



**Response to the Department of Education "Priorities for
Youth: Improving Young People's Lives through Youth
Work" Consultation**

December 2012

PlayBoard NI – Northern Ireland's Lead Agency for Children and Young
People's Play
7 Crescent Gardens, Belfast
Co. Antrim
BT7 1NS

Tel: (028) 90803380

Fax: (028) 90803381

Email: alan.herron@playboard.co.uk

Website: www.playboard.org

Introduction

PlayBoard is the lead agency for the development and promotion of children's and young people's play in Northern Ireland. The organisation provides a range of innovative services designed to strengthen service delivery through advice, support, training and tailored provision. Since its inception in 1985, PlayBoard has campaigned, lobbied, raised awareness and developed partnerships in order to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers.

PlayBoard is a membership organisation which exists to promote, create and develop quality play opportunities that aim to improve the quality of children's lives. This is achieved through a number of key functions:

- Having an inclusive and engaged membership voice
- Engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders to achieve increased recognition and understanding of the importance of play and playwork
- Research, Policy and Information services
- Supporting Playwork workforce development
- Driving Organisational growth and development

PlayBoard's vision is of *'A society that respects and values the child's right to play as an intrinsic and essential right of childhood'*

PlayBoard welcome this opportunity to respond on behalf of our membership to the Department of Education's "Priorities for Youth: Improving young people's lives through youth work" consultation.

General Comments

In addition to specific comment relating to the key questions outlined within the department's consultation response pro-forma, PlayBoard would make a number of general comments.

- ***Lack of Recognition for Play and the Role of Play Work***

First and foremost, we would like to draw the Department's attention to the lack of recognition for play and playwork within the consultation document.

Whilst the consultation recognises at the outset that the age range associated with youth work is 4 to 25 years, it fails to recognise the critical role of play in the lives of children and young people across Northern Ireland; the complementarity of the play work methodology to the wider youth service; or the positive impact of the play work workforce¹.

In order for Priorities for Youth to be all encompassing of the identified age group, and thereby meaningful for all of sectors affected by its implementation, we would strongly advocate for a central recognition of the importance of the

¹ Playwork National Occupational Standards (NOS) skill practitioners to work with children and Young People (0 to 16)

play sector and a statement of play's parity with youth work as a means of delivering holistically across all age ranges of children and young people.

- ***Continued Relevance of Under 10's Panel Report (2007)***

Youth work and play work share underpinning values as evidenced by the 'Big Deal NI' (<http://www.thebigdealni.com/Big%20Deal%20Contacts-6120.html>) and the Under 10's panel report 2007.

With regards to the under 10's panel report, we would take this opportunity to restate the recommendations contained within the final report to the Youth Service Liaison Forum which we would argue remain valid, namely:

Policy

- The Department of Education's overarching education policy should recognise the synergy between formal and non-formal education processes and establish a framework within which playwork and youth work can develop as complementary methodologies;
- Youth work policy should seek to develop age specific strategies. A strategy for work with under 10's should develop an integrated approach which brings together youth work and playwork as delivery methodologies for this age group;
- ESA should develop protocols to encourage the youth and play sectors to work effectively together in the delivery of services to this age group within the area based planning processes;

Scale and Provision

- A regional strategy should be developed to address the gaps in provision for this age range in terms of geography, deprivation and perceived community background;
- Service in this age group should be recognised within area based plans as laying the foundation for maintaining youth work services to the generality of young people;

Training

- Professional bodies and training providers should seek to create and shape appropriate training at all levels for those working with children and young people which shares common roles and responsibilities and offers opportunities to specialise with specific age groups or target groups;

Resources

- The funding reviews of both ELB's and YCNI should seek to develop a resource strategy that addresses gaps in provision in terms of geography, deprivation and perceived community background for this age group;
- DE should engage in interdepartmental groupings to seek resources on a cross departmental basis and explore the potential of the extended schools budget to address voluntary and community provision;

- Future designation of infrastructure funding for the voluntary sector should be inclusive of all age bands across the sector and should take cognisance of both youth work and playwork sectors;
- Provision for this age group is highly dependent on the contribution of volunteers and additional resources should be allocated to voluntary sector providers to develop and sustain their volunteer base;

Co-ordinating and Networking

- The Department of Education, through the Youth Service Liaison Forum should create a co-ordination forum which brings together voluntary and statutory providers for this age group. Voluntary sector representation should comprise of both youth work and playwork organisations. Youthnet should be given the role to facilitate the voluntary sector representation.

