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The Play Workforce in Wales – Perceptions from Local Authority Play Sufficiency Lead Officers

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

As part of the Welsh Play Workforce Study, seven lead local authority officers responsible for facilitating the three-year Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) were interviewed in respect of Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce development. Thematic analysis constructed three themes from the findings: play profile, collaboration and funding.

Although each lead officer was passionate about the importance of play, their play profile differed concerning their play and playwork experience, knowledge and qualifications. The study indicates the importance of collaborative and partnership working both within and external to the local authority, especially with the ever-changing play-related policy and potential funding streams. However, the unpredictable nature of funding for developing a play workforce is reflected in different local authority priorities where some have or support an established play workforce, whilst others have a sparse or no play workforce at all. What the PSA and the role of the lead officer does enable is a link between statutory legislation and the play workforce on the ground which is unique to Wales.

Key Words: *Play; Playwork; Play Sufficiency Assessment; Play Workforce; Wales*

The Play Workforce in Wales – Perceptions from Local Authority Play Sufficiency

Lead Officers

Wales was the first country in both the United Kingdom (UK) and across the world to have published a government play policy (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2002). This was followed up with a government play strategy (WAG, 2006). In 2010, the Welsh Government was the first to make play a statutory duty for the 22 local authorities that make up Wales (WG, 2014). The Children and Families (Measures) Act 2010 (legislation.gov, 2010) provided the first statutory duty for local authorities to assess the play opportunities for children and young people. The statutory duty stated local authorities “must assess the sufficiency of play opportunities in its area for children in accordance with regulations” and “must secure sufficient play opportunities in its area for children, so far as reasonably practicable” (p. 6). The 22 local authorities in Wales have a statutory duty to undertake a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years to meet the Play Sufficiency Assessment (Wales) Regulations 2012 and Statutory Guidance (WG, 2012). The first PSA was submitted in 2013 (Barclay & Tawil, 2015).

The PSA has clear guidance in the form of a ‘Toolkit’ (WG, 2015a) that includes a PSA form for each local authority to complete the assessment (WG, 2021). The PSA is divided up into nine sections, or Matters labeled as Matters A-I. One Matter, G, focuses on “Securing and developing the play workforce” (WG, 2021, p.3), where the play workforce is defined as:

Anyone employed 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. (Play Wales, 2020, p. 5; Welsh Government (WG), 2014, p. 38)

This definition can include playworkers, childcare workers, early years workers, hospital play specialists, and youth workers. It could also include people who build and install play equipment, but whether they are classed the same as playworkers in the play workforce is very much up for debate. For this study, the play workforce is split up into three areas: playwork; childcare/early years and ‘other play’ professionals. Playwork has been defined as:

A highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children’s play. It takes place where adults support children’s play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes (SkillsActive 2010a, p. 3).

The focus here is how children’s play is supported and this can be in a range of provisions such as adventure playground, after-school club, holiday playscheme, and mobile play provision in local parks and open spaces. However, placing people within the play workforce or playwork workforce has not always been clear cut (Russell et al., 2019), for example where playworkers may work in an early years setting.

Whilst playwork is not ‘driven by prescribed education or care outcomes’ when we define childcare, the Childcare Act 2006 (UK Parliament, 2006) states childcare as “any form of care for a child ... (a) education for a child, and (b) any other supervised activity for a child” (p. 10). Here the focus is on supervision of an activity that may or may not have an educational element to it. When we consider early years practice, this is guided by four overall principles: a unique child; positive relationships; enabling environments with teaching and support from adults; and learning and development (Department for Education (DoE), 2021). In addition to playwork, childcare, and early years provision, play is also used in other contexts, for example hospitals (Matsudaira, 2020). Although not playworkers or childcare/early years workers, anybody who uses play in their work is part of the play

workforce, emphasizing that the play workforce is therefore made up of a conglomerate of professions.

