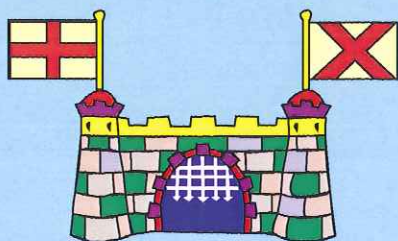


the children's  
research centre



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



# **PUBLIC POLICY ON CHILDREN'S PLAY IN IRELAND:**

***AN EXAMINATION OF CENTRAL AND  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES  
ON CHILDREN'S PLAY IN PUBLIC AREAS***

**Report Prepared by**

***Richard Webb & Associates***

**June 1999**

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***AN EXAMINATION OF CENTRAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
POLICIES ON CHILDREN'S PLAY IN PUBLIC AREAS***

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**THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL  
RESEARCH  
DUBLIN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
*and*  
THE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH CENTRE, TRINITY  
COLLEGE, DUBLIN**

***FINAL REPORT***

**June 1999**

**Report Prepared by**

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## SUMMARY

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### AIM OF STUDY

This study into policies guiding children's play in public areas in Ireland has been produced by The Children's Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin and the Centre for Social and Educational Research at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The study is not concerned with play within the home or with pre-school playgroups. The aim of the study is to examine the options for putting in place, in partnership with appropriate public and other bodies, an action-research project that will:

1. Integrate satisfactory play provision as part of one or more urban regeneration initiatives on the basis of a child's right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
2. Identify, and detail issues, and make appropriate recommendations, in relation to how a comprehensive play policy could be put into place in public space as part of standard development and planning.
3. Explore public policy and attitudes in relation to the development of a comprehensive play policy.

### METHODOLOGY

A number of research methods were used for this study. These include :

- (i) A review of relevant literature pertaining to play and the development of policies on play both in Ireland and in other jurisdictions; the study examines play policies in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.
- (ii) A survey of local authorities in Ireland to explore existing provision for children's play in Ireland. A number of issues are raised from the local authority questionnaire which outline the way forward for children's play in a manner that is appropriate to the resources of the Irish local authority.
- (iii) Contacts with relevant Government departments to determine existing provision in relation to play and to examine roles and responsibilities with regard to children.

### FINDINGS

The study found a lack of clear direction, no recognition, no strategy and no structure for children's play services or for play work training at government and departmental level in Ireland. The government needs to recognise that play is essential for the healthy development of the child and, therefore, should accord the role of play, the importance it merits. It is recommended that an essential first step in so doing is to implement the recommendations of the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child (1998). A policy vacuum exists; there is a need for expertise within various government departments to be co-ordinated with a lead role taken by the Department of the Environment, as the funding and policy body for the main local authority service providers.

### A CHILDREN'S PLAY STRATEGY

A proposed children's play care strategy for Irish local authorities would involve:

- recognising that children play everywhere and introducing traffic calming measures as part of urban and village renewal schemes, including 'safe routes to school', cycle ways and speed restrictions so that children have safe access to community facilities, and providing purpose-designed meeting places for teenagers.



- planning for play in residential development with a hierarchy of linked open spaces, wide grass verges, culs-de-sac, and the protection of natural areas for play.
- the development of equipped playgrounds designed and maintained to ISEN standards within enclosed supervised parks.
- support for after-schools clubs and holiday play schemes.

A framework proposal for an action centred research project at three centres is put forward in order to test this approach in practice.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BRIEF

This feasibility study has been produced by *Richard Webb and Associates* at the request of The Children's Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin and the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Following on from a previous study (Webb, 1997) which examined the level of provision of children's playgrounds by local authorities in Ireland, this current research focuses on the need to develop a comprehensive play policy.

### 1.1 BRIEF

The aim of the research is to develop a feasibility report on the options for putting in place, in partnership with appropriate public and other bodies, an action-research project that will:

1. Integrate satisfactory play provision as part of one or more urban regeneration initiatives. The emphasis is on the provision of physical space, either internal or external provided on the basis of a child's right to play.
2. Identify, and detail issues, and make appropriate recommendations, in relation to how a comprehensive play policy could be put into place in public space as part of standard development and planning.
3. Explore public policy and attitudes in relation to the development of a comprehensive play policy.

The feasibility report was requested to include the following:

### 1.2 METHODOLOGY

The study consisted of a comprehensive literature review (see references), and letters to and interviews with relevant government departments, state sponsored organisations and voluntary bodies. An example of a draft letter is included in Appendix 2, together with a list of those contacted. The main source of information was by means of a questionnaire circulated to the relevant engineers, town clerks and parks superintendents in 81 local authorities (Appendix 1); this included all county boroughs community councils and urban district councils. A response rate of 69% was achieved, calls were made to those who had not replied by August 24th 1998. Telephone interviews were also carried out following the format of the questionnaire with 2 local authorities.

The report examines the existing provision for children's play in Ireland, looks at the changing nature of play, the need to move away from a focus on playgrounds and examines the development of play policies in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

## 2.0 THE STATE OF PLAY IN IRELAND

This section outlines the child's right to play and the existing provision of children's play in Ireland and the focus of the relevant agencies. Definitions are also put forward in order to bring some clarity into the discussion on children's play.

### 2.1 DEFINITIONS

The National Voluntary Council for Children's Play has defined play as:

*"An essential part of every child's life and vital to the process of human development. It provides the mechanism for children to explore the world around them and the medium through which skills are developed and practised. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, intellectual and educational development and acquiring social and behavioural skills.*

*Play is a generic term for a variety of activities, which are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child. The activities may involve equipment or they may not, be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, be done with other people or on one's own, have an end product or not, be light-hearted or very serious.*

*Every child needs to play and has a right to play, but opportunities to play are often limited by external factors - discrimination, the effects of disability and special needs, insufficient space and other environmental factors, poverty and other social conditions. Play services are the means by which new opportunities for play are created."* (The Charter for Children's Play, NVCCP, 1992).

Other definitions, which will help to clarify the debate on children's play, are:

**Playcare** - Out of school care for primary school aged children. (The Playcare Strategy. PlayBoard. Northern Ireland, 1995)

- provision for children which aims to provide opportunities for development through play, and also takes responsibility for their care for agreed periods. (Spotlight on Play, a review of the County Council's Role in Play, Seminar Report, Oxford County Council, 1994).

**Playwork** - what adults do to facilitate children playing; on supervised playgrounds, after schools clubs or holiday play schemes, generally for children of primary school age. It is important to develop play as a core value in the policies and plans of appropriate organisations, services, disciplines and communities (Belfast Healthy Cities Play Policy and Strategy, 1993).

**Childcare** - Expert Working Group on Childcare established by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, uses the term childcare to describe day-care facilities and services for pre-school aged children and for school-aged children out of school hours. This definition includes playgroups, which provide informal 'learning through play' opportunities in a structured setting for a specific period during the day.

**Play facilities** - specific measures, which provide for structured or informal play and can include unsupervised neighbourhood play areas, supervised playgrounds in parks, after-school clubs, holiday play schemes and play buses. Programmes involving children with arts, sports, the environment, theatre or youth clubs, while important and which may contain elements of play, would not be included within this definition. Also excluded would be general recreational facilities such as sports pitches and swimming pools.

**A Play Policy** - a formal commitment to the provision of services and facilities for children's play and will normally define the nature and extent of the play provision. Such a policy would normally be written and available for public consultation, and be derived from a



process of community participation.

**Article 31** - the section of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by Ireland, that sets out every child's right to play, leisure and recreation, and to participate fully in the cultural life and the arts. The government is required to encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for children to participate in all kinds of artistic and cultural activity. Article 31 of the UN Convention states:

*"State parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."*

Further, the right to a safe, healthy environment (Articles 3.1, 3.3, 6.1 & 24), non-discrimination (Article 2) and a participative role for children and young people in making and influencing decisions in matters that affect their lives (Article 12), are important standards set by the Convention.

## **2.2 EXISTING PROVISION FOR CHILDREN'S PLAY**

In their submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child "*Small Voices: Vital Rights*", the Children's Rights Alliance stated that, "*A great many children in Ireland lack appropriate or adequate play provision because they are in some way disadvantaged. A recent survey found that 46% of local authorities do not provide playgrounds; there is only one trained hospital play specialist in the country and there is no training for play workers. Research is not available to show the proportion of children able to access holiday or after-school programmes, but it appears that such provision is limited. The Alliance is of the view that the child's right to play should be facilitated by the development of a national play policy which would identify strategies and cross departmental/agency methods of delivering play provision for all children*" (CRA, 1997).

In response, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child said, "*There had been insufficient information reported on recreational facilities, playgrounds, access to holiday programmes, etc. The child's right to play should be facilitated by the formulation of a national strategy in that area*" (CRC/C/SR.438. 1998).

In relation to Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the situation in the Republic of Ireland echoes that in Northern Ireland, where PlayBoard, an organisation established to look at the issue of play has stated that Article 31 has not had any significant impact on the level of services (PlayBoard, 1995).

### **2.2.1 Local Authorities**

The main provider of fixed equipment playgrounds are local authorities who are empowered, but not obliged, to provide them under the Planning Acts. As mentioned above, the study by Webb (1997) showed that 46% of local authorities did not provide playgrounds. This figure is almost identical to that achieved in the current survey, where some 47% of local authorities responded that they did not provide play facilities for children. The distribution of playgrounds was also uneven, with thirteen local authorities with populations under 5,000 possessing playgrounds. Three local authorities with a population in excess of 100,000 had no playgrounds. The ratio of playgrounds per head of population of local authorities is 1:19,098 compared to the National Playing Fields Association (UK) target of 1:1000. This figure compares with one golf course per 16,000 head of the population in Ireland (Department of Education, 1997). The low rate



of provision means that significant proportions of children are not within easy access of a playground. Not only does this make it difficult for children to freely access play facilities, but poses particular problems for those children who are economically deprived. Local authorities stated that they are influenced in their provision of playgrounds mainly by liability/insurance claims, vandalism and funding. This has led both to the closure of playgrounds and, also to changes in maintenance and upgrading of equipment.

#### **2.2.2 Government Agencies**

The only government agency directly providing play areas is Dúchas - The Heritage Service, which has installed play areas in four of its heritage parks, St. Stephen's Green and the Phoenix Park in Dublin, Kilkenny Castle and The J.F. Kennedy Park in Wexford. These play areas are provided and maintained to international standards in locations where there has either traditionally been a playground or where there are no similar facilities in the area. Some schools and childcare centres also provide equipped playgrounds.

#### **2.2.3 Local Development Partnerships and Childcare Training**

Most of the ADM funded Local Development Partnership companies have now developed childcare strategies which are being implemented through local resource centres like, for example, the Childcare for Tallaght project. Childcare, which includes pre-school playgroups, is generally provided by the voluntary sector, with part funding from the Health Boards and from the Partnership companies. Training in childcare is provided by several organisations. A key provider of training, support and advice nationally is the Irish Pre-school Playgroup Association (IPPA), with FAS and Barnardos also providing training for community based groups in specific circumstances. The tertiary education sector provides professional education and training in pre-school education and childcare. DIT is one of the main providers of formal training in this area.

#### **2.2.4 Playwork Training**

Apart from a private initiative based in Galway, no playwork training is provided in Ireland for play leadership schemes. In Britain, play work training, rather than childcare, is regarded as the appropriate training for entrants wishing to work in out of school or informal settings with children. The Northern Ireland Playwork Assessment Centre in Belfast provides playwork training linked to NVQs, undergraduate and postgraduate training is also available at universities in the U.K.

#### **2.2.5 Youth Services**

The Youth Services set up several years ago as partnerships between the VEC and the Catholic Youth Service operate in areas such as Dun Laoghaire, Tallaght, Blanchardstown, Bray, Galway, Limerick and Cork. They are primarily focused on facilities for older children and teenagers, such as arts and cultural activities. They are administratively independent of the local authorities, but do receive some funding from them. The Catholic Youth Service provides insurance. Potentially, the Youth Services could develop as play service providers and in one instance, have carved out a significant role in providing community play services.

