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From: Community Relations Council Northern Ireland  
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### **Issue: A Play Policy for Northern Ireland**

Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to OFMDFM's consultation on 'A Play Policy for Northern Ireland'. CRC is primarily interested in contributing to this debate in relation to how the policy can deliver the vision of the government policy priority A Shared Future (ASF) and enhance good relations within all levels of play. Council welcomes the reference and commitment to ASF throughout the document, but whilst the use of this language complements the strategy it is essential the rhetoric is interpreted into real actions.

Council also welcomes government's acknowledgement of the impact of the conflict on children and young people in Northern Ireland, and the need to develop and implement a strategic policy that will have a positive impact on their lives, especially in terms of exploring diversity and developing values that respect difference. These goals are described within the 10 year strategy for Children and Young People and we agree this play policy will contribute to its aims and objectives as play is an important area for the development of a child; it is crucial the final proposals reflect the various cross-cutting themes of government policy and reviews in particular ASF, the Racial Equality Strategy and the Independent Strategic Review of Education.

Council recognises the policy is at an early stage but felt it would have been beneficial to have produced a provisional action plan which identified lead agencies and organizations responsible for its delivery and implementation, a timetable and monitoring and evaluation responsibility. The delays that have emerged in developing and implementing action plans over recent years is far from encouraging for example the Children and Young People's Strategy launched mid 2006 still has no action plan. Therefore Council will focus its response on issues that we feel should be considered for the forthcoming action plan for the play policy:

**Capacity mapping.** Whilst an initial mapping exercise has taken place, already it is clear that play happens within a diverse number of settings, each with different capacities or facilities. It is crucial that each of the sectors is able to fully implement the policy and that further investment is made available to develop the capacity to deliver the policy. Another interesting factor is the number of play opportunities available to children

within different geographic areas, on an urban and rural basis. It is necessary to tackle inequalities of access, whether this means developing new facilities, or strategic planning to maximize existing facilities. Council would be interested to map current cross community facilities, and ensure future opportunities are devised on a collaborative and partnership method to maximize sharing in terms of cross community, cross cultural and cross sector (e.g. schools and youth organizations collectively developing play projects that promote diversity that complement each others work). This joined up approach between existing or new facilities/providers must be a core element of the policy.

When considering the development or conversion of existing spaces to accommodate or regenerate play in a particular location it is important to take full advantage of where the facility may be located and who can access it. Council would like to see discussions take place around maximizing its usage in terms of promoting good relations; this links in with the recommendations from the ISRE regarding an inclusive approach to integrating, in particular 'Good schools are not isolationist and inward looking but reach out to other schools in mutually beneficial relationships. The quality of those relationships, and their success in developing mutual understanding, respect, trust and tolerance, may be judged on the extent to which they involve significant, purposeful and regular engagement and interaction in learning, both by pupils and teachers, supported by governors and parents. Children should grow up to feel comfortable in their own uniqueness, and comfortable with difference. For that to happen they need to be able to work together, and "play" together, so that eventually they can assume a shared responsibility for their future.'<sup>1</sup> Providers of play have the same responsibility. Partnership is a key issue for the further development and delivery of this policy, and we acknowledge the links already made between the Department, NIPPA and Playboard and we hope this relationship continues along with other key stakeholders.

**Models of Good Practice.** Council acknowledges the many examples of good practice of sharing and partnership between the difference sectors, private, statutory and voluntary. Council would like an action plan to detail possible models that could be rolled out across the various sectors e.g. the work carried out by NIPPA i.e. research results indicate a significant change in the behaviour of young children who have embarked on the Media Initiative programme which to date has dealt with sectarianism, racism and physical difference. This positive outcome is all the more important when set within the context of Paul Connolly's Research '*Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*' which emphasizes the need to learn together to help combat the development of sectarian attitudes.<sup>2</sup> The Action Plan

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<sup>1</sup> Schools for the Future, IRSE 2006, page 159.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Connolly's research '*Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*'. This research counteracts the widely held belief that young children have no sense of cultural differences and showed for the first time the significant affect that cultural and political influence has on the awareness and behaviour of 3-6 year-olds in Northern Ireland. The report also demonstrates the increased likelihood of children to identify with a particular community as they grow older and significantly, to make sectarian statements or take actions accordingly.

should also provide examples of international models in terms of post-conflict societies and young children.

**Training.** The Policy is directed towards children between 0-11 years old. It will therefore be delivered by a wide range of individuals and professionals and Council feels it is essential that teachers/carers have an opportunity for professional training in dealing with inter-community issues and also have a range of suitable resources prepared for residents in the north of Ireland to address these issues through play. Training should take place on cross sectoral and cross community basis. This could result in joined up projects which would maximize opportunities to explore and learn from our diversity and interculturalism together instead of in separate facilities.

**Play in the Curriculum.** It is important to emphasize the essential role of play in the curriculum and the impact it has on a child's development in terms of mental, emotional, creative and social skills e.g. the Reggio Emilia Approach, whereby the teachers role is to co-explore the learning experience with the children, organize materials to help children make thoughtful decisions, have a dialogue about the projects with parents, and also foster the connection between home, schools and communities. This carefully links into the ASF agenda and principles, and also the collaborative and shared approach set out in the ISRE recommendations. The aspect of parental and community input has the potential to maximize cross community and inter-cultural participation outside the formal arena of play.

**Accountability/monitoring and evaluation.** As with all policies it is important to have in place a robust monitoring and evaluation process to ensure progress can be mapped. Clear indicators should be set in terms of improving access for all children and how well the policy is contributing to building good relations between children and the providers. This policy could have a positive impact, especially if it is implemented in line with the vision of A Shared Future to 'facilitate the development of a shared community where people wish to learn, live, work and play together'<sup>3</sup>.

CRC's Good Relations Framework recommends longitudinal qualitative analysis as one of many useful tools for observing and documenting change in good relations within groups and individuals. Case studies can look at the development of particular issues or groups over an extended period of time and reflect both progress and some of the difficulties of making progress with good relations work. CRC is interested in tracking progress in the delivery of a shared future and feel that case studies involving children over a given period of time would be extremely useful. However, case studies require a commitment to measure over an extended timeframe and requiring regular monitoring and documentation.

**Play policy for 12-18 year olds.** Council recommends that the development of this subsequent strategy takes a similar approach in terms of sharing information, joint

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<sup>3</sup> A Shared Future Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, OFMDFM, March 2005, page 10.

training and partnership to ensure the principles of sharing and collaboration become a cross cutting theme.

Council looks forward to examining the action plan in detail.

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