



Deirdre Fitzpatrick
& Associates



Final Evaluation Of PlayCare Sustainability Support Project

December 2006

CONTENTS	PAGE NO.
1.0 Introduction	2
2.0 Background	5
3.0 Aims and Objectives of Project	8
4.0 Project Outputs	12
5.0 Value of the Project	22
6.0 Conclusions	26
7.0 Recommendations	29
Appendix Copy of Questionnaire	32

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This document has been prepared as the final evaluation of the PlayCare project. There have been two previous evaluation reports which cover the work of the project during the first two years of funding. This report covers the period up to August 2006, and is the third evaluation of the project, which was funded under Measure 1 Priority 5 of the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, Positive Action for Women.

This PlayCare initiative has been implemented by PlayBoard, and has had its own dedicated staff.

1.2 Budget

PlayBoard is an intermediary funding body, and has administered funding for the after schools groups with which it works. However, the budget for the implementation of the PlayCare project was made available through the self-application process for Peace II funding. This has enabled PlayBoard to run the PlayCare Sustainable Support Project. The budget of £291,367 was offered for 4 years and 3 months, from 01 May 2002 – 31 August 2006.

This budget has been for the implementation of the project, and to provide a support role to groups to try to move them towards sustainability.

1.3 Staffing

The project team have been based in PlayBoard's head office at York Street Belfast. The staffing has consisted of a full-time project leader and 2 part-time project development officers throughout the life of the project. These development officer posts became full-time in October 2005, when the project leader applied and was successfully appointed to the role of Chief Executive of PlayBoard. The Project Leader post was continued by the previous Peace Manager, which has had the advantage of linking the staff teams, and the projects becoming more inter-related. The staff mainly carry out their own administration, but rely on some administration support provided on a goodwill basis from PlayBoard. The work of the PlayCare team is consistent with PlayBoard's strategic objectives, consequently the team works closely with other in-house development teams and projects. The project has provided continuity of support to groups. Its focus was on sustainability, but it built on the support services already provided to groups through PlayBoard. Therefore there is a close relationship between the project teams, which is particularly evident in the relationship with PlayBoard's monitoring team who have responsibility for financial and quality monitoring of Peace funded projects, and the

close links between the projects. It is also evidenced in PlayCare staff providing training for PlayBoard.

1.4 Strategic Context

PlayBoard's funding is from Priority 1, Economic Renewal, of the EUSPPR, Measure 5, Positive Action for Women, which states its aims and objectives:

To improve women's access to, and participation in, the labour market, to avail of labour market opportunities and to improve entrepreneurship among women.

Other indicative activities of the Measure are:

- The promotion of entrepreneurship as an option for women;
- identification of barriers which impede women from entering and progressing within the labour market;
- support for confidence-building actions and skill enhancement;
- providing skill enhancement and training which promote career;
- development and access to employment opportunities.

The Measure specifically identifies women wishing to enter or re-enter the labour market. .

With regard to the work of PlayBoard, the Children's(1995) Order (NI) (1996)(for the first time gave specific recognition to the importance of Play and the role of leisure and play services to children and families. The Order also for the first time stated that services to 'children in need' must be delivered to children up to the age of twelve. Given the full inclusion of primary school age children, it is critical that play needs of children are given equal attention to their care and education and for the continued recognition of children's play. Under the Review of Public Administration, responsibility for out of school hours care will move from the Department of Health to the Department of Education.

In addition, the profile of provision has been heightened. A Children's Minister has been appointed, and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has been established. There has been a commitment to develop a regional Play Policy for Northern Ireland, and PlayBoard has been involved in consultation work regarding this. The policy is due to be launched in October 2006.

The project started in an environment where there was no mainstream funding for out of schools projects. PlayBoard have lobbied and worked hard to maintain a focus on women within Measure 1.5. They lobbied for the PlayCare initiative and for continued focus on provision for children.

1.5 Report

This report has been prepared as a final evaluation report on the PlayCare Sustainable Support project. It seeks to summarise the findings of the first two reports as they relate to the overall project timescale. It also seeks to compare project outputs, as far as possible, to targets. Some of these have not remained valid or relevant because of changes in the project implementation and scale, which are discussed later. The report seeks to provide a current context for the project, to look at its achievements and the feedback from the afterschools groups, and to identify its relevance to Peace II funding. The project has provided continuity after Peace I funding, with a particular emphasis on sustainability, and this evaluation points to the need for core funding for the sector to be sustainable.

The report has been prepared using a variety of sources of information and feedback which have been gathered over the three year period:

- background literature
- project files
- meetings with PlayCare officers
- consultation with project promoters
- feedback from parents of children using the after schools clubs
- telephone interviews with project promoters.
- postal questionnaire sent to all groups

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Background to PlayBoard

The PlayCare Sustainable Support Programme was established with Peace II funding in May 2002

PlayBoard is the lead agency for the development of play for children and young people's in Northern Ireland. The agency is underpinned by United Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in particular articles 12, 23 and 31 and adopts a rights based approach . The agency has a considerable track record in its role of Intermediary Funding Body (IFB) and has pro-actively administered NOF, Peace I and II monies consistent with the measure and activities for which it has been, and continues to be responsible. The agency operates in a manner consistent with the distinctiveness of the Peace programme.

