

# 'a treasure chest of service'

The role of toy libraries within Play Policy in Wales

*Robot Powell*  
*Nia Seaton*



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Robat Powell

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# Acknowledgements

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# Executive summary

Play is enshrined as one of a child's fundamental rights under the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The first political expression of support for play was made by Lloyd George in 1926, and has since become known as the *First Claim Principle*.

The first toy libraries opened in the 1960s and 1970s to support families of children with special educational needs. Since then, they have expanded to serve broader communities. Toy libraries do much more than lend toys – they can also provide family support services and specialist support to families with children with special educational needs. They can also benefit children's development and encourage and provide creative play opportunities.

The UK government has supported the development of play opportunities for children and young people but England has so far been reluctant to adopt a national strategy. Northern Ireland has recently completed a consultation on a play policy, while Scotland has yet to adopt a strategy. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), in contrast, made an early move to support play, launching a *Play Policy* in 2002 and a *Play Policy Implementation Plan* in 2006. In the light of these policy developments, and in partnership with the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (NATLL)/Play Matters, NFER reviewed the role of toy libraries in Wales.

## Play and play policy: what we found

International research shows that engaging in play is vital for children's social, emotional and physical development, their good mental health and communication skills. Most importantly, it allows children to create their own space where they can enjoy themselves.

Our research with six toy libraries showed the following.

- The introduction of the *Play Policy* (WAG, 2002) and *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) were welcomed for the emphasis they placed on the importance of play, adult responsibility for protecting children's play opportunities and the contribution they made to raising the profile of play and the play sector.

- Discussions leading to the creation of the Implementation Plan were important as they had helped to bring different sectors together to develop a common understanding.
- Respondents felt that Wales was leading the way in the UK especially in terms of policy.
- Wales was able to take the lead because of the existence of a strong play sector and national organisation for play, Play Wales, and because of the political will present in the Welsh Assembly Government.
- While it was too soon to measure direct impacts on the number of play opportunities open to children, respondents in the research project felt that the policy and plan had strengthened the play sector and helped to encourage local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to play.
- Respondents were optimistic about the future and believed that cross-party support for play would continue.
- Toy libraries had an important contribution to make to play in Wales in resourcing playworkers, increasing parental awareness of the value of play, providing early experiences of play and as specialist providers.
- The profile of toy libraries and awareness of their contribution needed to be raised.

## What do toy libraries do?

### Toy library provision

We found that toy libraries do much more than loan toys – they provide a variety of important services to children, families, childcare providers and practitioners. We also found that toy libraries’ origins, i.e. why there were set up and by whom, was a more significant determinant of what services they provided than their geographical location.

The main types of services provided by toy libraries included:

- toy and resource loaning to children, families and childcare providers
- playwork and support
- family support and advice

- targeted support to address specific needs
- providing resources and advice to a variety of practitioners.

**Funding** for toy libraries was sourced from a variety of places. The main source of statutory funding was Cymorth, the WAG fund distributed by local Children and Young People’s Partnerships to projects operating in disadvantaged areas, and the main voluntary sources of funding were Children in Need and the Big Lottery Fund, while smaller grants came from organisations such as the Church in Wales and community councils.

**Staffing** in toy libraries also varied. Five of the toy libraries we visited were staffed by a full-time toy librarian, five were staffed by people as part of other responsibilities, three had a full-time and part-time toy librarian and four toy libraries were run entirely by volunteers.

## **NATLL/Play Matters membership**

The majority of toy libraries were members of NATLL. Non-members often knew of the organisation but could not afford to pay for membership. Member toy libraries believed they benefited from their membership and praised services such as:

- help sheets
- provision of information on funding
- advisory service
- networking opportunities.

Members would like NATLL to develop further in the future by providing more advice on the completion of funding applications, providing free or low-cost local training and sourcing funding to appoint development workers in Wales. Non-members and some members would also like NATLL to source funding to increase its support to non-members in financial difficulties.

## **Good practice and challenges**

Our research revealed a range of examples of good practice, and some practical challenges faced by toy libraries.



Examples of good practice included:

- extensive work with other partners and good partnership working
- provision of quality resources
- creation of a welcoming and non-threatening service
- commitment of the staff and volunteers running the toy libraries.

Challenges included:

- insufficient and unsustainable funding
- high turnover of staff and short-term contracts
- attracting people with the right skills to staff toy libraries
- attracting new volunteers
- addressing common misconceptions about the work of toy libraries.

## **Benefits**

Toy libraries offered a range of benefits to children, families, childcare providers and practitioners. These included:

- providing and encouraging creative play opportunities for all children, regardless of ability
- supporting families and providers
- overcoming disadvantage caused by poverty and lack of opportunity
- contributing to the achievement of the goals and work of other services
- contributing to the achievement of policy goals and objectives currently prioritised by the Welsh Assembly Government.

## **Future plans and aspirations**

In future, toy libraries hoped to extend their services to more people, extend the toy library to include new services, and to move into larger or more suitable accommodation. Additional funding and support would make it much easier for toy libraries to realise many of their development goals.

## Recommendations

The Welsh Assembly Government and other funding bodies should consider providing further financial support to bodies which promote play in Wales and to the toy libraries themselves in order to:

- help them continue to develop their relationship with other organisations in Wales
- provide free or affordable localised training to toy librarians and staff
- support the development of new toy libraries
- help struggling toy libraries unable to afford membership of NATLL/Play Matters in Wales in order to strengthen their services.

The Welsh Assembly Government should also consider toy libraries as a potential vehicle for service delivery in future WAG policy initiatives, such as in health and lifelong learning.

Children and Young People's Partnerships should develop greater awareness of toy libraries within their authority to ensure that they are given consideration in all appropriate funding allocations.

Toy libraries should make every effort in conjunction with NATLL/Play Matters to market their services and raise the profile of their work locally by, for example, offering to provide presentations about their work at statutory meetings or events.

Further research into measuring the impact and effectiveness of toy library provision would also be useful to help toy libraries improve their services and to provide evidence for them to strengthen future funding bids.

## How we did the research

The research was carried out in four phases between January 2007 and March 2007. Discussions with an Advisory Panel of four experts in the area helped to shape the direction of the research and devise research questions. We conducted a review of the available literature on the subject of play and toy libraries to set the work in context. Case-study visits to six toy libraries across Wales provided in-depth and first-hand information about their work today.

The case studies covered a range of toy libraries with varying statuses, including voluntary and statutory, mobile and fixed, general, centre-based and specialist. The case studies are presented in detail in Appendix 1.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The research project

Between January and March 2007 the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in partnership with the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (NATLL) / Play Matters in Wales carried out a research project on play policy in Wales and the role of toy libraries in contributing to play strategy and their local communities.

It was decided to conduct the specific research into toy libraries within the broader context of play policy in order to consider the other exciting developments taking place within the whole play sector in Wales. However, toy libraries also make substantial contributions to many other policy areas such as childcare and early years. In recognition of this, the report also provides a broad overview of the contribution of toy libraries to these key policy areas. As the title *A treasure chest of services* suggests, this report looks beyond the image of toy libraries as merely a toy lending service to review the wider range of services they commonly provide.

Chapter 1 of this report outlines the aims and methodology of the project. Chapter 2 looks at the policy context within which toy libraries operate in Wales. Chapter 3 reviews the development and implementation of play policies and strategies in Wales and toy libraries' contribution to this area, while Chapter 4 presents findings on the role of toy libraries based on the evidence from the case studies and individual interviews. Chapter 5 presents recommendations for the future. Appendix 1 presents six case studies of toy libraries.

## 1.2 Project aims

The aims of the project were:

- to review the development of play policy in Wales
- to review the role of toy libraries in Wales and their potential contribution to key Welsh policy goals, particularly those contained within the Play Policy and Play Policy Implementation Plan

- to map the extent and nature of toy libraries in Wales
- to conduct case studies of toy libraries in order to identify examples of good practice
- to assess how the play agenda is being interpreted and developed by the WAG, local government and other agencies in Wales.

## 1.3 Project methodology

The NFER team adopted a mixed methodology involving a desk study and qualitative research which included a series of case studies. The research activities described below were conducted during the period January-March 2007.

### Advisory Group

With the help of NATLL/Play Matters in Wales, NFER established an Advisory Group of five experts with extensive knowledge and experience of play policy and toy libraries in Wales. The Advisory Group members were:

- Mark Sainsbury, Director of NATLL/Play Matters in Wales
- Gill Evans, Information Officer, Play Wales
- Professor Marcus Longley, Professor of Applied Health Policy and Associate Director of the Welsh Institute of Health and Social Care and Non-Executive Director of Play Wales
- Anne Jones, Project Manager, Swansea Mobile Toy Library
- Dr Nigel Thomas, Research Director, Department of Childhood Studies at the University of Wales, Swansea.

The purpose of the advisory panel was to offer expert knowledge and policy insights and provide guidance on the direction of the research and its methodology. The group met twice during the project at inception and progress meetings.

## Desk study

A search was conducted through the NFER library service and with advice from NATLL/Play Matters, Play Wales and the Children's Play Information Service for relevant literature and policy documents on toy libraries and on play policy in the UK. These provided a background context for the qualitative research. Documentation reviewed included:

- key policy and strategy documents from the WAG, the UK government and local authorities in Wales
- relevant literature published by organisations engaged with early years policy and play such as NATLL, Play Wales, Children's Play Council
- International and national academic articles and papers on toy libraries and play.

## Qualitative research

A number of strategic face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with bodies possessing an overall view of Play and Early Years policies in Wales. Organisations taking part were:

- NATLL/Play Matters in Wales
- Play Wales, Wales Pre-school Playgroups Association
- The Children's Commissioner for Wales office
- Children in Wales
- National Childminding Association.

Six case-study visits were completed with toy libraries from across Wales. These visits included interviews with toy library coordinators or managers and staff, and parents and children where possible.

A further twelve semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with managers/coordinators of a wider sample of toy libraries.

Both the case-study visits and telephone interviews looked at the nature of the services offered by the toy libraries and their structure, the challenges of running a toy library, guides to good practice, toy libraries' contribution to

play and other policy goals and their perceived benefits for children, parents/carers and providers.

Following analysis of all the evidence gathered, the research team formed its conclusions and drew up recommendations to support the future work of toy libraries in Wales. These are detailed in Chapter 5 of this report.

## **Constraints on the methodology**

The limited time-scale of this project restricted the breadth of research which could be undertaken. While the project set out to map the nature and extent of toy libraries in Wales, it was only able to include those known to NATLL/Play Matters in Wales. The launch of the research was advertised in local and national papers in the hopes of encouraging other toy libraries to contact the research team or NATLL but there was limited response.

Few toy libraries systematically collect data on their work. While some toy libraries follow quality assurance procedures such as that offered by NATLL/Play Matters, they do not evaluate their work on a regular basis. Also, only limited work has been done on developing tools to measure the impact of toy libraries on children, young people and their families. Therefore, the findings of this research report are predominantly based on the perceptions of all those interviewed. Other research has shown that such data can still provide useful evidence. As the Ofsted study of Early Excellence Centres (2004) concludes, qualitative evidence in ‘the context of a wider narrative’ can provide ‘substantial and convincing evidence of “perceived” benefits’ (Ofsted, 2004).

