OFMDFM – Play Policy

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Response

January 2007
Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland and we welcome the opportunity to comment on this draft policy. We work with 11,000 children, young people and their families every year and provide over 45 distinct services in NI.

Barnardo’s vision is that the lives of all children and young people should be free from poverty, abuse and discrimination. We provide a broad range of services to children and families as well as policy influencing to achieve this.

This response is based on the experience and views of Barnardo’s staff and service users. Of particular relevance to this consultation is our work in the following areas:

- Implementing and training others to use High Scope in early years settings
- A range of parent education and parent support services
- Promoting play and positive parenting with parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, parents in prison and school aged and other young mothers
- Provision and promotion of inclusive play opportunities for children with disabilities and complex health care needs

Vision

We agree with the general vision as outlined but feel it could be strengthened through the use of more inspiring and directive language. The proposed vision is more a statement than visionary and does not set out a clear aim for the Play Policy.

Delivering the Play Policy

We agree that the Play Policy will help implement the Children’s Strategy and as such the Children & Young People’s Unit has a clear role in taking this forward. We also agree that the policy should be a ‘cross-cutting’ issue with impact on different government policies and departments. However, the policy states there is no fixed ‘home’ for the policy and we would be
concerned that progress may drift if no single government department has responsibility for its implementation.

We welcome the establishment of a Play Partner Network as key to delivering the policy and agree that the seven super councils will have an important role to play. We hope that this network will ensure greater consistency of provision as the experience of our staff highlights a breadth of commitment to play across the current council structure.

**Resourcing**

Barnardo’s would strongly urge government to prioritise resourcing the Play Policy within the current Comprehensive Spending Review. Without dedicated resources and leadership the policy will have limited impact.

**Risk & Safety**

In an increasingly litigious society, there are ever more restrictions on what are considered ‘safe’ activities for children and young people. In Barnardo’s we are very aware of the importance of carrying out meaningful risk assessments and ensuring a safe environment for children. However, feedback from our practitioners highlights that has encroached on practice to such a degree that children are missing out on opportunities and that the impact on play provision is particularly serious. The development of a Play Policy presents an excellent opportunity to redress the balance back to facilitating safe but stimulating play provision and activities for children. We strongly welcome the proposed ‘reassessment of our current approach to insurance, litigation and indemnity’ and feel this is a priority issue.

**Workforce Development**

Staff involved in early years and play provision have highlighted the need for more robust career and workforce development opportunities. Play and early years work is perceived by staff as less valued than other professions, for example it offers a limited range of qualifications and accessing degree level courses locally is very difficult. Staff delivering the vision of a Play Policy need to be valued, resourced and supported to do so.
Valuing Play

We agree with the aim to truly value the importance of play and believe that the development of a Play Policy will give play greater visibility and prominence. The consultation paper concentrates on access to play facilities and physical spaces, however this is only part of the picture. Play begins at home with parents and from our experience we know that many parents either do not value or understand the importance of play for a child’s development or are simply unable to meet this need. Our family support and parenting education helps parents develop skills and strategies to promote play within the home. The consultation paper states that there is a need for ‘better information’ to empower parents as the champions of play. From our experience information alone will not meet this aim. The Play Policy needs to be complimented by parent education and family support to enable families to truly value play.

Shared Future

The proposed Play Policy has a clear link to achieving a shared society where diversity and interculturalism is welcomed. We would like to see further discussion about how will be implemented. Providing inclusive play opportunities to address the barriers within our society will be challenging and there is a lack of clarity within the document as how this will proceed. With extended schools there is increased likelihood that schools will offer a local community resource outside of traditional school hours. This will provide excellent opportunities for children and we strongly welcome this development. However, the majority of children still attend separate schools and live in segregated areas and there is a risk that unless opportunities for integration and cross-community interaction are resourced and promoted some communities will be unable to ‘learn, live, work and play together’.

Children’s Voice

We welcome the commitment to involving children and young people in planning play provision and to ensuring the voice of the child is central to the implementation of the policy. We would hope the process chosen to facilitate this will be structured and resourced to include a range of voices
in a meaningful way. We have a number of services working with children often excluded from mainstream play and leisure provision (such as children with disabilities, children from travelling community and children with challenging behaviour) and would urge that their experiences and views are also included.

To finish we would repeat our broad welcome to the development of a Play Policy for children in NI and thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. If would like further information about our response or the work of Barnardo’s please contact Margaret Kelly, Assistant Director – Policy on 028 90672366 or margaret.kelly@barnardos.org.uk.