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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report represents a review of the Play Service provided by Belfast City Council. It sets out to establish the role of play in the lives of children and the wider community, including the range of benefits which a well-planned service can generate for the community. Play provision in Belfast City Council area is assessed against key determinants, including need, deprivation and current provision.
- 1.2 The review establishes that there is a clear fit with the existing BCC Corporate Plan (2003-2006), in addition to identifying that the Play Services provides a clear strategic fit with a wide range of strategies and policies including those for health and well being, education and learning, community development and strategies specifically aimed at children and young people.
- 1.3 As part of the process, the Venturei Network team conducted a research review. This review identifies 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 Playworkers and appropriate play spaces/environments. The evidence base identifies that play will contribute positively to:
- Health and well being of our children and young people
 - Creativity, intellectual development and enhanced performance in education and learning
 - Development of sound interpersonal and social skills leading to improved patterns of behaviour and better socialisation
 - A deeper sense of citizenship and respect for one's area/community
- 1.4 Given the socio-economic profile of Belfast City Council area in relation to health and well being, learning and the economy it is clear that play can be an important tool for contributing to positive outcomes over the longer term. This further validates the need for the Play Service to consider its current provision and determine how best it should move forward in the future.
- 1.5 The Venturei Network was guided by a steering group established for the specific purpose of guiding the Play Review process. The review process was underpinned by a robust consultation phase which involved engaging with the following stakeholders:
- BCC Playworkers/BCC Play Development Officer
 - BCC Community Development Workers/Community Development Assistants
 - Parents, children and volunteers associated with each of the six play centres
 - Elected members

- Trade Unions
- External stakeholders with specific involvement in or remit for play development

1.6 As part of the review process the independent review team examined the broad range of published research relating to the benefits of play. This is set out in detail but the following core conclusions can be drawn:

- Children who have access to enriched play experiences and appropriate play environments have a significantly greater probability of reaching their developmental potential; intellectual and physical
- Where children experience play deprivation due to many factors including a lack of parental understanding of play, a lack of facilitation of play in communities or in schools/children's services or due to a lack of safe and accessible play space there is a significantly increased possibility of that child presenting poor intellectual development, reduced risk management skills, increased mental health support requirements, reduced potential for socialisation and increased likelihood of anti-social behaviour
- There are many reasons why children in today/s society experience play deprivation. These include parental fear in respect of stranger danger and the physical safety of their children, lack of accessible play space due to high density urban housing development and associated roads development, influence of computers and electronics gaming and a lack of understanding by many parents of the important cognitive and physical development properties of play.

In simple terms play is equally important as formalised education and children's support services in helping our children to unlock their full potential; especially over their adolescent, young adult and adult lives.

1.7 The review process has concluded that Belfast City Council should continue to invest in play and the provision of a play service. However, in order to ensure that this investment has maximum impact, especially in terms of outcomes for children and young people it is important that:

- The service is needs led with provision directed by regular (5 year) mapping and needs analysis processes
- That the Play Development Officer reports directly to the Community Development Manager and that the development and delivery of the play service are in line with Council Community Support Plan and the overall strategy for the Community Services Unit

- Service Delivery should not be dictated over the medium to long term, by the location of the six existing play centres. In response to needs analysis Council should examine the potential for flexible and outreach delivery of the play service making it available in communities where there is limited existing provision for children and young people (up to age 16) and where there are concentrations of children and young people
- Council should recognise the fact that demand for its pre-school provision (3-4 years) has been reducing consistently over the last number of years. In addition there are other providers for children in the community sector. It should aim to promote good play practice with existing providers for pre-school but exit direct provision
- Council should focus its play service on the 4-11 year age group and explore options for provision for the 12 to 16 age group.
- Council should seek to examine its overall provision of services for children and young people. Over the medium to long term it should aim to have or to facilitate an interagency strategy for children and young people. However, as an initial starting point there should be coordination and an internal joined up strategy for children and young people across all Departments/Services involved in meeting the requirements of this target group.

1.8 Recommendations have been developed across the short, medium and long term. They are set out as follows:

- 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.
- 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. This will also fit in with a more flexible needs led approach being adapted with Community Services and to fit in with the Community Support plan.
- 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.

- 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.
- In particular, a more joined up and proactive approach by Council can more fully address the needs of all children, especially groups with particular needs (disability and different ethnic backgrounds), thus providing a more fully inclusive service.
- 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. Those centres that provide pre-school facilities have very young children who are in their pre-nursery year. On the basis that there are other providers, including Sure Start, Education and community sector it is recommended that Belfast City Council withdraw from the provision of a pre-school play service via its play centres.
- 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
- 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. This would involve pilots new approaches in the development of a more flexible needs led service and further centre and non centre based work relating to inclusion.
- 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:
 - 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

- 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
- Playworker recruitment criteria should focus on Playwork (NVQ) qualifications, as opposed to early years qualifications
- 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
- It is recognised that Belfast City Council has addressed a number of the issues associated with the play service. The change in management of the play staff 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 the likely direction 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.
- 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 4-16 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

- 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
- 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.
- 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, voluntary and statutory sector, in order to avoid duplication.

Refocusing the Play Service - Long Term

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

2.0 Introduction

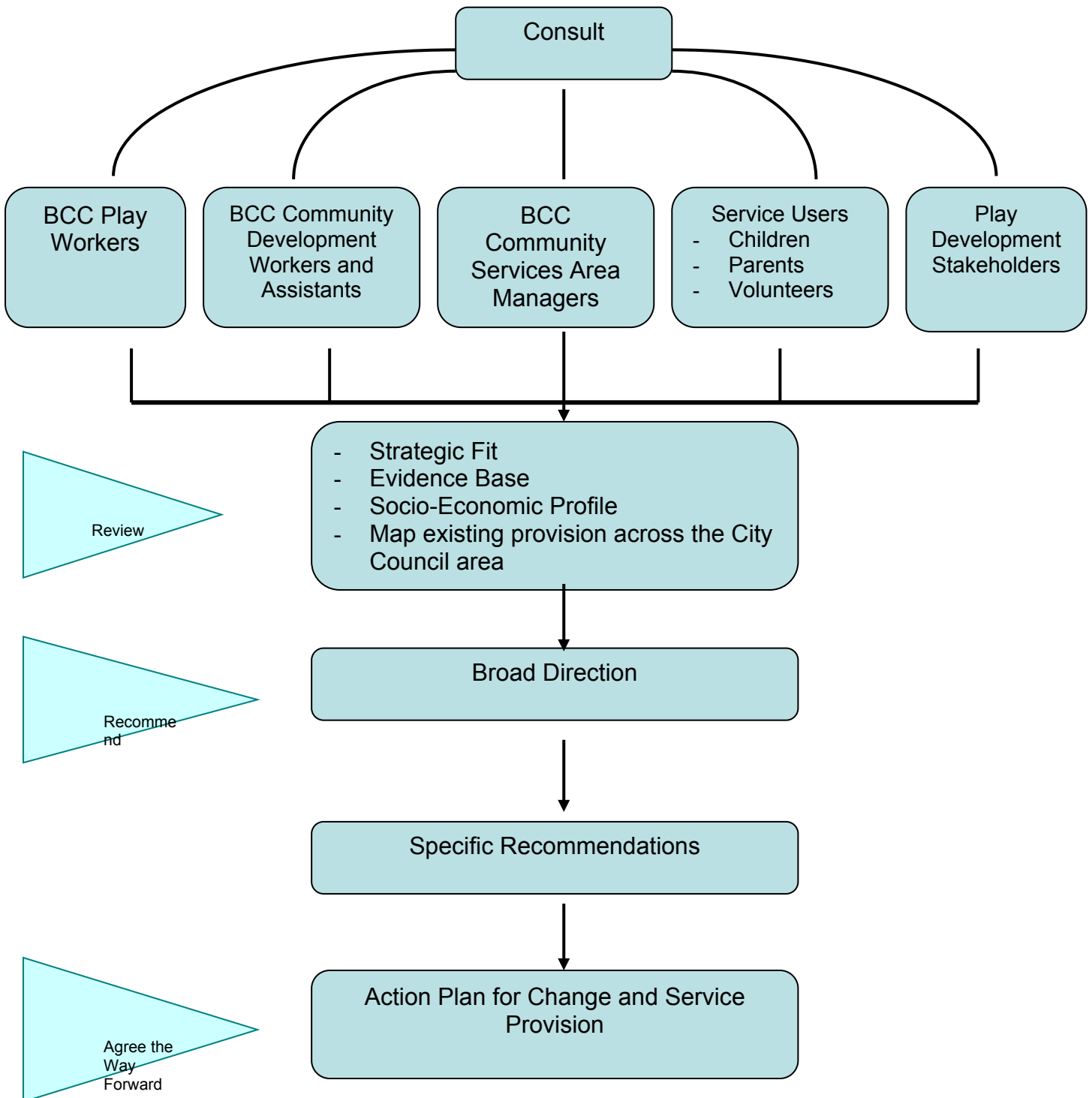
2.1 Belfast City Council commissioned the Venturei Network to complete a review of its play services. The Venturei Network play review team received its direction from a Play Review Steering Group established by Belfast City Council which comprised:

- Community Development Manager
- Play Development Officer
- Play Workers (3)
- Community Services Area Manager (1)
- Elected Members
- Representatives for BCC's Community Development Workers

2.2 The Steering Group set the context for the review of Play Services as follows:

- The review was to be totally independent...no preferred outcomes/recommendations were communicated to the review team
- The review was to focus on the 'case for play services'
- The review would make recommendations relating to the existing playservice provided by Belfast City Council
- The review would also develop recommendations relating to the wider strategic role of the service

2.3 Based on the terms of reference and direction provided by the Steering Group the Venturei Network facilitated the following review process:



3.0 Definition of Play

- 3.1 This section of the review seeks to establish what is meant by the term “play” and illustrate the wide ranging scope and impact which play represents. It is important to recognise the intrinsic role which play has in the lives of children, being central to their development and growth. This understanding is vital in recognising and appreciating the role and work of playwork and playworkers in providing a positive and rewarding play environment where children can be nurtured and supported.

“Play is a child’s work”.

S Isaacs
The Nursery Years
(1929)

Defining Play and Play work

- 3.2 Best Play (Bob Hughes and Frank King) defines play as behaviour which is:-

- Freely chosen - children making their own choices about **WHAT** they do
- Personally directed - children making their own choices about **HOW** they do something
- Intrinsically motivated - children making their own choices about **WHY** they do something.

