



## **An Executive Summary of the Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) 2025: The state of play in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council**

### **1. Local Authority Summary Statement [max 1,500 words]**

*Use this section to share a summary of the vision, main outcomes arising from the play sufficiency assessment and actions proposed to achieve sufficiency in the local authority area.*

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (MTCBC) is committed to fostering a play-friendly environment that supports the holistic development of children and young people. MTCBC recognises play as a fundamental right and an essential component of well-being, so the Council has undertaken a comprehensive Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) to evaluate the current state of play provision and identify key areas for improvement. This assessment forms the basis for a strategic approach to enhancing play opportunities and ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or abilities, can engage in meaningful play experiences.

The vision for play in Merthyr Tydfil is to create a community where every child has the space, time, and encouragement to play freely in safe and stimulating environments. The council aims to develop and maintain high-quality play areas, support a variety of play initiatives, and ensure that play remains a central part of everyday life for children and young people. This vision is supported by a commitment to inclusivity, sustainability, and community engagement.

The PSA has highlighted several important challenges that need to be addressed. One of the most significant findings are the barriers faced to participating in play, due to either accessibility due to physical disabilities, additional learning needs (ALN) and transport, or financial problems due to the cost of play activities being too high.

Community engagement will play a central role in shaping the future of play provision in Merthyr Tydfil. Parents, caregivers, and children will be actively involved in the planning and development of play opportunities to ensure that their needs and preferences are reflected in the services provided. Awareness campaigns will highlight the importance of play, encouraging greater participation and fostering a culture where play is understood as a vital part of childhood.

Monitoring and evaluation will be embedded in the council's approach to play sufficiency with regular assessments conducted to track progress, gather feedback, and make necessary adjustments to play provisions. This will ensure that play opportunities continue to evolve and remain responsive to the needs of the community.

### **Demographic Profile**

The demographic findings from research shows population concentrations of children aged 0–4 years are highest in wards such as Cyfarthfa, Town, and Gurnos, these areas will therefore, display a greater need for accessible early childhood services, including nurseries and play facilities. However, wards such as Vaynor, Park, and Merthyr Vale have significantly fewer children in this age range which implies a lower but still important demand for early years provision.

For children aged 5–14, the data shows that the wards with the largest populations are concentrated in areas such as Cyfarthfa, Town, and Gurnos suggesting again that these areas require significant investment in playgrounds, sports fields, and youth activity centres. Meanwhile wards like Vaynor, Park, and Merthyr Vale have much smaller populations in these age ranges, suggesting a lower demand but still a need for age-appropriate play and recreational provisions.

The forecast for 2026 indicates a shift in age demographics, with a decline in younger age cohorts and growth in older age groups. The number of primary school-aged children is expected to decrease, particularly for the 8–11 age range, which is projected to drop by 563 children. However, the population of 12–18-year-olds is expected to rise significantly, increasing from 12,764 in 2020 to 13,855 in 2026. This trend displays the need for secondary school-age facilities, youth-oriented recreational spaces, and teenage-focused services in the coming years.

It should be noted that Merthyr Tydfil is reflecting a UK-wide trend in experiencing an overall decline in birth rates, which could impact early childhood service demand and primary school enrolment in the future.

## **Actions to Achieve Play Sufficiency**

The actions to achieve play sufficiency focus on increasing accessibility, safety, and inclusivity in play opportunities across the borough. This includes MTCBC continuing to support and possibly expanding free and low-cost play provisions in economically disadvantaged areas, reducing waiting list times for play activity clubs, and developing community-led initiatives in rural play areas to ensure all children have access to formal and informal play spaces. Efforts to improve safety have been identified which could involve installing more bins to reduce littering, enhancing lighting in play areas, and implementing community-based initiatives such as neighbourhood watch programmes. To support inclusive play, the plan prioritises creating strategies for ethnic minority children, neurodivergent children, and LGBTQ+ youth, as well as increasing recreational opportunities specifically for teenage girls. Supervised play provision is being strengthened by ensuring playworkers have access to affordable training and increasing the availability of low-cost sports, recreation, and arts activities. Policy and advocacy measures include updating risk assessments, improving engagement with media to positively represent children's play, and reviewing official documentation such as the Open Space Assessment to maintain accurate and up-to-date information on play areas.

## 2. Methodology [max 1,000 words]

*Use this section to discuss:*

- *How the PSA was undertaken and agreed*
- *Which local authority departments/policy areas were involved and how*
- *Which external partners were involved and how*

MTCBC commissioned Premier Advisory Group (PAG) to complete this PSA. To ensure PAG met the specification requirements of the Council's PSA, a rigorous mixed methods methodology was deployed that involved primary and secondary, and qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. A guiding theme throughout data collection and analysis was to ensure every voice was heard, and so desk-based research was supplemented with surveys taken by children and young people (CYP), parents/carers and providers/works, other stakeholders, as well as play observations, 1:1 interviews with playworkers and focus groups with parents and children.

The fieldwork and research which informed the 2025 Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Play Sufficiency Assessment was conducted during the period September 2024 – March 2025. Multiple types of research and analysis were undertaken, including:

- Structured desk-based research
- Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with play provider leads
- Online Survey Monkey questionnaire with play providers and workers
- Online Survey Monkey questionnaire with parents/carers
- Online Survey Monkey questionnaire with Foundation Learning and KS2 pupils
- Online Survey Monkey questionnaire with KS3 and KS4 pupils
- Online Survey Monkey questionnaire with other key stakeholders
- Four focus groups with parents/carers, two accessible to all parents/carers and two accessible to parents/carers of children with ALN
- Two focus groups with CYP, one for primary aged and one for secondary aged people
- Play observation at MTCBC Playfest August 2024.

