



## Draft Response to Programme for Government Consultation

*Please note: Not all areas contained with the consultation have been included in this document, only those of most direct relevance to PlayBoard and its membership.*

### Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'

*How much do you agree that the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' should be included in the Programme for Government?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' Actions	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' priority: Please enter any comments below:*

A new Skills Academy for the Childcare sector is welcomed, and we would suggest alongside this an action plan be established to grow, develop and sustain the Playwork workforce.

The Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare identifies Playwork as the most appropriate qualification for those working within school age childcare settings:

1. QCF Level 5 Diploma in Playwork is the most appropriate qualification for SAC settings for Person in Charge
2. Team Leaders should have at least QCF Level 3 Diploma in Playwork or Child Care, Learning and Development
3. At least 50% of all other child-care staff should have minimum QCF Level 2 Diploma in Playwork or CCLD

Playwork is a professional approach focused on creating and maintaining environments where children can engage in freely chosen, self-directed play. It prioritises the child's right to play; supporting their physical, emotional, and social development through play that is child led and not directed by adults.

Playworkers ensure that these play opportunities are safe, inclusive, and enriching, while advocating for the importance of play in every child's life.

There are over 400+ registered Play Based School Age Childcare settings across Northern Ireland., however the sector currently is poorly recognised with little or no value placed upon it.

Staff recruitment and retention continues to be an increasing concern within the sector: Poorly funded settings and low wages have had a negative impact. Many staff are continuing to leave the sector either to take up classroom assistant roles or to other professions that have similar pay scales with less responsibility. Concerns grow particularly in relation to deputies and managers who are required to have a level 5 qualification, the experience and responsibilities placed on this role are vast and are impacting on recruitment and retention.

Settings are also reporting that it is common for staff to leave to join other professions even after financial and logistical investments have been made (by the setting) to upskill the staff member. This has also been seen during the apprenticeship courses where staff members undertake the majority of their apprenticeship with one setting and then move on to another in the final stages - resulting in the former setting receiving the financial compensation. This has made settings wary and reluctant to offer financial incentives for their staff to progress their qualification level.

Playwork qualifications should be offered regionally, currently there are barriers in terms of access to the qualification across NI.

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare'

*How much do you agree that the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' should be included in the Programme for Government?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Deliver More Affordable Childcare	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' Actions	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' priority: Please enter any comments below:*

Within the last iteration of the Draft PfG there was a focus on 'Our children and young people have the best start in life'. As an organisation committed to advocating for, and supporting the child's right to play, PlayBoard welcomed the acknowledgement within this outcome to the importance of play in our children and young people's lives.

Play is at the core of children and young people's lives. From the moment of birth children, right through to teenage years, have an innate desire and a natural drive to play as they explore the world around them, developing new skills and new learning whilst establishing social connections and developing a connection to the communities in which they live. In essence the role of play in children and young people's lives should be a central consideration within many of the key priority areas within the wider PfG.

With regards to 'Deliver More Affordable Childcare' we welcome this priority, however strongly highlight that it falls short to addressing the needs of the whole childcare sector.

As lead organisation for children and young people's play in Northern Ireland, PlayBoard has long advocated for the development of a sustainable play-based School Age Childcare (SAC) sector supported by a strategic policy framework and effective resourcing. Childcare is a critical service, providing parents and carers with the support they need to remain economically active by providing the care they need during work hours. Effective childcare settings not only provide safety and care, they offer children access to a range of play-based opportunities that support physical health and mental well-being, social development and learning and skills acquisition.

In 2013, the Executive established it's Bright Start programme which was instrumental in helping develop and sustain some play-based SAC settings. A small number of settings (44) continue to receive small pots of funding which, whilst welcome, only provides the bare minimum level of support. No further investment has been made for the SAC sector and the current focus on 'early years' provision has placed the sector in an increasingly vulnerable position.

'Early Years' childcare covers the age remit of 4-12 years (as per Minimum Standards); the current & recent investment (whilst welcomed) has had no impact for SAC services or the parents/families who use this provision. This is not acceptable.

During Covid 19 SAC settings were instrumental in providing vital support to key workers by offering essential childcare at a time of significant challenges. This was recognised by the Executive at that time, and yet providers now find themselves in a vulnerable position. As a result of Covid, and due to a shift in parental working patterns, many SAC settings had a decrease in numbers attending due to parents/carers working from home - this had an impact on long term sustainability and some settings closed (leaving a gap for working parents). However, we are now starting to see an increased demand for SAC as many work environments have increased their need for staff to be work based.

We would highlight the following key Challenges for SAC Providers:

(1) Sustainability Concerns:

Historically the SAC sector has been poorly funded. The Bright Start Grant Fund was developed and established in 2013 in response to consultation and research which identified that School Age Childcare was an area of under provision that required investment by the NI Executive in order to meet regional need.

