

# Focus on play

## Museums and the cultural sector

**This briefing provides information about how the cultural sector can support and influence children and teenagers' opportunities to play. It is aimed at managers and strategic leaders to build upon the growing understanding and interest to support children's play in the cultural sector, including museums and galleries, heritage sites and visitor attractions.**

Museums, galleries and cultural venues have a wealth of experience and understanding of children and families as visitors. Playing enhances children's physical and emotional wellbeing and there is a real interest from the cultural sector to engage more deeply with children's play. Through engagement strategies, learning and interpretation, many plan for play, respond to play<sup>1</sup>, and value and promote playful activities and behaviours. These venues afford the space and time which help to create the conditions for play to emerge, and yet often providing permission for play can be complex or ambiguous.

### The importance of play for health and wellbeing

Playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. Playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives. Children value time, freedom and quality places to play. Children need and are entitled to quality places for play, as part of their everyday life.

Play is any behaviour controlled and structured by children themselves and takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.<sup>2</sup>

Having welcoming places, enough time and the company of others to play with every day, is of great importance to all children and teenagers and we need to foster environments that can support this.

### National policy on play

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. This places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area. Through this legislation, the Welsh Government aims to make Wales a country where every child has a range of interesting and challenging opportunities to play and time and spaces to enjoy their leisure time.

The Welsh Government encourages local authorities to acknowledge the importance of play in children's lives and to make a firm commitment to work strenuously across policies and departments, with partner organisations, and with children and their families and communities to ensure that children have access to the play opportunities that they want and have a right to expect.

The statutory guidance to local authorities, *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*<sup>3</sup>, sets out a range of Matters across several policy areas that need to be taken into account when completing statutory Play Sufficiency

Assessments (PSA). As part of this, local authorities must assess recreational activities. The Play Sufficiency Assessment therefore considers to what extent the cultural and arts agenda is contributing to the provision of sufficient recreational activities for children.

Local authorities have a duty to complete assessments of children's opportunities to play every three years, and to create an annual Action Plan detailing priorities, actions and milestones to maintain strengths and address the shortcomings identified in the Play Sufficiency Assessment. Each local authority in Wales has an officer with responsibility for play sufficiency.

## International policy on play and recreational activities

Internationally, the importance of play and access to culture is recognised and protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to play, and to join in a range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play, it has published General Comment no. 17 on Article 31.<sup>4</sup> This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further

interpretation or emphasis. The aim of the General Comment is to clarify the importance of Article 31. Through the General Comment, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reinforces that:

'Involvement in cultural life and the arts is an important element of children's sense of belonging. Children inherit and experience the cultural and artistic life of their family, community and society, and through that process, they discover and forge their own sense of identity and, in turn, contribute to the stimulation and sustainability of cultural life and traditional arts'.<sup>5</sup>

The rights articulated in Article 31 of the UNCRC must be understood holistically – each element is linked and reinforcing, and when provided for, enriches the lives of children.

The General Comment asserts that:

'Participation in cultural and artistic activities are necessary for building children's understanding of their own and other cultures, and playful interaction with cultural institutions and traditions broaden horizons, contributes to mutual understanding and promotes diversity. Children create and pass on culture through imaginative play, songs, dance, stories, games and festivals'.<sup>6</sup>



Cultural, historical or creative pursuits are also valuable to children's wellbeing. Recognising that children encounter and explore the world through play, weaving consideration of play into the work of cultural organisations, whilst also valuing what heritage and the arts can offer, can ensure that children's lives are further enriched both by culture and by playful cultures.

'It's not either or. You can go to a setting and you can learn and you can play. In our work with schools, learning time happens, playful learning happens and playtime happens, and it's finding that balance, they can have all of these. Playworkers aren't suggesting we undermine the message or targets that museums have, such as protecting heritage or promoting learning, but we do need to ensure that play is recognised as an "and".'

**Local Authority Play Officer**

The UN Committee calls for cross departmental collaboration in national and local government and other partnerships to ensure the creation of environments in which children can realise their rights under Article 31. The UK endorsed the UNCRC in 1991 and the Welsh Government formally adopted it in 2004 as the basis of policy making relating to children and young people. By endorsing the UNCRC, the UK Government agrees to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child regularly examining its progress on implementation.

## How local authorities and the cultural sector can respond

To meet national and international responsibilities, and acknowledging that playing enhances children's physical and emotional wellbeing, it is essential that all organisations that attract and work with children are supported to provide the best quality spaces and opportunities for play as possible. There is endless potential to develop partnerships and practices to extend and advocate for children's play within the services and spaces offered by cultural and heritage venues.

