Developing a Neighbourhood Response to the Play Sufficiency Duty: A report on the neighbourhood research mentoring project August 2023-June 2024

Research team:

Mike Barclay, Ben Tawil, Wendy Russell, Donna Gaywood, Emily Ryall
and two play sufficiency staff from each of the two participating local authorities

LUDICOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Chwarae Cymru
Play Wales

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Key points:

- The project, funded by the University of Gloucestershire, piloted a mentoring package supporting staff in two local authorities in Wales to carry out neighbourhood level research into children's opportunities for play and to draw up action plans from that research, as a part of their role in the Play Sufficiency Duty.
- The full mentoring package was delivered successfully in both local authorities. It worked very well, mostly due to the expertise and responsiveness of both the mentors and local authority participants, and the resources shared.
- Key issues that arose during discussions were aligned with the conceptual tools developed in previous research studies into the Play Sufficiency Duty, namely
    - collective wisdom (acknowledging different ways of knowing about local space from children, residents, activists and professionals),
    - spatial (in)justice (children's constrained access to land for playing), and
    - account-ability and response-ability (developing authentic and ethical ways of accounting for the use of space and responses to injustices).
- The project has engaged in discussions on several issues including local authority staff as researchers, the messiness of real world research and working with communities, and a deep reflection on dynamic research ethics in a local authority context.

Background and context for the study

The Welsh Government's Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 includes a statutory duty for local authorities to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities for children. Local authorities are required to prepare and submit to the Welsh Government triennial Play Sufficiency Assessments (including action plans) and to update those action plans annually. The next full local authority play sufficiency assessments are due to be submitted to Welsh Government in June 2025.

Four research studies into the Play Sufficiency Duty (PSD) were commissioned by Play Wales and funded by Welsh Government (Lester and Russell, 2013, 2014; Russell, Barclay, Tawil and Derry, 2019, 2020). These studies developed a specific conceptual and practical framework for both policy and practice. The foundational principle sees the PSD as a duty to pay attention to the conditions that support children's ability to find time and space to play, not only in dedicated times and spaces for play but also in the public realm. These conditions are seen as a matter of **spatial justice**, that is, children's fair and just access to – and participation in – what public space has to offer, including children's everyday freedoms to move around their neighbourhoods and play or meet up with friends. The Duty therefore becomes a process of '**account-ability and response-ability**': developing multiple accounts of how children can and do use public space and responding to those accounts in ways that maintain and improve children's capability to play out.

Members of the research team (Russell, Barclay and Tawil) have recently completed an extensive review of contemporary research into childhood studies, social policy, the benefits of play for children's well-being, children's play patterns, and interventions to support children's play, commissioned by Play Wales to inform the current Ministerial Review of Play. The review

shows how the decline in children's everyday freedoms can be directly linked to how the design, organisation and ongoing production of public space prioritises the economy over people and adults over children. This is apparent in the increasing privatisation of land and in the way that cars, both moving and parked, dominate many streets and residential neighbourhoods. Children have been removed from streets in the name of safety. Over time, fewer children and adults are out and about on streets, leading to children being seen as "out of place" on the street, magnifying other fears (stranger danger, bullying, harassment, violence, or parents' concerns about being seen as negligent). This decline has been linked to the rise in concerns about children's health and wellbeing such as obesity, lack of physical fitness and poor mental health. Blame has been placed in many places, including digital technology, or 'screens', over-protective parents and stranger danger. The concept of spatial justice allows a broader and more nuanced view, acknowledging the many political, economic, social and environmental factors that contribute to the production of a public space where children are no longer welcome.

Such an approach has enabled a broader consideration of the policies that affect children, including policies related to spatial planning, urban design, housing, highways and active travel, landscape architecture, green space planning and more. It also supports a move away from a deficit view of children towards one that sees them as capable when the conditions are favourable. In Wales, it also supports working towards broader alignment of these policies with children's wellbeing, including the Welsh Government's overarching and radical Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.

