SkillsActive UK Play and Playwork Education and Skills Strategy
2011–2016
We are the Sector Skills Council for the Active Leisure, Learning and Well-being sector working with five sub-sectors: sport, fitness, playwork, the outdoors and caravans.

We are an independent, employer-led, UK-wide organisation that is licensed by the government to build a skills system that employers want. Our role is to create a framework of qualifications, training and continuous professional development based on industry requirements and standards. We ensure that employers and employees can access the right qualifications, based on those national standards that have been designed by employers, ensuring their workforce is appropriately trained and qualified.
We have five key goals;

1. **Reduce** skills gaps and shortages.
2. **Improve** productivity, business and public service performance.
3. **Increase** opportunities to boost the skills and productivity of everyone in the sector’s workforce.
4. **Improve** learning supply through national occupational standards, Apprenticeships, and further and higher education.
5. **We link employers** with training providers, policy makers and individuals to ensure that the importance of skills needs are communicated and addressed, and that workforce development policies really get to the heart of what our sector needs.

**Playwork is a highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances children’s play.**
It takes place where adults support children’s play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes.

Over the last few years we have experienced a step-change in the way the playwork sector approaches training and qualifications. Sector employers have embraced the move towards a professionally qualified workforce, and there has been a change in perception of the sector and what it means to be a qualified playworker. Playwork is beginning to become recognised as a professional sector with real career options and pathways.

Our new strategy will refocus the sector’s attention on workforce development and the need to have more people, better skilled and better qualified entering and progressing their career through the sector. It will give particular emphasis on giving the sector the professional recognition and support it needs.

I am particularly pleased that the strategy has been driven by the views of the sector itself, and I would like to thank all those across the UK who took part in focus groups, submitted online and written responses, and contributed through our committees.

**Stephen Studd**
Group CEO, SkillsActive
Our Approach

This strategy outlines our vision-led approach to developing the best people who provide time and space for children to play. It is founded on the principle of Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children have the right to play. It has been informed by the views of employers, practitioners and organisations across the UK.

It is the second UK strategy led by SkillsActive. It is aimed at improving the lives of all children and young people, and through this supporting their families and communities.

Context

Recent events, such as the success of the Big Lottery Fund for Play across the UK, the new requirement for local authorities in Wales to secure sufficient play opportunities for children, and the widespread adoption of play strategies by local authorities in England, have seen the play and playwork landscape change. Playwork itself has been changing, with the popularity of play rangers, the acceptance that children need to take risks to learn and grow, and the general drive to professionalise the children and young people's workforce. The recession is having a major effect on resources, yet investment in workforce development can be of great benefit to employers and a cost-effective way of making a positive impact on public sector targets such as health and community.

Impact

Through the strategy, we want to communicate the positive contribution that investing in playwork qualifications can make and reaffirm the impact that a skilled, qualified and educated workforce has. We want to define our role as the lead for play and playwork workforce development across the UK, and to support employers and work with key organisations to realise our vision. We hope that the strategy and its subsequent implementation plans will also support and inform the work of partners.

Delivery

Implementation plans will be developed in each of the four nations, and this is where we will define specific actions and measure impact. There will be different starting points and lines of progress across each nation, but all plans will be driven by their employer-focused Playwork Education and Training Councils (PETC). Funding and current action plans differ across each nation, so the implementation plans may well have different timeframes to accommodate these.

The heart of the strategy is contained in the Strategy Map, which will act as a guide for our work. More detail on the vision, aims and objectives is laid out on the pages following it.

Although the demand for play services has remained relatively stable in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in England it has grown significantly in the past few years. Since 2003, the number of after-school clubs and holiday playschemes in operation has increased by 105%. This increase has also seen the number of playworkers working at these establishments increase by roughly the same amount.
## Our Approach

### Strategy Map

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Vision, Aims & Objectives

Vision

A skilled, qualified and developing play workforce, whose practice is underpinned by the Playwork Principles, who provide high quality, accessible play opportunities for children and young people.

Our vision covers everyone whose work, paid or voluntary, is based on the Playwork Principles or whose activities have a direct impact on children’s play. We want all face-to-face workers and people working in roles where the majority of their work is dedicated to play, such as play development officers, to hold a playwork qualification or be working towards one. In the long term we also want all those managing play settings to have a professional qualification.

For those whose role is not focused primarily on play but whose work has a great impact on it, such as planners and teachers, we want to see them attending endorsed training courses and to see play and the playwork approach included in qualifications such as teaching. We would like to see the entire workforce engaging in reflective practice and lifelong learning. We believe that people are the most important resource for providing time and space for high quality, accessible play, and the attributes of the workforce provides a way of measuring this.

We want the play workforce to be recognised as a distinct profession within an integrated, but not homogeneous children and young people’s workforce. Playwork should be at the heart of the play workforce, led by a graduate core that reflects experience as well as education, while appreciating the need for those with different levels of qualifications. Recognition of playwork as a profession could provide a license for practice, which will further drive up quality and professional standards.

We know that there is a long way to go to achieve this. More than 40% of playworkers across England and Wales do not have a playwork-specific qualification, whilst 70% of employers in Northern Ireland, 60% in England and 40% of employers in Scotland say that there is a gap between the level of skill that they need to run their business and the level of skill that they currently have in their workforce. More than half of employers across the UK say that playwork-specific skills are hard to find in new recruits.
Aim 1
Position playwork as a distinct profession within the children and young people's workforce.

Objectives
1a. Promote play and the playwork approach so that it is embedded within children's workforce and play strategies.
1b. Advocate playwork as a distinct profession at national and local levels.
1c. Develop and promote a playwork professional body.