Following initial discussion with the Advisory Group it was decided that the qualitative research would also look at perceptions of the support provided by NATLL/Play Matters to toy libraries in Wales and toy libraries’ needs in terms of further support from the organisation.



## 2 Background and policy context

### 2.1 Toy Libraries

Toy libraries are not a new concept. Evidence of them dates back to the early 1900s, although most modern toy libraries were established in the 1960s and early 1970s. These were set up predominantly in Sweden and the UK by parents and committed professionals to support children with special educational needs and their families (Barton & Head, 1987; Dockrell & Wilkinson, 1989). Originally established as a toy exchange to expand the resources available to families, the toy libraries quickly became a larger phenomenon, lending purchased toys, providing a place where mothers could share information and support one another and where professionals could find resources for their work (Dockrell & Wilkinson, 1989).

The Association of Toy Libraries was established with 30 members in 1972 and became a charity and limited company in 1975. The role of the Association was to support the development of toy libraries and act as a source of information for both those working within and outside the field (Barton & Head, 1987). The Association grew in strength and increased its members and was renamed with the campaign title National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (NATLL)/Play Matters in the early 1980s to emphasise the importance of play and the broad-ranging impacts of toy libraries' work.

From their original aim of providing support to children with special educational needs and their families, some toy libraries have expanded to serve much broader communities and now provide services to a variety of families and children aged from 0–19. Today there are over 1000 toy and leisure libraries in the UK and NATLL/Play Matters has opened offices in Wales and Scotland.

As the title of this report suggests, while the lending of toys is at the heart of toy libraries' provision, they also provide a treasure chest of other services. As Mayfield (1993) argues: 'Toy libraries do much more than loan toys.' Often they are engaged in providing other services and opportunities including offering family support, providing social opportunities for parents to meet and supporting children's development (Mísurcová, 1986).



Toy libraries often continue to be specialists in offering resources and support for children with special educational needs.

Toy libraries have since their conception supported and encouraged the provision of creative play opportunities for children. Dockrell & Wilkinson (1989) argue that common to all toy libraries are two underlying assumptions:

- Play is seen as vital to the development of the child and those who are deprived of active play opportunities for whatever reason are disadvantaged.
- Toys are seen as vital in supporting learning through play (Dockrell & Wilkinson, 1989).

Similarly, Mísurcová (1986) argues that central to toy libraries' work is the belief that:

*... toys are the material objects around which play revolves. It stimulates children to handle things and obliges them to make countless movements... It is partly through toys that children perceive the world outside, learn, compare and add to their store of experience of things known and unknown.* (Mísurcová, 1986)

The benefits provided by toy libraries to children, their families and service practitioners and the value of their promotion of play through the loaning of toys are well documented. They include increased support for children's development, improvements in family bonds and parent-child relationships, increases in a child's experiences of play, opportunities for parents to play an active part in the service, opportunities for children to gain independence and responsibility by choosing and borrowing toys and opportunities for them to communicate with their parents/carers through toys. Mayfield (1993) summarised the benefits to children thus:

*...effects on children were: increased socialization and group behaviour skills, increased access to a variety of toys and the facilitation of play, provision of a positive first experience with a setting and increased play opportunities for special educational needs children. Effects on parents were: parents learning about child development, the importance of play, increased socialisation opportunities, especially for new immigrants and isolated families, improved parenting skills and more playing with children at home.* (Mayfield, 1993)

In England, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project, a longitudinal study of the effects of pre-school education on children concluded in 2001, found that children who play and engage with their parents at home through the support of organisations such as toy libraries do better than their peers on entry to school (DFES, 2001). Partly as a result of this research, the government pledged £6 million in the same year to develop toy libraries in disadvantaged areas of England (DFES, 2001).

In Wales in 2005, NATLL/Play Matters received three-year core funding from the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to establish an office in Wales and appoint two part-time members of staff, a director and an administrator to support the development of toy libraries in Wales (NATLL/Play Matters in Wales, 2006). Since opening this office, the aims of the organisation have been to:

- ensure that the importance of quality play provision for all children is recognised
- ensure that toy libraries and toy loan projects are members of NATLL and benefit from membership
- ensure that quality toy library provision is available in at least 75 of the most deprived wards in Wales
- ensure that toy library services are effective in meeting all children's play needs with specific reference to WAG Play Policy and Play Implementation Plan
- ensure the sustainability of services
- facilitate and develop regional toy library networks
- support toy library projects in undertaking Play Matters/NATLL Quality Assurance scheme (NATLL/Play Matters in Wales, 2006).

Since opening, the Welsh office has made good progress on these objectives and supported its members in Wales. As part of its commitments, NATLL/Play Matters in Wales established a Welsh Development Committee made up of member toy libraries and regional networks based in South, West, Mid and North Wales.

At the time of the research there were 37 toy libraries in Wales, covering a variety of geographical locations and serving a wide range of different communities.

## 2.2 Play and Play Policy

A child's entitlement to play was enshrined under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989:

*Article 31.1: State Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.* (United Nations, 1989)

Famously, the first political expression of support of a child's right to play was made by Lloyd George in 1926:

*Play is a child's first claim on the community. No community can infringe upon that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.* (Play Wales, 2006)

This has since come to be known as the first claim principle.

Since this time, a child's right to play has also been promoted by numerous advocates because of their belief in its proven benefits to children. Play Wales, the national umbrella organisation for play in Wales, state in their *Rationale for a National Play Policy For Wales* (Play Wales n.d.) that play 'is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development, not only for individual children but for the societies in they live as well'. Play is also said to be crucial in the development of children's 'problem solving, language and creativity' and for their education, as children are often 'learning whilst they are playing' (Play Wales, n.d.).

Similarly *Making the Case for Play* (Cole-Hamilton & Gill, 2002) argues that researchers such as Street (2002) show that play can have a significant impact on a child's mental and physical health and helps them to develop essential social skills through activities such as making friendships and dealing with challenges. Play is also recognised for its ability to develop children's creative imagination and understanding of the world.

These benefits of play were supported and recognised by the WAG in their adoption of a *Play Policy* (2002), *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (2006) and in the development of a new Early Years curriculum *The Foundation Phase* (2004) which advocates learning through play. Support for play has also been forthcoming in recent years from the UK government in Westminster.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has supported the development of the play sector. The 2004 Dobson Review of Play in the UK *Getting Serious About Play* (DCMS, 2004) made recommendations to the UK government on how Big Lottery Fund money could be best spent to support play and advocated that the national government should ensure that:

- play was given a higher priority nationally and locally
- the UK government should ensure that government departments work more closely together to develop and support play
- that national and local strategies for play should be encouraged. (DCMS, 2004).

In response to this, the DCMS established an inter-departmental working group in Whitehall to look at the government's work on play that included the DCMS, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Communities and Local Government, HM Treasury, The Children's Play Council, Big Lottery Fund and Kids. In 2005 the DCMS published *Time for Play* which outlined the contribution made by each of the departments to furthering children's play. These included work with children and young people through *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters*, work to protect green public spaces and common land by the Department for Communities and Local Government and work by the Department for Transport to regulate roads to make playing outside safer.

The DCMS has also sponsored three voluntary organisations to advocate and support play in England. It has provided funding to the Children's Play Information Service (CPIS) and the Children's Play Council and Skills Active, the sector skills council for play work. However, despite this support, the UK government has not adopted a national strategy or policy on play, and its development in England has been left to local authority and regional level.

The Scottish Executive has not adopted a play policy or national strategy but has funded a national voluntary organisation for play, Play Scotland (Children's Play Council, 2002). In Northern Ireland, the PlayBoard Northern Ireland (PBNI) have been working to fund play opportunities for children and the devolved administration has recently completed a consultation on adopting a Play Policy for Northern Ireland.

In contrast, as mentioned previously, the WAG has been a keen advocate of children's play and took several steps in its early existence to support it. In 2002, the WAG became the first government in the world to adopt a Play Policy. This defined the WAG's interpretation of play as:

*Children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.* (WAG, 2002)

The policy also stressed a belief in the importance of play for children's social, emotional and physical development. It recognised that pressures of modern society such as the loss of natural play spaces due to building developments have reduced children's opportunities to play freely and that adults should take responsibility for protecting these play opportunities. The WAG therefore committed itself to supporting the provision of 'compensatory' play spaces and secure children's access to:

*rich stimulating environments, free from inappropriate risk and full of challenge, thereby offering them the opportunity to explore through freely-chosen play both themselves and the world around them.* (WAG, 2002)

Following this policy statement, the WAG convened a Play Policy Implementation Group made up of key national organisations to make recommendations on the implementation of the policy. The WAG accepted the majority of the group's recommendations and published a *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) in 2006 that set out the concrete steps which the government and the National Assembly in partnerships with other key organisations would take to support play in Wales.

The *Play Implementation Policy Plan* (WAG, 2006) includes nineteen actions to improve play provision in Wales. These include placing a duty on local authorities through the Children Act 2004 and guidance to cooperate in addressing the play needs of local children and young people. It also

included actions on workforce development such as working with bodies like Play Wales to ensure adequate training for play workers and looking at recruitment and retention issues with the Sector Skills Councils. There are also actions to improve parents' understanding and knowledge of the benefits of play and the mainstreaming of play in other WAG policies. Commentators have heralded both the *Play Policy* (WAG, 2002) and the *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) as important steps forward (ChildrenNow, 2007).

## 2.3 Toy libraries and policy

Toy libraries make particular contributions towards the *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) and its goals of increasing awareness amongst parents of the benefits and importance of play.

In recent years there has also been considerable emphasis across the UK but particularly in Wales on early years, childcare and family support provision. Since its inception in 1999, the WAG has launched a raft of policies aimed at improving services in these areas. In addition to supporting play policy, toy libraries have also contributed directly or indirectly in many ways to implementation of these policies. These include Flying Start, the policy to provide free part-time childcare places to children two years of age, parental support and training and workforce improvements in disadvantaged areas in Wales; the Foundation Phase, a new Early Years curriculum for children aged 3–7 that emphasises learning through play; the Childcare Strategy which aims to improve the quality and provision of childcare in Wales; the Parenting Strategy which aims to provide integrated support and advice to parents, carers and families in Wales; and recent programmes such as the development of Integrated Children's Centres.



## 3 Play Policy in Wales

This chapter presents the findings of the research conducted during this project through strategic interviews with national organisations in Wales. It offers an insight into perceptions of how play has developed in Wales since the adoption of the *Play Policy* in 2002 and the *Play Policy Implementation Plan* in 2006.

### 3.1 The Play Policy and Play Policy Implementation Plan

The introduction of a *Play Policy* (WAG, 2002) and *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) was welcomed by all organisations who took part in this research because of the recognition they gave to the importance of play and their contribution to raising its profile nationally and locally. Respondents felt that these developments were crucial for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the documents recognised the right of the child to play and noted that many of children's traditional opportunities for play are diminishing. One respondent remarked:

*The policy and plan set out a standard that say we value children and their play shouldn't be subsumed, they say play is essential... It also recognises that children are losing freedom to play and that the adult agenda often impinges on children's needs.*

The policy and plan were also seen as an important way of bringing different organisations, sectors and government departments together to develop a shared understanding of play and decide its future direction in Wales. While it was noted that the policy and plan only represented a starting point for development, this was still of great benefit. One respondent commented that:

*They (Play Policy and Implementation Plan) give us hooks to hang things on and a focus but that doesn't mean the job is done yet.*

Another remarked:

*The Implementation Plan definitely brought people together to discuss the issue of play... it brought people together from across the spectrum and made us think, what do we mean by play? What is play? There was a real positiveness and willingness to come to grips with different interpretations to support play across the board and reach a common understanding.*

The willingness to support the play strategy was also evident in the fact that the WAG received one of its highest-ever responses to a consultation document on the *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006).

