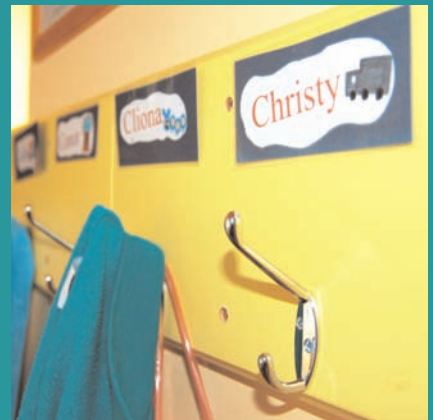


**Securing the future
for voluntary
cross-community
playgroups
in Fermanagh**





INDEX

1.0	Introduction	1
2.0	Rationale for the Research	3
3.0	Research brief and methodology	4
4.0	Pre-school and childcare provision - the policy context	4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1	Feedback from Playgroups	6
5.2	Playgroup finances	14
	Summary and Conclusion	18
	Strategic options for a way forward for Playgroups	20
	Recommendations for a way forward for Playgroups	21
	Special Thanks	22
	Appendix 1 - References	23
	Appendix 2 - Definitions	23



ABOVE: Joanna McVey, Chairperson of The Fermanagh Trust, opening the outdoor playground at Irvinestown Cross Community Playgroup.

Photograph: Pat Lunny

1.0 Introduction

Over thirty years ago residents in different communities across County Fermanagh began working together to provide a safe, welcoming pre-school environment for their children. The early pre-school playgroups in communities such as Lisnaskea and Irvinestown were replicated in townlands and villages across Fermanagh. Thousands of children benefited from this experience. In many communities the playgroups became a focus for cross community contact and joint working, often during difficult times.

Since 1995 The Fermanagh Trust (and prior to this the Barrow Cadbury Trust) has had a keen interest in the development of the Voluntary Cross Community Pre-school Playgroup sector in Fermanagh. The Trust views the playgroups as exemplars of local social enterprises, integrating cross community contact with meeting a real social need, hence this investment in the development and operation of playgroups. This has been evidenced through both the awarding of financial assistance through the Trust's grant-making programme, as well as the provision of organisational development, project management and fund-raising support through the Fermanagh Trust's Mentoring Programme.

This research was commissioned in response to a growing concern from Fermanagh's community playgroups about their future. This report aims to make a positive contribution to support the playgroups in Fermanagh as they plan for their futures.



2.0 Rationale for the Research

In recent years, the Voluntary Cross Community Pre-school Playgroups in Fermanagh has been articulating the issues and opportunities impacting on the sector within Fermanagh.

The cross community playgroups have provided important opportunities for cross community interaction, understanding and reconciliation within County Fermanagh, which like much of Northern Ireland is polarised and segregated. Thousands of Children and parents have benefited from playgroups over the years. The playgroups also 'facilitated' the establishment of venues, which afforded first class child-centred pre-school provision, which are accessible, welcoming and inclusive to both sides of the community. This work was initiated, developed and sustained throughout the most difficult years of the 'Troubles' by parents who wanted a new future for themselves, their children and their communities.

The playgroups have also made an important social and economic contribution within a largely rural County, whose agriculture and traditional industries are facing decline. Over sixty people are employed by the cross community playgroups and they provide training opportunities to approximately 20 people each year. They have given parents the opportunity to place their children within localised facilities that are committed to the development of their children. They have allowed parents to access employment, return to education and or undertake further training, or simply to have some time to themselves in light of the increasing pressures faced by a great many families. Equally, they have allowed new relationships and understandings across old divisions to be nurtured amongst the children and their parents.

The Trust identified a number of key issues which the research was to address. Firstly, there is a situation of constant flux and change within the management structure of the groups. The pre-school playgroup sector

has a number of unique characteristics compared to other community and voluntary organisations within the County. The predominant pattern is one of cyclical voluntary management committees, with parents coming on to the committee for the duration of their child's attendance at the playgroup. This creates strain and challenges in steering the strategic development and sustainability of the playgroups themselves.

Secondly, from the Trust's experience, the regulations and requirements being placed on the voluntary management committees are becoming increasingly complex and demanding. Voluntary management committees (parents) are being asked to deal with employment contracts and review, pay reviews, staff redundancy situations, sustainability, child protection, fund-raising, pre-school expansion programme negotiation and ongoing staff development and support.

The Trust was particularly keen to obtain information which would help to deal with fault lines which are starting to emerge within the sector. The overarching purpose of the research was to contribute to the ongoing viability and sustainability of the sector and to support the excellent community relations work of the playgroups.