Despite the Bright Start Grant Scheme having remained in place for approximately 11 years; only a relatively small number of settings continue to benefit. Limited grant amounts do not allow for staff incentives, training or quality improvements and settings do not know year-on-year if the scheme will remain in place - leaving them in a financially insecure position.

Prior to Bright Start and throughout the lifetime of that Grant, funding for the Early Years Sector ran parallel to Bright Start with Sure Start, the Pathways Fund and the Pre School Education Programme all operating alongside further investment announced to extend pre-school hours. The SAC Sector has an essential part to play in improving outcomes for children and it is crucial that it is included in future investment plans alongside Early Years providers.

In considering the scope of future strategy, school age childcare should NOT be viewed as having had its share of investment via Bright Start, and thus requiring no further investment. Only a relatively small number of SAC settings which met the required criteria were funded and broader economic challenges exacerbated with external factors (not least the Covid pandemic) has not prevented closures.

School Age Childcare provides major benefits to the economic infrastructure and contributes multiple vital benefits to children's development and well-being through the provision of opportunities for play. SAC deserves and must be given the respect which the Early Years Sector currently enjoys and with that, it should be given equality in terms of funding and investment.

With regards to enhancing delivery standards across the SAC sector, ongoing access to relevant practical support and mentoring across a variety of areas such as Minimum Standards compliance and inspection; good governance; recruitment and business development matters is essential. Furthermore, given the critical nature of play within children's developmental journey, support for settings in developing and delivering quality, participative play experiences is key to enhancing the lives of children and young people.

(2) Parents opting for unregulated childcare due to cost /schools offering low cost alternative (not under minimum standards):

Unregistered school provision continues to displace school age childcare services with several closures being reported. This is a growing concern and strengthens the inequality between registered and unregistered provision. Schools are often able to absorb financial implications through school estate meaning that school aged childcare provision cannot compete with school fees. This alongside the schools not having to meet minimum standards has also resulted in the discrepancies in salaries are vast, again having a detrimental impact on school aged childcare.

Communications with Trust Early Years Social Work teams have confirmed that they are observing similar as well as an increase in unregistered summer scheme and school holiday clubs. Although the providers of the summer scheme clubs are more likely to work with the EY social work team in terms of amending operational procedures or registering their organisation, schools are less willing to do so. Despite efforts from EY social work teams to work with schools they are largely being denied entry or informed that the clubs on offer do not meet the threshold for registration.

Most schools in NI are categorised by religion unlike SAC settings which offer a cross community benefit for children and families. Furthermore, SAC offers children time away from the school environment and valuable play opportunities (i.e. children should not be in school beyond the core school day - given time for freely chosen

play activities, rest and social opportunities rather than homework or leaning activities).

(3) Increasing demand for SEN places:

The draft PFG highlights the figure of 1 in 5 children needing extra support within the school environment. Considering that many school-age children with additional support needs attend school-age childcare settings and, recognising that these children have come from school where they have one-to-one assistance, attention needs to be given to the capacity of play-based settings in meeting those children's needs in the absence of similar support. (see priority 5).

(4) Workforce/Staffing:

As noted in priority 1 - the recruitment and retention of staff alongside workforce issues continues to be a concern for the SAC sector.

(5) Inequity of support to date:

Within the development of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy there has been a severe inequity of support through investment to date. The £25 million investment is welcomed however:

- Parents/Carers of children in SAC have been excluded from affordability support (15% reduction)
- Business Support Scheme (£2 million) has not been accessible as yet
- SAC further excluded from additional support (i.e. £100 per child) under Non-Consolidated Stabilisation Fund which has been targeted at Pre-School provision.

The following points are therefore recommended for consideration:

1. There is a need to prioritise SAC sector – sustainability, affordability, quality, growth.
2. Recognising the value of play, play-based SAC settings need funding to further develop quality and play resources. In the current cost of living crisis, settings are not replenishing equipment and resources as they are using income to cover the increased overheads of wages, energy and food bills, etc.
3. Recognising the value of play, those working in play-based SAC settings who have a CCLD and not a playwork qualification should be considered for financial help to attain the Transition to Playwork Award. Financial help is more than just the cost of a course; it potentially includes the cost of replacing the staff member on day release to attend the training with another individual so as to meet ratios.
4. Considering that many school-age children with additional support needs attend mainstream School-Age Childcare settings and, recognising that these children have come from school where they have one-to-one assistance, attention needs to be given to the capacity of play-based settings in meeting those children's

needs in the absence of similar support. The sharing of resources (EA) should be explored.

5. Recognition and value should be placed on the wider levels of support which community and voluntary settings provide to families in need and/or in crisis. This is particularly relevant in areas of deprivation where children may be placed in SAC for respite purposes. Settings would benefit from investment to enhance and better support these aspects of their services. Consider how School-Age Childcare settings can contribute to government targets and utilise those contributions to achieve high level outcomes for children.

