

Spotlight on ... CEO of The Joshua Tree cancer charity

Rich Driffield, a former playworker and now Chief Executive Officer of The Joshua Tree

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into play/playwork?

I started my career as a playworker for Flintshire County Council, then later moved into a full-time role in the Wrexham Council Play Development Team. Since then, I have managed an adventure playground in White City, West London and worked for a couple of youth charities in Manchester, leading business development and income generation. I started at The Joshua Tree in November 2021.

What is your job title and what does your role involve?

I am CEO at The Joshua Tree. As a charity we support families affected by childhood cancers across Cheshire, north west England and north Wales. My role involves providing leadership and overall responsibility for the charity and working closely with our board of brilliant trustees to develop our long-term strategy, budgets and business plans.

What is the most important or enjoyable aspect of your work?

The most important aspect of my work are the families we support. I am very proud of what we do as a charity in delivering emotional, health

and wellbeing support to families at a vital time. It is essential we continue to develop our services to meet the needs of those we support. I take huge pride in seeing the positive impact we have on families, and this drives me in all other areas of my work.

How has your background in playwork helped you in your current role?

I am a playworker at heart and my background in playwork has helped me hugely in my current role. A key aspect of this is the need to be creative and adaptable to a range of situations. The biggest learning I took from my early career in playwork was reflective practice. I have developed key skills around self-awareness and understanding on how to constantly improve my work. We also deliver lots of play sessions at the charity, so that practical experience has helped the team to put ideas into action.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

There are always a number of challenges in leading a small charity, especially now as we are expanding our work. But I like to be out of my comfort zone and really enjoy trying to develop the charity each day.

Spotlight on ... Lecturer in Childhood Development and Playwork

Emma Booth, a Lecturer in Childhood Development and Playwork at Leeds Beckett University.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into play/playwork?

When I first heard about playwork, I was dead set on studying psychology to go into forensic psychology. However, I found the fact the interventions came after the 'problem' didn't sit well with me. As I read more about playwork and the way it works with children, I was drawn to the unique, non-judgemental approach of working with children in the here and now. It's this unique way of supporting children that is a fundamental feature of playwork in prisons.

What is your job title and what does your role involve?

I am now a lecturer on the Childhood Development and Playwork degree. Prior to this, I worked in both the prison and probation service in family services. One aspect of my role with the prisons was to provide play for children visiting their parent who is incarcerated.

What is the most important or enjoyable aspect of your work?

An important part of the role is supporting a child's right to play in possibly the most restrictive playwork environment. Play within a prison setting can have several therapeutic benefits, such as reducing stress and anxiety, and support children in reconnecting with their parent.

Something I find truly special about playwork in prisons is the friendships children develop through finding themselves in similar situations.

There is a lot of stigma around having a parent in prison, and for children who know the truth they often feel shame and embarrassment, or the wider community can treat the children as being guilty by association. All of this can result in children struggling to maintain friendships. However, when playing in a prison setting these concerns are reduced, and as such friendships develop among children and their families which goes beyond the context of the visit hall.

How does a background in playwork help when working with children in the context of prison?

As playworkers, we recognise the importance of removing the barriers to play, as mentioned previously a prison setting is particularly restrictive. These restrictions can make the environment inflexible and hostile – this is where the role of the playworker comes in. Rather than increasing the flexibility of the environment, it is the playworker that needs to be flexible to remove the barriers to play.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

The most challenging aspect to the job is the restrictions. There are many resources that you can't provide, such as play dough, scissors and wax crayons, that in other play settings would be taken for granted. A further challenge is the lack of understanding around the importance of play within a prison. It is often viewed as a luxury for children rather than valued for the intervention that it is.

Spotlight on ... project officer working with parents

Kerstin Nott, a project officer working with Save the Children Cymru at Bettws Early Learning Community (ELC) in Newport.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into play/playwork?

I first started working with pre-school children when my own children were very young. I took my daughter to a stay and play facility and I ended up helping out. The lead playworker suggested that I get qualified as a childcare practitioner as I had a good rapport with children. I went on to do that in 2002. The job worked well around school times and holidays so I would always be around for my children, and I have been working in various roles in childcare ever since.

What is your job title and what does your role involve?

My role is to engage with families that are experiencing poverty. We work with parents and teachers to increase confidence and skills around children's education, seeking opportunities for improvement both in and outside of school. We provide learning tools and basic household necessities – like books, toys, beds, and appliances – that make homes healthier, happier, and better places to learn and play. I support Play Wales with new projects such as an afterschool play session in the local primary school. This has provided access to outdoor space for playing when the school day ends. It gives children a place to play and explore and it provides me with the opportunity to touch base with parents in a place where they feel safe.

