

PLAYBOARD NI

ANNUAL REPORT

2025



**CELEBRATING
40 YEARS OF
PLAY**

1985 - 2025



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LETTER FROM THE CEO



ALAN HERRON

Chief Executive Officer

In the year that PlayBoard celebrates its 40th anniversary, I am delighted to share our 2024/25 Annual Report with you. Since establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been to the forefront in championing play across Northern Ireland, and this year has been no different. Despite the many political and economic challenges, we have remained focused on what matters most - supporting children and young people to access their right to play, while ensuring our services, advocacy and influence remain strong.

Marking 40 years is both a celebration and a moment for reflection. It reminds us of how far we have come in advancing the play agenda, and it challenges us to look forward with renewed ambition and vigour.

The need for play has never been greater, and with growing recognition of its importance for children's well-being, learning, and development, PlayBoard is in a unique position to lead change over the next chapter.

Together with you - our members, funders and partners - we are building a playful, inclusive future where play is recognised and valued in every community.

Thank you for being part of this journey and for the vital role you play in helping us to keep children and young people at the centre of everything we do.



**Celebrating 40 years
of championing play.**

Play is not a luxury - it is a fundamental right that underpins children's learning, well-being, and future potential.

HIGHLIGHTS

The year 2024/25 has been challenging for the community and voluntary sector, though signs of stability are emerging. Uncertainty around external funding, particularly at core and strategic levels, has continued. Despite this, PlayBoard has successfully navigated these challenges, securing vital support from the Department of Education.

Political stability at the Northern Ireland Assembly has enabled more constructive engagement with government departments, though progress on key policy objectives remains slow due to ongoing public finance constraints.

Operationally, PlayBoard has had a strong year securing two major funding awards for critical play programmes. Building on the success of the *Spaces to Be* programme, PlayBoard received support for a further phase of the *OUR Generation* initiative through SEUPB's PEACEPLUS programme. This will expand play-based approaches to improving health and well-being through a play-based approach whilst further promoting community cohesion on a regional level. Additionally, funding was secured from the National Lottery Community Fund to support *Playful Minds*, a new initiative aimed at developing children's skills and confidence through play across the Belfast City Council area.



Alongside these new programmes, PlayBoard has continued to deliver a broad range of services aligned with the core themes contained in its Strategic Plan.



Members
1,810

Countries
19



Followers
7,311

Reach
385,700



Followers
5,881

Impressions
175,400



E-Play Newsletters
16 Newsletters



Celebrating 40 Years of Championing the Child's Right to Play

This year marks a remarkable milestone for PlayBoard NI as we celebrate 40 years of unwavering commitment to the child's right to play. Since establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has been at the forefront of play advocacy, transforming how play is understood, valued, and delivered across Northern Ireland and beyond.

Since its foundation in 1985, PlayBoard has worked tirelessly to place play at the heart of children's lives. From its early beginnings as a small advocacy group, the organisation has grown into a respected, sector-leading voice - influencing government policy, supporting play providers, empowering practitioners, and inspiring change across education, health, and community development.

At its core, PlayBoard believes that play is not a luxury, but a right - essential to children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive well-being. Over the past four decades, the organisation has led the way in making this vision a reality through pioneering programmes, innovative resources, and evidence-based advocacy. Whether transforming public spaces into play-rich environments, supporting school-age childcare settings, or shaping play policy at a national level, PlayBoard's impact continues to be felt across every corner of Northern Ireland.

This 40-year milestone is not just a moment to reflect on past achievements, but a call to action for the future. Today's children face increasing pressures - from digital overload to reduced access to safe outdoor spaces - making play more vital than ever. PlayBoard remains steadfast in its mission to ensure that play is prioritised in every community, supported through policy, and protected as a fundamental right.

As the organisation looks to the future, it will continue to advocate for a statutory Play Strategy for Northern Ireland, drive innovation through research and partnerships, and strengthen its work across borders through collaborative initiatives.



