

# XPLAY SCOTLAND



## Acorns and Conkers

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“Remember a few years ago there was a thing about the conkers. You can’t have conkers in schools anymore. No - one school banned conkers and from that it got in the media, etc, etc. So these stories grow arms and legs and people say, ‘You’re not allowed this’, or a member of staff says to another, ‘Oh, we’re not allowed that.’ And they go, ‘Oh, right, maybe we’re not.’ But actually there’s no concrete fact in that.”

“Anybody heard the story about the man with the acorn? He was a farmer, and he had this hillside, and this man planted a whole forest of wonderful deciduous trees and if somebody at the beginning of his lifetime had said you know, you are going to plant this huge forest he would have said no way, no I can’t, but each year he took the seeds from the acorns and each year he planted another little smallholding. By the end of it a whole forest was there.”

## FOREWORD

2007 was a monitoring year for the UK in relation to the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child. Of particular interest to Play Scotland was the 'adequacy' of how Article 31 (the child's right to play) has been implemented in Scotland.

Play Scotland was delighted to work with the Big Lottery to set up the Scottish Play Commission in 2007 to look at the 'state of play' in Scotland with a view to making key recommendations to the Scottish Government. Alongside this piece of work Play Scotland was also funded through Investing in Ideas programme to explore a 'Play Connects Scotland' programme. As part of this process a number of focus groups held across Scotland with a wide range of stakeholders in the play sector and the Scottish Poverty Information Unit compiled and analysed the 'Developing Play in Scotland' survey research report.

We are pleased to publish 'Acorns and Conkers', which provides an evidence base of the concerns and creative practice developed by the play sector to compensate for the inadequate support for the child's right to play in Scotland.

This is a timely publication given the UN Monitoring Committee expressed concern that in Scotland the child's right to play and leisure was not fully enjoyed by all children, especially due to poor play infrastructures. The committee also expressed concern regarding the steady reduction in playgrounds which has occurred in recent years.

Let us hope that the Scottish Government's commitment to play in the Early Years Framework and beyond provides a fertile soil for the play sector to grow from sturdy acorns to sustainable forests in which our children can PLAY.

*Margaret Westwood, Chair of Play Scotland*

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

In December 2007, four focus groups were set up to investigate:

- Needs and issues within the play sector
- Ways of meeting those needs

The focus groups took place in different parts of Scotland and involved trainers, assessors, local authority play providers, active schools coordinators, playworkers, nursery teachers and assistants and people with a strategic role relevant to play. Transcription services were employed to record all contributions.

## Stakeholder analysis

Participants discussed those who have a stake in the child's right to play and the most frequently given answers (aside from the children themselves) concentrated on the people and organisations which have a bearing on children's daily lives; such as family, community, playworkers, the local authority and school.

Much of the discussion during the groups focused on play as an experience that is rooted in the community.

## To what extent do children have play opportunities?

The two issues participants expressed the strongest concern over were the decline of 'playing out' and the decline of unstructured, unsupervised play.

"One of the biggest concerns I have got is this fear that people have of children going out to play, and I just worry about the future of some children who don't have that social time." (Glasgow)

Whilst some of the discussion focused on contact with nature and the benefits of play with natural materials, the point was also made that the most important thing is freedom to explore your environment, whatever that environment might be.

"But what did kids do before the play parks? They used natural features didn't they? They climbed trees. I was born and raised in urban Glasgow and you know our play park was the local bin shelters. Which you jumped about and fell into, but that's where you adopt and adapt to your environment." (Dundee)

These issues were linked to cultural changes and a lack of understanding of play, highlighting the need for community focused approaches and general awareness raising on play.

One group particularly highlighted that some schools undervalue play. However, the Curriculum for Excellence could provide an opportunity for a renewed focus on play.

## Key issues and needs in the play sector

The key issues identified, which must be addressed to work towards children getting the play opportunities they need, fall under seven overarching themes:

### Attitudes toward and lack of understanding of play

This is a pivotal barrier to address. Attitudinal factors were linked to the demise of playing out, resulting in children not being able to access the opportunities that do exist, such as parks and playgrounds.

### Support to the playwork profession

Playworkers can lack professional support and can feel undervalued. Playworkers also suffer from poor pay and conditions.

### Risk management and risk aversion

Time consuming risk assessments and misconceptions around what is permitted discourage people from enabling risk and challenge. Support is needed to help people overcome these obstacles whether real or perceived.

### Financial barriers

Small local authority budgets and the lack of ring fenced funding for play were identified as barriers to developing play.

### Design and planning of places for play

There is a lack of good play space design and the majority of money is spent in playgrounds on safety surfacing and fencing. More scope for flexibility, imagination, adventure and inclusions is required.

### Involving children

Children's rights and participation must be encouraged with a focus on making positive use of their contribution.

### Policy and strategy

The National and local policy context must reflect the importance of play in child development and local play strategies are particularly important for removing barriers to developing play.

"If you talk to people about outside play there is probably more formal play equipment and facilities than there ever has been, but it is not meeting all the children's needs. It is not providing the space for adventure and imagination. It is not providing the sort of natural and the wilderness play." (Glasgow)

## Addressing the issues

Participants discussed how individual organisations could begin to make inroads to addressing these complex and interrelated issues. Small steps are needed but it is also important to first see the bigger picture.

There are a complex series of links between the issues and a patchwork of different approaches, which recognise those links, would be more effective in working towards more and better play opportunities.

The ways of working thought to be most useful were:

- Networking forum
- Pilot or flagship projects
- More 'on the ground' support such as workshops and playdays
- Information and resource sharing
- Community development approaches
- Influencing the political and legislative context
- Training and CPD opportunities

## **The Scottish Play Commission**

The findings from the focus groups also contributed to the Scottish Play Commission, set up to examine the 'state of play' in Scotland and make recommendations to Scottish Government. A summary of the Play Commission findings is reproduced in section 4. A PDF of the full report 'Raising the Bar' is available on the Play Scotland Website ([www.playscotland.org](http://www.playscotland.org)).