The Dun Laoghaire Youth Service runs a purpose-built play centre catering for the under 10s with play equipment, a kick about area and indoor facilities and is a model of its kind. The newly opened play centre replaces a pre-existing playground which had existed for over 40 years and was financed by development gain as the old playground was removed to provide access to a new shopping centre. The centre illustrates how



many different local authority sections may be involved with play facilities, even when they do not directly provide them. The General Purposes section provides some funding, the General Administration section is involved with liaison and physical equipment, Housing and Maintenance is responsible for the fabric of the building, the Parks section is concerned with the planting and the play equipment and the Roads section is concerned with parking issues.

## **2.3 EXISTING DEPARTMENTAL PROGRAMMES**

There is no specific legislation with regard to children's play and no specific responsibility for children's play or the provision of funds for play facilities among any government department. Apart from education, almost the whole focus of the State's activities in the area of children is primarily concerned with childcare. Provision for play is left to the discretion of individual local authorities who are enabled, under the Local Authority (Planning and Development) Act 1963 and the Local Government Act 1994 to provide land for parks and playgrounds and to assist community groups in their provision.

The following section describes the various programmes financed and run by different Departments, which have an impact on play and children's play-related activities. Some of these programmes will be focused on separate issues, such as urban renewal, childcare or youth work and have only a peripheral relation to play. They are included here to illustrate that play crosses departmental boundaries and at the moment play is not the remit of any one department. The various programmes outlined also show both the potential impacts which programmes can have on children's play and also potential sources of funding for play-related activities.

### ***2.3.1 Department of Health and Children***

The Department of Health and Children has no policy on children's play. The Department is concerned with the administration of the Child Care Act, 1991, which is solely concerned with children at risk - those not receiving adequate care and protection. The Act places a statutory duty on the Health Boards to identify and promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection and to provide a range of childcare and family support services. No mention is made in the Act of the child's right to play or of the importance of play in the development of the child. The implementation of the Childcare Act is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Children and the Regional Health Boards. The latter also provide small grants to crèches and pre-school playgroups separately from the provisions of the Childcare Act.

### **Springboard Projects Initiatives**

In January 1998, the Government established the Young People at Risk Programme, the centrepiece of which is the Young Peoples Facilities and Services Fund. The Exchequer will contribute £30m to the fund over the next three years to support a variety of capital and non-capital projects in disadvantaged areas. The Government has decided that at least £20m be targeted at those areas affected by the drug problem. Much of this programme is being administered by the *Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport* and is aimed at the 10 - 21 year old age group.

Of the remaining £10m the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion gave approval in principle to funding of £2.4m over the next three years to support a number of pilot projects for children at risk. The objective of the Springboard projects is to support families in difficulty and work intensively with children mainly in the 7-12 age group



who are at risk of going into care or getting into trouble. The projects will be the result of the collaboration of a group of community, voluntary and statutory players engaged at varying levels in providing family support in these areas. The projects will strongly encourage multidisciplinary and partnership approaches to working with children and families. Each project is asked to establish or identify a local centre within each community, which will act as a focal point for the delivery of services to the families concerned. Two of these Springboard Projects will be in Galway, in Westside and Ballybane. Other projects will be located in each of the Health Board areas. Play-related schemes may be included within these projects.

### **2.3.2 *The Department of the Environment & Local Government***

The Department of the Environment and Local Government has no specific policy or guidelines on children's play. The Department did issue guidelines to local authorities in 1987 entitled, "*A Policy for the Provision and Maintenance of Parks, Open Spaces and Outdoor Recreation Areas*" which included open space standards of 2 hectares (5 acres) of public open space per 1,000 population. This was to be provided as neighbourhood parks of 16 ha. serving 10,000 people within a radius of 0.8km and including a playlot, and two local parks each of 2 ha. to serve a population of 10,000 within a 0.4km radius. It would appear from the survey results and from queries to the Department that few local authorities or Departmental staff are now aware of these guidelines. The following notes are provided by the Department and are reproduced here with their kind permission.

"Local authorities are empowered, under the Local Government Act 1994, to provide, operate and maintain parks and open spaces, including children's playgrounds, for amenity and recreation purposes. It is a matter for local authorities to determine the extent to which resources are applied to playgrounds generally".

"Under the Planning Acts, planning authorities' development plans must contain objectives for preserving, improving and extending amenities in their area. This provision will be looked at in the review of the planning process currently underway to see if it is necessary to strengthen it. When deciding planning applications, a planning authority must have regard to the policies set out in the plan and may attach conditions to permissions requiring the provision of appropriate facilities. Section 14 of the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963, as amended, allows a local authority to provide assistance, in certain cases, in relation to the provision of community facilities".

"The provision of open spaces, recreational facilities, amenity areas, etc. in local authority housing schemes is a matter for the individual housing authorities in the first instance. However, local authorities have been advised in the Department's Circular Letter N 8/82 which refers to standards to be applied in providing local authority housing that 'in the provision of open space, regard should be had to the requirements of the Development Plan for the area'. An area of 10% is normally appropriate within a housing scheme. In addition, the Circular letter also advised that "where playgrounds and open spaces are not already available in reasonable proximity to the scheme, provision for such facilities must be made in the scheme." In effect this means that the provision of a playground may be funded as part of the cost of a local authority housing scheme which is funded from the Department's capital allocations. Funding is available under the Remedial Works Scheme to assist housing authorities to carry out major essential works of a structural nature to dwellings in designated run-down housing estates. The objective is not only to upgrade the fabric of the dwellings but also to improve the living conditions of the tenants. For this reason, works of an environmental



nature, including limited amenity and recreational facilities may be included as part of a project where they are considered necessary to support the work undertaken to the dwellings”.

“The two programmes discussed below have been used to provide funding for playgrounds. However, the playground works funded were a part of wider environmental improvement investments aimed at supporting economic and social development in the towns and villages concerned.

#### Local Urban and Rural Development Operational Programme

Under the Urban and Village Renewal Sub-programme of the Operational Programme for Local and Rural Development 1994-1999 funding is available from the Department to finance a range of measures which are designed to rejuvenate the social and economic life of towns and villages, rehabilitate the built environment and restore and conserve important elements of Irish architecture and heritage. Most of the initiatives under this Sub-programme are implemented through local authorities. Each year allocations of funding are provided by the Department to the local authorities to undertake a programme of environmental improvement works in city, town and villages areas. It is a matter for the local authorities to determine, having regard to the allocations provided, the works to be carried out in the town and village areas selected for renewal. In some cases local authorities have, as part of an overall urban and village renewal project, carried out remedial and other works to children's playgrounds. These works have included the provision of safety surfacing in playgrounds, the installation of playground equipment, laying running tracks and playing pitches.

For instance, in 1994, Carlow County Council implemented an environmental improvement scheme in Bagenalstown, which included the provision of a children's play area. In 1996, Roscommon County Council provided an amenity/play area in the centre of Monksland village. Cork County Council has also implemented environmental improvement projects which have included the provision of a safety surface in the children's playground in Mallow; in Skibereen playground equipment has been installed in the town park; in Douglas playground equipment has been provided in Douglas Community Park and a children's play area was provided in Drimoleague. In Limerick City a play area, running track, playing pitches and tennis courts are being provided in the King's Island area of the city under the Major initiatives measure (see below).

The following is a brief description of the measures of the Sub-programme that are implemented by local authorities.

- Measure 1: Major Initiatives: Under this measure grant aid is provided to County Borough Corporations on the basis of matching funds for a major integrated urban renewal action plan to be implemented in the five main cities of Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. The objective is to implement a flagship project in these areas, which is concentrated as far as possible on a single area in need of renewal and which will have a major impact on the economic and social regeneration of the central areas in each of these cities. The projects, which are being implemented, were developed by local authorities and involve physical improvements to streets, street furniture, conservation measures, and the development of enterprise units, traffic calming and pedestrianisation. Over the period of the programme over £32m will be spent by the local authorities in the five main cities in the implementation of the major initiatives. The EU is providing half of this expenditure in grant aid.



- Measure 2: Urban Improvements: This measure involves urban improvements, including landscaping, pedestrianisation and the eradication of derelict sites in urban centres throughout the country. The objective of this measure is to improve the physical environment of towns in order to attract and sustain an enterprise base, as well as supporting tourism and living conditions generally. Grant aid is provided to local authorities on the basis of matching funds from local sources.
- Measure 3: Village Renewal: This measure involves a range of improvements designed to underpin the future development of villages and rural communities. Works undertaken in this measure include general amenity improvements and the development of focal points and meeting places. Grant aid is supplemented by contributions from local authorities own resources and private sources.

#### Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation

The EU Commission in 1995 approved the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. The strategic objective of the Programme is to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing cross-border co-operation and extending social inclusion in Northern Ireland and the Border counties of Ireland.

The programme is concerned with promoting the improvement of the social and physical environment in the worst affected towns, villages and rural areas. Such actions can include community-based neighbourhood revitalisation; heritage and tourism related actions, the development of derelict sites, street landscaping and works for the conservation of significant buildings, improvements to rural infrastructure and the development of social and cultural activities. Suitable projects for funding under the above measures are identified and approved by County Council-led Task Forces in each of the Border counties.

A number of playground projects have been funded under the programme, including the development or redevelopment of playgrounds within housing estates and or the provision of playground equipment. In particular, the Monaghan Task Force have funded six different playgrounds in housing estates in Berea and Drumhillard, Castleblaney, Cara Street and O'Neill Park, in Clones and Killygoan in Monaghan all of which were promoted by the relevant local authority. The Louth Task Force has also provided funding to a community group for a playground in Carlingford. Grants for these works range from £60,000 to £100,000 and were approved during 1996 and 1997.

#### Traffic Calming

With regard to traffic calming, local authorities are empowered under Section 38 of the Road Traffic Act, 1994 to provide such traffic calming measures, as they consider desirable in respect of public roads in their charge. Accordingly, any decision to introduce traffic calming measures would be a matter for the relevant local authority. The provision of traffic management measures on non-national roads may be assisted from the annual discretionary grants made available by the Department. The National Roads Authority (NRA) provides road improvement grants to local authorities each year. In addition to these the NRA has set aside a specific amount to be devoted to low cost safety improvement measures at high accident locations. It is intended that national schools on National Roads will have these facilities installed by the end of 1999".



### ***2.3.3 The Department of Education and Science***

The Department of Education and Science has no formal policy on children's play outside of the recognition of play as an essential aspect of the early learning process at primary school level. The only formal involvement in play is to set strict guidelines for the amount of time, which must be allocated to play in primary schools.

### ***2.3.4 The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform***

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, by its own admission, has no formal policy on children's play. The Department does, however, fund the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The Programme is administered by ADM for the Partnership Companies, most of who have childcare strategies in place, and has provided for labour market participation through the support of child care facilities. This provision has largely taken the form of pre-schools and crèches, motivated by a desire to get women back to work.

The current Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme contains three funding initiatives - the Capital Infrastructure Initiative, the Employer Demonstration Initiative and the Community Support Initiative - each of which has a separate budget with distinct criteria and targets. The initiatives are inter-dependent and strive towards the common aim of improving the quality and quantity of childcare provision in Ireland from an equal opportunities/disadvantaged perspective.

The Community Support initiative is aimed at twenty-five community childcare projects. Support is being provided over a two-year period to meet staffing and evaluation costs. One of the criteria for selection is that projects must operate within quality premises meeting the requirement of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996.

### ***2.3.5 Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport***

The Department's role lies in creating opportunities for all to participate in sport and recreation through access to facilities and activities, especially for young people in disadvantaged areas. The Department is also engaged in the development of a strategy for local development, in partnership with local authorities and the voluntary and community sectors, with an emphasis on promoting the integrated development of the most disadvantaged urban areas. While the Department has no specific policy on children's play, it is generally supportive of any initiatives, which improve opportunities for participation in recreation activities by young people. The Local Urban and Rural Development Operational Programme, while not funding projects with children's play as the focus, does provide funds for projects which involve learning through play. Projects have been supported in Clondalkin and Finglas. Under the URBAN Operational Programme the Children and Youth Measure within the Programme has an emphasis on providing after schools clubs. The URBAN Programme is funding the construction of two parks in Dublin and one in Cork, which will include play areas. The Department also has overall responsibility for the Government's Drugs Initiative. This includes the implementation of plans developed by Task Forces in 13 areas where drug abuse is prevalent. It includes the operation of the Young Peoples Facilities and Services Fund for 10-21 year olds mentioned above.

