# Children's Right to Play in a Window of Opportunity
## Understanding Local Policy Change— Multiple Streams in Bristol (UK) Policy Making

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The authors discuss their application of John W. Kingdon's multiple streams framework (MSF) and the role it plays in the analysis of a pioneering local public policy in the United Kingdom (UK). The aim of this policy, instituted in 2009 and initiated by a group of Bristol's mothers, was to reclaim children's right to play, mainly for their own enjoyment and sense of freedom and independence but also for all the important functional, healthy, and developmental outcomes of free outdoor active play. Their play street model was disseminated to more than one hundred other local authorities within a decade and obtained the explicit support of the UK government. The authors intend their analysis and conclusions both to contribute to the MSF and policy change literature and offer lessons learned in Bristol as useful for children's right to play advocates, social movements, policy makers, and strategic planners. **Key words**: multiple streams framework; policy entrepreneurs; policy making and play; right to play

## Introduction

ACCORDING TO ARTICLE 31 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989), all children have the right to play. Several academic disciplines confirm that playing has a vitally important role—both for an individual child's development and for a society in which children live into adulthood—but that play's primary purpose is simply to be enjoyed (Dawson 1993; Elkind 2008; Gill 2014; Henricks 2015; Jarvis 2014; Verdoodt et al. 2021). In line with this premise, some research has shown that children's favorite after-school activity is to play freely with their friends (Yates and Oates 2019; Lehto and Eskelinen 2020).

However, in all industrialized countries, children's freedom to play has declined in recent decades. Their spaces and opportunities to play have diminished (UNICEF 2007). Children today spend less time playing outside than children in previous generations. Some of the factors contributing to this decline include the decreased accessibility of traditional places in which to play (streets, woodlands, and open spaces in and around neighborhoods), increasing traffic and crime, the fear of abuse or abduction, negative perceptions of children and young people in public spaces, and the ubiquity of electronic devices (Lacey 2007; Lee et al. 2015; Singer et al. 2009; Voce 2015).

But, in general, even when governments acknowledge the value of play, it tends to be taken for granted as something that simply happens—and it is generally considered as either not a policy matter or as something that can be achieved through objectives considered more important, such as improving children's academic attainment or increasing their physical activity. Nevertheless, local, regional, and national governments can tackle this issue in several ways to improve children's opportunities for outdoor play. One of the public actions recommended by experts is promoting street play sessions wherever possible, which involves stopping the traffic and allowing children freedom to play and to self-organize in nonsupervised activities in the streets where they live (Jarvis 2014; Voce 2015).

In this article, we study the case of Bristol as a pioneer local authority in the United Kingdom (UK). We examine how street play policy got on the government's agenda in Bristol by a local initiative the parents brought to the city. A play policy for children and young people in Bristol had been passed in 2003, under the Department of Environment, Transport, and Leisure (Bristol City Council 2003). But this policy focused on play provision, playgrounds, parks, and green spaces with no reference to play streets. It also made little reference to scholarly literature or scientific evidence on the significance of play. We should note that until then very few scientific studies of play even existed. The studies on childhood and youth that may have had some connection with this issue mainly focused on physical activity and active travel to school.

Street play as a public policy began in Bristol on June 1, 2009, when two neighbors, with the support of other residents, closed their street to traffic on a weekday afternoon after school. To do this, they applied for permission using the existing street party procedure at the city hall, but they did not organize a party. They let children play freely and safely in their street.

In 2010 these neighbors supported the other residents of six local streets

who sought to carry out a similar activity. The council's lead member for care and health at the time, Jon Rogers, attended one of these sessions and observed the potential benefits of health and well-being for the children, as well its benefits for the community at large (Playing Out n.d.). Although the residents of these streets expressed their desire to be allowed to repeat this experience frequently (Playing Out 2010), at that time the city council permitted restrictions on through traffic for events and parties only three times a year.

With the political support of the local government and input from residents formed as a community interest company (CIC) called Playing Out, highway officials developed a novel local policy—the Temporary Play Street Order (TPSO 2011). This repurposed existing legislation was already used, for example, for street parties (Town and Police Clauses Act 1847). The new order allowed residents to make a single annual request to cut off motorized through traffic on their street regularly (up to three hours per week) so that children could access the street safely for play.

Playing Out received a grant from the city council to provide support and advice to interested street residents who also wished to apply for a TPSO. The TPSO was tested during 2011 and 2012. Since then it has become a permanent policy, and almost 240 streets have engaged in this activity in Bristol (Playing Out 2019). During lockdown and subsequent restriction of social contacts due to COVID-19, street play activities declined, but they have resumed as restrictions have been lifted (Playing Out 2022).

