'Stronger Futures - A Northern Ireland Youth Work Policy Statement'
PlayBoard Consultation Response

'Stronger Futures - A Northern Ireland Youth Work Policy Statement' is currently out for consultation with a closing submission date for comments of 30th October 2026. The draft is split into 6 key themes, further information and the online response portal can be accessed here.

Theme 1: Services Intended Outcomes:

1. Young people experience consistent, safe, inclusive, and high-quality youth services regardless of location or background.
2. Services are designed with young people and demonstrably responsive to their lived experiences.
3. Youth work complements formal education, improving engagement, attendance and broader life outcomes.
4. Universal, targeted, and enhanced youth work will be delivered consistently and effectively, as evidenced by annual reporting and consideration of UNCRC, equality and all other relevant legal requirements.
5. Comprehensive practice improvement support, including pre and post inspection, will be provided, highlighted in annual reviews.

Q1. *To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 1 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy.*

Please provide the reason for the above response and any comments/suggestions you have on Theme 1 and its intended outcomes, e.g. what you think works well, or what could be changed or added:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)

We welcome the ambition to provide consistent, inclusive and high-quality youth services shaped by children and young people. We particularly welcome the recognition that youth work is voluntary, relational and enjoyable, and should complement formal education.

However, the policy needs to give explicit recognition to play and playwork. Play is fundamental to children's lives and an essential component of developmentally appropriate youth provision. References to fun, recreation or non-formal education do not fully capture its importance or the professional skills needed to support it.

The policy's age range makes this especially significant. Stronger Futures covers children and young people aged four to twenty-five. A service beginning at age

four must recognise that play is a primary way through which younger children explore, communicate, form relationships and understand their world. Its approach to provision, workforce development and quality should reflect that starting point.

For children aged four to eight, play should sit at the centre of the youth service experience. For those aged nine to thirteen, substantial opportunities for child-led play remain essential, alongside opportunities for participation and increasing independence. Play and playfulness continue to matter through adolescence, taking forms such as informal games, creative expression, sport, humour, shared interests and social time. Provision should respond to these changing interests without assuming that the need for play disappears at a particular birthday.

Play has intrinsic value: children are entitled to enjoyable experiences, freedom, friendship and opportunities to pursue their own interests. It also offers a powerful contribution to the policy's wider ambitions:

- **Physical health:** opportunities for movement, coordination, balance, active outdoor experiences and developing confidence in physical abilities.
- **Emotional wellbeing:** enjoyment, expression, a sense of belonging, opportunities to work through feelings and supportive relationships.
- **Social development:** friendship, communication, cooperation, negotiation and resolving disagreements.
- **Skills and learning:** curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, persistence and learning through experience.
- **Education:** opportunities to explore ideas and develop confidence, language and engagement through a complementary, non-formal approach.
- **Cross-community and cross-cultural development:** shared experiences through which children can build relationships, encounter different perspectives and develop mutual understanding.

These opportunities are particularly relevant in Northern Ireland, where youth services can provide welcoming spaces for children from different community, cultural and social backgrounds to meet. Carefully supported play can create a shared starting point for relationships, including where formal discussion may be difficult or children do not share the same language or experiences.

Such benefits depend on the quality, accessibility and context of provision. They should not be treated as automatic outcomes of simply bringing children together.

We recommend an explicit commitment to regular, inclusive and freely chosen play, supported by appropriately skilled practitioners. This should apply across

universal, targeted and enhanced provision, with approaches adapted to children's interests, developmental needs and circumstances.

Proposed additional outcome:
"Children and young people have equitable access to regular, inclusive and developmentally appropriate play opportunities, supported by practitioners with playwork competence, contributing to enjoyment, health, wellbeing, learning, belonging and positive relationships across communities and cultures."

Theme 2: Evidence-based assessment of needs and outcomes

Intended Outcomes:

1. The assessed needs of children and young people will be identified and addressed, with outcomes captured and reported.

2. Services are prioritised based on evidenced need, ensuring resources are targeted effectively.

3. Young people will be empowered to share their perspectives and influence decision-making, as reflected in Youth Voice reports.