### ***2.3.6 Department of Agriculture***

The Department of Agriculture administers the LEADER rural development programme in Ireland. Funding is available for childcare under the LEADER programme in certain circumstances. For example, individual groups have funded childcare as an integral part of a training course and have funded the establishment or improvement of crèches in their areas. Childcare workers are also eligible for funding for training, employment



grants or feasibility studies. There are also a number of child amenities such as playgrounds, which have been LEADER funded throughout the country. The issue of childcare is also being examined in the context of the proposed White Paper on Rural Development, which is currently being prepared by the Department.

#### **2.4 THE EXPERT WORKING GROUP ON CHILDCARE**

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform set up an Expert Working Group on Childcare in July 1997 under Partnership 2000. The aim of the Working Group was to explore the issues on childcare in the Irish context and to make recommendations for improvement in the way in which childcare is organised and delivered. The group reported in January 1999. Its report produced a national childcare strategy which contained six supply side measures and five demand side measures which, when taken together, aim to address the inadequacies that exist in the current system. The Expert Working Group operated through a series of sub-groups, each of which had responsibility for one aspect of the childcare field. For example, one subgroup examined the needs and rights of children in relation to the national framework and another looked at training and qualifications within childcare. The report noted that 'play is one of the essential experiences of childhood. It is central to all aspects of young children's development and learning. All childcare services, therefore, should provide children with opportunities, materials, time and space to play'. (Expert Working Group on Childcare, p.46)

#### **SUMMARY**

There is no overall government or individual departmental policy on children's play in Ireland, in spite of the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. One of the main reasons why play policies have not been developed is that no government department or state-sponsored body has yet accepted that providing for children's play is a part of their remit or responsibility.

Leading departments with potential for development of work in this area include the Department of Health and Children, which has responsibility for children's welfare under the Child Care Act 1991 and the Department of the Environment and Local Government, which is the main source of funds for local authorities including for play areas within particular programmes and has responsibility for issuing guidance to local authorities on related planning topics. The Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport is responsible for the funding of tourism facilities, which may include play areas, and for funding the Youth Facilities and Services Programme. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is responsible for the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme which has provided funding for pre-school projects. The Department of Education and Science runs the Early Start programme for pre-school children in a number of disadvantaged areas.





### 3.0 THE NATURE OF PLAY

This section examines the nature of children's play and some of the changing influences on the activities of children in recent years and the role of the traditional children's playground. This section is included to inform a discussion on the reasons for, and the elements within, children's play policies at government and local authority level.

There is a huge amount of research and literature on this topic. The benefits of providing good play opportunities and play services for all children is discussed in a collection of essays by Lubelska (1993). The only published studies carried out in Ireland are those by Webb (1997), Andrews and O'Connor (1980), and a report by the Consumer's Association of Ireland (1994). A Review of Playground and Related Surveys and Studies is published by the National Play Information Centre (1994) and it is worthwhile to bear in mind some comments made in the introduction by the compiler, Peter Heseltine: "...one is struck by the repetitive nature of much of the material. In play we seem to spend too much energy in re-inventing wheels and refusing to believe that research carried out in other countries has any relevance to our own. It would be useful to see more research into the developmental aspects of equipment and designs - we spend a remarkable amount of money on timber and metal objects without knowing if they are of any benefit to children or even whether they play on them".

#### 3.1 DIVERSITY

Diversity is one of the most important aspects of children's play, yet often the most ignored. Heseltine comments: "The research continues to show the importance of complexity and manipulability in the provision of children's playgrounds and the development of creativity in children, yet practical observation suggests we have failed to learn from and profit from this. It continues to be startling how often the research and the children's own choice stresses the importance of the natural environment - and how often its importance is ignored in practice. One of the most useful and potentially influential pieces of recently published research is by Wheway and Millward (1997), which looks at play patterns and child mobility within a range of housing layouts. It has long been known that children tend to spend relatively short amounts of time (less than 15 minutes) on fixed equipment playgrounds (Naylor, 1985; Ellis, 1973; Hole, 1966). The majority of time spent outdoors involves children moving around the outdoor environment they have access to and playing *en route*, largely in the street (Moore, 1986). Children appreciate having a diversity of places to play close to home and their favourite places to play include parks and open spaces as well as play areas. Play is the way that children learn about themselves and the world they live in. The environment for play should, therefore, offer a richness of opportunity, allowing each child to exercise choice and to grow safely at their own rate (Dattner, 1969). Children value outdoor environments where there are lots of things to do (Akehurst and Wheway, 1982).

Access and diversity are the recurrent themes of many studies, which have sought to examine how children play outdoors and what they prefer. The outdoor environment is believed to offer children a continual source of raw materials for creative play and greater opportunities for meeting new children and adults than is possible within the home or school (Moore and Young, 1978; Naylor, 1985). Children can also impart rich meanings to landscape features and experience strong responses to it (Titman, 1994). The elements of nature such as bushes, rocks, trees, sand and water, dominate the reasons adults give for liking remembered outdoor spaces, and the places best remembered tend to be those experienced between the ages of four and ten (Wheway and



Millward, 1997). The relative availability and range of opportunities for play that children have access to, and the degree to which they can control their own play activities, have been found to have a direct bearing on the type of adult they become (Piaget, 1951; McLellan, 1968; Holme and Massie, 1970; Dattner, 1969). Where this diversity is lacking children often compensate for it by bringing loose parts into playgrounds, such as tyres, planks and rocks, or taking up paving slabs to get at the sand, which is classified as litter and vandalism. The need for diversity was echoed in a recent survey of children in Ballymun, north Dublin for the Ballymun regeneration programme: *"The playgrounds have nothing in them. We all want new playgrounds, in or near the area where we live, with lots of different things to do and play on for different aged children. We want them to be safe places, which are kept clean and supervised. We don't want them to be vandalised"* (Ballymun Regeneration Ltd., 1998).

### 3.2 PATTERNS OF PLAY

Children seek social contact with their friends through their play activity and to do this they need to move around their neighbourhood as widely and as safely as possible and from an early age (from two upwards). Children remain the most frequent users of the outdoor environment and spend approximately 40% of their playtime travelling from one place to another (Wheway and Millward, 1997). The majority of play outdoors is active; involving walking, running, ball games, use of wheeled vehicles and play equipment. The studies compiled by Heseltine (1994) seem consistent in suggesting that the mere provision of playground equipment has comparatively little impact on directly fulfilling the play needs of children, although the greater the variety of equipment, the more popular the playground. Equipped playgrounds are often seen by parents to provide a safer place for children to play away from the street. Playgrounds are also used by children as a base or a focus for play and as a place to meet friends. In addition, children do not distinguish strongly between the places they use for play or are obliged to use for play. They interact with the whole neighbourhood and it is the diversity of environments within the neighbourhood and the available access to them that are the most important factors for child development (Bjorkild-Chu, 1977; Parkinson, 1985 and van Anel, 1990). In this context, a quotation from Colin Ward in *"The Child in the City"* (1978) may be worth bearing in mind: "one thing that observation of the children makes clear, though it has only recently entered the world of reports and textbooks, and has yet to influence environmental policies, is that children will play everywhere and with anything".

In their study, Wheway and Millward (1997) found that the most successful residential estates in terms of child safety, parental assessment and the widest range of play opportunities were those with:

- traffic calming, street closures, walls and driveways
- grassy areas set back from roads, including small open spaces
- a footpath network (for pedestrians and cyclists) around and through the estate linking in to the public open spaces and to shops, and
- culs-de-sac layout with a spinal footpath network and informal play areas.

The guidelines from this study are reproduced in this report in Appendix 4.

The Charter for Children's Play, produced by PlayBoard Northern Ireland and Save the Children (1994), made the point that, "It is essential that children's play needs are considered and catered for in any new housing development, shopping area, road scheme and public facility such as clinics and libraries. Children's provision should be planned with community involvement. Architects and planners should work together with



statutory, voluntary and private play service managers and workers, community and parents groups, children and other relevant parties,"

### **3.3 PLAY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

It should be appreciated that equipped playgrounds are a formal recognition of our failure to provide for the needs of children in the wider environment. Research from around the world has consistently shown that when children are asked what play facilities they would like most, the answer is always sand and water, trees and bushes, long grass and hills. Last on children's lists is traditional play equipment, which is often provided for the interest or appeasement of adults, rather than children. It began to be recognised over a century ago, that a child's physical health demanded access to facilities, which would permit exercise through play. Such issues are of major concern today as not only has a child's access to play in the outdoor environment become curtailed, but television and computer based activities serve to disinterest children from playing outside. Environmental play is probably the most valuable and most natural form of play and teaches children more about the real world than any other form of play.

Adults need to understand a child's need to experiment with things around them. Children need to experience diversity, challenge and the chance to manipulate their environment. Failure to meet these needs constructively may result in vandalism by older children though it is important not to confuse this with damage that smaller children do in the course of testing and experimenting with their environment. This legitimate experimentation is a vital part of discovery and should be encouraged by providing opportunities in an acceptable way.

### **3.4 CHANGING ASPECTS OF MOBILITY**

In the last twenty years, the number of cars has risen by 80% and the car has now come to dominate the spaces where children could once play safely with their friends and within earshot of home. In addition, more children are now taken to school by car. The Policy Studies Institute in the UK has found that 9% of children aged 7-8 years old walked to school in 1990 compared to 80% in 1971 (Playing for Local Government, 1985). As a consequence of increased car traffic, bike riding has become more dangerous. The restrictions placed on children are already having a measurable detrimental effect on the physical health of children in the UK and one may assume that the picture is not much different in Ireland (Allied Dunbar National Fitness Survey, 1992). The personal freedom and choice permitted a typical seven year old in 1971 are not now permitted until children reach the age of about nine and a half (Hillman, et. al 1990). This dramatic decrease in mobility reduces the range of social contact children have with neighbours and may contribute to the dramatic rise in fear of 'stranger danger'. Within Ireland the importance of children's mobility has been recognised by the Dublin Transportation Office who have scheduled around £500,000 for works associated with the "Safe Routes to School Programme" over the next two years.

### **3.5 OLDER CHILDREN AND VANDALISM**

For older children and teenagers, it is the space and the opportunity for socialising rather than the equipment that becomes the most important consideration. This group of young people has almost no facilities provided for them and the only places in which to 'hang around' largely in the evening, are the playgrounds they used as children. This often results in complaints from the public about noise and nuisance. Groups of teenagers are

sometimes seen as a threat, especially by the elderly. The boredom and resentment of young people at having nowhere to go that is specifically designed for their needs, is taken out on the play equipment as 'vandalism'. Local authorities in the UK have found that where they have installed seats and shelters specifically designed for young people, sometimes together with basketball areas, the number of nuisance youth calls to the local police station has dropped dramatically and maintenance costs due to vandalism have also been reduced (Parks and Sports Grounds, 1997).



## 4.0 A SURVEY OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES ON THE ISSUE OF PLAY FACILITIES

Local authorities throughout Ireland were surveyed by means of a questionnaire (Appendix 1) which was sent to the relevant engineers, town clerks and parks superintendents. The aim of the survey was to assess current provision in relation to play. In total, seven County Borough Councils (CBCs), nineteen County Councils and thirty Urban District Councils (UDCs) responded to the questionnaire. The response rate was 69% including two telephone interviews.

### 4.1 PLAY PROVISION

Some 53% of respondents provide play facilities in the form of equipped playgrounds, a near identical figure to that obtained by Webb (1997). Of the total, four of the CBCs provide play areas, half of the county councils provided play areas and those providing play areas in the UDCs are almost equally divided at 51%. Two UDCs, which are known to have playgrounds, did not respond.

Only four respondents offer other play services, either directly or through funding support. These play services included after schools clubs, summer camps or holiday play schemes, and were offered by the larger urban authorities. Parks, sports pitches, swimming pools and even the library service were also mentioned as play and recreation services.

### 4.2 PLAY POLICY

Three respondents when asked about the existence of a play policy, have a written policy on the provision of children's play facilities. The policy is part of the City/County Development Plan rather than as a stand - alone document. The play policy of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council in their 1998 County Development Plan is an example. The policies generally relate to the space to be allocated to children's play within housing development and the facilities to be provided. Seven local authorities reported that they were in the process of developing a play policy. Three of the Dublin area County Councils have no written policy, but produced responses to specific questions from the public or Councillors. One of the major Dublin local authorities thought that having a written policy was not relevant, as it has evolved its policy through experience over the years. None of the respondents had a policy with regard to play services, such as out of school clubs or holiday play schemes. Where Community departments of the larger local authorities assisted such schemes, no policies with regard to them were in place.

