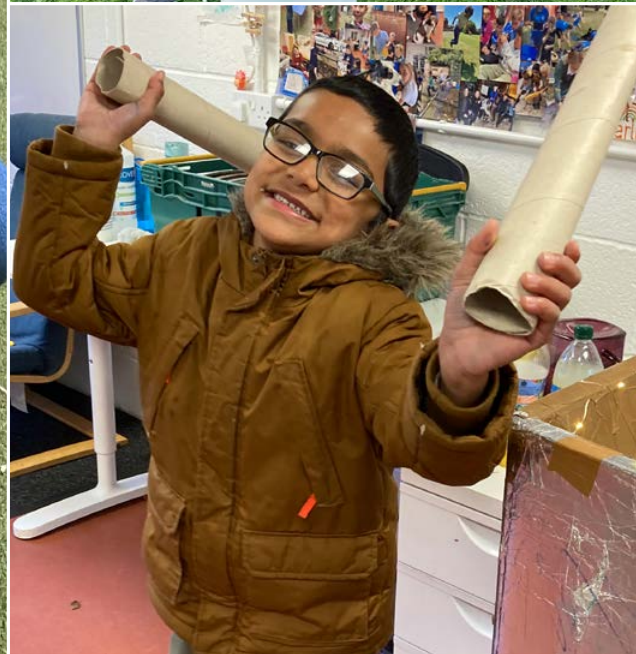


Play2Nurture

Year 2 of our journey

February 2024



Play2Nurture – the story of the project this year

This report covers the second year of Play Gloucestershire’s Play2Nurture (P2N) project, which is funded through The National Lottery Community Fund. The project offers a ‘playful boost’ for small groups of school-aged children living within a one-mile radius of The Play Sanctuary who are experiencing economic and/or emotional hardship.

Its overall aim is to use the therapeutic power of play to create the conditions where children facing adversity build resilience and have better chances in life. Sessions are supported by qualified staff, Young Volunteers, and a Pets as Therapy qualified dog, Rafa.

“The dog – he’s really good, he’s soothing for the kids. Not every child is the same, they’re not all boisterous, some find it hard to talk to new people and the dog gives them a chance to settle in and feel connected to the project. They can stroke and talk to the dog until they feel confident to join in.”

Mother of a P2N player



How children take part in P2N

- **After school sessions** take place in The Play Sanctuary for small groups of children who usually attend one day a week for one term. These after school sessions are considered the core offer, and they were complemented and supported through a range of broader offers listed below.
- **Holiday play days:** these sessions are offered to previous P2N participants, allowing them to stay in contact with the project and each other. Staff can stay up-to-date with the children's lives, occasionally offering or signposting family support if needed. Children can choose from three venues: The Play Sanctuary, Ayland Gardens local park, or the grounds of Oxstalls Campus at the University of Gloucestershire.
- **Community play sessions:** these are held in Ayland Gardens open space on Tuesdays and are open access, so anyone can attend. Previous P2N children who live near enough are regular attenders and can also attend at The Play Sanctuary when sessions move indoors in the winter months.
- **Super Saturday sessions:** these sessions are aimed at 5 to 8 year olds or children who would find it difficult to attend or thrive in the after-school sessions. These sessions can offer early help to younger children and are more flexible, being able to work with children over a longer period of time if needed.
- **School lunchtime sessions:** Each term, for one lunchtime a week, the project offers play sessions at one of the participating schools. The lunchtime sessions raise the profile of the P2N project with school staff, allows children to become familiar with staff, and builds more of a sense of continuity between the school and the project sessions.

Although these sessions are split into a core and a broader offer, reflective discussions in the team concluded that they all feed into each other, often in unpredictable ways that help the team to be flexible in their support, and so contribute to the success of the project as a whole. In thinking about possible futures, the team would want to retain options for catering for younger children to offer early help, for the community sessions because of the networks and trust built and maintained, and the school sessions for familiarisation and continuity of experience.