3.0 Research brief and methodology

The research set out to build up a picture of the current extent of the work being undertaken by the cross community pre-school playgroup sector in Fermanagh. This element of the research was conducted via desk research and a review of existing secondary data sources and interviews with the actual playgroups concerned.

The research also looked at a financial profile of the cross community pre-school play groups in Fermanagh in order to understand their income streams and the degree of financial autonomy and or dependence of the sector.

The question of sustainability and the organisational issues facing the playgroups were explored through semi-structured interviews with representatives of playgroups – both staff and voluntary committee members. Other key informants within the statutory and voluntary sectors were also consulted.

4.0 Pre-school and childcare provision – the policy context

Responsibility for developing early years' provision is split across a number of Departments and Agencies – in particular Health and Education.

The 1998 Children First Childcare Strategy focused on economic and social inclusion objectives such as social justice, equality, inclusion, quality, accessibility and affordability. It also introduced family support initiatives such as Sure Start and established Area Childcare Partnerships and Local Childcare Forums.

On the Education side, the 1998 initiative Investing in Early Learning – Pre-school Expansion Programme sought to create funded pre-school places for all children in their immediate pre-school year. The new pre-school curriculum was to apply in all settings and the voluntary sector was to be supported by Early Years Specialists.

By 2004, a level of 90% of funded places had been achieved. Other recent developments have included the appointment of a Children's Commissioner in October 2003 and the launch of a Consultation on a 10 Year strategy for children.

A difficulty for the current research has been the fact that these policy initiatives are under review, but the outcome has not been published at the time of writing. Issues covered by the consultation on pre-school education include:

- The rationale for whether places should be full-time or part-time
- The age of admissions to Nursery Schools and Nursery Classes
- A review of the priority given to children from socially deprived backgrounds
- Other issues such as Special Educational Needs, reception provision and staffing ratios
- Greater integration of services
- Organisational and structural issues

While this study was being carried out, there were two major developments of relevance. Firstly, the well publicised funding crisis affecting education in Northern Ireland obviously compounds the difficulties of receiving an increase in funding from DENI. Secondly, the UK Government in 2005 announced a significant increase in funding for early years provision linked to a strategy which integrates education and childcare for pre-school children.

Investment in early years and childcare will increase by £769million between this year and 2007-08. The Government will announce a 10 Year Childcare Strategy in the Pre Budget Report when more detailed plans will be published.



George

Joel

ARTWORK
TO GO
HOME

The broad areas to be covered will include:

- By 2008, there will be up to 2,500 children's centres:
 - Bringing education and childcare together into a single integrated offer for pre-school children;
 - Developing a year round, 8am-6pm, child care offer in many primary schools; with secondary schools offering a range of 'things for young people to do'.
- Investment in children's services will increase by almost £1 billion by 2007-08 compared with 2004-05.

In relation to Northern Ireland, Peter Hain the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his speech 'Grasping the Opportunity – Investing in our Future' in September 2005 announced that there "must be a commitment to cross community partnership. A 'Shared Future' will be at the heart of government policy and spending priorities".

Specifically in relation to childcare The Secretary of State also announced "I plan a new drive to deliver access to high quality, affordable childcare – critical to creating the opportunity and flexibility for people who are bringing up a young family to enter or come back to the workplace. We have fallen behind other parts of the UK in the provision and funding of services for children, be that childcare, pre-school or after school activities and Sure Start. I intend to begin to address this in the forthcoming budget"

Other studies and reports within Northern Ireland include the work carried out by the Western Area Childcare Partnership, 'Early Years Sustainability Audit and Report June 2003' which pointed towards the need for a long term strategy to resource Early Years services needs. In particular, there is an urgent need to explore initiatives such as Children Centres and promoting the uptake of the Working Tax Credit in order to offer Northern Ireland the same opportunities that are open to parents in England and elsewhere in the UK. The report is critical of the Government's fragmented approach and recommends a much greater degree of integration between childcare on the one hand, and economic and social development and regeneration on the other.

The context in the Republic of Ireland is completely different. A recent evaluation report by the Katherine Howard Foundation affirmed the value of community playgroups and identified some of the ways in which the quality of provision could be improved through a structured programme of support. The evaluation concluded that playgroups in the Republic could not be sustainable unless it was funded and recognised in the same way as primary education – (perhaps through an approach similar to the pre-school expansion programmes initiative in Northern Ireland).

Findings from the Research

5.1 Feedback from Playgroups

Playgroups from throughout the County responded to the questionnaire, interviews and workshops. Below is a summary of the information and views coming from their responses.

Playgroup details

The vast majority of groups were well established, with the first group having opened in 1975 and almost all were recognised by the Inland Revenue as having charitable status.