40 YEARS OF PLAY



PLAYBOARD NI – 40 YEARS OF PLAY



- 1985**  PlayBoard established
- 1990**  Play without Frontiers promotes peacebuilding through Play
- 1995 - 2006**  €20m+ investment secured to support development of SAC Sector through PEACE funding
- 2006**  Positive Playgrounds launched (going on to impact on 450+ primary schools)
- 2009 - 2011**  Secures NI's first ever Play & Leisure Strategy and Implementation Plan
- 2012**  Playwork recognised as key qualification in SAC settings within Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare
- 2015**  Secures inclusion of the Right to Play within the Children's Services Co-operation Act
- 2016 - 2025**  PlayBoard led Play Strategies result in £20 million+ investment in play through local Councils
- 2020**  SEUPB funded Our Generation Programme established to promote mental health and wellbeing through play
- 2022**  Supports development of UK Inclusive Play Guidance 'Including Disabled Children in Play'
- 2023 - 2025**  Supports development of Early Learning and Childcare Strategy securing expansion of NI Childcare Subsidy Scheme to SAC
- 2025**  PlayBoard celebrates 40 years championing child's right to play

PROJECTS & SERVICES



PlayBoard's Playful Minds project aims to support children across Belfast to build social connections through engagement in fun and engaging play activities. By creating stimulating play opportunities, the initiative supports children as they form relationships and learn social norms in a way that's age-appropriate and paced to their individual needs. These experiences play a vital role in nurturing their mental health and emotional well-being as they grow and develop.



Get ready for a fun-filled journey into the world of emotions with Playful Minds - building emotional intelligence through play!

- Children join fun sessions to discover what makes them special, explore their emotions, and become Play Champions like Archie bear.
- Practitioners learn playwork principles and how to support emotional resilience through play.
- Parents gain insight into what their child has explored and practical tips to nurture emotional growth at home through play.

OUR Generation ~ Spaces to Be empowers children and young people by promoting mental health and well-being. Building on the success of the earlier PEACE IV project, PlayBoard is one of nine partner organisations delivering cross-community programmes that foster resilience and connection. Through PlayBoard's *Spaces to Be* programme, play is used to heal past trauma, build relationships and create safe, supportive environments in which young people thrive.

Through play, *Spaces to Be* empowers children to:

- Increase mental health literacy
- Enhance emotional resilience
- Develop self-help and coping skills
- Encourage inclusivity and acceptance of difference
- Increase knowledge of community.



PLAY-BASED SCHOOL-AGE CHILDCARE

As work continues on the development of the NI Executive's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, PlayBoard continues to administer the Bright Start programme on behalf of the Strategic Planning and Performance Group, Department of Health.

In addition to providing targeted support to 44 Bright Start projects, PlayBoard delivers advice, support and training to the wider School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector across Northern Ireland.

PlayBoard represents the interests of the sector at a strategic level through membership of relevant forums, and ongoing engagement with regional Health and Social Care Trusts and NI Executive Departmental officials.

During the period, PlayBoard delivered:

- 11 cluster sessions on themed topics responsive to the ongoing needs of the SAC sector.
- An extensive programme of business support and business advisory clinics.
- One-to-one support clinics to SAC providers.
- Continuous professional development training for the sector.



- Re-established the School-Age Childcare Forum which now has 22 active members. Engaged directly with the Minister for Education, the Children's Commissioner, and the Equality Commissioner, raising awareness of play-based childcare and highlighting sectoral challenges. Liaised with Government Departments on the Early Learning and Childcare strategy, ensuring the sector's voice is heard at policy level.
- Conducted a comprehensive State of the Sector review to identify the main challenges facing providers and held two conferences to raise awareness, share findings, and highlight Government commitments required for future sustainability.
- Collaborated with NI Regional Colleges and National Occupations Standards to advance the development and delivery of Playwork qualifications, strengthening workforce skills and professional recognition.



Championing Play in Schools: A Whole School-Community Approach

PlayBoard is leading the way in transforming how schools across Northern Ireland approach play. Through a combination of expert training and focused development programmes including Taking Outdoor Play Seriously (TOPS) and Positive Playgrounds, PlayBoard empowers schools to create effective play strategies that support children's growth, development, and learning.

