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Valuing Community Playgroups: Lessons for Practice and Policy

Geraldine French

Dublin Institute of Technology, geraldine.french@dit.ie

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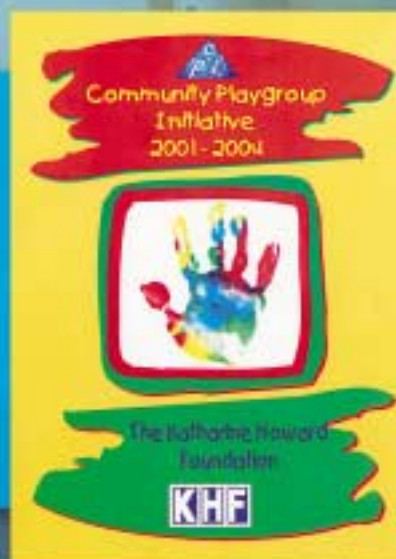


Valuing Community Playgroups: *lessons for practice and policy*

Community Playgroup Initiative
2001-2004

Evaluation Report

Geraldine French



Katharine
Howard
Foundation



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive
South Eastern Area

The Katharine Howard Foundation
ISFC
10 Grattan Crescent
Inchicore
Dublin 8

Tel. 01 453 1861
Fax 01 453 1862
Email info@khf.ie

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Eastern Area

Foreword

The publication of this report, *Valuing Community Playgroups: lessons for practice and policy*, represents a milestone for the many people who have contributed to and participated in the Community Playgroup Initiative. It gives great pleasure to the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) and the Health Service Executive, South East Area (formerly known as the South Eastern Health Board SEHB) to welcome this evaluation report.

The Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was a three year demonstration project established by the KHF in partnership with the SEHB. The overall aim of the project was to provide support and extra funding to five selected community playgroups in the South East in order to enhance the quality of their provision. The initiative was built on a core belief in the value of good community support systems for the child and his/her family. Both the KHF and the SEHB value the role that community playgroups have as a means of family support, providing early childhood care and education at low cost through a community service model.

This initiative was successful due to the commitment and contribution of all those involved. The five playgroups embraced the project and worked extremely hard to enhance their environments and facilities, and to meet the needs of the young children in their care. The success of *cpi* is largely due to the strong co-operative working relationship that developed between the participating playgroups and both the co-ordinator and the evaluator throughout the initiative. The project was very fortunate in the choice of co-ordinator as Mary Daly's commitment, energy and expertise ensured that the initiative delivered on its objectives. Mary was directed and supported by an inter-agency advisory group whose members also gave generously of their time and expertise and contributed greatly to the development of *cpi*. The success of the partnership between the two organisations, the KHF and the SEHB, demonstrates the benefit of partnerships between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors in order to develop new initiatives or to enhance existing provision.

As one of the main objectives of the initiative was to measure the impact on the quality of the service provided through increased targeted funding and support, formative evaluation played a central role within *cpi*. Much gratitude is due to Geraldine French, the evaluator of *cpi* and the author of this report. Geraldine is highly regarded within the world of early years care and education and we were fortunate and privileged to have her undertake this work.

This is an important time in the development of policy regarding the provision of high quality early childhood care and education. There is widespread recognition of the benefits of quality early years interventions that assist young children to reach their potential and nurture their love for lifelong learning. We believe that *cpi* confirms that community playgroups are an important part of early years provision in Ireland and offer a robust and viable option to parents while seeking childcare for their children. We intend to build on this success and continue to advocate for the inclusion of playgroups in the provision of community based services for children.



Noelle Spring
Development Officer
The Katharine Howard Foundation



Peter Kieran
Regional Co-ordinator of Child Care Services
Health Service Executive South Eastern Area

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- Slieverue Community Playgroup, Co.Kilkenny
- St Oliver's Community Playgroup, Clonmel, Co.Tipperary
- Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool, Ferns, Co.Wexford
- The Rower Inistioge Pre-School, The Rower, Co.Kilkenny

Glossary of Terms

Adults: The term 'adult' is used interchangeably with the word 'staff' in acknowledgement that not everyone who works with children is on a staff team.

Area Development Management (ADM): ADM is a private company established by the Government in 1992 to support integrated local economic and social development through managing programmes targeted at countering disadvantage and promoting equality.

Child Care: All personal social services for children up to the age of 18 years.

Childcare: Day care services to children up to the age of six years; and after-school services to children of primary school age.

Child-centred: Policy and practice that starts with the child's needs as the principal consideration.

Culture: An identity that everyone has, based on a number of factors including: memories, ethnic identity, family attributes, child rearing, class, money, religious or other celebrations and division of family roles according to gender or age. Cultures are neither superior nor inferior to each other. They are constantly evolving for individuals and communities.

Curriculum: All activities provided by the service that the child engages in. This includes attitudes and values, and should involve how children learn as well as what they learn.

Consultation: A form of communication that seeks to encourage ideas and opinions from others, for example, from children, parents or community. Consultation might be achieved by talking with individuals or in a meeting.

Community Development approach: A key principle of a community development approach is the participation of all actors in decisions that affect their community.

Community Employment Scheme: a labour market intervention designed to provide temporary rather than ongoing training opportunities for persons 25 years of age or over, unemployed for a minimum of 12 months and in receipt of any of the following payments: Unemployment Assistance,

Unemployment Benefit, Qualified Adults, One Parent Family Payment, Deserted Wives Benefit, Widows/Widowers pension. FÁS provide funding for a full-time supervisor and the participants' payments. A year is the norm for CE participants but this can be extended.

Community Playgroup: A community playgroup is a sessional service that operates for up to three and a half hours a day, for pre-school children aged from three to five years, providing play and socialising opportunities. It is managed by a voluntary management committee, and is usually housed in a community-owned centre and is non-profit making.

Community Playgroups Together: This network of community playgroups represents community playgroups in the Dublin city area.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: This is a term used to describe education that is based on the knowledge of child development (age appropriateness) and the uniqueness of each child (individual appropriateness). It acknowledges the importance of working with children at the developmental stage (as opposed to age) that they are at.

Early Childhood Care and Education: The term early childhood care and education is used to denote the inextricable linkage between the care and the education of young children up to the age of six years (compulsory school age in Ireland).

Early Childhood Service: This term is used as a cover-all to refer to any early childhood service including full day care, sessional services, drop-in centres, childminders, after-school care and infant classes in primary school.

Early Childhood Practitioner: The title used to describe a professionally trained person who works with children in early childhood services.

Equal Opportunities: An approach to people that works to redress any inequalities that exist, related to racial and cultural origins, gender or disabilities.

Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme: The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006 is funded by the Irish government and part financed by the European Union Structural

Funds under the National Development Plan 2000-2006. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has lead responsibility for the EOCP. ADM manages the day-to-day operations of the EOCP on behalf of and in consultation with the department. The Programme's primary aim is to facilitate parents to avail of training, education and employment opportunities through the provision of quality childcare supports. The 3 Sub-Measures of the Programme are: Sub-Measure 1 - Capital Grant Scheme for Childcare Facilities; Sub-Measure 2 - Support for Staffing Costs; and, Sub-Measure 3 - Quality Improvement Programme. The funding available up to 2006 is now €449 million.

Early Start Programme: The Early Start Pre-School Programme is an initiative under the Department of Education and Science. It is a one-year preventive programme for three-year-old children in disadvantaged communities. The programme's rationale is that a high-quality early childhood service can play an important part in offsetting the effects of socio-economic disadvantage and help alleviate its educational effects. This programme has been mainstreamed in 40 schools around the country. Each programme is staffed by a primary school teacher and an assistant childcare worker. There are 15 children in each session. Parental involvement is a feature of the programme. There is a high emphasis on the development of cognitive and language skills.

Family: The word 'family' is used, while recognising the changing patterns in families' lives.

FÁS: Foras Áiseanna Saothair is the national employment authority in Ireland

FETAC: The Further Education and Training Awards Council was established in 2001 and is the national awarding body for all further education in Ireland. FETAC has replaced the processes and procedures of the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA).

Formative Evaluation: Formative evaluation incorporates ongoing activities (observations, focus meetings, questionnaires) conducted throughout a programme. Its results provide information in the form of regular feedback designed to improve the programme.

Full Day Care: As defined by the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 1996 Explanatory Guide. A full day care service means the provision of a structured day care service for children for more

than 3.5 hours per day. Services such as those currently described as day nurseries and crèches are included in this definition.

Gender Role Stereotypes: Fixed and simplified ideas of the usual, appropriate or 'normal' activities, abilities, attributes and preferences of girls and boys, men and women, for example, the view that 'boys are strong, play football and don't cry; girls are delicate, play "mother" and are more emotionally expressive'.

High/Scope Pre-school Programme: In the High/Scope Curriculum developed by David Weikart and colleagues in Ypsilanti (Michigan, USA) for the Perry Pre-school Project in the 1960s, children are seen as active learners who plan, carry out, and reflect on their initiatives. The High/Scope environment is carefully planned and divided into distinctive work areas including a book area, a home area, a construction area, and an art area. The curriculum process includes a plan-do-review sequence within the daily routine in addition to individual, small and large group times; outside time; greetings and farewells and sociable exchanges at mealtimes. Attention is also paid to providing essential key experiences for optimal development; positive adult-child interactions; child observation and family support.

Honorarium Volunteers: Honorarium volunteers were staff in community playgroups who were not registered employees but shared any money that was left over after the various playgroup expenses were paid.

Minority ethnic: Belonging to a cultural, racial or religious group that is numerically smaller than the predominant or majority group.

Naíonraí: Naíonraí provide pre-school education through the medium of Irish and cater for children aged three to six years.

NESC: The National Economic and Social Council was established by the Government in 1973. Its main tasks are to analyse and report to the Government on strategic issues relating to the efficient development of the economy and the achievement of social justice.

NESF: The National Economic and Social Forum was established by the Government in 1993, to contribute to the formation of a wider national consensus on social and economic policy initiatives, particularly in relation to unemployment.

OECD: The Organisation for Economic Co-

operation and Development comprises 30 countries that share a commitment to democratic government and the market economy. With active relationships with some 70 NGOs and civil society, it has a global reach. Although best known for its publications and statistics, its work covers economic and social issues from macro-economics to trade, education, development and science and innovation.

Non-sexist: Resources or attitudes are non-sexist when they present neutral images of the roles and behaviours of men and women. Therefore, a book that shows adults sharing domestic tasks is non-sexist.

Parent: For the purposes of this report, the term Parent is used to refer to the primary caregiver in full acknowledgement that the primary caregiver could be a grandparent, step-parent, foster parent or other relation.

Pre-School Education Advisory Groups: Local Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) are a partnership in Northern Ireland between all pre-school interests, the statutory schools sector and the voluntary and private sectors. They were created through, and implement the delivery of, the Pre-School Expansion Programme (see below). They are chaired and supported administratively by their Education and Library Boards. They review provision annually and allocate places to playgroups.

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme: In Northern Ireland this is the Department of Education's contribution to the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, Children First (1999). The main target of the Programme is the provision of a year of high-quality pre-school education for all. In the 2003-2004 school year there were sufficient places for 95% of children in the immediate pre-school year in nursery schools and classes, playgroups and day nurseries that all followed common curriculum guidelines. Voluntary and private sector providers who participate in the Expansion Programme are allocated funded places by their area PAEG. Each place attracts inflation-proofed per capita funding of stg £1,300 in the school year 2004-2005.

Private Playgroup: A private playgroup is a sessional service for pre-school children that operates for up to three and a half hours a day, providing play and socialising opportunities. It is privately managed, is sometimes based in a person's home and is often the only service in the area.

RAPID: Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development Programme targets 25 urban centres and 20 provincial towns in Ireland that have the greatest concentration of disadvantage for priority funding under the National Development Plan (2000-2006). The Programme also facilitates closer co-ordination and better integration in the delivery of local services.

Reflective practice: Reflective practice involves practitioners thinking about their work with children and planning and implementing the curriculum to best support the children's interests and strengths. Understanding how children learn, observing, listening and reflection with colleagues are key components of reflective practice. It can be supported by action planning.

Regulations: Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996, Part VII, Supervision of Pre-School Services of the Child Care Act 1991.

Section Sixty Five: The Health Service Executive (formerly health boards) is enabled under Section 65 grant aid (Health Act, 1970), and through Section 10 of the Child Care Act, 1991, to provide funding to community and voluntary groups to undertake activities that otherwise it would have to undertake itself.

Sessional Service: As defined by the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996, Explanatory Guide, sessional pre-school services mean the provision of:

- a service offering a programme to pre-school children;
- a service of up to 3.5 hours per session.

Services covered by the above definition may include pre-school facilities, playgroups, crèches, Montessori groups, naíonraí or similar services that generally cater for children aged two to six years. Where younger children are cared for in sessional services the appropriate requirements should apply.

Special Needs: All children need affectionate and safe care. Some babies and children have additional individual needs.

Executive Summary

The Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was established and funded by the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) in partnership with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB*) and with assistance from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). This three-year project was developed to assist community playgroups to deliver a high-quality sessional service and to identify and evaluate the impact of funding and support on the quality of service provided to children and their families. A further aim of *cpi* was to highlight the value of community playgroups. Among the objectives of *cpi* were that children and families would benefit, that staff and committees would have opportunities to put ideas into operation and that new skills acquired would have a lasting impact.

The need for formative evaluation was recognised from the outset. It was hoped that the evaluation process would result in the dissemination of the information gathered and the lessons learned. This report serves to fulfill that objective.

Background to *cpi*

The KHF, through its experience of providing grant aid, recognised the value of community playgroups and their vulnerability in the face of regulatory changes and a lack of sufficient funding and support. Having decided to devise a strategic approach to the development and operation of community playgroups, KHF approached the SEHB with a view to collaborative work. Both the KHF and the SEHB value community playgroups as a means of family support. They recognise that adults often take part in adult education and personal and community development as a consequence of being involved in community playgroups. It was agreed that KHF would take the lead role in the employment of a co-ordinator and the overall management and supervision of *cpi*. An inter-agency expert advisory group was then established to assist in the development of *cpi* and the ongoing work.



Description of *cpi*

The *cpi* formally began in 2001 with the appointment of the co-ordinator. A fund was created from which five selected community playgroups could avail of up to €45,700 over a three-year period, from 2002 to 2004. The role of the co-ordinator was to assist the groups in planning and prioritising improvements in their services. The playgroups selected to participate were:

- Askea Community Playgroup, Carlow (Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area)
- Slieverue Community Playgroup, Co. Kilkenny (Waterford Community Care Area)
- St Oliver's Community Playgroup, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (South Tipperary Community Care Area)
- Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool, Ferns, Co. Wexford (Wexford Community Care Area)
- The Rower Inistioge Pre-School, The Rower, Co. Kilkenny (Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area)

The playgroups were not required to spend their funding in any particular way but on what was needed to enhance the quality of their service, and

* The South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) became the Health Service Executive South Eastern Area, on 1 January 2005. For the purposes of this report the title SEHB is used.

were guided in the prudent use of the funding by the co-ordinator.

Evaluation of cpi

In April 2002 an evaluator was appointed to conduct the formative evaluation of *cpi*. It was intended that the evaluation would inform both the development of high-quality and professional day care practice and measure the impact of support and funding on the five selected playgroups. Quality in *cpi* was seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that incorporated criteria specified by, and relevant to, the individual playgroups.

The methodology of the evaluation incorporated:

- the development of an observation tool and consequent observations of playgroups in practice;
- focus group meetings;
- self-reported questionnaires;
- telephone surveys;
- documentary mapping actions;
- the examination of action plans and reports.

The evaluation was conducted in three phases corresponding to the end of each of the three years of *cpi* (2002, 2003, 2004). It involved:

- children and staff of the five playgroups;
- 25 per cent of parents whose children attended the morning sessions;
- regional co-ordinator of child care services;
- members of the management committees;
- the development officer of KHF;
- the co-ordinator of *cpi*;
- members of the advisory group of *cpi*;
- childcare managers;
- pre-school services officers and a Children First implementation officer of the SEHB;
- trustees of the KHF;
- the monitoring team leader, EOCP.

In this evaluation the findings relating to *cpi* are presented and analysed according to three dimensions:

- **Dimension 1 Playgroups in operation**
- **Dimension 2 *cpi*: model of delivery**
- **Dimension 3 Community playgroups as family support**

Findings of cpi

Dimension 1 Playgroups in operation

Child-centred environment

Regarding the child-centred environment, the evaluation process showed that the key area where *cpi* had influenced the quality of the playgroups was the division of the playgroup rooms into interest areas. This led to greater investment and engagement in play by the children. Equipment and materials were more available and accessible to children through lower shelving systems. The materials were more interesting and varied, and reflected real life. There was increased provision of outdoor experiences. The environments were more welcoming and stimulating.

Activities and routine

There was evidence that children knew what was to happen next and that they learned the routine. The activities were more child-centred and focused on what children were interested in doing. There was much greater choice of activities and an atmosphere of active learning in the playgroups. The playgroups were more enjoyable places to be for adults and children.

Adult-child interaction

There have been positive enhancements to the adult-child interactions. In general, adults were less directive and more supportive of children's initiatives and ideas. They listened more to children and there was much greater emphasis on encouraging children's independence. There was evidence of child-led play where children did not have to wait for an adult or for the other children to engage in activities. Staff were better organised. The following comment from a staff member in the final evaluation best illustrates the learning resulting from *cpi*:

Children have more engagement with real life experiences, for example, one child was looking for the bar code on the cornflakes packet to 'scan' at the 'shop' and then did so with all the packets. When it came to cups, he examined them and then put them through one by one. Children are using their observation skills in the world and implementing them in play."

Management committees

The key learning from work with the management committees was that, although committees have

been enhanced through engagement with *cpi*, the commitment required for voluntary groups to manage services, and the burden of dealing with the legal issues regarding employment and salaries, remain a concern.

Development and training

Development and training of staff, parents and committees have greatly contributed to enhancing quality in the services. Practice improved as a result of staff training, and committees worked more effectively as a result of committee skills training.

Parental perception and participation

Parents were very appreciative of the improvements in the services, and the participation and involvement of parents increased. However, some parents were not clear about what a community playgroup was, and what their role should be within it.

Dimension 2 *cpi*: model of delivery

Role of co-ordinator

Evidence from *cpi* shows that the role of the co-ordinator was primarily one of enabler. This was apparent in the pre-development stage of building relationships with the playgroups, which was critical in the development of the playgroups' confidence and capacity.

Visits

The regular visits to the playgroups and contact with parents gave the co-ordinator accurate and firsthand knowledge of the operation of the services and an opportunity to identify, with staff and committees, any issues that needed to be addressed.

Action plans

Short-term action plans were developed and reviewed and have contributed to the development of reflective practice. The co-ordinator role allowed for recommendations to be made, while recognising that the playgroups and their committees made the decisions.

Cluster group sessions

Cluster group sessions, where the five playgroups met for training and information, had the effect of forging and strengthening connections between individuals, services and communities. The co-ordinator role supported the playgroups' ongoing professional development. It was interactive, formative and developmental in approach and part of a dynamic process.

Quality improvement is basically about relationships. Becoming a 'mentor' or 'critical friend' and advisor to services requires that we build trusting, empowering relationships. Understanding the complex cultural and resource context of a service requires on-site contact" (advisory group member, final evaluation).

Funding

Considering the very robust positive responses that have been received through the evaluation, it is clear that relatively small funding can make a substantial impact. This implies that long-term core funding must be provided to ensure these important community playgroups are sustainable and to enhance the quality of the services. The fact that most of the funds were spent on current items (salaries and rent) and not capital expenditure (equipment and premises) implies that funding should be directed towards salaries. While increased funding can enhance quality, experience gained through *cpi* suggests that building capacity and support, guidance, education and affirmation must also be provided. The playgroups in *cpi* found it "difficult to isolate funding from support"; the "success was (the result of) funding combined with advice on how to spend it"; and "there was security in knowing that wise investments were being made" (playgroups, final evaluation). Furthermore, "these benefits include capital expansions, renovations and staff training but also a long list of other quality improvements that did not have an associated cost but were brought about with the support of the *cpi* co-ordinator and the development of plans for each service" (ADM, final evaluation).

The delivery of *cpi* was built on solid foundations and was sufficiently flexible to deal with unexpected challenges and difficulties. The *cpi* has emphasised the importance of working systemically and of anticipating the complexities of community-based work during the planning phase.

Networking and integration

The *cpi* created a forum to facilitate the inclusion and participation of a wide variety of parties all of whom were concerned with community playgroups. This networking and integration process included engaging with the local city and county childcare committees, with other networks and local structures, writing reports and

disseminating *cpi* literature. The project acted as an advocate for community playgroups.

Policy development

The *cpi* contributed to policy development by responding to public invitations for submissions, presenting information at conferences, highlighting issues of concern for community playgroups, and by hosting a regional conference.

Dimension 3 Community playgroups as family support

Family support measure

The experience of *cpi* showed that community playgroups operate as a family support measure. One of the key findings was that parents had social networking opportunities through their children attending a local community playgroup. Participants in the evaluation said that community playgroups provided accessible, flexible, child-centred childcare that could meet changing needs. They had an open-door policy to all children, irrespective of ability, additional needs, socio-economic status or ethnic background.

Community playgroups provide opportunities for parental participation and training for parenting or committee roles. Parents and children can gain, when learning is shared about the important benefits of having stimulating early experiences through play, and when staff's professional practice with children can be observed.

Community benefit

Communities benefited from *cpi* by having access to high-quality early childhood services. Community effort and spirit were fostered through joint activities with families.

Language supports

The community playgroups were conduits for language support and other appropriate services for families with young children and created opportunities for essential early intervention. They provided information on how to access other supports and agencies.

Affordability

Because they are not run for profit, community playgroups create a particular ethos that is absent from commercially run pre-school provision and make it affordable for families on low incomes. The affordability of a community playgroup was fundamental to some parents' ability to use the service. The community playgroups were often the

only service that offered children opportunities for play, social interactions and valuable pre-school experience in their communities.

"A community playgroup where things 'are going well' offers an accessible, inviting, friendly, non-threatening and aesthetically pleasing environment to families. Parents can hand over their children to playgroup leaders in the knowledge that their children are safe, being well cared for, and are thriving. This matters enormously to all families"

(advisory group member, final evaluation).

Conclusion

The evidence provided by the range of formative evaluation strategies point to many improvements in the quality of provision as a result of *cpi*. It is clear that the immediate aims and objectives of *cpi* have been met. The benefits to the five participating playgroups, the playgroup committees, the communities and, most importantly to the children and their parents have been extensive. One playgroup described the change as:

"a complete transformation of the group, which would never have been achieved without the money and support; a much higher quality service is now offered"

(staff and committees, final evaluation).

This project has highlighted the extent to which community playgroups are unsupported and vulnerable despite being such a positive force particularly in areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage and in rural communities. The onerous responsibilities of voluntary management committees, dealing with premises, and changing staff were all persistent challenges in *cpi*. Aspiring towards a high-quality early childhood care and education service is an ongoing, dynamic process.

The *cpi* has demonstrated that, with developmental support and modest funding, community playgroups can support families and deliver high-quality services that give children positive social interactions and opportunities for active pre-school learning.

BACKGROUND

This is the final evaluation report of a three-year demonstration project called the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*), which was established in 2001 and funded by the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) in partnership with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB*) and with assistance from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). This project provided support to five community playgroups in the south-east of Ireland in the combined form of a co-ordinator and funding. Each participating playgroup was able to avail of funding up a maximum of €45,700 over a three-year period between 2002 and 2004. The purpose of *cpi* was to enhance the quality of service offered to children and their families in the community playgroups. The role of the co-ordinator was to assist the groups in planning and prioritising improvements in their services.

Introduction

This introduction begins by highlighting the importance of early childhood care and education. It then describes what a community playgroup is and sets the policy context for community playgroups within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland.

Why is early childhood care and education important?

During the early years of life the foundations are laid for all later learning. Children begin to move, crawl, walk, run and learn how to co-ordinate their hands with their eyes. They begin to develop language and ideas; form attitudes and values; become social beings and develop their first relationships; begin to learn who they are and how they feel about themselves.

The breadth and scope of the evidence regarding the crucial nature of the first five years was sufficient to inspire a succession of compensatory intervention programmes, notably Headstart and the Perry Project (later High/Scope), in the USA in the 1960s. Initial results suggested that improvements diminished after a few years. However, longer-term studies have shown statistically significant results (Lazar and Darlington, 1982). The experimental groups continue to do consistently better than control groups in relation to completing school, continued education, getting a job, sustaining positive family relationships (Schweinhart *et al.* 1997). Research has also demonstrated substantial savings in social welfare and prison costs, estimated at present in America as \$17 for every dollar invested in early intervention (Schweinhart *et al.* in press).

Some of the most influential evidence comes from American research on brain development. Early environment determines how the neural circuits in the brain are connected. Children who are played with, spoken to, and allowed to explore stimulating surroundings are more likely to develop improved neural connections that aid later learning (Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997).

These are also the years when children are most dependent on the care and education provided by adults. The benefits of good-quality early childhood care and education services for children have been widely documented. Sylva (1993), having reviewed the evidence on the impact of early learning on children's later development, concluded that this impact is found in all social groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was found also that the most important pre-school learning concerns aspiration, task commitment, social skills and feelings of efficacy. Children who have attended high-quality early childhood services are better prepared for school, better able to learn and have fewer emotional difficulties. Following such findings the UK government commissioned a review of literature (*Comprehensive Spending Review*, 1998) which concluded that the early years are the most important for child development and that early development is more vulnerable to environmental influences than had been previously accepted.

Consequently, UK government strategy to tackle social exclusion in the most deprived neighbourhoods recognises the importance of supporting families with very young children. Interventions designed to break the cycle of

* The South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) became the Health Service Executive South Eastern Area, on 1 January 2005. For the purposes of this report the title SEHB is used.

disadvantage are focused on these families through the Sure Start Local Programmes and the development of local family support services operating according to community development principles (Home-Start International, forthcoming).

In Northern Ireland, community playgroups are one element of that support and are recognised for their potential to deliver a high-quality service. As part of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme all children in the year before they attend school have access to a high-quality pre-school place in a variety of services including community playgroups (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2004). Local Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) implement the Programme. Each pre-school place receives inflation-proofed per capita funding. In the school year 2004-2005 this amounted to stg £1,300 per child. Pre-school services must satisfy the Programme's quality requirements and meet standards set by the Education and Training Inspectorate and register with their Area Health and Social Services.

If given equal support and funding, community playgroups in the Republic of Ireland would also have the potential to deliver quality services and to be an essential component of early intervention.

What is a community playgroup?

Community playgroups offer pre-school learning experiences to children aged three to five, which usually are available for three hours a morning and correspond with the primary school term. They differ from private playgroups in that they are managed by a committee that includes volunteers, both parents and community members, and that supports community development and participation. Community playgroups are sometimes operated in sports halls, parish halls and community centres, and are often established in areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage. Their primary function is to offer positive, enriching experiences for young children in their own communities with an emphasis on learning through play. They are not run for profit and fees are generally lower than in private playgroups, which allow young children to use the service regardless of means. In the past, community playgroups typically had a daily rota of parents to support the group. However, this is no longer customary partly due to the increase of mothers in the workforce, and partly to the establishment of

the Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) Community Employment Scheme, which provided extra staff to some playgroups.

Daly (2003) outlined the history of community playgroups and the important place that playgroups occupy in their communities. Ireland's first community playgroup was set up in the Crumlin Social Services Centre, Dublin, in 1970 (Douglas, 1994). Since then playgroups, both private and community, have been established all over Ireland as awareness grew of the crucial importance of the pre-school years for children's development and learning.

In 1969, the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association (now IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation) was formed to support playgroups. Its brief includes private and community day care, private and community-based playgroups, as well as individual members with an interest in early childhood. Most pre-school playgroups, including community playgroups, continue to be members of IPPA, which provides support, advice, information and training for members. Naíonraí (playgroups that are run through Irish) receive support and funding through Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (formerly An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaíochta Teoranta). Networks around the country provide some support to community playgroups, such as the Childcare Network Loch Garman, and five playgroup federations have been established in Dublin through local authorities. Community Playgroups Together (CPT) in Dublin have come together as a lobby group and have published a brochure, position paper and research document in order to highlight their role (CPT, 2003). Financial support is sometimes available to community playgroups from local partnerships, the health boards, and independent foundations including KHF.

The role of playgroups in community life

Community playgroups are particularly important to Irish society since they can contribute to the building of a caring community (Daly, 2003). Having a community playgroup in the village or estate encourages people to help their neighbours as well as themselves (Douglas, 1994). Beyond the family and the school, the community has the potential to contribute to the development of a supportive environment for children. Strong communities can be a special resource for children, supporting and nurturing them and, in some cases, ameliorating difficult family or social circumstances.

They can also offer education, a sense of belonging, social networks and accessible services and supports (Carroll, 2002). Community playgroups can contribute to the development of supportive environments in a significant way. Having a community playgroup that is respected and nurtured by the community in which it is located can benefit all those involved. These benefits accrue to adults as well as children since, as a consequence of being involved in a community playgroup, adults may take part in adult education, personal development, community development and part-time work.

Thus, the community playgroup is an accessible, affordable and universal service that has the potential to develop supportive, caring and learning environments that are essential for the crucial early years of a child's life.

Policy context

Over the last decade and a half, Ireland has seen unprecedented developments in early childhood care and education legislation, policy and programmes relating to education, including those established to support families. *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, states that the family, as the fundamental unit of society, which provides the natural environment for the well-being and growth of all its members and particularly young children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities in the community. Since then there has been a plethora of initiatives on early childhood care and education led by different government departments. Some of those developments include:

- *Strengthening Families for Life*: Report of the Commission on the Family, (1998). Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.
- *Our Duty to Care: The principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people*, (2002) Department of Health and Children.
- The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), Department of Education and Science, was established in 2002.
- *Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children, the supporting parents strategy*, (2002) Best Health for Children in association with the National Children's Office and the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs.
- *Towards a Quality Framework for Early Learning*,

(2004) consultation process by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Department of Education and Science.

