



Office of the

**First Minister and  
Deputy First Minister**

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**Play and Leisure Implementation Plan  
Narrative**

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## **Foreword**

*'The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens.'*

**David Lloyd George (1926)**


This policy and implementation plan represents the starting point in the N.I Executive's ambitious aim of offering all children and young people here access to a range of quality play and leisure opportunities which support their development, their enjoyment and their growth. The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan is intended to be a working document, a document which will respond to changing needs over time, resulting in measurable improvements in line with identified objectives.

The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan aims not only to improve communication and action between government departments and other groups and agencies, but also to promote and render more effective inter and cross departmental relationships in order to achieve the plan's aim and objectives.

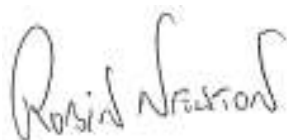
The implementation plan aims to change radically the way we think about and provide for children and young people's play. We recognise that this policy challenges both all those involved in its formulation and those organisations, agencies and groups that believe in the value of play and children's entitlement to quality play and leisure opportunities. We hope that agencies will take this plan into account whenever decisions are made that could or should affect children's play and leisure opportunities, either directly or indirectly.



**Rt Hon Peter D. Robinson MLA**  
**First Minister**



**Martin McGuinness MP MLA**  
**deputy First Minister**



**Robin Newton MLA**  
**Junior Minister**



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

## **INTRODUCTION - THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY AND LEISURE**

Both play and leisure are vital components of a child's life. A child or young person's capacity for positive development may be inhibited or constrained if they are denied access to a range of stimulating play and leisure opportunities. Play and leisure are therefore essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, as well as for intellectual, educational development and achievement.

Through play and leisure children and young people explore the physical and social environment; test out ideas and concepts and learn how to deal with situations that trouble or frighten them. Play helps children to develop self-confidence; a sense of themselves as individuals; enables them to make choices and to learn the connection between choice and consequences.

The best play and leisure provision is designed to offer children and young people access to a wide range of experiences in settings which support acceptable levels of risk.

Play is satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child. Play may or may not involve equipment, be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, be done with other people or on one's own, have an end product or not, be light hearted or very serious.

Through this implementation plan we aim to ensure that play and leisure opportunities are created which allow children and young people to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment within challenging settings, free from unacceptable levels of risk.

In aiming to achieve this, we will at all times, seek to ensure that the child or young person retains choice and control over their own play and leisure experience as far as is possible.

The plan should be read in conjunction with the Play and Leisure Policy Statement published in January 2009. For the purposes of the plan 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.

### **Benefits to engagement in play and leisure**

Evidence<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the lifelong benefits which are derived from play and leisure in helping to reduce the stress of either work or study for children and adults alike. Play and leisure offers individuals an opportunity to refresh, to have fun, to socialise, to learn new skills and to widen knowledge and understanding.

Through play and leisure children and young people are able to access opportunities which support social bonding, active citizenship and community cohesion. Play and leisure gives children the opportunity to increase their understanding of the world around them and can be a vehicle for inter-generational sharing and understanding.

As previously noted research has highlighted that access to play and leisure is key to healthy, happy children and young people and brings a breadth of personal benefits to the individual which impact upon broader society<sup>2</sup> including:

- positive physical and mental health development;
- supporting the development of brain capacity in early years;
- supporting a connection with nature and the environment;
- supporting broad holistic development incorporating areas such as physical literacy, cognitive skills and creativity;
- providing opportunities for children and young people to assess and manage risk for themselves.

### **Barriers to Play and Leisure**

Despite the many benefits associated with play and leisure, many of our children and young people face restrictions on their play and leisure opportunities on a daily basis.

