Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council

SANDWELL PLAY
Sufficiency Assessment
2025

Date of completion:	January 2024 – April 2025
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Go play
Sandwell

LUDICOLOGY

1. 'Doing' the PSA

1.1 Principle Statement

Sandwell Council understands and values that play is of fundamental importance for children and young people's health and wellbeing, their relationships, their development, and their learning. There is increasingly strong evidence, however, that children's opportunities to play are limited by factors outside their control: the dominance of the car in residential roads, lack of tolerance for children and young people, lack of access to and conflicts over use of local spaces in both rural and urban areas, fears for safety, increased focus on academic learning and structured activities outside school hours, the effects of disability, poverty and other social conditions, commercial pressures and more.

Play sufficiency is therefore a matter of spatial justice, working towards children having fair and just access to time, space, and permission for play. This is about cultivating the conditions for children's play to flourish, in local neighbourhoods, in schools, and throughout the wider public realm. The principle of play sufficiency challenges notions of play as a time and space bound activity, moving adult responsibilities beyond narrow definitions of play provision, towards a more collective and comprehensive response. Such an approach requires adults to take account of children's everyday experiences of playing and how these are shaped by, and can shape, the context in which children live (Russell, Barclay and Tawli 2023)

Sandwell Council recognises the importance of providing opportunities for play and is committed to raising the profile of play by cultivating more favourable conditions for play across the Borough and by identifying ways in which adult run organisations can improve their responsibilities towards children and their play.

Children's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and general comment 17 (2013) on Article 31 with aim of clarifying and emphasising the role of government in upholding children's right to play:

"The Committee, in its reviews of implementation of the rights of the child under the Convention, is concerned by the poor recognition given by States to Article 31 rights. Poor recognition of their significance in the lives of children results in lack of investment in appropriate provision, weak or non-existent protective legislation and invisibility of children in national and local level planning. In general, where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organised activities. Equally important is the need to create time and space for spontaneous play, recreation and creativity, and the promotion of societal attitudes that support and encourage such activity."

Sandwell Council endorses the definition of play outlined in General Comment 17 which states:

"Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled, and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end".

Committing to the principle of play sufficiency legitimises play as an outcome, justifies time spent supporting play, requires a broad range of professionals to give consideration to play and elevates the status of play alongside other strategic priorities. By prioritising play and positioning play as

central to our thinking, we can ensure children and their way of engaging with the world (what they do and how they do it) has much greater influence over how we govern and the types of environments we create for people. Play sufficiency provides a mechanism for local governments to deliver on their child-friendly intentions by orientating their ways of working towards children's agenda of playing (Barclay, Tawil 2023)

The purpose of Play Sufficiency Assessment is to cultivate more favourable conditions for play within local communities. Children will always find time and space for play if conditions allow. This ongoing process requires adults to pay close attention to the multitude of factors that affect children's opportunities for play and is as much about protecting and maintaining existing opportunities as it is about improving them where possible.

1.2 Background / Context

Sandwell Council has demonstrated a strong and long-standing commitment to providing free universal play provision across all six towns in the Borough. Sandwell MBC play service (Go Play) commissions a diverse range of voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver a range of free universal play opportunities via grant funding and contract arrangements.

This represents Sandwell's second attempt to conduct the Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA), following an initial effort that was interrupted by the lockdown restrictions in 2020. Had the assessment been completed at that time, Sandwell would have been the first Local Authority in England to undertake a Play Sufficiency Assessment. However, Leeds City Council was the first Local Authority in England to complete a PSA, with Sandwell Council following as the second. It is important to note that play sufficiency is a statutory obligation in both Wales and Scotland.

Nonetheless the data and evidence that had been gathered from the 2019 satisfaction survey and workshops with children and adults was put to good use in the interim and has allowed the play service to make changes to the way they commission some services, which has made them more effective. It is notable that children have reported increased satisfaction with their opportunities for play from the 2019 survey at 72% to 75% in the 2024 survey.

The existing play strategy is due for review and Play Sufficiency presents an ideal opportunity to evaluate the local authority's current position and identify priorities for the next three years. It is also an opportunity to see what is working for who and where and conversely what is not working and developing possible responses. The process of conducting a Play Sufficiency Assessment provides the data that enables the formulation of strategic evidence - based actions plans that make the best use of financial and human resources available in the current landscape as well as encouraging cross departmental working. PSA provides a mechanism by which the Local Authority can realise it's intentions to become a Child Friendly Community and directly contributes to the Growing Up in Sandwell strategic theme of the Council Plan 2024 - 2027, specifically the following outcome we want to deliver:

"Children and young people are supported to lead happy and healthy lives with access to a range of opportunities for positive activities, play and having fun."

Play is specifically committed to within the Council Plan (see page 8), and the PSA exemplifies how we actively engage with children and young people—listening to their voices and enabling them to inform intelligence and influence our decision-making processes. This approach aligns closely

with Outcome 7 under One Council One Team, which states:

"All of our residents, including our children and young people, are active participants in influencing change – through being listened to, their opinions are heard and valued."

1.3 Methodology

Sandwell MBC's Play Service worked with Ludicology to support the production of this Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA). Ludicology as an organisation exist to promote a better understanding of children's play and ways in which adults can support it. They provided the theoretical and ethical framework, methodology, content, and mentoring guidance to support local authority staff in all phases and stages of this assessment. From the outset the aim was to investigate children's lived experiences of play in an open-ended way that avoided assumptions and pre-conceived ideas about play provision. In order to provide a framework for this assessment we adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems approach to consider possibilities for play presented by the home/family environment, how these are affected by and in turn affect the possibilities within a child's local neighbourhood, and how all of this is affected by the socio-political context within which the community exists. Within each level of analysis, the following three lines of enquiry were investigated to establish how physical and social variables coalesce to affect children's day-to-day opportunities for play:

- Time - how often and how much time children spend playing
- Space - within children's locality, how accessible it is for children and the 'play value' of that space
- Attitudes - of children, parents, other residents and people whose work impacts on children.

Drawing on the work of Marketta Kytta (2003), we then applied the concept of constrained, regulated or free fields of action to each of our lines of enquiry to consider how these affect children's ability to actualise (make real use of) the potential possibilities for play within any given environment. In this model a constrained field refers to time, space or attitudes that prevent children's self-directed or free action (i.e., play); regulated fields are then those that direct children's action (i.e. they promote particular forms of behaviour); and free fields are those that allow for children's free action (i.e. play).

Research Methods and Objectives

The assessment a variety of research methods, generating quantitative and qualitative data to build a rich picture of children's everyday opportunities for play and the variables that shape them. This included
Collating of data on demographics, public spaces and service provision

- Online satisfaction questionnaires for children and parents/carers
- Workshops with children and focus groups with parents and practitioners
- Spatial audits in case study communities
- Multi-agency workshops
- Semi-structured interviews with lead professionals

- In-depth policy analysis

The primary objectives for this research included:

- Identifying representations of play sufficiency and the social and physical conditions (assets) that support this
- Identifying constraints on children's ability to access time and space for play and the reasons behind these
- Exploring how children's play is influenced by the context in which they live?
- Identifying opportunities to promote and protect time and space for play
- Paying attention to differences and diversity in people's experiences of play sufficiency

Satisfaction Surveys

The research process began by asking all primary schools across Sandwell to support children in year five to complete an online questionnaire regarding their satisfaction with their opportunities for play. Targeting this particular age group helped to limit the size of the survey but also enabled data to be compared across communities. It will also allow for a fair comparison if/when the survey is revisited in the future when attempting to establish any shift in satisfaction levels. By the age of 9 (start of year 5) children should be playing out and about in their local neighbourhoods and the experiences of this age group can therefore be seen as an indicator of localised conditions for playing.

The aim of these online surveys was to generate a large response rate, enabling a baseline in terms of the general levels of satisfaction to be established, identify broad factors that influence satisfaction, as well as differences in satisfaction between different groups of children. The data from these surveys was used to identify case study communities (of people and/or geographic areas) where children reported higher or lower satisfaction with their opportunities for play.

Case Study Communities

Based on the findings of the online survey described above, further research was then carried out in three case study communities to investigate how levels of satisfaction are affected by localized social and physical conditions - providing insights into children's and families' lived experiences (i.e., what's actually happening 'on the ground'). These case studies were focused around three geographic areas, including communities where children rated particularly high or low satisfaction with their opportunities for play.

To compliment the online survey carried out with children in year 5 across the wider assessment region, a similar survey was set up for older children in year 9 and for parents/carers living in each case study community. By age 13 (year 9) children are in their teenage years and whilst still experiencing their childhoods, their right to play is often overlooked and they are perceived very differently by adults. For all ages of children, parents usually have responsibility for their children being allowed out to play so it is important to also gather their views. These additional surveys enabled data to be compared and contrasted between different ages of children and between children and parents/carers.

A detailed spatial audit was also produced for each case study community. This auditing process began with an initial spatial orientation, which was desk based, helping to ensure researchers were familiar with the topography and characteristics of each case study community prior to facilitating face-to-face research with children and adults. Following the research with children described below, researchers conducted a more thorough spatial audit by visiting each case study community and using the information shared by children to explore the places where they live and play, collecting evidence of significant assets and constraining features. The information gathered through this spatial auditing process was added to other existing data sets to develop a community profile/portrait for each case study area that included:

- Demographics and socio-cultural characteristics of the community
- The amount, diversity and accessibility of playable public space
- The layout and characteristics of housing and roads
- The services available to children in the area

Each case study then involved a programme of three participatory research workshops being facilitated with a group of year 5 children in a local primary school. These workshops used a mosaic approach that incorporated a variety of mapping activities, enabling children to share detailed and subjective information about their reality of their day-to-day play experiences. In one case study community, a longer single session workshop, using the same activities, was facilitated with a group of year 9 children in a local secondary school to again compare and contrast their experiences with those of younger children. Focus groups with parents/carers and 'front line' practitioners were also facilitated in each case study communities.

In addition to the case study research, additional workshops were facilitated with children (and/or their parents) who were identified as having protected characteristics and who might therefore experience extra-ordinary constraints on their opportunities for play beyond those experienced by most other children. For each group a workshop was facilitated using the same activities as with other children, ensuring that these children's experiences were given equal attention to those of others.

Data Analysis

Following the completion of data collection in the case study communities — including additional workshops with children and families with protected characteristics — a substantial period of analysis was undertaken to generate findings from phases 1 and 2 of the assessment. This analytical phase aimed to identify emerging priorities for protecting and enhancing the sufficiency of children's opportunities for play.

A central principle of the assessment process was to uphold children's right to informed participation and ensure that their views and experiences were given equal, if not greater, weight than those of adults. Accordingly, throughout the analysis of results from the online questionnaires and subsequently the qualitative data generated with case study communities, an emphasis was placed on information provided by children. The themes that emerged from the children's data were then compared and contrasted with insights from parents, carers, and practitioners who took part in the research. This triangulation approach strengthened the validity of the findings and supported the identification of strategic priorities for improving conditions for play at a neighbourhood level.

Quantitative data from the self-reporting surveys was analysed using PowerBI. Priority was given to data from the year 5 survey because this represented the most robust and representative set of data. Results from year 9 and parents surveys were then compared and contrasted with these findings.

This analysis was carried out using a structured approach that aimed to go beyond headline figures and provide deeper insights into children's experiences. The initial stage involved summarising the overall results for each question using tables and charts to show the percentage breakdown of responses. Particular emphasis was placed on the final question about children's overall satisfaction with opportunities for play, which served as a key indicator of local play sufficiency.

A further in-depth analysis then focused on three core objectives:

- **Identifying communities of interest** – Responses were grouped by geographic area to highlight variations in satisfaction across different communities, helping to identify where further investigation or targeted support might be needed
- **Exploring influencing factors** – Children were grouped according to their reported satisfaction levels, and their responses to other survey questions were compared. Bar charts were used to show relationships between satisfaction and other aspects of their play experiences, such as how often they played out
- **Examining demographic patterns** – The responses of children from different demographic groups were compared, including by gender, disability status, and ethnicity. This allowed for an assessment of how these characteristics influenced reported experiences and levels of satisfaction

Analysis of the qualitative case study data then used an inductive, grounded theory approach to develop thematic findings across the case study areas. Taking each case study area in turn and again starting with the rich evidence from primary school aged children, each data set (from the various mapping activities) was analysed using open coding to identify distinct descriptors and examples associated with different aspects of children's play experiences. These descriptors and examples were then grouped into broader categories, starting to identify commonalties, differences and patterns across the experiences of each cohort of children. These categories were further grouped into broader themes capturing the range of issues influencing children's play in each case study area. The thematic findings from children were then compared and contrasted with data from the other research activities in each case study area, including spatial audits and focus groups with adults, adding further insight and nuance to the emerging themes. When saturation was reached in each set of case study data (ie no further substantial insights were being generated) thematic findings were compared and contrasted across the case study areas, resulting in a set of cross cutting themes that accounted for common and dominant issues shaping children's play across the research region. These themes were in turn used as headings when writing up the case study findings, illustrating how these thematic issues play out differently depending on context.

Policy Analysis and Other Existing Datasets

Alongside this research with children and adults, a detailed review of existing policy documents was carried out to establish the extent to which play is supported at a strategic policy level and the policy context in which the play sufficiency assessment has been undertaken. This included

a review of high-level council plans, local planning documents, and other strategies relating to transport, housing, public health and safety, community regeneration, education, early years and childcare. This analysis included identifying what the various strategies say about children in general and play in particular, existing strategic support and policy alignment with play, where consideration or promotion of play could have been included but has not, and opportunities to strengthen the policy context for 'doing' play sufficiency.

In addition, other existing datasets relevant to children and their opportunities for play were collated. This additional data was used to create a profile of the assessment region as a whole, as well as provide insights into the demographics, socio-cultural and physical characteristics of particular communities. The data included demographics (such as population density, age and ethnicity profiles), numbers of children from particular minority groups and those with protected characteristics, socio-economic factors (including levels of deprivation), spatial resources (for example the amount of public open space available) and levels of service provision (playwork, youth work etc).

Involving Partners

Essential to the profile and influence of the assessment was the involvement of policy makers, lead practitioners and strategic partners working within and across professional domains that (directly or indirectly) impact on children's ability to access time space and permission for play. This included representatives involved in work associated with each of the professional domains addressed within this final assessment document.

Early in the assessment process, the focus was on identifying and engaging partners. This included raising the profile of the play sufficiency assessment and helping others understand the value, scope and potential of play sufficiency in relation to other areas of work. It also included recruiting people to partake in an 'Understanding Play Sufficiency' course to be delivered during the second phase of the assessment. This online course consisted of three, three-hour workshops and was designed to support participants in developing their collective understanding around play sufficiency, their associated roles and responsibilities, and their sense of involvement in the process. In doing so the course prepared partners for responding to the findings from research with children and parents/carers in final phase of the assessment.

The final phase of the assessment then involved presenting findings from the research with children to department managers and various teams across the local authority. This was followed up with a series of semi-structured interviews involving internal and external partners, enabling experienced and knowledgeable professionals to discuss the implications of the research findings within their respective areas of work.

Writing the Assessment

Using this PSA proforma, data generated through the discussions with policy makers, lead practitioners and strategic partners was combined with the findings from the first two phases of the assessment to produce a detailed synthesis of the ways in which current practices support and/or constrain children's opportunities for play. In doing so particular attention was paid to the local authority's ways of working (what it does and how it does it) and how these systems might be developed and adapted to better support children's play. This includes identifying strengths and weaknesses of organisational systems, areas for improvement, opportunities for change, and

potential barriers to progress across all professional domains addressed within the PSA proforma. All partners involved in the assessment were then invited to read and comment on a draft version of the full report.

Appendix A – Introduction and Methodological Context provides further details on the approaches used

1.4 Research Participants & Partners

The following provides an overview of the 2230 individuals involved in our play sufficiency assessment:

- Facilitated group work in schools: 86 primary school children aged between 8 and 11 and 12 secondary school children aged between 13 and 14
- Online questionnaires: 2180 from children and young people, and a further 52 from parents and carers
- Workforce Audit: online questionnaires completed by 75 practitioners and managers
- Parents focus groups: 15 parents and carers from within our case study communities
- Professionals focus groups: 42 professionals from a broad range of disciplines working within the local authority
- Targeted focus Groups: 12 children with SEND, 4 Children who identified as LGBTQ+, 1 young person who identified as transgender
- Semi-structured interviews: over 50 lead professionals including representation from third sector organisations

The implementation team consisted of a broad and diverse range of colleagues from across the organisation which included:

- Tracey Jobber: Play Service Manager and Lead for Play Sufficiency. Children and Education Services
- Karen Greenfield: Senior Play Development Officer, Children and Education Services
- Nick Lockwood: Community Development Officer, Neighbourhoods
- Marcia Sandell Massey: Health Communities Project Manager, Public Health
- Jane Hemuka, Senior Research and Intelligence Officer, Public Heath
- Louis Bebb, Housing Policy and Strategy Lead Officer, Housing
- Jack Whitehouse, Lead Officer, Service Improvement
- Lydia Dunne, Project Manager, Public Heath
- Samina Mohomoud, Graduate
- Anthony Stocking, Lead Officer, Business Transformation
- Hannah Butler, Education Advisor, Children and Education Services
- Raman Susch, Public Health Development Officer, Public Heath

Such a varied group meant there was a diverse range of knowledge, skills and abilities regarding both play and research. Our considered approach utilised these existing skills, whilst also providing new development opportunities, which we acknowledged had an influence throughout the assessment however, the overview of the project manager ensured a certain amount of consistency was always maintained.

