

Reconceptualising Community Playgroups

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Commissioned by the
Playgroup Consortium

Research undertaken by the
Children's Research Centre
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The Playgroup movement grew out of an increasing awareness during the 60's and 70's of the value of play in children's development. IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation was established in 1969. Since then, Playgroups, both private and community, have been established all over Ireland. IPPA advocates for, and promotes at a national level, Playgroup participation for all families with young children. We advocate learning through play and supporting parents through Playgroups as an integral part of the early childhood experience. In addition, IPPA's 2,500 members run Day Care, After School and Parent and Toddler Groups as well as Playgroups.

The Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) is an independent grant-making foundation, whose key function is the provision of small, easily accessible grants to community based groups throughout Ireland. Within this provision, the Foundation's particular focus is on projects that provide direct support to children and their families in disadvantaged communities. Since 1996 KHF has focused on support for early childcare and education through a number of initiatives and grant schemes. These include grants for Community Playgroups (ceased in 2006) and the Community Playgroup Initiative (CPI, 2001-2004).

It is with great pleasure that IPPA and KHF publishes "Reconceptualising Community Playgroups". It represents a landmark report for the many people who have contributed to and participated in Community Playgroups over the decades and gives recognition to their work. The research, undertaken by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, is an original and critical enquiry that makes a significant contribution to existing knowledge as it embodies the results of independent investigation.

This research clearly demonstrates the value of Community Playgroups. It is now time to recognise and value the empowering work of Community Playgroups in Ireland through increased subsidisation and appropriate pay, conditions, training and qualifications for those working in this sector. Community Playgroups fulfil an important role today in the care and education of children and with the right level of investment could provide a ready-made infrastructure to facilitate a universal free pre-school place for every child into the future.

The report highlights the support provided by community based Playgroups for children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development in a caring and child centred environment. It acknowledges how these Playgroups contribute to the overall well-being of children and how their location within the community, the locally-based staff, the play-based curriculum and the family-friendly approach all add up to an affordable, responsive, socially inclusive and valuable resource to the community.

However, the report also states that there are practical barriers for Playgroups in maintaining affordability and openness and that these should be taken very seriously as they pose a potential threat to the encouragement of social inclusion and ultimately to the contribution of Community Playgroups to community development. Specifically the report calls for support in the form of funding, resources and training to enable Playgroups to enhance the quality of the services that they offer and engage more comprehensively with the needs of the communities in which they are situated.

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IPPA and KHF would like to acknowledge the consortium and the research steering committee that supported this project. These groups consisted of a number of organisations that participated in a variety of ways: expertise, making data available and general stakeholder interest. The consortium was made up of the following organisations: Community Playgroups Together; The National Children's Office; The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education and The Southern Health Board. A number of other agencies were supportive of the objectives of the research and assisted in the design of the project, sharing their expertise with the executive group. This latter category included The Family Support Agency; The Dublin Institute of Technology; The Border Counties Childcare Network; Pavee Point; The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; The Committee on Educational Disadvantage and University College Dublin. We are grateful to all the above for the support and advice provided to us.

We would like to acknowledge the research team at the Children's Research Centre (CRC) for all their hard work and commitment. The research team was ably supported by an advisory group comprised of Eilis Hennessey, UCD; Darragh Doherty, Dept. of Justice and Law Reform; Maire Uí Ainín, Forbairt Naíonraí Teo; Sarah Cullinan, Pobal; Irene Gunning, IPPA and Noelle Spring, KHF. We are very grateful to them for their contribution to this research project.

This research has been funded by a number of organisations including the Dublin City Childcare Committee, the Katharine Howard Foundation, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, the Irish Youth Foundation, the Community Foundation for Ireland along with a number of other City/County Childcare Committees: Carlow, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, Fingal, Kildare, Laois, North Tipperary, Offaly, South Dublin, Waterford City and County and Wicklow. All these organisations share a common belief in the importance of early childhood care and education for young children, particularly those from disadvantaged areas and sections of Irish society.

Finally we would like to acknowledge all those involved in the services that took part in this research. Their involvement has made a valuable contribution towards the gathering of evidence of the important role that Community Playgroups make within early childhood care and education.