The year in numbers:

During 2023, P2N has worked with a total of 136 children across its various delivery modes and locations, and offered:



575 Hours of Play Nurture

48 Children have taken part in the core offer

34 Community sessions for 17 P2N 'alumni' children

65

After school sessions for 48 children

44

Holiday play days for 59 children



32

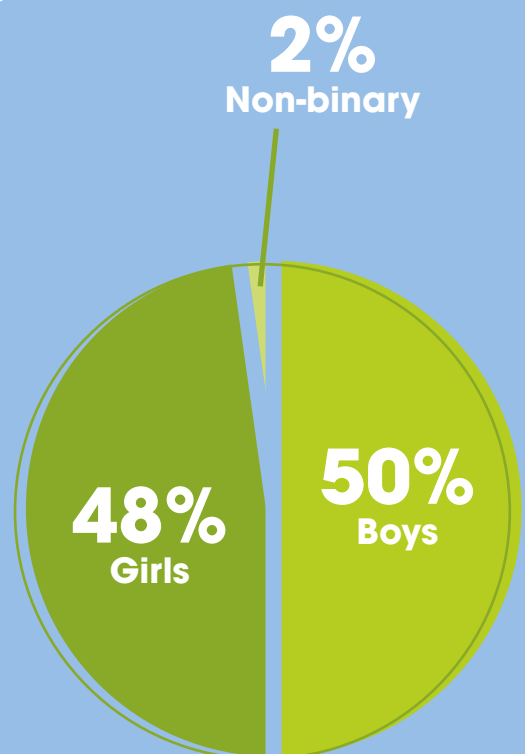
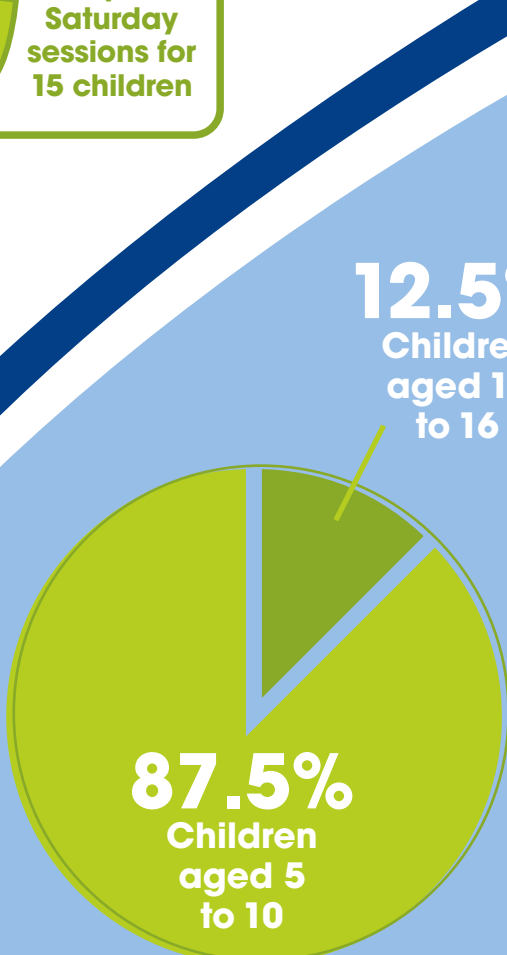
Lunchtime sessions for 76 children

14

Young Volunteers providing 1,659 hours of volunteering



19 Super Saturday sessions for 15 children



“This is no exaggeration, but honestly, I’ve been inspired by the work that they do.”

Mother of two P2N children



10% of the children are neurodiverse

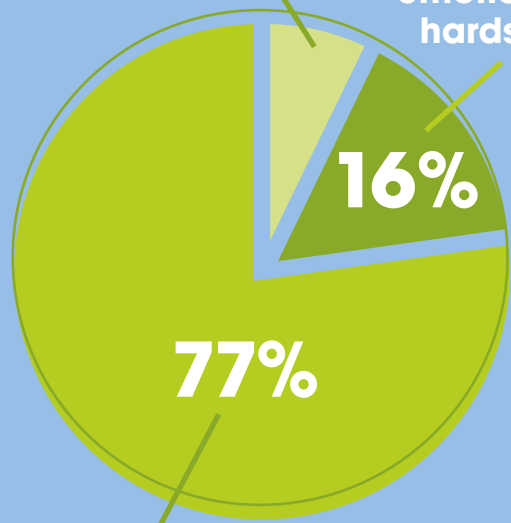
2% of the children are disabled

46% are black, asian or minority ethnic children

7%

Children experienced economic hardship

Children experienced emotional hardship



Sources of referrals:

12%

Play Gloucestershire

4%

Self-referrals by children

GARAS (a community group working with refugees)

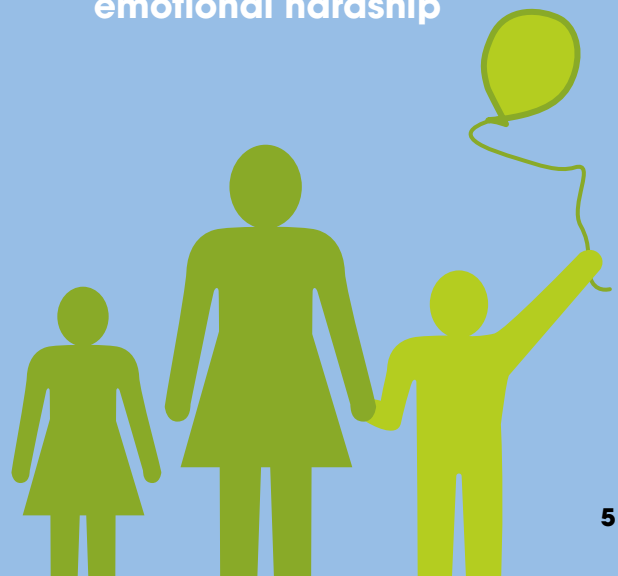
17%

50% Schools

17%

Community

Children experienced both economic and emotional hardship





A year of consolidation and growing confidence

Working thoughtfully at the intersection of playwork and play therapy, P2N has delivered a successful second year, consolidating and developing further the innovative approach. This, together with the flexible and responsive capabilities of project design, community networks and highly qualified and experienced lead staff, has resulted in a service highly valued by children, caregivers, families and professionals alike.

In particular, there is an evident growth in confidence in articulating the therapeutic elements of the work. This has been evident both in evaluation meetings but also in terms of publicising and sharing the work. A workshop on lessons from the first year of P2N was held at the International Play Association conference in Glasgow in June (550 delegates from 41 countries attended the conference), attracting much interest. Following this, the project was invited to write two articles, due for publication in 2024. This collaborative work has helped to build a theory of therapeutic playwork.

In June 2023, P2N invited **key professionals** from their networks from education, social services, health and community services to an **afternoon event** where the work was presented and well received and discussions on potential future commissioning arrangements were opened up. These are continuing to be explored alongside other possible futures for the work within Play Gloucestershire.

The project has also consolidated its work with Young Volunteers, starting the year with a **Young Volunteer training day** in January. The Young Volunteers, all children over 10 years who had been a part of P2N, engaged enthusiastically with the participative activities and took their responsibilities seriously. The day was a great success and all have sustained their volunteering.

Children also took a lead role in directing and filming a **short video** with the help of Motz Workman, describing the P2N project.

How we've involved people from the community in our work

The project understands 'community' as including children and young people themselves, the families and residents in the neighbourhood, and the community of professionals and supporters in their networks. The P2N project builds on and contributes to the history Play Gloucestershire has of building relationships of trust with children, communities and professionals. The 'broader offer' elements of the project play a key role in this and reap dividends for the children and families because of the team's caring, flexible and responsive approach.

Children are deeply involved in the project as participants, with their play styles and preferences influencing how the project works, including the resources available, the rituals and myths that develop over time and are reshared at reunions in the holidays, and the ways that specific groups are supported to play together. Many of the children who have had their full term of the core offer, and have reached the age of ten, want to become **Young Volunteers** and they are supported to do so. The project strikes a good balance between being clear on the responsibilities and expectations of the role and acknowledging many of the children still want to play and have their own issues. Most of the time, this works very well indeed.

The community sessions in Ayland Gardens have been fundamental in building relationships with the **local community**. Over the two years, attendance has increased significantly, with over 100 children and families joining some sessions when the weather is good, bringing picnics and blankets and creating a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere and a sense of community connection and belonging. The sessions attract a diverse mix of local families and refugee families, with a lot of friendships being formed. It has helped the team to become aware of children living in the area who could benefit from the core offer and has also led to other forms of family support, building relationships of trust.