At present, the approval process for a TPSO takes eight weeks. During these weeks, the city council provides a process to assess any objections raised by local residents. The city council gives a template letter to applicants, which they must use to consult all businesses and homes on the street. Any objections submitted are considered by the council. Bristol City Council (BCC) proved very cautious in the trial of the new policy, and if a local resident objected, the application of street play was likely to be refused. But with the clear support of a BCC executive member, the council, some months later, decided to remove the objection clause. Since July 2014, objections that focus merely on the rejection of street play are not considered sufficient to reject an application for a TPSO (Playing Out n.d., b). Only material objections are considered (e.g., genuine safety or access concerns), and BCC discusses them to attempt to alleviate the concerns and enable the play street to go ahead, at least for one trial session. This was a turning point in the policy change process. The TPSO is granted for one year, and there is no charge for it.

Since 2011 with the support of Playing Out to residents and councils across the UK, a growing movement began using this new temporary street play policy (Ferguson 2019b). At Playing Out's last count, over fifteen hundred streets have a street play session in more than one hundred local authority areas (ninety-four of them are now actively supporting the playing-out model), providing play for an estimated 45,180 children. In addition, 22,590 adults have been directly involved on their street (Playing Out n.d., c). The Playing Out movement and play street model have also inspired action in other countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, and Greece, indicating the influence of the Bristol model (Playing Out n.d., a).

To counter barriers of inconsistencies in legal frameworks as well as different interpretations of the same legal frameworks, Playing Out and other nonprofit organizations lobbied the national government to suggest guidelines to reassure and clarify that councils have a legal basis for authorizing street play. This action resulted in an official letter on  June 13, 2019, from the Department for Transport to all English highway authorities stating that "play streets offer wonderful opportunities not merely for children, but for families and communities" (Pike et al  2018). The Department for Transport's letter mentions the various legal possibilities available to councils, encouraging them to implement a play street policy (Department for Transport 2019). In August 2019, the UK government published an official guide to street play for local councils on its website, noting the importance of children's outdoor play and indicating that Playing Out could provide further information (GOV.UK 2019). As this summary illustrates, policy change is often a complex process involving several actors and institutions, each contributing its own resources, values, and competencies (Zahariadis 2016).

It is important to emphasize that the neighbors leading the Playing Out initiative in Bristol were both women.  Women's participation in campaigns for urban play streets in England is not new, starting in the post–World War II decades, when a gradual but steady rise in both motor transport and pedestrian injuries and fatalities led to an intense debate about the appropriate use of streets in urban environments. Women argued that neighborhood sociability was strongly connected to children's street play and that rising levels of traffic threatened both. Women organized demonstrations against traffic throughout England, especially in working-class areas. They wished to maintain a safe space for women and children outside their own front doors, to preserve the community and social functions of the streets and to fight against nonresident motorists using residential streets as alternative routes to busy streets. Despite

their determination, however, by the late 1960s the streets closed to traffic to allow play were disappearing, mainly due to the growth in the number of cars and the increasing belief that preventing their freedom of movement hurt commerce and the economy in general. Not only traffic but also the parked cars of residents contributed to the problem. In addition, married women who entered the labor market had less time to spend with their children after school. For these reasons, among others, beginning in the 1970s the time spent playing outside declined while indoor play increased. By the twenty-first century, such play was accompanied by an increase in consumer goods intended for children, such as computer games and electronic devices, which in turn did little to encourage children to play outside. But in recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in children's outdoor play, partly because of concerns about childhood obesity and partly because scientific evidence suggested links between childhood learning abilities and outdoor play. Nonprofit organizations are now actively seeking to reinstall street play in the United Kingdom (Cowman 2017), as the pioneering Bristol initiative, led by Playing Out and other initiatives such as Play Streets and London Play, in London demonstrate.

## Theoretical Framework

Key to our research are the factors that facilitated the changes in children's outdoor play policy in Bristol. To answer questions about policy change, political scientists have developed various frameworks for analysis (Weible and Sabatier 2017; Viñas et al. 2018). One often used theory—proposed by Kingdon (1984) in *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*—is the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF). Although Kingdon developed this approach to make sense of national public policy change in the United States, since he published the book many studies have supported the MSF framework's usefulness in explaining change at national, subnational, and international levels in a wide variety of countries, cities, and policy areas. The framework has been widely used to analyze how and why some issues get incorporated into government agendas, and how the ideas from different actors garner support through formal and informal mechanisms. Kingdon's questions are: "How do subjects come to officials' attention? How are the alternatives from which they choose generated? How is the governmental agenda set? Why does an idea's time come when it does?" (Kingdon 1984, vii).