Heavy traffic and congested roads; a loss of public open space; parental fears relating to child safety; a loss of informal supervision as a result of parents working and a historical under-investment in parks and playgrounds have all combined to reduce opportunities for play and leisure across many communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, L. L., and Smith, E.A. (1988) "Leisure: An overlooked component of Health Promotion", *Journal of Public Health* 79(2) 44-48

<sup>2</sup> Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008) "Play for a Change: Play, Policy and Practice A Review of Contemporary Perspectives", Play England

In addition, children and young people face further barriers which restrict access to play and leisure, including:

- A lack of tolerance and respect for children and young people in society;
- A lack of access to, and conflicts over the use of local spaces and places for play and leisure, in both rural and urban areas;
- The conflicting time pressures and constraints associated with modern living;
- Limited opportunities for inclusion and integration of children with disabilities or additional needs;
- Sedentary lifestyles, exacerbated by the growth in technology; and
- The limiting impact of poverty and other social conditions<sup>3</sup>.
- Contact, at an early age, with the criminal justice system

Whilst it is agreed that play and age-appropriate leisure activities are essential to a child's physical and emotional development they are often an aspect missing from the lives of children who come into contact with the criminal justice system. Introduction to such activities, even at a late stage, can be therapeutic through building confidence, empathy and teamwork. Play and leisure therefore form important elements in programmes aimed at diverting children and young people away from crime or further offending. They include activities that are informal and fun through to more challenging activities that promote personal achievement through, for example, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. We have the support of the Department of Justice on this and will work closely with them to realise.

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<sup>3</sup> Beunderman, J., Hannon, C., and Bradwell, P. (2007) "Seen and Heard: Reclaiming the public realm with children and young people". London: Demos

## **SECTION 1: THE CASE FOR A PLAY AND LEISURE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

### **1.1 Why do we need a Play and Leisure Implementation Plan?**

The impact of, and the cross-cutting nature of play and leisure has become increasingly recognised, both globally and nationally, as a priority area for both government and for broader society.

Government departments, local councils, statutory organisations and communities have become increasingly aware of the important role of play and leisure in improving outcomes for children and young people.

In recognition of this, in February 2009, the Northern Ireland Executive published a Play and Leisure Policy Statement which set out its commitment to ensuring a happier and healthier future for all of our children and young people.

The Play and Leisure Policy Statement is firmly anchored within, and is recognised as a key driver in seeking to achieve the aims of the ten-year children and young people's Strategy '**Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge**'<sup>4</sup>

Underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup> (UNCRC), '**Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge**' recognises the importance of play and leisure in improving outcomes for all children and young people across its six identified focus areas of:

- Health;
- Enjoyment, learning and achieving;
- Living in safety and with stability;
- Experiencing economic and environmental well-being;
- Contributing positively to community and society; and
- Living in a society which respects their rights.

We recognise that through play and leisure and the benefits it can bring about, there is an opportunity to contribute to all six outcomes of 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge'. Equally, we recognise that by addressing wider issues connected to the six outcomes, we can

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<sup>4</sup> "Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge", Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) (2006)

<sup>5</sup> UNCRC ratified by the UK Government in December 1991

collectively increase the ability of children and young people to secure their right to play and leisure.

This implementation plan outlines how the Executive will deliver on its Play and Leisure policy vision, which is:

***“to recognise, respect and resource play is to recognise, respect and value childhood”.***

To realise the UNCRC (1989), in particular Article 31, this plan will contribute to creating a society that respects and progresses the right of all children and young people to access play and leisure.

“Every child has the right to rest and leisure,  
and to engage in play and recreational  
activity appropriate to the age of the child  
and to participate freely in cultural life and  
the arts”  
***(UNCRC, Article 31 part 1)***

Underpinned by the active participation and engagement of children, young people and a range of cross-sectoral stakeholders, the plan aims to provide a broad mechanism for improving play and leisure opportunities, through:

- raising public awareness about the benefits of play and leisure for children and young people;
- improving the quality of, and enhancing access to existing play and leisure services;
- supporting the development of new innovations in play and leisure;
- utilising public spaces for play and leisure;
- reflective professional practice and workforce development.

We believe that every child and young person needs, and is entitled to, play and leisure. Through this implementation plan we will strive to create opportunities that will allow children and young people to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment within challenging settings free from unacceptable levels of risk; at all times giving key importance to the child's choice and control over their own experience.



If we are to achieve our aims it is critical that play and leisure provision is welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, economic or social circumstances, background or origin, or individual capacities and abilities. Through this plan we will work to ensure that play and leisure provision is inclusive, meeting the needs of all children and young people in both supervised and non-staffed situations.

