



School Age Childcare Matters!

**A scoping study on
school age childcare
in Northern Ireland**

**Interim Report
June 2009**



“Investing in disadvantaged young children is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Early interventions targeted toward disadvantaged children have much higher returns than later interventions such as reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies, or expenditure on police. At current levels of resources, society over invests in remedial skill investments at later ages and under invests in the early years.”

James Heckman Science 2006

Parents and communities play a crucial role in outcomes for children. That role needs to be valued by parents and communities themselves, but also supported by the community planning process. The vision also highlights the importance of high quality, flexible and engaging services delivered by a valued and appropriately qualified workforce in delivering the ambitions of this framework.

The Early Years Framework

The Scottish Government, Edinburgh 2008

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Joe McVey
Blueprint Development Consultancy Ltd.
June 2009

Section 1: Introduction

- 1.1 In April 2009 Blueprint Development Consultancy was commissioned by PlayBoard to undertake a scoping study focusing on School Age Childcare (SAC) in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the study was *“To critically review the contribution of School Age Childcare services and to examine the case for continued support in the medium to long term”*. The impetus for the study was to inform the Executive’s consideration of the issue of childcare and the need for an integrated strategy in Northern Ireland highlighting the contribution of SAC providers.

The approach agreed in undertaking the study entailed a review of the policy and strategic context, an analysis of the data relating to those projects supported by PlayBoard, the development of case studies and consultation with stakeholders, providers and parents. It was intended that the work would allow consideration of the question of sustainability and the development of recommendations. It was agreed that an initial draft report would be developed by mid June with an extensive report published in September 2009

The summary report set out below reflects the key findings to date base upon the interim report.

Section 2: Background

- 2.1 As the lead Agency for children and young people’s play in Northern Ireland, PlayBoard has long championed the need for sustainable childcare provision supported by strategic framework and adequate resources. The 1999 Childcare Strategy¹ established the principle that out of school childcare was identified as a priority in Northern Ireland ***“The aim is to have an out of school project available in every community”***, building a network of providers offering quality, affordable out of school child care. Funding to support this provision was accessed through a range of sources, including the Big Lottery (formerly NOF), Peace monies under Peace I and II and supplemented by investment from the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL)

¹ Children First 1999 The N.I Childcare Strategy

With the demise of Peace 11 funding the Executive Children’s Fund offered the potential for continued investment and through this source PlayBoard acting as an Intermediary Funding Body (IFB) secured funding for 57 groups² for the period 1 July 2006 until 30 June 2008, totalling £1, 631361.50. This was awarded against an agreed set of criterion and was seen as a necessary subvention to allow projects to function and offer a quality service with attention given to the quality of provision and workforce development .The funding was awarded as small grants and were set at a rate equating to approximately 10 – 30 percent of annual turnover per annum.

- 2.4 However, faced with the end of funding in June 2008, PlayBoard on behalf of the projects and wider sector has lobbied both to secure funding and make the case for a strategic approach to supporting childcare, recognising the benefits and the need for sustained investment. Efforts to date have resulted in two funding extensions: March 31st and August 31st, 2009. Whilst welcoming this further investment it must be clearly stated that the current levels of subvention only benefit one fifth of School Age Childcare services and to date no strategic framework has been identified.

² The original number was 57 now reduced to 52 due to closures

Section 3: Key Findings

3.1 The Strategic and Policy Context

From a European to local context there are a range of policy frameworks and drivers that highlight the importance of childcare and specifically school age childcare.

The EU policy perspective is based on the principle that parental labour market participation can be critical in helping families and children break out of a cycle of worklessness and poverty. A key driver of childcare demand in Europe has been the substantial growth in female employment over recent years. Another factor is the EU's political commitment to reversing the decline in fertility and birth rates, which are currently below that needed for population replacement.

The European perspective highlights a range of models from the heavily state supported Scandinavian models to a free market. More recent research focussing upon the European experience³ emphasises; the issues of sustainability, access and quality.