Departments that have been involved and or contributed to the assessment includes:

- Highways
- Regeneration
- Education
- Housing
- Service Improvement
- Public Health
- Parks and Green Spaces
- Planning
- Youth Service
- Play Service
- Community Safety
- Community Cohesion
- Neighbourhoods
- Children's Commissioning
- Leaders' office
- Equality Inclusion and Diversity

1.5 Challenges / Limitations

In order to include children in research gaining access to them is critical, Sandwell Primary Schools were in the main receptive to the survey and workshop requests. Gaining insights from children and young people in secondary education proved more difficult and this needs to be made easier in future. We need to gain insights, uncover the specific barriers and better understand how to improve engagement with this cohort of young people.

Including children with protected characteristics meant we were dependant on existing groups and those who were able to support with access to the groups. Access to these groups needs to be made easier in future. For example, we were unable to access children with care experience to include their perspectives in the assessment, which indicates that additional research is needed in this area. We aimed to deliver a case study session to Travellers, who were supported by a Sandwell Council Housing Officer. However, the officer was unable to assist us in accessing the group due to other work-related commitments.

Parents proved challenging to engage, even with the support of the case study community schools. In one case study area, only a single parent attended the workshops despite numerous

attempts and efforts to arrange a suitable time and venue. The reasons for the limited parental engagement are likely varied and complex, potentially including a lack of understanding among parents about the importance of play, as well as possible lack of understanding towards the research process.

Future engagement with parents could consider relying solely on the online survey as a more accessible method of participation.

2. Children's lived experiences

2.1 Key issues identified from research with children and parents/carers

Survey findings

As part of the evidence base for Sandwell's 2024 Play Sufficiency Assessment, online satisfaction surveys were conducted with younger and older children in year 5 (aged 9 and 10) and year 9 (aged 13 and 14), and with parents or carers of children aged 5 to 17. These surveys gathered perceptions about children's opportunities for play, including how much time children have for playing, where they spend that time, how they get to places where they play, and how safe they feel in their communities.

The survey questions were designed to mirror one another across the groups, providing a robust comparative perspective on play sufficiency from both adult and child viewpoints. Children completed questions about their own experiences, while parents and carers responded on behalf of their children.

Who responded to the survey?

The 2024 Play Satisfaction Surveys were completed by a substantial number of respondents across Sandwell, providing a valuable insight into children's opportunities for play. The respondent profile enables reflection on how experiences of play vary for different groups of children, including by age, gender, disability and ethnicity.

Appendix B – Survey Data Summary Illustrates the responses collated

Reflections on survey participation and representativeness

The online satisfaction surveys generated strong levels of engagement, particularly from younger children and older children. The breadth of responses from year 5 children means that the local authority can have a high level of confidence that the survey results are representative of the perceptions of all children in this age group. This is important given that (as explained in the methodology) the experiences of this age group can be seen as proxy of more generalised conditions for play. The structure of the survey was then deliberately mirrored across the child and parent versions, allowing for comparative insights between children's lived experiences and the views of the adults who care for them.

Importantly, the surveys were designed to act as a baseline against which future assessments can be compared. The findings from key questions offer a set of clear indicators that can be revisited to

measure change over time. In this way, the survey does more than simply record current levels of satisfaction; it creates a repeatable framework for monitoring progress toward play sufficiency.

That said, there are some important limitations to acknowledge. While the overall response numbers were strong, the level of participation was not evenly distributed across all parts of the borough. The data was not sufficient to provide reliable quantitative evidence at the level of electoral wards. As a result, the findings cannot be confidently disaggregated to show differences between all local areas. However, the postcode data has been useful in identifying a small number of case study communities for more focused qualitative exploration, helping to build a more detailed picture of place-based experiences of play.

Another limitation lies in the relatively low number of responses from parents. Although parent responses echoed many of the trends seen among children and young people, the smaller sample means that findings for this group should be interpreted with some caution. It is also worth noting that, as with all voluntary surveys, there is a risk of self-selection bias. Those with strong views about play - whether positive or negative - may have been more inclined to take part, and families facing digital exclusion may be underrepresented. These limitations are not unusual in local authority engagement exercises and do not undermine the overall value of the findings, but they do point to the need for continued efforts to hear from families whose voices are less easily captured through online surveys.

Taken as a whole, the survey findings offer a reliable and informative snapshot of play sufficiency across Sandwell. While the data cannot represent every individual community with equal precision, the number and diversity of responses - combined with the alignment of trends across children and parents - mean that the local authority can have a good degree of confidence in the main findings. The survey has proven to be a valuable tool for identifying the core factors shaping children's experiences of play, and for setting a baseline against which future improvements can be measured.

Online satisfaction survey – overall satisfaction

Three quarters of year 5 children were positive about their opportunities for play, with 75% rating them as 'great' or 'good', 20% as 'ok but in need of improvement', and 5% as 'not good' or 'rubbish'. This is clearly a positive for Sandwell and suggests there are many children are enjoying the opportunities available to them. However, the survey also suggests that 25% or 1 in 4 children are less satisfied with their opportunities for play and given that playing is central to children's well-being and healthy development this should be of significant concern. Furthermore, the survey results emphasize the need to take action to ensure that those children who report higher levels of satisfaction continue to do so.
People's interpretation of these statistics and recommendations will depend on the value they attached to children and their play. However, it is worth noting that in some other circles an incident rate of 1 in 4 would be considered a crisis.

Among year 9 children, satisfaction was significantly lower, with 53% rating their opportunities to play as 'great' or 'good', 31% as 'ok', and 16% as 'not good' or 'rubbish'. Parental views were also much less positive overall, with only 17% of parents rating their child's opportunities for play as 'great' or 'good', 40% said 'ok but in need of improvement', and 41% said 'not good' or 'rubbish'. This pattern suggests that while many children - particularly younger children - are having positive experiences of play, there remains a significant proportion for whom opportunities are insufficient,

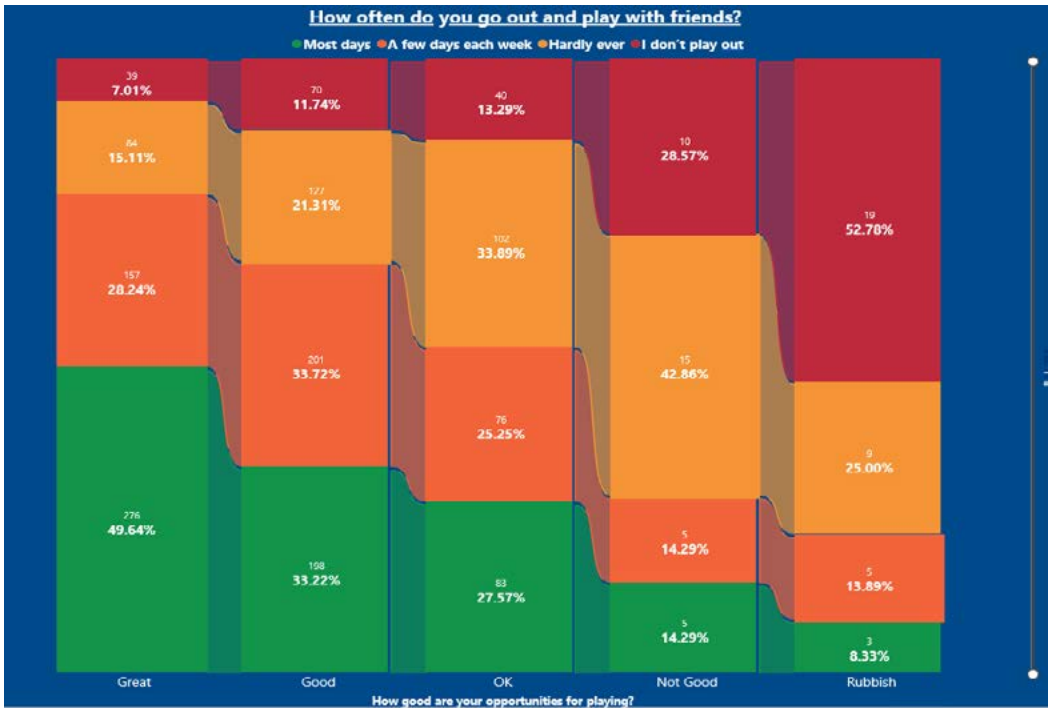
particularly as children get older.

The difference in satisfaction levels between children and parents could be for several reasons, including parents fearing for their children's safety more than children worry about it, parents placing more of an emphasis on designated play provision but children finding time and space for play in many other contexts, and parents comparing their own experiences of playing to their children's opportunities now.

All the data collected from the online survey is available to view on the Power BI platform. The data can be sorted and viewed to see responses from different children with different characteristics.

Drivers of satisfaction

An in-depth analysis of the survey responses identified further trends and patterns in children's play experiences, including factors that appear to influence children's and parent's satisfaction with opportunities for play. For example, the graph below shows how children responded to the question about how often they go out to play with friends based on their overall satisfaction with play. There is a clear trend of children who report higher satisfaction also reporting playing out with friends more often, suggesting that that how often children play out influences their satisfaction with opportunities for play. 68% of year 5 children who rated their satisfaction as great or good overall also reported playing out most days or a few days each week. However, when it comes to those that rated their overall satisfaction as not good or rubbish, 78% reported hardly ever or not playing out at all.



Overall, 56% of year 5 children reported playing out most days or a few days each week. In comparison, 63% of year 9 students reported playing out most days or a few days each week, and 61% of parents said that their children hardly ever or don't play out. These figures suggest that whilst some children continue to play out on a regular basis, many cannot. When it came to the case study research, there were children in each research area who could only list rooms in their house or other people's houses as places they could play without a grown-up present. In general,

children's play has become increasingly home-based, indoor, and structured by adults - with fewer opportunities for informal play or hanging out in public spaces.

Time to play

Children's access to "free" time for playing or hanging out with friends is a crucial element of play sufficiency. The survey findings show that while many children in Sandwell feel they have enough time for play, a significant proportion would like more, and for some, time for play is very limited.

Among Year 5 children, 76% reported that that they had 'loads or 'enough' time, 20% said they would like more time, and 4% said they needed a lot more or had no time at all. While this suggests that for the majority of younger children, time for play is adequate, one in four would like more.

Among Year 9s, access to time for play is even more constrained. Only 68% of these older children reported having 'plenty or 'enough', but 32% wanted more or a lot more. This reflects a common trend as children move into adolescence, where school pressures, homework, and social expectations begin to limit time for play or informal hanging out.

Parents' perceptions reinforce these findings. Only 39% of parents felt their child had 'plenty' or 'enough' of time to play and 61% said they wanted their child to have more time for play.

The evidence suggests that time pressures on children - particularly as they grow older - are a real issue for play sufficiency. It highlights the importance of schools, parents, and communities protecting and valuing time for play, and raises questions about the extent to which children's free time is squeezed by other obligations including structured activities, homework, or adult-controlled schedules.

Number of friends

The availability of friends to play or hang out with is another key factor shaping children's experiences of play - both in terms of enjoyment and social wellbeing. The survey findings show that while most children have good access to friends, a significant minority do not. Among both Year 5 and 9 children, 89% said they had 'plenty' or 'enough' of friends to play with but 11% said they would like more. Parents again provided a more cautious view with 68% saying their child had 'plenty' or 'enough' friends to play with, but 32% wanting their child to have more.

These findings suggest that while many children enjoy rich social lives, at least 1 in 10 children are at risk of social isolation. This highlights the need for inclusive, welcoming play environments where children can form and sustain friendships, as well as the role of schools, playwork settings, and communities in supporting children's social connections and associated wellbeing.

Where children spend most time playing

Participants were asked to identify the top places where they or their children spent most time playing outside of school. For Year 5s this most frequently included homes and gardens, online, designated play areas, sports facilities, and clubs or organised activities. Together these categories made up 84% of responses. However, some children did also identify playing in other neighbourhood spaces, with 13% of children identifying streets.

For Year 9s the most common places were homes, online, in town or at the shops, sports facilities and the local neighbourhood. Together these categories made up 83% of responses. Gardens and play areas were less of a feature for older children but some also identified streets and woodland or green spaces.

For parents it was homes, gardens, friend's or relative homes, play areas, online, and clubs or organised activities. These categories made up over 85% of responses with fewer related to other neighbourhood spaces like streets. This data illustrates a generational shift in children's play patterns with much more play taking place at home, online, or in supervised settings, with comparatively less use of public spaces (particularly those beyond designated spaces for play).

Number of different playable spaces

Access to a variety of playable spaces was an important factor in children's satisfaction with their opportunities for play. Among Year 5 children, 63% reported being able to play in 'all' or 'most' of the places they wanted to play, 32% reported only being able to play in a 'few' of the places they wanted to, and 5% reported not being able to play in any of the places they wanted. Among Year 9s, 69% reporting being able to play in 'all or 'most' of the places they wanted to, 25% said they could only play in a 'few' places and 6% said they couldn't play in any.

Parents were less positive about the range of spaces available to their children. Only 42% reported that their children could play in all or most of the places they wanted to, with 40% saying their children had 'only a few' places to play, and 18% reporting that their children couldn't access any places for play.

Quality of Spaces for Play

The quality of spaces where children play was a critical factor influencing overall satisfaction. Among Year 5 children, 47% rated the places where they played as 'great' with a further 47% reporting that they were 'ok', and 6% reporting spaces as 'not good' or 'rubbish'. Among Year 9s, perceptions of quality were less positive, with only 24% describing their spaces as 'great', 59% describing them as 'ok', and 17% describing spaces as 'not good' or 'rubbish'. Parents were again the least positive, with only 11% rating the spaces where their children played as 'great', 51% as 'ok', and 38% as 'not good' or 'rubbish'.

This evidence suggests that while younger children may be more easily satisfied with local play provision, dissatisfaction about the quality of spaces for play increase with age — and is widely felt among parents. Improving the design, attractiveness, and maintenance of local spaces is likely to have a substantial impact on satisfaction levels.

Are children allowed to play outside without adults?

Overall, 56% of primary school children reported being allowed to engage in outdoor play independently of their caregivers. In contrast, 81% of year 9 children reported freedom to play outside unaccompanied by adults. When it came to parents themselves, only 30% reported that their children are permitted to play out on their own.

The age at which children are allowed out to play can be seen as an indicator of community safety, with parental permission closely linked to perceptions of risk. These results align with national

research which suggests that the average age at which children are afforded freedom to play out has increased by approximately two years in a generation. However, these rates are likely to vary dependant on local circumstances. Whilst it is positive that just over half of children aged 9 or 10 report being allowed to play out, the other half cannot. Furthermore, many that can only do so very close to home and by the age of 13 or 14 there are still 19% of children reporting that they are not allowed to play out without an adult.

How children get to where they play

Year 5 children reported being heavily reliant on adults to access spaces for play. While 27% said they usually walked or rode on their own or with friends, a further 33% walked or rode with an adult, and 37% were taken by car. Only 1% reported using public transport. Among Year 9s, greater independence was apparent: 59% usually walked or rode on their own or with friends, 12% walked or rode with an adult, and 21% were taken by car, with 8% using public transport. 79% of parents then reported that their children usually relied on an adult walking or driving them to places where they played.

This reliance on adults for transport - particularly by car - limits children's spontaneity, adds to parental responsibilities, restricts access for those without cars, and adds to the amount of traffic on roads. It suggests a need for more local, easily accessible spaces within walking or cycling distance of homes.

Feeling safe in the community

Among Year 5 children, 91% reported always or mostly feeling safe when playing or hanging out, 3% said they never felt safe, and 6% said they do not play out. Among Year 9s, 88% reported always or mostly feeling safe, 8% never felt safe, and 4% did not play out. In contrast, parents expressed much high levels of concern about their children's safety. Only 13% said they didn't worry at all or much about their child playing outside, 32% said they worried 'a bit' but still allowed their child play out, but 55% said they worried so much that they found it difficult to let their child play out, or didn't allow them to do so at all.

This evidence suggests that perceptions of safety is much more of an issue for parents and carers than it is for children themselves, highlighting the need to creating community environments that parents/carers perceive as safe enough for their children to be given freedom to play outside.

Trends and inequalities in the survey data

Overall, 75% of year 5 children, rated their satisfaction as either "great" or "good," with boys reporting the highest levels at 77.9%, followed closely by girls at 74.25%. Those who preferred not to disclose their gender reported satisfaction at 68.19%. However, a notable disparity is observed among children who identified as a gender other than boy or girl, with only 33.32% rating their experience positively. This significant gap suggests potential issues related to inclusion, support, or representation for gender-diverse children within the environment surveyed, warranting further investigation and action to ensure a more equitable and welcoming experience for all.

When asked about their satisfaction with opportunities for play, 76.81% of children without a disability rated their experience as "great" or "good," compared to just 57.7% of children who identified as having a disability. This 19 %-point gap highlights a significant disparity in perceived

access to or enjoyment of play among children with disabilities. Additionally, 68.31% of children who preferred not to disclose whether they had a disability reported positive experiences, suggesting that concerns about stigma or inadequate accommodations might influence both their willingness to disclose and their satisfaction levels. These findings point to a need for more inclusive and accessible play environments to ensure all children can fully participate and enjoy play opportunities.

In terms of ethnicity, satisfaction with opportunities for play was relatively consistent across groups. Children who identified as Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) reported the highest satisfaction, with 76.55% rating their play opportunities as "great" or "good." This was slightly higher than the 75.22% of children who identified as non-BME and the 72.48% who preferred not to disclose their ethnicity. The narrow range between groups suggests that, overall, play opportunities were perceived positively and equitably across ethnic backgrounds. However, the slightly lower satisfaction among those who chose not to disclose their ethnicity could indicate a level of disengagement or discomfort and may warrant further exploration to ensure that all children feel seen and supported.

