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Evaluation of the Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22

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Title: Evaluation of the Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22

Authors:

Sioned Lewis and Kara Stedman, Arad Research

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Dr Jack Watkins

Childcare, Play and Early Years

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Email: TalkChildcare@gov.wales

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Arad Research was commissioned by Welsh Government to evaluate the first year of the Playworks Holiday Project, from March 2021 to March 2022. The aim of the evaluation, undertaken by Arad Research, was to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the Playworks Holiday Project ('Playworks 2021').

Playworks 2021 context and background

Playworks project 2021/22

- 1.1 There is a duty on all local authorities across Wales to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for the children in their area.¹ Part of the duty requires all local authorities to assess the sufficiency of play opportunities in their area and a key purpose of the Playworks 2021 funding was to enable local authorities to meet some of the actions in their 2021 – 2022 Play Sufficiency Assessment Action Plans.
- 1.2 During the financial year 2021/22, £1m was allocated to deliver the Playworks Holiday Project. It was intended that funding would allow local authorities to use community-based playwork schemes to offer provision to more children than they would otherwise have been able to. The aim—as set out in guidance to local authorities—was to provide better play opportunities for children in vulnerable communities and to realise the benefits this brings in terms of child development and activity levels². This all took place at a time when supporting children's play was particularly needed, after the impact of the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic on children's play.
- 1.3 All local authorities used the Playworks 2021 funding offered to them. The nature and amount of play provision varied between local authorities, and the number of children benefitting ranged from 85 to 2500 children in each authority area.³ The

¹ [Wales: a play friendly country | GOV.WALES](#)

² Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22: Guidance for Local Authorities. April 2021 (Unpublished)

³ The local authorities' activities included open access provision, staff training and distribution of resources and play materials. A record of children attending or receiving Playworks-funded activity was not always made for these activities. It is not possible, therefore, to provide an accurate estimate of the total number of children reached by the Playworks 2021 funding.

types of play activities funded included open access play, street play, provision of play equipment, sports sessions and arts and crafts. See also figure 3.1 for more examples.

Policy Context

- 1.4 The play sufficiency duty comes as part of the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda which recognises that children can have poverty of experience, opportunity and aspiration, and that this can affect all children from all backgrounds. The Child Poverty Progress Report⁴ outlined that poverty remained high in Wales with almost a third of children in 2018 (29%) living in relative income poverty. Some 66,000 pupils took free school meals across Wales, across all age groups⁵ but prior to 2021, those families and children did not routinely receive support on the 170 days that schools are closed for holidays. In Wales, as in the UK more widely, there has been a steep growth in the numbers of families seeking help from food banks and over the years there have been calls by charities and others for more support for families struggling to make ends meet during school holidays (for example Bevan Foundation's report 'Kids on the breadline'⁶)
- 1.5 To help address holiday hunger, in 2019-20 the Welsh Government allocated £100,000 to test the feasibility of tackling holiday hunger through play and community-based settings. This pilot facilitated the provision of meals during the summer and October 2019 half-term holidays in activity clubs. An evaluation⁷ found that nearly half of children who completed surveys felt less hungry attending the pilot, half tried new foods, a quarter said they ate more fruit and vegetables and a third of parents said it helped with the cost of food during school holidays. Additional benefits also included children drinking more water, trying new activities, exercising and having fun. It was concluded that funding food provision at playwork sites appears to be a cost-effective way of tackling holiday hunger.

⁴ [Child poverty strategy: 2019 progress report | GOV.WALES](#)

⁵ [Number of pupils taking free school meals on census day by local authority, region and year \(gov.wales\)](#)

⁶ [Kids on the breadline: solutions to holiday hunger | Bevan Foundation](#)

⁷ [Holiday hunger: playworks pilot | GOV.WALES](#)

- 1.6 During the financial year 2020/21 funding was originally allocated for another year of the Holiday Hunger Playworks Project as piloted the previous year. However, at the same time Ministers had also committed to extending free school meals to cover all school holiday periods for the year. Due to the availability of free school meals during holidays the Holiday Hunger Playworks Project funding was repurposed so that it no longer included meals as a core criteria. The repurposed funding along with £600k funding from the Welsh Government's education budget was allocated to local authorities via the Local Authority Emergency Hardship Fund to enable them to enhance childcare and play opportunities for children and young people aged five to 16 to provide for all those who needed additional support over the summer.
- 1.7 During the financial year 2021/22 £1m funding was made available to increase holiday playwork provision predominately in vulnerable communities, under the name of the Playworks Holiday Project 2021 (Playworks 2021). As free school meals were still available, local authorities could provide food at their discretion if they felt that children were going hungry.

Other schemes

- 1.8 Playworks 2021 sits alongside other Welsh Government investment in play, chief among them being the School Holiday Enrichment Programme⁸ (SHEP), the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing. These schemes all contribute to providing more activities for children and young people, albeit with slightly different aims. SHEP has been running since 2015 and aims to increase educational achievement through play, while both the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing were launched in 2021 to allow local authorities to support community-based play opportunities for children and young people as part of the Welsh Government's commitment to supporting children and young people to recover from the pandemic.

