

PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside

A play streets scheme was established in North Tyneside in 2015, as part of a national pilot funded by Play England. In North Tyneside, the scheme was run by House of Objects CIC, based at Rising Sun. With the support of Play England and Playing Out, House of Objects established about 10 play streets in the borough, mostly in Whitley Bay.

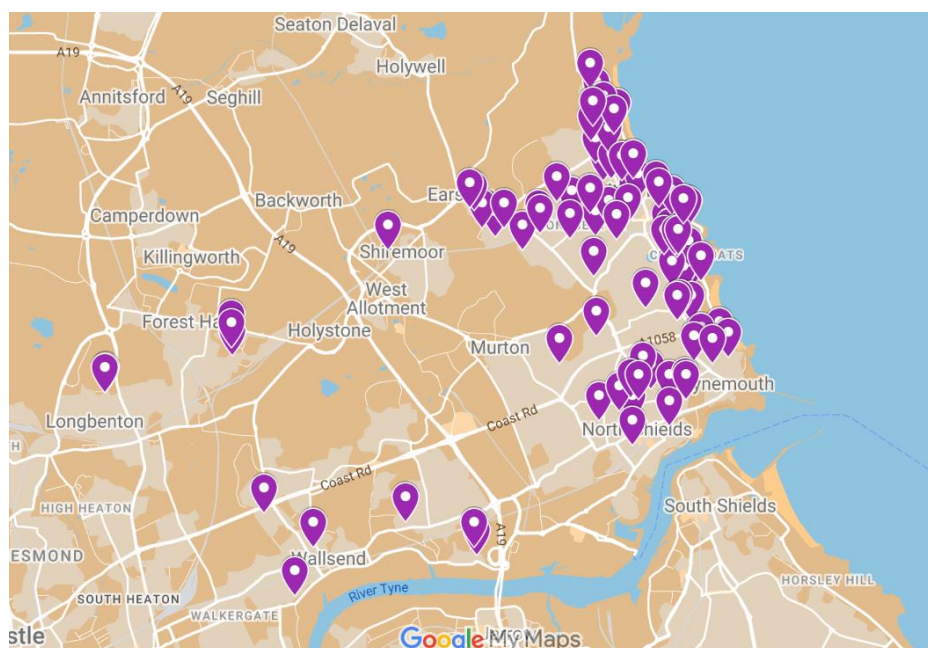
In 2017, that pilot came to an end and House of Objects chose to focus its energies on other projects. Three women whose streets had started playing out with House of Objects formed a constituted community group as volunteers to develop the play streets scheme. PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside was formally founded in June 2017.

Since then, PlayMeetStreet has supported **a total of 94 North Tyneside streets** to play out. Some of these have had only one-off or occasional events and we currently support about 40 regular streets, in addition to a steady flow of new streets (for example, 14 new streets started during the summer of 2022).

These numbers suggest that **North Tyneside's play streets scheme is one of the largest in the country**, with only Bristol (where the scheme started) and London supporting a larger number of play streets. North Tyneside's scheme is approximately the same size as that of Leeds, a city with a population considerably bigger than North Tyneside (and where the play streets scheme is managed and developed by the local authority).

We've attracted considerable local and regional media attention, including, for example, this short piece by ITV Tyne Tees (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2284551018379172>).

Many of PlayMeetStreet's streets are concentrated around the coast, in Monkseaton, Whitley Bay, Cullercoats, Tynemouth and North Shields, but we have also supported streets in Wallsend, Howdon, Forest Hall, Longbenton, and Shiremoor (see <https://tinyurl.com/PlayMeetStreet> for a map of all our play streets).



We estimate that 94 play streets equates to 1410 children and 940 adults having access to this opportunity to play and meet,¹ and that 40 regular play streets equates to approximately 600 children participating in a total of 120 hours of free, outdoor play in North Tyneside each month. In total, we estimate we've enabled about **180,000 child-play-hours** since 2017.

PlayMeetStreet has largely been funded by small grants from the National Lottery Community Fund. We received a Lottery Awards for All grant in 2018 and Coronavirus Community Support Fund (September 2020 – March 2021), and a Places Called Home award (October 2021 – June 2022).