- 3.3 It is clear, therefore, that play is central to a child’s development and growth, providing the opportunity to make choices and take decisions, thus developing their own identity.

Some Other Definitions of Play

- 3.4 Given the wide scale nature of play, and the many benefits which it can bring about, it is useful to consider other definitions of play in order to fully appreciate its scope and potential impact and gain a further understanding of the topic

- **NI Play Policy (Consultation Document OFM/DFM 2006):-**

“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.”

- The **Best Play** definition is expanded as:-
“*Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child ... Play can be fun or serious.* Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter”.

- **Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Getting Serious About Play (2004)** uses this description:
“What children and young people do when they follow their **own ideas**, in their **own way** and for their **own reasons**.”

Each of these definitions places the child at the centre of the play process and recognises the multiplicity of outcomes which play offers for children.

Why Play?

3.5 Play brings a number of benefits for children, and indeed the wider community. These will be explored in more detail in the next section, but the reasons for play can be broadly summarised as:

- Fun and enjoyable
- Aids learning and intellectual development, independence and creativity
- Benefits both physical and emotional health in children
- Improves fitness and increases physical activity
- Forms friendships and develops communication skills, both among children and across communities
- Builds community cohesion and social inclusion

4.0 Value of Play

- 4.1 The definitions outlined in the previous section give some indication of the value and benefits of play on a range of levels. This section seeks to expand on these values, highlighting the specific and vital contribution which play and playwork can make to the social, physical, intellectual and emotional development of children.
- 4.2 To highlight this potential, playworkers have developed a set of values and principles about children and play, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and on understandings about play and outlined in the National Strategy for Playwork Education and Training (1998). These are as follows:-

Children's views	Playwork and the development of better play provision needs to take account of children's voices, opinions and reactions, while also considering health, safety and respect for the needs of others.
Access to rich, stimulating environments	It is the responsibility of the community to ensure that all children have access to rich, stimulating environments free from unacceptable risk, thus providing children with the opportunity to explore both themselves and the world, through free play.
Freedom to play	Children's freedom to play should be preserved. Traffic and stranger danger fears often cause children's freedom to play to be restricted while educational policies has adopted a curriculum-centred approach that places increasing demands on children's time and energies in pursuit of educational attainment, and constrains their free time.
Equal entitlement	Every child, irrespective of gender, background, cultural or racial origin, or individual ability, should have equal access to good play opportunities.
Respect for children	Children should feel confident that the adults involved in play welcome and value them as individuals.
Children's abilities	Children should be able to control their own play activity, a crucial factor in enriching their experience and enhancing their learning and development.
Play for its own sake	Play is intrinsically motivated. However, adults may need to support children in creating and determining their own goals and outcomes.
The importance of risk	Play is a key element in children learning to appreciate, assess and take calculated risks, fundamental to the development of confidence and abilities in childhood. Children seek out opportunities for risk-taking and it is the responsibility of play provision to respond with exciting and stimulating environments that balance

	risks appropriately.
The adult role in play	Whereas children may play without encouragement or help, adults can significantly enhance the opportunities for a child to play creatively, through the provision of an appropriate human and physical environment.
Adult responsiveness	Children are entitled to expect that adults involved in play provision will understand and be responsive to cues that they may be in need of comfort or reassurance as a result of their play.

4.3 These principles illustrate how play is central to children’s lives, contributing to positive outcomes in terms of health, learning and community life. While it is primarily about fun and forging friendships, it assists in growth and learning in a number of ways and forms a vital part of childhood development. It enables children to develop and grow both as individuals and members of their community, forming relationships both with their peers and adult Playworkers.

“Play is an essential part of every child’s life and vital to processes of human development....It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, intellectual and educational development, and acquiring social and behavioural skills.”

(Charter for Children’s Play 1998)

4.4 Play allows children to develop creative and imaginative qualities, in addition to communication skills, co-ordination and dexterity. In particular open access or child driven play enables the child to learn how to act and work in a group environment, including leadership, negotiation and decision making skills and helps them find their own areas of interest. Overly structured, adult led play can lose many of these benefits. Early education views play as a crucial learning tool, concern having been expressed in some fields (New Policy institute review) that opportunities for free play have decreased for children, thus potentially impacting on their learning potential.

"..by playing, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community".

Best Play (2000)

4.5 Other benefits of play are wide ranging, including a contribution to cognitive and social skills such as:

- emotional development through active learning using mind, body and spirit – independence, confidence and self esteem
- fostering and nurturing life skills which in turn can aid personal development
- opportunities to develop new skills and functions and consolidate previous learning, including language and literacy development
- using the child’s imagination which in turn can contribute developing problem-solving skills and autonomous thinking
- group work, negotiation and social interactions
- opportunity to release pressure or tension which may result from learning or structured environments

Health

4.6 Given current concerns which exist around children’s health and specifically diet and exercise, play has the potential to add significant value to the lives of children through increased exercise and physical activity. These opportunities also carry mental health benefits for children and young people, in addition to improving social skills and relationship building.

4.7 Consultation on the Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in NI 2006 – 2016 advocates the benefits of play in encouraging lifelong physical activity from an early age. Play has a valuable role to play in assisting physical development and co-ordination skills for children.

Letting children go out to Play is one of the best things that parents can do for their children’s health”.

Making Children’s Lives More Active, University College London (2004)

4.8 In addition the Fit Futures report highlights the threat of obesity linked diabetes and found that, for the first time, type 2 diabetes is being diagnosed in significant numbers of children. It also reports on poor diets, a very significant disparity between actual and recommended activity levels of children and young people, and an increasing trend in obesity in children reinforcing the need for children to increase activity and improve health and fitness levels through play activities.

4.9 While the importance of physical education in schools is recognised as being vital in contributing to children’s health, there is an increasing recognition that play has a valuable contribution to increasing physical activity among children; play work should, therefore, be viewed on the same terms as physical education and sport.

“Lifelong physical activity starts with children’s play.”

Islington Play Association

4.10 It is clear, therefore, that play must, from an early age, be incorporated into children’s daily life at an early age and that relevant stakeholders co-ordinate politicians and resources to ensure a child’s right to play. Early intervention is essential in order to reaffirm to children, families and community the benefits of play and its long term social and economic benefits for society through improved health and economic performance of future generations.

4.11 Play also has a vital contribution to make to children’s mental health. The links between physical activity and positive mental health are well documented, as are the growing incidences of poor mental health among young people. Given that Northern Ireland has a high prevalence of mental illness (estimated to be 25% higher than England), interventions to address this must be explored. The Mental Health Foundation highlights the importance of play and associated risk taking as being important for emotional development and increasing resilience to poor mental health. Provision of accessible play opportunities for children provides one tool for addressing this, with the goal of reducing factors such as stress and depression.

“In a 1998 study of children aged 8-10 years, the concept of ‘being well’ was commonly associated with being physically active and doing things”.

New Policy Institute

- 4.12 Decreased activity levels can have an adverse impact on academic performance, creativity, acting on one's own initiative and communication skills. In order to ensure that children are not disadvantaged in these key areas, service providers such as Belfast City Council should ensure that children are afforded appropriate play opportunities and environments. Play and its associated benefits can act as a motivator for children to continue to pursue physical activity in later years, with its benefits for both physical and social development and mental well-being.
- 4.13 Evidence also exists to suggest play has a contribution to make in assisting children overcome trauma and aid the process of emotional healing, particularly where children can relive the trauma through play.
- 4.14 NISRA (2004) through the Young Person's Behaviour and Attitudes survey ascertains that children from low income families follow a poorer diet and participate less in sport and exercise than other groups, highlighting the need for accessible play provision/opportunities in areas of deprivation and low income where participation in physical activity by children may otherwise be limited.
- 4.15 In further support of this, the Mental Health Foundation's Bright Futures enquiry (1999) found that factors such as social exclusion and poverty can impact negatively on a child's mental health while positive factors such as social interaction through play carry many benefits. In areas of high density housing, provision of open spaces for play purposes are vitally important, providing children with safe, accessible areas to express themselves and form relationships with others. This can also contribute to reductions in anti-social behaviour, providing children with a positive recreational activity.
- 4.16 The case for play in areas of high deprivation is, therefore, a strong one, poverty being cited as one factor which limits children's access to outdoor pursuits such as play opportunities. Issues around accessibility and affordability are particularly important when considering play provision in the context of deprivation and poverty. The mapping exercise later in this report assesses current provision against demand, uptake and deprivation in order to make recommendations about how best to move the Play Service forward.

Education and Intellectual Development

- 4.17 In early years, most of a child's learning evolves through play. Play enables children to make their own choices and decisions, take risks, use their own initiative and make mistakes in a non-threatening environment. Other educational advantages of play include developing self-confidence, language and literacy development, problem solving and communication skills through increased interaction with peers and adults as well as creative and imaginative development. Play also

offers the opportunity to support and embed learning gained in both formal and non formal education environments.

4.18 Provision of open access, self driven play as an aid to learning can impact in a positive manner on a child’s educational attainment and should be integral to childhood and early years development, particularly in deprived areas which often records low levels of educational achievement. For younger children in particular, play is a vital tool in the learning and personal development process.

Play provision should aim to “manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm”.

Best Play (2000)

4.19 Less communicative children may express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing parents an opportunity to gain a greater insight into their child’s perspective. Play enables children to become independent, develop self esteem and respect for others, supporting emotional, educational and intellectual development.

4.20 Play makes a vital contribution to community life, providing children with social skills, while their physical play facilities, in the form of play

and community centres, are often viewed as key assets in the local area, offering opportunities for interaction for the whole community and fostering in the development of community spirit and greater participation in community life. Among the outcomes which play can bring about within a community are increased inclusion, particularly in relation to minority groups which have increased in recent years across Northern Ireland and the development or strengthening of community links.

“The fundamental rationale for public provision of play is to facilitate the social inclusion of children – most of the presumed outcomes of play have implications for social inclusion....”

Coalter and Taylor (2001)

“By encouraging the use and development of local community facilities, play provision can have a strategic use in bringing more widespread social benefits including greater social cohesion and the building of community networks.”

New Policy Institute

4.21 Reduction in anti-social behaviour is a further desirable outcome. In addition, child driven play enables the child to make its own decisions and develop its own learning points in a non-threatening environment without risk of failure.

Play Deprivation

4.22 Given the range of benefits offered through play, denying children the opportunity to engage in play activities can present a range of issues and challenges, some of which have been identified by the National Playing Fields Association in association with the Children’s Play Council and Play Link (Best Play, 2000):-

- poorer ability in motor tasks
- lower levels of physical activity
- poorer ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events
- poorer ability to assess and manage risk
- poorer social skills, leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural difference

“Play provision can also make a significant contribution to fostering a positive attitude to cultural diversity”.