⁸ School Holiday Enrichment Programme details; ['Food and Fun' School Holiday Enrichment Programme - WLGA](#); Summer of Fun details; [Summer of Fun to support children and young people recover from the pandemic | GOV.WALES](#). Winter of Wellbeing details. [Winter of Wellbeing: sporting activities to get young people active in winter | GOV.WALES](#)

1.9 The SHEP, Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing take the form of grants to local authorities, and all were operating in the same period as Playworks 2021. The schemes were usually managed by the same individuals at the local authorities as those leading on Playworks, and in some areas, the projects were delivered by the same play providers. There is a difference in funding scale: Playworks 2021 across Wales covered funds of up to £1.25 million while SHEP is allocated £4.85million for 2022 and Summer of Fun allocated £5million. Both the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing were new schemes in 2021.

2. Methodology

2.1 This section details the specific research questions for the evaluation and outlines the methodology adopted. The evaluation focused on the key themes set out in figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Evaluation Aims

- Mapping how local authority delivery models have varied
- Exploring the benefits of attending playwork provision from the perspective of children and young people, their families, playworkers and other delivery partners
- Understanding what enables and motivates children and young people to attend the project
 - Investigating whether any groups of children attending the project are sometimes hungry and / or have opportunities to eat healthy food/snacks during the school holiday periods
- Exploring the efficiency of administration and operational processes, what worked well and what didn't work well
- Assessing the extent to which local authorities and delivery partners have considered equal opportunities, accessibility, and delivering through the medium of Welsh
- Identifying what additionality the project has delivered beyond what would have taken place without the project funding
- Identifying good practice and ideas to improve holiday provision and playwork for children and young people in the future.

Source: Playworks Holiday Project invitation to tender

Desk research and development of research tools

2.2 Arad reviewed a range of policy and delivery documents relating to the Pilot. These included the guidance to local authorities, the evaluation of the Holiday Hunger pilot which preceded Playworks 2021, and the local authorities' proposal forms and monitoring forms.^{9,10} This desk research informed the development of research tools and guided decisions relating to the evaluation process.

2.3 Arad developed a series of semi-structured interview guides to collect qualitative data through interviews with policy and delivery partners. The key themes included in these interview guides were the rationale for the design and implementation of

⁹ Welsh Government: Playworks Holiday Project 2021-22: Guidance for Local authorities April 2021 (unpublished)

¹⁰ [Holiday hunger: playworks pilot | GOV.WALES](#)

the project; details of the delivery and administration; anticipated outcomes and impacts and future progression of the project.

2.4 Arad also developed a semi-structured guide to collect qualitative data through interviews with the lead officer for play from local authorities (hereafter abbreviated to 'play leads'). The key themes included in these interview guides were:

- Understanding of the Project aims
- Experience delivering Playworks
- Effectiveness of support provided
- What they feel has worked well / could be improved
- Views on the impact of the Project on settings, families and children / young people
- Future plans for using the funding.

2.5 An online survey was originally prepared for holiday project providers and families taking part but after the early desk research and interviews, it became apparent that the numbers of projects were too small and the type of projects too varied to be suitable for a survey. Semi-structured interviews were carried out instead.

Reviewing monitoring data

2.6 Local authority play leads were asked by the Welsh Government to submit proposal forms for their plans on how they would use the Playworks 2021 funding. Local authorities were also asked to submit monitoring forms after each Playworks 2021 project had been completed. These forms contain information such as what projects took place, types of activities, how many children took part, setting type and location and language medium. A total of 65 monitoring forms were submitted by 10 different local authorities.

2.7 Arad reviewed the monitoring forms to collate a summary of what was delivered (see chapter 3). Where local authorities did not submit a monitoring form, information was used from proposal forms and interviews with play leads.

Engagement with policy and delivery partners and local authority play leads

- 2.8 Arad undertook interviews with individuals involved in the design and delivery of the Playworks 2021 holiday project at the Welsh Government (two individuals) and Play Wales (one individual).
- 2.9 Arad contacted all 22 local authority play leads inviting them to take part in an interview to discuss the Playworks 2021 funding. Individuals from 17 local authorities took part in an interview with Arad.
- 2.10 Arad also invited all local authority play leads to take part in an online group workshop to discuss and provide feedback on the Playworks 2021 funding. Play leads from 15 local authorities took part in the group workshop, and the two fieldwork exercises combined reached 18 local authorities.

Fieldwork with Playworks 2021 holiday project providers

- 2.11 During interviews with local authority play leads, they were asked if they could pass on Arad's contact details to Playworks 2021 holiday project providers, in order for them to contact Arad to take part in an interview to provide feedback on their experience of the project. As a result, Arad spoke to four different play providers.
- 2.12 Some local authority play leads also act as play providers for some of the projects funded by Playworks, therefore provider perspectives were also gathered as part of the play lead interviews.

Fieldwork with families

- 2.13 During the interviews with Playworks 2021 activity providers, they were asked if they could pass on Arad's contact details to families and volunteers from projects, to gather perspectives from the beneficiaries of Playworks 2021. As a result, Arad spoke to four parents (including two who were also volunteers) and a further one parent provided feedback via email. Arad were also able to attend one open access play session and observed the activities taking place and carried out informal discussions with parents and children and staff.