One local authority stated that its policy on the provision of playgrounds is determined by safety, finance and public liability insurance. These factors are understandably paramount given the problems faced by local authorities.

Some local authorities are beginning to widen their concern with children's play from a narrow view of providing for equipped play areas. The most extensive play policy so far produced by a local authority in Ireland is provided by Galway County Borough Council in the City Development Plan 1998 which states:

1. *A commitment to ensuring that opportunities for play suitable for each stage of a child's development are available.*
2. *Recognition of the need to provide adequate formal play facilities for children.*

3. *The implications for children's safety and access to community facilities in designing publicly owned developments, environmental improvements and traffic management schemes.*
4. *Ensuring that wherever possible, areas of natural play space are created close to housing areas, ideally forming part of the network of green space".*

#### 4.3 OPEN SPACE STANDARDS

All local authorities have a policy on open space standards, which is applied through the City or County Development Plan. Public open space is generally provided at a rate of 2 hectares per 1,000 population. Open space within housing development is usually set at a minimum of 10% of the overall development area. In circumstances where open space standards cannot be achieved, either more intensive facilities for recreation may be provided or the developer must make a contribution to the purchase of land to develop a district park in the vicinity.

Over the years, local authorities have experienced major problems with "unending vandalism" and the resultant need for frequent maintenance of equipment and the problems that this entails with low staff resources and the expense of repairs. Public liability claims and the conditions imposed by the insurers have also prompted a reappraisal of playgrounds within residential areas and unsupervised open spaces. Where a play policy does exist in a Development Plan, it is often concise and relates solely to the local authority's role in planning and development control:

*"The Council will seek to promote the safety of children's play in relation to its role in the control of the development of new housing schemes and tourism developments, (Waterford County Development Plan, 1998).*

Usually such a policy may be interpreted in more detail in response to a specific enquiry.

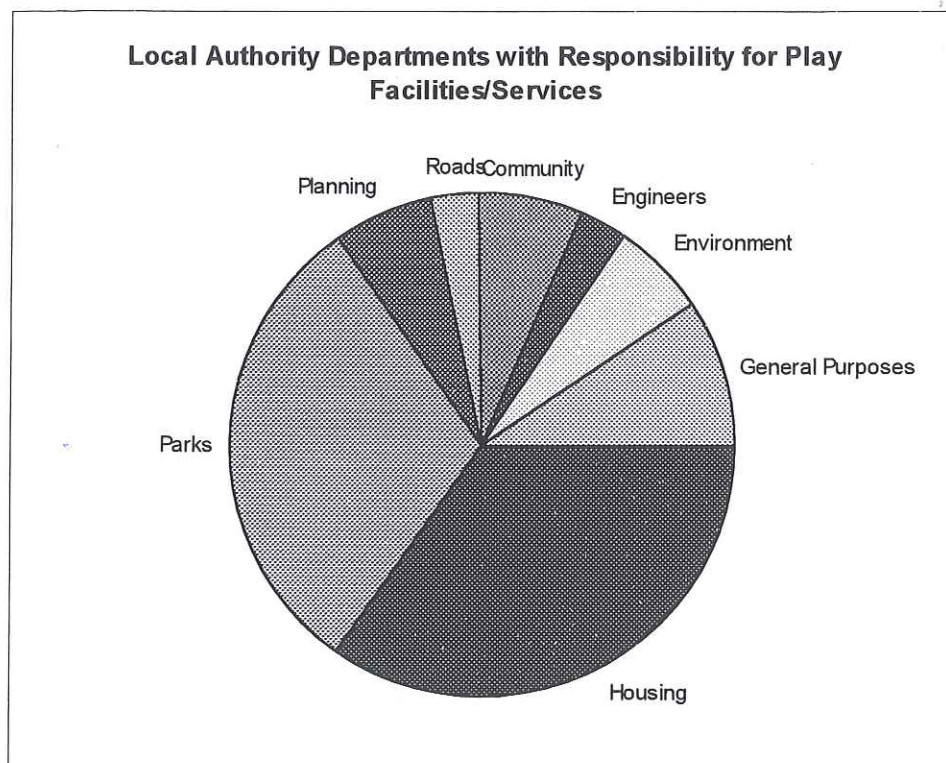
#### 4.4 SERVICE PROVIDERS

When asked to rank local play service providers in importance, the voluntary/community sector was ranked highest by 50% of the respondent local authorities, followed by the local authority themselves (39%). Both the commercial sector and government were given little importance as providers of play opportunities, with 4% of respondents giving them each first ranking in importance as a play provider. In the case of the Government, it is not known if this was in reference to direct provision, such as the four Duchas sites, or funding to communities through ADM or the Health Boards. Schools were cited as providers in two cases.

Referring back to the confusion surrounding the question of "which Government department should take responsibility for play policy?" a similar pattern of confusion, in terms of departmental responsibility, surrounds the actual provision of play facilities at local government level. Some eight different departments including; parks, environment, housing, community, engineers, planning, roads and general purposes are noted as having actual responsibility for the provision of play facilities for children (See Figure 4.1).



FIGURE 4.1



#### 4.5 BARRIERS TO PLAY

When asked if there were any barriers to providing for children's play, 86.5% of respondents agreed that there were, while 13.5% stated that there were no insurmountable barriers. It is to be noted that those not experiencing barriers were those local authorities that had successfully installed play facilities for children. When asked to describe these barriers, in their own words, multiple answers were given in many cases. A key barrier to most local authorities was that of insurance and liability, which was mentioned by 71% of respondents. This figure is lower than the finding of Webb (1997) which found that 87% of respondent local authorities were concerned with the issue of claims and litigation and the issue was discussed in some length in that study. The difference in response rates may reflect the fact that insurance or liability was not a question raised by the researcher in the present study, unlike in the 1997 study.

There is little doubt that a number of local authorities face a serious problem with insurance and liability based on past experience. For others, the reluctance to provide play areas may hinge around the *liability* to claims in a litigious society. One major urban authority which has taken the approach of challenging claims in court stated that daily and weekly inspections and the supervision of play areas within enclosed parks has overcome the problem of insurance.

The most significant problem, however, was seen by respondent local authorities to lie with finding the funding for play areas (cited by 77% of respondents). Once funding is provided, other problems may not be seen to be important. One border UDC that had received funds to create two parks and two play areas did not think that there were any problems with providing play areas.

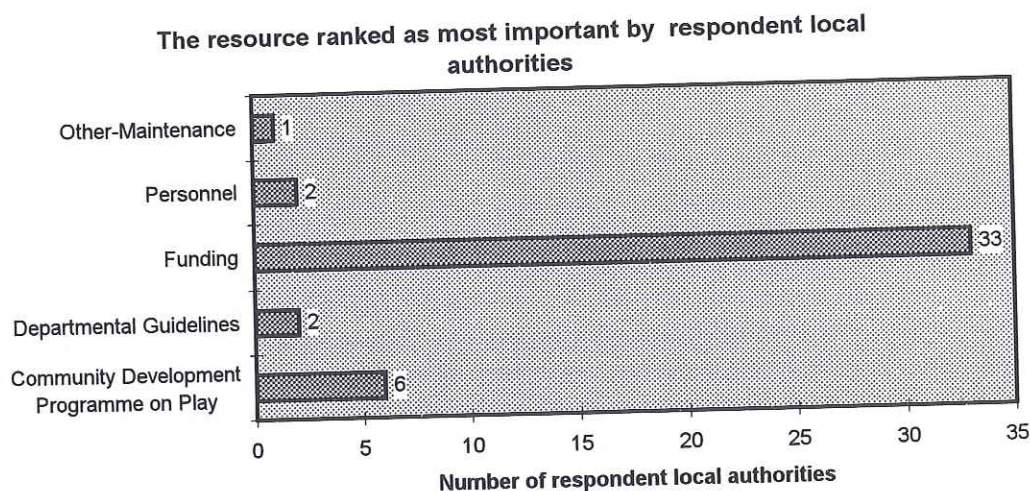


Vandalism was cited as a barrier by 15% of respondents, with more emphasis being placed on this problem in urban authorities. One referred to the "unending vandalism", while another mentioned, "Vandalism is the main concern and how to police and control the facilities so that they are not vandalised and misused." The real concern may be much higher as damage to play equipment is one of the main issues behind the concern with insurance and public liability.

Linked to the problem of vandalism and insurance was the issue of staffing and supervising playgrounds which was raised by 15% of respondents. The insurance company (Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurance Co.) for local authorities requires weekly inspections and this is seen as being a problem where staff resources are stretched to the limit. The insurance requirement for inspection, certification and supervision was seen to be a problem in one case. One respondent specifically mentioned the need for a centrally located maintenance crew. The lack of a suitable location was mentioned by 18% of respondents, including the need to find a site where supervision was available.

#### 4.6 MOST USEFUL RESOURCES

Respondents were asked to rank, in order of importance from 1 to 6, the resources which would be most helpful to them in developing and implementing a play policy and play provision for children.



Funding was cited by 77% of respondents (33 in number) as being the most important issue. The development of a community development programme based on play was seen to be the most important factor by 14% of local authorities (6 in number), together with trained personnel at 5% (2 in number). Departmental guidelines were seen to be of top priority for 5% of local authorities, possibly due to the feeling that the individual local authorities could do a good job if they were given more resources themselves. One Dublin authority felt that they already had adequate resources.

#### 4.7 STANDARDS OF PROVISION

With regard to the standards adopted for the provision of open space within residential developments, respondents were evenly divided among those using the 10% open space standard, departmental guidelines or specific standards within their Development Plan. The provision of standards did not seem to be an issue with the local authorities. Only three had no formal standards. One specifically mentioned that play areas were provided



according to British Standard Specifications. Most of the larger local authorities mentioned that they had a hierarchy of open space from regional parks, neighbourhood parks, neighbourhood open space, local open space and incidental open space. Only one local authority mentioned the Guidelines on Parks produced by the Department of the Environment in 1987. No respondents had adopted the UK National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) "Six Acres Standard" with its categories of Local Areas for Play, Local Equipped Areas for Play and Neighbourhood Equipped Areas for Play. There was no specific reservation of space for children within open spaces.

#### **4.8 AGENDA 21 AND LOCAL CONSULTATION**

The Department of the Environment and Local Government has requested all local authorities to prepare a Local Agenda 21 Plan. Agenda 21 is the United Nations agenda for sustainable development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and was signed by the Irish Government at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It aims to achieve balance between economic, social and environmental development objectives. It is called Local Agenda 21 because most of the issues require action by local authorities in partnership with the community. In essence it is about local partnerships carrying out local improvements.

In response to the question as to whether the local community has been involved in the development of a play policy in the spirit of Local Agenda 21, a range of responses was received, although they were largely concerned with provision rather than policy. Some 23% of respondents had involved the community in consultations regarding play areas. Consultation is not so apparent when play areas are being provided or renovated within established enclosed parks. The few responses in this area may reflect the general lack of progress being made with Local Agenda 21.

#### **SUMMARY**

The lack of play policies among local authorities in Ireland, compared with those in the United Kingdom, reflects not only the narrower financial and human resources available to local authorities in Ireland, but their narrower remit. Unlike their UK counterparts, Irish local authorities have only a peripheral role to play in education and social welfare, service areas, which are often used as vehicles to promote play services in the UK. In this sense it would not be fair to compare play policies between the two countries. Some of the larger local authorities in Ireland have, however, developed a wider remit, which may encompass playwork through the work of their Community and Environment Sections. These sections are at the cutting edge of local authority service delivery and are generally staffed by enthusiastic and committed people. The recently adopted Strategic Management Initiative, concerned with corporate values and public service delivery has ensured that these sections operate with a mission statement, core values, aims and objectives, which are essential to the difficult task of community development. Because of their remit, they need to be aware of, and involved with, other local authority plans affecting the communities with which they work and they also need to interact with other statutory and voluntary agencies. Grants and support are provided for, among other things, community activities, pre-school playgroups and holidays for deprived children. It is for these reasons that it is likely that a comprehensive policy on children's play may arise from such units in the future.