By working closely with the entire school community, PlayBoard enhances understanding of the value of play and guides the design of outdoor environments that maximise play opportunities. This commitment to taking outdoor play seriously and fostering positive playgrounds ensures that children experience meaningful, high-quality play every day, laying the foundation for improved learning outcomes and happier, healthier school lives.

Delivered:

- Eight programmes delivered within primary schools.
- Eight play audits completed within primary schools.
- Internal review of TOPS programme completed.



“The training was delivered to a very high standard and some valuable suggestions were made – I plan to take them on board. It also made me see how much fun we could have with the children during play.”

“The training was very informative and filled with lots of fun too.”

“I've learnt that we should be using play to help the children who struggle socially as well as their behaviour in school.”



PLAY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

PlayBoard's work within the Republic of Ireland continues to evolve, marked by expanding geographical reach, deepening partnerships, and increasing strategic connection. Through targeted collaborations with local authorities, academic institutions, and a range of organisations, PlayBoard is working to embed play as a vital component of community well-being, education, and policy development. During the period PlayBoard was active on a number of levels:

- Donegal Sports Partnership: Delivered Play Leaders training in four locations, with strong local engagement and sustained demand for further play development within the area.
- Kerry County Council: Undertook play value assessments influencing a three-year capital investment plan aimed at enhancing access to quality play opportunities.
- Undertook research on children's experience of play in Ireland with the National Childhood Network.
- Supported the establishment of the International Play Association, Ireland branch.
- Focused engagement with University College Cork on the enhancement of play in schools and the relevance and impact of PlayBoard's TOPS and Positive Playgrounds programmes.

Strategic Outlook

As we continue to grow our presence across Ireland, our focus remains on:

- Sustainable partnerships that foster long-term impact.
- Scalable programmes that can be adapted across regions and sectors.

Our work is not only expanding in reach but also deepening in significance, positioning PlayBoard as a key contributor to Ireland's evolving landscape of play, learning, and community development.



RESEARCH, ADVOCACY, POLICY & ENGAGEMENT



* Government

Worked with senior officials to strengthen commitment to quality and inclusive play opportunities.

* Policy

Contributed to the development of the Department of Education's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. Responded to Government consultations relevant to play and play delivery.

* PlayBoard continues to advocate for improved conditions for play and strives to put play firmly on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers at regional and local government level. Our research aims to inform, shape and influence practice and policy for children and families in Northern Ireland.

Events

Hosted Stormont events highlighting research and the state of play-based childcare.

Engagement

Delivered webinars, seminars and cluster sessions promoting the value of play across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

* Advocacy

Engaged political parties through briefings, meetings, and information sessions.

* Representation

Active on 30+ networks, forums, and partnerships locally and internationally.



STATE OF THE SECTOR

PlayBoard NI's State of the Sector report provides a vital snapshot of the current landscape of play-based school-age childcare across Northern Ireland. By capturing the voices of practitioners, educators, and stakeholders, the report highlights both the strengths and challenges facing provision today.

The findings reinforce the urgent need for strategic investment, policy alignment, and cross-sector collaboration to ensure that play is recognised, resourced, and embedded as a fundamental part of children's development and well-being.

As the leading organisation for play advocacy, PlayBoard will use these insights to inform future programmes, influence policy, and strengthen partnerships - ensuring that play remains a priority in education, community development, and public health.



FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

* FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

A review of the financial results for the year indicates an overall deficit of £9,463. However, this figure includes a depreciation charge of £26,802, of which £24,404 has been allocated against the designated fund related to the purchase and improvement of the organisation's building. When adjusted for this, PlayBoard reports an end-of-year trading surplus of £17,339. This positive outcome, achieved despite ongoing external challenges, reflects careful financial management and the organisation's commitment to long-term sustainability. Moving forward, PlayBoard remains focused on strengthening its financial position to support the continued delivery of its aims and strategic objectives.