PlayMeetStreet is run by unpaid volunteers, who form the committee, promote the scheme, process applications, liaise with the council, support residents, and apply for funding. In addition, those organising play streets on their own street do so as volunteers and commit a considerable amount of time and energy to animating play and community on their street.

In this context, it is important to note that all of this organisational work adds up as **thousands of volunteer hours**, dedicated to making parts of North Tyneside a nicer place to live.

For residents, organising a play street is free. Through its grant income, PlayMeetStreet gives residents everything they need to get started (leaflets, letters, Road Closed signs, play kit etc.). We also support applicants every step of the way, in consulting neighbours, dealing with questions and concerns, promoting events, troubleshooting, sharing ideas, renewing applications and more.

There is no doubt that the time and energy PlayMeetStreet have invested in play streets in North Tyneside over the past 5 years has enabled the scheme to grow to the scale it has.

National research confirms the positive impacts of play streets across a number of spheres, including public health, community and engagement, and active travel:

Physical Activity

- Children are 3-5 times more active during a play street than on a 'normal' day
- Play streets enable children to learn or improve physical skills (including cycling, scotting, skipping, roller-skating, and ball games)
- A 2021 survey suggested 76% of parents reported that post-lockdown play streets positively impacted their children's physical health

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 74% of parents report that their children make new friends on their street through play streets
- 82% of parents report that their children grew in social confidence on their play streets
- A 2021 survey suggested 82% of parents reported that post-lockdown play streets positively impacted their children's mental wellbeing.

Community and Belonging

- 45% of survey respondents reported that play streets actively alleviated loneliness
- 87% of respondents said their street felt like a safer, friendlier place to live after starting play streets
- 89% of respondents know more people on their street as a result of play streets

¹ Figures for each street vary, we estimate 15 children and 10 adults per street. This is a more conservative estimate than that from *a national survey (2017, 2019 and rechecked 2021) which suggests the following participation averages for play streets: 30 children attending and benefitting, and 15 adults actively involved in the play street.*

Active Travel and Campaigning

- 80% report that play streets enabled children to learn or improve riding a bike
- 57% felt that play streets had changed how they felt their street could be used
- Being involved in play streets has led residents to campaign for zebra crossings and 20mph zones, create parklets, campaign around air quality, and change their own driving and travel behaviour.

All of these documented impacts are all the more important in the recovery from covid-19 and as we face into a cost-of-living crisis, and in what follows we flesh out **the impacts of PlayMeetStreet's activities in North Tyneside.**

PlayMeetStreet North Tyneside: Impact and Issues

Results from a Survey (Nov 2022)

In November 2022, we circulated an online survey to every person who had been involved in setting up a play street in North Tyneside, from those who organised just one session to those who have been running play streets regularly for up to 5 years, and everyone in between.

We asked for key facts and figures about the play streets and their organisation, for information about the identifiable impacts, and for issues, concerns and obstacles. We also asked about the relationship between play streets and the streets' experiences of the pandemic.

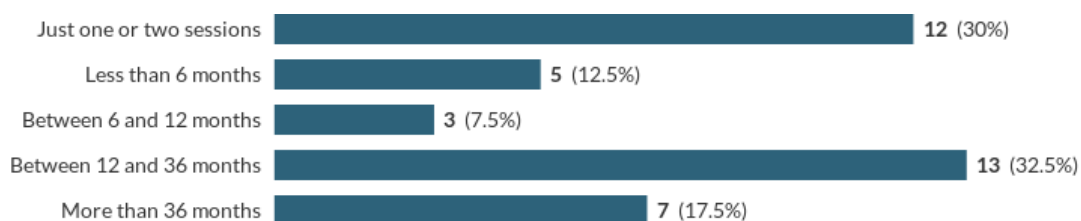
We received 40 responses, out of a total of 94 streets that have been involved in PlayMeetStreet in some way since 2017. These include streets all along the coast (from St Mary's to North Shields), but also Wallsend, Howdon and Longbenton, for example.