In recent years there have been increased demands for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland. Figures available (QNHS, Quarter 1, 2005) suggest that 40.3% of families with preschool children aged 0 – 6 regularly relied on non-parental childcare arrangements during the normal working day (an increase from 36.5% in 2002). Relatives (paid and unpaid) cared for approximately 15%, paid carers for 12.05%, and 10% were in Group Care settings (including full day and Sessional Child Care, which are not disaggregated in the statistics).

ECCE has until recently been provided by the state only to a very limited extent. Provision has been organised largely by the voluntary sector and includes:

- Full Time Day-Care (mostly for-profit, but also some community-based not-for-profit);
- Sessional services which operate for half a day or less on one or more days each week – Parent and Toddler Groups, Breakfast Clubs, After School Clubs, private and community Preschools and Playgroups;
- Childminders – in their own homes or in the child's family home, including relations and paid non-family members.

In addition the 0 - 6 age group is catered for by:

- infant classes in state primary schools (attended by almost all 5 year olds and 50% of 4 year olds);
- the Early Start Programme, which targets a very limited number of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds within the state system.

THE CURRENT PROJECT

¹Consortium members were:
 Barnardos,
 Community Playgroups Initiative,
 Community Playgroups Together,
 Dublin Institute of Technology,
 Ed. Disadv. Committee Dept of
 Education and Science,
 Family Support Agency,
 Finglas Playgroups Association,
 Forbairt Naíonraí Teo.,
 IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation,
 Katharine Howard Foundation,
 National Children's Office,
 Pavee Point,
 National Council for Curriculum and
 Assessment,
 Southern Health Board,
 The Border Counties Childcare
 Network,
 The Centre for Early Childhood
 Development and Education.

This project originated from an initiative of the Playgroups Research Consortium¹ coordinated by IPPA (The Early Childhood Organisation) in the context of increased demands for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland and a concern by the Consortium to reconsider the role of Community Playgroups against a background of changing communities and the changing infrastructure of early childhood care and education policy and provision. To this end the research aimed:

- 1 to document the role of Community Playgroups;
- 2 to identify the positive and negative factors impacting on that role; and
- 3 to consider how Community Playgroups might contribute to future developments in the ECCE sector and whether there was a need for a reconceptualisation of their role.

WHAT IS A 'COMMUNITY PLAYGROUP'?

Community Playgroups are sessional pre-school services that operate for up to three and a half hours per day, usually but not always, five days a week. They provide play and socialising opportunities for children aged between 3 and 5 years with caring and responsive adults in a small group setting, usually between 10 and 20 children. In this Executive Summary, the term Community Playgroup is used to encompass both English-medium and Irish-medium (Naíonraí) Playgroups. Many were originally set up by parents who recognised a local need. They are notified to the Health Service Executive and comply with the Childcare (Services) Pre-School Regulations (1996), revised and published as the Childcare (Services) Preschool Regulations (2006) and are monitored by the Preschool Services Officers. They are managed by a local committee, usually with parental representation. They are supported by dedicated umbrella organisations: IPPA for English medium groups, Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta (FNT) for non-Gaeltacht Naíonraí and Comhar na Naíonra Gaelacha (CNG) for Naíonraí in the Gaeltacht, and by official bodies at national, regional and county level.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT CARRIED OUT?

An Advisory Group was set up to guide the research with representatives from the Playgroup Consortium and other stakeholders (ADM/Pobal, Dept of Education, Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and an external academic). It was agreed that information should be collected in the following ways:

