

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(3)-03-10 Paper 2

Inquiry into Safe Places to Play and Hang out : Submission from The Welsh Local Government Association

Introduction:

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities, the three fire and rescue authorities, and four police authorities are associate members.

It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies the key priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.

Views on the Inquiry:

The WLGA welcomes the Children and Young People's Committee Inquiry into the provision of safe places to play and hang out and the opportunity to respond. The WLGA recognises the importance of play and the valuable role that such activities can have on a child or young person's life in terms of education, health, physical development and social interaction. The WLGA recognises and supports the need for provision of age appropriate play, leisure and recreational facilities in line with Articles 15 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Play is what children and young people do, whether inside, outside, with friends or alone. There is a vast breadth of provision, facilities and activities providing play and recreational activities and all children and young people will have very different experiences and outcomes. Age will also have an impact on how children and young people play and interact with others. The scope of the inquiry is therefore very wide and complex and as such this evidence can only touch on some of the issues relating to play, leisure and recreational provision.

The WLGA welcomes the fact that the inquiry has been informed from consultation with children and young people. Children and young people should be consulted on the issues raised and to determine what is most important to them in terms of the provision of safe places to play and hang out before further development in this area is commenced.

Policy development in Wales is underpinned by the UNCRC and the seven core aims in 'Children and Young People: Rights to Action' are based upon children's rights and entitlements. The UNCRC states in Article 31 that all children and young people have the right to play and this is mirrored by core aim 4, which states that all children and young people should have access to play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities. Although this aim explicitly mentions play, all of the other core aims also have an impact on children and young people's play, leisure and recreational activities. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has also made a commitment to take forward the play agenda under priority 7 in the National Action Plan on Children's Rights.

The Play Policy Implementation Plan set out how the principles of the Play Policy would be implemented and highlighted 19 key actions. This remains the key WAG document on play although future development of the Children and Families Measure will impact on this and set out new regulations for local authorities.

Part 4 of the Children and Families Measure places a duty on local authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities for children in their area; secure provision of and access sufficient play opportunities for children; and to make arrangements to ensure participation of children in decisions of the authority which affect them. The Measure will be underpinned by regulation and guidance and will form the basis for local authority play provision. The Measure will place additional burdens on local authorities which will involve carrying out play sufficiency assessments.

The WLGA notes that there is a need for further clarification around the terms 'play', 'sufficient' and 'child' within the regulations to be developed. The WLGA would recommend that during the process of developing the regulations and guidance for the Measure the WLGA and other stakeholders should be consulted.

Play covers a wide variety of provision and whilst the explanatory notes indicate that it should include recreational activities it will be difficult for a local authority to assess the use of open access, freely chosen play in the locality. The WLGA recognises that it is important not to be prescriptive as to what constitutes play and that children and young people play constantly but it is upon this same basis that it is difficult for local authorities to assess the breadth of play within their locality. Local authorities are keen to explore new opportunities and push the boundaries of traditional play, however as service providers this can sometimes be constrained by health and safety considerations and resources and in practice this can constrain the choice of provision.

The term child is used within the Measure and yet this can cause confusion at a local level. It is important to set the age range for which this applies as child can mean 0- 11, 0-16 or even 0-18 years of age. Within policy and at a local level the age range 0-11 is often used for children and 11-25 for young people and the UNCRC refers to under 18's as children. A number of play provisions within a locality may be aimed primarily at young people aged 11 plus, for example youth clubs and in which case may not be included within the assessment. In addition, young people would probably not see the activities they undertake as playing but rather socialising. The terminology can be patronising and care should be taken to ensure that terminology and age ranges are appropriate. Clarity as to the

age range of the term 'child' would be welcomed.

The explanatory notes for the Measure state that 'sufficiency' relates to quantity and quality of play opportunities. The WLGA notes that the term 'sufficient' will have different meanings within different local authorities and even within different wards within those authorities. Children and young people continually play either alone or in groups, at home or outside. Play is what children and young people do and can not easily be assessed. Play provision is what adults do to try and encourage children to play in certain places and which can be measured or assessed, once parameters and definitions have been set. Sufficiency of this play provision will still vary depending on location and geography. For example a child living in a rural area may have lots of open spaces to play in but they may not be able to easily access play provision or a child in an urban area may be able to access a lot of play provision but does not have open space in which to play. Setting a definition of sufficient play may in some cases mean that there is more than sufficient play provision and in another case not enough but that in that area there may not be the requirement or need for that level of provision. Decisions as to sufficient levels of play should be determined by the local authority based upon needs assessment and demography of the area allowing for a flexible approach to play provision.