Note on limitations

- 2.14 It is important to express some caution when interpreting the findings presented in this report for several reasons. Firstly, due to the reliance on families and providers being given information about the evaluation, and getting in touch with Arad themselves, only a very small number of families and play providers took part in the fieldwork. This limitation was addressed and managed through the use of a small number of case studies to present descriptive examples and through using the views of parents collected by local authorities themselves and shared with Arad.
- 2.15 Secondly, there were larger funds also being delivered at the same time as Playworks. In June 2021 the Welsh Government announced £5 million for the Summer of Fun project to provide a range of free leisure, recreational, sporting and cultural activities for children and young people aged 0-25 to help support their social, emotional, physical and mental wellbeing. The Winter of Wellbeing project also aimed to provide a range of free activities for children and young people. These additional pots of funding meant that much more play activity took place during 2021/22 compared to previous years and as such it is difficult to determine which impacts occurred as a result of Playworks 2021 funding only or as the result of increased funding as a whole.
- 2.16 Finally, the impacts of COVID-19 and its restrictions have still being felt in 2021/22. Local authorities were still recovering from the pandemic and opportunities for children and young people to play were still impacted. The impacts of COVID-19 on children's wellbeing made it difficult to generate a baseline to measure the impact of Playworks and disruption to delivery made it difficult to compare provision across different periods in order to attribute the impact of Playworks.

3. Delivering Playworks

3.1 This section outlines how local authorities delivered Playworks 2021. It summarises the guidance that was given to local authorities on how to use the funding, outlines how this was monitored, summarises what was delivered, and gives some more detailed examples of the variety of projects funded.

Local authorities' role

3.2 One of the main purposes of the funding was to enable local authorities to meet some of the actions within their 2021 – 2022 Play Sufficiency Assessment Action Plans, which related to staffed playwork provision (see paragraph 1.2). Local authorities were tasked with providing the staffed playwork provision and given guidance on what they could use the Playworks 2021 funding.¹¹ According to the guidance the funding could be used for:

- ‘Existing playwork provision as-is during the holiday period or extended to cover additional hours on weekends, if there is a need
 - All costs associated with setting up and running playwork provision including staffing, location rent or hire, training, PPE and cleaning materials
- Outreach playwork provision or family play sessions
- Playwork training and professional development
- Bespoke play packs for families with vulnerable children
- Playworker contact with families – this can be working with individual families and include contacting them via video conferencing (face time, etc)
- Places in out of school childcare settings for vulnerable children where other provision does not exist, or the additional benefits of childcare and play will make a significant impact on the child’.

3.3 Funding could be used for all school holidays in the 2021/22 financial year, as well as for weekend provision if needed. Funding could be used for settings catering for children aged 0 to 17, with a focus on school-age children. Open access playwork

¹¹ Welsh Government: Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22: Guidance for Local authorities April 2021

provision was to be targeted within vulnerable communities, but all children in the community be able to attend.

- 3.4 Local authorities were also asked to consider using the funding to provide for diverse needs for children across the age range 0 to 17, Children with disabilities and additional needs; children for whom Welsh is their first language or attend Welsh-medium schools and other recorded cultural factors, including other languages and gypsy traveller children.

Monitoring

- 3.5 As part of the Playworks 2021 guidance, local authorities were asked to complete proposal forms at least two weeks before each holiday period. They were then able to claim the funding after each holiday period based on the costs incurred in the delivery of the Playworks 2021 projects. As mentioned in chapter 2, local authorities were also asked to submit monitoring forms when projects were complete.

What was delivered: monitoring data

- 3.6 All 22 local authorities used the Playworks funding in 2021/22, delivering to between 85 and 2,500 children in each authority area. Activities were delivered mainly over the school holiday periods, with some weekend and after-school activities. Activities were delivered in both Welsh and English mediums, with some bilingual and a small number of settings also delivering with signing and sensory. There were a mix of ages who engaged with the activities, with the main group being primary school age (3-11 years), but with some projects accommodating children and young people of all ages (0-17 years).
- 3.7 Activities took place in a number of different settings, including open spaces/parks/forests, community spaces, sports facilities, leisure centres, schools and play/family/childcare centres. Figure 3.1 sets out examples of the different types of activities funded by Playworks 2021.

Figure 3.1: Types of play activities funded

- Open access play – community-based activities, street play, provision of play equipment, sports sessions, arts and crafts.
- Sensory play packs
- Camping events
- Halloween and Christmas clubs
- Wellbeing sessions
- After school clubs
- Playground markings
- Play ranger van
- Family events
- Stay and play sessions.

Examples of activities delivered

3.8 As is outlined above, several different types of activities were funded through Playworks 2021. Some authorities delivered the activities in-house using playworkers they already had on the team, or through using the funding to hire new playworkers to deliver activities in the area. Others contracted out to other providers such as leisure centres, housing associations, community teams and childcare settings. This section outlines more in detail some examples of the types of activities that took place.

Staffing

3.9 Several local authorities reported building their staff capacity through taking on playwork staff. One local authority used the funding to hire two in-house, part-time playworkers who were then able to facilitate a number of activities such as forest play, arts and craft days, family fun days and open access sessions. These activities were said to be based on child-led, loose parts play. Locations and children were selected based on areas in their Play Sufficiency Assessment and through local services and groups. Other local authorities also reported using the funding to hire casual playwork staff who delivered a number of play opportunities in

the area or a play ranger who could travel to deliver play activities in more rural areas.

- 3.10 The funding was also used to provide training for play staff, which included food safety, safeguarding, first aid and Makaton signing.