At a UK level, the 2004⁴ strategy provides the support framework setting out the Government's ten year vision for childcare supports the objectives of: choice, availability, quality, and affordability. Such an approach is further developed by the Scottish Executives Governance Early Years Framework with ten elements to achieve a "transformational change". This supports the 0-8 age group while recognising the necessity of support at all stages of a child's development.

With respect to Northern Ireland, the 2006⁵ strategy provides the backdrop against which Departmental plans and policies can be considered. Across most Departments and most notably with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the interest of the Departments and commitment is clear, with co-ordination provided by the Ministerial Sub-Group on Children and by interdepartmental working groups focussing upon specific issues including child poverty.

³ OECD Report Babies and Bosses – Reconciling Work and Family Life: Volume 4 – Canada, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom, 2005.

⁴ Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare (U.K. Government

⁵ Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge – a ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006 to 2016

However, in comparison to other European states and G.B., Northern Ireland presently lacks the strategic leadership and integrated strategic approach necessary to deliver adequate childcare provision.

3.2 The PlayBoard SAC Projects

PlayBoard currently acts as an IFB to 52 projects offering out of school childcare provision. Based on an initial review of the available data provided by 50 projects, the following picture emerges;

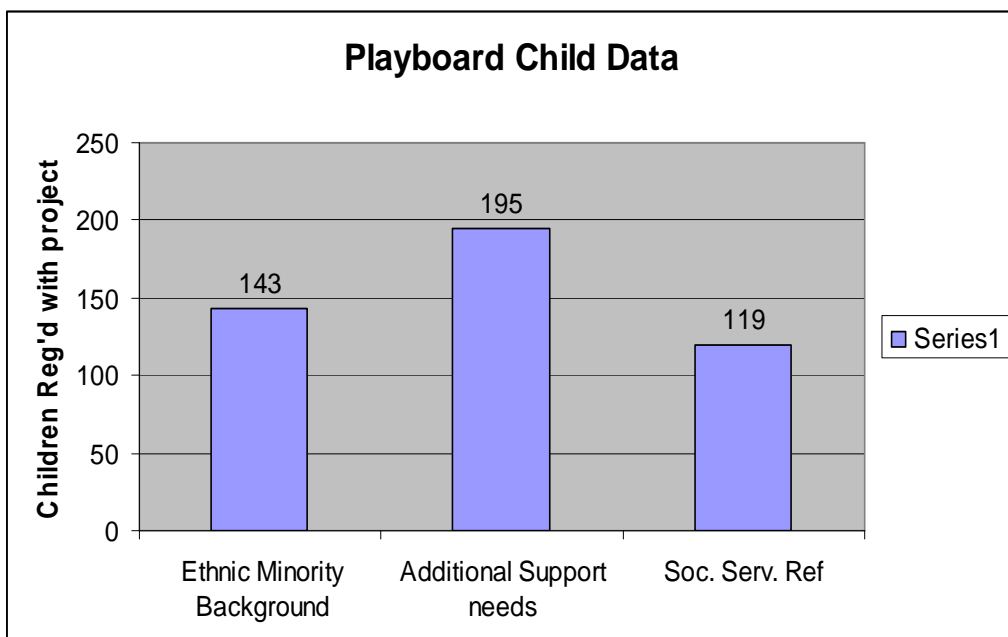
Table 1 Project Summary

29 Urban Locations	23 Rural Locations
17 projects are located in Neighbourhood Renewal areas	22 within the top 20% deprived wards
1,334 registered places equating to 2,338 children attending	

Socio economic Profile

The bar chart below demonstrates the socio demographic needs of these 2,338 children: 6% are from an ethnic minority background; 8.3% have additional support needs; and 5% of the children registered with the 50 projects have a social service reference. In project terms: 26 of the 50 projects have children registered from an ethnic minority background; 36 of the 50 projects have children registered with additional support needs; 29 projects have children registered with a Social Services Reference.