What may confuse matters on whether somebody is a playworker, childcare worker, early years worker or ‘other’ play professional is how they perceive their role in children’s play and what context they are working in (Howard & McKiness, 2013; King & Newstead, 2019). For example, somebody may perceive themselves to be a playworker and focus on the process of play but work in a supervised after-school club where children are ‘cared for’ whilst parents and carers are at work or studying. Alternatively, somebody may perceive themselves as an early years worker and focus on play as an outcome. However, they could be also be employed in other play-related settings, for example an open-access mobile play project, where more focus is on the process of play.

In July 2021, the Welsh Play Workforce Study was undertaken with the main aim to gain an insight into the play workforce in Wales 2021. The Welsh Play Workforce Study involved four elements: the Welsh Play Workforce Survey (an online survey); interviews with three main Welsh play and playwork focused organisations; interviews with the lead person responsible for their Local Authority Play Sufficiency Assessment and focus group/interviews with playwork, childcare/early years, and other play professionals within the play workforce in Wales. The Welsh Playwork Study was the first national study undertaken since the surveys undertaken by Melyn in 2008 and 2010 (Melyn, 2008; 2010).

This paper focuses on the third aspect concerning the lead officers within Local Authorities responsible for the PSA and focuses on Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce. The role the PSA officer within the local authority can be considered as the bridge between the legislation of the Children and Families Measures (Wales) Act (2010) and the number of play opportunities identified within their local authority, whether these

opportunities are within the authority or outside in the third (voluntary) or business sectors. This includes the play workforce.

There have been three review studies undertaken on the implementation of the Play Sufficiency Duty since the first assessment in 2013. In respect of Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce, there are terms of playwork having “a shared understanding across professional and community sectors (Lester & Russell, 2013, p. 10). This shared understanding needs to “work both within and across local authorities to engage with different professionals in appreciating the nature and value of play and their role in supporting it” (Russell, et al., 2020, p. 48). However, Lester and Russell (2013) in their review identified:

The primary focus of attention in PSAs under this heading [G] is on the development of the playwork workforce...[and the need to]... undertake training needs analysis for the workforce...[that fulfils]... a valuable role in developing quality play provision...[and] ... an equally and perhaps underexplored role as a wider ‘community resource’ (p. 63). (Lester & Russell, 2013, p. 63)

Consistent with the WG (2014) definition, more recent reviews of the PSA have acknowledged the need to reach out to the wider play workforce where workforce development “now includes not only the playwork workforce but also the broader play workforce: those whose work affects children’s ability to find time and space for playing (Russell et al., 2019, p. 6). The 2019 report recognizes that there is still a misunderstanding amongst people’s interpretation of the play workforce and the playwork workforce that is “not being used consistently across policy areas” (Russell, et al., 2019, p. 32) and the need to “build on current efforts to bring cross-disciplinary professionals together” (p. 35).

However, Russell et. al. (2020) also indicated that the playwork workforce was starting to decline as a result of BIG lottery funding coming to an end and the beginning of the effects of austerity measures put in place. The BIG Lottery, now called The National Lottery Community Fund, is a non-departmental public body, sponsored by the UK Government that awards funding for specific projects. In 2006 funding specifically for play projects was available for organisations to apply for.

There is a suggested recommendation for the PSA to “share research, experiences, and ideas, for example through training, professional development programmes or multi-agency conferences” (Russell et al., 2020, p. 35). However, with austerity affecting service cuts across all areas of local authorities, this has “hampered the development of stable cross-department relationships” (Russell et al., 2019, p. 5), and this would extend both within and outside the local authority and have an impact on workforce development.

The next Play Sufficiency Assessment each of the 22 local authorities have to undertake is due in 2022. The Welsh Play Workforce Study interviews with the lead officer for each local authority for the PSA were undertaken as each local authority was starting to prepare for the assessment. This part of the Welsh Play Workforce Study focused on Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce development and focuses on the perceptions of the PSA lead on the play workforce in Wales.

Methods

The research design used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as this enables the use of an interview guide where a “written list of questions and topics are covered in a particular order” but allows “the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviews” (Bernard 2013, p. 182) with follow up questions to probe responses and gain clarification.

