join in. Only one wanted to get involved but felt she couldn't:

"I don't know many people on the street and don't feel like I could just join in. I feel like I would have no one to talk too because some people already know each other. If I had young children, I would be more likely to join in. It is also at the bottom of my street and not aware of anyone who joins in from the top part but I may be wrong because we don't ever talk to anyone."

Asked what might make her more likely to join in, she replied:

"If someone knocked on the day and said come down and meet everyone (but obviously not in a forceful way if someone said no) then introduced me to others."

Some respondents had indeed tried this tack – actively doorknocking and inviting neighbours immediately before or during a playing out session, but some also recognised the limits to this:

"I mean we've put stuff through their doors and all the rest of it but I don't think I don't think I would, you know, playing out starting, I would bang on their door and say come out and have a cup of tea that does seem a bit intrusive."

Eva admitted that she did sometimes try to 'force' her neighbours to come out, because she felt it was potentially so important to them, in terms of their health and their connection to the street:

"Yeah, yeah I'll try to force them. Yeah, it's difficult, yeah, particularly the older ones. We've got a couple of older ladies and they've, like, been in hospital recently and kind of come back out and now their families visit once a fortnight, if that, and I just think it for them, it would, I think it, I feel it would be a bonus if they, you know, they would get a benefit from it if they just sat out for ten minutes and some of the other residents had a cup of tea and then even if they went back in."

Many recognised that the job of communication was at times hard work:

"Communication is hard with those not on the internet. It's quicker for me to reach and talk to people on our Facebook group or through WhatsApp and text it's expensive for me to keep printing and posting leaflets and letters even though I know that's how many of our residents communicate and my council wanted me to leaflet drop all of our street."

As social media not only served the purpose of communicating dates and times but increasingly also took on additional functions alongside and in-between playing out sessions (discussed above), the exclusion of those without easy access to social media was potentially aggravated. Existing evidence suggests that the relationship between loneliness and social media is complicated and, at times, contradictory.[39] These difficulties were reinforced by the time and resource pressures on organisers, mentioned in the quote above – most street activators are working as volunteers in their own time without access to funding, almost always, by definition, around the demands of a young family and work. We have seen that the vast majority of street activators/organisers are women.

In some places, street activators receive support from their council or from a local Playing Out group – this support may be financial, or provide leaflets and letters for delivery; but in many cases, such support is not available, and even when it is, the work of delivery, of knocking on neighbours' doors, or reminding neighbours, still falls to busy residents. A number of respondents, especially in interview, stressed quite how much work was involved in setting playing out up on a street and in keeping it going. Some had also faced considerable conflict and even personal abuse from neighbours who objected to the scheme. In many ways, these issues may undermine the desire to ensure inclusion and widen participation, and may, paradoxically, leave the organiser feeling more isolated.

Another manifestation of busy-ness was reported in questionnaire responses – that parents and children can be too busy with other activities to participate.[40] For some, this was identified as an issue of long working hours meaning that not only were parents not around to accompany their children, but children themselves were in wraparound or after-school care outside the home; for those streets that organise playing out sessions after-school on weekdays, this was a key issue. Yet those streets that organise playing out sessions at the weekend often found themselves competing with sports or dance clubs, birthday parties, or

[39] Patulny, R. (2020) Does social media make us more or less lonely? Depends on how you use it, *The Conversation* https://theconversation.com/does-social-media-make-us-more-or-less-lonely-depends-on-how-you-use-it-128468.

[40] Holloway, S.L. and Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2014) Enriching children, institutionalizing childhood? Geographies of play, extracurricular activities, and parenting in England, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 104/3, 613-627.

family events for which there was no time during the week. The increasing scheduling of children's time eroded, some argued, the potential for many to regularly participate in street play sessions. Apart from the weather, one of the most common reasons why organised sessions did not actually take place was that too many families were away and too few around to play.

