PlayBoard NI

Annual Report

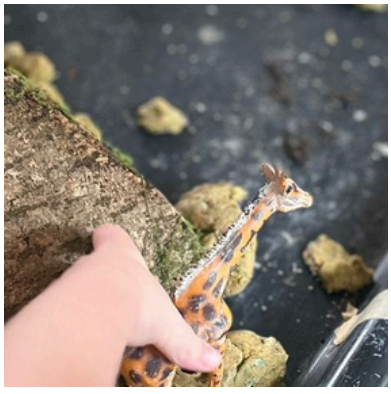
2026

Making Space for Play

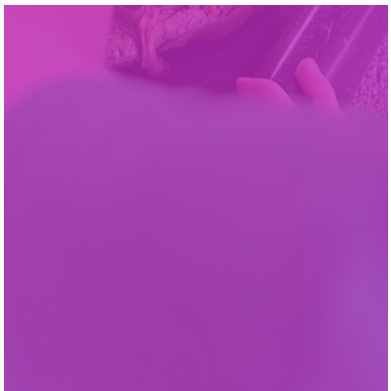


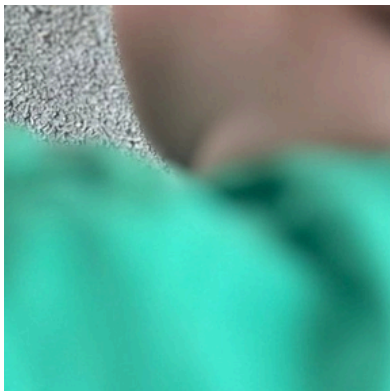












Letter from CEO & Chair





Since its establishment in 1985, PlayBoard has consistently shown leadership in championing the critical importance of play.

The past year has seen continued delivery, consolidation and strategic progression. While the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly enabled engagement with government, the financial and policy environments have remained challenging, with pressures on public expenditure impacting across the community and voluntary sector.

PlayBoard has maintained its focus on advancing the child's right to play. Programme delivery has been sustained and expanded, supporting children's mental health, well-being and inclusion through play-based approaches. Programmes such as *Playful Minds* and *Spaces to Be* continue to provide impactful, evidence-informed interventions.

PlayBoard has strengthened its influence in policy and strategic discussions. Through engagement with government, elected representatives and sectoral partners, PlayBoard has contributed to developments in early learning and childcare, school-age childcare and wider children's services.

Intensive work has been undertaken to secure delivery of a major Special Educational Needs (SEN) Inclusive Play Programme, aligned to the Department of Education's SEN reform agenda. This represents an opportunity to embed inclusive play within the school estate whilst demonstrating play's role in supporting whole-school approaches to inclusion.

The year ahead will see new programme delivery, engagement in key policy areas and the finalisation of a new Strategic Plan.

PlayBoard remains committed to ensuring that all children and young people have access to high-quality play opportunities, and that play is recognised as a fundamental right and a vital component of healthy childhoods.

We thank our staff team for their continued professionalism and commitment, and our members, partners and funders for their ongoing support and engagement.

Alan Herron
Chief Executive Officer

Stuart Buchanan
Chairperson

Highlights

Year in review

Members

1,924

Years' experience

41

Facebook followers

9,331

Facebook views

711,937

Children supported

1,352

through PlayBoard's *Playful Minds & Spaces to Be* programmes

Practitioners engaged

451

through PlayBoard's *Playful Minds & Spaces to Be* programmes



United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - Article 31

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, **to engage in play and recreational activities** appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Projects & Services

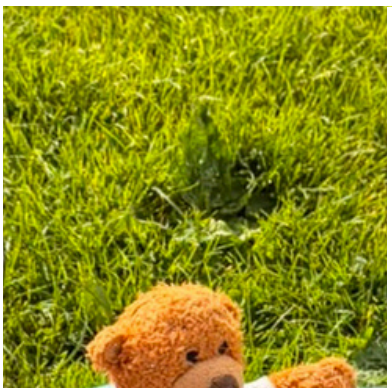
Playful Minds

PlayBoard's *Playful Minds* programme supports children's mental health and emotional well-being through the power of play.

Supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, the programme is delivered in primary schools, school-age childcare settings and community groups across the Belfast City Council area. The programme includes play sessions for children aged four to nine, stay-and-play sessions for their parents/carers and practitioner training.

The *Archie's Adventures in Emotions* resource forms the foundation of the programme, helping children to build emotional intelligence in an age-appropriate and enjoyable way.

23 programmes facilitated
498 children supported
211 practitioners trained
352 parents engaged



Playful Minds







> We wish the Play Champions could come back every day!

COMMUNITY FUND

> *This is one of the best programmes we've ever had come into our school.*

> The expertise and resources made for a wonderful environment for the children.



Spaces to Be - OUR Generation

Delivered as part of the OUR Generation project, the *Spaces to Be programme* advocates for the use of play to support the development of childhood resilience and as a means of positively addressing differences.

The programme includes play-based sessions for children aged nine to eleven, as well as interactive training for practitioners.