- *The OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*, (2004) commissioned by the Department of Education and Science.
- *Insights on Quality - a National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004*, (2004) CECDE.
- *Making Connections, a Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*, (2004) CECDE. This will contribute to the development of the National Framework for Quality in ECCE, and to the debate on quality in the early years sector in Ireland.

The case for the development of a national policy on early education was made over a decade ago (Hayes, 1995). However, despite the political rhetoric and the developments outlined, there is still no explicit, overall policy incorporating early childhood care and education or implementation plans regarding the delivery of services.

The greatest challenge to the development of an integrated and coherent policy on early childhood care and education in the Republic of Ireland is the lack of co-ordination between government departments. *The National Childcare Strategy*, (1999, p.11) showed that 11 different departments were involved in the management of policies relating to ECCE in Ireland. This complex web of departmental involvement is also shown in the report of the recent evaluation of the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006* (NDP,CSP 2003, pp. 92-96). However, as is illustrated in *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2004, p.12), the policies of three major departments are most pertinent to the review of policy, practice and research relating to ECCE currently in Ireland. These are: the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), the Department of Education and Science (DES), and the Department of Health and Children (DHC) and their associated agencies.

The *National Children's Strategy—Our Children, Their Lives* (DHC, 2000) led to the establishment of The National Children's Office (NCO) in 2001 to improve all aspects of children's lives by leading and supporting the implementation of the *National Children's Strategy*. The NCO facilitates an

interdepartmental working group, which aims to address the lack of co-ordination between education and care and between government departments.

A secondary challenge is to accommodate both the needs of parents (for employment, education, respite, support) with the needs of children (for consistent, loving, secure, developmentally appropriate nurturing education and care). In Ireland there is no universal pre-school provision beyond the statutory Junior and Senior Infant cycle in schools (compulsory school age is six years); the 40 Early Start Pre-School programmes in schools designated as disadvantaged and the limited number of pre-schools for Traveller children and for children with special needs. It is up to private and community childcare providers to ensure enriching pre-school environments for young children.

In Ireland, the argument in favour of early intervention, early childhood education and the provision of high-quality safe childcare services that support families with young children as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion is beginning to make an impact. This is an issue identified in the *National Economic and Social Forum Report (NESF) No. 24 on Early School Leavers, 2002*; the *Irish National Action Plans against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPS/Inclusion) 2003-2005*; and the *Report of the Inaugural Meeting of the Educational Disadvantage Forum, 2003*. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) has conducted a study on the impact of European policymaking processes and structures on Irish policy and has done case studies on childcare (NESC, forthcoming). In October 2004, the NESF invited submissions on Early Childhood Care and Education. Its task is to explore and analyse views on current provision, areas for change, and examples of good practice in ECCE. Finally, a review of family support services in health boards led by the Department of Health and Children aims to provide a clear Family Support Services Strategy to guide the development and operation of appropriate services in 2005. The importance of services that support the whole family is well articulated in *Families and Family Life in Ireland*, the consultation document for the Department of Social and Family Affairs' *Family Policy Strategy*, which is also to be published in 2005.

Two of the most significant developments to have an impact on community playgroups in Ireland are:

- the implementation of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, Part VII of Child*

Care Act, 1991, published in 1996 by the Department of Health.

- the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)* Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1998.

The impact these two measures have had on community playgroups is of particular interest in this report. Between 1998 and 2002, the number of community playgroups in the Dublin area declined by 31 per cent. Community Playgroups Together (2003) voiced concern about the demise of community playgroups, in particular since the advent of the EOCP. The EOCP provides staffing grants to community playgroups that meet the necessary criteria.

Community playgroups have the potential to offer a key early intervention service by providing caring family support and high-quality ECCE. They can support parents to return to work in addition to supporting those who choose not to. However, despite the potential of community playgroups, they are currently under threat. This is partly due to the increased emphasis on the development of day care places, but it is also due to a lack of government recognition and financial support for this important model of provision for children and families. It is against this backdrop that *cpi* evolved.

Report structure

Section 1 of this report outlines the background and rationale of *cpi*, explains the selection process and profiles the five participating playgroups. In Section 2 the principles, methodology and agents involved in the evaluation are discussed. In Section 3 to Section 5, the findings of the evaluation are presented and analysed according to three dimensions:

- *Playgroups in operation*
- *cpi: model of delivery*
- *Playgroups as a family support measure*

Each section concludes with recommendations for practitioners, management committees of playgroups, parents and policymakers and programme developers. The final section (*Conclusions and Lessons Learned*) provides a synthesis of the overall learning from *cpi* and makes recommendations for policymakers and programme developers relating to community playgroups.



section 1

The **Community Playgroup** Initiative (*cpi*)



This section outlines the background and rationale of *cpi* and the selection process undertaken in choosing the five community playgroups to take part. It describes the intervention model of support developed in *cpi* that combined funding with support. The section concludes with a profile of each of the participating playgroups.



1.1 Background and rationale of *cpi*

In 1999, the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) decided to formulate a strategic approach to the maintenance and operation of community playgroups that would also support playgroups to improve the quality of their service. In order to understand the motivation for such a decision it is worth examining the background of the KHF and the focus of its activities. KHF is an independent grant-making foundation with a particular focus on supporting projects where the formation and development of groups by those who live in the community leads to building or rebuilding a sense of community and community spirit. The development of self-reliance, the willingness of groups to take responsibility and the sharing of knowledge and experience between groups are essential elements of projects supported by KHF (Daly, 2003). The Foundation gives grants on an annual basis to projects related to children, young people, the elderly and disadvantaged throughout Ireland, north and south.

Since 1996, the KHF has consistently provided funds for community playgroups and parent and toddler groups through its community grants

scheme. This coincided with an ever-rising number of groups seeking funding due to the impact of new legislation such as the Childcare Pre-school Services Regulations (1996). KHF recognised the importance of children's early years and was also conscious of the supports that community groups needed in order to capitalise on the opportunity that those early years provide for supporting families and young children.

By 1999, KHF had developed a level of expertise in ECCE and the role of development officer had been created within the foundation. Beginning in July 1999, the development officer began to research possible approaches to supporting community playgroups by examining models of support and conducting discussions with relevant organisations. In 2001, the KHF contacted the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) with a view to collaborative work. The SEHB was concerned that the childcare agenda appeared to be driven by labour force considerations rather than a child-centred orientation. The board's staff were aware also that quality varied across the ECCE sector. When the KHF discussed its plan to develop a quality-centred initiative for community playgroups it was clear that the KHF's ideas about the importance of the community playgroup sector matched SEHB thinking (KHF, 2003). Both the KHF and the SEHB value community playgroups, since they are a means of family support, provide early years education and care in the child's own community and operate at a reasonable cost. Both agencies also value the involvement of parents in such groups, and see benefits arising from this as adults often take part in adult education, personal development, community development and part-time work. The KHF and the SEHB agreed a partnership and a project entitled the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was initiated.

Additional funding was secured through the EOCP under Sub Measure 3, Quality Improvement, which provides resources to innovative projects. The *cpi*'s focus on supporting community playgroups to improve the quality of their services linked well with the overall aims of the EOCP and of the Quality Improvement Sub-Measure in particular. The manner in which it was proposed to do this also

had strong resonance with the Area Development Management (ADM) approach of empowering and supporting local groups and enhancing quality. Two other foundations, including the St Stephen's Green Trust, and a small foundation that wishes to remain anonymous, also provided some initial funds towards the project.

It was agreed that KHF would take the lead role in the employment of the co-ordinator and the overall management and supervision of *cpi*. An inter-agency expert advisory group was established to assist in the setting up and ongoing work. Members of the advisory group were targeted for their experience, knowledge and geographical spread. A careful balance was developed between statutory bodies and voluntary agencies that represented people working on the ground. The advisory group comprised representatives from the following organisations: Barnardos, Childcare Network Loch Garman, Clonmel Community Partnership, Dublin Institute of Technology, IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation, the Kilkenny Early Years Project and the SEHB. The advisory group worked together to develop an overall programme plan for *cpi*. Sub-committees of the advisory group were involved in contracting the part-time co-ordinator, and the evaluator, in devising the selection process of the five groups and in planning a regional conference, which was held in October 2004. The advisory group met four to six times a year to review *cpi*'s progress and to advise on future developments (see *Appendix 1* for a description of the Terms of Reference for the advisory group).

The stages and time-scale in the development of *cpi* can be summarised as follows:

Research stage

- Examining models and initial discussions with relevant organisations, July 1999
- Development discussions began in February 2000

Development stage

- Funding in place
- Establishment of advisory group (early 2001)
- Establishment of Terms of Reference
- Developing the job description of co-ordinator

Delivery Stage

- Recruitment of co-ordinator, Feb 2001

- Co-ordinator appointed, Nov 2001
- Playgroups selected, Dec 2001
- *cpi* formally began January 2002 and continued until December 2004
- Evaluator appointed April 2002

1.2 Description of *cpi*

The primary aim of *cpi* was to provide a three-year programme to assist small community playgroups to deliver a high-quality sessional service, and to identify and evaluate the impact of funding and support on the quality of service provided to children and their families. A secondary aim was to highlight the value of community playgroups.

The challenge for *cpi* was to assist these groups to strengthen and consolidate their positions as important providers of ECCE within a changing national environment. Specifically, the desired outcomes of *cpi* were that:

- Children and families would benefit;
- Staff and committees would have opportunities to put ideas into operation;
- New skills acquired would have a lasting impact;
- Information would be gathered on the impact of increased funding and support on community playgroups;
- Lessons learned would be widely disseminated.

The *cpi* formally began in 2001 with the appointment of a co-ordinator and it continued until the end of 2004.

1.2.1 Combining funding and support

The central innovative aspect of *cpi* is its particular approach of combining support and funding in order to improve quality of provision. Over the past decade, childcare organisations in Ireland have been developing models of practice whose primary aim is to enhance the quality of service provision to young children. They include the following:

- Barnardos in collaboration with FÁS, in 2001, produced a model of training and self-assessment (through a document *Assuring Quality: a Manual for Assessment of Community Employment Projects Providing Early Childhood Services*). It aimed to help services identify their strengths and challenges and develop action plans.

- The Border Counties Childcare Network developed a *Quality Assurance Programme* (2004) for sessional services involving information, evaluation, training and accreditation. It plans to extend this programme to full and family day care in the near future.
- Childminding Ireland has been engaged in the development of *Quality Indicators in Family Based Day-care* (2004).
- High/Scope Ireland has developed the *High/Scope Accreditation Pack*, which includes completion of the Curriculum Implementation Course, continued cluster group support and training, application for accreditation and use of the *Program Quality Assessment Tool* (High/Scope, 2001) for accreditation purposes.
- IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, piloted the *Quality Improvement Programme* in 1999 and now delivers a range of programmes nationally to both playgroup and full-day care services. Each programme combines training, on-site support and evaluation mechanisms.
- The National Children's Nursery Association produced a *Good Practice Self-Assessment Manual* in 2000. Since 2002, the NCNA has implemented a *Centre of Excellence Award* for its full-day care members.

All of the above programmes are quality enhancement initiatives based on information and training. Some provide limited on-site support linked, in many cases, with assessment but without the financial resources to support the implementation of change.

The overall funding available to *cpi* was in the region of €125,000 per year for three years. A decision was made early on in the process to focus on a small number of services. In so doing, each participating service would be able to avail of relatively substantial funding. With five groups participating, each group was able to avail of up to €15,000 per year, to a maximum of €45,700 over the three years. Grants not used in year one were carried forward to year two and so on. The playgroups were not required to spend their funding in any particular way, but on what was needed to enhance the quality of their service. They were guided in the prudent use of the funding by the co-ordinator. Thus, the role of the co-ordinator

was envisaged as primarily one of assisting the groups in planning and prioritising improvements in the services.

The co-ordinator worked part time (20 hours per week) out of a home-based office in Cahir, Co.Tipperary. She visited the groups approximately twice a term and had contact with committee members and parents. She kept regular contact with the groups by email and telephone. Each group developed and implemented individual short-term action plans. These were drawn up by the groups in consultation with the co-ordinator and informed by the ongoing evaluation (see *Section 4.1.2 Action Planning*). The playgroups came together in cluster groups for training, networking, information and support.

1.2.2 Selecting the groups to take part in *cpi*

Approximately 100 community playgroups in the SEHB region were invited to apply for *cpi*. Application forms were sent to all of these using contact names and addresses that had been made available by the pre-school services officer in each of the four community care areas - Carlow/Kilkenny, South Tipperary, Waterford, and Wexford. The application forms for *cpi* were similar to those for the KHF Community Grants and were designed to be as user-friendly and as easily understood as possible (see *Appendix 2*). Criteria for participation in *cpi* had been agreed by the advisory group and these were clearly laid out in the application form. In order to apply to be part of *cpi* the groups had to:

- Be community-based (urban or rural) and providing sessional care;
- Not be in receipt of funding under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme;
- Have complied with the Pre-School Regulations, 1996;
- Have 10 or more children enrolled in the group;
- Have a management committee that included representatives from parents and other members of the community;
- Be open to links with other community activities;
- Have undertaken previous training, formal or informal, of either parents, staff or other volunteers;

- Identified readiness and interest to develop the service;
- Shown willingness to commit themselves to a three-year project aimed at enhancing the quality of the service.

In total 28 community playgroups applied to be included in *cpi*. In November 2001, the Selection Committee reviewed the applications and short-listed 14. There was an agreed framework for the selection process to ensure consistency in approach. Between November and December 2001, the co-ordinator and a member of the advisory group visited the shortlisted groups. Some time was spent observing the playgroup session in progress and afterwards a meeting was held with staff, committee members and parents. When all 14 visits were completed a selection meeting was held in December 2001. Five playgroups were selected and were informed of this decision before Christmas 2001. The remaining nine groups were told that they had not been successful. At a later stage each of these received a small grant from the KHF's community grants scheme.

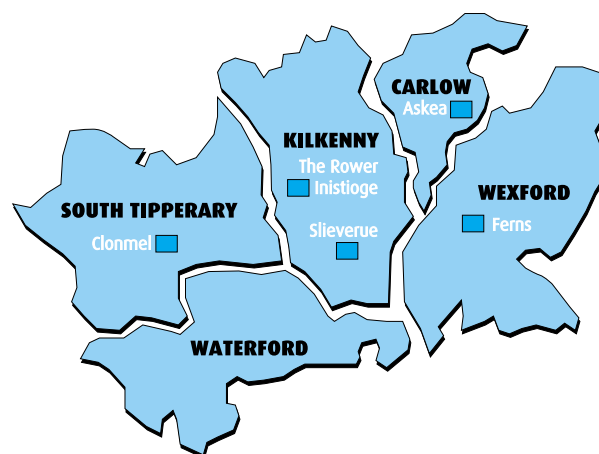
An attempt was made to have geographical representation in the selection of the playgroups (KHF, 2003). The five playgroups were located in each of the four Community Care areas in the south eastern region which represents five counties; one each from Waterford, Wexford and South Tipperary and two from Carlow/Kilkenny.

A letter of agreement (see *Appendix 2*) was drawn up by the KHF to formalise the project and to re-state the aims and objectives of *cpi*. Groups took time to read this. They could ask for amendments or clarifications. Once groups were satisfied with the agreement, they were asked to sign it, along with the co-ordinator, and their participation in *cpi* formally began.

1.3 Playgroups in Profile

The five participating playgroups in *cpi* reflect the diversity of playgroups in Ireland generally. They are situated in different geographical areas; they differ in their premises, facilities, and accessibility to the outdoors. They differ in numbers of staff and their level of training. They have differing levels of parental involvement and participation by staff in the management committees; and they differ in the

numbers, needs and socio-economic backgrounds of the children who attend. The playgroups support children with special educational and additional needs, children from ethnic minorities and Travellers. The *cpi* values and celebrates the uniqueness of each of these five groups and acknowledges the critically important work each of them does within its own community (KHF, 2003).



The following information provides a profile of the playgroups as they operated at the outset of *cpi* (see *Section 3 Playgroups in Operation* for further information). Significant changes that occurred to the premises of the playgroups during the course of *cpi* are also noted here where applicable.

1.3.1 Askea Community Playgroup, Carlow, Co. Carlow



Askea Community Playgroup is in the South Eastern Health Board Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area. Askea is situated on the outskirts of Carlow town and is included in the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) Programme. The playgroup has been in existence for 21 years. At the outset of *cpi*, it was operated by a playgroup leader, an assistant and a Community Employment Scheme worker. This playgroup could cater for 20 children (in compliance with the Pre-School Regulations, 1996) in a rented community house and had a large waiting list. The group was housed in what was originally a small cottage. The walls had been knocked to make it into one big room with an area sectioned off for a tiny kitchen and toilet. It was reasonably bright with some natural light but there were bars on the low-set windows. The building was located on the side of the street but a door at the back of the building opened onto a large school carpark. The premises had been the target of vandalism in the past. There was access to a large tarmacked area outside but the children were seldom brought out because there was no gate. There were curtains on the toilet cubicles in place of doors. Much of the equipment was old and needed to be replaced. Five morning sessions were held each week, from 9.30am to 12.00 noon.

A parish committee meets regularly and part of its brief is to oversee the delivery of this playgroup. The parish priest acted as committee chairperson. The playgroup leader and assistant did not attend these committee meetings; instead, they liaised with relevant people who conveyed the information from the meetings. The playgroup leader and assistant operated the playgroup and the wider

committee was there to support them when applying for grants. During the course of *cpi*, this playgroup successfully sought funding from the EOCP and is now accommodated in a purpose-built centre with an outdoor play area.

1.3.2 Slieverue Community Playgroup, Slieverue, Co. Kilkenny



Slieverue is a small village on the outskirts of Waterford city. The Slieverue Community Playgroup is in the South Eastern Health Board Waterford Community Care Area although the address is in County Kilkenny. The playgroup has been in existence for 24 years. When *cpi* commenced, it was operated by three staff; a playgroup leader and two assistants. It catered for 24 pre-school children in compliance with the Pre-School Regulations (1996) and had a large waiting list. The playgroup had recently moved into a large, bright but temporary room in the local secondary school, which they rented. The building had become vacant due to a merger with another school. This room did not have direct access to hot water, sinks or toilets. The windows were very high up on the wall, well above children's eye level, and are at a similar height in their new, permanent room. From the new room they have direct access to a kitchen, toilets and a sizeable area of outdoor space. At baseline they operated four mornings a week, from 9.15am to 12.15pm.

Slieverue Community Playgroup had a management committee of nine people. Staff did not attend committee meetings unless there was a specific issue the committee wanted to raise with the playgroup leader. On those occasions, the playgroup leader would attend the meeting only for the period during which that issue was being addressed.

1.3.3 St Oliver's Community Playgroup, Elm Park, Clonmel, Co.Tipperary



St Oliver's Community Playgroup is in Elm Park, Clonmel, in the South Eastern Health Board South Tipperary Community Care Area. Elm Park is on the outskirts of Clonmel town and is included as part of the RAPID Programme. St Oliver's has been in existence for 16 years and at baseline was operated by a playgroup leader assisted by three Community Employment Scheme workers. The playgroup had 20 children on the roll, and, according to the Pre-School Regulations (1996), 18 children were allowed in the room at any one time. There was a waiting list. It catered for children in a rented room adjoining the St Oliver's community centre. The room had no natural light. The windows were closed by shutters and were never opened due to vandalism. Lighting was by means of long florescent bulbs. There was a green area outside but the children were never taken out due to dangerous litter, including broken glass. While the room was attached to a fairly large community hall, children were not allowed access to this, as the windows were broken and the roof was leaking. Heating was by means of electric fan heaters. Sessions were held five mornings a week from 9.30 am to 12.00 noon.

The playgroup committee was comprised of four people. The playgroup leader attended the playgroup committee meetings and the Elm Park Action Childcare Committee (EPACC) meetings. EPACC has applied successfully to EOCP for funding for a full day care and after-school facility in the area. The playgroup is expected to amalgamate with EPACC and a new building is expected to be completed in 2006.

1.3.4 Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool, Ferns, Co. Wexford



Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool, Ferns, is in the South Eastern Health Board Wexford Community Care Area and is located on the outskirts of the small town of Ferns. This playgroup developed from a mother and toddler group and it has been in existence for seven years. At the outset of *cpi* it was operated by a playgroup leader and an assistant with parental support. Under the Pre-School Regulations (1996) it could cater for 20 children at any one time. Twenty-two children were enrolled and they had a waiting list. It was housed in the Church of Ireland community hall. The playgroup providers were anxious to secure permanent premises. All equipment and furniture had to be put away every day because the hall was used by many different groups. Negotiations were going on with the Church of Ireland to acquire some land (on a 30-year lease) behind the hall to build an extension. This continued during the course of *cpi*. Permanent accommodation has not been found to date for this playgroup. At the start of *cpi*, the group had access to a small, enclosed outdoor space and there was a lot of potential additional space around the hall including a large car-parking area. The equipment and shelving were in good repair as they had been acquired with funding under the National Lottery. Sessions operated three mornings a week from 9.00 am to 12.00 noon.

The playgroup was part of a wider community group, Ferns Area Community Services. The playgroup leader was the chairperson of the community group and the playgroup assistant was the secretary.

1.3.5 The Rower Inistioge Pre-School, The Rower, Co. Kilkenny

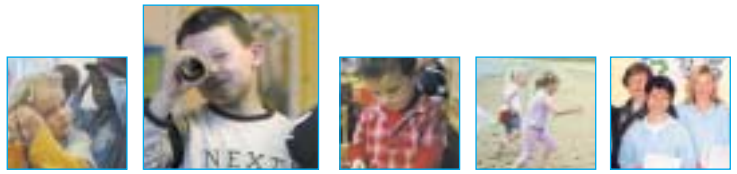


The Rower Inistioge Community Pre-School, Co.Kilkenny, is in the South Eastern Health Board Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area. The playgroup is set in a small rural village. The playgroup is four years old. At the outset of *cpi*, the playgroup had been newly formed as a community playgroup; up to the previous year it had been a private playgroup. Since it had become a community playgroup it had been operated by a playgroup leader and an assistant. At the beginning of *cpi* 12 children were on the roll. Under the Pre-School Regulations (1996) it could cater for 22 children at any one time. The playgroup is based in a galvanised steel extension of the local community hall. There were electric heaters in the room, which needed new fire doors and double-glazed windows. The windows were well above child level. The roof was leaking. There were tiles on the floor. The playgroup had access to the large community hall, which they used regularly. Although located in pleasant rural surroundings they did not use the outdoor space, partially due to the poor surface and the open access from the hall to the road. Equipment was very limited. The playgroup is in secure accommodation, and, since *cpi*, many physical challenges have been addressed including the development of an outdoor area. At baseline the service opened three mornings a week from 9.30am to 12.30pm.

The committee meets once a term and the playgroup staff always attend meetings. Parents automatically become members of the committee when their child joins the playgroup. At the outset of *cpi* this group was struggling to survive. The service was much needed in the community but, due to the rural location, the numbers were small.

In summary, through *cpi* it was hoped to enhance the quality of the service being offered to the

children and families in five community playgroups by providing extra funding and the support of a co-ordinator. This report considers whether or not such an approach had a positive impact on the five participating playgroups and their committees. The process by which this was assessed is explored in *Section 2*, which outlines the evaluation procedures.



section 2

Evaluating *cpi*



This section outlines the aims, principles and methodology of the evaluation and a description of quality as understood in *cpi*. The organisational frameworks under which the evaluation was carried out and the way in which the findings are categorised (outlined in *Sections 3 to 5*) are also presented.



It was considered essential to evaluate *cpi* from its inception in order to measure any change resulting from the funding and support made available by the project. It was very important to understand the processes and dynamics involved if *cpi* was to have a positive long-term impact on the participating playgroups. It was also important that recommendations for future policy and practice for the community playgroup sector be based on reliable evidence. Thus, formative evaluation was incorporated into the project design from the outset. An evaluation brief was drawn up and, following an interview process, an evaluator was appointed in April 2002. Formative evaluation involves assessing activities throughout the duration of a programme, the results of which provide information designed to improve the programme (Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey, 1999). It has the potential to provide continual feedback during the course of a project or intervention. This distinguishes it from summative evaluation, which is usually conducted at the end of a programme (Newburn, 2001).

2.1 Aim of the evaluation

The primary focus of the evaluation was to measure

the impact of support and funding on the quality of five participating playgroups. The evaluation involved contact between the evaluator and the project at different stages during the course of *cpi*. The intention was that the evaluator would bring an external, objective and analytical voice to the project. The evaluation report would present the lessons learned from *cpi* and would be written in a way that was user friendly for various audiences, including playgroups, support organisations, agencies and policymakers at local, regional and national levels.

The evaluation process was based on community development principles. From the beginning it was expected that the community playgroups involved in *cpi* would differ from each other in many ways. The evaluation was designed to respect these differences and to identify strengths as well as challenges. It needed to be transparent, objective, understandable, flexible, ethical and sensitive to the needs of staff and children, and to the practicalities of getting information. The use of the observation tool (see *Appendix 3*) helped each playgroup to assess its particular strengths and areas for improvement. The formative approach acted as a support to the co-ordinator and the playgroups by making use of reflective practices. The evaluation also included a wide range of views and personal insights. These ranged from the voices of families, playgroup leaders, staff, volunteers, management committees, co-ordinator, advisory group and the KHF to the views of other relevant bodies such as the childcare managers in the SEHB, ADM and pre-school services officers.

The following issues were identified as key areas in the evaluation process:

- *Continuity*: All stakeholders including the playgroups would be there for the duration of *cpi*;
- *Objectivity*: The objective stance of the evaluator would be maintained;
- *Perception*: The evaluator would not be seen as an 'examiner' but as a support;
- *Strengths based*: The evaluation process would be based on identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement;
- *Reflective*: The process would involve 'reflective

practice' and it was believed that the benefits of this would remain with the playgroups after *cpi*;

- *Simple*: The evaluation process would remain consistent, transparent and as simple as possible.

2.2 Quality in *cpi*

Quality is no longer viewed as one standard of excellence applied to all children in all services, but rather a set of core criteria towards which services may progress and against which their progress can be measured (French, 2003). In many ways *quality* is a socially constructed term dependent on cultural values and beliefs. Quality criteria should be dynamic, subject to ongoing review and evaluation. The Interim Report of *cpi* (KHF, 2003) stated that quality provision should support the well-being, development, needs and rights of children. Within *cpi* vital elements of quality are understood to include the interaction of those involved, both children and adults, the development of parental involvement, and liaison with others. Attention to staff, playgroup management and committees and the development of the physical environment are also regarded as important. Those involved in *cpi* acknowledge that, while quality can be enhanced in many ways, training, reflection, effective planning, monitoring and review are particularly important. In the context of *cpi* quality is seen as an ongoing, dynamic process that incorporates criteria specified by and relevant to the individual playgroups in *cpi*. It puts particular emphasis on environment, activities and routine, interaction, training, planning, monitoring and the development of reflective practice (KHF, 2003).

This consensus view of the fluid, dynamic, evolving nature of quality needed to be expanded upon and set down in a structured way by the evaluator through the development of an evaluation framework.

2.3 Evaluation framework

Devising an evaluation plan was one of the first tasks of the evaluator, working with the co-ordinator, the development officer of the KHF and an evaluation sub-committee of the advisory group. It was agreed to develop a framework for collecting data, including baseline information that would be

used to assess the impact of *cpi* on the participating playgroups. The framework was designed both to respect the features of individual playgroups and at the same time to measure impact in a consistent way by including defined indicators. It was agreed that the tools developed, documentation perused and development plans (see *Appendix 4*) of the playgroups would be framed and evaluated under the following framework elements:

- **Profile;**
- **Playgroup management;**
- **Development and training;**
- **Child-centred environment;**
- **Activities and routine;**
- **Interaction;**
- **Parental participation;**
- **Links to statutory and voluntary bodies;**
- **Funding;**
- ***cpi* - model of delivery.**

Profile: Profile includes a description of the geographical areas, the numbers and ages of children attending the playgroups and their socio-economic background.

Playgroup management: Management involves looking at the structure of the playgroups and management committees. This would include items such as compliance with the Pre-school Regulations 1996; ethos; mission statement; development or implementation of policy and procedures; administration and record keeping (register, accident records for children and staff, fire drills, safety audit); in addition to general health and safety; recruitment; terms and conditions of employment; staff ratios; planning; monitoring; and review of playgroup incorporating reflective practice.

Development and training: Linked to human resources, this element incorporates the work experience of staff; staff qualifications; ongoing training for staff, parents and committees; volunteers; and students.

Child-centred environment: The environment provided for children and parents is included, both indoors and outdoors, regarding room-space layout; interest areas; equipment and materials;

displayed material; staff room and parents' room; and health and safety issues.

Activities and routine: Activities and routine comprise the activities provided; reflection of children's homes and cultural diversity; curriculum planning; and assessment. It includes how the day is organised, such as greetings and farewells, outside time; group times; transitions; and break times. Use of time generally is also evaluated.

Interaction: Interaction encompasses demonstration of care, interest and warmth; staff-child communication; and separation from home. Encouragement of children's initiatives and independence is included in addition to their opportunities to explore and have choice. Other examples include supporting interaction between children; supporting problem solving generally; conflict resolution by children and staff; and adult-adult communication.

Parental participation: This includes creation of opportunities for parental involvement, for example, parents on policymaking committees; parental participation in child activities; having a parent information booklet; and staff-parent informal and formal interactions.

Links to statutory and voluntary bodies: Liaison with outside agencies was mapped, for example, membership of professional bodies, diagnostic or special education service referrals when needed; transition to school; or links created with voluntary and statutory agencies.

Funding: Funding contains the *cpi* expenditure, from baseline at the beginning of the Community Playgroup Initiative and incorporating the increments over the life of *cpi*. These include expenditure on staff wages; the environment; equipment and maintenance of environment; staff development and membership of organisations; parental involvement and running costs generally.

Community playgroup initiative - model of delivery: This final heading pertains to the evaluation of the model of delivery, management and organisation of *cpi*. This involves the establishment, development and process of *cpi*, including the role of the advisory group, sub-groups and co-ordinator.

