



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Play and Leisure Implementation Plan

16 March 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Molloy)
Mr Allan Bresland
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr George Robinson
Mr Danny Kinahan

Witnesses:

Ms Martina Campbell) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Ms Brenda Stevenson)

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Molloy):

Good afternoon, Martina and Brenda, you are welcome to the Committee this afternoon. Will you please give a short introduction to the report? I am sure that members will have some questions for you after that.

Mrs D Kelly:

Chairperson, the report that is under discussion has just been tabled. The Committee should have received it well in advance to give members an opportunity to read it. I have no difficulty in people talking us through some aspects of the report, but I reserve the right to ask officials to

come back to next week's meeting. Members will then have had ample and proper time to consider a report that has been outstanding for a very long time.

The Acting Chairperson:

OK. That is noted.

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

I first want to introduce my colleague, Brenda Stevenson, and myself. I take on board the member's point about the short notice, and I apologise for that. We are happy to come back to the Committee next week. I should also point out that we intend to bring the report to the Executive next Tuesday for agreement, and that we will consider the Committee's input today as an initial response.

We previously briefed the Committee on the plan, and I will give a brief overview of the consultation process that ran from 6 December 2010 to 6 February 2011. A total of 41 responses were received from stakeholders, individuals, councils and Departments. Four events were held specifically for children and young people. They were held in Belfast, Ballymena and Newry, and were joint events run with my colleagues who were working on the child poverty strategy. The events were attended by 109 children and young people aged between 1 and 18.

Analysis of the responses received highlighted a broad level of agreement with the key areas, and it is a significant opportunity to address many issues that affect children and young people's ability to engage in play and leisure. A number of suggestions were identified in the consultation responses including children with disabilities, legacy of the conflict, negative portrayal, intergenerational activities and links to other Government strategies. We considered those points and are pleased to have included additional actions into area 3 of the revised plan, 'Access to Play and Leisure', aimed at addressing some of them.

The additional actions include the promotion of the use of play services by children and young people with particular needs. Specifically, we intend to take forward a pilot project focused on the play and leisure needs of children with disabilities by March 2012. We have included an action around negative portrayal. Again, we hope to develop a project next year that will help to counteract that.

Quite a lot of respondents raised the issue of the need to engage parents in play and educate them about risks around play; about allowing children to engage in play without fear of falling and so on. We have included an action that will include engaging with parents' groups, and, as the councils develop their plans, there will be an onus on them to engage with parents.

That is it, quickly. I am happy to take questions.

Mr G Robinson:

Did all councils in Northern Ireland respond to the consultation?

Ms Brenda Stevenson (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

No.

Mr G Robinson:

How many responded?

Ms Stevenson:

We had responses from five councils, which was disappointing considering that we are currently working with 16 of them.

Mr G Robinson:

That was a very pertinent question.

Mr Kinahan:

To pick up on that, I spoke to one council that was being consulted on 32 different things, so that might be why they did not respond.

Ms Stevenson:

I understand; that came back in one of the responses.

Mr Kinahan:

Did anyone look at the resourcing and costs for councils in trying to implement this? One of the biggest problems they face at the moment is that they are struggling to do what is put in front of them.

Ms Stevenson:

Our work with the councils at the moment is on a partnership basis. It focuses on pooling resources and making best use of what is already available. We are not asking them to provide further facilities; we are just asking for joined-up working. We have had a lot of comments on the fact that facilities are there, but may be under-utilised or are not being used for the right age range. That is the kind of issue that we are working on with the councils. We initially gave them some funding to establish the partnerships and to carry out an audit of current facilities, but we do not want them to put in significant investment; we just want them to make best use of what exists.

Mrs D Kelly:

It is difficult to ask questions until we read the report in detail, so I think it would be useful for the officials to come back next week. I recall that, when I first sat on this Committee, money was set aside for flagship or signature projects within the play and leisure policy. That was over four years ago. I think that was around half a million pounds a year over three years.

Where did that money go? We asked Ministers about that before Christmas, but I do not think that we ever got an answer.

Ms Stevenson:

The money that was available for play and leisure was the total for both implementing and devising the plan. Several exemplar projects were carried out last year. It was open to all 26 councils, and eight councils replied. Only seven were successful, because one applied late, and £200,000 was spent on those projects last year.

Mrs D Kelly:

What were they?