The programme is delivered across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, and enhances Shared Education, fosters cross-community relationships and promotes peacebuilding.

A project supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

OUR generation
Growing Up Better, Together

PEACEPLUS
Northern Ireland - Ireland
Co-funded by the
European Union | UK Government
Rialtas na hÉireann Government of Ireland | Northern Ireland Executive

> "Children are more focused and engaged when returning to class."

23 programmes facilitated
854 children supported
240 practitioners trained





> "Amazing programme, we would like to have it implemented across the school."

4
cross-community celebration events

> "WE HAVEN'T GOT TO PLAY WITH THIS SINCE PI, IT'S SO MUCH FUN."

Play-Based School-Age Childcare

PlayBoard provides administration and governance oversight to 44 Bright Start-funded school-age childcare settings. Through financial monitoring and capacity building, PlayBoard strengthens the sustainability and quality of funded, play-based school-age childcare, whilst providing guidance and training to the wider school-age childcare sector.

Engagement with government, elected representatives and policy forums enabled PlayBoard to represent sector needs and contribute to policy developments. These included the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, expansion of the Childcare Subsidy Scheme to school-age children and the review of the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare for Children under 12.

Through the School-Age Childcare and Playwork Forum, PlayBoard engaged with policy leads and decision-makers, securing recognition of school-age childcare in the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Engagement with Health and Social Care Trusts and Childcare Partnership supported collaboration, good practice and responses to sectoral priorities.

UK-wide, PlayBoard contributed to the review of the Playwork National Occupational Standards and qualifications frameworks, whilst collaborating with local colleges to encourage uptake of Playwork pathways and deliver training to students and staff.

PlayBoard continues to advocate for high-quality, sustainable and accessible school-age childcare that supports children, families and communities.

13
training sessions for school-age childcare sector, including conference

180+
event attendees

27
targeted training sessions for Bright Start-funded settings



"PLAYBOARD IS THE VOICE OF ITS MEMBERS AND THE WIDER SECTOR ON REGIONAL PLATFORMS AND AT MEETINGS WITH EVERY DEPARTMENT IN NI... THEIR RESEARCH AND SUPPORT HAVE BROUGHT THE SCHOOL-AGE SECTOR TO THE FORE.

"Every child has the right to play... if organisations like PlayBoard didn't exist, these essential play opportunities would disappear.

"PlayBoard has reiterated the importance of ensuring that children's experiences... are centred around play... children are more engaged and benefit from a balanced experience.

Play in Schools

PlayBoard's school-focused programmes work with entire school communities to support and enhance understanding of play, whilst developing outdoor play environments to maximise children's play, learning opportunities and experiences.

Delivery of school-based initiatives continued throughout the year, with seven Positive PlayGrounds programmes delivered. Positive PlayGrounds supported improved play environments by providing practical guidance and staff training, enhancing pupils' play experiences alongside increased physical activity, skills development and enjoyment of playtimes.

Eleven schools renewed their TOPS (Taking Outdoor Play Seriously) Award, recognising their continued commitment to placing play at the centre of learning. These schools excel in providing outdoor play opportunities and embedding a positive play ethos throughout the whole school.



7

Positive PlayGrounds programmes delivered





> *Some fabulous ideas – keen to implement the pupil voice more effectively.*

> **It was a perfect opportunity to get the time and space as a whole staff team to discuss how we would put our knowledge into action and implement a new play space in a new building.**



11

TOPS renewals achieved

Councils

PlayBoard provides secretariat support to the All-Council Play Development Officers' Group, facilitating quarterly Northern Ireland Play Development Forum meetings and supporting play park site visits involving councils and the Department of Education.

Key activities during the year included:

- **Ards and North Down Borough Council:** Provided input on an internal review of council-owned play parks and participated in the Family Fayre, engaging with over 100 children.
- **Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council:** Facilitated summer *Play in the Park* sessions across five parks, providing access to a range of playful activities including loose-parts play, arts and crafts, den building and sensory play.
- **Belfast City Council:** Led detailed GIS mapping and assessment of council-managed play parks as part of a wider strategic review of the Council's capital play assets and underlying play needs.
- **Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council:** Conducted a play value assessment of the existing play facilities at Wallace Park, providing detailed advice and recommendations to inform the development and enhancement of the Capital Play Plan as part of the wider redevelopment of Wallace Park.
- **Newry, Mourne and Down District Council:** Facilitated six focus groups with children to capture their views, experiences and aspirations, ensuring their voices informed the planning and development of a new destination play park.