Group capacity ranged from 20 - 26 children, with an average capacity of 24. All the playgroups were open for between 2 hours thirty minutes and 3 hours each morning, 5 days a week for approximately 40 weeks of the year. In September 2005 one playgroup Kindertee Playgroup began running an afternoon session to cater for the local demand in the Derrylin area.

The youngest child in each group was generally 3 years. In some circumstances children were aged 2 years 9 months. The majority of children were in the fifth year.



Committee

The number of current committee members for each playgroup ranged from 6 to 12. In a number of playgroups there was a decline in committee size since 2001. Reasons given for the decline were a falling birth rate in the area and parents not wanting the inconvenience of being involved. Increased committee size in other groups was due to outgoing members staying on, establishment of a fundraising committee and mothers wanting to become more involved.

Enrolment and the Pre-school Expansion Programme

The number of pre-school expansion programme places has stayed reasonably constant over the last 3 years, with each group having an average of 15 places. Some groups have as few as 8 pre-school expansion programme places. One group had no free places.

Enrolment at each playgroup did not always match capacity, and ranged from 11 - 29, with an average of 19 children per group. The majority of groups expected a similar enrolment for 2005-6, although one group expected to lose 3 places because they had no PEP funding and another group anticipated gaining 4 places.

Community Relations

Community split in the groups ranged from groups who were 50:50 to two groups who were largely single identity. All groups considered promoting understanding and reconciliation between children, between parents/guardians and within the community to be important and all said that their playgroup promoted positive attitudes towards the other community. This emphasis on reconciliation does not



ABOVE: Anna McKenna, Playgroup Leader, welcoming President Mary McAleese at the official opening of Little Treasures Playgroup, Kinawley.

Photograph: Pat Lunny



seem to have made an impact on primary school choices, with the percentages choosing controlled and maintained schools from each group correlating exactly to the community split given above.

Staff

Each group employs between 2 and 4 members of staff. These are a mixture of full-time and part-time positions, and a number of groups make use of volunteers. Each playgroup spends an average of £20,000 per annum on staff wages, and approximately £6,800 per member of staff.

Playgroup premises

A number of playgroups owned their own premises, though the majority of the groups leased their premises.

The vast majority of groups felt that their premises would not permit them to let parts of it out, and only a small number of groups currently did so but did not make a profit out of this as they operate in a community centre. The most common reasons for not renting out space were that they did not have space, or that their building was purpose built and so would not be suitable for use by other individuals or groups.

Taking stock: Reviewing readiness for sustainability in the future

Opposite is a summary of the main opinions expressed when groups were asked to comment on different aspects of the running and structure of their group:

Feedback from Playgroups: reviewing readiness for sustainability in the future

PLAYGROUP AREAS	WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT IT?	HOW MIGHT IT BE IMPROVED?
Strategy (Direction and priorities for your playgroup; is your playgroup clear about how it might achieve sustainability; is your current approach sustainable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good location ● Group has clear views on sustainability ● Aim to meet individual needs of all children and provide quality service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased funding ● Secure long-term funding ● Convey sustainability ideas to parents more effectively ● Attract other ethnic groups and users from across the border to improve sustainability ● Larger premises
Structure (The shape of your playgroup, i.e. committee, sub-committees, volunteers, staff, parents and children etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lets parents see what is required to run a playgroup ● People are beginning to stay longer on committees ● Parents, staff and committee work well together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If parents stayed involved for longer to help others with their experience ● Increase parental involvement ● More committee members needed ● A secretary would be useful ● Increase number of children
Committee (Membership, size, turnover, length of involvement, skills, knowledge, experience, understanding, time available etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Committee members willing to remain & learn how to run the group as a business ● Committee has recently doubled in size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Retaining committee members for longer so they can pass on their skills ● More parental involvement needed ● Training needed
Staff (Employment practices etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good staff: child ratio ● Good quality care ● Regularly update training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More training for all ● Committee work more with staff ● Fixed pay rate for all staff
Skills (Competence, knowledge and skills gaps – committee and staff)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Well qualified staff ● Committee have necessary skills and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More courses/lectures for committee ● Include more staff on committee ● Hold an annual review
Systems (Financial planning, management and control; pricing and running the business; marketing the playgroup)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group beginning to run as a business ● Currently not done as committee not experienced in this field ● Make use of accountant, as well as treasurer being trained in accountancy ● Committee meet regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need help from people who know how to run this ● Need training on sustainability ● Encourage parents to attend the courses and training available ● Meet on a regular basis to plan for both long and short term ● Financial is planning difficult
Style (Relations, marketing and communication to actual and potential users and the image presented by your playgroup)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Word of mouth ● Parental involvement encouraged ● Keeping parents informed on a regular basis ● Everybody welcome ● Have a good image – children come from outside the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need help from professional people on this ● Need funding to produce brochures, signs etc. ● Advertise cross-community focus
Shared Values (What is important about how your playgroup works, i.e. openness, equality, financial viability, commitment to cross-community involvement & ownership.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equality ● Commitment to cross-community ● Openness ● Welcome special needs children ● Financially viable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need to be seen/recognised by schools and churches on both sides ● Need to make it financially viable ● Would like own premises ● Would like to attract more users