Key Play Streets Facts and Figures

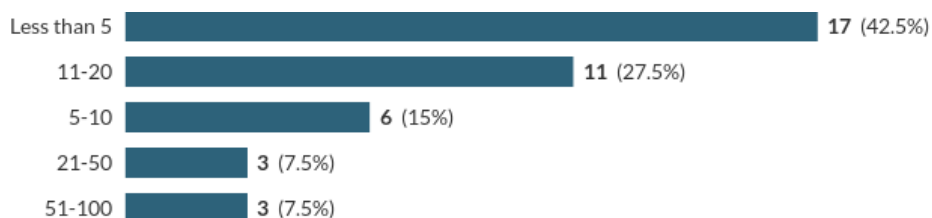
The two longest-running play streets in North Tyneside were set up in 2015 (with the support of House of Objects). Many others have been running since 2017 or 2018. A significant number started just after pandemic restrictions were lifted in the spring and summer of 2021.

Although a significant proportion only organised one or two sessions (see below for more on this), 50% of play streets have been going for over a year, with a number of these running for more than 3 years. This is mirrored in the number of sessions organised; most streets run monthly sessions, though some organise more infrequent, occasional sessions around key events and holidays (e.g. half-terms, Christmas, Halloween, etc.).

How long have you been (did you) organise play streets?



Roughly how many play street sessions do you think you have organised?



Most of the organisation of the play street sessions falls on the shoulders of one resident. This is a key issue. PlayMeetStreet supports all resident organisers but responsibility on streets remains with the residents, and there are questions here about ongoing support and about strategies for sustaining play streets.

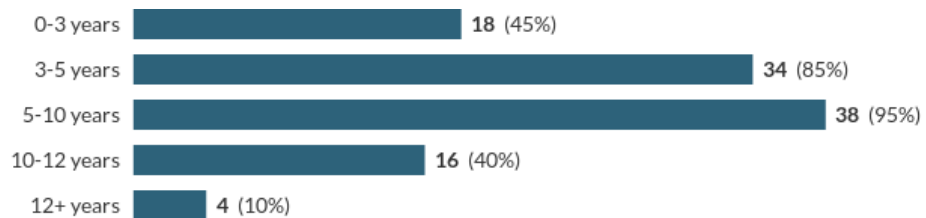
The number of children who join in play streets sessions varies from session to session, and from street to street, but the survey shows that on most streets, between 10 and 20 children normally take part. It is unlikely to always be exactly the same children who participate from month to month, so the total number of individual children involved will be higher than these figures.

Roughly how many children normally take part during play street sessions?



Most children involved are of primary and pre-school age. This has important implications for school readiness, for social and physical skills, and for community-building amongst parents of young children.

Roughly what ages are the children who normally take part in your play street sessions? Please tick all boxes that apply.

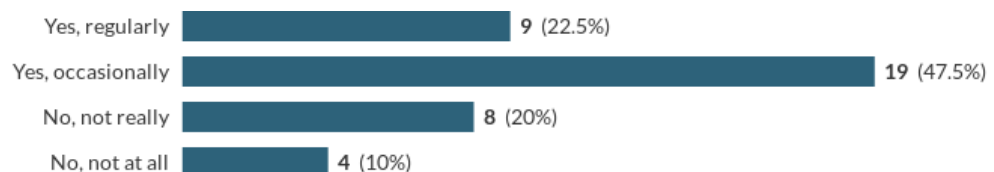


PlayMeetStreet play streets are not just for children. They also create a space for community and connection amongst adults. Significant numbers of adults take part (supervising their own children, stewarding, making cups of tea, playing etc.) and these include adult neighbours without young children on the majority of play streets

Approximately how many adults normally take part in your play street sessions?



Do adult neighbours without young children join in your play street sessions?



Some of the key, recurring reasons for getting involved in play streets (reported as short text answers) include:

- To create safe space for children to meet each other and play on their doorsteps
- To enable children to learn to cycle safely
- To get to know neighbours better
- To create a sense of community
- To build connections between young families
- Adults fondly remembering playing out as a child
- To build on occasional street get togethers (e.g. street parties, VE day, jubilee)
- To try to calm traffic
- To enable greater independence for growing children

These reasons are clearly reflected in the identified impacts of play streets.

