



**Response to Office of the First Minister and Deputy First
Minister Children and Young People's Unit Consultation
Paper on A Play Policy for Northern Ireland**

January 2007

Introduction

Include Youth promotes best practice with young people in need or at risk. We achieve this through the development and promotion of resources, the provision of training, information and support of practitioners and organisations. We also undertake activities aimed at influencing public policy and public awareness.

Include Youth promotes the development of positive choices and opportunities for vulnerable and challenging young people in the community, residential care or custody. Include Youth promotes the use of community alternatives to care and custody for children and young people.

Include Youth runs the Young Voices project, which is a participation project for young people who have been involved or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, with the aim of supporting these young people to become involved in decision-making processes which impact upon their lives. Currently the Young Voices project supports young people in two groups – one drawing its members from the Greater Belfast area, and the second based in the Juvenile Justice Centre, Bangor.

In addition, Include Youth runs the YOYO Practitioners Forum, which draws together professionals from a range of statutory, voluntary and community organisations working directly with young people in need or at risk, and meets on a quarterly basis.

General Comments

Include Youth welcomes the opportunity to take part in the Children and Young People's Unit within OFMDFM's current Consultation Paper on A Play Policy for Northern Ireland. This is an extremely important initiative which has the potential to have an enormous positive impact on the lives and futures of children and young people. It is therefore essential that we get it right, and Include Youth is committed to working in partnership with all stakeholders to ensure that the right of all children in Northern Ireland to play is promoted and protected. In the course of preparing our response to the consultation, we held a number of consultation sessions with young people from our Young Voices project. We have highlighted their direct comments throughout this response. The experiences they recount give a very powerful picture of the often harsh realities of life for vulnerable children, and the challenges facing all stakeholders in addressing their complex range of needs. They also demonstrate the huge importance of devising and implementing government policies which are responsive to the needs of all children and young people, and embedded in children's rights principles. In the context of the current consultation, Young Voices participants clearly identified the need for a Play Policy for ALL children living in Northern Ireland.

1. Why do children play?

- Boredom
- Something to do
- To be free. Whenever I played when I was a kid I felt free.
- Yeah – it's a way of kind of getting away from reality, escaping from everyday life.
- It's important for kids to have that, to be able to play, or you'll crack up.

- It exercises your mind a bit...makes you more creative in your thinking. That's why I think play's the most important thing. Like for story tellers, they can do what they do because they're creative – I bet they played loads when they were wee.
- Play is just what you do when you were younger
- You can change your characteristics when you play. If you don't like yourself, if you don't like who you are, you can change yourself, even if just for an hour or two.

Do you agree with the vision for play?

Include Youth is disappointed that the Vision for Play fails to set play in the context of children's rights, as enshrined in the UNCRC (article 31), and believe this to be a significant weakness in the draft policy. We further submit that this absence of commitment to the child's right to play sets the draft Play Policy at odds with government's own Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People *'Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge'* which places Realising Rights as one of its High Level Outcomes.

In addition, Include Youth believes that the Vision should be something which all stakeholders, including children and young people, can easily understand. The young people who took part in our Young Voices consultation were of the view that the current wording is difficult to understand, and should be changed to something more simple such as:

'All children and young people have the right to play and get whatever help and support they need to be able to enjoy playing'

Delivering on the vision – are there any areas you would like specifically to see included?

Our concerns over the failure to frame the vision in the context of children's rights are compounded by the fact that the draft Play Policy extends only to children aged 11 years and under. This arbitrary division of childhood, and the notion that children once they reach 12 years of age no longer play, runs contrary to international children's rights standards, including the UNCRC, which define children up to the age of 18 years. Moreover, in the context of the current consultation, we submit that that the current draft Play Policy by its exclusion of all children aged 12 and upwards is potentially discriminatory, running contrary to article 2 UNCRC and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In addition, it runs contrary to definition of childhood within the government's Ten year Strategy, which covers an age range of 0-18 and up to 21 for children in care or children with a disability.

Whilst we are aware that the Ten year Strategy for Children and Young People sets out a commitment to a two-stage development of play and recreation policies, we strongly believe that the proper course of action is to set out one Play Policy for all children in Northern Ireland, with two separate Action Plans to take forward commitments in respect of children aged under 11 years and those aged 12-18 years. Whilst we appreciate that not all older children and young people will necessarily feel comfortable with the terminology of 'play', we submit that to deal with this by reducing what older children do to the realms of 'recreation and leisure' is

unnecessarily narrow and limiting. It implies a sports orientation, or at the very least activities which require planning and action.

In addition, the failure to include all children in the Play Policy not only runs contrary to international children's rights standards, but also fails to strategically address this issue in a comprehensive manner which addresses the rights, needs and entitlements of the 'whole child', a theme underpinning the ten year Children's Strategy.