Funding activity at existing venues

- 3.11 One local authority paid a leisure centre provider to run sport and craft activities at eight council leisure centres during half term. They used an online booking system for parents, and children with disabilities, additional learning needs and looked-after children were given priority to attend the sessions.
- 3.12 Another local authority used the funding to pay for the delivery of open play sessions at three adventure playgrounds. Staff at the adventure playgrounds had previously been funded through other avenues which had come to an end, and the authority were no longer able to support the sessions. The Play lead at the local authority believed that without the Playworks 2021 funding for staffing, one of the adventure playgrounds would have had to close for this year, but with the funding, all three were able to be open for longer hours.

Funding resources and activity packs

- 3.13 One local authority used the Playworks 2021 funding to deliver a variety of different activities. They worked with partners to deliver open access play sessions as well as some closed sessions, which involved den building, arts and crafts, games and sports. Other sessions also involved encouraging family play, with an aim of encouraging parents to learn how to play with their children. At the end of some of these sessions, families were able to take an activity bag home with them to continue the play in their home life. Another local authority play lead explained how they had purchased resources and equipment for the use of community groups.

Targeting the play provision

- 3.14 Local authorities also varied on how children were identified and targeted to take part in play activities. Some authorities had identified gaps in their PSA and targeted the funded activity to address those gaps, for example in certain communities or areas. Some local authorities also targeted certain children who were known to be vulnerable, had disabilities or additional learning needs. Whereas others had activities which were open to all. Most local authorities used a combination of these approaches and targeted certain areas or groups of children but also left it open for other children to attend.
- 3.15 Activities were advertised or promoted to children and families in several ways, for example through social media, leaflets, newsletters, word of mouth and contact through social services or other teams working with targeted children and families.

4. Findings: Delivering Playworks 2021

4.1 In this section we discuss the delivery of the Playworks 2021 project with regards to the efficiency of administration and operational processes, and what worked well and what didn't work well for the local authorities in its delivery.

What worked well

- 4.2 **Working relationship:** Many local authorities were pleased with the working relationship they had with Welsh Government, with many giving specific praise to the help, support and guidance they received from Welsh Government officials. Several play leads used examples of being unsure of certain aspects of the administration process, but they were able to phone or email Welsh Government officials who always responded promptly to help clear things up. This relationship was also helpful when it came to the guidance on how to use the Playworks 2021 funding, for example, one local authority wanted to use the funding on something slightly different to what was outlined in the guidance, however by working with the Welsh Government they were able to come up with something together and confirm what activities could be spent under Playworks.
- 4.3 **Clear guidance:** Most play leads felt that the guidance document on what they could spend the funding on was clear and concise. Some also praised the flexibility of the guidance and what the funding could be used for. This allowed for a variety of different projects to run, bringing a range of benefits to children. Two play leads also mentioned flexibility in the guidance since the holiday hunger aspect was dropped.
- 4.4 One play lead also mentioned that it has been useful that the guidance is similar to the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing guidance and the familiarity has helped in managing the different funds.
- 4.5 **Submitting monitoring/proposal forms:** Several play leads found the online portal used in the administration of the Playworks 2021 funding simple and straightforward to use. One play lead mentioned the benefit of having everything in one place. Two play leads also felt that the monitoring and proposal forms completed on the online platform Smartsurvey were simple and easy to input.

4.6 **Availability of additional funds:** Most play leads expressed their gratitude at receiving the Playworks 2021 funding, not only for the benefits and impacts it has brought to the children and families (this is discussed in more detail in chapter 5), but some also mentioned the benefits in terms of easing the burden of delivering play. Having more funding available meant that they could have more flexibility in the delivery of some projects, for example by combining funding pots, expanding projects and looking at different/new areas and new activities. The additional funding also enabled them to build relationships with other sectors or organisations which has had a positive impact on delivering play generally (this is discussed in more detail in chapter 5). One play lead felt that the pressure on them to deliver play is huge, so any additional funding is always important and welcomed.

Areas for improvement

4.7 **Competing funds:** While local authorities were grateful for all funding aimed at delivering more play opportunities, many felt the burden of having different pots of funding at once and often at short notice (namely Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing). Part of this added burden came in the form of an administration overload. In the group workshop, one play lead described how they felt like they had spent the entire year getting applications, proposals, monitoring forms and smart surveys sent in. This was a feeling echoed by many play leads and their teams who also felt that the many different forms of paperwork for different funding streams were very confusing and that they felt it was difficult to keep track of what was coming in from different pots and their different requirements. Some found it difficult to differentiate between information they received from each funding stream and missed information as a result. It was also noted by Arad during play lead interviews that some talked about the different funding streams interchangeably, or by the time of the interview had forgotten which funding stream had paid for what activity, making it difficult to differentiate between what was funded by Playworks 2021 and the other funding pots.

4.8 Another issue raised in relation to competing funding streams was the actual capacity to deliver and spend all the money available. Several play leads felt that they had received too much money in one go without having the staff, play teams or

external contractors to deliver the projects. Some felt they had to ‘throw money’ at any organisations available without being able to give proper thought as to how best to spend the money.

