



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Development Committee
Subject:	Review of Belfast City Council Play Service
Date:	11 March 2009
Reporting Officer:	Marie-Thérèse McGivern Director of Development ext. 3470
Contact Officer:	Catherine Taggart – Community Development Manager Blanche Thompson - Play Development Officer

Relevant Background Information

Belfast City Council Community Services currently supports a range of services for children and young people throughout our play and community centres. The play development service provides support to enhance these services, to organise central events and to provide support for the voluntary and community sector. The 6 playcentres currently provide direct services for children through pre-school playgroups, after school clubs and holiday playschemes. Examples of the current range of services, their target age group and the support provided by Belfast City Council is provided in Appendix 1.

Belfast City Council agreed at their meeting on 4 July 2005 to undertake a review of Council-owned playcentres. The purpose was to:

- Review the benefits against the cost of providing six dedicated playcentres
- To relate them to alternative methods of providing a play service
- Make recommendations as to the way forward in relation to the Council's role in delivering a play service

The review was undertaken by an independent consultancy, *Venturei* and involved consultation with a range of internal and external groupings. The report and recommendations were presented to the Development Committee on 11 June 2008. The report highly commended the quality of work undertaken by the play staff team recognising them as a substantive resource for services for children and young people. The report recommended that the staff team were maintained and that their skills are further developed and maximised. Furthermore it recognised the value of play and outlined a number of recommendations to extend the impact of the service by widening both the geographical scope and to broaden the age range of the service.

The Committee accepted the recommendations contained within the *Venturei* report including a recognition of:

- The significant role of play in the lives of children and the wider community and the 'right to play' as articulated in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- The clear fit for play with a wide range of strategies contained within the Corporate Plan including those relating to health & well being, education and learning, citizenship, community development and strategies specifically aimed at children and young people.
- The strong research and evidence base which supports the positive impacts that result from providing children and young people with enriched play experiences and the significant contribution that BCC has made to positively changing the lives of children in this city through its investment in the provision play workers and appropriate play spaces / environments.

Committee however expressed some concern at some aspects of the report including the accuracy of the statistical information in the report which supported the recommendation to cease the provision of a pre-school play service at the remaining play centres which still offered this as part of their menu of programmes. Committee was also interested in how the play team could increase the level of support to the community sector such as churches and youth organisations who were significantly involved in play provision in the City but who received very little by way of financial or other assistance from the public sector.

To facilitate consideration of the review, officers tabled an associated plan which proposed actions and related activity including details of the time-scale for implementation and the anticipated benefits and service implications.

To support implementation of the review, Committee agreed to establish a Consultative Group consisting of Councillors and Officers to examine the current facilities which were available within the City and how the work undertaken by the Play Service could be improved.

This would involve:

- i. Verifying the evidence base regarding the recommendation to exit from pre-school playgroups. The decision relates provision at 3 of the 6 play centres: Avoniel, Ballysillian and Olympia.
- ii. To add value and determine how best to manage the implementation of points 2-6 of the agreed action plan.

The Committee further agreed that a decision regarding the provision of pre-school playgroups would need to be taken by Committee in February 2009 in order to support an effective exit strategy from pre-school playgroups and to inform parents and guardians.

Committee should note that the pre-school playgroup services based at Whiterock, North Queen Street and Loop River closed in previous years due to decreasing numbers and the inability to meet the agreed minimum number of children as agreed by Council. The resources released as a result of these closures have been used to enhance the current play service as demonstrated in Appendix 2. This has included extending the remaining services based at the centres that support play opportunities for children through after school, seasonal and summer provision and support for the sector.

Key Issues

In considering the current position regarding pre-school playgroup provision by Belfast City Council, the Consultative Group undertook a number of tasks that included:

- i. Meetings with external stakeholders including the Early Years Organisation which provides support for the pre-school sector.
- ii. Examination of the statutory responsibilities for the provision of pre-school playgroups.
- iii. Exploration of the different types of pre-school provision, associated resource issues and the current demand within the sector (reference: Appendix 3).
- iv. Commission of a mapping exercise to examine the current supply of provision in the areas where the pre-school playgroups are based. This was undertaken by Herbie McLearnon, an independent consultant. The mapping exercise examined the number of places currently provided in Nursery schools and the Belfast City Council pre-school playgroups. (reference: Appendixes 4 and 5).

The mapping exercise indicates that there are excess places within the statutory nursery education sector based in the geographical area provided for by the pre-school playgroup based at Avoniel Playcentre.

In the geographical areas provided for by the playgroups based at Olympia and Ballysillian Playcentres, there is spare capacity within the statutory nursery sector to include two children in the qualifying year that may attend the pre-school playgroups based in the two Playcentres. This potentially leaves 5 children in the qualifying year that would need to access alternative provision.

The consultative group also considered the challenges related to the changing context of our current pre-school playgroup provision including those associated with the increasing demands of the certifying authority and the particular needs of a younger client group. The group believe that if Belfast City Council is to continue to provide pre-school playgroup provision, this will only be viable if we are to include children from outside the qualifying age group, that is, those in this younger age category. To enable this, an additional staff resource will need to be dedicated to each playgroup in order to ensure the continued provision of a quality service. This would involve a strong resource commitment for a small number of children and is not included in current or future budget estimates.

Through releasing those resources currently dedicated to the provision of pre-school playgroups at the 3 remaining centres, the play service would be able to move from a static facility based approach to one associated with the provision of an enhanced service that is both flexible and needs led. This would enable the service to target a greater number of children and extend the geographical reach and age range of the service.

This reallocation of resources will have a positive impact on our vision of changing the lives of more children and young people across the city. Resources will be utilised to support work with marginalised children, to develop inclusive play opportunities, to piloting new projects, resources, training and practical support for community groups.

The service will also advance both internal and external partnerships in order to develop new areas of work and maximise the use of other Belfast City Council assets including parks.

Play staff would work with local stakeholders in each of the three locations where the pre-school playgroups are currently based to ensure an effective exit strategy.

Resource Implications

Financial

To take place within existing resources.

Human Resources

No implication on the current allocation

Asset and Other Implications

There is no impact on any physical BCC asset.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

1. Note the contents of the report
2. Agree the recommendation of the Play Review Consultative Group that Belfast City Council moves from a static facility based approach through pre-school playgroups to a city-wide approach that will enhance the service and enable it to be flexible and needs led.
3. Agree that officers engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure an effective exit strategy for each of the 3 affected areas

Documents Attached

Appendix 1: Examples of current services provided for children and young people in Community Services

Appendix 2: Development of Play Services

Appendix 3: Pre-School Provision

Appendix 4: Nursery Provision - BCC Play Centres - 12 February 2009

Appendix 5: Analysis of BCC Pre Primary Provision