- 1 A review of research and of developments in policy and practice in Ireland and other countries: this was undertaken so as to inform the background of the study and provide pointers for recommendations in relation to the possible contribution of Community Playgroups to future developments in the sector.
- 2 Consultations were held with stakeholders – playgroup providers, parents, teachers, preschool service officers, public health nurses and children – about the kinds of information necessary to achieve the aims of the study. A total of 38 individuals participated in this stage, including 8 children.
- 3 Access was obtained to the databases held by the three support organisations mentioned above (IPPA, FNT, CNG) with a view to establishing the number and distribution of Community Playgroups and providing a sampling frame for the case studies which were part of the main study.
- 4 Observations and interviews were carried out in three Community Playgroups (2 English-medium and one Irish-medium – a convenience sample).
- 5 All the Community Playgroups on the databases (N=457) were written to, informed about the study and invited to register their willingness to participate.
- 6 Ten further Community Playgroups were selected from those who replied; observations were made using a site observation tool; children in those Playgroups and in Junior Infants classes were involved in conversations and were observed (with parental consent); teachers, parents, Preschool Service Officers (PSSOs) and Public Health Nurses (PHNs) were interviewed and some advisory group members were contacted by email. A total of 174 individuals participated in this stage including 42 children.
- 7 A questionnaire was sent to the 457 Community Playgroups registered on the databases. Replies were received from 125. The questionnaire asked for views on the role of Community Playgroups and also for details about the day-to-day administration and organisation of Community Playgroups.

1 WHAT IS THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS?

The commissioners of the research project requested the research team to explore the role of Community Playgroups in the following areas:

- A. Early childhood care and education
- B. Supporting families
- C. Supporting social inclusion and contributing to community development

The extent to which Community Playgroups were seen to have a role was gleaned from the observations made by the researchers and the responses of interviewees and of those who responded to the questionnaire and findings are reported below.

A. EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Community Playgroups appear to make a substantial contribution to ECCE in Ireland.

- 1 They provide support for children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development in a caring and child-centred environment outside the family home for part of the day.
- 2 They contribute to the overall well-being of children by being responsive to their needs, by maintaining a happy relaxed atmosphere and by encouraging them to develop to their full potential. The conversations with children showed that they were very enthusiastic about attending Community Playgroups; parents reported that children did not want to miss a day, even if they were sick and that they wished it was open on Saturdays and Sundays.
- 3 Through play, art, music and some structured activities they offer stimulation and challenge to children, but with an emphasis on ensuring that children are happy, relaxed and at home in the environment.

- 4 They offer opportunities for children to interact with non-family adults and develop a trusting relationship with them, building confidence in their own ability to interact with other adults who respect and support them.
- 5 They support children in developing social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, taking responsibility, being independent, developing self-confidence, making decisions and learning the conventions of being in a group.
- 6 They assist the development of school readiness through offering experiences which support linguistic and cognitive development as well as learning familiarity with routine.
- 7 Playgroups are seen as contributing to an easier transition to school in that peer groups often progressed from a playgroup to the local school together and gave each other mutual support. Children mentioned this and so did parents.
- 8 They provide resources which might not be available in the child's own home – space, equipment, toys, books, outdoor experiences etc.
- 9 Attendance at a Community Playgroup was seen in some cases to bring developmental benefits through the very process of interacting and communicating – improvements in speech and language for example.
- 10 In some cases, playgroup leaders felt that they had a role in identifying potential developmental problems (which otherwise might not be identified until the child was attending primary school) at an early stage and advising parents on next steps and the possibility of organising intervention.
- 11 Naíonraí were seen as providing additional linguistic and cultural benefits through their emphasis on the Irish language which resulted in Irish becoming a natural part of the lives of the children attending them.

B. SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Community Playgroups were recognised as providing support for families in a number of ways:

- 1 Playgroups make it possible for parents to have some time to themselves while children are in the playgroup; this can reduce stress and tension and physical exhaustion and contribute to the well-being of the family which in turn will eventually impact on the child.
- 2 Playgroups offer choices to parents by the very fact of allowing them some free time – it could be spent with other younger children in the family, in leisure, in education or training, or in employment (part-time, or, with additional back-up, full-time). Having these possibilities also contributes to the well-being of the family and eventually of the child.
- 3 Playgroups occupy children in ways that are stimulating and beneficial for their general development and which result in happy children communicating 'news' to their parents about their activities (this was obvious from our observations and interviews). In this way playgroups contribute to the well-being of the whole family.
- 4 Playgroups may provide links with other services for the child such as speech therapy, social worker, psychologist and public health nurse, and act as advocates in a supportive and non-threatening way.
- 5 By providing opportunities for parents to meet other parents informally and sometimes formally: using these opportunities enables parents to exchange information on child development and other issues of interest; sometimes there are incentives to work together toward a goal which are facilitated by these occasions, thus increasing social capital.
- 6 By assisting families to best support their child by providing role models in situations where children present challenges: this can carry over into the family home and help the development of positive relationships and constructive ways of assisting children. This contributes in a lasting way to supporting and strengthening the nurturing environment present to the child.