Another important aspect noted by many was the duty the plan placed on local authorities to cooperate on play provision for children and young people within their authority. Some respondents felt that this would help to ensure that ‘quality play opportunities’ do not only exist in ‘silos’ across Wales but that every child ‘regardless of postcode’ has access to play provision.

## 3.2 Wales and the UK

In policy terms respondents felt that Wales was leading other nations and regions in the UK. One respondent noted that it had been important that ‘Wales stole a march on the rest of the world’ with the introduction of the first play policy. As one respondent remarked:

*Wales is definitely ahead of the game and has been since day one. We are definitely viewed with envy by some sectors in England.*

Respondents felt that Wales had been able to take the lead for a number of reasons. Firstly, the strength of the play sector and the national play organisation, Play Wales, had contributed to highlighting the importance of play with national and local government.

Secondly, it was said that the existence of a political will within WAG to carry this policy forward was a vital factor. The presence of key ministers in the Assembly government cabinet with experience and understanding of the



value of play was noted by all respondents as being an important factor. One organisation stated:

*We have only got the play policy because there was a strong sector and organisations like Play Wales who have lobbied for it and because there have been politicians in the WAG who have been receptive and supportive of the play ethos.*

One respondent noted that the history of good partnership work between sectors and organisations involved with play and the WAG since devolution created the space for the positive dialogue and discussion on play. They stated:

*There has been good communication between the government and organisations involved, there is a shared understanding, which is important.*

Some felt that the adoption of a play policy in Wales had helped to support other regions in their campaigning for their own play policy. Northern Ireland was often mentioned as another area leading the way in play, having recently completed a consultation on a play policy. While all respondents acknowledged that much work has been done in England locally and regionally, particularly since the launch of the Big Lottery Fund programme for play, some felt that England still lacked a coherent strategy at a national level.

### **3.3 Impact of the Policy and Implementation Plan**

While many respondents felt that it was too early to measure the impact of the policy on the opportunities available to all children, respondents certainly believed that the policy and plan had strengthened the sector. One commented:

*It has hugely strengthened the sector. Play workers are often undervalued and underpaid and are very rarely given the same status as other professionals. It was important that WAG recognised the value of play workers and play providers.*

Respondents felt that the recent launch of the Big Lottery Fund's *Child's Play* programme would increase children's access to play opportunities in Wales. Some respondents noted that this will be particularly true at a local authority level where local authorities have had to respond to the *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) and the Big Lottery Fund programme. Some local authorities had previously been slow to respond to the agenda, despite a national play policy. These new initiatives were driving developments in every local authority in Wales. Some authorities with existing play strategies were in the process of renewing them to meet the ethos of the WAG play policy and plan while others have begun the work of forming strategy groups to discuss and consult on a strategy for the authority. Funding from the Big Lottery Fund had helped this process by enabling Play Wales to appoint more development workers to support the local authorities.

Respondents also noted that the commitment by WAG to help ensure adequate training opportunities for play workers would certainly benefit play provision in future.

### 3.4 The future

In general, respondents were optimistic about the future but noted that there was still much work to be done to ensure that the Play Policy was implemented fully.

Some felt that greater attention will be needed in future to ensure the inclusivity of play for all children, particularly children with special education needs and physical disabilities. Given the planning currently being completed by local authorities, some organisations felt that it represented an opportune moment to ensure the inclusion of all children from the start. One representative stated:

*We feel that it's an opportune moment with play high up the agenda and partnerships working on their Children's and Young People's Plans by 2008 for us to ask what they are doing to be inclusive.*

Other organisations felt that although there was cross-departmental and cross-party support in Wales for play, more needed to be done to ensure that the impact of any policy on a child's opportunity to play was a consideration

for every WAG policy. Some respondents felt that some government departments at national and local level had still not grasped the true meaning of the Play Policy. One noted:

*In general, all people working with children and young people now understand and recognise play but in departments such as housing and transport it's not really hit home, they have a more traditional view of play as putting a bit of grass and some fixed play equipment in a housing estate.*

A majority of respondents felt that an awareness of play across all government departments in Wales could be improved with the creation of a Children's Minister with 'a real portfolio and budget'. While many praised the work of the current Children's Minister, they felt that the clout of this post in government was limited by the lack of 'power to push through actions and give stern reminders'.

Despite good partnership work to develop the *Play Policy Implementation Plan*, some organisations felt that the sector would continue to benefit from closer partnerships and better exchanges of information between organisations. Although it was noted that much good work was happening already in projects such as CWLWM (a European funded project to fund a partnership of organisations to help workforce development in the early years, childcare and play sector), more could be done to share resources and funding and strengthen work on play.

All respondents recognised that the continued successful implementation of the Play Policy would depend on the continuation of support and funding from any future WAG administration. However, most felt optimistic that the cross-party support received for play to date and the progress already made would mean that play will continue to be recognised as a fundamental entitlement for children in Wales.

### **3.5 Toy libraries' role within Play in Wales**

In addition to questions about the broader sector, respondents were also asked for their views on the role of toy libraries.

All believed that toy libraries offer an important service to children, young people and families. Within the play agenda, toy libraries' role in resourcing play providers was seen as effective. One comment was:

*Toy libraries have great potential. They have an important role in resourcing play providers. This is a seriously useful service to play providers who can't always store or buy expensive pieces of equipment.'*

Toy libraries were also recognised for the contribution they make towards raising awareness of the importance of play with parents and families and for their role as play providers, providing children with early experiences of play.

*Toy libraries make an important contribution to encouraging play early on and providing children with choice in what they play with and how they play. Toy librarians can also guide and support parents with their children in a non-threatening way. They learn about how children learn through play.*

Toy libraries were also recognised for the specialist services they often offer to children with special educational needs and their families. Respondents reported that toy libraries often provide support and guidance to families on the resources available for their children and how they can develop through play. One respondent also noted that toy libraries often support the work of playgroups and other childcare providers with children with special educational needs by lending them often expensive specialist equipment. One person commented:

*Toy libraries are often also skilled at supporting mums with disabled children or children with special educational needs and can show them what toys will most stimulate their child; this is a great piece of knowledge and skill.*

Overall, respondents agreed that toy libraries have the potential to make an important contribution to the play agenda. However, many noted that at present this contribution often went unrecognised. Some respondents therefore felt that more should be done in future to raise the profile of toy libraries in Wales.

## 3.6 Key findings

- The introduction of the *Play Policy* (WAG, 2002) and *Play Policy Implementation Plan* (WAG, 2006) were welcomed for their emphasis on the importance of play, adult responsibility for protecting children's play opportunities and their contribution to raising the profile of play and the play sector.
- Discussions leading to the creation of the implementation plan were seen as important as they had helped to bring different sectors together to develop a common understanding.
- Respondents felt that Wales was leading the way in the UK, especially in terms of policy.
- It had been possible for Wales to lead the way because of the existence of a strong play sector and national organisation for play, Play Wales, and because of the political will of the Welsh Assembly Government.
- While it was too soon to measure direct impacts on the number of play opportunities open to children, respondents felt that the policy and plan had strengthened the sector and helped to encourage local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to play.
- Respondents were optimistic about the future and believed that cross-party support for play would continue.
- Toy libraries have an important contribution to make to play in Wales as resourcing playworkers, increasing parental awareness of the value of play, providing early experiences of play and as specialist providers, but the profile of toy libraries and awareness of their contribution needs to be raised.



## 4 The role of toy libraries in Wales

This chapter summarises the research evidence collected on the role of toy libraries in Wales through the strategic interviews, telephone surveys of toy libraries and the case studies.

### 4.1 Toy Library Provision

#### Location and Origins

A key finding of this research is that while all toy libraries have similar aims and goals to their work each one is unique in the service it provides and the way in which it provides that service. This is in large part due to the differing locations and origins of the toy libraries.

In this study, each toy library included had a unique history. The oldest, a voluntary toy library, had been open since 1977 while the newest was yet to open officially. Of the 18 toy libraries sampled, six had been open since the 1990s, eight since 2000 and two were opened in the 1970s and 1980s. One that had been open in the 1990s had recently closed.

Nine toy libraries included in the research were voluntary organisations, some in their own right, while others formed part of larger voluntary organisations. For example, one operated as part of a children's hospice while two others were a part of larger play organisations.

These voluntary toy libraries had opened for a number of reasons. Mainly, they had been established because of a need identified in the community, sometimes by parents themselves, for a toy library's services. For example, one was established because of parents' awareness of a lack of provision for children with special educational needs in the area. Another was established by parents who wanted the opportunities for families, parents and children to socialise through play. Others had been set up to resource other providers such as playgroups so that they could provide quality play opportunities to the children under their care.

The nine other toy libraries included in the research were either part of a statutory service or funded predominantly through statutory funding. Five of

the latter were originally funded through Sure Start money made available at the end of the 1990s to provide integrated health, education and care services for families with children under the age of four in disadvantaged areas. Three of these were based in larger Sure Start family or children's centres which housed a range of practitioners such as play outreach workers, speech and language therapists, family workers and practitioners and health visitors. In both these centres the toy library was an integral part of the centre's services and highly valued by parents and practitioners. The other two originally set up under Sure Start funding offered mobile provision to childcare providers or parents on a county-wide basis. When Sure Start funding came to an end the majority of these toy libraries were funded via Cymorth, the WAG fund distributed by local Children and Young People's Partnerships to projects operating in disadvantaged areas.

Another two toy libraries funded mainly through statutory funding were based in recently opened Integrated Children's Centres that offered families the four core services of education, childcare, training and play. Of the other two, one was set up over 25 years ago to support children with special educational needs across five local authority areas and the other was run by a local authority as part of its Children and Young People's Partnership work.

The toy libraries included in the study represented a cross-section of geographical locations and sizes, being situated both in towns and rural communities. However, the origin of the toy library e.g. voluntary organisation set up by parents to serve a particular community or to provide specialist resources, had greater influence on its work and ethos than its location.

## **Nature of provision**

The title 'toy library' often does not adequately reflect the work that they do. As Mayfield (1993) argues: 'Toy libraries do much more than loan toys.' A misconception often repeated is: 'Children already have lots of toys; why do they need to borrow even more?' (Elias, 1987). Although toy lending is often at the heart of a toy library's provision, this is often a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Lending a toy to a child, parent or family and membership of a toy library brings about greater benefits than just the loan itself.

The nature of provision of the 18 toy libraries included in this research clearly demonstrated that they do much more than lend toys. They provided a wide variety of services, of which the main ones were:

- Toy loans to children, parents, families, childcare providers both in the maintained and non-maintained sector and relevant practitioners. This included mobile and fixed-base provision.
- Play work and support; offering outreach play sessions in homes, drop-in play sessions at centres and contributing to playdays, community days and play schemes.
- Family support and advice; offering a non-threatening source of information, signposting to other partners/services and opportunities for parents to socialise and contribute.
- Targeted support to specific groups such as children with special educational needs, asylum seekers and traveller families.
- Provide resources for a wide variety of practitioners, including family workers, health visitors and play workers.