Best Play (2000)

- 4.23 Lack of play opportunities can also bring about loss in self-confidence, self identity, concentration and independence in children. In addition, opportunities for social interaction at both family and wider community level can impact on community cohesion, with reduced opportunity for meeting new people and forming relationships. Given the rapidly changing demographics of the Northern Ireland population in recent years with growing ethnic communities, this opportunity to develop and strengthen community links from an early age should feature on local government agendas.
- 4.24 Further consequences of play deprivation may include reduced levels of physical activity and lack of fitness, combined with an increased threat of obesity, already a growing concern in relation to child health in Northern Ireland.
- 4.25 Play provides opportunities for children to develop their sense of self-identity, self-esteem, to empathise with others and increase awareness of the consequences of their actions. This in turn can contribute to reducing incidences of anti-social behaviour in later years, play creating an appealing diversion to such behaviours from an early age. Provision of play opportunities creates an environment to nurture and develop children to the benefit of themselves, their family, carers and wider community.

What are the Barriers to Play?

- 4.26 Children may encounter a range of barriers to play which can result in play deprivation. These barriers can take many forms, but may include:-
- Concerns around safety, including “stranger danger” , traffic concerns and risk taking
 - Lack of suitable play environments and play opportunities, including trained and experienced Playworkers
 - Lack of financial resources
 - Lack of appreciation of the benefits and value of play for both children and the wider community

Summary

- 4.27 Given the range of values and benefits which play provides, primarily for children, but also for the wider community, and the implications of play deprivation, it is important for local authorities to adopt a structured and proactive approach to play and playwork. This approach will ensure a clear message is communicated to all stakeholders about the role, aims and objectives of Council’s Play Service and the actions to be undertaken in support of these.
- 4.28 In light of this, the following section of the review explores the various types of play and how these might contribute to the action plan.

5.0 Types of Play

5.1 As discussed earlier in the report, it is clear that play is a wide ranging subject area, which takes many forms and approaches. This section seeks to outline the main forms of play, namely:

- Open access
- Outdoor play
- Education/homework clubs
- Sure Start
- Early years/Play group provision

5.2 The section aims to consider play in its various forms and how these sit with other services for children.

Playwork

5.3 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 usually, but not exclusively, between 4 to 16 years of age. Playwork aims to be inclusive of children of different abilities, religious or ethnic background and circumstances and recognises the importance of risk in children's play. This is particularly important in allowing children to take risks and explore boundaries in a supported environment with skilled Playworkers.

5.4 The following Playwork principles, endorsed by Skills Active, are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities:-

- All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.
- Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
- The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
- For Playworkers, the play process takes precedence and Playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.
- The role of the Playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play, play which can take place either indoor or outdoor.

- The Playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.
- Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
- Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.

Open Access

- 5.5 Open Access play is based on playwork principles. This approach provides children with the choice and opportunity to engage in play activity as they choose in staffed environments in a variety of settings. There are no restrictions, bar those around safety, regarding the type of play undertaken, the child being allowed to play on their own initiative, and to come and go as they please.
- 5.6 This approach aids the child in decision making as well as communication skills, enabling the child to act on its own initiative and decide whether or not to interact with other children and/or the playworkers. It is important to clarify that open access is not about childcare provision – the child, and its needs, are the focal as opposed to the needs or views of parents/carers. In most cases, open access play provision is provided in partnership with parents and volunteers, adhering to community development principles.

Outdoor Play

- 5.7 Much play takes place in the outdoors, on streets, in gardens, parks or other open spaces. Provision of outdoor play extends beyond designated areas and provision of fixed play equipment to how children use the space and environment around them. One important aspect of outdoor play is that such types of playwork can facilitate children to use space around them, again aiding their decision making processes an increasing physical activity.
- 5.8 Outdoor play can add value to the fabric of a community, developing a sense of community ownership through the use of local play facilities and the relationship building processes which will accompany these at both child and parental level. Research conducted by London South Bank University found a synergy between children playing and social interaction by parents, resulting in new neighbourhood relations and community cohesion.
- 5.9 Outdoor play also brings with it environmental benefits, as well designed play facilities impact positively on local communities through reduced graffiti and designated play areas create safer streets. The NI Play Policy consultation document acknowledges the role play has in

building relations and strengthening communities after many years of division and conflict.

- 5.10 Furthermore, outdoor play aids physical development, building strength and improving co-ordination, while also contributing to emotional and social development through interaction and negotiation with peers.
- 5.11 Outdoor play brings with it concerns over safety, in particular the threat of “stranger danger”, in addition to concerns over bullying from older children and traffic concerns.
- 5.12 The participation of children in outdoor play can be enhanced by playworkers who can encourage children to make increased use of their outdoor space in a safe environment. This work can be done in partnership with local communities and parents.

Education/Homework Clubs

- 5.13 These clubs can be based in a variety of settings, including schools, community and youth centres. The Extended Schools programme currently underway through the Department of Education offers significant scope to develop education and after schools activities for 4-11 year olds in schools and community settings, forging stronger links between the statutory and community sectors.

Formerly after schools and homework clubs were funded by the New Opportunities Fund (now merged with the Community Fund to form the BIG Lottery) through its Out of Schools Hour learning programme. This funding stream has since ended.

The government plans to spend £200m of the lottery money in an effort to reduce truancy and youth crime, Ministers intend to set up 8,000 homework clubs in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in a scheme announced in December 2007. Additionally, many libraries run homework clubs which are the subject of several Live and Learn bids to the BIG Lottery Fund, currently undergoing assessment.

- 5.14 They provide children and young people with the opportunity to spend time on homework in a structured setting, often with support available in the form of teachers, play or youth workers or other centre based staff. The homework or education element of these programmes is often balanced with a playwork input, providing rounder, and more attractive, service provision for children.

Out of School Childcare Clubs

- 5.15 These clubs provides childcare for the 4-11 age range out of school hours. This may involve both before (breakfast clubs) and after school. The activities are normally a combination of Homework and play opportunities. Fees are charged to cover staff costs.

- 5.16 The New Opportunities Fund provided £200m for out of school childcare in 1999. The programme was established to improve the quality of life and to address the needs of disadvantaged people and communities. The funding enabled groups to become established with the view that after a set period (normally 3 years) that the projects would become self sustaining. Projects based in areas of disadvantage were unable to meet this as parents were on low incomes and unable to afford the fees required. This resulted in a number of clubs closing after a few years. Currently there is a funding crisis in this sector with no long term funding available.

Sure Start

- 5.17 Sure Start is the Government's programme to deliver the best start in life for every child by bringing together early education, childcare, health and family support. In Northern Ireland Sure Start represents an investment of £9.3 million for 2006/07, with over 22,000 children aged under 4 years and their families have had access to the services provided through the programme.

- 5.18 Sure Start programmes are designed specifically to reflect and respond to local needs. For that reason, each Sure Start programme is unique in terms of the services it provides and the manner in which it provides them. There are, however, core elements which must feature in any Sure Start programme. These core elements include:

- Outreach and home visiting services, to make contact as early as possible in the child's life and draw families into using other services
- Family support, including befriending, social support and parenting information, both group and home-based
- Good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children, both group and home-based
- Primary and community healthcare and advice
- Support for all children in the community, recognising their differing needs - while Sure Start does not itself provide specialist services, projects need to ensure that their services are accessible to all families

- 5.19 The following principles have been developed for Sure Start:

- Working with parents and children
- Services for everyone
- Flexible at point of delivery
- Starting very early
- Respectful and transparent
- Community driven and professionally coordinated
- Outcome driven

The Sure Start programme, therefore, offers a structured programme of intervention for children aged under 4 years to access play opportunities in a supported setting.

- 5.20 Sure Start programmes are based in areas of disadvantage and use local community facilities, including Community Services directly managed community centres.

Playgroup Provision

- 5.21 These services generally cater for children aged between two and four years. Playgroups aim to provide learning experiences through structured play and to give children the opportunity for mixing with both other children and adults.

Early years experience should build on what children already know and can do, a well planned and supported environment providing children with a rewarding and stimulating play experience. Well planned, purposeful activity through early years services can engage children in the learning process, helping them to make progress in their social and intellectual development. Play, as already outlined, has a crucial role to perform in this context and thus forms a core component of the early years playgroup experience, requiring skilled Playworkers to provide an enriching environment.

A key component of early years provision is pre-school education in the form of the Pre School Expansion Programme. Part of the Department of Education's strategy for tackling low and under-achievement, the programme is designed as a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors to provide an integrated and coherent range of care and education services to meet the needs of young children and their parents.

The Pre School Expansion Programme is a non-compulsory phase of education for children in the year immediately before they enter Primary 1. Most pre-school places are available on a part-time basis (at least 2 ½ hours per day); some nursery schools and classes may offer full-time places (around 4 hours, with lunch available). The programme has enabled 92% of children in their pre-school year to be able to access a place at a nursery or playgroup. This figure is consistent with the expected take-up rate evidenced by the Household Survey. This had had the effect of reducing demand for early years provision by the Play service as evidenced by the user figures presented in Section 6. As early years provision becomes embedded in formal education, other providers must adapt accordingly.

Early Years Provision

- 5.22 Parent and toddler groups provide play opportunities for children from 0 till 4. The parents attending the groups are responsible for the supervision of their own children. Community development principles are used in working with these groups through working with the parents to enable them to develop their children's play activities.
- 5.23 Crèches or day nurseries will also provide for children from 0 till 4 and will be used to support parents to attend classes or to go to work. Staff will have responsibility for the children and provision will be based around the needs of parents.

Summary

- 5.24 It is clear, therefore, that there exists a range of services and interventions (see table below for summary), for children, many of which have a strong play focus, illustrating the importance of play to children from an early age. In order to ensure a rewarding and positive play experience for children, these interventions all require skilled Playworkers who can bring the necessary skills and experience to the service to ensure a play experience which is enjoyable, rewarding, challenging and confidence for all concerned.

In particular, it would appear that children aged four years and under can avail of play opportunities through a series of structured interventions such as Sure Start, play groups and early years initiatives. Those provided for the 4 – 11 age range are education or childcare focused, indicating scope for Belfast City Council to consider a programme of play provision for older children (aged five years plus), using a combination of the approaches.