2.4 Evaluation methodology

Having agreed the framework for the evaluation, the next task was to agree the methodology. A project as complex as *cpi* required an approach that was comprehensive. The challenge for this formative evaluation was to gain an in-depth insight into the processes of *cpi* while simultaneously using methods that supported improvements in practice and self-reflection. The methods used needed to encourage participation of all the agents involved in *cpi* with consequent acknowledgement of the time and commitment shown by the participants. In general the information was gathered by:

- Observations of playgroups in practice;
- Focus group meetings;
- Self-reported questionnaire;
- Telephone surveys;
- Documentary mapping actions;
- The hosting of a regional conference;
- Examination of action plans and reports where appropriate.

2.4.1 Phases and agents involved

Throughout the evaluation the co-ordinator worked closely with the evaluator and was the main contact person with the playgroups for the purpose of the evaluation as well as the overall project. The evaluation was conducted mainly in three phases corresponding to the end of each of the three years of *cpi*. In the first two years of *cpi* (2002, 2003) the emphasis in the evaluation was formative; on taking stock of plans, checking progress regarding *cpi* and making recommendations on developments within the playgroups or the delivery of *cpi* for the following year. The final stage of the evaluation (2004) was more summative and comprehensive. Approximately 180 people were involved in each of the three stages of the evaluation, with slightly more (200) in the final evaluation. The following participated in the evaluation:

- Children and staff of the five playgroups;
- Twenty-five per cent of parents whose children attended the morning sessions in the playgroups;
- Members of the five playgroup management committees;

- The development officer of KHF;
- The co-ordinator of *cpi*;
- Members of the advisory group of *cpi*;
- The regional co-ordinator of child care services and the four childcare managers of the SEHB;
- The pre-school services officers of the four community care areas of the SEHB;
- Two trustees of the KHF;
- A monitoring team leader of the EOCP, (ADM).

2.4.2 Observation tool

An observation tool was designed by the evaluator to facilitate the observation of the playgroups in practice and to provide information on what a day in the playgroup was like for children. This tool was adapted mainly from the *High/Scope Program Quality Assessment, PQA-Preschool Version, Assessment Form* (2001), and also incorporated the *National Association for the Education of Young Children, Early Childhood Classroom Observation* (1998). The purpose of the observation tool (see *Appendix 3*) was to guide and provide prompts to the evaluator in establishing objectively the standard and range of the services, and to attempt to measure change over time. It was designed to reflect the service from the child's perspective.

The observation tool was based on strengths. If evidence of a prompt (which demonstrates professional practice) was observed, it was recorded by the evaluator. Theoretically the more such evidence was observed in practice over each of the three visits the greater the evidence of an increase in professional practice. If prompts were not observed (that is, evidence was not obtained), it would be clear where improvements in practice could be made. It was an intrinsic part of using the observation tool that each playgroup leader received a copy of it before each visit and received immediate feedback from the evaluator after each visit in which opportunities for discussion, clarification or amendment were provided, strengths outlined and recommendations given. The observation, strengths and recommendations were then typed up and given to the playgroups by the co-ordinator.

The observations were carried out in each playgroup in November of each year (2002, 2003, and 2004) of *cpi*. Observing is a very subjective

process; to avoid being influenced by the observation of the preceding year, the evaluator did not read the results of previous years before the visits. At the very end of the process, the three years' observations were given to an independent person who simply counted the number of times evidence of good practice was observed. This was to give a numerical representation of the observation exercise. The evaluator took photographs of the settings on each visit before the children arrived in most cases (14 out of 15 visits) and, in the one exception, after they had left.

The co-ordinator gathered baseline data about each of the groups corresponding to the framework headings and passed it on to the evaluator. In all cases the observation tool (see *Appendix 3*), prompts for focus group meetings and questionnaires (see *Appendix 5*) were given in advance to all the respondents and were typed up and returned or reported afterwards to the respondents for amendment, further clarification or additional information. In these reports thematic analysis was employed to present the responses and information succinctly; issues that had been identified more than twice were collated and themed.

2.4.3 Parental involvement in the evaluation

Engaging parents in the evaluation was essential, in order to ascertain their views on community playgroups in general; what they valued, what developments they would like to see in the playgroups (to inform the action plans) and whether they had noticed any positive changes in practice. The evaluation also sought to explore parental perceptions of the support offered to families by playgroups. Capturing the views of parents randomly, efficiently and consistently called for a specific method of selection and administration of the interview schedule (see *Appendix 6* for details of the parent sample). It was agreed that 25 per cent of the parents of children enrolled in the morning sessions of each playgroup would be targeted randomly for the first year of the evaluation. A letter for parents and the *cpi* leaflet was given to playgroup leaders to distribute. This explained *cpi* and the evaluation, invited parents to take part and outlined the questions they would be asked. All the names were given to the co-ordinator

and, in the first year, were drawn randomly from a hat until 25 per cent was reached, a total of 33 parents. (see *Appendix 6 Parent Sample* for the three years' samples). The playgroup leader informed the parents selected and asked if they were willing to take part. The co-ordinator then phoned them directly and conducted the survey. Parents were assured that they were chosen at random and that, whereas their responses were confidential, they would be recorded and drawn up into a general report to be given to the playgroups.

In the second year it was agreed that any parent whose children had been in the playgroup the previous year and who still attended the playgroup would be targeted because they would have had the opportunity to see greater change. The numbers were randomly augmented to reach the 25 per cent level as before (a total of 33 parents; nine selected and 24 random). In the final year, the 25 per cent were selected randomly in the same way as the first year (29 parents) and were contacted directly by the co-ordinator. The surveys were conducted in January of the following year (2003, 2004, and 2005) of *cpi*. The co-ordinator typed up the responses and sent them to the evaluator.

2.5 Structure of findings

The findings relating to *cpi* are presented and analysed according to three dimensions:

- Dimension 1 *Playgroups in operation*: evaluates the impact of *cpi* on the physical environment of the playgroups, the activities and routine on offer and the adult-child interactions. It explores the management committees, development and training, and parental perception and participation.
- Dimension 2 *cpi: model of delivery*: appraises the activities of the co-ordinator under themes of action planning, cluster groups, and visits and general support. It examines funding, networking and integration, policy development, and the regional conference.
- Dimension 3 *Playgroups in the community*: explores family support, benefits to the community, links to statutory and voluntary bodies and affordability.

The use of three dimensions is designed to give

coherence to the findings and to communicate clearly the key learning from the project. It is not intended to suggest that these are discrete units; rather, there is a high degree of interdependence, connectivity and overlap between them. The playgroups operate in their own community contexts and are supported by the co-ordinator and their management committees, who receive funding from *cpi* to initiate change or improvements in the services according to their own requirements. The evaluator observed the playgroups in practice and made recommendations which fed into the action plans of the playgroup and helped direct the co-ordinator particularly in matters regarding practice.

For clarity each dimension is presented separately in the report in Sections 3 to 5. They are examined both from an internal (playgroup staff and committee, the co-ordinator) and an external (funding agencies, advisory group, development officer KHF, pre-school services officers) perspective.

To ensure a clear audit trail, the following template (Table 1) is provided to outline the framework elements being evaluated, the methodologies employed, the sources of information and the timing whereby the evaluation was conducted.

Table 1 Evaluation *cpi* - Methodology, agents and phases involved

FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS	METHODOLOGY AND SOURCE OF INFORMATION	TIMING
Dimension 1: Playgroups in operation		
Child-centred Environment Activities and routine Interaction	Observation tool administered 3 times in each of the 5 playgroups at yearly intervals Focus group meetings with staff and committees Questionnaire, Telephone conference pre-school services officers Telephone survey parents Focus group meetings with staff Focus meeting with co-ordinator	Nov 2002, '03, '04 Nov 2004, '03, '05 Dec 2004 Jan 2003, '04, '05 Oct 2004 Dec 2004
Playgroup Committees	Focus group meetings with committees, advisory group Focus meeting with development officer (KHF) Focus meeting with co-ordinator	Dec 2004 Dec 2004 Dec 2004
Development and Training Parental Participation	Mapping in general over the 5 playgroups Focus group meetings with staff and committees	Nov 2002, '03, '04 Nov 2004
Dimension 2: <i>cpi</i> – model of delivery		
Role of Co-ordinator Visits Action planning and self- evaluation Cluster groups General support Funding	Focus group meetings with committees and staff Action plans, reports, evaluations Focus meeting with co-ordinator Focus group meetings advisory group Focus meeting with development officer (KHF) Telephone survey parents Focus group meetings with committees and staff Advisory group Focus meeting development officer KHF Focus meeting co-ordinator Perusal of financial reports	Nov 2002, '03, '04 Nov 2002, '03, '04 Dec 2004 May 2003, Dec 2004 Dec 2004 Jan 2003, '04, '05 May 2003 Dec 2004 Dec 2004 Dec 2004
Networking and Integration	Map of Fields of Learning and Integration development officer (KHF)	July 2003
Policy Development	Map of policy developments	Dec '04
Regional Conference	Conference on Community Playgroups	Oct '04
Dimension 3: Playgroups as family support		
Family Support	Telephone survey parents Questionnaire funding agencies Focus group meeting advisory group	Jan 2003, '04, '05 Dec 2004 Dec 2004
Benefits to communities	Focus group with staff only and co-ordinator	Oct 2004
Links to Statutory and Voluntary Bodies	Focus group meetings with committees Focus group meetings advisory group Mapping over the five groups	Nov 2002, '03, '04 May 2003, Dec '04



section 3

Playgroups in Operation



This section presents and analyses the evidence gathered during the course of the evaluation regarding the impact of *cpi* on the everyday practice and operation of the five participating playgroups. Six issues are explored in turn:



30

- the child-centred environment of the playgroups;
- the activities and routine on offer to children;
- the adult-child interactions;
- the management committees;
- development and training;
- parental perceptions and participation.

The evidence for the first three issues is drawn from the observation tool (see *Appendix 3*), which was administered by the evaluator during site observation visits three times over the lifetime of *cpi*, in addition to the external views of parents and pre-school services officers. This evidence, and findings relating to the remaining three issues, are supplemented by the views from the various agents who were consulted in the course of the evaluation (see *Section 2.4.1*). The section concludes with a synthesis of the findings in the discussion. A list of recommendations is provided.

NOTE: It is important to understand the context the playgroups are operating within, so the profile presented in *Section 1.3* names each of the playgroups. However in this section, which deals with professional practice issues, the playgroups are

anonymous. The five playgroup names were drawn from a hat and given a number corresponding to the order in which they emerged. As reflects the developments of the playgroups, referred to in the profiles (see *Section 1.3*) only three of the groups were observed in the same room. In only one playgroup were the same adults present and at work for the three observations. Three of the playgroup leaders were in place over the lifetime of *cpi* and there were personnel changes in the case of the remaining two.

3.1 Child-centred environment

The observation tool focused on the physical environment of the playgroups, the activities and routine on offer and the adult-child interactions. Table 2 provides an overview of the impact of *cpi* based on a numerical count of evidence. If evidence of a prompt (which was defined as professional practice) was observed by the evaluator it was recorded; the more evidence recorded, the better the practice (see *Appendix 7* for a breakdown of the findings from individual groups).



Child-centred environment – through observation

- The term 'premises indoors' (see *Appendix 3* for further details of the prompts used) refers to the overall airiness and scale of the room. In some instances, this was outside the control of the playgroups. Nevertheless, practical measures such as improved heating and new windows have been taken in some groups.
- Regarding premises outdoors, there was provision for play for children in some playgroups; the evaluator observed children outdoors for the first time in three of the playgroups in the final evaluation. Plans are already in place for the development of a playground for the fourth playgroup and the fifth playgroup hopes to amalgamate with a

Table 2 Impact of *cpi* based on a numerical count of observation evidence

Playgroup	Child-centered Environment			Activities and Routine			Interaction		
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1	12	20	20	14	33	38	13	23	35
2	12	18	22	18	31	33	9	25	24
3	16	18	15	30	33	20	18	24	15
4	14	16	19	14	27	32	17	18	30
5	14	19	20	32	35	36	21	19	25
Totals	68	91	96	108	159	159	78	109	129

group who have successfully applied to ADM and will have a purpose-built premises with an outdoor area. This particular playgroup will also have a public playground located near them in the future. Those playgroups that did not have an outdoor space at the final evaluation had access to a large hall which was used daily.

- There have been positive changes in all the playgroups in the room and space layout and in the organisation of the rooms generally to accommodate different interest areas for play. Cosy book areas have been created, along with dress-up areas, construction areas, art areas, let's pretend areas and, in some playgroups, 'shops'.

The areas are named differently but they are clear and defined, separated by low shelving and made cosy with rugs. The rooms are no longer dominated by tables and chairs but by interesting play spaces.

- Regarding equipment: the furniture was low and shelving was adjusted to ensure maximum accessibility of materials for children. In the final evaluation, materials were accessible, freely available and reflected children's real lives.
- The final prompt for the section on child-centred environment concerned displayed material. To demonstrate what displayed material looked like in practice Table 3 provides a sample of the

Table 3 Evidence from one playgroup on displayed material

Child-centred Environment			
PROMPTS	BASELINE	MID-EVALUATION	FINAL EVALUATION
Displayed material Is there a variety of <u>open – ended children's artwork</u> , <u>emergent writing</u> , photos of block structures on display, portraying child-initiated activities?	5 paintings; 3 of orange paint, 2 of yellow paint on wall "also 1 pasting".	Wall inside door is used for child- initiated work, as underlined. A variety of open-ended artwork on display: stars, pastings, paintings, leaves pastings – limited amount of "colouring-ins", only 2 observed.	"Our Art" display which demonstrated a variety of art work.
Adult-made displays stem from children's interests, e.g. pictures of children's families or pets, or outings?	A variety of cartoons on wall and posters with real -life pictures of 'fruit', 'time' and 'animals'. Others with illustrations include farm animals, numbers, seasons, opposites, among other educational posters.	Pictures of 12 children are available in a display on door. Displays of "things we do each day" (in the playgroup), "Then we take our break", "Then we have fun".	Pastings, paintings, glitter sheet, emergent writing, nicely presented with care on coloured borders. Displays of many photos of children themselves at work in the playgroup and also pictures of the community.
Dated and changed regularly?	3 paintings of open-ended pictures were named, one other tortoise painting named.	One 'colouring-in', dated 29/9/03	Dated from 21/10/04 to 12/11/04, 6 different dates.

record of three visits to one centre and how those improvements were manifested through the observation. This demonstrates both the change in attention paid to the displays and what those displays contained that was relevant to children. It also gives an idea of the improved opportunities for children to engage in active learning experiences such as pasting with paper and glue materials as opposed to 'colouring-ins'.

Child-centred environment – external view



In addition to assessing the environment through the observation tool, the lasting impact of *cpi* on the quality of the services regarding the environment was identified through discussion with staff, committees, parents, the co-ordinator of *cpi* and the pre-school services officers.

Parents in the mid-*cpi* evaluation were delighted with their *"better facilities"*. The majority of the respondents in all of the playgroups said there was a greater variety of equipment and materials; in particular the inclusion of sand. The playgroups had *"better displays"* and *"loads of photos"*. They were *"more colourful"*, *"warmer"*, *"with more books"*, had *"new furniture – tables and chairs"*, *"the new reading area is lovely"* and *"there is a much homelier feeling"*. This was echoed through the parents' survey, which yielded very positive responses in the final evaluation: *"the room is super – incredible changes"*. Parents on one of the management committees said that, by dividing the room, the *"children can relate to the different areas and it is working well. Children can now reach and play with all activities in the room by making their own choice and getting the activity themselves"*.

The pre-school services officers in the four community care areas concurred. The new layout of the areas and the accessibility of equipment facilitated easier access for the children to play. The home corner, quiet area, sand and water play area

and the arts and crafts area got special mention. One officer *"loved the quiet area, where the children learn about their place within the community and the people they encounter on a daily basis"*. A second playgroup has a new room that is *"brighter and airier with proper toilet and kitchenette facilities"*. The development of outdoor areas in a number of the playgroups was valued. One officer felt that the money was very well spent, with upgraded heating and improved equipment. The fact that the new equipment was *"purpose-made, serviced, made locally and is of good quality, and that providers had an input into what they wanted/needed for their particular group"* was commented on as important. In *Appendix 8* there is a rationale for the creation of child-centred environments, division of areas and ideas for appropriate materials. This was used by practitioners as a guide to appraising their own playgroup environments for children.

3.2 Activities and routine

Activities and routine – through observation

The second aspect of observed practice related to the activities and routine on offer in the playgroups (see *Appendix 3* for the key prompts observed).



- By the final evaluation, reasonably consistent but flexible routines were in place and children seemed to be more aware of the routines. There was a balance generally between quiet and active play, whole body and fine movement.
- One key improvement in this section was observed: when welcoming children. adults planned for one person to greet the children and parents while another staff member read stories or played with the other children.
- All of the groups used a play-based approach.
- Children had individual, small and large group

times. Within this format adults were generally at children's level and were allowing children to express themselves more freely without interruption. In addition, small group activities were planned where each child had materials and the freedom to initiate their own creations as opposed to one directed by an adult. Children had much more free choice than previously.

- One example from a final observation regarding the general use of time illustrates this point. It relates to the prompt: 'Are the children actively engaged in their play?' It was recorded in one

playgroup that "at 10.35am, 3 children in Book Corner each reading a book, 4 playing with measuring tape, 3 at playdough table (P/D), 2 doing jigsaws, 2 at pasting/cutting table (P/C), 1 flitting between P/D table and P/C Table, 2 in Home Corner, each one completely absorbed in their play - some of them (2) dressed up in addition, 1 child at sand".

- Table 4 presents an example of how improvements in practice looked over the course of three observation visits to one playgroup with regard to *transitions – changing from one activity to the next*. This indicates another significant

Table 4 Evidence from one playgroup on transitions

Activities and routine			
PROMPTS	BASELINE	MID-EVALUATION	FINAL EVALUATION
<p>Transitions - changing from one activity to the next How long are they?</p> <p>Can children make <u>choices during transition times</u> (e.g., how to move from one part of the room to another, which person to move with)?</p> <p>Do adults let children know transitions are coming?</p> <p>Can children have the option of finishing the previous activity or moving to the next activity without the rest of the group (e.g., <u>not all children have to finish break before the next activity begins</u>)?</p> <p>Do adults plan ways for children to make transitions (e.g., choosing the next children to make the transition according to some characteristic of their clothing: "Now all children wearing runners jump to the coat rack")</p>	<p>Adult overheard saying 'What happens next?' at lunchtime, response from one child: 'roll over'.</p> <p>One child remained eating her break for a particularly long time and joined group later.</p>	<p>Transitions are adequate. At 11.:20 no transition had lasted longer than 4 minutes.</p> <p>Children were tidying in areas that they had not played in. One child said she didn't want to do a pasting when asked. Adult said "OK"! She did come and do it anyway.</p> <p>"In a few minutes time it will be lunch. It is time to start winding up your activity". "Can we start tidying up for lunch please?" "We're going to have circle time now".</p> <p>Some children sat for a long time eating their lunch, while others had put away their lunch boxes and resumed play.</p>	<p>Transition to lunch was reasonable and children readily tidied up, got their lunches themselves and came to lunch.</p> <p>They sat beside who they wanted to. Came back from hall at their own pace and with whom they wanted to. Moved to table- top activities. Children had choice in what to do.</p> <p>Five minutes to "lunch time" and "3 minutes," "5 minutes to going in."</p> <p>As experienced on next page re lunch/break time, children came in at their own pace to the hall. Also same for children who were reading.</p> <p>With children slow to go to hall, adult said "do you want to go and choose a ball to bring with you?"</p>

change prompted by involvement in *cpi*. Children moved from one activity to another without force and were given time to finish up what they were doing. Children who were interested in moving on could either go into that activity or, in the case of having to wait (e.g. taking turns to wash hands), could choose something to play with while waiting. This is in contrast to having to sit empty-handed at a table and every child having to do everything at the same time. That is not to say that children shouldn't have idle moments where they can 'just be' if they wish, but the change in the groups was that it was not enforced idleness while children waited for the adult to get everybody together.

- Lunch time practice in the groups was also enhanced. Initially children had been handed their snacks (in most instances biscuits and orange squash was provided by the group) and no responsibility was taken for healthy eating or for creating opportunities for 'chat' around the table between adults and children. This changed so that all the children brought in their own lunches and all playgroups had a 'healthy eating policy', which was very well adhered to by parents. In one group, relating to the prompt 'do the children eat healthily (or are encouraged in healthy eating)?' It was observed, "*Children had fruit, yoghurts, and sandwiches, juice and yoghurt drinks. No bars of chocolate. 2 Kelloggs snack bars were observed*". This was reasonably consistent throughout the observations. There was a greater tendency also for adults to sit and have a break themselves and talk to children. One interaction at break time was recorded as follows: "*Chat about an incident (observed earlier in the session) where children put flour on one adult's knee, laughed and then tried to clean it. The adult and children recalled the incident and the children had another laugh*".

- The final prompt in activities and routine was reflection of cultural diversity. During the course of the evaluation there was a large shift from there being little or no representation of other cultures, or indeed their own communities, to services providing (as prompted) 'books, materials, images, and experiences that reflect diverse cultures that children may not likely see, as well as those that represent their family life and cultural group'. At the final evaluation visit in one playgroup it was observed: "*Many images*

on the walls now reflecting positive experiences/images: Éist (from Pavee Point) photos and posters of diverse cultures; posters with children from different cultures with messages "I say 'please' and 'thank you'", "I listen quietly" and Traveller images on jigsaws. One black doll had been getting a lot of loving cuddles (up to 10.30am)".

- The sense of community and belonging that community playgroups in particular can offer families, and a sense of pride in their work and their community can be seen, literally, in the playgroups. Photographs of outings, children at play, celebrations, and posters of the local hurling team are much more evident on the walls than in the past, and children were paying attention to them. In addition there were photographs of 'our community' where familiar community buildings such as fire stations, schools and churches were displayed.



Activities and routine – external view

In addition to evidence of improved practice in activities and routine gained from observation, other sources provided more evidence of progression. The change in activities was positively identified and noticed by parents. One parent (at the mid-*cpi* evaluation) remarked that the children were "*not using stencils anymore*" but instead were "*doing lots of cutting and sticking and getting children to use their imaginations*". In the final evaluation a parent reported: "*I remember when X started, there is no comparison to what is there now*". Another said that the playgroup was "*up to date with an educational structure for children*".

Pre-school services officers identified that, within the newly formed areas, "*there are ample materials*" and a "*varied programme of activities*" now "*organised to support the developmental stages and interests of the children*". Being able to access an outdoor playground was mentioned. Having a clear

routine with a balance of free play activities and a more structured curriculum was valued. It was felt that children were “*enjoying their playschool experiences*”, “*engrossed in the various activities*”, and that they were “*active and happy*”. “*Story time*” was particularly enjoyed in one playgroup by the officer “*as the children were encouraged to interject with their own tales thus promoting speech and language development and social skills*”.

3.3 Adult-child Interaction

Adult-child interaction – through observation

The third, and arguably the most important, aspect of practice observed in the playgroups was interaction between the adults and children (see Appendix 3 for the key prompts observed). Interactions between the adults and children have been much enhanced. In general, adults were less directive and more supportive of children’s initiatives and ideas; they listened more to children and put much greater emphasis on encouraging children’s independence (e.g. hanging up and retrieving their own coats, getting their own lunch boxes, sweeping sand).



- Regarding separation from home, developments in practice could be measured by the fact that only one separation issue was observed in all the groups at the final evaluation visit. In relation to the prompt ‘adults acknowledge children’s feelings about separation’ the following was observed and recorded: “*The one child who was upset gave mum a hug (who left), and cried a little. Adult (who was comforting the child) said ‘x is feeling sad this morning’. Then ‘let’s go to playdough as it is safe to cross the road now’ (a*

pretend road on floor with children playing cars). *The child settled in well. Child was asked later by adult ‘are you feeling better now?’ Child nodded her head.*” The child was comforted while the other children’s play with the road was respected.

- One observation of adult-child communication (see Appendix 3 for expanded prompts) that was prompted by ‘adults share control of conversations with children (let children initiate conversations, take turns, wait patiently for children to form thoughts without interrupting)’ resulted in the following record: “*One child carefully explaining to adult about her cut pieces of paper – ‘that’s a shed’, ‘that’s a house’ and giving them to adult. Child was not interrupted and when finally gave items to adult, adult simply said ‘thank you’.*”
- A positive change in ‘adults as partners in play’ was observed as evidenced by the following record presented in Table 5. (The words in italics form part of the discussion in the feedback session).
- There were some developments also in the encouragement of children’s initiatives; prompted by ‘Adults encourage children’s ideas, suggestions, and efforts by listening to children’ the following was recorded in the final observation. Both the adult and child were working together at a table making cars. “*One child wanted an adult to ‘make a car’. The adult suggested using stickle bricks and acknowledged she didn’t ‘know how to make a car’ with those particular materials he was using. ‘Have you figured out what you want to do – any ideas?’ ‘No,’ child answered.*” Definite improvements were observed in providing opportunities for children to explore. In one final observation “*Children were free to use materials without correction, e.g. a real measuring tape was being played with by 4 children and was spanning lots of areas and creating a potential hazard but the children managed it safely and the adult did not prevent them exploring.*”
- In confirming children’s accomplishments, there was a development in the practice of adults specifically encouraging children’s activities as opposed to general praising. The following three samples were recorded on the final evaluation visit in three separate playgroups: “*When children were tidying up before break adult commented to one group ‘You’re putting the train*

tracks in the box very fast'. "Good man – you're holding the door for us," one adult said to a child who went to hold the door when we came in from outside and finally, "Great Cleaning'."

- Regarding supporting interaction between children, adults were observed to be encouraging children to interact in a general sense in the way they provided materials and social engagement opportunities. The next level of practice is to really know what children's strengths are and ask children to refer to each other, and ultimately to themselves, as a resource to others. This can be practised in small

ways, for example, children opening each other's lunch boxes, if there's a difficulty, helping with jackets and so on.

- This development leads to supporting problem solving and independence. In this respect positive shifts were also observed. Adults were trying to stand back more and not 'fix' everything for the children. In the final evaluation in one playgroup it was observed: *"Children were encouraged to hang up their own coats, put on own dress-up clothes. "You'll need to find an apron," "You can hang that up," "This one's wet; you can get a dry one there".*

Table 5 Evidence from one playgroup on adults as partners in play

Adults as partners in play			
PROMPTS	BASELINE	MID-EVALUATION	FINAL EVALUATION
Adults use a variety of strategies as co-players in children's play. For example, adults observe and listen before and after entering children's play		Nothing recorded here, however in discussion with staff <i>"Today was unusual, no one looking to ask 'do you want a cup of tea?' Staff are aware of the importance of children's pretend play and would support it.</i>	Adults watching and carefully placing themselves near children who turn to them for support.
They assume roles as suggested by children			<i>"The shop's open,"</i> , said one child. <i>"OK. Will I come and do my shopping?"</i> <i>"Yeah,"</i> , said the child. <i>"I'd like some cornflakes, please,"</i> , said adult. <i>"OK, cornflakes,"</i> said the child.
Follow the children's cues about the content and direction of play		Dancing to 'music' produced by one boy.	One adult in Home Corner with child, on floor, child suggested bringing the mat up to a different area. *Adult said 'you want to bring it to the book corner? OK'. She got up and went there. Child brought the mat and then went back to get tray of cups.
Imitate children			Adult making the same drawing with crayons and pasting as partner child.
Offer suggestions for extending play	<i>'Roll it around and make a snake today' – I suggested, asking 'what ideas do you have?' to the children re the play dough.</i>	One adult suggested a key for use in play dough.	Adult then went to get teapot and cloth, in case <i>"more (imaginary) tea gets spilled"</i> .
Staying within the children's play theme			Another adult also <i>"sipping tea"</i> and thanking child for such <i>"a lovely cup"</i> .

- Positive developments were also noticed in the process of conflict resolution by children. Ideally, adults and children work together to resolve conflicts, using a problem-solving approach. In any of the observations adults were always calm. Adults are beginning to gather information from the children to identify a problem: *“what’s happening here?”* *“Adult began with ‘X said you squeezed her hand. You tell me what happened’; adult then repeated back (re-stated the problem) that she ‘had to hold your hand crossing road or get knocked down’”* – (on an imaginary road). The next stage is to ask the children for solutions, wait for and support children’s decisions, so they are involved in the process of finding and choosing a solution. In this example it ended with adult saying: *“she didn’t mean to squeeze your hand and won’t do it again”*.
- In general in the final evaluation the overall sounds in the various playgroups were of happy children. A change was observed compared to the first observation when instances had been recorded where the predominating voices were those of the adults. Other general issues observed were that children were able to use the toilet as needed. In one playgroup this had been supported by building adjacent toilets because it had been a struggle to use the toilets previously. Negative discipline methods were never observed and injuries were attended to promptly.

Adult-child interaction – external view



At the mid-*cpi* evaluation, parents appreciated that staff were *“dealing positively with the children”*, in addition to *“adapting to a child’s needs”*. In the final evaluation it was felt that better *“attention”* was paid to the children in one playgroup. Pre-school services officers concurred at the final evaluation and identified that the *“benefits of training are seen, in staff, in how they handle issues”*. There was unanimous agreement among the pre-school

services officers that *“communication and interaction”* generally *“had improved”*, and the *“children and staff were happier”*. This was expanded upon by one officer who said: *“there is less directive communication and more involvement of the children in decision making”*. Further positive comments were made: *“the children respected the staff and were not afraid to approach them”*. As one officer put it: *“whether that was through training or support of the co-ordinator or because of cpi in general, it all led to benefits”*.

In concluding this sub-section, the following comment from a staff member at a staff and committee meeting, in the final evaluation, best illustrates the learning resulting from *cpi*: *“children have more engagement with real-life experiences, for example, one child was looking for bar code on cornflakes packet to ‘scan’ at the ‘shop’ and then did so with all the packets. When it came to cups, he examined them and then put them through one by one. Children are using their observation skills in the world and implementing them in play”*.

3.4 Playgroup management committees

Community playgroups cannot operate without a management committee. All of the management committees are voluntary and have a wide variety of support needs. When examining the impact of *cpi* on the management committees, the staff and playgroup committees felt that there had been many improvements in the working of their committees (final evaluation). However, the advisory group, development officer KHF and the co-ordinator acknowledged that the degree of influence may have varied according to each set of circumstances: *“in some groups the capacity of the committees has been strengthened, in others not. The transient nature of the groups makes it difficult to assess. You can have a strong committee one year and it changes the next, with a new group of parents”*.