What are the current external issues which are impacting on your work?

With the cost of living rising, the impact it is having on families is huge. The mental health and resilience of families are being pushed to the brink and children are feeling the stress and anxiety that their parents are coping with. A lot of families don't have capacity to engage and play with their children due to their mental health.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

With the difficulties families are facing, it takes time to encourage some parents to play with their children or allow their children to go out and play. A lot of parents find it hard to allow their children out to play in the neighbourhood due to worries of antisocial behaviour or fast traffic on the roads. Trying to change this cycle is an ongoing challenge which I will continue to support.

Spotlight on ... Playscheme and Inclusion Project Co-ordinator

Karianne (Kez) Harston, Playscheme and Inclusion Project Coordinator with Wrexham County Borough Council's (WCBC) Play Development Team.

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into playwork?

As a teenager, I volunteered as a junior youth worker at my local youth club. This influenced my decision to undertake a Youth & Community degree at Glyndŵr University when I was 18. I was lucky enough to secure a job as a playworker at Gwenfro Valley and was offered a place on the P³ course in 2012, which really helped me to gain an understanding of playwork and the Playwork Principles. I continued to work as a playworker for eight years, as I fell in love with the profession.

What is your job title and what does your role involve?

Since 2019, I now work for WCBC as the Playscheme and Inclusion Project Coordinator. It is my responsibility to organise staffing and resources for our term-time and holiday play sessions. In conjunction with this, I work with families to provide 1-1 support at play sessions for those who need it.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

Currently, staffing is an issue. Ideally, we need more staff to maximise the potential of our sessions. It can be hard to find staff due to unsociable hours, with sessions running after school and during holidays so people struggle for childcare.

What's the best bit about your job?

It's hard to choose just one! I get to work with a fantastic group of like-minded people. There are lots of opportunities for training. It's great to be able to provide a service to children that is free and supports their growth and wellbeing by giving them opportunities to do what they want in their own community. Play sparks joy in people which is a little bit like magic and being able to be a part of that feels very special to me.

How has your role changed as a result of COVID-19?

I had only been in my role for six months when we went into lockdown. We had been building up momentum and then everything stopped so it felt a bit like the rug was pulled from under us. My role seemed to morph into a family support worker for our inclusion families. We developed weekly themed walks for families to do on their daily exercise and weekly news bulletins that contained playful ideas and suggestions they could do at home. When some of the restrictions lifted, I delivered playful resource bags to the families, so that they had a variety of materials they could use for play, arts and crafts. We were able to run some closed access sessions for disabled children to offer respite for families during this time too. As restrictions have eased, it has been really nice to restart community play provision and support children to play and socialise again after such a strange year.

Spotlight on ... local authority Play Sufficiency Lead Officer

**Gareth Stacey, Wrexham County
Borough Council's Assistant Team
Lead – Play and Youth.**

Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into playwork?

As with many playworkers in the field, I fell into playwork whilst studying at university by taking up a seasonal, summer holiday playwork position. The training I received, in addition to the experiences I had during that first summer, impacted me greatly. I have been fortunate enough to be working consistently within the play sector for 20 years in a variety of roles across various local authority areas.

What does your role involve?

Ultimately, I have responsibility for both the community youth work team and play development team within Wrexham County Borough Council. The function of my role is both strategic and operational. As a team we deliver year-round and holiday play and youth provision as well as providing development support to communities, schools and organisations to better improve conditions for children's play. I am the nominated play sufficiency lead for the authority.

What is the most important aspect of your work as a Play Sufficiency Lead Officer?

It is vital to ensure that you engage with the relevant officers and adults who are able to influence the lives of children to become more playful. Therefore, I feel the most important aspect of my role is being able to identify, develop and maintain relationships with officers, service areas and organisations across Wrexham.

How has your role changed as a result of COVID-19?

Whilst under Covid restrictions our team had to adapt to respond to the ever-changing needs of children, families and communities. The focus of our service changed somewhat and forced us to innovate our playwork practice. We worked with the most vulnerable families during that time providing support and advice, however we strove to ensure that we were not neglecting the impact the pandemic had on all children in Wrexham.

Is there anything you find challenging about your job?

Thankfully, Wrexham has a strong history and culture of supporting children's play. The established play network is a group of highly experienced and qualified professionals who are passionate about improving the lives of children. However, the most challenging aspect of my role is being able to juggle my attention and support in the most effective way to the numerous fast paced projects taking place. At times, as I am sure with most people, it's a case of spinning as many plates as you can and hoping they stay up!