Ms Stevenson:

The focus was on providing innovative play for children, so we looked at providing something other than swings and slides; something different that we had not had before. Trim trail is an outdoor gym in Larne with an intergenerational focus. In Cookstown, there is what is referred to as the alien, which is a large structure that children can climb into, with a seated area where the older children can sit. Some of the other projects focus on natural play in wooden structures, one of which is in St Columb's Park in Derry. In Fermanagh, we built an extension of the playground

to include a gardened area. How many is that?

Mrs D Kelly:

That is all right. I just wanted to get a flavour.

Ms Stevenson:

We also had a highly innovative project in Banbridge, where the older children said that they wanted somewhere to hang out. We installed a pole with Bluetooth, where the kids could link up their mobile phones and play music, and that was used to counteract their hanging about an area where the younger kids normally played. We put effort into that last year and had hoped to extend it this year, but the partnership has taken slightly longer to develop. However, we have it in mind for next year, with an additional action of working with children with disabilities.

Mrs D Kelly:

Are details of those successful projects available on the OFMDFM website to provide models of good practice and spread the word?

Ms Stevenson:

Yes, there is a report on our website, and, this year, some of the other councils have taken on and decided to develop some of the projects themselves, particularly the Bluetooth and the trim trail projects.

Mrs D Kelly:

It sounds imaginative.

Mr Bresland:

Were any playgrounds provided in the Strabane District Council area?

Ms Stevenson:

I am trying to remember the name of the playground provided in the Strabane area. Is it Donemana?

Mr Bresland:

That is a fairly successful one, because a good crowd goes to it.

Ms Stevenson:

Yes, and there was not much in that area to begin with.

Mr Bresland:

It takes the cubs off the streets.

Ms Stevenson:

That is its purpose. At least it has been successful.

The Acting Chairperson:

One of the issues that members raise is that young people say that there is nothing for them to do. As part of this, do you envisage having trainers to teach people to play?

Ms Stevenson:

We have engaged in two programmes with our counterparts in Play England. They have developed a Play Shaper programme, which involves working with professionals to show people how to build play into the built environment and how to train children in innovative and creative play. It involves an element of risk taking, so that the children do not engage only in soft play, which would mean that they would end up being afraid to take challenges or manage risks. That is a major focus, and we have ongoing seminars on those areas, which will have finished by the end of the month. They have been extremely successful. We held those seminars with six councils, and we have had great interest from others that want to engage in them next year.

Mrs D Kelly:

I want to ask a question from a constituency point of view. This is a wee bit outside the play and leisure policy, but I wrote to the junior Ministers about how some of the young people most at risk became involved in street violence over the past two years. Given the scarce resources, will resources be targeted at areas most in need, and will community relations be taken into account? Rather than duplicating services, we should try to create neutral spaces for children and young people to meet.

Ms Stevenson:

We have been speaking to our counterparts in the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) division

about possibly linking up on something like that. With the problem of negative portrayal in mind, we have been considering a cross-community project focusing on positively portraying young people. That would involve something along the lines of making a promotional DVD or an advertisement. It will take groups of children from across the divide, and, although I am unsure whether I am allowed to comment on what we want the content to be, it will focus on that area. It will cover many remits: play and leisure, our UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) obligations, poverty and CSI. We want to link that up as a departmental project.

Ms M Campbell:

A strong theme that emerged from the consultation responses was the need to link in with other strategies. Fortunately, most of the relevant strategies are dealt with by our Department, and we work and will continue to work with our colleagues to ensure a more joined-up approach.

Mrs D Kelly:

I hope that young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) will be included.

Ms Stevenson:

Yes. The legacy of the conflict is also a big issue, so CSI also comes into play.

The Acting Chairperson:

As there are no further questions, are members are content that Martina and Brenda come back next week, after members have had the opportunity to read through the document and —

Mr G Robinson:

And digest it.

The Acting Chairperson:

The Department will have got the report through the Executive at that stage: is that correct?

Ms M Campbell:

Yes, we hope so.

The Acting Chairperson:

OK. In that case, you may be able to give the Committee a result next week.

Mrs D Kelly:

Given the absence of so many Committee members today, that would be useful.

The Acting Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your help.

Ms M Campbell:

Do you want me to stay for the next session?

The Acting Chairperson:

Yes. I see that you are a witness for the next session, and we will move into that now.