Playgroups working together for future sustainability

All groups felt that they had some level of co-operation with other voluntary playgroups, and this was mostly for the purpose of training, sharing ideas and developing the curriculum. Everyone expressed a desire to see closer working between playgroups to try and build sustainability as they felt that it would provide a stronger voice for community playgroups and would make it easier to share ideas, resources and expertise which would benefit all groups. There were lots of thoughts on factors driving playgroups to work more closely together and factors preventing co-operation. The most common ones are listed in the table below:



FACTORS DRIVING MORE CO-OPERATION	FACTORS PREVENTING CO-OPERATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Training ● All groups committed to providing good quality play and education ● Fermanagh's community support ● Funders requesting groups cluster together ● Need for support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distance ● Finding time to meet with other groups ● Fear of everyone promoting the same activities ● Each group has a separate committee

Ideas for developing more joint working between Fermanagh's voluntary playgroups included:

- More co-operation between committees or creation of overall committees
- Cluster training
- All groups attend branch meetings
- Staff/leaders visiting each other's playgroups
- Creating a group of people allocated to fill in grant forms

There were mixed views about the levels of competition and the productiveness of relationships between individual groups at present. However, most groups felt that money could be saved if playgroups worked more closely together as they could share resources and accountants, more fundraising monies could be raised

as more people would be involved and trusts would be more likely to fund larger projects.

The joint work of three playgroups in South East Fermanagh (Donagh, Newtownbutler and Roslea) who came together in the summer of 2004, with the support of the Fermanagh Trust and employed a joint administrator, was noted as a very positive development. Initial feedback on the consortiums work has been extremely positive. The Western Area Childcare Partnership who fund this project, have evaluated this initiative and found that it yielded very positive benefits. More recently the consortium has been successful in an application for funding to continue with this project, and they have widened their membership to include a fourth playgroup (Lisnaskea).

Support for Playgroups

The main areas where playgroups considered they needed more support were, obtaining more free pre-school expansion programme places, accessing funding, and catering for children with special needs.

The majority of groups felt that the right support and advice was not currently available to help them develop long-term sustainability, and to achieve this they would require more information of playgroup management, government plans and advice in filling in funding applications.

In order for their voluntary playgroup to be able to cater for children with Special Educational Needs, most groups required additional resources for an extra member of staff and for equipment. A number of groups felt that they would have to be able to offer one-to-one observation and support for the child, and they would need information about the nature of the special need from 'professionals'.

Feedback from Workshop attended by Playgroup representatives:

Organisational Support

- Early Years Specialist Support focusses on raising standards and building on quality.
- Support for playgroup could be improved by all groups coming together and voicing opinion.
- The Fermanagh Trust has provided development support to many playgroups
- NIPPA provides vital support for the overall running of the group and with training.
- Social Services provide playgroups with support
- We need more support with financial issues.
- Happy with the support we are currently receiving from NIPPA and Fermanagh Trust but would like more support from other agencies
- Would like centralised funding to be more available



ABOVE: Her Majesty the Queen visiting rascals Playstation, Ballinamallard.

Photograph: Harrison Photography

Pre-school Expansion Programme Funding

- Welcome recommended wage levels
- Enables some groups to have extra money for equipment and resources
- The pre-school expansion programme places provide playgroups with a regular assured income
- We need to be treated fairly equitably in relation to other pre-school providers.
- The funding needs to be increased and paid earlier
- Currently without these funded places playgroups couldn't operate; we like receiving a regular monthly income
- Pay rates should be revised across the board for both playgroups and nurseries

A synopsis of the differences between the cross community playgroups and the community nursery schools

(though both are providing the same service e.g. curriculum)