This view was evident from the experience of the evaluator. Out of 15 meetings held with the committees over the three years of *cpi*, only one was attended by the same participants who had attended a previous meeting (three people attended that meeting, two were staff and one was the chairperson of the committee who had been there for the three previous years). However, despite the changes in personnel, it was reported that *“individual members got a lot of support from the co-ordinator and valued input from her”*. The reasons why committees experienced difficulties were

highlighted by one member of the advisory group and echoed at the conference hosted by *cpi* (see Section 4.5 Regional conference):

1. It is difficult to recruit people to become involved in community playgroup committees; life is busy particularly when people have young children.
2. Committees now have an expanded brief with responsibilities for employment, fund management and reporting. Playgroups have moved out of the informal economy, and committees must adhere to employment legislation, which is a substantial burden for a voluntary group.
3. It is difficult for committees to access or afford the legal, accounting and management expertise that services now require.
4. Committee members remain on the committee while their children attend the service. This usually lasts for one year. It results in a lack of continuity on committees that is a problem; even where committee members receive good training, it needs to be repeated annually.

As evident from the profile of the playgroups (see Section 1.3 *Playgroups in profile*) the playgroup committees varied in their make-up and in the inclusion of staff or parents. In one group a parent automatically became a committee member when their child started in the playgroup. At the other end of the continuum the staff did not attend committee meetings (but were represented by their overall manager) and there was no parent representation.

- In response to a question on whether the capacity of the playgroup management committees had been strengthened as a result of *cpi*, the groups from baseline had felt that they had been strengthened by *cpi* but expressed their frustration at having to deal with the issues mentioned above (and having to continue to deal with them in the future).
- Staff leaving can create a crisis in any workplace but this is worse for a voluntary group. The co-ordinator and members of the advisory group had helped one playgroup in two recruitment campaigns. This playgroup greatly appreciated the expertise and insight they got of the interview process, and the funding from *cpi* that contributed to staff salaries.
- At the mid-*cpi* evaluation, this group said that in the previous year they had thought the

committee was “*history, but the co-ordinator got the problem solved and now they had moved on from that*”. At the final evaluation it was reported that the “*committee now operates effectively. Now, people are enthused and we remain a committee, with greater sharing of responsibilities*”. This committee had become a limited company and members are “*not afraid to ask for information and support now even if it is trivial*”.

- Growth in confidence is attributed to a “*committee skills course which was undertaken and we feel strengthened as a result – the allocation of jobs is helpful, the importance of delegation has been taken on board*”.
- In another group training was key to effective working and the group now invited the playgroup leader to the committee meetings which, they feel, “*makes more sense and cuts down on extra communication*”.
- One of the playgroups has been amalgamated into a community childcare centre after the playgroup leaders who were originally running the playgroup successfully applied to ADM for capital and for a staffing grant through EOCP. This particular group was managed before by a well established parish committee led by the parish priest. A steering committee is now in place and the day-to-day operation of the full day care centre is the responsibility of a full-time manager. The committee is there as a “*back-up support mechanism overall*”. The committee spoke about plans to form a parents’ committee.
- The formal organisation of the community playgroups as employers is another positive outcome gained from *cpi*. At the baseline evaluation, two of the playgroups were staffed by honorarium volunteers (see *Glossary of Terms*); at the final evaluation all the playgroup leaders and assistants were registered employees and playgroups provided staff with employment rights and entitlements.
- Other responsibilities of the management groups included the development of policies and procedures for the clear operation of the services. At the baseline evaluation, all the groups had child records and safety statements but lacked parent information leaflets or policies and procedures; one group had an informal recruitment policy. In the final evaluation, all playgroups had produced parent information booklets and had developed a variety of policies.

Policies and procedures on child protection, health and safety, healthy eating, diversity or equal opportunities, enrolment and admissions and positive behaviour management were common to all groups. Other policies relevant to individual groups were developed (see 3.8, *Overview of Playgroups in operation at the baseline and final evaluation*).

According to the co-ordinator, there was a wide variation in the degree of shift towards effective working of committees and parental participation among the five playgroups, compared to the baseline. Two groups have demonstrated little or no movement, one some movement and two have experienced a dramatic shift. One member of the advisory group commented: *“cpi has demonstrated the diversity and complexity of committee and community dynamics. The committees are certainly more aware of their roles, more informed about the childcare infrastructure and more informed about their responsibilities regarding staff management and service support”*. This may be true of the five playgroups in *cpi* but the challenge remains for committees in general and their sustainability. It is not realistic to expect voluntary committees to take on the wide range of roles expected of them, even though these are due mainly to very positive changes in the professionalising of the sector. It is evident that, without the support of the co-ordinator, two of the committees in *cpi* who were under severe pressure may not have been able to continue.

3.5 Development and training

The positive developments in the committees mentioned have been attributed to training. Through training, adults develop, extend and update their skills, knowledge and confidence in order to be able to fulfil their role more effectively. Training gives staff, parents and committees the opportunity to:

- Plan for future development for themselves, the playgroup or the community;
- Reflect on individual roles and work and how they need to develop;
- Focus on self-care and stress management;
- Contribute to the development of structures, procedures and policies as necessary;
- Develop initiative and creativity;
- Have fun and engender a shared community spirit.

Table 6 provides an overview of the training undertaken by staff, parents and committees. In addition, cluster group information and training sessions were held and these are outlined in *Section 4.1.3 Cluster groups*.

3.6 Parental perception and participation

The final issue considered under Dimension 1: *Playgroups in Operation* is parental perception and participation. Parental participation and involvement with services is a feature of professional practice in any childcare or education service. In the baseline, mid-*cpi* and final evaluation, parents were surveyed by telephone (see *Appendix 5* for details of questions) to ascertain their views on broad issues relating to the choice of playgroup, what they liked, didn't like and whether or not they were involved and, if they were, in what way. In addition, they were asked what particular developments they would like to see in the respective playgroups. Their anonymous responses were collated each year into a report and given to the services in order to inform the action plans of each playgroup. In the final evaluation, staff and committees were asked for their views regarding parental participation. Table 7 provides an overview of the parent sample (see *Section 2.4.3* for further details on the selection process and *Appendix 6 Parent Sample* for a breakdown of the sample).

The key issues arising from the baseline evaluation were that:

- convenience is the primary motivation for sending children to a particular group;
- a welcoming approach by staff is the key to facilitating positive transitions from home to playgroup; few difficulties were expressed at these times;
- friendly, helpful staff, children learning and a variety of activities are what parents appreciate about the playgroups;
- few responses were recorded on what parents did not like about the groups, except the response of little information being offered to parents about the services;
- parents identified social interaction, learning, and improved speech development as the major benefits of the playgroup experience for children;
- outdoor play, more feedback, longer sessions and more days were the main developments that parents would like to see;

- parental involvement was limited among all the groups with the exception of one where parents automatically become members of the committee. Overall, 25 parents were not involved, six were on the committee, one was on a parent rota and the final parent surveyed had been on the committee but had to leave due to family circumstances;
- eleven of the 33 parents felt that parents should

definitely be involved in the playgroup;

- uncertainty about the role of parents in a community playgroup was expressed by some.

In year two at the mid-*cpi* evaluation, parents were both randomly selected and targeted (see *Section 2.4.3* for further details on the selection process and see *Appendix 6 Parent Sample* for a breakdown of the sample). Similar questions (see *Appendix 5*) were asked in the mid-*cpi* evaluation of the

Table 6 Audit of training and development (2004)

COMMUNITY	COMMITTEES	PARENTS	STAFF
Askea		**First Aid Course *Session on Play	**FETAC Level II Childcare (x 3 people) **First Aid Course * Dealing with Challenging Behaviours * Food Hygiene **ECDL *Special needs * Art and Craft workshops / conferences e.g. Loch Garman Conference + IPPA
Slieverue	Committee Skills Training		FETAC Level II Childcare, Understanding Supervision; Management Course; Workshops Part FETAC II Manual Handling Course, Special Needs and some workshops. FETAC Level III **First Aid Course
St. Oliver's	Part funding for FETAC Childcare Level II (x 1)		*Special Needs – for all staff (3) **First Aid Course (2) **Basic accounting bookkeeping (1) **Child Development and Play (1) Level I
Teach na bPáistí	Committee Skills Training	First Aid Sign Language Child and Play Course	*Special Needs **FETAC II Childcare **First Aid Course Sign Language **Supervision Course
The Rower			**First Aid Course **FETAC Level II Childcare x 1 Part FETAC Level II Childcare x 1

*One day's/evening session

** Course

Table 7 Overview of parent sample

EVALUATION	PARENTS' INTERVIEWS						
Baseline Evaluation (January) 2003	33 (32 mothers, 1 father)						
Mid- <i>cpi</i> Evaluation (January) 2004	<table> <tr> <th>SELECTED</th><th>RANDOM</th></tr> <tr> <td>9 (9 mothers)</td><td>24 (20 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 grandmother)</td></tr> <tr> <td>29 (3 fathers, 1 grandmother, 25 mothers)</td><td></td></tr> </table>	SELECTED	RANDOM	9 (9 mothers)	24 (20 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 grandmother)	29 (3 fathers, 1 grandmother, 25 mothers)	
SELECTED	RANDOM						
9 (9 mothers)	24 (20 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 grandmother)						
29 (3 fathers, 1 grandmother, 25 mothers)							
Final Evaluation (January) 2005							

randomly selected parents. Those that were selected were asked questions relating to whether they had seen any changes since the previous year (given their greater experience of the playgroup), for example, if any further information was given or if they had observed any differences in the playgroups. Picking up on issues from baseline, they were asked whether they understood what a community playgroup was and what they thought the role of a parent should be. The key issues arising from the mid-*cpi* evaluation were:

- convenience (proximity to home) was still the primary motivating factor to send children to a particular group. Positive reports were also considered important;
- in contrast to the baseline evaluation, 21 of the 33 surveyed had received a parent information booklet complete with policies and procedures;
- there was general approbation for the services when dropping in and collecting children; only one respondent expressed dissatisfaction (this issue was then taken up with the co-ordinator and playgroup staff);
- parents valued the approachability and pleasantness of staff, and being allowed to stay until a child settled. They expressed happiness with how situations were handled in general;
- very little was reported as 'not liked' about the playgroup other than lack of an outdoor play space. One respondent felt that the committee "*don't feel confident enough to take on committee roles – it is only a committee in name*";
- regarding parental involvement by the 33 parents, 15 were now involved in the playgroup;
- regarding the role of parents in a playgroup, some did not know what the role was, others were not sure and one felt they had no role. However, many respondents felt that parents should get involved and have a role if they could and if asked to do so;
- understanding of 'what a community playgroup is' varied. Among the views expressed were that the community playgroup was for the "*local community*", "*parish*", "*everyone*"; that parents are or should be involved; that the community had a responsibility to keep it going. It was understood that there was a need for a committee and consequent meetings. However, seven of the 33 parents didn't know or weren't sure;
- community playgroups are more "*play-based*" and "*friendlier*" (than other early years provision);
- there was a need for "*local support*", from a broader base than just the parents whose children attended;
- affordability was mentioned a number of times. One parent commented that "*in private (playgroups) you pay more*"; another pointed out that the community playgroup was all she "*could afford*"; yet another parent felt that her address, which was in a disadvantaged area, excluded her from private playgroups; however, "*in community playgroups, everyone is welcome*".

Staff and committees were asked in the final evaluation if they thought parents were more involved as a result of *cpi*. Whereas it was felt unanimously that parents could always be drawn on for help, views varied as to whether there was more actual involvement, depending on the context of the services. In one playgroup there was a definite improvement, with parents helping out with fundraising, outings and attending meetings with the co-ordinator. This was evident at the final evaluation meeting when eight parents attended. In another playgroup they had felt they "*were always in limbo situation, waiting for something to happen*". Now having successfully secured their new building they "*are aware now through cpi of the need for parental involvement*". Another playgroup is hoping to "*instil the practice of parents as automatic members*" in their upcoming AGM. At present "*parents might not come as a committee member, but they'll come down and help if asked for specific tasks*". Of the two final playgroups it was felt in one that there had always been a degree of parental involvement.

3.7 Discussion

The evidence presented in this section shows that *cpi* has made a significant positive impact on the quality of the five playgroups in relation to the environment, the activities and routine and the adult-child interactions. Practice has also improved as a result of staff training; parents have reported that it reassures them that staff were being trained. Although the overall results are very positive, when they are broken down into the individual playgroups, two cases highlight issues that regularly affect early childhood services and which require further comment. These are: adult-child ratios and consistency of staff. In Playgroup 2 (see Appendix 7 for graphical representation of the observation visits; please note the group numbers are random identifiers) clear

3.8 Overview of Playgroups in operation Baseline Evaluation (2002)

Playgroup	Child Numbers	Staff on p/g Com's	Policies and Procedures	Development and Training See Table 6	Physical Environment	Parental Participation
Askea	20 children (26 on roll) 5 mornings	No	Informal recruitment policy Child Records Safety Statement	1. Starting NCVA II Childcare 2. Starting NCVA II Childcare 3. IPPA Introductory course First Aid Honorarium volunteers	One- roomed cottage owned by parish, in need of refurbishment, Limited equipment in need of replacement	No rota Outings
St Oliver's	18 (26 on roll) 5 mornings	Yes	Child Records Safety Statement	1. AMI Montessori + IPPA Introductory course 2. IPPA Introductory course Registered employee	Room attached to St Oliver's Centre Very poor repair, dark, vandalised, limited equipment.	Parents on committee No rota
Slieverue	24 (30 on roll) 4 mornings	No	Child Records Safety Statement	1. Child Development course First Aid 2. IPPA Introductory, First Aid, Child Development course Registered employees	Large bright temporary room in school. Much equipment in good repair.	Parents on committee No rota
Teach na bPáistí	20 (22 on roll) 3 mornings	Yes	Child Records Safety Statement	1. NCVA II Childcare 2. NCVA II Childcare First Aid Honorarium volunteers	Shared space with other groups, good equipment and storage Outdoor area	Parents on committee No rota
The Rower	12 (12 on roll) 3 mornings	Yes	Child Records	1. IPPA Introductory course 2. Childcare Course UK First Aid Registered employees	Galvanised extension to community hall, in poor repair, very limited equipment	Parents are automatic members on committee No rota

improvements had been demonstrated over the life of *cpi*. However, in the final evaluation regarding interaction, when one would expect a continued improvement, there was a very slight drop. This may be explained as follows: seven more children than in the previous observation were accommodated on the day of the final observation; so the child to adult ratio was increased. The staff did not have the time to engage in the kind of interactions that support adults as partners in children's play; their role was more of supervisor.

In the second situation, consistency of staff, in Playgroup 3 (see *Appendix 7*), there was less evidence of professional practice in all of the three areas. In this playgroup, staff had left and the group was in transition awaiting the recruitment of new staff. In the interim, volunteers were working on the day the observation was carried out. As a result the environment wasn't sufficiently set up. For example, the paints were in the press and not immediately accessible to the children, the equipment was not ordered and arranged (books were upside down), a routine was not evident as the one staff member who was present felt she was not in a position to direct the others. Thus, while the overall positive impact of *cpi* on practice is clear, as illustrated in the evidence presented in this section, the day-to-day realities and constraints that affect the quality of many ECCE services in Ireland, such as adult-child ratios and consistency of staff, were also evident despite *cpi*.

It is clear that the playgroup committees have been enhanced through engagement with *cpi* although the extent to which this has happened has varied between the individual committees. The commitment required for voluntary groups to manage services, the burden of dealing with legal issues regarding employment and salaries and with practice issues such as the development of policies and procedures are causes for concern. The two groups in *cpi* who received committee skills training gained substantially and felt that they had become effective working groups. However, given the fluctuating membership of playgroup committees, committee skills training needs to be available on an ongoing basis.

Overall, parents were very appreciative of the improvements in the services achieved through *cpi* and there was an increase in the participation and involvement of parents. However, an important finding of the evaluation was that parents were not always clear what a community playgroup was, and

what their role should be within it. Parental participation and involvement with services should be a feature of professional practice in all childcare and education services. Parents should know what is happening during the playgroup day, understand the policies and procedures of the service and be able to share information regarding their child's interests. For those parents who did go onto committees, there have been positive outcomes as reported in this evaluation. However, not all parents either want to be, or indeed should have to be, involved (See *Section 5* for further discussion on parental participation and how it is valued). Section 3.8 in table form provides an overview of the playgroups in operation at the baseline and final evaluation; section 3.9 makes recommendations for playgroups on practice, management committees and parental participation.

3.9 Recommendations

Early childhood practitioners

- The child-centred environment indoors and outdoors should be carefully planned to meet the needs of children by providing them with the optimum opportunities to work independently, to make choices, decisions and solve problems. Children should have access to the outdoors on a daily basis.
- A routine that worked well in the playgroups was as follows; it began with free play where children had free choice and initiated their own activities, followed by group activities where the adults initiated the activities, ensuring that each child had individual access to their own materials (e.g. glue, glue stick and paper); tidy up and wash hands time when children helped in the tidying; lunch time; outside time or hall time; and ended with story time.
- Attention should be paid to transition times. When changing from one activity to the next, children should have the choice to finish an activity slowly and without force. Welcoming time, tidy-up time, lunch time and outside time all require planning.
- Attention to healthy eating, including a healthy eating policy, is recommended.
- It is recommended that cultural diversity be reflected in the playgroups. This involves developing the sense of community and belonging that community playgroups in particular can offer families, including a sense of pride in their own work and their own

3.9 Overview of Playgroups in operation Final Evaluation (2004)

Playgroup	Child Numbers	Staff on p/g Com's	Policies and Procedures	Development and Training See Table 6	Physical Environment	Parental Participation
Askea	15 (29 on roll) 5 mornings 15 (29 on roll) 5 afternoons	No p/g Committ	All services have: Information Booklet for Parents Child Protection Health + Safety Behaviour Management Healthy Eating Policy Diversity/Equal ops Enrolment/admissions Positive behaviour management	1. NCVA Level II Childcare 2. NCVA Level II Childcare 3. NCVA Level II Childcare Registered employees EOCP Staffing Grant	Purpose- built premises, play areas established, Accessible open-ended equipment Outdoor area established	Outings No rota
St Oliver's	18 (25 on roll) 5 mornings	Yes		1. AMI Montessori + IPPA Introductory course 2 FETAC Level II childcare Registered employee EOCP Staffing Grant	Room attached to St Oliver's Centre, In good repair, play areas established, Accessible open-ended equipment Hall available Hopes to amalgamate with childcare centre	Parents on committee No rota
Slieverue	24 (30 on roll) 5 morning 8 3 afternoons	Yes	<i>Some have in addition:</i> Record keeping Open door/contact procedures Confidentiality	1. NCVA Level II Childcare 2. FETAC Level II Childcare Registered employees Committee Training Applying EOCP Staffing Grant	Purpose- built premises, play areas established, Accessible open-ended equipment Outdoor area established	Parents on committee No rota
Teach na bPáistí	18 (26 on roll) 5 mornings	Yes	Parental Involvement/ information charter	Change in staff FETAC Level II Childcare Registered employees Committee Training Applied for EOCP Staffing Grant	Shared space play areas established, Accessible open-ended equipment Outdoor area In search of new premises 2005	Parents on committee No rota
The Rower	12 (18 on roll) 3 mornings	Yes		1. FETAC Level II Childcare 2. FETAC Level II Childcare in progress Registered employees	Community centre In good repair, play areas established, Accessible open-ended equipment Outdoor area	Parents are automatic members on committee No rota

community. Photos of local shops, schools, churches, fire stations, and other familiar community images should be displayed in addition to images of outings, children at play and celebrations. Books, materials, and experiences should be provided that positively reflect diverse cultures that children are not likely to see, as well as those that represent their own family life and cultural group.

- Adults should engage with children as partners in their play, silently observing and listening to what children are doing before entering their play, assuming roles suggested by them and following children's cues.
- Adults should encourage children's initiatives by listening to them. Adults should provide opportunities for children to explore materials, for example, rolling paint on their hands or squeezing leaves outside.
- Adults should be specific when confirming children's accomplishments ('you've emptied all the sand into the sand tray').
- Adults should support interaction between children by allowing them to see each other as a resource, and should support problem solving (avoid 'fixing' the ill-fitting lid, but let children work it out for themselves) and independence (choosing their own materials for play).
- Supporting conflict resolution by children is recommended. This involves adults keeping children's developmental characteristics in mind: remaining calm; acknowledging and talking about what each child is feeling; asking the question 'what happened' and re-stating the problem; involving children as active participants in finding solutions (rather than solve problems for them); helping children choose a solution and, finally, being prepared to give follow-up support.
- The quality of interactions between the adults and children in a service is enhanced by a greater adult to child ratio. A recommended ratio for professional practice is one adult to eight pre-school children. For optimum child development, a limit of 20 children per room is further recommended.
- It is recommended that early childhood practitioners incorporate planning in their daily routines, building on children's strengths and interests and putting the child at the centre of the planning process. They could ask 'what were

the children playing with today in free play that we can add to for tomorrow? Should we bring in some more materials for the art area? Do the children need more space in the building area, how could we achieve that?' Planning involves setting written goals and reflecting on progress.

- A structure for holding meetings within the service where reflective practice, evaluation and action planning can happen should be established. Professional practice requires observation, assessment, sharing and planning.
- Through the experience of *cpi*, training has had a very positive impact. It is recommended that all staff should have continual access to training: both accredited and in-service professional development. Staff should avail of specific child protection training provided through the Health Service Executive or other relevant agencies.
- Staff qualifications and certificates should be displayed publicly to highlight the training acquired by staff in community playgroups.

Management committees

The structure of community playgroups requires a management committee. It is recommended that committees:

- encourage parental participation as well as participation by the wider community;
- allocate tasks to encourage a more equal ownership and distribution of work;
- minute every decision;
- be aware of employment and financial responsibilities;
- include a social and fun element;
- have regular meetings approximately every six weeks in order to keep abreast of the work;
- include the play leader and support open, transparent and two-way communication;
- identify sources of support when a problem arises and deal with problems that arise;
- ensure policies and procedures are implemented and up to date;
- establish a three-year rather than a one-year committee structure; new members need to be informed; an induction period is needed; and training should be provided on committee skills on an ongoing basis.

Parental participation

Parental participation in the services is closely linked to the issue of management committees. From the experience of the parents in *cpi* it is recommended that:

- the importance of parental participation in the development of community playgroups be made clear to parents from the beginning;
- services adopt a variety of ways of delivering information: having a notice board, giving notes, asking parents verbally to notify others and, as is the practice in one *cpi* playgroup, group texting;
- parent booklets should be provided for each family; this could include an explanation of the philosophy and ethos of community playgroups in addition to opening times, activities, daily routines and any policies and procedures developed;
- policies and procedures should be available to parents, at a minimum, on admissions, child protection, behaviour management, parental involvement, health and safety, record keeping and confidentiality policy;
- parents should be regularly asked for their views on how they feel their child is getting on in the service;
- a skills or talent bank for parents could be established at the beginning of every year; parents could be asked for a special skill they would like to contribute: cooking, gardening, sport, story telling or art or, indeed, a willingness to be on a parent rota. Parents' contributions to the playgroup, however small, should be valued;
- training and social outings for parents combined with fun fundraising ideas such as a sponsored 'toddle' could be provided.

The next section examines *cpi* as a model of delivery, looking at the evidence of how support and increased funding can enhance the quality of provision, with attention to networking and influencing policy development.



section 4

***cpi:* Model of Delivery**



A central feature of the improvements in practice of the playgroups that were demonstrated in *Section 3* was the combination of providing the support of a co-ordinator as well as financial support for each participating playgroup. The first part of this section evaluates the wide-ranging work undertaken by the co-ordinator. The findings on how the funding affected the groups and how it was deployed are then presented. Funding and support represented the core components of *cpi*. However, there were other components in the *cpi* model of delivery including networking, integration and influencing policy development. The role these broader components played in *cpi* are also analysed in this section. The regional conference hosted by the agencies of *cpi* in October 2004 is one example of this broader aspect of the work of *cpi*.



4.1 Role of co-ordinator

The co-ordinator's post was a part-time one of 20 hours per week (see *Appendix 9* for person specification and personnel profile of a co-ordinator or development worker). The main purpose of the job was to co-ordinate the day-to-day operation of *cpi*. This involved assisting the five playgroups to develop a three-year quality improvement programme and supporting them in the implementation of this programme. The role of the co-ordinator was examined as a central element of the formative evaluation from the outset. The key elements of the role of the co-ordinator included:

- Working with the advisory group to implement

all stages of *cpi*;

- Selecting the five playgroups that became the core of *cpi*;
- Building up a trusting relationship with the playgroups and becoming the critical support person to each group for the duration of the project;
- Collecting baseline data to form the basis for ongoing evaluation and review;
- Assisting each playgroup to draw up appropriate plans that would identify the targets they would like to reach, including a range of structural and process elements, such as curriculum used, training and support for staff, parental and community involvement, premises, environment and equipment;
- Through appropriate transference of skills, empowering the staff and committees to improve the quality of service as agreed;
- Identifying and implementing a networking programme between the five playgroups;
- Liaising with other support personnel involved with the playgroups, such as the SEHB, county childcare committees, community projects and the IPPA;
- Attending advisory meetings and helping the advisory group to identify the main issues arising from the work.

At each stage in the evaluation process, staff and committees were asked about the difference the support of the co-ordinator of *cpi* had made to the playgroups and, at year one and two, what could be done differently in the future. There was unanimous approval for the particular qualities of the co-ordinator and agreement on the value of having such support in place. Starting from the baseline meeting with committees (when the co-ordinator had been in place for almost 11 months) and every subsequent year, those key qualities were collated under a number of themes. The co-ordinator:

- provided expertise, ideas and information ("if she doesn't know she'll go and find out");
- prioritised how to spend the funding;
- was accessible, approachable and accommodating ("phone contact can occur at any time");
- worked efficiently (returned phone calls, followed up on queries, ensured funding was administered in a timely manner);

- gave encouragement, confidence, and enthusiasm to the groups.

Regarding the value of the role at baseline and final evaluation it was deemed *“very important to have such a support”*. The focused support helped *“change the atmosphere of the work in a progressive way”*, it *“helped to get ideas off the ground”* and provided *“help with training and information about playgroup organisation”*.

The advisory group (final evaluation) echoed these views and also felt that the role of co-ordinator underlined the necessity for ongoing support to community playgroups. The need for relationship building was identified and it was felt the co-ordinator had been particularly successful at developing trust and getting things done, allowing the groups to “scaffold” their development, taking one step at a time and ensuring that they were ready for the next.

When asked at the baseline evaluation what could be done differently in the future, the staff and committees expressed complete satisfaction with all aspects of the process. The efficiency with which money was drawn down and the role of the co-ordinator was appreciated. As one group put it: *“its perfect now, the funding is good, and we have support when needed – what could be better?”* One group, however, said that having regular, structured meetings in order to ensure continuity and have tasks set and targets met by the meeting date would have been useful for them. A suggestion was offered of a meeting a minimum of twice a term, ideally once every six weeks, which could help motivation and organisation. A second group concurred. This group was unsure how to avail of the co-ordinator’s support for the betterment of the playgroup and was looking for clearer guidance. These issues were addressed by the co-ordinator and in the mid-*cpi* evaluation the *“group (felt it) had had much more contact”* (with the co-ordinator).

When asked about the factors that helped in the role, the co-ordinator identified the following:

- Support of line manager – regular supervision at the beginning of the process. The development officer and the co-ordinator met once a month and then once every six to eight weeks, linked to an advisory group meeting or other occasion;
- Support of evaluator – within the context of all support, the ability to speak freely; there was a climate of trust. The evaluator and the co-ordinator met about four times a year and had telephone contact;
- External supervision and support – 1.5 hours every six weeks;
- Openness and commitment of the playgroups’ organising groups;
- Flexibility of the role: it wasn’t set; there were no hidden agendas, it was a needs-based approach. That openness in setting up the work helped the co-ordinator meet the needs of the groups;
- The support of the advisory group; both at meetings and outside of meetings.

Four core activities of the co-ordinator’s work are now discussed in greater detail. These are: visits, action planning, cluster groups and general support.

4.1.1 Visits

The visits to the playgroups by the co-ordinator were crucial to the success of *cpi*. As one member of the advisory group with experience of quality improvement said (final evaluation): *“Quality improvement is basically about relationships. Becoming a ‘mentor’/ ‘critical friend’/ advisor to services requires that we build trusting, empowering relationships. Understanding the complex cultural and resource context of a service requires on-site contact”*. She went on to say that the co-ordinator had successfully impressed on the advisory group *“just how different each service was and the complexity of the relationships and dynamics that set their operational context”*. It was important that the co-ordinator became familiar with each of the playgroups and their communities and was prepared to respond to the emerging needs of the groups and the range of support they required. Table 8 outlines the number of visits conducted by the co-ordinator.

The co-ordinator’s first visit entailed observation; arising from that, and informed by the evaluation visit, a short-term plan (action plan) was drawn up. The second visit checked on the implementation of the plan. The co-ordinator felt that the visits influenced practice by getting staff to think about it. She noted an immediate impact in the changing of rooms, buying a new piece of equipment or providing a new activity. The longer-term impact involved thinking and teasing out with the staff *“why do you do it?”* and *“why do you do it the way you do it?”* Staff tended to come back and say *“we were thinking about what you said”*. This encouraged

Table 8 Co-ordinator visits to playgroups over the life of *cpi*

Year 1 - 2002	Year 2 - 2003	Year 3 - 2004
Once a term	Moved to two per term with up to four extra visits for issues arising	Two per term, with extra visits for issues arising

reflection and encouraged staff to look at the situation from the child's perspective. The visits also provided experience in drawing up a plan, and the tools to ensure it was implemented.