According to this framework, policy formation results from the flow of

three streams: problems, policies, and politics. Each one remains independent of the others and has its own rules and dynamics. In fact, changes can occur within one stream without changes occurring in other streams. At critical moments—called "policy windows"—policy entrepreneurs manage to couple the three streams, increasing the chances of policy makers adopting a particular policy and, in turn, facilitating policy change (Zahariadis 2014).

Although some authors have suggested that the MSF elements can inform all stages of the policy process, including implementation (Howlett 2019; Howlett, McConell, and Pearl 2015; Ridde 2009), others have argued that policy implementation forms a distinct stage of the policy process, involving different goals, processes, mechanisms, and relationships (Fowler 2019; Matland 1995). This has led to the identification of fourth and fifth streams—"process stream" and "program stream"—which can help us understand the different modalities of the implementation process, say in different cities or different countries (Howlett et al. 2015; Mukherjee and Howlett 2015). However, research using the new MSF model as applied to implementation remains scarce, and many authors claim that MSF is suited to explaining only agenda setting or policy adoption (Fowler 2022). In addition, because our research focuses on the analysis of the process of policy making, agenda setting, and policy adoption, and not on the analysis of the implementation of street play policy, we have used Kingdon's original theoretical framework and not its subsequent extensions. In a following section of this article, Multiple Streams Framework and Play Street in Bristol, we explain the main components of the framework and present our findings.

## Research Questions and Methodology

In this study we address the following questions:  Why did Bristol change its children's outdoor play policy in 2010? Why was street play policy possible? What role did policy entrepreneurs—and in particular nonprofit organizations—play? How completely does MSF explain this policy change? To answer these questions, we combined empirical evidence from six structured, in-depth interviews and the information derived from an analysis of documents.

Other researchers using MSF have emphasized identifying policy entrepreneurs and analyzing their actions (Mintrom and Norman 2009; Johannesson and Qvist 2020, among others). For our analysis, we carefully selected the main actors of the policy process and interviewed them. We questioned representa-

tives of Playing Out, policy makers, and local government officials who were involved with street play. The interviews focused on the key elements of the children's outdoor play policy change process in Bristol, actors involved in this process, the relationships between them, and situations or circumstances that contributed to the policy change, all to explain how and why a proposal by two residents became actual public policy in Bristol. We transcribed the interviews and used NVivo software to code the transcriptions. We anonymized the data from the interviews, referring only to the type of organization to which each interviewee belongs. Therefore, we labelled the interviews as "PO" for Playing Out (N=1), "T" for transport officers (N=2), and "PH" for public health officers (N=3). We differentiated the interviewees with a numerical coding.

Our data focuses on the period from 2009 to 2012 to incorporate when a street in Bristol first closed to let children use the space in their own way and up until the first street play session before the council decided it would make the temporary street play policy permanent. To better understand this policy change, we reconstructed the story of street play, beginning when its initiators elaborated their preliminary ideas in 2007 and placed that alongside the political story line of BCC since 2004. We carried out further data collection a decade later to understand the current status of street play in Bristol and in the United Kingdom so as to highlight its importance and magnitude both as a public policy and as a community process.

We conducted face-to-face interviews for this research between April and September 2015. We updated data in 2021 via email consultations with the operations officer of Playing Out and with data from the Playing Out's website (https://playingout.net/). This time frame and timing have enabled us to take a longitudinal study from the years of the emergence of the proposal, its inclusion on the government agenda, the early implementation of it as public policy, the consolidation of this public policy in Bristol, its dissemination in other cities in the UK, and the support given it by the national government.

## Multiple Streams Framework and Play Street in Bristol

We organized our findings around the three streams (problems, policies, and politics), and the two other structural elements of MSF (policy entrepreneurs and policy window).

*Problem Stream*

The problem stream includes the issues that policy makers and the general population identify as problems and believe that we need government action to solve them (Zahariadis 2014; Béland and Howlett 2016).

Some issues are defined as problems and therefore receive more attention than others. As Kingdon (1984) states, problems are not defined by themselves, and problems are not objective facts. They are issues interpreted as problems by people, influenced by their beliefs and values. They are social constructs. People compare the present with the past, or they compare different countries or municipalities. Of course, not all issues become problems (Zahariadis 2014, 32). Again, as Kingdon notes: "Governmental officials fix their attention on one problem rather than another. Various mechanisms—indicators, focusing events, and feedback- bring problems to their attention" (119).