	CROSS COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS	STATUTORY 'COMMUNITY' NURSERIES
Capital Funding available to improve / build facilities via WELB	No funding	Yes funding made available to build new nurseries
Availability of Pre-school Expansion Programme (PEP) places to providers	Playgroups receive an average of 15 PEP places Playgroups can have PEP places withdrawn	Statutory 'community' nurseries each receive 26 PEP places To date Statutory 'community' nurseries have not had PEP places withdrawn
Finance	In light of the allocation of PEP places playgroups have to charge Fees & carry out fund raising activities. Playgroups funded for two and a half hour sessions, five days per week. Early years advisors paid from PEP resources.	Allocated 26 PEP places each. Funding available for additional hours.
Age of children	The funded ("free") places in the Voluntary sector can only be allocated by the provider to children in their final Pre-School year. The provider may have non-funded places available for younger children but the allocation of these places is not part of the enrolment process.	Community nursery schools (and other providers) are permitted to admit younger children where there are places available after the admissions procedure has been applied to the applications for the children in their final Pre-School year.
Terms and Conditions	Approximately £8.15 - £8.76 per hour.	Approximately £26,000 - £32,000 per annum.
Special Needs – Special Needs Assistants	No Funding Available. No specialist support resources made available.	Funding available. Specialist support available.
Focus - key member of staff has different responsibilities.	Playgroup Leader and Manager Fundraiser Staff Supervision Trainer	Pre-School Teacher
Inspections	Education Training Inspectors Social Services NIPPA	Education Training Inspectors
Staff / Child Ratios are different (therefore additional salary costs)	1 - 8 for three year olds 1 - 6 for two year olds	1 - 13 for three year olds 1 - 13 for two year olds
Outdoor Trips	1 - 2	1 - 13

5.2 Playgroup finances

In all groups the majority of income came from pre-school expansion programme funding (PEP), which averaged approximately £15,000 per group and made up between 59% and 99% of all income. Though one group received no PEP funding at all.

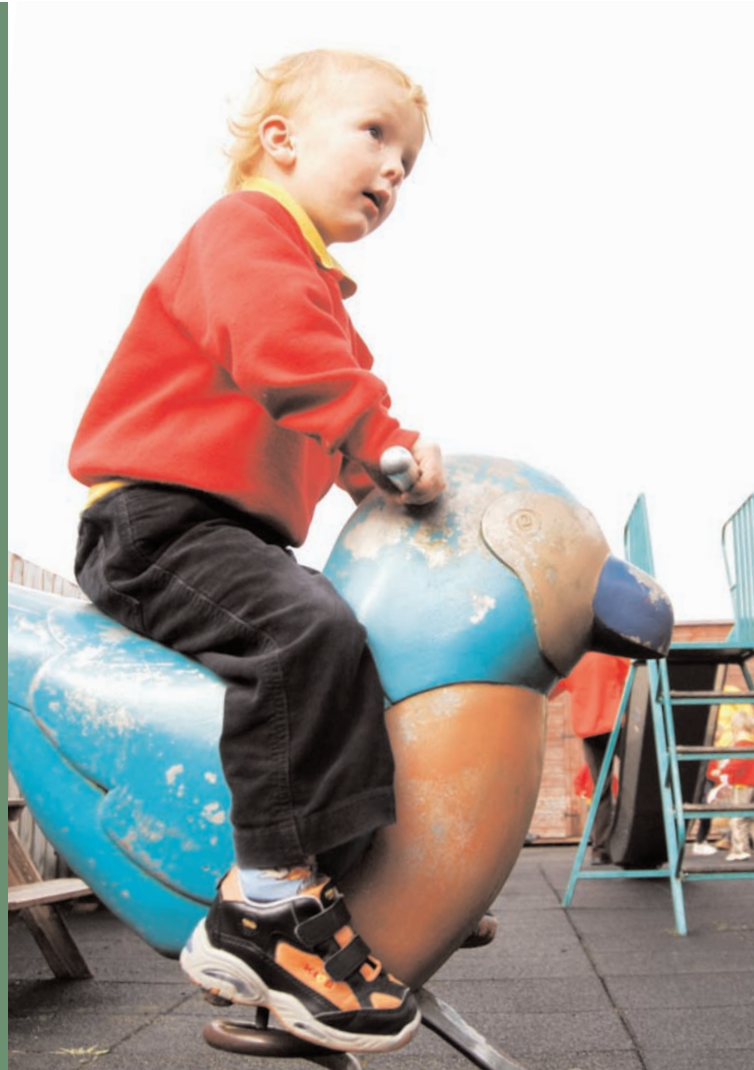
Other significant sources of income were parental fees, which contributed up to 25% of income and charitable trusts, which were particularly important to the group with no PEP funding. Local fundraising also generated an important income of £500 - £3,500 for the groups.

Most groups charged non-PEP places around £10 per week, but charges reached up to £16 per week. A number of playgroups asked PEP places to pay a supplementary charge of £1-£5 per week to help cover playgroup costs. Other groups did not have a supplementary charge as they felt that parents could not afford it.

