



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Development Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	Benview Community Centre: Pre-School Provision
<b>Date:</b>	9 June 2010
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	John McGrillen, Director of Development, ext 3459
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Catherine Taggart, Community Development Manager, ext 3525

### Relevant Background Information

Benview Community Centre is an independently owned and managed centre located in the Ballysillan area. Currently, Council's Play Service operates both pre-school and after-school programmes in the centre. The pre-school programme is scheduled to end in June as the final part of Council's withdrawal from pre-school provision following the adoption by Council of the recommendations of the Play Review in March 2009.

A local Councillor has been approached by users of the centre and the centre committee to seek from the Development Committee an extension to the pre-school programme for a further year, that is, until June 2011.

Previously, following Committee's determination in March 2009 to exit from pre-school provision, officers had agreed the continuation of the programme on a time limited basis until 30 June 2010 as part of an exit strategy in Benview. This extended time line for the locality took cognisance of the level of community capacity in the area. It was therefore considered necessary in order to balance the imperative of encouraging local residents and centre users to take greater responsibility in regard to future provision, while at the same time offering support and practical assistance through the immediate transitional period.

For several reasons – some valid, others less convincing – demand for wider capacity building measures failed to materialise until recently when the reality of withdrawal of the pre-school programme was fully realised. Since then, the centre committee and users have mobilised impressively and would appear to offer, albeit belatedly, an appropriate platform for such supportive capacity building measures as were originally proposed.

The current appeal to extend the period of the exit strategy is based on the continued

demand for the programme in the area and the recognition that its continuation would offer a focal point around which a much-needed, wider developmental and capacity building approach could be introduced in a planned manner.

This broader strategic and business planning support has been offered through the community development team and is available as soon as the group commit to a programme of support.

### **Key Issues**

The Play Service is in the early stages of implementing a planned programme of change in line with the Development Committee's reaffirmation (February 2010) of the direction of that change. Two salient issues apply.

Firstly, the move from a static facility-based approach to more flexible and needs-led approaches. Early pilot programmes are showing encouraging outputs, with such programmes extending the geographic scope of the service, targeting new groups and introducing innovative play methodologies. Secondly, it was agreed that Council should withdraw from pre-school provision on the basis of other bodies being better placed to lead on and resource such provision. That analysis continues to hold.

However, in seeking to devise an area-appropriate exit strategy in the Ballysillan area, there may be merit in exercising a degree of flexibility in regard to a different form of council led provision.

Council's objective, from a wider community development perspective, is to work with the committee of this locally owned and managed centre and with local residents to create an effective and functional community based group capable of maintaining a range of programmes that meet local needs.

While there is continuing demand in the area for pre-school provision, other bodies offer a range of programmes albeit out with the immediate catchment area of the centre. Council's decision to withdraw from pre-school provision therefore remains valid. However, on the basis of the wider community development process potential, the Play Service could offer to deliver a "Play Club", in the first instance, as a means of engaging and working on a capacity building basis with local residents and centre users, as originally envisaged.

Such a "Play Club" would be introduced from September 2010 and operate with Council support. This would be run by 2 Belfast City Council Play staff but encourage community involvement and ownership. Initially, for a 4 month period, the play staff would run the programme for 4 mornings per week, and with community development support, would offer advice and training to local volunteers. In January 2011, a phased withdrawal would occur, reducing to 3 mornings per week with ongoing support until June 2011, at which point the centre would assume responsibility for the programme.

This concept offers several advantages:

- The focus of the club will be on children's play needs.
- It would create a fun environment that is about play rather than education as required within the pre-school curriculum.
- There exist more opportunities to promote community involvement and capacity building.
- It should lead to reduced community dependence.

- The programme would be more manageable locally in terms of obtaining volunteer commitment.
- It should release eventually play service resources to develop further projects elsewhere.

Should Members be supportive, the proposed compromise offers a reasonable alternative to the existing pre-school programme in the form of a pilot "play club" while at the same time, offering a conduit through which community development processes can be introduced in a planned manner. Ultimately, Council's objective remains that of a functional community based group capable of maintaining a range of programmes that meet local needs.

### **Resource Implications**

1. The provision of a Play Club programme until June 2011 would incur direct costs in the region of £19,000 for staffing (although it can be argued that this represents an opportunity cost ie the staff will be employed anyway) and an estimated £5,000 for supplies, services and equipment. Provision within revenue estimates has been made for this financial year.
2. The deployment of two play staff at any centre for a given period by definition limits the opportunity to deploy those same staff elsewhere. However, in this particular instance, any such a limitation has to be offset against the wider developmental benefits that should be derived for the area from the associated process of capacity building.
3. Council currently support Benview through several financial means;
  - £13,475 through revenue grant to support costs associated with the provision of the community building
  - £4,200 rental for the after-schools and pre-school rooms
  - £1,800 summer scheme grant.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee is asked to:

1. Agree to the introduction of a pilot Play Club in Benview to operate in the Benview Community Centre for the period September 2010 to June 2011.
2. From January 2011, the programme would reduce from 4 mornings per week to 3 mornings.
3. If at any point, community engagement with the programme or the wider capacity building process diminishes, Council should reserve the right to withdraw from the Play Club provision at the discretion of the Director of Development.

### **Decision Tracking**

Recommended action to be completed by Eddie Jackson.

Time-line: September 2010

Reporting Officer: Catherine Taggart