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## 2. BACKGROUND

### Background to the focus groups

In December 2007, four focus groups were set up to investigate:

- Needs and issues within the play sector
- Ways of meeting those needs

This included exploration of a resource project for the Play Sector which Play Scotland is developing, The Pinc and Blew Project. (Play Inclusive. Buildings, Landscapes, Eating Wisely).

Findings from the focus groups supported the development of a survey, to gather further information on key issues that had arisen. This was carried out in spring 2008. The overall process was funded by a Big Lottery Investing in Ideas grant. Following this, and building on the findings from the focus groups and survey, Play Scotland devised a project called Play Connects Scotland to be submitted for funding.

The findings from the focus groups made a significant contribution to the Scottish Play Commission, which gathered evidence on the state of play in Scotland. More information on the Play Commission and a summary of findings is included in section 4.

The findings reported here could benefit other groups seeking to develop play or those engaged in community planning.

### Participation in the focus groups

Each focus group involved a different target group from within the play sector, and each took place in a different location in Scotland. Participation was by invite.

- Edinburgh – trainers and assessors (5 participants)
- Dundee – local authority staff (parks, leisure and communities sections) (7 participants)
- Inverness – active schools coordinators, playworkers, and nursery teachers and assistants (12 participants)
- Glasgow – people with strategic roles relevant to play (13 participants)

In this report, the group location from which each quote arose is stated in brackets. This is to give a sense of the background of the speaker but not to suggest that the participant lives or works in that location. Invites to each group were extended beyond the host city.

### Structure of the focus groups

The topics the group discussed which are reported on here were:

- A. Stakeholder analysis (discussing the people and groups with a stake in the child's right to play).
- B. Open discussion (the first prompt was 'to what extent do children have access to play opportunities?' Other prompts followed from the direction the discussion took).
- C. Key issues and needs in the play sector (identifying the main issues to be addressed).

D. Ways of working (identifying the types of support or projects that could benefit the play sector).

The groups also discussed the work of Play Scotland and the development of The Pinc and Blew Project.

The structure of this report follows the structure of the focus groups. In the main, the points discussed under each section of the report were raised at the equivalent section of the focus groups. However, as the discussions did jump around at times, some points have been moved to the section where they best fit.



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### 3. EVIDENCE BASE

#### A. Stakeholders in the child's right to play

Participants were asked to identify the people or groups who have a stake in the child's right to play. Suggestions were written on a spider diagram. Each of the four groups generated similar answers.

##### Stakeholders identified by four focus groups

Children, parents and carers, local authorities, playworkers, family and extended family

##### Stakeholders identified by three focus groups

Teachers, schools, head teachers and the community

##### Stakeholders identified by two focus groups

The media, manufacturers of play equipment and resources, landowners, charities, childminders, the out of school care sector, funders, the Forestry Commission, planners, volunteers, nurseries, the commercial sector including tourism and shopping centres, developers, colleges and trainers.

##### Stakeholders identified by one focus group

Social workers, fiscal bodies, researchers, neighbours, the government, playschemes, designers, trendsetters, nature trusts, parks staff, playground supervisors, health workers, playgroups, foster carers, housing associations, health boards and police officers

In addition to the children themselves, the most frequently identified stakeholders are the people that children encounter in their daily lives.

Most of the participants concluded that everyone has a stake in the child's right to play, and one group emphasised that there is a need to bring these different stakeholders together.

One group stated that, although children have the biggest stake in their right to play, and should be consulted, this must be an informed choice. Children, much like adults, sometimes go with what they are already familiar.

#### B. To what extent do children have play opportunities?

Participants often initially struggled to find a way to answer the question. In three of the groups, the first thing discussed was what is meant by play.

“Until you really understand what play is you can't answer that question because the play could be drawing in the house. That's play in some concepts.” (Dundee)

These discussions led to consideration of the different types of experiences children access and where the gaps are in their opportunity to play. One participant pointed out that play in settings such as nurseries can be different from free play. However most of the focus of discussion was on free play.

## Children's opportunities to play

### Unstructured vs. structured play

The prevalence of structured opportunities over free play arose as a concern in several groups. In one group, the issue was linked to the prevalence of fixed equipment playgrounds, which offer an adult perception of how children will play and have limited flexibility.

“Most children are doing lots of activities but its not actual play. They're taking part in activities but they're not actually playing with each other and going out to play and running about, they're learning which is great, but it's not just 'go and play.'” (Edinburgh)

“My biggest worry is that it is all structured things that they are going to and that it is all led. I think that it is great that they go to all these things but I think a lot of parents think 'they are going to that club so it ticks that box' but a lot of these clubs are adult led and the adults make the choices...We are not giving them the skills for future life to make decisions, to assess risk. If we don't actually teach them and show them how to walk to school safely, how are they ever going to know how to cross a road safely, if they've not got that experience?” (Glasgow)

“Unstructured play is something that's getting less and less. Even to the point where I think children have kind of lost their ability to do unstructured play because they're in so many structured environments, whereby if you say, 'go and play', you know, they struggle to do that now. And we need to actually allow children more chance to, not structure their play, to tell them to go and play without actually organising what it is they're doing during their play.”

(Dundee)

“I would agree, I think children's ability to range has diminished. I mean I remember, going back to my childhood, we travelled quite far around the area we lived in.” (Dundee)

“Within certain guidelines, within certain parameters, yes, you can learn, but only within this room here. Not the park or the city.” (Dundee)

The distinction between supervised and unsupervised play links to the distinction between structured and unstructured play.