An outline of the methodology is provided below:

Data was also gathered through desk-based research using secondary data sources to map the demand for play and prevalence of children and young people across the local authority (LA). Research focused on population projections, migration and the incidence of key groups, to map current and expected demand for play. A concerted effort was made to obtain the most current practicable data from the most appropriate source, and due regard was given to timescales for the release of the most relevant data. As such, data was primarily obtained from the Office for National Statistics and supplemented and supported by data from PLASC, the National Census, HM Revenue and Customs, and the Assessment of Local Wellbeing.

Following desk-based data analysis, PAG consulted with a range of key groups, including CYP aged 0-17, parents/carers across Merthyr Tydfil and playworkers currently working at a range of provisions.

Child-friendly online surveys were created for those aged 5-17 to complete; an online survey for under-5s was also distributed. To gather the data provided by children and young people effectively PAG and MTCBC distributed the surveys to schools and nurseries with full briefing, Julia Lewis, Play Officer MTCBC, also promoted the surveys at the head teachers meeting. Five separate surveys were created and distributed to the relevant age ranges, this included an under-5s survey (4 responses), Foundation Learning survey (19 responses), KS2 survey (40 responses), KS3/4 survey (91 responses) and an additional survey designed to be accessible for ALN children of all ages (8 responses). The under-5s and Foundation Learning surveys had an option to be completed 1-1 or in a group setting and filled in by the teacher, carer or parent, the KS2 and KS3/4 surveys were completed independently by children.

A short, voluntary and anonymous online survey was shared with parents/carers across Merthyr Tydfil, which gathered views around their perception of children's enjoyment of play, alongside their safety and access to play. An overwhelming 469 parents/carers responded to the survey.

To supplement the survey data, in-person and online consultations were completed. PAG's Online consultation consisted of two focus groups hosted for all parents/carers and two focus groups hosted for parents/carers of children with ALN. PAG's in-person consultation consisted of a focus group with primary school aged children and a drop-

in interview session with young people at a youth centre. PAG also attended two play festivals, one for 7–13-year-olds and one for 0–7-year-olds, at the play festivals short interviews with children, parents and play workers were conducted along with observations at each provision attended. PAG's presence allowed for informal but meaningful discussions with families, enabling a clearer understanding of how play opportunities are experienced by different age groups. Observations of children's interactions with play activities provided valuable data to assess patterns of engagement with activities, availability of suitable play options, and any barriers to participation.

To further supplement our consultation with CYP, parents/carers and play providers, a variety of stakeholders were consulted with via a short, voluntary online survey. The survey gathered the views of stakeholders on existing opportunities for play and access to play facilities. This survey was designed to gather views from other stakeholders such as local residents, employees/owners at local businesses, schoolteachers/leaders and governors, a total of 50 people responded.

This PSA was informed and coordinated through strong interdepartmental cooperation within the Council. The departments involved included Community Wellbeing, Education, Youth Services, Parks and Leisure, Planning and Countryside, Family Services, Estates Management, Highways and Traffic Management, and Community Cohesion. Each contributed insight and expertise aligned with their service area. The PSA further engaged with the Public Health team, aligning with health and well-being strategies, Active Merthyr and Active Travel programmes, ensuring physical activity and access considerations were included.

Following the completion of consultation and internal coordination activities, data was gathered and analysed to inform an overall picture of play in Merthyr Tydfil, with a summary of findings written with regards to the sufficiency of play. Meeting the requirements of the Action Plan will be the main agenda item for the Play Team at termly review. The Assessment and Action Plan will be shared with Cabinet in June 2025 and any requested amendments will be dealt with in the Play Strategy Group.

Based on this, PAG has provided recommendations for how the LA can address gaps in supply and demand. Using the analysis and findings, PAG and the Council will draft a detailed, costed Action Plan, which the authority can implement immediately.

### **3. How engagement with children and families has informed the Play Sufficiency Assessment [max 2,000 words]**

*Use this section to discuss:*

*How the views of children and families have been obtained*

*How this information has been used to assess against each Matter within the themes analysis below*

*How it has been used to inform the Play Action Plan*

#### **Obtaining the views of children and families**

A range of consultation methods gathered views. Surveys for different age groups were available in English and Welsh. Responses from children under five were collected through one-on-one sessions and group settings in childcare environments. Foundation Learning children participated through teacher-led group surveys, capturing classroom insights, while KS2 pupils completed surveys independently at school or as homework. KS3 and KS4 pupils engaged through online surveys. Accessibility ensured children with ALN and diverse backgrounds could participate. The demographic data on Welsh language ability in Merthyr Tydfil, where 21.4% of the population aged three or older can speak Welsh, informed bilingual surveys to ensure inclusivity in play provision planning. Parents and carers were consulted through surveys on play opportunities and barriers. Focus groups with children across age groups provided additional insights into play experiences, preferences, and limitations.

#### **Demographic data**

Before the 2025 PSA consultation, research using publicly available sources established baseline demographic and socioeconomic details. This data shaped the consultation approach and informed Matter A. As of mid-2022, approximately 9,427 children resided in Merthyr Tydfil (ONS, March 2024): 1,200 aged 0-1, 640 aged 2, 1,347 aged 3-4, 2,232 aged 5-7, 2,910 aged 8-11, and 1,098 aged 12-14, with notable concentrations in Cyfarthfa, Town, and Gurnos. The 0–18 population is projected to increase slightly from 34,129 in 2020 to 34,347 in 2026, driven by growth in 12–18-year-olds while younger age groups decline. This highlights the need for investment in facilities for teenagers while adapting early years and primary play provisions.

As of the 2021 Census, Merthyr Tydfil's population was 97.1% "White," down from 97.6% in 2011. The "Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh" category grew from 1.2% to 1.5%. Other ethnic groups, including "Mixed or Multiple" and "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African," formed smaller proportions.

An anonymous online survey was completed by 50 stakeholders in Merthyr Tydfil, available in English and Welsh. The first question identified stakeholder roles. 54% were local residents, 28% local government employees, 12% "Other," 4% play-related charity members or trustees (including the only Welsh-language respondent), and 2% educational institution employees.

