



RATIONALE FOR A NATIONAL PLAY POLICY FOR WALES

Edited extracts from
"A REVIEW OF FUNDING PROGRAMMES WITHIN CHILDREN'S LOCAL PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS"
Report to the National Assembly for Wales

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Children in Wales (in partnership with Play Wales), on behalf of the National Assembly for Wales, has undertaken to review funding programmes within children's local partnership working. It is intended to provide a comprehensive and informed rationale that explains why we believe play is important for children, and why we believe play should be provided for. A play policy should have, at its heart, the needs of the children of Wales, and it should support the thrust of the Assembly's other policies for children and young people.
- 1.2 In 2000 the National Assembly for Wales commissioned "The State of Play: a review of open access play provision in Wales and the Play 2000 grant scheme." (*Appendix 1*). The report was based on a survey of local authorities and voluntary agencies concerned with children's play across Wales. At their meeting on the 24th January 2001, the National Assembly for Wales's Health and Social Services Committee accepted the State of Play report and the recommendations it contained. The first two recommendations were of particular significance:
 - The first called for the development of a coherent policy framework for Wales.
 - The second proposed that local authorities and the voluntary sector should be encouraged to develop play policies and strategies for implementing them, aimed at achieving full implementation of Article 31 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises play as an important part of the development of children and of the cultural life of childhood.
- 1.3 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by the UK Government in December 1991. The Assembly's "Strategy for Children and Young People" states that the Convention 'should provide the foundation of principle for all dealings with children'. Article 31 is particularly pertinent to the development of a children's play policy. It states that signatory nations will:

"recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is the realisation of the first two "State of Play" recommendations

2. A Definition of Play

- 2.1 Play is defined by the playwork profession as behaviour which is “*freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated i.e. performed for no external goal or reward*”. (PlayEducation, 1982)
- 2.2 Play is a behaviour which is:
- **Freely Chosen** - that children choose **WHAT** they do, themselves.
 - **Personally Directed** - that children choose **HOW** they do something.
 - **Intrinsically Motivated** - that children choose **WHY** they do something: that children’s play is performed for no external goal or reward.
- 2.3 As currently understood a child’s behaviour is considered as play when several of the following criteria are evident. Play behaviour is variously: spontaneous, the result of a biological drive, first hand experience, goalless, where the child is in control of the content and intent, contain play cues or meta-signals, a performance of motor patterns in novel sequences, like galumphing, repetitious and novel, non-detrimental and compensatory.
- 2.4 Children will use their environment to support their play and an environment that would be regarded as rich for children’s play would include some or all of the following props.
- The Playwork Curriculum(Devised by King and Hughes, see Hughes, 1996b): the curriculum suggests that the essential experiences available to children fall into the following categories - The Elements (Fire, Water, Air, Earth), Identity, Concepts and The Senses.
 - Children need direct and first hand experience of all four elements. They need the opportunity to play with fire, water, air and earth. Children need to play with their identity, i.e., who they are and what they look like, and with the whole concept of identity. Children need to make sense of a world in which much of what exists is abstract. Children need to be able to explore the world of concepts. This doesn’t mean that the concepts have to exist in reality. The environment for children’s play should stimulate the senses. Music and sounds, tastes, smells, colours, and different textures should all be available.
 - Other elements of the child’s play environment will provide access to a varied landscape, materials, and opportunities for construction and change. The environment will provide focuses, choices and alternatives, and access to tools, loose parts, challenge and risk.

- 2.5 The above components of the child's play environment are concisely drawn together in "The First Claim – a framework for playwork quality assessment" (Play Wales March 2001 - see *Appendix 2*)

