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Clerk to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister
Room 285, Parliament Buildings
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10 October 2014

RE: PlayBoard NI Response into Building a United Community

PlayBoard is an independent charity and the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. Since our establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's right to play through a combination of: service delivery, service development; campaigning, lobbying; awareness raising and working in partnership with others to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers. The organisation takes great pride in promoting best practice in Play, Playwork and play based School Age Childcare services.

PlayBoard's mission is to drive the play agenda, ensuring that at every level of decision making across society, the child's right to play is not only recognised but is made a reality within the lives of children, young people, families and communities. Children and young people's views, aspirations and perceptions of themselves and the environment in which they live, are at the heart of PlayBoard's work. Our vision is of a society where the right to play is realised.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Building a United Community. As an organisation we are fully supportive of the Executive's commitment to Building a United Community. We believe that play, and

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playwork in particular has a critical role in bringing children together through their natural and shared drive to play; something which is unfortunately all too often overlooked and underutilised by educational and local government establishments.

Whilst PlayBoard's primary organisational focus is not on the area of community relations, our work over the past 30 years has included a considerable body of work aimed at using play as a positive vehicle for bringing communities together. In this submission we have focused on providing examples of how play-based programmes can work in practice to bring children together. We would urge that cognisance be given to the untapped potential of play to become one of the central lynchpins that attracts children, teachers and crucially parents to the idea of sharing services and spaces across and between communities.

Our experience in the practice of Building a United Community in schools, school age childcare sector and communities

Young children living in divided societies like Northern Ireland are inclined to develop particular cultural dispositions or habits reflective of their own ethnic group. These dispositions often manifest in relation to young children's preferences towards their own community's cultural events, symbols and practices. Children want to be with others who are of 'their own kind' and share their 'in-group preferences'. As a result they may develop negative dispositions towards those who are different from themselves and form 'out-group prejudices'.¹

Schools: Over the past two years PlayBoard has piloted and developed the implementation of our 'Spaces to Be' programme within the wider Contested Spaces programme. This pilot programme is jointly funded by OFMDFM and Atlantic Philanthropies and uses play to facilitate participating schools to address community and cultural barriers enabling respect for difference and inclusion of others within the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding strand of the statutory curriculum.

The 'Spaces to Be' programme is premised on PlayBoard's ['Spaces to Be – Mapping Identity and Belonging toolkit'](#), which was developed by PlayBoard through funding provided by Peace III. The resource builds on PlayBoard's many years of playwork and peace building experience, and practice of working with children, young people and communities across Northern Ireland. The toolkit is a

¹ Connolly, P. (2009). *Developing Programmes to Promote Ethnic Diversity in Early Childhood: Lessons from Northern Ireland. Working Papers in Early Childhood Development, Number 52.* Bernard van Leer Foundation. PO Box 82334, 2508 EH, The Hague, The Netherlands.

practice based resource, which was developed with and for children and young people, to support them to explore issues of identity and belonging through a play based methodology.

Using a play methodology, the 'Spaces to Be' programme seeks to promote and improve the relationships between and across an interface/contested space communities. In its current incarnation, through a range of play-based activities, P5, P6 and P7 pupils from schools come together to understand and respect difference relating to religion, culture, gender and disability. The programme is underpinned by the [Playwork Principles](#), which puts children at the centre of their play experience. Playwork enables children to be free to: choose, personally direct and be intrinsically motivated, to play. Children determine and control the content and intent of their play, follow their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons.

The aim of the 'Spaces to Be' programme is to enhance children's capacity for positive development by giving them access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities. Through contact with the 'out-group' they become more inclined to develop mutual respect for the other group's cultural events, symbols and practices. This is achieved by using practical and playful exercises that support the school curriculum, and encourage children and young people to explore their understanding of difference. Moreover, the toolkit helps to promote the creation of innovative shared space and peace building and reconciliation through play.