Street play was the idea of a group of resident mothers who wanted the street to be where their own and other's children could play. They wanted the street to be a place where cars, adults, and children have equal priority. As the interviewee from Playing Out explains: "We wanted to find a way to make our street somewhere that children can safely play. And we'd looked into various projects, various kinds of ways to make our street safer, nicer, to slow traffic, to make it more of a shared space. . . . I strongly believe, even regardless of the health benefits, or the community benefits, . . . it's a right for children to be able to play freely outside their own home. You know, just for their own enjoyment and sense of freedom and independence, just in itself" (PO1).

In June 2008, the women started to hold meetings with other residents to share these ideas, and they organized a street party in September 2008, where many people from the street came together. As one of them said: "So, I think that was the starting point [the street party in September 2008], probably. Where we started thinking 'This is nice as a one special event, but it would be nice to make the street feel more lived in, more sociable every day'" (PO1).

Using MSF concepts, our case study identified the problem stream as formulated by a few residents who defined the problem from their personal point of view and according to their own values and beliefs.

*Policy Stream*

According to Kingdon, the policy stream consists of the different solutions or alternatives for change proposed by specialists in the policy communities. Policy communities are relatively stable groups of civil servants, congressional staff

members, academics, consultants, researchers in think tanks, private and voluntary sector actors, and leaders of political parties and interest groups. The policy stream contains a "primeval soup" of ideas that compete for acceptance into the policy network. Kington presents the policy primeval soup as a system that resembles the natural selection process. Actors have their own understanding of certain aspects of reality and constantly try to generate alternatives and proposals according to such understanding (Kingdon 1984).

As in the natural selection process, some of these proposals manage to survive and be considered in the government agenda building process, while other proposals do not succeed. Though there are many ideas in the primeval soup, very few are accepted. The main criteria for selecting them are technical feasibility (i.e., that it is likely that what is intended will be achieved), acceptability of the value, and that no future limitations are foreseen. Alternatives that appear difficult to implement or more expensive are less likely to be accepted. In addition, proposals that conform to existing regulations or to the values of policy makers are more likely to enter the government agenda (Zahariadis 2014).

The residents who promoted street play wanted to change the actual physical layout of the street, and they discussed different ideas with other residents. First, they looked at examples of "home zones," but the cost proved a significant barrier. A home zone is a residential street where vehicles and people share the street safely. In a home zone, the surface of the road changes completely to remove the distinction between pavement and road and simply make the road all one surface, creating a space equally shared by vehicles, cars, and people (Gill 2006). Then, the residents studied the idea of DIY streets promoted by Sustrans, a charity that wants to make walking and cycling easier for people. DIY streets promote redesigning a street using planting, planters, seating, and other features to change the parking layout and slow down traffic.

These residents wanted to re-create the feel of home zones in a much cheaper and more community-led way, but they faced opposition from other residents to even very small changes to the street. They looked for a simpler and more immediate action to make the street suitable for children's play, and they came up with the idea of street play. They used the council's existing policy for closing roads for street parties, which they had previously employed and are one-off events. On June 1, 2009, residents closed the road, but they did not throw a street party. Instead, they let children use the space as they wished. This was as an experiment to see what happens when fast-moving traffic is removed from a residential street.

As one of the women who promoted street play explained in the interview, residents started street play thinking that it would be a catalyst, a visualization of what was possible, and that it would get people thinking about how to achieve this on an everyday basis. They were not imagining that street play would become a long-term scheme, as they explained: "What's been a bit of an adjustment for us is accepting that, for the time being, things aren't going to change as much as we would like. . . .  It's not the same as the long-term vision of children having complete freedom and to play outside independently. It's very different from that, it's very organized, it's very adult led, it's supervised, it's still a contained space and a contained time. . . .  Ideologically it's not the end result of what we want" (PO1).

Although street play was not the first choice of the residents who promoted it, it fits the aims of several Bristol City Council departments (transport, public health, education, children and young people's service, park services, and housing design for new developments, among others) (Bristol City Council 2003, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2013a, 2013b), and gained their support as explained by two of the public health officials. As one said: "We need to have a system which encourages people to choose to walk and cycle so that their total fitness levels are much higher, and playing out would just fit into that as another nice additional thing" (PH1). Another added: "I think the public health benefits are a key one . . . [but there are] also wider benefits like community cohesion so people knowing each other, and then that's important for things like community safety" (PH2).

As Kingdon (1984) states, "While many ideas float around in this policy primeval soup, the ones that last, as in a natural selection system, meet some criteria. Some ideas survive and prosper; some proposals are taken more seriously than others" (123).

