

Labour Party Consultation on Building Statutory Youth Services Play England's Submission

Children Play Everywhere

Enshrining children's right to play in law

Play England, the national charity supporting children's play in England, welcomes the Labour Party's consultation on 'Building a statutory youth service'. We support the creation of a National Strategy for Youth Work and a Charter underpinned by law, to define sufficient levels as well as a sustainable funding model to support the delivery of a statutory youth service. We believe that making youth services statutory will be of vital benefit to the health and wellbeing of our young people, and to the future of our society.

We also see the consultation as an important opportunity to address the need to protect, defend and rebuild an integrated approach to delivering play to support all children in England.

Play is an essential part of every child's life. It is vital for the enjoyment of childhood as well as for social, emotional, intellectual, creative and physical development. When children are asked about what they think is important in their lives, playing and friends are usually at the top of the list. Independent research, as well as the Chief Medical Officer's own recommendationsⁱ, emphasizes the effectiveness of play in helping children's health and wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundationⁱⁱ recommends that regular play helps keep children mentally well.

Play England believes in order for all children to have access to high quality play provision there needs a national commitment from government to support and deliver on a children's right to play, financed nationally and locally. Investing in play benefits everyone and is vital for this country's future.

Labour's consultation has given us the opportunity to address the issue of whether play provision should also be a statutory duty. There has been reference within some submissions we have received about whether play should be incorporated within a statutory youth service.

Play is a unique public service which can give children vital support when they need it most. Playworkers support children aged 4 to 13 years in the 'middle years' of childhood between statutory early education and youth provision. This is a significant transitional period from primary to secondary school which can bring stressful changes for children and young people,

including the breaking up of long-standing friendship groups and support networks. These 'middle years' can be particularly stressful for children with special educational needs.

Play is also delivered through unstaffed play provision: children and families' access to parks and open spaces, child-friendly urban environments that ensure spatial justice for children and young people and their independent mobility.

Finally, the inherent benefits of play rely upon its child-centred, unstructured and rights-based approach. The aims of the statutory youth services outlined in Labour's submission are understandably very specific. It would, therefore, be difficult and inappropriate to fit play services into the purposes of a youth services without over-instrumentalising play. For instance, playworkers can't 'ensure' personal and social development of children but they can promote, support and enhance it. Similarly youth work is much more directive than Playwork and linked to citizenship.

In essence, Playwork and Youth services are separate professions, which focus on different age ranges and development stages, requiring different approaches, individualised environments, specific training and development of staff.

We have therefore concluded there is a need for a separate body. Ensuring children and young people have sufficient support through these important middle years (usually from 6 to 13) will contribute positively to the role of youth services.

We advise that the age range for any statutory youth service – which is currently usually 13 years old to 19 years - should not be reduced. Whilst there will, of course, be a certain amount of overlap between the two services, it is important that there is an age differentiation. As we have outlined above, playwork is a child-centred practise with particular skillsets different to youth work. There are also issues around age appropriate information and support.

An integrated approach to Play

To effectively implement a national play strategy that champions children's right to play and delivers the quality play provision children and young people need locally, a Labour government would need a joined-up, holistic approach involving all ministries, in particular Communities and Local Government, Transport, Environment, Health, Culture and Education.

There is widespread support for this approach, including from the government's own Children's Commissioner for England in the recent 'Playing Out' reportⁱⁱⁱ which argues for increased investment in play provision, a joined-up approach to reverse the decline in children playing out, with children's play and physical activity a public health priority.

Play England's work with academics, experts, and those working in the sector provides unique insight into the delivery of children's play in England. This document will present key arguments namely, the creation of a mandated national body for play, the creation of playable neighbourhoods to support play sufficiency, delivered through the provision of funded quality play provision, protection of parks and open spaces, utilising schools as play spaces and championing child-friendly streets and communities. Put simply, by getting this right, every child in England can have a better start in life.