The most recent research study into the Play Sufficiency Duty (Russell *et al.,* 2020) considered the conditions that support local authorities to take actions in support of children's opportunities to play. Several of the recommendations from this study have been echoed in the Steering Group's report to the Ministerial Review of Play, particularly the recommendation for local authorities to carry out ethical research with children using observations, mapping and other creative methods at micro-neighbourhood level, alongside action to support and enable local authorities to carry out and act upon this research. This 'hyperlocal' research was the focus for this study.

Aim of the research:

The research aimed to pilot and evaluate a mentoring package to support key people within local authority areas to develop skills and confidence in undertaking ethical hyperlocal research with children and adults, and to develop action plans from this research, thereby supporting both the assessing and securing requirements of the Play Sufficiency Duty.

Methodology and methods:

The approach was participatory, building both on previous experience of the research team and on the theoretical tools that have been developed over four studies into the Welsh Play Sufficiency Duty and elsewhere in our work, particularly the concepts of collective wisdom, spatial justice, and the twin processes of account-ability and response-ability.

The study comprised two interrelated strands:

1. Two participating local authorities were identified through a process of generating a long list in partnership with Play Wales and inviting participation. In each authority, two key staff members with responsibility for the Play Sufficiency Duty were mentored through the process of planning, executing and analysing ethical hyperlocal research with

children and adults using a range of methods including surveys, creative workshops with children, focus groups and spatial audits. Neighbourhood concept plans were produced in response to research findings, and these were developed into action plans involving key stakeholders. This strand was carried out by Mike Barclay and Ben Tawil (Ludicology), building on their extensive experience of carrying out such work themselves.

2. Four reflective sessions, facilitated by Wendy Russell and Donna Gaywood, together with several team meetings and ongoing communication, provided a participative and ongoing approach to evaluating the mentoring package.

Data analysis:

Local authority staff were guided in analysing their hyperlocal research by Ludicology, and this then formed the basis of a concept neighbourhood plan and action plan. Qualitative data were themed using open and axial coding and iterative comparisons across data sets, including the quantitative responses from surveys.

Transcripts of the reflective sessions and team meetings were analysed into themes through a collaborative online process using Miro. Given the specificity of the hyperlocal research and the small number of local authorities involved, proactive efforts were made throughout the analysis of both the local research and the reflective sessions not to 'oversmooth' data and to acknowledge the particularities of each context.

Ethics

The project was approved by the University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee. Protocols were followed for gaining voluntary informed consent and for data protection. Special attention was paid throughout to the messiness of ethical decisions for local authority staff working with children and communities, and these discussions are revisited throughout the report.

Evaluating the pilot mentoring programme: an overview

Both local authority (LA) participants and the two mentors felt that the mentoring process had worked well, and the whole process has been highly valued by the LA staff involved. Much of the success was put down to the experience and standing of the mentors, who have been involved in this kind of work since the commencement of the Play Sufficiency Duty over ten years ago. In addition, the local authority participants felt that the mentors were supportive, created a safe space for trying out the processes, were available for guidance outside of formal meeting times and were responsive to the specific conditions of each authority.

It was noted that the local authority participants brought with them skills and significant experience of working with children and communities. Given this, there was some reflection on how the mentors' time could best be spent, and that this could be negotiated in future programmes depending on each context. Where the local authority participants particularly valued the direct mentoring and support was:

- in the pre-planning and planning phases introducing the theoretical underpinnings to the work, including theories of research and knowledge production, and agreeing the specific and timed workplan;
- in selecting which neighbourhood to work with;

- in carrying out the spatial audit; and
- in the process of data analysis.

As one participant noted:

> I'll just speak plainly - in the past, obviously we've done stuff with the community, but we've never done it to this high a standard in terms of ensuring the stuff we're writing up is spot on, we've got guidance, it's clear, we're not taking shortcuts anywhere. And I think going through that process helps us to stay on track and ensure that we're doing things properly.

A key element of the mentoring programme, which gave rise to some debate in the reflective sessions, was about developing the LA participants' skills as researchers. This issue is discussed further below in the section on account-ability and response-ability.

Much of the research required relying on others, for example on schools to distribute surveys and set up workshops for children, and on community members to publicise and attend focus groups and other events. Inevitably, this process is messy, and sometimes meant uncertainty or rescheduling. Nevertheless, despite this, participants felt that the timescale was reasonable.