All interviews were undertaken remotely between August and September 2021 using the Teams® or Zoom® platform. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the College of Human and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University. Before any interview began, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, informed consent, and the right to withdraw at any time. The interview questions asked to each participant were:

- Can you explain your role in being the Play Sufficiency Lead for your local authority?
- What is your play and/or playwork background?
- Tell us about the play and playwork workforce who work face to face with children and young people in your local authority?
- What are the opportunities for the play and playwork sector in Wales?
- What are the biggest challenges for the play and playwork sector in Wales?
- What play and playwork training is available for all staff?
- What play and playwork qualifications are available for staff?
- How has play and playwork been viewed within your local authority since the introduction of the Play Sufficiency Assessment?
- How do the play and playwork workforce compare between registered and unregistered provision?
- Is there anything you would like to add or ask?

The interviews lasted between 34.02 minutes to 56.32 minutes (average 37.33 minutes) and each interview was transcribed for analysis. All interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word® document and then uploaded into the Nvivo 12® software for analysis. All the transcriptions were undertaken by listening back to each interview to ensure what each participant had said was recorded accurately. Transcription packages were avoided as it was important in qualitative research to ‘immerse’ yourself into the data (Green et. al. 2007)

and listening back and rewinding sections to ensure accuracy as each interview can be listened to on more than one occasion.

Area of Study

The study was undertaken across Wales. The 22 local authorities can be grouped into six regions: South Wales; South-East Wales; West Wales; Mid-Wales; North-West Wales and North-East Wales. An email was sent to each designated officer to invite them to take part in an interview.

Participants

Emails were sent out to the lead PSA officer for each of the 22 local authorities on two occasions in August 2021 outlining the research study and providing a consent form. In total, seven interviews with Play Sufficiency Assessment Officers were undertaken, representing six local authorities, and consent forms were completed and returned. One local authority interviewed two people as one was leaving and passed the Play Sufficiency Assessment to another person. The six local authorities involved in this part of the study reflected each of the six regions and thus represents data being collected from all parts of Wales.

Analysis

The data were analysed using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a six-step process of familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. This involves the reading and re-reading of the interview to further immerse into the data (Green et. al. 2007) to identify initial codes which then are grouped into themes, a process in qualitative research called collapsing the data (Elliot, 2018). The analysis started after interview four and by interview six no new themes or sub-themes had emerged, suggesting the data had reached saturation point (Fusch and Ness, 2015).

The themes and sub-themes from the data were agreed by the two researchers and then sent to each of the participants for comments on the credibility of the themes, an important aspect of trustworthiness referred to as ‘member checking’ (Shenton, 2004) of the results as an authentic and accurate account. From the responses returned, the themes and sub-themes were confirmed as an accurate account.

Results

The process of using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clark (2006) started with 120 initial codes. These initial codes were then collapsed to form themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes are shown in the table below:

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes from the PSA Interviews

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Factors
Play Profile	Play Background	No play-related qualifications or background Child-related qualification or background Playwork specific qualification or background
	Job Role	Play as an add-onto role Play integrated into role Play specific to role
	Play Opportunities	No Play Workforce Competent Workforce Active Playwork Workforce
Collaboration	Co-Working	Cross-over Projects Third Sector Childcare, early years, youth & sports
	Community	Supporting Community-Based Provision Community Council Involvement Developing Networks
Funding	Change Focus	Change roles to meet funding stream Recovery
	Source	No guaranteed funding Short term

Theme 1: Play Profile

This theme reflects the diverse and varied play and playwork background of the Play Sufficiency Assessment officer or lead, how play is reflected in their job role and how the local authority supports the PSA in relation to play opportunities.

The play background reflected a spectrum of no play experience or knowledge to being both qualified with years of play and playwork experience:

“It’s interesting in how play is viewed. I have no play background or any experience.” (Interview three Mid-Wales).

“My life in the last 32 years has been in play and playwork. Qualification wise is very limited. I have the CCLD (Children’s Care Learning and Development) stuff, a level 2 playwork back from the mid-1990s. I have Take 10 for Play. In terms of my qualifications, my qualifications are fairly minimal as I’ve always been practicing.” (Interview six South Wales).