## 5.0 EXAMPLES OF PLAY POLICIES

This section examines play policies in other jurisdictions to provide examples of play policies and to suggest aspects of policies, which may be relevant for Ireland. Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom were examined as our nearest neighbours. The European Network on Play was contacted but only one reply was received, from Belgium. Notes on play in other countries came from research carried out by PlayBoard, Northern Ireland.

### 5.1 NORTHERN IRELAND

While local authorities in the North of Ireland may have greater financial resources than their counterparts in the Republic, they have a much narrower remit, similar problems with vandalism and the added problem of having to duplicate community facilities for loyalist and nationalist communities. In many respects they provide a more relevant example for Irish local authorities than that of local authorities in England and Wales.

The main legislation in relation to children is the Children (NI) Order, 1995, which became law in Northern Ireland in October 1996, and is mainly a replica of the UK Children Act, 1989. The Order has one significant difference in that services to "children in need" must be delivered up to the age of 12 and so focuses on primary age group children, removing the policy and provision gap that formerly existed for this age group in Northern Ireland. In recent years a number of children's play policies have been developed in Northern Ireland, largely through the influence and involvement of PlayBoard.

#### 5.1.1 PlayBoard

PlayBoard has a play policy development officer who works largely with community groups. The aim of PlayBoard is to have half of all local authorities signed up to a regional play policy. Draft *Play Policy Principles* have recently been drawn up by PlayBoard for the benefit of community groups and covers such issues as equality in play, accessibility, quality, community play, environmental play, outdoor provision, training and support and partnership.

PlayBoard produced a Playcare Strategy in 1995 at the request of the Training and Employment Agency to develop an inclusive strategy for the implementation of a Playcare initiative across Northern Ireland. PlayCare is out of school care for primary school aged children. The Strategy was intended to enable people in disadvantaged communities, especially women, to access training and employment opportunities. The strategy was developed through a wide-ranging consultative process with 60 organisations engaging in a playcare consultative forum. PlayBoard claims that the PlayCare Strategy is one of the few inclusive strategies, which exist, in direct response to the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The Strategy seeks to establish up to 100 community led PlayCare schemes within three years. The initiative will be managed both regionally and locally through a partnership approach involving government departments, local authorities, business and local communities. To date, 94 schemes have been set up.

*The Charter for Children's Play for Northern Ireland* was drawn up in 1994 between PlayBoard and Save the Children. The Charter bridges the gap between Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the then current policy position on play in Northern Ireland. The Charter identifies issues, which should be addressed, puts forward possible solutions and defines specific improvements and changes necessary to increase



children's play opportunities and to clarify the policy gap in Northern Ireland. Over 60 organisations have signed up to the Charter. The Charter recognised ten key issues in relation to play and produced a number of recommendations in each of these areas, namely: funding for play, models of consultation with children and parents, quality through equal opportunities in play, health and safety, the environment, play services, training, play and education, other services for children and play in hospitals.

The Charter arose from a review of policies and practices in Northern Ireland (1994). The main finding of the review was that there needs to be a consciousness about children's needs and creative, expansive policies to meet them. Apart from the ten-part summary of findings, a number of issues were identified as the way forward and a number of policy proposals were outlined. These issues are very similar to those resulting from this study and set out in Section 7.2.2.

### **5.1.2 Local Authorities**

A number of local authorities in Northern Ireland have produced play policies. Belfast City Council is currently developing a play policy and their Community and Leisure Services Department have already produced a *Playwork Code of Practice Handbook*. The Code of Practice covers programme planning, creating a safe environment and dealing with volunteers.

One of the most comprehensive play policies currently developed in Ireland as a whole is that of Newtownabbey Borough Council "*Play Through Partnership: Creating quality play environments for children*" (1997).

The policy document sets out the Strategic Aims, Value Statements and Objectives of the Council to address a range of different issues, including equal opportunities, accessibility, consultation, quality, raising awareness of the value of play, partnership, community play, environmental play, outdoor fixed equipment play areas, monitoring and evaluation. While this may be a more comprehensive approach to play policy than most local authorities in Ireland may require, it does set the standard and would be appropriate for the larger urban local authorities with a tradition of providing for children's play.

A much broader play policy was adopted by the Belfast Healthy Cities Project, an initiative of the World Health Organisation in 1993. The purpose of the policy was to improve the quality of children's lives in Belfast through the provision of comprehensive integrated play provision based on Article 31. The policy discusses fundamental principles, standards of provision and underlying processes, and outlines responsibilities, structures and functions with regard to service delivery. The policy allowed for the establishment of area joint play committees supported by a small development and co-ordination team. A play policy is currently being considered by the Dublin Healthy Cities Project (Ray Bateson, DHCP, pers.comm.).

## **5.2 ENGLAND AND WALES**

### **5.2.1 Government Departments**

In the United Kingdom, no one government department has overall responsibility for children's play and no individual department has a policy on play. Over the last ten years, focus has tended to move between different departments. Providing for play facilities and services is seen as the responsibility of individual local authorities. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport fund three facets of children's play services at



national level. These three services are provided by the National Playing Fields Association for the department and include playwork education and training, play information and dissemination and play safety.

Two major initiatives should be mentioned which impact on children's play in the United Kingdom. The primary legislation in the United Kingdom concerning children's play is the Children Act 1989. Under the Act, local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide for a range of services for children in need, including "supervised activities". For school aged children the Act has an impact on play because the duties and powers within it cover a range of services beyond the scope of any one department. It requires a joint collaboration between local authorities and, between local authorities and other agencies. The effects of the Children Act in England and Wales have been mixed. On one hand, it is a step towards better standards and more of a focus on the rights of the child. Registration requirements have ensured that quality standards for children's services are developed and maintained (Lubelska, 1996). However, it has been the experience of providers in England and Wales that the expense of meeting the strict provisions of the legislation is used as an excuse for, and has resulted in, the loss of some play services (PlayBoard, 1995).

In 1993, the Employment Department in the UK allocated £46.5m to a major childcare initiative aimed at providing out of school care in order to reduce barriers to returnees to the labour market and to promote job creation and retention. Local Enterprise Companies administered this with infrastructural support provided by the Kids Club Network, the lead national voluntary organisation on out of school playcare in Great Britain. By the end of 1995 there were 3,000 playcare schemes in existence (PlayBoard, 1995). The Department of Education and Employment are currently responsible for the National Childcare Strategy. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is examining the 'Home Zone' concept for making streets safer for children and their play.

### 5.2.2 *Local Authorities*

Many local authorities in England and Wales have established policies on children's play, largely prompted by the *Charter for Play* produced in 1992 by the National Voluntary Council for Children's Play, although some Councils, such as Newcastle-upon-Tyne had produced play policies before this date (Chilton, 1985). A study of the involvement of local authorities in the provision of children's play (Burton, 1993) showed that play policy is unevenly distributed across England, Wales and Scotland. Where good quality provision exists in the absence of any policy framework, one may conclude that the skills and enthusiasm of individuals and groups within the local authority are the most significant factors. There are some signs to suggest that effective play policies and good quality play provision are more likely to develop in authorities with comprehensive equal opportunities policies, where children are more likely to be seen as a group with its own needs (Burton, 1993). Knight, et.al, (1992) describe three examples of the implementation of integrated play policies in Hammersmith and Fulham, Manchester and Humberside.

A typical local authority play policy is that of Norwich City Council which is based on the Council's Strategic Review which identified three strategic issues: equality, anti-poverty and environmental protection. The play policy has a focus on conventional play areas, environmental play and community play activities. Policy statements, with supporting comments, are made on these issues as well as on learning through play, playground risk, and research on play provision and safety (Norwich City Council).



Advice is available from a wide range of organisations including the Children's Play Policy Forum, the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), County Playing Fields Associations, the National Play Information Centre run by the NPFA, and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). The allocation of appropriate community recreational space is promoted by the NPFA through its Six Acre Standard (NPFA, 1993). The standard introduced a new hierarchy of play space, ranging from casual space to fixed equipment play area. A minimum land allocation of 0.6-0.8 hectares per 1000 population is recommended incorporating three categories of play space in housing developments:-

(1.) LAP (Local Area for Play)

Small areas of open space suitable for children under 5 years of age and located within one minute walk of home.

(1.) LEAP (Local Equipped Area for Play)

A larger area with at least 5 types of equipment, mainly for 4-8 year olds and located within five minutes walks of home.

(1.) NEAP (Neighbourhood Equipped Area for Play)

This area would cater mainly for 8-14 year olds, be located within 15 minutes walking distance of home, and offer a minimum of eight types of equipment or recreational activities. While this standard is aspirational local authorities sometimes find difficulties in its application. According to one local authority the six-acre standard fails to identify the environmental, economic and social factors in the provision of space for play, which need not necessarily be equipped (Fenland District Council, 1996).

### 5.3 BELGIUM

In Belgium there are two separate programmes to promote and support care for school aged children. Under 1994 regulations, the Flemish Ministry of Employment gives a premium to local initiatives provided they meet certain criteria. In order to co-ordinate the efforts of the local and central authorities and in order to devise a coherent local policy, the new regulation is worked out with the general support of almost all youth organisations. In order to receive the subvention, a Municipality has to devise a "youth policy" which contains an overview of the youth population in the community, an overview of the initiatives for young people and their needs, the objectives of the youth policy of the Municipality and a plan for the use of the subvention. The money can be used for a variety of purposes including play, creative activities, training of youth workers, services, renovation of premises, and support to disadvantaged groups. The money cannot be used for the support of sports clubs and for childcare. At least five percent of the money has to be spent on the training of youth workers.

In order to develop this youth plan, youth organisations have advised the municipality. The plan covers a period of three years. Once the plan has been approved by the Minister the money is released to the municipality. 75% of the amount is based on the number of young people in the municipality, with the remainder available for projects. The advantages of the regulation are that it involves a partnership of the local authorities and the youth organisations, is based on local needs and is flexible.

The Federal Ministry of Employment runs a second programme where social partners, i.e. trade unions and employers, give money to the federal state for employment

programmes, one of which is out of school care. The federal authority makes allowances for wages and the cost of action when local initiatives have at least 60% of children of employed parents. Virtually all recent out of school initiatives across Europe have been implemented by government departments responsible for employment (PlayBoard, 1995).

#### 5.4 FRANCE

In France, there are high levels of provision for playcare after school and in the holidays. The responsible ministries are the Ministry for Culture and Education and the Ministry for Youth and Sport. Central policy determines the actions of the other Ministries towards young people at a local level and is implemented by means of contracts between central government and local partnerships. Children's councils have been set up in many towns to mirror the official town council and are designed to give children some influence over proposals that affect their lives and to prepare them for active citizenship. Play facilities are a frequent point of debate (Burton, 1993).

#### 5.5 SWEDEN

All family housing developments must include space for children's play. Play areas of different sizes for different age groups must be provided regardless of the density of development. There is an emphasis on providing trees and natural features to make the sites suitable for multipurpose use. In addition, each municipality is required to provide park playgrounds. Attention is also paid to street safety. There are networks of pedestrian-cyclist routes connecting residential areas to schools and workplaces, and speeds and entry of motor vehicles are restricted in housing areas. A welcome development has been the recent funding of a two year project "directed at the child's right to be heard and taken seriously with regard to planning and the built environment" (Birch & Nilsson, 1998) which will hopefully shed more light on how we can best plan with, and for, children.

#### 5.6 THE NETHERLANDS

The "Woonerf" system, which has been adopted in many parts of the Netherlands, ensures that both new developments and older neighbourhoods (where there may be little open space) can become safe environments for children. A Woonerf is a residential area within which motor vehicles have restricted access pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles share the same space with pedestrians taking priority. Parking is controlled, speeds are restricted to walking pace and the whole area is seen as an outdoor space, in which people can walk, meet and play. Studies show that children's play was enriched, there was greater interaction by children with their environment and with others, including adults (Eubank-Arens, 1985). This idea is now being promoted by the Children's Play Council as "Home Zones" in the UK, which has the highest child pedestrian mortality rate in Europe.





## 6.0 DEVELOPING A PLAY POLICY

This section looks at the reasons why a play policy is important. Guidelines for the development of a play policy are also given. A policy on children's play may be developed at two main levels; at the level appropriate to government departments which may guide the allocation of resources, and also at the level of the local authority or other body which is more concerned with service delivery.