"I came across the Play Rangers one day when going through the park. Our community is majority Muslim Asian, so when they have the community sessions, it's given the children exposure to people who are different in terms of colour, religion, all of that aspect, and the Play Rangers have built a connection with those children and their parents, they attract other Asian families as well because they see the connection there. When you see somebody - it's about integration and inclusivity as well, which is important for the Asian and the wider community."

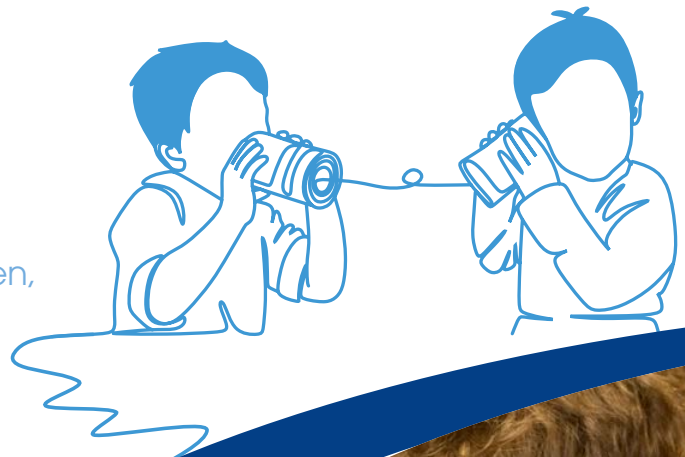
Mum of two P2N children

P2N works hard to involve and be flexible and responsive to the diverse family circumstances of the children, contacting **caregivers** and making arrangements that can support the children to attend. For those who collect children, staff make time to greet and chat with them. They also often send positive messages and photos of the children's activities and achievements. In interviews and other less formal opportunities for feedback, caregivers enthusiastically talk about how much their children both enjoy and benefit from the project.

The project has worked on building relationships with the **local schools** in the catchment area this year. The project manager works closely with the school to support them to identify and refer children, and she also goes in to run play sessions at lunchtimes. Focusing on one school for each after school session has a number of benefits, including making collection easier and having knock on benefits for friendships for the children. This has worked very well this year. Towards the end of the year, the team have been arranging for one of these sessions to be offered to a local Islamic school, with the connection being through the mother of regular Saturday children who is also the Chair of the PTA at the school.

One of the sessional Play Rangers also works as a teaching assistant (TA) at a local primary school. This gave a unique perspective on the children in the two different contexts and the relationships between them. In interview, she said:

"The first session with our group of children, this is no exaggeration, but it made me well up. For the two hours that we were there I was so full of emotion because it was just incredible seeing these children having their first experience of The Play Sanctuary and they were just like different children and it was lovely... for some of them school is really hard for various reasons. How they are at school, it's maybe slightly withdrawn or they have some anxiety around being in school, and just giving them the freedom to play, yeah, it was great."



This year, P2N worked with **GARAS** (Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) to offer a term's play nurture for a group of refugee children living in a nearby hotel. This came about because of a conversation at an unrelated networking meeting between Play Gloucestershire's Director of Play and a member of staff from GARAS, showing the ripple effect of strong networks and connections.

P2N has continued its valued relationships with **Toucan for Children**, a local play therapy organisation. The core team has continued regular reflective practice sessions with a play therapy supervisor. In addition, P2N has referred some children on to Toucan, supporting families to access the service.

A longstanding **friend and supporter** of the organisation has made two thoughtful donations this year. The first was a handmade interactive toy and the second a giant marble run. The friend was initially a professional contact when she worked as a landscape architect for the council, but has stayed in touch and helped to design **The Play Sanctuary** outside space. The giant marble run is made from repurposed drainpipes, scavenged and decorated golf balls, and metal stands. The children and playworkers have had great fun constructing and testing different runs, including turning it into a water and marble run, flowing into the sand pit, with games that again involved the anticipation and high affect of getting soaked.

During the holidays, the park sessions were visited by the **Eat Well Wagon**, part of **Gloucester City HAF** (Holiday Activities and Food programme). This is run by the manager of The Venture, White City, who was a child at the playground when it was run by Pip, one of the P2N Play Rangers. This is a friendship that goes back many years.