BCC has not previously identified any problem in relation to children playing, and street play fit its values and beliefs. It was technically simple and did not require the use of too many public resources (neither financial, nor material, nor human). And, because the neighbors were largely responsible for the organization of the events and their implementation, they began to support it. The council processes the request of the neighbors, carries out police supervision on the days of the events, and—in some cases—provides the necessary traffic signs. For the 2010 pilot project, BCC allowed the closure of six streets to let children play. And in 2011, the council approved a temporary play street order (TPSO) for a one-year trial of a new policy. From September 2011 to September 2012,

single application allowed streets to close on a regular basis for play for up to three hours per week. By September 2012, nearly twenty streets had successfully applied, using this policy. It was seen as a success, and the council decided to authorize the street order as a permanent policy.

No obvious national legislation had appeared that made it specifically clear councils could close streets for play, so BCC was very cautious in the trial. As one transport official explained: "Because this was so new and we were using legislation that was so old, when we first set this up as a trial, I wanted to make sure that it didn't fall at the first hurdle, so I was quite firm about it. If people objected to it, then I refused the application. . . . The reason being that, if people were objecting to it, and we let it go ahead, and then they decided to challenge it, I was concerned that, because the legality of this was still new, it might jeopardize the whole thing" (T1).

But this changed in July 2014. BCC, championed by an executive member, decided to adopt street play and promote street play as a governing body. This led to the removal of the objection clause. As the same transport representative explained to us: "When our executive member, Mark Bradshaw, decided to come to adopt a policy on street play, . . . they decided to adopt street play and promote street play as a council. So, because of that change in mind-set for the authority, I then removed this objection clause. So, people could still object. . . . But they couldn't just object based on the fact that, 'We don't want kids playing in our street.' We thought, 'Well, no. We're Bristol. We're going to promote street play, so we're not going to refuse an application because someone says they just don't like it'" (T1).

*Politics Stream*
According to MSF, the political stream consists of macropolitical processes—election results, political rotation (i.e., changes in administrative or legislative branches), interest group campaigns, or changes in the mood or climate of public opinion. Public mood means that a fairly large number of people in a country or municipality think similarly at any given time (Kingdon 1984). Government officials perceive changes in this mood, for example, by paying attention to public opinion polls, and they may react by placing certain issues on the government agenda (or removing them). Legislative or government staff turnover, including elected officials and senior managers, often affects choices. Such officials or managers may have different objectives, ideas, and values from those who preceded them.

From 2007 to 2009, a Labour Party minority with a center-left social democratic ideology (supported by the ideologically center-right Conservative Party) was in charge of BCC. And from the local election held on June 4, 2009, the socially progressive Liberal Democrat Party became the majority party. Although a change in partisan control occurred in 2009, this did not explain changes in the support for street play initiatives. Indeed, the support for street play has increased over time. According to our interviewees, three important factors converged in this period. First, there was no Conservative majority in the BCC that could oppose street play. Second, since 2007 Bristol prepared the application for The European Green Capital Award (awarded in 2015). And third, in 2008 Bristol was named United Kingdom's first "cycling city." Bristol as a Green Capital Award candidate and as a cycling city generated support and positive predisposition on the part of BCC and the residents of Bristol for proposals that could transmit a "green" image of the city, as street play does.

These three factors, when connected to the MSF's political stream, determined a positive political climate for change. Using MSF concepts, they are the factors that opened the policy window, giving policy entrepreneurs the opportunity to place their proposal on the decision agenda. As Kingdon (1984) says, public mood changes from time to time "in discernible ways, and these changes in mood or climate have important impacts on policy agendas and policy outcomes" (153).

One of the public health specialists we interviewed stressed the importance that no Conservative majority existed in the BBC that could oppose street play: "I think it is important that there are not Conservatives in power, because if they were in power . . . they are very likely to oppose these things. . . . They're generally opposed, as free marketers, to the idea of restricting the ability of people to drive cars anywhere they like at whatever time of day . . . and we've had over the years . . . a mix between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. They're much more open to this" (PH3).

Our interviewees also highlighted the importance of positive predisposition on the part of BCC and the residents of Bristol.

But Bristol has been known, in the United Kingdom, for a long time now, as a city that has and is trying to be a greener city in all ways, in digital technology as well as transport and housing and education. . . . We'd supported playing out in the city council across the different directorates and the different departments, because it meets

the wider objectives that Bristol City Council has got to be greener, to be healthier (PH1).

There is a feeling in Bristol that Bristol is a green city. . . . I think having the political situation with democrats in charge is important, but it is insufficient. What it builds on is a layer underneath in civic society which is supportive (PH3).

