

St. Jude's School Street Focus Group Report

November 24th 2021



St Jude's Launch Day © About My Area, September 2021

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Introduction

The School Street at St Jude's was one of two pilot schemes run by Portsmouth City Council (PCC) in partnership with Sustrans from 13th September – 5th November 2021. Though there was strong support from the whole school community for the measures, it was difficult for the school to get enough volunteers to steward the barriers and created an additional workload for the school which was not considered sustainable after the initial trial period.

Sustrans were asked to run this focus group to review the trial and to discuss potential longer-term interventions. The format was Before – During – After the trial, and the following questions were asked:

1. What was it like before the trial?
2. What did you think when you heard about the trial?
3. What worked well during the trial?
4. What didn't work so well?
5. What is the situation now the trial has ended?
6. What (if anything) would you like to see here in future?

Due to various clashes only four of the fourteen invitees attended the meeting. However, those who were unable to attend were given the opportunity to submit their thoughts by email and three further written submissions have been integrated into this report. Separate meetings were held with the Head and PCC for feedback on the scheme. All contributions have been anonymised and attendees are described according to their role(s) in the school street trial.

Key

R = resident of the school street zone
S = steward
P = parent
OP = Old Ports Resident (outside closure zone)

Attendees

Jenni Jones, Sustrans – facilitating
Natalia Luszczuk, PCC – observing
R/S1 (resident for 22 years)
OP/S (also representing FOOPA)
P/S1
P/S2 (former resident of Penny Street)
Written / Telephone Submissions
R/S2
RS3
P/S3

Question 1: What was it like before the trial?

Everyone in the group agreed that there was a long-standing issue with school traffic before the trial, despite the best efforts of the school to encourage parents to drive more considerately. Photos were also submitted by R/S3 – see Appendix 1.

Safety, Congestion and Inconsiderate Parking

The area around St. Jude's was very congested at drop-off and pick-up times, as a minority of parents and taxi drivers tried to drop children as close to the school gates as possible despite the narrow streets and absence of parking spaces. This behaviour often posed a danger to the many families walking or wheeling on the often-narrow pavements. Regular behaviours included:

- Vehicles left on double-yellow lines
- Early bird parking up to an hour before the end of school
- Vehicles blocking private driveways
- Vehicles turning on private driveways
- Pavement-parking
- Engine idling
- Circling Poynings Place waiting for a space to become available
- Vehicles simply left in the middle of the road causing other cars to queue behind or undertake U-turns in St Nicholas Street.
- PGS delivery lorries reversing dangerously, mounting the pavement etc
- Conflict between drivers meeting head-on and a stand-off as one has to reverse
- Residents having great difficulty leaving or parking at drop-off and pick-up times

“These parents/guardians seem to consider it acceptable to park on any unoccupied piece of road (or pavement), irrespective of the parking restrictions in place or whether it is private property.”

R/S3

As a result the group stated that the school run was often unpleasant for all concerned:

“Chaos, hazardous, unruly, lots of pavement parking and engine idling” - OP/S

Poor Air Quality

Congestion and engine idling also meant that some residents noticed issues with poor air quality; this stopped happening during the trial, strongly suggesting improvements in air quality in the immediate area. R/S1

“My neighbours had their windows open during these times and had noticed that their air fan [Dyson air purifier] started to work as soon as the traffic became busier. Hence needing to purify the air due to car emissions.” - R/S1

Conflict between Residents and Parents

Previous attempts to intervene by asking people to move their cars or park more considerately were often met with verbal abuse and were rarely successful. However, one resident had some temporary success in stopping poor driving by taxi drivers by reporting them to PCC.

One participant said that when she lived in the area she worked elsewhere and had no idea there was an issue with traffic until she went on maternity leave – this may explain why some residents didn't initially recognise the need for a school street.

Question 2: What did you think when you heard about the trial?

Residents

Overall the residents in the group said they felt very happy and relieved. Several residents had been liaising with the school, Ward Councillors and PCC for many years and were pleased that action was finally being taken.

“A solution at last because I've also read that creating cleaner air in cities starts with school streets” OP/S

Though it was felt that the majority of residents would have been pleased to hear about the long-awaited intervention, the group knew of a few who were sceptical because there would be so many exemptions, and a one or two felt it was 'complete overkill'. While we do not know how far those fears were alleviated, the group expect that most people liked it once it had started 'because it was and is to the benefit of the residents' and people still had full access to their properties.' R/S1

Parents

One parent said that she was unsure at first, but after seeing a presentation she was convinced that it was a good idea to try as “there were advantages for both residents, environment and safety of the children” (P/S1). Another parent (P/S2) had first heard about School Streets at a talk for Chat over Chai – a social group for BAMER women - by (now Cllr) Charlotte Gerada. She said “when the opportunity presented itself to kind of be a pioneer for St Jude’s I thought that was just going to be beneficial for all of us....there were so many advantages to it, the environment, the safety of the children, as well as the residents because I think... [they] seemed to be quite unhappy...there was an argument for both sides... [such as parents running late] but I thought it was a project to give it a go, yeah, and I’m glad I took part in it.”