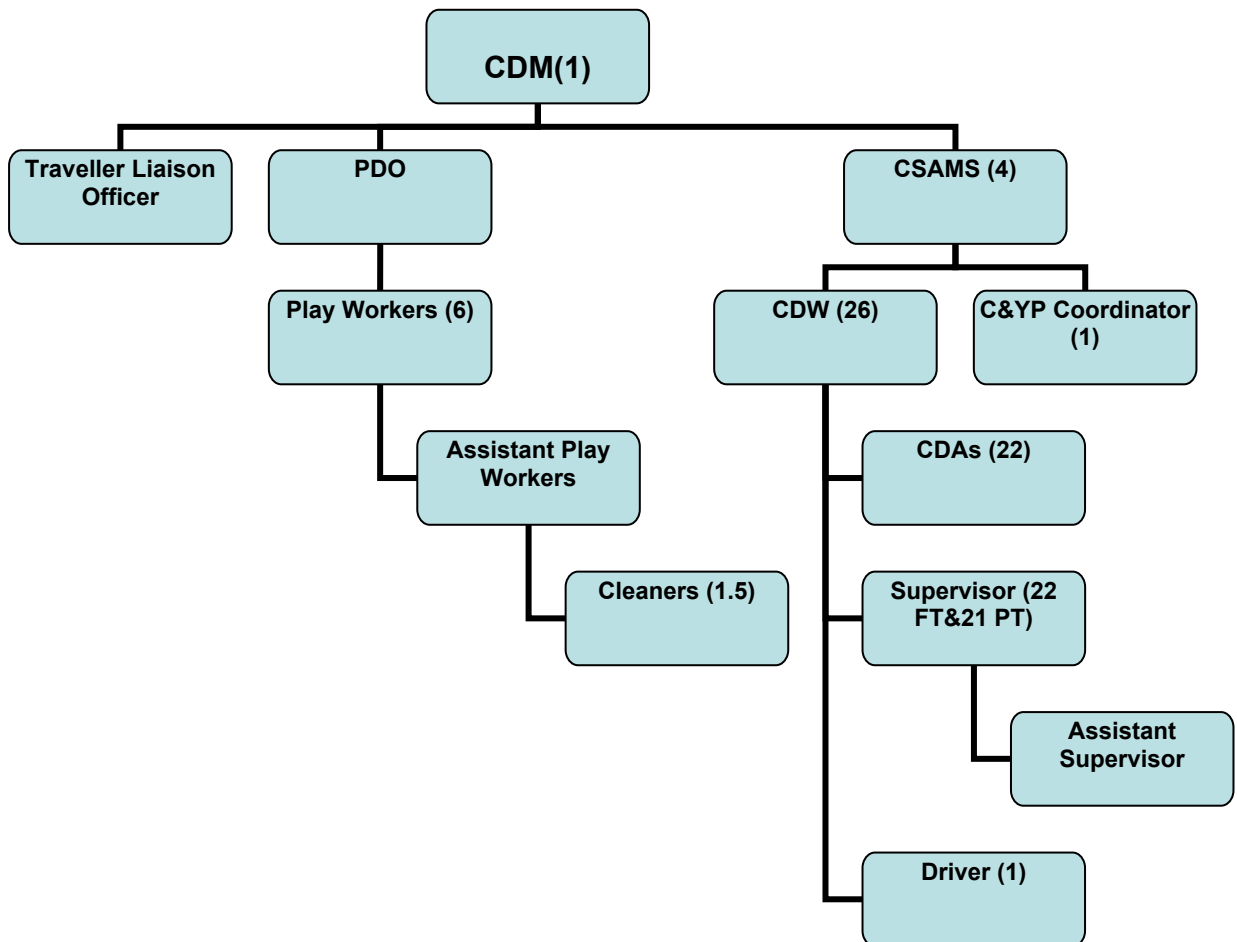
Any future programmed interventions should be considered and developed in light of current provision and services operated by both Belfast City Council and external providers, including those in the community and voluntary sector – these are examined in the next section. In simple terms any future Council intervention must be needs based considering the distribution of 4-11 year olds across the city, current provision by Council and external providers.

Summary of Initiatives

Programme	Age range	Activities	Investment
Extended schools programme	4 – 11	Homework clubs/ club activities	Children & Young People Fund - around £10m over 2 years
Out of School Childcare	4 – 11	Childcare for working parents	New Opportunities Fund – clubs have closed due to lack of long term funding
Sure Start	0 - 4	Support and services for families and children	£9.3m for 2006/07
Playgroups / Nursery Schools	3 – 4	Pre-school service	Pre school expansion programme – 92% of children able to access pre-school services
Crèche	0 – 4	Childcare provision	Fee based or subsidised through grants or organisations
Parent & Toddler Groups	0 - 4	Play activities for children; support for parents	Membership fees, fund raising, grants

6.0 Belfast City Council Service Provision

- 6.1 The previous section has examined the various types of play services which children can benefit from. In order to assess how best these various interventions can be taken forward in a strategic and meaningful manner for children in the Belfast City Council area, it is necessary to consider current service provision and how this may be developed and/or expanded in the future.
- 6.2 The Play Service is located within the Community Services Unit of Belfast City Council. The Community Services Unit works with community groups, organisations and citizens throughout the Council area to build community capacity and to offer front line services and advice to the community sector.
- 6.3 The Community Services Unit is led by a Community Development Manager (CDM) who is supported by four Community Services Area Managers (CSAMs) for East, North, South and West Belfast and a Play Development Officer (PDO). The current establishment figure for the unit is approximately 163.5 employees and is illustrated by the following diagram:-



6.4 The Community Support Unit manages twenty two community centres (some of which have a play focus) and **six dedicated Play Centres, based in the following locations:**

- **Avoniel**
- **Loop River**
- **Ballysillan**
- **North Queen Street**
- **Olympia**
- **Whiterock**

Expenditure on the centres in 2006/07 is illustrated as follows:-

Breakdown of net expenditure 2006/07	£	%
Community Centres (includes capital charges - £1,078,368, staff, maintenance, operating costs and contributions to community run centres)	£4,926,280	58%
Community Development (includes staff and operating costs)	£932,615	11%
Community Grants (allocation of 6 grants, includes £1,296,583 DSD contribution)	£1,953,474	23%
Play Centres & Play Development (includes capital charges - £166,270, staff, maintenance and operating costs)	£637,427	8%
TOTAL	£8,449,796	100%

6.5 Belfast City Council is the only local authorities in Northern Ireland to actively invest in the provision of a play service (Play Centres, qualified Play Workers/ Assistant Playworkers, wider play development and a Play Development Officer. The following table sets out the catchment areas and numbers of (registered) service users associated with each centre:

Play Centre Catchment Areas	Play Centres	No. of registered children			
		Playgroups (3-4 yrs)	After school clubs (4-11 yrs)	Summer schemes (4-11 yrs)	Total places
East Belfast	Avoniel	16	60	93	169
	Loop River	0	67	72	139
North Belfast	Ballysillan	16	53	42	111
	North Queen St	0	104	69	173
South Belfast	Olympia	16	48	48	112
West Belfast	Whiterock	0	24	30	54
Belfast Total		48	356	354	758

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- 6.6 As illustrated earlier in this review, a strong case can be made for the need for play in deprived communities, given the benefits play can deliver for children on a social, intellectual, emotional and health level. It is important, therefore to map current Playcentres/service provision against deprivation:

Play Centre Areas	Play Centres	Ward	Rank of Ward Multiple Deprivation	Where These Ward Rank in Relation to Deprivation in Northern Ireland
East Belfast	Avoniel	The Mount	11	Top 40%
	Loop River	Orangefield	43	Top 50%
North Belfast	Ballysillan	Ballysillan	28	Top 50%
	North Queen St	New Lodge	5	Top 10%
South Belfast	Olympia	Blackstaff	16	Top 40%
West Belfast	Whiterock	Whiterock	3	Top 10%

- 6.7 The provision of Play Centres and a play development service represented an investment of £637,427 across the 2006/07. This equates to £840 per service user per annum and 7.5% of the Community Service Unit annual budget. This distribution of net annual expenditure across the six playcentres is set out in the following table:

Play Centre Areas	Play Centres	Net Expenditure (£)	% Total
East Belfast Play Centres	Avoniel	£130,253	21%
	Loop River	£148,519	23%
North Belfast Play Centres	Ballysillan	£85,366	13%
	North Queen St	£62,901	10%
South Belfast Play Centres	Olympia	£136,023	21%
West Belfast Play Centres	Whiterock	£74,369	12%

In an addition to the provision of play sessions through the six play centres, Belfast City Councils play development service also undertakes/provides the following functions and services:

- Networking
- Policy analysis and input to policy development
- Development of Play Resources and Best Practice
- Promotion of play and good play practice

- Development of play inclusion projects
- Development and management of play events
- Promotion of good practice and provision of training in relation to Child Protection

6.8 This data should be taken into consideration in charting future Play Service provision for Belfast City Council.

The Future Direction of the Community Services Unit

6.8 Belfast City Council's Playservice is a function of the Community Services Unit; thus it is important that the review takes into consideration the change management processes which are currently being implemented and managed by the Community Services Unit, these being crucial to the future development and delivery of the Play Service.

6.9 Belfast City Council is undergoing a period of reorganisation and the implementation of initiatives geared towards efficiency to prepare the Council for the changes which the Review of Public Administration (RPA) will bring. As part of this wider reorganisation and efficiency agenda the Community Services Unit joined the Development Department in April 2007. A new manager has been appointed to lead the Community Services Unit

6.10 Key element of the leadership provided by the manager will be establishing a strategy for Community Services which is consistent with the strategies and policy directions adopted by both the Council and Development Department.

6.11 Currently the Community Services Unit is clarifying its strategic direction. Whilst its strategy is still a working draft the purpose of the Community Support Unit is:

To support and energise the communities to become stronger and more confident in order to develop an active, inclusive, safe welcoming city

6.12 This means that the work of the Community Services Unit aims to create a city that is:

- A vibrant and dynamic community with lots to do
- A rich tapestry of local community life, where people can be involved
- A sustainable community looking to long term needs
- A community you want to belong to.

6.13 In order to deliver this vision the Community Services Unit will use a number of building blocks which shape its approach to community support and development. It will:

- Know the strengths and concerns of our community.
- Provide venues for people to gather, meet, participate, share information and celebrate.
- Support community networking.
- Provide human and other resources.
- Create opportunities for participation.
- Enable opportunities for action.