Having a finite timescale and a specific externally supported project helped with prioritising the time. Both participating authorities ended up scheduling their data gathering and analysis all in one week. The project gave enough lead in time to be able to plan for a whole week away from other demands, and while this was stressful, participants felt that the immersion in the process was valuable and probably saved time in the long run. In particular, having a block of time to become immersed in data analysis without other distractions was felt to be important, as was having two people to work on data analysis, with the benefits of bouncing ideas off each other. Nevertheless, for one participant the reality of other demands on their time meant that they were unable to attend all the events, reducing their involvement in and learning from the project and also diminishing the benefits of co-working on the research. Overall, participants felt that a 12-month timescale was workable, give that this pilot effectively ran for 9 months once things got going. The additional time could be used as lead in for recruiting local people for focus groups and the neighbourhood planning workshop, as well as allowing time between survey completion and focus groups (as surveys can also act as recruitment for focus groups). The full 12 months would also allow more time for building alliances to carry the work forward, through a steering group or more flexible arrangement of stakeholder or task and finish groups.

As well as close mentoring, the project developed and used an e-pack of resources providing underpinning theory, PowerPoint presentations, research tools, guidance, examples and templates. LA participants were given the full e-pack at the start of the project, during the pre-implementation meeting. Initially, the pack was overwhelming for LA participants, but as they became more familiar with the processes, they valued the level of detail more. In addition, they recognised the value of the process of adapting some of the resources for their own use, as this required deeper engagement and thought. Other than some additional information for data analysis that the mentors wanted to add, there were no recommended changes to the contents of the e-pack.

There was some discussion about people using the resources in the e-pack without having undergone the mentoring programme. The developers of the e-pack were clear that it was not a toolkit:

It was felt, however, that some safeguards should be added to the e-pack to act as a disclaimer in the form of a footnote on each page outlining that the pack was developed by Ludicology as a part of a study funded by University of Gloucestershire and is intended for use as a part of a mentoring project.
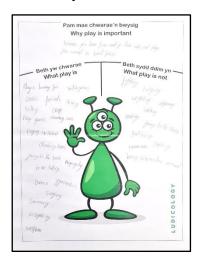
The rest of this report uses the three conceptual tools from play sufficiency research studies to discuss some of the more complex issues that arose during the neighbourhood research in the two participating local authorities, namely collective wisdom, spatial justice, and account-ability and response-ability.

Collective wisdom

The research design deliberately sought to engage with a range of ways of knowing about how the everyday conditions of children's lives can constrain or support their capability to play out. This included children themselves, local adult residents and activists and professionals from a range of sectors including planning, parks and open spaces, housing, family services and more.

Researching with children

Children's ways of knowing about space and time are very different from that of adults. One strand of the research engaged with schoolchildren from Years 5 and 9 (9-10 years old and 13-14 years old respectively) from local schools, using an online survey and then creative methods with smaller groups. The methods used have been refined over time, recognising the reality of the contexts in which they are used, recognising that local authority staff have limited capacity and so the methods used need to be both effectively and timely. They are purposefully low tech and designed for ease of effective data production by those less used to the process, working in tight time constraints and often on unfamiliar and uncertain territory (for example, schools, community centres, youth clubs) with a host of potential distractions and real world messiness. In this sense they worked well.

In these group sessions, children talked about what they thought play was, mapped where they played and developed ideas on how to improve conditions for playing. As one LA participant

commented, "What I was left with was that just absolute confirmation that children are experts in their own lives". It is not always easy to elicit and to hear such wisdom from children. The LA participants were experienced in working with children and were comfortable running the sessions, both with younger children and older ones, and responded well to the challenges some presented. They and the mentors felt that the activities worked well and gave them rich data for analysis. The LA participants also noted that although they had often asked children similar questions in the past, what was different with this mentoring project was that they were guided through a full analysis of the data, cross-referencing against different data sources and theming. The LA participants found this process both exhausting (at the end of a full week of data gathering) and exciting:

> It was hard work doing the analysis on the Friday afternoon. It was great fun as well. Just trusting the process to enquire and enquire and keep asking the questions of the data.

