

PLAY POLICY FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Consultation Responses

In November 2006 the Children and Young People's Unit, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister published a Play Policy for Northern Ireland for consultation. Approximately 1500 copies of the document were widely distributed and the document was accessible from the Children and Young People's Unit's website. In addition every school in Northern Ireland was sent an email and over 400 letters were sent to interested stakeholders informing them of the existence of the consultation and encouraging them to respond.

We are extremely grateful to all those who took the time to respond: a list of whom is attached at Annex A.

58 responses were received from a wide variety of sources including community groups, voluntary and statutory sector organisations, councils, members of the public and Government departments. One response consisted of 96 postcards, generated by PlayBoard, and submitted individually by their members. These postcards did not specifically address the three questions posed in the document but the general points they made have been taken into consideration and included in the relevant sections throughout this report.

Consultation Events

Focused consultation work was done both during the preparation of the document and during the consultation period. A small number of respondents stated they would have liked more information on who was consulted. The information below supplements that published in Annex 1 of the consultation document.

Document preparation:

A number of playgroups and after school groups were involved in the consultation during the development of the play policy document. Approximately 225 children from rural and urban

settings, and encompassing all sections of the community were involved. Groups involved in the Reggio Emilia project promoting international best practice, together with those implementing the Media Initiative in Northern Ireland were also involved in the consultation. We are grateful to NIPPA and PlayBoard staff for facilitating this work on our behalf.

Consultation period:

As mentioned above, all schools were emailed with a link to the policy document and were encouraged to respond. We did not receive any responses from children which had been facilitated by their schools and only two individual schools responded with adults' views.

To ensure that the views of children and parents were represented during the consultation, OFMDFM commissioned the voluntary sector to carry out consultation events throughout the province.

In addition, some voluntary and statutory organisations independently facilitated sessions with their children and young people and we are grateful to them for their efforts.

Voice of the Child

Focused consultation events were facilitated by NIPPA and PlayBoard. Children from twelve playgroups throughout Northern Ireland were involved in the consultation process. Approximately 220 children aged 3 – 5 years in Londonderry, Downpatrick, Causeway, Newtownabbey, Larne, Carrickfergus, Belfast, Dungannon and Omagh took part in the events organised by NIPPA.

Four after school groups were involved in the PlayBoard consultation events with approximately 150 children aged 5 – 11 years having the opportunity to participate in Belfast, Craigavon and Antrim. All groups involved were selected to be as representative as possible of section 75 categories and those who live both within the urban and rural communities.

General points:

It is clear from the responses from the children across both age ranges that they all endorse the vision for play. The range of examples they gave represents the play opportunities and experiences which are important to children. It is clear that children aged over 5 have given more outdoor examples, however risk and proximity to parents are factors coming through in all of the responses.

Children recognised that play was about having fun, having friends, playing with toys, making things, playing sports, getting dirty and also playing alone. Many of the quotes were similar and the main ones are as follows:

- *Children like to have fun*
- *They want to have more fun and better equipment*
- *They like art and making things*
- *They like working together, playing with cars*
- *They need to be more free*
- *They go to lots of play areas*
- *They should be able to play whatever they want*

Children also related to play taking place in different places for example, outside and indoor play, in parks, sports pitches, fields, hills, the street, the front garden, bedrooms, in friends' or relatives' houses and in play parks. Playing in fixed play areas (e.g. local council play parks) and also playing indoors were mentioned least as providing play opportunities for the children. The most popular play opportunities for children occurred outdoors and close to home for example in their own street or garden, in a nearby open space such as a field or sports pitch. The majority of responses related to playing outside:

- *Camping, playing outside, playing in the garden especially boys, getting dirty outside*
- *(Play parks should be)... "Everywhere"*
- *"We should be allowed to have fun outdoors, camping, playing with fires, we want play and play for all ages"*
- *"Parks should be clean"*

The children found the concept of Delivering on the Vision harder to understand but when explained, they were keen to be involved in decision making about play opportunities:

- *Because the children know better things about play than the big people*
- *I think adults should listen to the children and then they could play with us*
- *The children have best ideas*
- *Maybe if they listen they will be able to buy the things the children want to play with;*

and felt it was important to have play workers. Many felt that it was important for parents to know how to play:

- *Grown up people need the wee children to show them how to play with toys*

With regard to the 0-11 age banding, the children felt strongly that there should be no age limit and indeed, if play were made available to all, then there would be less vandalism by older children:

- *I do not think that it is fair, for children over 11 years old not to be allowed to play*
- *We should have a right of saying what age limit we should play*
- *Let us play until whatever age*
- *Let teenagers play – its not fair.’, ‘No wonder the walls are covered in spray paint*

Younger children were especially keen on having play rangers to supervise the play areas.

Whilst accepting that there were elements of the consultation difficult for the children to grasp, it is important to note that these consultations have highlighted the value and importance of involving children at each stage of the development and implementation of the play policy.

We are very grateful to NIPPA and PlayBoard staff and to all the children who took part.