6.14 As indicated earlier, the Play Service is governed by the Community Services Unit, under the strategic direction of the Development Department. The Vision and Mission of the Community Support Unit will be delivered against the following Development Department Themes:

- Strategic Leadership
- Quality of Life

6.15 The following table sets out the Development Department themes and sub objectives and identifies how the Community Services Unit proposes to contribute to them:

Theme	Sub Objective	The Community Support Unit will contribute to the Theme and Objective by....
Strategic Leadership	To support effective decision making for the city in collaboration with our public, private and community & voluntary partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through facilitative leadership and strategic direction, develop a Community Development Plan for Belfast • Create a Strategic Framework for the delivery of Strategic Neighbourhood Action Programme (SNAP) • Develop a Council policy and approach to Neighbourhood Renewal • Influence and build partnerships with all key stakeholders • Produce research and strong evidence base to develop and

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		<p>influence policies affecting neighborhoods and communities in the city</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with DSD, to map community infrastructure in the city • Lead the development of a multi-agency action plan linked to the Northern Ireland 10 year Strategy for Children and Young People • Lead the review of Belfast City Council Child Protection Policy and Procedures • Work with relevant stakeholders to ensure efficient transfer of Traveller site responsibilities related to RPA • Facilitate integrated working across Council departments to maximise the effectiveness for community groups • Develop a poverty policy
	To foster greater city responsibility and pride	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a programme to improve the governance of community organisations • Enhance mechanisms to allow communities to engage with policy makers • Build and support networks within and across communities
	To provide leadership by ensuring strategic, best practice approaches to regeneration and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop quality standards for well run community organisations • Increase the practical skills of the sector via training support for community organisations linked to quality standards to improve performance • Review BCC community centre management arrangements
Quality of Life	<p>To reinvigorate the city's communities and neighbourhoods by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Improving accessibility to high quality services that meet local community needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the accessibility and usage of our community centres and develop community centre curriculum programmes which meet the needs of local people. • Support the development of Neighbourhood Regeneration area plans • Continue to improve consultation and engagement with youth via our Youth Forum

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to improve consultation and engagement with children and young people via our community and play centres and the Youth Forum • Provide a high quality, accessible play service and development role • Encourage partnership approaches in accessibility to services
	Promoting community cohesion and supporting communities to live and work safely together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a range of cross community activities (language, sports, drama, EU, etc) to create opportunities for contact, engagement and participation • Continue to implement Good Relations Programme and Cultural Diversity Programme • Develop and implement an action plan to support neighbourhood Community Safety plans
	Increasing the participation of communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Community Services grant allocation programme and realign grant support in accordance with emerging CSP strategic themes • Distribute £2 million plus of grant aid to appropriate projects to support community development activity in the city • Develop and implement a volunteering policy and associated support programme • In partnership, agree and implement a development support programme for the traveller community to ensure effective service delivery

6.16 Any emerging Play Service must be developed in the context of the themes and objectives discussed above. Furthermore, a review of the emerging strategic direction for the Community Services Unit and its fit with the direction set by the Development Department confirm

- The Community Services Unit will shift its 'way of working' to one characterised by being needs led and being underpinned by a community development approach
- That the department and its functional units such as Community Services will work in a strategic manner to best meet the needs of its citizens

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- That the Council will build partnerships with key stakeholders to better meet the needs of its citizens
- Will place specific emphasis on evidence based mapping to ensure Council services are available 'where they are needed' and that they adapt over time to meet the changing profile of need
- The emphasis will be placed on meeting the needs of children and young people-adopting a multi-agency approach
- Emphasis will be placed on cross departmental approaches to meeting the needs of citizens
- That Council is committed to providing high quality and accessible play services – via direct service provision and developmental intervention

6.17 In light of these factors, any emerging Play Service in the future should:-

- Determine its target age group and those play interventions best suited to that age group
- Explore potential links with other organisations/facilities with a play remit (e.g. community centres, play projects (community sector), play organisations) in order to raise awareness and understanding of play and play values
- Develop internal partnerships with other Council Departments/Services including Parks and Leisure, Good Relations, Community Safety and Health and Environmental
- Be responsive to community needs and deprivation
- Be aware of both the internal (Council) and external (wider policy environments)

7.0 External Influences

7.1 The previous section explored the internal environment which the Play Service operates in. However, given the multitude of benefits generated by play, it is also necessary to consider the wider policy environment and funding opportunities which the Play Service should be aware of. This section considers key strategy and policy documents which can influence the field of play.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

7.2 Play is vital to child development and has been recognised by the United Nations as a right of every child. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out internationally agreed standards relating to children's civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. These include:

- the rights of a child to minimum standards of health, social security, physical care, family life, **play and recreation**, culture and leisure, as well as adequate standards of living and a good quality education.

7.3 In particular, Article 31 sets out the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

7.4 The New Policy Institute (2002) as part of its review of play literature (The value of Children's Play and Play provision) presents analysis by the National Playing Fields Association in partnership with the Children's Play Council and Play Link (Best Play 2000) suggests that arising from the UN Convention, Playworkers have developed a set of values and principles about children and play as set out in the National Strategy for Playwork and Training. These are that:

- Children's views must be taken into account
- Communities have a responsibility to ensure children have access to rich, stimulating environments free from unacceptable risk, allowing them to explore through freely chosen play
- Children's freedom to play must be preserved
- Children, irrespective of gender, background, cultural or racial origin, or individual ability, should have equal access to good play opportunities
- Children should feel confident that the adults involved in play welcome and value them as individuals
- The child's control of their own activity is a crucial factor in enriching their experience and adults need to recognise and support this
- An appropriate level of risk is fundamental to play allowing children to develop confidence and abilities - it is the responsibility of play providers to provide play environments which balance risk and stimulation

- Encouragement and responsiveness on the part of adults must be available when needed and appropriate.

NI Play Policy (Consultation Document OFM/DFM 2006)

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

7.5 This consultation document aims to establish play within a policy framework which will highlight the importance and value of play in children’s lives as well as those of their families and the wider community.

7.6 It recognises the contribution which play can make to children’s health, community safety and community life while the need for joined up action and multi-agency involvement in play provision is also acknowledged.

“A play policy for Northern Ireland should ensure that families are supported in the organisation of play and play is not a marginalised issue but is brought to the fore as a significant cross cutting policy and planning issue that will have huge impact on many current and future government policies”.

NI Play Policy Consultation Document (OFM/DFM 2006)

7.7 Facilitated by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, a Playworks conference, in addition to consultation workshops with children and young people through playgroups and after-schools facilities, formed part of the consultation process. Amongst the key areas identified for inclusion in a play strategy rationale were:-

- need to recognise the importance of the diversity of play
- providing time and space for play
- opportunities needed for creativity and innovation as well as physical activity

7.8 The policy proposes a number of priority areas to be addressed, including:-

- need for an integrated approach to play planning, which continues to involve children and young people
- need to identify resources and investment strategies to support the implementation of the play policy
- need to have better information for parents and communities to support and build on their knowledge, skills and understanding of play so that parents and communities are empowered and recognised as the champions for play in NI

A Ten Year Strategy For Children And Young People Northern Ireland 2006 – 2016

“Our vision is that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future.”

- 7.9 The aim of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people are in a position to realise their potential by 2016. To do this children will require support to reach their social and economic potential, play being a key determinant in realising this. One of the drivers for change cited by the strategy is development of play and recreation policies aimed at improving current play and recreation provision in NI.
- 7.10 Amongst the supporting themes relevant to play provision and delivery are:-
- The need to adopt a “whole-child” approach which gives recognition to the complex nature of our children’s and young people’s lives
 - Working in partnership with those who provide and commission children’s services
 - Securing and harnessing the support of parents, carers and the communities in which our children and young people live
 - Ensuring the needs of children are fully assessed using agreed frameworks and common language and that the services they receive are based on identified needs and evidence about what works

Belfast City Council Corporate Plan (draft)

- 7.11 Belfast City Council is currently in the process of agreeing and adopting a corporate plan for the 2007-2010 timeframe.

The vision promoted by Belfast City Council is:-

“to take a lead role in improving quality of life now and for future generations for the people of Belfast by making it a better place to live in, work and visit”. The vision is informed and underpinned by the following strategic themes:

- Strategic Leadership
- Creating Wealth
- Quality of Life

- 7.12 The forward looking approach adopted by Council through this vision and themes will require the Play Service to be similarly proactive and innovative in its approach and delivery. Through a range of actions and strategies such as sports development and physical activity strategy, strategy for open spaces and strategic neighbourhood action programmes, a range of opportunities will be presented to the Play Services team to work in partnership with other divisions throughout Council in order to develop a co-ordinated and strategic approach to service provision.

Integral to the future development and delivery of the play development service is the need to build and sustain partnerships at both internal and external level. At internal Council level, this entails formation of linkages with key sections/services such as Parks and Leisure, Community Safety, Good Relations and Health and Environmental. Development of these links as part of a wider strategic approach to Children and Young People will provide the Play Service with a forum for service development and expansion in co-ordination and co-operation with other key service providers internally.

A strong internal partnership culture will place the Play Service in a strong position to undertake collective action externally. Given the shift to Community Planning and cluster working through the Review of Public Administration, these external linkages will be crucial in taking forward the Play Service and confirming the value of play to children's development.

These external partners may include:

- Early Years Organisation
- PlayBoard
- Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
- Education and Library Board
- Play Resource Warehouse
- Community sector

Belfast City Council's Community Support Unit

In terms of the Community Support Plan promoted by Belfast City Council, the Community Services Unit seeks:-

"to support and energise communities to become stronger and more confident in order to develop an active, inclusive, safe and welcoming city."

Central to this will be the provision of a Play Service which will be accessible to all children in the Council area, providing a safe and welcoming environment within which children can learn new skills and form new relationships, enhancing their social and educational development.

Of particular importance will be promotion of actions identified under Council's corporate themes of Strategic Leadership and Quality of Life. These themes will facilitate delivery of a range of actions with the potential to impact, directly or indirectly, on the Play Services Unit, including:-

- Community Support Plan
- Multi-Agency Action Plan for Children and Young People
- Neighbourhood Renewal

- Review of Child Protection Policy and Procedures
- Consultation and engagement with Children and Young People
- Good Relations Programme
- Volunteering Support programme

It will, therefore, be vital that the Play Service Unit works closely with other services both within the Community Support Unit and across the wider Council environment to ensure there is maximum awareness of and support for Play Services.

