

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First
Minister

A consultation paper on
'A Play Policy for Northern Ireland'

Findings from the workshop consultation
exercise with parent focus groups

Submitted to Office of the First Minister and Deputy First
Minister

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Context with Process and Rationale

The Office of the First Minister and Deputy Minister are consulting on 'A Play Policy for Northern Ireland and are seeking parents' views about what would encourage children and young people to be able to enter into meaningful play.

The information provided by parents will help to shape the final published play policy. The Play Policy will be anchored within and will deliver on the aims of the 10-year Strategy for Children and Young People. The strategy includes strategic goals in key areas affecting children and young people and takes into account the role of parents and families. It also examines the scope for achieving a more joined up approach within Government to children's issues.

To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately two hours for use with the parent focus groups.

The programme provided four distinct elements:

Exercise 1 invites parents to consider how children play today, the value of play and how does play today differ from the way parents use to play.

Exercise 2 is designed to find out what parents thoughts are of the 'vision for play in Northern Ireland' within the context of the Play Policy for Northern Ireland.

Exercise 3 covers priority areas identified to deliver the vision.

Exercise 4 is the final exercise and covers Equality Impact Assessment and seeks parent's views on the promotion of Equality for All.

The Parenting Forum NI used an internal facilitator for the focus group consultation workshops. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and the facilitator was chosen accordingly. The consultation workshop focus groups were well attended and parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on the crucial role of play in children's lives.

Consultation Methodology

A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach in collecting and collating the views of parents.

The pack also included information for parents on the purpose of the consultation workshops and how the information will help shape the final Play Policy for Northern Ireland and develop the understanding of the crucial role of play in children's lives today. User-friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents the questions on service provision on which their views were being sought. Focus groups were chosen as the data gathering method because this will bring parents together in a way which allowed them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern. They also made effective use of the resources available. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum NI was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore parents were consulted from differing socio- economic backgrounds.

Quantitative information was collected from the focus group parents. Twenty-six parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of 54 children. The focus groups were held at a time that would most suit the parents, transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

The groups, which proceeded, were located as follows:

Orana SureStart, Newry, including representatives from DELTA Parent Group
Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast, including representative from Bulrush Day Nursery
Augher Parent and Toddler Group, including representatives from Clogher Valley SureStart, Co Tyrone

The facilitator compiled this report based on the 4 exercises carried out. The responses were analysed by the Parenting Forum NI and they are responsible for writing this report, which presents the quantitative views of parents.

Parent Focus Groups: The Findings

Exercise 1 aimed to find out whether parents consider the play experience for children is different today from their own experience of play and to consider how and where children play today. It also asked parents to identify why play is important to children.

Parents were invited to consider the question: **'how and where do your children play?'**

In response to the first part of the question: **'How do children play'** parents outlined that the type of play varies in accordance with the age and stage of the child. The needs of a pre-school child are very different for an 11 year old.

For parents with younger children imaginative/pretend play emerged as being important for their child examples given were of 'opportunities to dress up, role play, painting, playing with household items, play dough, music and small world play such as playing shops and play with dolls and teddies.

It was identified that children use pretend play to enter into role play where they copy/repeat/imitate the significant people around them such as parents/care workers/friends.

Parents consider that older children need to get involved in more structured organised activities. One group of parents stated that 'we want to let our children play out on the streets but we need to know that they are safe'. School was cited for providing opportunities for structured play, physical activities such as team sports, skipping, races, dance, as well as make believe games.

Physical play is considered important for all children and having a park/grassed area for a run around and to kick a football about is a top priority for parents.

The majority of parents believe that children play on their own more today, usually in the home and modern technology is popular particularly the use of computers, games consoles or watching television.

In response to the question posed as to **'Where do children play'** it emerged that play takes place both indoors and outside. Home is identified as where play takes place first and foremost but it is not the only environment in which children explore and experiment with play.

Below is a list identified by parents as to where they consider play happens: -

'the house, street, friends houses, clubs, parks, leisure centres, schools, early years setting i.e. Parent & Toddler groups, playgroups, after schools, crèche, day nursery'

It should be noted that where you live will affect what play opportunities are available and as one parent voiced 'Living in a housing estate with limited opportunities for play means that I must take my children out in the car to a safe area to cycle.'