‘Difficult to try and maximise the grant as don’t want to send it back to Welsh Government and for them to think we don’t need it....we could have done a lot more with the [Playworks] money if they hadn’t had so much other money. The administration of all the money is a lot of work.’ (Local authority play lead interview)

- 4.9 Many of the play leads interviewed felt that as there were larger funding streams (Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing) available at the same time, the Playworks 2021 funding seemed to be overshadowed. Play leads explained that they had received little notice of the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing schemes and that planning and commissioning projects for those schemes was a ‘bit of a scramble’ which kept them busy. Some local authorities focused more of their efforts on delivering projects through the bigger funding streams to make sure that the funding got used, and then used Playworks 2021 to ‘mop up’ from the other funding or add on to the funding. Some local authorities did not in fact return to commissioning or delivering Playworks-funded activities until the end of the funding year, at February half-term 2022.
- 4.10 Due to these issues, many play leads felt that it would be helpful if the money all came from one pot so that the paperwork could be streamlined going forward. It would also help them to plan effectively how to deliver the funding going forward.
- 4.11 **More notice needed:** Play leads also felt that more notice is needed in advance of when funding is going to be available, particularly in the context of already having to plan for different funding streams as outlined above. They also felt that the availability and the criterion of any funding needs to be made available with plenty of notice too, so that they can effectively plan ahead and progress with projects and activities. For example, one play lead noted that this would be useful so they could pilot projects first to help with sustainability, rather than having money last minute and having to pick whatever provision was available. Having more notice would also enable authorities to appoint relevant staff members if they have notice of funding.

‘One of my biggest fears is I have such good playworkers who are phenomenal, I want to give them reassurance the job is there for them and the level of funding for that post.’ (Local authority play lead group discussion)

- 4.12 It is important to mention that at the time of interviewing local authorities, most play leads had not yet received confirmation as to whether the funding was continuing into 2022-23. Many of these comments, therefore, reflect the situation where they were still unable to plan long-term. However, it was announced in December 2021 that the funding will continue and at the time of writing (summer 2022), local authorities have begun delivering the second year of Playworks.
- 4.13 **Other administration issues:** While the local authority play leads praised the good working relationship and approachableness of the Welsh Government, there were some issues raised about the **monitoring requirements**. In the main, these were complaints directed at the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing schemes where there had been some changes in the monitoring requirements over the life of the programmes. However, in raising these issues about the other grants, it became apparent that local authorities were keen that any monitoring and evaluation requirements be as streamlined as possible, to only collect the necessary information, and to acknowledge that requirement for profile information on children attending can deter open access play.
- 4.14 Looking forward, some of the local authorities were intending to review the administration of Playworks 2021 alongside the administration of other grants so that permanent staff could be brought in to ease the burden of managing funded play provision.
- 4.15 **Change from Holiday Hunger:** A further issue that a small number of play leads raised was that the change in requirements of the funding from Holiday Hunger to Playworks 2021 was confusing. Some of these had planned based on providing meals and then had to change things with little notice. This was not a view shared by all and some felt the change from a focus on providing meals to address holiday hunger had simplified things. This comes under the general theme that it can be difficult for authorities when expectations change mid-way through a programme, if information comes in at the last minute or requirements are changed.

- 4.16 **Staffing:** Play leads identified that there are challenges in making the most of any funding for play, mainly the ongoing challenge of **recruiting, training and retaining staff**. Play leads and play providers explained that this is an issue which is increasingly affecting the whole sector, wider than just Playworks-funded projects, and exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4.17 Local authority play leads explained that play work is often casual, often with part-time hours and/or zero hours contracts due to having to recruit staff for shorter periods over the holidays or for short hours after school hours. When they receive temporary funding they appoint staff, when funding comes to an end the local authority team have to let the play workers. Many local authorities use volunteers, and while this is usually a positive experience for all involved it is not without its issues: working with volunteers takes a lot of time, the volunteering schemes need to be built up over years; paid staff are still needed, and the COVID-19 has affected the supply of volunteers.
- 4.18 Linked to the issues raised about the administration of many different funding streams, there were concerns about the capacity of the wider play sector, private companies and third sector organisations to be able to deliver. Some local authorities felt that they were approaching the small number of providers for the different funds, and that they were the same providers working with their local authorities. They were however hopeful that the increased funds for play would raise the capacity of the sector.

5. Findings: Playworks 2021 making a difference to children and families

5.1 This chapter presents the evidence gathered primarily through telephone interviews with local authority play leads, staff involved in delivering Playworks 2021 funded activities and families which took part. It sets out the reasons for attending the Playworks-funded activities, the benefits of attending playwork provision from the perspective of children and young people, their families and the observations of playworkers.

Intended benefits

5.2 The Playworks 2021 guidance for local authorities states that the project's aim is to provide better play opportunities for children in vulnerable communities and to realise the benefits this brings in terms of child development and activity levels, and that this is particularly needed at this point as children's right to play has been impacted by the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic.¹² It goes on to state that play 'is a vital element in children's development and something that can provide a strong protective factor in children's lives'. Playing helps children to develop their inner resources and build resilience to difficulties and uncertainties in their home and other parts of their lives. Therefore, it was proposed that changing the focus of the Holiday Hunger project to focus on staffed playwork provision would help children and young people suffering from the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic. The guidance further sets out:

Figure 5.1: Intended benefits from Playworks

PRIMARY BENEFIT:

Enriched play, which is free at the point of access, and more positive experiences

- Socialising
- Being active
- Having fun / being happy

¹² Playworks Holiday Project 2021/22: Guidance for Local Authorities. April 2021 (Unpublished)

- Learning something new.

