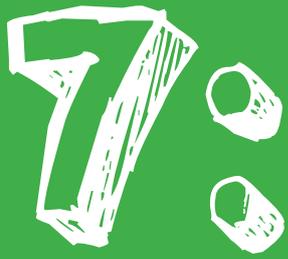


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Family Life and Alternative  
Family Welfare and Alternative  
Civil Rights  
Care  
Health and Culture  
Leisure, Play and Culture  
Justice  
Juvenile Justice  
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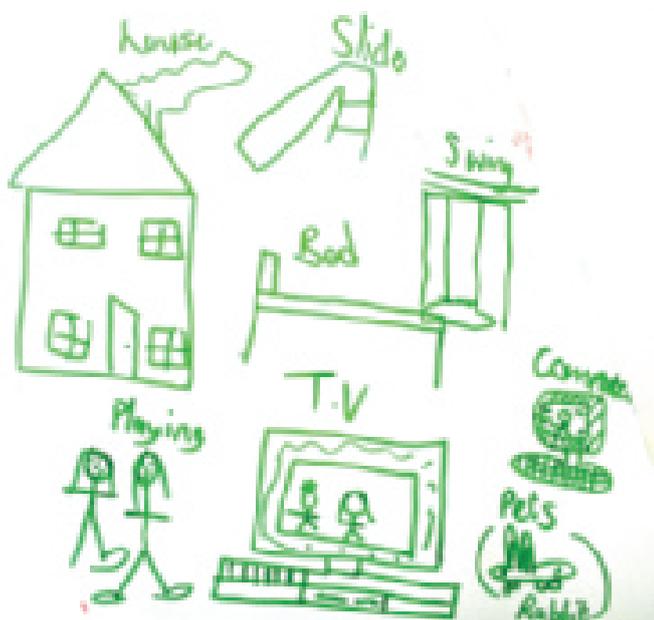


# LEISURE, PLAY AND CULTURE



## 7.1 Introduction

Article 31 of the UNCRC clearly stipulates that all children have a fundamental right to be able to engage in leisure, play and cultural activities, hereafter referred to as ‘the right to play’. Participants in this review were very vocal about the importance of the right to play, with play and leisure emerging as the top issue of concern for both children and young people and their parents and carers. This chapter explores the degree to which children and young people in NI are currently able to enjoy their right to play, together with the recent developments and strategic drivers that can impact upon this.



## 7.2 A Rights-based Approach to Play

Article 31 of the Convention addresses children’s rights to rest, leisure, play and recreational

activities and their rights to participate in cultural and artistic life. Together, these rights emphasise the importance of children having both adequate access to appropriate things to do and places to be in their free time and adequate time and energy to avail of these opportunities.

Like all other articles within the Convention, article 31 should be interpreted in light of both the four general principles of the Convention and the other articles contained therein. According to the UNCRC Implementation Handbook, such interpretation will lead to recognition that the right to play and leisure should pervade all aspects of life, including that of education (UNICEF 2007).

Key aspects of the right to play (incorporating rest, leisure, play, recreation and cultural activities) highlighted in the Implementation Handbook are:

- the importance of rest – ‘rest is almost as important to children’s development as the basics of nutrition, housing, healthcare and education’ – and the implications of schooling and work upon this
- the necessity of accessible and age-appropriate places to engage in play for children and young people of all ages
- the ability to be both consumers and producers of art and culture
- the importance of ensuring equality of access for all children and young people
- the need for State parties to adequately resource realisation of this right (UNICEF 2007).

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The significance of the right to play is often overlooked or underestimated in today's society, yet the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is unambiguous about both the benefits and necessity of play for all children and young people:

*"Children's right to play is sometimes referred to as the 'forgotten right', perhaps because it appears to the adult world as a luxury rather than a necessity of life, and because children always find ways and means of playing, even in the most dire circumstances. But play is an essential part of development: children who are unable to play, for whatever reason, may lack important social and personal skills" (UNICEF 2007:469).*



As highlighted above, the Committee recognises that play is a vital element in children's development. Engagement in play (both structured and unstructured) and engagement in the cultural life of society offers children and young people the opportunity to develop socially, physically, emotionally and intellectually. It offers them the chance to 'enjoy and challenge their current capacities' and facilitates development of key life skills such as cooperation, leadership negotiation and respectful interaction (UNICEF 2007):

*"Play is a vital part of childhood and in the very early years is the major source of a child's learning. It is through play that children can develop their language and social skills, express their emotions, develop their imagination and creativity and learn methods of problem-solving. Play is also crucial to a child's health and development and this is best supported by access to a wide variety of play experiences and opportunities. Having good play provision and well-designed safe play areas for children can contribute to a sense of wellbeing and security in their surroundings. Play, cultural and leisure activities and social interactions with peers remain essential for wellbeing and social development as a child becomes a teenager. Doing without these opportunities and experiences for any reason can have a major impact on the quality of life of a child or young person. Indeed, when young people are consulted about their priorities, play and social development regularly top the list" (Save the Children 2007:53).*

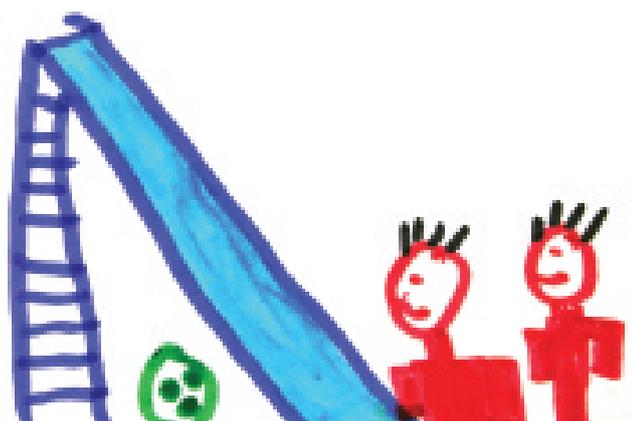
General Comment Number 7, issued by the Committee in 2005, notes with concern that *"insufficient attention has been given by States Parties and others to the implementation of the provisions of article 31 of the Convention"*, calling on State parties to *"pay greater attention and allocate adequate resources (human and financial) to the implementation of the right to rest, leisure and play"* (CRC 2005b:para 34).

Given the significance of play, both in terms of children's current lives and their future development, it is essential that the government fully implement the rights contained within article

31, considering in particular issues of access, availability and appropriateness.

### 7.3 Overview of Play and Leisure in Northern Ireland

*“Increased emphasis on minimising risk and child protection have led to fewer opportunities for children to play outside, engage in outdoor activities, and participate in their communities. While the current development of a play policy for children aged eleven and under is to be welcomed, this is not in itself an adequate response to what the leading play agency in Northern Ireland has described as ‘one of the most comprehensive crosscutting social policy issues affecting families and communities’” (SC/CLC 2008:40).*



The importance of play and leisure in children’s lives has, in many ways, been underestimated and neglected at a strategic level within NI to date. This has had an inevitable knock-on effect on the lived experiences of children and young people, with many lacking access to safe,

age-appropriate facilities and spaces in their local area, as is their right under article 31 of the Convention. The continued inadequacy of current play provision is reflected in the fact that play and leisure emerged as the top issue of concern for both the children and young people and the parents/carers who participated in this review. It is also reflected in the Committee’s 2008 Concluding Observations on the UK, in which it notes with concern that *“with the sole exception of Wales, the right to play and leisure is not fully enjoyed by all children in the State party”*, calling upon the government *“to strengthen its efforts to guarantee the right of the child 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”* (CRC 2008:para 68/69).

Children’s experiences of play and leisure within NI are undoubtedly still shaped and influenced by the legacy of the past. NI is a country emerging from 30 years of conflict and violence and the reverberations of this continue to impact, both directly and indirectly, on children and young people’s right to play. The impact of years of inadequate investment in infrastructure, the traditionally segregated nature of both school and community based sports activities and the existence of deeply embedded cultural divisions all combine to continue to impact upon children and young people’s experiences of play, leisure and the arts. For many children in NI, the sports they will engage in, the places they will go, the facilities they will use and the festivals they will attend continue to be largely determined by community background or religious affiliation. While moves towards

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integration in the field are to be welcomed, their scope and consequent impact are, as yet, very limited. As a professional who participated in this review concluded, *"The right to access leisure facilities...still very divided communities and not safe for kids to travel into some areas to use facilities"*.

Other key issues relating to children and young people's access to play and leisure within NI, identified by NGOs in their 2008 submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child include:

- insufficient priority given to play and leisure by government
- lack of consultation/consideration of children's views about play spaces in planning of housing developments
- under-investment in play and leisure facilities
- poor quality and unsafe play and leisure spaces
- lack of access to age-appropriate activities for all children and young people
- play spaces being restricted as a result of increased traffic, use of ASBOs and security concerns
- impact of discrimination on particular groups accessing and participating in play and leisure, including children and young people with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities, living in poverty, living in rural areas
- inadequate remuneration and training for staff in the play sector
- schools not playing a big enough role in relation to play (SC/CLC 2008:40/41).