- 7 By encouraging parents to participate in the running of the playgroup whether by sitting on the committee or being present on a rota basis: this supports and affirms parents by recognising their expertise and their potential contribution to the development of their own and other children. At the same time it supports them in the sense that the very act of being invited to contribute in this way and the experience of contributing and participating will increase their own personal confidence and social skills and assist them in preparing to return to the work force should they decide to do so.
- 8 By offering opportunities and encouragement to parents to undergo training courses to increase their skills and knowledge and an arena where they can practice newly learnt skills under friendly supportive supervision. This also increases self-confidence and assists them in preparing to return to the workforce should they decide to do so.
- 9 Playgroups provide a potentially significant element in childcare arrangements where the child is offered activity, company and stimulation for half the day, thus relieving the burden of relatives who may be childminding.



C. SUPPORTING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Two of the basic tenets of the ethos of Community Playgroups are affordability and openness to all comers. By striving to maintain affordability and by being open, they contribute to social inclusion and ultimately to community development because of the following:

- 1 By being open to all comers regardless of ability to pay, they offer opportunities to all children to benefit from the curriculum offered. Some Community Playgroups were found to have a discreet sliding scale of fees to further facilitate families who might have financial difficulties.
- 2 By being affordable they offer opportunities for those who may not have resources within their own families to be ready for school socially, linguistically and cognitively.
- 3 By being open to children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and with different needs – social, educational, linguistic or other – they promote the acceptance of diversity among young children who embrace it with enthusiasm.
- 4 Because they are small-group and locally based, and usually staffed by people who live locally, they can play a more intimate supporting role within communities – everybody knows everybody else.
- 5 Because they are locally based they are ideally placed to act as a 'hub' for community news and information about events; some of the Playgroups in our sample did this, others were not in a position to do so.

However we found that there were some practical barriers to maintaining affordability and openness and in the view of the researchers these should be taken very seriously as they posed a potential threat to the encouragement of social inclusion and ultimately to the contribution of Community Playgroups to community development. These are discussed in Section 2B, page 14.

2 FACTORS SUPPORTING THE EXISTENCE AND WORK OF COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS IN IRELAND

The main factors supporting the work of Community Playgroups can be identified as:

A. EXTERNAL

coming from the community and support organisations and

B. INTERNAL

relating to the strengths of the Community Playgroup model and its structures

A. EXTERNAL SUPPORTING FACTORS

These included:

- 1 External funding made available through the EOCP, the Health Services Executive, Gaeltacht bodies and philanthropic bodies was important in underpinning the continuation of provision using the Playgroup model, with its ethos of affordability and openness, especially in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- 2 External funding was found to be vital to the achievement of improved quality of service provision using this model.
- 3 Contact with umbrella organisations and City/County Childcare Committees was perceived to be very supportive.
- 4 The demand for places may be seen as showing support for the Playgroup model - 81% of urban playgroups and 57% of rural playgroups who responded to the questionnaire had a waiting list thus showing the sustainability of these sessional services in terms of demand. This could be taken as showing support for the playgroup model by parents, but it could also mean that there were no other options in those locations in terms of childcare provision or services.