For a few, the issue of stigma and fear around adults without children was identified as a barrier to participation. Interviewees queried whether adults, and especially men, without children would feel comfortable participating in child-oriented events and if, indeed, neighbours would welcome their presence. Although this theme appeared implicitly in a number of interviews, Eva was one of the few to verbalise it, albeit with difficulty:

> *"I don't know if there's a kind of, it's an awful thing to say but a kind of, erm, misconception about adults watching children, like kind of like they don't feel comfortable if it's not their kids and, nobody's ever said that, but I just wonder if it's kind of an underlying thing I don't know you know like just, it's kind of like there's something unspoken, but they don't want to say, about coming out, I just wondered if it was something like that you know if they felt uncomfortable, don't have children, coming in to what is you know a street full of children"*

Leaving aside a few very rare instances of convicted sex offenders living on or near playing out streets,[41] the recognition of this tension is important, not least because adults living on their own, without children or other family, may well be at particular risk of loneliness.[42]

Of course, some neighbours simply don't want to participate, as the majority of responses to the small survey targeted at non-participants suggested. These respondents all supported playing out and saw it as a positive initiative, but simply did not want to join in. As one respondent to the wider survey, suggested "some people just don't want to be social and that's fine".

Some respondents reflected on the absence of younger adults without children, again possibly because they were not interested or did not feel welcome, but also possibly because they may be more transient populations who move off the street more quickly and are less concerned about developing relationships with their neighbours. As Theresa, living in London, explained in interview:

> *"we have a lot of people who are quite transient, erm, so for instance, this, the house opposite was empty for quite a long time … has now has been divided in, is now a, erm, a house of multiple occupancy for 6 … it's been done nicely but they're definitely young people who are not here for very long, who are single who are doing their first job … and you know are pretty unlikely to get engaged in street play"*

These points suggest a possible tension that arises through the organising of playing out sessions. Leaving aside other objections to playing out, in the questionnaire and in interview, respondents highlighted examples where residents' non-participation reflected an apparent desire to maintain a level of privacy and a distance from their neighbours that was challenged by playing out. Some recognised that some of their neighbours might see playing out sessions as an unwelcome blurring of public and private boundaries and a kind of enforced neighbourliness. One respondent explained the reaction of one set of her neighbours:

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[41] Such instances have arisen but, to our knowledge, have always been satisfactorily managed with support from neighbourhood policing teams, where appropriate.

[42] See research by Dr Paul Willis and Age UK on 'older men at the margins' exploring older men's experience of loneliness and social isolation: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/older-men-at-the-margins-how-men-combat-loneliness-in-later-life/.

"there's a bit of not liking the fact that the whole dynamic of the neighbourhood is changing … and people would have retired here when it was quiet, suddenly there's these young people with kids making noise … they're the ones who never come out. They keep themselves to themselves and they're not really interested in the rest of us."

This quote points to a recognition that, for some, the street and their home are experienced or imagined as a sanctuary, into which the outside world does not encroach. Some residents may have sought peace and quiet, and chosen a quiet residential street for precisely that reason. These residents might not want more connections with their neighbours and might see this as a threat rather than an opportunity. For these residents, playing out sessions might be experienced more as alienation – reinforcing a sense of loneliness and disconnection – rather than connection and the alleviation of loneliness. As the quote above suggests, this may have a generational aspect and for all the beneficial intergenerationality highlighted above, playing out might also be a cause of intergenerational alienation rather than engagement. One respondent suggested that, for various reasons, older neighbours – for example, those over 75 or 80 – were more likely to connect than so-called 'boomers' (aged between approximately 56 and 74). If this is true, it may relate to life course, social attitudes, family circumstances and much more, but it is an interesting question in the context of debates around loneliness.

Interestingly, non-participation does not necessarily mean exclusion from the wider networks and benefits of playing out sessions. In the small survey of non-participants, those who lived on a street with a parallel Facebook page were active on that and the majority of the 8 respondents felt that they knew more neighbours and had experienced a more general friendliness on the street, since playing out started – despite not participating. Fiona noted in interview that simply the act of doorknocking in the initial phase of consultation (when most councils encourage organisers to speak to every neighbour) had created connections between neighbours, even when they don't play out:

"so I have got to know neighbours, they might not join in in playing out necessarily but we have just by me knocking, with that first consultation we've, we've made lots of new relationships and they don't come out for playing out"

Fiona continued to talk about another neighbour:

"I had one [card] from a lady that has never played out and she'd put, what was it she put … something like, you know, well done Fiona, erm, thank you for the difference you've made to our street and she's never joined a playing out session you know so but obviously, she can feel whatever's happened, you know, she can just feel it."