The production of a long awaited draft Play Policy in 2006 represented a welcome development for the children's sector which it was hoped would give life to children and young people's right to play. Encouragingly, in introducing the policy for consultation, OFMDFM clearly stated its recognition of the importance of play in children's lives, noting that investment in play will have a significant impact on positive outcomes for children and young people, contributing to the realisation of all six high level outcomes contained within the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People. It also recognised the positive impact that investment in play would have on the delivery of other government strategies, such as 'Fit Futures' or the Sport and Physical Recreation Strategy. In doing so, it gave explicit recognition to the significant positive impacts that opportunities for play can have on a child's social development and both their emotional and physical wellbeing.<sup>85</sup>



85. [www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/index/archive.htm#anc4](http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/index/archive.htm#anc4) [accessed May 2008].

The government's overt recognition of the importance, and indeed necessity, of play in children's lives makes its failure to deliver concrete outcomes in this field all the more disappointing and unjustifiable. In spite of its explicit recognition of the importance of play in children and young people's lives, the government has not yet translated rhetoric into reality. Though a draft Play Policy was released for consultation in 2006, no final outcome has yet been produced over 18 months later.

As it currently stands, responsibility for play in NI spans several government departments. While OFMDFM is ultimately responsible for the development of the Play Policy, several other departments also have a remit over play-related issues: DOE for planning and road safety; DSD for neighbourhood renewal; the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) for sport and arts; DE for the Enriched Curriculum (EC) and DHSSPS for health outcomes. Furthermore, while a number of local councils have taken the initiative and produced play strategies for their local area, this is unfortunately the exception rather than the norm. In the continued absence of a definitive policy or strategy, or clear responsibility and accountability structures, the right to play continues to lack an effective vehicle for realisation.

## 7.4 Play Policy

The Play Policy produced for consultation in November 2006 stated in its vision that "to recognise, respect and resource play is to recognise, respect and value childhood" (OFMDFM 2006b:7).

The language contained within this draft policy, further examples of which are cited below, is very much in line with a rights-based approach to play, recognising the centrality of play to children's lives, the potential benefits of engaging in play and the need for an integrated and adequately resourced governmental response to realising children's right to play:

*"Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood. For many years childhood in Northern Ireland has been lived as conflict, division and invisibility. This new vision of childhood in Northern Ireland is 'lived as play' (Plato); where play is valued and promoted by families and is planned for and resourced to ensure children are visible and communities are vibrant and filled with play" (OFMDFM 2006b:7).*

*"Play, although difficult to define, is one of the essential components in a child's life and is an intrinsic part of their learning, growth, well-being and development" (OFMDFM 2006b:5).*

*"A play policy for Northern Ireland should ensure that families are supported in the organisation of play and play is not a marginalised issue but is brought to the fore as a significant cross cutting policy and planning issue that will have huge impact on many current and future government policies" (OFMDFM 2006b:9).*

*"The public sector's investment in play is not the responsibility of a single service agency or provider nor does it have a policy or planning 'home' in any one government department. In addition, in the context of a finite public*



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*... pursue and competing agendas, there is a real danger or great risk that children's play will be relegated. It is intended through the development of a play policy for Northern Ireland that the crucial role of play in children's lives is understood and upheld" (OFMDFM 2006b:2).*

While the rhetoric contained within the draft Play Policy is compliant with a rights-based approach to play, both the prolonged delay in consequently implementing any outcome and the failure to commit to a timeframe for doing so, are clearly not. Nor indeed is the failure to produce an accompanying strategy for over 12s, despite the stated intention to do so in the initial policy. Similarly while consultation with children aged 11 and under with regard to the content of the policy is commendable, the failure to consult with those aged 12 or over, who are also intended recipients of the policy, is not.

Other criticisms and concerns levelled at the policy issued for consultation that would require addressing in any subsequent policy include the protection of parks and other green spaces, provision for 12 to 18 year olds and quality of provision. The draft policy also failed to address the issue of religious segregation in play and the many barriers that children and young people can face when attempting to access play, including those of disability, transport and cost. To expand, a number of respondents to the Play Policy consultation did not feel that the policy gave adequate importance to the issue of quality of play provision. These respondents felt that the mapping exercise, in particular, needed to consider the quality, as well as the quantity, of existing play provision in order to provide an

accurate and adequate basis on which to base future development.

Many children's sector organisations, responding to the consultation, also highlighted serious concern at the draft policy's focus on 0 to 11 year olds without accompanying consideration of the needs of young people aged 12 and over. As professionals who participated in this review summarised:

*"The rights of older children aged 11+ to play facilities is currently being ignored given the absence of a comprehensive play strategy for all children and young people aged 0-18."*

*"We need a play policy that would take account of all children, it's about how we can all integrate rather than have separate areas for young people."*

Almost half of all respondents to the draft Play Policy consultation 'stated a strong desire to see one Play Policy for all children aged 0 to 18 years'. Responding to this concern, OFMDFM stated that, though this may not have been apparent due to the language used in the consultation, this was always the intention (OFMDFM 2007c).

A further cause for concern is the delay in the production of the 0 to 11 action plan, which has not yet been produced at the time of writing, in spite of a stated deadline of June 2008. This failure to deliver outcomes when promised, both raises questions as to the genuine commitment of government to the effective realisation of the right to play and concerns regarding the

implications for children and young people currently growing up within NI.

It is imperative that these issues be adequately addressed as the draft policy is progressed. It is also imperative that any subsequent policy be accompanied by a SMART action plan that is evaluated and monitored to ensure continued compliance with the minimum requirements of the UNCRC and supported by adequate ring-fenced funding to enable full implementation of any such plan.

## 7.5 Strategic Context of Play Policy

As highlighted previously, responsibility for play spans several different government departments. A number of other policies/strategies are consequently of relevance to the effective realisation of the right to play, including the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and its associated action plan, the draft implementation plan for the Fit Futures Strategy, Planning Policy Statements and the EC.

With regard to the latter, recent years have witnessed welcome moves in the education sector towards integrating and facilitating younger children's rights to play within the school environment, most notably through the introduction of the EC at early years. The EC is "a developmentally appropriate curriculum [that] is more play-based and activity-led than the pre-existing curriculum" (Sproule et al 2005:2). Though the driving forces behind the introduction of the EC were not primarily play-based in nature – "the scheme was introduced to address

perceived problems in the formal traditional curriculum, particularly in disadvantaged areas" (Sproule et al 2005:2) – play has been recognised as an effective medium for facilitating the informal learning aims of the scheme and addressing these concerns. The EC is currently being implemented in more than 120 schools across NI. The academic and learning outcomes of the EC have previously been considered in chapter 6; it is suffice to note here that the implementation of the scheme offers potential contributions in terms of the effective realisation of younger children's right to play.



The draft Fit Futures implementation plan from DHSSPS also recognises the important role of play in children's lives, with particular reference to the fight against childhood obesity. Proposed actions contained within this implementation plan include a review of the impact of planning policies on the provision of open space for play and the establishment of a play partner network, however, at the time of writing this plan had not yet been progressed beyond the draft issued for consultation in early 2007 (DHSSPS 2007d).

The draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation and the Anti Poverty and Social



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Inclusion Strategy 'Lifetime Opportunities' also relate to, and impact upon, the realisation of children's rights to play within NI. It is therefore essential that forthcoming implementation plans for the Play Policy/Policies link in with strategies such as these, recognising the cross-departmental approach required to address the issue of children's right to play. Clear responsibility and accountability structures will be required to ensure all departments deliver on their actions, in a way that does not undermine the actions of any other. This is a role that could be fulfilled by the new Children's Champions identified in each government department and managed via the Ministerial Sub-committee on Children and Young People, if the political will exists to do so.

The commitment to develop a Play Policy has been incorporated into the first Ten Year Strategy Action Plan for 2007/08, under the overarching outcome 'Living in a Society which Respects their Rights', thereby recognising that the successful development of such a policy has the potential to deliver on the full range of strategic indicators across the six outcome areas. Setting target dates of June 2008 for an action plan for 0 to 11 year olds and June 2009 for the plan for 12 to 18 year olds, the document cites:

*"In addition to sporting and physical recreation opportunities, children need to be given the opportunity to play and young people the opportunity to engage in other recreational activities. Government is committed to the development of play and recreation policies for Northern Ireland...The aim of the [play] policy is to establish play within a policy framework*

*that will place high value on play as an essential element in the development of children's lives, families, communities and society. The play policy will be followed by the development of a recreation policy, targeted at the older age group. Both policies will clearly sit within the framework of the 10-year strategy and have the potential to deliver the full range of improved outcomes"* (OFMDFM 2007a:6).

The disparity in rhetoric contained within the Ten Year Strategy Action Plan cited above, the draft Play Policy and the summary of consultation responses to the same, with regard to whether the Play Policy spans the 0 to 11 or 0 to 18 year old age group, is a cause for concern. If three documents emanating from the same government department contain different messages, what is the accurate message and is this being consistently implemented?

### 7.5.1 Planning

A further area of government policy of direct relevance to the realisation of children's right to play is that of planning. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment Number 7, addresses the detrimental impact that planning decisions and residential developments can have on children's ability to exercise their right to play:

*"Children's right to play space is especially at risk in many urban environments, where the design and density of housing, commercial centres and transport systems combine with noise, pollution and all manner of dangers to create a hazardous play environment for young*

*children". Recognising this risk, the Committee recommends that "planning for towns, and leisure and play facilities should take account of children's rights to express their views (art. 12) through appropriate consultations" (CRC 2005b:para 34).*

Responsibility for planning in NI rests with the DOE administered through one of its agencies, the Planning Service. Planning decisions, in relation to open space for play and leisure, are governed by Planning Policy Statement 8 (PPS8) 'Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation' issued in 2004. This PPS8 *"sets out the Department's planning policies for the protection of open space, the provision of new areas of open space in association with residential development and the use of land for sport and outdoor recreation, and advises on the treatment of these issues in development plans"* (DOE 2004:5). Children are specifically referenced in one of the six stated main objectives of the policy, *"to ensure that new open space areas and sporting facilities are convenient and accessible for all sections of society, particularly children, the elderly and those with disabilities"* (DOE 2004:11).