Having a car or access to a car to access play opportunities is considered by many parents to be necessary particularly if you live in a rural environment. In addition parents explained that even with transport after school care can be prohibitive due to the cost, as one parent explained 'Here in the country you need a car to get your child to after school and the rates are expensive'

It is also considered that today children have access to more organised activities such as after school activities and clubs. It is important to state that parents found that it is time consuming and expensive ensuring your child attends their after school activities. One parent said that if her child says they no longer want to attend an activity her first thought is 'please let it be the most expensive activity she wants to drop'.

In response to the question: **'Do your children play differently from the way you did?'**

The key information which is emerging from the question is that 'yes' play is different today.

Parenting attitudes differ and what was considered safe practise would not now be seen by parents to be appropriate. An example provided by one parent when growing up is 'I had more freedom as a child, playing in fields, on farm, in out-houses, all now seen as unsafe'

With increasingly less sense of community parents are now more sensitive to who their children are playing with and where. This concern is reflected by how play opportunities are changing. Children play less outside particularly when they come home from school. Parents appear today to have concerns for their child's safety, resulting in more activities based within the home or going out to a more organised structured play environment such as after school clubs.

It is a concern to parents that children are regularly inside for play and the general agreement was that children should be outside more and getting exercise. As one parent pointed out 'When there were fewer cars on the road you could go out on your bikes with friends'

Street games don't happen as much due to conditions i.e.. Busy road, not allowed to play on street - neighbours not always as tolerant of children 'playing' games such as hop scotch. Where there is a grassed area signs placed saying 'No ball games'

In addition children don't walk as much to school and are more likely to be taken to school by car where as parents pointed out they had 'walked to school with friends which provided plenty of play opportunities and physical exercise'.

Of course it is important to say that parents realise that their often too busy life style means that dropping their child off at school is time effective.

One significant change for children today is how structures in families are changing, families are smaller - parents when children would have played with older siblings and their friends, now children tend to play separately within their family unit.

It should also be noted that parents are concerned that peer pressure is starting at an earlier age which is influencing what children choose to do.

One focus group stated that although there may be more disposable income to spend on their children there is 'the dilemma of feeling under pressure with not enough available time to spend with their children'.

Added to this is the perception that children expect to be 'entertained', are more 'materialistic' and 'they get bored more easily'.

One group of parents explained that 'when we were growing up we used to make our own fun and made good use of our imagination because we had fewer opportunities for organised activities and less play resources were available. When we received a new toy it was for special occasions like Christmas or your birthday and the wait made the toy more pleasurable and you certainly appreciated what you had'

To summarise there is overall agreement from all focus groups that play today is very different from when parents themselves were growing up.

It appears that a certain 'freedom' particularly for outdoor play is eroding. In its place is play which is more 'house bound' or within a more organised, formal, structured setting. Modern technology such as computers and games consoles provides play which although popular with children and families and reflects modern life can lessen the opportunities for a more balanced play life for children today. One group illustrates this by explaining: 'computers, and play stations can develop children's minds however there is always a 'next level' on a game and it is hard for child to say when to stop a game and do

something else instead.' The other concern raised about the use of too much technology is that this could result in children not using their imagination, and entering into made-up, make believe games.

In answer to the question: '**Why is play important to children**' from the many responses it is possible to conclude that parents see play as an important part of their child's life with many overall benefits. Some qualified their responses:

Play is important to children and is stimulating, it is a learning experience and helps develop life skills

It is fun, good for emotional well-being, keeps you occupied and you learn in a fun way.

Through play children choose to do something they really like doing. It allows children to test things, try out situations and express themselves.

Playing outside provides fresh air and exercise which helps children to sleep, more physical play needs to be a priority to keep our kids fit.

Play promotes self esteem, imagination, practical and communication skills. Different kinds of play help children to develop in different way.

The overwhelming response from all groups was that play is important for their children. It is recognised that there are many benefits to children when they have the opportunity to play and more needs to be done to ensure that all children can access and enter into meaningful play.