Voice of the parent

Parenting Forum NI organised focused consultation events on behalf of OFMDFM with 26 parents, caring for a total of 54 children, in the Newry, Belfast and Augher/Clogher areas. The parents explored a range of issues relating to play including how play today differs from when they were young and why play is important to children.

The overwhelming response from all the groups was that play is important for their children. It is recognised that there are many health and well-being benefits for children when they have the opportunity to play. It emerged that play takes place both inside and outside. Home is identified as where play takes place first and foremost but it is not the only environment in which children explore and experiment with play.

More needs to be done to ensure that all children can access and enter into meaningful play i.e. 'which will allow them to test things and try out situations and express themselves.' For parents with younger children, imaginative/pretend play emerged as being important for their child and to support this, access to available affordable local play facilities is important.

Parents consider that older children need to get involved in more structured organised activities for play experiences and more needs to be done to ensure access for all.

Schools were cited as places which could provide opportunities for all types of play. It was suggested that school buildings should be more accessible during out of school hours to meet the needs of local communities.

Physical play is considered important for all children, and especially for boys, and there is a need to have more play areas and green areas in Northern Ireland.

Parents appear today to have growing concerns for their child's safety. More play activities are based within a home setting or at a more organised structured play environment such as after school clubs. It is therefore particularly important that childcare workers receive ongoing training on the value of play and how to ensure

that children are able to have the freedom to play in the way that they need to.

A key theme emerging from consultation is the need to secure adequate funding for after-schools clubs and activities to ensure that all older children have access to well established, organised facilities in order to meet their play needs.

In relation to the specific questions asked in the document:

Vision: the parents agreed with the suggested vision and stated, 'it is a good vision which should encompass everything children need.' They added a caveat to this, that it is essential that the necessary funds are available to implement and maintain the policy commitments.

Priority Areas: the parents broadly agreed with all the priority areas, with some parents voicing dissenting views on issues such as defining play and researching play, stating that they would rather see money put into actual play provision rather than discussing opportunities: 'do less talking, spend money on local green areas...'

Areas not covered included travel and transport issues, accessibility of play for children with disabilities and the preservation of green areas and parks.

Equality Impact Assessments: parents voiced general agreement on some points such as religious belief, sexual orientation and people with/without dependants. A range of comments was given about the other points including extending the age range to 13 years to allow for boys developing later; more elaboration on the disability and political opinion areas; and making opportunities for lone parents to access affordable play provision.

Parents from rural areas voiced concerns about the proposed amalgamation of schools necessitating even longer bus journeys for rural children, thereby further eroding their time for play. Homework policy was also raised as a concern by all parents who felt more emphasis should be placed on being creative and less on formal education methods.

General responses to specific questions in the consultation document

The consultation document contained three specific questions, which were designed to establish a measure of support for the content of the policy. Whilst the majority of responses were characterised by commentary rather than by explicit agreement or disagreement, it is possible to state that more than half of all respondents agreed with the Vision and agreed with the priority areas.

This section provides an overview of the responses to the three questions contained within the draft policy document.

1. Do you agree with the vision stated on page 7?

The majority of responses to the consultation agreed with the vision set out in the policy document, with 33 out of 58 responses specifically stating they agreed with the vision. The vision was described as ‘strong’ and ‘powerful.’ A number of respondents, whilst agreeing with the vision, expressed the view that the language could be more inspiring. Some offered examples: *‘every child is able to access and enjoy a range of fun opportunities to play – at home and in their local communities – on a daily basis,’* – Youth Council for Northern Ireland.

2. Delivering on the vision: are there any areas which you would like to see specifically included? Are there any areas listed above with which you strongly disagree?

The majority of those expressing an opinion was in agreement with the areas contained in the draft policy. The proposed establishment of a play partner network was widely welcomed with many respondents adding that such a network must be driven by play experts.

‘We welcome the priority areas that are set out in the document as consider them to be an effective road map to deliver the vision.’ – Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education.

Of the 9 local councils responding, all supported a network and were keen to play a key role. It was recognised that any delivery

mechanism for the Play Policy will have to take into account the new council structures yet to be established and Antrim Borough Council suggested that further consultation work needs to be done with councils in this regard.

There were no priority areas with which respondents strongly disagreed; in particular the following areas received strong support:

- the need for a common language about what we mean and what we want to measure when we talk about play ;
- the need to determine the quality of play provision in Northern Ireland and to develop regional quality standards that are evidence based and informed by international best practice;
- the need for an integrated approach to play planning, which continues to involve children and young people;
- the need to identify resources and investment strategies to support the implementation of the play policy;
- the need to ensure that the voice of the child is central to the implementation of the play policy and that children are viewed as real participants;
- the need to examine closely the issues relating to risk management and risk aversion in decisions about play. This will need to involve a reassessment our current approach to insurance, litigation and indemnity;
- the need to support a workforce development plan that is inclusive of play, learning and development for those working with children and young people.

3. Equality Impact Assessments: do you have any comments on the equality impacts identified or anticipated? Are there, in your view, any other equality impacts which have not been identified or any other ways in which the policy could promote equality of opportunity, and if so, how?