As we have seen, according to the interviewees, the new and perhaps more important element in the political stream was the change in the public mood (or climate of opinion), both inside and outside BCC.

*Policy Entrepreneurs*

Policy entrepreneurs are actors who promote concrete solutions. They can be elected politicians, civil servants, interest group leaders, lobbyists, or just people who defend concrete proposals. They may be people from nonprofit organizations or private-sector actors who advocate for a particular policy proposal (Johannesson and Qvist 2020). Entrepreneurs are people with the power, knowledge, experience, persistence, and time to take advantage of policy windows to promote their proposals to policy makers. Their actions increase the chances that an idea will be included in the government agenda (Cairney 2012). They know that issues are included in an agenda when they succeed in generating attention to some issues over others, so they find it important to identify ways to reinforce or manipulate the values and beliefs of policy makers (Cairney 2018).

Policy entrepreneurs perform several important roles in the policy-making process, including defining problems, mobilizing public opinion, and formulating solutions. But in the most important role they play, they use policy windows to persuade policy makers to accept a particular policy proposal. That is, in the MSF concepts, they couple the streams together (Henstra 2010).

When a policy window opens, policy entrepreneurs should not miss the opportunity to act, otherwise they may have to wait a good while for the next one. There are three important variables for entrepreneurs to increase their chances of success—resources, access, and strategies. Entrepreneurs who spend more time lobbying politicians and promoting their proposals are more likely to succeed. In addition, those who have access to policy makers are in some ways even more likely to achieve their goals (Zahariadis 2014).

The residents who first promoted the idea of street play in Bristol can be labelled policy entrepreneurs from civil society. But ideas are not enough. Thanks to the local media attention, after the policy entrepreneurs developed the play street model, they also contacted and lobbied officials and council members and gained access to influential senior officials and politicians from the city council. A representative of Playing Out explains this process.

> Claire Lowman (works in Public Health at the council) and Jon Rogers (who was the cabinet member for Health), were both very supportive of what we were doing. . . . And they both helped to lobby within the council to get the cabinet decision that actually there should be a trial, a one-year trial, of a new policy that would let streets close on a regular basis for play. So that happened in 2011. . . . And it was named The Temporary Play Street Order or TPSO and that was launched in September 2011, and by the end of the year, so by September 2012, there were I think sixteen or seventeen streets had applied, using that policy. And so, it was seen as a success, basically. And so, the council decided at that point that they were going to continue the policy as an ongoing policy, as a permanent policy from September 2012 (PO1).

Both senior officers and politician of BCC supported the initiative, although they had doubts about the legality of the measure in relation to national legislation, the possible traffic problems that it could bring, and the criticism or complaints that might arise from people who opposed it. A representative of Playing Out explained.

> And it took quite a few months of meetings, us going into meetings with the cabinet members and the highways officers, who were actually the ones that were [in opposition]. They had to work out the practicalities of how it was going to happen . . . and what the legal basis of it would be, and how they were going to actually process the applications. So, we worked quite closely with them . . . and obviously it's a bit of a negotiation . . . they're very concerned about making sure it meets the legislation and it's safe and that they are protected, that they're not exposing themselves to any kind of legal challenge or . . . liability. But then, we're pulling the other way of "Let's try and make this as practical as possible, let's make fit what people actually want

for their street." So, I think it wouldn't necessarily be the same policy if we hadn't been involved with it from the beginning (PO1).

A senior officer of transport also describes how the politicians supported street play and the important role played by Playing Out.

Jon Rogers [the cabinet member for Care and Health] was the executive member at the time. He was wholly supportive of this, and when you get a politician on your side that is supportive of a particular idea, they tend to move mountains and make things happen. I think, in simple summary, that's the reason it happened. Jon Rogers said to officers, "Find me a way of supporting this model of street play." . . . Playing Out . . . changed the Bristol City Council policy. They cajoled Bristol City Council, by getting Jon Rogers on board, to think slightly outside of the box and come up with an interpretation of the law that enabled us to deliver temporary play street orders. If that networking between the city council and people outside of the city council hadn't existed, I don't think Bristol City Council would have taken temporary play street orders forward on their own (T2).

As Cairney (2018) highlights, in subnational governments entrepreneurs can be really influential, and in Bristol as in other areas, non-profit organizations were key agents in the government agenda-setting process (Wilson 2012; Chaskin and Greenberg 2015).

*Policy Window*
According to MSF, an issue can more likely get placed on the political agenda and produce a policy change when the three streams converge, that is, when simultaneously "a problem is recognized, a solution is available, the political climate makes the time right for change, and the constraints do not prohibit action" (Kingdon 1984, 93).

