



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee.
Subject:	Review of Belfast City Council Play Service
Date:	16 th May 2008
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Relevant Background Information

‘Play, although difficult to define, is one of the essential components in a child’s life and is an intrinsic part of their learning, growth, well-being and development. Play is essential for the enhancement of family and community life. Strong vibrant communities that are confident about their future have at their heart a clear and visible commitment to children and to play as the fundamental expression of childhood.’ (NI Play Policy Consultation Document OFM/DFM 2006)

Play provides benefits to children and young people through enhancing learning opportunities; encouraging independence; increasing physical activity; improving physical and emotional health; building community cohesion and social inclusion; and supports the formation of friendships and development of communication skills, both among children and across communities.

Playwork is regarded as a distinct form of work which facilitates and enhances children’s play. Playwork offers play opportunities to children and young people between the ages of 4 to 16 years.

Play services for children and young people can be provided through a range of both indoor and outdoors, including: holiday playschemes, after school clubs, playgroups, youth clubs and drop-in projects. The projects may be provided as a direct service or in partnership with local communities.

Belfast City Council currently provides play services for children through their 22 community centres and 6 playcentres. The play development service provides support to enhance these services, to organise central events and to provide support for the voluntary and community sector. The 6 playcentres currently

provide direct services for children through pre-school playgroups, after school clubs and holiday playschemes.

In order to inform our response to changes in both the external and internal environment that may impact on play service provision, a decision was made (and ratified by Belfast City Council at their meeting on 4th July 2005) to undertake a review of council-owned Playcentres. An independent consultant, *Venturei* was appointed to undertake the review which involved looking at both the internal and external environments; relevant legislation and consulting with a range of internal and external stakeholders.

The review was delayed due to the relocation of Community Services into the Development Department and the development of the Community Support Plan.

Key Issues

Venturei has now presented their report which has considered definitions of play, types of play and the value of play. It has examined the nature and quality of BCC service provision and has noted the impact on services from changes in demographics and internal and external environments. The report sets out the conclusions of the review team and makes a number of recommendations to refocus the work of the Play team proposing short, medium and long term actions.

The report concludes that there is a strong research and evidence base which supports the positive impacts that result from providing children and young people with enriched play experiences through the provision of professional play workers and appropriate play environments. It shows clearly how play contributes to the targeted outcomes of the BCC Corporate Plan, the Development Department's Capital Cities Strategy and the Community Support Plan.

While the review has concluded that the BCC play service is of a high quality, with an experienced and qualified staff team and well developed practices and processes, it notes that it has not responded to changes in either the external environment and or neighbourhood demography. The report recognises that BCC is the local authority in NI which has invested most in play as a specialist service for its Children and Young people, but suggests the service and staff team have not benefited from consistent and clear strategic and operational leadership over the past 3-5 years.

The review notes that a number of improvements have already been implemented during the lifetime of the project. It further recommends a number of changes that it suggests will further support the service to become more adept at identifying and responding flexibly to the needs of children and young people across the city.

Recommendations:

This independent review team present recommendations against the against the following themes:

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| - Refocusing the Play Service | - | Short Term (2008-09) |
| - Refocusing the Play Service | - | Medium Term(2009-10) |
| - Refocusing the Play Service | - | Long Term (2011- |

Refocusing the Play Service: Short Term (2008/09)

- a. It is clear that the Play Service has stagnated over the past three to five years from a lack of strong strategic and operational leadership. On the basis that Play now sits within the Community Services Unit, it is recommended that this review and its associated actions are implemented and that it does not become another in a long line of abandoned reviews and service improvement initiatives for Council's Play Service. Any emerging organisational structures should recognise the value of Play.
- b. The Council's service has largely been provided through six dedicated play centres. It is recommended that the service delivery model shifts from a centre focused to a needs led model. This will require a more flexible needs led service delivery model. All service should not be provided from Play Centres. The team should work in other indoor and outdoor environments where need has been established.
- c. Part of this model will entail a more "joined up" and integrated approach to Playwork and play provision, recognising for example, the benefits of working in partnership with other sections such as Parks and Leisure. Co-operation such as this recognises the play can be both indoor and outdoor, making use of open spaces and other community facilities.
- d. There is a need for an integrated strategy for children and young people across all Council services, in order to avoid possible duplication of service provision and ensure a strategic approach to the issues of Playwork.
- e. In particular, a more joined up and proactive approach by Council can more fully address the needs of all children, especially children with a disability, thus providing a more fully inclusive service.
- f. It is clear from an analysis of the user/waiting list for Councils existing Play Service that demand for pre-school (morning sessions) has been reducing over a number of years. Three centres do not have sufficient children registered to provide a pre-school service. On the basis that there are other providers, including Sure Start and the community sector it is recommended that Belfast City Council withdraw from the provision of a pre-school play service via its play centres.
- g. It is recommended that the withdrawal should be phased across 2008/9. Parents in the communities adjacent to the Play Centres seeking to register children for the service would be informed of the decision. The 2009 timescale would allow Council to meet its responsibilities in respect of existing users and parents planning to use the service over the timeframe up until the their children enter the formal primary education provision