PPS8 stipulates that, with some noted exceptions, all proposals for new residential developments of 25 or more units, or those on sites of 1 hectare or more, must include public open space (generally equating to 10–15% of the total site space) as an integral part of the development. It also stipulates that proposals for developments of 100 or more units, or those on sites of 5 hectares or more, must provide an equipped children's play area (accessible to

those with disabilities) as an integral part of the development, unless one exists within reasonable walking distance (generally defined as within a 400 metre radius of the majority of units within the scheme). The policy further stipulates that the initial provision of such open space and/or play areas is not enough; suitable arrangements for the future management and maintenance of such spaces must be assured (DOE 2004).

Justifying the requirement to provide public open space as an integral part of a housing scheme, PPS8 explains *"the 'greening' of an area can also contribute to people's health, well-being and quality of life, particularly that of children"* (DOE 2004:21). The policy further notes:

*"A particularly important consideration in determining the layout of new housing developments is the provision of safe opportunities for children's play. The main place where children play is adjacent or near to their homes as generally they are constrained in terms of the distance they are allowed to venture from their house for supervision and safety reasons. It is important, therefore, that children's play areas and facilities are located within a reasonable walking distance of where they live...In large developments, there may be a need to provide more formal outdoor recreation facilities, such as playing pitches, to meet the needs generated by the development"* (DOE 2004:21/22).

The provisions contained within PPS8 are a welcome development in terms of the provision of space necessary for children to exercise their right to play, but they need to be consistently strictly applied when planning applications are

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assessed. The Planning Service must ensure that developers have adequate structures in place to ensure the management and upkeep of open spaces and play facilities post completion of the development, and must hold them to this requirement. They must also tightly monitor the number of 'exceptions' granted to the requirements and ensure adequate accessibility of play areas built as part of development schemes.



Planning decisions should also take account of open space that is not designated as play space, but regularly used by children and young people for play and leisure purposes. Regulated protection of such spaces could ensure that land that is regularly used by children and young people for play purposes is not sacrificed to development, without a requirement for providing alternative space. Clear guidelines as to what constitutes 'regular use by children and young people' would be required in order to operationalise this, but the parameters of this could be pre-set in consultation with key stakeholder groups.

The potential benefits contained within PPS8 are only really available to a subsection of children and young people within NI; those who will be living in, or near, the new developments covered by the policy. Children and young people living in already (over) developed areas will not benefit from the scheme, as there is no retrospective element within it.

### 7.5.2 District Councils

Primary responsibility for the provision of public open space (playing fields, parks and children's play areas), beyond that stipulated for new developments covered by PPS8, currently rests with district councils, under the Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Order 1986. Article 10 of this Order stipulates that district councils shall 'secure the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities'. Article 10 also places a duty on councils to maintain and manage such facilities; however, as subsequent quotes from participants in this review will reveal, it is questionable whether this duty is, in reality, adequately being fulfilled.

The current RPA offers an unprecedented opportunity to clarify and enhance the duties of local councils in relation to the provision and maintenance of play space and facilities. Under RPA, increased powers will be transferred from central to local government. Relevant functions cited for transfer, in relation to planning, include area plans and local plans (including town centre plans), development control, enforcement and consultation on all strategic policies including planning policies statements.

Other relevant functions cited for transfer, in relation to maintenance of the public realm, include maintenance of public routes (roads, cycle routes etc) and public spaces (including school playgrounds, parks and gardens and leisure centres). Operational delivery of community development programmes and rural development will also be vested in local councils under the transfer scheme.<sup>86</sup> It is imperative that the opportunities offered by RPA to clarify and enhance the duties of local councils with regard to the provision and maintenance of play facilities be fully availed of in the coming months if children and young people are to be able to fully enjoy their article 31 right to play.

### 7.5.3 Children and Young People's Involvement in Strategic Decision Making

A second key issue in relation to the provision of play and leisure opportunities, beyond that of outcomes, is the issue of how decisions are made and who is involved in these decisions. Children and young people have traditionally not had the opportunity to be involved in decision making in relation to developments within their community, though a rights-based approach to decision making would require that they are when the decision made could bear consequences for them. Children and young people who participated in this review repeatedly raised the issue of open space 'disappearing' and facilities they use being removed for development purposes, without any consultation with them:

*"If free space up town, they turn it into a hotel or something."*

*"[They] took cinema away and replaced it with a pub."*

*"[They] knock things down that we like and build houses. Don't listen."*

*"[There are] too many homes being built, not enough parks."*

*"They are always building things – houses, factories – and this means there is less space for shops and places to play."*

Though there have not been many studies conducted in this field in NI, studies conducted elsewhere in the UK support the messages of this review, that children are rarely offered the opportunity to engage in planning and community development decisions. As Fitzpatrick and others (1998, cited in Esley 2004:162) conclude, "young people's participation is usually compartmentalised, linking only to youth specific matters, rather than being integrated in the overall regeneration agenda". Commenting on the inadequacy of this approach, Esley (2004:163) concludes:

*"Policymakers should ensure that public policy is influenced by the views and experiences of children so that resources and initiatives meet the real, and not simply the perceived, needs of children. The everyday experience of what it means to be a child should be as valid and influential as the outcomes of, for example, child poverty in adult life. Ultimately the participation*

86. [www.doeni.gov.uk/lgrt\\_tof\\_requiring\\_legislation.pdf](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/lgrt_tof_requiring_legislation.pdf) [accessed May 2008].



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*of children and young people should be regarded as a pre-requisite by policymakers for ensuring high quality policy decisions and delivery.”*

The current failure to engage children and young people in planning and community development decisions is in direct contradiction to their article 12 right to be consulted on decisions affecting their lives. As the main users of the facilities, children and young people need to be involved in the planning of play and leisure activities and in decisions made about use of public space in their local communities, in order to ensure such decisions are based on real, and not perceived, need. If the government is serious about implementing its commitment to the provision of adequate and appropriate play and recreation space and facilities for all children and young people, it should place a statutory obligation on both the Planning Service and the new local councils to consult with children and young people when making any planning decisions that could impact upon their access to public space or play and leisure facilities. As the new councils will also have responsibility for community planning under RPA, it is essential that the DOE place a further statutory requirement on them to involve children and young people in this process also. PPS8 should also be amended to place an onus on developers to involve children and young people in the design of residential areas and play space.

### 7.6 Children’s Experiences of Play and Leisure in Northern Ireland

Participants in this review were very vocal about the right to play, with play and leisure emerging as the top issue for both children and young people and their parents/carers. One of the most pressing issues raised by children and young people in this review with regard to play and leisure was a lack of safe spaces to play or ‘hang out’ in. This finding corresponds with findings of previous research, carried out by Monteith and McLaughlin (2004), that found that one in five children do not have access to nearby safe play areas. Key issues identified within this include a physical absence of space or facilities, the condition of available places and facilities, the cost of facilities and difficulties accessing them and the need to feel safe while engaging in play and leisure activities. Particular issues were raised in relation to both children living in poverty and children with disabilities and their access to play. Consideration was also given to the relationship between having things to do and places to go and engagement in perceived and/or actual anti-social behaviour.

#### 7.6.1 Lack of Places to Go and Things to Do

The first General Comment issued by the CRC in 2001 makes specific reference to the implications of inadequate opportunities for children and young people to access appropriate environments for play and leisure:

*“Realising the right to rest, leisure and play is often hindered by a shortage of opportunities for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centered, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress free environments”*  
(CRC 2001a:para 34).

The findings of this review would suggest that this is certainly the case within NI:

*“There is not enough space to play, not enough parks to play in”* (young person).

*“There is no place to go and just hang around with your friends”* (young person).

*“In my opinion there is a definite lack of suitable venues for young people to meet in. Sometimes all they want is somewhere to sit and chat and perhaps have an inexpensive cup of coffee”* (parent).

*“There is no provision nor is there ever going to be provision for children and young people. There is nowhere for them to go”* (professional).

*“In the North of Ireland, what we don’t have anywhere is what we would know as a dedicated culture and arts space for children. Despite the investment which has taken place in terms of capital resources in terms of larger cultural arts facilities, there has never been a successful proposal taken through and funded to develop dedicated spaces for children and young people”* (professional).

There was a general consensus amongst both the children and young people and parents/carers

who participated in this review that there are currently inadequate opportunities for children and young people in NI to enjoy their article 31 right to play, socialise or engage in structured recreational or leisure activities. This view was also expressed by many of the professionals who participated in this review. It is further supported by the findings of a study of 417 young people in the Greater Shantallow area of Derry, which reveals that 68% of participants felt there were not enough facilities for them in the local area (ICR 2004) and the findings of Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) research, in which 65% of 16–25 year olds said they did not feel there was sufficient provision for teenagers and young adults in the areas in which they lived (YCNI 2004 cited in McAlister et al 2007). McAlister et al’s (2007) research with young women aged 16–25 also reveals a similar picture, with 36 of the 43 young women interviewed determining facilities within their local areas to be insufficient.