From the seven interviews, there is a clear variation in respect of undertaking the PSA. Whilst two of the participants have a clear responsibility on all aspects of the PSA, for others their involvement is more of an add-on and only address the PSA when it is due every three years.

In relation to the job role, it was clear from each interviewee how much play is valued and recognised as important. For example, one local authority has moved the play workforce and changed their name:

“Then the LA has a restructure and told them you are Early Help Hub Workers, which is exactly what they didn’t want to be.” (Interview six South Wales)

However, this did not always reflect the local authorities view of play where for many, play is an ‘add-on’ particularly when the PSA is due. This move from playworkers to

early help hub workers reflects the job title in a different local authority where ‘play’ is integrated into the job title of the PSA lead:

“I’m the Early Years, Integration and Play Officer for the Local Authority.”

(Interview five West Wales)

The inclusion of ‘play’ in the job title indicated more value of play from the local authority and in turn, provides more focus to the PSA.

“My official job title is Strategic Childcare and Play Officer.” (Interview one North West Wales)

“My official role is Assistant Team Lead for the Play and Youth Support teams.”

(Interview four North East Wales)

There was an example of how ‘play’ was the focus of the job title:

“Play Service Manager.” (Interview seven South East Wales)

The implications of having ‘play’ as the focus in relation to it being integrated into a role has implications for the play workforce in relation to the two statutory assessments each local authority has to undertake: Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) and Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA). For some in the study, they have been given the task to do both for their respective local authority.

For the sub-theme of play opportunities and the play workforce, again a spectrum can be considered from no play workforce to a well-resourced and active play workforce:

“There isn’t what you would call a play workforce.” (Interview two Mid-Wales)

“We also have now permanently changed the playworker’s job title to well-being playworkers, and I’ve never had as many staff as I have at the moment.” (Interview seven South East Wales)

Theme 2: Collaboration

The theme of collaboration reflected two sub-themes of co-working and community. Co-working included both within the local authority and outside in relation to the play workforce and a ‘shared’ workforce across other projects, departments and sectors:

“The Flying Start project is being expanded, so will have playworkers there.”

(Interview one North West Wales)

“We’ve renamed those sessions as Family Engagement Sessions for families that don’t engage with traditional services, Families First and Flying Start Services with play sessions as a means of engaging with families.” (Interview two Mid-Wales)

“We found 13 high level priorities from the PSA and all our research and consultation, and my kind of stance is everything we do as a play development team, and a community youth team as well falls under at least one of those 13 priorities.”

(Interview four North East Wales)

The reference to the ‘community youth team’ links also with the wider community sub-theme where the play workforce is important in all areas and aspects of the community:

“The sessions we are developing in the community with our third sector partner, we have the same expectations out of them, although they will not be registered as they will be running for less than 2 hours, I would still expect from this new team the same quality as our open Access in the integrated Children’s Centres.” (Interview five West Wales)

“A lot of the county councilors who sit in Scrutiny and Cabinet, they sit in the Community Councils as well and they really know the state of play in their community but not from a play workforce point of view, it’s from a facilities point of view.” (Interview one North West Wales)

What is highlighted is the need to engage with everyone within the community, including those with ‘influence’ as well as those who will benefit from a playwork force.

This shows the importance of networking:

“I’ve developed a play network of people who run play areas, so when money comes in from Welsh Government or other grant opportunities from European Funding, I know what different communities are wanting to do.” (Interview two Mid-Wales)

“All our playschemes are funded by our community councils, whereas the development is funded by Families First.” (Interview 4 North East Wales)

These last two comments lead into the third theme of Funding. This relates to what funding is available and how it is allocated.