“We have a lot of play areas in the Highlands...We've obviously got loads of green space too. But that is a major issue in my mind, that we've got play areas but you don't go (to them) by yourself as a child, hardly ever, you've always got a parent watching. We know that that stifles children's development.” (Inverness)

The point was made that when people in a community say there is not enough for young people to do, they are meaning supervised provision to 'get them off the streets'. However children and young people benefit from time away from adults too.

### The decline of 'playing out'

The majority of participants agreed that outdoor play is particularly important. Children like adventure and excitement and we should provide them with opportunity for this, instead of just moving them on from public spaces.

“I think whilst the full spectrum of play is important, there is something special and unique...It is about exploring and finding your environment and pushing your boundaries and parameters, which doesn't happen with indoors play.” (Glasgow)

Whilst some of the discussion focused on contact with nature and the benefits of play with natural materials, the point was also made that the most important thing is freedom to explore your environment, whatever that environment might be.

“But what did kids do before the play parks? They used natural features didn't they? They climbed trees. I was born and raised in urban Glasgow and you know our play park was the local bin shelters. Which you jumped about and fell into, but that's where you adopt and adapt to your environment.” (Dundee)

“We had a purpose built play park – that was the last place I went to play, because we went to play on the tops of the garage roofs and over the walls and things like that because that was much more enjoyable.” (Glasgow)

“I think there's also a perception that public, open spaces need to be neat and tidy whereas children want to play with their park. And they want to climb spaces, without somebody taking an objection to it – and asking them to calm down or complaining to the parks department that you're not sort of supervising your parks and spaces as you should be. Children like to break off bits of bushes and bits of trees but there's a perception that they shouldn't be doing that...We should be encouraging natural play and using the natural resources as their play equipment.” (Dundee)

The discussion highlighted that enabling play does not need to be about providing designated play areas.

Across the four groups, there was much concern that 'playing out' is under threat and that it could be a dying culture. This was highlighted as an issue to urgently address.

“One of the biggest concerns I have got is this lack of, this fear that people have of children going out to play, and I just worry about the future of some children who don't have that social time.” (Glasgow)

“I think what is quite worrying is...What we are picking up is that at the moment it is the grandparents who are still providing the natural play. When the generation of parents now, if they haven't had that, or if that hasn't been part of their current culture, are we actually storing up a major problem for the future...We have actually got a critical moment in time, where if we don't tackle it now, it doesn't bear thinking about to be honest.” (Glasgow)

Some participants discussed that the decline of playing out is in part due to the changed nature of our communities and a resulting breakdown of trust, as people do not know their neighbours to the same extent that they used to.

“But for me there is something that has changed in society in that time period and I think there is a large degree around people's mobility...As a child and where my parents lived, we knew people, and I think people did know each other, whereas now we tend to live in commuting zones where people drive in and out. Maybe it is actually to do with things like increased levels of car ownership, because if you are in your box,

you drive and you don't connect with people, but if you are walking to the shops or you are walking to the bus, you interact with people, and so even if you don't know people in great detail, they are familiar to you and there is that sense that you know who is in your neighbourhood." (Glasgow)

It was suggested that these issues could be addressed through community development work. There is an upward spiral of playing out – after some children in the neighbourhood play outside, other parents allow their children out too.

### **Other types of play opportunities**

One group discussed children's need for messy play. Parents restrict this at home because they don't have time to clean up or don't want their child to get messy.

Children need different experiences at different times of their life. The parent and child interaction is very important too, whether facilitated through playing with cardboard boxes or toys.

The point was raised that children need access to good quality toys, because the consumer culture isn't going to change. Parents will continue to buy their children toys.

Participants also identified that play can express trends or fashions, such as for skateboarding.

## **Access to play and equality issues**

### **Age**

One group, with reference to a school context, discussed that older children don't tend to play often because it isn't seen as cool. This perception is encouraged by age segregation in the playground. If there are younger children around then there is an excuse for older children to play.

Participants discussed the benefits of play taking place between people of different generations.

"We're so, you know, the child has got their rights, and the older people want their quiet life, and you know we've have actually lost the ability to empathise with what other people need. Because we haven't learnt that all the way along as we've grown up. So I think we need to give more opportunities to allow that inclusive interchange between people. And that, in a sense, makes the play environment richer because there are not just teenagers playing together, and toddlers playing together. There are teenagers playing with the toddlers, which makes them more responsible because they have to think about somebody who needs looking after so...You know there's a whole sort of 'unseen' benefit to allowing inclusive play." (Dundee)

### **Urban and rural contexts for play**

The rural context was discussed at the Inverness group. Participants said there can be barriers to outdoor play in rural areas too. The environment can be richer but whether or not children play is still dependant on parents letting their children out. The roads can be a problem because there are no pavements and the roads are bendy, making it tricky to see cars coming. Remoteness can be an issue too. Children are often taken by car to meet up with their friends at e.g. a leisure centre. It is not a case of just going out to play.

An urban environment is not necessarily a barrier to play. Examples were given in the section 'playing out' which demonstrate that children can find play opportunities in an urban environment.

### **Additional support needs**

One group spent time discussing access to play in more detail and the emphasis was on getting the right approach to inclusion.

"It's not just about providing things which are especially for disabled parents or children or aunties or whatever you know. Because play can involve the whole family and not just the child, but it's about offering inclusive mainstreamed opportunities."

(Dundee)

### **Socio-economic factors**

Participants in one group stressed that there are inequalities in accessing indoor provision, which on the whole people have to pay for.

"Ironically the re-generation areas are actually quite well served because there's free money there. It's the other parts of the city that perhaps miss out on those opportunities. So if you happen to be poor, or low income, but don't live in a re-generation area then your chances are even less to get that kind of support." (Dundee)

### **Play for play's sake**

The tendency to look at play from an outcomes perspective was discussed during one focus group.