The project also provides additional benefits in supporting the sustainability of playwork settings and supporting parents, families and communities.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

- Enhancing the appeal of settings
- Supporting the sustainability of settings
- Providing a break for parents / carers and / or childcare

Source: Playworks 2021 guidance for local authorities

Making a difference to delivering play

- 5.3 Local authorities reported that having additional funds had enabled them to offer **more activities** and play sessions than they would have otherwise. They reported that they were able to provide more activities during the school holidays compared to before Playworks 2021, to deliver play sessions in a larger number of communities, to offer schemes at times of the year for the first time (e.g., at Christmas) and increase the number of sessions offered in established schemes.
- 5.4 Several of the play leads interviewed explained that they had delivered or commissioned play **in communities where there was no play provision previously**. One local authority play lead in a largely rural county explained that previously, the majority of activities and events were offered in its main towns but thanks to Playworks 2021 funding they were able to hold sessions in more rural areas, reaching children in communities previously not served.
- 5.5 In delivering more sessions in more communities, the local authority play leads reported that they had **reached new families** through the Playworks 2021 funding.
- 5.6 Many local authorities had used the funding to run play sessions for **disabled** children. Play leads explained that the activities and events to date were not adequate in meeting the play needs of disabled children and young people and many local authorities used the funding to help address this and commission or directly deliver additional opportunities to these children.

‘The funding has allowed us to buy in specialist support to work with children with disabilities. Not something they have been able to do in past. So the funding has

allowed these children to attend just like other children' (Local authority Play lead interview).

- 5.7 In some local authorities Playworks 2021 was the prompt for them to establish or **expand its play team**. One local authority play lead explained that before Playworks 2021 (and the other play funding during 2021/22) there was one staff member working on play—among other responsibilities—whereas now they have 'established a full play service' and are able to deliver open access play sessions. Another local authority play lead explained that they had been very reliant on play volunteers and commissioning external partners to provide play services. They had used Playworks 2021 funding to hire two part-time staff to run play sessions delivered in-house and believed that this had benefited them as 'commissioning out is usually more expensive'. When the funding for 2022/23 was confirmed, they were able to extend posts until March 2023 and 'feel like they are now able to move forward with play'.
- 5.8 It was reported that the funding had helped **establish new partnerships** and strengthened partnerships with the third sector and private providers. As there were funds available the local authorities could approach play providers but also, the funding 'encouraged more cross working', and to work more closely with the police and other services and community councils.
- 'Worked with a lot more play organisations than before because the funding was there.' (Local authority play lead)
- 5.9 It has enabled some play teams to **strengthen links with other local authority departments** such as colleagues leading on family support, youth work and children's disability. However, it was noted that building the links across departments to ensure the fit with other provision is in its very early stages.
- 5.10 Several local authorities explained that the funding had contributed to **raising the** profile of play, within the local authority, among partners and in the communities. One local authority had intentionally used its funding to raise the profile of play and spent some of the funds on merchandise and one-off events.
- 5.11 For the most part, the activities (play sessions, events, training) funded by Playworks 2021 was new. Although it is difficult to estimate the true additionality,

when asked this in the group discussion several of the local authorities were certain that they had delivered new play opportunities to new children that would not have otherwise taken place. Through delivering play in new communities and liaising with new partners, one local authority play lead said that they now have a greater understanding of play throughout the county.

Making a difference to the play providers

- 5.12 Providers of Playworks funded projects (including play workers employed by the local authorities) were asked whether receiving the funding had made a difference to their ways of working and to them as organisations. Several examples were shared during their interviews on the main benefit to their project or organisation.
- 5.13 An organisation delivering the street play project in Carmarthenshire was able to test new ways of working (see case study, page 30). They treated the first year as a pilot and learnt lessons about how to market and engage with the community. At the time of interviewing, they were working with the local authority to now deliver in a second community.
- 5.14 Some providers and local authorities believed that they had improved the accessibility and inclusivity for disabled children: One provider (see case study, below), a leisure centre, explained that they were able to put into practice some of the aims in their disability plans for the first time. Not only had they offered sessions targeted especially at disabled children for the first time, but they had also then gone on to install lights and specialist play equipment to suit the group of children attending the play sessions. This was an example of the Playworks funding **unlocking other funding**. The provider explained that once they started sessions for disabled children the local health and local authority partnership that work with disabled children also supported the project and paid for play equipment. The partnership also benefited as its workers could now visit and meet parents when they attend the sessions.

Provider Case Study: Byw'n Iach, Gwynedd

Background

Some of the Playworks 2021 funding in Gwynedd was used by 'Byw'n Iach', the county's leisure service, to deliver Saturday morning play sessions for disabled children.

Playworks 2021 Project

The provision came about after a conversation between a leisure centre staff member and a mum who attended a fitness class. The mum explained that her child had special needs and wasn't comfortable attending the open access soft play sessions. Mum had said that she wished there was a session just for children with special needs, and further explained that although there were some play activities in the county her child could attend they were a long drive away. This prompted a discussion at the leisure centre, and then a further discussion with the local authority that contract the leisure centre. This resulted in the local authority paying for separate sessions for children with special needs using the Playworks 2021 funding. The sessions are run once a month in the leisure centre and are free to attend. The local authority and the leisure centre group are now planning to extend the free special sessions to leisure centre in other localities.