'We will recognise the complexity of children's lives by adopting a 'whole child' approach in all areas of policy development and service delivery relevant to children and young people.' (14)

However, children of all ages, including older children and young people need time, space, opportunities to socialise and freedom etc. all of which are core components of play, as the following experiences of young people involved in our Young Voices project illustrate.

Young Voices participants experiences of play

In the course of preparing our consultation, we asked the young people what games they had played / play at different stages of their lives. A number of themes emerged from this exercise, including where children play, impact of the conflict, violence, poverty and capacity. What also clearly came across was the vivid sense of imagination which these young people had as young children – however, many of the group spoke of childhood ending for them when they were still very young –

'I didn't want to believe in make believe anymore – like Santa and stuff – I just stopped believing.'

It emerged that that the young people at all stages of childhood mostly played in places which were not designated play spaces – on streets, in entries, on wasteland, in houses.

Many of the games they spoke of playing as 5-10 year olds would appear to be rather typical: cars; Cowboys and Indians; Barbie dolls; bikes; playing with your imaginary friend; hide and seek; hunts; cops and robbers; Action men. However, the following quote from one young person illustrates how very young children growing up in violent families or communities were trying to make sense of their environments through play, and how violence was becoming normalised to them.

Me and my brothers or friends used to fight for money – whoever won got to keep the money – it was real serious like, we'd bounce each others heads of walls and all

Again, as older children aged 10 -15 the Young Voices participants identified street games which reflected themes of emerging sexual identity; young people at risk of offending; substance abuse.

- *Didn't play as much – you stopped about whenever your friends did – you wouldn't want people to laugh at you and go "Look at him, playing wee games!"*
- *British Bulldogs*

- *Kissy catchy*
- *Spin the bottle*
- *I robbed shops and cars. I was dealing blow by the time I was 12.*

One particular game which was discussed graphically illustrates the violent impact which the conflict has had on these children and young people, and demonstrates why government must fully address the rights and needs of all children and young people through the development and implementation of a Play Policy which includes those who are marginalised and everyone up to the age of 18 years.

- *I.R.A. and Hoods – you would think of a name, or just a letter, and when you were caught, you would beat the b*****s out of each other till they gave you the name.*

By the time the young people had reached 15 – 18, the games played included:

- *Football*
- *Drinking games*
- *Truth or dare*
- *Spin the bottle*
- *Strip poker*
- *More competitive stuff*

The following quotes recognise that many children and young people do not have the opportunity to ‘play’ when younger, and we submit that it is essential to address such issues/barriers for all children up to the age of 18 years in the final Play Policy.

2. *Do some children and young people not get an opportunity to play? If not, why do you think this is?*

- Cos of your parents.
- I didn’t because my dad was an evil b*****d, basically. I had to work for him. The only chance we got to play was when he wasn’t about. I’d be lucky to get an hour a day. He’d make us work at stuff all the time – like help him at work, or tidy the yard – always something
- Cos your dad bullies you.
- If parents are hard to you and don't let you out. I’d get a beating if I tried – you just take that then you’d get out anyway. But you might get hit when you get back. It makes you feel bad, so you don't feel like playing. Cos it hurts, bloody right it hurts – you’re only about 4 foot and your ma’s whacking you – it f***** hurts alright.
- I didn’t have the chance to play when I was young, so I just lit fires – I just used to go about burning things. It was just the way it was – life wasn’t nice to me, so I wasn’t nice to life. I used to burn everything in my way.

Participation

It is essential to involve children and young people directly and in a meaningful way at all stages in development of the draft Play Policy pursuant to both section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Article 12 of the UNCRC, which provide that children have a right to be consulted about decisions affecting them. Include Youth submits

that a version of this draft play policy should have been produced in forms accessible to children and young people of different ages and abilities, telling them about the policy.

Resourcing

It is important that the final Play Policy is fully implemented and resourced. Include Youth welcomes the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister as the designated office/department that has responsibility for implementation of the Play Policy. In driving full implementation of the policy, it will be important to create effective structures both at inter-departmental and local level to ensure and safeguard the right to play – for example at local council level. Proper and children’s rights complaint monitoring systems must also be established in the form of Child Impact Assessment of all emergent policy and legislation, to ensure full implementation of the Play Policy.

Play & Anti-social behaviour

3. Why do young people get involved in anti-social behaviour or crime?

- To get a police chase
- To get a buzz
- For a laugh
- There's not enough to do
- Too many people in a small area
- To pay for drugs - its normal to do drugs, everybody does – that makes you more likely to do stuff, you have no inhibitions
- Money (theft)
- Boredom
- To get respect from friends
- Buzz from getting a chase – from cops and paramilitaries
- Cos all kids like to have fun
- It’s a laugh – like playing games, sort of grown up chasies

Include Youth is disappointed to note the curious anomaly that while the Introduction of the draft policy makes reference to the fact that: *‘Politicians and opinion formers are interested in exploring how good play opportunities can help improve quality of life and safety in neighbourhoods...and build community cohesion’* this issue is completely ignored in the remainder of the document. We believe that this failure to make the connections between, and address issues concerning, the often absence of safe, age-appropriate provision and space for older children to play within communities and the wider politicised issues of anti-social behaviour, fear of crime, youths causing annoyance etc. is a missed opportunity. Although children and young people have as much right as adults to make use of public space, their high visibility on the streets, mainly ‘hanging about’, has resulted in young people being blamed for being a nuisance and seen as a problem to be solved, not as a group of children who need somewhere to meet and ‘play’.