Fit Futures DHSSPS (March 2006)

Established in response to concerns about rising levels of overweight and obese children, the Fit Futures task group highlighted the role of play in encouraging children to engage in an active lifestyle as one option to address rising levels of obesity in children. In addition it further found that statutory bodies had a role to play in ensuring opportunities for active play are available and accessible to children as evidenced by the following priority for action:-

“In the Fit Future, children and young people, of all ages and from all sections of our society, will be motivated and supported to access a range of readily available, quality, enjoyable opportunities to be active and eat healthily.”

“Immediate action should be taken to overcome the potentially disjointed approach to the promotion of physical activity, sport and leisure, and play ... Local authorities will have an increasingly significant role to play in helping to connect these agendas”.

The report acknowledges that parents are often reluctant to let children play outdoors due to worries about traffic and strangers. These very real concerns reinforce the need for accessible play provision where children can play in a safe and non-threatening environment.

A Shared Future - OFM/DFM (March 2005)

This strategic framework for community relations in Northern Ireland advocates support for cross sectoral working, including education through initiatives such as citizenship programmes and capacity building. There is also a commitment to “creating safe and shared space for meeting, sharing, **playing**, working and living.”

Amongst its stated policy objectives is facilitation of “the development of a shared community where people wish to learn, live, work and play together”, recognising the potential of play to strengthen community cohesion and provide children and their parents to form new linkages, which can be facilitated through provision of safe and accessible play environments, which can have an associated positive impact on community morale and cohesion.

Summary

It is clear from the wider policy environment that there exists scope for play to link with a range of other stakeholders in order to ensure that

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the needs of children are met at a range of levels. The Play Service has the potential to contribute in a positive and meaningful way to key policy agendas, raising awareness of the value and benefits of play to the wider community.

Such a partnership approach can also create opportunities for additional funding for the service through programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal. This will involve liaising with other service providers in order to ensure joined up working and avoid duplication of resources. The next section, therefore, considers external providers.

8.0 External Providers

- 8.1 In addition to provision through Belfast City Council, there are a range of external providers involved in play and play development. It will be vital for any emerging model of service provision to liaise with these service providers in order to avoid duplication and ensure any potential gaps in service provision are addressed. Such providers are discussed below:-

The Early Years Organisation

- 8.2 The Early Years organisation (formerly NIPPA) has a team of Early Years Specialists who can work with local community based playgroups, parent-toddler groups, full day care groups and after school providers to provide early years services and family support services. In addition, the organisation has a team of Community Development workers who can support community and voluntary sector organisations through community development principles and approaches.
- 8.3 Amongst the projects provided by the Early Years organisation is Toybox Project, which aims to support Traveller children and enhance their social and emotional development of Traveller children aged 0 – 4. Project Workers establish a relationship with participating families, providing toys and materials for play activities to aid each child's ability and support their personal and intellectual development.

PlayBoard

- 8.4 PlayBoard is the lead agency for children and young people's play in Northern Ireland, working to improve the quality of children's lives by increasing their opportunity to play. Amongst the play oriented services operated by Playboard are:-

Positive PlayGrounds - a school based training programme to encourage schools to re-examine their attitude to and use of the school playground, instead seeing it as an asset to the school and enhancing its role in children's play.

Fit for Play Quality Award has been designed to help tackle the growing obesity crisis encountered by children across Northern Ireland and seeks to increase physical activity promote healthy lifestyles for children.

The *Reclaiming Playspace Project* aims to 'reclaim' parks and open spaces for play for children/young people aged 6 -13 years living in some of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. Three communities in North Belfast participate in the programme, receiving two sessions each per week designed to create safe, quality, outdoor play experiences. The project is based on the concept of mobile play, offering outdoor play on an open access basis. Using a van, staffed by a small team of play rangers, furnished with an array of play

equipment; children and young people are offered the opportunity to engage in activities to increase participation and provide avenues to experience fun and enjoyment in a safe environment. Children and young people are encouraged to take ownership of their local community spaces and parks.

The *Play Quest programme* is part of the Big Deal which is a new £4 million programme for 0-25 year olds funded through the Big Lottery Fund. The Play Quest Team made up of a project manager and four Playrangers work in a variety of settings with 0 - 10 year olds, offering support to staff, parents and children to participate in innovative approaches of implementing appropriate play experiences and environments.

Play Warehouse

8.5 The Play Warehouse is a centre for arts, play and educational activities for children, providing a unique package of resources and materials, advice, ideas and training for people working with children, young people and community groups. Its stated aims are:-

- Promote the value of creative activities and good quality play opportunities
- Promote environmental awareness by re-using non-toxic waste materials in creative activities
- Increase children's self esteem, confidence, creative and intellectual ability
- Assist play and youth workers in developing their creative skills

8.6 The Play Resource Warehouse has the dual aims of promoting creative play and encouraging environmental responsibility, by collecting non-toxic waste materials from industry and providing them, together with other low cost play and art resources, to groups working with children and young people throughout Northern Ireland.

Mapping Need

8.7 Analysis of the mapping information for Belfast City Council identifies a number of characteristics which must underpin future planning and decision making relating to the Play Service:

- There are just over 60,000 (60,261) children and young people aged under 15 in Belfast City Council area;
 - 31% (18,755) of them reside in West Belfast wards,
 - 29% (17,604) in the North Belfast wards,
 - 23% (13,834) in the East Belfast wards
 - 17% (10,369) in the South Belfast wards
- Northern Ireland has
 - 7% of its population aged under 4
 - 4% aged 5-7,
 - 3% aged 8-9,

- 8% aged 10-14
 - 2% aged 15
 - Review of the midterm population projections for Belfast City Council area demonstrates that population will stabilise....in real terms the volume of children in the 4-15 age ranges are unlikely to increase. Therefore the key issue for the Council will be identifying where the 4-16 year olds are, what is provided for them and is there potential for the ply service to provide services where gaps exist, to promote play services or to support good play practice through supporting existing providers.
- 8.8 The following tables set out the population distribution area (North, South, East and West) across the City Council. It also identifies the wards sitting within the top 10% in terms of deprivation. These figures identify wards with above average numbers in the 0-15 (and especially 4-16 from a Playwork perspective) age ranges. Moreover, it sets them against Noble assessment of deprivation. Clearly North and West Belfast have in many cases higher concentrations of children (than the city norm) living in some of Northern Ireland's most deprived wards e.g. Beechmount, Whiterock, Glencolin, Ardoyne, Waterworks. There are also examples in East (e.g. Ballymacarrett) and to lesser extent Shaftesbury in South Belfast.
- 8.9 This data can help focus on communities where need is likely to exist.
- 8.10 The proposed 'detailed' mapping exercise will be required to link existence of children (up to 16) with provision. Analysis of the following four tables for each area starts the process of mapping current 'registered' provision against the numbers of children up to 16 and the deprivation ranking of each ward. This process supports this type of review but is still 'crude' in that it does not capture a range of community and voluntary provision including sports clubs and church groups as an example. In addition it cannot capture the quality of provision or the extent to which playwork, good play practice and play development exists. The review recommends a more detailed play mapping process to build on this type of analysis. This more detailed mapping process will be required to confirm the medium to long term role of the Play Centres. It will confirm primarily if the Play Service needs Play Centres and if it does where they should be located.

Review of Belfast City Council Play Service

Area	West Belfast													
	Total Population	0-4 Number	0-4 %	5-7 Number	5-7 %	8-9 Number	8-9 %	10-14 Number	10-14 %	15 Number	15% %	16-19 Number	16-19 %	Noble Indices
Northern Ireland	1685267	115238	7%	72347	4%	50703	3%	132664	8%	27104	2%	102097	6%	
Belfast City Council Area	277391	16616	6%	10716	4%	8006	3%	20588	7%	4335	2%	18315	7%	
West Belfast	69886	4953	7%	3217	5%	2551	4%	6617	9%	1417	2%			
Ward														
Glencairn	4026	253	6%	156	4%	116	3%	308	8%	62	2%	231	6%	24
Highfield	5310	340	6%	219	4%	164	3%	427	8%	97	2%	329	6%	73
Shankill	3784	261	7%	146	4%	124	3%	319	8%	59	2%	233	6%	1
Beechmonut	4942	393	8%	250	5%	195	4%	484	10%	99	2%	373	8%	37
Clonard	4421	324	7%	206	5%	156	4%	409	9%	74	2%	307	7%	18
Falls	5046	395	8%	252	5%	208	4%	471	9%	117	2%	413	8%	2
Upper Springfield	5895	471	8%	289	5%	258	4%	706	12%	171	3%	557	9%	8
Whiterock	5424	443	8%	309	6%	265	5%	586	11%	116	2%	445	8%	3
Andersontown	5764	298	5%	193	3%	157	3%	447	8%	99	2%	419	7%	86
Falls Park	5888	362	6%	232	4%	184	3%	526	9%	117	2%	429	7%	81
Glencolin	7129	607	9%	378	5%	280	4%	721	10%	130	2%	521	7%	42
Glen Road	5872	386	7%	278	5%	206	4%	601	10%	125	2%	431	7%	29
Ladybrook	6385	420	7%	309	5%	238	4%	612	10%	151	2%	501	8%	89

Review of Belfast City Council Play Service

Area	North Belfast													
	Total Population	0-4 Number	0-4 %	5-7 Number	5-7 %	8-9 Number	8-9 %	10-14 Number	10-14 %	15 Number	15%	16-19 Number	16-19 %	Noble Indices
Northern Ireland	1685267	115238	7%	72347	4%	50703	3%	132664	8%	27104	2%	102097	6%	
Belfast City Council Area	277391	16616	6%	10716	4%	8006	3%	20588	7%	4335	2%	18315	7%	
North Belfast	74169	4784	6%	3212	4%	2333	3%	6020	8%	1255	2%			
Ward														
Bellevue	6025	353	6%	240	4%	166	3%	362	6%	66	1%	295	5%	184
Castleview	4878	238	5%	192	4%	139	3%	402	8%	85	2%	288	6%	195
Cavehill	5282	331	6%	212	4%	154	3%	423	8%	91	2%	372	7%	501
Chichester Park	5109	333	7%	207	4%	146	3%	429	8%	84	2%	329	6%	117
Duncairn	4007	234	6%	149	4%	119	3%	275	7%	64	2%	216	5%	12
Fortwilliam	4798	269	6%	165	3%	116	2%	297	6%	61	1%	235	5%	233
Crumlin	4376	236	5%	159	4%	124	3%	303	7%	73	2%	218	5%	4
Woodvale	4594	285	6%	182	4%	115	3%	315	7%	62	1%	259	6%	13
Ardoyne	6602	576	9%	413	6%	269	4%	698	11%	139	2%	492	7%	7
Ballysillian	6020	367	6%	258	4%	205	3%	490	8%	94	2%	366	6%	92
Cliftonville	5421	390	7%	239	4%	187	3%	534	10%	107	2%	338	6%	79
Legoniel	5528	331	6%	227	4%	183	3%	425	8%	90	2%	335	6%	57
New Lodge	5224	351	7%	261	5%	164	3%	456	9%	112	2%	402	8%	5
Waterworks	6305	490	8%	308	5%	246	4%	611	10%	127	2%	471	7%	16