Whilst we acknowledge that many sectors face considerable economic challenges for the future, we would highlight that the School Age Childcare sector has a critical role to play in providing essential quality childcare for parents and carers alongside valuable play opportunities for children.



## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'

*How much do you agree that the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' should be included in the Programme for Government?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' Actions	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs' priority: Please enter comments below:*

The Draft PfG highlights the increased levels of children needing extra support (1 in 5) and acknowledges that the system is struggling to keep up with demand. However, we would strongly highlight that the needs of these children/families go beyond the school gates. The SAC sector has also seen a significant growth in demand for SEN support and it needs assistance to meet that growing demand from

both parents who are looking to remain economically active and requiring childcare and those who are needing respite care.

SAC settings are facing significant challenges to meeting the level of need - including the recruitment of skilled and experienced staff, extra resourcing for 1-to-1 dedicated support, and the need for capital adaptations or specialist resources to cater for children's individual needs.

We believe there is a need for enhanced sharing of resources for the best needs of children and families (i.e. in many areas EA funded transport are unable/unwilling to drop-off children at SAC settings; they will only drop off at the child's home - this does not support working parents who require childcare).

We would suggest that the Executive explore the feasibility of two-way support between schools and SAC settings (i.e. classroom assistants who work with children on a 1:1 basis in schools extending hours to work in SAC to provide continuity for the child / two-way communication and/or planning between the school and SAC / sharing of specialist equipment and resources).

For some children, the school playground is the only accessible space available to them for outdoor play opportunities - for children with SEN or a disability, quality outdoor play opportunities within the school environment is critical therefore for their mental, physical and overall health and wellbeing. Furthermore, those children who spend vast amounts of time travelling to and from school on buses have even more restricted time for freely chosen play opportunities. It is essential that thought should be given to developing quality outdoor play opportunities within SEN provision.

Beyond education and SAC there is a lack of inclusive capital fixed play provision across NI. Following local research which highlighted that disabled children and their families face significant barriers accessing quality play experiences within play parks, PlayBoard and the Mae Murray Foundation produced a new resource (ADAPT my Play) to support the development of inclusive play parks in Northern Ireland.

ADAPT my Play and its associated toolkit aims to support local authorities, voluntary organisations, housing associations, schools, private play providers and other organisations to design and build inclusive play parks that meet the needs of all children.

We would like to see adoption and expansion of the framework across all council areas, driven at Executive level <https://www.playboard.org/new-guide-to-support-development-of-inclusive-play-parks/>

## Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'

*How much do you agree that the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' should be included in the Programme for Government?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' Actions	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' priority: Please enter comments below:*

In responding to this priority area, PlayBoard would like to highlight the natural environment and the benefits of green space within built environments/housing areas.

Natural Environment: In the face of continued concerns regarding climate change and the sustainability for the earth's natural resources, the protection and enhancement of our natural environment is one of the most important challenges we face. Critical to our success will be imbuing in our children and young people with a connection to the natural world, a connection that will not only allow them to

engage with it but will instil a desire to protect it. Play, when it takes place in natural spaces can have a central role in this process.

The benefits of playing in natural spaces are many and include:

- Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Fjortoft 2001, Grahn et al. 1997)
- When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Faber Taylor et al. 1998, Fjortoft 2000, Moore & Wong 1997)
- Exposure to natural environments improves children's cognitive development by improving their awareness, reasoning and observational skills (Pyle 2002)
- Nature buffers the impact of life stress on children and helps them deal with adversity. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (Wells 2003).
- Play in a diverse natural environment reduces or eliminates anti-social behavior such as violence, bullying, vandalism and littering, as well reduces absenteeism (Coffey 2001, Malone & Tranter 2003, Moore & Cosco 2000).
- Nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity and instills a sense of peace and being at one with the world (Crain 2001).
- Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder (Cobb 1977, Louv 1991).

Beyond the individual developmental benefits of play in natural or green spaces, research indicates that children who are exposed through play to the natural environment establish not only a connection to the environment but develop an environmental ethic. As such their interest in conservation and the protection of our natural environment is heightened, remaining with them into adulthood. It is critical that we as a society not only recognise the value of the natural environment but work to ensure that our children and young people are able to come into contact with the natural world through play from the earliest stages of their development.

**Built Environment:** When proper consideration is given to the impact of the built environment (residential and public spaces) it is possible to create multi-functional spaces that meet a variety of needs across a range of ages and abilities. Unfortunately, all too often a lack of consideration for the needs of children, young people and indeed wider citizens leads to the creation of built environments which fail to meet the needs of those who use them - whether that use be for living, working or for recreational use.

