

Focus on play

Play and county councillors



County councillors have strong roots in the community. They are well known to residents and will often have strong links with useful and potential partners, such as local authorities, schools and business leaders.

Councillors are well placed to be play champions for the communities they serve, whilst also ensuring that the council as a whole complies with statutory duties regarding play sufficiency.

This briefing for councillors provides information about statutory duties on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area.

Why has the Welsh Government legislated for play?

Since its establishment, the Welsh Government has placed great value on play and its importance in the lives of children. The Welsh Government's Play Policy stresses that children have a fundamental right to be able to play, and that play is central to their enjoyment of life and contributes to their wellbeing. The Welsh Government also recognises that high quality play opportunities for all children may contribute to mitigating the negative effects of poverty on children's lives and help to build their resilience.

Playing is one of the most important aspects of children's lives. Children value time, freedom and quality places to play. When asked about what matters to them, children consistently mention playing and meeting up with their friends.

The national policy framework for Wales aims to 'make communities more play friendly by valuing and increasing quality opportunities for play throughout the community. The intended outcome will be more children playing ... and so, enjoying the health, social, cognitive and emotional benefits that play provides'.¹

Internationally, the importance of play is recognised and protected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 31 of the UNCRC states that the child has the right to play and to join in other recreational activities. As an indication of the significance the United Nations places on children's play it has published a General Comment on Article 31.²

This is an official statement that elaborates on the meaning of an aspect of the UNCRC that requires further interpretation or emphasis. It aims to clarify the meaning and importance of Article 31. It also encourages countries to consider introducing legislation which addresses the principle of sufficiency to ensure the rights under Article 31 for every child.

What do I need to know about play sufficiency?

In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to legislate for play through the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. Section 11 of the Measure places a duty on local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their area.

The Play Sufficiency Duty, as it has come to be known, is part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda which recognises that children can have a poverty of experience, opportunity and aspiration, and that this kind of poverty can affect children from all social, cultural and economic backgrounds across Wales. The Welsh Government defines sufficiency, in relation to play opportunities, as the quantity and quality of opportunities for children to play.

The Play Sufficiency Duty was introduced in two parts. The first part, which requires local authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities for children in their areas, was commenced in November 2012. The second part, which requires local authorities to secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas, as far as is reasonable and practical, was commenced in July 2014.

Local authorities in Wales have submitted Play Sufficiency Assessments and Action Plans to the Welsh Government every three years since 2013. Local authorities are also required to publish a summary of their Play Sufficiency Assessments, which must include the outcomes of the assessments and highlight the actions that they intend to take to achieve sufficient play opportunities.

To support this duty the Welsh Government has published *Wales: A Play Friendly Country* – statutory guidance that sets out what local authorities must follow to comply with the duty. It sets out a wide range of Matters across several policy areas that need to be considered:

- Matter A: Population
- Matter B: Providing for diverse needs
- Matter C: Space available for children to play, including open space, outdoor unstaffed designated play spaces, playing fields
- Matter D: Supervised provision, including playwork provision and structured recreational activities
- Matter E: Charges for play provision
- Matter F: Access to space/provision, including road safety measures, transport, information and publicity
- Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce development
- Matter H: Community engagement and participation
- Matter I: Play within all relevant policies and implementation agendas.

Has the duty improved outcomes for children?

Since the commencement of the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty in 2012, Play Wales has commissioned four small-scale research studies.³ These show local authorities' experiences when implementing the duty to assess and ensure their area provides children with enough opportunities to play.

Findings of this research⁴ note that '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.'



Play Sufficiency Assessments require consultation with children, and as a minimum this is done through surveys. The children's survey asks questions that attempt to predict children's satisfaction with their play opportunities, and therefore identify the most important barriers that children face.

Analysis of surveys⁵ completed by nearly 7,000 children across fifteen local authority areas in Wales suggests that overall, the picture presented by children across Wales is that when they are allowed out, and able to play in the places they want to, most children are happy with the choice of good quality spaces. Overall, children are satisfied with their play opportunities. There are however, many children – because of parental restrictions or issues related to disability or ethnicity – that are not able to play out and therefore gain the greatest health, social and emotional benefits on offer.

How can we make sure there is enough play when there is so little money?

Providing for children's play is not just about playgrounds, play areas and playschemes. The responses to the children's survey reinforce the

assertion in the General Comment that play 'takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise'⁶ and the Play Sufficiency Duty recognises that children's ability to find time and space for play is affected by all local authority functions and therefore requires authorities to work cross-departmentally.

As the research demonstrates, the Play Sufficiency Duty offers the opportunity for local authority officers to pay attention to how spaces in general are made available for children and how easy it is for children to access them. A range of case studies and examples of how local authorities and their partners have maximised resources to secure play sufficiency are available.

What can I do to support play sufficiency in the council?

There are some essential factors, which need to be in place to promote children's access to opportunities to play. These are permission, time, and space and councillors are well placed to support all these factors.

The Play Sufficiency Duty requires professionals across a range of sectors to work together, both to gather information against the criteria in the template for the Play Sufficiency Assessments and to draw up and implement action plans. The breadth of Matters which are assessed means that people working across all professional domains need to be involved at either strategic or frontline delivery level, and therefore, play sufficiency is everyone's business. Play Wales has produced a series of *Focus on Play*⁷ briefings for a range of professionals to inform policy links.

As a councillor, you can contribute to raising the profile of play locally and ensure the forging of stronger cross-departmental links between local government officers.

The duty has encouraged council officers to try new and innovative models, but this hasn't always been understood by local residents. You can act as an advocate locally in the community you serve, explaining to residents why decisions have been made.

The statutory Play Sufficiency Assessments have resulted in positive partnership working across local authorities⁸, and the support of councillors is crucial to this.

Advocate for play whenever possible – when talking with residents, in community meetings and when making decisions that impact on children and teenagers.



References

¹ Welsh Government (2014) *Wales – a Play Friendly Country*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

² United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child CRC (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.

³ Play Wales, Our research. Available at: www.play.wales/play-policy-legislation/our-research

⁴ Russell, W., Barclay, M., Derry, C. and Tawil, B. (2019) *Children's Right to Play in Wales: Six years of stories and change since the commencement of the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

⁵ Dallimore, D. (2023) *What children say about play in Wales*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

⁶ *General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (Article 31)*.

⁷ Play Wales, *Focus on Play* briefings. Available at: www.play.wales/resources-library/briefing

⁸ Play Wales (2019) *State of play*, Cardiff: Play Wales.



www.play.wales