We want to develop and promote playwork as a profession and to improve playworkers’ self-confidence and ability to act as advocates for play and playwork. We think this is essential to support playworkers to be part of the UK workforce. We will develop a playworker-led professional academy, based on a code of ethics and a commitment to continuing professional development, and promote this widely. This will start as a voluntary register and will be flexible to the differing contexts in each of the four nations. We will also work with trade unions, the government and funding bodies to create an environment where employers can afford to offer playworkers terms and conditions at parity with allied professions.

We also want the importance of play and playwork to be recognised by the government, and we will campaign to improve its profile in government policy development. We want all government and local authority workforce development strategies that cover children and young people to include playwork as a distinctly recognisable strand. We know that there are great difficulties in considering playwork as a career, and we will work with partners and the government to break down barriers and develop guidance and tools to support playworkers in career progression.

We will act as advocates for playwork, and will encourage playworkers to act as advocates for children’s play in their communities.

Surveys and consultations with the sector consistently bring up the importance of playwork as being distinct, but also emphasise the need to work as part of the wider children and young people’s workforce.
Aim 2
Support other sectors and the public in their understanding of the value of play and playwork.

Objectives

2a. Work with national organisations to develop education and training for people working in the children’s workforce and other sectors.

2b. Encourage playwork national occupational standards to be included in other qualifications as appropriate.

2c. Involve children, young people, parents and communities.

The work of many other professionals in the children and young people’s workforce, such as social workers and police officers, has a great impact on children’s ability to play. Other professionals, such as teachers and health professionals, also use play as part of their work, although they might use it for different purposes and in different ways. We want to work with partners to develop modules and training for other professionals based on the playwork principles.

We think parents and families should be the biggest supporters of play. We will work with community and parents’ organisations to help bring about a cultural change that will see acceptance of children playing in the heart of communities. We will also encourage parents and other community activists to act as champions for play and playwork.

In England, we have already worked with the Training and Development Agency for schools to include playwork units in midday supervisor qualifications. In Scotland, we have worked to ensure playwork is included in the Childhood Practice standards.
Aim 3
Develop and promote a suite of sustainable qualifications that are valued by employers and the workforce, including volunteers.

Objectives
3a. Develop and promote quality assurance processes that support the improvement of playwork practice, learning and skills.
3b. Build on national occupational standards to meet employers’ needs.
3c. Work with the government and other bodies to shape funding to meet employer needs.

We know qualifications are essential, and that there should be a range of both academic and vocational qualifications from entry level to higher education. Our successful Sector Qualifications Strategy has been taking this forward.

Playwork is an essential element of the children and young people’s workforce today, so we will work with the different governments and registration authorities across the UK so that playwork qualifications are valued and accepted.

We will work with training providers and other partners such as awarding organisations so that qualifications are kept up-to-date and meet the needs of employers and practitioners. This will include improving progression routes to management and raising standards in both management and leadership.

We will work directly with employers and through employers’ networks and groups to show how developing their workforce will build a better service. We will develop clear guidance for employers about the range and value of qualifications and current issues, and offer tools such as online workforce development toolkits.

We would like to see all employers having a workforce development plan and resourcing it, and all practitioners being committed to improving their skills, knowledge and understanding. National occupational standards are also a great resource, and we want to continue to develop additional practical uses for them, such as models for job descriptions.

We will create a framework of standards, training, qualifications and higher education programmes for playwork. This will include reviewing and assessing the network of training providers, and developing a network of occupationally competent training providers who are delivering learning that is responsive to employers’ needs.

We expect them to offer accessible training across the UK. We will provide and continue to improve and streamline quality assurance systems, including a code of practice for training providers and peer endorsement of training courses.

Employers have told us that funding is key, and we will work with governments, funders and other bodies so that resources are available to fund playwork education, qualifications and training.

We know that about 40% of the playworkers working in England and Wales do not have a qualification specific to playwork. In England and Scotland, only about half of the playwork employers we have recently surveyed said that they preferred playwork qualifications over other childcare qualifications.
Aim 4
Encourage delivery and uptake of high quality accessible training, education and professional development opportunities.

Objectives
4a. Engage and inspire employers and practitioners to prioritise workforce development.
4b. Increase the uptake of training and qualifications in play and playwork.
4c. Increase capacity to deliver training and qualifications in play and playwork.

We want to see all those working in play and playwork engage in continuous professional development (CPD), and for this to happen we need to make sure that training is accessible and that everyone in the sector realises its importance. We will develop tools and methods for CPD and embed expectations with practitioners that training and CPD needs will be met, and this includes appropriate and accessible training for volunteers. We will work with training providers, higher education institutes and awarding organisations to offer a range of ways to access learning, including distance learning and online resources. We also know there is no substitute for experience and that some things can’t be taught, and we will continue to promote the value of experiential learning.

We know qualifications are essential for the professionally led workforce we want to build, and we believe that everyone working in playwork should have the opportunity to access qualifications. We will make sure there is a variety of ways of achieving qualifications and there is support available to help those who need it. We will also promote the value of qualifications to parents to show that great playworkers are not born that way; they work hard to train and qualify. Our vision covers staff working in holiday playschemes as well, and we want achievable qualifications to cover this important area of work.

It is evident from research conducted across all four nations of the UK that access to training and education is a key issue for both playworkers and playwork employers. Evidence shows that the cost and accessibility of training and education opportunities are both significant barriers to their uptake.
We at SkillsActive believe that not only is play a child’s right, but that the whole of society benefits, both immediately and in the long term, when children have the time and space to play. Staffed play provision is central to this, and only a playwork approach, properly administered, can guarantee that a child’s free play experience is ‘invaded’ as little as possible. That is one of the defining principles of playwork as compared to other ways of working with children. Children’s free play is what SkillsActive works to protect, and it is our belief that playworkers, working to the Playwork Principles, are key to protecting and advocating this.

**Conclusion**

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