As an organisation we are under no illusion that implementing a play programme within a school setting is challenging; and that implementing a contact based play intervention is even more challenging. However, it is our firm belief that the challenges are outweighed by both the innovative nature of play as a mechanism for contact and the potential impact it has to bring about better intergroup relations for future generations. We have learned through our experience of 'Spaces to Be' that Building a United Community is a journey that requires buy-in from schools, principals, teachers and parents who need to be 'empowered' to engage in a process that allows them to identify and confront problems and overcome barriers.

School Age Childcare: PlayBoard is also passionate about leading the development of the School Age Childcare sector, a sector which provides childcare and age appropriate play opportunities for children aged between 4 and 14 years. School Age Childcare settings provide a caring and safe environment, offering a range of active and stimulating play activities for children.

Crucially, due to the cross-community nature of most settings, School Age Childcare providers have the ability to provide for many children an opportunity to meet with, interact and engage with children from another community or cultural background on an almost daily basis. Given the largely segregated nature of the education system the importance of School Age Childcare provision in helping to build a united community should not be underestimated.

The Executive recently launched 'Bright Start', the first stage of the Northern Ireland childcare strategy and this has seen the beginning of a much needed investment in the development and growth of School Age Childcare capacity across Northern Ireland. It is critical that this investment is protected and that the impact of providers in supporting cross-community contact is acknowledged by government.

Community: In addition to the work required within schools and the school age childcare sector, PlayBoard firmly believes that the development of shared spaces within communities is critical to building a shared future. It is our experience, that play and play areas can offer an excellent opportunity to initiate a process of changing societal perceptions of the 'other group' for both children and adults alike.

As PlayBoard's very successful CAN Peace III Partnership funded, Positive Play Programme 'CAN Play' demonstrated free-play practice can lead to the more effective utilisation of shared spaces and services across community boundaries. The impact of 'CAN Play' exceeded all expectations particularly in terms of developing play based opportunities for cross-community contact between children and adults, and in terms of using free play as a means of creating shared spaces which met the play needs of children whilst encouraging wider social and community interaction.

Our experience of 'CAN Play' highlights the critical importance of building in sustainability from the outset. In particular there is a need to acknowledge and recognise that Playworkers or trained volunteers capable of overseeing community-led play initiatives are critical to long term sustainability.

Concluding Comments

As a relatively new post-conflict society Northern Ireland has made progress, however for many children – know or known to them - it remains a divided society. At the heart of much of the division is the segregated schooling system, which enables the status quo of children having little or no contact with the other group, to remain. This leads us to strongly advocate that all future work charged within the realm of Building a United Community focuses on the need to promote respect for difference and inclusion of others from birth, through the early years,

middle childhood and adolescence. We believe play is an excellent mechanism to make serious inroads into achieving a shared future of substance.

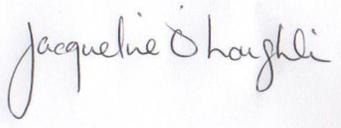
Furthermore, given the unique ability of play to bring children and young people together through a common, natural drive we would strongly advocate that the Together Building a United Community Strategy recognises the importance of play within the school curriculum, school playground, school estate, the wider school age childcare sector and crucially within communities. PlayBoard cannot reiterate strongly enough the important role that we believe play has in paving the way for enabling 'sharing' whether that is within the confines of educational settings or community spaces.

Classroom settings offer an ideal setting for much of this work but outside of the 'formal' school day there are considerable benefits to be accrued from, for example shared school aged childcare within the workings of OFMDFM's Bright Start Strategy. Also with the advent of Community Planning there is an excellent opportunity to develop shared spaces to encourage community integration and to remove both physical and perceived interface barriers that divide our society.

We would urge that play is considered to be a priority for inclusion within any proposals relating to Building a United Community. We are not suggesting that play areas should be state of the art but rather they are so appealing to the local population that the utilisation of the space cannot be resisted. An example might be the [St Kilda Adventure Playground](#), Melbourne or the [BBC clip](#) on playwork in action from Wrexham.

There is little doubt that play is of considerable importance to childhoods and it is our hope that it can be effectively harnessed through this initiative and others to build a shared future for the coming generations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jacqueline O'Loughlin". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Jacqueline O'Loughlin
Chief Executive Officer