"We don't want play to become kind of a panacea, in a sense, for society. I mean it's this kind of instrumental approach, when you look at funding, you get driven down this road: what can play do, we can do this, we can do that, we can do everything. And then you kind of chase the money and in actual fact that sets play up to be something that, you know, play should just be play." (Glasgow)

There was some agreement with this viewpoint although another participant expressed the view that we do not have the right balance yet of linking play with other agendas and that it is beneficial to do so.

### **The role of professionals in play**

A tension was highlighted between the aspiration for a professional workforce for play and the need for children to have freedom to play away from adults. The general view was that there is an important role for professionals, but this came with a reminder that we have to be aware of unintended consequences.

"I think the whole thing about how society has changed and now we are not allowing this freedom of play... Professionals are the instigator that's going to be there. We don't let the kids out on their own, so where are they going to go to make society feel

more comfortable, to make parents feel more comfortable with it...We do need a professional and we need a professional that knows what playwork is and knows that you don't interfere with the play and how it can develop itself." (Glasgow)

"There are loads of different aspects of play that require professionals, but I think that professionalisation of play in a kind of a broader sense rather than, I mean play is the most spontaneous natural thing for children to do and... if we just say, right, well sorry time has moved on and it is a different place now, we live in a different world and we just accept that rather than try and change it then, you know, it will only ever be professionals that relate to children. You will have children who will only ever relate to people who are paid to do that, rather than other people in the community." (Glasgow)

## Play in schools

The issue that there can be a lack of valuing of play in schools arose in the Inverness group and was discussed in detail.

"I think one of the things I find hard is when I'm going through the corridor and children are kept in at break time and it's because they haven't worked in class. And it's so unfair because they really should be out playing and they would work so much better if they were to get exercise. And it's just... To use play as a punishment is really wrong. It happens a lot, though." (Inverness)

"They just don't seem to see what going out at break time is about for children; it's a social thing, it's the exercise, it's everything. Where we work, when we have children who are getting a little bit restless, you know, "let's go out to play" and we have that fun and opportunity to run. I can just see how it settles them down and they're ready to listen." (Inverness)

"There's also a gap from nursery going into primary one, as well, because, you know, nursery's very good at play, most nurseries are, and in primary one there isn't opportunity to play as much. And I think that needs to be valued more." (Inverness)

Participants commented that play is about experiencing things hands-on. However, this is not always incorporated in the way that adults work with children.



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“You know, for example, doing a project on snow. And there are all those wonderful pictures in the classroom, and all these things, and it’s snowing outside. And the child is sitting in the classroom learning about snow...Whereas in nursery we’re out there; we’re building snowmen and we’re playing in the snow and things. And it’s just that different approach.” (Inverness)

Participants saw an opportunity through the Curriculum for Excellence for schools to focus on play. However this may not happen to any great extent until the Curriculum for Excellence becomes part of the inspection process. This could also be a tool to strengthen pupil councils and give pupils more control over their school playgrounds, under the banner of producing ‘responsible citizens’.

The point was made that schools should link with their communities to a greater extent than at present. School grounds are a wasted resource as children cannot play in them after school hours.

### **C. Key issues and needs in the play sector**

Participants were asked to decide on the most important issues within the play sector and the key areas to be addressed to ensure play opportunities for every child.

Some of the issues had already been covered (see section 3 B) and were therefore not discussed again in depth, although new issues were also identified.

The issues identified across the four groups are summarised under the main themes arising with more detailed discussion included where this took place.

#### **Attitudes toward and lack of understanding of play**

The key issues identified that fall under this theme were:

- The attitudes of individual adults, communities and society particularly impact on children playing out – this is linked to a change in community demographics
- There is a need for community capacity building and engagement
- There is a lack of understanding of play in society
- Community consultation on play space can be difficult due to conflicting preferences within a community

This was explored by each of the groups, highlighting the issue as a pivotal barrier to address. Participants linked attitudinal factors to the demise of playing out, resulting in children not being able to access the opportunities that do exist, such as parks and playgrounds.

“Sadly the people, the adults, that I’ve been talking to through our end working in schools, when talking to them, you know a fair percentage of them are also parents and when we talk in general about play they’re all for it, but as soon as you then talk to them specifically about their own children, something like 50% of them halt, it’s as if they’ve flipped the side of a coin and they cannot see that they could allow their children to go out and enjoy the environment and do what they want in the same way that they did.” (Edinburgh)

One factor is parental perception of risks such as 'stranger danger' leading to a fear of allowing their children to go out unaccompanied. Participants identified the media as a key influence.

Perception of risk is compounded by worry about what other parents might think. There have been cases of police querying why children are out unsupervised. However, another participant commented that community police can provide a very positive presence.

"There are issues around wider society's perspective and this isn't just about parents, it is also about the constraints that are put on parents by other peoples expectations, you let your children go out and play on their own, you know – horror – and it's that fear that parents have, they know they should let their children out to play but what if something happened, could I live with that, could I live with what people would say about me." (Glasgow)

Other adults in the community can have negative attitudes towards children being in public space – there are too many no ball games signs for example – although participants agreed that this varies from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. One reason for negative attitudes towards children in public could be that there are competing demands for space, as there is less available now.

"It's about use of space. Older people, as was suggested, don't always welcome young people in their space or adjacent to their space. And yet, there is a demand from young families for it so, there's a big tension there between people about how space is used." (Dundee)

"You know those who like to live in a sort of glossy, village atmosphere...And you can sit back and look out the door and you're looking out the door and there's this gang of guys chasing a wee ball about the ground and stuff like that. And that's the harsh reality of competing views of what life should be like in a community." (Dundee)

There has also been a change in the nature of the relationship between different generations in a community.

