



Why making towns more playful makes sense in Ireland

By Wessel Badenhorst, National Expert, Ireland NPTI, December 2022

In May 2018, a delegation from the city of [Cork](#) in Ireland attended a transnational meeting of URBACT's Playful Paradigm Network in the city of Udine, Italy. It would be three days that would have a profound impact on the city organisations who were part of the URBACT Local Group (ULG) in Cork. In particular, one afternoon the delegation joined other city partners to witness the 'magical' effect of the [Ludo Bus](#). What they saw was a bus full of toys and games arriving at a city square and how children just came from 'nowhere' and started to play for the next two hours. When they were finished, they brought all the toys and games back to the bus to be repacked for a next time!

Udine has developed a [great practice](#) of making the city playful as recognised by URBACT. The success of Udine to use play to facilitate social change is especially evident in two areas namely to practically advance social inclusion at community level; and to use play to initiate community-led placemaking.

The inspiration that the delegation from Cork brought back to Ireland has now resulted in a set of specific play actions that are being replicated in five Irish towns supported by URBACT's National Practice Transfer Initiative (NPTI). The following actions were developed in Cork namely:

- The establishment of a Play Forum in the city where local organisations get together to exchange ideas and practices which could bring more playfulness into their own work and to benefit their target communities.
- The procurement and manufacturing of play equipment suitable for outdoor play in public spaces (that could be used in in groups or individually).
- The purchase of play bags to hold sets of play equipment (a substitution and adaptation of the Ludo Bus!) and the development of a loan system for local community groups administered by local libraries.
- Training of community play leaders to facilitate play events in communities. The training was provided by Cork Sports Partnership.
- Getting permission to temporarily open streets for play (for example every Sunday for a month) and promoting the concept of Play Streets which at its core is the repurposing of the street for free play.
- Preparing play packs for older people of which thousands were distributed in Cork city during the Covid pandemic to help recipients cope with social isolation.
- Conducting placemaking training for local groups as well as for Council officials to unlock the potential of local communities practically re-designing the uses of public spaces in collaboration with local authorities and thereby to also ensure the incorporation of more play aspects (i.e. more local activities, improved physical features and new play events).
- Developing a Playful Cultural Trail that harnessed all the cultural institutions including museums, art galleries and community centres to make their public offering more playful with the aim of becoming more inviting to new audiences and hence more inclusive.
- Working on a guidance manual for other cities to plan incorporating more playfulness in their festival programmes.
- Using a coherent consistent branding – [Let's Play Cork](#) - to signify the theme of playfulness across many programmes, equipment and events.

The five towns who participated in the transfer of practice all established local organising groups (i.e. ULGs) with representation from key local stakeholders including local authorities and public services as well as community

organisations. During a study visit in Cork in September 2021, the ULGs identified those actions which they could adapt and re-use in their own towns. Also, Cork's passion for trying new play activities impressed the visitors. [EMRA](#), the Ireland NPTI Co-ordinator encouraged the groups not to be afraid to 'try and fail, learn and try again'.

Soon after the transfer plans were agreed by each ULG in December 2021, the experimentation began. In the next year public spaces like the Diamond – the town square of [Donegal Town](#) - was occasionally turned into play areas inviting all, young and old, from all persuasions, to actively have fun and connect with each other. See pictures below.



In the town of [Rush](#), just north of Dublin, the ULG created a Play Street, just off the main street, to demonstrate new uses for tarred spaces usually occupied by cars. At the event new play equipment purchased by the local authority were showcased. Rush also used the idea from Cork to put a sign up saying 'Open for Play' rather than 'Street Closed'.



Members of the [Rush ULG](#) (picture below) such as the Rush Community Council and Rush Tidy Towns also worked with the local authority to create new play elements including a new storytelling trail in the town's main park, Kenure Park.



Co-designing play events unlocked creativity in a group like the ULG of [Rathdrum](#), the partner town with the smallest population in the Ireland NPTI. Nestled in the Wicklow Mountains, the focus of the town's ULG has been on play in their natural environment. One idea that became a great hit with the locals (and eventually copied by other partner towns) was to re-use old socks (washed of course!) as 'snow balls' for a good old snow ball fight in the woods! See pictures below.



The town of Rathdrum has also been fortunate that a new library and community centre complex were completed in 2021. It made sense to use the public space outside the library as a play area and to adapt the play actions from Cork such as the purchase of play bags and play equipment and the installation of a loan system via the library. The pictures below show play activities outside the new Rathdrum Library organised by the ULG.

In fact it went so well, that the play equipment loan system is now being expanded to all libraries in County Wicklow!



In [Portlaoise](#), a large town in the midlands of Ireland and a partner of the Ireland NPTI, the local community organisations decided to organise play activities with an emphasis on making play equipment from recycled materials or building play environments. The aim was to initiate more participation from disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. In particular the ULG engaged the Ukrainian refugee community in these activities. Pictures below.





In [Sligo Town](#), bringing playful elements to the town centre by transferring play street actions observed in Cork, coincided with a major regeneration of the public realm in the centre which included new pedestrian sidewalks and cycle lanes as well as improvements to the street furniture. Play events where busy retail streets in the centre where temporarily closed for car traffic, were well received by residents and businesses alike.



Some of the successful elements that Sligo decided to implement following the Cork visit included to install the first parklet in the town (taking out two parking spaces and creating a seating area where residents and visitors can meet and linger) as well as creating opportunities for residents to ‘chalk up’ the street to make walking areas more playful.



The Ireland Playful Towns NPTI is reaching its conclusion. A great partnership has evolved over the last 18 months. All partners implemented their transfer plans, hence proving the value of the adapted and re-used actions first observed in Cork (the transfer city). Collectively ULG participants also gained knowledge of the strategic value of play, including how play can bring people together in communities, and how play in public spaces can demonstrate possibilities for change to create more liveable towns. And, although most people instinctively know that play makes everyone feel better, the NPTI helped the partner towns to observe and understand how inadvertently over time the opportunities for free play in Irish towns have been reduced for example by allocating too much space for the exclusive use of cars. With practical low-cost play activities the partner towns demonstrated to their residents that a more liveable alternative is possible!

Being playful also lightens the mood. In a playful city or town there is the possibility for better connection and communication between officials and communities, service providers and beneficiaries, and older and younger people.

All partners in the Ireland NPTI reported that the impacts of their play activities and interventions exceeded their expectations. The most telling endorsements are that residents are requesting more play activities and that funding for play activities are being secured from national and municipal sources.

At the start of the NPTI one of the questions asked to participants was to describe how they played in their town when they were young and what has changed since then. Most gave answers about how much more freedom they had to play in the streets and public places as children and that this is not the case today. Most are motivated to recreate the playful environment they knew as children as a legacy for their children and grandchildren. Play is now a priority in these Irish towns.