General Qualitative Impacts

Asked what sorts of changes organisers have seen on their streets since they started running play streets, a number of themes recurred:

- Much closer relationships with many neighbours
- Stronger community
- Improves sense of security/safety
- Children of all ages know each other
- Neighbours just chatting and saying hello to each other more and more

A few resonant quotes:

“one of the kids was worried that he couldn't find his parent one afternoon (a case of crossed wires) and called to me to help him, I wonder if he would have done that had we not done street play”

“just generally a friendlier place to be”

Impacts – Children and Play

When the barriers are up and the space of the street is safe to play, children engage in hundreds of different play activities, representing most of the so-called ‘play types’.²



² Playworker Bob Hughes developed a description of 16 play types. These are Communication Play, Creative Play, Deep Play, Dramatic Play, Exploratory Play, Fantasy and Imaginary Play, Locomotor Play, Mastery Play, Object Play, Recapitulative Play, Role Play, Rough and Tumble Play, Social Play, Socio-Dramatic Play, and Symbolic Play. For more, see <https://www.playscotland.org/resources/play-types-poster/>.

The following are all forms of play identified by respondents from their streets.

Chalking	Dolls and prams	Throwing and catching
Cycling	Skipping	Obstacle courses
Firing rockets	Chatting	Role playing
Hopscotch	Water play, water fights and	Picnicking
Colouring in	water pistols	Tin can alley
Bubbles	Kerby	Giant jenga
Scooting	Quizzes	Sand and water trays
Races and chases	Bingo	Indoor toys on blankets
Noughts and crosses	Scavenger hunts	Remote control cars
Playing music	Bug hunts	Messy play
Dressing up	Treasure hunts	Football
Duck duck goose	Party games	Badminton
Hide and seek	Dressing up	Creating their own worlds
Playing in dens and tents	Basketball	Plays and performances
Toasting marshmallows	Planting seeds	Loose parts play
Slaloms	Toy planes	Cardboard boxes
What's the time, Mr Wolf?	Reading	Skipping
Rollerskating	Stuck in the mud	French skipping/elastics
Piggy in the middle	Skateboarding	

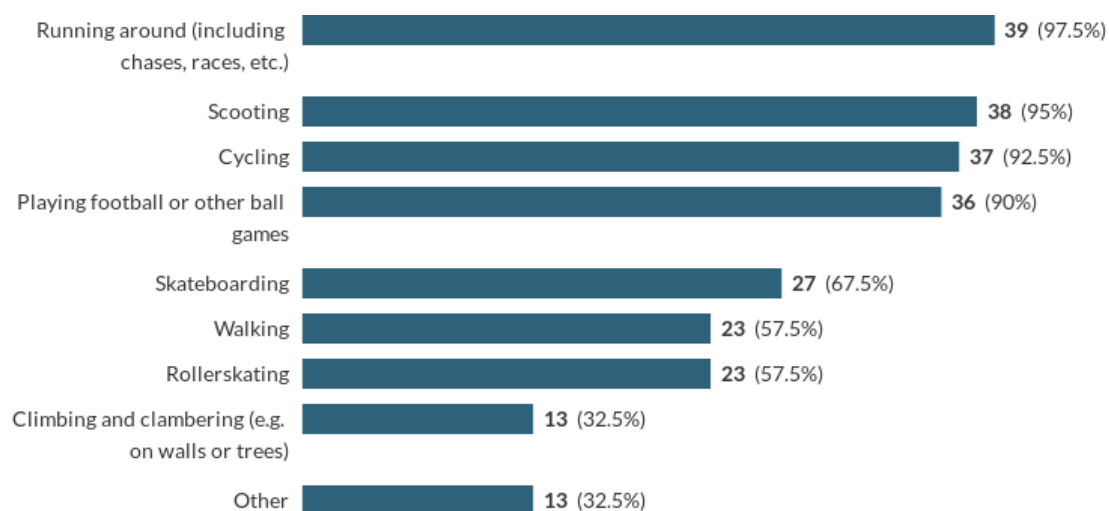
This all sounds like a lot of fun, hours when children are enjoying themselves with their siblings, friends and neighbours, of all ages.

As well as fun, though, we know that play – across the range of types identified – supports all sorts of physical and social developments for children.

- Physical Activity and Skills

One of the most visible impacts of a play street is on children's physical activity and skills. Children make the most of the safe space offered to move in all sorts of ways, usually for the full three hours.

In what ways have the children on your street been physically active during your play streets? Please tick all that apply and add 'others' as appropriate.



Others included: old school games like “What’s the time, Mr Wolf” and Stuck in the Mud; cricket; dodgeball; pogo sticks; jumping; skipping; tennis; musical chairs; dancing; throwing and catching.