"You test the boundary and somebody pulls you back, you test again and somebody pulls you back. Now what's happening is we're sort of letting children go off and really saying, 'Oh I had better not say anything because I know those children, or I had better ring the police, I'd better not say anything because they'll hit me over the head or...'" (Dundee)

"You know that sort of input from responsible adults to a child's play has actually gone. You know they're very protected up until a certain age and then they're just let loose." (Dundee)

Another attitudinal barrier to play, particularly in staffed provision, is adult perceptions of the weather. Very often the weather is used as a reason to keep children indoors, when a pair of wellies and a waterproof jacket could enable play to take place outdoors.

Some solutions to the barrier of attitudes were suggested, although broader solutions to the multiple issues around play were discussed in more detail at a later point in the discussions.

- Community development approaches are needed
- Social marketing on play (a public information campaign)

- Empowerment of children, giving them a greater understanding of their rights
- Understanding of children's rights could be promoted through ante-natal classes, health visitors and PTAs.

Participants saw a lack of understanding of play as linked to attitudes towards children playing out. Positive media coverage of play was suggested as one solution to this issue.

A need was identified for people to understand the benefits of certain types of play, for example, the difference between taking your child to the soft play or to the woods.

“If you talk to people about outside play there is probably more formal play equipment and facilities than there ever has been, but it is not meeting all the children's needs. It is not providing the space for adventure and imagination. It is not providing the sort of natural and the wilderness play, but it is a kind of ‘tick box’ and it is the easy solution for people to do and it is responding to when there is funding available, and it is usually in the financial year and we will have a page 26 out of the catalogue, and so people aren't going through the processes of actually auditing play provision, having an understanding of what children's needs are and then creating the facilities that are appropriate to it.” (Glasgow)

“What is play? What can we contribute towards play? Not just a fixed play provision. I think it's getting across to the general public what can be included as play.” (Dundee)

Participants said that understanding of free play and risk has to be embedded at all levels in society, right up to Government.

## Support to the playwork profession

The key issues identified, which were listed without discussion, were:

- The poor pay and conditions of playwork staff affects confidence
- Playworkers lack confidence in understanding their role in play

## Risk management and risk aversion

The key issues identified that fall under this theme were:

- (Perceived) health and safety restrictions/litigation
- Risk assessments – these are time consuming to do

Participants discussed the perception that the Care Commission prevents playworkers from enabling children to experience risk and challenge. Some expressed the view that the Care Commission is an obstacle to providing best practice play opportunities, while others said that sometimes it is easier for playworkers to say ‘we can't do this’ than to change their practice.

“Are they in reality restricted or are they restricting themselves as to how to solve a problem or how to assess and take care of those risks? You've got actually an opportunity for children to learn how to handle their own cuts and bruises and how to

look after themselves, so you know how much of it is real and how much of it is preventing an opportunity, and how much of it could be seen as an opportunity?" (Edinburgh)

"I think that's right, the playworkers...Can see it as an easy option to use the Care Commission as an excuse not to do this, not to try that, not to do the next thing – it's easier for them to carry on with what they do." (Edinburgh)

"But that holds back the others who are enthusiastic, assessing it and moving forward because you've got a layer of people who – 'Oh you can't do that' and other people kind of pushing." (Edinburgh)

Similar discussions took place around the topic of risk assessments and the extent to which services are held back from enabling risk and challenge by that process, which is time consuming. There may also be myths circulating about what is 'allowed' by health and safety.

"I think its common sense, though, I think you just don't get tied up too much in that. Obviously you have to have a risk assessment but it can't stop you doing things, being creative. I just think do your best that way but just don't go too far; don't let it stop you doing things." (Inverness)

Participants said that there may also be confusion within services around their role in providing adventure because the words 'safe' and 'risk' do not sit easily together.

"Well I think for a lot of people, that's in their mission statement, that's one of their aims – to provide safe play." (Edinburgh)

Various bodies carry out inspections such as the Care Commission, Environmental Health and HMLe. Participants thought it is not always clear where guidance stems from. It can be hard for play providers to work through this complexity to get to the source of information.

"Remember a few years ago there was a thing about the conkers. You can't have conkers in schools anymore. No – one school banned conkers and from that it got in the media, etc, etc. So these stories grow arms and legs and people say, "You're not allowed this", or a member of staff says to another, "Oh, we're not allowed that." And they go, "Oh, right, maybe we're not." But actually there's no concrete fact in that." (Inverness)

Litigation, or at least the fear of, was thought to be a particularly significant issue for local authorities when considering the design of play provision. Cases tend to be settled out of court because that is cheaper for the authority than risking a claim being upheld in court. However no participant in this discussion was aware of a source of information on how many case do go to court and are won.

Some solutions to these issues were proposed:

- Inspire playworkers with confidence to ask questions and challenge the Care Commission
- Model approaches to playwork that show how to enable risk taking
- Support on legal and insurance matters from someone who could offer independent advice
- Standard risk assessments covering local sites available online for adaptation

“I think maybe a way round it is not so much training, it could be getting somebody going in as a trouble shooter and to lead by example...If a playworker went in and showed them what they could be doing, how they could prevent different things like bullying...And maybe jump on that band wagon which is very rife at the moment, like the health and the obesity issues and all the different things that are coming out from government, and give them some challenges in the playground.” (Edinburgh)

## Financial barriers

The key issues identified, which were listed without discussion, were

- The financial cost of using leisure centres or taking part in activities is prohibitive
- Small local authority budgets leave insufficient money for play development
- Funding is needed to cover school playground repairs and equipment
- Ring-fenced funding for play is needed

## Design and planning of places for play

The key issues identified that fall under this theme were:

- There is much poor design of public playgrounds around
- More stimulating and flexible environments are needed
- Better access to imaginative indoor play opportunities is required
- The cost of putting in safety surfacing uses up too much of a playground budget.
- More adventure playgrounds are required
- There is a lack of suitable sites for play space
- The built environment creates barriers to play and there is a need for multi-functional environments
- School playgrounds should be protected for play, including during out of school hours
- There is a need for more inclusive play opportunities

Participants explored the topic of design from various angles. The point was made that the right kind of design can bring communities together. The need to think about particular groups when designing play space was also recognised. The under threes may be particularly poorly serviced and there is a lack of recognition of the needs of families. Travel to and from play spaces must also be considered.

