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Encouraging state of playwork in the UK

Mike Wragg^a and Siôn Edwards^b

^aThe School of Health, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK; ^bThe Venture I.C.C., Wreccsam, UK

ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last 15 years, the UK Playwork sector has experienced significant reductions in public spending, which has led to the closure of many community-based play projects. National bodies, representing the field, particularly in England, have been pared back in terms of scope and influence, and children's play and playwork have fallen down the political pecking order. Never to be deterred, however, the playwork sector has rallied and features a number of examples of play projects and organisations that have grown in size and influence during these lean times. This paper discusses a particular example of the playwork sector's resilience in the face of adversity, namely the development of the first UK-wide Adventure Playground Network, and discusses the encouraging state of playwork in the UK.

KEYWORDS

Adventure playgrounds;
playwork; children; play

At the time of writing, the United Kingdom is hours away from discovering whether July 5th will herald a change of government and with it an improved outlook for the nation's children. Some might say that desperate times call for desperate measures, and only time will tell whether the next five years will bring about the urgent change needed by a generation of young people. But what can be said for certain is that the last 14 years of Conservative rule have had a profoundly adverse impact on the lives and aspirations of millions of children. In 2010, the Conservative-led coalition government instigated the biggest cuts to state spending since World War II, resulting in the highest recorded levels of child poverty in the last 80 years, and infant mortality rising for the first time in two generations (Rajvanshi, 2024).

According to the UN's Special Envoy for Global Education, '... the [Conservative] government's support for children has been spiralling downwards, each year more difficult than the year before, with almost surgical precision' (Brown, 2024). Since 2020 every region in England has experienced cuts of between 60% and 90% to its youth services (YMCA, 2020), and a 9% per pupil reduction in spending on education. This has led to larger class sizes, restricted access to extracurricular activities and free school meals for many of the least well off. Unsurprisingly, those with special educational needs and disabilities are disproportionately adversely affected (Henshaw, 2024).

CONTACT Mike Wragg  m.wragg@leedsbeckett.ac.uk  The School of Health, Leeds Beckett University, Calverley Building, City Campus, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK

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Whilst cuts to health and social care, education and youth services may garner the lion's share of the public's attention, the children's play and playwork sector has arguably fared worst of all in terms of the withdrawal of political will and investment. Upon election in 2010, the coalition government resoundingly rejected children's play as a policy priority and disinvested in virtually all existing play initiatives established by the previous administration. This included the abandonment of England's National Play Strategy, which sought to make a reality of the UNCRC article 31 right to play, and the retraction of £235 million dedicated to the nationwide development of supervised adventure playgrounds and training for 4,000 playworkers (Gill, 2015).

In 2011, Play England, the government's play and playwork delivery partner received a substantial reduction in funding, severely limiting its capacity to influence national policy. In a further blow, in 2016, playwork's Sector Skills Council had its recognition withdrawn from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, leaving the profession without a validating, professional body. This dismantlement of the play and playwork sector's national infrastructure, along with increasing insurance premiums and rising rents has seen many local play projects close, education and training courses withdrawn, and job prospects diminish. Across England over 300 fixed play areas have closed since 2014, park budgets have fallen by £350 million over the last 11 years (API, 2024), and 15% of staffed adventure playgrounds have closed between 2018 and 2022 (Grant, 2022).

Despite this decline, research conducted by Long (2022), found that the adventure playground sector – that from which the profession of playwork is widely regarded to have emerged (e.g. Russell, 2013; Wilson, 2009) – has in fact been comparatively resilient to the consequences of reduced expenditure on children's play services. Long's work identified several characteristics shared by those adventure playgrounds that have not only survived but in some cases thrived during the last 14 years of restricted funding for children's play.

The first of these relates to the inherent resilience of a mixed funding model employed by those adventure playgrounds operating outside of total local authority control, either in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) or with joint local authority / VCS management arrangements. Secondly, Long's research identified the importance of what she refers to as 'competent social actors'. These are individuals, often employed as managers in both paid and voluntary capacities, who are skilled and experienced in navigating the complex social and political landscape, networking, and winning the hearts and minds of potential investors. Borrowing from the title of Beunderman's (2010) report for Play England: *People Make Play: The Impact of Staffed Play Provision on Children, Families and Communities*, Long (2022, p. 182) refers to the 'competent social actors' identified in her research as the 'people who make play'.

As McKendrick et al. (2015, p. 291) suggest, one can determine whether a UK playworker is an optimist or a pessimist by asking their opinion of the recent history of play in the UK.

... the former will emphasise the progress made in the growth years and the legacy it has left behind; while the latter will bemoan the potential not realised of an English National Play Strategy (DCSF & DCMS, 2008) and on-going disinvestment from play through local funding cuts.

Long's (2022) research suggests that the people who make play are very much representative of that former group of positive protagonists. Another group indubitably

deserving of this dynamic soubriquet, although not featured directly in Long's research, are those who have worked tirelessly to organise and regenerate the playwork sector's national infrastructure.

An example of one such group's endeavours began in 2013 when a crisis meeting was organised by two eminent playwork scholars to consider how the sector might best respond to the political and economic pressures it was facing. This resulted in two main conclusions. Firstly, the 'grand narrative' of playwork needed to be more persuasively articulated. Secondly, a fully independent playwork practitioner body needed to be created to develop and amplify the 'argument for playwork' (Voce, 2017).