4. There is clear visibility of impact, with measurable improvements in outcomes for young people, providing a robust evidence base for youth work delivery through evaluations and research.

Q2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 2 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy, e.g. what you think works well, or what could be changed or added:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)

PlayBoard fully supports evidence-informed planning and proportionate evaluation. The framework should explicitly recognise children's need for play and assess the conditions that enable or restrict it.

A needs assessment focused mainly on educational difficulties, disadvantage or acute concerns risks overlooking an everyday requirement shared by all children: sufficient time, space, freedom and support to play.

In Northern Ireland, assessments should consider barriers such as poverty, rural isolation, disability, limited transport, unsuitable public spaces and the accessibility of provision across community boundaries. They should also examine whether children feel welcome, safe and able to exercise choice within youth settings.

Children's perspectives must inform this work from the youngest ages included in the policy. Four-year-olds cannot be expected to participate through the same consultation methods as teenagers. Observation, creative activities, playful conversation and accessible communication approaches can help younger children and children with different communication needs express their interests and experiences.

Evaluation should capture the quality of play opportunities alongside their contribution to wider outcomes. Relevant measures could include:

- Children's enjoyment, sense of belonging and experience of choice.
- The range and accessibility of play opportunities.
- Opportunities for physical activity, creativity and outdoor play.
- The quality of relationships and inclusive participation.

- Children's experience of shared activity across community and cultural backgrounds.
- Practitioners' ability to support play without unnecessarily directing it.

Assessment should recognise learning and development emerging through play without requiring every play experience to deliver a predetermined educational target. Excessive prescription can undermine the autonomy and enjoyment that make play valuable.

PlayBoard NI's *Embedding Play in Youth Settings* (https://www.playboard.org/resources/embedding-play-in-youth-settings/) provides practical approaches to play audits, planning, risk-benefit assessment and reflection. These offer a useful foundation for implementation, supported by further evaluation of children's experiences and changes in practice.

Theme 3: Youth Workforce
Intended Outcomes:

1. A skilled, diverse, and sustainable workforce is in place across all areas of youth work.
2. The assessed needs of the workforce will be identified and addressed, with outcomes captured and reported.
3. An effective curriculum to support youth workers will be delivered with impact measured.
4. The workforce is recognised and valued, leading to greater stability and improved outcomes for young people.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 3 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)
PlayBoard agrees with the intended outcomes but considers that an explicit requirement for playwork competence across the youth work workforce is essential.

We welcome the commitment to a skilled, diverse and sustainable workforce. To make this meaningful across the policy's full age range, it is critical that playwork is recognised as a core competence within youth services, supported by role-appropriate accredited qualifications.

Youth workers supporting children from age four need knowledge and skills appropriate to childhood as well as adolescence. The policy should explicitly identify how the workforce will develop the competence required to meet younger children's needs while supporting play and playfulness as children grow.

Playwork provides a distinct professional and ethical approach to supporting play. It helps practitioners create environments in which children can follow their own interests, exercise choice and develop through play. It requires skilled observation, reflection and judgement about when to support, join, adapt or step back.

The relevance of playwork and playwork qualifications extends across the policy's priorities. Through skilled playwork practice, practitioners within the youth field are better able to:

- Create welcoming environments that support emotional security and belonging.
- Enable varied physical, imaginative, creative and social experiences.
- Adapt environments and support participation for children with different needs.
- Recognise and respond to children's communication, including non-verbal expression.
- Support appropriate challenge through risk-benefit assessment.

- Facilitate shared play across community and cultural backgrounds without imposing assumptions about children's identities.
- Reflect on how adult intervention affects children's autonomy and relationships.

PlayBoard NI's 'Youth@Play' programme (https://www.playboard.org/resources/youth-at-play/) was developed and piloted with funding from the Education Authority. It provides a locally developed, evaluated approach to strengthening playwork knowledge and practice within the Youth sector, with an established qualification pathway through OCN Levels 1, 2 and 3.