The lack of appropriate things to do and places to go was raised by virtually all groups of children and young people who participated in this review, irrespective of age or geographical location. For younger children, the particular focus of the issue was a lack of parks, playgrounds and spaces to play in. For older children, it was primarily a lack of places ‘to hang out’ without hassle or fear for their safety. For those in rural areas, proximity to facilities and how to reach them was a particular issue. These issues were felt particularly acutely during school breaks when most children and young people had more free time available:

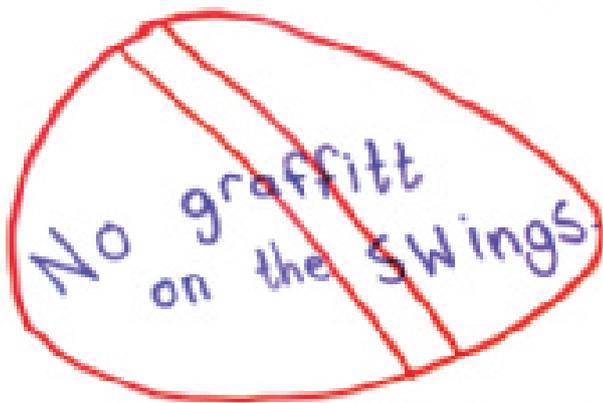
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*"We have no play park or anything to do, all we do is play hide and seek and catch. Nowhere to go in our free time" (young person).*

*"There is nowhere to go. You sit around the village and people come and tell you to move" (young person).*

*"There is absolutely nothing to do in [our village]. There is a small park which is now run down because of graffiti and care is not taken. Also I have to travel at least 14 miles to get to a proper town with facilities for children or people the same age as me" (young person).*



*"There are halls, but nothing on, they say they don't have the funding" (young person).*

*"For ten years I have campaigned for safe playing areas in the neighbourhood. Children are seen as a problem when they play on the small available greens that are not designated as play areas but leftover from the building sites. Because houses have gardens, it is assumed that children can play there, but they are often too small for teenagers" (parent).*

*"Often my daughter just wants to hang out with friends because school activities are so organised. She likes the freedom" (parent).*

*"Potential opportunities for children to have enough to do and places to go are reducing. One reason for this is that we now live in a claim culture and organisations are not willing to provide additional experiences" (parent).*

*"I feel local councils and rural schools could work together and should open up rural school playgrounds and pitches for summer activities for sport and recreation in the summer months" (parent).*

*"[There is a] serious lack of activities during summer of interest to young people and opportunities to develop social and personal skills outside of school hours" (professional).*

*"The right to access leisure facilities – still very divided communities and not safe for kids to travel into some areas to use facility – in rural areas there simply are no facilities so very difficult for YP to access at all" (professional).*

### 7.6.2 Safety

Those places where children and young people do currently spend time, in the absence of suitable alternatives, were also deemed to be far from ideal in terms of safety and security. In the absence of adequate play spaces in local communities, for example, many younger children spoke of playing on, or near, busy roads. The safety implications of this speak for themselves:

*"There are no places to play, I have to play on the road."*

*"[I play] round my estate...when there's cars coming I quickly go onto the footpath."*

*"I play on the road – with my daddy – but I watch out for cars – 'cos there's no room in my back yard."*



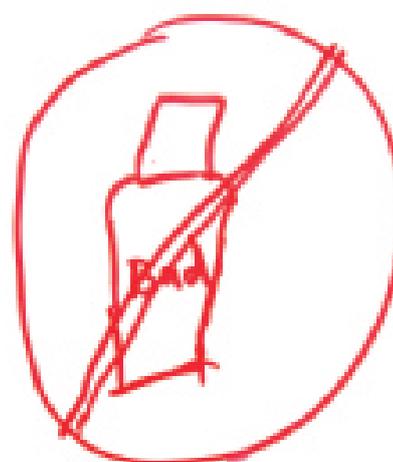
The poor state of many public spaces is putting the safety of children and young people at risk:

*"Down the tar pitch there's lots of glass and even on the grass pitches."*



Many of the children and young people, who did have access to some form of park or play facility, were critical of both the physical condition and safety of these facilities and the degree to which they felt able to use them, due to fear of others who were also there.

Children and young people had a lot to say about the poor state of their parks and other public spaces. Issues raised included broken and poorly maintained equipment, broken glass and rubbish lying around, vandalism, dog dirt and a lack of public conveniences.



*Stop Breaking  
glass bottles*

*"In some parks there are glass bottles smashed and if you fall you can get hurt badly."*

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*"When I'm out in the park there is a lot of broken glass and bottles lying around. The river water is polluted and there is dog poo everywhere. I would not feel safe enough to go there on my own."*



*"The local playground is full of broken glass and dog dirt."*

*"Sometimes the park isn't safe, like people put blades on the slides."*

As highlighted previously, responsibility for the management and maintenance of parks currently rests with local councils which, it would appear from the views elicited in this review, are not adequately fulfilling their duty. Councils need to fulfil their duty, not only to provide adequate space for play, but to maintain it and ensure that it is a safe and clean place for children and young people.

fix  
 Broken  
 fences!



As highlighted above, children and young people also frequently spoke about fear of other young people or adults when using unsupervised public spaces. Particular reference was made to people (young or otherwise) drinking and using drugs and intimidating others. Younger children also expressed fear of older teenagers hanging around where they were playing:

*"You get abuse shouted at you – everywhere – by other teenagers."*

*"You can't go to the park after 7 or 8 cos big boys are drinking."*

*"Some people go to the park with drink, not soft drink, and they shout and roar at people and it's really scary – they make you feel unsafe."*

*"If drunks weren't in parks you would use a lot more."*

*"[There] should be more protection in leisure centres and parks because people have been bullied."*

*"Can't even go into the park – every time you go into the park, you get chased out by angry glue sniffers with machetes."*

*"If you are in the park after 12, the peelers or the paramilitaries throw you out."*

Parents also raised the issue of safety in relation to places to play; they do not feel that there are safe places where their children can go to play or socialise with their friends:

*"The children must be taken by car as they do not feel safe to either walk or cycle."*

*"[There are] no proper play facilities nearby or safe playing fields."*

*"Parks are not safe because of underage drinking, violence and anti-social behaviour."*

*"I do have concerns about the activities of a lot of youths – drink, drugs and general criminality – and the safety of my children when they are in the park or even going to the shops where groups of youths congregate."*

Many older young people understood that younger children could be intimidated by their presence in parks and play areas, but explained that they were only there because there was nowhere else for them to go.

Children and young people also raised the issue of religious segregation in public spaces, and organised activities, and how this impacts on their safety:

*"Depends on where you come from – in the park, if they know you're a Catholic, you get chased out."*

*"As soon as you get everyone together, fights start...because of their differences."*

*"[Youth clubs] are all for Protestants or all for Catholics."*

Regrettably, despite recent political developments within NI, religious and political segregation continues to have a negative impact on the right of children and young people to access play and leisure. In some cases this involves children and young people having to leave their communities and socialise elsewhere; in others, it results in a fear of moving beyond familiar boundaries.

These observations are reflected in research from North Belfast that explored young people's experience of safety in an interface area. The children and young people who participated in this research felt their religion restricted their use of public space and play facilities. The author concludes that *"the once innocent spaces of childhood such as streets, parks and other public spaces have become redefined as areas where children are in potential danger from other children or from some adults"* (Leonard 2007:432).

Ewart and Schubotz's 2004 study of young people's views of sectarianism in NI further explores the impact of sectarianism on children and young people's experiences of play, leisure and sport. McAlister et al's 2007 study of young

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women across NI also explores this issue, as does Byrne et al's 2005 study of young people in North Belfast and Connolly and Healy's 2004 study of the impact of the conflict on 3–11 year olds growing up in Belfast:

*"Young people have also reported how sectarianism has been constructed through their social lives, with this leading to 'restricted social spaces' in choice of venues for meeting friends and undertaking social activities such as sport ... Symbols, primarily located within segregated housing, were associated with defining young people's social spaces to the extent of having 'no go' areas for residing, socialising or accessing services... The sporting landscape was also found to have a considerable role in the fostering of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, as well as in some young people's identity; more so for young men than women" (Ewart and Schubotz 2004:16,18, 41).*

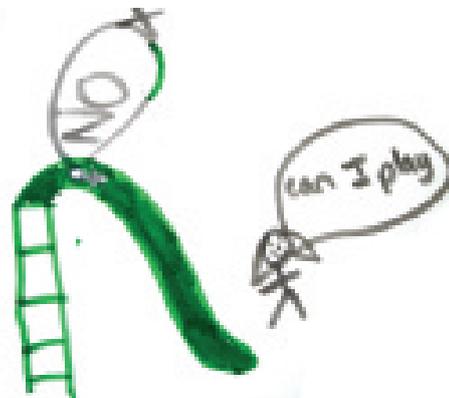
*"The conflict impacted upon young women's use of free time and leisure in a number of ways, particularly in terms of how their movements were regulated or restricted. A significant number, for instance, noted that particularly when younger, that there were certain places they were not allowed to go, or which they knew were unsafe to go... Despite moves towards peace in Northern Ireland, division and segregation remains. As areas are often divided upon religious lines, so too can be the youth and leisure provision within such communities" (Leonard, 2004).*

*"Alongside this, conflict and sectarianism continues within communities regulating*

*movements and thus impacting how and where leisure is spent" (McAlister et al 2007:108).*

*"The majority of respondents (61%) maintained that their community background restricted their movement within North Belfast...38% felt that meeting friends was difficult and 36% found it difficult to go to a leisure centre...25% found it difficult to go to the cinema, 15% to go to shops and 12% to play sports" (Byrne et al 2005:24).*

*"While living in the same city, the children were found to inhabit very different social worlds...the persistence of sectarian tensions and violence in the area means that it is often very risky to venture out of the local area" (Connolly and Healy 2004:i, 23).*



Connolly and Healy further noted that some very young children (three to four years of age) were beginning to re-enact violent incidents and events in their play and that participants generally exhibited a preference for events associated with their own community and for remaining within the boundaries of their local neighbourhood. This reluctance, or inability, to access play and leisure opportunities outside one's own community can serve to reinforce traditional sectarian divisions.