Toy libraries included in this study provided these services to children of different ages. While some concentrated on providing early years services for children under the age of four, others provided services to out-of-school clubs caring for children up to the age of 11 and others provided for teenagers with special educational needs.

Many of the toy libraries also provided these services free of charge or for a nominal membership fee of between £1–£2 p.a. for parents, carers and individuals and £20 for large playgroups.

The membership of the toy libraries varied greatly. However, the number of members attracted by all toy libraries was often remarkable considering the average size and number of staff running the toy library. The smallest included in this study had 30 members while the largest had a potential 300+. While not all registered members were actively using the toy library at the same time, on average at least 70–90 members in the larger toy libraries were accessing the service on a regular basis.



## Funding and staffing

Funding for running the toy libraries in the study came from a variety of sources. Many of the local authority-sponsored examples received most of their funding for daily running costs and salaries from annual Cymorth grants. While some of these received slippage money at the end of the financial year to buy new toys and resources, others had to source funding elsewhere to replenish their stock. These had sourced funding from similar organisations to the voluntary-run toy libraries.

The main sources of voluntary funding and grants were Children in Need who had funded equipment and in some cases additional workers at several toy libraries, the Big Lottery Fund and, where applicable, Communities First. Other small grants had been sourced from a variety of foundations such as the Church in Wales, the Toys Trust and community councils. Some small toy libraries run by volunteers depended solely on small fundraising community events such as summer fêtes etc. to raise enough money to pay for insurance and new toys.

Where voluntary toy libraries were situated within family centres or other public buildings they have often been subsidised indirectly, for example, through the provision of free storage space and heating/lighting, or the help of paid staff members at the centre. Local authority-sponsored toy libraries situated within bigger centres also avoided having to pay for storage space, staff salaries etc. as individual costs. In these instances toy libraries often only sought funding to replenish their toys.

Staffing of the toy libraries also varied greatly from library to library. In five of them, running the toy library was only one part of an individual's role. Staff had often been asked to take on the toy library in addition to their existing responsibilities.

Only five of the toy libraries had a full-time, dedicated member of staff. The hours allocated to these individuals varied between 20 and 30 hours a week. Other toy libraries had one or more part-time members of staff and three had a part-time member of staff in addition to a full-time member. Four toy libraries included in the study were run solely by volunteers dedicating their spare time to manage it. While some of the voluntary toy

libraries had committees, others struggled to attract new volunteers and were predominantly run by one committed individual.

Funding and staffing were undoubtedly ongoing challenges for the toy libraries included in the study, and those with sufficient funding to employ a full-time, dedicated member of staff benefited from this. However, the commitment of the individuals working and volunteering at all the toy libraries meant that their quality of service did not suffer from any lack of full-time staff.

## 4.2 NATLL membership

As mentioned previously, NATLL is a national membership organisation that offers support to, and lobbies on behalf of, its toy and leisure library members. As part of the study, toy libraries were asked whether they were members of NATLL, whether they had benefited from membership and what further services they would like to receive as members in order to enhance the support that NATLL offers its members in Wales.

Of the 18 toy libraries included, the majority were members of the organisation. Those who were not members had not joined because of a lack of current funding but were aware of the organisation's work. Those who were members had joined for a variety of reasons but mainly because NATLL provided a good source of information and support.

Toy libraries who were members of NATLL/Play Matters in Wales felt that they benefited from their membership. These benefits included the receiving of help sheets and information on funding opportunities, a support service which they could ring up with questions and get an answer or advice on who to ask, and being kept up-to-date with developments. Members particularly valued the development of regional networks as they felt that these had provided excellent opportunities to meet other toy libraries and share experiences and good practice. Many felt these local meetings were especially valuable as they did not have the time or funding to travel to the national meetings. Members also noted that the service provided to them had improved dramatically since the Welsh office of NATLL/Play Matters had opened.

Additional support that members would like to receive included more information on funding and particularly help in completing funding applications, more lobbying and advocacy work at a national level to raise the profile of toy libraries and a newsletter with information on what different Welsh toy libraries were doing. Some members also mentioned that the sourcing of funding by NATLL/Play Matters in Wales for development workers to support new and existing toy libraries would be very beneficial and help to increase the sustainability of toy libraries.

However, the main additional service that members would like to see was the provision of cheaper, more localised training. Many toy libraries noted that often the closest locations for training were in England and many training opportunities cost over £100 which was too expensive for small and voluntary organisations.

Non-members, and some members, felt that the organisation should also aim to increase their support to struggling non-member and member toy libraries. However, non-members acknowledged that this was a catch-22 situation as NATLL/Play Matters is a membership organisation dependent partly on membership funding to provide the services and impoverished toy libraries cannot afford to be members. Without support from NATLL/Play Matters in Wales it was likely that these toy libraries would continue to struggle, therefore making it unlikely they would be able to join at any point in the near future.

### **4.3 Good practice and challenges**

The main challenge facing almost all 18 toy libraries was funding. In some cases a lack of money meant that toy libraries were facing closure and while some had sufficient funding at present, insecurity about the future was a constant cause for concern. For some voluntary toy libraries, securing enough money to continue was an ongoing daily challenge. One toy library coordinator noted: ‘The main challenge is securing ongoing funding and making the service sustainable.’

Some toy libraries struggled to get funding to replenish their toys, which was a major cause for concern to them as they didn’t want ‘to let children down’ with disappointing, old and tired toys. In several cases any small

amounts of money raised through a nominal membership fee went towards paying for the toy libraries insurance, leaving no money to buy new toys and resources.

Even in well-established, core-funded toy libraries, concern about funding was evident. Most of the toy libraries financed mainly or solely through Cymorth put in annual bids for funding, and many were concerned that if support for the toy library were to diminish in the local authority, the toy library might lose its funding and be put in a precarious position. One toy library project manager remarked:

*Despite core funding we are still only funded from one year to the next. If there was a person appointed to the local authority who wasn't sympathetic I don't know what would happen to us.*

This uncertainty about funding also gave rise to further challenges of which the main one was staffing the toy libraries.

In several cases, those responsible for running the toy libraries on a daily basis did so as part of a much wider role. Since the running and organising of a toy library is, as one individual noted 'quite a time-consuming role,' this meant that either the toy library or their other responsibilities suffered as a consequence. Some respondents felt that their other work had suffered because they had to dedicate so much time to the toy library while others felt that its development was affected because of their lack of time to devote to it. One coordinator stated:

*The main challenge for me is getting enough hours to properly run the toy library. I can't dedicate as much time to it as it needs to develop because it's not my main role.*

Another toy librarian recognised:

*It's quite time-consuming to administer a toy library properly. It's hard to find the time to dedicate to it and so it could probably develop with a part-time person in charge much more than it has done.*

Another difficulty caused by a lack of funding was the high turnover of staff in some toy libraries. The frequent employment of staff on annual contracts created a sense of job insecurity, with many leaving after a year to positions

that were more secure in the long term. Short-term contracts also meant that some toy libraries had difficulties in attracting people with the right experience for the job. One toy library noted that some people with experience of working with childcare providers or toys/resources were discouraged by the amount of delivery work involved with working at a mobile toy library while others who applied had delivery experience but could not offer the advice and support to providers that was also a key part of the role.

Toy libraries run by volunteers had encountered some problems in recent years in attracting enough volunteers 'to man the toy library'. Often, these libraries were run by groups of dedicated volunteers who had been involved for long periods of time. This recruitment difficulty, however, reflected a general trend that had faced many other voluntary organisations in recent years.

Other challenges for several toy libraries were:

- a lack of appropriate space to store toys and to open the toy library for children, families and providers to come and choose toys
- a lack of understanding/ awareness of the work of the toy libraries.

Some smaller toy libraries had a broom closet or a caretaker's cupboard from which to operate, which limited the amount of toys they could store and made access for users difficult. The lack of space was often due to an inability to afford a bigger area and/or a lack of understanding of the nature of their work and the space required for a toy library to operate fully.

A significant challenge was raising awareness of their work amongst parents, local authorities and other statutory bodies. One toy library noted that when they first opened, people on the local estate would not borrow toys because they thought it was a sign to others that they could not afford them. Through drop-in sessions, toy library staff were able to emphasise the social and developmental aspects of the toy library's work and change the attitudes of many parents.

Another example of good practice evident in strong toy libraries was their partnership work with other organisations and services. Either as part of a bigger centre or through their work with families, many toy libraries worked with other practitioners to support families. By working in partnership with

other services, toy libraries were able to raise awareness of their work and identify need, for example, the need for more multicultural resources or more sensory equipment for children with special educational needs. In some cases partnership working with other organisations also helped them to identify funding opportunities.

Another feature of good practice was the quality of the toys and resources stocked. Not only were there a huge variety and range of toys and equipment but toy librarians often spent a lot of time choosing and sourcing the most appropriate toys, talking to users about their needs and accessing specialist catalogues to ensure high-quality provision.

A further example of good practice in several toy libraries was the welcoming and non-threatening atmosphere which attracted parents and encouraged them to borrow toys. It was important in many cases for toy libraries to reassure parents that it was not a problem if toys broke or bits went missing as many parents were afraid to borrow in case of breakages. Where toy librarians reassured parents that this was expected as ‘part and parcel of children’s play’, they were happy to borrow on a regular basis.

Another feature of flourishing toy libraries was the commitment of staff and volunteers, often far over and above their official working hours. As one toy library project manager noted: ‘What makes us successful, it’s the enthusiasm, motivation and commitment of the people, staff and volunteers, running it.’

Without this level of commitment, many of the toy libraries in the study would either not be in existence or be unable to offer their current services.

## 4.4 The benefits of toy libraries

Toy libraries included in this research benefited children, parents/carers, providers and practitioner in numerous ways. Most important among these was their contribution to:

- providing and encouraging creative play opportunities for all children regardless of ability
- supporting families and providers

- overcoming disadvantage caused by poverty and lack of opportunity
- the goals and work of other services
- policy goals and objectives currently prioritised by the WAG.

## Providing and encouraging play

Many international and UK-based studies have shown that toy libraries make an important contribution to increasing the opportunities children have to play. The toy libraries included in this research were no exception. Through their work with families the toy libraries were able to educate parents about the importance of play and especially creative play. The toy librarians were able to advise on the most appropriate toys and encourage families to play with each other. One toy librarian noted that some parents often did not understand why it was necessary to talk to or play with young babies and had the impression ‘that babies just sit there’. Through showing parents the babies’ response to toys in the toy library, the librarian was able to show them the importance of play. After such an experience parents often remarked how much their children had developed by playing with toys there.

Toy libraries also educated parents about the way children play and the importance of allowing them the freedom to choose and communicate by playing with the toys. A toy librarian remarked that this was an essential element of their work:

*Improving parents’ knowledge of how and why they should play with their children is vital. There are a lot of little subtle things involved in a toy library like letting the child choose a toy and letting parents know that it’s ok for a child to choose its own toy even if it chooses the same one six weeks in a row.’*

Many of the toy libraries also noted that children benefited from the responsibility involved in borrowing and choosing the toy. Once borrowed, children are responsible for caring for that toy and then bringing it back for others to play with and share. Both parents and toy librarians noted that children attending drop-in sessions also benefited from and enjoyed the opportunity to play with other children. One older child noted that they enjoyed coming to the toy library ‘to play with Tom and my friends’ and another noted that he could ‘borrow the sea creatures lots of times’.