This pattern reflects broader structural inequalities and highlights the importance of ensuring that play sufficiency efforts in Sandwell explicitly address equity, accessibility, and social barriers to play — not just physical provision.

A further important trend was the significant difference between the views of children and those of parents and carers. Generally, parents were much less satisfied with their children's opportunities for play than the children themselves — a finding consistent across almost all survey questions.

This difference was most marked in relation to overall satisfaction of opportunities to play, where only 17% of parents rated their children's opportunities as 'great' or 'good', compared with 75% of Year 5 children. Parental concerns about safety, traffic, the quality of play spaces, and time pressures are all likely to contribute to this lower level of satisfaction.

Additionally, the survey findings highlight a clear decline in satisfaction with opportunities to play as children grow older (consistent with findings from the case study research). Levels of satisfaction were highest among younger children (Year 5) and dropped sharply among secondary-aged pupils (Year 9) 53% rated their overall satisfaction with play 'great or 'good', compared to 75% of Year 5s. This pattern reflects wider concerns about the lack of spaces and opportunities for teenagers to play, socialise, and hang out in ways that meet their needs and interests.

Case study research

As explained in the methodology the survey data was used to identify three case study communities where children reported significantly different levels of satisfaction with their opportunities for play. This included a higher, an average, and a significantly lower rating community. Further qualitative research was then conducted in each of these communities to explore localised conditions for play and possible reasons for this difference in satisfaction. This research combined detailed spatial audits, mapping workshops with primary school children, and focus groups with adults. Additional workshops were also facilitated with a group of older children at a secondary school, children attending two SEND schools, and children attending transgender and LGBTQ+ groups. An in-depth analysis of the rich data generated identified several common themes across the communities and groups, which played out differently dependant on context

and who was involved. These findings are summarised below with a more detailed write up of the thematic case study findings available on request.

Understandings of play

Across all groups of children involved in this research, there was a high degree of consistency in how play was described and understood. Children of all ages defined play as having fun and freedom. It was consistently associated with feelings of enjoyment, laughter, and relaxation. Children described play as something they want to do, rather than something they have to do, with play being free from obligation, particularly adult-imposed rules or expectations. Whether playing alone or with others, children often emphasised the importance of being in control of what happens, pointing to the idea that play is organised and directed by children themselves, not by adults.

Play was almost universally described as active and intentional - something that involves doing, creating, moving, making or imagining. Even quieter forms of play, such as listening to music, drawing, or playing board games, were spoken about as things children choose to engage in because they bring pleasure and a sense of freedom.

A strong pro-social thread ran through children's accounts of play. Children spoke about play as something that brings people together and helps build and strengthen relationships. It was described not just as a solitary pursuit, but as a means of connecting with others - friends, siblings, cousins, and occasionally trusted adults. Statements like "it's about feeling good and feeling better" were echoed across settings, highlighting how play is seen as a way to build self-esteem and support emotional wellbeing.

More attention was given by children to how play feels and who it happens with than to where play happens or what is used to play. This focus on the emotional and social dimensions of play (more so than the material) was consistent across all groups.

Children were notably articulate when invited to describe their experiences of play. They consistently offered thoughtful and often sophisticated accounts of why play matters. These accounts align strongly with the academic literature on play, particularly in terms of play's open-endedness, emotional significance, and the importance of players themselves being in control of what happens.

In summary, children across Sandwell see play not as a luxury or a pastime, but as a vital, joyful, and meaningful part of life - deeply embedded in relationships and personal wellbeing.

Time for play in school and after school during term time

Across the case studies, children commonly reported that opportunities for play during the school day are limited and often feel heavily structured or regulated. Morning break time and lunchtime were the main windows for open-ended playing, but even these were subject to restrictions—such as short durations, queuing for lunch, and adult rules about acceptable games. This theme was echoed by parents, many of whom felt their children didn't have enough time to play at school. Some commented that their children would rather skip lunch in order to have more time to play.

These constraints were most keenly felt by children in the lowest rating community. Children in the

other two case study areas also shared these concerns but with some variation in experience. For example, in the higher rating community, some boys viewed breaktimes as free play, while most girls saw both break and lunch as structured or limited in opportunity.

In the secondary school, children no longer described break times as opportunities for play. While some used the terms "hanging out" or "chilling" instead of "playing," their accounts still reflected the theme of constraint during school hours. They described breaktimes as regulated and shared that some peers left school grounds at lunchtime to avoid these constraints altogether.

After school, children's opportunities for play were shaped by a mix of personal routines, family rules, and external commitments. A consistent finding across nearly all case studies was that very few children regularly played outside with friends after school. In the lowest rating community, even when children had time in the evenings, almost none were playing out. In the average rating community only three children reported doing so. The main barriers included safety concerns, the dominance of older children in public spaces, and heavy traffic.

Girls across multiple case studies were more likely to report after-school responsibilities such as chores or caregiving that further limited their free time. For example, one girl in the higher rating community explained that she was not allowed to play until all her household tasks were done, which could take up most of the evening.

Religious obligations were also a factor. In all three case study communities, children mentioned attending mosque or other structured sessions after school, which reduced their time for play. Among children with SEND, after-school hours were typically spent at home, often involving digital technology for entertainment.

Among older children, evenings were generally seen as more flexible and open for self-chosen activities, though what counted as "play" varied. These children reported spending evenings listening to music, texting, or gaming - often alone or with friends online. These were framed as free, relaxing activities, even if they weren't explicitly labelled as play.

Despite these contextual differences, a common thread across all groups was that time for play during the school day was limited and tightly managed, and that after school hours—while sometimes more flexible—were often constrained by adult-imposed schedules, safety concerns, or family responsibilities. Very few children reported having daily opportunities for spontaneous, outdoor play with peers during the week.

Traffic and its effects on children's access to space for play

Concerns about traffic and road safety emerged as a significant and consistent barrier to children's ability to access space for play across nearly all case study groups.

In the lower rating community, the physical layout of the area - encircled by three main roads - acted as a firm boundary. Children were not permitted to cross these roads alone, meaning their access to outdoor spaces and friends' homes was severely restricted. One child simply stated, "I don't really play out; I live on a main road." Parents shared these concerns, frequently citing reckless driving and road safety as reasons for not allowing children to play out.

In the medium rating community, traffic was also mentioned as a constraint, though there were

some streets where lower traffic levels allowed for limited outdoor play. Children suggested ideas like having "no car days" as ways to make their streets safer.

For children with SEND, such as those attending specialist provision, adult supervision was always required outdoors. Although traffic was not always named explicitly, it formed part of a broader concern for safety that included physical vulnerability and the risk of harm when playing in public spaces.
Older children, such as the Year 9 group, were more likely to navigate their neighbourhoods independently. They described walking or using buses to access shops, parks, and town centres. However, traffic still shaped parental permission for where they could go, especially when travelling further afield or at certain times of day.

Overall, traffic acted as both a physical and psychological barrier. Even where parks or green spaces were nearby, the need to cross busy roads or concerns about drivers' behaviour made these spaces feel out of reach without adult accompaniment. These restrictions not only limited children's access to play but contributed to a culture of dependence that reduced their ability to play freely, socially, and independently in their local environments.

Sense of community safety and parental permission for play

Across all case study groups, children's ability to play independently was heavily influenced by adult concerns about safety. Parents across settings consistently cited threats such as knife crime, drug dealing, antisocial behaviour, and "strangers" as reasons for not allowing children to play outside unsupervised.

This was especially evident in the lower rating community, where parents reported serious concerns about violence in the area, and some described conflicts with neighbours over outdoor play that had escalated to police involvement. As a result, only a small number of children in that community reported being allowed to play out without an adult.

In the other two case study communities, although the environments were generally more conducive to play, safety concerns still shaped the boundaries of children's freedom. Parents often permitted outdoor play only within the immediate vicinity of the home or in known, closely supervised settings. Children described being restricted from going to particular estates or parks due to perceived risks associated with those locations.

Children with SEND experienced even tighter restrictions. These children were often not allowed to play outside unsupervised, with adults citing concerns about both children's ability to keep themselves safe and the dangers posed by others. For these children, opportunities for play were largely limited to home, school, or structured environments with trusted adults present.

Among LGBTQ and transgender young people, the experience of feeling unsafe was especially acute. These young people described being afraid to use public transport, walk alone, or visit local parks without adult support. Their sense of vulnerability was often linked to past experiences of discrimination or hostility. One participant described local parks as unsafe and "not a good choice" unless accompanied by an adult.

Older children in secondary school reported greater autonomy, but still navigated parental boundaries informed by safety concerns. Some described being allowed to visit certain friends'

houses but not others, depending on the perceived safety of the area. Gender differences were apparent, with several girls describing stricter rules imposed by parents compared to their male peers.

Overall, while children expressed a desire for independence in play, their access was significantly shaped by adult perceptions of safety. In nearly every setting, children's freedom to play outdoors was conditional on adult presence or permission, limiting their opportunities for spontaneous, self-directed play in their own neighbourhoods.

Localised spatial arrangements and associated community cultures

Children's opportunities for play were shaped not only by infrastructure but also by the social norms and spatial arrangements specific to each community. These localised factors determined where children felt welcome, how space was used, and whether parents were comfortable allowing children to play there.

In the lower rating community, physical layout and restrictive signage combined with a lack of communal tolerance for play to create a highly constrained environment. "No Ball Games" signs were common—even in designated play areas—and parents described neighbour complaints escalating to police involvement. Few children reported playing outdoors with friends, and many spaces were seen as contested or unwelcoming.

By contrast, the higher rating community offered a more supportive play environment, with green spaces like the Tibby and the Cracker forming important local assets. The Tibby, in particular, was described as a place where families knew each other and children were looked out for by the wider community. This embedded sense of social familiarity enabled a greater degree of freedom for play, though issues such as litter and antisocial behaviour in other spaces still caused concern.

In the medium rating community, spatial access varied. While children identified many different play locations—both indoors and outdoors—most were reliant on adult accompaniment. Families compensated for limited freedom by taking children to a wide range of venues, including commercial activities, though cost could be a barrier. Streets were sometimes seen as playable spaces, but only when traffic levels were low and community tolerance was high.

Parents repeatedly emphasised the value of trusted adults in enabling safe and enjoyable play. They expressed support for community-based events and activities that bring families together and create environments where children are well known to staff. While the parents acknowledged a range of local activities, the high cost of many options was seen as a barrier, and their preference was clearly for environments that fostered connection, familiarity, and trust.

Children's opportunities for play are deeply shaped by the context in which they live. Localised spatial arrangements—such as the layout of roads, the volume and speed of traffic, the presence of safe walking and cycling routes, and the accessibility of playable spaces—directly influence whether and how children are able to move through their neighbourhoods and engage in outdoor play. These physical features intersect with community norms to shape cultures of play: in some areas, social networks and spatial familiarity support children's independence, while in others, environmental risks and restrictive attitudes lead to greater surveillance and regulation. As a result, children's freedom to play is not evenly distributed, but reflects the specific spatial and cultural dynamics of their local environment.

The significance of digital technology in children's contemporary play patterns.

Digital technology features in nearly all children's accounts of play, though its prominence and meaning vary across age groups, settings, and individual circumstances. For many children, especially those with limited access to outdoor spaces, online gaming, social media, and screen-based activities formed an important part of their play routines—particularly during evenings and weekends.

In settings with low and medium levels of satisfaction, where children had few opportunities to play out independently, digital platforms offered an alternative space for connection and entertainment. Children described playing video games with friends online, watching YouTube, or using social media. While these activities were often solitary, they were also described as social in function—offering a way to "be with" friends when physical gathering wasn't possible. This was particularly true for children whose movement was restricted by traffic, safety concerns, or parental rules.

Among children with SEND, screen-based play—such as watching TV or using tablets—was a common part of after-school routines. However, children in these groups also mentioned imaginative and relational forms of digital play, such as caring for pets or engaging in creative online tasks, which blurred the line between leisure and therapeutic activity.

Older children in secondary school were more likely to frame digital activities as part of their regular social lives. Listening to music, texting, gaming, and scrolling through apps like Snapchat or Instagram were described as relaxing ways to "chill out" and unwind. These activities often replaced more physically active or outdoor forms of play, particularly during the winter months or in households with stricter parental oversight.

For LGBTQ and transgender young people, digital platforms sometimes offered safer or more affirming play environments than public spaces. One young person described online gaming and social media as a way to "turn off your brain for a bit"—a valuable escape from the pressures of the outside world. Digital spaces also offered continuity of friendships that might not otherwise be sustainable offline due to distance, safety concerns, or lack of local provision.

Across all groups, children were selective about what they considered "play." While digital technology was widely used, children often made clear distinctions between passive screen time and activities that felt playful, meaningful, or connected to others. This suggests that while digital play is increasingly embedded in children's lives, its value and status are shaped by how it is experienced—and by whether it offers choice, freedom, and joy.

Conclusion: what we now know about play sufficiency

This thematic analysis has deepened the local authority's understanding of children's play experiences across a diverse range of communities and settings. It confirms that children across Sandwell share a remarkably consistent view of what play means: it is about fun, freedom, connection, and doing things on their own terms. However, their ability to access these experiences is highly variable and strongly shaped by where they live, who they are, and how the environments around them are organised and governed.

The findings highlight that play sufficiency is not only a question of provision, but also of spatial

arrangements, community cultures, permission and safety. Children's time for play is constrained by school routines, adult expectations, and structured commitments. Their freedom to play outside is often limited by traffic, associated parental concern, and a lack of easily accessible playable spaces. While digital technology is a valued part of play for many, its prominence often reflects the absence of more active and social alternatives. Some children - particularly those who are disabled or neurodiverse, or who are marginalised because of identity - face extraordinary barriers to play, including social isolation and exclusion from public space.

Through this work, the local authority now has a more nuanced understanding of what enables and constrains play sufficiency, and a clearer view of how it differs by place, identity, and local culture. In response, the following strategic priorities have been identified:

1. **Improve children's experience of playing in school and during adult-run after school activities** – encourage more playful and permissive approaches to children's play in schools and after school activities, create more inclusive, open-ended and child-led opportunities for play.
2. **Improve children's opportunities for playing outside with friends after school during term time** - address the barriers that prevent children's spontaneous, peer-led outdoor play during the school week, including parental concerns and environmental conditions.
3. **Provide direct support to children experiencing extraordinary barriers to play** - identify and prioritise support for children who face multiple or compounding barriers to play, including disabled children and those experiencing social isolation.
4. **Improve children's freedom of movement and opportunities to play on residential streets by reducing the constraining effects of traffic** - explore ways to calm traffic, create safe active travel routes, and reimagine streets as places for play and community interaction.
5. **Improve parental permission for play by improving perceptions of community safety** - build community confidence through safer neighbourhood design, inclusive local initiatives, and trusted adult presence.
6. **Promote a balance between the time children spend playing on digital devices and out in the public realm** - recognise the value of digital play while increasing opportunities for social, active play in outdoor and public spaces.
7. **Protect existing times and spaces for play** - safeguard school play times, school grounds, designated play areas and public parks, and more informal playable spaces from further erosion or loss to ensure that all children retain places where they can play freely.

3. Socio-political context

3.1 Demographics

Analysis of the data held and its usefulness in terms of planning for play

Strengths

Sandwell holds a strong and wide-ranging evidence base that can support informed, targeted planning for play. The borough's Sandwell Trends platform is a well-established local intelligence

hub, offering public access to a variety of datasets sourced from national and local intelligence. It covers core themes relevant to play — including child population, deprivation, ethnicity and diversity, health and wellbeing, education and special educational needs, community safety, and access to green space.

In addition to the data presented through Sandwell Trends, the council has produced several strategic assessments that significantly strengthen the play data landscape. The Sandwell Open Space Assessment (2024) is particularly important. It includes detailed information about the quantity, accessibility, and quality of public open space and designated play areas across all six towns and at ward level. It maps both provision and deficiencies, providing a strong baseline for understanding spatial inequalities in children's access to playable environments.

Taken together, these sources offer a comprehensive view of the conditions in which children are growing up, the resources available in different neighbourhoods, and the factors shaping children's access to play — both through formal facilities and the broader public realm.

Shortfalls

While the overall picture is strong, there are key gaps that limit the usefulness of existing data for fully understanding play sufficiency.

One significant limitation is the lack of data on children's time and space for play in schools. Opportunities for informal play during the school day — including before school, break times, and lunch — are a central part of children's everyday play experience. Yet these are not systematically captured or assessed, even though they are likely to vary across schools and age groups.

Similarly, there is limited routine data on children's use of space outside designated play areas, such as amenity green space, shared residential courtyards, or local streets. These everyday spaces often support important forms of informal, active, and social play — particularly in areas with fewer formal facilities — but they are not consistently audited for their play value.

The inclusiveness of provision is also difficult to assess systematically. While data exists on the number of children with SEND, and on wider indicators of vulnerability (e.g. looked after children, young carers), there is no consistent method for assessing whether these children are able to access or enjoy the spaces available. Insights into accessibility, cultural relevance, and social inclusion are largely absent from the current data infrastructure.

There is also a lack of qualitative data to complement the quantitative sources. While some assessments include site audits and observations, there is little ongoing, borough-wide insight into children's lived experiences of play, their preferences, or the barriers they face — especially in relation to safety, autonomy, or adult permission.

