



Children's Right to Play in Wales: Six years of stories and change since the commencement of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty

Summary report



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Introduction

This report presents a summary of findings from a small-scale research project exploring perceptions of what has changed since the commencement of the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty in 2012.

The full report is available on request – please email info@playwales.org.uk

The research team comprised Dr Wendy Russell, Senior Lecturer in Play and Playwork at the University of Gloucestershire; Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil, Ludicology; and Charlotte Derry, Playful Places. The study follows on from two previous small-scale research projects.¹ It works with a number of conceptual tools that were developed through these studies and through other work of team members in and with Welsh local authorities on the Play Sufficiency Duty. These include:

- **collective wisdom:** working with multiple ways of knowing, across professional domains and with children's different ways of knowing about their everyday lives and spaces;
- **account-ability and response-ability:** starting from the premise that children's right to play is a matter of spatial justice for children, adult actions address the intertwined processes of accounting for children's ability to find time and space for playing and responsiveness in terms of rethinking habits and routines to leave space more open for play;
- **Amin's four registers:** adapting Ash Amin's four registers for a 'good city', namely repair and maintenance, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment.² These form the headings for arranging the discussion of the data and are introduced in more detail below.

The research, undertaken between January and March 2019, comprised three strands:

- documentary analysis of 2013 and 2016 Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs),

policy documents, research, and additional documentation provided by local authorities, with a brief analysis of some 2019 PSAs possible within the timescale;

- interviews with 18 Play Sufficiency lead officers, Play Wales staff, Welsh Government officials and a representative from the Office of the Children's Commissioner;
- work with three case study local authorities, including interviews and focus groups with professionals, and using creative methods to talk to children and families.

Policy does not take place in a vacuum, and there have been many variables and events that have affected the progress made by local authorities, including:

- each authority's starting point;
- the capacity, capability, confidence and consistency of people involved;
- support and networking facilitated by Play Wales;
- austerity measures;
- changes in legislation, funding streams, inspection regulations and personnel.

Despite the challenges faced, there is still great enthusiasm for the Play Sufficiency Duty. People talked of new connections and breakthroughs, of play being taken seriously within the authority, and of innovative initiatives. There was a sense of a broad appreciation of the nature of children's play and the conditions needed to support it, embracing both specific provision and opportunities for children to play and hang out in their neighbourhoods.

'The Play Sufficiency Duty didn't make things easier ... but it did radically change the way we went about the work. It dramatically changed the way we talked about children and their play.'

Play Sufficiency Lead

Repair and maintenance

For environments to support children's play, the basics need to be in good repair, and habits of practice need to be held up to scrutiny to see how spaces might exclude children. Not surprisingly, the austerity measures imposed by the UK Government featured highly in both Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) and interviews.

Cuts to services: There have been unprecedented cuts in play and playwork services, and the loss of the regional play associations has been particularly keenly felt. Cuts to youth services have affected both their users and younger children; anti-social behaviour came up frequently when talking to families and children about playing out. Some maintenance budgets have reduced to as little as £20 per play area per year.

These cuts, together with the cost-neutral basis for introducing the duty to secure sufficient opportunities for play, have required local authorities to think differently, giving rise to a number of innovative initiatives, often with a community focus. Examples included:

- shipping containers with loose parts placed in communities;
- a planning department putting lots of information about play in their Residential Design Guide;
- a town centre manager chalking hopscotch on the pavement;
- local volunteers undertaking training to run play sessions;
- playworkers running sessions in a homeless hostel;
- a supplier donating scooters for a Scoot to School project;
- social services drawing up a policy enabling foster carers to support risk-taking in play.

Cuts to staff: Alongside service cuts, staff cuts have meant many officers leading on Play Sufficiency now have extended remits, meaning less time and fewer resources for Play Sufficiency work. One of the biggest strengths and achievements of the Duty is the recognition that play is the responsibility of all adults, and the requirement for local authorities to work across different professional sectors is highly valued. However, staff cuts in other departments, alongside restructuring, hamper the development of stable cross-departmental relationships.

There is a role for the Welsh Government in terms of keeping the processes of Play Sufficiency in good repair and to support conditions for local authorities to secure sufficient opportunities for children to play. There is still a power in the statutory nature of the Duty. The requirement to submit progress reviews every year and carry out a full PSA every three years is crucial for keeping momentum, and all 22 local authorities have done so. However, there was a sense that the hard work that goes into PSAs and Play Sufficiency generally needed to be made more use of and backed up at national level, as the quote below shows.