In a modern democratic society, religion and political affiliation should not be factors that influence where children and young people are able to spend their free time or, indeed, who they can spend it with. However, the continued impact of the conflict means this continues to be the case in NI. Concerted effort, from across the political spectrum, is required to address religious segregation in play and leisure and the consequent restrictions this places on children and young people's ability to enjoy the right to play.

### 7.6.3 Age Appropriate

It is widely accepted that the play and leisure needs of children and young people vary considerably with age. Activities and facilities for younger children will not meet the developmental needs of teenagers, nor indeed can younger children's needs be met through provision of more adult-oriented activities or facilities. It is therefore imperative that a range of age-appropriate facilities be provided for children and young people at different parts of the developmental spectrum.

The lack of such activities was a particular issue for older young people who participated in this review. Teenagers, as a general rule, felt facilities were aimed either at younger children or adults and rarely at people of their age. This was a cause of extreme frustration for them, as they felt too old for one set of activities/facilities and too young to access the others:

*"Everywhere you go, you're either too big or too small."*

*"There's stuff to do but just not for us...for children and for adults, but not us."*

*"Nothing for our age – stops at 12 years and stuff for 18 years, nothing for 13–17 year olds."*

Parents also agreed that there was inadequate provision for older children:

*"Not enough organised activities for older children."*

*"Not much happening for young people/teens that isn't church based or related to sport."*

The particular absence of activities for older young people also featured in the results from the Greater Shantallow study cited previously, with over 14s being less satisfied with the provision of leisure facilities in their area than their younger counterparts (ICR 2004).

### 7.6.4 Accessing Activities

The issue of physically accessing play and leisure activities was also raised by children and young people throughout NI, in terms of the difficulties faced in getting to places and the need to depend on either transport from parents or other costly and/or unreliable transport options:

*"There are lots of places as in the cinema, ice skating and bowling, but they are all in the towns so I have to get someone to take me or I have to pay for a taxi. As I am not a city girl I never feel safe as you always hear stories and I don't feel at home."*



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*"If parents won't take us down we can't go."*

*"Local facilities are important, as if your parents are too busy you can't get to an activity."*

*"Difficult – buses are dear and never on time."*

*"Places are too far away to walk to by myself. Sometimes there are joy riders so I couldn't walk by myself."*

Access to play was noted as particularly difficult for children and young people living in isolated rural communities, by both children and young people themselves and their parents. These children are particularly isolated and dependent on others to access activities, given how far many of them live from 'social hubs' and the limited public transport options available to them:

*"I live in the middle of nowhere, I can't really go anywhere unless my mammy drives me" (young person).*

*"The young children have no activities outside the home and the teenagers who could travel into town for activities have such poor bus links, leaving it impossible, therefore they have no activities outside the home either" (parent).*

*"We live in the country and there are no summer schemes in our local area for teenagers and young people. There are no regular transport services either" (parent).*

*"Rural communities' lack of transport really limits options. They can't get into town or the cinema unless we take them" (parent).*

*"We live in a rural community with very poor bus links. All leisure and summer/football activities are all 8 to 12 miles away" (parent).*

*"I would like more access to leisure facilities and feel that living in a rural area has isolated us from the ability to access these services" (parent).*

*"Youth clubs far away from home and most clubs available during term time. Summer holidays can prove boring and long for children" (parent).*

These messages are echoed in other research, including that of McAlister et al (2007:93) in which young women living in rural areas *"discussed how where they lived, the isolation of areas, limited local facilities and services, a poor bus service and/or a reliance on lifts, meant that they would often spend much of their free-time in their own area"*.

### 7.6.5 Financial Cost of Play and Leisure

The costs incurred with some recreation and leisure activities, both in terms of the cost of the activity itself and the cost of transport required to access it, was a matter of contention for many children and young people who participated in this review:

*"Everything good costs money."*

*"It's too expensive to pay for sports and music lessons."*

*"Anything half decent, too hard to get and very expensive."*

*“Not enough activities and the ones you want to do are too expensive.”*

*“You have to sell your soul to get to the cinema.”*

*“If you don’t have money, there’s nothing to do.”*

*“A lot of people have jobs to get money to go places. This holds you back at school.”*

Some young people aged 16–18 years raised the issue of being charged adult prices for transport, and student discounts not being available at all times. This was something they strongly disagreed with:

*“Translink should have greater reduced rates for young people, not just when you are going to school.”*

*“I can’t get reduced rates at the weekends – to go to the Balmoral show on the train cost me £11.”*

The application of adult rates to over 15s is discriminatory to young people of this age, many of whom are still engaged in full time education and therefore not able to engage in full time work. Though some of these young people may be in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowance, many others are not, and the application of higher adult rates can act as an additional barrier to accessing play and leisure facilities. Application of adult rates can also disadvantage young people who are out of education, due to the lower benefit and minimum wage levels applicable to this age group.

Parents and carers who participated in this review also expressed concern regarding the cost of leisure activities for children and young people and the particular implications this held for families with a number of children or families facing financial difficulty:

*“There could be more youth places for children and teenagers to go to that don’t cost too much to get in to.”*

*“As a lone parent renting in quite an affluent area out of school activities are expensive, averaging £5 per hour.”*

*“If you have the money children will have more access to safe play. A lot will depend on where you live and what is available within the voluntary network. A lot will depend on [the] age group of children, the community and area you live. Finance and parental availability make a difference.”*

*“There is provision but some activities like cinemas are very costly for families.”*

*“There is a hidden poverty for the middle class where parents will be strapped for cash and further interest rates will have an impact on what families can afford to provide for their children’s leisure time.”*

## **7.7 Youth Service Provision**

The Youth Service in Northern Ireland comprises both statutory provision (under the control of ELBs) and voluntary provision, delivered by a range of voluntary and community agencies and

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organisations. Activities provided by the Youth Service are generally 'non-formal' occurring outside school/work time and participation in the service is voluntary.

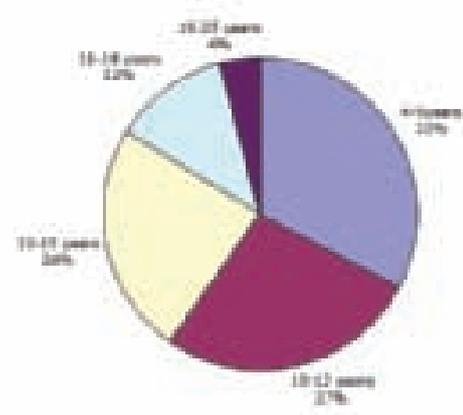
The policy aim of the Youth Service is "to ensure the provision of opportunities for children, young people and young adults to gain for themselves knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued individuals; to encourage the development of mutual understanding and promote recognition of and respect for cultural diversity". The vision of the service is a future "where all young people in Northern Ireland are able to enjoy themselves, realise their potential and participate as active citizens in a secure and peaceful society; know their rights and responsibilities and have these rights protected and promoted; are valued, understood and involved and feel safe and supported" (DE n.d.:4).

Youth Service provision, though aimed at all young people, is primarily utilised by 'white' children and young people, those from a Protestant background and those aged 15 and under. Participation of Catholic children and young people and children of 'non-white' ethnic origin is limited; as is that of young people aged 16 and over (GIS 2006).

In 2006, there were 1,983 youth facilities across NI (uniformed, church based, voluntary and controlled) with a combined membership of 164,207 children and young people. As illustrated in Figure 7.1, one third (32.7%) of members were aged 4 to 9 years. A further 27.1% and 24.2% were aged 10 to 12 years

and 13 to 15 years respectively, while older young people tend to be less involved in Youth Service provision, with only 11.8% of members coming from the 16 to 18 year age range. Significant differences are observable with regard to community background, with 70% of overall membership coming from a Protestant background. Virtually all members' (98.9%) ethnic origin was white (GIS 2006).