> I was confident everything they said would be represented through that process you took us through.

The wisdom of local people

A range of adults was involved in the research in different ways, including local residents, parents and caregivers, local activists, local politicians (town and community councillors, for example) and professionals. In the process of identifying neighbourhoods for the hyperlocal research, participants were encouraged to identify places where there were local community activists. This was to help with the logistics of the research by tapping into local networks (links with schools, community centres and people who could host and promote events), to gather their wisdom on how local spaces worked, to help with progressing actions that emerged from the research, to develop a sense of ownership over the issues and actions, and to develop a way of seeing that can translate to other issues and neighbourhoods. During the early reflective sessions, there was much discussion on who to involve when, where and how, given the nature of community politics. In one of the authorities, it was felt that an adult focus group should be held just for local residents, without local professionals or activists, in order to provide a safe space:

> There's a few people of authority that the community trusts and believes in and respects. So I think it was just important for them to have a place where they could get their ideas across and feel heard.

Participants were encouraged to set up some form of group for the duration of the project, and the nature of this was intentionally responsive to local conditions. A stable steering group might work in some contexts, but in reality this is likely to be *ad hoc* stakeholder groups or task and finish groups who are interested in different aspects of the research. Additional time (if the project actually ran for 12 months rather than 9) would also allow for greater flexibility in how these steering groups emerge and evolve over the course of the project.

Engaging across a range of adults who hold different knowledge is crucial in getting a sense of how spaces work for children's play and also for a sense of the history of neighbourhood spatial practices. One example was where a long-standing land ownership dispute became relevant in terms of its impact on children's access to space for playing. Another was where a change in land ownership had closed off a space that the previous landowner explicitly made available for children's play. A third was where a history of efforts to regenerate an area had had little impact on people's sense of neighbourhood safety.

Cross-professional working

As well local people, the LA participants also needed to work with relevant local authority professionals who could help advise on and enact recommendations. Because of the history of cross-professional working as a part of the Play Sufficiency Duty, the LA participants already had good relations with some officers, and their wisdom was valuable in terms of the practicalities of realising action plans. Although these people were not seen as primary research participants, their wisdom and knowledge, including historical knowledge, was important in terms of what actions were practicable and how they might be progressed.

Spatial justice

The collective wisdom from both children and adults highlighted fundamental spatial injustices for children. The spatial audits also played a key role in making such injustices visible and were highly valued by the LA participants in both authorities. The spatial audits were done in two parts: firstly, LA participants and mentors looked at the neighbourhood on Google maps, including using streetview, so that they had a foundation for understanding what people were talking about in the focus groups. Then after the focus groups with adults and children, the mentors and LA participants walked the neighbourhood together (including with a local activist in one authority) and took photographs.

> This is when I felt like everything is coming together and lightbulbs are going off and we can see now what the children were saying when they are talking about certain areas and certain problems. We can see it firsthand.

Although differing in detail, issues of land use that constrained children's capability to play out were identified in both participating authorities. In one of the neighbourhoods, the persistent and high levels of antisocial behaviour, litter and dog faeces, together with pervasive public drug and alcohol use created an atmosphere of fear that prevented younger children from playing out. In addition some of the older children who participated in the research talked about participating in the culture of intimidation (although it is possible that such behaviour could also be seen as playing).

When we walked around the community, I'm not exaggerating to say there might have been 50 bottles of spirits left around a bench. You know the level of it was really quite shocking.

In the other neighbourhood, the key issue was the lack of space that children had permission to access for playing, particularly for older children. The spatial audit showed evidence of children playing in some spaces, but officially public access is restricted. The biggest open space belongs to the local secondary school: "When you look at the map, the school field absolutely dominates that community and they're not allowed to freely access that space." Here there had been a history of informal permission, but now the caretaker was telling children off for playing

there. Another key piece of land that could be used for playing was subject to a land dispute linked to the building of a housing estate and the allocation of Section 106 money. The dispute had a very long history and its resolution, together with negotiating public access to the school grounds, emerged as a key action from this research.