All groups have seen an increase in running costs over the last 2 years and as a result most have increased the fees for non-PEP funded places. It was anticipated that running costs would rise by a further £200-£4,000 over the next 2 years, and the majority of groups planned to increase non-PEP place fees by between £2 and £12 per week to try and cover the extra cost. A number of groups intended to raise PEP place supplements in the coming years, and this increase was expected to be smaller: in the region of £1-£4.

Reasons for not increasing PEP place supplements included parental unwillingness to pay more, a falling birth rate in the area, and a belief that PEP places should be available to all. Most groups planned to raise the additional funding needed to cover increased running costs through fundraising and grants.

On the whole, groups were confident that their management committee had a good understanding of their current financial status and had the skills and experience to manage the financial sustainability of the playgroup.



Groups were considering a range of alternative activities and strategies to increase the income of their playgroup to keep it going in the future. These ideas included increasing fundraising activities, taking in more children, running an afternoon session for non-PEP children, running a summer scheme, introducing music and drama and working towards accreditation.

A range of concerns about the future were expressed, with the most common being allocation of PEP places / securing funds, maintaining enough staff to adhere to child: staff ratios, falling birth-rates and getting parents involved in management.

For many groups, there was a massive jump of 100-200% in the amount of money being turned over between 1998 and 2003. This may be due to the introduction of PEP places.



Income

The main source of income for all of the groups was PEP funding, in particular from the WELB. On average each group received an average of £15,000 in grant funding, although this amount was as high as £26,000 for some groups.

Fees were an important secondary source of income, bringing in on average £2,400 annually. Unlike grants, which increased massively between 1998 and 2003, on average the income generated from fees fell by roughly half – again probably due to the introduction of PEP funded places.

Fundraising was also an important source of revenue, generating £2,000 annually. The amount raised generally stayed constant over the 2 years. Mean income for 2003 was £29,000 although this was very widely distributed.

Expenditure

While income generally came from the small number of sources listed above, every group had a long list of outgoings, of which the most significant were always wages and, if premises were not owned, rent.

In 2003, the mean amount spent on wages was £19,000, although there were a small number of groups whose spending on wages were quite far out-lying from the mean and median: one group spent as little as £6,000 annually, while another spent as much as £27,000.

Other significant expenses include:

- New toys and equipment (approximately £1,000)
- NIPPA membership and services (up to £1,300)
- Heat and electricity
- Advertising
- Insurance

Mean expenditure for 2003 was £26,500.

Feedback from Key Informants

Questionnaire returns and interviews with Key informants (organisations with an interest in this area) revealed a very positive view of the work of pre-school playgroups in Fermanagh.

Fermanagh pre-school playgroups make a valuable contribution towards childcare needs and social educational development and the cross community element of their provision was valued, playgroups had genuinely tried to improve community relations in their areas and a number had made a real difference. Fermanagh playgroups were seen as a strong and cohesive grouping which provides non-stigmatising services to children in need. The high staff to children ratio was also seen as a strength.

Fermanagh playgroups were seen as being effective in working together for the purposes of lobbying and fund raising. However, despite their successes in working together to source funding, it was felt that Fermanagh playgroups retained a certain element of insularity and inflexibility.

In common with other areas, Fermanagh's pre-school playgroups face huge demands on management and staff, with the risk of turnover as a result. The voluntary committee model simply was not working in some instances. Some of the major problems were identified as the loss of high calibre staff due to stress or uncertainty about the future and the problems of keeping a voluntary committee going.

Sustainability varies according to the number of PEP places and there is a need for more joint working and pooling resources. Viability is a very real threat and there was concern that the future of playgroups with PEP places in single figures looked particularly vulnerable. The need for more training for Management Committees and a sustained attempt to ensure that there is greater continuity in the composition of Management Committees was also identified.

Perception existed that some playgroups were reluctant to work together and were unwilling to look at expanding their services due to the extra responsibilities



and commitment required. There is a need for a coherent sustainability strategy and a need to look at economic and social models and alternative sources of funding. Also it was felt playgroups needed to consolidate their fee structure to bring in more income and also to use their buildings and other assets for alternative revenue-earning uses. Informants also pointed to a need to look at increasing user access/opening hours.

Suggestions about the way forward included:

- Central management of pay and personnel issues
- Linking up with out of school groups and share staff and resources
- Lobbying DENI, DEL, DHSSPS to develop long term joined-up strategy (as in England and Wales)
- Integrating childcare with economic and social agenda
- Promoting increased uptake of Working Tax Credits



Summary and Conclusions

Community relations

Playgroups have a tremendous record of providing a safe neutral environment for parents and children to come together on a cross community basis.