Although UNCRC article 31 focuses attention on the child's right to Play and Leisure, through Play and Leisure, we can contribute to the child's ability to enjoy other UNCRC rights such as the right to health (article 24) the child's opinion (article 12) the right to freedom of assembly (article 15) the right to inclusion for children with a disability (article 23).

## **1.2 What does the Implementation plan look like?**

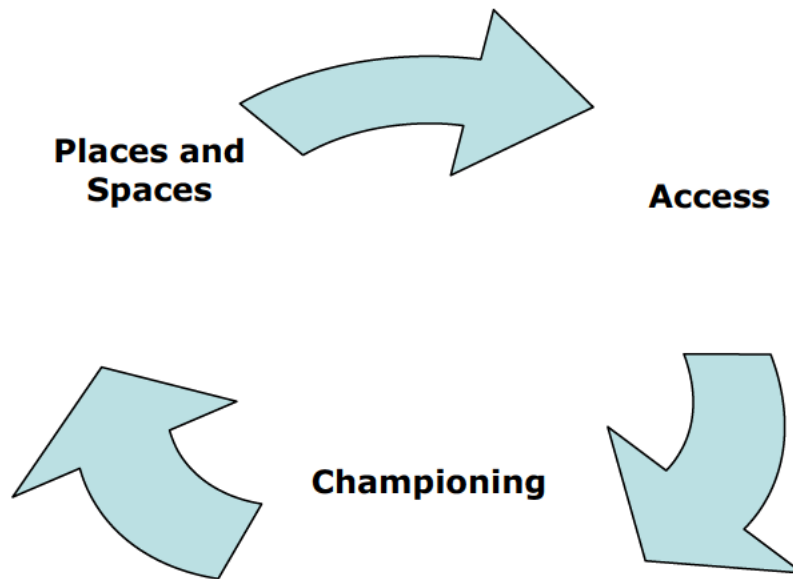
This document has been set out in 3 sections, with each section providing further detail as outlined below:

***Section 1*** – Outlining the ***context and purpose***, making clear what the Play and Leisure implementation plan is about.

***Section 2***- Explains the ***key components*** of the plan.

This section looks in particular at how play and leisure is defined and outlines the underpinning principles and ideas that have to date guided the process of development. This section also outlines the three key areas of work to be undertaken in a bid to secure child friendly communities:

- Places and Spaces for Play and Leisure
- Access to Play and Leisure
- Championing for play and Leisure



Aligned with these key areas the plan considers a number of cross cutting issues, which include:

- Continuous Professional and Workforce development;
- Meeting the particular needs of groups of children (i.e. children with disabilities and children from migrant communities);
- The risk benefit debate;
- The active participation of children and young people

**Section 3** - Outlines the **key activities** to be undertaken, alongside the monitoring systems to be put in place and the identification of those with lead responsibility for realising the plan.

### **1.3 Who is the Implementation Plan for?**

Over recent years, play and leisure has become increasingly recognised as a cross cutting issue, impacting at both a social policy and operational delivery level across all government departments and statutory bodies.

In developing this plan we have recognised that no one organisation (statutory, voluntary or private) has the authority, the power or the resources to meet in full the objectives contained within the Play and Leisure Implementation Plan. With this in mind the implementation plan

has been developed by a multi-agency group made up of key stakeholders. For a list of sub-group members please see **Appendix A**.

If we are to successfully deliver the actions required to bring about change and improvement, consideration must be given as to how we can best pool resources and work together more closely. Partnership working to jointly deliver key outcomes will be critical to the successful implementation of the play and leisure implementation plan.

The plan recognises that many stakeholders have played, and continue to play, a significant role in the realisation of play and leisure at a number of levels. Many organisations, including departments have had a key role to play in the provision, delivery and maintenance of play and leisure services and sites. We do recognise of course that we are not starting from scratch. Departments have already begun to recognise the real benefits which can be realised through play and to invest in it. For example considerable resources have been provided under Neighbourhood Renewal to develop or improve the community play and leisure facilities in these areas. In the last three years (07/08 – 09/10) almost £9m has been provided from the Neighbourhood Renewal budget to provide new or enhance existing, play and leisure facilities.