## **Findings**

During the August 2024 Playfest event, playworker feedback highlighted the importance of well-staffed indoor play. Football was most popular, but all activities, table tennis, swing ball, and a bouncy castle, were well received. The spacious, supervised environment allowed children to rotate every 15 minutes. Playworkers noted challenges in obtaining CIW registration but acknowledged benefits such as a wider activity range, extended hours, and grant eligibility. However, concerns about funding included wage increases not being matched by funding, threatening supervised play sustainability.

The popularity of youth clubs and group activities underscores the value of social play and investment in supervised provision, such as staffed youth centres. Emphasis on outdoor play, including forest schools and splash pads, highlights the need for inclusive, creative spaces for spontaneous play. Playworkers noted facilities were accessible for children with ALN, with positive feedback from parents on quality and inclusiveness.

Parents and carers were highly satisfied with Playfest, valuing community engagement and opportunities for children of all ages. Parents praised new parks for safety and accessibility but cited antisocial behaviour as a barrier to play. Some parents of 11–14-year-olds reported their children felt unsafe due to older youths at parks, limiting outdoor play options.

There was a push for more bilingual play opportunities, ensuring Welsh-speaking children access activities in their language outside school. Maintenance of play areas, especially in deprived areas, was a priority, with calls for better equipment and more



play opportunities in underserved communities. Awareness of play opportunities was also a concern, as many parents relied on social media for information.

Stakeholder survey respondents identified cost and age restrictions as barriers, particularly for families with limited financial resources. Nature-based activities like bushcraft and green spaces were less popular where maintenance was poor or antisocial behaviour was prevalent. Digital entertainment and a lack of structured outdoor activities made outdoor play less appealing.

When asked about additional provisions, 47 respondents requested better-equipped play parks, including skate parks, adventure play areas, splash pads, and spaces for children with disabilities and neurodivergent needs. There was strong support for improved outdoor sports facilities, such as 4G pitches, trampolines, bike areas, and outdoor fitness equipment. Football, rugby, basketball, and skatepark enhancements were priorities. Beyond traditional play areas, respondents valued open spaces for imaginative play, such as sand parks, zip wires, and natural playgrounds. Bushcraft areas, forest schools, and local history-based educational spaces were suggested. Family-friendly activities, including green gyms, after-school clubs, and non-digital events, were also recommended.

Accessibility issues included inadequate ball courts near Trelewis Community Centre and poor infrastructure near Taff Merthyr Garden Village, making areas hard to reach. 80% of respondents felt there were insufficient play spaces. Matter B findings showed 63.27% of stakeholders reported access difficulties, particularly for disabled children, emphasising the need for inclusive play. Many play areas lack suitable equipment such as accessible swings or sensory spaces, and some children struggle to use apparatus due to space constraints or the presence of able-bodied children.

Cost was another barrier, as some facilities required payment, were locked, or were difficult to reach due to transport costs. Respondents often outlined that cost to participate greatly limited engagement with recreational and sport activities. (Matter E).

Findings on play activity popularity inform Matters C and D, reinforcing the importance of accessible parks and structured sports areas. Some communities lacked play areas within walking distance, necessitating targeted improvements. A lack of provision for older children led them to occupy spaces meant for younger children, causing discomfort and contributing to antisocial behaviour. Parents of 11–14-year-olds noted their children felt unsafe due to older teens. While football fields exist, parents

highlighted limited unstructured social spaces for older children, particularly teenage girls - one parent suggested a community hub for this age group specifically. The closure of a local skatepark due to antisocial behaviour and lack of supervision further underscored this need. Parents advocated for a monitored skatepark and more recreational options like basketball and tennis courts.

Parks cater well to younger children under supervision but offer few options for independent play. Some parents noted their children stayed indoors more, increasing screen time. The council encourages community involvement in play provision, but engagement must be maintained to align play opportunities with community needs. Play is considered in local health, education, and community development strategies, with ongoing efforts to ensure prioritisation in policymaking and funding (Matter I).

Consultation responses revealed concerns about the lack of play areas, poor park conditions due to vandalism, and outdated equipment. Safety concerns, particularly poorly maintained walking paths, deterred families from accessing play areas. Respondents stressed the need for better communication and equitable play facility distribution, especially in lower valley wards. Supervised provisions, such as holiday play schemes and after-school clubs, were valued, though funding constraints affected consistency.

Relating specifically to matters F, G and H, Playfest events highlighted challenges like parking difficulties, a common issue even outside peak days. Limited public transport links hindered access to play spaces, especially for children and young people in isolated and rural areas. This is further linked to Matter E as lower-income families cannot afford to spend money on petrol to access play areas. Safe walking and cycling routes were flagged as priorities for improving independent access to play. Parents highlighted concern regarding the lack of awareness about available play opportunities, with many relying on social media for information. Those not using these platforms struggled to find details about local provisions. Safety concerns, particularly regarding poorly maintained walking paths, also deterred families from accessing play areas. Most respondents stressed the need for more equitable distribution of play facilities, particularly in lower valley wards, where outdoor provisions were seen as lacking (Matter F). In further relation to Matter F, the Playfest events revealed practical challenges such as parking difficulties at the second event, which parents noted was a common issue even outside high-turnout days. Discussions with parents noted concerns about the accessibility of play areas for different age groups. The absence

of dedicated spaces for older children and teenagers often led them to gather in areas meant for younger kids, causing discomfort for younger children and raising concerns about antisocial behaviour. However, a recurring concern was the lack of dedicated spaces for older children and teenagers, which often leads them to gather in areas intended for younger kids. Some parents of 11- to 14-year-olds noted that their children felt uncomfortable going out due to the presence of older teens in these spaces.

Playworker training opportunities exist, but recruitment and retention remain challenges (Matter G). A skilled workforce is needed, with efforts underway for professional development.

Parents expressed a strong desire for similar events to be held more frequently, not only for their children's enjoyment but to strengthen community connections. While one park had a dedicated emergency contact number, parents suggested that this should be available in all parks to enhance safeguarding measures, reflecting the community's desire for improved safety protocols (Matter H).