'Youth@Play' therefore offers an established foundation that could be delivered more widely through PlayBoard NI to strengthen playwork competence across the youth sector. Investment in its delivery would enable workers and volunteers to access qualifications appropriate to their roles, supporting the policy's workforce ambitions and improving the quality of developmentally appropriate play opportunities within youth services, beginning at age four.

We recommend a funded, phased framework comprising:

1. A required foundation in play and playwork within induction and initial training for youth workers and volunteers, proportionate to their role.

2. Role-appropriate accredited playwork competence for practitioners regularly working with children aged four to thirteen, with deeper preparation for those leading provision.

3. Explicit playwork content within youth work qualifications and the workforce curriculum, developed with relevant sector and training bodies.

4. Continuing professional development, reflective supervision and practical assessment, so competence is demonstrated in delivery.

5. Playwork expectations within relevant role descriptions, service specifications and quality frameworks.

The framework should support existing workers and volunteers through accessible training, recognition of prior learning, mentoring and funded release time where appropriate. Small and volunteer-led organisations will need practical support to meet the expectations.

The policy's concern about unintended barriers is important. It should inform a fair transition to a clear competence standard, with realistic timescales and funded development routes.

Proposed policy wording:
"Playwork competence will be established as a core requirement of the youth workforce. All workers and volunteers will undertake foundational learning appropriate to their role. Practitioners leading or regularly delivering provision for children aged four to thirteen will be supported and required to achieve role-appropriate accredited playwork competence through a funded, phased implementation framework."

Proposed additional outcome:
"The youth workforce demonstrates the knowledge, skills and reflective practice required to support inclusive, child-led play and developmentally appropriate provision across the policy's age range."

Theme 4: Funding and facilities

Intended Outcomes:

1. Resources will be utilised effectively to meet the needs of children and young people, evidenced in an annual report.

2. Young people have access to high-quality, safe, and accessible facilities, open at the right times and in the right places.

3. Youth services benefit from more sustainable and diversified funding sources across sectors.

4. Greater collaboration and reduced duplication providing better value for money

Q4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 4 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)
We welcome the focus on sustainable funding and suitable facilities. Investment should explicitly provide for the people, environments and resources needed to support quality play.

The value of a youth facility should be assessed partly through what children can do there: play, explore, move, create, socialise, retreat, experiment and shape their surroundings. A safe building alone does not guarantee a stimulating or inclusive play environment.

Provision should include flexible indoor spaces, access to outdoor and natural environments, varied materials and resources, quiet areas and appropriate opportunities for challenge. Facilities should accommodate different interests and support participation by children with disabilities and additional needs.

In Northern Ireland, investment should also consider whether settings are accessible and welcoming across community backgrounds. Children and families should be involved in identifying barriers and shaping practical solutions.

Funding should cover playwork training, staff development, resources, maintenance, inclusive adaptations and sufficient staffing. Opening times and transport arrangements should enable children to access provision when they need it.

Play audits and risk-benefit approaches should inform improvements, helping providers create stimulating environments while managing significant risks.

Theme 5: Structures and support

Intended Outcomes:

1. The system operates as a cohesive and coordinated delivery model, focused on outcomes for young people.

2. Governance and support structures enable efficient decision-making and continuous system improvement.

3. Effective partnerships with the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) will be developed to meet the needs of children and young people.

4. Capacity to deliver youth work will be addressed within the CVS to enhance youth work outcomes for children and young people.

Q 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 5 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)
We welcome clearer responsibilities and co-ordinated support. Explicit recognition of play must be accompanied by responsibility for delivery.

The Department should set the policy expectations; the Education Authority should embed them within planning, workforce development and relevant funding arrangements; and providers should receive the guidance and resources needed to apply them.

Playwork expertise should inform implementation, curriculum development, inspection and practice improvement. PlayBoard NI's 'Youth@Play' programme (https://www.playboard.org/resources/youth-at-play/) offers an existing, locally developed solution to support this work. Developed and piloted with Education Authority funding, it combines practical support for play within youth settings with an established qualification pathway through OCN Levels 1, 2 and 3.