B. INTERNAL SUPPORTING FACTORS

- 1 The structures of Playgroups meant that they could be flexible and quickly responsive to local need through their leaders or committees or professional umbrella organisations. This ability to respond adequately could be seen as coming from being *local, small, and community based* and was a huge strength of the model.
- 2 The long-term commitment of staff, and their dedication to the Playgroup model in the face of the challenges presented by its operational at the present time were another source of great strength.
- 3 Community Playgroups are low cost in that they are relatively easy to set up, have been established with minimal resources (although this is not ideal); rely on low-paid minimally trained workers (though this is not ideal either) and provide a much-needed service (as evidenced by their waiting lists).
- 4 The involvement of parents on various levels and their commitment over time on a voluntary basis was seen as a particular strength of the playgroup model and one which contributed towards the possibility for Playgroups of supporting and promoting social inclusion and community development. However, there was evidence that this form of parental involvement is becoming less common.
- 5 An aspiration towards the highest standards of quality in all aspects of provision was expressed by all those involved in Community Playgroups. This was evidenced by the findings of the observation tool used with the ten case studies. However, quality depends not only on aspiration, willingness and commitment but also on the funding, expertise and support mechanisms available to all playgroups.
- 6 Some of the playgroups in this research benefited from proximity to other services – like primary schools with whom they could share facilities, and community clinics with which they could build a relationship.

3 FACTORS CHALLENGING THE EXISTENCE AND WORK OF COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS IN IRELAND

The main factors identified as challenging the existence and work of Community Playgroups in Ireland may also be grouped as

A. EXTERNAL

and

B. INTERNAL

A. EXTERNAL SUPPORTING FACTORS

- 1 ***The confusing nature of public debate in Ireland*** about the purpose and the beneficiaries of childcare. It has lacked cohesion and leadership at policy level and has not been concluded although recent developments in terms of the National Childcare Strategy and the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children give cause to hope that progress may now be made. This makes it difficult for Community Playgroups to establish what the framework of provision is to be and to determine how best they could contribute. Is childcare primarily to assist participation in the labour force, is it primarily to provide greater equality of opportunity for children regardless of background, or does it provide for the rights of young children to a stimulating happy and secure environment in their early years? Playgroups should state where they stand and base their case for funding on it.
- 2 ***The current view of ECCE underpinning the National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010.*** This marks a progression from that proposed by the EOCP. Community Playgroups should be able to negotiate a place for themselves in the new system whose primary objective is to meet the needs of children and families (rather than facilitate return to work). Community Playgroups need to stress the value of what they currently offer in terms of affordability, tackling educational disadvantage (fitting in with DEIS objectives), offering a supportive accessible quality preschool experience to vulnerable children, being locally based and being responsive to the needs of the community, providing experiences and supports for training in childcare. The challenge for Playgroups will be to establish their credibility as experienced players and to help policy makers and funding agencies understand the particular niche of Community Playgroups as detailed in this Report.

- 3** *The challenge of data collection, storage and retrieval.* Because of deficient overlapping data collection, storage and retrieval systems at a number of levels, it was not possible for the research team to establish with certainty the number of Community Playgroups providing services and the number, distribution and diversity of children served by Community Playgroups. Official statistics (CSO, HSE, Pobal) do not disaggregate full day-care and sessional services nor do they separate out different types of sessional services. This makes it very difficult for Community Playgroups to put forward a coherent case for their own future. It is suggested that they review their own record-keeping storage and retrieval systems.
- 4** *The challenge of affordability.* The ethos of affordability underlying the model of Community Playgroups is under threat because the costs of meeting minimum and quality standards are continuing to rise and this has implications for the sustainability of some services.
- 5** *The challenge of social inclusion.* The ethos of being open to all who seek admission and of being socially inclusive is under threat as there is little scope to increase fees where parents have low income, and income generated from fees alone is not sufficient to cover the expenses involved in paying staffing and other costs in areas of social disadvantage.
- 6** *The challenge of staff training with more standardised and accredited training routes.* Meeting the training and support needs of staff in order to cope with additional challenges presented by a diverse range of client groups (children from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, children with special educational needs) is very difficult if not impossible under present conditions of funding and this presents a challenge to the ethos of openness and social inclusion. Training and education in all aspects of the work involved in running playgroups – administration as well as child centred activities – will strengthen the understanding of how higher quality standards can be achieved.