Employment and Training

Community Playgroups are social enterprises. They provide employment to approximately 60 people Training opportunities for around 20 people each year

Management Committees

Successful small businesses require good management structures. Groups identified a clear need for parents to become more involved and to stay longer in membership.

Finances

Significant concerns exist in relation to the difficulties of becoming sustainable in the long term.

Equality Issues

There is widespread concern that Western Education Library Board treat community playgroups differently from all other providers.

Staff

The contribution of staff was highly valued by the groups but there are concerns at the insecurity associated with not having an effective pay structure. Difficulties do exist in the recent turnover of playgroup leaders, which can partly be explained by the difficult circumstances in which they are operating in.

Support

Most playgroups were happy with the assistance they get from support organisations including NIPPA but identified a need for more support to help them cope with the threats and rapid changes facing the sector.

In terms of forward planning and the development of premises etc groups outlined they have no effective support structure relying on ad hoc support from various organisations to assist in capital developments.

Training

A number of groups referred to the need for training for staff and committee members on management, financial planning and staffing matters.

Status of Playgroups

Many groups felt that they were compared adversely to community nursery schools and that it was not widely recognised that they delivered an educational curriculum. There was resentment at perceived inequality of treatment, particularly in terms of the implementation of the PEP scheme both in terms of availability of capital funding and in the allocation of PEP places at the outset and now annually.

Nb.

All community nursery schools have 26 PEP places; the average number of places in the cross community playgroups is 15.

'Alternative' strategies

Increasing fundraising activities, taking in more children, running an afternoon session for children, running a summer scheme and shared use of an administrator with other groups, were all identified.

Premises

The vast majority of groups felt that due to their leases and the nature of their facilities, earning an income from renting out their premises was unlikely.

Co-operation among groups

Playgroups were generally positive about working with others to share ideas, resources and expertise but identified a difficulty in making this happen due to barriers of time, distance and separate identities. Informants and support groups saw Fermanagh playgroups as very cohesive in seeking funding but somewhat insular when it came to co-operating in other areas.

Recent developments including the joint 'administrative' support structure in SE Fermanagh is a positive development.

Concerns and threats

The most common concerns identified by groups were securing funds, maintaining enough staff to adhere to child: staff ratios, falling birth-rates and getting parents involved in management and both securing and maintaining much needed additional PEP places.

Key informants were clear in their view that not all Fermanagh playgroups may survive in the next few years, with those with fewest PEP places being particularly vulnerable.

They stressed the need for more PEP places for all children as well as the needs for groups to come together and achieve economies of scale to reduce expenditure. They also stated that groups need to generate more income through an improved fee structure, greater use of buildings and widening the activities and services offered.



Strategic options: a way forward for Playgroups

1. Continue as at present

Playgroups could continue opening for up to three hours in the morning, funded by PEP places supplemented by local community fundraising.

With declining birth rates and squeezes on funding, the differential support given by the education authorities to the school based nurseries, the implications are that some groups may have to close or amalgamate. All groups will need to pay increased attention to controlling costs.

2. Develop a social economy approach

In its purest form, this would entail running playgroups as businesses with profits being used to develop the playgroup further. It involves "diversifying" into other activities and using the premises and resources of the playgroup to generate income in other ways.

A number of groups are examining the potential of afternoon provision and offering homework and after-school clubs. These ideas will bring in additional income and may lead to greater sustainability in the long term.

3. Further Integration of childcare and pre-school provision

A third option would be to lobby for Northern Ireland to adopt the type of approach being taken in England, with Children centres open from 8 am to 6pm. Positive developments have been taken in Belleek and Kesh and work is ongoing in Belcoo to develop this form of approach.



Recommendations for a way forward

Structures in place in the late 1970's up to the present day are not necessarily appropriate for the next 30 years.

Changes must be made if the cross community playgroups are to continue to provide a warm and safe environment for children in Communities across Fermanagh. This will require all the key organisations to change their policies and practices and where possible 'think outside the box' the following recommendations outline some potential steps;

Lobbying

Early Years' organisations in Fermanagh to join together in lobbying the Northern Ireland Children's Minister, the Children's Commissioner and local political representatives to bring about improvements in pre-school provision. Specifically, the Fermanagh organisations should ask for a level of Government funding which is comparable with the rest of the UK and permits the development of playgroups and other childcare and educational provision within the context of all day Children Centres.

The organisations should also lobby for a consistent level of funding between different types of pre-school provision and a consistent policy on staff: children ratios.

The lobbying agenda should also include a request for all aspects of education and health for pre-school children to be the responsibility of a single Government Department.