Part 1 of the Children and Families Measure requires local authorities to make and demonstrate their contribution towards eradicating child poverty. This part of the measure will set out local authority power to secure parental support services and health support services. Currently the Parenting Action Plan sets out the policy direction for parenting in Wales but this needs updating and the measure will therefore set out the future direction. Parents, grandparents and carers have an important role to play in the promotion of play and safe engagement in activities. Parents can help to build a child and young person's skill to play and take proportionate risk and to support the development of social and personal skills. It is important therefore that a parent, grandparent or carer understands play. The role they can take in promoting play should form part of this inquiry and any future parenting policy.

The Children and Young People's Partnerships have responsibility under the Children Act 2004 to develop the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) based on the seven core aims. Under core aim 4 every Children and Young People's Partnership will have developed a plan for play provision within their area based on need. This flexible approach enables local authorities to take into account the need and demographics of their area. Children and Young People's Partnerships are required to consult stakeholders on the CYPP and these stakeholders include children and young people.

Leisure services have a key role to play in promoting physical activity and playing. The inquiry should therefore have regard to the Climbing Higher: Creating an Active Wales 5 Year Strategic Plan in which Active Children and Young People is a strategic aim. The Strategic Plan priorities include ensuring that there is access to opportunities for quality play; opportunities for families to undertake physical activities together and developing whole school approaches that engage the wider community. Another strategic aim of the Strategic Plan is Active Environment which aims to develop a physical environment that makes it easier for people to be physically active. This aim includes actions to create a web based toolkit to signpost planners etc to the best practice as to how they can contribute to the physical activity agenda referring specifically to developments which reduce green spaces in residential areas.

Many young people are drawn to leisure services to hang out and not necessarily to participate. It is important that this is recognised and that they are not pressurised to participate. Many leisure services are currently reassessing services to consider whether they best meet need and whether they are providing the right menu of services. There is a recognition that a one size fits all solution will not meet all needs. Provision has to be appropriate to the age and interest of the child or young person. Leisure centres sometimes meet the need, sometimes libraries but there is also a strong need for unstructured play or hanging out space. This may help to reengage children and young people who are currently not engaging in activities.

The recent increase in the number of children and young people choosing their public library, refurbished via grants from WAG through CyMAL (Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales) as a place to hang out would appear to suggest that the condition of leisure type buildings is important in determining whether or not young people will use them.

The Youth Service has a key role to play in the provision of play and recreational activities for young people. Youth work involves the education and development, both social and personal, of young people aged between 11 - 25 years and is delivered in a variety of settings, including youth clubs, residential settings, in information, advice and counselling centres, on the streets and in various public locations where young people meet and through special issue based projects. Youth work is a distinct profession with its own qualifications framework and national occupational standards (NOS). Relationships with young people are based on voluntary engagement and underpinned by the four pillars in the Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales - Educative; Expressive, Participative and Empowering. Youth work can and does make a valuable contribution to the positive outcomes and overall wellbeing of young people and the opportunity for young people to learn through experiences is implicit throughout the process.

Whilst many youth facilities offer indoor/enclosed provision, young people must be afforded the rights of all citizens in accessing open spaces in which to play. Youth work is not about 'getting young people off the streets' but is more about working with young people in their communities and supporting them in becoming productive members of society. Providing social 'hanging out' time is carried out with consideration of other citizens, any restriction on this access can lead to feelings of rejection or exclusion, which can be costly to society later on. In this regard it is also crucial that young people's views are taken fully into account when considering play and experiential opportunities. As part of the transition to adulthood, young people must be allowed and encouraged to learn through undertaking new experiences and appropriate risks.

Young people learn through the processes of informal learning, non-formal learning and formal learning. Informal learning results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure, it is not structured and does not lead to a qualification but can lead to improved social skills and interaction. It can be argued that there is a link between safe play opportunities for young people and anti-social behaviour. Young people do not always turn to anti social behaviour out of boredom but because they lack the opportunities to engage in

experiences which encourage informal learning. These experiences do not always need to be structured but can be through hanging out on the street and meeting with friends. Working with the community and young people through youth work to overcome the fear associated with young people hanging out is therefore critical.

The WLGA believes that participation with children and young people is important in the development of play provision and recognises their right to participate as set out in article 12 of the UNCRC. Consultation and participation with children and young people at a local level can help shape provision that they believe to be sufficient to meet their needs and can also help to remove the fear that is often associated with young people hanging out.