In response to the question “***During play streets, do you think children on your street have learnt or improved any physical skills?***”, the following percentages of respondents said yes to:

- Cycling – 74%
- Scooting – 66%
- Skateboarding – 47%
- Rollerskating – 54%
- Skipping – 69%

Respondents added the following specific skills:

- Balance and dexterity
- Mark making and other motor skills
- Strength and coordination
- Fitness

- Social Skills

The impacts on children are not limited to physical skills, however. Play streets create opportunities for children to develop and practice a range of social skills.

During play streets, do you think children on your street have learnt or improved any social skills?

	Percentage stating ‘yes’
Interacting with children of a similar age	85%
Interacting with older or younger children	79%
Interacting with adults on the street	87%
Learning about road safety	69%

Other specific social skills that respondents suggested children had developed included:

- Helping to set up the street for play
- Doorknocking neighbours to let them know about the play street
- Asking neighbours to move cars
- Getting to know the street and adjacent streets
- Taking turns and sharing toys and treats
- Litter picking
- Taking responsibility for younger children
- Extending friendship groups
- Speaking to people (of all ages) who they don’t know well
- Teaching other children games and skills
- Learning to deal with conflict and arguments
- Working as a team
- Listening to adult organisers
- Being polite with neighbours

45% of respondents also noted that the children on the street have started playing with each other more, inside or outside, as a result of their play street.

Impacts – Community and Connection

The impact of play streets on connection, friendliness, safety and belonging on residents is overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of respondents in North Tyneside noted that, in a variety of ways, their relationships to their streets and neighbourhoods and to their neighbours dramatically improved. The increases in feelings of connection, safety and belonging are incredibly important to families in terms, for example, of their capacity to support each other, to negotiate challenges and crises (such as the pandemic and the cost of living crisis), and to feel at home. Play streets undoubtedly contribute to the council's stated goal of making North Tyneside an even greater place to live.

	Percentage stating 'yes'
I know more people on my street since we started to organise play streets	93
My street feels a friendlier, safer place to live since we started to organise play streets	73
Children on my street have made new friends since we started to organise play streets	76
I feel I belong more in my neighbourhood since we started to organise play streets	78
I have become friends with neighbours since my play street started	83

As well as the more intangible feelings of connection, belonging and safety, we can identify a range of specific activities that demonstrate a clear growth in trust and support on the borough's play streets. Respondents reported that five key acts which demand considerable levels of trust (holding spare keys, borrowing equipment, feeding pets, borrowing money, and look after children) all grew in scale since their play street started.

Some of these – such as borrowing tools and equipment – support not only families' capacity to deal with everyday jobs more easily, but also potentially reduce costs to families and serve environmental agendas of sharing occasional-use equipment.

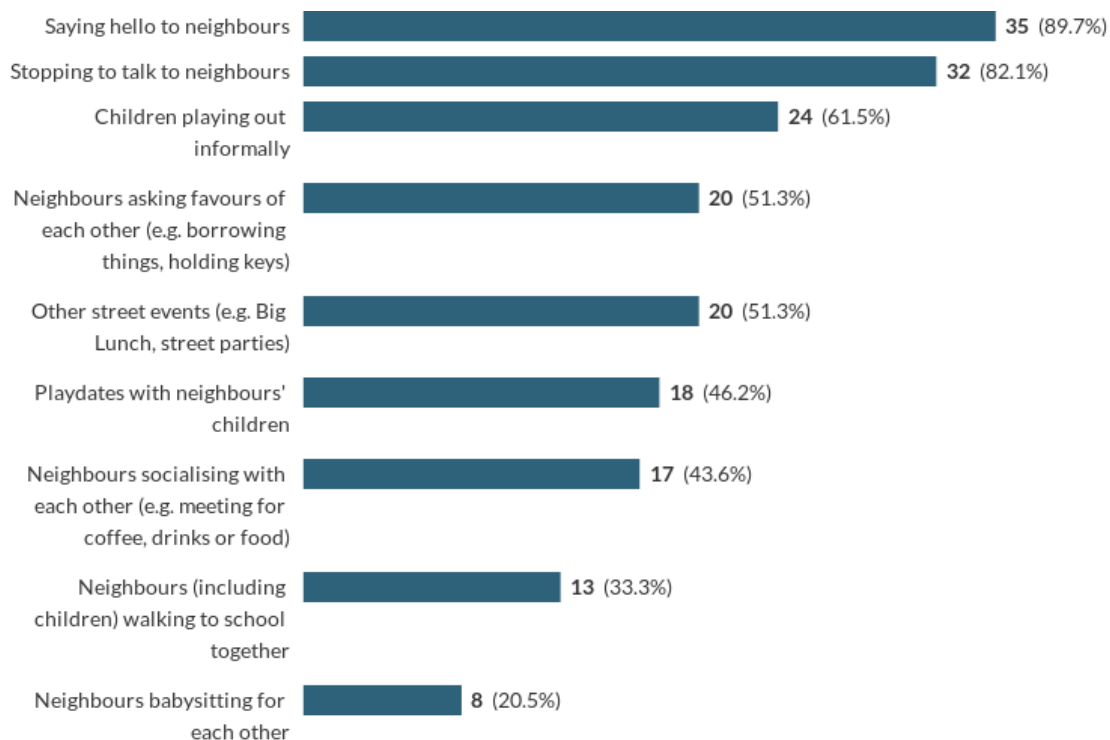
Since your play street started, how many more of your neighbours would you trust to:

	Percentage stating 'many more'	Percentage stating 'one or two more'	TOTAL
Keep hold of spare house keys	12	39	51
Borrow tools or equipment	34	42	76
Feed your pets	15	50	65
Borrow money	-	20	20
Look after your children	3	46	49

More generally, the responses regarding increases in neighbourliness and connection are overwhelmingly positive. Some of these reaffirm the positive changes outlined above, but it is clear that play streets support neighbours to get to know each other and to support each other in a number of ways. According to respondents, every one of these activities had seen an improvement since streets had started to play out together.

In all these ways, it is clear that the benefits of play streets extend well beyond children and their opportunities for play.

***Have any of the following increased in frequency since your play street started?
Please select all that apply and add your own examples.***



Engaging adults without young children

Whilst one might imagine that it is families with children who reap the most benefits from play streets, on 70% of streets surveyed, adult neighbours without young children participate occasionally or regularly. This suggests that these neighbours too, who might not have a particular interest in creating space for play, potentially also benefit from impacts of play streets.

The resident-organisers who responded outlined some of the ways these adults have engaged in, and benefitted from their play streets, and underlined the efforts they go to ensure that all neighbours are invited and included in the play street. One noted, for example, that “We made sure our play streets are for everyone, including adults and teenagers. We want that sense of community.”

Those who reflected on the participation of adults without young children noted that

- elderly neighbours would come out to chat, to share a hot chocolate or some cake
- adult neighbours would express real pleasure in seeing children play on their streets
- at key events (street quizzes or bingo, summer street parties, Christmas, for example) more adults would participate
- many adults without children pop in to the play street or stop to chat as they're coming and going, even if they don't stay out
- some adults without young children volunteer to 'steward' the road closure, enabling the play street to happen and giving them a chance to chat to other neighbours
- adults without young children will sometimes come along with grandchildren, nieces and nephews, or other young relatives and friends

- others often out gardening, washing cars, fixing bikes while the children and their families play and chat and engage as they do so

Through this participation and the general increase in neighbourliness outlined above, it could be assumed that the community benefits of play streets are felt by many residents.

Facebook and WhatsApp

One of the ways in which the community benefits of play streets are reinforced is through the street Facebook and WhatsApp groups that have developed, often as a result of the play street, but sometimes as a first step towards the street establishing a play street.

90% of the streets surveyed have either a Facebook group (10%) or WhatsApp group (77.5%) or both (2.5%). These groups complement the in-person socialising on the street and enable connections to continue between play street sessions.

Respondents noted a wide range of topics discussed on these groups, clustered around:

- recommendations for tradespeople and services (e.g. plumbers, roofers, electricians, dog walkers, cleaners)
- people offering unwanted objects (furniture, books, games, plants, etc.)
- safety, security, crime and anti-social behaviour on the street
- tracking missing post and parcels
- lending and borrowing tools and equipment
- asking after/caring for older, poorly or isolated neighbours
- missing or found pets
- jokes and general chat
- reminders of bin day, roadworks, etc.
- sharing information about other local events, new shops/cafes etc.,
- organising other street events (coffee mornings, litter picking, bake sales, etc.)
- parking issues
- queries about other street issues (internet, water, power cuts, noise, etc.)