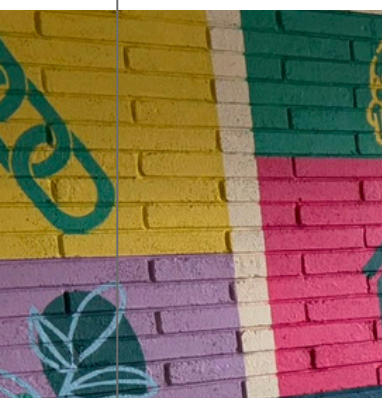


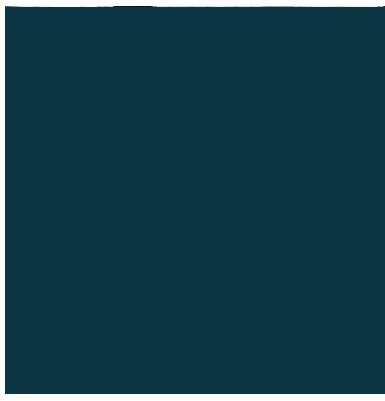
Progressing Play in Ireland

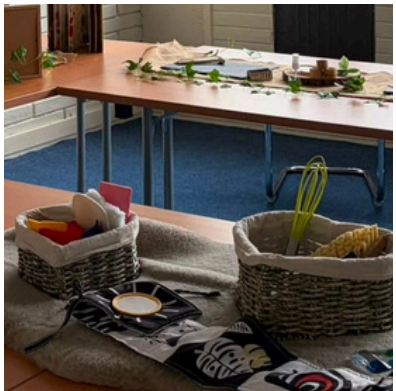
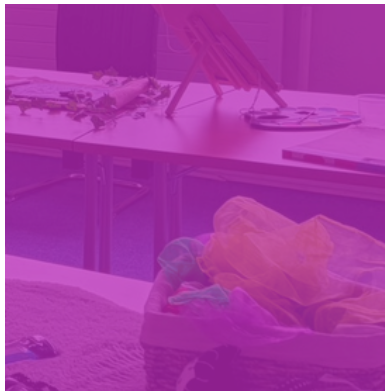
During the year, PlayBoard further strengthened cross-border engagement across the island of Ireland, expanding its reach, developing strategic partnerships and promoting the exchange of expertise, learning and good practice in play.

Key activities included:

- **Kerry County Council:** Providing specialist insight and recommendations to inform the quality and development of local play park provision, building on Play Value Assessments undertaken by PlayBoard in the previous year.
- **Donegal Sports Partnership:** Building on previous years' delivery, facilitated a series of Play Leaders training sessions, building knowledge, skills and capacity to support the delivery of high-quality play opportunities.
- **University College Cork:** Contributed to the *Making Space for Play in Irish Schoolyards* webinar series, sharing PlayBoard's expertise and learning from its school-based programmes to inform wider discussion and practice development.



Policy, Advocacy & Engagement

Throughout the year, PlayBoard continued to champion children's right to play, strengthen the voice of the play sector in Northern Ireland, and influence policy and practice across government and wider society.





Influencing Policy and Representing the Sector

Represented the play sector across 30+ regional, national and international forums and networks, contributed 10+ policy briefings, consultation responses and submissions, and engaged with political representatives and government departments. Key priorities included advocating for a Play Strategy for Northern Ireland, Early Learning and Childcare policy, Minimum Standards and play-based school-age childcare.

Strengthening Engagement and Sector Connections

Delivered consultation workshops, webinars and learning events, including sessions on Early Learning and Childcare, play awareness and infant mental health. Continued to grow membership and strengthen sector engagement through 12 E-Play newsletters, social media and digital communications.

Building Evidence and Supporting Play Practice

Produced research, guidance, frameworks and practical resources to support policymakers, practitioners and families. Publications included *Why Play Matters in Primary Schools*, alongside resources promoting inclusive play, emotional well-being, nature play, loose-parts play and community play opportunities.



Championing Play through Campaigns and Celebrations

Supported the UN's International Day of Play and UK-wide Playday, sharing resources and delivering community play opportunities, including sessions at IKEA Belfast and parks across the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon area.

Celebrated PlayBoard's 40th anniversary through a programme of events, including two major conferences exploring children's play and the future of school-age childcare.





Scan the QR code to watch messages of support marking 40 years of PlayBoard leading the play agenda







Board & Staff

At 31 March 2026

Board of Directors

Stuart Buchanan	Chairperson
Roger Winter	Vice-Chairperson
Sinead Kelly	Treasurer
Rachael Black	
Fey Cole	
Kierna Corr	
Peter McCartney	
Judith Winters	
Eileen Russell	(Stood down 11 March 2026)

Staff

Alan Herron	Chief Executive Officer
Jimmy Gillen	Director of Corporate Services & Finance (retired 30 June 2025)
Lauren Robinson	Director of Corporate Services & Finance
Angela Stallard	Director of Service Delivery & Development
Maria McBride	Senior Marketing & Communications Officer
Joanne Keery	Finance & Administration Officer
Katherine Lindsay Dunlop	Regional Childcare Co-ordinator
Frances Walsh	Project Officer
Meryl Boyd	Development Officer
Roberta Johnson	Service Delivery & Development Co-ordinator
Rebecca Beattie	Play Participation Officer
Danielle Crosbie	Play Participation Officer
Jess Eadie	Play Participation Officer
Susan Williams	Play Participation Officer
Hayley Ford	Administrator (left 16 May 2025)
Anne Tubritt	Administrator
Laura Perry	Team Leader
Chloe Allison	Play Participation Officer
Bernadette McPoland	Play Participation Officer

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