Others reported that neighbours who don't play out had also commented on a wider sense of safety and familiarity on the street, developing out of playing out sessions; these may be experienced as an alleviation of disconnection and loneliness if they help residents to feel that they could recognise and reach out to their neighbours, if they needed to. As one questionnaire respondent noted: "Just doing it for a while brings huge benefits to the whole street, whether everyone attends or not."

5.6 What Difference Does Play Make?

We have outlined many of the benefits and barriers to participating in playing out sessions in terms of the connections made and nurtured, but so far the discussion of play itself has in many ways been incidental. This section reflects on what difference it makes that play is at the heart of playing out.

For children, of course, playing on the street is the primary connection made. Playing out sessions enable children who likely did not know each other previously to play together, to

connect and to start to develop friendships. Play is often the way in which, for children, these connections are extended and deepened outwith playing out sessions too, through play at school, play dates and, on some streets, independent playing out, either on the road itself or on pavements and in front gardens. Play, then, appears to be critical to the relationships children build through playing out.

Play is at the heart of children's relationships for a whole variety of reasons, but one is that play can open up a space of trust that enables a reaching out and a reflecting back. Play both facilitates and is a form of communication. This kind of communication might also be generated through play for adults, though we might more ordinarily identify hobbies or shared interests or culture (art, film, theatre, etc.) as the spaces in which this happens for adults. Playing out creates a space for adults to play too, whether that is play as we might understand children's play or other forms, such as gossip, banter or just hanging out.

(Credit: Playing Out)

There are many examples of adults playing during playing out sessions, both with children and without, at times as they seem to rediscover a playfulness with scooters or balls or bubbles, for example. Whether this eases connections made between adult neighbours is an open question, but it would seem to be the case. Certainly, respondents highlighted particular examples where those perhaps reticent or unlikely to join in where drawn out by the possibility of play. Imogen described the experience with one of her neighbours in Leeds:

> *"There was one woman once who was just walking down the street, and I think, I mean, I don't know for sure, she's quite self-contained, but she just started skipping and I got into a chat with her and that was lovely, and she started stewarding after that. It certainly helped, just the skipping, she couldn't resist basically, she just thought I just really want to have a go at that … and we saw a lot more of her after that"*

and Fiona narrated another fantastic story:

> *"the other elderly couple, just the husband comes out, every time, he actually had a water fight with the kids last session and he went in and got changed and come straight back out … and it started all over again and he was just lovely"*

A number of respondents, both in questionnaires and in interview, gave examples of intergenerational conversations around play too; in addition to tea and cakes, one of the common ways in which organisers tempted older neighbours out was by encouraging them to share stories and practices of their childhood play, telling young children about the games they played – sometimes on the very same street – and showing them how to play. Imogen continued her story about skipping to explain:

> *"I have had quite a few, erm, women in their fifties and sixties skipping actually because they're, they're actually they're good at it really good at it and they remember all the rhymes and things, and often I find at least when we started playing out that the young girls couldn't skip very well, they don't know how to do it they don't do it at school so they don't know that you do that big jump and that little jump and do that rhythm, so we had to kind of teach them but all the older women remembered"*

This kind of sharing did not just involve younger children and older adults but also teenagers and younger adults.

In some examples, teenagers – sometimes reluctant to join in playing out sessions – would show younger children how to kick a ball, or would hold a skipping rope, or help to balance a learner cyclist. Other adults without children were also draw in on occasion to help fix bikes, mend punctures, provide play equipment and, in other ways, facilitate play, overcoming their concerns that playing out 'isn't for them' by helping out with specific, play-related tasks.

Of course, play might also be offputting for some. For those described above who dislike the disruption of playing out sessions, the noise of children playing, for example, may dissuade them from coming out, even if they were otherwise tempted. Flying balls, water fights, and scooters and bikes zooming past might also discourage or frighten off more vulnerable or less mobile neighbours, even if organisers do all they can to minimise these dangers.