PlayBoard works to improve the quality of children's and young people's lives by increasing their opportunities to play. It recognises the positive contribution PlayCare projects, with a peace and reconciliation or cross-community focus, contribute to the development of anti-sectarian attitudes in Northern Ireland. As a membership organisation PlayBoard exists to promote, create and develop quality play opportunities, through three key functions:

1. Tackling play deprivation in the community
2. Supporting quality out of school PlayCare provision
3. Workforce development of the Playwork sector

PlayBoard was established in 1985, and was one of four UK national organisations set up under the auspices of the Association for Children's Play and Recreation. In 1990 the organisation launched itself as an independent specialist play organisation. The original objectives continue to reflect the work of PlayBoard, these are:

- To promote facilities for play, recreation and other leisure time opportunities for children;
- To carry out and commission research into children's play and recreation;
- To promote quality school aged childcare to enable parents to reconcile work and family life; and
- To provide a co-ordinating and development role for voluntary organisations concerned with children's play and recreation.

PlayBoard is a regional organisation that offer various services and expertise on play. One of the key areas of work is that of support for PlayCare projects as they progress along the various stages of development. They ensure that PlayCare is provided to meet the needs of carers and parents while they train or work, and that quality play standards are adhered to. They assist groups through the various stages of:

- set up
- management
- meeting statutory legislation
- meeting financial and monitoring requirements
- ongoing project staff training and development through accredited and non-accredited training
- maximising impact in local community
- adhering to the range of funding criteria as it applies to children, women, families and schools.

2.2 Background to PlayCare Sustainable Support Project

The PlayCare Sustainable Support Project was set up by PlayBoard to provide a support network to PlayCare Clubs throughout Northern Ireland. The need for the support network was identified by PlayBoard because they were already working with the groups under Peace I and recognised the need for further support to focus on sustainability. The PlayCare Sustainability Support Officers (PSO's) were funded under Priority 1, Economic Renewal, of the EUSPPR, Measure 5 which states its aims and objectives:

To improve women's access to, and participation in, the labour market and avail of labour market opportunities and to improve entrepreneurship among women.

The PlayCare officers are responsible for co-ordinating and delivering a range of development activities which include:

- Management capacity building;
- Introduction and implementation of quality accreditation scheme;
- Business Planning;
- Project Development;
- Cross community networking;
- Promotion of equality of opportunity within the PlayCare sector;
- Anti-sectarian training;
- Assisting Clubs towards sustainability.

2.3 Synergy of Operating with PlayBoard

Although this evaluation report is only reporting on the work of PlayCare Sustainability Support Project, the project is integral to the work of PlayBoard. The value and outputs are enhanced by the links with PlayBoard. Not only does PlayBoard provide project management, but its staff provide resources for monitoring, and work can be shared between PlayBoard and PlayCare. The project could not have achieved what it has without these direct links. In turn, PlayBoard has also benefited from the arrangement in terms of the support provided to its member groups. The development of policy has been carried out

jointly which has been a benefit to both PlayCare and PlayBoard, as well as providing benefit to groups and policy makers.

PlayBoard has a number of programmes running, and the PlayCare project fits very well with the other programmes:

- **Positive Playgrounds** has been piloted and is currently being delivered across Northern Ireland. It is a scheme to train teachers and playground supervisors games and activities that can be played with minimal resources
- **Fit for Play** is a quality award which integrates physical activity and nutrition, promoting healthy lifestyles among children. Groups must complete 3 modules and be deemed “fit for play” to gain the award.
- **Out of School Hours Learning** was a 3 year Big Lottery funded project, offering children across Northern Ireland the opportunity to play and learn in fun environments. It included activities such as dance, circus skills, music, IT, local history, sport and games, cookery and drama.
- **Reclaiming Playspace** is a project aimed at empowering local communities to reclaim space for outdoor play. It concentrates on re-introducing traditional street games and training adults to supervise and organise these activities.
- **Extended Schools Team** is a team of PlayBoard staff who can work with groups to provide support. They can address individual needs, and have experience in providing advice on play development, play in school strategies and development, staffing/recruitment, premises and suitability, quality standards, and financial and legal responsibilities.

The PlayCare project fits very well with these projects, and the after schools projects benefit from the range of support available from PlayBoard. It is clear from communication with the groups that they do not differentiate between PlayCare and PlayBoard staff, support and resources. This demonstrates the synergy achieved through the delivery of the programme by a support organisation which already has strong links with the clubs and groups it aims to help. PlayBoard had already established its credibility and value. This has made it easier to develop relationships and to deliver the support effectively.

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF PROJECT

3.1 Overall Aim of Project

The PlayCare Sustainable Support Project is concerned with providing quality out of school hours play, through supporting management and workers to deliver this on a sustainable basis and to a high quality. Their original overall aim was to assist clubs towards sustainability. This is articulated in the aim which was identified at the start of the project:

After three years of consistent support from PlayBoard, most projects on the ground will have the skills and understanding necessary to:

- *ensure the continued quality of childcare provision;*
- *maintain their own networks and partnerships; and*
- *continue to implement policies and practices which ensure sustainability*

In reality the focus of work has been much broader than sustainability. The financial position of many clubs, and the cost of providing quality childcare, has meant that sustainability is more difficult. There have been other external factors which have impacted on the sustainability of groups. However, the work carried on through the project has had a very broad impact on both the groups and the sector.

