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Play Areas in Residential Developments NI

1 Introduction

This paper considers provisions for play areas in new residential areas within Northern Ireland. It will examine:

1. PPS8: 'Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Policy';
2. PPS7: 'Quality Residential Environments';
3. Supplementary Planning Guidance 'Creating Places: Achieving quality in residential developments (Planning Service NI); and
4. The Play and Leisure Policy (OFMDFM).

The second section refers to the issue of access to safe play areas for children in NI, by looking at information produced by Playboard (NI's lead play agency), and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). Finally it looks at examples where provisions in relation to play areas in NI have been put into practice through OFMDFM's Exemplar Project Scheme.

2 Provisions

The following section considers the provisions in NI for play areas in new residential developments.

PPS8: Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Policy

Through the Quality Initiative¹, it is the Department of the Environment's (the department) stated objective to secure a high quality of design, layout and landscaping in new housing developments. It is considered essential, therefore, that areas of pleasant, attractive and landscaped public open space, including children's play spaces, are provided as an integral element of new residential development.

Provisions in Northern Ireland for play areas in residential developments can be found in Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Policy (PPS 8). According to this, children's play areas are defined as open space:

*"Open space, for the purposes of this Statement, is defined as all open space of public value. The definition includes not just outdoor sports facilities, parks and gardens, amenity green space and **children's play areas**, but also natural and semi-natural urban green spaces, allotments, cemeteries, green corridors and civic spaces."*²

Further definition can be found in Annex A (p.37) of this statement which encompasses provisions for children and teenagers (play areas, kick - about areas, skateboard parks and outdoor basketball hoops) as public areas.

A particularly important consideration in determining the layout of new housing developments is the provision of safe opportunities for children's play. The main place where young children play is adjacent or near to their homes as generally they are constrained in terms of the distance they are allowed to venture from their house for supervision and safety reasons. It is important, therefore, that children's play areas and facilities are located within a reasonable walking distance of where they live. However, they should not be located so close to dwellings as to cause noise or nuisance problems for residents.

In large developments, there may be a need to provide more formal outdoor recreation facilities, such as playing pitches, to meet the needs generated by the development. In such cases, the Department will consult closely with the recreation department of local district councils.

In calculating the precise amount of public open space provision needed in an individual development proposal, only appropriate and 'useable' open space, will generally be counted. Accordingly, verges and visibility splays, which form part of the adopted highway, will not normally count towards the open space provision.

The assessment of provision commences with a survey of existing open spaces, both public and private, identifying the different needs they serve. Based on the survey information, the Department will then assess provision against the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) recommended minimum standard of 2.4 hectares of 'outdoor playing space' per 1000 population (commonly referred to as the '6 acre standard') (see Annex B of PPS8). This assessment will consider not just the absolute level of provision of 'outdoor playing space', but will also look at the distribution and accessibility of such facilities.

While it is recognised that provision of open space facilities can vary greatly from one area to another, the NPFA standard is intended to reflect a minimum level of provision of 'outdoor playing space' that the Department feels should be aspired to by district

¹ This encompasses the Ministerial Statement made by Malcolm Moss MP in January 1996 and Planning Policy Statements - [PPS 1 General Principles](#) (DoE, 2001), and [PPS 7 Quality Residential Environments](#) (DoE, 2001), as well as the guidance contained in the publication - [Creating Places \(DoE and DRD, 2000\)](#) and [Development Control Advice Note 8 - Housing in Existing Urban Areas](#) (DoE, 2002).

² [PPS8 Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Policy](#) (p.7)

councils and exceeded wherever possible. Further information about the NPFA standard and the term 'outdoor playing space' is contained in Annex B of PPS8³.

Requirements

Residential developments of 25 or more units, or on sites of one hectare or more, must provide public open space if they want to receive planning permission.

Smaller residential schemes will be judged on their own merits. Exceptions to the requirements will be permitted for apartment developments etc where it is evident that an acceptable level of private communal open space is being provided.

Discussions with applicants will be carried out in relation to the precise amount, location, type and design of such provisions, while having regard to the following:

- A normal expectation will be at least 10% of the total site area;
- For residential development of 300 units or more, or for development sites of 15 hectares or more, a normal expectation will be around 15% of the total site area; and
- Provision at a rate less than 10% of the total site area may be acceptable where the residential development:
 - is located within a town or city centre; or
 - is close to and would benefit from ease of access to areas of existing public open space.

Management and Maintenance

The provisions made for the management and maintenance of public open space is left in the hands of the developers. They must ensure that the land/area will be managed and maintained to carry out its designated function. Such provisions are key consideration when decisions are being made on planning applications

PPS7: Quality Residential Environments

Neighbourhood Facilities

The need for local neighbourhood facilities to be provided in conjunction with proposals for new residential development will be assessed by the Department in consultation with relevant bodies, generally as part of the development plan process. Where such a need is identified, it will be a requirement that the developer provides for this need as part of the development process.