The second exercise was designed to find out what parents thoughts were on the vision for play in Northern Ireland which is on page seven of the consultation paper on a play policy for Northern Ireland and is as follows:

'The vision for play in Northern Ireland is: to recognise, respect and resource play is to recognise, respect and value childhood'

Parents were asked the question: **is it a good vision** and general agreement after discussion on what play is and how it could be viewed is that 'yes' this is a good vision which should encompass everything children need.

In answer to the question: **does this sum up play** parents considered that the vision could be seen as only words on a page which without 'actions' could be seen as ineffective and dormant. A major concern raised is that without sufficient funds provided it will be difficult to implement and maintain.

The final question posed was: **do you want to add anything/what would you change** the general opinion of the focus groups is that they would not add anything but the one thing which is missing is the 'fun element' which parents highlighted as an important aspect of play and should not be

neglected because as stated in the play policy (page seven) 'Northern Ireland's children and young people are no different from children and young people anywhere else in the world – every child's first instinct is to play and have fun

The third exercise was designed to find out what parents views are on delivering the vision. Parents were invited to consider the 'priority statements' listed below and to identify what this would mean to them within a local, area and regional context and to state if they agreed or disagreed with each priority statement presented.

'The need for a common language to describe play'

Agree

This is an important priority which will establish amongst professionals and parents an understanding of play and the different stages of play which children experience.

When describing play please avoid jargon and write in plain English only. It may be helpful to provide key words with a clear understanding of what key words mean in relation to play.

Do not forget to ensure that when describing play there should be an element of fun included.

Disagree

More opportunities to create talking shop, with more strategic groups and forums.

All children are different and have different needs. It is wrong to try to group them. Play should be determined by age, needs and ability of individual child.

'We should agree the need to determine what play is in Northern Ireland'

Agree

A definition maybe helpful to ensure everyone has a clear understanding. Start with the vision statement for play policy, and do consider how to determine what play is in Northern Ireland from both the point of view of the adult and the child.

We need to determine play to take account of local needs

When play is a higher priority it will ensure that play is understood and should result in kids getting good play opportunities where ever they may happen.

Need to agree to have more play areas and green areas in Northern Ireland because a large element of play which needs to be supported is access to outside play.

Disagree

Isn't play meant to be free flowing?

It maybe to diverse to slap a one dimension on it

everyone defines play differently and it is too big an area to define.

'Children and Young People need to be involved in planning play'

Agree

Very important to get input from your target audience and ensure that their voice is heard.

Children and young people should be involved and have an input in planning play and education

If they don't have an say then they won't be interested

Consultation is always profitable it would be wrong for us to decide what they want.

Children are the priority focus and they know what they want

Money needs to follow to put into actions

'Provide information on standards for play for organisations'

Agree

Uniformity is important. Be sure to share fully any information, and any changes made.

All relevant organisations need to be updated on standards.

There should be the expectation that children should receive the same treatment no matter who they are or where they are from by providing information on standards this should make a difference.

Would be good to have a balance where by red tape does no hinder job being done.

Provide opportunities for parents to become involved in play with children - keep parents informed and work together so that it is done properly

'Play Policy requires to be monitored'

Agree

It's not just the 'policy', it is the overall establishment of quality play which will need to be put into practise?

Policy is required but I feel that all this could create is a 'talking shop'

Yes, due to changing social trends, changing face of Northern Ireland.

Government departments should ensure that they deliver what is required.

Parents should be informed, and know what is happening with the delivery of the 'play policy'.

Policy should be changed to keep up to date with requirements of children and families

Structures should be monitored and evaluated if changes made when needed.

Wide extensive research required

'Play needs to have adequate resources'

Agree

Many facilities have been neglected, children should not have their play opportunities 'means tested'

Newry needs more parks and green spaces it would be good to see that this is taken into account, perhaps we could follow some examples of other European countries which have a play area accessible within the small local communities within a town.

Yes to more facilities, more money, and more resources.

Play does need resources of course however to balance this we should recall that sometimes children are given opportunities to do things that are free and without cost.

Secure adequate funding for after-schools to ensure that all older children have access to well established, organised facilities.

There should be money put in to resource play but not to pay for something over the top that will not be used.

'Carry out research to provide evidence and identify best practices for those delivering play'

Agree

Keep in mind the simplicity of play.

Learn from others and try to evaluate and adapt for local needs.

Yes, as long as it doesn't take away money for play itself.