3.2 Need for PlayCare Sustainable Support Project

PlayCare has been provided in the community, with the help of PlayBoard, for approximately 11 years. The PlayCare Sustainable Support project was implemented to provide a support structure for the workers, managers and management committees of the individual projects. Resources were needed to work with PlayCare projects to address the issues eg cross-community networking, anti-sectarianism training, management of projects, sustainability strategies, quality play, and adherence to standards. The resources were focused on improving standards, quality of provision, and looking at a sustainability strategy.

The project has provided training, support and monitoring necessary for the projects to deliver high quality, accessible PlayCare. Many of the target outcomes of the project were intended to meet the wider policy objectives of Peace II, Measure 1.5, including:

- The project will have a direct effect on the employability of PlayCare workers in the sector. The support, guidance and training given will result in an increased level of expertise and encourage self-esteem for individual staff within PlayCare projects.
- The capacity building of management committees regarding sustainability will ensure the viability of projects and secure

employment opportunities for experienced and qualified professionals.

- The continued efforts of PlayBoard will result in an increased recognition of the benefits of play and PlayCare from grass-roots level to local government departments. This should encourage play workers to remain within a sector which is more highly regarded, and highly valued.
- The PlayCare facilities will result in established, quality childcare provision being made available to local communities across the province. In a culture where women may have depended on extended family or less than satisfactory or reliable childcare, this will remove one of barriers they face when accessing education, training and employment opportunities. Women will be able to undertake training and qualifications, re-enter employment, extend working hours etc, safe in the knowledge that their primary school-aged children are being cared for in a safe and stimulating environment.

3.3 Objectives of PlayCare Sustainable Support Project

The PlayCare Sustainable Support Project was set up with the objectives to:

- Provide training, advice and appropriate resources;
- Address areas of quality, seeking to improve the play experience for children whilst offering peace of mind to women while accessing training, employment and education;
- Provide business planning guidance, enabling projects to further develop competencies associated with compiling and delivering strategies enabling them to become self-sustaining;
- Develop and consolidate existing Play Club networks with a view to enabling Playworkers and Management Committees to access appropriate information, training and resources;
- To ensure the delivery of a quality accessible service to users;
- Raise the profile of Playwork, Playworkers and the Play service delivery within all sectors, e.g. voluntary, community and statutory;
- Develop Fund raising awareness and strategies;
- Arrange and/or deliver non-accredited training.

The original targets set for the PlayCare Sustainable Support Project are set out on the next page. This final evaluation seeks to demonstrate progress against the target outputs, and also to explain why some of these are no longer relevant.

This is a necessary part of the evaluation, as these are the original targets agreed for the project. However, the evaluation also seeks to identify the many qualitative outputs of the project, and to provide evidence of the value of the project to the sector, and to communities. It also seeks to make recommendations on the way forward.

TARGET	YEAR ONE	YEAR TWO	YEAR THREE
No of groups being supported	22	22	12
No of reviews and action plans prepared and agreed with groups	22	22	12
No of management training courses run	6	6	4
No of groups represented at each session	4	4	4
No of quality accreditation schemes			
Total No at Level 1	10	10	6
Total No at Level 2	12	32	40
No of cross-community PlayCare network meetings organised	3	3	3
No of groups attending	12	12	8
Amount of anti-sectarianism training organised and delivered	6	6	3
No of groups attending	12	12	3
Evidence of heightening of the profile of the sector	Shown in evaluation		
Geographical spread of work under each key area	4 areas	4 areas	4 areas
New groups availing of services	3	6	3
Range of statutory and non-statutory bodies worked with	Evidence for evaluation		
Effectiveness of work (feedback sheets)	80% satisfaction		
Religious composition of groups	10% improvement on current imbalance		
Gender of participants			
Urban/Rural breakdown	10% improvement on current imbalance		
Participants from TSN areas	Minimum 75%		
No of business plans and strategies prepared by groups	22	22	12
No of groups ready to continue without PlayBoard funding	20	18	12
No of groups in existence at end of each quarter	22 - 20	20 - 18	14 - 12

4.0 PROJECT OUTPUTS

4.1 Scale of the Project

The PlayCare Sustainable Support Project was set up with funding for one full-time project leader and two part-time sustainable support officers. The part-time posts became training development officer posts, as this was a more accurate reflection of the broad remit of the post. From October 2005, these two posts have become full-time.

This staff structure was established to provide support to 56 projects, with the expectation that a maximum of 22 projects per year would require support. The reality has been that with additional funding available for groups, there have been 91 groups for most of the project and the impact of the project has been much greater and much more widespread. All 91 groups have been supported at different levels, depending on their needs.

4.2 Gathering Information and Monitoring

This role has been carried out by PlayBoard, and has provided an overall picture of activity levels throughout the groups. The staff have carried out bi-annual reviews and mid-term evaluations with the groups.

