



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Draft Play and Leisure Implementation
Plan**

20 October 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kennedy (Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Allan Bresland
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Martina Campbell)
Ms Orla Heatley) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson (Mr Kennedy):

Good afternoon. You are very welcome, and thank you for attending today to brief us on the draft play and leisure implementation plan. I am sorry for the delay. Thank you for your advance briefing. We are happy to hear a short presentation and then we may ask you questions. The evidence session is being recorded by Hansard for future publication.

Ms Martina Campbell (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Thank you for this opportunity to update the Committee on the work we are doing on the play and leisure implementation plan. Members have already received copies of the draft implementation plan from Ministers. We will give Committee members a brief overview and then answer

questions on the detail.

The Executive's play and leisure policy vision statement is:

"to recognise, respect and resource play is to recognise, respect and value childhood."

The implementation plan is the way in which Ministers propose that the Executive should deliver on that statement. The overarching theme of the draft plan is to have a child-friendly community. In our pre-consultation with children, we reviewed the plan and structured it into three distinct areas. First, we have "places and spaces"; that is, to provide well-designed places and spaces where children and young people are welcomed. Secondly, we have "championing play"; that is, to promote and encourage the benefits of play with a wide range of stakeholders, professionals, parents, children and young people in order to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard when it comes to their play and leisure experiences and opportunities. Thirdly, we have "access to play"; that is, to make opportunities for play and leisure accessible and welcoming for children and young people regardless of ability or disability. The draft plan also takes account of cross-cutting issues such as workforce development and participation of children and young people.

In developing the plan, we recognise that no one organisation, be it statutory, voluntary or private, has the authority, power or resources to meet in full the objectives contained in the plan. With that in mind, the plan has been developed by a multi-agency group, which is made up of key stakeholders, including local councils, Departments, PlayBoard, the Youth Council and others. To successfully deliver the actions required to bring about change and improvement, consideration must be given as to how best we can pool resources and work together more closely. Partnership-working to deliver key outcomes jointly will be critical to the success of the plan. With that in mind, we are working with all the councils, which we see as key drivers in delivering the actions contained in the draft plan on a model of partnership-working and strategic planning. The plan is scheduled to run until 2016, which is in line with the 10-year children's strategy. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. The deadline for response or comment on the draft implementation plan is this Friday. A considerable number of other Departments and agencies are involved, and our processes involve contacting the other statutory Departments. I am not sure that that can be done before Friday, and next week the Assembly is in recess. How tight are you on that deadline?

Ms M Campbell:

The deadline is very tight, and we apologise for that. Ministers signed up to the timeline to take the draft plan to the Executive on 4 November, the point of which is to try to complete the consultation and bring it back to the Committee and the Executive before purdah. I respect the fact that the Committee will want to write to the other Committees. With the Committee's permission and agreement, I suggest that the Committee go ahead with that and feed the responses back to us during the consultation. We will then take them on board. Departments have already been involved in the implementation plans and, therefore, should be fully aware of what is in the draft plan.

The Chairperson:

Do you accept that the timeline that you have given the Committee is somewhat unsatisfactory?

Ms M Campbell:

I apologise for that.

Ms M Anderson:

Despite that, Martina, I welcome the fact that there has been some progress and that we have a paper in front of us. All Committee members appreciate that. Has any regard been given to our child poverty inquiry? I know that that theme came up. I am trying to go back into my memory bank to determine whether we made a specific recommendation on that, but I know that the inquiry made reference to the issue of play and leisure. Therefore, you may want to look at that inquiry as a source or reference.

I was keen to hear your comment that councils are the key drivers for the pooling of resources. You could look at the public realm or the design of, for instance, housing estates or regeneration plans. The city of Derry is going through a regeneration process at the moment, and the issue of places and spaces is a feature of that. I suspect that Departments have a key role to play, particularly on capital spend and on the design of housing estates or the public realm. You require joined-up government, but, at times, Departments can be very protective of the budget in individual silos. I can see that there is a role for councils, but there is a specific role for Departments as drivers.

Ms M Campbell:

I absolutely agree with that. Some of the actions in the plan are attributable to the parent Department as well as to councils, architects and anyone else involved in design. At the outset, we will try to put in place some models of best practice in areas such as design in planning policy statements. We will develop guidelines and models of best practice for everyone who is involved in urban regeneration and in the design of play areas.