Cross-Departmental Impact of Youth Work

The consultation document is heavily focused within the policy remit of the Department of Education. Whilst recognising that responsibility for youth work falls under the suite of DE priorities and areas of responsibility; the impact of youth work in relation to the individual and wider community is much broader, crossing a range of government departments including by way of example DHSSPS (with regards to improving health and wellbeing); DSD (in relation to addressing anti-social behaviour, housing etc.); Department of Justice (In relation to community safety) and so on.

By restricting consideration of youth work to a purely educational environment the consultation does not in our view fully capture the critical importance of youth work to the holistic development of the individual child or young person, and critically fails to recognise the positive impact of youth work on the wider community.

United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

Under the UNCRC, which was ratified by the UK government in 1991, devolved administrations have an obligation to ensure that children and young people have are afforded a series of rights as articulated within a series of articles.

We recognise that in developing Priorities for Youth the Department have taken the principles of the UNCRC into consideration. We would highlight the critical importance of ensuring that the articles of the UNCRC remain firmly embedded within the process as the Department seek to progress development, drawing particular attention towards:

- Article 2: The obligation of the state to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights at all times;
- Article 3: That the best interests of the child should be the primary concern in making decisions that may impact upon them (in relation to all areas including policy, budget and law);
- Article 4: That government shall ensure that all available measures are taken to ensure that children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled;

- Article 6: That all children have the right to life and that governments should ensure that children not only survive, but develop healthily;
- Article 12: That in all decisions made by adults, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account;
- Article 15: That children have the right to meet together and to join groups and organisations, as long as it does not stop other people from enjoying their rights.
- Article 29: That education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest; develop respect for human rights; respect for their parents, their identity and values, and those of others.
- Article 31: That children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities;

In identifying the specific articles above, we would highlight that the articles contained within the UNCRC are indivisible and interdependent, therefore individual articles cannot be viewed in isolation.

Play and Leisure Policy

We are pleased to note recognition of the Play and Leisure policy within the consultation and would encourage the department to ensure that in developing Priorities for Youth it pays close cognisance to the actions contained within the policy and implementation plan.

In reviewing the responses of children and young collected as part of the pre-consultation engagement phase (section 2.14) we note a number of correlations with views expressed through the Play and Leisure policy consultation phase, namely:

- Negative perceptions of children and young people;
- The lack of appropriate provision and transport difficulties;
- A lack of accessible information about available provision; and
- The particular needs of marginalised and disadvantaged children and young people.

We would encourage the Department of Education to ensure that it works in close partnership with OFMDFM to pro-actively support delivery of the Play and Leisure policy, and in so doing support more effective delivery for children and young people across Northern Ireland.

Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations

We would highlight what appears to be considerable weakness within the strategy in relation to its failure to recognise the significant contribution of RVYO's to youth work.

Whilst the document states that *'the Department fully supports the shared values and principles of the 1998 Compact, and which were restated in the 2011 Concordat, and is committed to working with Partners towards implementation of the agreed commitments contained in the Concordat'*, we note that there is a lack of clarity regarding the role of RYOs in the development of Regional and Annual Youth Development Plans. We also note that there is no reference to partnership working within the document as referenced in the concordat and compact.

Priorities for Youth Work Consultation

1. Do you agree with the vision, aims and principles of youth work supported by the Department of Education as proposed (see Section 3 of the consultation document)?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
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In responding to the document (and in light of earlier comments made regarding the lack of recognition for play and the defined age range) PlayBoard have throughout this response viewed the term youth work as referring to youth/play work.

'Priorities for Youth' is firmly placed within the context of the Department of Education's vision, namely "Every young person achieving his or her full potential at each stage of his or her development".

We would question whether placing the development of youth work within the overall DE vision provide adequate scope for the development of youth work services which genuinely deliver holistic development opportunities within non-formal settings.

