

# **PLAY AND LEISURE POLICY STATEMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

## **FOREWORD**

We are delighted to publish this Play and Leisure Policy statement which sets out the commitment of the Northern Ireland Executive towards ensuring a happier and healthier future for all our children and young people.

All children and young people deserve an enjoyable childhood – no matter what constraints they face. Our job is to help them do that by providing accessible opportunities and affordable facilities.

Play is a powerful medium for teaching values to children of all ages and we can harness the many benefits of play to help build a safe and tolerant society for everyone living in Northern Ireland.

We can all learn from our children and young people. We will engage with them, ensuring that their voice matters on how they think our communities should be shaped.

We also look forward to working closely with our many partners in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors on the development of the implementation plans which will follow this statement. In recognising

the very different needs of the age groups, we are planning two separate implementation plans: one for 0-11 years and one for 12-18 years. Work on these will begin this year with a view to consulting on them in 2009. The membership of these groups will be drawn from a wide range of stakeholders.

We are grateful to all those adults and children who responded so positively to the consultation last year. Their endorsement has confirmed our intention to spearhead this exciting new period for children and young people.

**Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson, MP, MLA**  
**Junior Minister**

**Gerry Kelly, MLA**  
**Junior Minister**

**The vision for play is:**

**to recognise, respect and  
resource play is to  
recognise, respect and value  
childhood**

We offer this policy statement to reflect the value that we, in the Northern Ireland Executive, place on play and leisure to the lives of children and young people in our society. It reflects our commitment to those children and young people and to their right to engage in play and leisure activities.

A play and leisure policy for Northern Ireland will be anchored within, and will help deliver on, the aims of the ten-year strategy for children and young people. Our aim is to improve current play and leisure provision for all children and young people aged 0 – 18 years<sup>1</sup>.

The ten-year strategy has its foundation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the UK Government in December 1991, and which recognises the importance of play and leisure activities for the child.

In seeking to ensure full implementation of Article 31 of the Convention, we intend that this policy statement should contribute to creating an environment that respects and progresses the right of children and young people to play and underpins a strategy for providing for children and young people's play and leisure needs.

Socially, there is growing interest in the area of children's play. Opinion polls and surveys show a strong demand from adults and children alike for 'places to go and things to do' for children and

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the play and leisure policy, a child/young person is defined as someone up to 18 years of age. For children who are/have been in care or children with a disability, the age limit extends to 21 years.

young people. Politicians and opinion formers are interested in exploring how good play and leisure opportunities can help improve quality of life and safety in neighbourhoods, tackle obesity, promote children's health and well being, support children's development and build community cohesion. There is a growing view that good play experiences are not only an essential part of every childhood, but also a key public responsibility and an expression of our shared social obligations towards children.

We recognise that particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as those in poverty and those with disabilities, may need additional support to gain maximum benefit from play. We will therefore ensure that the development of the implementation plans takes account of the needs of a range of vulnerable groups.

The Play and Leisure Policy for Northern Ireland, at present, does not include play experiences and opportunities taking place in funded playgroups, nursery classes or school settings. These are covered by the Pre-school Curricular Guidance and Northern Ireland Curriculum documents. It is anticipated the use of play and leisure facilities in school environments by local communities will however be considered when the policy moves into the Implementation Phase.

Every society which is aiming to build a better future needs to invest culturally and economically in its children. A community that is confident about itself and confident about its future will ensure that

children are a highly visible part of its society and are given the best possible start in life.

We recognise the key role parents and grandparents play as gate keepers and first informal educators of children. The DHSSPS draft family support strategy – Families Matter - aims to help families and parents with support when they need it, so they can raise children and young people to flourish and achieve their potential. Although the strategy does not include specific references to the promotion of play, through initiatives supported under the strategy such as parenting education, it complements the ethos of the Play and Leisure Policy in achieving positive outcomes for children. It is intended that parents and grandparents will be actively involved in the development of the implementation plans.

We also recognise the valuable contribution which local government already makes to play and leisure provision for children and young people and we consider our colleagues in local government to be vital players in taking this policy forward. We will be working closely with them on developing implementation plans and will engage with them on resourcing issues to seek the best way forward.

Play is not the responsibility of a single service agency or provider. Whilst the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has taken the lead in coordinating policy on play and leisure, all government departments are committed to contributing to the development of the policy and to future action plans. It is intended

through this play and leisure policy for Northern Ireland that, in the context of a finite public purse and competing agendas, the crucial role of Play and Leisure in children's lives is understood and afforded the appropriate consideration.

## **How play<sup>2</sup> will contribute to the aims of the ten-year strategy for children and young people**

Play is central to children's lives and an evidence based policy on play will have a significant impact on the positive outcomes for children and young people we committed to delivering through the ten-year strategy. The ten-year strategy for children and young people published by OFMDFM in June 2006 sets out six high level outcomes, namely:

- Healthy;
- Enjoying, Learning and Achieving;
- Living in Safety and with Stability;
- Experiencing Economic and Environmental Well-being;
- Contributing Positively to Community and Society
- Living in a Society which respects their rights.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'Play' is used throughout this section to refer to both play and leisure.

The section below explores how play links directly to these high level outcomes.

## **Healthy**

Play is crucial to children's health and development. There is currently major concern about the physical health of children. Much of this concern focuses around low levels of physical exercise. Children's play, especially outdoors, offers many opportunities for physical activity. For children to get the maximum developmental and experiential benefit from their play they need to have access to a range of play experiences and opportunities and be involved in different and distinctive types of play.

Play opportunities enhance the mental health of children and young people. Research highlights the importance of children being able to play, take risks and to use their own initiative. It is essential for them to have opportunities to practice making and consolidating friendships and to deal with and resolve conflict – these are the basic skills needed to become “emotionally literate”.