Context

In 2008, Play England worked with the Labour government, to develop the national play strategy^{iv}.

It set out the following vision for play:

- supervised and unsupervised places for free play areas in every residential area
- local neighbourhoods that are safe, interesting places to play
- routes to children's play space that are safe and accessible for all
- parks and open spaces that are attractive, well maintained and well used
- children and young people having a clear stake in public space
- children and young people play in a way that respects other people and property
- children and communities take an active role in the development of local play spaces
- play spaces that are attractive, welcoming, engaging and accessible for all local children.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families funded 3,500 new or refurbished play areas, 20 public play spaces and one adventure playground in 30 play pathfinder local authorities. £1.5 million was also made available to help refurbish existing third sector adventure playgrounds.

However, in 2010 the coalition government dropped the national play strategy and cancelled funding for play provision. Since then, national government grants to local authorities has been cut by 37%^v. The impact of these cuts is clear: since 2014 nearly 400 playgrounds have been closed or are in line for closure, and Fields in Trust research shows 92% of local authority park departments have experienced budget cuts in the past three years. Staffed play provision is one of the public services suffering from continued cuts. Restricting the funding for such vital work damages the life chances of vulnerable children and places further burdens on other public services, including youth services.

Since September 2014, there has been no statutory requirement for out-of-school clubs and holiday play-schemes to employ staff with 'full and relevant' childcare or playwork qualifications. This means that employers are not being given the support they need to recruit and train staff to deliver quality play provision. Play is vital to children's development and professionally trained staff can help children develop vital emotional and physical life skills.

Seven years of cuts to local provision, continuing traffic dangers and worsening pollution levels are limiting children's access to free, local play spaces - and this is taking its toll on their health and wellbeing.

According to the government's childhood obesity strategy^{vi}, nearly a third of children aged two to 15 in England are overweight or obese. The problem is worse amongst children from the most deprived areas, with five-year olds twice as likely to be obese compared to their most well off counterparts. By age 11 they are three times as likely.

A Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition survey^{vii} has found that young people's mental health problems have become more severe over the last two years. School teachers have reported an increase in stress, anxiety and panic attacks among children in 78% of primary schools over the past two years.

The Benefits of Play

A large body of academic research identifies the numerous and wide-ranging benefits of play. Studied to Doctoral level there is no shortage of evidence to support the benefits children get from playing. What follows is a very small sample of the benefits reaped through an investment in English play.

Planning cities and towns to be child-friendly will also help tackle pollution and promote sustainable communities. The Scottish government has adopted the Place Standard^{viii}, a planning tool which recognises the role of play and recreation in creating healthy communities. In England, many cities are adopting child-friendly approaches to planning. The Greater London Authority's London Plan^{ix} asks for boroughs to audit existing play provision and produce strategies to improve access and opportunities for all children and young people in their area.

Staffed play provision such as adventure playgrounds give children free daily access to a wide range of inclusive play opportunities supervised by trained staff. Making sure children have access to staffed play provision can positively impact on perceptions of their neighbourhood, transforming it into a trusted place in which they feel welcome, improving community cohesion. For the most vulnerable children they can be a vital lifeline. Skilled and qualified playwork staff can greatly enhance children's play experience.

Evidence also shows that because of the children-centred approach of playworkers, children can build confidence to play games, take risks, test boundaries and socialise with others in a way that is not always possible at home, on the street, at school or in unsupervised playgrounds. This means that play workers are often uniquely placed to support particularly vulnerable children dealing with the significant challenges of unstable family lives, changing schools or wider social problems and can provide informal counselling, mentoring and coaching along with advice on drugs, sex and staying safe as well as sign-posting and referral to statutory services, including local safeguarding boards.