It is envisaged that this implementation plan will be used by a broad range of stakeholders including Government Departments, local councils, statutory and voluntary organisations, the private sector, local community groups, parents, carers and children and young people.

The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan is scheduled to run until 2016 in line with the 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People, 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge'. OFMDFM will co-ordinate the development of progress reports to monitor implementation and work closely with the lead departments and agencies identified against the actions in the plan.

## **SECTION 2: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN KEY COMPONENTS**

### **2.1 Defining Play and Leisure**

The terms 'play' and 'leisure' can mean different things to different people. In developing the implementation plan the sub-group agreed the following definition:

'The right to play and leisure is an intrinsic entitlement of childhood (Article 31, UNCRC). Play is a natural and universal drive in childhood.

Play and leisure is an essential element and contributory factor to supporting children's physical and emotional well-being, growth, learning and development.

Play and leisure can support children's creativity and cultural awareness.

Play and leisure can be structured, non-structured, formal and non-formal.

Through play and leisure children and young people explore the world around them and learn to take responsibility for their own choices.'

It is important to recognise that the dividing line between what constitutes 'play' activity and what constitutes 'leisure' activity can often be blurred. Activities which are seen as being part of 'play' for younger children are often seen by older young people as 'leisure' and vice versa.

The most commonly accepted definition describes play as "Freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child. It can be fun or serious...by playing children learn and develop as individuals and as members of the community"<sup>6</sup>

Through play, children explore the world around them and make meaning of it for their own lives. When children are given the freedom to follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons play can become a hugely powerful tool.

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes, B. and King, F. (1984)

The term leisure is most often used to describe a period of recreational time spent engaged in an activity that is enjoyable to the individual. This may include a diverse range of activities which can be fun or serious, ranging from attending organised events to meeting with friends or going to the cinema.

## 2.2 The Underlying Principles

Consistent with 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge' the following principles underpin the Play and Leisure implementation plan:

- **Accessibility:** There should be sufficient provision of, and transport to and from, places and spaces for play and leisure to meet the needs of children and young people;
- **Affordability:** Costs associated with play and leisure should be affordable, enabling children and young people to access provision and opportunities;
- **Flexibility:** service providers should be flexible in delivering play and leisure opportunities to meet the needs of children & young people based on their views;
- **Diversity:** Through play and leisure, children and young people should have access to a diverse range of people, places, spaces, opportunities and experiences.
- **Integration:** Play and leisure services and opportunities should support all children & young people to participate fully in building community cohesion;
- **Inclusion:** all children & young people irrespective of race, ethnic origin, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion or age should have an equal opportunity to be involved in play and leisure;
- **Quality:** all play & leisure activities and places should be fit for purpose and meet quality standards;
- **Participation:** all children & young people have the opportunity to participate actively in decisions that may affect their play and leisure.

## 2.3 Child and Young Person friendly Communities

The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan seeks at its core to build children and young person friendly communities.

A child and young person friendly community is one in which children and young people are active participants; their voices and opinions

taken into consideration, influencing and informing decision making processes.

*"A child-friendly city is a city, or any local system of governance, committed to fulfilling children's rights. It is a city where the voices, needs, priorities and rights of children are an integral part of public policies, programmes and decisions. It is, as a result, a city that is fit for all"*

*Child Friendly Cities Framework for Action  
(UNICEF, 2004)*

As detailed earlier in this document, there exist many obstacles which preclude children and young people's play within many communities, ranging from heavy traffic, to parental fears for safety and poorly kept or maintained public spaces. In many of our neighbourhoods children and young people have limited opportunities for play and leisure resulting in a loss of the enjoyment, freedom, confidence and the independence that this activity provides.

As a further consequence, many communities lack the positive experience of seeing children and young people hanging out and playing in public spaces.

The sight and sound of children playing and having fun is a sign of a healthy, vibrant community. Children and young people are entitled to use shared public space and should be encouraged to do so. Through this plan we want to create the right conditions for the development of child friendly communities which demonstrate respect for children and young people and value them as part of a wider community. We want our public spaces to be places where individual children and young people and the wider community are at ease with each other.