The differences P2N is making

Evidence for the differences P2N is making comes from observations, log sheets, feedback from teachers and caregivers, 'exit' interviews with the children, interviews with stakeholders and from the collaborative evaluation approach. The team has continued with and further developed the evaluation approach used in the first year, which is a blend of Theory of Change, a traditional evaluation tool, and a spatial method called critical cartography. Theory of Change is often a very linear approach, and the mapping work has offered a method that can encompass nonlinearity, messiness, context and the detail of how the project worked.

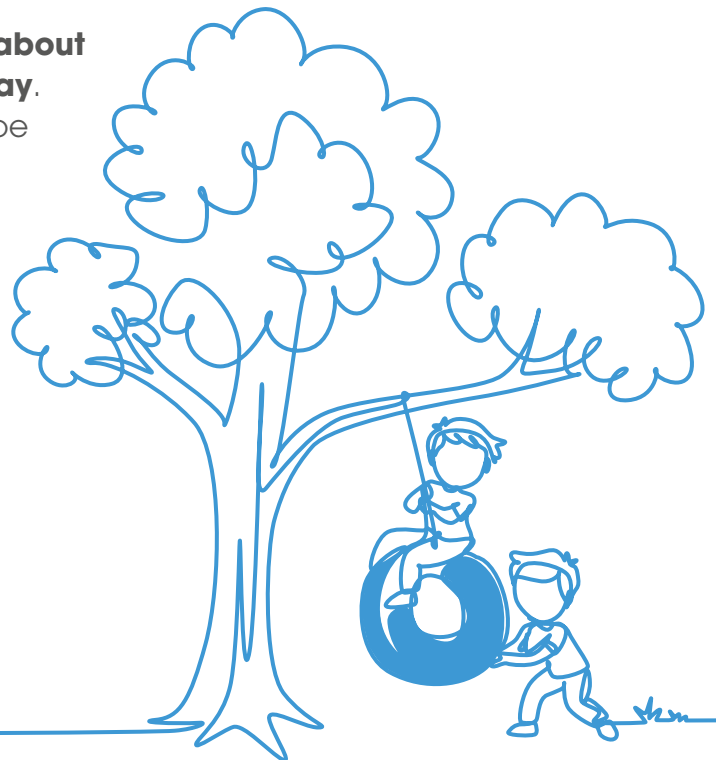
Outcomes for children: contributing to wellbeing and resilience

Two of the outcomes identified in the Theory of Change relate directly to children's wellbeing and resilience. There is considerable evidence for the relationship between playing, wellbeing and resilience.*

In developing the theory of therapeutic playwork, the team has drawn heavily on the work of paediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, in particular **three key principles:**

- **The process of playing is itself healing,**
 - through the joy of playing
 - through the emotional vitality of playing with strong emotions like fear and anger
 - through respite from daily hardships
 - through catharsis.
- **Therapeutic playwork is fundamentally about creating a space where children can play.**

This means working to support children to be able to play and letting play do the rest. Such support includes holding the space and holding play frames when they threaten to fall apart, which for some of these children happens quite often.
- **Therapeutic playwork is grounded in relations of care and trust,** which need to be 'good enough' rather than perfect, coping with both failure and anger from which there can be recovery and growth.



* For a recent overview, see <https://play.wales/resources-library/research/briefing-playing-and-being-well/>



Given this, the intermediate outcomes, and therefore the staff's work, focus broadly on creating conditions for children to be able to play, where children:

- feel safe, comfortable and confident in the space
- can and do play
- are physically active
- enjoy themselves, experiencing adventure, friendship and fun
- build relationships with each other and staff
- can play with primary emotions in a safe frame
- can practice coping mechanisms
- can unlearn damaging response patterns.

There is abundant evidence, from the mappings and evaluation meetings, spatial play profiles and social media posts, that children can and do **feel safe and comfortable** to play in many different ways. One child said:

"It helps me with my anxiety. Everything makes me really anxious but I like coming here, it's a good place. It's the clay and stuff, it helps my brain become creative. I've got to know someone in year six and I'm being honest, I now really like them. Most of the time I'm relaxed here, not all of the time but most of the time. I was anxious the first time. It's a cool place though."

