



Press release

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Plea for more Government investment in toy libraries to help families on low incomes and children with disabilities

Toy libraries should be an integral part of Sure Start children's centres and schools, according to Play Matters, the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries, the registered charity which represents toy libraries.

This follows a new report by Capacity – *Toy Libraries: Their Benefits for Children, Families and Communities* – on the work of toy libraries in disadvantaged areas. The report, which is being launched at a seminar at the House of Commons on Tuesday 12 June, sponsored by Helen Goodman MP, suggests that more toy lending schemes are needed to help to equalise access to play experiences for children affected by poverty and for children with disabilities and additional needs.

The last major investment was in 2001 when the Government announced £6m for the creation of new toy libraries in disadvantaged areas and to fund toys, play equipment and specialist toys for children who have special needs. Play Matters estimates that there are only around 1,000 toy libraries in the UK, serving a quarter of a million children and their families.

The report shows that toy libraries can add value to Sure Start children's centres because of their proven success in engaging "hard to reach" families, and says: "Parent volunteers can be particularly effective at supporting other parents and many toy libraries have worked in their communities for a considerable number of years. Where children's centres are co-located in the same areas, it would seem to make sense to work together. As a next stage development, toy libraries could usefully become part of the offer of extended primary schools."

At present, children's centres are not required to provide toy libraries as part of their core offer, although many do. A recent survey by Play Matters found, among those responding, that 61% of local authorities intended to provide toy libraries as part of the work of children's centres and in some cases, though other additional arrangements.

Pauline Henniker, Chief Executive of Play Matters, says: “All children, regardless of their circumstances, should have the right to play and toy libraries provide a crucial role in helping to ensure that the most vulnerable children in our society can enjoy this right too. We welcome the recommendations of this report and urge government to help us to extend this important work.”

Many toy libraries are located in disadvantaged areas and they are often run by parents. As well as toy lending, they provide places for parents to meet, to gain help in choosing toys for their children and to have opportunities to volunteer and to learn new skills. Some toy library projects provide a full range of services, including short breaks, family support and courses about health, children’s play, or other subjects chosen by parents themselves. In this way toy libraries provide parenting support and encourage parental involvement in children’s play.

For the report, Capacity visited five toy libraries in Birmingham, Greenwich, Nottingham City, Portsmouth and Salford to provide a snapshot of the wide range of services that they provide.

To interview Pauline Henniker, Chief Executive of Play Matters, contact her PA Diane Chapman on 020 7255 4609.

Margaret Lochrie, Director of Capacity and author of the report, is available for interview on 020 8977 0283, mobile 07785 918376.

Notes for editors

Play Matters is the campaign title of the **National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (NATLL)**, the national body for toy and leisure libraries in the UK. Founded in 1972 as the Toy Libraries Association (TLA), in 1993 it was renamed the National Association of Toy & Leisure Libraries (NATLL). The charity’s website is at www.natll.org.uk.

Capacity is a leading policy, practice and research body for children’s services that is based in Teddington, Middlesex. It specialises in cross-cutting services for children and families, helping to manage and deliver change where change is needed, and developing strategies to increase social inclusion. For more information about Capacity, visit its website at www.capacityltd.org.uk.

- Toy libraries were formed in England in the late 1960s initially for children with special needs.
- Today there are 1,000 toy libraries in the UK serving around 250,000 children and their families.
- Some toy libraries operate as voluntary organisations, often with charitable status, while others are part of local authority-managed centres.
- Helen Goodman is Member of Parliament for Bishop Auckland in County Durham.

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