In order for the built environment to adequately meet the needs of users we need to have an effective planning system that acts in the best interests of all citizens in requiring the maximum return from developers. For too long the planning process has failed to ensure that developers (of residential, retail and public spaces) make adequate provision for, and access to playable spaces for children, young people and the wider community. This failure has led to many of our areas becoming characterised by:

- A lack of communal, accessible spaces that support play and leisure
- The prioritisation of cars and traffic in terms of street layout and parking provision
- Inadequate traffic calming to make streets safe for children at play.

Whilst PPS 7 and PPS 8 remain as part of the overarching Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI, there is little evidence that the requirements expected of developers outlined within have been adequately enforced. It should be noted that PlayBoard have worked with a number of local councils to develop play strategies that place an emphasis on the pro-active use of the planning system (including the community planning process) to ensure that the play needs of children are adequately catered for within new developments.

The Covid pandemic highlighted the value of play and leisure space within communities as people found their normal avenues for recreation closed down due to social distancing requirements etc. PlayBoard, at that time, welcomed the acknowledgement by the Minister for Infrastructure for a need for a greater focus on the safe use of streets for physical activity (cycling, walking and play), and we believe that the Executive need to place a focus on changing the planning system to ensure that new developments are planned with adequate provision for play already in place. With this in mind we would draw attention to the Rotterdam norms which highlight the need from a planning perspective to view all public spaces as potentially being a play space, the underpinning principles being that if we get planning right for children, we get planning right for the whole community.

As we strive towards creating better futures for our communities, it is imperative to recognise the role of inclusive, engaging public and community spaces. They are the bedrock upon which strong, resilient communities are built. By investing in innovative projects, we have an opportunity to lay the foundations for a more connected, compassionate society. We need to prioritise initiatives that deliver social value, foster inclusion, and address societal challenges.

The current planning system fails to protect, enhance or provide spaces and places that support children's health, development and wellbeing. In too many areas across NI traffic-domination, low quality housing layouts, inadequate facilities, and poorly designed housing estates, along with a lack of parks and green spaces, harm children's wellbeing, undermine their quality of life and deprive them of critical infrastructure that they need.

Many of the problems set out above have multiple causes. However, foremost amongst them are the failures in the current planning system.

Also see priority 7.

## **Doing What Matters Most Today: 'Safer Communities'**

*How much do you agree that the priority 'Safer Communities' should be included in the Programme for Government?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Safer Communities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Safer Communities'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take?*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
'Safer Communities' Actions	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the 'Safer Communities' priority: Please enter comments below:*

We welcome the priority 'Safer Communities' and agree that it should be included within the Programme for Government. As we continue to address the legacy of the conflict, it is critical that we provide our children and young people with positive opportunities to engage with each other on a cross-community basis.

Evidence gathered by PlayBoard through the delivery of a targeted, play based cross-community programmes has highlighted the role and impact that play can have in establishing social connectivity across communities. By affording children opportunities to follow their natural urge to play together from an early age and on throughout childhood, community division can be reduced.

We would encourage the NI Executive to consider the impact that cross-community based play programmes can have in breaking down the barriers between communities and the role play can have in helping to shape a new society, one based on social connection and understanding as opposed to division and mistrust. PlayBoard would be happy to provide further evidence of the impact play can have within this area.

From a broader justice perspective, for the majority of young people involved in crime, formal criminal justice processing makes them more likely to commit crime again. There is a strong evidence base, nationally and internationally, that clearly shows that youth diversion is a better way of addressing low-level criminal behaviour— multiple studies show that youth diversion can reduce crime, cut costs, and create better outcomes for young people.

Point-of-arrest youth diversion schemes are a way of addressing low-level criminal behaviour without putting young people through the formal criminal justice processing (either through out of court disposals or prosecution) that can result in a criminal conviction and other negative consequences. Some further references which may be of interest include:

- Moffitt T (1993). Adolescent-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100, 674-701. 70. Unit Cost Database v1.4
- 
- New Economy via National Audit Office (2011). The cost of a cohort of young offenders to the criminal justice system: Technical paper. (Uprated for inflation at 2015/16 prices.)
- National Audit Office (2011). The cost of a cohort of young offenders to the criminal justice system: Technical paper. (Uprated for inflation at 2015/16 prices.)
- Audit Commission (2009). Tired of hanging around.

PlayBoard, has been delivering a package of support to staff and prisoners' in Maghaberry, Hydebank and Magilligan prisons over recent years. Initially funded through DE's Play Matters (EITP) project and more recently in partnership with Barnardo's and funded through the DoJ Northern Ireland Prison Service Resettlement Branch. The support package was designed to:

- Enhance the knowledge of prison staff on the importance of play and how best to support enhanced play opportunities for children during visits
- Enhance the knowledge of prisoners around the importance of play for their children
- Build the confidence of prisoners to play with their children during visits and upon release
- Promote practical ideas for play during visits and upon release.

The interactive play awareness workshops have made an impact on building positive relationships within families. Attendance and input in the sessions helped improve the confidence of parents to engage in play with their children during visits and upon their release within the home and community environment.