These findings have informed the action plan by identifying gaps in provision, safety, inclusivity, and accessibility, which are then addressed through targeted actions. The consultations highlight the need for improved play opportunities, particularly for economically disadvantaged areas, teenage girls, and children with disabilities. In response, the action plan includes expanding free and low-cost play provision, increasing inclusive play initiatives, and reducing waiting list times for play clubs. Safety and environmental concerns identified in the assessment, such as inadequate lighting, littering, and the lack of well-maintained play areas, are addressed in the action plan through the installation of additional bins, the implementation of community watch programmes, and updates to the Open Space Assessment to ensure accurate documentation of play areas. The consultations noted concerns about the availability of supervised play and access to training for playworkers, which the action plan responds to by reviewing playworker training accessibility and expanding low-cost supervised play options. Funding permitting, the further inclusion of media engagement strategies has been outlined in the action plan to promote a positive portrayal of children's play.

## **4. Maximising resources [max 1,000 words]**

*Use this section to discuss:*

- *How the local authority and partners use existing budgets to support opportunities to play*
- *Highlight what has changed since the last Play Sufficiency Assessment in terms of resources*
- *Describe how Welsh Government programmes have been used locally*

### **Use of existing budgets**

Over the past three years, Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council has significantly expanded play opportunities for children and young people, supported by strategic funding and collaboration with various teams and third-sector organisations. The use of Welsh Government funding has enabled a wide range of free and inclusive play, sport, and recreational activities across the county. This has had a positive impact on play provision, ensuring that children from all backgrounds, including those who are most vulnerable, have access to meaningful play experiences.

A key focus has been on supporting children who face additional challenges, with dedicated places set aside in each activity to ensure they are not excluded. By working in close partnership with different departments and organisations, MTCBC has been able to provide opportunities that are both accessible and engaging for all children. However, there is a clear recognition that more work needs to be done to expand these opportunities further and to reach more young people who may still be experiencing barriers to play.

### **Welsh Government funding**

Despite the achieved success in play provision, difficulties in expanding these services remain, largely due to financial pressures and funding cuts affecting local authorities. One of the biggest challenges has been the limited guaranteed funding from Welsh Government, which is considered insufficient to fully meet the needs of play provision. However, every effort is made to maximise its impact. Without secure, long-term funding, sustaining and expanding play opportunities becomes increasingly difficult. In response to these challenges, MTCBC actively seeks and applies for additional funding each year to ensure a varied and sustainable approach to play provision. The Welsh Government has recently allocated an additional £10,000 to support work on

key recommendations. The Children and Communities Grant, which includes childcare and play grants, has also been utilised to help maintain essential services. The Playworks grant, alongside investment in training and support, has also been instrumental in enhancing play opportunities despite financial constraints.

MTCBC remains committed to ensuring high-quality, inclusive play provision for all children and young people in the borough. However, to further develop and sustain these services, continued financial support and investment from Welsh Government are essential. The continued support of the Welsh Government has been instrumental in maintaining the current level of play opportunities, and without this backing, it would not have been possible to deliver such a comprehensive programme of activities. Since the last PSA, there have been several notable changes in terms of resources. One of the most significant developments has been the award of £5 million in capital funding from the Welsh Government to local authorities, aimed at improving the quality of play spaces, refurbishing playgrounds, and increasing the availability of accessible play areas. This funding has provided a much-needed boost to play provision, allowing for essential upgrades and the creation of new, high-quality environments for children. In addition to this, each local authority will receive £10,000 in revenue funding for 2025-26 to support the implementation of actions identified in the Play Sufficiency Assessment. Despite these funding increases, challenges remain, particularly in relation to long-term sustainability. The pressure of wider budget cuts has meant that the ability to expand play opportunities is still constrained, and while significant improvements have been made, more work is needed to secure ongoing financial support.

Playworks funding from the Children and Communities Grant has supported a wide range of activities that are free and inclusive, ensuring that play, sport, and recreational opportunities are available to all children and young people, regardless of their circumstances. A strong emphasis has been placed on providing for the most vulnerable children, with a proportion of places in all funded activities specifically reserved for those facing additional challenges. This targeted approach has been possible through close partnership working between different departments, schools, and community organisations, ensuring that children who need play the most are able to access it.

## **5. Monitoring [max 1,000 words]**

*Use this section to discuss:*

- *Who takes lead strategic responsibility for play in the local authority*
- *How PSA links to the Public Service Boards, Regional Partnership Boards and Local Development Plan*
- *How the Play Action Plan is monitored:*
  - *Is there a Play Sufficiency Monitoring Group or similar?*
  - *Membership*
  - *How facilitated / terms of reference*
  - *Strengths and weaknesses of the group*

### **Strategic responsibility**

In MTCBC the responsibility for ensuring play sufficiency falls under the remit of the Play Steering Group (PSG), chaired by Chris Hole, Head of Prevention. Chris is supported by Lisa Mytton, Councillor and Children's Champion, and Julia Lewis, Play Officer, who oversees all matters. The team consists of 26 members who lead on strategic planning and coordination, with a key officer responsible for ensuring compliance with the Play Sufficiency Duty under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. Each Matter is also assigned to one or more members of the PSG to ensure that actions are adequately monitored and addressed. The PSG works in close collaboration with Active Travel, Active Merthyr, School Officers, a range of Youth Services and Play Providers to achieve this. Parks, Sports and Leisure, Family Services, Highways and Traffic Management, Community Cohesion, Estates Management, Planning and Countryside are all departments represented on the PSG, with membership extending to a Senior Youth and Community Officer, Community Focused Schools, Cymryd Rhan and Cwm Taf Health Board.