The reaction from parents was mixed at first but largely positive:

- Some parents questioned why people were volunteering: “I got the opportunity... to recruit some of them because I said look, this is clearly beneficial for all of us because our kids, they can actually scooter, they can walk.” P/S2
- The visit from Stomper proved very popular with the children: “my daughter has never been so excited! It was very positive” P/S2
- “We had a few people who would occasionally moan but on the whole, it has been received really well!” P/S1
- Some parents were concerned that their children would get wet or that they would be made late for work by the short park and stride.
- Tackling inconsiderate driving: “The main thing that I heard was the... anger from parents who don’t drive down St Nicholas Street who were pleased that they would be able to stop the inconsiderate drivers: ‘Yes, let’s get them, let’s stop all these people that are giving us a bad name!...’ we all recognise the people that do it, it is the same people every day”

Question 3: What worked well during the trial?

Safety

- Improved safety for all due to cars being removed
- Residents have also been heard to say that they noticed the improvement in AQ when the school street started.

Support

- Very high levels of resident support (including many volunteering as stewards)

Space for People

“By removing the cars, there was space for parents to stop and chat that just wasn’t there before even for people walking. Once you could step into the road because there were no cars, there was literally the space to stop and have that one minute conversation of ‘how are you’ and a smile that you couldn’t do before”. P/S1

- Room for a double buggy
- Space to stop and chat
- Parents felt able to let their children skip or scoot ahead within the closure area

Stomper

“The cartoon characters [Stomper on launch day] added very positive feelings!” R/S1

- Stomper and friends at the taster and launch days
- Stomper challenge encouraging children to walk or wheel to school – “the kids love to collect the keyrings” P/S2

Education & Awareness

- The parents were pleased that the school was educating the children about air quality and the benefits of active travel. P/S1 lives about a mile away from the school and the school street initiated conversations about travel choices, for example choosing to walk when it isn’t raining. Children were also initiating those conversations as they had been learning about air quality and pollution in school.

Atmosphere & Community Cohesion

- People were largely very respectful and parents seemed grateful for the school street and to the stewards for giving their time.
- Residents enjoyed seeing and hearing the children, and have commented on the positive impact on their own mental health – seeing and hearing children playing makes everyone feel good!
- A lovely atmosphere with lots more socialising and social cohesion across the whole school community
- More relaxed, with happy children free to scoot or skip ahead with their friends.
- Stewards had lots of opportunity to chat and interact with parents, children and passers-by.
- Less stressful due to not having to deal with stressed people in a hurry!

What people said

“I’ve made friends and some of them hopefully I will be meeting outside of the school routine for a coffee.” P/S2

“It was an opportunity to socialise as well as to get that community feeling and It was really important to just say good morning. And the children were also very nice, they would say good morning to people and there was that atmosphere of like, a mini-community developing which was based on positive vibes, so that was definitely a plus.” P/S2

“I mean, you don’t say good morning to someone when you’re in a car,...with parents and kids walking to school and passers-by crossing at the junctions, neighbours... all of that builds... community feeling, a feeling that this could be a positive thing. But just the mental health [benefits] of interacting with people which you do not do when you’re in a car” OP/S

“The social cohesion that was generated by having stewards saying hello, greeting passers-by and drivers sometimes winding their windows to ask about the scheme. A neighbour friend said this is great for all our mental health to have smiley people on the street doing this.” OP/S

“I talked to far more people on the school run each day” R/S1

“no problems requiring having to speak with time-stressed people” R/S2

“There was a lot of difference because people seemed happier, people seemed to not have a bee in their bonnet...you know?’ ...They had time to say hello or to chat and that meant less stress for the parents, the residents, people who were coming to do a delivery, people seemed happy and relaxed and there was an understanding that this was a small and short-term intervention, and people were happy with that.” R/S1

Question 4: What didn't work so well?

Equipment

It was agreed that the type and amount of equipment proved cumbersome as the closure points were some distance from the school and parts of the route were cobbled or uneven. The barrier was not stable in strong winds and the sandbags required to hold them down were heavy to transport. The trolleys were not robust enough for the equipment and had begun to break by then end of the trial. Gloves could have been provided to protect hands when carrying the equipment.