When the convergence of streams occurs, a policy window opens. This is the moment when policy entrepreneurs can focus attention on their problems or propose their solutions, facilitating a policy change.

Policy windows usually open on an occasional basis and are short lived. They can be predictable (such as annual budgeting or elections) or unpredictable (such as crises or accidents, e.g., earthquakes or airplane crashes) (Howlett

1998). This is one reason policy entrepreneurs must act quickly, before the window closes again.

A policy window in the problem stream opens when indicators show a major deterioration or sudden change (e.g., inflation or unemployment) or when focusing events, such as terrorist attacks, or major natural disasters occur. A window in the political stream opens if the distribution of parties in government changes or if new members enter. New actors may be open to new policy proposals. In addition, a major change in the public mood can open a policy window (Herweg, Zahariadis, and Zohnhöfer 2017).

Rational-choice theory assumes that policy makers first identify problems and then develop policies to solve them. MSF, by contrast, claims that in some cases solutions may precede problems. When windows open in the problem stream, the process is sequential, allowing solutions to develop in response to specific problems. However, if windows open in the politics stream, solutions emerge before the problems are clearly defined. In these cases, the process becomes ideological, because policies are planned in the pursuit of rationality. The solution adopted seems more important than the problem that could be solved (Zahariadis 2014).

As we have outlined, after the local election held in June 2009, partisan distribution in BCC changed, from a Labour Party minority to a Liberal Democrat Party majority. But this political change cannot by itself explain the change in children's outdoor play policy in Bristol because both parties supported street play.

BCC senior officers and politicians had not previously detected a problem that could be solved by promoting, on their own doorsteps, the street play of children, but the Playing Out proposal was in line with the interests of various departments of the council (children services and play, public health, highways) because they all encourage cycling, walking, and sustainable forms of transport and help discourage the use of cars.

In this case, as MSF claims can happen, a window opened in the politics stream, and solutions emerged before the problems were clearly defined. Playing Out's proposal also coincided with the application process for the European Green Capital Award (the first British city to be named European Green Capital), and with Bristol's being named the United Kingdom's first cycling city in 2008. Both situations supported a new public mood inside and outside BCC, leading to a feeling that Bristol was a green city and open to innovations. For all these reasons, politicians and senior officers supported the initiative, even though there

was a lack of clarity about the legality of the measure—whether the Temporary Play Street Order, approved in 2011, was in line with national legislation or not.

In 2010 the three streams (problem, policy, and politics) converged, and a policy window opened, giving Playing Out the opportunity to push its proposal for closing streets to through traffic and making the space safe for free play, facilitating the changes to children's outdoor play policy in Bristol.

## Conclusion

Although most of MSF studies are focused on the national level of governance (Jones et al. 2016), the changes to street play policy in the city of Bristol outlined in this article demonstrates the applicability of MSF to an analysis of the dynamic and complex processes of local policy making. Our findings support other policy research, demonstrating that MSF is a valuable tool for analyzing both local policy change and the role played by local policy entrepreneurs in that process (see also, Henstra 2010; Oborn et al. 2011; Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al. 2023). In particular, because MSF has not been used to analyze play policy before, in bringing together MSF and play policy we hope to have made a significant contribution to the MSF and policy change literature. And the lessons learned from this research can be useful for children's right to play advocates, social movements, policy makers in local government, and strategic planners elsewhere to improve children's opportunities for play.

The street play policy in Bristol came about as a result of citizen demand, and it was developed collaboratively between Playing Out and BCC. Moreover, its implementation is also made possible thanks to the collaboration between civil society and BCC. For all these reasons, this public policy is an example of policy entrepreneurship for the public good. Above all in state and local governments, civil society and nonprofit organizations can be key agents.

Our analysis of Playing Out in Bristol has demonstrated the activity in each of the three steams (policy, problem, and politics) led to the placement of street play on the government agenda, offered affirmation that policy entrepreneurs existed inside and outside BCC and that they worked together to generate support for their policy proposal, provided evidence of the determining role of a non-governmental actor in the local policy change, and showed that a policy window had opened.

The analysis of the problem stream reveals that residents who pushed

street play onto the policy agenda shared a set of basic beliefs about the right of children to play safely on their own doorstep, for their own enjoyment, in full freedom and independence. These ideas did not constitute the BCC objectives but, because they fitted the goals of diverse BCC departments, they gained the support of several senior officers and cabinet members. That is to say, a window opened in the politics stream, and solutions emerged before the problems were clearly defined, in line with the holdings of MSF.