- 7 ***The challenge of making a case for and devising an acceptable funding mechanism.*** Many of the respondents felt very threatened by the ongoing financial challenges, even if they had already received some grant aid and they felt torn by their desire to fulfill the ethos of the Playgroup movement by being affordable, by charging low fees to parents, and yet being of high quality. Multi-annual funding or funding which is assured for 3–5 years would enable planning for overall quality. There is an ongoing public discussion about the merits and disadvantages of different funding mechanisms – whether the state should subsidise places directly in Playgroups, or, alternatively, provide financial support for parents so that they could afford to pay economic fees.

- 8 ***The challenge of raising awareness of the ethos and role of Community Playgroups.*** The unique contribution of Community Playgroups to the sector in terms of their role in ECCE and in family and community support needs to be highlighted so that they will gain the support and funding necessary to continue with their role.

B. INTERNAL CHALLENGES

- 1 ***The challenge of communication.*** Umbrella organisations and government departments face challenges in communicating with those at grass roots level. It was clear from the research that many respondents involved in the day-to-day running of Community Playgroups were misinformed or lacked information about crucial issues and that resources need to be dedicated to additional support to rectify this situation. This is particularly the case with playgroups starting from a low capacity base who need intensive hands-on support in many aspects of their work.

- 2 ***The challenge of maintaining local involvement.*** While the place of local committees in the organisation was seen as being important in supporting their community standing, it was recognised that maintaining the voluntary nature of involvement is challenging as it can be difficult to find local people who have the time and are willing to serve on committees. It was felt in addition that the role of committees and how they were structured should be re-examined and supports for committee members (e.g. training) should be considered.

- 3 ***The challenge of maintaining minimum standards and meeting quality standards.*** This was difficult for some of the Playgroups who participated in this research project due to inappropriate premises and facilities and lack of finance to overcome these difficulties. It was difficult for umbrella organisations to provide leadership without adequate resources and training themselves.

- 4 ***The challenge of consensus.*** While some of those involved with Community Playgroups see themselves as providing an early education service, others do not go along with the connotations of 'education' and some feel that Community Playgroups offer more than an early education service. A consensus should be reached about aims within the Playgroups and the professional organisations which support them, and research is needed to substantiate claims about what is provided (e.g. contributing to community infrastructure) in a more concrete way.



4 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS TO FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ECCE SECTOR – SHOULD COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS BE RECONCEPTUALISED?

This research project concluded that Community Playgroups as they are conceptualised today have an important role to play in ECCE in that they provide an integrated and holistic family and community service. The need and preference for their services is demonstrated by their waiting lists and the widespread support voiced by those who participated in the research. There is a need to emphasise, perhaps more than previously, certain aspects of Community Playgroups which contribute to the uniqueness of what they offer – being child-centred, affordable, offering quality ECCE and play opportunities in small, local group settings, providing encouragement for social inclusion and support for families and community development. The service they provide is very much at one with the aims of the National Childcare Strategy 2006 – 2010.

Issues were identified around cost basis, affordability, social inclusion, training and support for staff, links with other services and availability of basic statistics.



5 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Playgroups are **low-cost** in the sense that they can be and have been set up with almost minimal resources, often based in local community premises for which they pay rent and which they share with other organisations. They are low cost also in the sense that outgoings are fairly low – staff are generally not well paid: some are paid through the Community Employment schemes, and many playgroups also have the services of volunteer parents and sometimes students on work experience who assist on a rota basis. Playgroups are however, highly reliant on the goodwill and commitment of staff and their acceptance of the conditions under which they work. This reliance could be seen as a weakness in the longer term. It is not respectful of the contribution and dedication of staff nor does it value the service and care they are giving to children and it does not respect children's rights to a quality service.

Recommendation 1:

Measures should be taken to value the work of Playgroup leaders and staff through appropriate pay and conditions of service.

- 2 Playgroups aim to be **affordable** for parents and strive to keep fees low so that their ethos of inclusiveness can be supported and so that they can offer all children regardless of background an equal opportunity of benefiting from the services they offer. It is generally agreed that children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have attended playgroups, have a better chance of negotiating the transition to school successfully and confidently. Children in designated disadvantaged areas will qualify under the DEIS initiative for a year's state-funded preschool experience, and Community Playgroups would be well placed to provide services for this group. However, children who do not live in designated disadvantaged areas should also be seen as having a right to quality early education and care and they do not come under the DEIS umbrella. In order to maintain affordability, it is recommended that some means be found of subsidising this service as is the case in other EU countries.