Review of Belfast City Council Play Service

Area	East Belfast													
	Total Population	0-4 Number	0-4 %	5-7 Number	5-7 %	8-9 Number	8-9 %	10-14 Number	10-14 %	15 Number	15%	16-19 Number	16-19 %	Noble Indices
Northern Ireland	1685267	115238	7%	72347	4%	50703	3%	132664	8%	27104	2%	102097	6%	
Belfast City Council Area	277391	16616	6%	10716	4%	8006	3%	20588	7%	4335	2%	18315	7%	
East Belfast Ward	68558	4004	6%	2502	4%	1810	3%	4570	6%	948	1%			
Ballymacarrett	4942	365	7%	224	5%	161	3%	419	8%	86	2%	330	7%	9
Bloomfield	5537	332	6%	208	4%	148	3%	321	6%	63	1%	211	4%	152
Orangefield	5496	343	6%	184	3%	142	3%	353	6%	66	1%	233	4%	428
Ravenhill	5500	278	5%	165	3%	148	3%	321	6%	67	1%	202	4%	385
The Mount	4259	241	6%	143	3%	121	3%	282	7%	63	1%	212	5%	14
Woodstock	5133	320	6%	193	4%	137	3%	329	2%	73	1%	255	5%	44
Ballyhackamore	5693	365	6%	224	4%	161	3%	419	7%	86	2%	267	5%	416
Belmont	6025	356	6%	237	4%	165	3%	398	7%	83	2%	297	5%	357
Cherryvalley	5933	321	6%	228	4%	120	2%	354	6%	61	1%	239	4%	496
Island	4280	266	6%	139	3%	122	3%	284	7%	59	1%	198	5%	34
Knock	4995	253	5%	196	4%	113	2%	320	6%	67	1%	234	5%	432
Stormount	5530	267	5%	164	3%	143	3%	444	8%	97	2%	319	6%	529
Sydenham	5235	297	6%	197	4%	129	2%	326	6%	77	1%	264	5%	174

Review of Belfast City Council Play Service

Area	South Belfast													
	Total Population	0-4 Number	0-4 %	5-7 Number	5-7 %	8-9 Number	8-9 %	10-14 Number	10-14 %	15 Number	15%	16-19 Number	16-19 %	Noble Indices
Northern Ireland	1685267	115238	7%	72347	4%	50703	3%	132664	8%	27104	2%	102097	6%	
Belfast City Council Area	277391	16616	6%	10716	4%	8006	3%	20588	7%	4335	2%	18315	7%	
South Belfast	65300	2971	5%	1822	3%	1322	2%	3455	6%	739	1%			
Wards														
Blackstaff	3964	198	5%	114	3%	73	2%	229	6%	59	1%	211	5%	28
Finaghy	4994	261	5%	168	3%	135	3%	355	7%	81	2%	299	6%	512
Malone	5694	387	7%	225	4%	169	3%	453	8%	88	2%	334	6%	558
Musgrave	5277	331	6%	188	4%	125	3%	367	7%	93	2%	342	6%	394
Upper Malone	4926	278	6%	169	4%	122	3%	338	7%	72	2%	304	6%	315
Windsor	7087	160	3%	85	1%	53	1%	123	2%	34	0.50%	404	6%	346
Ballynafeigh	5251	279	5%	148	3%	94	2%	222	4%	58	1%	237	5%	221
Botanic	9572	238	2%	138	1%	123	1%	310	3%	64	1%	1142	12%	248
Rosetta	5115	259	5%	195	4%	143	3%	331	6%	62	1%	220	4%	429
Shaftesbury	5785	281	5%	201	3%	155	3%	412	7%	73	1%	296	5%	23
Stranmillis	7635	299	4%	191	3%	130	2%	315	4%	55	1%	1457	19%	554

West Belfast

	Registered Childminders	Creche	Creche Capacity	Playgroups/Nursey	Playgroups/Nursey Capacity	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision Capacity
Glencairn	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Highfield	8	1	24	0	0	1	24
Shankill	1	3	44+	0	0	0	0
Beechmonut	5	2	120	1	15	1	27
Clonard	1	3	62	0	0	2	54
Falls	1	2	22	5	193	2	64
Upper Springfield	4	0	0	6	252	4	97
Whiterock	1	0	0	3	102	1	36
Andersontown	8	0	0	1	24	0	0
Falls Park	1	2	70	1	26	0	0
Glencolin	16	1	54	2	41	0	0
Glen Road	8	0	0	1	29	0	0
Ladybrook	10	0	0	1	32	1	24

North Belfast

	Registered Childminders	Creche	Creche Capacity	Playgroups/Nursery Groups	Playgroups/Nursery Groups Capacity	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision Capacity
Bellevue	5	1	24	0	0	0	0
Castleview	3	0	0	1	24	0	0
Cavehill	2	0	0	1	47	0	0
Chichester Park	14	0	0	1	70	0	0
Duncairn	4	0	0	2	48	0	0
Fortwilliam	11	0	0	1	40	1	20
Crumlin	2	1	12	2	39	5	109
Woodvale	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ardoyne	8	0	0	1	5	1	310
Ballysillian	9	0	0	3	88	2	76
Cliftonville	15	1	8	1	47	1	27
Legoniel	8	1	50	1	50	2	200
New Lodge	4	2	69	3	70	4	154
Waterworks	8	1	15	4	96	2	104

East Belfast

	Registered Childminders	Creche	Creche Capacity	Playgroups/Nursey	Playgroup/Nursery Capacity	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision Capacity
Ballymacarrett	2	5 (includes 1 SS)	24	2	40	24	48
Bloomfield	14 (p/t)	0	0	2	74	2	48
Orangefield	0	0	0	1	24	0	0
Ravenhill	12	0	0	4	122	2	99
The Mount	0	2 (includes 1 SS)	18/As Required	4	98	1	24
Woodstock	7	0	0	1	16	0	0
Ballyhackamore	5(p/t)	0	0	7	282	0	0
Belmont	17 (p/t)	0	0	2	137	1	32
Cherryvalley	0	0	0	1	50	0	0
Island	0	2	0	3	62	2	40
Knock	6 (p/t)	4 (includes 3 SS)	10/As Required	1	24	0	0
Stormount	8 (p/t)	0	0	2	54	1	16
Sydenham	16 (p/t)	1	10	1	47	0	0

South Belfast

	Registered Childminders	Creche	Creche Capacity	Playgoups/Nurse Groups	Playgoups/Nurse Group Capacity	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision	4-12 Yrs Afterschools/ Holiday Provision Capacity
Wards	0	1	12	1	24	2	48
Blackstaff	0	0	0	0	0	1	24
Finaghy	0	0	0	3	66	0	0
Malone	0	1	10	5	168	1	48
Musgrave	5	1 Sure Start	As Required	2	56	0	0
Upper Malone	1	1 Sure Start	0	6	263	1	16
Windsor	7	1 Sure Start	0	1	26	0	0
Ballynafeigh	1	2	62	2	39	4	102
Botanic	0	0	0	7	340	2	48
Rosetta	0	3 Sure Start	As Required	0	0	1	24
Shaftesbury	0	0	0	2	106	2	60

8.11 Review of these tables is summarised below in the context of the current location of the Councils six play centres.
Service Provision for Pre-school children (children turning 3 between 1st July and 30 June)

Play Centre	Ward	Deprivation	Children in pre-school year	Playgroup places BCC* & other providers	Nursery places	Total playgroup/nursery places	Variance Demand/Supply
Avoniel	The Mount	11 Top 40%	62	64 (16)	104	168	+106
Loop River	Orangefield	43 Top 50%	46	48 (0)	52	100	+54
Ballysillan	Ballysillan	28 Top 50%	73	36 (16)	26	62	-11
North Queen Street	New Lodge	5 Top 10%	70	0 (0)	104	104	+34
Olympia	Blackstaff	16 Top 40%	43	16 (16)	26	42	-1
Whiterock	Whiterock	3 Top 10%	89	40 (0)	124	164	+75

*number of total places in BCC Playcentres are indicated in brackets

Service Provision for children 4-11 age group

Play Centre	Ward	Deprivation	Children 4-11 age group	Number of children registered in playcentre	Number provided by in other providers	Total places for children in 4-11 age group	Variance Demand/Supply
Avoniel	The Mount	11 Top 40%	341	55	24	79	-262
Loop River	Orangefield	43 Top 50%	489	63	0	63	-426
Ballysillan	Ballysillan	28 Top 50%	634	38	0	38	-596
North Queen Street	New Lodge	5 Top 10%	586	54	57	111	-475
Olympia	Blackstaff	16 Top 40%	327	48	40	88	-239
Whiterock	Whiterock	3 Top 10%	720	24	42	66	-654

8.12 The table on the previous page sets the playcentres in the context of the ward they are based in and other registered provision in the ward. However, the importance of the playcentres and future delivery model of the playservice could only be defined by supplementing the available information at this point with a more detailed understanding of other registered and unregistered provision. The current analysis clearly demonstrates an excess of supply over demand for pre-school service provision and therefore would suggest Belfast City Council no longer need to offer services of this nature.

Regarding delivery of current service elements for the age range 4-11 years, and indeed the proposed developed services for 11-16 years, Belfast City Council would need to supplement the current evidence base. It will only be when this information is available that robust decisions could be made about the location of or requirement for playcentres as part of the playservice.

9.0 Conclusions

9.0 This section of the report sets out the conclusions of the review team based on the information available to it across the timeframe of the review process. The conclusions are set out against the following themes:

- Value of Play
- External Environment
- Belfast City Councils Current Play Service
- Planning for the Future

The Value of Play

9.2 The Play Review placed specific responsibility on the review team to examine ‘the case for play’ and its value for children and young people. This was carried out, largely, by completing a review of existing published information relating to the value of play and its importance for the development of our youngest citizens.....children and young people.