3. The Importance of Play in Children's Development

- 3.1 There is a growing awareness, supported by research evidence, that play is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development, not only for individual children, but for the societies in which they live in as well. Neurological data Huttenlocher, (1990, 1992), Sutton-Smith, (1997) and Gould, (1996) suggests that early enriched play experiences may have a lasting effect on children's development and later capacity to think and process information, whilst impoverished experiences have the reverse prognosis. (See, for example Balbernie, 1999)
- 3.2 The neurologist Huttenlocher, (1992, p 63), having suggested that children under ten years of age may have brains of twice the potential size of children over that age, proposes a sensitive period for brain growth spanning from about eight months to eight years in length - a period which is undeniably dominated by play behaviour in children.
- 3.3 Sutton-Smith, (1997), citing Huttenlocher, (ibid), suggested that "*the infant's brain's ability to constantly undergo physical and chemical changes as it responds to the environment is taken to suggest enormous plasticity*", and that, "*Play's function ...may be to assist the actualisation of brain potential...*" (p225)
- 3.4 Sutton-Smith, (ibid), linking what he describes as play's "amazing" diversity, to Gould's (1996) notion of variability, which he suggests is "*the central characteristic of biological evolution*", also suggests that, because of plasticity, the human brain will retain its potential variability, because the over-capacity of neurones at birth will be more effectively utilised, if they are exposed to the diversity of experience through playing. (pp. 221 and 226)
- 3.5 He also argues that play's role could be in making neuronal connections real, rather than possible - "*its function being to save...more of the variability that is potentially there, than would otherwise be saved if there were no play*". (pp. 225-226)
- 3.6 The thrust of Sutton-Smith's view being that the human child is born with a huge neuronal over- capacity, which if not used will die. He believes the "*quirky, apparently redundant and flexible responses to experience*", that is, play, result in the uptake of this over capacity, thus ensuring its continued participation in future brain processes, and avoiding problems which Gould, (ibid), suggested were associated with "*rigidification of behaviour after any future successful adaptation*".

- 3.7 Balbernie, (1999), on the other hand, signals the neurological outcome of not playing.

“..a child who is not being stimulated, by being ...played with, and who has few opportunities to explore his or her surroundings, may fail to link up fully those neural connections and pathways which will be needed for later learning.” (p. 17)

- 3.8 Perry *et al*, (1995), also suggest that trauma in childhood has the effect of influencing the child’s brain physiology:

“Children exposed to sudden, unexpected, man-made violence, [are] at great risk [of] profound emotional, behavioural, physiological, cognitive and social problems.” (p. 17)

- 3.9 Gunner, (1998), reports that the brains of traumatised children develop ‘hair trigger’ circuitry, for stress reaction, because of high levels of cortisol, which *“increases activity in the part of the brain involved with vigilance and arousal.”* However, Gunner continues, *“high levels of cortisol also directly effect (sic) the hippocampus”*, and *“children with disorganised attachment...have a permanently higher level of cortisol”*. (p.18)

- 3.10 Balbernie, (1999), also suggests that another adaptive response that can be activated by fearful situations is, what he calls, *“the dissociative continuum - the freeze or surrender response”*. (p 39)

- 3.11 It is self-evident that play is the focal point of children’s lives. Everything else they do (eat, wash, sleep, shop, go to school) is an interruption to their play. Whenever possible children will try to play while these other activities are happening. From a child’s perspective, any activity other than play diverts them from their play and it is a reasonable inference that play is a child’s first hand learning, undertaken by trial and error.

- 3.12 The persistence of children to play strongly suggests that all children have an overriding innate drive to play and that play is an inborn and natural activity. Arguably, this is a behavioural imperative that has its roots in the evolutionary experience of mankind. For example, Hughes (2001) suggests children use the phenomenon of recapitulation to *“play themselves up to evolutionary speed.”* (p199) It might be conjectured that play is the process by which humanity has ensured it’s continuation. Lorenz (1972), suggests, *“Certain animals including man, are liberated from rigid instinct and have evolved as specialists in non-specialisation.”* (p 59) and Sylva, (1977), supports this also citing play as significant component,

“Natural selection would favour the most playful individuals in specialist species, for they have acquired more useful information about the potential of the environment and their actions on it.” (p 60)