### **Wider PSA integration**

The PSA in Merthyr Tydfil will be closely integrated with wider strategic frameworks to ensure that children's play needs are adequately considered across different areas of local governance. The Public Service Board (PSB), which is responsible for promoting the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of the community, plays a significant role in aligning play sufficiency goals with broader well-being plans. Lisa Mytton, cabinet member is appointed as a 'play champion' to represent play sufficiency considerations within the PSB's decision-making process. This approach ensures that

play remains a key focus within wider policy discussions related to community well-being and planning.

The Regional Partnership Board (RPB) offers another important connection for play sufficiency efforts, particularly in relation to health and social care. RPBs are tasked with integrating health and social services to improve overall well-being, and incorporating play sufficiency within this structure ensures that play is recognised as a vital component of children's health and development. Through collaboration with health professionals and social services, play opportunities can be framed not just as recreational activities, but also as interventions that support mental and physical health outcomes for children and young people.

The PSA is also linked to the Local Development Plan (LDP), which sets out long-term land use and planning policies for the area. The LDP group are aware of the action plans and are actively working with PSG and MTCBC as a whole to ensure these are implemented effectively. Those involved in the LDP also sit on the PSG to ensure that accessible and high-quality play spaces are included in future developments. This is crucial for maintaining and expanding safe and engaging play environments, particularly in urban areas where children's access to natural play spaces may be limited. MTCBC's considerations for play sufficiency within the LDP have resulted in planning policies that prioritise the retention of green spaces and the inclusion of designated play areas in new housing developments.

### **Play Action Plan Monitoring**

The monitoring and evaluation of the Play Action Plan in Merthyr Tydfil are essential for assessing progress and identifying areas for improvement. The PSG is tasked with reviewing the implementation of the action plan. This group is composed of representatives from various sectors, including MTCBC officers, play providers, community organisations, public health professionals, and educational institutions.

The facilitation of the monitoring group is guided by a formalised set of terms of reference, outlining its purpose, roles, and responsibilities. MTCBC uses the guidance provided by The Welsh Government provides guidance on structuring this group, they meet quarterly to discuss progress, address challenges, and develop strategies for improving play opportunities across the county borough. Effective facilitation requires active participation from all members, clear communication channels, and a shared commitment to the goals outlined in the Play Action Plan.

The existence of a monitoring group provides valuable oversight, but its effectiveness depends on several factors. One of the main strengths of such a group is the diverse expertise it brings together, enabling informed decision-making and collaborative problem-solving. By involving stakeholders from different sectors, the group ensures that play sufficiency is considered within broader social, health, and planning agendas. However, challenges can arise due to competing priorities among members or resource limitations that hinder the implementation of proposed initiatives. Ensuring that the group remains well-resourced and that its recommendations are taken seriously by decision-makers within MTCBC is crucial for maintaining its impact. Although we do believe that collaboration between different departments has drastically improved since the previous PSA in 2022, the implementation of a cross-departmental PSG reflects this and has streamlined decision making hugely. Integrating play sufficiency within strategic frameworks such as the Public Service Board, RPB, and LDP, and through maintaining a structured approach to monitoring and evaluation, MTCBC actively works toward ensuring that all children have access to high-quality play opportunities that support their well-being and development.



## 6. Conclusion [max 1,000 words]

*Use this section to discuss:*

- *Concluding comments*
- *Key messages on outcomes*
- *Proposed actions for way forward*

Across the borough, play is widely recognised as essential to children's development, well-being, and social integration, and the assessment reflects that the statutory obligations under the Welsh Government's Play Sufficiency Duty are being met. Play is recognised as a fundamental right of children, contributing to their physical, emotional, and social development, yet ensuring sufficient provision remains a complex issue shaped by financial, spatial, and social constraints. Accessibility to play was consistently highlighted as a concern throughout the consultation. MTCBC is actively increasing efforts to provide inclusive play opportunities, however there are barriers that remain for children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some play spaces are not fully equipped to accommodate diverse needs, limiting opportunities for all children to engage in play on an equal basis. It was further noted that distance to play provision is a barrier, particularly as those from lower-income backgrounds cannot afford the bus fare or petrol to access these areas. Addressing these issues requires a more strategic approach to inclusive play design, ensuring that all children, regardless of ability or socioeconomic status, can access safe and stimulating environments.

Through the consultation it is clear that MTCBC has successfully implemented initiatives to promote awareness of the importance of play, alongside efforts to integrate play into wider community and educational settings, demonstrating a commitment to improving provision. However, in order to sustain these efforts, a long-term strategic approach, backed by appropriate funding and policy support will be required. Improving accessibility and inclusivity will be forefront of future actions. Accessibility audits on existing play spaces will be conducted to help identify specific barriers and guide targeted improvements, ensuring that children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds have equal access to play opportunities. Further investment in inclusive play equipment, enhancing transport links to play areas, and developing play-friendly public spaces will also be explored, specifically given the number of KS3/KS4 pupils who mentioned anti-social behaviour including

people drinking and substance abuse in parks. There were also a large number of respondents calling for improved play areas, and updated equipment – however, the council has already begun to address this as they are in the process of a large refurbishment.

## 7. Theme analysis

### **Population:**

**Matter A:** The number of children in respect of each age range within its area

**Matter B:** The needs of children from different cultures and backgrounds within its area

**Matter E:** Whether there is a charge for play provision and where there is a charge

### **What children have told us:**

- Availability of facilities across Merthyr Tydfil appears mixed, particularly for older children and teenagers, the lack of sports fields, skate parks, and structured play options having been frequently mentioned.
- Feedback from children with ALN reflects that existing play spaces are not always inclusive or accessible, with a limited variety of options, particularly in terms of adaptive equipment and sensory play.
- Whilst there is a generally positive perception of safety, children reported concerns about poor lighting in parks at night and feeling unsafe due to antisocial behaviour, including reports of a “dodgy older man” loitering near shops and public spaces.
- During the focus group interview, 12-14-year-olds children expressed a need for more recreational options, such as longer youth club sessions, better football facilities, additional skate parks, and improved maintenance of existing spaces.
- Children often noted that transport to larger facilities was a barrier.
- Ethnicity data from survey respondents reflects that Merthyr Tydfil has a predominantly White population (87.88% in KS2 and 97.37% in KS3-4 identified as White Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British); however, there is meaningful presence of Indian, Pakistani, and mixed ethnicity children.
- The population data also reveals that areas such as Cyfarthfa, Town, Gurnos, and Dowlais and Pant, have the highest concentrations of children aged 0-14 years. This highlights a strong demand for well-developed and accessible play facilities in these regions.