There are a number of examples at a local authority level of effective participation with children and young people helping to remove negative stereotypes and lead to greater community cohesion. Safer Blaenau Gwent identified through the Police and Communities together (PACT) process that local residents continuously identified young people hanging around and/or youth alcohol related anti social behaviour as one of the top three priorities of local concern. As a result a Youth Detached Team was established, consisting of 8 youth workers regularly meeting with the Neighbourhood Policing Team to identify 'hotspots' and engage with the youth. Initially the team built a relationship of trust with the young people and as a result the leisure services have been refined and new street games have been introduced. During the process the team consulted with the young people regarding their views and thoughts on the area, why they congregate there, and what they would like to be done to the area. The results of the consultation showed that young people want to hang out in an area with shelter, lights and bins and they wanted to be in sight of the public and to feel safe. The main reason for hanging out was to meet friends. The process in Blaenau Gwent has been very productive and the next phase will be to explore exactly what a 'safe place' would look like to young people.

Intergenerational work can also help to remove negative stereotypes and barriers which create a sense of separation between children and young people playing and hanging out and the rest of the community. Often linked to work supported by the WAG Strategy for Older People, local authorities in Wales are undertaking a significant amount of initiatives to bring older and younger people together with the aim of reducing segregation based on age and increasing community safety. These intergenerational initiatives allow older and younger people get to know each other and share activities in a creative and safe environment. Older and younger people live, work, learn and play side by side. They may have common interests and concerns, live in the same communities and see each other regularly but never meet. Intergenerational work can be difficult but exciting because it challenges many of the stereotypes, institutions and segregations on which modern life is built, which lead to these divisions between people. However by bringing people together it aims to make communities safer and increase understanding between different groups.

Many Welsh local authorities have undertaken initiatives to bring older and younger people together through play. In Anglesey, as part of the local Age Well Project, a scheme was established during the last summer holidays where grandparents could bring their children to the Age Well Centres on the island to play together. The activities included an intergenerational band which made their own instruments and composed and performed their own song.

Issues, other than negative stereotypes, affecting children and young people playing and hanging out include bullying, traffic, transport and planning. Children and young people indicated in the Blaenau Gwent consultation that they felt safer playing and hanging out in public spaces so that they were able to be seen. This indicates a fear of bullying and of being isolated from the rest of the community. Following WAG guidance, Respecting Others, issued in September 2003 all schools in Wales must have a written anti-bullying policy. Schools are at the heart of the communities and they can play a large part in changing the culture of a community and have a positive effect on bullying both inside and outside of school.

Transport can also be an issue for children and young people accessing play provision. The 2003 Labour Manifesto contained a promise to look at introducing a form of concessionary fares for young people in Wales. In 2004-05 WAG introduced a pilot half fares scheme for Bridgend and North East Wales (Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire) for young people aged 16 -18 years old. In 2007, with the new administration and budget the Minister decided to end the scheme and not roll it out on a national level. The WLGA recognises the importance of transport enabling children and young people to access play provision and would welcome a re-examination of the idea of concessionary fares for young people. However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties in prioritising such schemes in the current financial climate.

Road safety can be a major concern for parents, children and young people. The WLGA therefore welcomes the Road Safety Grant allocated annually to local authorities to ensure there is improved safety for children and young people walking or cycling to school, leisure centres and play areas.

Planning can have a large impact on children and young people's access to playing fields and recreational grounds. The WLGA recognises that the planning process can play a role in protecting playing fields. It is important to retain and improve community recreation land to maintain access to open spaces, promote healthier lifestyles and tackle health inequalities. TAN 16 states that schools should be seeking to preserve the optimum area of playing fields available rather than looking to secure minimum provision. Also following TAN 16 there is an expectation that most Local Development Plans which come forward in the next couple of years will be informed by an open space assessment. Local authorities are aware of the issues with regards to maintaining open space and recreational ground when undertaking the planning process and are committed to securing the best outcome for all involved. The WLGA would like to point to the importance placed in the Climbing Higher: Creating an Active Wales 5 Year Strategic Plan in relation to planning services and would recommend the inquiry look at the proposals under the theme Active environment, particularly appertaining to the retention of green spaces where children can play and to take account of tools such as Open Space Assessments when preparing local development plans.

Playing fields must be looked at as a 'flow' rather than a 'stock' and cannot be considered in isolation of a number of other local

authority planning responsibilities. It must be understood that some playing fields will be periodically lost, mainly due to housing, retail or commercial development, but at the same time, significant number of new ones are developed, which often serve to improve the wellbeing and prosperity of the community even better. We must also remember that there has been a massive growth in the number of Artificial Turf Pitches, which can be used year round, and in all weather conditions, which results in less traditional pitches being required for training. However, Section 106 agreements can often be used to provide play opportunities on a wider scale than just playing fields. These agreements can also be used to develop parks, open spaces, and build new libraries and other recreational provision. School re-development and lottery funding can also provide opportunities for new provision.

Local authorities welcome the involvement of young people in the planning process but this can sometimes be difficult. The planning process can be long and complicated and local authorities can often find it difficult to engage with young people in the area. However, effective participation through youth work, play work etc, such as the work of the Youth Detached Team in Blaenau Gwent is taking place and with collaboration and discussion with partners, the planning process can be rewarding for young people.