Toy libraries providing services to children with special educational needs and their families played a vital role in encouraging and providing play opportunities for these families. Several toy librarians noted that parents/carers with severely disabled children and young people were sometimes unaware of their need to play. In these cases, toy libraries with a wealth of experience and equipment can support families in their play with their children. This helps to support a child's development. Some parents noted that the effort required to care for their child meant that they lacked energy to think of ways to play with them. Toy librarians can work with families and play workers to resource and advise these families on ways to play and engage with their children.

Toy libraries and the lending of toys can also provide children with special educational needs with a way of communicating. One toy library used things such as painting competitions to allow children with special educational needs to paint toys, colours or shapes they liked so that the toy library could provide appropriate resources. The toy library had also developed cards that helped parents to evaluate a child's response to a toy, e.g. blinking to a sound or a light, to help the toy library advise parents on what toys would stimulate their child most.

Several toy libraries noted that part of their role was to dismantle old perceptions of playtime and education and demonstrate how imaginative play benefits children, for example, by providing playgroups with boxes of wooden spoons and pots and pans that children could use creatively.

## **Support services**

One of the most important benefits of toy libraries was the support they provided to families and providers.

Many toy libraries in this study supported families by offering 'a non-threatening' environment where parents and carers could come and talk about their problems or their children with staff and one another. Parents using the toy libraries consistently noted that the opportunity provided there to socialise was the biggest benefit to them. Many had made friends through the toy library and loved 'coming to have a chat about the kids or holidays or anything'. Parents also noted that by chatting with the staff they had been



able to get help with other issues. Similarly, practitioners and toy librarians noted that the toy library provided an informal entry point to families where they were happy to talk about any issues without feeling they were being judged. If unable to help, many toy libraries would signpost parents to useful services.

This was particularly true in toy libraries that were a part of larger family or children's centres. Family workers valued the opportunity that drop-in sessions run by the toy library gave them to build up relationships with parents. By supporting families through play, family workers were able to build up trust with parents and help them with other challenges they were facing. One toy librarian noted:

*I think toy libraries can be of benefit because they offer support in a non-threatening way, which means we can reach hard-to-reach families. It gives them an opportunity to open up and talk to us in a neutral environment so we can provide family support or can suggest other people to them.*

Toy libraries also offered advice and support to childcare providers. Their wealth of experience meant that they could advise providers on the resources available, how they could improve certain aspects of their provision and provide resource support when caring for children with special educational needs. Toy libraries in this study also worked to support providers' work by helping them respond to new curriculum requirements or to inspection regime requirements, for example, helping them to meet the requirements of the Foundation Phase by lending and purchasing more outdoor equipment or by encouraging them to borrow multicultural toys to improve their children's knowledge of other cultures.

## **Poverty and lack of opportunity**

By the nature of the services they provided, toy libraries in this research helped to overcome certain barriers created by poverty. Many of the toys purchased by the toy libraries included expensive equipment that parents normally would not be able to afford. One grandmother using a toy library reported that she had been able to borrow an expensive wooden pram to help encourage her granddaughter to walk that her daughter could never have

bought herself. Another toy library had purchased large and sometimes expensive toys like paddling pools and ball pools that families could borrow for birthday parties or during the summer months.

All toy libraries also provided opportunities for both parents and children that would not be available otherwise, such as involvement with the service through volunteering or helping with drop-in sessions which helped increase their confidence and in many cases led them to volunteer or take part in other activities elsewhere.

For children with special educational needs the commitment and enthusiasm of staff to provided them with equal opportunities to play and develop undoubtedly provided them with opportunities that previously were limited or non-existent.

## **Working with others**

Where toy libraries worked closely with other services they offered important advantages to other practitioners. One family practitioner noted:

*The resources are excellent, they really help to facilitate work with families. It's much easier to communicate with families through play. There are some lovely resources here that really encourage children's development. I use the toy library all the time.*

Practitioners are also able to signpost families to toy library services that can support them through mobile provision and drop-in sessions. Practitioners also had an input into the work of the toy library by requesting certain resources or identifying particular needs.

## **Policy contribution**

Through the benefits and services mentioned above, the toy libraries made important contributions to many of the current policy targets set by the WAG. These included encouraging learning through play, reducing the effects of child poverty and supporting parents and families, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Toy libraries also mentioned contributions to some more unexpected policy targets such as reducing the impacts of climate change. A few toy libraries mentioned their green credentials and that by

lending toys and pooling resources they were reducing the carbon impact of producing ten toys when one can be made and borrowed. Specific policies to which toy libraries often unknowingly contributed were Flying Start, Parenting Strategy, Childcare Strategy, child poverty, the Foundation Phase, Play Policy Implementation Plan, Integrated Children's Centres and the Wales Environment Strategy.

When asked to which area they felt that toy libraries made the biggest contribution, many library workers answered 'all these and more'. However, many toy libraries felt that their contribution and their potential to contribute further were not always recognised. One toy library manager remarked:

*At the moment we aren't recognised. The amount of funding we receive shows that what we can do is undervalued.*

## 4.5 Future aspirations and plans

All toy libraries involved in the research had ambitious aspirations and future plans. Most hoped to receive or find additional funding to expand their service either to mobile provision, to open for longer hours or to extend their current service to families or to providers dependent on the current nature of the service. Many toy libraries situated in one location expressed a desire to open satellite provision closer to communities to make access easier for parents and increase their membership.

Many toy libraries funded by specific funds such as Sure Start or Cymorth which targeted specific user groups e.g. disadvantaged communities, outlined the need to expand the service to all areas of the authority. One toy library manager summed up her wishes thus:

*It would be of great value if we could deliver the service to all families who need support and not just those in Communities First areas. Who can say who is disadvantaged? There are pockets of disadvantage everywhere! The service should be available anywhere families need support. There should be a Flying Start for all children and not just some!*

Other toy libraries wished to acquire more storage space and more suitable premises. One volunteer toy librarian noted:

*It would be lovely to have a place of our own where we could be open the days and times we wanted. The library won't allow food and drink in but if we had our own place people could stay longer, have a coffee and a chat.*

In general, all toy libraries felt that for any of these ambitions or plans to be realised, there needed to be greater recognition of their work at all levels of government, more mainstreaming of the toy libraries service and increased levels of sustainable funding. One toy librarian who had ambitious hopes for the volunteer toy library she ran noted that much of what they wanted to achieve would not be possible without at least some recognition of their work from the local authority:

*It would be a great help even without any funding from them to get at least some recognition of all the hard work we do, some support for what we trying to achieve for this area.*

## 4.6 Key Findings

### Toy library provision

- Toy libraries do much more than lend toys: they provide a variety of important services to children, families, childcare providers and practitioners.
- Toy libraries' origins i.e. why and by whom they were set up, was a more significant determinant of what services they provided than their geographical location.
- The main types of services provided by toy libraries included: toy and resource lending to children, families and childcare providers; playwork and support; family support and advice; targeted support to address specific needs; providing resources and advice to a variety of practitioners.
- Funding for toy libraries was obtained from a variety of sources. The main source of statutory funding was Cymorth and the main voluntary sources of funding were Children in Need, the Big Lottery Fund

and smaller grants came from organisations such as the Church in Wales and Community Councils.

- Staffing in toy libraries also varied. Five toy libraries included in this study were staffed by a full-time toy librarian, five by people as part of other responsibilities, three toy libraries had a full-time and part-time toy librarian and four toy libraries were run entirely by volunteers.

## **NATLL/Play Matters membership**

- The majority of toy libraries were members of NATLL. Non-members knew of the organisation's work but could not afford to pay for membership.
- Member toy libraries believed they benefited from their membership and praised services such as: the help sheets, provision of information on funding, advisory service and networking opportunities.
- In future members would like NATLL to develop further by: providing more advice on how to complete funding applications, providing free or low-cost local training and sourcing funding to appoint development workers in Wales.
- Non-members and some members would also like NATLL to source funding to increase its support to struggling non-members.

## **Good practice and challenges**

- Examples of good practice in toy libraries included: extensive work with other partners and good partnership working; the provision of quality resources and the time spent sourcing these resources; the creation of a welcoming and non-threatening service and the commitment of staff and volunteers running the toy libraries.

- Challenges faced by toy libraries included: insufficient and unsustainable funding, high turnover of staff and short-term contracts, attracting people with the right skills to staff toy libraries, attracting new volunteers and addressing common misconceptions about their work.

## Benefits

- Toy libraries offered a range of benefits to children, families, child-care providers and practitioners. These benefits included:
- providing and encouraging creative play opportunities for all children regardless of ability
- supporting families and providers
- overcoming disadvantage caused by poverty and lack of opportunity
- contributing to the achievement of the goals and work of other services
- contributing to the achievement of policy goals and objective currently prioritised by the WAG.

## Future plans and aspirations

- In future toy libraries hoped to: extend their services to more people; extend the toy library to include new services and move into larger/more suitable accommodation.
- To realise these plans, toy libraries needed to source additional funding and support.



## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

#### Range of services

The evidence gathered in this report demonstrates that toy libraries in Wales offer ‘a treasure chest of services’. Often misunderstood as a library service that loans toys instead of books, they in fact offer a wide range of services to children, families, providers and practitioners. Additional services provided by toy libraries included:

- Toy loans to children, parents, families, childcare providers in the main-  
tained and non-maintained sector and practitioners. This included mobile  
and fixed-base provision.
- Play work and support: offering outreach play sessions in homes, drop-in  
play sessions at centres and contributing to play days, community days  
and play schemes.
- Family support and advice: offering a non-threatening source of informa-  
tion, signposting to other partners/services and opportunities for parents to  
socialise and contribute.
- Targeted support to specific groups such as children with special educa-  
tional needs, asylum seekers and traveller families.
- Providing resources for a variety of practitioners including family work-  
ers, health visitors and play workers.

#### Valued impact

Through their work to date toy libraries have provided substantial benefits to children and families in Wales and are highly valued by all who use them. This value is clearly reflected in the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the staff and volunteers who run the toy libraries and believe strongly in their worth.

## Contribution to policy areas

Through their provision of these services toy libraries also make an important contribution to key policy areas in Wales such as health, early years education, childcare, environmental protection and most notably play. Toy libraries act as play resources providing equipment and toys to play providers, raise awareness with parents from a very early stage about the value of play and are play providers in their own right.

## Key success factors

Common elements of good practice were evident in the toy libraries' work. Key factors to their success were:

- good partnership work with other services and organisations
- provision of non-threatening and welcoming services
- flexibility in delivery of the service and their approach
- commitment and enthusiasm of toy library staff and volunteers
- provision of high-quality resources and experiences.

## Greatest challenges

Toy libraries faced challenges in running the service on a daily basis and in planning for future developments. The greatest challenges were:

- insufficient sustainable funding
- high turnover rates for staff on short-term contracts
- difficulties in recruiting staff with the right skills
- difficulties in recruiting volunteers to sit on committees or help to run toy libraries
- a frequent lack of understanding of their work amongst statutory and funding bodies.