### **Strengths**

- Despite some difficulties in obtaining CIW registration, its advantages include access to a wider range of activities for children of all ages, extended hours, and eligibility for grant funding. CIW registration also allows parents to apply for free food programmes, particularly beneficial for families from low-income backgrounds.

- A majority of children surveyed reported feeling ‘usually safe’ when playing outside in Merthyr Tydfil, indicating a generally positive perception of safety in outdoor play environments
- Targeted initiatives exist to support minority groups, such as the Gypsy Traveller community and children with disabilities.
- Existing play programmes have received positive feedback from parents and children, indicating that they are valued and meeting some community needs.
- Youth clubs, community centres, family days, and group activities are among the most popular recreational options for children and young people. These activities encourage social interaction and provide structured, safe spaces for children to engage with their peers.

### **Weaknesses**

- Data on current population and age groups (0-18) broken down by ward level is available, but it is based on the 2022 dataset and may not fully reflect recent trends.
- The population data lacks specific details for children with ALN by age group, including comprehensive data on children from ethnic minorities or those for whom Welsh is a first language. This gap in data could impact future planning for inclusive play facilities.
  - There has been limited engagement of children and young people with ALN in the consultation process (only 8 survey responses), which may result in their specific needs being underrepresented in future play provision planning.
- Areas with higher concentrations of children aged 0-14, such as Cyfarthfa, Town, and Gurnos, exhibit a strong demand for well-developed play facilities, highlighting a need for more accessible and varied play options to accommodate this demographic.
  - 80% of respondents in the stakeholder survey indicated that there are not sufficient places for children to play.
- Economic disparities in Merthyr Tydfil significantly impact access to play opportunities, particularly in areas with high percentage of children in absolute low-income families, such as Gurnos (22%), Merthyr Vale (21%), Bedlinog (17%), and Penydarren (17%).
- The cost of play facilities remains a significant barrier to access, indicating the higher impact on families from low-income backgrounds. Key findings from stakeholders and parents/carers surveys include:
  - Activities that require additional fees or have age restrictions are less popular, especially among families who cannot afford them.
  - Some facilities have limited access due to being locked or require a payment to enter, further restricting opportunities for families to use them.
  - 40% of parents reported that the cost-of-living crisis has made activities too expensive, particularly for families with multiple children.

- Single parents, in particular, have found it increasingly difficult to afford after-school clubs or local activities, with costs having doubled compared to pre-COVID levels.
- Some play facilities are difficult to reach, either due to being far from home or located in town areas, making them less accessible.
  - 41% of respondents are dissatisfied with the accessibility of open spaces, particularly in more remote or suburban areas. Many parks require a car to reach, creating barriers for families without transport.
- Safety remains a significant concern among parents/carers with issues like drug activity in public areas, anti-social behaviour, traffic hazards, and general safety concerns due to lack of police presence and stranger encounters.
  - Limited surveillance and poor lighting in some parks make feel unsafe, especially during evening or after dark.
- There is noticeable absence of inclusive play spaces where families can enjoy time together, especially in areas where children of different age groups have limited opportunities to play together.
- There is a clear demand for more diverse and safe play areas across the borough, particularly areas that cater to the needs of teenagers and young people.
- Improving the accessibility and safety of play areas is also crucial, especially for children with disabilities or those with ALN, as these children often face barriers to engaging with existing spaces.
  - A majority of respondents in the stakeholder survey highlighted difficulties with apparatus access due to space constraints or the presence of able-bodied children.
  - 15% of parents/carers said their child(ren) have difficulty in participating in certain activities, primarily due to disability.
  - Many play areas lack suitable equipment, such as accessible swings or sensory spaces.

## **Opportunities**

- With a noticeable gap in facilities for older children (12-18 years) and the expected growth in this age group, there is an opportunity to develop more youth-friendly spaces, such as sport facilities, skate parks, and recreational spaces. Expanding these options would meet the recreational and social needs of this age group, helping to reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour and providing positive engagement opportunities.
- Given the reliance on the 2022 dataset, more up-to-date data collection focussed on areas experiencing demographic shifts would enable more accurate and effective planning for future play provision.
  - Improved data on children with ALN could support the development of more inclusive play options, including the provision of accessible and adaptive play equipment, sensory areas, and spaces that promote social inclusion for all children, regardless of ability or background.

- Expanding data collection to cover children from ethnic minorities and Welsh-speaking households would help address gaps in culturally inclusive play provision.
- Areas with higher concentrations of children, such as Cyfarthfa, Town, and Gurnos, present an opportunity for focussed development of play facilities.
- Economic disparities, particularly in areas with high unemployment and low-income families, present an opportunity to address inequalities to play spaces.
  - Developing subsidised or free access to play facilities and introducing transport schemes for families without cars could increase accessibility.
  - Investing in free, accessible activities for families, such as organised sports events or community fun days, could help reduce financial barriers and increase engagement.
- Establishing more community-led play spaces or “play streets” could provide safe, flexible options for outdoor play and social interaction, particularly in areas where permanent facilities are lacking.
- Engaging children and young people in the design and planning of new facilities would meet their needs more effectively whilst fostering a sense of ownership.