Mr Elliott:

Thanks for that. I notice that one section of the draft plan lists one barrier as:

“A lack of access to, and conflicts over the use of local spaces and places for play and leisure, in both rural and urban areas”.

Is there any clear description in the policy of the differences between urban and rural areas? If there is, I have not seen it. There is a clear distinction between how the policy should develop in those areas.

Ms M Campbell:

There is not anything specific. However, one of our first tasks will be to give the councils some seed funding, as it were, to undertake some work setting up strategic partnerships and conducting an audit. We expect to see those differences come out more forcibly in the outworkings of that audit.

Ms Orla Heatley (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

The main differences may have been more around transport and access to play areas or facilities, perhaps affecting rural areas more. Obviously, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) was represented on the implementation group, which may have been how that came out. However, we just wanted to acknowledge that it is right across the board.

The Chairperson:

What is your sense of the opportunity for play facilities for scattered rural areas?

Ms Heatley:

The issue for rural areas was around transport and how to get to the places. That is what came out of some of the groups. I do not know about that in depth, but that was one of the issues that came out, and we looked at that as part of the implementation plan.

The Chairperson:

How do you envisage the outworking of that? Do you think that by creating play areas or activity areas in one centre, parents and children will gravitate towards those areas?

Ms Heatley:

As part of the audit to which Martina referred, we want councils to look at their specific areas to say not only what facilities are there and where they are but who is accessing them, and who can and cannot, so that we can go some way to start to look to see where the gaps are. There may be rural areas where people cannot get access. As you say, one place may be identified, and acknowledged as a gap, and the council can start to look at that.

The Chairperson:

I am no longer a member of a local authority, so I am entitled to say that councils have a particular concern that a plan and a scheme will be devised that will leave them with the responsibility of providing play facilities extensively throughout their areas. Yes, some are urban areas, while others are rural and scattered. Councils are just a wee bit nervous. My sense is that they will be left with something that says, “It’s up to you guys to provide these services.”

Ms Heatley:

That is something that we can look at with councils. We regular engage with the councils in taking forward the implementation plan, and —

The Chairperson:

Have you heard that argument from any of the councils at this stage?

Ms Heatley:

Most councils initially raised issues about what will happen as we progress the plan longer term. However, I do not think that councils in certain areas have specifically raised the issue more than other councils.

The Chairperson:

Sorry to flog this, but, in the minds of ratepayers, services of that nature are generally a council-provided facility. The Department seems to be saying that this is a very good idea. Who will do

it, where will it happen and, more importantly, who will fund it? That is what the councils are saying to me. Well, that is my sense of the situation anyway.

Ms Heatley:

The other point that is worth mentioning is the work that we did with the councils last year on exemplar projects, which involved looking at things in one area that could be replicated across other areas, with the intention of sharing best practice and knowledge across council areas, especially those that have similar issues and a similar spread of young people.

As part of the pre-consultation, councils and young people said that, much of the time, it is not necessarily about designing a playground or a facility. It can simply be about allocating space for young people to come together, especially older children. Therefore, although councils will obviously be concerned about the longer term and the financial implications, we have to balance those concerns against the fact that it is not always about saying that a playground has to be built.

We will continue to liaise with the councils on that issue as we take forward the plan. To date, however, councils have been very receptive to the whole idea and intention of viewing it as a council-wide partnership approach.

Mr Elliott:

The policy's overall remit appears to be about collective play and leisure as opposed to opportunities for individual play and leisure. Is there any recognition in the draft plan of individual rather than collective opportunities?

Ms Heatley:

I hark back to the audit that we are asking the councils to carry out, which we are supporting them in doing. The audit requires councils to look at what facilities are in their areas and who is using them so that they can start to identify whether groups or specific individuals are not accessing or cannot access play. Councils can then accommodate them in longer-term planning, to ensure that all children and young people in those areas can engage in play.

Mr Elliott:

What are the outworkings if there are no reasonable facilities in a particular area? Let us assume that we are talking about an urban area. Do the responsibilities lie with Departments or councils?

Who will you pass responsibility to for making provision, or is that up to each individual Department or local authority?

Ms Heatley:

A number of Departments have a role to play as well as other providers. The Department of the Environment (DOE), the Planning Service, the Youth Service and others have a responsibility, as well as councils and local delivery agencies.