What is noticeable with the findings from the research is how little the issue of traffic was raised. In more generalised research, traffic (both moving and stationary) has been identified as the biggest constraint on children's capability to play out (Russell *et al.,* 2024). In one of the participating authorities, the spatial audit showed how the village was cut in half by a main road with few safe crossing places, and so traffic calming was identified in one area in the action plan. However, traffic had not been discussed as a top concern from either children or adults, rather the priorities identified were concerned with permission for children to use space. In the other neighbourhood, the design of the estate was fairly supportive of safe movement, with many pedestrian walkways connecting multiple open spaces. Here again, traffic was rarely mentioned, with fear of crime, violence, intimidation and rubbish much more of a concern.

This shows the importance of the granular detail that can be revealed through hyperlocal research and that can inform local responses: it can identify what matters to these children in this place at this time.

Account-ability and response-ability

The interrelated processes of account-ability and response-ability have been useful conceptual tools both for four research studies into the Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales (Lester and Russell, 2012; 2013; Russell *et al.,* 2019, 2020) and in other play sufficiency related work. Account-ability refers to developing the capacity to give authentic accounts of children's play; response-ability is about the capacity to be responsive to those accounts in ways that improve opportunities for playing. These processes also work well in exploring some of the issues that arose throughout this study including the ongoing, non-linear and interrelated research processes of design, ethics, recruitment, data production, data analysis, reporting and actions.

As a part of their play sufficiency work, the LA participants had previously carried out various consultations with children and communities, and we explored from the start what the difference might be between consultation and research. In early discussions, research was seen as more theoretically driven and requiring more structured procedures, for example, consent or analysis. As the research progressed, these discussions became deeper, broader and more nuanced. A flavour is given in what follows.

Dynamic ethics

As a part of the planning process, participants explored how they might respond to ethical dilemmas arising from the research, for example, what would they do if the research uncovered unsafe or illegal practices (sometimes referred to as the ethical dilemma of guilty knowledge). Generally, local authorities do not have systems in place for supporting staff as researchers in that kind of situation. The mentors talked through developing a risk-benefit assessment, an approach familiar to those in the playwork sector. Here they discussed the benefits of the research, the possible risks attached and how they might address them. Standard issues such as consent and data protection were covered, alongside other more complex questions. The process worked well and allowed for dialogic responses to complex issues.

It became apparent early on that there was a justice streak running through the research. The two neighbourhoods were partly chosen because they were seen as ones where children's capability to play out was constrained for various reasons mostly to do with spatial (in)justice (see that section below). Given this, the ethics rested mostly on authentic account-ability and response-ability to the children participating and other children in the neighbourhood.

> You can't find this stuff out and not do anything about it. And it requires a significant response.

Local authority officers as researchers: exploring positionality

Responding to spatial injustices towards children becomes complex when it is local authority officers carrying out research. It is possible, even likely, the research and identifying actions may be interpreted as revealing local authority failings and/or placing a responsibility on local authorities to take action. As one of the mentors put it, "There is a tension between being a good researcher and a good local authority officer".

In both authorities, the corporatisation of online surveys meant that the LA participants had to go through bureaucratic procedures to gain permission to carry out the survey and to use corporate rather than child-friendly survey design. One authority also insisted on adding generic corporate questions to the end of the survey, and several of the adult respondents used these to attack the authority.

Although this potential tension was identified by the core research team, it appeared to be less of an issue for the LA participants themselves, who clearly identified with the communities they were researching. One commented,

> If something needs changing, I'd like to think we'd be able to support people to make that change, whether that's inside or outside the local authority.

One of the mentors observed that, for all four LA participants,

> You've ended up in that middle ground between residents not wanting to have a crack at you because you're from the Council but also Council officers feeling like they can trust you in having that conversation.

For some LA participants, some of this was grounded in long term experience of community playwork and of the Play Sufficiency Duty, which has both taken them into communities and created conditions for building good networks and relationships across the local authority, allowing for what they termed "honest conversations". This shows the particularity of the skills and experience of the people from two participating authorities and cannot be assumed for future mentoring projects.