Disagree

Who is doing the research?

Do less talking, spend money on local green areas to prevent developers purchasing and taking all available green areas.

We already know the importance of play, is this money wasted?

Money could be put to better use, maybe into resources for training

Wasted money could be going on resource

'Parents/communities to be better informed in order to be champions of play in Northern Ireland'

Agree

We all need information but to what extent?

Yes, need information and support to make it happen

Agree, but some parents have no interest they want every thing done for them

This is about active citizenship, everyone has expectations of rights but very few are interested in responsibilities

Disagree

I feel these are 'loaded questions'

'Play needs to be risk assessed to reduce accidents and claims'

Agree

Provide adequate signage where required at play areas to ensure disclaimer in case of accident.

Parental responsibility needs to be taken into account.

Parents need to stop being so greedy, viewing the possibility of suing when an accident occurs to their child.

I feel parents need to think of the care of their children and not on the amount which can be paid out in the case of accident.

Set rules and stick to them, when working with young children, provide one to one supervision in special circumstances.

Every precaution should be taken to reduce risk but accidents are accidents by their very definition.

More applicable to organised play settings, not so much in home setting.

Yes, also need to make facilities accessible for children with a disability.

Agree, but where do you draw the line and let children take risks. Learning from mistakes is also an important aspect of child development.

Yes, however there is always going to be a risk, even at home there are risks.

Disagree

This could be just a way to avoid providing certain play by using safety as an excuse.

Accidents happen we are now all to 'politically correct'.

'Play must be linked to all strategies and policies'

Agree

All policy makers should understand the implications of their decision with regard to play.

Decisions on play should cover the whole of society and it is for policy makers to ensure it is carried out.

Disagree

Not sure what policies exactly, would need some clarification

'Ensure workers trained to help children learn and develop play'

Agree

Childcare workers should be qualified and when required supervised and continue training through out career to keep pace with changing child care practise.

All childcare/teachers/youth clubs should receive right training in play to ensure that play is valued and to help children extend their play experience.

Play is a learning process - should be delivered/presented effectively

Very important but 'workers' need to be recognised for their training and paid proper wages accordingly.

Is there any other areas not covered?

What actions are in place to preserve green areas and parks?

Less talk, provide more parks/play areas in central location

The areas identified need to be broader

Top priority is play space/areas for children to play

Travel and transport are not mentioned, why?

Accessible play for kids with disability

How will all these areas be resourced?

The fourth and final exercise was designed to gather parent's views on each area of the equality impact assessment in relation to the play policy to ensure promotion of equality for all. It was also intended to ascertain their views on what they consider needs to happen to ensure that all children have the opportunity and freedom to play in the way that they need to.

Below are parents comments to equality impacts covered:

General Comments:

- The Play Policy is too wordy and full of jargon, it appears that the government is trying to meet everybody's needs and meeting nobody's needs.
- Schools should review home work policy, because children at a younger age now have so much homework that it erodes their time for play. In addition there is too much emphasis now on formal education not enough time for children to be creative.

Age

- Why is the play policy only covering up to 11 years of age? Children develop at different rates. Age 13 would have been a better cut off. There has been no allowance for the fact that boys develop later. Not all children will fit into play for 11 and under only.

Disability

- The wording for disability equality impact appears to be just a 'cut and paste job', these are recycled words. What do they really mean?
- Will training be provided to ensure children are helped to play in the way that they need?
- Even if this sounds all right in practise it can be difficult to implement. A practical approach is required; look at training because one size doesn't fit all.
- What does the child want?
- It may be necessary to provide one to one for a child with a disability and resources will need to be factored in to ensure this happens.
- Special needs teachers are specifically trained and this benefits the children in their care and should ensure a quality play/learning environment.

Gender

- Kids play together more and are not so stereo-typical.
- Boys are more physical and it is important that there are open spaces available for them to run around etc.
- 'My son wants to play hairdressers and has asked me to buy a 'hair model' for him to practise on, my husband doesn't think this is appropriate and refuses to buy one'
- Within the childcare profession we appear to lack the ability to 'trust men' and more needs to be done to positively promote men as carers and positive role models for young children. It should not be less desirable for a man to care for our children. Parents have fixed view on this and are part of the problem. Most parents do not want a male carer to change their child's nappy etc.