### 6.1 PLAY POLICY AT DEPARTMENTAL LEVEL

At present there is no legislative framework for the development of a policy on play. However, a play policy at departmental or interdepartmental level would acknowledge the value of play in the development of the child and play as a universal right of children as established in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and not just as a means to other primary aims, such as labour market participation. It aims to define responsibilities, ensure co-ordination of resources, support partnerships in the delivery of play, as well as child care services, and develop appropriate structures for the funding and development of play services and appropriate training.

Sugradh, an umbrella group of voluntary bodies concerned with children's play in Ireland, recognises that there should be an interdisciplinary approach to children's welfare and play and has produced a policy for play that sets out areas of concern that should be the responsibility of particular departments. This policy is based on that of the International Play Association and is included in Appendix 5.

In order to acknowledge Article 31, it is important that play finds a 'home' within one key department. It is suggested that this should be the Department of the Environment and Local Government for the following reasons:

- the key providers of children's play facilities are local authorities
- funding for play facilities has been provided from programmes administered by the department
- guidelines for parks and open spaces and for public housing have been issued by the Department
- the Department could produce guidelines on the location, planning and design of play facilities and recommend compliance with ISEN Standards
- planning guidelines could also be produced on the layout of residential areas to facilitate children's play, along the lines of those in Appendix, including safe routes to school and streets for play or 'Home Zones'.
- planning guidelines could also require the protection of natural features within residential developments to facilitate natural and informal play opportunities.
- a remit for play within the Department would avoid the existing confusion with the provision of childcare facilities under the Department of Health.

Interdepartmental discussion among relevant departments would be important to seek guidelines for local authorities and other service providers on local play policies as a framework for their play services and provision. Such guidance would demonstrate the value to a local authority, for example, of a policy for play and describe the basic outlines of the contents of a play policy. Other key Departments would include the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport (it is the equivalent department to that in the UK which has a remit there for play), the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

The benefits of an overall, strategic approach to a play policy would be to:



- raise awareness of the lack of a policy framework for play provision and the problems that arise as a result
- enlist the support of departments in tackling the issue at national level in order to create a context for work with local authorities and voluntary organisations
- raise the profile of the departments with respect to children's play
- support groups concerned with issues of safety and quality in play
- support the establishment of a nationally recognised qualification in both childcare and playwork training
- provide consistency in the overall approach to play while allowing for flexibility in local services
- promote a better public appreciation of the value of play to child development.

## 6.2 PLAY POLICY AT LOCAL AUTHORITY LEVEL

A children's play policy for a local authority will show how ideas developed at the planning stage to provide a safe stimulating play environment for children, are not later undermined by inadequate maintenance or insensitive management. A policy will help the local authority to establish priorities and set itself objectives, thus contributing to its capacity to ensure that resources are used effectively (Coffin & Williams, 1989). A policy will also identify the need to upgrade equipment to European standards, to set standards for maintenance and management, to consider children's safety in the wider environment and how the local authority will work with the community in the delivery of services for children.

Local authorities are involved with children's play at a number of levels:

- as direct providers of play facilities in parks and open spaces
- as indirect providers supporting community groups in the form of grants or premises
- as regulators and inspectors of facilities, with environmental health, building and fire regulations
- as planners and engineers providing for safe access and play in the wider environment in terms of allocating land for parks, development control of open space in private housing schemes and with projects for traffic management, bicycle lanes and 'safe routes to school'.

Issues which may be faced by local authorities in developing their roles and functions in support of play (apart from the immediate issues of funding and insurance) are:

- the development of effective play strategies
- better control of children's services
- providing an environment conducive to play
- involving children in the planning and design of services
- demonstrating the value of play

Local authorities are now in a unique position to make a difference for children by providing safe, accessible, challenging opportunities for play at local level because :

- Children make up nearly a quarter of the population and have a right to expect local authorities to respond to their needs.
- Play can help local authorities achieve broader strategic goals, in relation to Local Agenda 21 and sustainable communities, the Strategic Management Initiative and meeting local needs and providing a high value service.

In the UK the implementation of the Children Act 1989 by local authorities has shown how services can be radically improved by taking a multi-disciplinary and partnership approach (Gill, 1995). The difference in Ireland, of course, is that local authorities have little direct involvement with providing services in the fields of education and social services, which may have an impact on, play service provision. Play friendly planning, however, can form part of an effective urban regeneration strategy as has been shown in Dublin with the redevelopment of Ormond Square as part of the inner city H.A.R.P scheme and the proposals of Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.

A local authority usually takes responsibility for core support for playground development. The involvement of community groups, volunteer labour, community artists, local fund-raising, private sector involvement and sponsorship and grants can supplement the resources of a local authority and are often essential to the success of the play facility. Providing for insurance is beyond the means of a local group and often it is only the local authority that can obtain insurance cover.

Unfortunately, the development of a play area can take many years of lobbying by a community group and the key players, both in the community and the local authority, can inevitably, change over the period of development. It is essential to avoid any misunderstanding regarding responsibilities. To achieve this it is important that the local authority has a policy and guidelines on the appropriate roles for the private sector, volunteers, local fund raising and charitable funds. It will also ensure that the different functions of the local authority are clearly defined, so that council employees, the staff of voluntary groups and volunteers can work effectively together.

### **6.3 PLAY POLICY FOR VOLUNTARY GROUPS**

A play policy in an organisation will help to ensure that the staff, both paid and volunteer, all have a common understanding of what they are doing and why. It will also inform the users of the play service, both parents/carers and children, of the value of the service, the worker's role within that service and the responsibilities of the carers and children themselves. Further guidance in this area is provided by the National Play Information Centre (1998) and by PlayBoard and NIACRO (1992).

### **6.4 DEVELOPING A PARTNERSHIP**

Community development through a community-based play project is an ideal way to move forward with the Local Agenda 21 process, involving local people in local environmental and social initiatives. Some of the advantages in developing a community-based approach to children's play are:

- The participation of community groups in the planning, development and management of the built environment, including traffic calming, "safe routes to school", the development of open spaces and providing sports pitches, as well as play facilities, should ensure a sensitive approach, responsive to local needs and therefore effective.
- The process of involving children, youth and other residents in the planning and management opportunities for children's play will contribute to the development of the community.
- Involving children and youth in the location, planning and design of play facilities and meeting places has a proven effect in reducing vandalism and nuisance to residents.



- Local involvement can ensure a quick response to difficulties, often preventing the emergence of problems later.

The advantages of involving local people in policy development and management include the possibility of delegating responsibility for small sites or facilities and encouraging local action. One of the difficulties mentioned by local authorities in the survey was in providing adequate supervision of play areas. The Council's insurers require weekly inspections of play areas, which can be done by staff. Trained volunteers who would keep a site tidy and litter free, report any damage or vandalism to the Council and monitor the equipment can carry out daily inspections. Gill (1995) provides examples from the UK on how a corporate and partnership approach to children's play, bringing together local authority departments, voluntary organisations and other agencies, can improve services throughout authorities.

## 6.5 GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY POLICIES

In the development of a policy on play, the three stages of policy development should be applied to ensure an effective working document:

1. Clarify the principles on which the policy will be based
2. Gain understanding of the realities of life for children, young people and the families whom the policy will affect
3. Draft and evaluate the policy to make sure that it is fulfilling its objectives.

In clarifying the principles, a bottom-up approach ensures local participation and allows the policy to emerge from the identified needs and recommendations of local people. By bringing groups together, a wider range of resources can be identified and harnessed, advice can be provided on obtaining grants for training, organisational support and equipment, the local authority can provide a guide to the relevant regulations, and management structures can be identified to involve the community.

A policy may cover the following areas:

- *A statement about how the organisation sees and values play:*

For example, the values of play, the different types of play, the needs of children according to their age and stage of development, the needs of the children in terms of equal opportunities, children's rights.

- *The Legislative Framework:*

This would cover the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, The Childcare Act, Youth Work Act, the Planning Acts and the Local Government Acts where they relate to playgrounds and parks and legislation on disabled access and equality.

- *Existing Services and Provision:*

An outline of the responsibilities, aims and objectives of the existing services, and how they are provided, together with, in the case of a local authority, the parks, play areas, leisure services, youth services and other providers in the area.

- *Service Delivery:*

This includes statements about how the organisation intends to deliver the service, and may include, for example, the environment it wishes to create, such as “a child friendly city”, the types of play settings such as supervised play areas within enclosed parks, school gardens and play areas, unequipped, natural play opportunities within residential layouts, and an open space hierarchy.

***Statements of Intent:***

Statements of intent and objectives may cover the following areas:

- **Equal Opportunities:** staff selection and training issues covering children with special needs, gender, and minorities.
- **Accessibility:**
- Issues of concern include planning for a hierarchy of open space, the development of supervised play facilities, holiday play schemes, support to play schemes, location and hours of provision, support to disadvantaged groups and children with special needs, rural play, road safety, traffic calming, footpaths and cycle lanes.
- **Consultation:** with children, young people, adults and other service providers.
- **Quality:** staff training, monitoring and evaluation of services, providing a range of play opportunities.
- **Partnership:** with the statutory, private, voluntary and community sectors to ensure that all interests are represented in the decision making process.
- **Community Play:** quality play provision must meet the identified needs of local communities.
- **Environmental Play:** ensuring that adequate green space is provided for children’s play, providing a green space network, recognising that the environment provides stimulation and learning opportunities which cannot be provided by fixed equipment playgrounds.
- **Fixed Equipment Play Areas:** providing a range of playground types, age segregation for younger children, play audits, equipment designed, installed and surfaced to ISEN standards, maintenance schedules, independent annual inspections, incident records and procedures and staff responsibilities.



## 7.0 CHILDREN'S PLAY - THE WAY FORWARD

This section presents a list of recommendations designed to provide a framework for developing a government strategy on children's play. The overview of research on children's play in Section 3 and the results of the survey of local authorities in Section 4 highlights issues which may be important in helping a local authority to develop a play policy and a general approach to making our whole environment safer and more accessible for children. The issues suggest that an action-research project to test these ideas in partnership with a local authority in an urban regeneration area is important, and this is outlined in Section 8. An outline of possible sources of funding for this for local authorities and voluntary groups is also included.

### 7.1 POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION

The more important points to come from the research review and the survey of local authorities are:

- Children make use of the whole environment in their play
- Children play mostly on the pavements and the street even when play areas are provided
- The mobility and 'freedom to roam' of children has been dramatically reduced in recent years because of perceived traffic dangers and parental fears of child abduction
- The independent journeys made by children are still highly significant
- Playgrounds with a range of play opportunities are important, especially for children in urban and disadvantaged areas
- Natural areas with a diversity of features, including slopes, trees and bushes, long grass, rocks, sand and water are highly valued by children and should be retained wherever possible in new developments or designed into new play facilities
- Where purpose-built seats and shelters and robust ball games areas are provided for young people, vandalism and nuisance is significantly reduced.
- The community, including young people, should be involved in the siting and design of play facilities.
- Issues of insurance and liability, lack of funds and human resources and the scarcity of suitable land are factors inhibiting local authorities in Ireland from providing play facilities.

Webb (1997) discusses this last set of issues in some depth. In developing a play policy it should be recognised that the provision of play space cannot be separated from other opportunities for children's play. It is important to include both the physical provision of facilities, such as playgrounds, as well as the provision of play services such as after-school clubs and holiday play schemes.

#### 7.1.1 Insurance

It is clear that while local authorities are the main providers for children's play in Ireland, they face severe difficulties in service provision. A key obstacle to providing for children's play is the factor of insurance, which can take several integrated forms, including the problem with meeting the insurers requirements for inspections and supervision with inadequate staff resources, the fear of being liable to large personal injury claims through playground accidents, often caused by vandalism and the need for constant maintenance to deal with vandalism damage. There is no doubt that many local authorities have faced real difficulties with insurance and claims and others may wish to avoid the issue by either not providing equipped play areas or by removing those that do exist. It is interesting to note that one large urban authority had no problem with



insurance issues because equipped play areas were provided within enclosed, supervised parks to international standards of design, installation, surfacing and maintenance. It is also worth noting in Webb (1997) that over 46% of authorities had not experienced a rise of insurance premiums from litigation. Also quoted in Webb (1997) was a statement from the local authorities insurer, "*Accidents in playgrounds are only one of many sources of public liability claims against Local Authorities and in the overall context are not the main cause of concern*". The Department of the Environment also points out that the premiums charged to local authorities are primarily related to road and footpath accidents.

The Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurance Co., which acts as broker and risk adviser to local authorities, recommend that local authorities operate the existing playground equipment and maintenance standards (UK and Germany) for existing play areas pending introduction of the EU standard for equipment and surfaces. Since April 1998 the new standard has been in operation in Ireland for new playgrounds as ISEN 1176. Local authorities have cover under their general public liability policies for all activities including the provision of playgrounds and playcentres. The cover operates under the following conditions:

1. The playgrounds/playcentres are operated directly under the control and management of the authority.
2. The authority is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the playgrounds/playcentres and all equipment therein.
3. Suitably qualified employees of the Authority carry out weekly inspections of all equipment.
4. All defective/dangerous equipment is immediately removed.
5. Equipment is not reinstated unless satisfactorily repaired.
6. Records are available of the inspections setting out the date of the inspection, name and qualifications of the person carrying out the inspection and the action taken.

One problem with local authority playground provision is that the issue is driven by the insurers in the absence of any guidance from the Department of the Environment.

### **7.1.2 Vandalism**

The consensus among local authorities is that unsupervised play areas in open parks or residential areas are a non-starter from the point of view of constant vandalism. Vandalism itself is a complex issue and was discussed in more detail in Webb (1997). Contributing factors include the chronic under-provision of facilities where young people can meet without being seen as a nuisance by older residents. Often the playground is the only place where they can gather and frustration is taken out on the equipment. It also arises from the lack of consultation with children, young people and the community when new facilities are being provided. Playgrounds which offer little in the way of diversity and chance for children to create and manipulate their own environment often get 'manipulated' anyway.

### **7.1.3 Funding**

With no direct source of funds allocated for children's play, funding is the most important issue for local authorities. There are a number of potential funding sources for play facilities, several of which are open to community groups rather than local authorities, which suggests that a partnership approach may be considered. Table 7.1 presents these sources in summary form. Funding sources are in a state of flux and the



following comments only apply to the situation current at the time the study was carried out.

All of these schemes will involve public participation and consultation. While funding to provide for traditional equipped play areas is limited, there is greater scope for using the planning process and existing engineering and roads budgets to make streets and residential areas safer for children and to provide for children's play in the wider environment.

**TABLE 7.1(A)**

<b>Potential Funding Sources for Local Authorities</b>	
<b>Source</b>	<b>Potential Areas</b>
Department of the Environment Urban and Village Renewal Programme	Environmental improvements including paving, traffic calming, removal of overhead wires, street furniture, tree planting, landscape treatment and other general improvements.
Department of the Environment Annual discretionary grants	Traffic calming to provide safe streets for play
National Roads Authority - Road improvement grants - Low Cost Accident Programme	Traffic management measures
Department of the Environment Housing Remedial Works Scheme	Environmental improvements, including the sensitive design and incorporation of features conducive to children's play close to their homes. Many local authority-housing departments are using this grant to provide small play areas for younger children within an estate.
EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation	Play areas in local authority housing schemes in the border counties (Sub-programme 2c on urban and village regeneration)
Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation The Young Peoples Facilities and Services Fund	Purpose-designed seats and shelters and ball-games facilities
Dublin Transportation Office (DTO)	Safe routes to school with cycleways, footpaths and traffic calming measures.
Department of Forestry Urban Woodland Scheme	Increased tree planting within urban areas, facilities including seats, litter bins, 'trim trails' and play areas

Funds are not currently available from the National Drugs Strategy Team, the ADM Community Childcare Initiative, the Irish Youth Foundation and the International Fund for Ireland as these programmes are fully committed for the time being.

TABLE 7.1(B)

<b>Funding for Community Groups</b>	
<b>Source</b>	<b>Potential Areas</b>
National Lottery	Starter funds for local projects
Area Partnership companies	Organisational support, training to groups concerned with developing playgrounds, play groups or after-schools clubs
Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs Grants for locally based community and family support groups	Grants to voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups; Renovation of premises and purchase of equipment to 90% of costs; Child care and crèche facilities, including running costs and equipment
Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs Community Development Programme	Play facilities may be a part of a larger programme to be eligible for funding.
Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Young People's Facilities and Services Fund	Facilities for young people aged between 10 and 20 years, ball game areas, purpose-designed seats and shelters
EU LEADER	Play facilities as part of a wider development programme
EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation	Play facilities (e.g. PlayCare)
Department of the Environment Urban and Village Renewal Scheme	Children's playgrounds, traffic calming
Department of the Environment Remedial Works Scheme – local authority housing improvements	Overall environmental improvement work including development of play areas
UK based trusts (e.g. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation)	Improving the status of children and young people
Local groups (e.g. Rotary Clubs)	Playground development

## 7.2 DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO CHILDREN'S PLAY AT GOVERNMENT LEVEL

The interviews with state and state-sponsored service providers and the responses from government departments with regard to play lead to a summary of findings and suggestions for action almost identical to those put forward in *Agenda for Play: The Way Forward* published by PlayBoard and Save the Children in Northern Ireland in 1994.

### 7.2.1 Summary of Findings

- Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the "right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreation appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts".
- In response to a government submission on children's rights in Ireland in early 1998, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child said, *The child's right to play should be facilitated by the formulation of a national strategy in that area* (CRC/C/SR.438. 1998).



- There is a lack of clear direction, no recognition, no strategy and no structure for children's play services or for play work in Ireland. The government should take the role of play seriously as being essential for the healthy development of the child.
- There should be an acknowledgement of play as a universal need and right.
- Many government departments are already involved with childcare and play provision through a variety of programmes and funds.
- All children should have the same access to safe, good quality play opportunities without discrimination.
- Children benefit physically, emotionally, educationally and creatively from quality play opportunities. Such children are more likely to develop into fulfilled citizens.
- Parental involvement in children's play can be beneficial for both parent and child and can aid community development. While pre-school playgroups are being developed, the lack of after school schemes limits parental choice of training and job opportunities. School holidays are a time of stress for many families, with financial implications resulting from children being at home and a lack of access to holiday play schemes.
- Increased parental concerns about traffic and "stranger danger" have significantly reduced the mobility of children in their neighbourhoods, reducing play opportunities and interactions with adults.
- Children benefit in many ways from stimulating play opportunities. However, play provision is being reduced through the removal and closure of play areas due to insurance implications, vandalism and the difficulties with maintenance faced by under resourced local authorities.
- Play provision and play work are diffuse. Training in childcare and playwork is rudimentary in the former and non-existent in the latter. The growth of after school care and the requirements of the Childcare Act will require qualified childcare and play work professionals.

### *7.2.2 The Way Forward With Government Policy*

The following recommendations are made to assist the development of a framework to guide government departments in producing a comprehensive policy for children's play in Ireland. Aspects of policies which affect different departments are indicated in the Sugradh policy shown in Appendix

- The proposed National Strategy for Children should allocate and define departmental responsibilities and remits for children's play policy and provision.
- Departments should acknowledge Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the need for children to have access to play facilities and services as an essential part of the healthy development of the child.
- In line with the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the expertise within various government departments may be co-ordinated within an interdepartmental working group. A lead role should be taken by the Department of the Environment as the funding body for the main local authority service providers. Other members of the working group may include the Department of health and Children, the Department of Equality and Law Reform, the Department of Education, the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport and, in the spirit of social partnership, those voluntary groups which are focussed on play.
- Play in its diverse aspects falls within the remit of health, education, sports and recreation, the environment, social welfare and community development, and into the public, voluntary and commercial sectors. Recognition by the government would stimulate the subject of play and provide credibility and support.



- There is a need for a government focus for play work to provide quality and credibility in the field;
- to produce proficiency standards in play work training;
- to provide national guidelines on play environments and ensure good planning, design and safety in meeting ISEN standards;
- to promote demonstration projects,
- to provide information on 'best practice',
- to provide guidance for local authority planners, engineers and architects, and
- to disseminate information on play.

### 7.3 DEVELOPING A PLAY STRATEGY FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

With these issues in mind, including the points outlined in Section 7.1 and also remembering the nature of children's play - that it takes place largely on the street even when play areas are provided, and that children's freedom to roam has been significantly restricted in recent years, how can we devise a "play strategy" that is relevant to the situation faced by local authorities in Ireland?

Any play policy or strategy must be based on the child's right to play as set out in Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. A proposed play strategy for a local authority, which can be implemented with the existing resources available, should acknowledge that play is a wider issue than simply providing equipped playgrounds. Planning the whole residential environment to safely accommodate children's play and to increase the diversity of play opportunities, as outlined in Appendix 4, can help to move away from the need to provide fixed equipment playgrounds and will reduce the problems associated with insurance and public liability. The financial investment needed for this approach is very much less than that needed for fixed equipment playgrounds. A variety of traffic calming measures, which again make children's play safer can also be carried out using existing engineering budgets and skills. More public education will be needed for this approach, especially in relation to having more 'natural' open spaces, which may be perceived by some as being 'untidy'.

A general strategy or approach to play may include the following aspects:

- Recognising that children's play takes place throughout their environment and that children's freedom of movement has been restricted in recent years, it is important that the streets of existing residential areas should be as "child friendly" as possible. Traffic calming measures, speed and vehicle restrictions and the "Home Zone, or safe streets for play" concept may be developed. *Action: Roads and Engineering Section using normal roads budget.*
- Within planned residential developments measures providing for a safe environment for children and the desired diversity of play will include traffic calming, street closures, walls and driveways, grassy areas set back from roads, including small open spaces, a footpath network (for pedestrians and cyclists) around and through the estate linking in to the public open spaces and to shops, and culs-de-sac layout with a spinal footpath network and informal minimally equipped play areas. *Action: Planning and Housing Sections.*
- Recognising that the outdoor environment offers play and learning opportunities which cannot be provided by fixed equipment playgrounds, there is a need to protect, retain and develop natural areas within and adjacent to residential areas which have a diversity of natural play opportunities. *Action: Planning Section.*
- Develop a hierarchy of local open spaces, from small unequipped play lots near to children's homes, to local parks and district parks along the lines of the NPFA "Six



Acre Standard” or the Guidelines for Parks issued by the Department of the Environment. *Action: Planning Section.*

- Provide equipped play areas, with age segregated equipment, designed, installed, surfaced and maintained to ISEN standards within supervised play situations. Playground maintenance schedules and incident records should be kept and independent annual inspections carried out. *Action: Parks or Engineers Section.*
- Provide, in consultation with young people, purpose-designed ball games areas and meeting places for teenagers. *Action: Planning/Engineers Section.*
- Support young peoples involvement in community development, the arts, sports and environmental projects. *Action: Community and Environment Sections.*
- Support community based pre-schools, after-schools clubs and holiday play schemes. *Action: Community and Environment Sections.*
- Develop a play policy in partnership with the community and with statutory service providers in order to optimise the potential for quality play opportunities for children. Partnerships are needed to develop the most appropriate play delivery at local level. A Play Forum bringing together the local authority and community/residents/tenants groups to discuss play related issues would be a step forward. Good examples already exist, including the Dun Laoghaire Youth Service Library Road play project. *Action: County Secretary/Town Clerk in conjunction with other sections and departments including Community and Environment.*

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## Appendix 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), DIT & The Children's Research Centre TCD

### Research on Play Policy in Ireland

*A Play Policy is a formal commitment to the provision of services and facilities for children's play and will normally define the nature and extent of the play provision.*

Please return the questionnaire by 24th August 1998 in the enclosed envelope. Thank you

1. Does your local authority provide:
  - a) Play facilities for children e.g. playgrounds, play equipment, play centres?  
Yes/No
  - b) Play services e.g. after-school clubs, holiday play schemes  
Yes/No
  - c) Other play provision - please describe \_\_\_\_\_
2. Does your local authority have a formal (i.e. a written) policy on the provision of :
  - a) Play facilities e.g. playgrounds, play equipment and play centres  
Yes/No
  - b) Play services e.g. after-school clubs, holiday play schemes  
Yes/No
  - c) Other play provision  
Yes/No
3. Is your local authority currently working on the development of a play policy  
Yes/No
4. In your local authority area, there may be one or more providers of play opportunities for children (facilities and/or services). Please rank them in order of the importance of their role in providing play for children:
  - a) Commercial Sector \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Government Department \_\_\_\_\_
  - c) Local Authority \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Voluntary/Community Sector \_\_\_\_\_
  - e) Other statutory body (please name)..... \_\_\_\_\_
  - f) Other (please name)..... \_\_\_\_\_
5. Which departments of the local authority provide play facilities and/or play services for children? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are there any barriers to providing play opportunities for children in your local authority  
Yes/No  
If Yes, please describe these barriers: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Please rank, in order of importance, the resources which would be most helpful to your local authority in developing and implementing a play policy & play provision for children:
  - a) Community development programme focused on play \_\_\_\_\_
  - b) Departmental guidelines \_\_\_\_\_
  - c) Funding \_\_\_\_\_
  - d) Personnel e.g. play leaders \_\_\_\_\_
  - e) Training \_\_\_\_\_
  - f) Other, please indicate..... \_\_\_\_\_



8. Please describe the standards adopted by your local authority for:

a) The provision of Open Space in residential developments \_\_\_\_\_

(b) The provision of Open Space for use by children within the designated Open Space in residential developments \_\_\_\_\_

In the context of Agenda 21, has the local community been involved in the development of a play policy ?