In one of the authorities, the participating officers decided to speak separately to individual relevant officers from other departments regarding the issues and actions emerging from the research and then to meet again with the group of local activists to feed back to them, playing a kind of mediating role. Without this, they had felt that the local activists may have latched on to longstanding (if related) difficulties they had with the council rather than the play sufficiency issues. This mediated approach meant that subsequent joint meetings were more likely to be able to be more focused on the neighbourhood play sufficiency action plan.

Another participant was confident in presenting research findings that were critical of the actions of one councillor who had personally campaigned for a dog park that had been sited next to the children's playground, causing problems for playground users.

Actions: response-ability

Account-ability and response-ability are not separate or sequential but inform each other in an ongoing way. For example, when a local councillor involved as a participant was told that having one of the playground gates permanently locked was a problem, they could address the issue immediately. At the same time, the LA participants and mentors commented often that data production did not stop once data analysis and action planning began: these later processes were equally about developing ongoing account-ability for how the spaces worked. Nevertheless, for ease of presentation, this section focuses on the actions identified from the research.

In the neighbourhood blighted by antisocial behaviour, there was a palpable sense of hopelessness and helplessness from the community participants, and the view that nothing short of an ongoing police presence could allay safety fears. Through discussion, and the acknowledgement of the value of a consistent, play-focused and supportive rather than corrective presence, this became a recommendation for a community play development worker working from a shipping container style base to engage and build trust with the whole community and to introduce spatial practices that were supportive of play for children of all ages. The mentor was able to share examples of where such a role had significantly changed and sustained the culture of a neighbourhood to one that supported children playing out. As well as being a consistent presence while children are out playing, the worker would also work with the community on a neighbourhood beautification project (clean-ups, planting and installations) and the development of a network of low maintenance playable spaces. Whether the provision of such a resource would be fully supported by the council and other partners was discussed during a reflective session. There was some concern that the reality of constrained resources together with a lack of understanding of the community play development role may mean a watering down of the intensity, consistency and proximity of presence required and of the approach.

The other neighbourhood developed two strands in their action plan, organising these into immediate, medium-term and long-term actions. One focused on permissible access to space, including the school and the ongoing land dispute on the housing estate. The other was in community activation, including community events, cleanups and securing funding for a local youth club. This LA have set up bi-monthly meetings with the local group of activists to support them in delivering on the action plan. Longer term plans included developing play areas and possibly supervised provision.

Closing thoughts and considerations for future programmes

The mentoring project has been successful, in the sense that the two participating authorities completed the mentoring programme and now have an action plan for their identified neighbourhoods as well as the skills and knowledge to repeat the programme in other neighbourhoods. The programme was highly valued by the LA participants. All those participating, mentors and LA participants alike, brought expertise, skills and experience to a full engagement with the process and with the communities. The issues raised by the pilot included both those specific to the contexts and those that can be generalisable to other future mentoring projects. A summary of considerations for future projects is given below.

- A 12-month timescale is practicable.
- More lead in time for the focus groups would be helpful in recruiting participants.
- Having time between the survey and the focus groups allows for following up on survey respondents interested in being in the focus group.
- Having a dedicated block of time for data gathering and data analysis works well because of the benefits of immersion. It helps to have a long lead in time in order to plan for blocking out a whole week. It is recognised that some play sufficiency staff may not be able to commit such an intense period of time.
- It works well having two people involved in data analysis who can bounce ideas off each other.
- Depending on the skills and expertise of LA participants in future programmes, there can be some negotiation on where mentors' time is best spent. For example, many may be confident in carrying out the creative workshops with children but want more time supporting data analysis.

- There could perhaps be additional resources in the e-pack to support data analysis.
- Add a footer to each page of the e-pack explaining that the pack was developed by Ludicology as a part of a pilot study funded by University of Gloucestershire and is intended for use as a part of a mentoring project not as an independent toolkit.
- The establishment of a group or groups of people involved in the research needs to be appropriate to each context. This may be a steering group, or could equally be different stakeholder groups or task and finish groups. This again requires flexibility in the mentoring approach, allowing time and space for such groups to emerge and evolve throughout the process.

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All these reports are available at: https://play.wales/play-policy-legislation/our-research/