**Figure 7.1:**  
Age Range of Youth Service Users 2006



Source: GIS 2006

The children and young people who participated in this review discussed the provision of youth services and youth clubs in their areas. Not unsurprisingly, their views varied significantly according to their own personal experiences. While some really enjoyed attending youth clubs and organisations, many others felt that the activities on offer were not interesting enough or age-appropriate, noting that provision within youth clubs often lacked innovation and they consequently got bored. Reference was also made to the strict rules applied in Youth Service provision:

*"There are some clubs to go to but when they're on there is nothing much to do."*

*"Some youth clubs are intended more for younger children."*

*"We do have Sunday School and youth club, but can only go up to a certain age."*

*"Youth clubs are all religious."*

*"Youth clubs are boring. If you go in you can't get back out again for the rest of the evening."*

*"The youth club gets boring after a while, you do the same thing every week."*

Parents also noted the need for improvement in the youth service provision on offer:

*"I would like to see youth schemes be more proactive in trying to get young people involved. I don't think it's enough that they are open in the evenings I think young people should be encouraged to go."*

That said, in areas where young people did not have access to any Youth Service provision, there was an observable desire to have this, both amongst children and young people and their parents/carers:

*"We don't have a decent youth club here during the year, they complain about us hitting the street and hanging around the town hall but if we had a youth club then we wouldn't" (young person).*

*"Not many youth clubs round my way" (young person).*

*"[Need] more youth clubs within each community or a meeting place for different age groups" (parent).*

The current RPA will mean changes to the governance of Youth Service provision, with ESA taking over the advisory role of the current Youth Council. This provides a tangible opportunity to build upon the current strengths of the system, while at the same time investing in meeting the needs of older children and young people, those from a Catholic background and those from ethnic minorities, who are currently failing to or choosing not to engage in Youth Service provision.

## 7.8 Sports Provision

Access to, and engagement in, sporting activities is another medium through which children and young people can realise their right to play. The children and young people who participated in this review discussed their experiences of sport within both school and the community. With regard to the former, they raised the issues of both gender discrimination and differential treatment of those involved in sport, and those who are not. Both males and females expressed objections to the gender restrictions placed on available sports within schools. All felt that they should have the freedom to play any sport in school regardless of their gender:

*"School is sexist in sports; girls play hockey and netball and the boys play football and Gaelic. Tried for years to get girl's football team, we got rugby because I set it up, I got my coach to come into the school to teach it, but the teachers*

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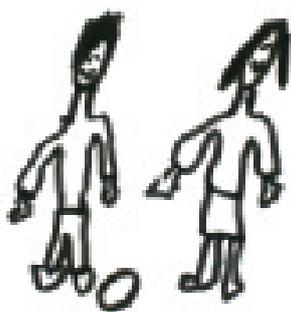
*do not like it, they think it's nothing to do with the school."*

*"Certain sports that girls can take part in and ones that boys can do – girls cannot play rugby/cricket, only hockey – teacher doesn't listen when we say what sports we want to do."*

*"Girls and boys are separate for sport – only certain sports that girls can play – boys cannot play tennis and girls are not offered rugby or cricket."*

*"In school girls are not allowed to play football – that's not fair."*

*Let boys and girls play together.*



The other key issue raised with regard to sports in schools was the perceived preferential treatment afforded to pupils involved in sports. A number of pupils felt that they were not afforded the same opportunities or treatment as those who were involved in sports within the school:

*"Tend to look at sports people as better – there's a hierarchy – if you're into netball and Gaelic that's great, but not English."*

*"A guy on the football team had the same results as me – I got held back a year, but he got to go on."*

*"In school praise is given to those who do sport – not our fault we are no good at sport."*

Physical education is a vital part of the school curriculum that plays an important role in relation to the development, health and wellbeing of children and young people. It is imperative that all children and young people feel able to engage in this aspect of school life, irrespective of their ability or 'sporting talent' and that no-one is prevented from participation in particular sporting activities, solely on the basis of their gender.

The children and young people who participated in this review were also very vocal about inadequate access to and/or the bad condition of sports facilities within their local communities. As highlighted previously, many children and young people recognised the impact of building and development, upon the availability of places to play and engage in sports:

*"There was a massive Gaelic pitch at the back of our house and one day they came and ripped down the nets and we knew nothing about it. Now they've built on it and it's gone, and they didn't even ask anyone."*

*"I want to be able to play soccer in and out of school but the community doesn't provide that right."*

*"There is only one football pitch in Glenarm and the grass is really long and it's hard to kick the ball."*

*"We have no nets in the football field, we have to use cones, we used to have nets, there are all holes on the pitch burnt by the bonfire. I would like it fixed and nets put up."*



*"Nets were taken down at the football pitch."*

*"We have a cricket pavilion but if you go near it the man shouts at you."*

Some children and young people felt doubly disadvantaged in terms of accessing sports activities and facilities, feeling that access to the limited sports facilities and activities that did exist was based on 'talent', rather than interest or need – *"you have to be very good at sports to get into clubs"*.

Statutory responsibility for both the development of policy and the promotion and central administration of sport rests with DCAL. The Department produced a draft Ten Year Strategy

for Sport and Physical Recreation in October 2007, issuing this for consultation between then and January 2008. Though not exclusively child focused, the strategy contains a number of targets specifically related to children and young people. These include establishing a baseline record by 2009 of the numbers of compulsory school age children currently engaging in two or more hours quality physical education per week and, following on from this, ensuring every child aged over eight has the opportunity to participate in at least two hours per week extra-curricular sport and physical recreation by 2014. This should be facilitated through extended schools, active schools and community sports programmes. Other targets of relevance to children and young people, timetabled for realisation by 2017, include achieving a 6% increase in the number of people with disabilities engaging in sport and physical recreation, ensuring all planning decisions follow PPS8 and ensuring 90% of the population have quality accredited multi sports facilities within 20 minutes of travel (DCAL 2007).

Identifying *"what success could look like if the Vision underpinning the Strategy is fully realised"*, the draft strategy envisions that:

*"By 2017 every pre-school child in Northern Ireland will experience quality play opportunities either at home and/or through formal play groups. The link between a sound base in physical literacy skills and the further development of the child's literacy and numeracy skills as s/he enters formal education will be better understood. An increasing number of school children will receive a minimum of two*



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hours physical education during each school week. For children aged eight years and older, this will be complemented by a further two hours of school-based extra-curricular sport and physical recreation for children of all sporting abilities. Having developed a range of transferable (fundamental) skills, schools will encourage the child's introduction to local, quality accredited sports clubs. A network of qualified coaches and teachers working in both clubs and schools will nurture the child's development. These same teachers, coaches and clubs will lay the foundations for lifelong physical activity and identify those with the potential for high performance in sport" (DCAL 2007:15).

The aspirational nature of this vision, together with the many challenges and hurdles to be overcome in order to realise it, are also explicitly recognised within the draft strategy:

*"The achievement of these aspirations will demand Herculean efforts. It needs to be recognised that overcoming longstanding systemic failures will require time, considerable investment and human resources. Realistically, actions beginning in 2007 require a long-term view and are likely to take until 2017 to realise the Vision of "a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport" ... 'Success' will be dependent on marshalling the commitment and resources of all the stakeholders in pursuit of this Vision" (DCAL 2007:15).*

At the time of writing, the final strategy has not yet been published, despite a commitment to do so in the spring of 2008. In the absence of a

final strategy, and an accompanying action plan and financial commitment, it is difficult to judge the likely extent of progress within the field over the lifespan of the strategy. What can be judged at this stage, however, is the urgent need for increased investment in the provision of sports and recreation facilities and activities in both the school and community environment, that are accessible for all young people, irrespective of age, gender, disability, location, ability or talent:

*"I would like to take part in sports but because I lip read it's hard to understand when everyone is moving, especially the coach if they are not facing you."*

*"Girls only have Camogie and Netball."*

*"There are no sport facilities within walking distance of my house."*

The impending strategy must address the many barriers that currently exist in terms of children's access to sport and physical recreation and ensure access to safe, high quality facilities and opportunities delivered at local community level. Adequate funding, together with effective inter-departmental and inter-agency working and clear lines of responsibility and accountability, are required in order to achieve this.

### 7.9 Arts and Culture

DCAL also has responsibility for policy development for culture and arts within NI. The Arts Council NI, a non-departmental public body of DCAL, is responsible for developing the arts and supporting artists and allocating funding

to projects within the arts sector. Though the remit of the Arts Council is not age-specific, the Council has developed a specific Youth Arts programme in order to promote children and young people's engagement in arts and culture:

*"The Council recognises that the arts are central to future policy for children and young people in educational, social and economic development...Engaging in the arts enriches children and young people's lives, enhances social cohesion and opens up personal and collective dialogue while providing the opportunity to learn skills which are increasingly important in our economy. These positive outcomes and outputs are achieved by the dynamism and energy that children and young people bring to the art form. The Council believes that Youth Arts is about the entitlement of all children and young people in Northern Ireland to participate in a diverse range of arts-led cultural opportunities; from direct participation in arts activity, to working with and seeing the work of creative practitioners, the Council will continue to champion and work to achieve this right. The Council ensures its funding contributes to increasing the participation of young people in the arts as audiences, performers and creators and through promoting the development of skills training and development initiatives. The Arts Council's support and resourcing of youth arts is based on the knowledge that the arts are a means to improving quality of life, enabling self-expression, enhancing learning and furthering the exploration of personal and social identity for children and young people as they grow and develop" (Arts Council 2007:2).*



The Arts Council has made significant progress in relation to the engagement of children and young people in planning processes – *"the Arts Council's new Strategy 2007–2012 and its Youth Arts Policy both recognise that young people's participation in the arts has to start from the needs and experiences of young people today, how they engage with the arts and the resources needed to support this"* (Arts Council NI/Youth Council NI 2007:4).