Through the realisation of the actions contained within this plan we will begin to develop 'child and young person friendly communities', evidenced by:

### **Spaces and places**

- Well maintained parks and open spaces which encourage and support play and leisure;
- Local neighbourhoods that are designed and planned with children and young people;

- Communities in which children and young people have a clear stake in the use and designation of public spaces; and
- Neighbourhoods in which children, young people, families and communities take an active role in the development of local play and leisure spaces.

### **Access to Places and spaces**

- That are welcoming, attractive and engaging for all including disabled children, children with additional needs and children from minority groups;
- In which all children and young people can move around in and be safe. Where they can be creative and experience nature
- Where routes to and from play and leisure spaces for children and young people are safe and accessible
- Which give children and young people the opportunity to play freely in their local neighbourhoods'. Local streets, estates, green spaces, parks and town centres

### **Championing**

As evidenced throughout this document, research and engagement with children and young people has consistently highlighted the important role of play and leisure in their lives<sup>7</sup>.

Where children and young people are actively engaged within the decisions which impact upon the community, they often offer many practical and strategic suggestions for the improvement of play and leisure which impact on, and influence services. Through this implementation plan we aim to place children and young people centrally within our services; our organisations; our families and our communities.

In seeking to achieve our aims, this implementation plan will create and support opportunities for children and young people to express their views freely on all of the matters which affect them, and will ensure that those views are given due weight of consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> (Kilkelly, U.; Kilpatrick, R.; Lundy, L.; Moore, L.; Scraton, P.; Davey, C.; Dwyer, C. & McAlister, S. (2004) "Childrens Rights in Northern Ireland", Belfast, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and Queens University Belfast) (McAlister, S., Scraton, P., Haydon, D. (2009) "Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Marginalisation and conflict in Northern Ireland", Belfast, Queens University/Save the Children/Prince's Trust).

## **2.4 Partnership Working for Play and leisure**

The Play and Leisure Implementation Plan has been developed to reflect the ethos of partnership working, aiming to achieve a coordinated and multi-disciplinary approach to play and leisure provision, strengthening working relations between the key children and young people's service providers in Northern Ireland.

In seeking to deliver the implementation plan it is proposed that local play and leisure partnerships be established. The pooling of financial and non-financial resources and expertise would ensure that play and leisure services, opportunities and experiences are grounded in the needs of local communities.

Through such an approach it is our belief that we can better support a culture in which service providers:

- have a greater awareness and appreciation of the impact their actions have on wider agendas;
- can support each other in delivering common goals; and
- can maximise resources so as to add value to the opportunities available to children and young people.

## **2.5 MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

Monitoring and evaluation involves looking at the individual parts of the implementation plan including the outcomes and targets. Understandably, many of the high level outcomes are difficult to measure and are not necessarily quantifiable. Measurement may often be through feedback from young people and ongoing monitoring of their views about the play and leisure facilities in their local communities. OFMDFM will however be developing an indicator set which will go some way towards measuring the delivery of the outcomes.

However, integrated planning for play and leisure outcomes is a relatively new concept it is therefore likely for some trial and error to occur. An important consideration will be meeting levels of expectation. The implementation plan sets out a timetable of actions so periodic checking will be crucial, the reality is that some aspects will be quite easy to implement whereas others will be quite challenging and may require further time for realisation.

OFMDFM will take responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the implementation plan. The first review will take place one year after the publication of the agreed plan.



**PART 3: THE IMPLEMENTAION PLAN – attached as separate document**

## **Appendix A - Play and Leisure Implementation**

### **Plan: Main Group Members**

- Anti Poverty Unit, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)
- Arts Council
- Belfast City Council
- Chief Leisure Officers Association
- Department of Education
- Derry City Council
- Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL)
- Department of Employment and Learning
- Department of the Environment (DoE) Planning Service
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)
- Early Years
- Education Training Inspectorate (ETI)
- Include Youth
- Multi Cultural Resource Centre
- Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA)
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)
- Nursery School Sector
- PlayBoard
- Police Service of Northern Ireland Community Involvement
- Post Primary Sector
- Primary School Sector
- Sports NI
- Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC)
- Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster
- Youth Council