Under article 15 of the UNCRC all children and young people have the right to play. For some children and young people this can be more difficult because of where they live, either in a rural or disadvantaged area, of a disability or because they are a marginalised group such as Gypsy and Traveller. Having the opportunity to play and hang out is as equally important to these children and young people and local authorities work hard to ensure that they are able to fulfill their rights. The Children and Young People Plans will include provision for these children and young people.

For children and young people living in rural areas transport and access to play provision can be difficult. Transport can be irregular and costly as the distance to travel to play provision may be long. It is important that these issues are addressed by local authorities when considering play provision and local authorities utilise outreach provision such as play buses etc to meet needs where appropriate. The needs of children and young people in rural areas are quite different to those in urban areas where open space may be limited.

Many Children and Young People Partnerships identified rural issues in their Children and Young People Plans as highlighted in the Children and Young People's Plans 2008 -2011 Partnership Support Unit Review. There are examples of notable practice in addressing rural issues and one Children and Young People's Plan identified rurality and access to services as a priority theme. The plan highlights the need for cross agency cooperation and the need for projects to target vulnerable children and young people living in rural communities; enhance facilities in rural areas; ensure access to services is planned into all projects; ensure language and cultural issues are addressed and ensure the promotion of the Family Information Service.

The WLGA also has a Rural Forum which looks at issues affecting all people living in rural areas of Wales and ensuring equality of access etc to services. Other local authority services such as the Family Information Service can also help children, young people and families in rural areas to find their nearest service or play provision.

The Children and Young People's Plans 2008 -2011 Partnership Support Unit Review highlighted that transport and its connection with access to services was identified as an issue for children and young people in all 22 local authority areas. Areas with low car ownership were found to encounter the same issues in relation to accessing services as those living in rural areas. This illustrates that children and young people living in disadvantaged areas can also face barriers in accessing play provision including transport. Many plans identified the need to ensure that local strategic plans recognised the transport needs of children, young people and their families and will look to work with Local Service Boards (LSB) and other planning groups to ensure this.

Children and young people living in disadvantaged areas may have their right to access and participate in sporting and cultural pursuits severely curtailed through a lack funds to pay fees and lack access to transport. The area in which children and young people in disadvantaged areas have to undertake freely chosen play may also be less appealing due to litter, graffiti and the fear of others in the locality with a lack of community feel. It is important to note that this is not always the case and in some areas there is a strong sense of community cohesion which is key to encouraging children and young people to play on the streets and feel safe. Outreach youth and play work can help to achieve this sense of community cohesion in all communities in Wales.

Disabled children and young people can face a number of barriers in accessing play provision. This may be because suitable provision is not available in their locality or may be because of the reluctance of families to take their children to mainstream services because of the needs of the child or young person. The WLGA recognises that it is vitally important that disabled children and young people have the same opportunities as any other children and young people and welcomes the additional money that WAG have previously allocated to Children and Young People's Partnerships to provide play facilities for disabled children and young people. The Children and Young People's Plans 2008 - 2011 Partnership Support Unit Review identified that ensuring disabled children and young people have access to play and leisure activities under core aim 5 was addressed in a number of plans. Meeting the needs of disabled children and young people is a continued priority for local authorities and with the use of the priorities in the plans and the use of the National Service Framework for children, young people and maternity services they will continue to improve access and services for all disabled children and young people.

Part of the development of safe places to play and hang out is the training for professionals. It is important that professionals working with children and young people need are aware of how to encourage play at all times, this includes understanding age appropriate play, proportionate risk and terminology. For example there may be stigma attached with idea of young people playing and yet when they kick a ball or jump about in the park this is what they are doing. Professionals need to encourage this behaviour and to harness the enthusiasm without stigmatising. The Child and Young People Workforce Development Network - Common Core Strategy will form the basis for training for professionals working with children and young people.

There are a number of opportunities for local authorities to maximise access to play provision, recreational facilities and places to hang out for all children and young people. Community Focused Schools and Integrated Children's Centres can be valuable facilities and with

effective participation with the community a great resource for everyone. Play and general social interaction with peers contributes greatly to mental and physical well being and development.

Conclusion:

Local authorities welcome the opportunity to look at all the issues and barriers facing children and young people in accessing and feeling safe when playing or hanging out. The WLGA reiterates that it would like to see children and young people as a stakeholder in this inquiry and for them to illustrate what they believe is a safe place to play and hang out. Local authorities have to work within the confines of legislative and resource constraints but recognise the importance of play and every child and young persons right to play as set out in article 15 of the UNCRC and core aim 4.