Income	£573,982
Expenditure	£583,445
Deficit	(£9,463)
Depreciation charge	£26,802
End of Year Trading	£17,339 Surplus

* STRATEGIC FINANCIAL OVERVIEW

To deliver on its strategic aims, the Executive Committee recognises the need to maintain both the capacity and competency required to meet existing funding obligations, while also cultivating new partnerships and initiatives. In this regard, strategic investment in organisational development remains a priority. By building on a strong operational foundation, the Executive Committee is focused on ensuring PlayBoard can respond proactively to opportunities and challenges in an increasingly complex operating environment.

As part of its commitment to good governance and improved outcomes, the Executive Committee will present a responsible and manageable budget. This financial plan will prioritise alignment with strategic goals, enhanced impact delivery, and improved sustainability. Through careful stewardship and forward-looking planning, PlayBoard aims to strengthen its position and ensure it continues to deliver effectively for children and young people across Northern Ireland.

* PLAYBOARD RESERVES

PlayBoard's reserves policy plays a critical role in demonstrating sound financial stewardship to existing and potential funders, donors, and wider stakeholders. A well-articulated policy not only builds trust in the organisation's financial management but also provides a clear rationale for the level of reserves held. It serves as an indicator of the charity's financial resilience and preparedness to meet future funding needs.

Level of Reserves **£502,488**

The Executive Committee have agreed a level of reserves needed to cover six months expenditure.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

FUTURE PLAN

Over the coming period, PlayBoard will continue to lead on:

- The design, development and delivery of quality play training programmes aimed at both the playwork sector and wider sectors that have an interest in, or an influence on play.
- The undertaking of research aimed at highlighting the impact of play on individuals and communities.
- Proactively engaging with government Departments and Councils in order to influence and enhance policy and practice.
- Advocate and lobby for children and young people's right to play.
- Provide support, advice and guidance to all who have an interest in play.
- Deliver focused area-based community development projects centred on enhancing play experience within communities.
- Review of the existing, and establishment of a new PlayBoard strategic plan.



KEY CHALLENGES

- Successful delivery of the operational plan, ensuring that PlayBoard continues to meet its strategic aims and objectives.
- The securing of additional funding to ensure that PlayBoard has the capacity to deliver on its strategic plan.
- Successful completion of all contractual service level agreements in the delivery of face-to-face services.
- Continued focus on supporting the play sector regarding the impact of the Children and Young People's Strategy and the upcoming Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.
- Enhancing the policy arena for play, including the development of a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland and the securing of a Play Sufficiency Duty.

BOARD & STAFF

AT 31 MARCH 2025

PlayBoard Board of Directors

Stuart Buchanan	Chairperson
Roger Winter	Vice-Chairperson
Sinead Kelly	Treasurer
Fey Cole	
Kiarna Corr	
Eileen Russell	
Judith Winters	

Israel Hontavilla	(Stood down 8 May 2024)
Joy Hadden	(Stood down 4 June 2024)
Neil Galway	(Stood down 14 November 2024)
Pam Lowry	(Stood down 14 November 2024)

PlayBoard staff

Alan Herron	Chief Executive Officer
Jimmy Gillen	Director of Corporate Services & Finance
Angela Stallard	Service Delivery & Development Manager
Maria McBride	Senior Marketing & Communications Officer
Mairead McLaughlin	Finance Officer (retired 31 March 2025)
Katherine Lindsay Dunlop	Regional Childcare Co-ordinator
Frances Walsh	Development Officer
Maura Moore	Business Development Officer
Roberta Johnson	Service Delivery & Development Coordinator
Rebecca Beattie	Play Participation Officer
Danielle Crosbie	Play Participation Officer
Jess Eadie	Play Participation Officer
Susan Williams	Play Participation Officer
Hayley Ford	Administrator
Laura Perry	Team Leader
Chloe Allison	Play Participation Officer
Bernadette McPoland	Play Participation Officer



PLAYBOARD NI
CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF PLAY