The Chairperson:

If my children think that their human rights are infringed on because of the lack of availability of swings and roundabouts on the Maytown Road in Bessbrook, whom should they expect to provide those swings and roundabouts?

Ms M Campbell:

That issue is within the audit that we are asking councils to undertake. We expect them to have consultation in their communities. That is the sort of issue that we hope will come up. We will then resolve that through the audit. We also put an onus on private housing developers and the professionals involved in developing housing estates to incorporate access to play areas within developments.

The Chairperson:

A developer may say to the local authority that he will provide it initially but that he expects the council to maintain it.

I got a quizzical look there. I did not get a response.

Ms M Campbell:

I am sorry. I will have to write to you with the answer to that. The person who has been working exclusively on that aspect is on sick leave. Orla and I are not as close to the detail.

The Chairperson:

I will not flog this point to death, but we are asked to respond to the document by this Friday. We may be asking awkward questions about some of the practical outworkings of this plan, but they are not unreasonable. Answers are not being provided.

Mr Molloy:

I have the same issues. I declare an interest as a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council. People wrongly assume that councils have all sorts of powers and responsibilities. The implementation plan may be a case of too little, too late. All the developments have been built, and every piece of green grass has been built on. Developers propose to leave so much green grass, and when those proposals are analysed, they mean that a foot-wide strip beside the footpath has been left throughout the estate, which does not amount to any sort of sod.

The Planning Service is key to getting a change of policy here. If it does not propose legislation, nothing can be done. My council tried to do so, but the planners overruled us. They said that there is no provision in legislation to allow that to happen. It is 30-odd years since councils lost those kinds of powers, so, instead of looking at councils, people need to wise up and accept that councils no longer have those powers and that, before the arrangements for councils out of the review of public administration (RPA) come into effect, we need to look at what powers are needed. The issue of council responsibility and the question of who maintains and processes the play area afterwards is a big issue. We have to get legislation to ensure that the responsibility is shared across Departments and does not just sit with one.

Ms M Campbell:

I accept what you say. Indeed, the first page of the action plan outlines three actions to ensure that the planning policy statements and planning policy frameworks are fit for purpose and are reviewed accordingly. We acknowledge that the delivery partners are broader than the councils alone, but initially we want the councils to take up our offer of seed funding to carry out the audit, and, indeed, 20 of the 26 councils have already registered an interest in doing so.

Mr Molloy:

It is very important that any organisation insists on talking to the council, not to the officers. We have a specific line in our council that the councillors run the council, not the officers, although too many of them think that they still run it.

The Chairperson:

Your council must be unique.

Mr Molloy:

That is very important, because it is very easy to talk to council officials, who will agree or disagree without actually consulting councillors.

Ms M Campbell:

Our colleague Brenda, along with PlayBoard, gave presentations to all the councils.

Mr Molloy:

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council never received a presentation.

Ms Heatley:

It was open to all councils, but some of them declined. She did have a further meeting and she did present —

Mr Elliott:

Do you mean to say, Francie, that some of your officers are not bringing matters to your attention?

Mr G Robinson:

I have a follow-up comment to make.

The Chairperson:

You had better declare that you are a member of Limavady Borough Council.

Mr G Robinson:

Yes. I am a member of Limavady Borough Council. There should be an onus on, for example, the Fold Housing Association and even the Housing Executive when they are building new estates to make that sort of provision, rather than just lumber it all on councils. At the end of the day, it is ratepayers' money, and I am not knocking the suggestion one iota, but I think that too much emphasis is being placed on councils to provide this and provide that. They just do not have the money, particularly given the harsh economic times that we are in. We have a play area that our council provided, and it is mainly used at the weekends as a drinking den. As I said, I am not knocking the idea, but I would like to see provision for children and young people. Sometimes the people for whom facilities are earmarked are not the ones who can utilise them.

The Chairperson:

By way of response by the deadline, what we will seek to do — I will try to get the support of the Committee for this — is attempt to provide the Hansard report of this evidence session to you to reflect some of the concerns that you have heard raised. We will consult with all Statutory Committees and continue our work in preparation for the full consultation. I am not entirely happy about the lateness of the presentation and the deadlines that we have been given. They are unfair and unreasonable, and I think that some of the detail has been absent even from today's session. That is unsatisfactory. Thank you for your attendance today.

Ms M Campbell:

Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated assent.