9.3 Section 3, 4 and 5 set out detailed definitions of play, overviews of the types of play and the value of play. In terms of clarity it does not make sense to repeat the outputs of these debates. However, it is worth reinforcing the following conclusions:

- The case for play and investing in play is proven. There is a robust empirical research base which demonstrates that creating appropriate opportunities and environments for children to play brings about benefits in terms of social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development. In simple terms children who have a quality play experience, especially up to pre teens will:
 - Have significantly increased probability of reaching their full intellectual potential
 - Develop better motor and physical coordination abilities
 - Develop social and team working skills
 - Develop enhanced creative thinking and problem solving abilities

The External Environment

9.4 The external environment will always form the context within which a local authority provides services, either directly or via service level agreements with a service delivery partner/contractor/community organisation. The following conclusions can be made about the external environment which will form the context for Belfast City Councils Play Service over the next five years:

- Clearly it is the Councils experience that the demand for pre-school play service has reduced to the point that there is not a waiting list at any of the six play centres; with provision ceased at three of the centres. A number of factors in the external environment are likely to increasingly impact on demand. Investment through the Surestart programme will make a range of preschool services available to parents and children across some of the Council areas most deprived wards.
- The Preschool Expansion Programme will also create a series of places for preschool children for many parents across the City Council area. This will increasingly create competition for Council service and raise the question about whether Council needs to intervene in providing services for an age group where government is likely to be a significant provider; directly or through resourcing of delivery agents, across the next three-five years.
- Examination of mid-term population identifies that there is likely to be a reduction in the population across the City Council. This will initially mean a reduction in the overall volume of 0-4 year olds as a percentage of the City Councils population. On the basis that government funded initiatives will meet need for this age group and that the age group will reduce over time it is reasonable to argue that the resources invested by the Council in a play service should focus on the 4-16 year age group.

Belfast City Council's Current Play Service

9.5 The information and consultations underpinning the process bring the independent review team to the following conclusions in relation to the current play service:

- Belfast City Council is the local authority in Northern Ireland which has invested most in play as a dedicated/specialist service for its children and young people. Based on the understanding of the value of play developed earlier in the review this has been a 'wise' investment which will clearly contribute to good outcomes for children and young people (consistent with the NI 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People) over the longer term
- The investment in its Play Service has resulted in Belfast City Council having access to an experienced and qualified

Playworker/Assistant Playworker team (16 ftes) in addition to well developed practices and processes and provision of a Play Development Officer

- Whilst the Council has invested in play it is clear that the service/team has not benefited from consistent and clear strategic and operational leadership over the past 3-5 years. This has resulted from pro-longed internal restructuring, changes in line management and services of abandoned reviews of the service. As a result the service had stagnated with no obvious sign of strategic thinking (a vision or sense of purpose for the service) or needs led service development. Much of this has been addressed through placing the Playworkers under the management of the Play Development Officer reporting directly to the Community Development Manager.
- It is the conclusion of the independent review team that the service delivery model is dominated by the location of the six play centres rather than having a City/Council wide view which maps the service delivery model and resources to need. As an example the demand for pre-school (morning) play work sessions has reduced to a point where only three (50%) of the centres offer this service. Only one has the maximum number of 16. Those attending are also very young with only 24% in their pre-school year. However, there is little evidence that new needs have been identified and the service refocused to meet these needs, making better use of skilled Playwork team. From an external point of view the model appears to be “this is the way we have always done it so this is the way to do it”. In the evolving local authority arena with an increasing emphasis on the ‘efficiency agenda’ and being needs led this approach to service planning for the play service cannot be sustainable over the longer term. It is clear that the draft Community Support Plan sets out that the Community Services Unit will become needs focused. It is imperative that the Play Services follows this lead
- There is no doubt that the existing service is delivered well and valued by those who use it. However, given the size of the play service team (16 ftes) and the annual resourcing dedicated to the play service it is the opinion of the independent review team that too few people get to benefit from the service on the basis of the current centre focused service delivery model. Transition will be required over the next three years to provide a needs led play service with flexibility to meet changing need and demand.
- Given the changing population profile and the reducing demand for the Councils pre-school service it is concluded that Council should exit this type of play service delivery. There are a range of providers of services for pre-school children with Government funded Surestart and the pre-school expansion programme. This has reduced demand for Council intervention as

demonstrated by attendance data for the playcentres. Playwork should focus on the 4-16 years age range

- To move a needs led flexibility service delivery model cannot be achieved within an immediate timeframe. As Council exits pre-school provision it will be required to communicate with service users. Moreover, the current team need support to refocus and time to carry out more detailed local mapping prior to agreeing annual service delivery plans.
- There are examples of duplication in service provision e.g. Whiterock and Olympia. Whilst some services are delivered by Play workers/Assistants and others by Community Centre staff it is the view that this, from a Community Services Unit perspective, has created an overlap and duplication. In Ballysillian services are provided for children by both the community group and the playcentre. How or why this situation developed is unclear but it should be addressed if the service is to be truly needs led.

Planning for the Future

9.6 Whilst key recommendations are likely to focus on the short term (2008/9) the following conclusions are made in respect of planning for the future:

- At present there is no sense that the service has been 'planned' or needs led. Over the duration of the review process, a transition structure for Community Services has been put in place while new Departmental structures are agreed. It is concluded that given a clarity in relation to 'where the play service fits' the play service must follow a formal planning process which compliments processes that will be put in place for the Department and the unit
- Given the history of management of the service, transition planning and service improvement are likely to be required prior to embracing a detailed service improvement agenda

10.0 Recommendations

10.1 This section of the review sets out the recommendations of the independent review team. The recommendations have been developed against the following themes:

- Refocusing the Play Service - Short Term (2008-09)
- Refocusing the Play Service - Medium Term(2009-10)
- Refocusing the Play Service - Long Term (2011-13)

Refocusing the Play Service-Short Term

10.2 The following are the short term (2008-2009) recommendations:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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
- 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.
- 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:
 - 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
 - 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
 - Playworker recruitment criteria should focus on Playwork (NVQ) qualifications, as opposed to early years qualifications
- 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
- 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.

- 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

- 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
- 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.
- 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

- Any emerging long term models should be based on the findings and recommendations of the mapping exercise discussed above.
- Given the scope and nature of play provision it is vitally important that any long term model is flexible and needs driven.

Review of Belfast City Council Play Service

- 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.

11.0 Action Plan

11.1 The Councils Play Service is to follow the strategic, community development and needs led approach which will represent the ethos of Community Services Unit (and it should do so) the Play Service will be required to adopt a change agenda set out in the model below:



11.2 This section of the document provides an action plan to support the Community Support Unit, Community Services Manager, Play Development Officer and Playwork team to manage the change agenda across the 2007-2010 timeframe.

11.3 In order to compliment the Community Support Unit's process the action plan has been developed against the following themes:

- High Quality Service Delivery
- Review and Improvement
- Strategic Planning

Timeframe:	Short Term: 2008 – 2009				
Objectives:					
Recommendations	Action(s)	Responsibility	How Will We Know	Resource Implications	Timeframe
It is recommended that this review and its associated actions are implemented and that it does not become another in a long line of aborted reviews and service improvement initiatives for Council's Play Service. Any emerging organisational structures should recognise the value of Play.	The review findings and recommendations are implemented as outlined in this Action Plan .	Community Services Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of the review findings and recommendations • Regular progress reports to staff/team/committee meetings 		April 2008
It is recommended that the service delivery model shifts from a centre focused to a needs led model.	The Play service adopts a needs led approach through regular needs analysis and consultation with users.	Play Development Officer	More focussed and efficient service		April 2008
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular meetings with relevant sections – Play, Parks and Leisure, Community centres • Consultation with 	Community Services Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater integration across services • Monitoring through Community Services business plan 		Ongoing

<p>issues of services for children and young people. 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.</p>	<p>all service users and potential service users</p>				
<p>It is recommended that Belfast City Council withdraw from the provision of a pre-school play service via its play centres.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents in the communities adjacent to the relevant Play Centres seeking to register children for the service would be informed of the decision • Existing users of the service are supported to access alternative provision. • Pre-school services are withdrawn 	<p>Community Services Unit</p>	<p>Withdrawal of services</p>		<p>2008/09</p>
<p>It is recommended that, in the short term, the Play worker</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playwork team work together to 	<p>Play Development</p>	<p>Development and delivery of play</p>		<p>April 2009</p>

<p>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 Play development projects under direction of the Play Development Officer which can be piloted to inform future service delivery.</p>	<p>develop and deliver a range of play development projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs analysis carried out to inform the development and delivery process • Skills support programme for the Play work team • Playworker recruitment criteria should focus on Playwork (NVQ) qualifications, as opposed to early years qualifications 	<p>Officer</p>	<p>development projects</p>		
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<p>A needs analysis of the playservice should be undertaken as a short term measure, the findings of which should be implemented over the medium term.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of needs analysis template • Carry out needs analysis with staff, centres and service users • Report development and dissemination 	<p>Play Development Officer</p>	<p>Needs analysis completed and implemented, resulting in a more focused and efficient service</p>		<p>2009</p>
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Timeframe:	Medium Term: 2009 - 2010				
Objectives:		Objectives:		Objectives:	
Recommendations	Action(s)	Responsibility	How Will We Know	Resource Implications	Timeframe
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dissemination of the findings of the analysis to relevant staff across the Community Services Unit, centres and users Inclusion of recommendations in section business plans as performance indicators 	Community Services Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular updates through staff/team/committee meetings Analysis of progress against targets laid down in business plans 		Annually
It will be vital to link the Playservice to the wider external environment, including the policy and strategic environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and establish links with key external agencies e.g. Playboard, Early Years Ongoing liaison and communication on key issues e.g. Community Planning 	Play Development Officer	Regular reports to staff/team/committee meetings		April 2009
Mapping exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of a 	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mapping 		5 year cycle

<p>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.</p>	<p>mapping template</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors to inform mapping exercises. 	<p>Services Unit</p>	<p>exercises conducted and completed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings shared and implemented 		
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Timeframe:	Long Term: 2011 – 2013				
Objectives:					
Recommendation	Action(s)	Responsibility	How Will We Know	Resource Implications	Timeframe
Any emerging long term models should be based on the findings and recommendations of the mapping exercise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping exercise completed and findings disseminated • Discussion with relevant officers in relation to moving forward implementation of recommendations 	Community Services Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping exercise findings implemented • Regular progress reports to staff/team/committee meetings 		Ongoing
Potential play models 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of needs analysis and mapping exercises to ascertain how best various play models can address key findings and recommendation • Implementation of play models accordingly 	Play Development Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation with staff, centres and service users • Regular progress reports to staff/team/committee meetings 		Ongoing