The Fit Futures<sup>3</sup> task force for Northern Ireland in examining the options for the prevention in the rise in levels of obesity in children and young people highlights the role of play in developing in young children an active and healthy lifestyle. Government departments and agencies have a major role in ensuring opportunities for active

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<sup>3</sup> DHSSPS published March 2006

play are available and accessible to children. Research indicates that the levels of obesity in children and young people are increasing in Northern Ireland year on year at a huge cost to individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. Fit Futures calls for investment in and joined planning for the creation of an environment where children are motivated and supported to access a range of readily available, quality, enjoyable opportunities to be active and to eat healthily.

It is essential that the needs of sick children both in hospital and in the community are also recognised and the expertise of Play Specialists in delivering the role and working with both children and their families actively encouraged.

For children and young people who are sick or have a long-term medical condition, play acts as a means of communication for that child or young person. It can assist the child or young person to act through a situation and overcome their fears and anxieties and also act as a relief from traumatic, stressful experiences.

Play can be used to prepare a child for a medical procedure and also as a support and distraction during and following the procedure. It also has a vital role in helping a child or young person understand and adjust to their illness/condition and in many cases explaining how to manage and cope with the diagnosis.

Play is not an optional extra in the treatment and management of sick children and young people but an essential and vital part of the child's whole recovery as well as development. Therefore opportunities for play for sick children, and the specialists who deliver this role, need to be integral when providing and delivering care.

### **Enjoying, learning and achieving**

The essence of play is fun, enjoyment and achievement. It is widely accepted that in early childhood most of children's learning is acquired through play. When playing, children define their own goals and interests, decide what is success and failure and pursue these goals in their own way. Play allows children and young people to explore boundaries, test abilities, use initiative, take risks and make mistakes without fear of failure. Motivation for play, exploration and discovery comes from the child. When fully absorbed in play, children feel satisfied with what they have achieved. Play is a child's work; the playful child is an achieving child.

Play promotes increasing levels of flexibility for children and young people. Advantages associated with children's play include the development of problem-solving skills, supporting their language development and literacy, developing their social skills, expressing emotions, developing imagination and creative interests and abilities.

The Consultation on the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland, 2006 – 2016 supports the value of play for children in developing physical literacy and promoting lifelong physical activity from a young age.

The Northern Ireland education system has recognised the value and importance of play for learning with the introduction of The Foundation Stage, recognising that learning is most effective when children learn through enriched play-based experiences, building on their natural curiosity and wonder at the world. The Early Years Strategy will ensure age appropriate play continues to be at the heart of child development and well-being.

This reinforces the point that play is about having fun: it needs no other end point and it is important that we work to create spaces, both in rural and urban areas, and in a range of settings where children are enjoying themselves and having fun.

### **Contributing positively to community and society**

Play makes an important contribution to community life. It is a crucial medium for social interaction and for forming, maintaining and negotiating relationships. Children learn from the way others and the environment react to their play, the effects of their actions and value others place on them. Play helps a child develop their skills and knowledge and ensures they are valued as active community

members. Children contribute to the community and to society when they are visible, when the environment within which they live maximises all opportunities for play – play is a significant part of children’s contribution to community and society. Facilities used for play are frequently seen as focal points for communities and offer opportunities for real social interaction for children and for the wider community and supports the development of a greater sense of community spirit.

### **Living in safety and with stability**

Good play provision and appropriately designed spaces for children create a positive environment and contribute to the sense of well being and security children have with their surroundings. Children have a greater sense of ownership and belonging and are more likely to be protective of the places that are designed to meet their needs. Research shows that play can make a valuable contribution to reducing children’s behaviour that is socially unacceptable, thereby creating a safer and more stable environment for all children and young people.

Where communities and environments are configured to maximise informal contact among neighbours, particularly through well developed and appropriate opportunities for play, the streets are safer, children are taken better care of, people are generally happier

with their surroundings, and there is increased social participation in local activities and reduced risk of crime, graffiti and violence.

### **Experiencing economic and environmental well-being**

There is now overall agreement on the role of play in the contribution to the development and sustaining the sort of human and social capital needed to support economic and environmental well being. It is more beneficial in terms of social and economic development to take a broad view of the way in which skills are produced in a modern economy and to encourage a greater focus on non-institutional and non formal sources of skill formation to produce a variety of skills that are more useful to a modern economy. Scholars refer to a characteristic of skills and ability formation whereby more able people acquire more skills and more skilled people become more able. For more robust economic models, policy and investment needs to focus on those areas that address the ways in which children acquire skills and develop ability: central to this focus is play.

## **Living in a society which respects their rights**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child underpins the right of every child to play.

Patricia Lewsley, the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland has emphasised children and young people's right to play and the government's responsibility to act.

*“Play is a vital part of children’s development, contributing to growing social and educational skills, and has benefits in terms of improved physical development, such as reducing the risk of obesity and improving mental health.*

*Safe, engaging and appropriate facilities must be designed, taking into account the views and experiences of young people themselves, not just handed down from on high. Appropriate play policy from Government, as well as local authority action, can provide the framework for these facilities to be developed.”*

(Patricia Lewsley, Sept 2007.)

## **Moving forward.**

Whilst the Play and Leisure Policy is clearly aimed at all children and young people, we feel that to reflect the varying and different needs of the age groups, it is necessary to develop the implementation plans in two phases.

Therefore, two implementation groups will be established shortly and will run concurrently. One group will focus on the 0-11 age group and the second on the 12-18 age group. Their key tasks will be to develop the respective policy implementation plans. These will be issued to stakeholders for consultation in 2009.