According to PPS7, local neighbourhood facilities include social and community uses such as schools, crèches, surgeries, local shops and **play facilities**. Where these are required they should be incorporated into the overall design and layout of the development⁴

³ http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/policy/policy_publications/planning_statements/pps08-open-space.pdf

⁴ [PPS7 Quality Residential Environments](#)

Public Open Space

PPS7 also highlights the importance of integrating “pleasant, attractive and landscaped” areas of public space, which include children’s playspaces, as an essential part of any new residential development, and refers to PP8 for more detail.

PPS7 also states:

“Regard should always be given to ways of integrating pleasant, attractive and landscaped areas of public open space, including children’s play spaces, as an intrinsic element of any new residential development to meet the needs generated by that development”⁵

Creating Places: Achieving quality in residential developments⁶

This Supplementary Planning Guidance produced by the Planning Service NI, states the following:

- Public open space includes:
 - equipped play areas for young children;
 - informal kick-about areas;
 - formal playing fields;
 - village greens and small parks; and
 - natural surroundings and amenity planting
- The amount of the area to be provided for play in any development will be negotiated with developers, having regard to the Department’s policy requirements (PPS8). The normal amount may be around 10% or more of the site area.
- Areas should not be located out of sight and designed as part of the overall layout.
- Larger areas can be a focal point along local distributor roads and other important streets/avenues.
- Smaller areas can provide minor focal points and should be separated from houses with roads to restrain vehicle speeds.
- To reduce crime risk, areas should be directly overlooked by fronts of dwellings and also have informal surveillance, and should be designed to minimize nuisance to local residents.
- Understanding that in inner urban areas and other high density areas that space is likely to be more limited, small play areas should be considered for children. Design considerations should include:
 - street width, alignment, quality of space;
 - traffic calming design;
 - street planting;
 - lighting, signage, street furniture (such as bus stops, benches and litter bins); and
 - paving and surface textures.

⁵ [PPS7 Quality Residential Environments](#) (p.23)

⁶ NI Planning Service, Supplementary Planning Guidance- Creating Places: Achieving quality in residential developments.

- Responsibility for the provision, landscaping, and subsequent maintenance of these spaces after completion, will rest with the developer. This matter should therefore be discussed at an early stage in the design process with the Department.
- Developers may wish to consider transferring the land to the local district council or a charitable trust, or setting up a management company to administer and maintain such areas.

The Play and Leisure Policy OFMDFM

OFMDFM supports the development of play areas for children, and in doing so produced the 'Play and Leisure Policy' (2008)⁷. It is hoped that the Implementation Plans to accompany the Policy Statement will come into force next year⁸.

According to the Play and Leisure Policy Statement⁹:

- The aim of the policy is to improve current play and leisure provision for all children and young people aged 0 – 18 years¹⁰. The development of the policy is a response to the ten-year strategy produced in 2006 by OFMDFM "Our Children and Young People"¹¹. The strategy has its foundation in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the UK Government in December 1991.
- Provisions for play areas are crucial as:
 - Children contribute to the community and to society when they are visible and when their environment offers them maximum opportunities to play. Facilities and areas for play act as focal points for communities offering social interaction for children and the wider community, which all help in the generation of community cohesion.
 - Good play provision and appropriately designed spaces for children create a positive environment, and contribute to the sense of well being and security that children have with their surroundings.

3 ACCESS

The following section looks at the issue of access to safe play areas for children in NI.

Playboard¹²

According to the 'Play and the Environment' briefing paper by Playboard, research has shown¹³:

⁷ Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2008) Play and Leisure Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, (Belfast: OFMDFM).

⁸ [NICCY Play and Leisure Policy Briefing Paper \(2010\)](#)

⁹ [OFMDFM Play and Leisure Policy Statement](#)

¹⁰ For the purposes of the play and leisure policy, a child/young person is defined as someone up to 18 years of age. For children who are/have been in care or children with a disability, the age limit extends to 21 years.