### **Threats**

- The overall decline in birth rates in Merthyr Tydfil, in line with national trends, may lead to a reduction in demand for early years play services if the trend continues. This may necessitate a shift in resources toward accommodating older children and adjusting provision for younger cohorts accordingly.
  - The 0-18 population in Merthyr Tydfil is expected to decline to 34,347 by 2026, with a noticeable drop among 3-11-year-olds. This decline may reduce participation in early years play services and impact future funding allocation.
- Certain areas experiencing low levels of economically active population, such as Gurnos and Bedlinog, may limit families' ability to afford paid play provisions in the future if no action is taken.
  - Persistent economic disparities and rising living costs may widen the gap in access to play facilities, particularly in high-unemployment areas, where families are already struggling with affordability.
- Funding limitations may affect the ability to expand subsidised transport, maintain existing play spaces, and develop new facilities, particularly those tailored toward older children
- Poor maintenance, outdated equipment, and lack of appropriate facilities could lead to underuse of existing play spaces.

- Safety concerns, including drug activity, antisocial behaviour, and poor lighting, may deter children and families from using local play spaces, even if improvements are made.

**Places where children play:****Matter C: The space where children can play, including open space, and any other space****Matter F: Traffic measures that are used to promote access to play****Matter I: The extent to which education and local development planning policies take into account the need to enhance play opportunities for children****What children have told us:**

- The majority of children prefer indoor and home-based environment with 96.77% of KS2 respondents and 68.18% of KS3/4 respondents playing in their house or a friend's house.
- For outdoor public spaces, streets near their homes and local grassy areas were the popular options for playing and socialising.
- Access to preferred play spaces appears to be limited for many children
  - In the KS2 survey, only 16.67% of respondents reported being able to play in all the places they would like, with 40% able to access some, 26.67% only a few, and 16.67% unable to access any of their preferred play areas
  - In the KS3/4 survey, 32.95% reported being able to hang out in all the places they would like, whilst 28.41% could only access some, and 29.55% could only access a few.
- Youth clubs and open fields were frequently mentioned as positive spaces for socialising and play, particularly among KS2 and KS3/4 respondents, highlighting their importance for community engagement.
- Sports facilities and green spaces were valued where available, but children surveyed noted a lack of diverse and age-appropriate options such as climbing walls, skate parks, and tennis courts.
- Maintenance issues were a common concern, with damaged equipment, overgrown grass, and littering highlighted as barriers to play, particularly among younger children.
- Traffic and road safety were raised as significant issues, with multiple references to too many cars, motorbikes near play areas, and limited safe routes to parks.
- The most common mode of travel to play and hangout locations is walking or riding with friends, with 35.48% of KS2 respondents and 33.33% of KS3/4 respondents reported traveling this way.
- Accessibility barriers included limited transport options and play areas being located too far from home, creating challenges for families without cars.
  - A significant portion of children (29.03% in KS2 and 29.33% in KS3/4) are taken by an adult in a car, suggesting that play locations are not always within walking or biking distance.
- None of the KS2 respondents selected public transport as their main mode of travel.
- Respondents emphasised a need for more structured activities and additional youth clubs, especially for teenagers to increase social opportunities and reduce boredom.



- Children with ALN reported a preference for playing at home, in afterschool clubs, and in the streets, highlighting the importance of structured and familiar environments for play.

### **Strengths**

- Youth clubs and open fields are frequently mentioned as positive space for socialising and play. These spaces are seen as essential for community engagement and provide structured environments for both recreation and social interaction.
- Despite some challenges, local grassy areas remain popular play spaces for children, offering accessible options for socialising and physical activity.
- Play priority Signs have been erected.
- MTCBC have applied to the Welsh Government for powers to enforce Moving Traffic Offences. This will allow MTCBC to ensure adherence to existing traffic orders that make our streets safer for residents, especially those outside schools.
- The council's Active Travel initiative has submitted an Active Travel Network Map to the Welsh Government, highlighting existing routes and proposed future pedestrian pathways identified through community consultations. MTCBC maintains priority lists for new crossings and routes.
- Green spaces and sports facilities are valued where available, with some children actively engaging in sports activities and socialising with friends.
- Parks are viewed positively by parents, especially those catering to younger children, as good options for supervised play.
- Parents viewed newly built parks positively for their safety and accessibility, indicating that investment in modern, well-maintained play areas can improve the overall experience for children.
- Playworkers reported that their facilities were well-equipped to accommodate children with ALN, with parents and carers offering positive feedback about the inclusivity and quality of the services provided.

### **Weaknesses**

- A significant portion of children reported limited access to their preferred play areas.
- Only 20% of parents/carers were satisfied with the overall play provision in their area, with 50% expressing dissatisfaction. This satisfaction stems from a combination of safety concerns, limited play options, and poor maintenance of existing facilities, which together limit children's opportunities for safe and enjoyable outdoor play.
- Safety issues such as too many cars and motorbikes near play areas were mentioned by children surveyed, with limited safe routes to parks.
  - 40% of parents/carers surveyed also expressed concerns about their children's safety when playing outside, with key reasons including drug activity, anti-social behaviour, and high-traffic roads.
  - Parents cited the lack of police presence and incidents involving strangers as contributing factors to their safety concerns.
- Insufficient age-appropriate facilities were raised as a recurring concern throughout the consultation.

- Many children highlighted the lack of diverse and age-appropriate play options, including skate parks, climbing walls, and tennis courts. This is particularly problematic for teenagers who may not find existing facilities engaging enough
- Stakeholder and parents/carers surveys also revealed the lack of dedicated spaces for older children as a concern, combined with concerns about antisocial behaviour. Some parents view this lack of diverse and age-appropriate play options contributes to a rise in screen time and indoor play for older children, detrimental to their children's wellbeing.
- Issues with damaged equipment, overgrown grass, muddy areas, dog excrement, and littering were frequently raised by children, impacting the usability and appeal of play spaces.
  - Parents also reported that existing parks are often rundown, with common issues such as broken equipment, litter, and vandalism. In particular, parks were criticised for lacking adequate facilities and equipment, making them less inviting and potentially unsafe for children.
- For many children, play areas are not within walking or biking distance, requiring adult transportation.
  - 29.03% of KS2 respondents and 29.33% of KS3/4 respondents rely on adults for car transportation to play areas.
  - A notable 41% of parents were dissatisfied with the accessibility of local open spaces, with many parks and playgrounds being either located in other town or difficult to reach without a car.
- Children, particularly those with disabilities, faced difficulties in participating in outdoor play activities due to accessible play areas.
  - 15% of parents/carers said their child(ren) have difficulty in participating in certain activities, primarily due to disability.

