

Executive Summary

Sandwell Play Sufficiency Assessment 2025



Introduction

Purpose & Vision

Sandwell Council's PSA reaffirms its commitment to children's right to play, recognising play as essential to health, wellbeing, development, and social inclusion. The assessment aims to evaluate and improve the conditions that enable children to access time, space, and permission to play, aligning with the Council's ambition to become a Child Friendly Borough.

This second iteration of the PSA, led by **Sandwell Council Play Service** in partnership with **Ludicology**, has positioned Sandwell as a national leader in embedding play sufficiency into local governance, building on the borough's long-standing commitment to universal, free play provision.

Strategic Importance

Play is a child's right under article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Sandwell Council's commitment for cultivating environments that support children's play is aligned with broader strategic objectives, including:

- **Growing Up in Sandwell**
- **Child Friendly Community ambitions**
- **Public Health and Wellbeing**
- **Community Cohesion and Safety**
- **Tackling Inequalities and Promoting Inclusion**

The PSA provides both the **baseline evidence** and **strategic framework** to guide coordinated, cross-sector action to improve conditions for play across neighbourhoods and communities.

Overview of Methodology

The assessment applied an ecological systems model, supported by qualitative and quantitative research tools.

Over 2,230 participants were engaged through:

- Surveys with 2,180 children and young people, and 52 parents/carers
- Workshops and mapping activities with children (including those with protected characteristics)
- Focus groups with professionals and parents
- Spatial audits in selected case study communities
- Interviews with 50+ lead officers and strategic partners
- Extensive policy and data analysis

Three case study communities provided in-depth local insights, alongside targeted engagement with disabled children, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalised groups.



1

Children's Experience of Play

Children consistently described play as a fundamental aspect of wellbeing, identity, and community life.

They value:

- Freedom, fun, and control
- Social connections with peers and trusted adults
- Variety and safety in public spaces

However, their ability to play is unequally distributed, shaped by factors including traffic, adult supervision, time constraints, and neighbourhood safety.

2

Satisfaction with Opportunities for Play

- 75% of Year 5 children are satisfied with their play opportunities, but this falls to 53% among Year 9s.
- Only 17% of parents believe their children have good opportunities to play.
- Satisfaction is closely linked to frequency of playing outdoors, independence, and perceived safety.

3

Barriers to Play

- Traffic and road safety are key physical barriers.
- Parental fear of crime, antisocial behaviour, and poor-quality public space limit children's independence.
- Digital play has increased but often compensates for a lack of local, accessible, and inclusive alternatives.
- Children with protected characteristics including disabled children and LGBTQ+ youth face compounding constraints on their access to play.

4

Inequalities and Inclusion

The assessment identifies structural inequalities in access to time, space, and permission to play.

These correlate with:

- Poverty and deprivation
- Gender and care role
- Ethnicity and cultural obligations
- Neurodivergence and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Strategic Priorities for Council Action

The following priority areas have been identified for cross-departmental collaboration and policy development:

2. Improve children's opportunities for playing outside with friends after school during term time

Address environmental and social barriers to spontaneous outdoor play.

3. Provide direct support to children experiencing extraordinary barriers to play

Prioritise inclusive practices and targeted interventions.

5. Improve parental permission for play by improving perceptions of community safety

Build trust through community development and safer public environments.

6. 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.

7. Protect existing times and spaces for play

Safeguard playtime in schools and public access to parks, green spaces, and informal places for play.

1. Improve children's experience of playing in school and during adult-run after school activities

Promote more playful and permissive approaches within school environments.

4. 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.

Implications for Council Leadership

The PSA offers a clear blueprint for strategic alignment across council services including planning, housing, health, education, highways, children and young people's services, and community safety. The data and methodology provide a repeatable framework for progress monitoring and cross-sector planning.

A Play Partnership will be established to drive this work forward, ensuring ongoing alignment with Sandwell's child-friendly objectives.

Recommended Actions:

- 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

Conclusion

The PSA provides a robust evidence base and a clear roadmap for embedding play into Sandwell's strategic and operational frameworks. It calls for a cultural and organisational shift to treat play not as a luxury, but as a right and a public health imperative. With strong leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained investment, Sandwell can lead the way in creating a borough where all children have the freedom and opportunity to play.



LUDICOLOGY