Opportunities

There is considerable scope to strengthen the existing evidence base in ways that directly support strategic planning for play. One key opportunity is to embed routine data collection on school-based play time and environments, recognising the crucial role that the school day plays in shaping children's everyday access to play.

In addition, existing datasets could be enhanced through more consistent use of participatory methods, such as play mapping, peer-led research, or engagement activities with children and families. These methods can capture how children actually use different spaces — both designated and informal — and what they value in those experiences. There is also real potential to combine different datasets to guide strategic investment. For example, results from large-scale satisfaction surveys — such as those exploring children's views on local play opportunities — could be linked with spatial data on play provision, deprivation, or health inequalities to identify priority areas for action.

The existing data infrastructure also enables opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration, particularly between planning, public health, education, parks, and community safety. Shared use of data can support joint planning for child-friendly environments and integrated approaches to improving wellbeing.

Challenges

The main threat is that the strength of the data infrastructure is not fully translated into planning, investment, or design decisions. Without dedicated capacity to coordinate and apply this data, insights may remain siloed or underused.

Budget constraints also pose a threat to the sustainability of local data collection. Maintaining up-to-date datasets — especially those requiring qualitative engagement or site audits — depends on having staff time and cross-service cooperation.

In the absence of proactive strategies, there is also a risk that gaps in the evidence base will reinforce existing inequalities. For example, children who play in informal, overlooked or marginalised spaces may remain invisible to planners — and as a result, their needs may go unmet.

What the data tells us about children, childhoods and opportunities for play in Sandwell

Strengths

The statistical data available presents a clear and grounded picture of childhood in Sandwell: a borough with a significant child population, rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, and with a network of public open spaces that — in principle — offer substantial play value.

Children under 16 make up over 22% of Sandwell's population (approximately 75,900 children), and many live in densely populated neighbourhoods with access to green and open space. 97% of households are within 400 metres of some kind of public open space, according to the 2024 Open Space Assessment. While not all of this space is specifically designated for play, it includes a wide range of environments — such as parks, wooded areas, canal towpaths and amenity greens — that children regularly use for informal, active and imaginative play.

The borough also has 110 equipped play areas mapped and assessed, providing infrastructure for more structured outdoor play. In areas like West Bromwich and Wednesbury, the data shows relatively good provision of accessible, higher-quality play sites, often located near residential areas with younger populations.

Demographic and health data also support play-friendly planning. For example, population projections and ward-level child density statistics can help align investment in play with where children are — now and in the future. Similarly, data on active travel rates, school journeys, and child traffic incidents help identify where changes in the built environment could make neighbourhoods more conducive to play.

Shortfalls

The data also presents a picture of significant inequalities in children's play opportunities, often linked to wider patterns of poverty, deprivation, poor health, and environmental risk.

Sandwell is ranked among the 12 most deprived local authorities in England, and approximately 34% of children live in low-income households. These are often concentrated in areas such as Tipton, Smethwick, Rowley Regis and Oldbury — places where play provision is also lacking in either quantity, quality or accessibility. For example, some wards in Tipton and Rowley Regis have no designated play areas within a reasonable walking distance, and where provision exists, it is often of poor quality and limited in variety.

Children's health data reveals additional concerns. 41.8% of children in Year 6 are overweight or obese, and only 42% of children meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity. This suggests that for many children, the built and social environments do not support regular active play. These patterns are even more pronounced for girls and for older children, whose opportunities for play often diminish in the absence of safe, welcoming, age-appropriate spaces.

Emotional wellbeing is also a concern. The estimated prevalence of mental health disorders among 5–16-year-olds is 12.5%, higher than national averages, with older girls reporting especially low life satisfaction and high levels of anxiety. The data points to the importance of everyday play opportunities — for freedom, social connection, emotional expression — and the risks associated with children becoming increasingly disconnected from their communities and outdoor environments.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) also face barriers. 15% of school pupils receive SEN support, and 3.5% have an EHCP. Yet few play spaces in Sandwell are explicitly inclusive or designed with these children in mind. The borough's many looked after children and young carers may face additional constraints on time, freedom, or confidence to engage in play — yet their experiences are rarely visible in routine datasets.

Opportunities

The patterns revealed in the data present clear opportunities for action. Firstly, they allow the council to target investment in areas of under-provision — such as parts of Tipton, Rowley Regis, and Oldbury — where children are statistically more likely to experience poor health, economic disadvantage, and limited access to local play.

Secondly, the data supports a more inclusive, place-based approach to play planning. By layering health indicators, deprivation levels, green space access and child population density, planners can create a sharper picture of where improvements to the physical and social environment could have the most impact — not only for play, but for broader child wellbeing outcomes.

The data also supports the case for reframing play as a public health and equality issue, which can attract broader support and funding. In areas where health inequalities are most pronounced, increasing access to free, local, outdoor play could be an effective and equitable intervention.

There is also an opportunity to work with schools, health professionals, and community organisations to translate these insights into joined-up initiatives — combining play, movement, social connection and nature-based activities in ways that respond directly to the data.

Challenges

Without intervention, the data suggests that existing inequalities in children's access to play may deepen. In areas where play provision is already poor — and where families face additional pressures linked to poverty, housing, or safety concerns — the cumulative effect may be that children rarely play outside of the home, or not at all.

This is compounded by concerns about community safety, with surveys indicating that many parents and children do not feel safe using parks or public spaces after dark, particularly in urban centres and high-density housing areas. In these environments, even good provision may go unused if the surrounding conditions are hostile or unsupportive.

Children's opportunities for autonomous play are also threatened by high traffic volumes, poor pedestrian infrastructure, and the loss of informal spaces due to development. These pressures are not evenly distributed, and children in the most deprived areas are often those most exposed to environmental risk and least able to access high-quality outdoor space.

Finally, the data warns of the long-term consequences of childhoods with limited play: rising obesity, reduced physical activity, declining mental health, and social isolation. These trends are already visible in Sandwell's public health data and, without proactive, play-focused planning, are likely to intensify.

UNICEF and World Health Organisation (WHO) Play England and The Children's Play Policy Forum (UK) often highlight play deprivation as part of broader child well-being or rights assessments. Common findings from this research include limited access to safe play spaces, children in urban and low-income communities often have limited access to safe parks, playgrounds or natural play areas.

Screen Time vs. Outdoor Play: Research indicates increasing screen time correlates with less physical and imaginative play, contributing to play deprivation. Time Constraints: Data show that children's free playtime has declined significantly over recent decades due to increased academic pressures, organized activities, and safety concerns restricting outdoor play. Social Inequality: Play deprivation disproportionately affects children with disabilities, those living in poverty, or in unsafe neighbourhoods. Studies link play deprivation to increased risks of mental health issues, reduced physical fitness, social skill deficits, and poorer creativity.

Appendix C – Policy analysis provides further details of the organisational strengths weakness opportunities and threats from a policy perspective and evidence of growing support at a national and political level

3.2 Infrastructure to support play sufficiency

Sandwell is comparatively well-positioned to deliver on play sufficiency, with the continued existence of a dedicated play service standing out as a significant organisational strength. At a time when many local authorities have dismantled or substantially reduced their play and youth service offers, Sandwell's sustained investment has preserved internal expertise and operational continuity. This play service now provides the central infrastructure for coordinating activity, developing partnerships, and guiding strategy. However, this very strength can also present a risk: the existence of a specific service can reinforce the perception that play is the responsibility of a single team, rather than a shared organisational commitment.

A key finding from the research was the need to reposition play sufficiency as a whole-council responsibility. The PSA process has helped to increase interest in play across a range of departments, with many services beginning to reflect on their roles in shaping children's opportunities for play - whether through planning, regeneration, housing, public health, or community safety. Promising examples of cross-departmental integration are already emerging, such as efforts to embed playful design into regeneration projects like the Tipton Greenway. However, this momentum now needs to be sustained and translated into concrete organisational structures. Currently, collaboration on play often depends on informal relationships or one-off initiatives. To maintain progress, Sandwell will need to establish stronger, more consistent frameworks for partnership working - ones that embed play sufficiency in decision-making about land use, service design, and public space at both corporate and neighbourhood levels.

The role of the play service itself has evolved in recent years. Transitioning from a direct delivery model to a commissioning approach, the team now operates through the Go Play Sandwell partnership, which brings together a consortium of voluntary and community organisations to provide free, inclusive, and localised play opportunities across the borough. This shift has allowed officers to adopt a more developmental function—supporting quality improvement, encouraging innovation, and fostering collaboration across sectors. It has also positioned the team to lead on play sufficiency more effectively, offering a borough-wide perspective and influencing strategic direction. However, the assessment highlights the need to formalise this leadership by designating a named Play Sufficiency Lead within the team. In parallel, it is essential to preserve capacity for community development work, enabling the service to continue brokering partnerships, supporting resident-led initiatives, and embedding play in neighbourhood life.

The Go Play Sandwell partnership itself forms a cornerstone of the local infrastructure for delivering play sufficiency. Its collaborative delivery model not only increases the reach and diversity of play provision but also supports trusted relationships between families and local organisations. It provides a platform for knowledge-sharing, peer support, and quality assurance, all coordinated with oversight from the council's play service. However, the wider assessment found that voluntary and community sector engagement and funding mechanisms do not always foreground play. There is significant scope to better recognise and support informal, unstructured play activities—such as creative play sessions in libraries or board game clubs in community centres—especially in neighbourhoods where outdoor space is limited or underused.

A key opportunity identified through the assessment is to more explicitly position play sufficiency as a mechanism for delivering on Sandwell's Child Friendly Borough ambitions. Anchoring play within the governance of the Child Friendly Borough Partnership would establish a clear reporting pathway, provide strategic oversight, and embed play in a broader rights-based framework. It

would also help ensure alignment with other priority areas (such as participation, inclusion, and wellbeing) and reinforce the message that safe, accessible, and inclusive play is a defining feature of a borough that genuinely puts children first.
Ultimately, the research highlights a strong appetite for using the Play Sufficiency Assessment as a springboard for change. There is clear recognition that the findings should be shared with corporate leadership and embedded across directorates, prompting departments to reflect on how their work supports or constrains children's right to play. Moving towards a whole-system approach - where play sufficiency is not a siloed task but a shared, cross-cutting responsibility - will be essential for delivering the sustainable, inclusive, and playful environments that children in Sandwell have said they want and need.

There is currently growing national momentum around play, play sufficiency, and child-friendly neighbourhoods. A significant milestone in this movement is the publication of the Final Report of the Raising the Nation Play Commission titled "Everything to Play For: A Plan to Ensure Every Child in England Can Play". This year-long independent inquiry has made a compelling case for recognising play as critical to children's wellbeing and development, and for restoring it as a fundamental right for every child. The report provides a strategic framework for how government, local authorities, and communities can work together to embed play into planning, policy, and everyday life. Sandwell's Play Sufficiency Assessment aligns strongly with the themes and recommendations of this report and is well positioned to respond to, and benefit from, this renewed national focus.

Appendix C for further information on this.

4. Professional Domains

4.1 Workforce Development

The assessment found that Sandwell has a strong foundation for workforce development around play in the early years and school sectors, but limited opportunities for other professionals to deepen their understanding of play sufficiency and the conditions that support it. Much of the current training provision is concentrated in the early years workforce, where a well-developed programme of online and face-to-face training covers a range of play-based topics including outdoor learning, curriculum planning, and developmental theory. These training offers are accessible and inclusive, with targeted support for settings rated Inadequate or Requires Improvement, ensuring that the most in-need providers are not excluded by cost.

Engagement in training has been affected by post-pandemic staffing pressures, and uptake among out-of-school childcare providers and schools has varied. Connections with the out-of-school sector were weakened during structural changes to the Family Information Service, and while efforts are now underway to rebuild these links — including plans for play-focused bite-sized training and increased digital promotion — this remains an area of underdevelopment.

Within schools, there is currently no system-wide training offer on play, though growing numbers of primary schools are engaging with the OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) programme.
OPAL mentors reported significant shifts in school culture, staff understanding, and children's experiences in participating schools. The programme supports whole-school change, including lunchtime staff training, space redesign, and a move away from adult control toward child-led,

inclusive play. However, access to OPAL is currently uneven and reliant on schools' ability to secure external funding, such as from public health or sports premiums. Many schools remain unclear about eligibility, and inflexible job descriptions (e.g. "lunchtime supervisor" instead of "playworker") make recruitment and retention more difficult.

Beyond these sectors, the assessment found limited formal opportunities for professionals in planning, public health, community safety, neighbourhoods, housing, or green spaces to access training on play or play sufficiency. Many professionals across these domains interact with children's environments or freedoms on a daily basis but have not received training that equips them to understand children's right to play or how to design and manage for playability. This knowledge gap contributes to the risk that decisions in one part of the system unintentionally constrain play in another.

In response to this gap, the local authority commissioned a bespoke professional development course — Understanding Play Sufficiency — delivered by Ludicology. The course brought together officers, policy leads, and partners from a range of services over three online sessions. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. The course used systems thinking tools and conceptual frameworks such as response-ability, spatial justice, and collective wisdom, encouraging participants to reflect on how their own work affects play. Participants reported that the course helped them develop a shared understanding of play, become more attentive to children's lived experiences, and recognise where their professional responsibilities intersect with play sufficiency. This model of training offers a valuable blueprint for future workforce development — particularly for professionals outside the traditional play and childcare sectors.

The assessment also highlighted the importance of reaching parents and carers, who often act as gatekeepers to children's play. Programmes like Making it Real, which uses outdoor walks and literacy to encourage park use, were cited as successful examples of family engagement that support both learning and play. Similarly, schools such as Victoria Park Primary were praised for creating inclusive environments that welcome families into play, supporting both community cohesion and child development.

Equity and inclusion were noted as persistent challenges. While play-based training content often includes general inclusion principles, there is a need for more targeted training that equips practitioners to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities, those with neurodivergent profiles, and children from different cultural or religious backgrounds. Practitioners emphasised that play provision needs to be flexible and responsive to different rhythms and responsibilities within families and communities.

Looking forward, participants in the assessment called for play to be embedded more fully in cross-sector workforce development agendas. Play should not be confined to education or early years, but treated as a public health, neighbourhood development, and planning issue. There is also potential to develop shared training content for elected members, communications teams, and corporate decision-makers, supporting a more consistent narrative and understanding of children's right to play across the whole council.

The creation of a coordinated and inclusive training strategy — supported by cross-departmental buy-in and accessible to a broad range of staff — could serve as a cornerstone for embedding play sufficiency across systems. Building on the success of the Understanding Play Sufficiency course, Sandwell is well placed to lead the way in creating a play-aware professional workforce that

is responsive to children's needs and committed to building more playful neighbourhoods and services.

See Appendix D for further information on Strategic Partnerships for Play.

4.2 Publicity and Marketing

The Play Sufficiency Assessment has highlighted the strategic importance of communications in shaping public understanding of children's right to play and reinforcing the Council's commitment to play sufficiency across services and communities. Sandwell Council is well positioned in this regard, with a broad range of communication channels already in use — including stakeholder newsletters, GOV deliveries to residents, and internal communications systems — which can be activated to promote play-related messages. These tools offer a valuable platform for disseminating the PSA's findings and reinforcing the case for action.

A key strength identified in the research was the alignment between the communications team and the Child Friendly Sandwell programme. The team sits on the Child Friendly Sandwell board and is committed to ensuring that messaging around play sufficiency is embedded within a broader narrative about children's rights. This joined-up approach avoids fragmentation and helps present play not as an isolated agenda, but as a core part of the borough's ambition to become a more inclusive and child-centred place.

There is also a strong commitment to inclusive messaging. The council's recent work to recognise "care-experienced" as a protected characteristic provides a valuable example of how communications can reflect lived experience and promote inclusive values. This approach — developed in collaboration with young people and Sandwell Children's Trust — demonstrates a wider willingness to co-produce content and ensure that diverse voices are represented in strategic communications. The PSA presents a further opportunity to apply this model, using children's insights and lived experiences to shape how play is framed in public discourse.

However, the assessment also found that more could be done to target communications effectively and consistently. Participants noted that the impact of messages depends heavily on how well they are tailored to specific audiences — including residents, elected members, professionals, and community partners. While broad messages may work for general promotion, the complexity of play sufficiency calls for more nuanced storytelling. A dedicated online hub was suggested as a way to house detailed information about play sufficiency, enabling deeper engagement, clearer signposting to services, and the sharing of practical examples and case studies.

There is currently no indication that council communications have directly undermined the right to play. However, participants acknowledged the need for continued reflection and coordination to ensure consistency across departments. This includes avoiding mixed messaging — for example, celebrating play in one context while restricting it in another through signage or enforcement. Strengthening internal messaging around play sufficiency could help to embed a more cohesive approach across services.

The role of communications in challenging negative perceptions of children's presence in public space was another theme raised during the assessment. Concerns persist that children's play is often misinterpreted as antisocial behaviour, particularly in parks, streets, and communal areas. Communications campaigns could play a powerful role in reframing these perceptions —

presenting children as active citizens with rights, rather than as potential problems. This approach aligns with wider public health and safeguarding goals, promoting the benefits of outdoor play for physical and mental wellbeing, resilience, and community connection.

Participants also noted the value of positive, human-centred storytelling in promoting play. Rather than focusing solely on provision or risk, communications can highlight how play contributes to children's friendships, emotional wellbeing, family life, and sense of belonging. Examples of inclusive provision, neighbourhood success stories, or youth-led initiatives could be used to promote a sense of shared ownership and civic pride.