The development of resilience and the ability to manage stress and cope with adversity is a key component of childhood development, enabling children to cope better with the challenges they face now and on into adulthood. Research has consistently highlighted that play supports the development of resilience, offering children an opportunity to create and resolve uncertainty, developing the skills necessary to adapt to changing circumstances and cope better with adversity. The development of rich play environments (within communities) that offer a variety of play experiences whilst encouraging socialising, creativity, resourcefulness and challenge is of utmost importance.

It is worth noting that PlayBoard are rolling out a significant programme (Spaces2Be) based around resilience and cross-community engagement as part of a PEACE and PEACE PLUS funded Our Generation partnership. The programme seeks to enhance resilience through a play-based approach.

<https://www.playboard.org/resources/our-generation/>

The right to play is enshrined within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, sitting alongside arts and culture. For children and young people creative play often provides a routeway to develop and explore individual talent leading to often lifelong engagement in the arts. From a cultural perspective, play has been shown to provide a natural mechanism to allow children to explore both their own and other cultures through a play-based approach.

We have also been engaged in the development of 'Street Play' initiatives within communities in Belfast and Armagh and have training materials to support local community leaders, parents, councils etc. to develop and consider street play opportunities as a means of supporting safer play opportunities for children within neighbourhoods.

PlayBoard believe that Investing in play areas within communities and neighbourhoods is a strategic move for long term community development which provides a return of investment. By collaborating with communities, local authorities and housing associations there is a unique opportunity to spearhead transformation. By integrating play concepts into community planning, there is an opportunity to address multiple objectives:

1. **Enhancing Social Cohesion:** Family Inclusive play areas break down social barriers, encouraging interaction among diverse groups.
2. **Promoting Health and Well-being:** Physical activity is essential for all ages, and playable/green spaces make exercise accessible and enjoyable.
3. **Economic Benefits:** Safer, more cohesive communities often see a boost in local economies, attracting businesses and increasing property values.
4. **Impact:** Thoughtfully designed play areas can incorporate sustainable materials and green spaces, contributing to environmental goals.

Also see priority 6.

## Doing What Matters Most Today: Priorities

*Are there any other priorities that should be included in the Programme for Government?*

*Please enter any comments in the box below:*

PlayBoard strongly believe that Play should be a priority within the Draft PfG.

The child's right to play is enshrined within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The UNCRC grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights and was ratified in 1991, committing all branches of government to ensuring that children are afforded the rights and protections contained within its articles.

Article 31 states:

i. That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

ii. That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

In 2013, the UN adopted General Comment 17 clarifying for governments worldwide the meaning and importance of Article 31. The general comment highlights the critical role of play in children and young peoples lives and to emphasise the central role of play in supporting the development of health, wellbeing, learning and overall development.

In its most recent (sixth) periodic review which commenced in 2023, the UN Committee made 4 key recommendations for the UK and Northern Ireland aimed at supporting delivery of the child's Right to Play:

1. The Development of a play strategy, with sufficient resources to deliver the child's right to play
2. The integration of the right to play within schools curricula, ensuring children have sufficient time to engage in inclusive/age appropriate quality play and recreation
3. Ensure that all children have access to accessible, inclusive and safe outdoor play spaces
4. Involve children in decisions regarding the development of play spaces.

Play is vital for children and young people's health, wellbeing and happiness enabling them to have fun experiences whilst engaging in activities that support their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. Critically, play provides children with an opportunity to interact with the world around them, exploring new ideas and concepts whilst developing understanding and learning new skills that can be applied within more formalised learning environments including school.

The term play refers to a wide range of activities that children and young people naturally seek out during their free time. The importance of play in children's daily lives and healthy development has become increasingly recognised in recent years. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing, throughout childhood, is not only an innate behaviour but also that it contributes to children's quality of life, their well-being and their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

General Comment 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child describes play as being: "Play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves. Play happens whenever and wherever there is an opportunity to play. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. These factors contribute to the enjoyment of playing and the incentive to continue playing."

There are numerous skills which children develop and enhance through playful experiences and opportunities when they play, children drive their own development. Play has a critical role in building:

- the structures of the brain and healthy brain development
- stronger, fitter, healthy bodies, physical agility
- resilience, ability to cope with stress, challenges and setbacks, emotional regulation
- skills such as creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking, resilience
- Cognitive agility and learning, inquisitive minds, imagination and creativity

Playing also builds:

- children's sense of identity
- close family relationships
- strong connections within neighbourhoods and communities.

Research highlights the critical role of play in supporting children and young people's development across a number of key areas including:

#### PHYSICAL HEALTH

Play often involves children being engaged naturally in physical activity, for example running, jumping, or climbing. Physical play brings multiple developmental and health benefits; running and jumping supports the development of bone density, climbing helps to develop strength and coordination whilst running and chasing games develop fitness, stamina and agility.

## MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Play is crucial to children's healthy development and happiness and is vital for children's mental health and wellbeing. It is through playing that children, from a very young age, engage with and learn about the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore the world; developing lifelong skills and competencies. From birth through to teenage years, babies and children develop important social and emotional skills through watching, listening, and interacting with you and through their play.

## SOCIAL SKILLS

Play provides children with the opportunity to develop their social and communication skills enabling them to interact and engage with others, learn to negotiate and share, deal with conflict and develop and maintain friendships. At a wider level play has been shown to contribute to active citizenship, supporting the development of community cohesion.

## LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Play is central to the learning process with research indicating that 75% of post-brain development is influenced by the range and variety of play activities children engage in. Play has been shown to have a positive influence on language development, creativity and problem solving, enabling children to explore new ideas and concepts, testing their own abilities and learning new things about the world around them. Play is naturally a tool for learning.

## RISK & CHALLENGE

Children and young people have a natural thirst for challenging play, often seeking it out regardless of whether or not safe provision has been made. Challenge in play is important as it allows children to test the boundaries of their limitations, develop new skills to overcome the challenges they face and develop the ability to better manage risk on an individual basis.

## CONNECTIONS TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Playing outdoors in natural spaces not only benefits health and wellbeing, but helps children and young people to gain a greater appreciation for, and connection to the natural environment. Evidence suggests that time spent in the natural environment (parks, fields, forests, beaches) offers developmental, emotional and overall health benefits for children. There are numerous benefits ranging from increased creativity and problem-solving skills, reduced stress and anxiety, and increased physical activity

## OLDER CHILDREN/YOUTH

Play is often viewed as something younger children engage in when in reality it remains a key part of young people's lives throughout their teenage years. As children become teenagers social connection becomes increasingly important, with play and recreational activities often providing the central basis for such interactions. Teenagers may call play something else, such as chilling out or hanging out. Playing, relaxing, and socialising all contribute to your teenager feeling well, happy, and able to cope with life's ups and downs

Despite the many benefits associated with play, there remain a number of significant barriers that children in Northern Ireland continue to face in seeking to fulfil their natural drive and urge to play:

- A lack of understanding about the importance of play and a low level of tolerance towards children playing outdoors from adults within communities
- Increased levels of traffic within residential areas which limits traditional street and community play opportunities due to safety concerns
- More housing and a loss of accessible public, green spaces which are openly available for children to play on
- A lack of appropriate play infrastructure (e.g. fixed play areas, open recreation spaces, playable public realm etc.) to meet the play needs of children and young people
- Limited opportunities for the inclusion of children and young people with disabilities or complex needs within play spaces and environments
- Increased academic pressure on children and young people
- A lack of understanding about the developmental importance of play across the broader policy arena leading to failed opportunities to harness the power of play to enhance learning, health and wellbeing, social development and community cohesion.
- The continued lack of a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland alongside targeted funding streams focused on delivering the Right to Play for all C&YP

In order to support good health and well-being, growth and development children need to be able to access a wide range of play opportunities and play types. When children are unable to or are restricted from accessing a wide variety of play types they are said to be experiencing 'Play Deprivation'.

When children are deprived of play for prolonged periods, the effect on their development and wellbeing can be detrimental if not addressed in a proactive manner.

A number of key characteristics can emerge from severe play deprivation, including:

- A tendency for the child to engage in automotiv and repetitive activities
- A failure for the child to engage with others socially
- Lower levels of creativity through play
- A low level of self-esteem and self-worth
- Lack of physical strength and muscle development; higher obesity rates
- A growing sense of alienation and a lack of belonging as the child grows older leading to poor mental health

- Lower levels of resilience and an inability to cope with/overreact to changing circumstances.

In addition, the impacts of play deprivation can extend beyond childhood and can manifest in increased levels of depression and diminished levels of optimism in adulthood. A lack of play leaves children mentally and physically unprepared to cope with life.

### **Play Policy, Strategy, Sufficiency**

We all have a responsibility for play and play deserves a broad and comprehensive approach, involving cross departmental collaboration and accountability. Improving play opportunities and removing barriers is central to how we can realise our ambitions for play in Northern Ireland.

Within a policy context play and the right to play is currently poorly served within Northern Ireland. Whilst a number of policies exist which focus either fully (The Play and Leisure Statement 2009) and Implementation plan 2011) or partially (Children and Young Persons Strategy, Co-operation Act) on play, these are either outdated or have had minimal impact.

Beyond these specific policy frameworks, broader Executive strategies which acknowledge play lack the ability to bring about the level of fundamental positive change required to deliver the Right to Play.

The historic underinvestment in play at Executive level has led to consistent criticism from the UNCRC regarding Northern Ireland's lack of progress on fulfilling the child's right to play.