## Lack of recognition

As acknowledged by many who took part in this research, toy libraries' contribution and potential often go unrecognised. Long-standing misconceptions of toy libraries often remain, indicating that they have struggled to get the recognition they deserve and the funding they need. If toy libraries are to continue to offer their treasure chest of provision in future and further increase their contribution, greater support for their work is required.

## 5.2 Recommendations

- 5.2.1 The Welsh Assembly Government and other funding bodies should consider providing further financial support to bodies which promote play in Wales and to the toy libraries themselves in order to:
- help them continue to develop their relationship with other organisations in Wales
  - provide free or affordable localised training to toy librarians and staff
  - support the development of new toy libraries
  - help struggling toy libraries unable to afford membership of NATLL/Play Matters in Wales in order to strengthen their services.
- 5.2.2 Children and Young People's Partnerships should develop greater awareness of toy libraries within their authority to ensure that they are given consideration in all appropriate funding allocations.
- 5.2.3 Toy libraries should make every effort in conjunction with NATLL/Play Matters to market their services and raise the profile of their work locally, for example, by offering to provide presentations about their work at statutory meetings or events.
- 5.2.4 The Welsh Assembly Government should consider toy libraries as a potential vehicle for service delivery in future WAG policy initiatives apart from play, such as in health and lifelong learning.
- 5.2.5 Further research into measuring the impact and effectiveness of toy library provision should be conducted to help toy libraries improve their services and to provide evidence for them to strengthen future funding bids.

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# Appendix 1

## Toy library case studies

### Toy Library A

#### A1 The area and background

Toy library A was situated in North-East Wales close to the English border. It was part of a Sure Start centre situated on a housing estate that was also a Communities First area. The centre was the base for the local Sure Start team who operated a number of outreach and in-centre services for families with children aged 0–4 in the area. The centre also formed part of a wider network of family centres throughout the local authority.

The toy library had been open since 2000 when Sure Start money was made available to the area. In addition to the toy library, the centre also housed a nursery class, family workers and practitioners, a fruit and vegetable cooperative, a citizens advice bureau, drop-in sessions, a child safety project, home visiting for new parents, a range of courses for parents, breastfeeding support sessions and a community parenting scheme.

#### A2 Toy library services

As part of the wider range of services at the centre, the toy library offered three drop-in sessions a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings. The sessions were an opportunity for parents to come and play with their children and meet one another. The sessions were supervised by the centre's family workers who offered a range of activities such as arts and crafts and cooking as well as an opportunity to play with the toys and explore what was stored in the toy library cupboard.

Children could choose to borrow toys they had played with in the session or other toys held by the toy library. These sessions were vibrant and noisy experiences as the children discovered all the things available to them. Parents and children were also encouraged to drop in any time during the centre's opening hours to borrow toys.

Toys and resources held by the toy library were also used by the family workers and practitioners at the centre during their home visits. The language and play Sure Start programme run by the centre offered a six-week course where family workers visited families at home to encourage play and language development. Parents were involved in the planning of the weekly sessions and could choose toys for the home.

The Sure Start crèche team that offered childcare in the network of centres whilst training courses were run for parents also made extensive use of the toy library resources.

The centre also loaned child safety equipment such as fire protectors and stair gates that families could borrow when their child was young and return when they were no longer needed.

250 families were registered with the toy library. However, not all members were active at the same time and use of the toy library by families tended to vary across time.

### **A3 Funding and staffing**

Original funding for the toy library came from the Sure Start fund. Since then the toy library had been funded through the centre by the local authority's Cymorth budget. The running costs of the toy library were covered by the centre. One of the centre's family workers was responsible for the running of the toy library as part of her other responsibilities. There were also volunteer parents who helped with the organising, cleaning and care of the toy library stock.

The toy library also usually received slippage money from the Cymorth budget in March to buy new stock. Toys were bought from a range of catalogues such as Galt and Wesco.

### **A4 Impact and benefits**

Particularly through the play sessions, the toy library helped provide quality play opportunities for the families that attended. The family workers running the sessions felt that the toy library helped parents to connect and support their children through play. Family workers at the drop-in sessions encour-

aged parents to recognise the importance of play for their child/children by facilitating play and demonstrating the potential of the resources. Family workers also felt that parents learnt how to play with their children by watching other parents engage in activities.

The family worker with responsibility for the toy library noted that toy libraries are ‘not just about loaning toys, they’re about enriching children’s play by using toys’. The family worker felt that the drop-in sessions created an informal atmosphere where ‘a lot of subtle learning happens’ without parents being aware that they are learning. For example, family workers encouraged parents to let the children choose their own toys even if their child chooses the same toy six weeks in a row. If the child was happy with this choice family workers let the parents know that this was acceptable.

Parents and carers at the drop-in session also valued the opportunity to meet and socialise with one another. One carer noted:

*It's really nice to come and have a chat here with everyone else ... we have a chat about everything ... sometimes even on the days I'm not looking after my grandchildren I pop in for a chat.*

Some parents who had been attending the drop-in sessions for a number of years volunteered at the toy library, giving their spare time to help organise and clean the toy library stock. The parents were proud to be involved with the toy library and enjoyed being able to make a contribution. The Sure Start centre also ran a community parenting scheme where trained volunteers offered semi-structured home visits to share their experiences and support with other families. One parent who had volunteered at the toy library had gone on to join this scheme.

Parents and carers also noted that drop-in sessions provided good opportunities for their child/children to play with other children and socialise. Family workers at the centre noted that the informal/social atmosphere of the drop-in sessions allowed parents to get to know the centre staff and helped the staff to build better relationships with the parents.

Some of the older children attending an observed drop-in session said that they ‘had fun’ and enjoyed the opportunity to be ‘messy’ and play with the sea creatures and play dough. The family worker running the toy library

noted that being a member of the toy library allowed the children to develop independence by making choices about which toys they wanted and by being responsible for looking after that toy and returning it for others to use.

In addition to supporting families informally through the drop-in sessions, the family centre staff used the toy library stock to support families during home visits. Practitioners at the centre valued the range of resources at their disposal and noted that the toys helped to facilitate much of their work with families. Practitioners noted that toys in the toy library were particularly good in developing children's creative imagination and often helped children who had been through traumatic experiences to communicate how they felt.

In general, the toy library helped to overcome both opportunity and income poverty by enabling families to access resources that otherwise might be too expensive to buy. This was particularly true of developmental toys and the larger items stored in the toy library such as the paddling and ball pools which were lent out during the summer, particularly for birthday parties.

## **A5 Good practice and challenges**

The informal nature of the drop-in sessions at the centre helped to attract parents and allowed centre staff to build good relationships with them. The play sessions offered a non-threatening environment where families could get informal or more formalised support without feeling intimidated.

By encouraging parents/carers to stay and play, staff had the opportunity to teach parents about the importance of play and provide advice how they could play with their child.

The success of this toy library was partly due to its location within a larger family centre and its good partnership work with other services. This not only attracted families to the toy library but also allowed practitioners to signpost families to the right place for support. One family worker noted:

*The toy library works so well because it's part of a holistic service, i.e. if we didn't have a citizens advice bureau to help families in debt then those families wouldn't be able to play together as well. On the other hand it would be really hard to facilitate relationships with families if we didn't have the play resources to do it. Being part of the centre is really important.*

The main challenge facing the toy library was the lack of dedicated staff time to run it. It was currently run by a family worker as one of her many responsibilities. Administration and organisation of the toy library were time-consuming tasks that in reality required a dedicated part/full-time member of staff. At present the staff member in charge did not feel that she had the necessary time needed to dedicate to it.

## **A6 Future plans and aspirations**

In view of the beneficial impacts of this toy library, the main aspiration for the future was to roll out toy library provision across the local authority to serve all communities, not only those in disadvantaged areas, so that all children benefited.

## **Toy Library B**

### **B1 Background and origins**

Toy library B was situated in a coastal town in North Wales and worked to provide a county-wide service for childcare providers. It served both urban and rural settings and English and Welsh-speaking communities.

The toy library was opened fully in 1999 and was located in an office in an Early Years centre. Despite being situated with the local authority Early Years team, the toy library was a voluntary organisation managed strategically by a voluntary Early Years forum. When the toy library first opened it had only 33 members but now served over 150 members.

The toy library was originally established to raise the standard of care in pre-school settings and ensure that children were provided with sufficient opportunities to develop before entering school. This continued to be the main aim of the organisation.

### **B2 Toy library services**

The toy library provided a mainly mobile service for registered childcare providers within its authority. It served over 150 providers, including all-Wales Pre-school Playgroups Association (WPPA) groups and all registered



Day Nurseries, 83 per cent of Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin (MYM) groups, 60 per cent of the authority's childminders and some out-of-school clubs.

The toy library provided childcare practitioners with a catalogue of toys, advice and support on the resources available to them. Providers placed orders for the resources which were then delivered to them. The toy library worked closely with practitioners to support their work. For example, some providers would give staff a list of their planned themes and topics and the staff would advise on what toys/resources were available to support their work.

All boxes and toys were split into themes and groups in the catalogue to provide ease of access to providers.

### **B3 Funding and staffing**

The toy library was core-funded through the local education authority. This funding paid for the library's daily running costs and the toy library project manager position. Additional funding for the mobile vehicle and an additional worker was sourced from a variety of grants including money from the Big Lottery Fund and the county voluntary services.

The toy library cost approximately £35,000 p.a. to run, which did not include the cost of purchasing new toys and resources. Money for new toys and equipment was obtained from a variety of sources. This had often been a very time-consuming process.

Toys were purchased mainly from educational catalogues and suppliers such as Galt, 3 Bears Playthings, ASCO, LFC and edu play. The toy library also purchased from a specialist supplier called Early Excellence. While some toys bought had a specific purpose such as multicultural awareness, others encouraged free play, such as a box containing wooden spoons.

The toy library was managed on a daily basis by a project manager who also worked as the development officer for the Early Years forum that oversaw the toy library. Originally appointed to both roles, she has since dedicated most of her time to developing the toy library and found that the work required to develop a toy library subsumed her other roles. The project manager was supported by a toy library coordinator who helped with the deliveries, organisation and advising providers about the stock.

## B4 Impacts and benefits

The toy library provided an invaluable service for childcare providers within the authority and indirectly benefited children by raising the standard of care they received.

Staff at the toy library were able to support providers by responding to their needs and queries. One good example of this was the way in which the toy library responded to Care Standards Inspectorate Wales findings. The toy library was able to help providers develop the areas found weakest under the report, e.g. multiculturalism, and offer resources for providers to enhance their development of multicultural awareness.

Being situated within the Early Years centre meant that the toy library also worked in close partnership with the local authority Early Years team to identify needs for resources. This also allowed the toy library to respond to changes in the curriculum such as the Foundation Phase and provide resources/toys that enabled practitioners to respond to these changes, e.g. providing more outdoor equipment to respond to that element of the Foundation Phase.

The toy library also sought to change ‘the old idea/philosophy of education’ and stress that free play was important in its own right. Toys borrowed from the toy library included things such as treasure baskets that contained wooden spoons and pots with which the children could explore and experiment. The toy library project manager noted that:

*We can show the educational value of these things (wooden spoons etc.). We can help to support and explain that natural materials or things around children can facilitate their play.*

Providers accessing the toy library praised the advice and support they received. Providers also welcomed the opportunity to access equipment and toys that they could not otherwise afford. One provider remarked:

*We definitely benefit from the toy library, things like soft play are really expensive and we couldn't afford them.*

Providers also noted that they simply lacked the space to store the range of toys and equipment available through the toy library, particularly large items

like outdoor play equipment. Consequently, without the toy library service children would only have access to a limited number of toys and would not have the opportunity to experience new equipment every few months. One comment was:

*We don't have the room to store all the toys here and with the toy library you can change them every couple of months so the children can enjoy something new.*

Access to a wide range of new toys was particularly beneficial to providers caring for young babies who quickly grew out of toys and looked for something new to discover. The toy library therefore stocked over 1500 baby toys.