These reviews have provided information to PlayCare on how groups have met the conditions of their Letters of Offer, peace distinctiveness, and how they have performed against targets. This information has been useful to the PlayCare team in identifying where resources are most needed to support groups.

4.3 Training and Development

The PlayCare team has been very active in providing training and networking activities. These have been provided with the aim of improving standards, ensuring quality provision and assisting clubs towards sustainability.

PlayCare has linked with existing management committee training through NICVA, and has promoted this to the clubs. This has avoided duplication of effort, and provided another link to an umbrella organisation for groups.

PlayCare also linked with Business in the Community to provide a business plan template for groups. Again this has capitalised on the contribution of expertise from outside organisations, which allows for more appropriate use of PlayCare resources, and brings added value to the project.

PlayCare staff, in conjunction with PlayBoard have provided support in many other ways:

- Telephone support for individual queries
- Staff management and development advice and information
- Development of tailored resources to meet project needs
- Development and implementation of a quality accreditation scheme
- Cross community networking
- Anti-bias and anti-sectarianism training
- Promotion of equality of opportunity within the PlayCare sector
- Information sharing through newsletters etc.

This support has been in addition to the other resources and help provided through PlayBoard's other projects. The training programmes run include:

- Introducing Playwork
- Games not Names
- Programme Planning
- Summer Scheme Training
- Play Development
- Tailored Training
- Addressing Disability in Playwork
- Team Building
- Training on the PlayCare packs

It is an acknowledgement of the PlayCare expertise within the sector that training has been provided to other sectoral agencies such as Social Services, Mencap, Early Years Team, and to PlayBoard staff.

4.4 Quality Assurance

PlayBoard has developed a Quality Assurance Pack "Pathways to Excellence". It provides a robust quality assurance scheme which monitors the performance of the groups. It has also helped to set guidelines for good practice, and has provided considerable support to groups throughout the Province.

The PlayCare team supported the training team in the development of resources and delivery materials for the Quality Assurance accreditation team. The PlayCare team helped with the development of an assessment framework. The quality assurance was delivered regionally, with afterschool projects receiving bursaries towards the cost of PlayBoard's QA scheme from the four area childcare partnerships.

The number of projects enrolled per Board area was as follows¹:

	Original Allocation	Projects Enrolled	Projects Completed
Eastern Board	37	27	27
Northern Board	16	8	7
Southern Board	20	11	8
Western Board	22	15	13
	—	—	—
	95	61	55

As part of the quality assurance scheme, there were regional roadshows delivered. These were to raise awareness of the scheme and its purpose, and to provide information and advice to groups.

The quality assurance scheme and all of the related mentoring and assessment have helped ensure the quality of PlayCare provision. The additional support provided and facilitation by PlayCare officers, such as the cluster meetings, roadshows, and their training events, also contribute to ensuring high quality standards are implemented and maintained.

The groups have given very positive feedback on the value of the quality assurance, and the value of the Pathways to Excellence pack. Many of the groups expressed the view that they expected it to be cumbersome, but actually found it very beneficial, and also reassuring to know that they had good practice policies and procedures in place.

4.5 Cluster Groups

PlayCare support staff responded to the needs of groups to meet and share experiences with other groups, and to extend their cross-community links by establishing cluster groups. This informal network provides a support infrastructure, particularly for groups which are geographically disparate.

All projects in receipt of funding were encouraged to take part in cluster groups. PlayCare established the clusters as a platform for discussion and a method of support, as well as an opportunity for playworkers to engage with suitable cross-community partner groups. These clusters are encouraged to run their own events and meetings.

4.6 Heightening the Profile of the Sector

The project has had an important role in heightening the profile of the PlayCare and PlayWork sector. Working with PlayBoard, PlayCare are represented on many other committees, steering groups, at meetings across all 4 Board areas. These include:

- Area Sustainability Task groups
- District Childcare Partnerships meetings
- Strategic Funding panel meetings
- Area Development Officers Network
- Early Years Area Team Meetings
- NIPPA Development Officer Area Meetings
- Area Policy Advisory Group
- Common standards working group
- RCN Board of Directors
- VDA Governance Practice Group
- SEUPB Implementers Forum
- NIAP Executive Committee
- Inclusive Play Exchange

In addition, PlayCare staff were part of the following:

- Pathways to Change Consultation
- Common standards seminar
- Childcare in Practice conference
- Anti-bias curriculum workshop
- Management Training
- U Can Play 2 Training

PlayCare has been heavily involved in consultation work, representing the sector. This includes:

- Review of Children First
- Young Peoples Fund
- Big Lottery priorities
- R World 2
- Consultation with staff, parents and children (commissioned by the Western Board)
- UK strategy for Playwork Education, Training and qualifications.
- Review of minimum standards
- Represented Northern Ireland in the Four Nations Playwork, Education and Training Council
- Co-ordination of Intermediate Playwork Award for Causeway Institute.