It should be noted that the development of a Play Strategy was noted as a key recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its most recent review of progress on the Right to Play.

There is a clear need for the development of a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland, with a central focus on Play Sufficiency in line with the significant progress being made by the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. This would provide a powerful and a high-profile catalyst for much needed meaningful change in NI. Much work is already being done across local council areas, and areas of good practice are shared through a council Play Development Forum facilitated by PlayBoard.

Play sufficiency was first established within Wales as part of the anti-poverty agenda (2012) and was the first time a government had embedded play and a play sufficiency approach as part of core policy.

More recently, the Scottish Assembly has introduced Play Sufficiency through the Planning Act with a focus on designing public spaces that better support and encourage the child's natural desire to play as part of the developmental process.

The Play Sufficiency duty places a statutory responsibility on public bodies to carry out an assessment of children’s opportunities for play every three years and in between times act to secure sufficient opportunities based on their findings.

A Play Sufficiency duty therefore establishes a strategic commitment to meeting play need across all branches of government ensuring that children and young people have time, space and permission to play. The introduction of Play Sufficiency legislation in NI would ensure that all children, young people, and families have access to time, space, opportunity, and permission to play and recreation throughout all aspects of their daily lives. It would protect, provide, and enhance opportunities for play and recreation at home, at school, in communities, parks and public spaces. As indicated, an equivalent duty has been in place in Wales for over a decade, and in May 2023 a play sufficiency duty was introduced in Scotland, leaving NI lagging well behind other jurisdictions.

Due to the significance of the harm caused by a lack of play and the huge benefits that can be gained if we develop environments that support play - play should be prioritised. A Play Sufficiency duty for Northern Ireland would not only enhance the quality and availability of play but would pro-actively seek to address barriers (physical, social, economic etc.).

The development of a resourced Play Strategy based around a Play Sufficiency duty has the potential to transform the landscape for play, both literally and figuratively.

## **Building New Foundations**

We are committed to investing in our public infrastructure and reshaping how our services are delivered.

Together, we will work as hard as we can to continue taking care of your needs today while supporting your hopes and ambitions for tomorrow through the high-quality, sustainable public services you deserve.

We will:

- Boost Housing Funds
- Improve the Planning System
- Deliver Better Public Services
- Support Our Net Zero Future
- Manage Our Water
- Upgrade Stadia and Support Local Sports
- Retrofit Homes
- Improve Our Transport Infrastructure for Safer Travel, Connected Communities and Sustainable Economic Growth

We are committed to investing £26 billion of public funding in the next decade. More detail on this will be provided in the upcoming Investment Strategy.

How much do you agree that these are the right commitments in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the plans for investment in infrastructure:

Please enter any comments in the box below:

As previously indicated throughout our response we welcome a focus on the planning system and would highlight the need for review and updating of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement to incorporate greater recognition for Play.

PlayBoard also highlights (in response to 'support local sports' ) the critical role of play and children's natural drive to engage in physical, social and creative play as a means of establishing life-long activity patterns, leading to improved health and well-being.

Children have an innate desire to play and the fact that most play involves movement brings with it multiple physical health benefits. By way of example running and jumping has been shown to support the development of bone density, climbing helps to develop strength and coordination whilst running and chasing games develop fitness, stamina and agility.

With regards to engagement in sports, play provides the essential skills required that enable children to progress from informal physical play to more formalised sporting activities. Through play children are able to develop fundamental movement skills, all of which are essential to their physical development and are at the core of sports progression:

- Locomotor: Crawling, running , hopping, jumping etc.
- Body control - Climbing, rolling, swinging, balancing etc.
- Object control - Throwing, catching, kicking, bouncing, rolling etc.

In addition to supporting physical literacy, growth and development, providing opportunities for children to engage in physical play represents an important means of tackling rising obesity levels. Statistics from 2014/15 showed that across Northern Ireland 21.2% of children measured in Primary 1 were considered overweight or obese; by year 8 the figure had increased to 28% . At a time when childhood obesity represents one of the main public health challenges we face as a society, the importance of ensuring that children are able to follow their natural desire for physical play has never been so great.



In addition to its role in supporting physical growth and development and in encouraging higher levels of activity, play is also critical in supporting wider childhood development including:

- Supporting cognitive development, improving self-confidence, enhancing mental health and well-being and developing resilience
- Supporting the development of brain capacity, enhancing learning capability, memory skills and language development
- Supporting social development and assisting in the learning of approaches to dealing with conflict, sharing and impulse control
- Providing exposure to challenge through play, enhancing the ability to assess and manage risk both in childhood and on into adulthood.

From a broader health and well-being perspective, research consistently highlights that children who are active through play in early and middle childhood are more likely to remain engaged within more formalised recreation and sporting activities (e.g. team-based sports, gymnastic, athletics etc.) as they move towards adulthood. We would therefore welcome inclusion of supporting play alongside the focus on supporting local sports.