In Wales, statutory guidance<sup>7</sup> defines the play workforce as anyone whose role has an impact on children playing – those who may either directly facilitate their play, design for playing, or those with the power to give permission for children to play, or not. This is distinct from the role of a playworker, but acknowledges that if we work with children, then play is central to every way that we relate to or work with them. Making this shift in thinking can be the first step towards organisational change. We outline some practical next steps for local authority play sufficiency leads and for cultural organisations in the following section.

## Actions for creating more playful cultural places and practices

Cultural organisations and local play development officers or partner organisations can work together. Play development officers and play organisations can help to:

- Signpost to local and national resources for developing your staff as part of the play workforce
- Provide play awareness training for museum and cultural venues' staff
- Work with staff to identify ways to include opportunities for playing into new exhibitions and events
- Help to create and adopt a play policy across the whole organisation, service groups or hubs
- Support the development of a risk-benefit approach to play across the organisation, which is sensitive to the museum and gallery environment and the needs of all visitors
- Help to undertake a play facilitation skills assessment of staff.

Cultural venues can also take immediate and small steps to embed play into their day-to-day practices. Small but effective changes could include:

- Regularly and consistently taking time to observe how children move and play within your space and during organised events and sessions. Get everyone involved and share your observations.
- Put play on the agenda at team meetings.
- Think about how visitor-facing staff use language and tone of voice. Is it engaging and welcoming? Is it permissive of playful behaviour?

- Consider how your communication plans and materials can incorporate promoting play, and the value of play at your venue. Check that this encourages play for all users and considers those that want to and who don't want to play. How can you meet everyone's needs?
- Discuss and reflect on how spaces and activities might be unnecessarily segregated for children, and how our often adult-designed spaces and events might better incorporate children's play needs.
- Consider thinking more about how you create the conditions for play to emerge throughout the space and in events and practices.<sup>8</sup>

## Valuing play

Creating time and space for children to engage in spontaneous play and recreational opportunities encourages creativity, and cultural organisations can play a vital role in this. By providing opportunities for self-initiated play and encouraging playful interactions, playful museums and children's cultural lives can be enhanced, all contributing to the creation of good childhoods and at the same time creating highly attractive and enjoyable places for people to spend time.



## Creating a culture of collaboration between the play development and cultural sectors – an example

Charlotte Derry, a Museums and Play Consultant, spoke to Gareth Stacey at Wrexham's Play and Youth Support Team and Eleri Farley at Wrexham County Borough Museum, about their experiences of working together to support play and the development of the new Welsh Football Museum. Gareth and Eleri were put in touch during a Playful Museums Project to support museum recovery after COVID-19 related closure, funded by Kids in Museums. Having connected for one project, Gareth and Eleri now realise how the legacy of this will be ongoing mutual support.

'Having recently connected with Wrexham Play Development Team for the first time, I feel cross-authority working is absolutely key. Moving forward this will be a huge step for us at Wrexham Museum and the new Welsh football museum – in regard to the staff and volunteer training and getting the play team's input from the very very beginning ... I'm now trying to get play written into our business plans as well. The play team are better than me with the terminology, they're the professionals in play, I'm not, so I'm learning from them. I'm hoping we can bounce off ideas, we can go to designers together and there's just more support there for play.'

Eleri

'It's really important that our support is there from the start (with the new Welsh Football Museum) and that applies to any sort of service area, planning or housing development. We often get consulted after the design and by then it's often too late. What we have learnt through doing play sufficiency assessments is that it's more likely to have a wider impact if we are involved from the beginning. Supporting the football museum and, how children will be active, creative, makes complete sense, we want to help them make it even better ... I do feel that there is still a general view of museums as not being

a place for children. I know things are changing and it has to be incorporated and expected that as more families come to museums, there will be children there, and children will play, therefore we need to prepare for and accommodate that.'

Gareth

'I think that the play element has almost been secondary to learning and with all the evidence that has been coming out of the play sector, and with the new curriculum for Wales, it highlights the fact that children learn through play and it's all those skills that we take for granted, that we learn automatically, by following wiggly lines, meeting new people, by taking risks. I feel that as a sector we are in a very good place to accommodate that.'

Eleri

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Charlotte Derry, the Museums and Play Consultant and Opal Mentor for Play in Schools, for her support and contribution to this issue of *Focus on play*.

## References

<sup>1</sup> See report cards 25 and 26 in Russell, W., Barclay, M., Tawil, B. and Derry, C. (2020) *Making it possible to do Play Sufficiency: Exploring the conditions that support local authorities to secure sufficient opportunities for children in Wales to play summary report*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General comment no. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*. Geneva: Committee on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

<sup>4</sup> *General comment no. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31)*.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*.

<sup>8</sup> See report cards 25 and 26 in *Making it possible to do Play Sufficiency: Exploring the conditions that support local authorities to secure sufficient opportunities for children in Wales to play summary report*.

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