

“That in building new playgrounds or regenerating existing playgrounds, Cork County Council would introduce a policy of application of the Principles of Universal Design by installing a range of equipment which can be used by both able and less able bodied children alike. In addition, that towards achieving universal design, Cork County Council would begin a programme of retrofitting all existing playgrounds in its jurisdictional area with at least one item of play equipment specifically designed for inclusivity of all.”

Not much is written about the benefits of playgrounds, but the fact is that in a world where play patterns are changing, where there is a decrease in free play and outdoor play and where concerns over children’s safety leads to increasing adult supervision, playgrounds are more important than ever before. Playgrounds help children to develop physical awareness and abilities, social skills, language interaction, motor skills, spatial awareness, balance, co-ordination, fitness and emotional wellbeing.

There are lots of playgrounds in County Cork. They are bright colourful places, a focus in the community, well used and well maintained. But very few of our playgrounds are universally designed. This often means that when a family with two children take an afternoon out in the local playground, the able-bodied child can play freely whilst her wheelchair-bound sibling can do little other than look on.

13% of people living in County Cork have a disability. Of those, over 6,000 are children under the age of 14. The National Intellectual Disability Register tells us that 98.7% of those under 18 with a disability are living at home. So for these children and their parents, the playground as a destination is critically important. Much of the equipment installed in playgrounds is labelled in the catalogues as being universally accessible. But the reality is quite different.

In preparing for this motion, I had the pleasure of visiting St. Paul’s Special Needs School which caters for pupils aged 4 – 18 years with moderate, severe or profound general learning disabilities. According to the National Intellectual Disability Register, almost half of children registered as disabled fall into this category. I spoke to the principal and to many of the teachers so that I might benefit from their direct experience as to the value of County Cork’s playgrounds for their students.

The immediate reaction from all to whom I spoke was that there are nowhere near enough facilities which their students can use. The new swings in the Ballincollig Regional Park with the back and harness were singled out as being great for many. Basket swings everywhere were spoken of positively. But swings like these can be used by a wheelchair-bound child only if he/she is small enough to be lifted in. There is a wheelchair accessible roundabout in Lisgoold. There is a simple wheelchair swing in Fermoy and a top of the range wheelchair swing in Whitegate. The latter was provided by the Whitegate community, assisted by SECAD. That’s it.

Universal design does not require every piece of equipment to be accessible to every child, nor does it mean providing stand-alone features designed for the exclusive use of children with disabilities. It means choosing a variety of features and products that are usable by children of all abilities. Installing a spring system on gates to reduce the risk of a child bolting. Providing a sufficient range of equipment to cater for gross motor skills without undue physical effort on the part of the carer. Catering for finer motor skills with activity panels at ground level. Allowing access onto equipment via a transfer platform or

ramp. If for example, more than one spring rocker is provided, install one with a back rest and sides.

Because children with disabilities can often be marginalised when it comes to play opportunities, the National Play Policy, “Ready, Steady, Play” (2004) recommended that all new and revamped local authority playgrounds would be universally designed. But Cork County Council’s recreational policy drafted in 2006, doesn’t mention universal design.

So I ask that we amend this policy to reflect our collective aim of making playgrounds equally usable by all children.

Retrofitting just one item of universally accessible equipment into existing playgrounds is a small ask. Simple rainbow chimes provide sensory benefits, take very little space and cost in the region of €1,100. A chalkboard that allows children who cannot verbalise to express themselves is €700. A small spinning, swinging bowl for one costs €1,400. The same for two or three children is about €5,300. A gentle rocker with a back to seat several children costs about €4,200. A roundabout accessible to both wheelchairs and able-bodied children can be purchased for about €6,300 and needs a 17cm dig to make it level with the ground. These are just examples to illustrate how retrofitting just one item of universally accessible equipment is financially achievable, does not need specialist installation but would extend the multi-faceted benefits of our playgrounds to all children, all over the county.