- 3.13 Not only are children developing the neurological foundations that will enable problem solving, language and creativity, they are also learning whilst they are playing. They are learning how to relate to others, how to calibrate their muscles and bodies and how to think in abstract terms. Through play children learn social skills such as communication, negotiation and listening skills. Through the freedom, choice and control they experience at play they learn about themselves and how to interact with their surroundings, including the natural world. Children's physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills all develop when they are playing. Such skills are critical in the creation of self-esteem and confidence, and are linked to emotional intelligence, an increasingly important attribute for successful functioning in the 21st century. (See Goleman, 1995)
- 3.14 Through play children learn about risk. This is an essential element of confidence and competence building, necessary for personal development, flexibility and survival. Throughout their lives children will be confronted with hazardous situations and it is during their play that children choose to encounter risk, learn to assess it and develop skills to manage it. Through trial and error they discover their limitations and realise their potential for undertaking challenge. Children are inquisitive and curious, with an innate and compelling drive to explore the unknown, and to experiment and to test themselves.
- 3.15 Play is first and foremost the process of a child's own, self-directed learning and as such is a process that has a validity for all ages of children. A child plays from birth and throughout childhood and as such it's play might be conjectured as a demonstration that it is following a personal biological agenda for improving it's knowledge base, and gaining direct and concrete experience of the world.
- 3.16 Some sociologists have equated play with the culture of childhood, that is, "*the arena in which children as social actors are most likely to express their values, their art, their music, their physical culture, and their language and humour*" where children are "*active in the construction and determination of their own social lives*". (Prout and James 1997).
- 3.17 If play is the culture of childhood, then like its adult counterpart, it is a culture that can at times be creative or destructive, cruel as well as innocent. Children play within their personal codes of behavior, as well as those of their culture and society. Play can provide children with a process for exploring these codes.
- 3.18 It has also been proposed that children's play, with its repetitive and exploratory characteristics, represents "*a critically important feature of their development of cognitive and emotional skills*". (Singer 1994).
- 3.20 Through their play children learn how to learn. "*What is acquired through play is not specific information but a general (mind) set towards solving*

problems that includes both abstraction and combinatorial flexibility" where children "string bits of behavior together to form novel solutions to problems requiring the restructuring of thought or action". (Sylva 1977). Furthermore, Hughes (1996 and 1998) paraphrasing Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970) states "Play has been described as scientific research conducted by children".

- 3.21 Some may regard play merely as a child's version of adult recreation. When children are engaged in playing, their activities may appear haphazard, aimless and without any anticipated outcomes, and as such, may not be considered as important. In a world presently focused upon visible and tangible outcomes, there is a risk that play will not given the position of significance in children's development that it warrants. However, it is the very freedom and child centredness of play that makes it such an effective and comprehensive learning process. It is self-evident that play is for children, an incredibly profound process of internal growth and development.

4. The Benefits of Play for Communities and Society

- 4.1 In every community in Wales, throughout Welsh society, our children are our today and tomorrow. Experience shows that play is nature's mechanism for enabling children to make connections with their world, to develop survival skills, build relationships, to experience control and to make some sense of life and the context in which they are living and growing. When our children play, they are enabled, included, empowered and connected with their world. Thus it follows that if our children cannot play, or if their play is limited or biased in some way, then they will feel disabled, excluded, cynical, frustrated, powerless, angry and disconnected.
- 4.2 There is a clear choice here for our society. The feelings and perceptions that our children have as they grow up will form the foundation for everyone's tomorrow, and ultimately, for society's future.
- 4.3 In 1926, the then Prime Minister, Lloyd George stated:
- "Play is a child's first claim on the community. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens".*
- 4.4 This statement implies that play is of utmost importance to any community's children and that to be deprived of it can cause great harm. This is born out in studies by, for example, Huttenmoser (1995), the work of Chugani, (1995, 1996, 1997) and Brown (1998)
- 4.5 Huttenmoser *et al*, (1995), for example, referring to what they describe as 'battery children', attribute play deprivation to the effects of traffic and parental fears of predatory adults. Battery children, they say, "*showed*

considerably less advanced social and motor development, and were less autonomous”, (p vi) Hugill, (1998) also quoted the report, stating that they, (battery children), are “often aggressive and whine a lot. By the age of five they are emotionally and socially repressed, find it difficult to mix, fall behind with school work and are at much greater risk of obesity”. (p. 7)

- 4.6 Chugani's, (1996), studies on children who have been without play and who have become stimulus deprived, report *“mental problems, physical de-sensitisation, and restrictions in brain-growth and severe learning difficulties, erratic behaviour, difficulty in forming bonds, depression and withdrawal resembling autistic children or hyperactivity and loss of control, like children with ADD. The neurological cost.. [being].. that regions of children's brains are utterly devoid of electrical activity.”* (See Tobin, (1997))
- 4.7 The impact of play deprivation is further highlighted in a study of 26 young murderers. Brown and Lomax, (1969) concluded the following: *“What all these studies repeatedly revealed ... was that ... normal play behaviour was virtually absent throughout the lives of highly violent, anti-social men regardless of demography. [My] remaining impressions are that ... play deprivation also takes a devastating toll on women.”* (Brown, 1998, p.249)