In conclusion, the research points to a strong foundation and a clear willingness within the communications team to support the goals of the PSA. With careful targeting, inclusive storytelling, and alignment with the Child Friendly Sandwell brand, communications can play a vital role in raising awareness, shifting perceptions, and helping to embed a culture that values and protects children's right to play. The challenge moving forward is to ensure that messaging is consistent, strategic, and visible — not just during the assessment process, but as part of ongoing efforts to make play a recognised and celebrated part of everyday life in Sandwell.

4.3 The built and natural environment

Planning

The Local Development Plan sets a clear ambition for housing growth across Sandwell, and this aligns with wider strategic goals around regeneration and development. However, there are tensions when it comes to ensuring that children's opportunities for play are embedded within the spatial planning framework. Professionals involved in focus groups raised concerns that open space and play were not always sufficiently prioritised when new housing schemes are brought forward. For example, a significant challenge in delivering adequate play provision in Sandwell relates to land-based constraints. Viability is a key issue, as many sites are affected by high levels of contamination coupled with relatively low house prices. These factors create financial disincentives for developers to provide dedicated play areas within new developments.

Moreover, the availability of sufficiently large sites is limited, reducing opportunities to secure formal play provision through planning processes. Despite these limitations, the council remains committed to promoting natural surveillance, connectivity, and informal play opportunities wherever feasible within developments, ensuring that play considerations remain integral to site design.

Some participants flagged the need for a more consistent application of planning gain mechanisms (e.g. Section 106 contributions) to support play infrastructure, particularly in areas experiencing demographic growth or increased child populations. There was also a view that spatial audits and field visits—already used in the play sufficiency assessment—should be embedded into routine planning and design processes. These could help planners and developers to better understand the lived experiences of children in different neighbourhoods and respond with more tailored solutions.

The PSA interviews revealed a growing interest among planning professionals in play-friendly design but also highlighted some key gaps in policy and practice. Although some officers were aware of children's right to play under Article 31 of the UNCRC, most had not previously

encountered this framing. As a result, play is not consistently embedded in local design codes or planning guidance. Engagement with children tends to be limited to specific consultation exercises rather than forming part of a systematic approach to child impact assessment.

Encouragingly, professionals expressed strong support for moving beyond a reliance on fixed equipment. There was recognition that designated play areas, whilst valuable, can unintentionally restrict access to narrow age groups, for example excluding teenagers. Instead, participants advocated for inclusive, multifunctional environments with playful features that encourage intergenerational use — such as grass mounds, boulders, natural surfacing, and places to sit, gather, or explore. These features are viewed as lower-cost, lower-maintenance, and more sustainable than traditional kit, and can be integrated into wider open space strategies.

The session also surfaced a desire to use design codes where feasible and viable and provided it does not conflict with existing planning policy such as the Local Plan and planning frameworks more effectively to support play. There was interest in retrofitting small, overlooked urban spaces — including ginnels, alleyways, and informal cut-throughs — to make them safer, greener, and more playable. International models, including those from the Netherlands and the North of England, were referenced as inspiration. Officers also gave examples of good practice already underway in Sandwell, such as the Brandhall consultation and Friar Park design code, which seek to connect homes, schools, and green space more effectively.

At the same time, several structural constraints were identified. Land availability across Sandwell is limited, and the scale of new development is often too small to support the kind of large-scale, master planned environments where play infrastructure can be more easily incorporated. Developers are often more focused on meeting core requirements for highways, drainage, or housing mix, and play may be deprioritised unless explicitly required by policy. The Sandwell Residential Design Guide promotes the concept of "living streets" and "home zones," where streets are designed as integrated spaces that prioritize pedestrians, cyclists, and overall quality of life for residents and users. However, the practical implementation of these principles often faces challenges due to constraints such as viability concerns and highway regulations. Certain areas, including parts of the Lyng estate, have begun to adopt this approach to street design. There is potential to further enhance this model through targeted retrofitting of existing streets and new street designs that encourage a more user-friendly, community-oriented environment. Maintenance costs also influence decisions about whether to install formal play areas, with the example cited of £600 per swing seat leading to the removal of equipment in some cases.

Professionals acknowledged the need for cultural change as well as technical solutions. Children's use of public space is still often interpreted through a lens of risk or nuisance, with reports of antisocial behaviour arising even when children are simply gathering or playing. There was agreement that public narratives must shift to embrace the idea that noise, movement, and energy are signs of a healthy neighbourhood. Supporting this cultural shift will require leadership, communications, and more consistent alignment between planning, community safety, and public health.

Housing

Sandwell's Housing Strategy and the newly published Housing Asset Management and Compliance Strategy (2025–2030) both include strong commitments to creating safe, sustainable, and inclusive neighbourhoods — all of which are critical to children's everyday opportunities

for play. The local authority's housing stock includes a diverse range of estates and green spaces that could support children's play close to home. However, many of these spaces are currently underused or shaped by restrictive adult perceptions, rather than being designed with children's rights or experiences in mind.

Focus groups with housing officers confirmed that these teams are influential in shaping the physical and cultural environments in which children live. Participants expressed a strong willingness to embed play more explicitly in their work and saw the Play Sufficiency Assessment as a useful prompt to reframe how children are included in housing policy, estate management, and community engagement.

One of the clearest opportunities identified was to make better use of the open and communal spaces on housing estates. While these areas are not always formally designated for play, they are some of the most accessible and visible places where children can play safely and independently. Officers supported the idea of working in partnership with tenants and residents' associations to animate and protect these spaces - whether through informal landscaping, play-focused events, or supporting resident-led initiatives such as play streets. There was also interest in revisiting earlier examples of partnership with community organisations that delivered play training and estate-based engagement work.

The PSA interviews revealed that children are not consistently recognised as stakeholders in housing policies, despite being a significant part of the tenant population. Officers welcomed the suggestion that children's views should be more systematically included in tenant consultation and engagement - for example, through events like the annual tenants' conference or thematic workshops on community safety and neighbourhood improvements. This was seen not only as a way of strengthening the rights of children to be heard, but also as a practical route to reducing intergenerational tensions and fostering greater community understanding.

A recurring theme was the tension between adult complaints and children's right to play. Residents frequently report groups of children gathering on estates, and these reports often lead to the installation of "No Ball Games" signs or other restrictive measures. Officers acknowledged that such responses are not always evidence-based and can send negative messages to children about their place in the community. There was agreement that a borough-wide review of signage, combined with public communications to promote tolerance and understanding, could help foster more welcoming neighbourhood cultures.

Professionals also noted that estate design itself can limit opportunities for play. Poor sightlines, fencing, lack of natural surveillance, and inaccessible routes all contribute to spaces being perceived as unsafe or unfriendly - even when they are technically open. There was support for design guidance and officer training that encourages play-friendly design, including low-level interventions such as seating, open boundaries, and the reintroduction of green buffers or planted edges that double as informal play spaces.

A further issue identified in the housing focus group was the influence of housing allocations on play opportunities. For example, whether a family is offered a home with a garden, or within walking distance of a safe green space, can have a major impact on children's day-to-day play experiences. Officers suggested reviewing how access to outdoor space is considered in allocation decisions, and how the wider neighbourhood environment (including play facilities and community infrastructure) could be better factored into housing policy.

Finally, professionals spoke candidly about the need to challenge legacy practices and institutional assumptions. While there is a long tradition of housing teams responding quickly to complaints from adult residents, this can sometimes lead to reactive decisions that are detrimental to children. Officers supported the idea of embedding play sufficiency into Equality Impact Assessments and policy review tools, making it easier to assess how decisions will affect children's rights and wellbeing. There was also strong interest in connecting housing's Good Neighbour policies with the broader objectives of Child Friendly Sandwell, ensuring that messages around mutual respect explicitly include children's right to be seen, heard, and active in shared spaces.

Traffic and Transport

Children's freedom of movement—particularly their ability to play on or near residential streets—was identified through the Play Sufficiency Assessment as one of the most pressing concerns raised by children themselves. While there is strategic alignment between road safety, public health, and active travel agendas, current operational policies often constrain children's ability to move and play independently.

One of the most significant barriers identified is the local authority's requirement for £5 million in public liability insurance to temporarily close a street for play. Professionals described this as disproportionate and out of step with practice in other local authorities. It presents a serious deterrent to residents who wish to enable community-led street play and reinforces a culture of risk aversion. Participants strongly supported a review of this policy, alongside the development of clearer, low-barrier processes for play street schemes.

The PSA process also highlighted contradictions between local priorities. For example, while active travel and physical activity are promoted through school transport strategies and public health initiatives, children are often prohibited from scootering or cycling near school gates due to restrictive signage. Similarly, "No Ball Games" signs remain commonplace in housing estates and cul-de-sacs — spaces that could otherwise support safe and spontaneous play. These mixed messages illustrate the need for more integrated policymaking, where transport, education, and public health departments work together to support children's everyday movement and activity.

The potential to align play sufficiency priorities with active travel corridors and school streets was also noted. Active travel infrastructure — including well-connected walking and cycling routes, traffic-calmed streets, and safe crossings — plays a critical role in enabling children's freedom of movement, both for purposeful journeys and for spontaneous play. When designed with children in mind, these routes not only support independent travel to school or local amenities but also double as playable environments where children can gather, explore, and socialise. Participants in the PSA process highlighted the opportunity to plan active travel networks in ways that connect homes, schools, parks, and green spaces, thereby opening up a wider landscape for play. Embedding play sufficiency principles into the design and implementation of these routes could help normalise children's presence in public space and make play an everyday part of children's journeys — rather than something confined to designated times or locations.

Professionals emphasised the importance of using PSA spatial audit data to guide such interventions. This includes identifying neighbourhoods where children experience limited freedom of movement and targeting those areas for street-level improvements such as traffic calming, active travel infrastructure, or community activation.

Green Spaces and Parks

The Parks and Green Spaces team are perhaps the most directly associated with play provision, although their work is far broader in scope. Sandwell maintains an extensive network of public open spaces, including over 2,000 hectares across a variety of typologies. The 2024 Public Open Space Assessment confirms that while overall provision of green space is generous, the distribution and quality of designated play provision is far less equitable.

Only 0.11 hectares of equipped play space per 1,000 residents are available across the borough, which is significantly below recommended levels. The assessment notes particularly low provision in Tipton, Rowley Regis, Oldbury and Smethwick. Quality issues are also prevalent: around half of formal play areas fall below a 'good' quality threshold, and many lack inclusive features for disabled children.

However, there is a clear ambition within the Parks team to take a more strategic, data-led approach to managing the play estate. Officers described a plan to rationalise provision - moving towards a smaller number of high-quality sites that are well maintained and more responsive to local need. While this poses some risks, especially if not carefully planned and communicated, the intention is to ensure public resources are used effectively and equitably.

Whilst a rationalisation of designated play areas may seem incongruent with the findings from research with children—particularly given that proximity and variety of spaces is a pressing issue—this was not seen as meaning a loss of playable spaces. Rather, it reflects a shift in emphasis away from maintaining a high number of fixed equipment "destination" spaces for play and toward creating a wider range of lower-maintenance, landscaped playable spaces that are closer to children's homes. This approach offers an opportunity to deliver more flexible, intergenerational, and inclusive spaces that support everyday play, particularly in areas where formal provision is limited.

Perhaps most importantly, the Parks team expressed a strong understanding of the value of informal and intergenerational play. Discussions highlighted the role of landscape features—like banks, hillocks and natural elements - in creating 'play affordances' that can be used creatively and inclusively. The team recognised that play is not limited to designated areas, and emphasised the importance of designing parks as active, engaging spaces for all.

Efforts are also underway to make it easier for community groups and organisations to animate green spaces through activities and events, removing bureaucratic barriers to programming and permitting. This could significantly enhance the playable value of public spaces, especially in areas where cultural or social barriers restrict children's independent play.

Neighbourhood Regeneration

The Regeneration Strategy sets out ambitions to improve neighbourhood environments and enhance quality of life across the borough. Officers involved in regeneration and neighbourhood services acknowledged that these ambitions are well aligned with the play sufficiency agenda but also identified a number of tensions.

In particular, the drive to meet housing targets and address physical regeneration needs sometimes overshadows the importance of designing for children and families. Professionals

expressed concern that play is not always recognised as a core element of community wellbeing and resilience, despite its links to health, social cohesion, and perceptions of safety.

However, there was strong interest in using the findings of the Play Sufficiency Assessment to inform regeneration priorities and shape a more child-friendly approach to neighbourhood planning. Officers suggested that the PSA could be integrated into wider "Sandwell Story" workstreams and shared across the Intelligence Group to influence place-based strategies more effectively.

Participants also highlighted the potential for ward profiles and neighbourhood working models to play a more active role in shaping play environments. They saw opportunities to involve residents directly in the development and stewardship of local play spaces, including through Tenants and Residents Associations and voluntary sector partnerships.

The key challenge identified was cultural: shifting attitudes so that play is recognised as a legitimate and valuable use of public space. Participants felt that changing this narrative - particularly among adult residents, councillors, and decision-makers - would be essential if play is to be genuinely embedded in the future of Sandwell's neighbourhoods.

4.4 Education, health, social care and community safety services

Education

Schools remain a vital component in the statutory infrastructure that shapes children's daily access to play. Through the OPAL programme and initiatives like Edgmond Hall residentials, we see examples of schools creating more playful and relationally rich environments, especially during lunchtimes and outdoor periods. The presence of trained play coordinators, better use of outdoor environments, and structured risk-benefit approaches are all improving the school day for those settings that engage with such programmes. However, this picture is not consistent across the borough.

One of the most significant constraints is that lunchtime and breaktime play are still undervalued in many schools. Play is often framed as a reward for good behaviour, and withdrawal of playtime is still used as a common sanction, despite being in direct conflict with the child's right to play. Feedback from the OPAL focus group suggested that while many heads are supportive in principle, they face structural and cultural constraints—particularly around staffing, safeguarding concerns, and budget pressures—that restrict their capacity to improve play provision.

The Sandwell Local Area Partnership Inclusion Plan (SEND and Alternative Provision) brings this into sharper relief, especially for children with additional needs. A significant proportion of the children in Sandwell require differentiated support to access play, yet inconsistent identification of SEND needs, delays in EHCP processes, and variable implementation of inclusive approaches in mainstream schools all create barriers to play for disabled children. The Plan outlines promising workstreams for co-production, early intervention, and inclusion—but many of these are still in development and need to be fully embedded at school level to make an impact on daily play opportunities.

Access to school grounds outside teaching hours also remains patchy. While some schools engage with Opening School Facilities funding or allow community use of their grounds, this is not

widespread. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy and feedback from public health officers suggest there is potential to integrate schools more fully into the local play infrastructure—but only if regulatory, liability, and workforce barriers can be overcome.

Public Health

Health services in Sandwell are increasingly recognising the relevance of play to public health priorities, and there are encouraging signs of integration with play-focused initiatives. The Sandwell Health and Wellbeing Strategy takes a holistic, place-based approach to health inequalities, explicitly recognising the importance of emotional wellbeing, green space access, and children's everyday experiences. Public Health officers already fund or support several play-related projects, including junior park runs, cycling schemes, and the OPAL rollout.

The Better Mental Health Programme is particularly aligned with the strategic priorities for play. It includes projects tackling bullying, promoting parenting confidence, and supporting young people's social connection—all of which have implications for children's playfulness and peer relationships. The programme's emphasis on asset-based, community-centred approaches resonates strongly with the findings from the play sufficiency research.

However, there remains a tendency for play to be instrumentalised within health services—as a route to physical activity or a mental health outcome—rather than recognised as a right or valued as intrinsically important. Furthermore, while health officers understand the developmental value of play, this is not yet embedded across all clinical or commissioning pathways, particularly in areas such as CAMHS, paediatrics, or primary care.

In the context of SEND and inclusion, health services have an important role in enabling children with complex needs to access play. Yet feedback suggests that children still face long waits for speech and language therapy, autism diagnosis, or occupational therapy—all of which limit their participation in settings where play occurs. The SEND and Inclusion Plan outlines clear targets for reducing waiting times and improving coordination, including commitments to more timely advice for EHCPs. If delivered, these will remove significant structural barriers to play for many children.

Social Care

Social care's contribution to play sufficiency is particularly visible in the context of looked-after children and children with extraordinary barriers to play. The Corporate Parenting Strategy sets out a strong commitment to promoting wellbeing, participation, and aspirations for care-experienced young people, and this is echoed in the focus groups involving residential centres such as Edgmond Hall.

The ethos of these centres prioritises play as both developmental and therapeutic, with staff explicitly carving out time and space for children to play informally, especially in nature-rich environments. Care-experienced children are offered placements funded by the Virtual School, and the team works proactively to support children with SEND and those from specialist schools. These practices are well aligned with strategic priorities around protected time for play, inclusion, and emotional wellbeing.

However, there are wider challenges. Access to residential play experiences still depends on funding, staff willingness, and parental confidence. While efforts are made to subsidise

participation, professionals noted that cost remains a barrier, especially when parents are more inclined to pay for commercial activities like theme parks rather than outdoor residentials. Furthermore, secondary schools often frame residentials around academic catch-up, diminishing opportunities for extended, child-led play.

Importantly, the Corporate Parenting Strategy includes a commitment to increasing access to leisure passes, play services, and reward-based activities—but these are not yet consistently taken up, and awareness remains low among carers and families. There is potential to better embed play sufficiency into the local offer for children in care and to ensure that youth voice on play and space is given more strategic weight.