Recommendation 2:

The affordability of Community Playgroups should be safeguarded by mechanisms of subsidisation. They make an invaluable contribution to combating educational disadvantage and promoting social inclusion and community development.

- 3 Many of the playgroup leaders and staff have some **training** to at least a basic level and this is provided by a range of accredited organisations; however, having a qualification in the area is not currently obligatory for those working in the playgroup sector. This is a factor in keeping the costs low - since qualifications are not officially required, no recognition or reward in a monetary sense is given to those who actually have attained qualifications; this means also that workers in the sector have no basis on which to argue for higher salaries or a career structure. However, while the lack of recognition and requirements in relation to qualifications and training contributes on the one hand to the low cost base and probably helps keep fees to affordable levels without state subsidy, on the other hand, the lack of recognition of and opportunities for more advanced level training does not augur well for the upcoming implementation of the National Quality Framework. If it is to be implemented it will be necessary to find ways of providing and supporting more opportunities for training.

Additional supports in terms of training and resources should be provided to facilitate the ethos of openness and the social inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds and with additional needs.

The lack of commitment to training (which is essential for quality of services) at policy level would seem to be contrary to the rights of children to quality provision in this sector. Research has demonstrated that investment in quality provision for the preschool sector can reduce social and educational expenditure in later years.

Recommendation 3:

The issue of training and qualifications within the sector should be addressed as it is vital to the implementation of the National Quality Framework and to support social inclusion.

- 4 There is strong support for the retention of the **sessional** nature of their services. A child-centred ECCE sector, as envisaged under the National Childcare Strategy should include a Community Playgroup option for parents and children and would also support the diversity of provision sought under the programme. In line with the diversity of provision, an extension of hours might be considered in some cases, but it would have resource implications. Sessional services provide sufficient support for many families; they are more affordable than full day care and usually take place in a more intimate local setting.

Recommendation 4:

Playgroups should retain their sessional character.

- 5 Playgroup leaders and staff welcomed opportunities to form stronger *links* with other forms of provision while maintaining their ethos of being child-centred, small-group, locally based, affordable and socially inclusive. The signs are that Community Playgroups could fit into a more integrated framework of provision and this would offer parents more choices in selecting the form of care they want for their children which is in line with the guiding principles of the National Childcare Investment Programme. Community Playgroups and the children in their care would benefit from having more formal integration with other children's services.

Recommendation 5:
Playgroups should be supported to provide services which are more integrated with those of other service providers.

- 6 In making their case for increased and ongoing subsidisation, Community Playgroups would benefit from improved systems of *data collection* storage and retrieval within the sector. In addition it should be noted that umbrella organisations which currently support Community Playgroups so well require adequate funding for themselves and for developing their own organisations as well as being a channel for funding.

Recommendation 6:
Systems of data collection, storage and retrieval should be standardised and umbrella organisations should be adequately funded to carry out this and other functions.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Community Playgroups fulfill an important role in the ECCE sector in their current conceptualisation. In the view of the research team, they do not need to be reconceptualised in the face of changed conditions; however, their capacity to play an expanded role in the education, support and development of children and a more proactive role in meeting the needs of changing communities should be recognised. Their distinguishing feature has always been their organic and community base. They form part of a core community infrastructure that has the capacity to work with children in the context of their families and communities and this should be recognised and supported. Community Playgroups would benefit from support in the form of funding, resources and training to enable them to enhance the quality of the services that they offer and engage more comprehensively with the needs of the communities in which they are situated. Their location within the community, the locally-based staff, the play-based curriculum and the family-friendly approach makes them unthreatening and easily accessible to families. They are also affordable, responsive to need, small-group and socially inclusive. From the figures to hand it is clear that there is a considerable demand for this kind of provision, that many benefits accrue from it and that there is a role for it in the future.

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