In addition, PlayCare has developed a very broad network of organisations with which it works, all of which has helped increase the profile of the sector. They have worked with all of the following organisations:

- NIPPA
- NICVA
- Business in the Community
- Childcare Partnerships
- Social Services Early Years Teams
- Training and Quality Co-ordinators Area Childcare Partnerships
- Community Relations Council
- Future Ways
- Mencap
- TWN

4.7 Peace and Reconciliation

The funding provided to PlayCare out-of-school groups through Measure 1.5 has been targeted at groups located in TSN areas. The

peace distinctiveness criteria are fully integrated into the selection process, and are effective in identifying those projects that make a direct contribution to the peace process.

The conditions set out in the Letter of Offer ensure that the projects meet the horizontal principles and peace distinctiveness criteria. The conditions include:

- All projects are to provide a cross-community programme of activities and promote the understanding and respect of various cultures.
- All projects must subscribe to a lead agency (eg PlayBoard; NIPPA).
- Projects must register to undertake an appropriate accredited Quality Assurance Scheme. PlayBoard launched its own Quality Assurance Scheme in October 2002.
- Projects must encourage children's participation and empowerment. Projects achieve this by various means such as setting up children's committees; involving a child in the management committee; involving children in decision making about the activities of a project.
- Projects must demonstrate clarity regarding provision of genuine PlayCare for women, accessing training, educational or employment opportunities.
- Projects must implement a viable fee structure aiming towards future sustainability.
- Projects must submit a detailed Annual Plan which includes curriculum, finance and training
- Projects must encourage and register their staff to undertake NVQ PlayWork qualifications
- Projects must demonstrate proactive targeting of disabled and ethnic minority children within their local community.

Groups are obliged through their funding conditions to embark on cross community activities. This is sometimes restricted by their location, where they cannot easily access a cross-community partner. However, this has been encouraged by PlayCare, and activities have been very varied. Examples of activities organised by groups are:

- Involvement with PSNI, where they are invited in to talk with the children.

- Involving children in courses, this deals with single identity and active citizen ship.
- Many projects are encouraging the children in environmental projects, such as community gardens. One project in Belfast has just completed their project “Creating Common Ground”; this is both a play area and an environmental garden. The project wish to use this garden as means of reaching out to other projects to extend their cross community and cross-cultural work.
- One project in Belfast produced videos, books, jigsaws, cd-rom and other resources to explore differences, i.e., disability, religion, culture.
- A project in an urban area has made links with children in Zimbabwe. The children have become pen pals and have exchanged photographs of each other.
- Arts and crafts is one of the most popular mediums used with the children in exploring issues in their area and the effect of the conflict, for example three projects from East and West Belfast joined together for a 12 week programme looking at the effects of the conflict in their area through art, drama and storytelling.
- Some rural projects have extended their remit by providing activities on a cross community basis for local children on a Saturday, these are mostly sporting activities.
- Children in high conflict areas or in extreme rural areas use the Internet to email children from different religions and cultures. This has been extended to emailing children in other countries such as France.
- Two rural projects in the Northern board joined together for a 10 week cross community health programme, this led to further cross community activity.
- During the summer projects establish links with local Councils and their summer activities, which expands on their cross community programmes.
- Projects that were single identity in high conflict areas have over the last few years through extensive advertising succeeded in encouraging participation from other sections of the community. For example a project based in a loyalist area of Larne has raised their participation to 60/40 split.
- Cross-cultural work is taking place with Chinese, Indian, Portuguese and traveller communities.

4.8 Impact on Women

Women have been the main carers for children, which has resulted in significant negative impacts on their economic potential. PlayCare has been instrumental in providing women with an opportunity to return to work, education or training.

There are many women now wishing to return to work, and this is particularly prevalent in the 25-44 year age group. There are many women returning after breaks for childcare, and they see opportunities for employment.

Feedback from these women, using PlayCare facilities, demonstrates the economic and community development impact of PlayCare²:

- 20% of parents increased their hours of work
- 40% of parents increased their labour market potential
- 47% of parents felt their effectiveness increased
- 20% of parents experienced greater job satisfaction
- 13% of parents felt they took fewer unplanned absences.

Feedback from parents has also reflected that the need for and value of the projects is consistent. Women rely on the services provided, and the quality and consistency provided by the after school clubs.

- *Only for the after schools club, I could not have returned to work*
- *If it wasn't for the (after schools) club, I'd have to go back to part-time working*
- *I know my kids are both safe and happy in the after schools, and that makes all the difference to me*
- *Other childcare is just not affordable when you only earn a small wage, but it allows me to work*
- *Because they also provide childcare over the holidays and days off, it works out very well*
- *There is absolutely nothing else round here. If it closed, I'd have to give up work*
- *The children can come here together, and they're with their friends, so they're happy*
- *There are very few places 11 year olds are happy to go to, so this is a Godsend for me*
- *It's safe and I don't have to worry about them*
- *The facilities here are super, so the kids are never bored*
- *I couldn't even start to provide my children with all the things they get to do here – it's really great for them and for me*

4.9 Wider Impact

The thrust of Measure 1.5 has been to support women to re-enter the world of education and/or work. The provision of quality childcare for school aged children has made a huge contribution to this. However, many of the groups have branched out and are making a very direct contribution to their communities and to giving direct help to women returners. Examples of these are:

² Taken from Year 2 Evaluation.