Community Safety

The intersection of community safety and children's freedom to play emerged as a critical domain in both focus group discussions and the Safer Sandwell Partnership Community Safety Strategy. Perceptions of danger, especially around youth disorder, knife crime, and anti-social behaviour are key factors in whether parents allow children to play outside. This is especially true in more urbanised and deprived parts of the borough, where visibility of policing and access to safe, inclusive spaces are lower.

Professionals working in community safety acknowledged a disconnect between actual and perceived risks, particularly around young people's presence in public spaces. Detached youth workers programmes funded through community safety funding and violence reduction partnership funding provided by the West Midlands Office of Police Crime Commissioner play a vital role in bridging this gap in targeted locations, reassuring residents, diffusing conflict, and supporting young people in their use of public space. However, these programmes are funding dependent and are reactive, being deployed in hotspot areas and not evenly distributed across the borough in a more preventative way.

The Community Safety Strategy commits to trauma-informed approaches, early intervention, and the embedding of protective behaviours into school and community settings. It also includes place-based pilots like the Bearwood and West Bromwich's Safer Streets programmes, which involved detached youth work, education, mentoring, and the promotion of safer public environments. These pilot initiatives offer clear opportunities to increase children's independent access to play spaces if replicated or expanded.

At the same time, there are institutional practices that still constrain play such as overuse of no ball game signs on green spaces or the imposition of restrictive public liability requirements on play street events. These approaches reflect a tension between expectations of residents in relation to community safety and children's right to public space. The challenge is not only to align these agendas but also to shift wider cultural narratives that view children's presence in public as inherently problematic.

4.5 Play, leisure and recreation services

Playwork and Community Play Services

Neighbourhood-based play provision in Sandwell is primarily delivered through the Go Play Sandwell partnership — a consortium of voluntary sector organisations commissioned by the local

authority. This partnership provides free after-school and holiday play sessions for 50 weeks per year under a contractual arrangement with Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.

Provision spans all wards across the borough's six towns, offering sessions in parks, community venues, and via mobile units. This delivery model upholds children's rights to access play opportunities close to home and is particularly valued in neighbourhoods with limited access to formal play provision.

In addition to the core Go Play service, the Council supports smaller-scale, hyper-local voluntary and community sector (VCS) initiatives through the Creating a Playable Sandwell grant funding programme. These grants help expand local access to play in areas where need is particularly acute.

Professionals consistently highlight the strengths of the playwork approach adopted by these services. This model is characterised by responsiveness to children's needs, a strong emphasis on child-led play, and the development of trusting relationships. It is especially beneficial for children who face additional barriers to accessing play — including those living in poverty, experiencing social isolation, or living with disabilities.

Despite its strengths, sustainability remains a key concern. Many of the organisations delivering these services are reliant on external funding sources, while demand continues to grow across the borough. The Go Play Sandwell website reflects a clear commitment to inclusive, community-based provision but also acknowledges current limitations in capacity — with sessions in high-need areas frequently oversubscribed.

Youth Services

Youth services in Sandwell operate both centre-based and detached models across the 6 towns, including 2 dedicated youth facilities focusing on the arts and outdoor education.

The Service focuses on providing young people with safe places to go, and someone trusted to engage with, and positive things to do, with an emphasis on wellbeing and personal and social development.
Detached youth workers are seen as critical in building relationships with young people in public spaces, addressing anti-social behaviour concerns, and supporting young people's sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods.

Professionals note that youth services play an important role in improving parental permission for play by providing a visible, trusted adult presence. However, while demand for services remains high, partners work creatively to maximise capacity, with ongoing efforts to address variations in access. The Youth Service also supports mobile provision, including youth buses, which have been identified as particularly valuable in reaching young people in underserved areas.

Youth work is also seen as a vital contributor to community safety outcomes, creating safer environments for play and gathering, though this is often reactive and dependent on community safety funding priorities.

The Service also provides targeted support to young people that are socially isolated, helping them to develop confidence and self-esteem to be able to engage with universal youth provision.

In addition, there is specific provision for SEND young people to engage in targeted support as well as engaging in the main youth offer.

Leisure and Recreation Partnerships

Partnerships with voluntary sector organisations are central to Sandwell's provision of leisure and recreation opportunities for children and young people. Programmes such as the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) initiative provide valuable play and recreation opportunities during school holidays, reaching children eligible for free school meals.

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Young People's Corporate Plan both highlight commitments to promoting access to public spaces, maintaining green flag parks, and creating new spaces for play. However, access to school grounds outside of teaching hours remains inconsistent, despite recognition of this as a significant opportunity to expand community-based play provision.

Strategic work is underway to better coordinate these offers, but challenges remain in ensuring consistent communication with families, promoting existing opportunities, and supporting organisations delivering play through adequate monitoring and funding mechanisms.

Inclusive and Targeted Play Provision

There is widespread recognition across Sandwell's play and community development services of the importance of inclusive play provision. The Children and Young People's Engagement Strategy and feedback from play providers highlight concerns that children with disabilities, LGBTQ+ children, and those with other protected characteristics often rely more heavily on digital play due to barriers in the physical environment.

There are examples of good practice, such as play sessions targeted at children with SEND and the adaptation of community sessions to support inclusion. However, many professionals identified a need for greater investment in spaces that are designed with inclusion in mind, moving beyond fixed equipment to more flexible, landscape-led play environments.

Work is also underway to promote the role of play in fostering social connections across diverse groups, recognising that play enables children to form friendships beyond school settings and across community divides. Embedding this approach within future play strategies and planning processes is seen as essential for delivering on the borough's wider equality and cohesion objectives.

5. The way forward

5.1 Conclusion and strategic priorities

This assessment has confirmed that while many children in Sandwell report positively about their opportunities to play, a significant number continue to face constraints that compromise their right to play. The survey findings show that one in four Year 5 children are dissatisfied with their opportunities for play, rising to nearly half of Year 9 children and the overwhelming majority of parents. Particularly troubling is the high percentage of children who are not allowed to play

outside independently and who rely heavily on adults to access places where they can play. These limitations point to a wider cultural and structural issue: children's freedom to play is increasingly curtailed by concerns about safety, the dominance of traffic, and a lack of accessible, welcoming neighbourhood environments.

This situation presents a pressing public health challenge. Children's play is not a peripheral concern—it is central to their wellbeing, healthy development, and social inclusion. The erosion of everyday, spontaneous play is likely to exacerbate physical inactivity, social isolation, and mental health concerns, especially among those who already face extraordinary barriers, such as disabled children or those experiencing marginalisation.

Framing play sufficiency as a principle—not merely a goal—offers a powerful way to evaluate how well Sandwell is fulfilling children's right to play. This principle challenges adults to consider not just the presence of play spaces or provision, but the broader ecological conditions that either support or constrain children's time, space, and permission for play. It positions play as a matter of spatial justice and social equity, demanding coordinated, cross-sectoral action.

The strength of this assessment lies in both its depth and breadth. It has brought together a robust body of evidence, involving over 2,000 children, parents, professionals, and community partners. It has triangulated large-scale survey data with rich, place-based qualitative research, and analysed this through the lens of rights, inclusion, and lived experience. This provides Sandwell with a strong foundation for action, backed by a wide base of cross-departmental support.

Nevertheless, the assessment also reveals that much more needs to be done to embed consideration of play across the planning and delivery of council services. Play remains too often siloed or treated as a discretionary issue, rather than as a central concern for neighbourhood planning, public health, education, housing, and community development. Realising the ambition of play sufficiency will require a cultural and organisational shift, with sustained commitment from senior leaders and alignment across policy agendas.

To support this shift, the following seven strategic priorities have been identified as neighbourhood-level actions that reflect the issues surfaced through research with children and families:

- **Improve children's experience of playing in school and during adult-run after school activities** – Promote more playful and permissive approaches within school environments.
- **Improve children's opportunities for playing outside with friends after school during term time** – Address environmental and social barriers to spontaneous outdoor play.
- **Provide direct support to children experiencing extraordinary barriers to play** – Prioritise inclusive practices and targeted interventions.
- **Improve children's freedom of movement and opportunities to play on residential streets by reducing the constraining effects of traffic** – Promote safer, more child-friendly street design.
- **Improve parental permission for play by improving perceptions of community safety** – Build trust through community development and safer public environments.
- **Promote a balance between the time children spend playing on digital devices and out in the public realm** – Create more appealing alternatives to screen-based leisure.

- **Protect existing times and spaces for play** – Safeguard playtime in schools and public access to parks, green spaces, and informal places for play.

To make these neighbourhood priorities possible, the following four organisational priorities must also be addressed:

- **Establish and maintain high-level commitment to the principle of play sufficiency**, ensuring that the process of assessing and securing play sufficiency is central to delivering Sandwell's Child Friendly Borough vision.
- **Develop a cross-cutting and shared responsibility for play sufficiency**, embedding children's right to play across the planning and delivery of council services and work streams.
- **Improve alignment between play sufficiency and other strategic agendas at a policy level**, making connections more explicit and promoting the importance of play to the wellbeing of children, families, and communities.
- **Develop a neighbourhood-level and collaborative approach to planning for children's play** – Embed play into local decision-making and regeneration initiatives.

5.2 Recommended actions

The following recommended actions have been identified to support delivery of Sandwell's play sufficiency strategic priorities. These actions prioritise cost-neutral approaches that can be implemented using the council's existing staff capacity, infrastructure, and partnerships.

Establish and maintain high-level commitment to the principle of play sufficiency

- Position the process of assessing and securing play sufficiency as a delivery mechanism for Sandwell's Child Friendly Borough ambitions. Establish clear reporting lines through the Child Friendly Borough Partnership, using this structure to provide strategic oversight, cross-sector coordination, and accountability.
- Agree and monitor key performance indicators (KPIs) for play sufficiency based on the identified drivers of satisfaction. These KPIs should be used to inform and evaluate interventions at a neighbourhood level and be considered alongside health data to build a fuller picture of children's wellbeing at a localised level.
- Repeat the borough-wide play sufficiency satisfaction survey on a triennial basis as a mechanism for tracking change over time and comparing experiences across communities, age groups, and children with different characteristics.
- Produce a triennial play sufficiency assessment to evaluate and report on progress in terms of securing play sufficiency across the county borough. This should include collating research evidence produced over the previous three years, sharing examples of good practice, and enabling directorates to reflect on how their work has contributed to play sufficiency.
- Use the recommendations from this play sufficiency assessment to develop a 12 month play sufficiency action plan (to be redeveloped on an annual basis) based on the findings and recommendations of the play sufficiency assessment, prioritising those actions that will have greatest strategic influence and that are deliverable within the local authority's financial and human resources.
- Ensure the PSA findings are formally presented during Cabinet reporting and annual service

and financial planning processes, highlighting their relevance to cross-cutting themes such as wellbeing, inclusion, and community resilience.

- Expand the role of corporate performance monitoring to include specific review of how different departments contribute to play sufficiency. Where play is underrepresented in business plans or performance data, prompt directorates to reflect and build new links with other services to address the gap.
- Deliver internal briefings and awareness sessions for council officers and elected members to deepen understanding of play sufficiency and encourage shared responsibility.
- Host multi-agency conferences or learning events on play sufficiency, exploring how different professional contexts (e.g. schools, housing, public health, transport) can contribute to improving conditions for play.
- Support communications campaigns that challenge negative perceptions of children in public spaces, reinforcing play as a visible, valued and essential part of everyday neighbourhood life.

Develop a cross-cutting and shared responsibility for play sufficiency

- Formally designate the current Play Service Manager as the Play Sufficiency Lead, with responsibility for overseeing the delivery of Sandwell's play sufficiency action plan. This lead role should be supported by a small internal development team to coordinate research, policy integration, and community engagement.
- Establish a cross-departmental play network to facilitate collaboration between services whose work impacts children's time, space, and permission for play. This network should provide a forum for sharing data, coordinating action, and embedding play sufficiency into mainstream planning processes.
- Use the play sufficiency network to share findings from further play-based research with children and examples of place-based planning for play - thereby further developing the collective knowledge and experience of play sufficiency across the council.
- Continue investment in the Go Play Sandwell partnership as a key delivery vehicle for play sufficiency, while supporting its further development as a space for collaboration, quality improvement, and peer learning among providers.

Improve alignment between play sufficiency and other strategic agendas at a policy level

- Reframe play sufficiency as a core element of public health, spatial justice and social inclusion, rather than an optional or recreational add-on.
- Develop a play charter or position statement setting out Sandwell's shared understanding of play sufficiency and its commitment to children's right to play. This document should be endorsed corporately and offered for sign-up by external partners, schools, and community organisations.
- Reinforce the thematic outcomes model used in the Council Plan by encouraging directorates to collaborate on play sufficiency as a shared priority and to articulate their contribution clearly in planning documents. Use this approach to highlight interdependencies and reduce the risk of play falling between departmental remits.
- Ensure that future strategy updates across sectors (including planning, housing, regeneration,

transport, health and education) include explicit references to play sufficiency and the role of play in supporting children's wellbeing, rights and holistic development. Strengthen cross-strategy alignment by linking play sufficiency to wider outcomes, such as community safety and cohesion and active travel.

- Ensure that planning policies, neighbourhood regeneration and transport strategies incorporate play-friendly design principles, promoting low-traffic environments, easily accessible green space, and 'play on the way' infrastructure.
- Embed play sufficiency goals into the emerging strategy to rationalise fixed play areas, ensuring that closures are accompanied by investment in alternative local, lower-maintenance, landscaped spaces with strong play value.
- Embed playwork in strategic thinking and service planning, recognising the strategic and operational roles of playwork in improving conditions for play. Link play activation work to wider wellbeing and community development goals, such as tackling isolation, improving mental health, and strengthening neighbourly relations.
- Finalise the development of the new integrated impact assessment toolkit, ensuring it includes clear prompts and guidance around children's right to play and play sufficiency. Train officers across directorates to use the tool effectively and consistently at the earliest stages of policy development and decision-making.
- Review and amend the current requirement for £5 million public liability insurance for temporary street closures for play. This threshold is a major barrier to community-led play streets and is inconsistent with practice elsewhere in the UK.
- Pilot a simplified, resident-led Play Street application process, supported by the council, to encourage safe, localised play on quiet residential roads.
- Align Health and Safety policies with a risk-benefit approach to children's play, supporting reasonable and well-informed decision making, that balances adult's duty of care with the benefits of children being afforded freedom to play.

Develop a neighbourhood-level and collaborative approach to planning for children's play

- Coordinate a borough-wide review of playable spaces, led jointly by Parks, Planning, and Housing, to map existing provision (both formal and informal) and identify deficiencies and opportunities.
- Audit green and incidental spaces within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) portfolio to identify opportunities for playable improvements, particularly in areas of low play satisfaction.
- Support a shift from ad hoc engagement to a systematic approach of paying attention to the lived experiences of children, particularly those who may face additional barriers to play. Prioritise school-based engagement and insights into what makes children feel safe, welcome and free to play.
- Develop a collaborative model of planning for play at a neighbourhood level, using hyper-local research with children and spatial audits to inform place-based plans that combine infrastructure improvements with activation aimed at cultivating improved conditions for play.
- Prioritise work in localities where children and parents/carers are identified as reporting lower levels of satisfaction with opportunities for play, as well as working opportunistically with communities seeking to improve play sufficiency.

- Test co-designed micro-interventions with local families on estates (for example, playful landscaping, seating, or public art) to create welcoming and watchable doorstep places for play.
- Support a shift away from equipment-led provision by commissioning designs that include more natural elements, playable landscapes, and open-ended features that invite creative use.
- Remove or revise outdated "no ball games" signage and replace it with positive messaging that welcomes children's presence in the public realm.
- Support the roll-out of the OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) programme to more primary schools, particularly in areas where children are more likely to experience an insufficiency of opportunities for play.
- Build on existing strategies that support schools as community anchors by developing sustainable models for opening up school grounds for play outside teaching hours. Prioritise areas with limited public green space and explore partnerships with playwork, youth work and leisure providers.

Appendix A: Introduction and Methodological Context

Introduction to the template

This Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) Template should be used to create a thorough account of the ways in which spaces, services, practices and policies currently work to support or constrain children's opportunities for play. It also provides an opportunity to identify ways in which adult run organisations can improve their responsibilities towards children and their play. This will in turn inform the development of a strategic action plan aimed at cultivating more favourable conditions for children's play.

This PSA Template has been designed to support the following objectives, which people should keep in mind when filling in this document:

- Identify assets that support play which need to be protected (this might include spaces and other physical features, community practices and public services).
- Identify constraining factors that serve to restrict children's time, space and permission for play
- Identify gaps in information, service provision, partnership working and policy implementation
- Highlight or suggest ways in which these gaps and constraining factors might be addressed.
- Provide a monitoring system, generating 'baseline' evidence with which future developments can be compared / evaluated / assessed.
- Involve a wide range of partners in considering the sufficiency of children's opportunities for play
- Improve people's collective knowledge and understanding about the conditions that support children's play and the ways in which these could be protected and improved.

The intention is that those completing the assessment provide a narrative description about the current 'state of play', using the headings in this template which are aligned with the methodology developed for the assessment. All elements of the methodology therefore have a clear place in the template.