“If you recognise children are the only ones who don’t have a choice if they want to go somewhere independently, walking or cycling, if we actually put that at the heart of how we designed our places that makes it easier for adults to also make those sustainable choices. And it is about creating spaces that are public spaces within housing estates around schools that also then influences adults behaviour as well in terms of meeting in public space and it is about design for communities as opposed to designing for a bunch of individuals and family units.” (Glasgow)

Criticism was expressed of the amount of money spent on fencing and rubber safety surfacing, when there are alternative available, as it does not help to achieve any of the real value to a

community of having a play space. There is a public perception that play areas ought to be fenced. Initially this was because of dog mess, but now there is a desire to keep the children contained.

## Involving children

The key issues identified, which were listed without discussion, were

- Children's rights and participation must be encouraged
- We need to learn from children
- The focus should be on releasing children's imaginations and using their energy in positive ways

## Policy and strategy

The key issues identified that fall under this theme were:

- There is a need for local authority policy and strategy on play
- Baseline information is needed for benchmarking
- More political lobbying is required

Local authority participants agreed that it is important to have a play strategy to back up their approach to play and bring in resources.

“The lack of a coherent policy is an obstacle to the development of activities or access and resources on a whole range of things.” (Dundee)

“If the Play Strategy isn't there then it doesn't even get into the pot when you're making the decisions about limited resources. Unless it becomes health and safety then it goes into a different area so it's very, very difficult operationally to commit to the resources that you need to maintain, just to maintain, the current stock of play equipment. And often if it isn't a high priority it's removed because there isn't the money to replace it or it's not seen as a priority to be replaced. It's a challenge.” (Dundee)

“You know, the Scottish Government is not ring fencing money, or ring fencing very little now... So the council gets a block of money and there are some broad targets it's



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got to reach. So really it's up to making sure that whatever local authority you're in, the councillors, certain committees, are really going for it and are informed and are keen. Because there's going to be less and less central control." (Inverness)

## D. Addressing the issues

### Levels and links in the issues

Participants discussed how individual organisations could begin to make inroads to addressing these complex and interrelated issues.

"Anybody heard the story about the man with the acorn? He was a farmer, and he had this hillside, and this man planted a whole forest of wonderful deciduous trees and if somebody at the beginning of his lifetime had said you know, you are going to plant this huge forest he would have said no way, no I can't, but each year he took the seeds from the acorns and each year he planted another little smallholding. By the end of it a whole forest was there." (Edinburgh)

Discussion in another group highlighted that before an organisation can start to take small steps, it has to see the bigger picture.

"I think this is reminding me a bit about a similar meeting I was at... Part of the problem with why we still have a problem is that we try to take it into bite-sized chunks. So we do a bit of research, we do a demo project, we do so and so and actually, this is a hugely complicated project. The conclusion we came to there was we needed some form of influence diagram, of some sort of flow chart which is around all of these. You've said it yourself, they all relate together. So it's taking, okay, societal attitudes, what influences those? How could we influence them? Societal attitudes link onto the community. How do we link? So I think this has to get bigger before it can hone down to what needs to happen which is scary because it just blows it completely out." (Glasgow)

"You can also then map who else should be involved in this area? And then you can maybe decide, well who needs to lead this, but who needs to be involved? That does take it much, much wider but I think that for a moment in time, where we're really going to change things, we have to accept there are no simple linear relations and no one solution's going to fix all of it." (Glasgow)

The discussion highlighted that there are a complex series of links between the issues and that a patchwork of different approaches, which recognise those links, would be more effective in working towards more and better play opportunities. Some of this work would need to take place at quite a local level to be effective, while other work could take place at wider levels.

"Yeah it's at different levels isn't it? Within the city, we look at things like community planning partnership where, I don't know where play sits at the moment, probably under life long learning or something I would imagine. And that's the sort of mechanism we would use for bringing the partners together. Taking it down to community level, each area has got a local community plan... So it varies across the levels, from city wide strategies down to local issues." (Dundee)

It may be, as suggested during two focus groups, that more partnership working is needed, to pool resources and share practice. Also, the potential is there to springboard from other opportunities, for example the Government is focusing on 'sustainable communities' which has relevance to play.

"I think a critical part...Is about how you share practice between sectors. Some of the things we've talked about are how you would influence traffic engineers or developers, and what frustrates me, quite often, is that we spend a lot of time talking to the converted and we don't actually then break out beyond our professional peer groups." (Glasgow)

"We talk the word partnerships, but as an organisation that does a lot of partnership working, I actually think it's about recognising that every organisation is a collection of individuals, and it's about connecting with people on an individual...On a hearts and minds level rather than on a 'Yes our policy areas coincide. We have similar objectives. We should work together'. It's about finding somebody else in that organisation who has a passion for what you're doing." (Glasgow)

## Ways of working and projects

Participants discussed ways of working and projects that could help to address the issues discussed. The examples for which interest across the groups was strongest are reported on here.

### Networking Forum

This was suggested during three groups and was the idea that generated the most interest. Participants said that both local and national forums are needed.