About half way through the trial the barriers were replaced with cones, which were much preferred by all.

“On the down side seriously cumbersome with the equipment and sandbags, it felt very makeshift and sometimes feeling exposed and unsure if you put the notices in the right place or direction” OP/S

Volunteer Model

With three closure points, the scheme relied heavily on volunteers from the school community and local residents as well as PCC staff. It was often difficult to get enough volunteers despite the best efforts of the school, and some closures were run with a skeleton crew of stewards, or with residents being recruited at very short notice. Although the additional workload proved unsustainable for the school to manage, they were keen to see the trial through to its end as the benefits to all were clear.

Although every house in the closure area was visited in person before the trial, it seems that many residents were not all aware initially of the need for, and reliance on, volunteers. However, many got involved after R/S1 door-knocked the area and successfully recruited more stewards: “Her zest for action was amazing.” – P/S3

It was hoped that volunteers would be recruited from the University, but this did not materialise. One parent described feeling optimistic in the beginning but disappointed that there was not more ongoing support from Sustrans and PCC.

Stewards also reported feeling exposed and unsafe due to low numbers – there was a consensus that the number of stewards (and perhaps their gender) impacted driver behaviour:

“More bodies as volunteers were definitely needed. I was there one day and there were 4 of us and it felt so much safer plus drivers didn’t get shirty – it was so dramatically different’ ‘It wasn’t much fun [doing it alone] because you felt like you needed to have eyes in all directions”

OP/S

Displacement & Continuing Traffic Issues

While the group felt that overall there was an overall reduction in the number of vehicles in the vicinity, issues with people parking on DYL were identified in several areas by residents and the Crossing Patrol Officer, and additional enforcement is recommended at:

- Pembroke Road – various points on DYL
- Penny Street (Southern end)
- The junction of Penny Street and High Street

In addition, one resident raised concerns about the use of unlicensed e-scooters by parents within the closure zone.

More enforcement from police and parking enforcement officers would have helped to tackle the poor driving, particularly on Pembroke Road. Occasional issues were reported with inconsiderate drivers within the closure zone – taxi drivers and a Suez lorry were mentioned specifically – but these were the exception.

Question 5: What is it like now the trial is over?

‘I miss the loveliness, the quiet, the chatting and the communal spirit’ R/S2

The safety issues have returned, with a near-miss witnessed by one resident on the day of the focus group. While some feel that it is not quite as bad as it was, many of the vehicles have returned – participants agree that the same few people are driving inconsiderately. Traffic counts will be carried out by PCC in January 2022 to evaluate and longer-term behaviour change / modal shift.

Question 6: What might you like to see (if anything) in future?

A number of examples of long-term infrastructure solutions were presented to the group. It was made clear that this was not a shortlist of options from PCC, but rather examples of what has been done elsewhere to make school streets permanent.

“Doing nothing is not an option!”

- P/S3

One Way System

This is an option that was presented some years ago for Penny Street and was not considered viable as it would send the PGS delivery lorries round smaller streets and corners. However, the group felt it may be an option, either permanently or at drop-off and pick-up times only, if PGS moved their deliveries to the Museum Road entrance. Bollards have recently been installed at the bottom end of Penny Street to protect the houses from the lorries but the noise, pollution and safety issues generated by these vehicles is a great and ongoing concern to many residents.

Resident Permits

The group felt that resident permits would be an effective way of identifying which vehicles should be in the area – this would also have been helpful for stewards to identify residents' vehicles during the trial.