Theme 3: Funding

Funding will always be a major factor, particularly in relation to play that is not educationally outcome-based or focused. For example, within other areas of Flying Start and Early Years Education, there is more dedicated money committed on a regular basis. The aspect of dedicated funding does not apply to all of the play workforce, for example playwork where funding may be derived from various funding sources:

“The play development team is funded through Families First, all of us which is not the best ramp for us to be honest, but that is in the absence of any other funding streams from Welsh Government or the local authority that will fund play development.” (Interview four North East Wales)

“There was a review that started in January 2020, and with the way it was funded through Families First, Families First recommended more collaborative working, so all the team except for the two have moved to Early Help Hubs.” (Interview six South Wales)

“But actually, what I want to do is fund open access play within Families First and rename them as Family Engagement in order to keep the play going.” (Interview two Mid-Wales)

When funding is made available for play and the play workforce, it often is short-term and often linked to some form of ‘recovery’, evident with the ‘Summer of Play’ money the Welsh Government provided for the summer 2021. This funding stream was a response to children and young people experiencing lockdown during the first year of Covid-19:

“Coming from Active Young People, we had money coming in each year. From the outside just stepping into play, it looks even more difficult for play.” (Interview three Mid-Wales)

“We are finding with all of the grants we have been flooded with now because of Covid, we’ve not got the workforce to deal with it.” (Interview five West Wales)

“Summer of Fun funding came in. It came late, but it was something that could be utilised for more provision, not re-badge existing provision.” (Interview seven South East Wales)

Summary

Seven interviews were conducted with the officer in the local authority responsible for the Play Sufficiency Assessment with a focus on Matter G of the PSA, the play workforce. The recognition of both the value and importance of play from each interviewee was clear. However, there is variation in their play qualifications, knowledge, and experience. In turn, there is also a variation in the commitment to the play workforce from the local authority in respect of having no, or a very restricted play workforce. Another variation related to funding made available where local authorities committed funding to the play workforce.

What is clear is that the play workforce is working collaboratively across different child-related professions, within and outside of the local authority sector, and are trying to

work with all members of the community to support and develop a playwork force within local communities.

Discussion

The aim of the Welsh Play Workforce Study was to gain an insight into the play workforce in Wales in 2021. This included the role of the lead officer within the local authority concerning the Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) in respect of Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce. Interviews with six lead PSA officers representing each of the six regional areas identified three main themes: play profile; collaboration and funding. The diversity in play experience, knowledge, and qualifications within the lead roles responsible for the PSA reflects the diversity and complexity of defining the play workforce in Wales.

For this study, the play workforce was broken down into three broad groups: playworkers; childcare/early years workers, and ‘other play’ professionals. These three groups also reflected the variation in the play profile of the PSA lead interviewed. There was a continuum of no knowledge and experience with an ‘other play’ background, more childcare, or early years to playwork background with 20 years experience in play. Although each lead was aware of the need of the PSA, for some this was their first and for others, they have been involved in the PSA since the first in 2013. The most established PSA lead officers were also in a local authority that invested in the play workforce and was responsible for practitioners delivering play sessions. This enabled the PSA lead officer to monitor the PSA action plan on a regular basis between assessments. Where the local authority had no play workforce, the PSA was something that was addressed when needed every three years. However, there was a bigger turnover of PSA lead, often linking in with other child-related areas local authorities also have to undertake (for example the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) (WG, 2016)).

The play profile of the PSA lead officer influenced how the PSA was undertaken in relation to their play experience, qualifications, and knowledge. A PSA lead officer with

more of a playwork background undertook the PSA in a different way compared to somebody with a more childcare background. However, it was noted in one of the interviews how the established play team with a playwork background was being incorporated into an early years focused team. This reflects the continuous diversity and flexibility of play and playwork within the play workforce (King, 2020).

The diversity and flexibility of the play workforce reflected in the different PSA lead officers within this study and also reflect the theme of collaboration. The PSA requires each local authority to engage with the statutory, third (voluntary) and business sector and the play profile and background have an influence on who may contribute to the PSA in relation to the play workforce. Irrespective of the lead PSA play profile, there was a recognition of the importance of co-working across both play and non-play-focused professions that involve working with children and young people. This includes not only the play workforce in relation to projects that cross-over playwork and childcare, but also working in collaboration with the lead play organisations in Wales responsible for developing and delivering play-related qualifications and training. This clarifies the 'linking role' the PSA lead officer has between the play workforce working face to face with children and young people, and the strategic development of the play workforce in relation to supporting training and education.