5. Context - The Current Environment for Children's Play in Wales

- 5.1 Experience throughout Wales shows us that the child's drive to play also provides society with a secondary benefit, by involving the wider community in the development of opportunities for children to play. This process significantly contributes to the process of social inclusion and community capacity building. Experience shows that both play for children themselves, and the process in which parents engage to provide for their children's play, make a significant contribution in realising the objectives of many government initiatives. But play, first and foremost belongs to the child!
- 5.2 All children in Wales have 35% of their time potentially available for play – twice the amount of time they spend in school each year. Children who make up nearly 25% of the population are the greatest users of the outdoors spending 4 to 6 hours per day and sometimes up to 10 hours outside, playing and enjoying exciting and risk-taking activities. The environment in which children live, grow and play has a significant impact on their play behaviour. (See *Make Way for Children's Play*": Playboard 1985)
- 5.3 Traditionally children have played where they can. Children will play when and where they can; in the street, in the fields, on their way to and

from school, in a crowd, on a piece of wasteland, running down a hillside.

- 5.4 The environment that children play in needs to be appropriate for their developmental needs. However, these opportunities are being increasingly eroded. The streets are perceived as unsafe, the countryside and open space often inaccessible, much territory is forbidden, and the mess and noise they create make children unpopular. It is the urban environment in particular which is becoming increasingly restrictive for these play opportunities. Over the past fifty years it is not unreasonable to state that adults have progressively colonised virtually all public outside space. Sometimes fenced areas for children's playgrounds have been created. Where children used to play in freedom with unlimited opportunity to discover the breadth of their world, they no longer have the space, opportunity or freedom.
- 5.5 Children living in different parts of Wales face similar restrictions on their opportunities to play. The risks, real and perceived, which face them when they leave their homes mean that many children are allowed little opportunity to create their own play opportunities outside their homes. Children living in both remote communities and on city estates are often unable to access the play provision that currently exists. It must be recognised that although the restrictions placed on children's freedom to play in rural areas are perhaps different from those for children in urban areas, the effects of those restrictions are just as profound.
- 5.6 Given this situation, it becomes incumbent upon the National Assembly for Wales to consider adopting a policy that creates an environment:
- to redress the imbalance of these inequalities;
 - to protect children's rights for free play; and,
 - to ensure all children having access to appropriate play provision that meets their developmental needs.

It should ensure that all decisions and actions that potentially impact upon children's play needs, would in future take account of those needs.

- 5.7 As the Assembly considers the plethora of demands from others with agendas that do not encompass the needs of childhood, there is a risk that children's play will become further lost from view and marginalized than it has already become. Children do not spend their time engaging in politics – rightly so, it diverts them from their play. It is the responsibility of adults and government to understand and ensure that children's play needs are met and protected. Play is interesting, challenging and fun for children. However, creating opportunities for children to play demands a serious, informed and planned approach.
- 5.8 At present, no other European nation has adopted a policy for children's play. Thus, the decision of the National Assembly for Wales to adopt a play policy is groundbreaking and visionary, clearly demonstrating the

commitment of the National Assembly to ensure that the children of Wales and their needs are central to policy making, and that provision is made to meet those needs. It will be a clear and explicit statement of the NAW's belief of the value of play in childhood and the importance of children in our society.

6. Benefits that arise from a National Policy for Play

6.1 It is believed that the adoption of a play policy by the National Assembly for Wales will have the following benefits. The play policy will:

- be an unequivocal statement of the vision for a future where all children of Wales, and their play needs, are given the highest regard and they are provided with play opportunities of quality.
- articulate an agreed definition of play and provides a framework of values and principles that are consistent across Wales.
- raise awareness and contribute to a shared understanding of the fundamental value of children's play and the integral role of play in all children's well-being, learning and development.
- contribute to the creation of an environment of change where, all with an interest in the play needs of children and those whose work has an impact upon children's lives, share an understanding of both the contribution that they make, and also the contribution of others.
- provide the context in which the focus of government's vision for the play needs of children is realised through change, innovation and long term strategic development.
- promote a new way of thinking about and working with children. This includes defining their play needs and identifying ways of meeting them, providing the basis for the development of a strategy for the allocation of resources, to deliver both a universal entitlement to play and also strategically in response to identified play needs.

7. Methodology

7.1 The above report has been drawn from best practice throughout the U.K. It reflects the current received thinking as to how a policy should be framed in order to ensure that it might effectively contribute to the creation of an environment that is supportive of the need to provide for children's play, in the long term.