In interview, a mother said:

"My son used to mask at school, he wasn't his true self. But when he's with the Play Rangers, he's himself completely."

The Play Sanctuary is a space that is small enough to feel homely and big enough to allow for many varied forms of playing, and the atmosphere is one of welcome, attention and acceptance as well as playfulness. The Play Rangers recognise the importance of **small spaces** that children can gravitate towards when they feel the need to be apart from others, be partially hidden, feel enclosed and secure and from where they can watch what is happening.

On a more pragmatic note, the team is aware of the importance of **offering food**, both as a general support for families and in terms of creating a space where children are able to play. Fresh and healthy snacks are available and in many sessions they also prepare and eat food together, often round the fire. Some children seem to be permanently hungry.

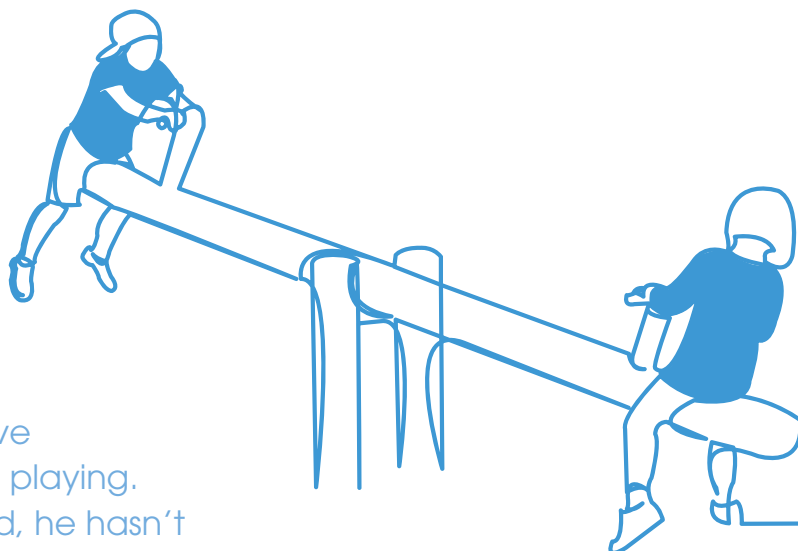
Friendships are also a big aspect of the experience for children. Making friends includes navigating disagreements and fallings out. In evaluation meetings, the Play Rangers talked a lot about the friendships that had formed, and they were highlighted in the children's interviews too:

"I think it's a good place because I make good friends here."

"I wasn't actually friends with some people here but now I'm friends with them."

A significant number of children struggle with emotion regulation when things are not how they want them to be. Therapeutic playwork within the P2N project works with small groups of children, unlike much of traditional play therapy. This means children can play and build friendships with other children, including all the fallings out and disagreements that entails. It also means that they cannot always have the exclusive attention of one play ranger. This offers both strengths and challenges. Staff work both to keep the space safe for all children and to be supportive of children when they lose control, making themselves reliably available, "sitting with the silence" as one Play Ranger described it or listening to them.





“His mum thought that he really wouldn’t cope but actually it was just what he needed, and it just gave him a chance to immerse himself in playing. It’s really interesting – nothing is fixed, he hasn’t been on a journey where he’s come out the other end, it’s an ongoing thing, but he still can find respite from his troubles when he comes to The Play Sanctuary. As a Play Ranger, what a lovely thing to be able to do, you just think that for those two hours, life really was worth living for him.”

The **joy and pleasure** of playing is more than an indulgence or a luxury. It is the joy of playing that motivates children to seek out more playing, with all its attendant benefits for wellbeing and resilience. There is also evidence that the neurochemical rewards of joy develop affective neural networks that can protect against depression and stress. Alongside the fallings out and moments where children struggle with emotions and reactions, there is much joy.

What we’ve learned

From the outset, P2N was designed explicitly as a **learning project**, with lead staff attending regular reflective practice sessions with Toucan for Children (a local play therapy provider) and in terms of the collaborative approach to evaluation.

The ongoing intertwined processes of **account-ability** (finding ways to document and account for the work) and **response-ability** (being responsive to what needs to be maintained, strengthened or changed) help to support the ongoing flexibility and willingness to change in informed and justifiable ways.