- 5.15 The interviewed providers, and many local authorities, believed that the relatively small funds of Playworks 2021 have enabled a better use of previous capital expenditure already made on leisure facilities, play equipment and so on.
- 5.16 In working with new children and new communities the providers and local authorities were able to learn what works for different groups of children in different communities, for example learning that open public sessions don't work for some groups of children with additional needs or understanding which venues are best suited.

Making a difference to children and families

- 5.17 The small number of parents interviewed had heard about the opportunity to take part in Playworks 2021 activity through existing links or after their child having previously attended an activity by the play provider. For example, the organisers of a holiday activity club for children that was already delivering after-school clubs,

used the same methods (social media, email contact with parents on mailing list, item on school newsletter) to let people know about the Playworks 2021 holiday opportunity.

5.18 The reasons for families taking part varied according to the type of activity and its target. One of the main reasons cited by parents and collected in feedback by the providers and play leads, was that families opted to take part to provide their child with opportunities to socialise and play with other children having missed out on those opportunities over lockdown. The opportunity to support the child's use of Welsh through providing more exposure to informal Welsh was the main reason given by a parent who used Welsh-medium provision. The child was in a Welsh-medium school with non-Welsh-speaking parents, and the parent felt that the child's language skills had deteriorated over lockdown.

5.19 The feedback from parents directly interviewed as part of the evaluation and in feedback to the providers and play leads was positive. They welcomed the chance for their children to take part in fun activities and reported that it is a positive experience for their child.

'We are very pleased with the [] club. It brings utter joy to our foster Child. We just wish it run for longer periods during the holidays.' (Email from parent)

Another parent explained that their 'son has complex needs and it can be exhausting...the group is a respite ...and amazing after lockdown'. Their son loves the group, and it makes a 'massive difference' to them as a family. They went on to explain that the staff are 'great, holding his hand to do stuff, messy play, painting, walks outside, stuff that I don't always have time to'. They also explained however that they have to travel half an hour each way to reach the group and 'that there's a real shortage of places in the holiday sessions - like you have to book straight away when they send the email about it' They also explained that they only use the sessions twice a week because they're aware that there are other families that need the service (Parent interview).

5.20 Some providers and play leads also referred to the respite given to parents a major benefit coming from the funding. One play lead described how it prevented some families going into crisis, giving children a break from difficult home lives, and

parents a break. Some parents who got involved in the activities were also able to learn new skills and how to play with their children effectively which play leads and providers were hopeful has continued into their home lives.

- 5.21 Playworks providers also observed other benefits to parents and children's wellbeing. One provider of play sessions aimed at disabled children cited the example of a parent of a disabled child who had some mental health issues and rarely left the house, but after attending the play sessions went on to enrol in fitness classes at the same venue and the other siblings have also started using the facilities and attend other sessions. The same provider explained that they had observed that parents of children attending special schools do not usually have the same opportunities to meet at the school gate and socialise with the other school parents (as the children receive transport to attend schools some distance from home). The weekend Playworks-funded sessions have offered some opportunities to meet and given parents opportunities for informal support that they had lacked.
- 5.22 Many play leads, providers and parents emphasised the impact the Playworks 2021 funding has had on children after the pandemic. As mentioned previously, the restrictions imposed during the pandemic resulted in a lack of socialisation and interaction amongst children. However, the additional Playworks funding has enabled authorities to provide additional opportunities for children who missed out during the pandemic to socialise with other children again. Many felt that this has been invaluable and helped children with their confidence and social skills and allowed children to have fun again after a difficult couple of years. There were many reports of how much children had enjoyed activities delivered through Playworks.
- 5.23 Some local authorities (including the case study on page 31), also mentioned a further benefit to the activities in that anti-social behaviour had reduced in the area where the activities were being delivered. This was associated with children 'being less bored', as well as increased responsibility through the activities.
- 5.24 Providers and local authority play leads commented that these benefits had been achieved with relatively small sums of money.

Provider Case Study: Street Play, Carmarthenshire

Background

Carmarthenshire Council allocated some of the funding to an organisation called People Speak Up (PSU) to run street play sessions for the most deprived community in Llanelli.

Description

Leaders from PSU provide activities for children to do and provide a safe space for them to play outdoors. Children turn up each week and decide what they feel like playing with on the day. The sessions run every Saturday morning at a park in the area. Arad attended one of the street play sessions. During this session around 10-12 children and young people aged around 6-17 years old came along to the session. No parents were initially present with the children, except for the leader from PSU, who had brought his two sons with him. During the session, most children went to the park to play, with the young people supervising and playing with them. Some also played frisbee, football, catch, bowls and drew on the pavement with chalk. According to the leader they do a wide range of activities, and it varies every week.

Feedback from parent/PSU leader

'My [12-year-old child] was very shy but coming along to these sessions has made him come out of his shell massively and has done wonders for him. He now is much more confident and gets to engage with lots of different children and young people through these sessions.'

Feedback from the session staff at PSU

The children enjoy being able to play outside and it provides security for them to do so. Some have disabilities, others are in a situation where parents can't provide space or engagement for children to play. The street play sessions provide an opportunity for these children to play and socialise with others in their local community. Staff went on to say that they felt it is really important in getting the children off their screens at home. Some children do not know how to catch a ball when they first start going to the sessions, but this is a skill they quickly learn from playing with the workers and other children. One young person volunteer also spoke of her own experience of coming to the session and how they enjoy spending time with the people there, acting as a good distraction to difficulties they were currently going through in college.

