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School streets case studies from Southampton - how using temporary street closures and trial interventions can help to gain support for permanent changes to improve our school environments.

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Abstract

Streets around our schools are dominated by cars at the start and end of the school day. In Southampton (UK), this has led to high levels of air pollution, unsafe environments for children and parents, and unpleasant conditions for walking, cycling and other social activities.

Southampton City Council (SCC), with the support of its major partners, the University of Southampton, Sustrans, and Balfour Beatty, have worked in partnership with local pupils, teachers and residents to transform these unpleasant environments through a combination of street closures, other infrastructure measures, and behavioural change projects. These approaches place the needs and preferences of the local community, and in particular children and young people, at the heart of identifying what steps need to be taken to create safer, cleaner, and more pleasant school environments, which encourage more families to walk, cycle or scoot to school.

In our paper, three case studies that explore a range of measures will be presented (see below). These range from one-day street closures, 6-week trials using temporary street furniture, through to ongoing (semi-permanent) physical traffic restrictions. Using these examples, we will describe the lessons learned from adopting each approach, the impact they have had on levels of active travel and changes in driver behaviour at the school gates, and the wider outcomes on the local community and environment, as well as recommendations for other councils and authorities considering this approach.

Southampton Case Studies

St John's School

SCC, with its highways partner Balfour Beatty Living Places, implemented a timed road closure outside a City centre school at drop-off and pick-up times. The scheme was introduced in November 2018 on French Street outside St John's Primary & Nursery School, which was originally undertaken on a trial basis to reduce local air pollution, improve road safety and encourage families to travel actively to and from school. This part-time closure is the first of its kind in Southampton, and uses movable bollards which restrict traffic for a period of 45 minutes during the morning and afternoon 'school runs', and is implemented under an official experimental Traffic Regulation Order.

<https://www.facebook.com/BBCRadioSolent/videos/346420405905996/>

Sustrans School Streets

On the 25 March 2019, SCC worked in partnership with Sustrans, its behavioural change delivery partner, to manually close the streets outside four other schools in the City at drop-off and pick-up times. The purpose of this event was to raise awareness of the challenges, and illustrate the improvements that removing car traffic from the school gates can make, and in so doing, also encourage children to play and socialise around these local neighbourhoods.

Child Friendly Streets

Two further trial road closures were also conducted as part of the EU Metamorphosis 'Child-Friendly Streets' Project which aims to transform car-oriented neighbourhoods into child-friendly spaces in collaboration with local communities. This project used 'co-design' workshops and trial days to enable members of the local community, especially children, to share their creative ideas on how to improve the local physical environment, which also involved Valentines School in Sholing, Southampton. The street closures included festivals which enabled the local residents, businesses, parents and children to work together to put their ideas into action, for example decorating pathways, installing planting, and providing other fun activities to encourage people to socialise and play. Families were also treated to a bike agility course, and Bike Doctor Sessions. Temporary urban furniture involving seating was also installed by the residents, which remained in place for over a month to test the improved road layout. The community were also able to share their views on the proposed changes by voting on various design sketches, some of which has now been made permanent.

Innovation Deployed

The cases studies employed a combination of mixed methods, including physical infrastructure changes, street and furniture re-design, and measures to encourage behavioural change.

A people-orientated approach was also adopted, involving four phases:

1. Workshops conducted with parents and children to identify routes they used for school, and their barriers to walking and cycling more frequently.
2. 'Co-design' tasks, where people were given a plan of the local area and a model kit (containing scaled street items including trees, benches, vehicles, people, planters, parking bays, etc.) and had over 30 minutes in which to co-design changes with project staff (including an urban designer) as part of a wider brief.
3. On-street trials, where the street was closed for 4 hours to allow project staff to support the pupils and parents in recreating the designs compiled from three co-design workshops, using additional street furniture and coloured chalk.
4. This 'street kit' was then left in place for 14 weeks to enable the effects to be monitored and experienced in everyday use.

The street closures enabled children and parents as well as residents to visualise the street differently, and to imagine and see how the space could be better repurposed to their needs.

Results and Impact

Examples of the impacts on active travel, public perceptions of safety, and levels of support are outlined below. Note the case studies have been delivered in the past year, hence the long term effects have not been measured.

Active travel: early results at St John's indicate the street closure is having excellent results, with Travel Tracker engagement (a Living Streets initiative to record pupils' travel behavior) increased to 80%, and the levels of recorded active travel increased to 93% since implementation.

Improved safety: 'Healthy Streets'-type surveys were undertaken to gauge satisfaction of the road closures amongst key target groups. There was a 28% reduction in how intimidated people felt about traffic at St John's, and for the one day Sustrans School Streets closures, 92% of respondents agreed that the streets felt safer to use.

Perceptions/local support: 66% of respondents to the one-day closures also agreed that the surrounding streets were less congested, and 93% supported a street closure happening more regularly outside the schools or on a permanent basis. More importantly, this improvement was also seen in car drivers who had been affected by the closure, 72% of whom also felt the street was a more enjoyable place to be.

Lessons Learnt

Lessons learnt include:

There was some knock-on effects, which needed to be managed, e.g. at St Johns, although the number of pupils travelling by car has reduced, a challenge has been the displacement of parental parking onto adjoining streets, which were not experiencing a parking issue prior to the scheme. Council enforcement officers were therefore asked to patrol adjoining streets, and ensure compliance with parking restrictions.

For the one-day closures, it was important to capture the impact of the event on the day, e.g. through social media and local news companies. This has been an effective tool to record the views of residents and parents/pupils, which in turn has influenced decision-makers and secured support for more permanent closures. The temporary closures and trials themselves can be used to manage the concerns of residents and parents/children early on, to reduce the number of objections to future schemes.

Using the schools as points of contact had ensured good engagement with parents and pupils. However, the engagement of residents, particularly those without children or the elderly, was more problematic. Further street trials are required to determine how to engage these groups, to ensure any permanent closures meet the needs of the whole community.