Consequently, in 2018, the Playwork Foundation was incorporated as a charitable organisation,

to advance and promote education, for the public benefit, in children's play and playwork, in particular but not exclusively by (1) providing information, (2) raising awareness, (3) facilitating discourse, (4) carrying out research, and (5) building capacity (Playwork Foundation, 2024, np).

In 2023, building on a piece of work commenced by Play England six years previously, the Playwork Foundation produced a report and mapping document featuring the first complete, UK-wide list of adventure playgrounds. Criteria for inclusion were derived from the Play England publication, *Adventure Playgrounds: the essential elements* (Play England, nd). The compilation of this list allowed for one of the report's most urgent recommendations to be acted on: the development of a nationwide Adventure Playground Network.

As seems so often to be the case in the development of playwork initiatives, the UK Adventure Playground Network began in earnest with some serendipitous encounters between a handful of influential individuals. In this instance, it was at the June 2023 International Play Association Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, that Trustees of the Playwork Foundation got together with playworkers and academics to discover that the subject of insurance was not only a hot topic of conversation in the adventure playground sector but also an endemic, existential threat to it. This worrying realisation reinforced a sense of necessity amongst these individuals to urgently initiate a network that could provide the benefits first proposed in the Play England report, *The State of Adventure Playgrounds in England*: 1. alleviate feelings of isolation, 2. provide a place to seek support, 3. strengthen adventure playgrounds' sustainability, and 4. Provide a place to share good practice.

Although the Playwork Foundation had already made a significant contribution to the basis of such a network by compiling the database of UK adventure playgrounds' contact details, the organisation's representatives rightly expressed reservations concerning the Foundation's role in relation to a UK Adventure Playground Network. The reservations were broadly speaking political and practical. In terms of the former, concerns related in part to the possible appearance of performing a 'power-grab' in the eyes of other play boards and associations. On the other hand, as the sole UK-wide organisation of its kind, the Playwork Foundation was arguably the only body with the reach to accommodate adventure playgrounds from all four nations of the United Kingdom. In terms of the latter, without a dedicated staff team, the Playwork Foundation did not have the capacity to undertake the administration required to co-ordinate the network.

In order to address both of these concerns, representatives of a local play development charity, Play Bradford, and those of the Playwork Foundation discussed collaborating to facilitate a democratic, non-hierarchical model of network co-ordination. Rather than be governed by a bureaucratic management structure, the Network would be self-managed; topics of discussion would be proposed and determined by those attending its meetings, and each subsequent event would be 'hosted' by a member of the Network and chaired by the previous meeting's proposer. Bimonthly get-togethers would be held online, and the role of the Playwork Foundation would simply be to publicise the virtual meetings and send invitations to all those adventure playgrounds featured on the database. The inaugural meeting of the UK Adventure Playground Network was initiated with the following invitation to all adventure playgrounds on the database:

Dear People Who Make Play,

We'd like to invite you to join a like-minded collective to inaugurate a UK-wide Adventure Playground Network.

The vision for this collaborative venture is to connect people who make play, across the UK, to discuss issues affecting the adventure playground sector and shape the agenda for subsequent bimonthly meetings.

The first of these meetings will be hosted by Play Bradford, a local charity that incorporates the Big Swing adventure playground.

Play Bradford would like to propose discussing lessons learned and questions raised from a recent experience of legal action, the insurance implications of which brought the Big Swing to the brink of permanent closure.

If adventure playground-related issues of insurance, litigation and risk-benefit assessment are of interest to you, or if you would like to find out more about the vision for the UK Adventure Playground Network, please join us on November 7th from 11:00am – 12:30pm

Approximately 50% of adventure playgrounds attended this meeting, which generated significant discussion surrounding the subject of insurance premiums, risk-benefit analysis, health and safety inspections and policy development. One particular outcome of this inaugural meeting was the proposal by two of its members to work together to conduct a survey of all adventure playgrounds' experiences of insuring their provision. As was hoped in the design of the Network's model of delivery, the subsequent meeting's subject of discussion was proposed and agreed by the Network, namely the threat to adventure playgrounds of diminishing local government budgets. In this case, however, the elected 'host' was Dr Alexandra Long, author of the research that had both highlighted the adventure playground sector's greatest strengths in withstanding the threats posed by diminishing funding, and provided the collective title for the Network's members.

The subject of the third meeting focussed on the adventure playground sector's capacity to gather the evidence that might influence policy should the change of government alluded to at the beginning of this piece come to pass. This is ongoing and as is so often the case in the playwork sector, the arrival of the busiest time of the year for those working on adventure playgrounds means that the planning and delivery of face-to-face, summer holiday playwork takes precedence over all else. Anecdotally, some

have suggested that a UK-wide platform may be too unwieldy to allow for a fully integrated network of adventure playgrounds. Consequently, it appears as though sub-groups and local and regional networks have emerged as offshoots of the UK Network, which may prove to be a more effective model of co-ordination. In times of uncertainty, it remains to be seen whether the UK Adventure Playground Network will continue to provide a viable platform, but what does appear certain is that it is those that retain a positive, proactive outlook in these straitened times who are the people who make play.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr Mike Wragg is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Health at Leeds Beckett University and Chair of Trustees of Play Bradford, a local play development organisation, incorporating the Big Swing Adventure Playground, which he founded in 2004. Mike's current research looks at the impact of playwork interventions on people living with dementia.

Siôn Edwards is a playworker and the manager of communications and inclusion at The Venture Integrated Children's Centre Wrexham. He is also the Chair of The Playwork Foundation.

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