The Playing Out/Play Streets model

The Playing Out model also particularly facilitates adult connections. It is resident-led so always starts with a small number of adult neighbours. In most local authorities, these two or three neighbours are required to consult with every affected neighbour and are encouraged to doorknock every house to explain how play streets work and to gain support. Many respondents and other activists highlighted how this initial act was, literally and metaphorically, the start of doors opening on the street. We highlighted this above with the illustration of Fiona making connections through the initial consultation with her older neighbours, and in previous research, we found that "for many, this was the first time they'd walked up the paths, knocked on the doors, of all but their most proximate neighbours, the necessity to consult immediately appeared to create the potential for new connections."[43]

For some, however approaching strangers at their doors was seen as a barrier to getting started and this is likely perhaps to be especially true of residents with social anxiety who might be at particular risk of loneliness and of disconnection within their immediate neighbourhoods. Eva talked about a mum she knew from school who was keen to start playing out:

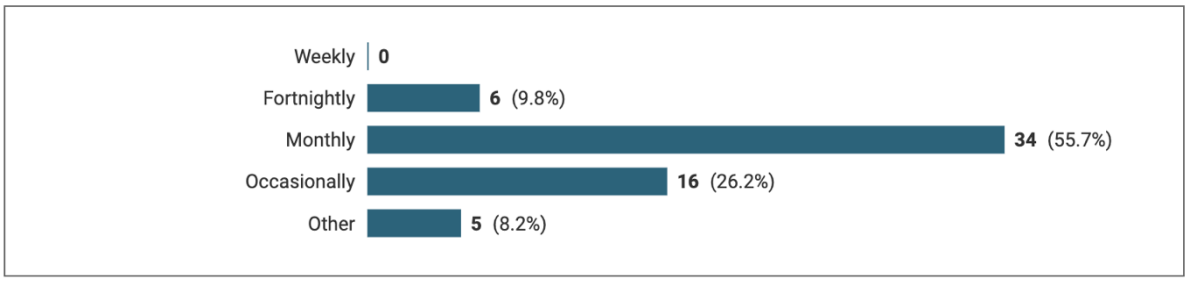
[43] Stenning, A. 2018 *Potential Space? Play, Parents and Streets*, Paper presented at RGS-IBG Conference, Cardiff, https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/alisonstenning/potential-space-play-parents-and-streets-a-blog-of-a-preliminary-paper/

"there's one mum she's like, you know, I've known her years and she's, she just will not do the door knock to get the signatures and that's the only thing that's holding her back and I'm like, well, I'll come and do it, I said get the kids to do it just do, just once you've done it once you've done it … she's just not that sort of personality to talk to people and it just absolutely, the thought of it is just crippling to her, so she's just, that's it you know, it's like not even a consideration cos she can't bear the thought of having to doorknock"

As Eva noted, many local activators explicitly offer to accompany residents on their first doorknock, but in some cases this is not enough, and points to another area where additional support from community groups or local authorities may be necessary. Others noted too that, for the first steps to playing out to be manageable and not alienating or exhausting, it was important to have a few existing relationships with neighbours. This raises the question of whether it is easier to establish playing out on streets with already active communities.

The Playing Out model also requires adults to be present and responsible for their children and it relies on volunteer stewards to secure the Road Closed barriers, stopping through traffic and allowing residents to drive up the closed street safely. These two features in particular mean that, more than 'independent' playing out, the model encourages adult presence and adult connections too. As we have seen, older adults and those without (young) children often offer to steward sessions; this encourages them to join but also leaves parents to play with their children, and with other adults. The requirement for adults to supervise their children combined with the model's commitment to child-led play can mean that parents congregate around certain points on the street, watching their children from a distance and leaving them free to hang out with and chat to other adults in a playful environment for a few hours.

Figure 16: How often do you close your street to play out?



Most playing out streets, 65.5% of those surveyed, organise frequent and regular sessions, either monthly or fortnightly. This means that participating neighbours meet and play together regularly, much more than, for example, one-off street parties. This reinforces the potential for connections to be made, maintained and developed.

5.7 Are Resident-Led Play Streets Alleviating Loneliness?

As with the implicit focus on play, so too loneliness has been slipped in and out of focus through this report, as we have talked about relationships, connections, communities, and neighbourhoods.

As we have suggested, some questionnaire respondents acknowledged that they felt lonely and, as we noted above, those that reported they sometimes or often felt lonely were more likely to agree that playing out had helped to alleviate loneliness on their street. This would seem to suggest that playing out can play a role in tackling loneliness. In interview, two respondents acknowledged that they felt lonely, in different ways.