Signage

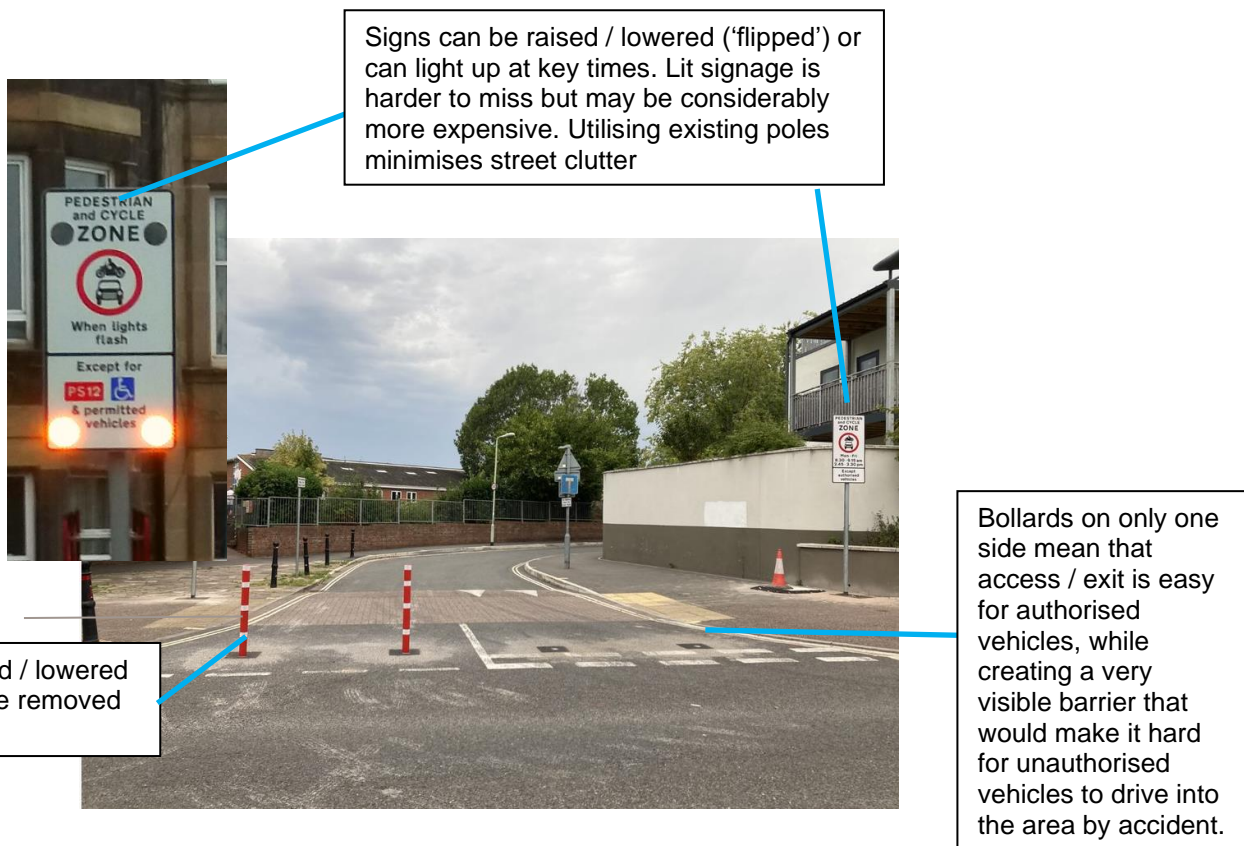
The group liked the idea of using signage for timed closures but felt that signs alone would be ineffective without cameras or very regular enforcement. The signs that flash during closure times were a popular option because they reduce the chance of people entering a restricted area by accident.

Bollards

The group felt that bollards used in conjunction with signage at closure times would be an effective way to restrict traffic provided there was adequate communication beforehand and regular enforcement to ensure it was not abused or ignored. One of the written submissions felt that this would be unsuitable if it had a negative impact on residents' access, but this should not be the case. Bollards on one side of the road only mean that residents are still able to come and go but it would be very difficult for anyone to enter by accident or without being aware that restrictions were in place. They also appreciated that this is a fairly cost-effective means of enforcement and suggested that CIL money might be used to part-fund the intervention.

They also felt that there would probably be enough residents who would be willing to raise and lower the bollards on a rota system, perhaps sharing this responsibility with the school. It may also be something that could be taken on by the Crossing Patrol Officer on Pembroke Road.

The preferred model is shown below:



Permanent Infrastructure at Whipton Barton School, Devon

Additional Suggestions

Surrounding Areas

“I would like to see a walking bus in the morning. Perhaps starting at the Holiday Inn. There’s plenty of parking in Victoria Avenue to drop the children off.” P/R3

Speed

- 20mph and ‘School Ahead’ signs requested for Pembroke Road.
- Speed limit of 20mph within the closure zone is too high and should be reduced – even if cars are not speeding it is too fast for such an enclosed area. (P/S3)

Enforcement

- More enforcement is needed at the Peacock Lane / High Street junction to stop (PGS?) parents parking here.

Behaviour Change & Engagement

- More engagement with PGS is needed to see if they are willing to change their entrances. Removing vehicles from the Penny St entrance could also allow the minibus pick-up from the Hovercraft to be replaced with a Walking Bus with children entering the school from this closer southern entrance.
- Continue educating the children about the benefits of active travel so that the legacy goes beyond the trial.
- Share findings from the surveys and traffic counts that (hopefully) demonstrate need, benefits and support for school street measures from residents, parents and staff.

Appendix 1 – Historic School Streets Images



Poynings Close, 2015



Poynings Close, 2017



Poynings Close, 2018



Poynings Close, 2020



Poynings Close, 2020



Poynings Close, 2020