7.2 During the development of the draft play policy Play Wales contacted representatives of sister organisations in the U.K., i.e. the Children's Play Council (England), PlayBoard Northern Ireland and Play Scotland. Representatives of PLAYLINK, and the International Play Associational (IPA) were also consulted in order that a review of other European play policies might be considered.

7.3 A search was undertaken of the documentation held by the National Play Information Centre, a resource base operated under contract from the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) by the National Children's Bureau. The Information Centre houses the most comprehensive bank of international knowledge regarding play and playwork, in Europe.

- 7.4 However extensive research across Europe, including the rest of the UK, has failed to find any example of a nation that has adopted a play policy. There remains the possibility, albeit extremely slim that there is a national play policy, of which we have no knowledge, which has yet to be translated into English.
- 7.5 In the absence of any play policies at a national level, a selection of local authority wide play policies were considered; as was guidance on developing play policies produced by Play Wales for local authorities in Wales. Also considered, was guidance for developing a play and cultural strategy funded by the DCMS and prepared by PLAYLINK on behalf of the Children's Play Policy Forum.
- 7.6 The development of the this rationale builds upon the findings, issues and recommendations of Appraisal of "The State of Play" report. (*Appendix 1*)
- 7.7 The philosophical and practical content of the draft play policy has been further informed by a survey of 150 individuals and organisations, throughout the UK that have utilised "The First Claim – a framework for playwork quality assessment": Play Wales (March 2001) and their experience in the implementation of the quality assessment process.
- 7.8 The consultation process, whilst being constrained by the time available, was broad, and comment was requested from a wide range of individuals and organisations across Wales, with an interest in children's play and play provision or whose work might have an impact upon children's play. Those consulted had an interest and knowledge that was relevant to the consultation content and included for example: individuals within local communities who are actively involved in children's play on a voluntarily basis, local authority officers with a management responsibility for a play service, national childcare organisations, local authorities and councils for voluntary service.
- 7.9 The consultation was undertaken by e-mail, post and interviews either telephone or face to face. The final draft play policy reflects a consensus of response from those consulted.
- 7.10 Of the 175 invitations to contribute 25 responses were received. Responses ranged in detail and depth. However all responses unequivocally reflected a significant consensus of approval for the proposals as outlined above
- 7.11 It is noteworthy that researchers and theorists with an interest in children's play, agree that the role of play in child development remains relatively under-explored. Throughout the development of this draft play policy it has become increasingly apparent that the contribution that children's play makes to both the child's development and the significant role it plays within wider society has been the subject of very limited research or evaluation. However, those theories and findings that there

are, do support the contribution play makes to children's learning, health and well-being.

7.12 Whilst there is the possibility that there is research based evidence to further support the contentions embodied within this report it would appear that it is not known to the wide range of international professional contacts made during the drafting of this report.

7.13 There is currently a paucity of research-based evidence to support current and future developments in children's play provision, which might at present be regarded as an act of faith.

7.14 Guidance for local partnerships on development of Play Policy

7.15 The drafting of the guidance on development of play policy (*Appendix 4*) was informed by the same information and documentation as the draft play policy. The consultation, however, was restricted to individuals and organisations who have direct and relevant experience of the process of play policy development. The focus of this guidance is upon process rather than content.

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Much of this report is drawn from a variety of sources. Source materials that have been used to contribute to this process include:

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Appendix 1

Extracts from the State of Play report to the National Assembly for Wales

The Study

This report was funded from the Play 2000 Grant scheme. It reports on a study of open access play provision in Wales, which was commissioned by the National Assembly. The report is based on a survey carried out in August 2000 of local authorities and voluntary agencies concerned with play across Wales. This was supplemented by analysis of Play 2000 grant bids, grant return forms and Children and Youth Partnership plans; and by interviews with key individuals.

The importance of play

Play is 'freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child'. There is a growing awareness, backed up by research evidence, that play is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children, but for the societies they live in as well. Neurobiological research suggests that early play experiences may have a lasting effect on children's development and later capacity to learn. Play also keeps children healthy and active, develops social skills and confidence, helps children to deal with stress, and may reduce youth crime and vandalism. Play provision fosters a sense of community and can improve social inclusion.

Responsibility for play

Play has a place in the responsibilities of many departments, but a home in none. At both local authority and Assembly level there has been little coordination or strategic development of play provision, although some

authorities are now beginning to develop county play policies and strategies. The majority of play services are located in their local authority Leisure Services department, but Education, Social Services, Housing, Planning, Parks and Highways and Technical Services may all be involved. Increasing numbers of authorities are adopting a corporate/cabinet style management structure, but it is not clear yet whether this will result in a more joined-up approach to play provision.