Unfortunately for many children opportunities to engage in non-formalised play and recreation activities from an early age are becoming increasingly scarce due to a range of reasons including:

- A lack of access to, and conflicts over the use of local spaces and places for play and leisure
- Conflicting time pressure and constraints associated with modern living
- Limited opportunities for inclusion and integration of children with disabilities or additional needs
- Sedentary lifestyles, exacerbated by the growth in technology
- Financial/transport/social restrictions limiting play and leisure opportunities
- Parental fears e.g. perceived stranger danger, risk of injury etc.

As a result, levels of physical play are on the decline and research into levels of physical activity amongst children in Northern Ireland in 2013 (Millennium Cohort Study) found that 7 to 8 year old's in Northern Ireland have the lowest levels of physical activity across the British Isles (with only 43% meeting guidelines), reducing to 20% between the ages of 9 and 11 and 11% between 11 and 18.

Of more recent concern, research undertaken by PlayBoard relating to the impacts of lockdown associated with the Covid-19 pandemic indicated a decline in levels of physical play over the period. Findings included 22% of children indicating that they spent less time engaged in physical play during lockdown with a corresponding increase in sedentary technological play noted by 54% of children surveyed.

Fundamentally, play has a key role in supporting children and young people to engage in activities that support physical and mental health and well-being, whilst establishing patterns of activity that have been shown to remain into adulthood.

Without an opportunity from the early years to engage in physical play, the essential skills at the core of sporting achievement are not learned impacting on levels of engagement in sporting activities throughout childhood and into adulthood.

PlayBoard would encourage the Draft PfG to recognise and support the value of play for children's overall health and wellbeing alongside the aspiration to support local sports.

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## Shaping a Better Tomorrow

While making things better today is important to us, we also need to look at long-term issues.

Our commitments are based on a recognition of our duty and drive to do better for you, your family, our communities and this place we all call home, now and for generations to come. Our focus will centre on three long-term Missions: People, Planet, and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace.

- **People:** Working to support everyone at all stages of their life to ensure they have the chance to succeed by improving life opportunities.
- **Planet:** Harnessing the potential of a green growth economy while ensuring we provide an equitable transition to a sustainable and affordable society as we take responsibility for decarbonising our economy and society.
- **Prosperity:** Improving our economic productivity while making sure that we have an economy that works for everyone, and our story continues to be an inspiration to others.
- **Peace:** Our cross-cutting commitment to Peace will make sure that everyone feels the benefit of a growing economy, improved environment, and fairer society.

The Executive have set out a long-term strategy to deliver three Missions, People, Planet and Prosperity, as well as a cross-cutting commitment to Peace. How much do you agree with a Missions-based approach?

- Strongly agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly disagree

Please enter any comments in the box below:

How much do you agree that these are the right Missions to focus on?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
People	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Planet	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prosperity	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Are there any areas that are not captured under these missions?

*People Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Is there anything else that should be included under the People Mission?

Joint working across departments, statutory agencies, and the community and voluntary sector are essential.

As indicated throughout this response - PLAY - can tackle many areas identified within the priorities and the development of a Play Strategy for NI should be prioritised.

Build on the Executive's strategic framework for public health, Making Life Better, to tackle the wider determinants of health, and we will redouble our efforts to improve the physical and mental health outcomes of Northern Ireland's population and reduce inequalities, through continued implementation of, for example, the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 is welcomed.

The "Live Better" initiative will deliver and test a new place-based approach to addressing health inequalities is welcomed.

Prioritise sports and physical activity to tackle obesity is welcomed.

*Prosperity Mission: A series of actions have been proposed under this Mission. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Is there anything else that should be included under the Prosperity Mission?

We welcome the goal to support social enterprises and businesses to thrive and to ensure that everyone, no matter where they live, can have well-paid and fulfilling jobs.

We urge the inclusion of the school age childcare sector (many are small non-profit, social economy businesses) be included.

*A commitment to Peace will underpin the three missions (People, Planet and Prosperity). A series of actions have been proposed under this commitment. How much do you agree that these are the right actions?*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Is there anything else that should be included under the commitment to Peace?

As previously highlighted throughout this response opportunities to PLAY and play based programmes can support this commitment.

Alongside this there is a need for focused prioritisation of early intervention for improvement of mental health and wellbeing.

### *Understanding Missions by Tracking Wellbeing*

The draft Programme for Government outlines how it will measure progress through a Wellbeing Framework. How much do you agree with the proposed approach?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Please provide any further comments you may have in relation to your response

The Wellbeing Framework and associated Dashboard should take cognisance of the work of the Community and Voluntary sector, who provide many valuable services that support the domains contained within. The Community and Voluntary sector and its work is not evident within the Draft PfG priorities.