Arad observations

The children seemed to really enjoy running around outside and taking part in many different games and activities but in a safe environment. The children, young people and workers all seem to have really good and friendly relationships with each other.

Provider Case Study: Play scheme in Ceredigion

Background

Ceredigion used part of their Playworks 2021 money to fund Wales and West housing (a social housing association) to deliver a community project. Wales and West housing targeted a community in Tregaron known to have a lot of drug crime, causing fear for a lot of families who lived on this estate. They therefore spoke to residents to gather feedback on what they and the children on the estate would like to see. There were very little opportunities for children to engage in physical play, therefore the project focused on sports equipment and open access outdoor play within the estate.

Description

The project involved purchasing a play shed containing play equipment to be placed in the estate on a small green area for everyone to access. There was an informal group of parents who helped to run the shed and play with the children. As part of this parents were also given the opportunity to upskill themselves and take part in training in play. The shed contained many different types of equipment such as mobile scooter ramps, tennis nets and rackets, balls, skipping roped, cones, giant chalk, COVID-19 kits etc. This encouraged children to do a variety of different activities and team sports within their community, they were also able to use the cones to block off areas for children to play safely. They have also started to host events at the shed, for example they had a Santa's grotto over Christmas and an easter egg hunt during easter. The scheme has been running since summer 2021 and has benefited 23 children aged 0-15 years. The scheme cost around £1,000 in total, and half of this funding came from Playworks 2021 (the other half was funding in-house by Wales and West housing).

Feedback from Wales and West housing

The provider felt that the project had effectively brought the community together and improved community cohesion. Not only was it felt that it improved played opportunities for children, encouraged them to be outside and socialise, and improved their health and wellbeing, but there were also positive impacts on parents and families. The parents who were involved in training were able to be upskilled and given a sense of purpose and responsibility. Parents were given a break while children were outside playing, it also reduced pressure on families to provide play equipment and to spend money on entertaining children in the school holidays which can be a real struggle for low-income families. Teenagers were also often tasked with overseeing the checklists for equipment which gave them a sense of responsibility. The provider also noted that there has been a decrease in reports of Antisocial Behaviour and low-level complaints since the project started. This has been associated with the children and teenagers feeling they have responsibility over the equipment and so not vandalising it, as well as being given the space to play instead of playing in spaces where residents are likely to complain (i.e., children hitting balls at cars etc.).

Feedback from parent/volunteer

The evaluation team spoke with one parent who volunteered to run the community playscheme. She felt that the training was very useful as although she had children herself, it was informative to learn more about play and the benefits of play. She felt there have been a number of benefits from the scheme such as bringing the community together, giving children the opportunity to play outside, increased socialising opportunities for children since the pandemic and improved behaviour in teenagers given more responsibility. She was hopeful that the scheme would continue to bring these benefits and would like to expand in the future and bring in more equipment.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1 The aim of the evaluation was to evaluate the Playworks 2021 and assess its efficiency and effectiveness. Evidence was gathered using mixed approaches: qualitative research was carried out with local authority play leads and a sample of holiday project providers and families. This chapter presents conclusions and provides recommendations based on the evidence gathered.
- 6.2 The Playworks 2021 funding aimed to allow community-based playwork schemes to offer provision to more children than they would otherwise have been able to, and the evidence shows that new, additional activities were delivered. The evidence gathered as part of the evaluation indicates that local authority play leads welcome the additional funding available for play and it has allowed them to address gaps identified in their Play Sufficiency Assessments and offer play to more children in more communities. Local authorities explained, however, that they need time to plan play, recruit and train staff, make the links with the wider play sector and commission projects and as such would welcome plenty of notice in advance of any funding allocations, or changes to funding. Knowing that funding would be available for a period of some years would also support the recruitment and retention of staff.

<p>Recommendation 1 – Welsh Government should continue to fund the Playworks Holiday Project as ongoing funding to support play year on year.</p>

- 6.3 Local authorities explained that funds to support community-based play in recent years tended to be allocated with relatively short notice rather than being part of a longer programme of planned funding. This was also true of the other funds allocated during 2021/22 as a response to the pandemic (i.e., the Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing). While these rounds of play funding were welcomed by local authorities and play providers, it has detracted from the time and capacity to plan and deliver activities using the Playworks 2021 funding. For many local authorities the use of the Playworks 2021 funding was a matter of fitting around the larger grants. The short notice and the sudden increase in available funds for play (associated with the larger Summer of Fun and Winter of Wellbeing funds) was a

challenge for local authorities and made it difficult to plan systematically. By comparison, the Playworks 2021 funding—once it had been made clear to local authorities that it was to be included in the budget up until 2025—was welcome as a base for more strategic and planned play provision.

Recommendation 2: When considering the future funding model for play, the Welsh Government should prioritise longer-term funding so that play provision can be planned and scheduled over a period of years.

- 6.4 The various grants and funding sources made available for play in recent years vary their design, timing, reporting methods, target audience and levels of funding. However, they are often managed by the same individuals, delivered by some of the same providers and reach many of the same children. A more coherent approach could therefore save administration time and help local authorities and others plan a more coherent play offer over a longer term.

Recommendation 3: Where possible the Welsh Government should explore options for amending and streamlining the funding available for play.