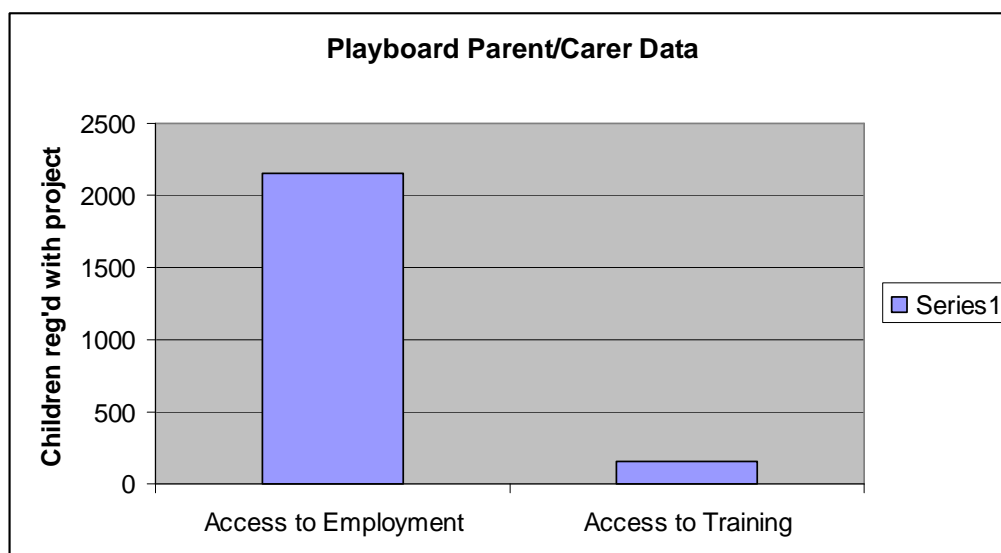
Diagram 1: Data related to the children registered with Playboard Projects.



Parental Information

In regard to the parents/carers of the children, **2,149 were able to access employment as a result of the after school childcare provided by the 50 PlayBoard projects**, and **154** were able to access training as a result of the projects.

Diagram 2: Data related to parents/carers of the children registered with the Playboard projects



3.3 Case Studies

The purpose in developing case studies was to offer an in-depth look at the benefits and challenges facing providers and project promoters.

Eight case studies were selected at random to provide a cross section of rural/urban, large/small, mixed community and BME backgrounds

Projects	Location
Bluegrass	Rosemount, Londonderry
Camowen Partnership Smart Kids	Carrickmore, Co Tyrone
Chinese Welfare Association (CWA)	Lisburn Road, Belfast
Ionad Uibh Eachach	Iveagh, West Belfast
Just 4 Kids (After schools)	Rathenraw, Antrim
Oasis Family Centre	East Belfast
Teemore After Schools Club	Derrylin, Enniskillen
Zero -8-Teen	Brownlow, Lurgan

Each project has developed out of a recognised community need, originating in a larger community/voluntary organisation. A number of the projects are serving some of the areas of highest multiple deprivation in Northern Ireland, e.g., Ionad Uibh Eachach, Zero -8-Teen, Oasis and Bluegrass are located in areas identified within the top 10 of most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. Others located in rural areas; Teemore and Camowen face added issues of rural deprivation and isolation. While focused on providing a service to children and parents the projects would be perceived as part of the fabric of the community. Most are part of a large parent body organisation. Those with separate Management Committees are still closely linked with the parent body.