In addition, the **strengths of a bottom up and flexible response** to need has meant that P2N has been able to offer places to children closer to any trauma, complementing and taking some pressure off oversubscribed statutory services. For some children, their participation may have mitigated the need for statutory interventions, bringing a preventative element to the work.

Being **visible in the community** has also had its benefits. A child due to attend was quite anxious. The Play Ranger had popped in to see him at school lunchtime and recognised him from a previous time when they had had played in the local park. Such a memory and the familiarity it brought greatly lessened his anxiety about joining the P2N sessions.

Reflecting on the year, one Play Ranger recognised the highly effective combination of a **good funding package** giving time for the project lead to be flexible and a **staff team who care** enough to build community relations and to be willing to act responsively.

This year the project has worked to develop a theory of therapeutic playwork (and hence the theory of change) that considers the **interconnectedness of everything** that makes the project work.

The team has worked on the issues of **endings** for children once their term of after school sessions is over. This has included a stronger marking of endings, including 'exit' interview and being given a 'bag of play' with contact information if they want to get in touch with the Play Rangers. They are also clearer on how to offer continued contact both through the weekly community sessions and holiday play days.

For some children they offer a **'return ticket'**, a repeat term, and are developing principles that can inform how such decisions are made fairly and ethically. Children can also stay in touch through becoming Young Volunteers.

The P2N project works at the intersection of playwork and play therapy. It is a strengths-based approach that rests on the principle that the process of playing is itself healing, and so the job of the Play Rangers is to create a space where all the children can play.



Looking forward to year 3

Drawing on learning over the last two years, and aware that the project is entering its last year of this funding stream, the project has identified key areas of work that can both develop the current offer and position the organisation well to develop the solid foundations built through this funding:

Developing the **vision and a strategic plan** for the future of play nurture work within Play Gloucestershire, working with trustees and the broader team.

Working with the evaluator to develop the theory of change through the emerging **theory of therapeutic playwork**, developing this into a clear information sheet and infographic for future potential commissioners and partners and for use in future training programmes.

Developing the **referrals process** by working more closely with the Early Help and Targeted Support team and considering how it can be part of the Children and Young People's Multi-Agency Navigation Hub in the future as well as consolidating their community referrals route. A blended referral approach is preferred as the last two years have shown how community referrals are a vital way of supporting children that might be overlooked by others.

Testing **statistical models for measuring impact** in order to strengthen the case for funding from statutory service commissioners. Working with the evaluator to trial and evaluate the use of quantitative methods such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and Goals Based Outcomes, alongside continuing with the critical cartographic approach.

Two discrete areas of further work have also been identified. The first is the need for more **support for Young Volunteers**. Play Gloucestershire has a strong track record and clear process for supporting Young Volunteers. This requires supervision and support during sessions and the P2N team has recognised that they struggle to find the capacity to do this as well as they would wish. Given this, they will be seeking further funding to support this area of the work.

The second is the recognised need for **training** in therapeutic playwork. Having therapeutically qualified and experienced lead staff working on the P2N project has been crucial to its success. Whilst the two most senior practitioners are either training or qualified to Postgraduate level, the rest of the team have no therapeutic qualification. Having looked unsuccessfully for relevant qualifications at levels 2 and 3, the project feels well placed to develop a training programme that could be piloted with Play Gloucestershire staff and if successful share with the wider playwork sector. This idea will be further developed over the final third year and will be a part of the strategic long term plan.



"It is amazing, my kids absolutely love it and it gives them a space to meet other children, just to be free and to be children. They're given the freedom, the space and the resource to be able to do that with support as well. It's something my children look forward to and it's going to be a pivotal part of their memories as they get older and it has been fundamental in terms of their development as children."

Mother of two P2N children

Report by Dr Wendy Russell** with Pip Levett, Charlie Marsh, Ellie Rowles, and Jenni Wilson. Thanks to all who contributed to the evaluation process, including the children.

Copies of the full evaluation report available from
pip@playgloucestershire.org.uk

**Dr Wendy Russell is a visiting fellow at the University of Gloucestershire, specialist in play and playwork and our external evaluator.



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