People with/without dependants

- General agreement with this identified equality impact.
- More flexible opening times of parks would benefit children, families and the wider communities.
- Ensure that schools are more widely available to access for the wider community.

Marital status

- Lone parents are aware of play but are not always able to afford play opportunities for their children.
- Fathers/Mothers who are separated from their children need more access to a variety of play for their children when caring for their children during their access time. At present there are not enough places at a reasonable/discounted rate for a parent to take their child on a regular basis.
- The title of 'marital status' should be changed to 'partnership household'

Religious belief

- It is important to encourage children from a young age to respect differences and to play together.
- Cross community trips together are a good way for young children to mix and accept one another. It is important to maintain contacts through a child's life not just at Pre-School age.
- A buddy system works well for children and will establish meaningful and lasting friendships.

Political opinion

- More explanation required how could this be ensured?

Racial group

- Encouragement for children to play together will happen in inclusive environments such as leisure centre, local parks, play areas, schools, and organised clubs.

Sexual orientation

- General agreement with this equality impact area

Good Relations assessment

- How can play be supported to promote positive good relations?

New Targeting Social Need assessment

- There should be equal needs to play no matter what status because there is no such thing as a typical family

Human Rights assessment

- This is for children and is designed to protect children's rights.
- Will the Children's Commissioner be taking on board any complaints and follow them up for parents on behalf of their children?

Rural proofing

- Traditional places to take children are reducing
- For years the road infrastructure stopped at Banbridge and it is only now that this is changing for the main route to Newry, people in rural communities do miss out.
- One parent comments: 'If play is to be given consideration in all Government Policy then the Bain report should be scrapped'.....'already children spend an hour each morning and evening sitting on a bus'....'by amalgamating schools this would mean children having to spend even longer periods of time on a school bus'
- In rural areas small play groups are folding due to lack of funds and more should be done to ensure that these groups are supported ensuring available play facilities for children.

Conclusions

The Parenting Forum NI has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to what the requirements of play is for our children today and how the play policy can recognise, respect and resource play.

The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultations/workshops because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. From the three consultation workshop groups with parents 26 parents were consulted and of these parents a total of 54 children are cared for. The required mix of parents was met by selecting and joining together parents situated in areas of high deprivation e.g. SureStart groups, and groups both in rural and urban location.

The consultation has provided a range of useful information. For parents in rural environments access to facilities and transport for their children to access play were more pronounced but apart from this the view of parents in areas of deprivation did not seem to differ from those in less deprived area.

The overwhelming response from all groups was that play is important for their children. It is recognised that there are many health and well-being benefits for children when they have the opportunity to play.

It emerged that play takes place both inside and outside. Home is identified as where play takes place first and foremost but it is not the only environment in which children explore and experiment with play.

More needs to be done to ensure that all children can access and enter into meaningful play i.e. 'which will allow them to test things and try out situations and express themselves'

For parents with younger children imaginative/pretend play emerged as being important for their child and to support this access to available affordable local play facilities is important.

Parents consider that older children need to get involved in more structured organised activities for play experiences and more needs to be done to ensure access for all.

School was sited for providing opportunities for all types of play and school building should be more accessible during out of school hours to meet the needs of local communities.

Physical play is considered important for all children and there is a need to agree to have more play areas and green areas in Northern Ireland because a large element of play which needs to be supported is access to outside play.

Parents appear today to have growing concerns for their child's safety. More play activities are based within a home setting or at a more organised structured play environment such as after school clubs. It is therefore particularly important that childcare workers receive on going training on the value of play and how to ensure that children are able to have the freedom to play in the way that they need to.

A key theme emerging from consultation is the need to secure adequate funding for after-schools clubs and activities to ensure that all older children have access to well established, organised facilities in order to meet their play needs.

A play policy is needed due to the changing social trends and the changing face of Northern Ireland. Parents should be informed, and know what is happening with the delivery of the play policy. Provide and support opportunities for parents to become involved in play with their children

The play policy vision for play in Northern Ireland received general agreement from parents that this does sum up play and is a good vision which should encompass everything children need, a major concern raised by parents is that without sufficient funds provided it will be difficult to implement and maintain.