Case Study Project Overview

Project Name	Reg. Cert.	Children Reg'd With Project	Eth. Min. B'Ground	Additional Support Needs	Social Servs. Refs	Parents in Employment	Parents in Training	No. of Staff
Bluegrass	40	40	03	02	03	46	0	1FT/3PT
Camowen x 3 projects	24	210	09	01	03	62	06	12
Chinese Welfare	16	23	22	03	0	31	0	2PT
Ionad Uibh Eachach	38	71	05	02	02	100	30	1FT/7PT
Just Kids	24	30	0	13	08	24	07	7PT
Oasis	56	48	03	04	04	46	01	1FT/5PT
Teemore	24/16	47	0	0	0	87	0	3PT
Zero 8 Teen	50	72	10	16	01	66	04	11F/7PT

Outcomes

What are the outcomes of the projects? The themes emerging are as follows:

Benefits to Children:

With respect to children, the service offers a quality supportive environment within which children are provided with an opportunity to play, explore and learn safely. The emphasis on play and structured learning, supporting children with homework is perceived as providing an ideal environment to foster the child's development.

The children are seen to benefit through the development of social skills, self esteem and self confidence. This is partly achieved due to the emphasis on inclusivity, welcoming those from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds and supporting children with special and additional needs.

Benefits to Parents:

The benefits to parents are perceived to be related to childcare providing a mechanism of support for parents to return to or continue in paid employment, and to access education and training opportunities. While perhaps not planned, access to childcare in this context also provides a degree of respite to parents and the wider extended family allowing time for other children and members of the family to receive support as necessary.

Benefits to the Community:

As indicated above, most of the projects are rooted within their respective communities and make a contribution greater than the provision of a service. The school age childcare provides is part of a package of support offered to communities, linking into childcare, education, community development and community animation. Teemore and Zero-8-Teen have played a role as a catalyst for taking a strategic approach to children and childcare issues in their respective areas.

Funding

The level of investment varies between projects and may be considered relatively limited given the staffing numbers and number of beneficiaries. However, what is significant is the importance of funding, particularly core funding, which most of the projects require for salaries. Funding awarded to the sample projects is used toward salaries with a small portion of it going toward overheads. The importance of this allows a degree of stability,

planning and the opportunity to focus on workforce development, training and quality standards.

The charges levied are reflective of the communities within which the projects are based. The view was expressed by all those sampled that increasing fees would be counter productive as parents could not afford to pay and would simply withdraw, potentially having to give up work or training opportunities as a result.

In the absence of the subvention currently provided by Government and administered by PlayBoard, those interviewed emphasised unanimously that this would have a severely negative impact leading to closure or a greatly reduced service. The real effects of this were clearly highlighted in terms of the children, further disadvantaging parents and the local community infrastructure.

3.5 Consultation

Individual interviews were undertaken with project providers and parents Government, Departmental key stakeholders and funders. Based on the above, it is possible to highlight a number of issues:

- There is a widespread level of knowledge around the issue and recognition of the importance and benefits of school age childcare.
- Statutory knowledge and involvement was evident as was the delineation of responsibility. Departments could easily point out their level of engagement and responsibility.
- In contrast and perhaps not surprising, those working directly in the sector took a more holistic view of the issue i.e., the development needs of a child between 4 and 14 years cannot be separated or fit neatly into Departmental priorities.
- There was clear support for an integrated, resourced strategy and implementation plan. Allied to this was the need for clear and authoritative leadership. Where the responsibility for this should lie was unclear with a number of contenders being discussed; however leadership allied to resources was a key feature of the discussion.

- The current funding climate and economic condition militate against gaining support from funders and additional charges. Given this, the nature of the projects' subvention is necessary provided it can be related to a model of a social enterprise, which focuses upon sustainability recognising the principles of affordable, flexible, accessible quality childcare.

3.6 Sustainability

The question of sustainability has been a recurring theme both in the research and the consultation. Through discussion, it is evident that there is wide disparity in terms of definition and interpretation.

A simple definition of sustainability would suggest that in monetary terms a project should be able to survive from money earned, in this case through fees charged. Within this simple definition and based on the information provided, the projects are not sustainable in that they have sought and received subvention from PlayBoard and would argue that the funding is essential to survive. In the absence of funding the service would be curtailed or cease.