Wider delivery of Youth@Play through PlayBoard NI would build on this investment, providing a structured route for workers and volunteers to develop playwork competence appropriate to their roles. It could support consistent practice across statutory and community and voluntary provision, helping services meet the play needs of children from age four upwards.

A funded implementation plan should identify responsibilities, milestones and progress measures, including how Youth@Play could support workforce development and practice improvement. It should also ensure that children's experiences of play influence decisions, including the views of younger children who may be less visible within conventional youth participation structures.

The community and voluntary sector should receive accessible training, mentoring and practical tools, with support proportionate to organisational capacity. Delivery should accommodate smaller and volunteer-led settings through flexible learning opportunities and practical support to apply learning within their provision.

Theme 6: Partnerships
Intended Outcomes:

1. Effective partnerships with other statutory agencies and government bodies will be embedded within youth work practice, with joined-up support for young people.

2. Collaboration across sectors delivers shared outcomes and maximises collective impact.

3. Resources, knowledge, and expertise are shared effectively, improving service reach and quality.

Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Theme 6 and its intended outcomes in the draft policy:

PlayBoard Response: Agree (with additional comment)
We support stronger partnerships and recommend explicit inclusion of play and playwork organisations.

Play offers a valuable area of shared interest across youth services, education, health, councils and community organisations. Joint working can improve access to spaces, support workforce development and address barriers to participation.

Within Northern Ireland, partnerships should explore opportunities for sustained cross-community and cross-cultural play provision. Shared, enjoyable experiences can help children develop familiarity, friendships and confidence in engaging with others.

Provision should be thoughtfully facilitated, responsive to local circumstances and inclusive of linguistic, cultural and religious differences. A single shared event should not be assumed to demonstrate lasting changes in relationships; continuity and the quality of children's experiences matter.

Partnerships with schools and School Age Childcare providers can also support learning and transitions while preserving the voluntary and exploratory character of youth provision. Partnerships with health and wellbeing services should recognise play as part of everyday supportive environments, with value beyond specialist interventions.

Q7 — Policy title
Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the current title "Stronger Futures – A Youth Work Policy Statement"?

PlayBoard response: Disagree
Whilst agreeing with the positive ambition reflected in the title "Stronger Futures", we would suggest an alternative:

"Stronger Futures, Thriving Childhoods: A Play and Youth Work Policy Statement."

This retains the aspirational focus of the original title while placing greater emphasis on the importance of childhood and adolescence as valuable stages of life in their own right, rather than viewing children and young people primarily in terms of their future potential.

We believe it is particularly important that play is explicitly recognised within the title, alongside youth work. Play is a fundamental children's right, enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and should be recognised as an essential part of children's everyday lives rather than simply a recreational activity or a means of achieving wider educational, social or developmental outcomes.

Play has intrinsic value. It provides children with opportunities for enjoyment, freedom, creativity, exploration, friendship and belonging. It supports their wellbeing and development, but importantly, children should have opportunities to play simply because play matters to them. Access to quality play opportunities, particularly through welcoming, inclusive and accessible youthwork spaces, is also an important issue of equality and children's rights.

Explicitly referencing both play and youth work would recognise their distinct but complementary contributions and ensure that neither is overlooked within the policy's identity, priorities and future implementation. It would also send a clear message about the importance of protecting and investing in play opportunities as well as youth work provision.

Ultimately, stronger futures should not come at the expense of thriving childhoods**.** The proposed title recognises that children and young people deserve opportunities to play, enjoy life, build relationships, participate and flourish today, as well as being supported to achieve their aspirations for tomorrow.

Q8 — Overall policy statement

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the Stronger Futures policy statement as a whole?

PlayBoard response: Agree, subject to substantive strengthening

We welcome the policy's ambition to provide accessible youth services and a well-supported workforce. The clear focus on children from age four creates a clear responsibility to articulate the place of play and the competence needed to support it.

Play is central to developmentally appropriate provision for younger children and remains relevant throughout childhood and adolescence. It offers enjoyment and agency, alongside opportunities for physical health, emotional wellbeing, skills, learning and positive relationships.