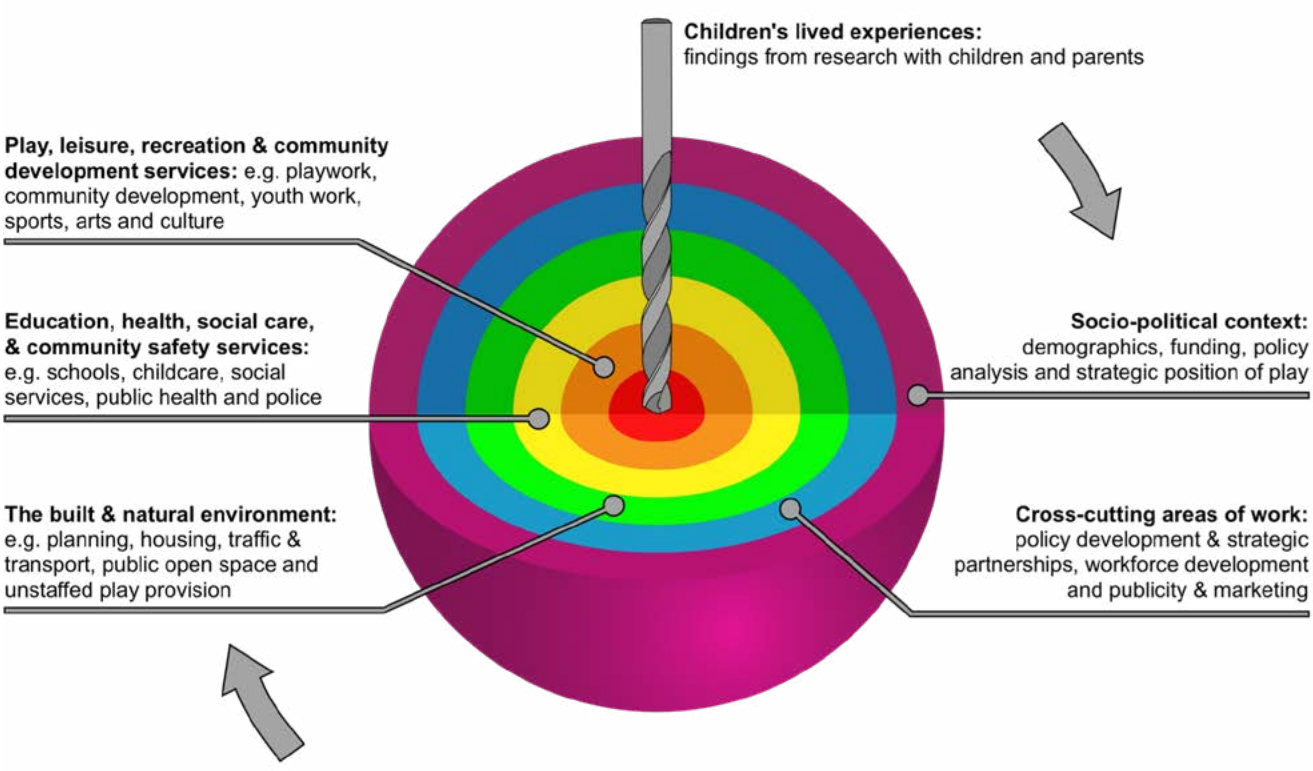
This narrative or story will benefit from the inclusion of examples that illustrate children's actual lived experiences and others that showcase good practice in terms of support for children's play.

Future assessments

When revisiting the assessment phase of the play sufficiency process in future years, the aim should be to build on the information, knowledge and experience gained from the previous assessment. This may mean that the methodology used for completing the PSA will be different second or third time around (although this should still include generating evidence about the actual lived experiences of children and their parents/carers). When re-completing the template, a focus may also be placed on exception reporting i.e. what has changed and what more could be done. Where there has been no change evidence from the previous assessment should still be considered relevant.

Structure of the assessment template

The diagram below illustrates how sections within the PSA template have been set out to provide for a comprehensive and logical discussion regarding variables influencing play sufficiency that reflects the ecological systems approach taken to completing the assessment itself.



The template begins with a section where the approach used to complete the assessment can be described, including what you did, who you did it with and why it was done that way. The following section then enables you to represent what has surfaced from 'drilling down' into children's actual lived experiences of playing and their parent's / carer's experiences of supporting them to do so, as part of the play sufficiency assessment process. The findings from this section should influence reporting in all other sections of the assessment that follow i.e. given what is now known about children's and their parent's / carer's actual lived experiences, what are the implications for the work of those with responsibilities for children and their play?

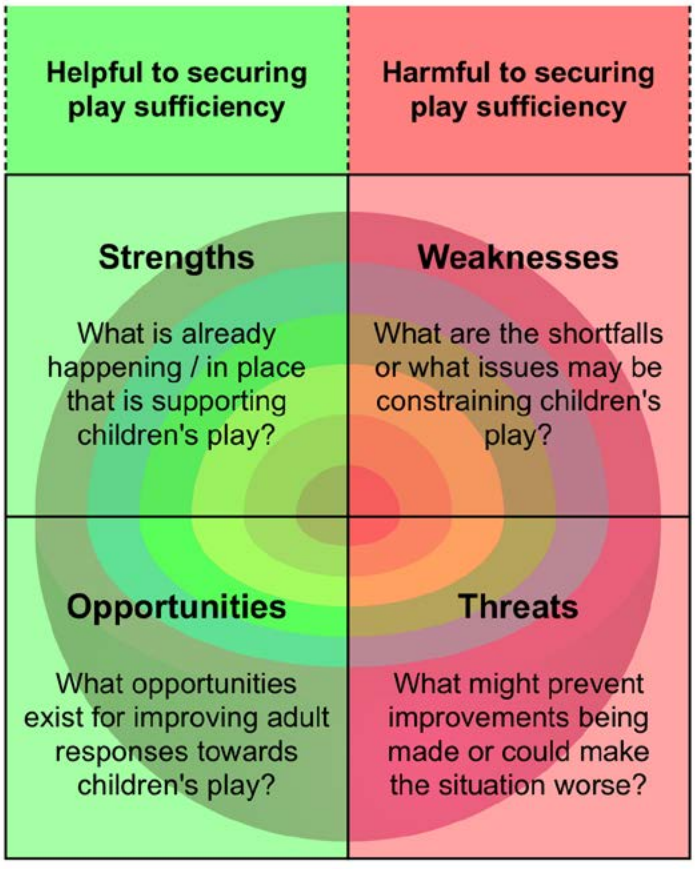
The template then goes on to encourage an exploration of how the work of organisations and service providers operate at different levels across the eco-system to influence local conditions for playing. This starts by considering the local socio-political context and strategic support for play, before going on to explore work across a range of professional domains that directly or indirectly impact on children's time, space and permission for playing; starting with cross-cutting areas of work and then focusing in on more specific services / departments.

The final section of the template sets out the 'way forward', providing a conclusion of the findings from the assessment and identifying strategic priorities for securing play sufficiency. There is then a section for listing and prioritising all of the potential actions identified throughout the assessment

before producing the final action plan.

Completing the assessment template

Within each section of the template, prompts and/or questions have been included to aid a comprehensive account of factors that influence play sufficiency. For the most part these are tailored to the specific section or topic in question. However, the pro-forma departs from this approach for the professional domains concerned with specific services or departments. Here the same questions are duplicated across each grouping ensuring all services are subject to the same lines of enquiry.



To ensure a thorough and logical discussion within each of the socio-political and professional domain sections it is recommended that a SWOT analysis is applied as illustrated in the adjacent diagram, organising the narrative under the headings of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Each of these sections should then conclude by describing the implications for children's opportunities for play and identifying potential actions for securing play sufficiency.

In doing so, the intention is not to fully reproduce detailed information that is already held elsewhere but rather to describe the approach to various areas of work that influence play sufficiency, providing examples where possible and signposting to further sources of information where necessary.

Throughout the assessment it is also important not to assume equality of opportunity to play and to pay attention to the experiences of different children, recognising that all children have a right to play but that some may need more support than others to access that right. Within each section of the template consideration should be given to those children who may experience extraordinary barriers to play and/or discrimination because of their characteristics. This includes but may not be limited to:

- Different genders/ages
- Disabled children
- Children living in poverty
- Children within the care system
- Children from minority ethnic groups
- Children living in isolated locations

Catagory	Year 5 Children (9–10 years)	Year 9 Young People (13–14 years)	Parents and Carers Survey about their children
Number of responses	1,525	373	54
Gender	Boys: 48% Girls: 48% Prefer not to say: 3% 'They/Them': <1%	Boys: 54% Girls: 43% Other: 2% Prefer not to say: 1%	Boys: 50% Girls: 50%
Disability status	Not disabled: 90% Disabled: 4% Prefer not to say: 6%	Not disabled: 89% Disabled: 3% Prefer not to say: 8%	Not disabled: 91% Disabled: 2% Prefer not to say: 7%
Ethnicity	White British: 37% Prefer not to say: 12% Sikh: 11% Indian: 9% Pakistani: 7% White and Black Caribbean: 6%	White British: 24% Sikh: 15% African: 12% Pakistani: 12% Prefer not to say: 9%	White British: 70% White and Black Caribbean: 7% Pakistani: 7% Indian: 4% White and Asian: 4%

Appendix C: Policy Analysis

This section provides a strategic SWOT analysis of how well Sandwell's current policy landscape supports play sufficiency. It draws on an in-depth review of key strategies, plans and frameworks across different sectors and departments. The analysis reflects both the explicit references to play and the wider values, priorities and delivery mechanisms that influence children's opportunities to access time, space and permission to play. The SWOT analysis is structured around four core dimensions: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. Each section reflects not only what is currently in place, but also what could be improved or developed further to support a more joined-up and holistic approach to play across the borough.

Strengths

Sandwell's ambition to become a Child-Friendly Borough provides a timely and powerful strategic anchor for progressing play sufficiency. While play is not always made explicit across policy documents, the values and commitments underpinning the child-friendly approach (particularly around inclusion, wellbeing, and children's rights) align well with the wider aims of creating accessible, high-quality spaces and conditions for play.

This ambition is supported by a number of existing strategies that, while not always focused on play directly, show a strong alignment with the core conditions that enable it. For example, the Health and Wellbeing Strategy takes a holistic view of children's development and promotes a preventative, place-based approach to tackling health inequalities. Within this, there is clear potential to position play as a protective factor for both physical and mental wellbeing, especially when considered alongside other strategies that support community resilience, green infrastructure and active travel.

Sandwell's strategic frameworks also reflect an increasing interest in whole-system and place-based ways of working. The Neighbourhood Strategy, Green Spaces Strategy, Regeneration Strategy, and Local Plan all promote more locally tailored, integrated and community-responsive approaches. This is significant because the opportunities children have to play (where, when, and how) are deeply shaped by local patterns of urban form, green space access, housing layout, and community culture. A place-based approach opens the door to recognising and responding to these patterns more directly.

A further strength lies in the borough's emphasis on participation and co-production, particularly through the Co-Production Charter, the Children and Young People's Engagement Strategy, and the Young People's Corporate Plan. These frameworks articulate clear commitments to involving children and young people in shaping the services and decisions that affect their lives. While not all of these are currently applied to spatial or environmental planning, the foundations are in place to begin drawing more intentionally on children's knowledge of their lived experience in neighbourhoods - how they move, where they feel safe, where they find joy or connection, and where they face barriers.

There is also encouraging recognition across strategies of the value of community spaces, parks, and shared infrastructure in promoting wellbeing and social inclusion. For example, the Green Spaces Strategy Implementation Plan highlights the importance of maintaining and improving the borough's natural and community assets. The Housing Asset Management Strategy acknowledges the role of outdoor communal areas, including play areas, in supporting a child-friendly borough. Together, these policies offer a foundation on which to advocate for more flexible, shared and intergenerational spaces for play - not just fixed equipment, but inviting, inclusive environments integrated into the everyday fabric of local life.

Additionally, there is increasing recognition of the vital role that schools and other educational settings play as hubs within the community, as highlighted in the SEND and Inclusion Plan and the Health and Wellbeing Strategy. This presents valuable opportunities to enhance the dual use of school facilities and their surrounding environments, ensuring they consistently contribute to expanding community play opportunities particularly in areas where access to other play spaces is limited.

Some Sandwell primary schools are adopting the OPAL programme which is aimed at transforming playtimes by encouraging more active imaginative and child led play outdoors. The programme focuses on enhancing children's physical activity, social skills, and well-being by improving playground environments and play opportunities.

Lastly, although it is not always articulated as such, the role of play in supporting wider outcomes (such as confidence, creativity, teamwork, resilience and social connection) is implicitly acknowledged in strategies concerned with skills development, lifelong learning, and employability (as in Vision 2030, particularly Ambition 3). These connections could be drawn on more clearly to embed play within broader narratives about growth, inclusion and opportunity.

Weaknesses

Across Sandwell's strategic framework, there is broad recognition of the importance of promoting children's wellbeing, inclusion, and healthy development. Many of the borough's core strategies (including those focused on health, education, housing, neighbourhoods, and regeneration) articulate ambitions that are highly relevant to play sufficiency. However, the way in which play is referred to, if at all, tends to vary in scope, consistency and prominence.

In several cases, play is referenced in terms of specific infrastructure (such as designated play areas or equipped playgrounds) rather than as a broader principle that relates to children's everyday use of public space, their freedom to move through their neighbourhoods, or their right to engage in spontaneous, social, or nature-based play. This narrow framing can limit the extent to which play is factored into wider policy ambitions relating to placemaking, transport, housing design, or urban greening.

Although many strategies do promote inclusion, safety, resilience and health (all of which are closely tied to children's ability to play) these links are not always made explicit in policy language. There remains scope to strengthen alignment by more clearly recognising the role of play in delivering wider outcomes, particularly in relation to mental health, emotional wellbeing, social connection, and children's autonomy.

Notably absent across the strategies reviewed is any sustained reference to playwork. Where play is mentioned, it tends to be framed in spatial or recreational terms, with little or no acknowledgement of the professional practice of playwork and its role in supporting children's right to play, particularly in community contexts. Playworkers play a key role in creating safe enough, inclusive, and responsive environments for play—especially in areas where children may otherwise face barriers due to safety concerns, lack of space, or social exclusion. The absence of any discussion about playwork as a workforce, an ethos, or a method of enabling play represents a missed opportunity to link play sufficiency with the broader goals of community development, preventative health, and youth engagement.

The borough's commitment to whole-system and place-based working is a notable strength, but in practice, opportunities to embed play more consistently across departments and strategy areas are not always fully realised. While tools such as Health Impact Assessments are referenced (for example in the draft Local Development Plan), it is not always clear how consistently they are applied to decisions affecting children's access to public space, mobility, and opportunities for play.

Similarly, while many strategies include commitments to co-production, these are often focused on service delivery rather than the shaping of built environments or neighbourhood design.
In relation to children's engagement, there is strong support across the policy landscape for participation. However, there remains further potential to draw on children's own knowledge of their lived experiences - how they navigate local spaces, what enables or inhibits play, and where they feel safe or excluded. Insights of this kind can help ensure that planning for play is grounded in the realities of children's lives, even where formal design decisions remain the responsibility of professionals.

Transport and mobility planning represent another area where policy alignment could be strengthened. While the borough has made important commitments through Vision Zero and sustainable travel strategies, these are not yet clearly linked to children's right in terms of their freedom of movement and opportunities to play. There is a need for stronger integration of child-friendly street design, low-traffic neighbourhoods, and active travel infrastructure into broader efforts to enable everyday play.

Finally, without a clearly articulated, shared vision for play sufficiency there is a risk that responsibility for play sufficiency and enabling play remains fragmented and limited to the actions of a few, with play considered a discretionary or peripheral issue rather than a shared strategic priority that supports multiple policy outcomes.

Opportunities

There is a clear opportunity for Sandwell to consolidate and build on its existing strengths by making play sufficiency more visible and connected across the policy landscape. The borough's forthcoming commitment to becoming a Child-Friendly Borough offers a timely and strategic opportunity to position play not simply as a standalone policy concern, but as a cross-cutting mechanism that can support multiple ambitions - from children's health and wellbeing, to inclusion, lifelong learning, and neighbourhood resilience.

One important opportunity lies in clarifying and broadening the framing of play across strategies and service areas. By moving beyond the traditional focus on designated playgrounds or fixed equipment, Sandwell can promote a wider understanding of what makes a space playable - from well-connected green corridors and school grounds to safer streets and housing courtyards. This shift in emphasis would better reflect the ways children actually experience their neighbourhoods, and would support more creative, place-based planning for play.

The borough's increasing focus on whole-system and place-based working also presents fertile ground for embedding play more consistently in decision-making. Where strategies promote health equity, regeneration, housing renewal, or safe active travel, there is often scope to consider how these changes can actively support children's access to opportunities for play. Making these connections more explicit, and embedding them in frameworks for delivery, would help ensure that play is recognised as a shared responsibility.

There is also significant scope to draw more systematically on children's lived experiences. Sandwell already has a strong culture of co-production and participation, supported by the Co-Production Charter and a range of youth engagement mechanisms. These could be extended and adapted to include children in conversations about public space, street design, mobility, and regeneration—not necessarily asking them to design solutions, but to describe what helps them feel welcome, free, and safe in their local area. Their insights could be particularly valuable in helping local teams identify overlooked opportunities to enhance play value within existing spaces.

Another area of opportunity lies in connecting policy ambitions around school and community

integration with play sufficiency goals. Several strategies recognise the potential of schools to act as neighbourhood anchors. Exploring more consistent and resourced approaches to dual use of school grounds (especially in areas with limited public green space) could extend opportunities for play while reinforcing community connection and local trust.

In addition, the borough's growing emphasis on active travel and safer streets, as seen in its Road Safety Plan and Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy, could be more deliberately aligned with play sufficiency goals. Measures such as School Streets, 20mph zones, and improved pedestrian and cycling routes do more than promote safety; they also open up space for play, social connection, and children's freedom of movement. Strengthening the links between mobility and play would help ensure that transport infrastructure is contributing to a more child-friendly borough in practice.