- h. It is recommended that, in the short term, the Play worker team (16 FTEs) use the time freed up as a result of the decreasing demand for its pre-school service to carry out a range of play development projects under direction of the Play Development Officer. The projects can form a pilot for future service delivery.
- i. Clearly the Play service must move in line with the direction of the Community Service Unit.....that is it must provide needs led services whilst adhering to community development principles. In order to do so the role of the Play staff team will change. It is recommended that the management of this change is carried out as follows.
- j. The principal role of the Play staff team is the provision of play sessions. This should remain the case. If the service is to promote sound play practice and support other organisations to develop children's services based on the play work principles they must do so from a practice(hands on) rather than academic base.
- k. The shift from the current centre focused play service model to a flexible, needs led and championing service must be a 'managed transition'. The current team is experienced and qualified in play work. It will need a skills support programme across the 2008/9 timeframe to leave the team ready to implement the proposed medium term action plan.
- l. Playworker recruitment criteria should focus on Playwork (NVQ) qualifications, as opposed to early years qualifications.
- m. An annual needs analysis of the playservice should be undertaken as a short term measure, the findings of which should be implemented over the medium term.
- n. It is recognised that Belfast City Council has addressed a number of the issues associated with the play service. The appointment of a Play Development Officer has provided the service with strong and appropriate operational management. The appointment of a new Community Service Manager and the development of a new Community Support Plan which directs all community services, provides a strategic framework within which the playservice will change and develop. However, it is also recommended that Belfast City Council recognise the importance for a strategic approach to meeting the needs of children and young people across its departments. It is recommended that the Play Development Officer becomes a member of a cross department/services children and young peoples team. This would help to bring a strategic management approach to Councils provision for children and young people, sharing best practice and reducing duplication. It is recommended that this happens within the short term. On a longer term basis, and in line with a likely out workings of community planning, it is recommended that Council examines the potential for an interagency strategic forum for Belfast City Council area which will focus on identifying and understanding the needs of children and young people, mapping existing provision across the Council area and coordinating service provision across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

- o. A detailed mapping exercise will be required to determine the role of the current Play Centres within the Play Service. Identifying, in detail, provision for services for 0-16 year olds will confirm the availability of environments, indoor and outdoor which will support play provision or be able to host/include play provision. This data is needed to confirm the need for Play Centres. If need is confirmed this information will identify the optimum number and locations for Play Centres.

Refocusing the Play Service: Medium Term (2009/10)

- p. Implementation of the findings of the needs analysis of the play service should happen over a two to three year timeframe to embed the findings and emerging processes
- q. It will be vital to link the playservice to the wider external environment, including the policy and strategic environment discussed at Section 4. Given the move towards Community Planning in relation to local service provision, this process should take place over the medium term in order to develop meaningful and sustainable linkages.
- r. Mapping exercises should be undertaken on a five year cyclical basis, in order to ensure that the service remains responsive to local needs and circumstances. This exercise should also consider other provision, including that provided by the community and voluntary sector, in order to avoid duplication.

Refocusing the Play Service: Long Term (Post 2010)

- s. Any emerging long term models should be based on the findings and recommendations of the mapping exercise discussed above.
- t. Given the scope and nature of play provision it is vitally important that any long term model is flexible and needs driven.
- u. In terms of potential play models, these should consider a variety of approaches, including outdoor environments eg Play Ranger schemes and adventure play, recognising the value and impact of different types of play as discussed in Section 5.

Recognising the need to ensure consistent quality of service delivery and a phased approach to manage change, we have drafted an Action Plan. The plan proposes action and related activity with details of the time-scale for implementation and the anticipated benefits /service implications. Committee are asked to note that this action plan is in line with the current service business improvement agenda as part of the Development Department Change Management Process.

Resource Implications

Financial

To take place within existing resources.

Human Resources

No implication on the current allocation

Asset and Other Implications

There is no impact on any physical BCC asset.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Committee consider and accept the following summary recommendations:
 - i. The report has highly commended the quality of work undertaken by the play staff team and views them as a substantive resource for services for children and young people. The report recommends that the staff team are maintained and that their skills are further developed and maximised.
 - ii. External environmental changes, such as funding through the Pre-school Expansion Programme and demographic shifts, have resulted in the pre-school playgroups operating at less than 50% of capacity. The report also notes the majority of those benefiting from our preschool provision are outside the targeted age group and that there is no waiting list at any of the 6 centres. For these reasons the report recommends that Belfast City Council withdraws from this form of service provision but manages this via a phased approach in order to facilitate parents.
 - iii. The service delivery model is dominated by the location of the 6 play centres rather than having a city / council wide view which maps the model and the associated resources against need. In order to move towards a needs led flexible service, the service should undertake mapping and evidence gathering to better inform location and delivery. More detailed local mapping in line with the SNAP framework will support future annual service delivery plans.
 - iv. In order to maximise scope and impact, the service must develop and work in partnership with both internal and external stakeholders to deliver pilot projects for the 4-11 and 12-16 age groups. These projects should address the following issues:
 - Maximising access to other BCC assets, for example, parks and community facilities
 - Support capacity in the voluntary & community sector
 - Expand access for children and young people currently excluded due to their disability or ethnic background

- Inform the review of grant aid which currently only supports children and young people through the summer scheme grant aid programme
 - Assistance for the play sector through the provision of support for policy development, resources and training
 - To contribute to BCC programmes that address community safety, anti-social behaviour, good relations, recycling and health promotion.
- v. As noted above, improvements must be made to the evidence base in order to inform play specific service delivery. This should be done in association with the policy and research unit through mapping exercises which will inform best practice across all council departments in order to align with the corporate strategy for children and young people.
- vi. The report suggests the need for a wider understanding of the full range of services provided by the play team through the development of a stronger communications strategy which will in turn align the inputs to targeted strategic outcomes for children and in doing so integrate, motivate and encourage the staff team. Committee are asked to note that in support of this, the Development Department has identified the need to develop and brand the summer programme for children and young people. The play unit is responsible for a number of elements within the programme and has a key role in this initiative which aims to improve awareness of, access to and improve the customer focus of the current and expanded summer activity programme across the department.
2. Committee are asked to approve the Action Plan to implement the recommendations (Appendix 2).

Key to Abbreviations
BCC – Belfast City Council

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