A local play forum would provide a way to explore ideas and ways of working. They would also function as a source of support which could help to improve playworkers confidence.

"Maybe there's a need for a networking group in each area, and for each of these networks to come together. (It could be) part of the research that people need to do if they're doing their Playwork Level 4, then you've got people on the ground actually setting up these networks from a play background, but you've also got people like the police coming in, people from the community, libraries, schools...And if they meet on a monthly basis or something like that they can all speak about each others roles, what they do and how they relate to young people and children." (Edinburgh)

One suggestion was that a grassroots approach, in the way that networks are created and information is spread, would be beneficial.

"Something as well that, I don't know, it's almost like a guerrilla movement in terms of play. A real grass roots thing that actually...Is there something about getting people within this sector to actually sign up to behaving in the way we think we ought to be doing, so that if there is a network of people out there who do let their kids go out and play and give them the freedom, who talk to other people whenever you're having a conversation about why it's okay to do that. You know, it's the bottom up that comes to complement whatever happens top down." (Glasgow)

The play sector could link with other forum that exist such as Childcare and Family Resource Partnerships, where there is a captive audience of people who may not go to a play forum.

### Projects (including flagship or pilot projects)

Several ideas for the content of projects were proposed as priorities:

- Play rangers
- Making school playgrounds available for play out of school hours
- Design of 'holistic' play space
- Design of play space without fencing and demonstrating the benefits
- Intergenerational play within a community
- Rotating use of games areas rather than using MUGAs (Multi Use Games Areas)
- Placements and exchanges

"If (Play Scotland) wanted to target a particular issue you could get funding maybe for your organisation to trial that in one or two cities to see how well it works and then from that generate best practice which can then be disseminated." (Dundee)

"But I think the pilot has to happen at that community level, embedded across all services, because I think if it's just a play demonstration project, it's not drawing in all of the other organisations and cultural change." (Glasgow)

### More 'on the ground' support

This was discussed by two groups. One suggestion was that there should be more regular Playday style events, which would bring people together through play and promote the sharing of ideas. The Highland Roadshow was given as an example of a similar project that was successful. The events should be inexpensive to attend.

"The opportunity to access different types of play that they perhaps didn't come across when they were training." (Edinburgh)

Half-day workshops were a popular idea. The group in Edinburgh discussed workshops, play events and forum as complimentary ways of sharing information and providing mutual support locally.

"The more local it is, the better." (Edinburgh)

The point was made that it is the actual experience of doing things that leads to behaviour change. The need for hands-on support to existing projects was also discussed.

### Information sharing and resources

It was proposed that, amongst other possible topics, there is a need for case studies or an exploration of approaches on:

- Urban streetscapes for play
- Community group ownership of land

Participants said that resources on play are needed, especially visual resources as images can be powerful. However the point was made that people do not always hear about existing resources, knowledge of which tends to be quite local. Information is often not shared effectively.

“One person gets information and it doesn’t then trickle down to the next person. That’s the problem really.” (Highlands)

Resources that participants identified as needed were:

- Leaflets that parents could pick up in, for example, the health centre, that back up the need for children to go out to play
- Web based resources for playworkers
- Design for play (for local authorities to use with communities)
- School playground upgrade pack (there is an existing example in the Highlands)

“Information that you can present to community groups when you’re trying to present alternative ideas to the traditional play area design. Whether that is a video or some kind of literature that you can hand out, I think that would be useful or even training for people that are trying to work with community groups and design the play areas.”

(Dundee)

### Community development

Participants identified a need to get communities involved, to encourage children out to play. Community development work would be useful, perhaps through pilot projects, or through locally based forum.

“You find when a community group, for example, identifies a need in an area and are pursuing it, they are all entering a sub learning experience which looks at all the things like design of equipment, how kids play.” (Dundee)

“I don’t know if you are looking at a play development officer but some supporting role possibly to local communities in terms of that learning capacity, if community groups were looking to take on projects.” (Dundee)

A Development Officer from a play organisation could provide an interface between the community and local authority.

“I think there’s work on the Council side, reassurance that you are not losing an asset, you are actually perhaps reducing your costs and able to have a facility there and on the other side is community capacity building in terms of actually having a community



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set up that could feel that they could run it safely and would meet the criteria of all the health and safety things we've been talking about, child protection and actually run a facility." (Dundee)

An innovative way of addressing community attitudinal barriers to children playing out is through careful design of public space that encourages intergenerational contact.

"In other countries they are designing play areas so that they can be used by adults and older people, retired people, to get that physical activity into people's lives and the adults aren't just watching the children play, they are actually participating so it becomes a community, more of a community facility than just a play area for children." (Dundee)

### Influencing the policy and legislative context

Participants discussed the need for a national play strategy and for each local authority to have a local strategy.

"Managers obviously have to prioritise what is statutory and play always comes in at the end... at the end of the day the money is not there for that maintenance of those play areas. And having a national play strategy with a statutory responsibility would obviously make a big difference there." (Inverness)

A need to influence legislation which has an impact on play was also identified.

"It might seem a bit draconian but I think I would get the legislation through the Scottish Government to ensure that every time a housing development of say more than twelve houses was built that there was provision made within that for local play. The reason I would say legislation is because when housing associations who are the main builders of houses these days go to do cities there are invariably objections from other residents about the inclusion of pocket parks so if you make it law then there's no objection." (Dundee)

### Training and CPD

Participants expressed a preference for training and CPD opportunities to be delivered on a small scale and with hands on experience.