Open access play provision in Wales

A diverse range of open access play opportunities are made available to children by local authorities and voluntary sector providers across Wales. These opportunities include holiday playschemes, afterschool play sessions, junior youth clubs, adventure playgrounds, play centres, homework clubs, fixed play areas and mobile play provision. However there is wide variation in the availability of play provision across Wales.

The survey indicated that there were nearly 2,000 play areas (with fixed equipment) across Wales and almost 400 holiday playschemes. However it proved difficult to quantify the extent of play provision because it was rare for one department to have an overview of what was offered across the authority. Some concerns were expressed about the impact on open access play of the introduction of European regulations concerning fixed play areas, and the targeting of funding under the National Childcare Strategy towards services providing childcare for working parents.

Working in partnership

The study highlighted the importance of structures for consultation and joint planning of play provision, and the need to find ways to include all those with an interest in play. There was support for the idea of a local 'play champion' in every authority, provided this post could function within a clear structure and local authority commitment to developing play provision.

The voluntary sector plays an important role in delivering open access play provision. Some sources of grants for play are only open to voluntary bodies, and they are often able to develop new and innovative projects that respond to community needs. Yet the extent to which local authorities work in partnership with the voluntary sector varies greatly across Wales. Play networks or forums do not exist in all areas. Where they have sufficient support and resources, they are able to provide a means of involving all interested parties. Forums in the survey with a paid worker were able to take a more effective part in distributing the Play 2000 grant and ensuring that all relevant organisations were consulted.

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 This final chapter of the report outlines a number of key issues arising from the findings of the review, and presents a number of recommendations for consideration by Assembly members.

Unequal access

6.2 There is a wide range of open access play provision across Wales, including some innovative and exciting projects, but availability varies between authorities, and between urban and rural areas within authorities. Children's access to play facilities depends to no small extent on where they live.

6.3 The development of play opportunities often seems to depend on the energy and initiative of a few committed individuals, and is not underpinned by a county-wide policy on play which would ensure provision continued even if the individuals concerned moved on.

Lack of co-ordination and a 'lead' department for play

6.4 Many authorities have only a very partial view of the play provision available, and there is little strategic overview or joint planning. Different departments have responsibility for different aspects of play provision, often with very different approaches and understandings of what children need. This fragmentation is mirrored at the National Assembly level.

6.5 A key issue raised by the review is the question of where lead responsibility for play should be located, at both Assembly and local authority level. Research evidence demonstrates that play is essential for children's development, and also helps to support families, strengthen communities and address social exclusion. It can make an important contribution to achieving the objectives of many government initiatives and to the agenda of Better Wales. But without a clear lead and a strategic approach to developing play provision, it will be difficult to maximise this potential.

Impact of government initiatives and health and safety legislation

6.6 Play provision has never been a high priority for government spending, but recent developments have further threatened the viability of some play facilities.

6.7 European legislation, introduced in January 1999, requires all playground equipment installed after that date to meet particular health and safety requirements. Although existing equipment that does not meet the new standards does not need to be removed if it can pass a 'risk assessment', some authorities have felt the need to close a number of their fixed play areas.

6.8 Another threat to the open access play philosophy has been the impact of initiatives such as the National Childcare Strategy, which has made funding available for services which provide childcare while parents work. Whilst

welcoming this initiative, organisations and individuals promoting children's play are concerned that this is diverting after-school and holiday playschemes away from their original aims in an attempt to gain funds, and downgrading the importance of open access play.

6.9 Play does not have a high profile, indeed is hardly mentioned, in the many planning documents which local authorities are now required to produce. If anything the situation has worsened as Early Years and Childcare Plans, which focus on education and childcare services, have replaced the Day Care Reviews undertaken under Section 19 of the Children Act, which did consider the availability of holiday playschemes and other play services for children up to the age of eight.

Improving quality

6.10 Although there are Codes of Practice and health and safety regulations which apply to some forms of play provision, relatively little attention has been paid to assessing the quality of play service delivery, and how well it meets children's developmental needs. This is now being addressed by the Play Wales Quality Assessment Project, discussed in Chapter 2.

6.11 A county play policy agreed by all play providers within an authority would help to ensure that the ethos and values of open access play are understood and practiced by all involved in this area.