The staff and committees of the five playgroups expressed unanimous satisfaction with the visits from the co-ordinator in the mid-*cpi* evaluation and in the final evaluation. The groups appreciated the new frequency of visits, the increased communication, the focus on the present situation, the positive changes in the groups that resulted, such as children bringing in their own healthy lunches, the lack of interference in the groups combined with useful recommendations: *"there was great insight from the co-ordinator. If we said we couldn't get things to work, she'd suggest a different way of doing the same thing – sometimes it would work then"*. In addition, any ideas developed by the groups were discussed: *"she didn't just come in, say her piece and go. We always had come-back with her. She wasn't 'above us' but was always on our side. She wouldn't get offended. She would say 'that's fine' if we didn't agree – but would ask 'what did you do instead?'"* It was identified that while it was great to get financial support, it was also good to have someone to keep groups on their toes.

4.1.2 Action planning and reflective practice

Action planning was the process by which the groups with the co-ordinator drew up their ideas into concrete plans that were to be implemented. The planning started after the evaluation framework was devised, and when trust had been established with the groups. The formative nature of the evaluation identified themes that were to be concentrated on the following year, for example, after the first visit and meetings with staff and committees, the following issues emerged that needed attention:

- Strategies for active learning and supportive adult interaction strategies, particularly sharing control, transitions, length of waiting times for children and encouraging independence;
- policies and procedures to be developed;

- parental involvement to be encouraged;
- diversity, identity and culture to be explored;
- room arrangement and areas be made more specific;
- planning generally to be encouraged;
- daily routine (to be communicated to children);
- outdoor play to be developed;
- healthy eating;
- the potential for cluster group training.

During years two and three of *cpi*, short-term action plans were developed every term. It was hoped that regular planning would have long-term impact on practice; that planning would be valued by the groups and that reflective practice and evaluation would be incorporated in the future. The advisory group at the final evaluation said the action planning *"provides a practical framework to develop practice and the secondary benefit of planning/reflection on regular basis"*. Each action plan was very detailed (an example of an actual plan is presented in *Appendix 4*) and corresponded to the evaluation framework headings.

Staff and committees expressed satisfaction regarding action planning. Groups identified that the process created awareness, supported planning in general and placed a structure on what had to be done. Just having a plan was appreciated and there was agreement that it was better to have one in place to set the goals and review consequent progress. Having funds to support the ideas was an advantage. Having the plans written down was valued. It was identified that the plan needed to be simple, specific and flexible. It was also agreed that much *"had been achieved"* through planning.

There are two separate issues here: first, the action planning as part of *cpi* (which was successful), and second, the development and continuation of reflective practice. As one member of the advisory group outlined *"there is an on-going dilemma. Where providers have a low level of training they are dependant on being told what to do and they tend to do what will be assessed. For on-going quality*

improvement, it is imperative that services take responsibility for setting their own targets and action plans".

The evidence shows that there has been development in reflective practice as a result, regarding planning and setting the playgroups' own targets. The staff in the five playgroups (final evaluation) were asked how their practice had changed as a result of *cpi* regarding reflective thinking and planning. They identified that *"weekly, monthly meetings are important for reflection"* and that they *"now look at activities and the room from a child's point of view"* and *"incorporate what children want more"*. *"The routine may be changed and adapted as a consequence"*. They felt that they *"will plan in the sense of making lists"* and divide tasks as in *"who's going to do the cleaning?"* One group *"always talks now at the end of the day regarding planning"*. In another *"we plan our week on Mondays and if one of us had a good idea we would talk about it before we leave the playroom, if it is for the next day"*. When asked, as part of the final evaluation observation visit, most groups said that they met and planned more frequently than in the past. One said: *"it has become a habit – we've started writing plans; now a diary is kept open for everything. We know it worked – it got changes implemented"*.

In general the co-ordinator felt that planning progressed at a slower rate than had been envisaged at the beginning. However, the action plans gave the playgroups a framework with which to improve practice. In the main the plans used were 'to do' lists. However, the co-ordinator also acknowledged that *"making lists is the start of reflective practice"*. Clearly the benefits of review and planning have been appreciated by the playgroups: *"review and planning keeps focus fresh"*; it *"would be a good practice to continue"*; and it *"helps to focus"*. Regarding evaluation and reflective practice, the co-ordinator identified that *"Reflective practice takes time and skill, the groups involved in cpi, though their practice has improved and developed in many ways, they could not be said to be at the stage of reflective practitioning"*. In order to develop reflective practice and gain long-term benefit groups need to have ongoing support.

4.1.3 Cluster groups

Cluster groups were hosted where the five playgroups came together with committee members and parents for training or information. At the beginning of *cpi* it was seen as logistically

difficult to get the groups together, given the distances between them. It was considered more important to emphasise links and networking with supports within their own areas, especially since *cpi* was a relatively short-term project. However, the management of *cpi* embraced the idea of cluster groups once it became apparent the enjoyment that the groups got, the sense of belonging, and the value of sharing experiences. Furthermore, the cluster group days provided important opportunities for training.

The cluster groups were organised at mid-term breaks and in holiday periods to facilitate all playgroups, parents and committees to take part. Initially they took place in a hotel in Kilkenny during the day (as it was equidistant to most groups). A participation fee was paid to all, in addition to travelling and childcare expenses as appropriate, and lunch was provided. Hosting the sessions in their own playgroups was suggested so groups could see each other's settings. This proved very popular. Table 9 provides details of the cluster group sessions (see Section 3.4 and Section 3.8 for further information on training conducted in *cpi*).

In the mid-*cpi* evaluation, staff, committees and any parents who attended expressed unanimous approval of the cluster group days. The cluster days were "brilliant" was a view repeated many times. It was said that visiting other playgroups promoted sharing of ideas, exchanges of information, knowledge that other groups were in the same situation, social interaction, enjoyment, new learning was achieved and a variety of topics were covered. The co-ordinator found that groups often gave insightful comments and some thought provoking discussion ensued during these sessions. In the final evaluation, other issues regarding the value of the cluster group sessions were identified by the groups and the advisory group; the trust and the networking, sharing and connecting that were developed with each other. The groups and the co-ordinator found training was particularly successful when it linked theory to practical experiential learning; particularly training on interaction and conflict resolution delivered by a High/Scope Trainer. The development officer of the KHF felt that the cluster sessions were very well planned and great commitment was shown both by the delivery of the sessions and the attendance. She also felt that they helped the groups to become more active in *cpi* and to take ownership of the process.

Table 9 Cluster group date, topic, venue and participants

DATE	CLUSTER GROUP TOPIC	VENUE	PARTICIPANTS
2002 - August	Review <i>cpi</i> to date Introduce evaluator	Kilkenny Day time	Playgroups, parents, committees co-ordinator, evaluator
2003 – June	Active learning Cultural diversity Role of co-ordinator Quality	Kilkenny Day time	Playgroups, parents, committees advisory group member, co-ordinator, evaluator
2003 – August	Follow- up Organisation of cluster days in each other's groups Cultural diversity 18- month plan for <i>cpi</i>	Kilkenny Day time	Playgroups, parents, committees co-ordinator, development officer (KHF)
2003 – October	First cluster group meeting held in a playgroup Open-ended materials Upcoming evaluation visit	Playgroup Evening	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator
2003 – December	Outside time Planning	Playgroup Evening	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator
2004 – February	Interaction and Conflict resolution	Kilkenny Day time	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator, High/Scope trainer
2004 – March	Review of clusters Active learning Cultural diversity Others	Playgroup Evening	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator
2004 – May	Review of evaluation tool Child protection NCCA document Introducing conference	Playgroup Evening	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator
2004 – September	Preparation for autumn conference hosted by <i>cpi</i>	Playgroup Evening	Playgroups, parents, committees, co-ordinator, advisory group member
2004 – October	Practice run for conference	Kilkenny Evening	Playgroups, co-ordinator, public speaking advisor

The playgroups themselves not only enjoyed seeing other playgroups but derived value from the experience of hosting the sessions: *"people coming to this playgroup were confronted by the 'outside' which was described as 'off-putting'. They came in and loved the inside. It affirmed this playgroup"*.

4.1.4 General support

In addition to the three areas discussed in Sections 4.1-3, the co-ordinator provided general support, which varied depending on the needs of each group. The development officer of KHF noted that the general support aspect of the co-ordinator's role served to build up trust and laid a good foundation

for the evaluation and the co-ordinator's work with the playgroup committees. One committee member said at the mid-*cpi* evaluation *"the playschool aspects are easy to achieve (she felt); a functioning committee is most difficult"*. She had regretted that she hadn't asked the co-ordinator to meet more with the committee. This support of the committee is explored further in Section 3.4 *Playgroup management committees*. One pre-school services officer identified that the co-ordinator provided *"crucial transition support"* which was important to one group who moved to a temporary room in a new building before getting a permanent home.

The conference hosted by *cpi* in October 2004 (see Section 4.5) provides a further example of how the co-ordinator's support role worked in practice. With careful preparation, the co-ordinator encouraged the playgroups to present for the first time at a public conference. The value of that work was identified by one playgroup committee discussing the conference: *"the co-ordinator prepared them well. There was good planning on her behalf; it was very professional – took lay people and made them superstars. People don't give credit to all the work undertaken by staff in the playgroup (the conference gave them an opportunity to articulate the work). The staff performed so well, they were so confident. The timing was excellent"*.

It is important to explore the kind of support required for the role of a development worker (co-ordinator) and the need to work within the contexts of community development. The co-ordinator herself replied, when asked what kind of general support she needed to give: *"everything" from "help with parents booklets, recruitment, EOCP application forms, builders, planning, personnel issues, drawing up contracts, choosing books and equipment, liaising between committee and staff, conflict resolution, physically driving people to meetings - whatever was needed was done and that need varied between the groups"*. In addition, the life circumstances of the adults and families involved in the playgroups, their celebrations and tragedies, inevitably affected the life of *cpi*, and changed priorities and the support that the co-ordinator needed to offer. One of the staff in the playgroups said that the co-ordinator *"had the interest of the community playgroup and KHF well balanced"*. It was acknowledged unanimously (throughout all phases of the evaluation and by all participants) that support was essential and had a critical effect on the groups, particularly in validating their work and the importance of community playgroups.

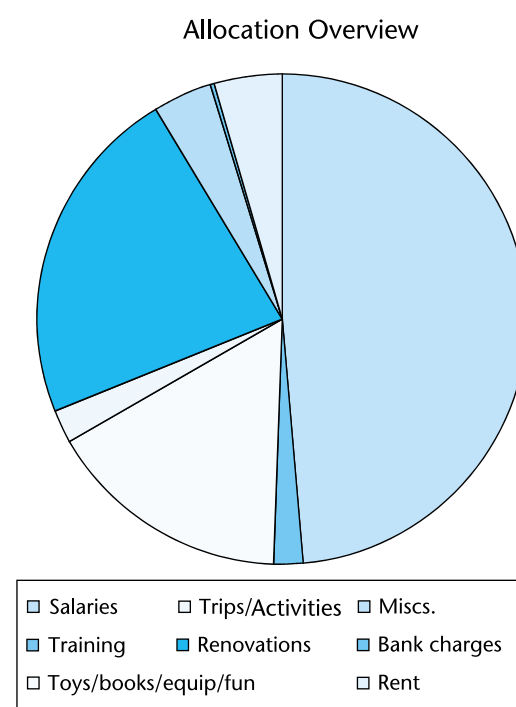
Participants came to appreciate this support very much and they continue to need it for two particular reasons: for its motivating impact and when, at times of difficulties, they need *"an outside 'objective' opinion"*. This is exemplified by the following two reports from playgroup staff: *"Its not as if cpi came in a rule book, with a list of instructions. Everything you learned yourself. Learning assertiveness through confidence and belief in yourself. That's what the staff got from engagement in the process of cpi"*. Another playgroup acknowledged *"the co-ordinator had come up with the ideas and the drive to keep it*

going. If there was just money there, we wouldn't have got this far. There was a need to find best ways of spending it wisely".

4.2 Impact of funding on the playgroups

There was consensus among the advisory group, the staff and the playgroup committees that the security of knowing that there was a set amount of funding available (even if only for three years) provided space for participants to think about everyday practice and planning. Thus, the financial support was a critical element of *cpi*. Having money to spend with some guidance provided an opportunity for services to think about what was really important in the kind of experiences they offered to children, as well as thinking about what was important for them as adults in order to be a positive force in children's and families' lives. The impact of the funding *"has helped participants to make significant progress and given them a sense of competency, achievement and pride that allows them to continue the never-ending journey towards quality"* (advisory group member, final evaluation). Table 10 provides an overview of how the playgroups in *cpi* allocated the funding over the three years (see also Appendix 10 for a detailed Financial Summary).

Table 10 Overview of *cpi* funding spend



An analysis of the playgroups' expenditure of the funding provided by *cpi* over the first two years reveals that the greatest amount of funding went on salaries. This was followed by building work, equipment and, finally, training. As identified by the development officer of KHF *"when staff have opportunities for training and development they will leave for better salaries, unless the terms and conditions of their own services improve and indeed they should leave as is their right"*. It is important to note that the figures presented in Table 10 and Appendix 10 relate to funding provided through *cpi* only. The overall running costs and the finances provided by fees, fundraising and Section 65 grant aid are not included. Additional monies received from non-*cpi* sources were spent on similar expenditure to that indicated in this section such as salaries, training, equipment, day-to-day running costs and rent. While community playgroups are often situated in community-owned buildings they still have to pay rent. In 2004 the five groups in *cpi* paid rents between €1,300 and €3,850 per annum to their respective landlords. These are considerable expenses for services that are trying to maintain low fees (see also Section 5.4 Affordability).

The following points summarise the comments made by participants in the evaluation on the impact of funding on the playgroups:

- **Improved premises:** equipment has been bought; the premises have all been upgraded; consequently children have access to greater resources and facilities;
- **Appreciation** by the community: one parent had sent older children to the same playgroup: *"this has completely changed. The facilities are wonderful"*. Another family had moved from Dublin and reported that the *"facilities are second to none; it is a privilege to have this in the community"*;
- **Staff Development:** staff are proud of where they work; they are providing a more professional, rather than an informal, service. They are valued by having a salary and affirmed by the interest in them. Staff have had opportunities for networking and training; training has improved work practice. Extra staff have been employed due to funding;
- **More sessions:** extra days and afternoons have been offered to the community;
- **Sustainability:** services have become more sustainable (identified by two groups); one

service said that the service *"may still be here but it would have been scraping the barrel"*;

- **Supported funding:** because the funding was *"supported"* there was security in knowing that wise investments were being made. Some of the playgroups felt it was *"difficult to isolate funding from support"*; the *"success was funding combined with advice on how to spend it"*.

The availability of funding meant that practical support could be offered very quickly, immediate needs could be addressed with confidence, the opportunity to link practice and development was maximised. As one member of the advisory group said: *"the services have all improved; their premises, staffing conditions and levels of training have improved and children and families enjoy better quality services"*. This investment reaps rewards not only for the existing cohort of young children and their families but for future generations of these families and future attendees in the playgroups.

As a final comment on funding, it is also interesting to note that as a by-product of the quality improvement approach taken by *cpi*, services were actively engaged in thinking about, and putting into practice, developments and improvements that didn't necessarily cost money, such as re-arranging the areas, changing the routine, focusing on adult-child interactions. These had been prompted by good questioning at cluster days, co-ordinator visits to services and the process of the formative evaluation.

4.3 Networking and integration

The management and co-ordinator had recognised that *cpi* from the start had promoted and raised awareness of the place of community playgroups in Irish society. These roles were incorporated among the desired outcomes (see Section 1). Networking and integration became central to this aspect of the project. The *cpi* created a forum to facilitate the inclusion and participation of a wide variety of interests, all of them concerned about community playgroups. Working relationships were enhanced and *cpi* provided for information sharing. One member of the advisory board described the significance of the learning from the networking and integration aspect of *cpi*: *"a realisation that you must promote and advertise your work, I appreciate the learning regarding advocacy, partnership and promotion from this programme"*.

Examples of networking and integration included engagement with the relevant county childcare committee, in addition to other networks and local structures, the development of an information leaflet about *cpi*, and the production and dissemination of the *cpi* Interim Report. In the final evaluation the regional conference (see Section 4.5) was highlighted a number of times as a useful mechanism for disseminating information and providing affirmation at a local level.

4.4 Influencing policy development

Linked closely to networking and integration was the expressed desire for collaborative action in order to influence policy development. Throughout the project the KHF was very proactive in disseminating the learning of *cpi*, engaging with policy development agencies and in publishing findings. This is illustrated in the following list of activities engaged by KHF on behalf of *cpi*:

- Partnership with the health board; their investment and commitment to community playgroups; guiding the health board to continue funding for community playgroups as part of their new family support strategy;
- *cpi* is a case study in the ADM Annual Report (2003) and on the Economic and Social Forum's website under priority area Social Inclusion and Childcare;
- The wide dissemination of the *cpi* Interim Report (2003) with a cover letter generated invitations to meetings with the:
 - Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education;
 - National Children's Office;
 - Family Support Agency;
 - Educational Disadvantage Committee.
- A presentation was delivered at the OMEP (L'organisation Mondiale pour L'Education Prèscolaire) Conference 2003 and inclusion of a paper in the conference proceedings;
- There is ongoing engagement with the newly formed Irish Childcare Policy Network;
- A presentation was delivered at the CECDE (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education) conference 2004;
- A presentation was delivered at the Family Support Conference, hosted by the SEHB in order to formulate Family Support Policy (2003);
- Submissions were made to the National

Economic and Social Forum on *Early Childhood Care and Education* and to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on their *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) raising awareness of the need for a cohesive policy framework;

- An article about *cpi* appeared in IPPA, The Early Childhood Organisation's summer 2003 edition of *Children at Play*; Childlink's Special Edition on *Childcare in Disadvantaged Communities* Barnardos (Winter, 2003) and in a Barnardos publication, *Supporting Quality* (French, 2003);
- A collaborative consortium involving the IPPA and the KHF among other relevant family support and early childhood organisations has commissioned research on community playgroups nationally;
- The *cpi* informed KHF's approach to the Tallaght West Small Grant Programme. KHF, in partnership with Atlantic Philanthropies, began this programme in July 2004 to provide grants and support to community groups working in the early years;
- The hosting of a regional conference (outlined in Section 4.5 below).

4.5 Regional conference

On 27 October 2004, the KHF and SEHB hosted a conference called 'Community Playgroups in the South East: Exploring Issues Past and Present', in the New Park Hotel, Kilkenny. The conference was aimed at staff, parents, and management committees of community playgroups, statutory and voluntary services that support playgroups, and policymakers. The 130 participants were invited to celebrate the five community playgroups involved in *cpi*. The conference provided an opportunity to share the experience arising from *cpi* as the project came to an end; meet with other community playgroup staff, committee members and parents; explore issues of relevance for the sustainability of community playgroups; develop recommendations for the future; and to create a forum for agencies and policymakers who support community-based playgroups. Thus, opportunities for networking and participation were maximised.

A 10-minute video of a playgroup in session was shown and all five playgroups made presentations to the conference. These presentations were made by staff, committee members and parents who had no public speaking experience. It illustrated the

personal effort that individuals were willing to make for the playgroups they were so proud to be part of.

In addition to the presentations by the five playgroups in *cpi*, Dr. Noirin Hayes, Dublin Institute of Technology, delivered a keynote address. Two workshops were held. The purpose of the first workshop (conducted in 12 groups of approximately ten participants) was to identify the key issues or challenges for community playgroups. Those key issues were collated and themed by members of the advisory group and the evaluator between workshops. In the second workshop groups were informed of the key challenges that had emerged and were then requested to make recommendations to address them. The morning's workshop identified the key challenges of funding, staffing, affordable childcare, family support, sustainability and policy as follows:

Funding

Concern was expressed regarding:

- Uncertainty of future funding and the consequent lack of ability to plan;
- The withdrawal of the crèche supplements from the Department of Social and Family Affairs;
- The need to develop funding in a way that supported the values (and value) of community playgroups. In the push for profit, there is a change in ethos away from that of the community playgroups;
- The fact that, in some cases, having EOCP funding meant Section 65 (Health Board) funding was unavailable.

Staffing

Concerns were raised about:

- Maintaining the adult/child ratio in services;
- The lack of staff availability;
- The lack of Garda clearance;
- Job satisfaction – long unpaid hours being worked in the sector;
- Introduction and implementation of a salary structure;
- The need for training, professionalism and a professional progression route;
- The need to acknowledge the important role of volunteers and to acknowledge that not all staff need formal qualifications.

Affordable Childcare

It was felt strongly that:

- Children should not have to pay to play and socialise together;
- There should be equal access for all children to early years education;
- There is a conflict between what is affordable childcare on the one hand versus sustainable childcare on the other.

Family Support

It was determined that:

- Community playgroups should be seen as an important family support structure;
- The work of parents in community playgroups should be acknowledged (on committees, rotas and generally helping out);
- Resources available for community playgroups should be sourced, accessed and centralised for all groups;
- There is a need to develop understanding and interpretation of what community playgroups are about on the part of parents and society.

Sustainability

In order for groups to remain sustainable the following issues emerged:

- There is a difficulty attracting people to become involved in community playgroup committees;
- There is a need for ongoing guidance and support for committees and playgroups – a co-ordinator or development worker was seen as very important;
- Some community playgroups feel under pressure to form a limited company; this involves having to learn the rules and fulfil the duties of company officers, a challenge for community groups;
- Some services are operating in temporary or shared premises and require suitable premises to call their own;
- Services are paying substantial rent for premises owned by the communities they serve. This rent is a significant drain on the already limited resources of the community playgroups and affects their ability to keep their fees low;
- The need for community playgroups to respond to the evolving needs of their community regarding after-school and drop-in services.

Policy

Policy should address:

- A rights-based approach for government – every child's right to pre-school education;
- The need for policy to be child-centred;
- The need to centralise and increase support services and resources for all.

Recommendations made arising from these concerns have been incorporated in the relevant sections throughout this document and in *Appendix 11*.

4.6 Discussion

A critical aspect of *cpi*, which is highlighted throughout this report, is the combination of funding and support. Increased funding can enhance quality provision. Considering the very robust positive responses that have been gathered through the evaluation it is clear that relatively small funding can make a substantial difference. This implies that long-term core funding must be provided to keep community playgroups sustainable and to enhance the quality in the services. In *cpi* the bulk of funding was directed towards salaries, demonstrating the necessity for investing in and valuing professional practice.

However, the experience of *cpi* indicates that capacity building, support, guidance, education and affirmation must also be provided. The role of a co-ordinator in *cpi* has emerged as critical to creating the conditions whereby effective relationships are developed and sustained to improve quality in the services. The role is primarily one of enabler. It is characterised by commitment, careful, progressive movement with the playgroups, listening and observing, and being clear before moving to the next stage. In *cpi* there was an amount of relationship building in the pre-development stage that led to development of the groups' confidence and capacity.

One of the main challenges for the co-ordinator in the efficient delivery of *cpi* was the geographical spread of the five playgroups. Since the co-ordinator was a distance from the services, this resulted in long journeys. A further challenge was time. The co-ordinator commented that 20 hours a week was not always sufficient to perform the job efficiently. A further issue affecting the co-ordinator was the low profile of community playgroups in general.

The delivery of the *cpi* model was sufficiently

flexible to deal with unexpected challenges and difficulties. Emphasis was placed on networking and integration. Work of this nature, which is of value, should be profiled and promoted. A substantial effort is required to do this successfully, particularly in a large area spanning five counties and four community care areas. Other work included report writing; attending conferences and linking with relevant agencies. Allied to networking and integration the project lobbied for community playgroups and contributed to policy development by responding to public invitations for submissions, presenting at conferences, responding to opportunities to highlight the issues for these groups and hosting a regional conference. These particular aspects of the project took more commitment and work than was originally foreseen; this is partially due to the developing policy climate in Ireland as referred to in the *Introduction*.

4.7 Recommendations

Co-ordinator and development worker

- Any co-ordinator or development worker should have a special interest and motivation to work in the early childhood sector; have expertise on early childhood care and education; know where and how to access information and keep abreast of changes in legislation that would affect community playgroups (*Appendix 9* provides a *Personnel Profile*);
- Direct ongoing contact through visits between a co-ordinator or development worker and the site is recommended and is essential for initial building of trust;
- It is recommended that visits should be at a minimum twice a term in order to effectively enhance quality;
- The purpose of the first visit in each term should be to observe, give feedback and develop a short-term plan; the second visit should be to check whether the plans have been implemented. Should the role be linked to funding, clarity should be established from the start about the role of the co-ordinator or development worker and on whether suggestions have got to be implemented;
- Reflective practice should be encouraged through establishing a structure for meetings within the service where evaluation and action planning can happen. Concrete action planning and short-term plans should be developed by

the staff, committees and co-ordinator/development worker as part of the process. Naming a person to carry out the action and setting a time for implementation is also recommended. The plans should be simple, specific and relatively flexible (Appendix 2 provides the format that was employed in *cpi* and a sample plan);

- Creating opportunities for community playgroups to get together in cluster groups is recommended. Playgroups can share ideas, information and resources and, where possible, training. In *cpi* it was also an occasion for nurturing and social interaction. It is recommended that playgroups open their doors to others and host cluster group sessions; generating pride in the services and supporting a network of playgroups;
- The general support needs of community playgroups should not be underestimated; the role of co-ordinator or development worker needs to be flexible enough to respond to situations as the need arises.

Funding

- The fact that most funding went on current as opposed to capital expenditure implies that, in order to provide sustainable high-quality sessional services, funding will have to be ongoing, long term and directed towards salaries (as opposed to once-off capital grants for building and equipment).

The next and final section provides evidence from *cpi* that illustrates that community playgroups can operate as a family support measure in the community.



section 5

Community Playgroups and Family Support



The *cpi* arose from a shared understanding of the value of supporting communities, community development and community projects in all their complexity. The voluntary commitments of people at local level were acknowledged as was the need to enable, support and build the capacity of groups to engage fully in their communities. In this section community playgroups are discussed and analysed with regard to their role in community development:

- community playgroups as a family support measure;
- benefits to communities;
- links to voluntary and statutory bodies;
- affordability.

5.1 Community playgroups as a family support measure

The realisation that community playgroups are a family support measure encourages much support of community playgroups. At the mid-*cpi* evaluation the greatest benefit in terms of family support that parents whose children attended the five participating community playgroups reported was the social networking opportunities they gained by their children attending a playgroup. The need for parents to have a break was also identified. One parent remarked that the child needed a break from the parent. The children's happiness at the playgroup was paramount, and having the child safely occupied brought peace of mind. In addition, one parent felt that the child was *"much better at doing things when asked"*; another felt her child *"was much better behaved at home since she started playgroup"*; and a third said that it allowed her *"time on her own with the new baby"*.

In response to the question 'does the playgroup (and community playgroups in general) support your family in any way, and what is that way?' parents in the final evaluation (see Section



2.4.3 and Appendix 6) were very clear that the playgroup did support their families. There was almost complete concurrence with the responses at the mid-*cpi* evaluation. Parents referred to opportunities for both the child and parent to engage socially with others, for children's learning, for both parents and child to have a break from each other and so on. One grandparent said that it *"gives me a break, I mind her when her mother is gone to work, I would be lost without the playgroup"*.

In the final evaluation, there was also a greater appreciation of family support and a greater variety in the ways families felt they were supported. One way that was identified was how the transition to school was made easier. *"You meet new parents and kids, get familiar with faces, you know who is going to be in school with your child, it makes the transition to big school easier,"* one parent said. Three of the parents had sick children; in two cases they were attending the playgroup and in the third a sibling was ill, which required frequent hospital visits. The care and attention the children received and the feeling of appreciation was apparent; parents said they were *"wary of leaving their children"* at first and relieved at *"knowing that the child is safe and happy"*.

The bonding that can occur among parents and the sharing of *"hassle"*, and the knowledge *"that you are not the only one with settling problems"* were identified. The confidence gained by engagement with the playgroup was reported. *"Yes (the playgroup does support me), I'm learning a lot more, I'm more informed about what children need, I'm much more confident about things, being on the committee is great, taking part in the conference was good"*. As another parent said, it is *"good for the child, therefore it's good for the family"*.

Community playgroups as a family support mechanism drew a unanimous response from the funding agencies, the advisory committee, the development officer (KHF) and the co-ordinator of *cpi* who agreed with what the parents had to say. Community playgroups are an important family support measure for the following reasons:

- They provide an opportunity to develop social networks, known to affect family well-being and thus the capacity for positive parenting (McKeown (2001); they help newcomers to integrate and young families to develop friendships;
- They provide accessible and flexible childcare to

meet changing needs, including parents' needs to enhance self-esteem and access informal training and part-time work;

- They provide an opportunity for parental participation, training for parenting, or committee roles; families involved in participative services became more knowledgeable about child development and good practice;
- Parents and children can benefit from a shared awareness of the importance and experience of play and the example of good practice with children;
- Children have an integrated opportunity for development in their own communities but particularly for social development and friendship;
- A listening ear, advice and support can be afforded to families in addition to information on accessing other supports and agencies, particularly for special needs, speech therapy, community involvement, training courses and job opportunities;
- Community groups operate an open-door policy to all children irrespective of ability, socio-economic status or ethnic background and provide the inclusive, non-stigmatising, universal services advocated in McKeown (2001) and *Best Health for Children* (2001);
- For many parents, participation in their local community playgroup has been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement;
- Being not-for-profit creates a particular ethos that is absent from the commercially run pre-school provision. It makes pre-school affordable for families on low incomes;
- They can be the first service that a family engages with; a good experience at this point can set a positive predisposition for school;
- Community playgroups have links (see Section 5.3) with public health nursing, language support and other appropriate services for families with young children;
- All of the respondents are committed to early intervention, as a more effective way in which to provide better services, and it is considered that the community playgroup provides a very acceptable model for such early intervention.

In summary, as one member of the advisory group

put it: *"a community playgroup where things are 'going well' offers an accessible, inviting, friendly, non-threatening and aesthetically pleasing environment to families. Parents can hand over their children to playgroup leaders in the knowledge that their children are safe, being well cared for, and are thriving. This matters to all families"*.

Ultimately, with appropriate support, community playgroups can strengthen the development of communities and enhance the quality of life for parents and children, so that they can reach their full potential, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas.