- Staff and management are taking on board training in community relations, social inclusion, anti-sectarian and conflict resolution.
- Parents are encouraged to be involved in the management of the projects, to take part in fundraising activities and open evenings. One project runs “Community Big Breakfast” to attract more parents. These activities are to facilitate the parents coming together in cross community setting therefore extending on the children’s programme.
- Organisation’s organise and run various courses to encourage the women in their community; these courses can be educational or recreational such as computers, “Victims of Conflict” programme, Enneagram courses.
- A number of the projects have the capacity to provide counselling and outreach assistance within their community; this is also available to persons outside their community.
- Project in East Belfast opened a community café for all sections of the community.
- One project in West Belfast runs a cross community programme called “SAM”, school aged mothers.

4.10 Strategic Role of PlayCare

The main issue facing the out of school hours groups is the uncertainty over funding. PlayCare has played a very important role in having the importance of quality play care provision recognised, and in lobbying for continued funding for the sector. The government pledged that over £200million of National Lottery money would be used for new and improved children’s play facilities. However, this allocation did not come to Northern Ireland, and the sector struggles for funding.

One of the most notable successes of PlayBoard with a contribution from the PlayCare team in providing a more secure future, was their very successful lobbying campaign in conjunction with other agencies. Under the revised funding framework for the extension to Peace II funding, the women’s measure (Measure 1.5) was removed, and Measure 1.3 was deemed to be inclusive of women’s training requirements. Measure 2.5 was also removed, thereby reducing the support for the children’s sector.

PlayBoard and TWN travelled to Brussels to discuss this. They also sat on a working group to highlight the key issues affecting the sector by this decision. In addition, PlayBoard launched a postcard campaign for the continuation of funding for groups.

The lobbying was successful in re-instating a women’s measure (which included a childcare aspect), and PlayBoard were a key part of the leadership in this campaign. This has been strategically very important for the whole women’s and childcare sectors. However, the children’s sector has been less successful than the women’s sector,

and PlayBoard are keen to promote provision for school age childcare.

5.0 Value of PlayCare Project – Postal Questionnaire

5.1 Evaluation Reports

Over the last three years, the evaluation reports have taken a slightly different focus. They have each attempted to capture different aspects of the value of the programme, and the outcomes achieved. The first year evaluation looked at profiling the services being offered by a sample of the groups. The second year evaluation reported the views of parents on the value of the projects to them and their children.

The final evaluation has included carrying out a postal questionnaire with the PlayCare groups³. A copy of the questionnaire is appended, and this section concentrates on reporting the feedback from the survey.

5.2 Level of Provision

The questionnaire sought to identify the level of provision across the groups. The questionnaires showed that 75% of groups offer full day care when local schools are closed, and 92% offer a full-day summer scheme.

The uptake of registered places is high. Many groups are fully subscribed, and 85% of the maximum number of registered places are filled. 62% of the groups are cross-community providers. Only one group reported that it does not collect children or have an arrangement for children to be transported to the after schools. All others either arrange bus transport or collect the children, by several means – bus, walking, minibus, car.

5.3 Extended Schools

In their feedback to the questionnaire, groups have expressed concern about their viability in the face of the extended school offering. 65% of groups have expressed concern about the short-term effects, though many may not have been not fully aware of the purpose of the extended schools policy. The concerns expressed were primarily about their own sustainability, with groups stating that if schools provide funded “wrap-around” care they will not be able to compete. The PlayCare project has been working with groups to let them understand the need to charge realistic rates to cover costs and secure their future. If schools undercut them, because of funding and lower running costs, then they foresee that their future may be jeopardised. At present, only 16% of groups believe they are sustainable.

³ 91 were sent out and 37 returned (41%)

PlayCare in conjunction with PlayBoard carried out substantial research and has provided groups with an outline budget which demonstrates the cost per child per session. The figures were calculated in 2005, and will have increased with the rise in minimum wage.

5.4 Cross Community Participation

The PlayCare groups have had, as a condition of their letter of offer, the need to operate on a cross-community basis, and have cross-community links. The groups believe this has been very beneficial, and believe the children will lose out if this is not maintained. Groups are concerned about the effect that single extended school provision will have on the cross-community links that have been developed. They are concerned that single identity schools will provide single identity after schools clubs.

5.5 School Closures

The level of provision is also an area of concern. 92% of groups currently offer a full-day summer scheme, and 75% offer full day care when schools are closed. The groups are concerned that schools will attract their clients, and then fail to provide the all-round service that they currently provide, which will be to the detriment of both the children and the working mothers.

5.6 PlayCare Groups' Plans

Despite the concerns about sustainability and competition from schools, most of the groups had plans for growth and development. These included earlier opening, longer hours, new building, breakfast club, and adding more activities, such as sport and music. Only one group had no plans for continuation after the period of funding.