6.12 There are many small play projects and organisations scattered throughout the principality with little, or no, support. Play forums or networks could perform an important function in helping such groups to offer high quality provision.

Consultation and partnership

6.13 The review highlighted the importance of structures for consultation and joint planning of play provision, and the need to find ways to include all those with an interest in play. There was support for the idea of a local 'play champion' in every authority, but in order for this post to be effective it would need to function within a clear structure and local authority commitment to developing play provision.

6.14 The voluntary sector plays an important role in delivering open access play provision. Some sources of grants for play are only open to voluntary bodies, and funding bodies consulted for this review saw the voluntary sector as 'groundbreaking and innovative in its approach to services and answering community needs'. Yet the extent to which local authorities work in partnership with the voluntary sector varies greatly across Wales

6.15 Play forums, with sufficient support and resources, are able to provide a means of involving all interested parties. Those forums in this survey with a paid worker were able to take a more effective part in distributing the Play

2000 grant and ensuring that all relevant organisations were consulted. But other forums had disappeared, or were struggling to survive.

Insecure funding

6.16 The issue of funding is a real concern to both statutory and voluntary play providers. Insecure funding makes it difficult to adopt a strategic, long-term approach to developing play provision, and to create the infrastructure needed to support play providers.

6.17 Ongoing funding with clear criteria would ensure that activities and projects were well planned, rather than an ad-hoc reaction to one off funding. If funding was provided over a longer period (at least 3 to 5 years), it would be easier to attract match funding, ensure a pro active service and enable more children to access quality play opportunities.

6.18 The Play 2000 Grant scheme was a welcome boost to open access play opportunities, but would have been even more useful had a longer time been available for consulting interested parties and developing joint proposals. The timing of grant aid is particularly important for play providers, many of whom are particularly active during the summer holiday period.

Conclusion

6.19 All the evidence suggests that play benefits children, families and societies. In the words of Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport in 1998, "Play is not only important to the quality of life of children, it is of great importance for the country's future, to the creative industries and for the economy'. In Wales, the Assembly has already taken the lead in allocating funds for open access play through the Play 2000 grant, and in commissioning this review. There is now a real need to build on this work by developing a strategic approach to promoting play opportunities for all children in Wales.

The report gives seven key recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Assembly should establish an all-party group to consider how to develop a coherent policy framework on play for Wales, and establish where lead responsibility for play provision should lie.

Recommendation 2: All authorities should be encouraged to develop a play policy and strategy in collaboration with the voluntary sector and other agencies, aimed at achieving full implementation of Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Recommendation 3: The precedent of setting aside funding specifically to develop open access play provision should be continued, subject to the

outcomes of discussions by the all-party policy group. Allocation through the Children and Youth Partnerships has proved reasonably successful.

Recommendation 4: Funding will be more effective in developing a strategic approach to play if it can be guaranteed for longer than a year at a time. In any event it needs to be announced with sufficient time for consultation and planning, and with clear criteria for the kinds of provision, which are eligible.

Recommendation 5: The infrastructure for supporting and developing open access play provision across Wales needs to be strengthened. Play Wales/Chwarae Cymru is well placed to assist in this task, having worked closely with statutory and voluntary play providers in most parts of Wales. An increase in the funding the organisation receives from the Assembly would enable it to expand its activities in this area.

Recommendation 6: The Assembly should address the issue of improving quality in open access play provision, and consider whether the Quality Assessment framework being developed by Play Wales could be recommended as the basis for improving standards nationally. The Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales should be made aware of the need to develop appropriate standards for regulating play provision and play workers, in consultation with organisations such as Play Wales.

Recommendation 7: If the Assembly requires information on spending on play, it will be necessary to provide definitions of terms like 'open access play' and to issue guidance for local authorities on the budget headings required, so that information is provided in a consistent format.

Appendix 2

Extract from “the 1st claim – a framework for playwork quality assessment”: Play Wales (March 2001)

BASIC DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Ideas and Terminology.

People often use the same terms to describe different things. The following is an attempt to clarify what is meant by the different terms.

PROPS.

The Playwork Curriculum: Devised by King and Hughes, see Hughes, (1996b), the curriculum suggests that the essential experiences playworkers make available to children fall into the following categories - The Elements, (Fire, Water, Air, Earth), Identity, Concepts and The Senses. These examples are guides only:

The Elements.