It's clear that these groups, developed alongside play streets, support residents in all sorts of ordinary but important ways that simply make life easier.

The Pandemic

One of the particular ways in which play streets enabled support was during the pandemic. 72% of resident-respondents on streets that had started playing out before the pandemic stated that their play street positively impacted their street's experience of the pandemic.

This manifested in a number of ways. Play streets:

- quickly established informal support networks on the basis of the existing friendships and connections and their Facebook/WhatsApp groups
- organised informal and socially-distanced but playful activities on the street, such as discos, bingo, quizzes, chalk trails, and Easter egg hunts
- facilitated children playing outside together, when this was permitted
- came together in front gardens/yards and on doorsteps for residents' birthdays, for the Clap for Carers, and other key moments
- shared chats and cuppas on doorsteps throughout lockdowns.

Some of our play streets also emerged out of the pandemic, as a way of consolidating and developing the connections and informal support networks established during the pandemic and as a reflection of how the streets felt during and after lockdowns. Respondents from these streets noted, for example:

- The connections made during lockdowns encouraged them to organise regular play streets to maintain something of what had emerged in the pandemic
- The quieter streets of lockdown led them to think about what might be possible on the street
- The possibility of safe, outdoor play was particularly attractive as restrictions were gradually lifted.

Other Street/Community Activities

In addition to support during the pandemic and the wide range of connections and support described above, play streets also enable other forms of very local engagement and activism.

A significant minority of streets have also got involved in activities such as litter picking and tending their nearby green spaces. A number have also participated regularly in the Tin on a Wall collections for local charities and other collections for food banks etc.

Almost half of the streets involved have started conversations more generally about their streets. These include speaking to their councillors about speeding, parking and pavement repairs, training as speed awareness volunteers, and speaking to other road users (e.g. neighbouring schools and clubs) about driver behaviour.

- The Best Things to Happen on Play Streets

“elderly neighbour now brought a hot meal every evening”

“Street Play has increased the 'neighbourhoodness' of the street. Many of us (adults) are now close friends and organise social activities together”

“There was a real community feel again after the long Covid months”

“The 100th Birthday party for our neighbour Doug which included the Backworth Colliery Band playing for us; the sense of community and knowing everyone better”

“Regular playing now in front gardens as well as in the back alley”

“Feels like a little community & more united. Look out for each other a lot more”

- Issues and Obstacles

There are inevitably a few issues and concerns that arise on play streets; some of these pose challenges for the organisation, sustainability, and development of play streets in North Tyneside.

Some neighbours do object to the temporary closures. Our experience is that these objections are very small in number and often reflect a misunderstanding about access to homes – vehicle access is maintained for residents, though they asked to follow a steward (i.e. a neighbour in a hi-vis vest) at walking pace when the road has been cleared of playing children.

In most instances, objections from neighbours are discussed and negotiated, resulting in possible solutions such as tweaks to the timing and/or exact location of the closures. In

many other instances, when concerned neighbours see a play street in action their objections fall away, as play streets tend to be much less disruptive than anticipated – and more fun!

“I felt a bit surprised by the neighbours who objected. However in the end they both came out to join in, and so I think they have changed their minds.”

One more persistent issue is that the responsibility for organising and running play streets, with the support of PlayMeetStreet, often falls on the shoulders of just one or two residents, and when their circumstances change (e.g. they move away, their children grow out of play streets), it can be difficult to sustain the established play street. There is a need to reflect on this challenge in terms of the organisation of play streets in North Tyneside.

Another recurring issue is cancellations as a result of bad weather – because streets apply for specific, scheduled dates in advance there is no flexibility in response to the weather. Although many of our streets do play out in all weathers – rain, wind, even snow – if residents were to decide to cancel the inflexibility of the permission process would be that they would have to wait a month to try to play out again. Residents are not able to take advantage of good weather and arrange last-minute play street sessions. On established play streets with confirmed and widespread support, we see no reason why closures could not take place with less notice.

Rethinking the legal processes and the kinds of traffic orders used would potentially allow for established streets to be designated “play streets” with priority given to children and with permission to close for play at short notice.