The Arts Council has taken proactive measures to engage children and young people in consultation processes about the current state of the arts and the future direction this should take. Ascertaining awareness of the arts, their 2007 consultation found that young people in NI had limited knowledge about what the arts were and little knowledge of art activities in their area. The consultation noted an absence of purpose-built or dedicated arts spaces and a fear of engaging in existing groups or initiatives. Young people who participated in the consultation identified communication as the key area to address in order to improve young people's access to, and participation in, the arts (Arts Council NI/Youth Council NI 2007).

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A further mechanism established to promote children and young people's participation in the arts is that of the Creative Youth Partnership (CYP), a partnership between the Arts Council NI and the ELBs, established with the aim of increasing young people's access to, and participation in, the arts. An ETI inspection of the first two years of CYP reported delivery of almost 1,000 programmes for children and young people across a range of sectors, noting the commitment from those involved, the quality of work, pastoral care and child protection procedures as some of the key strengths of the partnership. Recommending the continuation of the partnership, the report concludes, "throughout the short lifespan of CYP, there has been much good work as evidenced by the numbers of children and young people who have had the opportunity to benefit from the initiative and from the positive feedback from participants" (ETI 2007c:20).

### 7.10 Poverty and the Right to Play

Children living in poverty can be particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to play, leisure and recreational facilities. According to Monteith and McLaughlin (2004), 37% of children experiencing severe child poverty did not have access to nearby safe play areas, a significantly higher proportion than that of the general child population (21%).

As highlighted previously, restricted access to play has a major impact on the quality of life and wellbeing of children and young people:

*"For many children in Northern Ireland, especially those in poverty, access to and the affordability of good play and leisure provision poses a major problem, cutting them off from a world of fun, adventure, learning, development and wellbeing. Being excluded from social participation due to poverty can also have detrimental effects on a child or young person's sense of self-worth and belonging" (Save the Children 2007:53).*

Monteith and McLaughlin (2004:28) also found "a strong relationship between social activity exclusion and poverty for children in Northern Ireland. For each of the nine social activities included in the Northern Ireland analysis, the likelihood of exclusion was greater for those children who were living in non-severe poverty compared to children living in no poverty, and was even greater for children living in severe poverty". Examples of such social exclusion cited in the report include 33% of children living in severe poverty lacking leisure equipment, 14% being unable to take part in a hobby or leisure activity and 9% being unable to attend youth clubs or similar activities:

*"Almost one in ten (8%) children growing up in severe poverty do not have access to nurseries, playgroups or mother and toddler groups... Almost one quarter go without educational games (23%) and construction toys (23%) and more than one in three (38%) goes without a bike because parents can't afford them" (Save the Children 2007:53).*

Children living in poverty are also less likely to be able to participate in school trips and other

activities, due to the associated costs. They also tend to have less access to public sports facilities, bus services, community centres, libraries and cinemas, theatres or museums given the costs associated with accessing and using such facilities (Save the Children 2007). The cumulative effects of an experience of poverty therefore significantly hamper a child's ability to enjoy their right to play, far beyond that of other children, and must urgently be redressed.

### 7.11 Children with Disabilities and the Right to Play

*"Children with disabilities need particular assistance in gaining access to or using recreational facilities and particular stress needs to be given to inclusive forms of recreation. Children with disabilities may still be receiving special education separately from their peers... so recreation may be the only opportunity for integrated activities and is thus particularly important"* (UNICEF 2007:475).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in December 2006, stipulates that State parties should both recognise the right of persons with disabilities to take part, on an equal basis with others, in cultural life and recreational, leisure and sporting activities and take all appropriate measures to ensure realisation of this. Commenting specifically on children with disabilities, article 30 of the Convention places an onus on State parties *"to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and*

*leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system"* (UNGA 2006). General Comment Number 9, issued by the CRC in 2006 on 'the rights of children with disabilities', also observes that:

*"Play has been recognized as the best source of learning various skills, including social skills. The attainment of full inclusion of children with disabilities in the society is realized when children are given the opportunity, places and time to play with each other (children with disabilities and no disabilities). Training for recreation, leisure and play should be included for school-aged children with disabilities. Children with disabilities should be provided with equal opportunities to participate in various cultural and arts activities as well as sports. These activities must be viewed as both medium of expression and medium of realizing self-satisfying, quality of life"* (CRC 2006b:para 70/71).

In spite of the stated intention of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, many children with disabilities within NI are currently unable to enjoy their right to play. This was raised as a particular issue of concern by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2008 Concluding Observations on the UK in which it notes the particular disadvantage experienced by disabled children and young people in relation to play and calls upon the government to *"strengthen its efforts"* and ensure they have *"adequate and accessible playground spaces to exercise their play and leisure activities"* (CRC 2008:para 69).



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Considering this issue, the 'Equal Lives' Review of policy and services for people with a learning disability commented:

*"To play is one of the fundamental rights as stated in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is an urgent need to address the invisibility of disabled children in almost all the forms of play provision. For many children with a learning disability current provision is still too often inaccessible, unwelcoming and fails to meet their needs. Attitudinal or logistical barriers often currently exclude children with severe and profound disabilities, an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, severe communication difficulties or challenging behaviours, from almost all forms of publicly funded play" (DHSSPS 2005a:41).*

Reflecting on the changes and developments necessary to redress this invisibility in, and exclusion from, play, the Review further commented:

*"Policy and provision to promote play needs to take sufficient account of the very different role and form of play in the lives of children at different stages of their childhood. Many children with profound and multiple disabilities or complex health needs spend significant periods of time in hospital. Disabled children also spend time away from home using short break services and again the emphasis is all too often on care rather than play. All of these services used by children with a learning disability would benefit from more focus on play" (DHSSPS 2005a:42).*

*"Children and younger people with a learning disability should have equal access to and benefit from play and leisure opportunities including sports and the arts. The Equal Lives Review has been encouraged to learn of initiatives in each of these areas that have included children and young people with a learning disability in community based play groups, after school clubs and youth services. However, there remains a lack of locally based accessible provision particularly for children and young people with profound and multiple disabilities. This needs to be addressed by ensuring that key agencies implement plans to reach children and young people with a learning disability. Public bodies should, therefore, require that the sports, leisure and recreational services for which they have responsibility evidence that they have been inclusive by monitoring uptake of their schemes and use of their facilities" (DHSSPS 2005a:43).*

The findings of this review are echoed in the contributions of both parents/carers and professionals who participated in this review. These individuals outlined the barriers they faced when trying to access play and leisure facilities/activities for children and the impact these difficulties have on the children's wellbeing and development. Particular reference was made to the issue of accessing activities/facilities during school holidays:

*"Special needs children do not get the same number of swim lesson times as 'normal' children" (professional).*

*“There is a lack of facilities for children and young people with special needs or disabilities which cater to their needs. Parents feel that services provided for other children and young people are not adapted to make them inclusive. There is a lack of facilities which continue outside term time” (professional).*

*“Children with disabilities, learning and physical, are not provided for sufficiently in Northern Ireland to ensure their health is maintained. Through observation, many teenage children with learning difficulties are overweight because they have limited opportunity for exercise” (professional).*

*“My child is autistic and it is difficult to get access to activities. Summer schemes are limited to one week – he has been on the waiting list for months for swimming lessons. There is high demand with few people to take autistic children on” (parent).*

*“Difficulties arise because of upper age limit on using play facilities, which children with special needs do not understand. Complaints from other users about big girls using small swings etc... Suggest that parks allow one afternoon a week, one day a month dedicated to people with special needs. Parents are happy to supervise. City Council could open facilities with special days for these children” (parent).*

*“Most things are catered for term time. Not enough during the holidays especially Easter and Christmas. No one realises that two weeks’ holiday is a long time for a child with special needs” (parent).*

A number of parents of children with ASD chose to participate in this review. They outlined the specific challenges that they face in accessing appropriate play and leisure activities for their children:

*“As I have two children in the ASD spectrum there is no or very few clubs which can cope with our children outside of school eg horse riding, swimming activities, outings.”*

*“My son is a 6 year old with autism and ADHD. Only places [that are] appropriate are swimming pool, cinema with adult supervision at all times.”*

*“Two of my three children have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Leisure centres tend not to cater for those with a communication and social disorder. Particularly social activities, eg youth clubs, would need to be more structured and with greater supervision to allow access for those with ASD.”*

*“My middle child is a 15 year old autistic boy and he has nowhere appropriate to go in his free time – he has severe difficulties. There are no playgrounds that can accommodate his size, very few activities that will cater for his specific needs, and no public facilities that can be used without being greeted by tuts and stares from insensitive members of the public.”*

It should also be noted that some parents outlined positive experiences of voluntary organisations providing access to play and recreation for children with disabilities:

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*"NDCS run plenty for my son who is deaf."*

*"Our 6 year old who has autism relies on PAPA (now Autism NI) to provide a social scene for her, and others like her, who have this disability."*

*"Only activity is MENCAP swimming club on Monday evenings, which only runs during term time."*

While it is clearly beneficial to parents/carers and their children that such activities are offered by voluntary organisations, the fact that access to such activities primarily relies on provision by the voluntary sector, that varies according to region and available funding, does not represent an effective realisation of these children's right to play; nor does the fact that many such activities are segregated from mainstream provision. As highlighted most recently by the Committee in its 2008 Concluding Observations on the UK, all children with disabilities should be able to access mainstreamed facilities that are open to, and inclusive of, all children and young people irrespective of their disability status.