Further, we would question whether the constriction placed by the department's vision (which is clearly focused on the individual) enables full recognition of the impact of youth work at a wider community level.

Across Northern Ireland youth work providers are helping to tackle a broad range of societal and community issues across a wide and diverse range of areas. We would suggest that there would be merit in the department exploring a vision for youth work which encapsulates this totality of individual and community experience, rather than limiting it to individual impact.

The consultation document does not provide a clear, overarching definition of youth work and consequently it is difficult at times to discern the outcomes that the framework hopes to achieve. We would suggest that providing a clear definition could assist in identifying the true value of youth work beyond a purely educational remit, helping to support wider recognition of its critical importance.

With regards to the strategic aims outlined in section 3.1, PlayBoard are broadly in agreement, particularly with regards to the stated role of youth/play work in:

- "providing access to enjoyable, non-formal learning opportunities that help to develop enhanced social and cognitive skills and overcome barriers to learning"
- To continue to improve the non-formal learning environment by creating inclusive, participative settings in which the voice and influence of young people are championed, supported and evident in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes";

PlayBoard are however concerned that the subsequent section (3.2) goes on to identify a number of actions required in order to achieve these aims, namely:

- *"A realignment of youth work policy with the strategic priorities for education which will help shape and modernize provision"*

We would strongly question whether this proposed action is conducive to achieving the stated aims, particularly given the departments earlier stated recognition of the importance of youth/play work to the holistic development of children and young people.

We have real fears that a realignment of youth work policy in line with the strategic priorities for education has the potential to negate that which makes youth work so important i.e. it's holistic and non-formal approach.

- *"A clear focus on the provision of measurable, quality learning experiences for young people"*

Whilst recognising the importance of measuring impact, we would be concerned that a focus on *'measurable, quality learning experiences'* would lead to a dilution of the non-formal approach, and would question whether this is in line with the holistic nature of youth work.

2. Do you agree that youth work supported by the Department of Education should be strategically aligned with the education priorities (see paragraph 2.17 of the consultation document)?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
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On the face of it, the 5 strategic priority areas detailed within the consultation document would appear to strongly lend themselves primarily towards application within formalised educational settings.

PlayBoard would question whether the 5 strategic priorities outlined in section 2.17 are sufficiently broad enough to allow for the non-formal and holistically based work of youth service providers to flourish and develop.

There is a clear body of evidence available (for example Hayden and McAlister) which highlights that for many children and young people, involvement and participation within youth work settings is not connected to a desire to achieve measurable educational/learning outcomes.

The strength of youth work (as recognised within the consultation document) is within the field of non-formal delivery, and we would raise concerns that the placement of youth work policy within the context of the 5 DE Strategic priorities could restrict and negate its ability to deliver activities which support the holistic development of the young person.

Further we would question whether the proposed principles supporting youth work in education (particularly those focused on participation, voluntary, enjoyable and need-led service provision) can be achieved within the restrictive boundaries of the department's formal strategic priorities.

We would suggest that the development of a separate vision for youth work which recognises and embraces the holistic impact of youth service (as referenced in our response to question 1) could lend itself to the identification of more focused strategic priorities which lend themselves more closely to the reality of youth work impact.

3 Do you consider that there is sufficient emphasis in the consultation document on enhancing participation for young people in the youth service?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Article 12 of the UNCRC children and young people are assured the right to be able to express their views and to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that impact them.

Article 12 encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and to actively involve them in the decision-making process. Article 12 recognises that the level of participation should be appropriate to the child's level of maturity. As children grow older their ability to form and express their opinions develops, and as such older children and teenagers should be afforded a greater and more detailed level of input.

Ensuring the effective participation of children and young people will be critical to the development of a successful youth service, capable of meeting the demands of the younger population.

Whilst the document states that participation has been an integral part of the service for many years (section 4.14), we would highlight that the pre-consultation engagement with children and young people highlighted a number of issues, one of which was:

"the adult led and driven programmes on offer, and the lack of real or meaningful opportunities to participate in planning and delivery"

It is clear that further work needs to be done in order to ensure that participation is not tokenistic, and truly provides opportunities for children and young people to shape the service in a manner which best meets their needs.