¹¹ [Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge](#)

¹² The leading play agency in NI <http://www.playboard.org/>

- That increasing urbanisation, traffic dangers, a general lack of play provision within housing developments and parental fears have reduced children's access to an appropriate and safe play environment.
- That according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, across the UK children's access to the environment has "shrunk ninefold" within the last 20 years. Playboard believes the amount to be greater in NI as a result of the 'Troubles'.
- Due to lack of access to play areas, the street can be a popular place of play for most children, increased urbanisation and traffic has reduced the safety of streets.
- Little attention is given to the design of streets as safe areas for children, and areas for play are put aside as attention is focused on the demands of traffic.
- The design of housing developments largely ignore children's play needs, play provisions tend to be an after thought located on the periphery of developments or on left over land.
- Access to safe play areas is also an issue in rural areas, as children's access to the countryside tends to be limited due to safety reasons.
- Continued building on green belts further erodes children's access to natural green space.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

According to NICCY in their briefing paper on the Play and Leisure Policy¹⁴, children's access to play areas in NI has been neglected at strategic level, and this has resulted in the decrease of availability of safe, age appropriate facilities and spaces in children's local areas. NICCY states that research by Monteith and McLaughlin in 2004¹⁵ showed that one in five children, living in severe poverty in NI, did not have access to local, safe play areas. According to the Equal Lives Review by Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), many children and young people with learning disabilities found that play and leisure provision was inaccessible and/or unwelcome¹⁶

The NICCY briefing paper further suggests that the situation of access in NI is severely affected by the legacy of the 'conflict'. This is apparent in the segregated existence of school and community based provision, which ultimately leads to limited access to play and use of public space.¹⁷

¹³ [Playboard, Play and the Environment Briefing Paper](#)

¹⁴ [NICCY, Play and Leisure Policy Briefing Paper \(2010\)](#)

¹⁵ Monteith, M. and McLaughlin, E. (2004) Children and Severe Child Poverty in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Save the Children.

¹⁶ Bamford, D. (2005) Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland), Equal Lives: Review of Policy and Services for People with a Learning Disability in Northern Ireland, (Belfast: DHSSPS).

¹⁷ Connelly, P. and Healy, J. (2004) Children and the Conflict in Northern Ireland: The Experiences and perspectives of 3 -11 year olds. Belfast: Office of the First and Deputy First Minister

Direct Evidence

In NICCY's report 'Children's Rights: Rhetoric or Reality (2008)¹⁸, opinions were gathered from children and young people of all ages from all geographical areas regarding the lack of facilities in relation to play areas, youth clubs and sporting activities. The main points were:

- Children worried about the lack of play and leisure spaces and the safety of existing ones;
- Young people expressed concern about the cost of leisure activities, particularly as they get older;
- Children talked about the importance of having play and leisure facilities close to where they live; and
- Young people shared their frustration about the lack of leisure activities available when they became teenagers.

According to the 2008 NICCY Review¹⁹, several groups, representing the more disadvantaged and marginalised children, including children experiencing poverty, children living in rural areas, those who have caring responsibilities, and those with disabilities, did not have equal access to play and leisure.

Putting provisions into practice

The following section gives examples where provisions such as those under the Play and Leisure Policy, produced by OFMDFM, have been used to improve access and quality of play areas throughout NI.

In an attempt to promote new and innovative play and leisure facilities that are accessible and attractive to children, OFMDFM, in their commitment to the policy statement, recognised the importance of local councils in respect of providing these areas. Seven councils participated in the initiative: Armagh, Banbridge, Cookstown, Derry, Enniskillen, Larne, and Strabane.

A range of projects were undertaken which reviewed input from the children and young people within the council area. The seven councils listed above successfully applied and received funding from OFMDFM's Exemplar Project Scheme²⁰. For example:

Armagh

A number of Wards within Armagh City and District Council area were highlighted as being without play facilities i.e. Derrynoose and Ballymartrim. In response to this a piece of unused land upon the Derrynoose Primary School property was used to build a play area. The area could be used by the school during term time from 9.00am to 4.00pm Mon-Fri, giving the community access in the evenings, weekends and school holidays.

¹⁸ [NICCY Report: Children's Rights – Rhetoric or Reality \(2008\)](#)

¹⁹ [NICCY Rights Review \(2008\)](#) (Chapter 4)

²⁰ http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/play_and_leisure_reporton_council_projects.doc



According to OFMDFM the completion of the park has many advantages for the school:

- It enabled achievement of many aims of the new revised curriculum by developing 'A Play Programme';
- Allowed the school to develop their 'Active Lifestyles' programme; and
- Increases and encourages opportunities for 'Physical Activity'.

The wider community has also benefited from having its first ever play area by:

- Providing a focal point for families in this rural setting;
- Families do not have to travel to other play sites outside of Derrynoose;
- It provides a service for those who have no access to travel;
- The partnership agreement between the school and Council ensures that the site is well supervised and maintained at all times; and
- Good partnership working between both groups has resulted in a successful project being delivered.

For examples in the other areas, please refer to the Play and Leisure Exemplar Projects by visiting the following link:

http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/play_and_leisure_reporton_council_projects.doc