### 7.12 Consequences of Inadequate Play and Leisure Provision

Many of the young people who participated in this review believed there to be a direct link between lack of play and leisure facilities/activities and some young people's engagement in risk-taking or anti-social behaviour. They also observed a direct link between inadequate places to play/socialise and the public's frequently negative attitudes towards young

people. These views were also echoed by a number of the parents and professionals who participated in the review:

*"Society today appears to fear children being allowed to experience play, children are often moved on from playing in the street" (parent).*

*"It is unacceptable that children may be described as behaving 'anti-socially' when 'hanging around' when no meaningful consideration has been given to the reasons why children use the streets as meeting places – there is a real lack of age appropriate, young people friendly facilities and services that engage and stimulate young people" (professional).*

They were also echoed by the Committee in its 2008 Concluding Observations in which it notes that *"the reduction in playgrounds [that has] occurred in recent years has the effect to push children into gathering in public open spaces, a behaviour that – however – may be seen as anti-social according to the ASBOs"* (CRC 2008:para 68).

As highlighted by the Committee, young people living in communities with nowhere to go and nothing to do said they frequently ended up hanging around on the street with their friends, in the absence of any valid alternatives. They commented that their presence on the streets, particularly when in a crowd, was often perceived as threatening by others in the community, thereby creating a negative response:

*“Don’t like us hanging about – if we had something to do, we wouldn’t do this and everyone would be happy!”*

*“We don’t have a decent youth club here during the year, they complain about us hitting the street and hanging around the town hall but if we had a youth club then we wouldn’t.”*

*“Every time we play football, the next door neighbours phone the peelers – an old woman said she would phone the ‘Ra’.”*

*“There is nowhere to go. You sit around the village and people come and tell you to move on.”*

*“Can’t stand anywhere – people phone the peelers – come out and try to lift us – just for making noise and playing football.”*

*“You are standing on the street kicking a ball and all of a sudden the police arrive, a few days later BALL GAMES PROHIBITED sign went up, so we had to move away, that sign is directly opposite my house.”*

This view is reiterated by Save the Children NI, who note that “young people are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators. However, young people hanging around public spaces are often seen as a nuisance or threat and as ‘anti-social’. As a result, they are often moved on to the margins of communities, less well-lit, less public and less safe. A primary reason for hanging around on streets is a lack of leisure provision – put simply, they have nowhere to go and nothing else to do” (Save the Children 2007:56).

The link between inadequate play and leisure provision and young people hanging around the streets and/or engaging in anti-social behaviour was also clearly made by young women who participated in McAlister et al’s (2007) research. The authors note “young women in all areas made a link between a lack of appropriate youth provision, young people ‘hanging about the streets’ and anti-social behaviour. Indeed, most of those who said that they spent most of their free-time involved in underage drinking (in homes, parks or the street), related this to a lack of other activities within their local areas, or the inaccessibility of youth provision” (McAlister et al 2007:93). Hansson (2004) similarly notes the relationship between lack of opportunity for appropriate play and leisure and a propensity to engage in violence and anti-social behaviour.

Many young people who participated in this review also observed a strong link between a lack of things to do, the consequent boredom experienced and a propensity to become involved in anti-social behaviour:

*“Too many young people getting involved in certain associations (paramilitaries, drugs and drinking) which are not helping them anyway. Just because they’re bored and have nothing to do.”*

*“I used to get in trouble with the police a lot. Lots of fights and all. Because I had nothing to do I ended up taking a lot of things and drinking, but because I was bored.”*

*“Young people get blamed for anti-social behaviour, but it’s actually just boredom and lack of things to do.”*



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*“Do you blame them for drinking – there’s nothing else to do.”*

*“Nothing to do – people turn to drink and drugs or sit in house and not be active.”*

*“Not enough to do, so people vandalise – therefore, if there’s more to do, it would stop.”*

*“Get so bored you end up doing something stupid.”*

*“Nothing to do so wreck the place – bored, angry, nowhere else to go.”*

Parents and professionals who participated in this review also highlighted the relationship between a failure to meet children and young people’s play and leisure needs, their consequent boredom and frustration and engagement in risk-taking or anti-social behaviour:

*“Young people hang about the shop causing annoyance as a result of lack of facilities” (parent).*

*“Bangor is about pubs and clubs and there are no safe age-appropriate facilities for young teens. The temptation to become involved in underage drinking is immense. The PSNI are overly keen to clamp down on groups of young people but it is the council who are at fault not providing alternative facilities for young people” (parent).*

These findings are consistent with those of other studies of young people’s experiences of community life in NI in recent years, in terms of the finding that engagement in violence, disorder and/or religious conflict is frequently a consequence of the boredom experienced by young people growing up and a desire to be involved in something that will alleviate this. This was particularly noted to be the case for young people growing up in economically disadvantaged areas (Hansson 2004; Leonard 2007).

This is not to suggest that all young people with inadequate access to facilities or opportunities for play and leisure will inevitably be drawn into crime or anti-social behaviour – that is far from the reality, as illustrated by the fact that the vast majority of young people who participated in this review refrained from such behaviour in spite of having a lack of positive diversions within their spare time – but to highlight that the provision of further play and leisure opportunities for young people, if relevant and appropriate, could have a valid contribution to make in terms of diverting them away from involvement in less positive activities. The provision of adequate and appropriate recreational space and activities could also address the ‘perceived’ anti-social behaviour of other children and young people who innocently hang around in public spaces within their communities.

### 7.13 Conclusion

Play is not a privilege; it is a right. All children and young people should have access to adequate and appropriate play, leisure and

recreation opportunities within their local communities. This is not currently the case within NI where many children and young people continue to be denied their article 31 right to access safe, age-appropriate recreational facilities, activities and spaces within their local area, on the grounds of safety, age, cost, availability and accessibility.

Children’s right to play has not, as a general rule, featured highly on the political agenda and this has inevitably impacted on children and young people’s lived experiences, however, recent developments would indicate greater political recognition of, and commitment to, the need to ensure children enjoy their article 31 right to play:

*“Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood. For many years childhood in Northern Ireland has been lived as conflict, division and invisibility. This new vision of childhood in Northern Ireland is ‘lived as play’ (Plato); where play is valued and promoted by families and is planned for and resourced to ensure children are visible and communities are vibrant and filled with play” (OFMDFM 2006b:7).*

It is imperative that the government take immediate and comprehensive action to translate this admirable rhetoric into a lived reality for all children and young people within NI and that they embrace the Committee’s most recent call to strengthen their efforts *“to guarantee the right of the child 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” (CRC 2008:para 69).*

As highlighted throughout this chapter, there are a number of key areas in relation to children and young people’s experiences of play, recreation, sport and the arts that must be addressed in order for children’s right to play to be fully and effectively realised within NI. These priority action areas, and the developments required within them, are summarised below.

## 7.14 Priority Action Areas

- The production of time-bound and adequately resourced action plans that outline how the implementation of the positive rhetoric contained within the Play Policy will be effectively translated into reality for all children and young people within NI, in terms of both the quantity and quality of play provision and young people’s access to it. If current plans for the production of separate action plans for under 12s and those aged 12 and above are to be pursued, it is imperative that the production of both plans proceed in tandem with each other, sit together within an overarching framework and contain complementary aims and strategies.
- The realisation of the aims of the Play Policy will not be achieved without increased financial investment. It is imperative that adequate resourcing is sourced and ring-fenced for the lifespan of the action plans.
- Greater coordination and cooperation across all government departments directly responsible for the provision of play, sports, arts and culture facilities and opportunities and those whose mandate impacts upon



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children's potential access to such facilities and opportunities. The Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People could adopt an oversight role with regard to ensuring consistency and inter-connectedness between the many policies and strategies that impact upon children's right to play.

- Consistent application of the provisions of Planning Policy Statement 8 relating to the provision of green space and play facilities in the assessment of planning applications. Planning Policy Statement 8 should be revised to incorporate an additional requirement on developers to involve children and young people in the design of residential areas and play space.
  - Ensuring the impending Sport and Physical Recreation Strategy addresses the many barriers that currently exist in terms of children's access to sport and physical recreation and ensures access to safe, high quality facilities and opportunities delivered at local community level. Adequate funding, together with effective inter-departmental and inter-agency working and clear lines of responsibility and accountability, must also be delivered alongside this.
  - The current Review of Public Administration offers an unprecedented opportunity to clarify and enhance the duties of local councils in relation to the provision and maintenance of play space and facilities. It is imperative that the opportunities offered by the Review of Public Administration in this regard be fully availed of in the coming months.
- Clarification of the duties of each council in relation to play, explicitly stated within the legislation governing their powers.
  - As the new councils will have responsibility for community planning under the Review of Public Administration, it is essential that a statutory requirement be placed on them to involve children and young people in the planning process, in an appropriate and meaningful manner. It is also imperative that adequate monitoring systems are introduced at council level to ascertain and monitor both the quantity and quality of play and leisure facilities, and spaces and opportunities available to children and young people in their local community. This information should be collated centrally in order to ensure equality of opportunity and access across NI.
  - Greater efforts to identify and implement appropriate mechanisms for addressing the ongoing religious segregation in play and leisure facilities/activities. Similar mechanisms must be identified and implemented in order to address the continued exclusion of many children with disabilities and/or those living in poverty from play and leisure opportunities. The provision of accessible and integrated play space should be a mandatory requirement on all play and leisure providers.
  - Greater investment in the provision of more affordable, comprehensive and flexible transport systems in rural areas.