One, Dawn, a mother of small children, was clear that playing out sessions and the connections made on her street through playing out had helped her in her loneliest times, which tended to be after school (see section 5.3). The second, Simon, discussed at length what he called an 'external loneliness' which he characterised as a kind of disconnection within a community; he felt strongly that this kind of loneliness had been alleviated by playing out on his street:

> *"so, what playing out has done here, and the street parties, is that, that it has … I think it's been the single, by far and away the single biggest thing that has dealt with that what you might call external loneliness"*

Simon also highlighted what he called an 'internal' or 'existential' loneliness which related more to living with a sense of meaning and purpose, connected to others who share similar commitments and, for him, working as a playing out activator on his street and beyond had very much alleviated his own sense of internal loneliness.[44]

Interview respondents were more reluctant to label their neighbours as lonely, recognising the stigma and shame sometimes attached to such a label. Asked in interview to reflect directly on the role of playing out sessions in alleviating loneliness, most felt they couldn't say if their neighbours were lonely. They often identified neighbours who were older, or with health conditions, or who lived alone, and wondered about their experience, but seemed reluctant to interpret too much.

Theresa talked hesitantly about two of her neighbours:

> *"I think L_____ sees more of her neighbours than she did … [she] has a good social life with her … she has her family who don't live with her, or mostly don't live with her, I think one might, and she has the church but she's more jolly in the street than she used to be, I think, erm but beyond that I don't I'm not aware of it, I don't think so, I mean it's much more, well, I don't know there's D_____ who never comes across as, as lonely but lives alone and has you know a family that comes and goes and she knows people through only I think through street party and street play but whether that is assuaged any loneliness, I don't know erm so I think it's incredibly hard to actually but she you know maybe she just has a feeling of you know doing a bit of public service and community and that's a good thing too"*

Here Theresa highlights a couple of important themes. Firstly, playing out sessions can allow connections to flourish – and, it seems, a sense of happiness or 'jolliness' – even amongst neighbours who have already rich family and social lives and it seems to complement these, adding another space of connection which had previously not existed. Secondly, for some, as Simon also suggested above, the act of organising and getting involved in facilitating street play can add a sense of purpose and connection, which may in itself be key to alleviating or even protecting against loneliness.

Fiona identified at least two of her older neighbours as lonely, though she acknowledged that they might not agree. She was clear, however, that, whatever the label, these two older men had considerably benefitted from the connections made through playing out and that they certainly felt much less isolated in their everyday lives as a result of these connections. A third neighbour had posed some challenges for Fiona as she organised playing out on her street, complaining about a number of play-related issues, and Fiona felt very much that she was lonely. She was persistent in her complaints but one weekend, as Fiona explained:

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[44] Simon's characterisation of an internal and external loneliness echoes a key theorisation of loneliness as emotional and social, developed by sociologist Robert Weiss in the 1970s; Weiss, R. (1973) *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, MIT Press.

“she’d had her grandchildren round and I don’t think she really wanted to join in the session but because they’d made friends with the [Fiona’s] boys, just, actually in the [back lane], it was only a few weeks ago, they sort of forced her to come so she reluctantly come to the playing out”

Not all the issues have been resolved and more have arisen, but this neighbour has now started engaging more actively others on the street.

A couple of interview respondents raised concerns about neighbours in unconfirmed situations of domestic violence or abuse; in these cases, the respondents wondered whether they should make more of an effort to invite and encourage these neighbours to street play sessions, since they may feel especially isolated, but were worried either that the reports were not true or that their invitations may be seen as unsettling intrusions.

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6. CONCLUSIONS: PLAY STREETS AND LONELINESS

The responses and discussions presented here offer strong evidence that playing out sessions create new and important connections between neighbours of all ages. These connections support everyday contact and conviviality, friendships between adults and children, the exchange of help of all kinds, and a range of other neighbourhood activities.

These new relationships connect a diverse array of neighbours, including young children and their families, adults without young children, older adults, those who have lived on the street for a long time, and those who have recently moved in. Connections are made through playing out sessions that have not been made before, including between those who have been neighbours for years, such that it is possible to argue that these connections would not have happened without playing out. Street activators and organisers go to considerable lengths to invite and encourage neighbours to join playing out sessions, or otherwise to make the most of the associated infrastructures (such as social media groups).