### **Opportunities**

- There is an opportunity to expand parks and recreational areas to include play equipment suited for teenagers, such as skate parks, adventure play areas, and sports courts, as well as for children with ALN, such as inclusive and sensory-friendly play equipment.
  - A clear demand for better-designed play spaces that cater to a wide range of ages and abilities.
  - A strong desire to create dedicated spaces where older children and teenagers can safely hang out and engage in activities without feeling restricted.
  - The need for more accessible, inclusive spaces to cater to a broader range of children, including those with physical or neurodivergent needs.
- Investments in high-quality outdoor spaces for free play would create more opportunities for children to engage in outdoor activities. In particular, the need for better-maintained green spaces, including grass areas and open fields, has been highlighted throughout the consultation.
- Developing more nature-based and imaginative play spaces, including bushcraft areas, forest schools, and community gardens.
- There is an opportunity to implement traffic-calming measures around parks, playgrounds, and popular play areas to mitigate concerns about traffic safety.

- Investing in secure and convenient walking or biking paths, free from traffic hazards, would reduce barriers to accessing play spaces.
- An opportunity lies in increasing the availability and accessibility of public transport to play spaces, ensuring that all children, regardless of where they live, can easily get to parks, sports fields, and community centres.
- Local development planning could benefit from integrating more play spaces into residential areas, ensuring that parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities are within walking distance for children.
  - There is an opportunity to address the gap in facilities for older children and teenagers in local development policies by planning for more youth clubs, skate parks, and multi-purpose community spaces.
  - Development plans may consider flexible spaces that can adapt to the evolving needs of youth.
  - Local development planning should prioritise accessibility and inclusivity in play spaces, in line with inclusive education policies.
- Education policies and local development planning could further enhance play opportunities by funding and supporting after-school programmes, community centres, and youth activities.

#### **Threats**

- Some play areas remain poorly maintained, with issues like broken equipment, litter, and overgrown grass frequently highlighted by children and parents.
- Limited funding may delay or prevent improvements to existing spaces and the development of new facilities, limiting children's access to better-equipped and diverse play options.
- The Local Development Plan should prioritise play spaces for older children and teenagers, which could result in continued gaps in provision for this age group.
- Insufficient age-appropriate facilities for older children and teenagers may lead to disengagement.
- Limited provision of inclusive play spaces for children with ALN means that some children face barriers to participating in outdoor activities.
- Without local development planning with a clear strategy for improving play opportunities, continued gaps in provision may continue.
- High traffic volumes near play areas, combined with a lack of safe pedestrian and cycling routes, remain significant concerns.
- Safety concerns in public spaces were frequently raised, with children mentioning feeling uncomfortable due to interactions with groups of older youths, anti-social behaviour, and the presence of strangers.
- Drug activity and anti-social behaviour in public spaces create an unsafe atmosphere for children and limit opportunities for outdoor play.

- Poor transport links and the distant location of some play areas restrict children's independent access and freedom of movement.
- Limited community engagement in play provision and decision-making could reduce the effectiveness of future investments and prevent alignment with the needs of local families and children.

**Supervised provision:**

Matter D: Supervised play provision

Matter G: Playwork training and workforce development

**What respondents have told us:**

- Responses from play providers and workers identified barriers to play and recreational activities due to cost of participation were prevalent throughout the consultations.
- There are barriers faced by play providers themselves, due to financial or time constraints.
- Providers share concerns regarding the lack of appropriately qualified staff and their ability to recruit effectively.
- Providers outlined that Family First is always received well and is successful in the way families are informed.

**Strengths**

- Play training opportunities are shared across the play sector. Play providers, whether in childcare or not, can access this. Family support initiatives provide information and support for parents to help their children play, providers felt this was signposted effectively

**Weaknesses**

- There is not sufficient evidence to determine whether playworkers in unregistered provision can access training

**Opportunities**

- MTCBC could develop a dedicated training scheme specifically for playworkers in unregistered settings, ensuring they have equal access to professional development
- Providing subsidised or free training through local funding initiatives would encourage participation and raising further awareness of existing opportunities.

**Threats**

- Insufficient funding opportunities may impact the ability to deliver on subsidised training and initiatives.

**Policy synergy, engagement, advocacy and information:**

**Matter F:** Measures used to promote access to play, including the provision of information, publicity and events

**Matter G:** Training opportunities for the play workforce

**Matter H:** The level of community engagement and participation

**Matter I:** The extent to which other policies of a local authority take into account the need to enhance play opportunities for children

**What respondents have told us:**

- There has been a strong level of community engagement throughout the consultation
- Parents and Carers seemed content with the availability of information
- Providers felt that engaging with the community is becoming easier, especially since lockdown. However, training opportunities are limited by time and cost.

**Strengths**

- MTCBC actively promotes and supports events that provide play opportunities, the council works closely with partners to ensure this information is available.
- High level of community engagement showing there is an overall consensus on the importance of play.
- Training opportunities for providers are regularly publicised and updated.
- Strong interdepartmental collaboration within MTCBC means that play needs and opportunities are always considered

**Weaknesses**

- Cost of training opportunities has been presented as a barrier; providers have requested more CPD either in the evenings or weekends as the times are often during working hours.
- Funding is impacting the council's ability to engage with media outside of its own free internal processes.

**Opportunities**

- To maintain the level of community engagement and further create a supportive, open community.
- Offer subsidised and out of hour training to providers

**Threats**

- Lack of sufficient government funding will hinder the LA in offering more subsidised training and engaging with media outlets at-cost. Further funding will be required to ensure the great level of community engagement is maintained.