1. Statutory duty for children's right to play and play sufficiency

Play England believes the Labour Party should support the adoption of a statutory duty on play provision, and a legal framework enshrining children's right to play. There is already such a framework in place to enshrine children's right to play in law. The British government, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and as requested in the 2016 Concluding Observations^x of the UNCRC's committee, should bring the Convention in to domestic law. Article 31 of the UNCRC recognises the right of every child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities and free and full participation in cultural and artistic life.

Article 31 gives a solid legal framework for a national government to embed a child's right to play in all public institutions and deliver the play provision children and young people want. It would make statutory impact assessments so policies take into consideration their impact on children and young people as well as the requirement to involve children and young people in decision-making.

In 2013, the UNCRC adopted a General Comment^{xi} to draw particular attention to Article 31 because of the failure of signatories to adequately recognise and implement it. The Comment lays out clearly government's obligations under Article 31.

The UNCRC framework, like that of the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty, are rights-based, rather than outcomes-based statutory services. This is to ensure that children's voices are central to decision-making and that play provision in any local area is sufficient to the needs of those children and young people.

A rights-based approach would also include Article 15 of the UNCRC^{xii}, which is the right to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly. This takes up the issue around social attitudes towards children's access to public space.

2. A Charter for Children's Play

As part of the 2008 national play strategy, Play England developed a charter^{xiii} which states:

- Children have the right to play
- Every child needs time and space to play
- Adults should let children play
- Children should be able to play freely in their local areas
- Children value and benefit from staffed play provision
- Children's play is enriched by skilled playworkers
- Children need time and space to play at school
- Children sometimes need extra support to enjoy their right to play

The charter aimed to serve as a guide and framework to those involved in developing, revising and implementing play strategies, community plans and children and young people's plans. Organisations whose services impact on children's play, such as local authorities, voluntary organisations, and health, education and social service providers, could formally adopt the charter in order to raise awareness of the importance of play.

We believe that such a charter should be advocated by the Labour Party.

To support the implementation of the charter's aims, Play England developed ground-breaking approaches to play design^{xiv}, risk assessment^{xv}, as well as an updated accredited quality assurance scheme^{xvi} specifically for play providers. These resources are still in widespread use by organisations delivery play provision as well as being taught in universities and colleges.

3. Mandated national body for Play

Play England believes, as well as a mandated national body for youth services, the Labour Party should advocate a similar body for Play, with dedicated ring-fenced funding.

This body should work with government ministries to ensure the consistent and systematic implementation of a national play strategy, which:

- promotes health and well-being for children and young people without detracting from their free play

- champions children’s right to play and ensures the delivery of sufficient, high quality play provision for all children where they want it
- develops child-friendly, inclusive local children’s play forums to enable children to participate in the specification, governance, delivery and scrutiny of play provision, to direct and manage activities and organisations offering play in the community
- maintains equality of opportunity under the Equalities Act 2015, including the right to a voice (Article 12 UNCRC)
- promotes a greater understanding of cultural diversity and promote international liaison
- promotes creativity and participation in the arts and culture, sport and informal physical activity (Article 31 UNCRC)
- works with other public services in the interests of children, play and youth services.

This body should also be tasked to re-establish and manage an appropriate qualifications framework, which reinforces the ethical framework of playworkers underpinned by the Playwork Principles^{xvii}.

As the national organisation for Play, we have the experience and the track record to develop this national body. Having worked with the then Labour government to develop the national play strategy, Play England developed ground-breaking resources outlined above and have a Trustee team with strong experience developing and managing adventure playgrounds and other staffed play provision, with particular expertise in inclusive play for disabled children, developing and delivering playwork qualifications, as well as therapeutic play in hospitals. We continue to provide guidance for thousands of play providers such as adventure playgrounds and after-school clubs, as well as parks departments, parents, volunteers and schools. We have developed and retained strong links with the playwork sector and play providers across the country. Our recent Play Policy roadshows to develop a Manifesto for Play have involved 150 playworkers and play rangers, academics, head teachers, public health workers as well as local councillors.