Fire: Experience of fire can be gained through cooking, burning rubbish or simply by enabling children to have small fires. Some play settings give out fire buckets, thus encouraging safety whilst limiting the number of fires to the number of fire buckets. Indoor experience is more limited but can included for example indoor cooking and candle making.

Water: Access to water can come in the form of changing the course of streams, water fights, paddling, ice and puddles. Most importantly, access to water should be well supervised, and where appropriate, the depth of water should be kept to a minimum in keeping with the experience.

Air: Access to air can come in the form of flying kites, standing in high places, making windmills and model aircraft and watching the effect of wind on trees and water.

Earth. Pottery, gardening and mud all give children access to earth. If the play setting has earth banks children will inevitably *want to dig holes and caves. If this happens help them to do this safely.*

Identity.

Children should be enabled to play with their identity, i.e., who they are and what they look like, and with the whole concept of identity. i.e. what does identity mean? Mirrors, face and body paints, make-up, cameras and video can all facilitate this exploration. The favourite however, is the dressing-up box. Play setting that use a dressing-up box should keep it well stocked with every possible item, of all sorts of sizes. It should include everyday clothes, party clothes, uniforms, and the props for imaginary and unusual identities.

Concepts.

To make sense of a world in which much of what exists is abstract children need to be able to explore the world of concepts. This doesn't mean that the concepts have to exist in reality. For example democracy can be discussed, as can justice. They and alternatives to them can be played with. Mathematical formulae or signs of the zodiac can be incorporated into the fabric of the play setting. Play clocks and new calendars can represent time. Children have an embryonic awareness of abstracts like religion, philosophy and science from a relatively early age, and need the time and permission to explore them in their own ways.

The Senses:

The play setting should stimulate the senses. Music, food, perfumes, colours and views, and different textures do that. Every play setting should have a musical backdrop. Not just "children's music and nursery rhymes", but all music, in abundance and diversity. The play environment should be a colourful and visually stimulating space, where design subtlety is employed. Playworkers should not just use primary colours or predictable materials. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, (1964), suggested that play is "scientific research conducted by children". We should rise to the implied challenge and ensure that the setting facilitates exploration and experimentation. Gardens and/or plants can provide children with a great deal of sensory stimulation. Particularly if there are different types of textures, colours, perfumes and fruit.

A Varied Landscape: Play needs a varied environment to be effective. They should contain opportunities to access solitude, height, games with formal/informal rules, slopes, gorges with/without bridges etc.

Materials: Although loose materials are vital to play, access to other materials e.g. cooking equipment, trees, structures, computers etc., is also important.

Building: This refers to construction by the children. There should be building materials; children should be given information regarding building and have access to the tools and techniques needed for building.

Change: Mastery play in particular, requires that children engage in the physical modification of the play space. This could mean anything from re-routing a stream or digging a hole, to building a den or painting a wall.

Focuses: This refers to a feature known as neophilia. Neophilia means that children are attracted to play with things they find new, interesting and novel. Children should be provided with features they regard as new, interesting or novel focuses in their play space for them to play with.

Choices: This simple requirement asks if children can make honest and genuine choices about what they do - that there isn't just one thing to do on a take it or leave it basis - a sort of 'football or nothing' situation.

Alternatives: The term alternatives refers to children having access to experiences they would not normally have at home, or in their home locality. For example, step dancing, poetry, trips to the seaside or to an ecological space. However, increasingly for many children alternatives will include outdoor space, dirt and experience of risk.

Tools: Mention tools these days and some adults get very nervous. Nonetheless, children need access to the means to create and build as a normal feature of their play experience. Although we wouldn't advocate access to power tools without appropriate supervision, children should be able to have less restricted access to knives, staplers, scissors, hot glue guns, hammers, pliers, saws, including bow saws and hand drills.

Loose Parts: Loose Parts, from Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts, (1972), refers to anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, piled one on top of the other or combined to create interesting and novel structures and experiences. Loose Parts include: wood, containers, shapes, toys, animals, plants and so on.

Risk: Children can only learn to risk assess and avoid unnecessary risks if they know what risk is and have some experience of it. The play setting is ideal for giving children access to experiences that contain risk whilst ensuring that if they do hurt themselves qualified help is at hand. In supervised play settings access to risk has normally been provided through sports and games, climbing, balancing, inter-acting with the elements, travelling through the air at speed, for example bike riding, swinging and using an aerial runway. Sometimes children may hurt themselves, but the injuries are normally very different to those sustained from electric railway lines, roads, multi-storey car parks, rubbish tips, rivers and canals.