5.2 Benefits to the communities

In the final evaluation, staff and committees were asked did they feel that their communities had changed as a result of *cpi*. Overwhelmingly the responses implied that the changes were positive, communities had gained substantially. These benefits varied depending on the circumstances of the playgroup. It was felt overall that children and their families can now access a high-quality early childhood service; the playgroups all had a higher profile, raising the importance and benefit of stimulating early experiences for young children. There were more quality childcare places on offer. Many of the services were experiencing more visitors who were coming to admire the settings and were commenting on good ideas (regarding *"layout of play areas"* or *"shelving"*) seen for implementation elsewhere. All playgroups have now got extensive waiting lists (in November 2004 one playgroup had a waiting list for 2008).

Individually the playgroups identified better links to the school; one group is providing an after-school facility accessible by the school next door. The playgroup *"feeds children to the school – the school feeds children to the after-school, which completes the circle"*. In this particular group they are also adjacent to a day care centre for older people; *"they (the older people) love looking at them (the children) going out to play, or on nature walks"*. A second playgroup had noted that children who live a distance away but are minded by their grandparents have started using the playgroup. In this group they were involved in a community effort to erect a new fence by the parish/council/SEHB, which now protects not just the playgroup but all the houses in the area.

A third playgroup identified the community spirit

engendered after “grannies, grandads, children and dogs walked 3.2 miles and raised €1,450 for the playgroup”. This particular group has 18 on its current waiting list and is now open for afternoon sessions. The fourth playgroup reported that a “lot of children who may not have had the opportunity to have play can have it. As the numbers here increased some have benefited” by having an affordable, accessible playgroup in the community. Financial support arrangements for people with difficulties are now in place; *those on low incomes can be accommodated*. The final playgroup which is also experiencing increased numbers “due to the improvements” is now providing a facility that “local children can now meet each other” before “going on to the nearby school”, and as a result “parents are beginning to know each other”. Previously children used to go to the town seven miles away, to access a playgroup; “now we have our own community playgroup.”

5.3 Links to voluntary and statutory bodies

The importance of community playgroups being integrated and connected with their communities was identified in Section 5.1. Children should be encouraged and facilitated to be active participants in their communities. Playgroups should provide opportunities for interaction with community groups and services, both by visiting the world outside the playgroup and by welcoming visitors in. This will allow children to feel part of their community and, ultimately, have a sense of responsibility towards it. Adults working with children should find out what resources are available in the area and refer parents on as necessary (French, 2003). The playgroups in *cpi* regularly use facilities in their areas, e.g. going on trips or bringing the fire brigade into the service.

It can also be very helpful for playgroups to link up with health board personnel on a formal or informal basis, possibly sharing events with other services such as training sessions on child protection, conferences, or sharing newsletters. The existence of relationships like this can help if a crisis arises and workers need advice and support. The playgroups in *cpi* again have demonstrated their developed professional practice regarding their links to a variety of statutory and voluntary services.

All of the playgroups have established connections with:

- The various parish committees involved in the

playgroups through the renting of premises;

- the pre-school services officer in their community care area;
- their locals schools;
- the public health nurse in their community care area;
- the relevant city or county childcare committee.

Some of the playgroups also have established working relationships with:

- speech and language therapists;
- the local dental clinic;
- home-school liaison officers in local schools;
- local residents associations;
- colleges of childcare and education;
- local voluntary childcare organisations and networks such as Barnardos and the Childcare Network Loch Gorman;
- funding sources (for example National Lottery);
- ADM.

In addition each group has contact with committees, agencies, clubs or political representatives (among others) of particular relevance to them such as, in one playgroup, a project that supports children with broad spectrum autism.

5.4 Affordability

The issue of affordability of the community playgroups was identified by families and most other respondents. For some families it is fundamental to their use of the service. In the final evaluation it was referred to by the majority of the respondents. The community playgroup is often the only service offering play opportunities, social interactions for children and valuable pre-school experience that families can afford. It is useful, therefore, to look at the level of fees at baseline and at the final evaluation and reflect on what families had to say about the fees.

All of the parents surveyed in the final evaluation of parents in January 2005 were asked what daily fee they paid and their opinion of that fee. With the exception of one playgroup, satisfaction was expressed at the cost of the service: “very good - wouldn’t get it anywhere especially for the work staff do”, “grand, it could go up a euro or two, very reasonable for what child gets”. In the case of the exception a parent thought it was ‘pricey’; in another, concern was expressed at having to pay fees when a

Table 11 Playgroup fees at baseline and final evaluation

YEAR	ASKEA	SLIEVERUE	ST OLIVER'S	TEACH NA BPÁISTÍ	THE ROWER
2002	€4 per family per morning	€5 per child	€3 per child	€4	€7 €12 x 2 days €16 x 3 days
2004	€9 per child per morning	€7	€5	€5.50 €20 x 4 days	€8 per day €15 x 2 days €20 x 3

child was sick. In general people felt it was good value. The one exception was where the playgroup had become amalgamated into a community childcare centre. Out of seven parents, three thought the fee was 'OK'; the remainder felt it was too expensive and, of those four, one felt *"it was not fair to have to pay for bank holidays, my child is only allowed to go two days a week – Monday and Fridays, if the bank holiday is on a Monday I still have to pay"*.

During the three-year period of *cpi* one of the playgroups secured major EOCP funding. This playgroup subsequently increased its fees. Of all of the playgroups in the final evaluation, this was the only one where parents expressed discontent. When asked what developments they would like to see, one parent responded: *"support with fees, I'm not working, there is no reduced fee for people not working, if my child is sick I still have to pay, I find it really hard to pay the fees"*. This raises the issue of affordability for families and sustainability of playgroups. Community playgroups deliberately keep their fees low. Outside of voluntary fundraising and fees, their only other source of potential income are small grants from independent foundations such as KHF and the health boards which adds a maximum of approximately €3,000 to their annual income. As outlined in the *Introduction* to this report, community playgroups are required to change their structures and services to access EOCP funding. This is not always possible and may not be what is needed by the community. With support and funding the community playgroups in *cpi* have become a valuable family support service. If community playgroups cease to exist, families on low incomes will have no opportunities for positive pre-school experiences for their children before they send them to school from the age of four where, as noted in the *OECD Thematic Report*, they may be taught in a class of 30 children or more, and where the teaching style is

principally whole group didactic teaching (OECD, 2004, p.9 and p. 32).

5.5 Discussion

Community playgroups as a family support mechanism were widely accepted by the families and the funding agencies. This supports the argument that their potential has not been realised in Ireland to date. In the OECD report (2004) it is acknowledged that family support, parental engagement and information services *"may be weak in the Early Childhood Education and Care system as a whole... Other centres in Europe offer as a matter of course, family support, referral, educational and recreational courses and up-to-date information on all matters of concern to parents"* (OECD, 2004, p. 86). Community playgroups currently vary in their capacity to meet this element of their brief. However, they are obviously extremely well placed to work with families at their most receptive and formative stage. Community playgroups offer social networks for adults and children alike, and accessible and flexible childcare and education.

The *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* states that *"the early involvement of parents in early childhood education and care is a matter of central importance to the well-being of society and should be accorded the public support and attention it deserves"* (1998, p. 42). *Ready to Learn; the White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999) concurs and links parental involvement in services with later success in a child's life. One of the most distinguishing and unique features of community playgroups is the participation of parents (O'Brien, 2003). They provide an opportunity for parental participation (see also *Section 3.6 Parental perception and participation*), and training for parenting or for committee roles.

Community playgroups highlight the importance and experience of play for all children. They provide information on using other supports and agencies. The *White Paper* asserted that “early identification and intervention ...is most effective for the individual child and cost effective in the long term” (1999, p. 77).

The playgroups in *cpi* welcomed children with special needs and had access to speech and language therapists and other specialists in the area. An open-door policy operated for all children. For many parents, participation in their local community playgroup had been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement role. The opportunity should be seized to capitalise on and maximise the potential of community playgroups as early childhood care and education intervention services.

There have been positive benefits in communities as a result of *cpi*. This is illustrated by the fact that high-quality, affordable, accessible early childhood services are on offer to a greater number of children in local communities; there are better links to schools; groups are involved in community efforts and community spirit is engendered. Financial support arrangements for people with difficulties are in place (in some playgroups). Families in one playgroup in *cpi* have their own playgroup in their own community rather than having to drive to the nearest town for childcare. Even though relatively modest it should be noted that the fees of one playgroup created a financial burden for some families.

Other benefits of *cpi* are evident in the increased links to statutory and voluntary agencies. Community playgroups remain affordable for most families. However, one dilemma facing community playgroups remains substantial. The modest fees they charge makes them accessible; however, their sustainability is at risk.

5.6 Recommendations for community playgroups as family support

- Community playgroups are a valuable family support service and should be aided with modest finances and developmental support where the current ethos and flexibility of community playgroups should be maintained;
- The Health Service Executive’s (HSE) role as a family support mechanism or measure, in

supporting community playgroups, should be recognised and valued;

- The HSE should publish an information leaflet on the value, benefits and structures of community-based playgroups as a family support. Community playgroup leaflets should be in all family support services, and family support services’ leaflets should carry information on community playgroups.
- Community playgroup staff should be resourced and trained to provide information and support to parents through a mentoring service to community playgroups (see further in *Recommendations policymakers / programme developers*). Community playgroups should be informed about services in their areas but also should be proactive in seeking and disseminating information;
- A greater number of family resource centres and community centres should be developed for use by families, playgroups and general services with free universal parenting courses;
- Affordable childcare should be seen as an essential element of a family support policy which should be child-centred. It is recommended that fees be maintained as low as possible to allow families in most need to access places. A sliding scale could be introduced for those parents who are unemployed or who are on low incomes;
- Assistance should be provided to community playgroups to help them to access funding;
- Secure premises should be made available cheaply by communities to playgroups; awareness within communities of the value of the playgroups is needed.



conclusions

Conclusions and lessons learned



The *cpi* was established to provide a three-year programme to assist small community playgroups to deliver a high-quality sessional service and to identify and evaluate the impact of funding and support on the quality of service provided to children and their families. A further aim of *cpi* was to highlight the value of community playgroups. Among the objectives of *cpi* were that children and families would benefit, that staff and committees would have opportunities to put ideas into operation and that new skills acquired would have a lasting impact. The need for formative evaluation was recognised from the outset. One of the desired outcomes of the evaluation process was that the information gathered regarding the impact of increased funding and support on community playgroups and the lessons learned would be widely disseminated. This evaluation report represents an important step in fulfilling that aim.

Based on the evidence presented in this report it is clear that the immediate aims and objectives of *cpi* have been met. The benefits to the five participating playgroups, the playgroup committees, the communities and, most importantly, the children and their parents have been extensive. The evidence provided by the range of formative evaluation strategies employed during the course of *cpi* point to many improvements in the quality of provision. The playgroup environments have improved, the materials and activities available to the children have been increased, flexible child-centred routines are in place and the interactions between adults and children have been enhanced.

Quality has been developed in many ways, but particularly through training, reflection, effective planning, monitoring and reviewing. One playgroup described the change as a *"complete transformation of the group, which would never have been achieved without the money and support, a much higher quality service is now offered"*. In another, *cpi* has meant that the playgroup has *"developed, got bigger, got more numbers, better*

equipment". A further group noted that *"the 'teacher's desk' has gone – which had created a barrier between the adults and children. It was too much like school; now it is much more democratic"* which had a very positive impact on the children.

The combination of funding and support allowed for a *"complete makeover and implementation of recommendations"*. One group commented that *"money can't buy happiness" – but in this case it can, just look at what it has achieved"*. ADM recognised the critical role of the co-ordinator in the following terms: *"these benefits include capital expansions/renovations and staff training but also a long list of other quality improvements that did not have an associated cost but were brought about with the support of the cpi co-ordinator and the development of plans for each service"*. This was similarly recognised by the playgroups themselves: *"The ongoing support of the co-ordinator was a strength who came up with the ideas and the drive to keep it going. If there was just money there, we wouldn't have got this far"*.

It is clear that *cpi* was multi-faceted in its approach both in respect of how services were supported and how *cpi* succeeded in integrating with and influencing other policy developments. It succeeded in providing a timely focus on community playgroups, which highlighted the profile and value of playgroups regionally and nationally. It focused its attention on providing support for small groups as it felt that these groups were not in a position to apply for EOCP funding due to the costs of the application or to finding such funding schemes were not relevant to them. By taking the context and culture of small services into account, *cpi* has provided insight into the everyday issues affecting small community playgroups.

The delivery of *cpi* needed to be sufficiently flexible to deal with the unexpected, unplanned-for challenges and difficulties experienced by small-scale community services. The *cpi* has reinforced the importance of working systemically, of anticipating the complexities of community-based work in the planning phase, thus building flexibility into a time frame but also naming small significant steps. It was recognised that each participating playgroup was at a different starting point and multiple factors affected change and progress.

It is worthwhile in this concluding section of the report to analyse both the key ingredients that contributed to *cpi's* effectiveness and the lessons

learned throughout the process, starting from the initial research and development stage through to the implementation of the *cpi* model of support. The following points represent a synthesis of all the views expressed by those who participated in the evaluation.

- The establishment of *cpi* was characterised by thoughtful, inclusive planning, ethical and wise leadership by KHF;
- Preparation was important. The *cpi* was developed from a solid knowledge base, a key aspect of which was community development work. The leadership exercised in *cpi* involved commitment, the recognition of strengths, building on challenges and nurturing;
- The early stages were not rushed. Careful thought and consultation went into every stage of the process;
- A collaborative approach was taken both in terms of funding the project and in terms of the make-up of the advisory group;
- The *cpi* was based on a holistic framework that combined support with funding. There is a presumption that funding equals quality; however the experience of *cpi* indicates that building capacity, support, guidance, education and affirmation must also be provided;
- The decision was made to support five groups and provide relatively substantial funding to each, as opposed to spreading funding over a larger number of groups;
- The time-frame of three years acknowledged that a high-quality initiative takes time. Time was needed in order to reflect and implement changes emerging through the formative evaluation findings;
- The application form for *cpi* was user friendly and accessible for the playgroups (see *Appendix 2*);
- The method of selection reflected the ethos of *cpi*. It involved thoughtful, careful and inclusive planning. It was hoped there would be an element of self-selection. The process was also transparent;
- Strategic placement of key individuals was important. When it came to dissemination of information about *cpi*, people, particularly pre-school services officers, were in place locally and were able to meet with, and within, the services, providing opportunities to tease out the suitability of the services;
- The *cpi* was needs-led and it resolved to take the services in their current state, in all their diversity; in their community contexts, their learning, practice and resources;
- The *cpi* dealt with the reality of sessional play provision regarding quality. It was acknowledged that playgroups have been operating largely unsupported, with an overwhelming responsibility but without sufficient remuneration or accessible training. Each playgroup was different and had different needs. There was no 'one size fits all' approach;
- The *cpi* supported self-determination. The playgroups were involved in decision making and they determined how to allocate the funding;
- The *cpi* positively supported social inclusion;
- The *cpi* acknowledged that support was a positive thing. The need for groups to seek support in their own areas was emphasised throughout the process and for the future;
- The role of co-ordinator was sufficiently flexible and dynamic to adapt to groups' ability to develop throughout the process. The pace of groups varied at times partially due to "*life situations*" and partially just to the complexities of community life;
- Having a co-ordinator who was experienced, able to view matters objectively and give expert advice was valued by all the groups;
- The advisory group was characterised by commitment and very hard work. The relevant representation and multi-disciplinary nature of the group meant that it was able to provide technical assistance and support, expertise and advice at local level at critical stages in the process;
- The provision of finance for the playgroups to attend cluster meetings;
- The conference made *cpi* real for others and highlighted issues facing community playgroups in general. The personal development accruing from the conference was offered as a key benefit of *cpi* by the playgroup participants;
- Cluster group days provided links to other groups, which was valued by all the groups, they "*got to meet others, travel and attend conferences, lectures and workshops*";
- The flexibility of *cpi* and the self-determination

that it offered was recognised. *“Confidence and competence has developed as a result of cpi”*. One staff group had experience of ADM regarding *“the staffing grant some years earlier; they were fearful at that time. Now they have more knowledge and are able to answer any queries”*. Another playgroup acquired the *“confidence to push for things for the playgroup and ask for help”*;

- The formative evaluation (rather than an after-the-event evaluation) allowed the process as well as the outcomes to be captured. The acceptance of the evaluation and the evaluator as a help rather than a hindrance was critical. The follow-through on the commitment to document and share the learning was also valued;
- Support of the playgroup committees was reported as *“a great strength”*; *“in fact cpi definitely made the committee. At the beginning, the committee was all over the place, it is much more ‘jelled’ now. There are 20 names on the committee; it used to be two people who did the work”*;
- *“A path to training was provided”* which improved knowledge, resulting in *“better practice, and a better working playgroup”*;
- The cpi kept a *“valid community service necessary for the area alive”*.

An evaluation such as this also offers an opportunity to reflect on the particular challenges posed and on what could be done differently. The consequences of using health board boundaries as opposed to county boundaries could have been further explored; there is no representation of playgroups from Waterford (although the Slieverue Community Playgroup is adjacent to Waterford City, is based in the Waterford Community Care Area and is supported by the relevant agencies in Waterford). A further issue commented on by a number of participants was the geographical spread of the five playgroups in relation to where the co-ordinator was based. This situation highlighted the need for groups to be linked to local support. Another spatial issue affecting the project was the fact that the evaluator and development officer were based in Dublin.

With regard to the budget for an initiative such as this, it was noted that provision should be made for the management cost of the initial set-up. This funding provision is required to meet costs such as

time, travel, administration, disseminating information about the programme, training staff, and mentoring.

Because of the *ad hoc* nature of the community playgroup sector and the absence of a clear framework (see *Policy Context* in the *Introduction*), the cpi management experienced some difficulty in knowing who should be influenced in order to create policy. Overcoming this was complex at times. In fact, the overall management role and commitment of the KHF’s development officer was underestimated at the outset. This was particularly apparent when accounting for the time involved in influencing policy.

Concern has also been expressed regarding the sustainability of the playgroups now that cpi has come to an end. The level of support needed by groups like those in cpi cannot be provided by county childcare committees alone as they are currently operated. However, they do provide training and some support for community playgroups.

In conclusion, community playgroups are child centred, flexible, and adaptable. They have an open-door policy to all children, irrespective of ability, socio-economic status or ethnic background; and they involve parents and other volunteers. They are extremely well placed to work with families at their most receptive and formative stage. It is acknowledged that, for many parents, participation in their local community playgroup has been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement role. Being not-for-profit creates a particular ethos that is absent from the commercially-run pre-school provision. This project has highlighted the extent to which community playgroups are unsupported and vulnerable despite them being such a positive force particularly in areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage and in rural communities. Difficulties with premises, the onerous responsibilities of voluntary management committees and changing staff were persistent challenges in cpi. Aspiring towards a high-quality early childhood care and education service is an ongoing, dynamic process. The cpi has demonstrated that, with developmental support and modest funding, community playgroups can support families, deliver high-quality services, provide children with positive social interactions and active learning pre-school experiences.



recommendations

Recommendations for **policymakers** and **programme developers**



All participants in the final evaluation, that is, the funding agencies, the advisory group, the five playgroup staff and their committees, the co-ordinator *cpi*, the development officer (KHF), the pre-school services officers, the regional co-ordinator of child care services SEHB, the child care managers in the four community care areas of the SEHB, a Children First implementation officer, parents and participants at the conference hosted by *cpi* in Kilkenny in October 2004 were asked to make recommendations for early childhood care and education in Ireland (see *Appendix 11*). The recommendations that relate directly to community playgroups are presented here.

- Community playgroups are a valuable family support service and should be supported with modest finances and developmental support on an ongoing basis.
- Management committees need support on a national, regional and local level to alleviate their onerous employment and accounting responsibilities. A 'national community playgroup programme', which identifies appropriate lead organisations in an area, should be established as a technical unit to take on an advisory role regarding employment and accounting issues. At a regional level supports should be made available locally for assistance with legal, financial and human resource issues. The playgroup committee is freed up then to concentrate on quality and parental participation.
- It was not intended that *cpi* be replicated. Instead, it is recommended that the support of community playgroups at a local level should fit into the structure in place such as the city and county childcare committees (CCCs). The CCCs could enhance the role of their development workers regarding support of community playgroups.
- The role of the city and county childcare committees should be expanded and should include a small grants scheme for community childcare groups, to provide a quick response to community needs regarding pre-school provision.
- The complexity of the existing EOCP funding system is very demanding in terms of submissions, reporting and auditing, particularly for community playgroups. A more efficient and fair system that would allow services to know what they are entitled to and to plan on that

basis should be developed and it should be available from one source.

- Community playgroups should be freely accessible to all children in every community and a guaranteed basic allowance or capitation fee per child should be given to the playgroup by government to provide pre-school places for children (as in the *Department of Education Northern Ireland Pre-School Expansion Programme*; see *Introduction, the importance of early childhood care and education*).
- Committee skills training, as well as ongoing support on specific issues like employment legislation and financial responsibilities, should be provided for playgroup committees. It could become a criterion of Health Service Executive Section 65 and EOCP funding that services have committee skills training in order to avail of funding.
- Early childhood care and education should be recognised and funded in the same way as primary education but should be delivered by early childhood practitioners through a range of services including community playgroups.



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appendices

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| Appendix 2: | Application Form for <i>cpi</i> and Letter of Agreement |
| Appendix 3: | Site Observation Tool: <i>cpi</i> Evaluation |
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Appendix 1

Terms of Reference, Advisory Group

The following Terms of Reference for the advisory group applied:

1. The primary function of the group is to assist the Katharine Howard Foundation and the South Eastern Health Board with the following:
 - Planning and implementing a three-year initiative with the principal aim of enhancing the quality of five community playgroups;
 - Selection of a part-time co-ordinator to undertake the day-to-day implementation of *cpi* according to an agreed job description;
 - Selection of playgroups to take part in *cpi* according to agreed criteria;
 - Ongoing review of developments and progress of the project;
 - Putting into place a system of ongoing formative evaluation which will aim to document the impact of the project along with transferring action research skills to the playgroups;
 - Advise on any information and/or resource materials arising from the work;
 - Oversee the final stages and assist in drawing out the conclusions and recommendations;
 - Advise on methods of dissemination of *cpi* and possible follow-up.
2. The advisory group will help to keep the overall project focused and on track within agreed time-scales and budgets.
3. The group will meet initially on a regular basis and from then on at regular intervals for the duration of the project.
4. Discretion will be used at all times in relation to material that should remain confidential.

Appendix 2

Application Form for cpi and Letter of Agreement

Application Form



Community Playgroup Initiative 2001-2004

The Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) in conjunction with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB), has initiated a three - year programme to assist small community groups to develop their capacity to deliver a quality playgroup service. The Community Playgroup Initiative (CPI) also aims to indicate what improvements in quality can be achieved by playgroups when they are given additional resources and support over a set period.

Who is CPI designed for?

The initiative will include 5 community playgroups within the South Eastern Health Board, one from each of the counties of Kilkenny, Carlow, South Tipperary, Wexford and Waterford.

Playgroups that would like to take part in the programme must:

- Be community - based, (urban or rural) and providing sessional care
- Not be in receipt of funding under the EOCP¹, (but can have applied).
- Have complied with the Pre-school Regulations
- Have 10 or more children enrolled in the group
- Have a management committee which includes representatives from parents and other members of the community
- Show signs of openness to link with other community activities
- Have undertaken previous training of either parents, staff and other volunteers, formal or informal
- Identify readiness and interest to develop the service
- Show willingness to commit to a three-year project aimed at enhancing the quality of the service

What will CPI involve?

The co-ordinator of CPI will work with each of the five playgroups on an individual basis to draw up a three-year quality improvement plan for the service. All aspects of the service can be included in this plan, ranging from the curriculum, staff training working with parents and management to structural issues such as the premises and transport. Each playgroup will be able to benefit from funding of up to £36,000 over the three - year period in order to implement the service plan. The co-ordinator will assist the service to review and reflect on the developments and the plan will be adapted as agreed by all those involved. Opportunities may arise for the five participant playgroups to link with each other during the initiative.

¹ Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006

What benefits will arise from the programme?

- The children and their families who avail of the service will benefit from the improved quality.
- The staff and management of the services will be given the opportunity and resources to put many of their ideas into operation.
- New skills acquired by all the participants will have a long-lasting impact on the quality of service provided and the development of the service in the long-term.
- The programme will gather information of the impact of increased funding and support on community playgroups and make recommendations to the relevant statutory and voluntary bodies involved with community playgroups.
- Lessons learned will be widely disseminated and benefit community provision on a national basis.

Who can apply?

If your playgroup meets the criteria set out above and is willing to participate in CPI please fill in the attached application form and return it by **26th October 2001**.

If CPI interests your playgroup, but you are not sure if the playgroup is eligible to apply, please contact one of the following for advice and further information:-

Carlow

Pre-school Service Officer
Barnardos

Brenda Conway
Marian Dowd

Phone Numbers

056 52208
0503 32868

Kilkenny

Pre-school Service Officer
Kilkenny Early Years
Community Worker - SEHB

Brenda Conway
Greta Murphy
Liz Kearney

056 52208
056 70234
056 52208 (ext. 4172)

South Tipperary

Pre-school Services Officer
Clonmel Community Partnership

Phil Mackey
Emoke Sweetman

052 77350
052 29616

Wexford

Pre-school Services Officer
Childcare Network Loch Garman

Maura Murphy
Pat Purcell

053 23522 (ext.333)
051 420024

Waterford

Pre-school Services Officer
Waterford Area Partnership

Monica Ryan
Margaret Mulligan

051 842897
051 841740

Or from any of the above counties you may also contact

The Katharine Howard Foundation

Noelle Spring

01 8351579



Community Playgroup Initiative 2001-2004**Application Form**

1. NAME OF PLAYGROUP:

2. ADDRESS OF PLAYGROUP:

3. NAME OF CONTACT PERSON, (with address if different from (2))

4. TELEPHONE NUMBER

5. PLEASE PLACE A TICK IN THE FOLLOWING BOXES WHERE THEY APPLY TO YOUR PLAYGROUP

Is the playgroup;

- community - based, and providing sessional care?
- in receipt of funding under the EOCP?
- awaiting the outcome of an application for funding made to EOCP?

☐
☐
☐

Has the playgroup?

- Complied with the Pre-school Regulations?
- 10 or more children enrolled in the group?

☐
☐

Has the playgroup:

- a management committee which includes representatives from parents and other members of the community?
- undertaken previous training of either parents, staff and other volunteers, formal or informal?

☐
☐

Can the playgroup:

- Show signs of openness to link with other community activities?
- Identify readiness and interest to develop the service?
- Show willingness to commit to a three-year project aimed at enhancing the quality of the service?
- **No of years the playgroup is established**

☐
☐
☐

6. DESCRIBE HOW TAKING PART IN THIS INITIATIVE WOULD HELP THE PLAY GROUP TO PROVIDE A QUALITY SERVICE, BENEFITING THE CHILDREN, PARENTS, STAFF AND COMMUNITY. (Please attach an A4 sheet if you require additional space for this section.)

What happens next?

Please return the application form to Noelle Spring, KHF, P.O. Box 6729, Swords, Co. Dublin.

Closing date for receipt of application form is **26th October 2001**

After applicants are shortlisted, they then will be contacted by the project co-ordinator to arrange a time for a visit to the playgroup to discuss the application.

Notification of decisions will be as prompt as possible.



Community Playgroup Initiative
2001-2004

Letter of Agreement

Background of the Community Playgroup Initiative

Arising out of The Katharine Howard Foundation's (KHF) support for community playgroups the Foundation approached the South Eastern Health Board (S.E.H.B) to see if a more strategic approach to supporting this sector could be adopted. The S.E.H.B. agreed to partner the KHF in organising a three-year pilot project whereby five community playgroups would receive additional funding and support in order to enhance the quality of the service provided.

The selected playgroups can avail of £36,000/ €45,700 over a three-year period and will have the support of a project co-ordinator. Thus the Community Playgroup Initiative was developed.

This is a letter of agreement between the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) and the five selected playgroups in *cpi*. It aims to formalise each of the playgroups commitment to be part of *cpi* and to outline what being part of *cpi* will entail.

Terms of Agreement

Each playgroup will undertake a three-year commitment to *cpi* which involves the development of a three-year quality improvement plan. The plan will identify the areas that the playgroup would like to improve. This plan can include a range of *structural* and *process* elements. Examples of process elements include: the curriculum used; training and support for staff, the management committee, volunteers and parents; parental and community involvement and development. Examples of structural elements include: premises, environment, equipment and transport improvements. Other changes/developments not mentioned above can also be included in the plan. A short-term plan will be drawn up with the assistance of the co-ordinator to enable the playgroup to agree their priorities for the first year.

The playgroups will each have access to £36,000/€45,700 over a three-year period and will have the support of the *cpi* co-ordinator.

The playgroup will co-operate with and facilitate the co-ordinator in her efforts to make the most of *cpi*. This will be done in the spirit of partnership from both sides.

Baseline data, which gives a picture of the current situation in the playgroup, will be gathered and this will form the basis for ongoing evaluation and review. Each playgroup will be assisted to develop a recording system using a self-evaluation approach. The playgroup will also be asked to co-operate with the overall evaluation of *cpi* which will aim to demonstrate the impact of this type of support and funding on community playgroups.

As a result of consultation with and knowledge of the playgroup the co-ordinator may also encourage the playgroup to liaise with other support personnel and to be open to link with other community organisations and the other participating groups in *cpi*.

If the playgroup is unable to continue with *cpi* for any reason as deemed by either the playgroup itself or by the Katharine Howard Foundation this agreement will be ended. The KHF will be subsequently reimbursed where funds have not been spent and will withhold any part of the funding not yet paid.

If a dispute arises between KHF and the playgroup either side can recommend a person to negotiate on their behalf. If no agreement is reached through such mediation either side may take any action necessary against each other in regard to any matter of dispute.