Most importantly, providers noted how much the children enjoyed the toys delivered by the toy library, particularly the story sacks and dressing-up clothes. A provider responded that the children 'loved it when a new bag arrived' and were 'always excited to see a new delivery'.

## **B5 Good practice and challenges**

A key element of the toy library's success and good practice had been its close working relationship with its members. By fulfilling a clear need and responding to members' comments the toy library had expanded rapidly. The advice and support that it offered alongside the lending of toys/resources contributed greatly to its success. Providers valued the fact that the service was run for and responded to them.

The mobile nature and organisation of the service was also an example of good practice. Providers were well informed about what was being delivered to them and when toys/resources were being collected. This meant that providers were already prepared when the van arrived and could plan ahead knowing what resources they would have.

Working in close partnership with the local authority Early Years team whilst remaining a charitable body allowed the toy library to work with the team to identify need but at the same time apply for a variety of grants not available to local authority bodies.

Despite receiving core funding from the local authority one of the main challenges for the toy library was funding. Core funding was provided on an annual basis and depended in large part on the existence of an Early Years advisory team supportive of their work. If this support declined in future the toy library would be in a vulnerable position.

Staffing of the toy library coordinator position could also be a challenge. Many people applying for the position may have had little previous experience of a toy library and either were unprepared for the amount of van driving and deliveries involved or had delivery experience but little understanding of the advice and support role that went with the job.

## **B6 Future plans and aspirations**

In future the toy library hoped to expand to acquire more storage space and provide satellite provision throughout the county. Staff would have liked to expand to offer service to parent and toddler groups. The toy library project manager remarked that:

*It would be lovely to have a space where we could run play sessions and it would be nice to help parent and ‘incredible years’ groups as well.*

In general, the toy library would like to increase people’s understanding about toy libraries and their potential contribution. This, they believed, would help attract more sufficient and sustainable funding:

*People don’t really understand what toy libraries do and the significant impact they can have on children. People don’t understand about the quality of toys and equipment we offer – they think children have enough toys but don’t understand that the toys they see on TV are not what we do. We promote toys that encourage development and stimulate children.*

## **Toy library C**

### **C1 Background and origins**

Toy library C was situated in an urban valley authority in South Wales. The authority had a mixture of disadvantaged and prosperous districts and included eighteen Communities First areas.

The toy library was set up with funding from the Early Years partnership when Sure Start funding was made available to the authority in 1999, when it had been open for eight years. It was established to support childcare providers in the county. At the time, the children's library was already operating a book loan scheme to 20 or 30 playgroups and was asked to take on the toy library project. The toy library was therefore housed and run by the authority's library service at the southern end of the county.

## **C2 Toy library services**

Toy library C provided a mainly mobile service to registered childcare facilities within the authority. These included playgroups, parent and toddler groups, childminders' and out-of-school clubs. The toy library catered for children from 0–11 years old. The main aims of the toy library were:

- to provide a free toy loan facility to enable children to have access to stimulating play which will enhance all aspects of their development
- to provide a particular focus for toys which positively support equality in terms of disability and ethnicity
- to complete and enhance the library service provision for early years by providing a holistic approach to learning through play.

When the toy library first opened it only served children under the age of four in Sure Start areas. Since then it had expanded to offer services for children from 0–11 years of age throughout the county. The toy library had approximately 102 members spread across the authority and over 900 toys in its stock. When members joined they were provided with the original copy of the catalogue and copies of the additions catalogues that were sent out every year that included the new toys and resources. The catalogues included pictures and a brief description of the toys/resources. Toys were arranged into collections, e.g. baby collections, ethnic and multicultural collections to help providers to easily see what was available. In future, the toy library hoped to have its collection online so that people could browse for toys and book toys through the internet.

In addition to its mobile service, the toy library was also open to providers to visit twice a week on a Tuesday and Wednesday or through appointment.

Staff advised providers about the resources available and helped them to make decisions.

### **C3 Funding and staffing**

Currently the library was mainly funded through a Cymorth grant from the local authority of £22,000 that covered the cost of a 12-hour scale toy library assistant, a 30-hour scale clerical/driver salary, van hire and the purchase of toys. Ongoing costs for the storage rooms, overheads, equipment and managing of the service were covered by the library service and staff.

The toy library was managed by the Children's Librarian as part of her wider role. Originally she was the only member of staff running the toy library and the children's library but this became impossible as the toy library expanded and grew with success. As a result, money was sought for other members of staff.

A toy library coordinator worked six hours, two days a week, and helped with the delivery of toys to the providers and another member of staff worked 30 hours a week and was responsible for organising the toys, washing and cleaning them on return to the toy library, helping with deliveries and the toy library's opening hours and looked after the day-to-day organising.

### **C4 Impacts and benefits**

The toy library provided a valuable service to local providers and particularly to small groups who often struggled for adequate funding to buy their own resources.

To providers, the toy library offered a huge range of toys and resources that they could not otherwise access. The nature of the toys on offer was also highly valued by providers. Group leaders were often astounded how much their children developed through using equipment from the toy library. For example, one group was able at the beginning of the year to borrow push bikes and trikes with no pedals to help encourage coordination and physical development. By the following term the children were ready to move and the playgroup was able to exchange the push bikes for trikes with pedals to help further develop children's skills. The group could not have afforded both

types of bikes/trikes and so the children at the playgroup would not have had that opportunity to develop without the toy library. The playgroup thought this type of opportunity was ‘fantastic!’.

Through the toy library, playgroups were also able to borrow resources to fit the individual needs of children attending the playgroup. The toy library’s staff had a wealth of experience and could advise on what resources would best stimulate and develop the child. Toys were bought from specialist manufacturers and educational suppliers via catalogues and the range of toys was chosen to be as inclusive to all children as possible.

The toy library worked in close partnership with many other groups in the authority such as the Childminder Network, the authority’s play association and the Early Years partnerships, and received considerable support from its partners. The Children’s Librarian noted that good partnership working had been important to the toy library since the beginning. Inter-partnership working had helped the toy library develop excellent relationships with providers, better identify needs and had attracted more people to the toy library. It took part in any Early Years events hosted by the authority which helped them to attract new members and encourage old members to utilise the library more fully.

Overall, the most important element of the toy library was their close relationship with the authority’s providers. Comments from a recent self-evaluation exercise carried out by the toy library noted that toy library staff were ‘welcoming’, ‘friendly’ and ‘supportive’ and that providers were always happy to see them arrive and hear from them. Providers also noted that the service was of high value to them and the children they cared for. The Children’s Librarian noted that one of the joys of the role was seeing the excitement on children’s faces as the new toys arrived but one of the hardest parts was collecting toys from tearful toddlers who had to say goodbye to the old toys they had enjoyed so much before testing and trying the new arrivals.

## **C5 Good practice and challenges**

The key element in the success of this toy library was the enthusiasm of the staff who had remained committed to the toy library and its aims despite periods of stress and high workloads before new appointments were made.

The toy library had striven to be a friendly, welcoming place which was evident in the support it received from providers.

The librarian training and experience of staff had also been invaluable. This had allowed the toy library to catalogue and organise the collection of toys for providers' ease of use and choice. While this may not seem as important as other elements, proper organisation of the toy library was essential if it was to be successful. It prevented children from being disappointed by opening a box only to find half a toy missing, and it prevented providers from being overly anxious about missing pieces and encouraged them to use the service.

Good partnership working from the outset had also helped the toy library to share good practice, highlight its work and develop a good support network.

One of the main challenges the toy library faced was lack of storage space. Since it was housed within a library building the toy library had made use of whatever space it had been able to claim. Originally, the Children's Librarian gave up her office to store toys before a disused hall on the first floor was given to the toy library. However, toy library staff felt that in order to be fully accessible it should be on the ground floor in a space where people could come in and clearly see what was on offer. The toy library had been working on a bid that would hopefully secure the necessary funding for a warehouse space positioned more centrally in the authority.

A second challenge to the toy library was sustainability of funding. Cymorth funding was provided on an annual basis which meant that toy library staff could only be employed on annual contracts. This insecurity meant that there was a high turnover of staff as they left for more permanent and secure positions. In addition, a full-time member of staff working solely on developing the toy library would have more time to spend on expanding the service than the Children's Librarian whose role included many other responsibilities.

## **C6 Future plans and aspirations**

In future, the toy library hoped their catalogue would be available online and work on this had already begun. The toy library was also in discussions to include foster carers in their service and hoped to broaden the service to more out-of-school clubs. The local authority was developing two new inte-



grated children's centres and the toy library hoped to offer satellite provision within these settings once they were open.

The toy library also aimed to secure new premises that included a suitable play facility where children could play with the toys when they visited and where they could offer a service to families and improve their stock of resources for children with special educational needs.

Staff also hoped to use funding to employ a play worker who could run sessions at the toy library and attract new members.

## **Toy library D**

### **D1 Background and origins**

Toy library D had been open for approximately thirty years. Originally run by a social services department, it now served families with children who had special educational needs in five local authorities in South-East Wales. The authorities included a mixture of prosperous and severely disadvantaged areas.

### **D2 Toy library services**

The toy library offered a mobile home-visiting service for children with special educational needs and served approximately 130 families. In recent years it had also extended its service to some mainstream schools whose pupils had special educational needs.

A large range of specialist equipment was stocked, designed specifically to stimulate children with special educational needs and to support their development.

Loans were also made to a number of practitioners working within the authorities such as health staff, speech and play therapists, social workers and physiotherapists who engaged with the same families and severely affected children. The service also supported playgroups and after-school groups by providing them with opportunities to borrow specialist equipment.

The toy library serviced children from six months until parents decided they no longer wished to use the service. This could range from age three to age 12.

### **D3 Staffing and funding**

The toy library was funded by contributions from the education and leisure and libraries departments of the five local authorities and was well established. The funding was sustainable and there was little risk of it not being available in the future. The toy library was constantly working at its maximum capacity with little scope for further increase in its membership.

The toy library was staffed by a single librarian who had extensive experience of working with children and families with special educational needs, having previously worked as a portage officer and for another toy library specialising in special educational needs. She had been working for the toy library for about fifteen years and had extensive knowledge of the local area and the families. She was responsible for organising the toy library, its day-to-day management and conducting all the home visits and deliveries.

### **D4 Effects and benefits**

The toy library offered an invaluable service to children with special educational needs and their families. Many services for families and children i.e. portage, finish when the child attends school, which could leave some families feeling abandoned or anxious. The toy library service was provided to all families as long as they wished to access it, which gave families a source of advice and support.

Children using the toy library had access to a wide range of specialist equipment which was often very expensive and which they would otherwise not see or possess. The toy librarian purchased equipment from specialist suppliers and catalogues to which parents might not have access and tried to choose unusual items that could stimulate the child.