With regards to the wider document, PlayBoard agree with the assertion contained within the document (section 2.22) that *"There should be a renewed focus on active and evidenced participation of young people in youth work at local, sub-regional and regional levels"*.

We welcome the references to the importance of participation within the underlying principles supporting youth work in section 3.3. Furthermore, and in light of the age range covered (4 to 14) we welcome the commitment to flexible approaches outlined in section 4.14, *"Youth workers should have the flexibility to adopt the most suitable approach to enhancing participation within their setting, reflecting the needs of the young people at each age and stage of their development"*.

Whilst welcoming the department's recognition of the need to ensure participative approaches, PlayBoard would highlight the importance of ensuring that participation is real and meaningful regardless of the age group. Participation is about more than simply consulting. It is about involving children and young people on a consistent basis through a range of informal and formal approaches aimed at ensuring that all are able to express their views and opinions.

As part of our delivery of the Big Deal programme (0 to 10 years), PlayBoard developed the 'Play Quest' resource which focused on creating meaningful participation for children through play. The programme delivered an effective approach to achieving ongoing participation through play based approaches, ensuring that children were able to express their views on the decisions which impacted upon their lives on an ongoing basis.

We would suggest that consideration of such resources could provide the department with a suite of participative approaches which would support the development of truly participative youth work settings.

- 4(a) Do you agree with the proposed actions in Priority 1 (see paragraph 4.5 of the consultation document)? (See Question 4(b) which seeks comments specifically on proposed age bands)

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PlayBoard believe firmly that play/youth work should be planned around the needs of children and young people. It is also our belief that all young people have the right to participate within play/youth service provision, regardless of their background or individual circumstances.

It is critical that the department ensure that children and young people are able to participate within the process of needs identification, enabling them to shape services at a local level which will meet their needs.

In considering the actions outlined within priority 1 for ESA in relation to quality assurance systems, and whilst recognising the need for such approaches, we would highlight the existence of a wide range of quality assurance mechanisms which provide a basis for learning and best practice.

As previously highlighted, we have a concern that the overtly

educational focus placed on youth work throughout the document has the potential to restrict its ability to provide holistic personal development opportunities for children and young people.

In seeking to address this we would suggest that the department make a clear statement regarding high level outcomes that are weighted towards the development of social and emotional capability, rather than focusing on accreditation and essentially formalised educational outcomes.

4(b) Do you agree with the proposed age bands for youth provision, as set out in action 7, paragraph 4.5 of the consultation document?

Agree

Mostly
Agree

Neither Agree
nor Disagree

Mostly
Disagree

Disagree

PlayBoard have some concerns around the proposed age bands and are unclear as to the rationale behind the groupings. No explanation is provided as to why the age bands have been changed and the new age bands selected.

We would question the narrative surrounding age bands and area of focus, for example the focus for the older age group (19 to 21) is identified as being issue based, volunteering and leadership opportunities, however the focus identified for the age groups 9 to 13 and 14 to 18 is *'youth work activities in line with the priority needs identified'*.

Evidence would suggest that interest in issue based, volunteering and leadership opportunities is not confined to the older age band and could be restrictive dependant on a young persons particular circumstances and/or experiences.

PlayBoard would suggest that the identified age bands are overly rigid and restrictive, and do not lend themselves to the underlying non-formal and holistic based approach adopted by many across the youth sector.

We welcome that there will be a focus on the needs of the younger age range (4 to 8) and that the document references generic youth work provision lined to the youth work curriculum. We would however suggest that generic youth work should be a key element running across all age bands.

Finally, we would again emphasise that the Youth Policy imperative is for the age range 4-25, however there is no narrative contained within the document regarding the complementarity of a play work methodology within the youth sector.

5(a) Do you agree with the proposed actions in Priority 2 (see paragraph 4.7 of the consultation document)? (See Question 5(b) which seeks comments specifically on the action on additional targeted provision).

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Whilst recognising the importance of ensuring that the needs of those in most disadvantage are recognised, we would raise concern regarding the use of weighted formula for the allocation of funding based on council area.