'I think Welsh Government need to acknowledge that quite a lot of progress has been made locally, a lot has been done, but there is a lot that can't be done locally and needs a national approach. We are at the point now where there is collective wisdom and shared skills and lots of authorities doing similar things. So I think we need that bit of national leadership now, which Play Wales do offer to an extent, but really it has to be led by Welsh Government to pull everything together to say – ok, now what, we've got the Duty, where are we going to go with this, how is this informing how we fund, what we fund, the policies we make. Because without that leadership what's it for?'

Play Sufficiency Lead

In terms of funding to support Play Sufficiency, most funding streams have either been depleted or reframed in ways that make them difficult to access for play services. Whilst local authorities value highly the £9.4 million made available through the All Wales Play Opportunities Grant (AWPOG) since 2013, and these grants have been used to fund good work, the unpredictable and last-minute nature of the funding militates against effective long-term strategic planning. The introduction of the Flexible Funding Programme raises fresh questions regarding funding for children's play, both in terms of guidance for local authorities and the future of AWPOG.

In interviews with Welsh Government officers, these concerns were acknowledged, as were other difficulties faced by local authorities. The intention is to address them in the forthcoming Welsh Government Play Review.

Relatedness

This register is about working with connections with difference (different professionals, policies, children and communities). A play-friendly Wales is one that pays attention to difference in order to change habits of practice that exclude access to common resources. One of the biggest strengths and achievements of the Play Sufficiency Duty is the development of partnership working across local authority departments and beyond. Given that play *'takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise'* (as recognised in the UNCRC's General Comment 17 on article 31), and given the emphasis in the Statutory Guidance³ on children being able to play out in their neighbourhoods, play becomes a matter of spatial justice.

Children's approach to the world is different from adults; whilst life may be understood as a process of constantly seeking out moments where we feel better, how this plays out for adults and children is very different. Playing might be seen as children's default position, and they will seek out opportunities for playing wherever they might be. As such, partnership working becomes crucial. For many of those interviewed, this was the single biggest sense of progress made since

the commencement of the Play Sufficiency Duty, although not in any linear, uniform or predictable way. People spoke enthusiastically about how the Play Sufficiency Duty has opened doors to partnership working, although this has varied across authorities.

'Within the authority, awareness of play's contribution to different agendas has massively increased. It is now a given that colleagues in parks, highways and planning, among others, seek out play representation on new developments and policies.'

Workforce development now includes not only the playwork workforce but also the broader play workforce: those whose work affects children's ability to find time and space for playing. Innovative ways to engage non-play professionals in appreciating their role in Play Sufficiency, have included:

- the 'Life' conferences (School Life, Park Life, Home Life, Street Life);
- a professional development programme for local authorities;
- the development of an e-module on play for non-play specialist local authority staff.

In terms of playwork workforce development, the current revision of qualifications recognises the increasing diversification of playwork roles. The development by Play Wales of shorter, top-up qualifications at Level 2 and Level 3 has made it easier for holiday playschemes to meet regulatory requirements.

The work of Play Wales in supporting local authorities and their partnership with Welsh Government was greatly valued. This has included:

- regional Play Sufficiency meetings;
- research;
- national reviews of PSAs;

- training, qualifications and professional development work;
- information sheets and toolkits;
- personal officer support.

‘The role of Play Wales and the support they offer to local authorities, that’s been really key throughout this whole process ... the work that Play Wales do and the relationship they have with Welsh Government, it’s been really good for play.’

When supporting children’s play, it must also be recognised that children themselves are not a homogeneous group. There have been several initiatives for specific groups of children, including supporting play for disabled children, older children (although cuts to youth services have had an impact), looked after children and refugee children.

In terms of neighbourhood play, many initiatives focused on building capacity within communities and in encouraging acceptance of and support for children playing out. One 2019 PSA noted that community-based projects meant that:

‘parents and other adults could observe children’s capacity for and capability to play as well as their responsiveness to it. As such they serve to reduce adults’ intolerance of children’s play, improve people’s skills in interacting with playing children, as well as acting as a potential catalyst for community action and participation in service development and delivery.’

Rights

Rights here are understood as held in common rather than as possessed by individual rights holders; they are about the right to the common wealth. In a play-friendly country, rights are about participation in everyday life and the ability to shape and benefit from what life has to offer. For children, this is as much about article 15 of the UNCRC (the right to association and peaceful assembly) as it is about articles 12 (the right to be heard) and 31 (the right to play, rest, recreation and cultural activities).

PSAs require consultation with children, and as a minimum this is done through surveys, yielding useful longitudinal data. Those authorities with capacity have developed more creative and child-friendly ways of compiling collective wisdom regarding children’s relationship with their neighbourhoods. One authority has begun to pilot neighbourhood level child-led assessments, saying this helps to *‘get under the skin of what the actual local issues are in a community’*. Much of the research shows that many children do still play out.