_____ Community Playgroup agrees to sign this letter of agreement.

Noelle Spring, Development Officer KHF

Mary Daly, Co-ordinator CPI

Playgroup Leader

Committee Member

Date: _____

Appendix 3

Site Observation Tool: *cpi* Evaluation

SITE VISIT RECORD

Playgroup Name:

Visit Number:

Date:

Time of opening:

Time of closing:

Number of children present:

Names of adults present:

Name:

Role:

Name:

Role:

Name:

Role:

Services, when reading your copy of the administration of the site visit on a complete session in your services, please note anything underlined in the left-hand column of the observation tool means it was 'observed' and anything in quotation marks "... " refers to 'said by adult or child'. In order for the document to be used to enhance professional practice attention needs to be paid to what was not observed as well as what was observed. Comments/modifications are in addition to, or to emphasise, comments made on the observation tool and may not include recommendations obvious when reading the comments.

Site Observation Tool of the Community Playgroup Initiative, adapted from the High/Scope Programme Quality Assessment (2001) and incorporating the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (1998)

CHILD-CENTRED ENVIRONMENT

PROMPT

EVIDENCE

☐ Premises *indoors*

Bright, airy, safe, clean, well ventilated?

Spacious well scaled rooms?

Danger spots supervised?

Is it crowded?

Is it warm?

Visit Number

☐ Premises *outdoors*

Given safe provision, does the area accommodate various types of play, running, jumping, skipping, climbing, riding, swinging, sliding, pretending, hopping, and painting?

Are danger spots supervised?

☐ Room/space layout

Is the room divided into logical well-defined areas of interest clearly understood by children, such as book, sand, water, art, building area, home corner?

Is there low furniture, and shelving?

Floor covering delineating different spaces?

Is there adequate space for each area with enough space for a number of children to explore materials?

☐ Equipment

Is it:

Clean, safe complete?

Arranged, ordered and accessible to children (without adult assistance)?

Reflect diversity and the positive aspects of children's homes and community cultures?

Support language, initiative, social interaction, music and movement?

Are materials varied, manipulative, open-ended, such as blocks, books, corks, water, and playdough inviting to all senses?

Are materials systematically labelled, (tracings, photographs, actual objects) arranged and accessible to children?

Are materials plentiful?

Site Observation Tool of the Community Playgroup Initiative, adapted from the High/Scope Programme Quality Assessment (2001) and incorporating the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (1998)

CHILD-CENTRED ENVIRONMENT (continued)

PROMPT

☐ Displayed material

Is there a variety of open – ended children's artwork, emergent writing, photos of block structures on display, portraying child-initiated activities?

Adult- made displays stem from children's interests, e.g. pictures of children's families or pets, or outings?

Dated and changed regularly?

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINE

PROMPT

☐ General

Is there a consistent daily routine?

Is there a balance between: Quiet and active play?

Whole body movement and fine movement?

How do children know the routine, is there a chart or do adults name the routine?

Can the children anticipate what happens next?

☐ Welcomes/good byes

How are children greeted in the morning?

How do they leave?

☐ Approach

Do the adults use a particular model or educational approach?

What activities are offered (sand, water, art, 'lets pretend', construction, books, puzzles, musical instruments, and computers)?

Do the adults:

Use a team approach to planning and implementing the activities?

Record or plan activities?

Use observations to assess children's developmental progress, on a regular basis?

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINE (continued)

PROMPT	EVIDENCE
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Individual, Small and Large Group Times</p> <p>Is there time for children to engage in individual, small and large groups focused to extend and develop their interests?</p> <p>Are activities geared to their developmental level?</p> <p>Do all adults:</p> <p>Watch and listen to children?</p> <p>Allow time for children to talk about themselves and their families, what they see and do?</p> <p>Imitate and add to children's ideas for words and actions?</p> <p>Use children's words?</p> <p>Let children be leaders?</p> <p>Assume children's physical level?</p> <p>Encourage children to think, reason and experiment?</p> <p>Follow up on children's changes to their ideas and suggestions?</p>	Visit Number
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Time Generally</p> <p>Is enough time allotted for each routine?</p> <p>Is there a set time when children initiate their own activities/have choice time?</p> <p>Are the children actively engaged in their play?</p> <p>Do they appear focused?</p> <p>Is there a set clean- up time?</p> <p>Are children given a reasonable amount of time to finish up what they are doing?</p> <p>Are there reasonable choices/expectations for children regarding time?</p>	

Site Observation Tool of the Community Playgroup Initiative, adapted from the High/Scope Programme Quality Assessment (2001) and incorporating the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (1998)

ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINE (continued)

PROMPT

☐ Transitions - changing from one activity to the next

How long are they?

Can children make choices during transition times (e.g. how to move from one part of the room to another, which person to move with)?

Do adults let children know transitions are coming?

Can children have the option of finishing the previous activity or moving to the next activity without the rest of the group (e.g. not all children have to finish lunch before the next activity begins)?

Do adults plan ways for children to make transitions (e.g. choosing the next children to make the transition according to some characteristic of their clothing: "Now all children wearing runners jump to the coat rack")

☐ Outdoor Play

Is outdoor play daily available, (providing it is safe to do so)?

During outdoor play, do children have many choices and variety about how they play e.g. climbing, running, jumping, riding, sliding, hopping, swinging, digging, moulding, pouring, sorting, arranging, pretending?

Do adults use a variety of strategies to support children's outdoor play and learning?

☐ Lunch time

Do children:

Bring their own lunches to the playgroup?

Eat healthily (or are encouraged in healthy eating)?

Have choices at break time, who to sit beside, how much to eat?

Do things for themselves, e.g. wipe up spills or distribute lunchboxes?

Do the adults:

Eat with the children at break time?

Encourage social interaction, by listening to and participating in children's conversations?

Encourage safe and healthy practices, like washing hands before eating, brushing teeth?

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINE (continued)**PROMPT**☐ **Reflection of Cultural Diversity**

Do adults:

Provide books, materials, images, and experiences that reflect diverse cultures that children may not likely see, as well as those that represent their family life and cultural group.

Initiate discussions and activities to teach respect and appreciation for similarities and differences among people.

Talk positively about each child's physical characteristics, family, and cultural heritage.

Avoid stereotyping any group through materials, objects, language.

Infuse all topics with diverse cultural perspectives, avoiding a "tourist" approach?

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

INTERACTION

PROMPT

☐ Creation of a warm and caring atmosphere

Adults show positive attention to children (e.g. smiling, hugging, using a calm voice, making eye contact: getting down to child's level). Children call adults by name

Adults attend to children who are upset

Children go to adults for help, comfort and guidance

Adults talk to children rather than talking to other adults about children in front of them

☐ Separation from home

Adults help children separate from parents/guardians (e.g. children are encouraged to stand at the window, say or wave goodbye, carry family pictures or objects from home)

Adults acknowledge children's feelings about separation

At the beginning of the day, children enter play at their own pace

Parents/guardians are encouraged to stay until children are ready for them to leave

☐ Adult - child communication

Adults share control of conversations with children (let children initiate conversations, take turns, wait patiently for children to form thoughts without interrupting)

Adults observe and listen to children before and during conversations with children

To further the conversation, adults offer a balance of comments, observations, and acknowledgements and seek children's ideas

Adults ask children questions sparingly, avoiding questions that call for predetermined answers or that redirect or cut off the conversation

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

INTERACTION (continued)**PROMPT****EVIDENCE****❑ Adults as partners in play**

Adults use a variety of strategies as co-players in children's play. For example adults observe and listen before and after entering children's play

They assume roles as suggested by children

Follow the children's cues about the content and direction of play

Imitate children

Match the complexity of their play

Offer suggestions for extending play

Staying within the children's play theme

Visit Number

❑ Encouragement of children's initiatives

Adults encourage children's ideas, suggestions, and efforts by listening to children

Encouraging children to talk about what they are doing

Trying out and imitating children's ideas, using children's words, and commenting specifically on children's play

Adults focus on strengths

❑ Providing opportunities to explore

Adults encourage children to explore and use materials at their own developmental level and pace

Adults encourage children to use materials in their own individual ways

Adults support children when they choose to repeat an activity

Adults provide children of both sexes with equal opportunities to take part in all activities

❑ Confirming children's accomplishments

Adults acknowledge individual children's accomplishments

Adults do not use praise but offer encouragement instead, to acknowledge individual children's efforts and ideas (e.g. repeating children's ideas, commenting on what children are doing. Putting children in control of evaluating their own work and efforts)

Site Observation Tool of the Community Playgroup Initiative, adapted from the High/Scope Programme Quality Assessment (2001) and incorporating the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (1998)

INTERACTION (continued)

PROMPT

☐ Supporting interaction between children

Adults encourage children to interact with one another in ways appropriate to their developmental levels

Adults find many opportunities to refer children to one another

Adults look for and support children's spontaneous co-operative efforts

☐ Supporting problem solving and independence

Adults encourage children to solve problems

Adults allow time for children to do things for themselves and use opportunities such as tidy up and snack to encourage independence and self-regulation

Adults support children's solutions (e.g. hanging picture on door when there is no more room on notice board)

☐ Conflict resolution by children

Adults and children work together, to resolve conflicts, using a problem-solving approach.

Adults use these steps to mediate conflicts:

approach children calmly,
acknowledge children's feelings,

gather information from the children (what happened, what made the child upset) to identify problem, re-state the problem,

ask the children for solutions, wait for and support children's decisions, so they are involved in the process of finding and choosing a solution

☐ General

Negative discipline methods are never used (e.g. denial of break/food is never used as a form of control or punishment)

Children use the toilet as needed. Wet or soiled clothing is changed promptly

Injuries and illnesses are attended to promptly

The overall sounds in the group are happy, with children's voices predominating

EVIDENCE

Visit Number

Actual routine

Perceived routine

[illegible][illegible]

Drawing of Group Room, areas, fixtures, fittings, furniture, shelving

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Comments/Modifications

Site Observation Tool of the Community Playgroup Initiative, adapted from the High/Scope Programme Quality Assessment (2001) and incorporating the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (1998)

Appendix 4

Action Plan Template with a Sample Short-Term Plan

Name of playgroup

Names of leaders

Date of Action Plan

EVALUATION HEADING	ACTION	WHEN	WHO TAKES RESPONSIBILITY	RESOURCES NEEDED
Playgroup Management				
Human Resources				
Physical Environment				
Art/Sand/Water Area				
Building Area				
Home Corner				
Quiet Area				
Activities/ Daily Routine				
Interaction				
Parental Involvement				
Links with Statutory and Voluntary Agencies				
Other				

Sample Short-term plan of Participating Playgroup cpi October 2003

Playgroup Management

- AGM to be called in November, new committee to undertake committee skills training
- A proposal to have all parents to automatically become members of the committee is to be voted on at AGM
- Work to begin on drafting a parent information booklet
- New application form to be drawn up for next year
- A copy of the group's policies and procedures to be sent to co-ordinator
- Copy of last PSSO's report also to be forwarded to co-ordinator

Development and Training

- Staff are continuing with FETAC Level II Childcare Training and are focusing on relating what they learn in training to their practice. They are also availing of any workshops or short courses that are run by the local County Childcare Committee and another local agency

Child-Centred Environment

- New heating system is heating up the hall very well but the cost of it needs to be monitored as it is run on electricity
- Lots more junk material including big cardboard boxes is to be available
- Leaf rubbings and painting leaves to be done, some books on nature and the environment to be bought
- Life-size saucepans, cutlery, cups and saucers to be purchased
- Basket of fruit to be brought to home corner
- Box of old phones which were donated by PSSO to be found and used
- Empty food packets, old kettles, toasters and so on are to be brought in
- Chubby paint brushes to be bought
- Displays to be at children's height
- Coat hanger to be moved near to door
- Stand to be made for lunch bags/boxes
- Cultural diversity posters to be bought either

from Barnardos or Trocaire

- More material on cultural diversity to be available (minutes of cluster meeting to be referred to for ideas)
- Blackboards to be moved down to ground level
- Some big books to be bought including a big book with nursery rhymes
- Dress-up corner to be developed – scarves, kimonos, glasses (without lenses) to be added, shoes that are there at present to be removed as heels too high and very small sizes, small adult shoes and old communion/debs dresses to be obtained. Hats not to be added as parents expressed concern last year that they contributed to the spread of head lice
- Storage unit for dress-up to be made with hanger rail (design to be copied from Wesco/Hope catalogue). Dressing table with mirror also to be added
- Workbench area to be developed and hammers, hard hats and tools to be purchased
- Whistle to be bought for fire drill, batteries for fire alarm to be purchased and 2-3 new fire alarms to be bought
- Large storage container to be made on wheels for jigsaws/small equipment
- Old teashirts or men's short-sleeve shirts to be used as protection when painting

Activities/Daily Routine

- Some children complaining of being hungry on arriving at group – all children to be offered toast. As time goes on children to be allowed to make own toast (under supervision) and to butter it themselves, brown bread to be offered on some occasions
- More music to be used, warming-up exercises to be done to music
- A routine chart to be developed with pictures/photos of children doing activities; this will be referred to during the course of each day
- Portfolio of children's work to be kept and given to parents at end of term, all work to be named and dated
- Children to be taken out as much as possible even when weather is cold as they can run around with coats on
- Children to be allowed to help in clean-up and in giving out materials/putting away

equipment and so on; rota to be developed for some of these activities

- Children to have a balance of individual, small and large group work, children to be encouraged to work/play together in pairs or in groups of three or four to do a painting, build bricks or do jig-saws together; the importance of co-operation to be emphasised
- Food colours to be added to water for variety, very little interest in it by the present group, a variety of pouring utensils to be available
- Children to be shown how to wash and dry hands after toilet; discussion on why it is important to do this to take place. All children to be encouraged to wash hands before lunch. Laminated picture of hand washing to be posted in toilet
- Two trips to take place before Christmas – one to the woods and one to the fire station
- Pegs and basket to be available to develop fine motor movement
- Feeling box to be made
- Children to be brought together in one group for lunch; adults and children to sit with, chat, eat and socialise during this time

Interaction

- Emphasis to be put on saying 'please' and 'thank you' by adults
- Children to be given choice in their activities and asked for their ideas on what activities they like and adults to follow through on children's initiatives
- Adults to ensure the focus is on children and communicate with them. Notice to be taken that overall children's voices should be heard more than adults
- Adults to observe and enter into children's play silently as partners in children's play
- Children not to be coerced into partaking in an activity, they can read if they don't want to dance or do another activity
- Photographs of staff to be put up with name underneath. Adults to address each other by name and to regularly tell children their names
- Children to become familiar with names of all children in the group – children to say own names and to ask each other's names in circle or in small group
- Circle time to be developed and discussions on

looking after teeth, on manners and on caring and sharing to take place

Parental Participation

- Parent's notice board to be purchased
- Permission to be got from parents to take photographs
- Parents to be asked to make sure to send children to group in old tracksuits and clothes; lots of them wearing new and really good clothes which sometimes get paint on them
- Parents to be asked for old dress-up clothes, glasses, mobiles, materials for the shop
- Parents to be offered a subsidised Parenting and/or First Aid Course in 2004
- Parent booklet to be available in 2004
- Parents to be invited on trips
- Parents to be invited to take part in management committee

Appendix 5

Focus Group Prompts, Questionnaires and Surveys

Focus Group Prompts, Baseline for committee and staff of *cpi* 2002

1. What do you know about the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*)?
2. What are the good things about *cpi*?
3. What difference has the extra funding made?
4. What difference has the support of the co-ordinator of *cpi* made?
5. What could be done differently in the future?
6. What agencies are you currently involved with?

Telephone Survey for Parents, Baseline *cpi*, January 2003

It is important to advise parents that they were chosen at random and that whereas their responses will be confidential they will be recorded and drawn up into a general report and feedback to the playgroups.

1. Why did you choose to send your child to this playgroup?
2. What information did you get about the playgroup prior to your child starting or when your child started?
3. What is it like dropping your child in or collecting your child from the playgroup?
4. What do you like about the playgroup?
5. How do you think the playgroup benefits your child?
6. What do you not like about the playgroup?
7. What developments would you like to see?
8. Are you involved in any other way in the playgroup other than dropping your child in and collecting your child?
9. What do you feel in general a parent's role should be in a community playgroup?

Focus Group Prompts, mid-*cpi*, Advisory Group, May 2003

Effectively we want to look at the past the present and the future. The prompts for discussion are as follows:

Model of Delivery

1. What was good about how *cpi* was set up?
2. What could be done differently or better?

Community Playgroup Initiative

3. What is good about *cpi*?
4. What modifications/developments would you like to see?

Advisory Group

5. What do you see as the function of the Advisory Group?
6. How do you see your individual role?
7. Has it evolved over time?
8. How has *cpi* benefited by your involvement?
9. Assuming that the Advisory Group is worthwhile what ingredients make it work?

Added Value

10. What is the impact of *cpi* on your work?
11. What connections/links/'fields of influence' have occurred as a result of your involvement in *cpi*?
12. Is it possible to map those 'fields'?

The Evaluation Itself

13. How do you feel the evaluation is going?
14. Any improvements/suggestions you'd like to make?

We can discuss anything else that arises, the role of the co-ordinator will arise when looking at *cpi* itself.

The Co-ordinator's Role

1. What do you see as the role?
2. How do you feel the role has developed to date and in what way?
3. How would you like the role to develop from now on?
4. What do you think would happen if there was no co-ordinating role?

Focus meeting prompts, mid-*cpi*, November 2003

Agenda and Questions for committee and staff of *cpi*

Agenda

- Introductions
- Acknowledgement of the stage in the process
- Recap on what was said last year
- Questions

Questions

What do you know about *cpi*?

How do you feel *cpi* is going generally?

- What developments suggested last year (at the committee meeting and outlined in this meeting) have been achieved or planned for?
- How do you feel the short-term planning is operating?
- How do you feel the co-ordinator's visits are impacting on the playgroup?
- How do you find the cluster days?
- What could be done differently in the future?
- What steps are you taking to promote *cpi* as a positive model of practice/funding/support? What steps could you take?
- What could be done to get parents more involved?
- What could be done to develop committee structures?
- What training is being undertaken? Are you interested in further training?
- What local agencies/networks/funding agencies are you currently involved with?
- What local agencies/networks/funding agencies do you plan to get involved with in the future?

Telephone Survey for Parents, mid-*cpi* random, January 2004

It is important to advise parents that they were chosen at random and that whereas their responses will be confidential they will be recorded and drawn up into a general report.

1. Why did you choose to send your child to this playgroup?
2. What information (please list) did you get about the playgroup prior to your child starting or when your child started?
3. What is it like dropping your child in or collecting your child from the playgroup?
4. What do you like about the playgroup?
5. How do you think the playgroup benefits your child?
6. What benefits or support do you get for your child attending a playgroup?
7. What do you not like about the playgroup?
8. What developments would you like to see?
9. Are you involved in any other way in the playgroup other than dropping your child in and collecting your child?
10. (a) What is your understanding of a community playgroup?
(b) What do you feel in general a parent's role should be in a community playgroup?
11. Has your child been attending the playgroup since 2002 or early 2003, the beginning of the *community playgroup initiative (cpi)*?
Yes ☐ No ☐

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If yes have you noticed any improvements in the playgroup since your child began in the playgroup? Please specify?

12. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on, specifically relevant to *cpi* and its impact on the playgroup.

Telephone Survey for Parents, mid-*cpi* selected, January 2004

A reminder to parents that this is similar to last year, their responses will be confidential but they will be recorded and drawn up into a general report.

1. Have you received any further information (please list) about the playgroup since last year?
2. Is there any difference in dropping in or collecting your child from the playgroup, since last year?
3. What do you like more about the playgroup?
4. What do you not like still about the playgroup?
5. What developments would you like to see?
6. Are you further involved in any other way in the playgroup other than dropping your child in and collecting your child?
7. How do you think the playgroup benefits your child?
8. What benefits or support do you feel you may get for your child attending a playgroup?
9. (a) What is your understanding of a community playgroup?
(b) What do you feel in general a parent's role should be in a community playgroup?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on, specifically relevant to *cpi* and its impact on the playgroup.

Focus Group Prompts, Staff, final evaluation *cpi*, October 2004

1. How has your practice changed as a result of *cpi* regarding:
 - a. the environment,
 - b. the activities and routine you offer
 - c. your interactions with children
 - d. reflective thinking/planning
2. Have there been changes as a result in your committees? What changes – if any?
3. Have there been changes as a result in your community? What changes – if any?
4. What has been the major learning for you that you can take away from the experience of *cpi* and which will continue to benefit you?
5. Do you think *cpi* was a good idea? If yes - why? If not - why not?
 - a. What are the overall strengths of *cpi*?
 - b. What are the challenges?
6. If you were to design a programme to support community playgroups what would you do differently?
7. What are the key policy areas/messages you'd like to see emerge/should be addressed?

Focus Group Prompts, Staff and Committees, final evaluation *cpi*, November 2004

In this, the final stage of the evaluation process, the questions posed are in the context of reviewing the last three years (acknowledging those who are new to the process).

1. What do you think is the lasting impact of *cpi* on the quality of your service regarding:
 - a. the environment,
 - b. the activities and routine on offer to children
 - c. the interactions with children
2. What developments suggested last year (last year's committee meeting to be outlined in this meeting) have been achieved or planned for?
 3. What is your view on the role of the co-ordinator?
 - a. the visits
 - b. the cluster days
 - c. planning
 - d. general support
4. Were parents more involved as a result of *cpi*? If so how?
5. Have there been changes as a result in your committees? What changes – if any?
6. Have there been changes as a result in your community? What changes – if any?
7. What local agencies/networks/funding agencies have you become involved with as a result of *cpi*?
8. What training was being undertaken by staff or committee as a result of *cpi*?
9. What do you think were the overall strengths of *cpi*?
10. What do you think were the overall challenges of *cpi*?
11. How many parents use the playgroup as part of their childcare arrangements and work outside the home and how many parents work at home?

12. How many child hours¹ per week were in place in the community playgroup before *cpi*?
13. How many child hours per week are now catered for in the community playgroup?
14. What difference has the funding made?
15. Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

¹ Child hours: the number of children by the number of hours each child has in the playgroup

Focus Meeting Prompts, Development Officer (KHF), final evaluation *cpi*, November 2004

1. How was the idea of *cpi* conceived?
2. How did it fit with your work/organisation's overall strategic plan?
3. Do you feel the main objective and aims of *cpi* were fulfilled? If not why not?
4. Have you any views on the impact of *cpi* on the playgroups in practice/the lasting impact of *cpi* on the quality of the services regarding:
 - a. the environment
 - b. the activities and routine on offer to children
 - c. the interactions with children
5. What is your view on the impact of the role of the co-ordinator regarding:
 - a. the visits
 - b. the cluster days
 - c. planning / self-evaluation procedures
 - d. general support
6. What would be your recommendations now for a job description/personnel profile of an ideal co-ordinator?
7. What is your view of the impact of the funding on the playgroups?
8. What is your view on whether the capacities of the playgroup management committees have been strengthened as a result of *cpi*?
9. Have you any recommendations for effective committees or ways of supporting them?
10. What is your view on *cpi* (and community playgroups) as a means of family support?
11. What for you is the key learning from:
 - a. the establishment of *cpi* ?
 - b. the establishment of the advisory group of *cpi* ?
 - c. the delivery of *cpi* ?
 - d. networking/integration of *cpi* ?
12. Did the concept of a formative evaluation work? If it did, how? If not, how could the evaluation process have been improved?
13. In what ways do you think *cpi* has influenced government policy?^{1, 2}
14. What do you think were the overall strengths of *cpi*?

¹ Review fields of influence

² Ensure mapping of all policies

15. What do you think were the overall challenges of *cpi*?
16. If you were to start all over again is there anything you would do differently?
17. How has this initiative impacted on the way you may support playgroups in the future?
18. Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

Questionnaire/Telephone Conference, Funding Agencies, final evaluation *cpi*, November 2004

As a funder of this initiative what led you to support *cpi*?

How does this support fit into your organisation's overall strategic plan?

What were your expectations of *cpi*?

Given those expectations were they met?

What do you think were the overall strengths of *cpi*?

What do you think were the overall challenges of *cpi*?

If you were to fund an initiative like this in the future is there anything you would do differently?

Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

Focus Meeting Prompts, Co-ordinator, final evaluation *cpi* December 2004

1. Did your job description match the work you undertook? If so why, if not why not?
2. What were your expectations of the work in *cpi*?
3. Given those expectations, were they met? If so why, if not why not?
4. How did your work evolve?
5. Did the concept of a formative evaluation work? If it did, how? If not, how could the evaluation process have been improved?
6. What do you think is the lasting impact of *cpi* on the quality of the services regarding:
 - a. The environment
 - b. The activities and routine on offer to children
 - c. The interactions with children
7. In your role as the co-ordinator
 - a. How often were your visits in year 1, year 2, year 3?
What do you think is the ideal amount of visits?
How do you think the visits impacted on practice?
 - b. How often were cluster days held and what topics were delivered?
How do you think the cluster days impacted on practice?
 - c. How often did you plan with the groups?
How do you think the planning impacted on practice?
How do you think planning could be incorporated in the future?
How has the development of reflective practice/self-evaluation element of *cpi* progressed?
 - d. What kind of general support did you feel you needed to give?
8. In your role as co-ordinator what helped your work?

9. In your role as co-ordinator what hindered your work?
10. What would be your recommendations for a personnel profile of an ideal co-ordinator?
11. What is your view on whether the capacities of the playgroup management committees have been strengthened as a result of *cpi*?
12. Have you any recommendations for effective committees or ways of supporting them?
13. What is your view on *cpi* (and community playgroups) as a means of family support?
14. What for you were the overall strengths of *cpi*?
15. What do you think were the overall challenges of *cpi*?
16. If you were to start all over again is there anything you would do differently?
17. Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

Questionnaire/Telephone Conference, Pre-school Services Officers, final evaluation *cpi*, December 2004

After much discussion and investigation a three-year project called the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was established to provide support and extra funding to community playgroups in order to enhance the quality of their provision. The *cpi* formally began in November 2001 with the appointment of a co-ordinator and in January 2002 five playgroups were selected from the south-east region. The playgroups taking part in *cpi* are:

- Askea Community Playgroup, Askea, Carlow
- The Rower Inistioge Pre-School, The Rower, Co.Kilkenny
- Slieverue Community Playgroup, Co.Kilkenny
- St Oliver's Community Playgroup, Clonmel, Co.Tipperary
- Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool, Ferns, Co.Wexford

In your role as pre-school services officer and assuming you have visited at least one of the playgroups:

1. Have you any views on the lasting impact of *cpi* on the quality of the service you visited regarding:
 - a. the environment
 - b. the activities and routine on offer to children
 - c. the interactions with children?
2. What is your view of the model of *cpi* which provides funding and support in the form of a co-ordinator?
3. How has this initiative impacted on the way you may support playgroups in the future?
4. Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

Focus Group Prompts, Advisory Group, final evaluation *cpi*, December 2004

1. Do you feel the main objective and aims of *cpi* were fulfilled? If not, why not?
2. Looking back do you think *cpi* was worthwhile? If so why? If not, why not?
3. Have you any views on the impact of the role of the co-ordinator regarding:
 - a. the visits
 - b. the cluster days
 - c. planning/self-evaluation procedures
 - d. general support?

4. What would be your recommendations now for a job description/personnel profile of an ideal co-ordinator?
5. What is your view of the impact of the funding on the playgroups?
6. What is your view on whether the capacities of the playgroup management committees have been strengthened as a result of *cpi*?
7. Have you any recommendations for effective committees or ways of supporting them?
8. What is your view on *cpi* (and community playgroups) as a means of family support?
9. What for you is the key learning from:
 - a. the establishment of *cpi* ?
 - b. the establishment of the advisory group of *cpi* ?
 - c. the delivery of *cpi* ?
 - d. networking/integration of *cpi* ?
10. Did the concept of a formative evaluation work? If it did, how? If not, how could the evaluation process have been improved?
11. In what ways do you think *cpi* has influenced government policy?^{1, 2}
12. What do you think were the overall strengths of *cpi*?
13. What do you think were the overall challenges of *cpi*?
14. If *cpi* were to start all over again is there anything you would advise differently?
15. How has this initiative impacted on your work or the way you may support playgroups in the future?
16. Have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

Telephone Survey for Parents, final evaluation *cpi*, January 2005

A three-year project called the Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) was established to provide support and extra funding to community playgroups in order to enhance the quality of their provision. The *cpi* formally began in November 2001 with the appointment of a co-ordinator and in January 2002 five playgroups were selected from the south-east region. The playgroup that your child attends was one of those selected. These questions are for an evaluation of *cpi*.

1. When did your child/ren start in the playgroup?
2. Have you had any previous children in the playgroup prior to *cpi*?
3. Have you any views on the impact of *cpi* on the quality of the playgroup?
 - a) Does the playgroup (and community playgroups in general) support your family in any way, and what is that way?
 - b) Does the playgroup form part of your childcare arrangements?
5. What do you like about the playgroup?
6. What do not like about the playgroup?
7. What daily fee are you paying? What do you think about that?
8. Are there any developments you'd like to see in the playgroup or have you any recommendations for general early childhood care and education policy?