Experience shows that the use of large scale geographical areas as a means of identifying disadvantage is flawed with pockets of severe disadvantage falling within seemingly affluent council areas. This can be particularly the case for certain groups including by way of example travellers, minority ethnic children and young people and those with a disability.

We would raise grave concern at the capping of funding for Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations (RYVO's) at 10% of the youth budget available.

RVYO's have a critical role to play in the youth work sector, often reaching children and young people who others have not been successful in engaging with. This is often particularly the case for those most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people who are so often missed out.

We would question the rationale behind a capping of RYVO funding at 10%, and would raise very real concerns that significant levels of expertise and good practice could be negatively impacted by such a move. We would ask the department to provide a clear explanation of criteria applied in the determination of the 10% cap, and would suggest that the development of a resource strategy taking into account:

- How the current youth work budget is distributed and loaded to address front line delivery;
- An examination of current infrastructure across the statutory and voluntary sector, including an examination of best value and effectiveness;

- An examination of the effectiveness of RVYO's, including consideration of best practice and impact with vulnerable groups;

PlayBoard would support the proposed action relating to the prioritisation of *'access to, and longer opening times for centre or units operating in areas of disadvantage and on or near interface areas, including periods when community tensions are heightened.'* We would however highlight the need to ensure that participative approaches to the development of activities and programmes will be critical to ensure that children and young people make use of the centres at such times. Further, we would guard against the placing of unrealistic expectations on youth workers during particularly difficult periods of civil disturbance.

5(b) Do you agree that additional targeted provision should be supported to help meet the needs of specific groups of young people assessed as facing barriers to learning, as proposed in action 3, paragraph 4.7 of the consultation document?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Whilst PlayBoard agree that additional targeted provision should be supported to help meet the needs of groups identified as facing barriers to learning, we would highlight that the barriers faced by children and young people may be in relation to a much broader range of issues, not just learning.

By focusing solely on learning we believe that youth services may become restricted in their focus, thereby failing to meet the needs of those facing barriers within the wider sphere of experience.

6. . Do you agree with the proposed actions in Priority 3 (see paragraph 4.11 of the consultation document)?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PlayBoard welcome the recognition given to the needs of the workforce within the document, however would question the proposed remit for the Practice Development Unit as set out in the document.

The document clearly identifies that the PDU will establish a forum for the sharing of information across all education sectors, and in line with previous comments we would suggest maintaining a narrow education focus is restrictive and could be counter productive.

We would further highlight that there are areas of practice development which do not currently fall within statutory functions and that a large body of expertise rests within RVYO's in relation to the delivery of youth and playwork training.

With regards to the volunteer workforce, we would encourage the department to set out a clear strategy focused on addressing the needs of volunteers within youth work settings. Such a strategy should consider a range of areas including recruitment, retention, support for developmental needs and management of volunteers.

7. Do you agree with the proposed actions in Priority 4 (see paragraph 4.17 of the consultation document)?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PlayBoard would suggest that the review of the statutory youth estate and outdoor education centres should be extended to take into account the voluntary youth sector estate, thus providing an overarching review of the resource base in its totality.

We welcome recognition of the 'Big Deal' programme and would support the idea of developing the network for networks approach as a means of supporting and developing participative structures for children and young people.

In line with previous comments, we would highlight the need to ensure that in considering participative approaches, it is critical that the department recognise the need to embed participation rather than viewing it through a structural approach.

8. Do you agree with the proposed actions in Priority 5 (see paragraph 4.21 of the consultation document)?

Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
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Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

We would question the assertion contained within the document that “there is a need to rationalise the number of regional groups funded” and would request that the department provide a clear overview of the basis on which this statement has been made.

Further, we would urge the department to ensure that voluntary providers are engaged within the process of developing any new funding scheme.

We would highlight that within the field of play/youth work there is a long-established history of collaborative, partnership working. We recognise the value of collaborative approaches and would state our commitment to a continued exploration of how sectors can work more effectively together.

9. Please use the space below for any additional comments you wish to make about the Priorities for Youth.

Thank you for taking the time to respond to the Priorities for Youth Consultation.