Play and playwork matter – it is time for government to act

Policy proposals from a special session of the National Playwork Conference, 2015

“A General Comment from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2013[1] said that governments have an obligation under international law to ‘recognise, protect and fulfil’ children’s right to play, through appropriate legislation, planning and budgeting.

A recent research review of the impact of children’s play initiatives found that there is good evidence that they ‘lead to improved health outcomes for children, and are also linked to a range of other developmental benefits’ and that these can be shown to be cost-effective.[2]

Yet, in spite of it being a clear responsibility of government and there being good evidence of its immediate and long-term benefits, public play provision has been one of the main casualties of austerity.[3] A ten-year play strategy for England was abandoned after only two years, and the voices of children and those who support their play have been virtually unheard in the debate about the economy and public services.

UK playworkers now call on political parties to recognise the vital importance of time and space to play in children’s lives and of the vital role of playwork in opening up opportunities otherwise denied to many of them.

We urge all parties, relevant government ministers and other agencies to adopt children’s right to play as a central plank of policy for children and to take urgent steps to protect the country’s unique network of staffed play provision, such as adventure playgrounds, by developing a new national play strategy to include:

- A statutory play sufficiency duty for all local councils, as is now the case in Wales.
- Recognising playwork training and qualifications as essential to extended services, after-school, and holiday play provision.
- Reforming the regulation of extended services and out-of school provision to make playwork practice an essential part of the inspection criteria.
• Reinstating central funding for infrastructure, professional workforce development and a new national body for playwork.
• Directing Public Health England to work with local authorities to develop area-wide strategies for free play.
• Making play policy a core component of a new Cabinet post for children.
• Addressing the need for equitable terms and conditions for playworkers.
• Developing a national programme of ‘playable neighbourhoods’, expanding the numbers of adventure playgrounds, play streets, home zones and play ranger schemes and by supporting playwork and community play development projects.
• Reforming anti-social behaviour law affecting children’s play so that participation and mediation replace criminalisation.

The playwork sector will continue to develop these proposals in consultation with the field, and is committed to working with government and other agencies to realise such measures in the interests of all the UK’s children, their families and communities”.

*Drafted from workshop discussions, feedback sessions and prioritising exercises at the National Playwork Conference, Eastbourne, March 2015, facilitated by Ali Wood and Pete Duncan.*

**Notes**

[1] UNCRC (2013) General Comment (GC17) on Article 31 of the CRC.


[3] An investigation by Children and Young People Now, reported in January 2014 found that local authority spending on play services over the past three years had been reduced by an average of 39 per cent.