International children’s rights standards give clear direction to government on the positive impact provision of appropriate and accessible play space / opportunities for

children and young people can have in preventing them becoming at risk of involvement in offending behaviour or other risk taking activities, in particular the UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency 45/112 (The Riyadh Guidelines).

Communities should provide, or strengthen where they exist, a wide range of community-based support measures for young persons, including community development centres, recreational facilities and services to respond to the special problems of children who are at social risk. In providing these helping measures, respect for individual rights should be ensured. (Rule 33 Riyadh Guidelines)

A wide range of recreational facilities and service of particular interest to young persons should be established and made easily accessible to them. (Rule 39 Riyadh Guidelines)

Young Voices participants also made the connection between the right to play and prevention of risk taking behaviours among older children and young people.

4. What happens if children / young people are not given opportunities to play?

- They turn out like me – they’ll do crime
- They turn out to be your typical nightmare
- Its not just about crime – there’s other stuff too.
- You don't learn to socialise – you don't learn to be with other kids, then later you get behavioural problems. I think that’s the reason for the majority of people being violent.

5. What would/does work to help stop young people doing crime/ASB?

- More to do in communities – most people get into crime at the start cos they’re bored and have nothing to do.
- More youth activities late at night when young people are out hanging about with nothing to do
- Ones that suit any and ALL ages, not just for young kids
- More *affordable* facilities (leisure centres/sports clubs - most are too expensive for young people)
- Give people activities / programmes to do, *before* they do crime
- Make other areas safe to go into
- Poor kids need help to have fun, to go places, where their parents don't have money to take them
- The government should pay for the majority of the stuff, then let you pay for some of it yourself

This relationship between lack of appropriate play opportunities for children and young people, and problems emerging in relation to anti-social behaviour has been well documented. Research commissioned by NICCY in 2004 found that ‘many children and young people who participated ...suggested that a lack of things for

young people to do in their free time led to them either becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, or being viewed in this, even if it was not the case.’ [Kilkelly et al, (2004). *Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland*, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. pg 203] Include Youth firmly believes that the final Play Policy must address these issues in a comprehensive manner.

Moreover, Include Youth believes that the current draft Play Policy fails all children, including those aged less than 11 years because it fails to take cognisance of the fact that children exercising their right to play will often impact upon one another. For example, research has well established that the absence of age-appropriate play provision for older children and young people can impact negatively on younger children’s enjoyment of their right to play, as the play spaces become ‘taken over’ by older children and become or are perceived to become unsafe. The research commissioned by NICCY identified lack of safety for children and young people as a significant barrier to enjoyment of the right to play – vandalised play equipment, joy-riding, needles, broken glass in the grass and older youths ‘hanging about’ were identified as main obstacles jeopardising their right to safe play space. In the context of the current consultation, it is important to note that this issue of safety extends to older children and young people too – for example, the NICCY research identified that lack of appropriate play and leisure facilities can lead to young people getting into trouble with local paramilitaries: *‘At the weekend you cannot stand without getting told to move by the RA- even if you are not doing anything, just drinking. If you disagree they chase you and try and beat you although this usually only happens with the boys...I don’t see why we always get told to move on by the RA when there is no-where else for us to go’* (Girl, aged 14, NICCY 2004, pg 203)

Include Youth strongly believes that a Play Policy for children in Northern Ireland must address these issues and ensure that children up to the age of 18 years are able to play in safe and appropriate environments.

Recommendations

- **Include Youth strongly recommends that there should only be one Play Policy for all children in Northern Ireland aged 0-18.**
- The Play Policy must be embedded in children’s rights principles, therefore the Vision should expressly make reference to the child’s right to play as enshrined in article 31 of the UNCRC. In addition, reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the child’s right to play, should also be included elsewhere in the document – particularly in the Introduction, where government gives a commitment that the policy ‘will be anchored within and will deliver on the aims of the ten year strategy’.

Conclusion

Include Youth is grateful to have the opportunity to comment on the Children and Young People’s Unit within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister’s Consultation Paper on A Play Policy for Northern Ireland. We intend the above as a constructive and useful submission and would welcome the opportunity to discuss any issues raised in our response. We wish to be kept fully informed of progress in the development of this important policy initiative and look forward to the issues raised and recommendations made in this response being addressed and taken

forward. In addition, we would grateful to receive a copy of your analysis of responses when same becomes available.