These new connections enable and are reinforced by a proliferation of contact between neighbours outwith street play sessions. Neighbours lend and borrow equipment, ingredients, and occasionally money. They look out for each other and each other’s homes, pets and, sometimes, children. They play and spend time together between sessions, on the street and in each other’s homes. The new connections feed into lives beyond the street too, facilitating connections for children at school, for example.

The positive impacts of playing out spill over not just into other neighbourly activities but also into times and spaces between playing out sessions, not only through informal connections, play dates, social events and so on, but also through online spaces such as Facebook and WhatsApp that function in a variety of ways and draw in neighbours who are not consistently involved in actually playing out sessions.

These new relationships connect neighbours in vulnerable situations, whether with ill-health, or elderly, or recently separated. Through the connections made in playing out sessions, neighbours learn each other’s names and much more about their everyday lives, including their struggles.

The connections made are intergenerational and develop between children of different ages. Teenagers befriend small children; those in different school years play and hang out together on the street; children and adults get to know, respect and trust each other; older adults and children share stories, experiences, games and skills.
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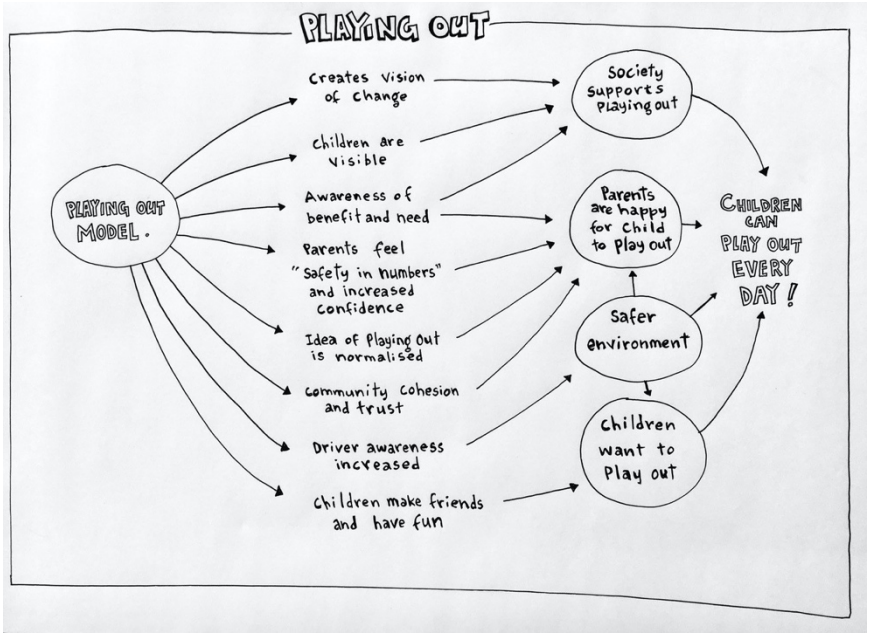
Above and beyond the individual connections made, neighbours say that they feel increasingly at home on their streets and increasingly secure, since they have started playing out. Some of evidence suggests that residents feel less isolated and less vulnerable in their homes as their neighbours are more visible and more present on the street, even if not everyone joins in with playing out sessions.

Play and playing out are important in shaping these new connections, because of the particular nature and format of the activities that take place. Even though new connections often spill over into other activities, the potential of play to enable new connections seems to be critical, not just for children but also for adults. The looseness of play, the playful atmosphere created, the unexpected pleasure of skipping again or joining in a water fight, the regularity of street play sessions, and the remaking of the street itself for people having fun, rather than cars, all feed an environment that enables connections to be made and pursued.

Play and playing out can, of course, also exclude neighbours, as we have explored above. Many feel that it is “not for them”; some of these neighbours appear still to be very supportive of the initiative but a small minority seem to experience playing out sessions as an unwelcome intrusion and as a disruptive remaking of their residential space.

Importantly, as we have suggested, the Playing Out model for temporary road closures is part of a wider campaign for children’s freedom to play. The organised closures are seen as a stepping stone to the (re)creation of an environment in which children playing on streets and in other spaces close to where they live is possible and ordinary. Playing Out envisages a virtuous circle through which playing out sessions enable changes within residential communities which in turn enable much more general, every day playing out.