The two residents who proposed street play to BCC had previously considered and studied various alternatives to achieve their goals but concluded that closing streets once a week for a few hours after school was a proposal that could both be supported by neighbors and accepted by politicians and officials of BCC (although it was not a permanent street change, as they too would have liked). As Dudley (2013) says, ideas must be adapted to the possibilities and circumstances of each moment to survive and be carried out. The proposal that Playing Out presented to BCC was in the policy stream, and it was compatible with the values of policy makers, technically feasible, and financially reasonable.

Analyzing our case study through the lens of the MSF supports the claim that a policy window opened in the political stream in Bristol. There was no Conservative majority in the BCC to oppose street play, and Bristol as a Green Capital Award candidate and as a cycling city generated support and positive predisposition on the part of BCC and the residents of Bristol for proposals that could transmit a green image of the city.

Policy entrepreneurs could be identified in children's outdoor play policy change in Bristol. Playing Out (a nonprofit organization), along too with some senior officials and some elected members advocating as policy entrepreneurs, and together they pushed street play onto the local government agenda.

Through developing the play street model, some people involved in Playing Out gained access to influential senior officials and politicians from the city council and got their attention. Furthermore, they mobilized their resources and designed a strategy to turn their proposal into public action. As Zahariadis (2014) says, those policy entrepreneurs who have access to policy makers increase their chances of success. Playing Out carried out the most important role of policy entrepreneurs. They took advantage of the open policy window to persuade policy makers prone to accept a previously generated policy proposal.

A success story may seem simple, but it can involve a complex interaction involving problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities to influence

decision making (Dudley 2013; Zahariadis 2016). In 2010 Bristol's approach to promoting children's outdoor play was refocused to allow increased street play. This policy shift diversified to promote street play alongside the more traditionally focused elements of play policy (parks and play areas, usually fenced and with adult surveillance required), allowing residents to close residential streets temporarily to through traffic after school so that children could play at their doorstep. This was a first step toward a longer term policy both at local and national level.

As a social movement, Playing Out's long-term goal is to restore street play as part of children's daily lives. As one of the original residents who set up street play in Bristol says: "This will take a real social shift and political commitment to creating more permanently child friendly streets, estates, and neighborhoods. Meanwhile play streets are a great temporary solution and an achievable and very important step towards this" (Playing Out, 2019 n.p.).

It is important to stress that, at the time of writing, this policy is still ongoing. Up to now, almost 240 streets across Bristol have held street play sessions. And the initiative of Bristol has been taken as a model in other cities. At Playing Out's last count, more than 100 different local authority areas across the UK have a street play policy and over 1,500 streets have a street play session across all the local authority areas, providing play for an estimated 45,180 children. These data underline the influence of the Bristol experience on other UK cities.

Research carried out after the start of regular temporary street play closures in Bristol and other cities has found significant increases in children's physical activity, and greater community cohesion among all ages resulting from play street sessions (Ferguson 2019a; Gill 2015; Page 2017; Pike et al. 2018; Playful Bristol 2018). These publications make particular reference to local authorities play policies. We need to emphasize the important role of nonprofit organizations, such as Playing Out and Play England, focused on children and youth play in conducting and supporting research and publications on the right to play of all persons.

To highlight the diffusion of this play policy across the United Kingdom, in June 2019 the Department of Transport wrote a letter to all English highway authorities encouraging them to promote street play. Furthermore, in August 2019, the UK government published a guide to street play for local councils.

Its aim is to encourage children to play in the street. Thus, ten years after its inception, a public policy initiated in Bristol by a group of residents has been replicated in numerous cities and is supported and promoted by the government.

Future research could address the process of policy change in each of these cities and at the national level to provide a deeper understanding of policy transfer among Bristol and other UK local authorities. Future research could address these issues with innovation and diffusions models in policy research. Policy diffusion and policy transfer constitutes a highly developed field of study in public-policy analysis (Berry and Berry 2017; Mintrom 1997). There are diverse case studies of policy transfer analysis from one jurisdiction to another. One, for example, analyzes policy transfer across the United States (Mitchell and Petray 2016), others between a state and its local governments (Kim et al. 2018), across European Union countries (Common and Gheorghe 2019), across distant countries (Van der Heijden 2020; Walker 2019), and across local authorities (Ma 2013). There are also case studies that combine concepts from policy transfer and diffusion analysis with the MSF (Lovell 2016) and the role of policy entrepreneurs in policy diffusion garners scrutiny in Hatch and Mead (2019).

In short, our analysis of Playing Out has demonstrated the value of taking an MSF approach to understanding how citizens identify a problem, influence policy makers, and enable sustained and widespread social change, which has resonance within and beyond play policy.

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