Yes/No

If Yes, please briefly describe how the local community has been involved

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

On behalf of \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 2:

### EXAMPLE OF LETTER TO GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS REQUESTING DETAILS OF PLAY POLICY

11<sup>th</sup> August 1998

Dear Sir,

#### Research on Children's Play Policy in Ireland

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College and the Centre for Social and Educational Research at the Dublin Institute of Technology has commissioned research into children's play policy in Ireland. A play policy is a formal commitment to the provision of services and facilities for play for the 5-12 year old age group, as distinct from childcare. The aim of the current research is to examine the present position on policy for children's play and to develop a feasibility study on the options for putting into place, in partnership with appropriate public and other bodies, an action centred project that will:

1. Integrate satisfactory play provision as part of one or more urban regeneration initiatives.
2. Identify and detail issues and make appropriate recommendations, in relation to how a comprehensive play policy could be put into place in public space as part of standard development and planning.
3. Explore public policy and attitudes in relation to the development of a comprehensive play policy.

In relation to this third item we note from the ADM evaluation study "Developing Childcare Services in Disadvantaged Areas" that your department has a number of programmes related to childcare. We would welcome any information and observations regarding the Department's approach to play policy within these programmes: whether the Department has any formal policy on play, and if not, the progress being made within the Department in the development of a play policy for children as it impinges on the remit of your Department.

I look forward to your reply,

Yours sincerely,

---

Dr. Richard Webb.



### Appendix 3:

#### ORGANISATIONS CONTACTED FOR THE STUDY

Department of the Environment and Local Government  
Department of Health and Children  
Department of Education and Science  
Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport  
Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform  
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment  
Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands  
Duchas - The Heritage Service

Area Development Management Ltd  
Ballybane Residents Association - Galway  
Ballymun Regeneration Ltd.  
Barnardo's  
City Arts Centre  
Commission for the Family  
Dublin Corporation Community Section  
Dublin Healthy Cities Project  
Dun Laoghaire Youth Service  
Expert Working Group on Childcare  
Focus on Children  
Galway Corporation  
International Fund for Ireland  
Irish Pre-school Playgroup Association  
Irish Youth Foundation  
National Drugs Strategy Team  
Programme for Peace and Reconciliation  
Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland  
Trevor Sargent, T.D. Balbriggan  
Women's research Centre TCD.

Belfast City Council  
Children's Law Centre, Belfast  
Northern Ireland Playwork Assessment Centre  
PlayBoard Northern Ireland

Children's Play Policy Forum  
National Play Information Centre UK  
National Playing Fields Association  
Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents  
Thames Valley Police Architectural Liaison Office

European Play Network, Belgium

International Play Association

## Appendix 4:

### GUIDELINES FOR ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS AND ENGINEERS ON CREATING A CHILD FRIENDLY ESTATE.

These guidelines are adapted from Wheway and Millward (1997) with the permission of the publishers, The Chartered Institute of Housing.

Objective	Measure
<i>To enable children to move freely round their neighbourhood</i>	Footpath network linked to grassy areas, tarmaced areas, play areas, schools, shops and bus routes.
<i>To travel safely without danger from traffic</i>	Traffic calming measures to limit car speeds to 10 mph. Bumps, cul-de-sac, change in surface material or colour, pinch points, chicanes, bollards etc. Cul-de-sac and no through route layout. Narrow sight lines on approach roads and sharp angled turns into residential roads. Wide sight lines to enable drivers to see children moving between pavement and road. Car parking off-road, on drives or bays to increase visibility of children moving between pavement and road.
<i>To be able to play in front, or within sight of their homes.</i>	A variety of play spaces and surfaces in the front street landscape, such as walls, sitting areas, grassy areas, and sections of wider pavement, to encourage children to play outdoors. Front gardens with good visual oversight from house kitchens and living rooms. Network of footpaths.
<i>To be part of the community and the communities interactions.</i>	A variety of play spaces and surfaces incorporated in the front street landscape, such as walls, sitting areas, grassy areas, sections of wide pavements. Public open spaces along pedestrian routes to shopping centres, schools, and community facilities to increase the level of informal community supervision.
<i>To be able to play in the natural environment.</i>	Trees, hedgerows and natural areas conserved within the residential landscape. Public open space to include mature trees, long grass, slopes, rocks, bushes and wild areas, in addition to flat, grassed ball games areas. Where equipment is provided, slides and swings as a minimum.
<i>To be able to play in purposefully designed play opportunities.</i>	Play areas sited along footpath network, within public open spaces, adjacent to public buildings to allow for informal supervision. A hierarchy of open spaces from small informal sites near homes, larger equipped open spaces and neighbourhood parks with ball games areas. Places for teenagers to meet & play ball.



## **Appendix 5 : SUGRADH - PLAY POLICY**

### **THE NEED FOR POLICY GUIDELINES**

There is no central government policy on children's play and the provision of play facilities. It is recognised that for local authorities and community groups in Ireland, children's play is a difficult and emotive issue, made more complex by considerations of vandalism, insurance and litigation. Play also crosses traditional departmental responsibilities. A recent study found that 46% of local authorities in Ireland had no children's play facilities and 24% of those surveyed has equipment in a poor or unsafe condition (1). Sugradh's objectives include working towards the co-ordination of policy, practice and provision of opportunities for children's play, promoting standards for the design and provision of play facilities and to identify and provide for training needs in play work. The following points and suggested policy guidelines are to guide a rational discussion of the issues and approaches to their possible resolution, in order to create a truly "child friendly" environment. Many of these proposals are listed under those government departments having a measure of responsibility for children. Two areas are also discussed which are important in the debate on children's play in Ireland, namely equipped playgrounds and vandalism.

### **DEFINITIONS OF PLAY**

- Play is the main business of the lives of children and is the way that they learn and explore the world around them.
- Play is a vital process by which children develop their intellectual, physical, creative and social skills and is the highest expression of human development in childhood.
- Play is a means of learning to live, not a mere pass-time.
- There are as many forms of play as there are children in the world; it can be active or inactive, solitary or group play, structured or unstructured, but what is central to the whole process is that it is the child who sets the agenda in the play situation.

### **PLAY AS A HUMAN RIGHT**

Play is central to the healthy growth and development of the child and as such, is recognised as a basic human right for all children. This right is stated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, Article 7 which states *"The child shall have full opportunity to play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education: society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right"*, and also by Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, *"the rights of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child"* (2).

**Recommended Policy: Opportunities for play suitable for each stage of a child's development should be freely available for all children irrespective of their background, ability, religion, race or culture.**

### **PLAY AND HEALTH**

Children learn to live through play. The multi faceted skills, be they physical, intellectual or social which a child needs to acquire, are first learnt through the medium of play, which also provides real psychological benefits - for play can and does help a child to cope with the stresses and strains of modern life. Play is also fundamental to later good health and sporting achievement. Underlying all these benefits, for children play is fun and is a positive, natural outlet for their curiosity and energy.

#### **Recommended Policies**

- Establish programmes for professionals and parents about the benefits of play.
- Incorporate play into community programmes designed to maintain children's physical and mental health.
- Include play as an integral part of all children's environments, including hospitals and other institutional settings.

### **PLAY AND SOCIAL WELFARE**



Play is an essential part of family and community life and should be valued and promoted for its own sake and for the benefit of the child other than being seen as a means to an end, such as return to work programmes.

#### **Recommended Policies**

- **Ensure that play is part of community-based services designed to integrate children with physical, mental or emotional disabilities into the community.**
- **Ensure that play is accepted as an integral part of social development and social care.**
- **Provide safe play environments that protect children against abuse and violence.**

#### **PLAY AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

Children are the biggest users of the outdoor environment and have 35% of their time potentially available for play. Children play wherever and whenever they need to: for most children the traditional play space is the street. A Northern Ireland study showed that in a residential estate most children played on the roads and pavements. Only 13% were seen in play areas (3). Children are very vulnerable to road accidents because they have not developed physically or mentally to the stage where they can cope with traffic. National Roads Authority pedestrian accident figures show that in 1997, 217 children aged 1-9 years were injured on our roads.

The ability of children to be able to use facilities and opportunities freely is dependent on their freedom of travel which is severely limited due to parental perceptions of traffic and social dangers. Distances traveled by children on their own has significantly decreased in the last decade with major implications for the location of play spaces. As children get older, their needs to access community facilities, shops, playing fields, sporting and leisure centre, should be recognised.

Children use the total area accessible to them and designers should look at the total environment, not just equipped playgrounds, and the possibilities of designing play opportunities into such items as footpaths, walls, and planting schemes, not only in housing areas but also routes to school and shopping areas.

Whenever children are asked what play facilities they would like most, the answer is always sand and water, trees and bushes, long grass and hills. Traditional equipped play areas have developed because the natural environment has become less accessible and safe for children. Environmental play is probably the most valuable and most natural form of play and teaches children more about the real world than any other form of play and also helps children understand and feel secure in their environment.

#### **Recommended Policies**

- **Reserve adequate and appropriate space for a range of play and recreation opportunities through statutory provision, recognising that children also need safe informal play opportunities within their communities.**
- **In the planning and design of developments, environmental improvements, traffic management and public transport schemes, the implications for children's safety and their access to community facilities must be considered.**
- **When planning new developments, recognise the child's small size and limited range of activity.**
- **When planning for development, the implications for children's access to and experience of, natural play opportunities should be considered. Areas of natural play space should be retained or created close to housing areas, and in schools, to form part of a green space network.**
- **Ensure that children and young people can participate in making decisions that affect their surroundings and their access to them.**
- **Disseminate information about play facilities and play programme to planning and design professionals and politicians.**

#### **PLAY AND LEISURE**

Children need opportunities to play at leisure and in a safe environment. The provision of children's play space cannot be separated from other opportunities for children's play. Children need to interact with adults who are able to provide programmes encouraging play opportunities. A recreation liaison officer in a local authority would have a wide responsibility for facilitating children's play and reducing the incidence of vandalism. Duties would include



developing children's playgrounds, consultation programmes and management, the development and quality of leadered play provision, holiday play schemes and after school clubs, including working with the voluntary sector and Partnership programmes developing projects for young people in conjunction with local sports and arts organisations and developing environmental programmes in association with schools and the VEC.

#### **Recommended Policies**

- Provide time, space, materials, natural settings, and programmes with trained leaders where children may develop a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and enjoyment through play.
- Recognise that children need to interact with adults who are able to provide programmes encouraging opportunities in play, sports, arts and the environment and facilitate the development of such programmes.
- Provide all children, particularly those with special needs, with access to a diversity of play opportunities through community programmes such as play groups, toy libraries, play buses and after school clubs.
- Encourage the use of traditional games.
- Stop the commercial exploitation of children's play and the production and sale of war toys and games of violence and destruction.
- Promote the use of co-operative games and fair play for children in sports.

#### **STANDARDS**

The application of standards is a key way to ensure that children play in a situation which is safe, well maintained and appropriate. For capital items, standards would cover the design, construction, maintenance and management of play facilities. For play services, standards would cover training, staffing and equipment requirements.

#### **TRAINING PROVISION FOR THOSE WORKING IN/WITH PLAY**

Training needs to be provided for all staff working with play; this includes those working directly or indirectly with children at play, whether in a professional or voluntary capacity.

#### **FUNDING**

Funding, from both statutory bodies and the community is essential if play is to be provided which is free, accessible and inclusive.