5.7 Feedback on PlayCare Support

All of the groups found PlayCare help and support valuable. They found the help "invaluable", "useful and relevant" and "appropriate". Most groups depended on the support of PlayCare to ensure quality provision and to help with policies and procedures. It is important to note that groups do not recognise a division between the support of PlayCare and PlayBoard. Groups commented:

- *"(we) could not have sustained the service without support from PlayBoard"*
- *"we would not be in existence if PlayBoard hadn't funded us. We also availed of invaluable training provided by PlayBoard staff."*

- *“PlayBoard have been an invaluable help over the last number of years”.*

When asked for examples of the ways in which PlayCare has supported groups, it is clear that the groups do not differentiate between PlayCare and PlayBoard. The most common responses were:

- Monitoring visits
- Information packs
- Information and advice
- Advice and guidance
- Training
- Funding information and advice
- Ideas
- Lobbying
- Quality Assurance
- Staff development and staff training
- Monitoring
- Financial controls and monitoring
- Good practice advice and guidance
- Sustainability

5.8 Staff Qualifications and Training

PlayCare has endeavoured to improve the quality of care through promoting qualifications and training for staff. Interestingly, the responses received indicate that no groups are operating with unqualified staff. All groups have at least one person with a minimum NVQ Level 3 qualification. The majority have several qualified staff with relevant degrees, diplomas, HNCs and BTEC qualifications, as well as Level 2 and Level 3 NVQs.

In addition, staff are highly trained in other areas. All of the groups were able to provide a list of other training which has been undertaken by their staff. This includes first aid, child protection, special education needs, behaviour management, fire safety, health and safety, risk assessments, play development, disability awareness, food hygiene, cultural awareness, media initiative, drug awareness, building self-esteem, and several other more specialist areas of

training. In addition to these, many of the groups had participated in PlayBoard's Games not Names training, Out 2 Play, Fit for Play, Food for Play, etc.

The level of qualifications and training is very high for the sector. This reflects the value placed on training and staff development by PlayCare throughout the project. It also reflects the availability and support provided in this area.

6.0 Conclusions

The PlayCare projects have been in existence for more than 10 years. This project has funded and enabled the employment of dedicated PlayCare staff to support the out of school groups and their individual projects.

The scale of the overall project has been much greater than originally anticipated. It was expected that support would be provided to a maximum of 56 groups, and that this would be staged. However, the project has supported 91 groups throughout the life of the support funding.

The project has had a major impact on the quality of out-of-school PlayCare facilities, and on the way in which they are run and managed. It has provided management capability training to enhance the capacity of the management committees. It has also provided staff development through training and advice. It has provided quality assurance, and lots of ideas and resources for the sector. As well as providing a monitoring role, the project has enabled groups to develop and to broaden their networks, enhance their networking skills, and develop cross-community links.

The conditions contained in the letters of offer to groups have been identified in Section 4.7 of this report. However, the support provided to groups has been invaluable in making these a real and integral part of after school group activities, rather than a condition to be met.

The PlayCare Sustainable Support project has had a real impact on the ground at community level. The feedback from groups confirms this:

- *“It was my lucky day when I discovered PlayBoard. They are an extremely professional organisation who support and develop quality play experiences for children.”* (Cool Kids, Lisburn)
- *“PlayBoard have been an invaluable help over the last number of years.”* (Draperstown ASC)
- *“Support from groups such as Playboard has helped us deliver a quality service with confidence.”* (SVDP, Mountainview)
- *“At our PlayCare centre, the children mix and make friends regardless of religion, colour or ability. We are concerned that the introduction of groups within the individual schools will prevent these friendships and cross-community relations being established.”* (Carryduff PlayCare)

It is clear from the comments being made that the sector holds PlayCare in high regard. They groups have valued the support and professional approach of PlayCare, and the resources provided to them. They have found the support vital and very appropriate, and

have found the quality assurance and quality standards very appropriate and helpful. Staff are better trained, and the uptake of training reflects the desire of the sector to provide a quality service of the highest standard.

There are clear fears and concerns about the implementation of extended schools. Groups have concern for their own viability if schools receive government funding for provision of after school care. However, they also fear that a lot of good practice in networking, practices and procedures, and quality play will be lost. This, coupled with the difficulty of charging self-sustaining fees in areas of high deprivation, makes the work environment very difficult and very uncertain.

“Uncertainty over long-term life of after school club makes work difficult. Increasing parental fees is decreasing daily attendance. What do we do? Very frustrating.” (KidsView)

“The whole sector needs permanent decent funding if the needs of families and employers are to be met.” (Erne East)

“Fee increases that need to be passed on to parents are unrealistic in inner city areas, with high levels of deprivation and associated difficulties”. (Short Strand)

The PlayCare Support Project has had a huge impact on the quality and standards being achieved through the PlayCare after school groups. This has improved the play experience for children, while offering peace of mind to women.

Groups have received training, advice, guidance, and a broad range of resources. They have also received management training and capability training, as well as guidance and a template to help them prepare a business plan.

The profile of the Playwork sector has been heightened, through lobbying, and through representation on various groups, steering committees and at meetings across the voluntary, community and statutory sector.

Substantial training has been provided and signposted to the groups. The uptake is evident in that all groups operate with appropriately qualified staff, and have undertaken substantial non-accredited training in other areas.

Considerable work has been carried out in identifying appropriate fund raising awareness and strategies with groups.

In conclusion, the PlayCare Sustainable Support project has made a real difference to the PlayCare after schools groups across Northern Ireland. 91 groups have received support over the last 3 years, even though the budget was set on the basis of 56 groups getting support. The groups have found the support invaluable and it has certainly strengthened the sector in terms of resources, the play experience for

the children, and professionalism, including good practice and high standards. The groups willingly credit a lot of this to PlayCare support which has been invaluable to them in helping them set up and maintain a quality service, based on quality standards.