"I mean you could probably oblique awareness raising because sometimes training is thought of as something that is very formal and very specific but a lot of it can be awareness raising actually which is needed as much as formal training." (Dundee)

"I suppose it comes under training, but more on the road things for actual playworkers. A lot of the things are quite expensive and they're usually on a day when they're working, and it would nice if there were sort of half day sessions that people could go to. More up to date things." (Edinburgh)

### More ideas

Some further ways of working that can address barriers to play were listed by participants with little discussion. Those that have not been discussed elsewhere in this report were:

- Involve children in planning and reviewing
- Play Development Officers are needed

- Use the media to promote play with positive stories, locally and nationally
- An award system for outdoor play similar to the green flag award
- Research into play
- Conferences
- Consultancy
- Advocacy
- Use participatory methods



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## 4. THE SCOTTISH PLAY COMMISSION

### Background

In October 2007, Play Scotland received funding from the Big Lottery to establish the Scottish Play Commission. Chaired by the author Sue Palmer, the Play Commission examined the 'state of play' in Scotland and heard evidence from leading academics and play specialists from around the world. This ran parallel to the focus groups and survey and the two processes were complimentary. Findings from the focus groups contributed to the Play Commission findings. The summary of the Play Commission findings is reproduced here. A PDF of the full report 'Raising the Bar' is available on the Play Scotland website ([www.playscotland.org](http://www.playscotland.org)).

### High level recommendations

For all children and young people in Scotland to have equal access to diverse and quality play opportunities that meet their individual needs, the Scottish Play Commission recommended to the Scottish Government that they:

Develop a national Play Strategy, 0-18 years, in consultation with children and young people, which will inform local play strategies and address the themes identified in this report.

Create a national Play Indicator, with minimum actions and standards, national monitoring and resources to support its implementation across all local authorities.

Promote the critical role of play in child development and raise public awareness of the value of play.

Build the capacity of communities to support a wide range of play opportunities and monitor the benefits.

Support the Playwork Profession to develop as a valued workforce.

### Areas to consider

#### 1) A Rights Based Approach

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child should inform the approach to all the areas outlined below in particular Articles 31, 12 and 23, e.g. including the development of a wide range of play opportunities appropriate to ages and stages of development, the meaningful involvement of children in planning, developing and evaluating play and the inclusion of every child.

#### 2) A National Play Indicator

Identifying specific measures to record and monitor play opportunities in terms of accessibility, inclusion, affordability, quality and children and parents' satisfaction with provision.

### **3) Planning for Play**

Community Planning Partnerships have a central role to play. Play can take place in both dedicated play provision and in any public space. A strategic planning approach would take both into consideration to ensure that all children have access to a wide range of places to play on their doorstep, in the local neighbourhood and further afield. The consideration of play in planning guidelines should be mandatory (PAN 65 and SPP11).

Initiatives could include: Home Zones; traffic calming; play rangers; mobile community play services; new housing developments should be required to provide loosely supervised or 'overlooked' provision; removal of 'no ball games' signs; supporting community ownership of space suitable for play; guidance on play and community space should be available to ensure spaces meet children's play needs (e.g. nature, flexibility, 'loose parts')

### **4) A Philosophy of Resilience**

In the development of any opportunity to play, staffed or unstaffed, the important role of risk in play must be considered. Opportunities need to be created for children to stretch themselves physically, socially and emotionally. This allows for the development of physical literacy, resilience and children to reach their full potential. A philosophy of resilience must be embedded in planning and in workforce development.

Children's independent mobility should be promoted, for example, by improving road safety. Action must be taken to promote positive messages on children's right to use public space for play. The benefits of challenges in play and unsupervised play should be promoted to parents and regulators. Parents should be supported to assess the real likelihood of children coming to harm, and the benefits of incremental challenges. Local authorities should be supported to be resilient in the face of a blame culture.

### **5) Health and Play**

The important role of play in nourishing the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people must better inform health services, professionals and government policy. This should include recognition of the important role of outdoor play and the restorative benefits of contact with nature. There is concern at the degree of medicalisation and the labelling of children's behaviour.

### **6) Workforce Development**

Scotland's Playwork, Education and Training Strategy published by Skillsactive should be fully implemented. The recognition and development of playwork as a professional field should be supported through working to improve pay and conditions, career progression pathways and by promoting playwork as a career to young people and to career guidance professionals.

Training on free play (including environments and adult approaches that support free play) should be incorporated throughout the children's workforce (including playworkers, regulators, teachers, nursery staff, active schools coordinators, childminders, youth worker and health professionals). 'Cross professional' training should be arranged encompassing those professionals and also for those who plan, design and manage public spaces (including architects, designers, planners and transport professionals in local authorities). Volunteering should be supported. Regulation should be streamlined and an investigation undertaken to ensure that existing regulation does not put unnecessary burdens on groups wishing to develop play and recruit volunteers.

## 7) Play in Schools

Schools should be encouraged to place more emphasis on free play and creativity, linked to the Curriculum for Excellence, and 'playful' resources to support this produced. The benefits of play must be promoted and playtime should not be withdrawn as a punishment. Actions should be taken to support schools to develop their playgrounds to provide more stimulating spaces for play and learning.

The development of outdoor, nature nurseries should be supported and promoted and contact with nature through play incorporated into schools (or vice versa e.g. support the development of forest schools). More school grounds should be available for play out of school hours (evenings, weekends and holidays) as these can play a strategic role in building a range of play opportunities in the community.

## 8) Involving Everyone

"It takes a whole village to raise a child." (African proverb.) Play is everyone's responsibility. Funders must be supported to understand play as a unique entitlement and to create funding streams flexible enough to cater for 'play for play's sake'. Scottish society must be supported to develop positive attitudes to children and young people and to understand the value of play, for example, through a social marketing approach with media guidelines. Providing and promoting a strategic approach to play can be achieved successfully if everyone plays their part. It is essential that the Government creates the vision and a wide range of stakeholders play their part to make the child's right to play a reality in Scotland.



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