Some respondents stated that they were content with the assessments made. Others highlighted the needs of marginalised children: ie ethnic minority children and children with disabilities in relation to designing and providing access to appropriate play provision.

Other comments

In addition to the questions set out in the draft policy document, respondents took the opportunity to raise issues which lay outside the specific focus of individual questions. The key issues raised related to the following issues:

General overview of comments:

In general terms, the majority of responses appeared to support the framework within which the policy is being developed:

‘as parents with two young children we were delighted to hear that the government finally recognised the importance of play for children.’ Kyra and Gerry Pauley.

Other respondents whilst less critical of the strategic framework, did express concern that the policy needs to go further than a statement of commitment and should include an action plan or implementation plan to prove that government is serious about doing something about this issue:

‘the policy should be modified to include a concrete, time-bound action plan,’ Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland.

Resourcing

A common concern expressed in responses was that funding had not been ring fenced in order to ensure that the actions contained in any action plan arising from the draft policy would actually take place and without firm resources in place the policy carried little weight. Respondents wanted to see concrete evidence in the policy of the amount set aside for play.

'a secure funding stream needs to be allocated to play to ensure that there is adequate provision for all.' Belfast City Council Youth Forum

Scope of the Policy

Twenty seven respondents stated a strong desire to see one play policy for all children aged 0-18 years. There appears to be some confusion in that it was always our intention to have one overall Play Policy for all those aged 0-18, but to implement it in two phases: a play policy for 0-11 years and a recreation policy for those aged 12-18 years. The language used in the draft document may have contributed to this confusion and the views of these respondents will be addressed in the published Play Policy.

Further mapping exercises

Around a quarter of respondents supported the need to do further work on mapping the extent of play provision. As was stated in the draft document (page 13), this is a need we recognise and work on assessing the quality of provision has already commenced. Respondents also highlighted the need to identify barriers to and benefits of community based play; the need to map quality of provision, including access, especially for children with disabilities and marginalised children and the need to record the length of time children actually spend at play facilities.

In responses, the use of the Six Acre standard as a recommended minimum open space standard was disputed by most councils, with only one council supporting it. The Equality Commission also questioned its application to Northern Ireland,

'... which may not be entirely appropriate in contexts such as areas where there is a community interface.'

In the preliminary mapping work done for the production of the document, we used the criteria used by local councils in Northern Ireland and which is largely consistent with the Six Acre Standard to give us a benchmark for mapping existing provision. It should be made clear that in doing this, we were not advocating the use of one system of measurement over another.

Policy proofing

The importance of policy proofing from a child/young person perspective was mentioned in a number of responses and it was noted that this process should apply to existing as well as new policies.

Participation

A number of responses highlighted the need to ensure effective participation for the most marginalised groups of children and young people and efforts should be made to ensure their active involvement in future decisions. In particular respondents were keen that children from ethnic minorities and children with disabilities should be involved in decisions about access to provision. Several respondents questioned the lack of a child-friendly version of the consultation document.

As stated above, OFMDFM organised several focused consultation events with children, both before publication of the document and during the consultation period, and is content that the broad view of children aged 3-11 years has been represented. We accept the point that older children could have been involved and could have spoken from their experiences. This point has been noted for future work on the policy.

Conclusion

It is aimed to publish the final policy in the Spring of 2008.

Responses to Play Policy Consultation Document	
No	Response from
1	Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission
2	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
3	North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust
4	Limavady Borough Council
5	St Peter's Primary School
6	Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland
7	PlayBoard
8	PlayBoard Members
9	Ballymena Borough Council
10	Armagh City and District Council
11	Ulster Teachers Union
12	DCAL
13	Belfast City Council
13a	Belfast City Council Youth Forum
14	Ards Borough Council
15	The Bees Nees Early Years Centre
16	Northern Ireland Branch of Early Education
17	Northern Childcare Partnership
18	Upper Andersonstown Community Forum
19	Jeanette Keenan
20	Big Lottery Fund

21	Youth Council for Northern Ireland
22	Mrs McCusker
23	M McLaughlin
24	Kyra and Gerry Pauley
25	Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster
26	Fermanagh District Council
27	Western Area Childcare Partnership
28	Roisin McCooey
29	BELB
30	Include Youth
31	Western Education and Library Board
32	Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network
33	Lisa O'Connor
34	Barnardos
35	NICVA
36	British Heart Foundation NI
37	Children in Northern Ireland
38	Youthnet
39	Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education
40	Derry City Council
41	Idris Moore & Maura Moore
42	The Deevy Family
43	Children's Law Centre
44	Enniskillen Primary School
45	Bulrush Daycare

46	MENCAP NI
47	SHSSB
48	Playwork Education and Training Council for NI
49	Community Relations Council Northern Ireland
50	Lisburn City Council
51	NEELB
52	Various Playboard Postcards – Playboard
53	Equality Commission for NI
54	Parenting Forum NI (Parents Advice Centre)
55	DHSSPS
56	Kids Academy Afterschool Staff
57	Antrim Borough Council
58	NIPPA