The third theme of funding reflected the need for collaboration and co-working as the source of funding for the play workforce is short-term, never guaranteed, and often has to change the focus of the play service to meet the aims of the funding stream. This again relates to the diversity and flexible nature of the play workforce, where the funding can influence or dictate how the setting will deliver play, for example local authority funding available through the Families First initiative compared to the funds provided through the 'Summer of Fun' (Morgan, 2021).

The ‘Summer of Fun’ funding was to support well-being (Welsh Government, 2021) to meet the needs of children’s play opportunities in relation to Covid-19. Although the funding was appreciated, difficulties in providing play opportunities within the local authority related to whether there was already an established play service or the need to recruit workers to deliver sessions. If this is not within the local authority, this can be outsourced, but there then needs an established play workforce to be located in either the third or business sector (or both) to be able to facilitate this.

The play workforce in the business sector focuses on childcare provision and being a business will impact on what funding they can access. The impact of austerity and the ending of the BIG Lottery funding from the Child’s Play Programme has seen a decline in local play associations, play projects and, in turn, employment of the play workforce. This has reduced the play workforce over the last ten years. This was emphasised in one of the interviews where the local play association employed playworkers to run a BIG Lottery open-access project until the funding ran out, and now runs occasional family-focused play sessions that are financially sourced by the local authority but under the Families First banner. The play workforce requires funding to develop: however, implementing funding streams (recovery) requires a play workforce.

The theme of ‘collaboration’, in conjunction with having a play workforce, has benefits in supporting play provision within the community (King, 2021a). This was demonstrated further where a play team supported primary schools during the first lockdown in March 2020 and the subsequent July 2020 re-opening (King, 2021b). The adaptive and flexible nature of playwork (King, 2020), in conjunction with having an experienced and qualified play workforce, enables collaborative work with teachers in the primary schools to help run the ‘hubs’ created during the first lockdown in March 2020 in the UK. The theme of collaboration about the play workforce reflects Lester and Russell’s (2013) comment on “a

shared understanding across professional and community sectors” (p. 10) and starts to address the “underexplored role as a wider ‘community resource’ (p. 63). However, it was recognised that there is still a need to “bring cross-disciplinary professionals together” as the interpretation of play is still not “being used consistently across policy areas” (p. 32). What was clear from each of the seven interviews, irrespective of their play and playwork experience, knowledge and background, was a commitment to the PSA and to ensure there are sufficient play opportunities identified within their local authority area.

The study involved six out of the twenty-two local authorities that reflected each of the six regional areas. This could be considered as a limitation as there are 22 local authorities in Wales. More interviews within each of the six regional areas would have strengthened the study by providing more considering within each region, rather than having one local authority involved. However, the study does provide a line from the top of North Wales to the bottom of South Wales and includes rural, urban and city-based local authorities. Another limitation that may be considered is the timing of this study. Each local authority are due to undertake a new PSA, which may have prevented possible PSA leads to take part. However, with a new PSA due, discussion of the play workforce was relevant to the task each PSA lead officer were responsible for.

Conclusion

The statutory duty of each of the twenty-two local authorities in Wales to undertake a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years provides a unique opportunity to assess many aspects of play. This includes the play workforce that can be considered in three contexts: playwork; childcare/early years; and ‘other play’ professions. The role of the PSA lead officer provides a link between the play workforce and the statutory requirement where three themes of play profiles, collaboration, and funding have been identified as common areas. However, these themes do vary across the local authority areas where in some there is

an established play workforce both within the statutory and third (voluntary) sector, to local authorities where there is no established play workforce. This reflects the variation in the lead play officer's play and playwork experience, knowledge, and qualifications concerning the theme of play profile. However, the one theme of funding and supporting the play workforce is a continuing issue to meet Matter G: Securing and developing the play workforce within the PSA guidance. Wales is unique in having statutory play legislation, something that is not reflected within the UK or globally. The PSA provides the opportunity for local authority areas to find out what aspects of play is and is not available for children and young people. The PSA is a consideration that can be replicated in any local authority area, state, or region internationally.

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