¹ Review fields of influence/learning/connections/integration/links

² Ensure mapping of all policies

Appendix 6

Parent Sample

Parent sample (Baseline January 2003)

ENROLMENT NUMBERS		NO OF PARENTS INTERVIEWS
Askea	34	9
Slieverue	35	8
St .Oliver's	32	8
Teach na bPáistí	18	5
The Rower	10	3
Total	129	
Sample of 25%	32.25	33 (32 mothers, 1 father)

Parent sample (Mid-cpi evaluation January 2004)

ENROLMENT NUMBERS		NO OF PARENTS INTERVIEWS	
		Targeted	Random
Askea	41	3	7
Slieverue	34	3	5
St.Olivers	22	1	4
Teach na bPaisti	22	0	5
The Rower	19	2	3
Total	138		
Sample of 25%	34.50	9 (9 mothers)	24 (20 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 grandmother)

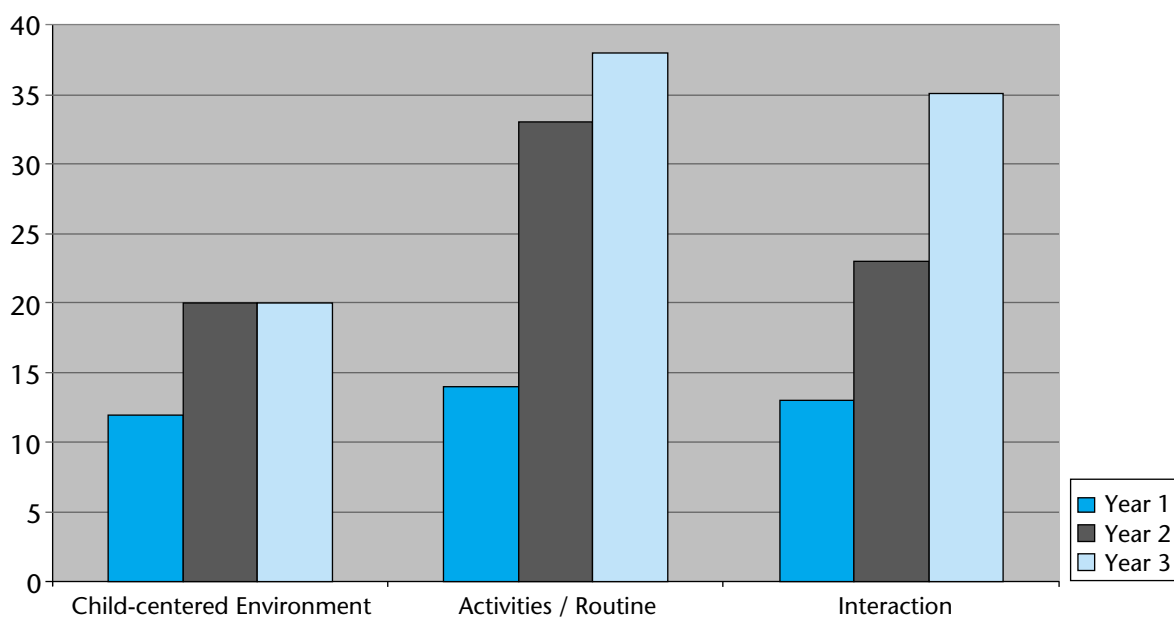
Parent sample (Final Evaluation January 2005)

ENROLMENT NUMBERS		NO OF PARENTS INTERVIEWS
Askea	29	7
St.Olivers	20	5
Slieverue	30	7
Teach na bPaisti	26	6
The Rower	18	4
Total	123	
Sample of 25%	29	29 (3 fathers, 1 grandmother, 25 mothers)

Appendix 7

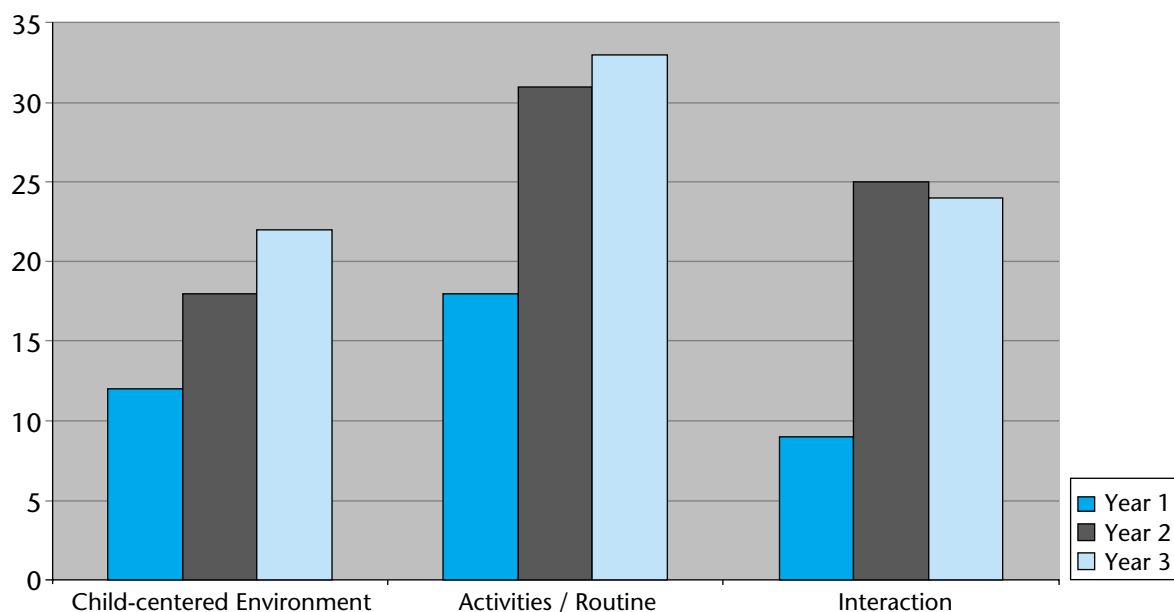
Parent Sample

Playgroup 1

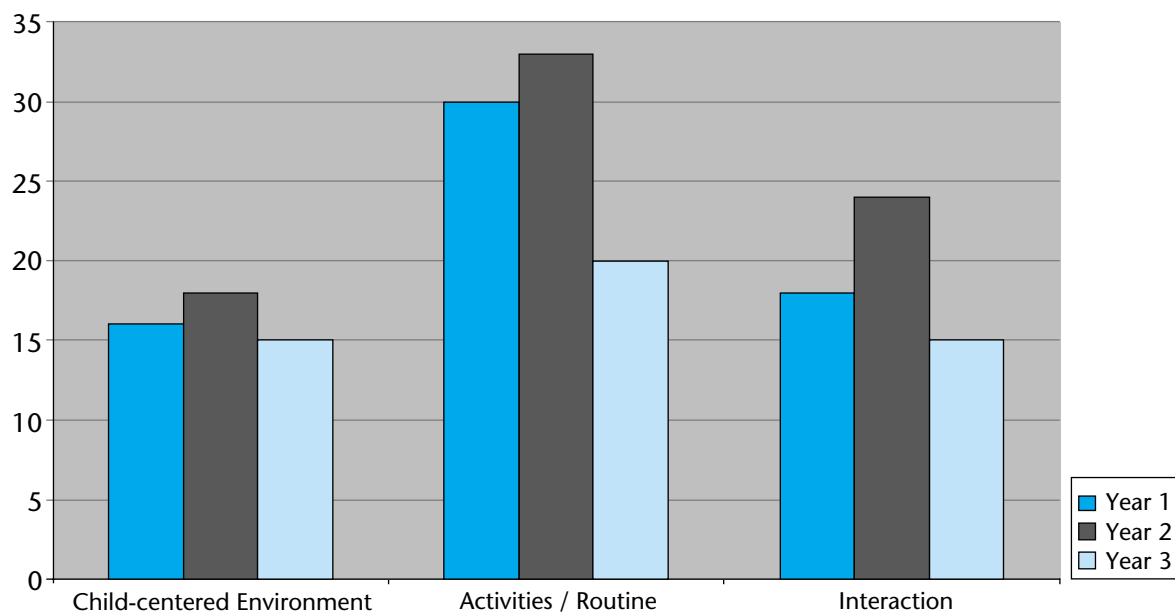


105

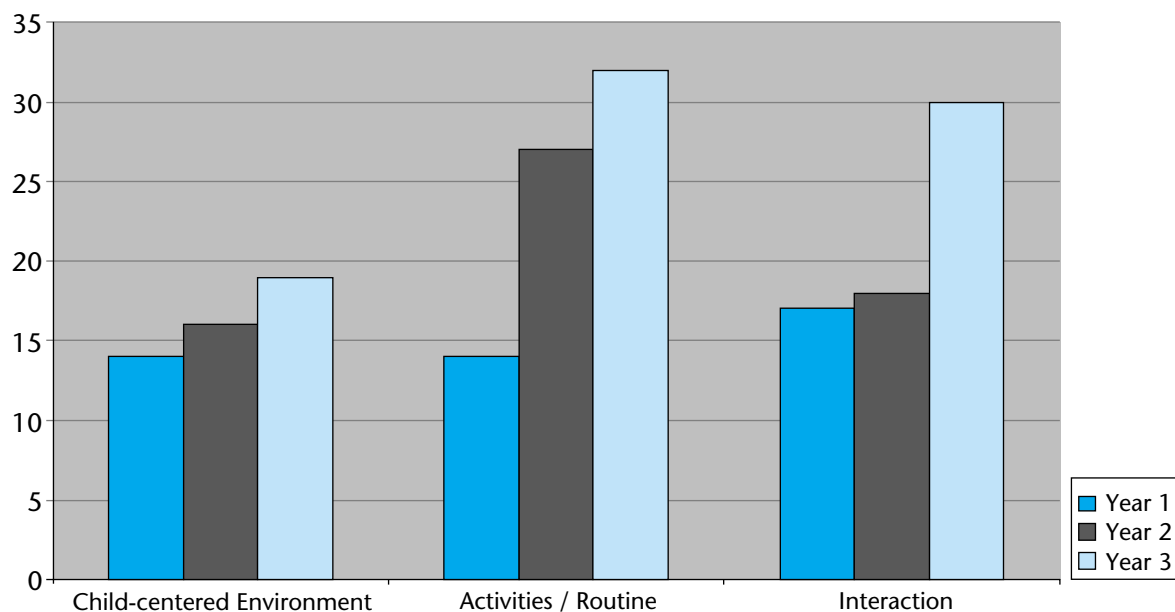
Playgroup 2

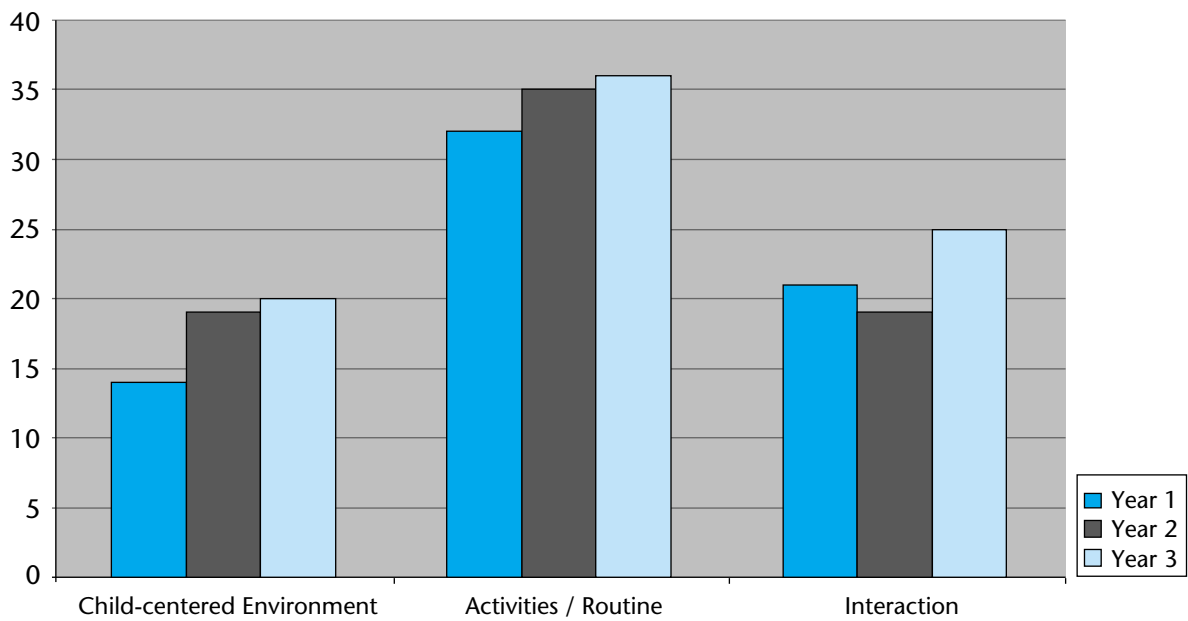


Playgroup 3



Playgroup 4



Playgroup 5

Appendix 8

Suggestions for a Child-centred Environment

Establishing a Learning Environment

Children learn best when they can make choices and act upon them. The arrangement of the room can encourage children to explore materials, make friends, and become self-confident. The playroom should be exciting, yet orderly enough so that children can find materials and things to do on their own. High/Scope (Hohmann *et al*, 1979) offers the following steps in arranging and equipping the classroom. Note: the following are extracts from *Supporting Quality* (French, 2003, pp. 74 -75).

Step One: Dividing the Room

The room should be divided into distinct areas or interest centres, such as house, block, quiet, sand-and-water, computer, and music. It can be useful to have a permanent cleanable surface in the water area. One idea that can work well in purpose-built services is to place the water table over an area which slopes down into a drain. The National Children's Bureau (1994) concurs with the above divisions. The management of children's rooms should include permanent areas for quiet activities, creative and messy activities, musical activities, large space activities and other interests. The following recommendations are made:

- Quiet activity areas should include equipment such as comfortable chairs, warm rugs, cushions, and a small activity table.
- Creative activity areas should provide opportunities for exploring with a range of natural materials, paint, drawing and craft activities, and might include such equipment as easels, sand or water trays, space for storage of materials, activity tables, and suitable waterproof aprons and head covers for those children who require them.
- Other areas should provide opportunities for table top or floor activities, for example, large construction activities or brick play, for imaginative or fantasy play, for musical activities and for physical play and for the particular needs of babies and toddlers.
- An area should also be provided for scientific or technological play, together

with opportunities to develop mathematical experiences.

- There should be enough space for children to use materials.
- Boundaries can be set, by using low shelves or dividers, so that children and adults can see into other areas. This facilitates easy entry into group or individual play situations.
- These areas should be clearly marked. In naming the areas for children, use words that describe the room from a child's point of view, rather than 'adult' words that are too abstract to be meaningful (e.g., "climbing area" is better than "gross motor area").
- Beware of 'freeways': large open spaces with no materials that promote running through the room. Instead, use up extra space by including it in one of the interest areas. One idea that works well, if the room allows it, is to leave the centre of the room open to contain any overflow from the interest areas, and to provide a central location for meetings of children and adults.
- Other practical ideas: put the art area near a sink, put the block area on carpeting, put the house area near or next to the block area so that children can use them both at the same time.

Step Two: Choosing and Storing Materials

Materials should be stored where they will be used; label shelves, drawers, and containers so children can easily put materials away.

Many kinds of labels will work well with children: real objects, such as a bead glued to a bead storage bin, pictures of materials cut out from catalogues, sketches, photographs, or silhouettes.

- Textured or scented labels will help the visually impaired child.
- For children who are beginning to recognise letters and words, you can also add word labels.

Similar items should be stored together. Hang or store sets of materials, such as pots and pans, so that size differences are apparent. Be sure to have

enough of each material so that more than one child at a time can use it. Include materials that can be used in more than one way; these promote creativity. Materials can be acquired free or inexpensively by asking parents to collect them or by asking businesses for donations. It is essential that new and interesting materials are periodically added. If there are not enough low wooden shelves to store all of the materials, be creative in finding other ways to store things: in shallow box tops, in round ice cream containers, in boxes, or by hanging up objects on a pegboard.

Step Three: Displaying Children's Work

In each area, if possible, have a display space for children's work at child's eye level. Any educator-planned displays should present things children can understand or that they have had a part in creating. Pre-cut or pre-determined patterns for children to follow should not be hung up; instead display work that children have created and that has meaning to them. These displays are used to reflect topics, which are currently of interest to the children, such as festivals and changes in nature. This allows children to take pride in their work and helps them own their environment.

Orderly arrangement of the classroom, besides encouraging children to take care of the equipment, can provide natural opportunities for learning. Children gradually begin to understand why materials are sorted and stored in different ways. Scissors of different sizes are hung in order of size on one rack; beads are stored in the same tray, but the small ones go in the front section and the big ones go in the back; zoo animals go in one tub, farm animals in another. Important abilities, such as the ability to classify or to represent the world, develop as children strive to make sense out of the storage system. Thoughtful planning can make the classroom a better place for children to develop such abilities.

The following are potential areas for play in children's group rooms and suggestions for what could be found, recycled, brought in by parents or friends.

Many items from the above checklist emanate from the High/Scope® Educational Research Foundation, 1995

ART/MESSY/JUNK AREA

The following open-ended materials could be available in the art area:

junk, paint, water, sand, and playdough, a large variety of paints, liquid starch/cornflour for finger painting, easels, plastic squeeze bottles, muffin tins, frozen food tins, saucers for painting, newspaper, brushes of different sizes, sponges, paper towels, toothbrushes, different types of paper/different colours and textures, cardboard/bits of wood to paint, staplers and staples, staple remover, paper punch, paste/glue, individual containers for paint/glue (old yogurt cartons), masking tape, sellotape, paperclips, rubber bands, elastic, string yarn, scissors, pencils, toppers, erasers, coloured pencils, chunky crayons, chalk, chalkboard, water soluble markers, magic markers (water soluble), ink pads and stamps, old toy magazines and catalogues, paper of different sizes, textures and colours, large rolls of wrapping or wall paper, tissue paper, wrapping-paper scraps, foil, contact paper scraps, paper plates, cardboard pieces, cardboard boxes, home made playdough, flour dredgers, baking trays, playdough accessories: rolling pins, scone/gingerbread men cutters, plastic knives, potato masher, garlic crusher, buttons, straws, modelling clay, egg cartons, shoeboxes, ice-cream tubs, empty thread spools, pipe cleaners, wire, bits of wood, sequins, cardboard tubes, paper bags, cloth, felt, macaroni/pasta (different shapes), food colouring, paint, crayons, and paper which mirror skin colours.

SAND AREA

The following open-ended materials could be available in the sand area: wet sand, dry sand, storage for sand equipment such as open shelving unit or vegetable racks, a variety of measuring spoons and cups, scoops, spades, sand wheels, moulds, sieves and colanders.

WATER AREA

The following open-ended materials could be available in the water area: water, a variety of scoops, spoons, funnels, things that float, things that sink, washable dolls, dolls clothes for washing, jug, watering cans, pipes and balls, boats, plastic cars and trucks, plastic people, plastic tubing, squeeze bottles, plastic bottles equipped with siphon and pump such as hand lotion or glass cleaner bottles, measuring cups and spoons.

CONSTRUCTION AREA

The following open-ended materials could be available in the construction area: tool box, large hollow blocks, boards, unit blocks (as many shapes and sizes as possible), cardboard blocks, cloth or contact-paper covered blocks made from shoeboxes or milk cartons, carpet pieces, boards, cardboard pieces, old sheets, blankets/bedspreads, plexiglass pieces, large boxes, small boxes, old birthday/greeting cards, tubes, string, ropes and pulleys, photographs of children's buildings, screwdrivers, claws, hammers, saws, pliers, vices, hard hats, nuts bolts nails, measuring tapes, wood scraps, materials to take apart and put together, plastic or wooden "take apart" trucks and cars (some that snap and some that screw), interlocking blocks and boards, clip-on wheels and blocks, interlock wooden train tracks, materials for filling and emptying, dump trucks, baskets, cans, buckets, crates, spools, small blocks, stones, chestnuts, shells, large beads and strings, small beads and strings, wooden cubes, plastic cubes, smell bottles (baby food jars with smell saturated gauze pads made by children), sound boxes (made from film cans or contact-covered baby cereal boxes), buttons, stones, shells, materials for decoding and pretending, matching card games (children and adults can make their own), materials to order and build with, nesting boxes, nesting cups, nesting rings, contact-paper covered coffee can set, with lids (large, medium, small,) washers, nuts, and bolts (large, medium, small), plastic pipe fittings (large, medium, small), materials to fit together and take apart, large pegs and pegboards, small pegs and pegboards, stacking roundabout rings, wooden puzzles (simple four-piece puzzles and more complex puzzles), magnets, interlocking plastic squares, shapes sorters and shapes, construction straws, interlocking octagons, scales, balances, screw and board sets, stickle bricks, a variety of small jig-saws and floor puzzles.

Multi-racial toy people

animal figures found in your community (e.g., house pets)
toy vehicles representative of those found in the community
puzzles reflect the community atmosphere (e.g., rural or urban),
puzzles represent occupations of the parents and others in the community.

QUIET AREA

big books, small books, accessible storage systems that show the front of the book, books reflect the interests and cultures of the children, books dealing with reality e.g going to school, getting a new baby, losing a loved one, allow children make their own books, child-sized sofa, bean bags, large floppy cushions, a mat, area cordoned off by a screen or a piece of furniture, books written in children's home languages, books depicting a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, focusing on modern lifestyles and including natural-looking illustrations of people, books representing a variety of family situations, including single-parent families, two-parent families, bi-racial couples, step-parents, and children cared for by extended family members, books portraying women and men in realistic situations, with both girls and boys playing active roles, and both women and men seen as independent problem-solvers, books showing children and adults with various abilities and with characters who have a disability portrayed as real people who happen to have handicaps rather than as objects of pity who struggle hard to overcome handicaps

LET'S PRETEND AREA

real toaster, real oven, (for cooking scones etc) real microwave, real blender/juicer, available

For the home corner

oven, refrigerator, sink, sofa, table and chairs, ironing board, iron, dressing table,

adult-size (real)

cutlery, pots and pans, cooking utensils, large and small spoons, large and small spatulas, eggbeater, egg timer (sand or wind-up), kettle, teapot, ladle, colander, sieves, can opener, real baking equipment (large and small cake/loaf tins,) mixing bowls, measuring cups and spoons, weighing scales, rolling pin, plates, cups, saucers, bowls, sponges, dishcloths, towels,

place mats, tablecloths, lamp, empty food containers, empty biscuit tins, salt and pepper, containers, old toaster with socket, removed, old hairdryer, with socket, removed, old mobile phones, frying pan, rug, a real lightweight Hoover, dustpans and brushes, mirror, old clocks (de-electrified or wind-up) camera, small step ladder, old computer, calculators, computer keyboards

The shop

cash register, play money, used stamps, shopping

trolley, variety of empty containers – baby powder, sudocrème, baby wipes, washing-up cartons, bandages.

multicultural dolls, multicultural puppets, pop-up tents, garage, miniature people, animals, dollhouse, doll house furniture, cars and trucks of all sorts and sizes, a ramp for cars, a track or mat for cars, construction and farm vehicles, planes, helicopters, diggers, boats, tractors, trains, buses, farm set, zoo set, dinosaurs, train set, puppets, (finger and hand held), dolls, stethoscope, doctor set, old thermometer, stuffed animals, doll beds, baby rattles, buggies, changing mat, baby bath, highchair, prams, doll car seats, cots, bibs, bottles, clothes, dress-up clothes, hats, shoes, purses, dresses, scarves, jewellery, neckties, boots, watches, wallets, briefcase, glasses, picnic basket, old blankets, sheets, tablecloths, bedspreads (or large material scraps), beach towels, TV (just the case and the knobs), sturdy cardboard boxes, low, movable partitions, (cardboard or pegboard), plants (real and plastic), prop boxes (boxes with props for different themes), multiracial girl and boy dolls with appropriate skin colours, hair textures and styles, and facial features, contents and arrangement of house area mirror homes found in your community, kitchen utensils, empty food containers reflect what children see their family members using, dress-up clothing reflective of the community, including occupations of the children's parents, child-sized wheelchairs, crutches, glasses with lenses removed.

MUSIC/MOVEMENT AREA

Equipment for music and movement:

Music player, CDs/tapes/mini-discs (tapes/mini-discs both pre-recorded and blank), Microphone, Earphones, triangles (three sizes), bells, xylophone, tambourines, drums, children can make their own musical instruments, variety of music played in the session (traditional, classical, modern), reflect children's cultural diversity in the music and movement area, variety of instruments are available for movement games characteristic of the children's cultures played.

OUTDOOR/MOTOR AREA

A tree with low hanging branches, children can paint murals on the walls, paint big timber constructions, make dens and camps, places to hide, climb, run, clamber over, crawl through, dig, pedal, pour, sort and pretend, a variety of portable and stationary outdoor equipment, an area to grow

plants, strong gardening tools available, wellingtons available in the setting, a wild, uncultivated area, a bird feeder, bird house, bird bath, a picnic area, a garden seat, a covered in area/lean-to type structure children can play in the rain or can take shelter in the sun, a quiet area, a pedalling/driving area, a climbing area, a construction area, a seating area, a running area, a large sand pit/water area, a creative area, access to flowing water, pumps and pipes, a wooden playhouse, tunnels/barrels, art materials outdoors, a slide, a small climbing frame, a storage shed, an outside tap, a covered sand tray, a water tray, tunnels for climbing through, a foldable tent, low ramps/tracks for cycling on, wheel barrows, pieces of wood, cardboard boxes, old sheets/blankets, watering cans, clothes line/pegs, tractors, trailers, bikes, cars, trolleys, flagpole, wind chime, water feature such as bubble fountain, hula hoops, skittles, things to climb and balance on, things to push, pull, and ride on, things to kick, throw and aim for, balls, large and small, beanbags, low hung basketball hoop and net, traffic sign set, golf stick set, bouncers, outdoor area can be organised into areas (open, quiet and active), a variety of surfaces, hills/ramps, a hard surface such as cement for sand/water area, a rubber/soft cushioned area in some parts, a grassy area.

Appendix 9

Personnel Profile of a Co-ordinator, Development Worker in Early Childhood Care and Education

Person specification - personnel profile of a co-ordinator, development worker

In the **person specification**, successful candidate will have:

- A third-level qualification and experience in early childhood care and education
- Experience in community work
- Excellent communication and facilitation skills
- A proven ability to work to deadlines
- Information Technology skills and experience in report writing
- Driving licence and use of a car.

The role of a co-ordinator, development worker is very diverse – there's a need for flexibility, an ability to think on one's feet, have good inter-personal skills, be a good listener, have good organisational skills, the ability to motivate, and have sound theoretical and practical knowledge of early childhood care and education principles and practices. A co-ordinator or development worker supporting community playgroups should have:

- Respect for early years work and the people within it
- Evaluation and reporting skills
- Training and group facilitation skills
- Team working and building skills
- Networking and accessing support and funding skills
- Understanding of development work and the slow pace of change - an ability to balance task and process
- Skill and abilities in mentoring to support management committees as they work through management issues
- Understanding of group and community dynamics
- Knowledge of the community context
- Understanding of diversity and the complexity of the sector
- Commitment; a demonstration of the ability to stay, focus and follow through with groups
- Human warmth; empathy, honesty, knowing

limits, ability to say so if something is not possible

- Flexibility with respect to working hours

Appendix 10

cpi Overview of playgroups' spending

cpi Overview of playgroups' spending

2002

	Salaries	Training	Toys/books/ equip/furn	Trips/ Activities	Renovations	Miscs.	Bank chges	Rent	Total
Askea	2892	100	675	817	1545	410	17	0	6456
The Rower	3315	60	1938	150	7201	412	33	584	13693
Slieverue	1731	210	3322	0	180	0	380	27	5850
St Oliver's	226	0	6171	0	0	209	0	0	6606
Teach na bPáistí	90	1287	7358	415	303	1918	10	3400	14781
Totals	8254	1657	19464	1382	9229	2949	440	4011	47386

2003

	Salaries	Training	Toys/books/ equip/furn	Trips/ Activities	Renovations	Miscs.	Bank chges	Rent	Total
Askea	11408.5	910	5040.43	895.5	0	393.58	61	0	18709.01
The Rower	7319	315	1109	270	2780	820	152	0	12765
Slieverue	1876	174	596	0	24065	0	38	2557	29306
St Oliver's	19317	175	1375	280	186	70	8	315	21726
Teach na bPáistí	6431.28	380	616.08	757	0	1683.5	31.29	2000	11899.15
Totals	46351.78	1954	8736.51	2202.5	27031	2967.08	290.29	4872	94405.16

2004

	Salaries	Training	Toys/books/ equip/furn	Trips/ Activities	Renovations	Miscs.	Bank chges	Rent	Total
Askea	17276.59	80	1974.57	702.5		454.65	46.68	0	20534.99
The Rower	8867.74	0	852.98	212	6400.78	283.3	28.89	0	16645.69
Slieverue	729.23	5	1151.68	488.4	7804.84	60	0	0	10239.15
St Oliver's	14662.3	60	1869.87	290	0	395.15			17277.32
Teach na bPáistí	13279.3	80	2093.28	137.5	0	1297.65	76.83	1050	18014.56
Totals	54815.16	225	7942.38	1830.4	14205.62	2490.75	152.4	1050	82711.71
Combined Total	109420.9	3836	36142.89	5414.9	50465.62	8406.83	882.69	9933	

Appendix 11

General Recommendations for Early Childhood Care and Education

All participants in the final evaluation: the funding agencies, the advisory group, the five playgroup staff and their committees, the co-ordinator *cpi*, the development officer (KHF), the pre-school services officers, regional co-ordinator of child care services, the child care managers in the four community care areas of the SEHB, a children first implementation officer, parents and participants at the conference hosted by *cpi* in Kilkenny in October 2004 were asked to make recommendations for early childhood care and education in Ireland. It is recommended that:

- One government department should take overall responsibility for the sector: ensuring a more joined-up approach without the artificial divisions into care and education. That department should fund the sector.
- All children between the ages of three and five should have access to a choice of free high-quality preschool care and education as of right in their own community.
- The recommendations of the OECD Thematic Report (2004) should be adopted in full; it has identified many of the policy and infrastructure supports needed.
- Providers should be supported to implement any future quality guidelines that will emerge from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- There should be a standardised salary scale for early childhood practitioners where set pay scales adhere to individual's qualifications and experience; similar to primary school teachers and with similar holiday entitlements. A Professional Childcare body should be established with one specific department to take responsibility to develop an appropriate salary scale for early childhood practitioners.
- A national steering lobby group should be developed with co-ordinated leadership, and genuine commitment, to provide a unified, strong voice, for young children and their families. It should be representative of all childcare services and statutory and voluntary childcare agencies. They should network together to foster a process involving the employment of a national co-ordinator and ensure a forum for the voice of community playgroups and children.
- An advertising campaign should be launched to promote discussion and awareness of the importance of play.
- A national body representing the childcare sector to take responsibility for Garda Clearance, should be established where early childhood practitioners could register and where part of the membership criteria would be to acquire a Garda Clearance check.
- Access to state-funded standardised multi-professional in-service training in each county for the pre-primary sector (statutory and voluntary) should be made available.
- The childcare sector should be unionised.



The Katharine Howard Foundation, ISFC, 10 Grattan Crescent, Inchicore, Dublin 8
Tel. 01 453 1861 Fax 01 453 1862 Email: info@khf.ie