‘In areas where children report high satisfaction with their opportunities for play, their stories of playing are not confined to designated spaces, instead they share stories of roaming across their communities and evidence of them having played can be found throughout their local landscapes. These children are able to find their own ways through and around their neighbourhoods, making the most of what the environment offers for playing, and importantly it offers much (although this may not always be obvious to adults).’

In situations where other children’s rights are compromised, for example children in homeless shelters, playwork sessions are greatly valued.

Re-enchantment

This is about the many, often small, changes that have been made that leave space open for children's play to emerge. Often, the stories of re-enchantment we were told, examples of success, came about through complex assemblages of relatedness, repair, rights and seemingly chance (but embedded in systems) conversations and/or meetings. In many ways, children's play itself constitutes a re-enchantment of space, a re-appropriation of adult organisation of time and space for moments where life is better.

There is still broadly a sense of enchantment with the Play Sufficiency Duty, despite many disenchanting forces at work, most notably the far-reaching effects of austerity measures. The forces of re-enchantment can also reflect the qualities of play itself: opportunism, unpredictability, process, working with things-in-the-making, uncertainty.

Concluding remarks

Change takes time and it is still early days for Play Sufficiency in Wales. The Duty has been introduced at one of the most challenging times in the history of devolved and local governments and public services, and yet much has been achieved in terms of partnership working, raising awareness of children's right to play, and reconfiguring services and spaces to create opportunities for playing.

Given the collective wisdom that has now been gathered, we might conclude that what has changed is the collective understanding of Play Sufficiency itself, and therefore actions taken in support of maintaining and enhancing children's opportunities to find time and space for playing.

These concluding observations, therefore, offer a blend of principles and recommendations that can sustain and develop further Wales' capacity to be a play-friendly country:

- There is still great **enthusiasm** for the Play Sufficiency Duty at local and national government levels; efforts should be made to

retain or reboot this enchantment and hold off the forces of disenchantment.

- The concept of 'sufficiency' is a **process not a product**: there is no end state of 'sufficient', rather it involves an ongoing collaborative process of engagement and experimentation at national and local levels and requires people to be open to doing things differently.
- Play sufficiency is **rights based**, in line with all Welsh Government's policies relating to children and young people. However, given the relational nature of space, life and play, and the concept of the play-friendly country, rights are seen not as held individually but as **held in common**.
- Play itself is valued for its role in **children's well-being in the here and now** as well as future-focused instrumental benefits. Children will seek out whatever time and space can offer for moments of feeling better about life, moments of hopefulness and pleasure, when the rules of the rational and adult world need no longer apply (what we might call playing). These moments emerge from whatever is to hand.
- At **national level**, there is a role for Welsh Government to **keep the processes of Play Sufficiency in good repair** to support conditions for local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children, including the continuation of the crucial partnership with Play Wales. The planned Play Review offers an opportunity for this. **Account-ability and response-ability at national level** requires paying attention to the PSAs and locally gathered collective wisdom, scrutinising PSAs to see what works well and supporting such practices across all authorities. It also requires using that collective wisdom to work cross-departmentally within Welsh Government to ensure children's right to play is **acknowledged and embedded in national policies, practices and funding streams** (including funding for local authorities, the delivery of playwork qualifications, and Play Wales' key role in supporting Play Sufficiency). At the point when the Play Sufficiency Duty legislation is reviewed, the

list of services/organisations required to engage could be extended to include police, health boards, public service boards and fire services.

- **Account-ability and response-ability at local level** is also about developing collective wisdom. This requires paying attention to the ways in which children can find time and space for playing in the routines and habits of everyday life. Focus therefore switches from 'providing play' to identifying, developing and maintaining **the conditions that support playing**. It also requires paying attention to multiple (which includes but is not limited to

play provision), different and situated ways of knowing about how space works and therefore how open it can be for children's play productions. This involves support for **creative research** in addition to standard surveys, together with ongoing opportunities for dialogue.

- Children's right to play is a matter of **spatial justice**. Adult account-ability and response-ability is about holding **spatial habits and routines up to critical scrutiny** to see how spaces might include or exclude children and young people from accessing the common resources available.



References

- ¹ Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2013) *Leopard Skin Wellies, a Top Hat and a Vacuum Cleaner Hose: An analysis of Wales' Play Sufficiency Assessment duty*, Cardiff: Play Wales; Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2014) *Towards Securing Sufficient Play Opportunities: A short study into the preparation undertaken for the commencement of the second part of the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty to secure sufficient play opportunities*, Cardiff: Play Wales
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- ³ Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*, Cardiff: Welsh Government

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