Financial stability is a key area of concern. Groups are aware of the commercial rate and the cost of their provision, but many groups in TSN areas cannot afford to charge the “going rate” as it is too high for local communities. In addition, an external factor which will impact greatly on the sustainability of groups is the provision of wrap-around care by schools, which is being promoted by government.

7.0 Recommendations

7.1 Core funding for the sector

It is evident from the evaluation that a lot of expertise has been built up and that after school clubs are providing quality playcare for primary school aged children. However, it is also clear that the majority of groups have not reached self-sustainability. Without core funding groups will have to close, and the huge investment which has been made in the sector will be lost. There is a need for core funding to allow the after school groups to continue. It must be realised that the groups have all been established in disadvantaged areas, and it is not possible for them to charge self-sustaining rates. This would mean that many of the women that the project was set up to help would no longer be able to afford to use the service.

Article 20, published by the Early Years Team has identified a gap in provision, and the need for both capital and revenue investment in strengthening the provision of school age childcare.

7.2 Core funding for regional infrastructure

The value of the regional infrastructure has been clear from all the consultation and evaluations throughout the project period. Having a regional infrastructure has allowed groups to benefit from standards, quality accreditation, networking, advice, guidance and general good practice. It has been a valuable support to the whole sector, and there is a clear rationale to continue this. However, it will require core funding to be provided. The networking and regional support has been highly commended by groups, and has meant that good practice has been shared, and quality standards have been introduced and met. Without the continuation of this, many of the after schools projects would again operate in isolation without support and guidance.

There is a need for further support for the sector. It experiences high staff turnover due to job insecurity, thereby diminishing the capacity and expertise retained within the sector. There is a need to consolidate the previous investment through funding and training for the small businesses, and the need for key support at both a strategic governmental level and through sectoral support.

Clearly PlayBoard are ideally placed to provide sectoral support because of the experience they have gained and the expertise and credibility developed in this specific area. PlayBoard have spent 21 years developing the unique expertise required to deliver the childcare and play needs of children.

7.3 Value of play recognised

The government has recognised the need for play in the Children's Order. There is a need to provide a structure to facilitate this, and to ensure that children have access to affordable quality play care after school hours. This is currently provided by after schools clubs, supported by PlayCare, and there is a real need to support its continuation.

7.4 Quality Assurance

PlayBoard has developed this framework and assessment process. They have unique expertise in their field. The QA operates in line with the Children's Order and social services framework and with the Playwork Assumptions and Values. The external regional panel includes representation from social services early years team and this is unique to the sector.. It has also provided support to groups by way of advice, guidance and resources to help them implement quality systems, practices and procedures. This has been a very valuable tool which projects have reported very positively on.

It has been implemented through the Childcare Partnerships providing bursaries too groups, and PlayCare carrying out the accreditation process. There has been benefit to the whole sector in this collaborative support. There is a need for this quality support to be continued for the benefit of children in ensuring that projects have adequate support to implement quality procedures and maintain them.

7.5 Workforce Development

It is clear from the survey carried out in 2006 that the level of qualifications, training and workforce development in the sector is very high. The range of training and qualifications of project leaders and assistants bears testament to their commitment to the sector. Not only have the staff completed qualifications, they have also participated greatly in the training provided by PlayBoard, and have valued it very much. Without continued professional development and the regional infrastructure that has been developed, the projects will not continue to develop at the rate they have. This has provided a strong support structure which has benefited the projects right across Northern Ireland. However, the sector has also identified that job security is low and that qualified staff move to other sectors, with their expertise lost to the childcare sector.

There is a real need for PlayBoard to gain funding to continue the support role they have played in the sector. They have provided an infrastructure and support to groups, forming networks and providing practical support which will not be provided without ongoing funding.

In June this year, (and led by SkillsActive) the first UK Strategy for Playwork Education and Training was launched at the All Party

Parliamentary Group on Children's Play in the House of Commons. 'Quality Training, Quality Play' is a ten year vision with a five year strategy for the development of playwork education, training and skills across the four Nations. Northern Ireland's implementation plan focuses on the need to:

- Address the increasing demand for quality playwork
- Professionalise and up-skill the workforce
- Gain recognition of the value of playworkers in the children's workforce
- Increase the supply of skilled playworkers
- Support the development of playwork
- Promote collaboration across agencies and allied sectors
- Attract resources to provide long term support

This means that the continuation of support to the sector would fit well with the overlapping policy and implementation plan. PlayBoard is well experienced and well placed to provide this much needed support role to the sector, but core funding is needed to ensure this role is maintained.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE SENT TO ALL GROUPS

8. How useful has it been to have the support of PlayBoard / PlayCare over the last 3 years?
9. In what ways have they supported you and your group?
10. Will your group be sustainable without grant aid?
11. What links do you have with other organisations?
12. What qualifications do your staff have?
13. What additional training have your staff attended, either through Playboard, or through another source?
14. Any other comments

*Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire,
we really appreciate your feedback!*