4. Creating playable neighbourhoods – making communities play sufficient

Feedback from our policy roadshows has highlighted strong support for a reversal of government spending cuts to local authorities, directing Public Health England to work with local authorities to develop area-wide strategies for free play as part of ‘playable neighbourhoods’. These playable neighbourhoods should involve children and communities in developing sufficient quality play opportunities with staffed play provision at their core.

As part of the immediate steps needed to champion children’s right to play and rebuild local play provision we ask that the Labour Party integrate the following policies into a Charter for Children’s play, many of which are in line with current manifesto commitments.

Fund quality staffed play provision and open-access provision

Creating a ‘playable neighbourhood’ grant so local play providers can improve the play provision they offer, strengthen their work with statutory bodies, schools and children and young people, and recruit play rangers to develop play opportunities in housing estates and local parks.

Protecting parks and open spaces

Reverse cuts to funding for local parks and end the sell-off of public open spaces

Play in Schools

Protect children's break times. Fund schools to champion playful approaches and introduce training for lunch time staff and maximise play opportunities for children.

Championing child-friendly streets and communities

Involve children and young people in planning and development of local communities. Cut local authority red tape to allow national roll out of Street Play and School Streets initiatives.

Local authority Play champions

As well as the excellent initiatives being led by the Welsh and Scottish governments, there are some local authorities in England who have maintained a commitment to children's right to play. We believe that there are some good examples already up and running of the initiatives we are proposing – which would provide terrific case studies to help a Labour government develop improved play provision nationally.

- In **Bristol**, the council has launched a Children's Strategy^{xviii} which promotes play and children's participation in decision-making
- **Leeds City Council** was recently awarded Child-Friendly status. It has carried out a consultation with children resulting in 12 wishes^{xix} – children's demands for what they want from Leeds - in which their right to play is central.
- In **Bradford**, despite on-going cuts, the council has managed to retain three adventure playgrounds
- **Islington Council** has created the 'Fair Futures'^{xx} commission based on year-long consultation with residents to make Islington 'the best place for children, young people and their families to grow up'. Its recommendations, which include the importance of children and young people's access to play^{xxi}.
- **Hackney Council** aims to become the first child-friendly borough, outlined in its ten year vision^{xxii}.

ENDNOTES:

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- ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/c/children-and-young-people>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.playengland.org.uk/play-englands-response-to-childs-play-report-by-childrens-commissioner/>
- ^{iv} <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/120447/play-strategy-summary.pdf>
- ^v <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-impact-funding-reductions-local-authorities/>
- ^{vi} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action/childhood-obesity-a-plan-for-action>
- ^{vii} <http://www.cypmhc.org.uk/resources/charities-report-increasing-severity-children's-mental-health-problems>
- ^{viii} <https://www.placestandard.scot/>
- ^{ix} <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/implementing-london-plan/supplementary-planning-guidance/play-and-informal>
- ^x <http://www.playengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/PlaytodayJuly2016.pdf>
- ^{xi} <http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Right%20to%20play/GC%20Article%2031%20summary.pdf>
- ^{xii} https://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf
- ^{xiii} <http://www.playengland.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/charter-for-childrens-play.pdf>
- ^{xiv} <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/design-for-play/>
- ^{xv} <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resource/managing-risk-in-play-provision-implementation-guide/>
- ^{xvi} <http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources-list/quality-in-play/>
- ^{xvii} <http://www.playengland.net/playwork-2/playwork-principles/>
- ^{xviii} <https://bit.ly/2ePIBca>
- ^{xix} <https://www.leeds.gov.uk/childfriendlyleeds/cfl-the-story/12-wishes>
- ^{xx} <http://www.fairfutures.org/>
- ^{xxi} http://www.fairfutures.org/app/uploads/2018/02/Fair_Futures_Report_Web_Final.pdf
- ^{xxii} <https://www.hackney.gov.uk/community-strategy>