How the Playing Out model affects long-term change
(Credit: Playing Out)

In terms of our discussions of loneliness, this virtuous circle could be seen to include the kinds of connections that we have evidenced here and appear to part and parcel of the development of playable streets; more play creates more connections which create the

space for more play and more connections. This explicit connection between play and social space echoes historical research into play streets by Krista Cowman who concluded that "mothers … saw play street orders as the best means to preserve [streets] as a safe social space for themselves and their children".[45]

It is difficult to conclude that playing out sessions alleviate loneliness, for it is difficult to map loneliness and its alleviation for a whole variety of reasons. But we can undoubtedly conclude that playing out sessions very effectively build connections on streets. Play streets transform the streets where neighbours play out; not a single respondent suggested in any answer that playing out had changed nothing on their street.

For these reasons, there is a strong case for support for resident-led play streets from government, local authorities and campaign groups. Much of what the government's strategy for tackling loneliness seeks happens on playing out streets. Evidence from the ONS and other research is clear that people want to know their neighbours and that knowing your neighbours is associated with lower levels of reported loneliness. The evidence presented here is clear that playing out sessions facilitate regular and multi-stranded connections between neighbours. It is a powerful initiative.

Yet, it is not, of course, a magical solution to loneliness. The value of playing out sessions can not be reduced to making connections, powerful though this is. Much of the movement's value lies in promoting play, children's rights to public space, and the importance of physical and creative activity.[46] Moreover, so much of the work of playing out sessions rests on the efforts and energy of small groups of neighbours and hardworking activists locally, and also nationally within Playing Out itself, and these groups can not be expected to bear the burden of combatting loneliness[47] when its roots lie in structural and political inequalities and disadvantages and, importantly, in the cuts to public and community budgets and infrastructures enacted in austerity.

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7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of this research, it is possible to identify a number of recommendations to different actors in the field of resident-led play streets, including the government, local authorities, community groups, the Playing Out movement and residents.

It is worth remembering, however,

> *"The thing is, playing out is such a great 'light touch', most gain for little effort, that adding lots of other things would take away the simplicity of doing it ... just doing it for a while brings huge benefits to the whole street, whether everyone attends or not."*

- For government and national funding bodies to recognise and value the contribution of this bottom-up, resident-led movement in tackling loneliness, isolation and disconnection in neighbourhoods and to provide policy and financial support to local authorities to enable them to better support resident-led play streets/playing out sessions;

[45] Cowman, K. (2017) Play streets: women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930-1970, *Social History*, 42/2, 233-256.
[46] See https://playingout.net/why/impact-overview/ for an overview of the broader impacts of resident-led play streets.
[47] Stenning, A. and Hall, S. (2018) Loneliness and the politics of austerity, *Discover Society*, 62, https://discoversociety.org/2018/11/06/on-the-frontline-loneliness-and-the-politics-of-austerity/
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- For local authorities, to similarly recognise and value the contribution of playing out sessions and to follow best practice in implementing resident-friendly play street policies;
- For local authorities, housing associations and other local or community groups, to allocate resources (financial and otherwise) to provide the empowering, hands-on support needed for residents to initiate, develop and sustain playing out sessions on their streets or estates;
- For local authorities, housing associations and other local or community groups, to particularly target support to more mixed neighbourhoods (with more socially and ethnically diverse communities) and those living with material disadvantage, where organising play streets may be more demanding and more time-consuming, but all-the-more necessary;
- For the Playing Out movement to communicate to the public and to stakeholders that 'playing out' is not just about play and not just for children by highlighting how promoting play on streets is directly associated with an increase in neighbourliness, a sense of belonging, and safer, friendlier streets;
- For the Playing Out movement to lobby local authorities to offer street activators more support in establishing and maintaining playing out sessions on their streets;
- For the Playing Out movement to create a list of 'top tips' for residents to support them in overcoming barriers to participation on their streets;
- For researchers and for the Playing Out movement to work to build a stronger evidence base around playing out and men; playing out and single parents; playing out and mixed communities; and playing out and social housing;
- For local residents, to identify other 'add-on' activities, such as litter picking, book swaps, plant sales and gardening, that might give neighbours without young children a greater incentive to join.