The toy librarian's extensive experience of working with families and children enabled her to advise and support parents and give them tips on how to play with their children. The toy librarian noted that the progress children made through using the toys and equipment often 'enthused' and encouraged parents.

Toys loaned by the toy library 'provide a medium that the child can work through'. They could help children communicate and provided 'a good

medium for development'. Children with special educational needs could work through soft/tactile toys and then move to sound items like rattles and cause and effect toys which helped to develop hand-eye coordination and toys that promote motor skills. Through using the toys to play and stimulate, the toy librarian could help families to help children reach their full potential.

Similarly, providers and practitioners using the service had access to a large range of equipment to aid the delivery of their own service and could ask the toy librarian for advice and information about the equipment available.

Both parents and providers could also try out equipment and toys before buying them. They could find out if the child/children enjoyed them and whether they would suit their needs.

Partnership work was important to the toy library as there were often several practitioners working with the same family. Practitioners could refer families to the toy library and provide background information on the families so that the toy library could cater for their specific needs.

## **D5 Good practice and challenges**

The toy library was long-established, which had helped to build up resources and a wealth of experience to aid the families currently referred to the service.

The mobility of the provision was essential as it served a large area and families benefited greatly from having the provision in their homes. Many families would not have accessed the service otherwise.

Good team working with other services and providers and flexibility were important to the toy library. The capacity of the toy library to be flexible about how long families accessed the service helped to provide support to families when other services sometimes were no longer available.

The toy library had also benefited from sustained support from the local authorities who valued the service highly. This meant that the toy library was stable and sustainable and had fewer funding concerns than other toy libraries.

Two needs for all toy librarians who visited homes were awareness of personal safety issues and child abuse. The toy librarian, however, had undertaken a number of training courses provided by the local authority.

## **D6 Future plans and aspirations**

The toy library worked at maximum capacity with little scope to increase its membership as it had only a single librarian. Employing a second person would enable the library to expand its service to offer increased provision to schools and out-of-school clubs and work on developing the service. However, this would have required increased levels of funding and support.

## **Toy and Leisure Library E**

### **E1 Background and origins**

Toy and leisure library E was located within a children's hospice in South-East Wales. This toy library was a toy and leisure library as it provided for children and young people from 0–19 years of age and aimed to support leisure opportunities of older children as well as the play opportunities of the youngest. The hospice provided palliative and respite care for children with life-limiting illnesses. The hospice had been open since 1999 and the toy library was opened in 2004. The toy library served children and families from all parts of Wales.

### **E2 Toy library services**

The toy library was open to all children and families using and staying at the hospice. Toys and equipment were also loaned to children and families through the outreach play service based at the centre. Users on average had about three respite visits per annum to the centre when they could access toys. As part of the outreach service, the toys and equipment were delivered all over South Wales. Other professionals working with children who attended the hospice could also join the toy library.

Currently, approximately 130 families were members of the toy library. The number of members had increased over recent years due to increased referral rates and better awareness of the library's existence.

The aim of the toy library was:

*To promote every child's right to play, enabling them to reach their fullest potential and develop new skills.*

The toy library stocked a large range of specialist equipment suitable for children with a whole range of special educational needs. In addition to lending equipment, the toy librarians provided advice and support to families on the toys and equipment available.

### **E3 Staffing and funding**

The toy library was funded as part of the hospice's services. The hospice was a voluntary organisation that depended wholly on grants and donations. The toy library recently received a grant from Children in Need and a dedicated funding source for the toy library was being sought by the fundraising section of the hospice.

The toy library was staffed by two outreach play workers who had taken on the toy library as part of their role. Equipment and toys from the toy library were used extensively in their outreach work.

Securing ongoing funding was a challenge for the library. Due to the nature of the library's provision the costs of running the toy library were high.

### **E4 Impacts and benefits**

The toy library stocked a large range of equipment that was often specialist in nature and expensive. The toy library staff worked hard to locate suitable items for the library, often searching catalogues, the high street and the internet for equipment that was age-appropriate. For example, a severely disabled teenage child may enjoy the sound made by a rattle but most rattles found on the high street would look totally inappropriate. The dedication of the staff to providing the highest quality play and leisure opportunities ensured that those who accessed the service had the best possible choice. Toys and equipment stocked at the toy library were also selected to encourage a child's development and to promote their social, emotional, communication and physical coordination skills.

Use of the toy library also helped families to ‘try before they buy’ and get advice on the best resources to buy. Toy library staff often helped families to select larger expensive items for their home that family members and friends could contribute towards for a birthday or Christmas.

Through the outreach play service the toy library offered support to families in their homes. One of the most important functions of the toy library and outreach play service was to provide families with play ideas. As the outreach play worker noted:

*Because of the severity of the children’s disabilities, parents sometimes think that they are not capable of playing, so the role of the library and its staff are especially valuable in promoting play that might not otherwise be considered.*

Similarly, much of the parents’ time was taken up with caring for their child. In these situations play could easily be overlooked as an important priority. The resources and staff of the library helped to facilitate these play opportunities by providing parents with opportunities to play with their child.

The overall aim of the toy library was to ensure that all children who accessed it had fun when they played.

## **E5 Good practice and challenges**

By supporting the outreach play service, the toy library greatly increased the number of people able to access the resources. The time dedicated to sourcing suitable equipment also guaranteed that families and children had the highest-quality play opportunities available to them. This encouraged parents to use the service again.

The toy library also worked in close partnership with other services at the hospice and during outreach work with partners such as teachers, therapists and community workers. Through this partnership work the staff could better assess demand and need and respond to it. For example, if there was a gap in the sensory equipment available to families, the toy library was able to fill this gap by purchasing and loaning suitable equipment.

The main challenge for the toy library was funding. Staff felt that the highly beneficial nature of the service should mean that more funding was provided by the statutory sector and the WAG.

## **E6 Future plans and aspirations**

The toy library hoped that its membership would continue to increase and that increased funding would allow the library to purchase even more specialised resources to cater for children's individual leisure and play needs.

Ideally, the library would have liked to open for dedicated staff to access resources seven days of the week and twelve months of the year so that they could access equipment as and when the need arises.

Both these aspirations depended upon the securing of additional funding for the service.

## **Toy library F**

### **F1 Background and origins**

Toy library F was situated in a coastal town in mid-Wales on a housing estate in a Communities First area. The centre and toy library served the community where they were located and family and children from the wider area.

The toy library was established after the family centre manager borrowed a box of toys from NATLL that were circulating Wales in 1996. Having seen how much the parents and children enjoyed the toys and missed them when they were sent back, the family centre decided to establish a toy library.

The toy library was first opened in 1998 and became a charity in its own right in 1999. It was a voluntary organisation supported in kind by the family centre and its staff.

## **F2 Toy library services**

The toy library had 219 members and served children aged from 0–11 although not all members were active at the same time. The toy library loaned toys to children and families and also to providers such as play-groups.

As part of the centre the toy library was open any time during centre opening hours from Monday to Friday for parents to call in to borrow toys. Children and families could also attend one of the drop-in sessions run by the family centre and play in the centre's two play rooms. Staff offered advice to parents on what toys and resources were available and what was most appropriate for their child.

Toy library resources were also accessed by a range of professionals and other services that worked with the centre, including speech therapists and health visitors, and were used when parents attended training sessions there.

The toy library had a wide range of resources, including some for children with special educational needs, and toys were purchased through specialist catalogues.

## **F3 Staffing and funding**

Although housed in the family centre which received statutory funding, the toy library was an independent voluntary organisation. It was mainly managed on a daily basis by volunteers and run by a volunteer management committee. However, staff at the family centre often donated their time to help with toy loaning during centre hours.

The toy library was predominantly funded through the membership fees and occasional voluntary grants. Individual members paid £1.50 p.a. while providers such as playgroups paid £20. In the past the toy library had also received money from Sure Start and Children in Need and recently received a toy donation from the Children and Young People's partnership funded from Cymorth slippage money.



The toy library gained from being housed at the centre as it did not pay any rental or running costs towards the storage space. It also benefited from dedicated volunteers who gave up their free time to run it.

#### **F4 Impact and benefits**

The toy library offered children and families in a disadvantaged area the opportunity to access a wide range of sometimes expensive equipment that they might not be able to access otherwise. Because of the location of the town in mid-Wales there were only a small number of retailers within easy distance selling toys and resources for children. The toy library was able to compensate by ordering toys from specialist catalogues that were not easily available to families locally. It also housed a range of specialist toys that have been used by families to support the development of their children with learning difficulties.

The toy library was a welcoming place and the volunteers and centre staff had worked hard to make it a friendly and informal service, easy for parents to use. Parents were often encouraged to make suggestions about the toys and resources the toy library stocked and volunteers made every effort to respond to parents' needs. One volunteer remarked:

*Often I tell parents when they are borrowing toys, if there is something their child has shown interest in or wants but they don't think they can afford it then let us know and we'll do our best to provide that child with that experience if we can.*

The toy library also often offered children and parents/carers the opportunity to try toys to see if they enjoyed playing with them before they bought them. This helped to ensure that money was not wasted on toys with which the children did not enjoy playing.

The toy library resources were used by the family centre staff to support and facilitate their work with parents. Evidence of the toy library's existence was clear in both play rooms at the family centre. Children were welcome to borrow toys they had played with during their visit and family centre staff were happy for families to borrow any of the resources available at the centre, even those not owned by the toy library. The family centre manager commented:

*If the families want to borrow anything we encourage them, even the resources not in the toy library. What is the point for something to be sitting in the centre when someone could be playing with it? That's what they're made for!*

In general, both volunteers and centre staff felt that the toys loaned have helped many children experience creative play opportunities that have helped them to develop their imagination and 'make sense of the world around them'.

## **F5 Good practice and challenges**

One of the main challenges faced by the toy library was attracting enough volunteers to the voluntary management committee. The committee was currently smaller than in the past due to difficulty replacing former volunteers such as parents whose children no longer used the centre. This problem with volunteering reflected a general trend in the voluntary sector. However, the toy library was optimistic of attracting new parents to join the committee in the near future.

One of the biggest successes of the toy library had been its capacity to change the attitude of parents on the estate which it served. Some parents felt that there was a stigma attached to the toy library because borrowing toys was a sign to other people on the estate that they could not afford to look after their children. Since being open, through its work with the family centre, the toy library had been able to change this image and encourage parents to borrow by showing them the benefits their children got from using the toys. Toy library staff had also been successful in helping parents understand the value of play. Other parents were afraid to let their child touch any toys in case they broke them. Through encouragement and explanation the toy library and family centre staff were able to change parent attitudes to the library. The centre manager commented:

*There was a complete culture change within two years. I would say we had a 75 per cent success rate in encouraging parents. Now the service is valuable to them and they often return to borrow toys, which is a good sign it's working.*

## **F6 Future plans and aspirations**

The toy library wanted a satellite base in town on a ground floor with disabled access that would be easier for parents to use. Ideally, the toy library would like to offer more mobile provision to families in rural areas of the authority but all plans depended on the toy library's ability to attract the necessary funding.

While the volunteers remained very committed to the toy library they also noted that it would benefit from a paid coordinator with time to dedicate to developing the service.



National Foundation  
for Educational Research  
The Mere Upton Park  
Slough Berkshire SL1 2DQ

+44 (0) 1753 574123  
enquiries@nfer.ac.uk  
www.nfer.ac.uk