In Northern Ireland, inclusive play provision can also contribute to shared experiences across communities and cultures. Youth settings are well placed to support these opportunities through trusted relationships and locally responsive practice.

The policy should make these contributions explicit while protecting play's intrinsic value. Children should have opportunities to play because play matters to them, alongside the wider benefits it can support.

Our principal requests are to:

1. Embed play and playwork explicitly across all six policy themes.
2. Place play at the centre of provision for ages four to eight and protect substantial child-led play opportunities for ages nine to thirteen.
3. Recognise the continuing relevance of play, recreation and playfulness through adolescence.
4. Establish playwork competence as a core workforce requirement, with funded, role-appropriate accredited pathways.
5. Resource suitable environments, inclusive access and sustained opportunities for play.
6. Include play within needs assessment, quality improvement and proportionate evaluation.
7. Recognise play's contribution to health, wellbeing, education, skills and cross-community and cross-cultural relationships.

Stronger Futures has an opportunity to establish a coherent relationship between its age range, its service expectations and its workforce requirements. Explicit commitments to play and playwork would make that relationship substantially stronger.

Section D: Equality and human Rights, Children's Rights and Rural Impact

An Equality and Human Rights Screening document as well as a Children's Rights Impact Assessment and Rural Impact Assessment are available on the DE Website https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations/public-consultation-strongerfutures-northern-ireland-youth-work-policy-statement.

We are seeking your views on these in the questions below.

Q9 Do you agree or disagree with the findings of the Equality Impact Screening document?

Please share any further views or suggestions you have in relation to this question.

Disagree

We support the policy's intention to provide inclusive youth services. However, we do not consider that the screening sufficiently demonstrates its conclusions about equality, good relations and human rights.

The assessment repeatedly relies on services being open to everyone aged four to twenty-five and on future Education Authority needs assessments. These are important foundations, but availability in principle does not establish equality of access, participation or experience. Children may require different environments, support and approaches to benefit equitably.

Age and developmentally appropriate provision
The screening suggests that retaining the existing age range means there is no adverse impact arising from the review. An unchanged age range does not, by itself, demonstrate that the revised approach will meet the different needs of children and young people within it.

Provision beginning at age four requires explicit consideration of play, child development and the workforce competence needed to support younger children. The assessment should examine whether proposed services, curricula, facilities and funding arrangements adequately support children aged four to eight and nine to thirteen, alongside older participants.

Opportunities to advance equality
Section 2.2 identifies no further opportunities to promote equality across any of the nine categories. We disagree that the opportunities have been sufficiently explored.

Explicit commitments to inclusive play and skilled playwork could strengthen participation through accessible environments, varied resources, communication support, sensory adaptations and developmentally appropriate practice. The assessment should examine how these measures could benefit disabled children,

children with additional needs and children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

It should also consider overlapping barriers, such as disability combined with rural isolation or poverty.

Good relations
Section 2.3 rates impacts on good relations as "None", while Section 2.4 acknowledges opportunities to encourage respect for different beliefs and views. The relationship between these findings needs clarification.

In Northern Ireland, youth services offer opportunities for sustained cross-community and cross-cultural relationships. Inclusive shared play from age 4 upwards can provide a valuable starting point for communication, cooperation, friendship and mutual understanding. These benefits require thoughtful facilitation and should be assessed rather than assumed.

The screening should identify how playwork competence, welcoming environments and sustained shared provision could strengthen these opportunities.

Human rights
The answer "No" to whether the policy affects anyone's human rights is difficult to reconcile with its repeated references to the UNCRC and the separate Children's Rights Impact Assessment.

A policy can affect rights positively. The screening should explicitly examine how service design, workforce competence and resource decisions support children's participation, inclusion and opportunities to play.

We recommend revising the screening, strengthening its evidence and identifying measurable actions to advance equality and good relations. The decision not to undertake a full Equality Impact Assessment should then be reconsidered in light of the revised analysis and consultation evidence.

Q10. Do you agree or disagree with the findings of the Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)?

Please share any further views or suggestions you have in relation to this question.

