



*Working together for a healthier Belfast*

## **Response to consultation on a draft Play and Leisure Implementation Plan**

4 February 2011

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Play and Leisure Implementation Plan.

Belfast Healthy Cities is a partnership organisation working to improve health equity and wellbeing for people living and working in Belfast and beyond. Our focus is on improving physical and social living conditions and prosperity in a healthy way, through intersectoral collaboration and a health in all policies approach. Belfast is a designated World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy City, and the role of the partnership is to deliver on targets set by WHO for all European Healthy Cities. Equity in health has been a core issue of the Network since its inception more than 20 years ago.

Belfast Healthy Cities broadly agrees with the approach taken in the draft Plan. It is particularly pleasing that the Plan places a strong emphasis on creating a physical environment that supports play, as this is often obscured by a focus on service delivery. However, having access to a play friendly neighbourhood is vital for children, as it encourages free, creative and spontaneous play that is not dependent on external supervisors, transport etc. This, in turn, helps young people develop healthy habits for life, and also supports their social and mental development.

We also broadly agree with the proposed actions; however we believe there could be more ambitious actions. For example, it may not be sufficient to distribute the Plan to relevant stakeholders to achieve change. Rather, focus could be on integrating play as an important objective of stakeholders' policies and plans. This would create a stronger platform and mandate for action, and also support stakeholders to take ownership of the Plan.

We would also suggest that there could be more actions focused on concrete delivery of play opportunities, even in the form of demonstration projects. For example, the audit of unused space mentioned under Area 1, point 'Promoting the conversion of unused land into viable play and leisure spaces' could be amended with the development of a demonstration project that shows how a space can be converted, and what the results of this are.

Similarly, under Area 1, point 'Public Spaces create a welcoming environment for all children and young people', it would be useful to develop projects that both demonstrate a child focus, and build on needs and wishes identified by children. In relation to this, it is worth noting that Belfast Healthy Cities is developing a project that will directly work with children to identify how they perceive their environment, what they like and don't, and what would help them use their neighbourhood. This project is intended both to support children think critically about their environment, and develop guidance on creating child friendly neighbourhoods. It will involve children in schools and afterschool clubs in Lenadoon and Suffolk in west Belfast, and will be delivered in spring 2011, in collaboration with a local partnership delivering a childhood obesity prevention project. A potential second stage of the project is intended to involve children directly in planning and shaping a local regeneration project.

Belfast Healthy Cities would also stress the importance of delivering on community engagement with children. It is somewhat disconcerting that the proposed action is to act on views 'where achievable', as this has the potential for creating disappointment and disillusion, which may last for a lifetime and harm children's mental wellbeing and aspirations. Rather, we would suggest focusing on managing expectations during the process, and delivering at an agreed minimum level.

We stress that a key function of engagement with children should be to enable children to value themselves and giving them the skills to look confidently to the future, concretely by showing children how to participate in decision making. This is a vast area that requires action from all sectors, but engaging all children in decision making is one very important way of conveying the message that they matter and have a role to play in society, which in turn supports mental wellbeing and can help strengthen aspirations.

Finally, working across sectors, within government as well as in wider society, and ensuring that better outcomes for children is a priority across sectors, is essential to deliver this action plan. It is important that implementation includes direct engagement with stakeholders ranging from other Departments and Councils to parents, as this is a key way to ensure that action is integrated in existing and future organisational plans.