In June 2025, Labour MP Tom Hayes tabled an amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, advocating for a statutory Play Sufficiency Duty. This amendment, supported by Play England, aims to require local authorities to assess, secure, and enhance sufficient play opportunities for children, integrating these considerations into local planning processes
While there is increasing governmental recognition of the importance of children's play, the current approach in England lacks the statutory framework seen in other parts of the UK. The recent amendment to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill represents a significant step forward.
Finally, there is an opportunity to explore the more routine use of tools such as localised play sufficiency assessments and/or health impact assessments in planning and development decisions. These can provide a structured way of asking how new developments or investments will affect children's access to time and space to play, as well as potentially helping to guide the design and implementation of such initiatives.

Threats

Sandwell's strategic ambition to improve conditions for children's play is grounded in strong values and policy commitments. However, a number of challenges could affect the practical realisation of this ambition, particularly when it comes to turning high-level commitments into meaningful and consistent change on the ground.

One significant challenge lies in the complexity of delivering cross-sector change. Although many of the borough's strategies support aims that are consistent with play sufficiency (such as healthy development, inclusion, and neighbourhood resilience) these priorities are often operationalised through different departments, funding streams and delivery timescales. Without strong coordination and shared accountability mechanisms, there is a risk that play-related considerations may fall between services or be addressed inconsistently, depending on local leadership, capacity or interpretation.

A further challenge is the lack of a shared and joined-up way of thinking about play and play sufficiency across sectors. While many strategies support objectives that relate to play (such as safe streets, mental wellbeing, or access to green space) the language and framing of play often differs between policy areas and is not always made explicit. This can make it more difficult for services to recognise where their work already supports play, or how they might build on that in partnership with others.

This connects to a broader issue around defining what play sufficiency means in practice. Without a clear, shared understanding, developed across departments, partners, and communities, there is a risk that play is interpreted narrowly, for example as the provision of fixed equipment play areas alone. A more expansive and inclusive vision could help guide efforts to create playable neighbourhoods that support children's social, emotional and physical wellbeing in a variety of ways, across a range of spaces and settings.

Another related challenge is the lack of common approaches for measuring and tracking play sufficiency. Although insights have been generated through research, there is currently no agreed set of indicators linked to the sufficiency of children's time, space and permission to play. Consequently, there is a risk that efforts to support play lack focus and assessing progress is more difficult.

These issues can also make partnership working more difficult to sustain. When play is not clearly linked to wider policy outcomes (such as wellbeing, childhood development or community cohesion) it can be harder to prioritise in multi-agency conversations. Developing stronger cross-sector narratives about the role of play in achieving shared goals could support deeper collaboration and shared ownership.

There is also a wider set of challenges relating to the dominance of car infrastructure in how the public realm has traditionally been planned. While progress is being made through Vision Zero and active travel strategies, the lived experience of many children continues to be shaped by high levels of traffic (both moving and parked), which constrains their freedom to move, explore and play. Without stronger design principles or planning guidance focused on creating play-friendly environments, opportunities to reimagine streets and public spaces in support of play may remain underdeveloped.

In addition, there is a broader cultural challenge in that play is sometimes still perceived as secondary to other policy concerns. In a context where urgent demands around housing, health, education and community safety dominate the agenda, play can be seen as a 'nice to have' rather than a foundational part of what children need to thrive. Without deliberate efforts to reframe play sufficiency as a core wellbeing, health and equity issue, it may struggle to secure the prominence and investment it requires.

Finally, although Sandwell has a well-established commitment to co-production, there is further potential to draw on children's own knowledge of their lived experience—how they use their local environment, what helps them feel welcome and included, and where they encounter barriers. Supporting services to engage with these perspectives more regularly and meaningfully could ensure that changes to public space and service design better reflect children's needs.

Conclusion

This SWOT analysis demonstrates that Sandwell has a strong foundation for supporting play sufficiency through its strategic ambitions, values, and cross-sector priorities. The borough's commitment to becoming a Child-Friendly Borough, its focus on well-being and place-based working, and its support for co-production all align with the aims and aspirations of play sufficiency.

At the same time, the analysis highlights that to move from aspiration to delivery, further clarity, coordination and shared ownership are needed. A more consistent framing of play across strategies—one that recognises its role in health, inclusion, learning, resilience and neighbourhood life—would help ensure that play sufficiency becomes a shared endeavour rather than the responsibility of any single service.

Broadening the scope of how play is thought about, provided for and measured will also support more collaborative and community focussed plans. By drawing on children's lived experiences and ensuring their insights shape the environments they inhabit, Sandwell can ensure its neighbourhoods are not only safer and healthier, but also more playful, social and creatively engaging for children of all ages.

Delivering play sufficiency is not only about infrastructure or services—it is about creating the

conditions in which children are free to move, explore and connect. With the right coordination, leadership and shared vision, Sandwell is well placed to lead this work with ambition and care. However, doing so will require play sufficiency to be positioned as strategic priority.

The Raising the Nation Play Commission, a year-long independent inquiry into why play is critical to the wellbeing and development of children, and how it can be restored to every childhood in England, is today (Wednesday June 11th – the International Day of Play) publishing its Final Report, 'Everything to Play For: A Plan to Ensure Every Child in England Can Play'.

- The report warns that cuts to clubs and playgrounds, busier roads, and increased fears among parents and children about safety, have left children with fewer safe places to play. As a result, children's independence to play outside has shrunk dramatically over the last 30 years, impacting on their health and happiness and increasing screen time.
- The report calls for the Government to establish a National Play Strategy, including new investment in play that is part-funded by the sugar tax; a Minister for Play; a ban on 'No Ball Games' signs; raising the digital age of consent to 16; restoring play to our education system including banning phones during the school day; and a statutory Play Sufficiency Duty for local authorities.
- It urges the Government to set out a clear plan for creating playful neighbourhoods and for disrupting the addictive grip of digital devices on children's lives.
- The report says play should also be central to the Government's strategies for boosting opportunity and growth, tackling the crisis in children's physical and mental health, school readiness and attendance, and the increasing numbers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).

The Raising the Nation Play Commission was launched in June 2024 and is chaired by entrepreneur and campaigner Paul Lindley OBE - founder of Ella's Kitchen, the UK's biggest baby food business. It has worked in partnership with former Children's Commissioner Baroness Anne Longfield's Centre for Young Lives think tank and has been advised by a panel of leading experts.

Today's final report puts forward a positive vision of a country where children's play is at the heart of government strategy and our public spaces, and where it is embedded across education, health, local government and beyond. It argues for the restoration of play into early learning and our schools, for communities where safe parks, playgrounds, streets, and housing developments are alive with the shouts and laughter of children, and for a broader, cultural shift in attitudes towards risk, childhood independence, and play.

Over the last year, the Commission has been struck by the evidence it has heard about the many barriers to play - from a crammed curriculum to rising traffic, from risk-averse planning to closing playgrounds and youth centres, from a growing "no-ball games" anti-play culture to the loss of school play time. The Commission also heard from parents, frustrated at the lack of safe and accessible places for their children to play, and from children who have shared their love of play and their hopes that their world can become more playful.

Outdoor play has declined by 50% in a generation, and children travel shorter and shorter distances independently. New polling commissioned by the inquiry shows over half of parents (55%) believe their youngest child plays outside less than they did when they were children. Three quarters of parents (75%) agree that society is less accepting of children playing out than it was when they were growing up.

The report shows how play is both critical to childhood development and a powerful tool for reversing the concerning trends we are seeing among many children, including the crises in obesity, mental health, school readiness, school attendance, Special Educational Needs (SEN), and young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).

The report argues that one of the reasons many children are spending increasing amounts of time doom-scrolling on addictive smartphone apps is due to there being fewer opportunities to play offline. It calls for play to become a political and policy priority, underpinned by national leadership, legal protections, and cultural change.

Its main recommendations include:

A new, cross-departmental National Play Strategy for England with a 10 year vision, led by a Minister with responsibility for Play. This should be backed by an annual budget of £125 million to the end of this parliament, part-funded by measures including the Soft Drinks Industry Levy and unspent funds currently held by councils and collected from developers to mitigate the impact of new developments.

A statutory Play Sufficiency Duty for local authorities, bringing England in line with Scotland and Wales.

Legal protections for children's rights, including incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law, and protecting all children against discrimination in accessing play.

Child-friendly neighbourhoods as part of reviving a culture which embraces play and childhood independence and which gives parents confidence to allow their children to play again. This includes reducing the speed and volume of traffic where children play, live, and learn. It should become easier for parents and communities to organise safe play in their streets, and there should be a national ban on 'No Ball Games' signs. There should be greater use of play streets, play rangers, play buses, mobile play stations, and toy libraries to bring play to more communities and families, with a focus on children living with disadvantage.

Schools are supported to harness the power of play for learning. Schools should be supported and required to develop their own play plans and there should be high quality training for school staff in play. Play should be embedded into the primary curriculum. There should be Government guidance protecting play at break time and lunchtime, alongside a restoration of lost play time. All primary schools should move towards adopting 'always-active' uniforms.

The National Planning Policy Framework and related guidance should be updated to require developers and planners to adopt pro-play policies in all new developments.

Parents and carers are supported and empowered to help their children to play. The Department for Education should introduce an awareness campaign for parents on the importance of play and how they can help their children to play more as part of the push to increase school readiness.

Play is made a foundation of children's early years, including the roll out of play-focused Family Hubs with parent play champions to support and encourage play.

Embed play in healthcare settings and recognise and use it as a tool to improve public health outcomes. The Department of Health should recognise the importance of play in its 10 year health plan and establish a national 'play-on-prescription' pilot.

The report also calls for the reimagining and better regulation of the digital lives of children. Digital play can be both beneficial and hugely enjoyable for children and parents. However, the report argues the Government's National Play Strategy should include a specific commitment to a step-change in the quantity and quality of children's use of digital devices through a combination of stronger regulation, public engagement and information, and addressing addictive 'push' factors that have driven children online and indoors. It recommends:

- The Government should commit to raising the digital age of consent to 16.
- The Government should introduce a ban on smartphones in schools during the school day facilitated by 'smartphone pouches' or similar. Those children who require access to a smartphone for health or wellbeing reasons can still do so at the discretion of headteachers.
- Digital products and services that are marketed to children, and which don't require digital consent, should not include 'addictive-by-design' features such as 'streaks' or endless scrolls. Any products and applications featuring these should carry health warnings on their packaging or in the app-store and should only be available to adults.
- The Government should develop and regularly update evidence-based guidance to schools, nurseries, and childminders about the appropriate use of digital devices.
- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport should promote a national digital detox campaign to raise awareness among parents and young people about the adverse effects of excessive and unhealthy use of digital devices and services, with a particular focus on social media risks.

Over 1,000 GPs and health workers, headteachers, experts in the built environment, creative industries, physical activity and sports, and early years, charity leaders, academics, and local government leaders have written open letters to the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media & Sport, Education, and Housing, Communities, and Local Government, to emphasise how critical play is to children's wellbeing and development and to support the call for a national play strategy to be established. Such breadth of support for a new strategy reflects the urgent need felt across the spectrum of society for play to return to the heart of childhood and for leadership from Government to break down the barriers to play.

Paul Lindley, Chair of the Raising the Nation Play Commission, said:

"Play is a crucial and innate part of childhood. Play is how children explore who they are, how they relate to others, and how they make sense of the world. It is one of the most powerful tools we have to boost children's physical activity, wellbeing, and confidence. Yet as this report shows, in England we've made it incredibly hard for children to play.

"We have visited countries where children's play is at the heart of government strategy – embedded across education, health, local government and beyond - because it is seen as the central fabric of life. All of this is within our grasp in this country, but England needs a National Play Strategy to make it happen.

"Creating truly playful communities is not just about better street design, traffic management, and reduced crime, but also about a reversal of the growing culture of intolerance towards children playing.

"This will also encourage more parents to have confidence they can let their children play out more freely, in the knowledge that their children will be both having a great time and are also safe.

"We need to give our children back the time, space, opportunity, freedom - and the right - to play

again. 'Everything to Play For' sets out a bold and necessary vision and framework to restore play to the heart of childhood in England. We urge this mission-led Government to act upon it."

Baroness Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives, said:

"Too many of our children are spending their most precious years sedentary, doom scrolling on their phones and often alone, while their health and wellbeing deteriorates. It is no coincidence that the least happy generation, the generation with the highest rates of obesity and rising ill health, is the generation that plays less and less.

"As we have heard from a swathe of experts and professionals working with children over the last year, play is being squeezed out of childhoods, with drastic implications for children, our economy and public services. With so much at stake children really have everything to play for: their health, wellbeing, happiness, learning, and development depends on our ability to reignite the role of play.

"This report provides a blueprint for how we can get children playing again and also tackle the scourge of addictive doom-scrolling, so we can prevent future generations from becoming glued to screens."

The Play Commission's call for a National Play Strategy has also received the backing of Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, who as Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, launched the last National Play Strategy in 2008. He said:

"I was proud to launch the then Government's Play Strategy in 2008 as Culture Secretary. It was a huge mistake for it to be side-lined after 2010, and we have seen over recent years how play has become squeezed out of many children's lives. Play is vital for children's development, their health, and wellbeing.

"We have to break down the barriers that are preventing so many of our children from playing.

"The Raising the Nation Play Commission's report is a very timely and vitally important call to action, and its central message is clear: we need a new National Play Strategy to get our children playing again."

ENDS

For further information and media interview requests, please contact Jo Green (WhatsApp: 07715105415 or jo.green@centreforyounglives.org)

Notes to editors

1. Everything to Play For: A Plan to Ensure Every Child in England Can Play' is available here. The report will be launched on Wednesday 11th June at an event in Parliament.
2. The Raising the Nation Play Commission commissioned a poll of 2,000 parents across England between 24th January and 4th February 2025 by Stack Data Strategy to understand more about their views of play, including its barriers and its benefits. Its full findings are included in the report. Half of parents told us they play with their youngest child every day while a further third (35%) say they play with them "most days". Three quarters (76%) of parents agreed that people are generally less accepting of children playing outside on the street than when they were a child. Over half (55%) of parents say that their youngest child plays outside less than they did as a child. This is even more the case with parents aged over 45 (69%).

Appendix D: Strategic Partnerships for Play

Research undertaken as part of the Play Sufficiency Assessment indicates that Sandwell has taken meaningful steps toward embedding children's right to play within its policy and strategic planning frameworks. A significant milestone has been the inclusion of play within the current Council Plan, where it is explicitly referenced under the "Growing Up in Sandwell" priority as a contributor to healthy, happy childhoods. This represents a departure from previous plans and reflects a deliberate effort to raise the profile of play at senior levels of the organisation. Engagement from directors and cabinet members, supported by resident feedback and input from programmes such as SHAPE, has been instrumental in securing this high-level recognition.

Despite this progress, the assessment identifies that play is not yet systematically embedded across all policy domains. While the Council Plan sets the direction of travel, related documents such as the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) do not explicitly reference play, and many individual service strategies and policies still lack consideration of children's play altogether. Earlier policy reviews and conversations with officers in planning and housing confirm this inconsistency. Embedding play sufficiency as a cross-cutting theme remains an area for development, particularly where policy silos can obscure shared responsibilities for children's everyday experiences.

One promising development emerging from the assessment is the creation of a new, integrated impact assessment toolkit. This tool aims to combine equality, environmental, health, and child rights impact assessments into a single framework. Once operational, it will provide a mechanism for ensuring that children's rights — including the right to play — are consistently considered across policy decisions and service design. This approach, informed by learning from other local authorities, represents an important step toward institutionalising a values-driven, child-focused approach to planning and governance.

The structure of the Council Plan itself is also supportive of cross-departmental working. By organising around thematic outcomes rather than departmental boundaries, the Plan enables officers to consider how different services might contribute to a shared aim — for example, how both regeneration and children's services might support play. This structure is backed by regular corporate monitoring processes, which examine directorate plans and performance to identify gaps or missed opportunities for collaboration. These review processes are helping to create more consistent expectations around shared responsibility for issues like play.

The Play Sufficiency Assessment has also highlighted opportunities to align emerging findings with existing planning and reporting cycles. The annual service and financial planning framework — which draws on resident feedback, deprivation mapping, and local research — provides a key forum in which play can be recognised as a factor contributing to wider goals such as emotional wellbeing, inclusive growth, and community cohesion. There is clear potential to use the PSA to inform these processes and to support evidence-led decision-making in future iterations of the Council Plan.

Importantly, the PSA is expected to feed directly into the Child Friendly Sandwell programme. The intention is to present the assessment findings to officers and elected members during key strategic planning windows, including Cabinet reporting in the summer and autumn. Actions emerging from the PSA are likely to be integrated into next year's business planning cycle, creating opportunities for departments to identify accountable leads and formally commit to improvements. Embedding play sufficiency into these structures would not only support delivery of the Child Friendly Borough vision but also provide ongoing oversight and accountability.

Throughout the research, it has been acknowledged that Sandwell is still at the beginning of its journey in embedding children's rights, including the right to play, into everyday policy and planning. However, the conditions for progress are already in place: there is high-level commitment, increasing

cross-departmental awareness, and a growing understanding of how values must be translated into structured, accountable action. The challenge now is to sustain this momentum and ensure that play is not simply referenced in headline strategies but is actively and consistently considered in the decisions that shape the spaces, services, and experiences available to children across the borough.


Sandwell
Metropolitan Borough Council