Disagree

We welcome the emphasis on children's participation, best interests and non-discrimination. However, the CRIA is incomplete because it does not explicitly assess the right to play under Article 31 of the UNCRC.

This is a significant omission for a youth work policy applying from age four. Play should be a central consideration in assessing how the policy supports children's rights.

Recognising play in its own right

The CRIA should assess whether children will have sufficient time, space, freedom, resources and skilled support for freely chosen, personally directed play.

Play offers opportunities for physical activity, emotional expression, creativity, problem-solving, friendship and belonging. These contributions connect directly with the health, wellbeing, learning and good relations ambitions identified in the assessment.

However, access to play should not depend on demonstrating improvements in attainment, employability or other predetermined outcomes. Children's enjoyment and agency matter in their own right.

Assessing different ages and experiences

The CRIA acknowledges the age range but provides limited analysis of how impacts differ across childhood.

It should explicitly examine:

- Play-centred provision for children aged four to eight.
- Substantial opportunities for child-led play for those aged nine to thirteen.
- Age-appropriate play, recreation and informal social opportunities through adolescence.
- Barriers experienced by disabled children, children facing poverty, rural children and those experiencing exclusion.

The assessment should also show how younger children and children with different communication needs have influenced the proposals. The consultation activity described is welcome, but does not clearly demonstrate whose views were captured within each age group or how those views changed the policy.

Workforce competence as an implementation requirement

Children's opportunities to play depend partly on adults understanding how to support their play without unnecessarily directing it.

The CRIA should therefore identify playwork competence as an implementation requirement: foundational learning for workers and volunteers, role-appropriate accredited competence for practitioners regularly working with younger children, and continuing reflective practice.

These expectations should be supported through funded training and achievable implementation timescales.

A clearer assessment of risks and safeguards

The expectation of positive impacts needs to be tested against delivery risks, including insufficient funding, inaccessible environments, unsuitable provision for younger children and inadequate workforce preparation.

The assessment should also distinguish children choosing not to attend from children being unable to participate because of barriers. Voluntary participation does not remove the need to examine exclusion.

We recommend revising the CRIA to include explicit Article 31 analysis, evidence of younger children's participation, differentiated assessment of impacts, and a funded plan with responsibilities and monitoring measures.

Q11 Do you agree or disagree with the conclusions of the Rural Needs Impact Assessment (RNIA)?

Please share any further views or suggestions you have in relation to this question

Disagree

We welcome recognition of rural isolation, transport barriers, limited facilities and the importance of a sustainable rural workforce. However, the assessment needs stronger analysis of how these issues will be addressed.

Different rural and urban impacts
Section 2C describes different impacts on rural and urban populations as "Not applicable". This is difficult to reconcile with the assessment's identification of rural-specific barriers.

The revised assessment should explain how distance, population dispersal, transport availability, delivery costs and workforce capacity affect the feasibility of providing consistent services.

Access to play from age four
For younger children, access depends heavily on parents' or carers' availability, transport and household resources. A service may be geographically present while remaining difficult to use.

The assessment should examine travel times, transport costs, opening hours and the availability of developmentally appropriate provision for children aged four to eight and nine to thirteen.

It should not assume that living in the countryside provides accessible play opportunities. Outdoor space may be difficult to reach, unsuitable or unavailable for children's use.

Practical, funded responses
Shared buildings may help, but their suitability should be assessed for play, including accessibility, outdoor space, storage, flexibility and children's ability to shape their environment.

The implementation plan should consider:

- Transport support and outreach or mobile provision where appropriate.
- Funding that recognises the costs of serving dispersed populations.
- Support for small and volunteer-led settings.
- Accessible playwork training, mentoring and continuing development for rural practitioners.
- Monitoring of actual access and participation, including travel barriers and gaps in provision.

Rural delivery should also support opportunities for children from different communities and cultures to meet, where local circumstances and children's interests indicate a need.

We recommend revising the assessment to connect each identified rural need with a specific response, responsible body, resource requirement and measure of progress. Positive intentions should be supported by evidence that rural children can access regular, inclusive and high-quality youth provision in practice.