The reasons for this are clear; the level of fees, the location and community being served would not allow a free market model to work. Providers would also point to the absence of other providers in the locality. The present situation sees projects being supported through a mixed economy model comprising fees, registered places funded through Social Services, and fund raising. This patchwork of funding, while precarious, allows an affordable service to be offered. The current arrangements also encourage a quality driven approach allowing training and staff development.

Subsidy to Investment

Rather than view the support offered as a subsidy or a throw back to a grant mentality it might be useful to consider the intervention as an investment, which brings significant dividends socially and economically.

Some of the pioneering work done in this area by James Heckman suggests that the language needs to be altered and the economic benefits recognised.

Prof. Heckman has demonstrated how an investment of £1 in early childhood services can yield a return of up to £17 over time, helping our population to become better learners, more creative, more adaptable in their

attitude to life, more likely to live a healthy lifestyle and to be more law abiding⁶.

Section 4: Conclusions

4.1 While much work still has to be undertaken, it is possible to offer some outline conclusions at this point of the scoping exercise.

4.2 The Need for the Service

The growth of the SAC infrastructure reflects a need within communities and changes in society, which require childcare facilities to be available. Facilitated by access to external funding provided by Government through NOF, Peace 1 and II, and the Executive Children's Fund, there is now a network of providers in place. With strong links within communities, the providers offer affordable quality and accessible SAC in areas of multiple deprivation and isolation.

4.3. Benefits

Research and evaluations undertaken and informed by the case studies and information provided by projects above clearly highlight the benefits to children, parents and the wider community.

4.4 Policy Context

The policy hierarchy from Europe, the United Kingdom and regional policy set within the Assembly clearly supports the need for investment in children and young people. However at a local level, while the Executive Strategy on Children and Young People through to individual Departmental Strategies offer support, there is no integrated strategy on childcare nor is there any clear commitment to funding an integrated Northern Ireland response.

4.5 Sustainability

Rather than considering the support as a subvention, it should be considered an investment bringing considerable benefits to the social, economic and community infrastructure.

⁶ Early Years - the organisation for young children Information Briefing – Issue No 5 January 2008
| [6http://www.early-years.org/policy/policy_papers/info_briefing_jan_08_02.pdf](http://www.early-years.org/policy/policy_papers/info_briefing_jan_08_02.pdf)

- 4.6 The arguments supporting the need for and benefits of SAC appear to be well rehearsed. The work on the ground has been evaluated, monitored and tested. The benefits and contribution are clear. Unfortunately the threat of closure hanging over a number of projects in August 2009 is in contrast to the policy and academic arguments supporting the needs and rights of children and young people, further highlighting the need for a strategic approach to the wider issue of childcare. The issue of the development of the “whole child” doesn’t recognise policy drivers or Departmental priorities. What is lacking is an integrated and coherent response supported by long term funding.

Section 5: Recommendations

- 5.1 Based upon the initial work undertaken to date, it is possible to offer some draft recommendations to PlayBoard and its sectoral partners.

Recommendation 1

That the current projects under threat are offered transition funding for 2 years up to April 2011

Recommendation 2

During this transition period the Executive develop a robust and integrated childcare strategy for Northern Ireland, strongly championed by a Departmental lead underpinned by adequate resources. Part of this work will entail analysis of the wider economic and societal benefits from investment in appropriate childcare services for the 0-14 age group

Recommendation 3: Co-Production

That the strategy and implementation is drawn up with the proactive engagement of sectoral partners, children and young people

Recommendation 4: Extended Schools (E.S.)

That the lead Department for Extended Schools (D.E) should consider the outworking of the E.S. Programme to ensure there is a strategic and operational fit with childcare provision

Recommendation 5: Tax Credit Systems

That the current Tax Credit system is reviewed to ensure that the system can be utilised to fully support SAC.

Recommendation 6: Local Partnership and Delivery

Mindful of the introduction of community planning, recognition must be given to local partnerships in the development of any strategy and in the implementation thereof; recognising local needs and the success of local partnership models such as the Childcare partnerships and Investing for Health partnerships and the new rural partnerships.