The Education Board should treat all preschool providers equitably in terms of staffing structures, capital funding for providers and the allocation of PEP places both in terms of the number of places to each provider and the age of the children which each provider caters for.

The existing policies and practice is not equitable and needs to be challenged.

Future Support

The Government to be asked to contribute to funding a pilot project aimed at developing the capacity of the playgroups in Fermanagh to develop and manage economically sustainable facilities for children in their early years. Possibly as part of the Governments Modernisation Fund recently announced by the Department of Social Development.

An Early Years organisation to act as a co-ordinator for the pre-school playgroup sector in Fermanagh as it faces the challenges of the next three years or so.

Playgroups

Playgroup Committees and Staff need to look beyond what they are currently doing and look at alternative approaches including;

Offering a wider range of services i.e. afternoon playgroup

Joint working i.e. playgroups to come together and employ joint administrators or fundraisers?

Changing the management structures including three-year term management committees being appointed as well as examining the potential of playgroups working together, for example under a joint management structure.

Community playgroups to explore working together under a countywide structure with appropriate management support, advisors, financing, branding etc.

Special Thanks

Fermanagh Trust would like to thank all of the professional staff, volunteers and committee members (all of them busy people) from the various organisations who gave so freely of their time to complete questionnaires and take part in interviews. We assure you of our ongoing commitment to help and support voluntary and community activity in Fermanagh.



Appendix 1 - References

Directory of Services for Children and Families, County Fermanagh
Fermanagh Early Years Partnership

Early Years Policy Developments in Northern Ireland 1994-2004 - Siobhan Fitzpatrick, Chief Executive, NIPPA
NIPPA, The Early Years Organisation, 21 September 2004

Early Years Sustainability Audit and Report June 2003
Western Area Child Care Partnership

Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland, Summary of Main Issues
Department of Education, June 2004

Valuing Community Playgroups: lessons for practice and policy
Evaluation Report, Katherine Howard Foundation

Ages covered - Mainly children between two and four years, although a growing number cater for younger children. The minimum child/staff ratios are as follows: children under two: 3:1, two-year-olds: 4:1, three- to seven-year-olds: 8:1

Day Nurseries

Day nurseries are also registered with the Government regulatory bodies and inspected every year. At least half the staff must be qualified in an early years discipline, and some must be qualified teachers. Day nurseries vary in size, but most take between 25 and 40 children.

There are different types of day nursery, including:
Private - independent businesses providing full daycare.
Community - provide full daycare and run on a not-for-profit basis for local families.
Workplace - linked to specific employers who offer places to their staff.

Ages covered - Children up to five, although a few will take children up to eight.

Appendix 2 - Definitions

Community Playgroups

These groups are run on a not-for-profit basis, most often by parent management committees. Normally they charge fees, although these are kept to a minimum and children may be entitled to a free part-time place if the group has PEAG places. An increasing number of groups offer extended or full daycare, but the majority run shorter sessions, ranging from two-and-a-half to four hours.

Preschools are registered and are inspected every year by the Sperrin and Lakeland Trust. Staff are trained and qualified. The groups offer opportunities for children to learn through play, and also offer the DENI-approved early years curriculum. Many parents become involved either as a helper or as a member of the management committee, or by taking a course or doing an activity.

Community Nursery Schools

A school which must be under the management of either controlled, catholic maintained or grant maintained integrated schools or be self-contained schools of these types.

A nursery school has to be registered with DENI and is inspected every year. It will offer the DENI-approved early years curriculum.

Nursery Classes

A nursery class is a preschool class attached to a school for older children. Its head teacher is the head of the entire school. It's staffed by trained teachers, nursery nurses and classroom assistants, who are also part of the main school. It will offer the DENI-approved early years curriculum.



CROSS COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS IN FERMANAGH

Belcoo Community Playgroup

Bo-Peep's Playgroup, Boho

Brookeborough Playgroup

Bunnahone Bunnies, Derrygonnelly

Irvinestown Playgroup

Jolly Tots Playgroup, Trory, Enniskillen

Kilmacormick Playgroup

Kindertee Playgroup, Derrylin

Little Castle Playgroup, Lisnaskea

Little Smarties Playgroup, Garrison

Little Treasures Playgroup, Kinawley

Mullanaska Pre-school Playgroup

Naiscoil An Spideoige, Enniskillen

Naiscoil An Traonaigh, Lisnaskea

Newtownbutler Playgroup

Rascals Playstation Childcare Centre,
Ballinamallard

Roslea Community Playgroup

Small Fry Community Playgroup,
Maguiresbridge

Stepping Stones, Belleek

Tempo Playgroup

Tiny Tots Playgroup, Arney

Wee Folk Community Playgroup, Donagh

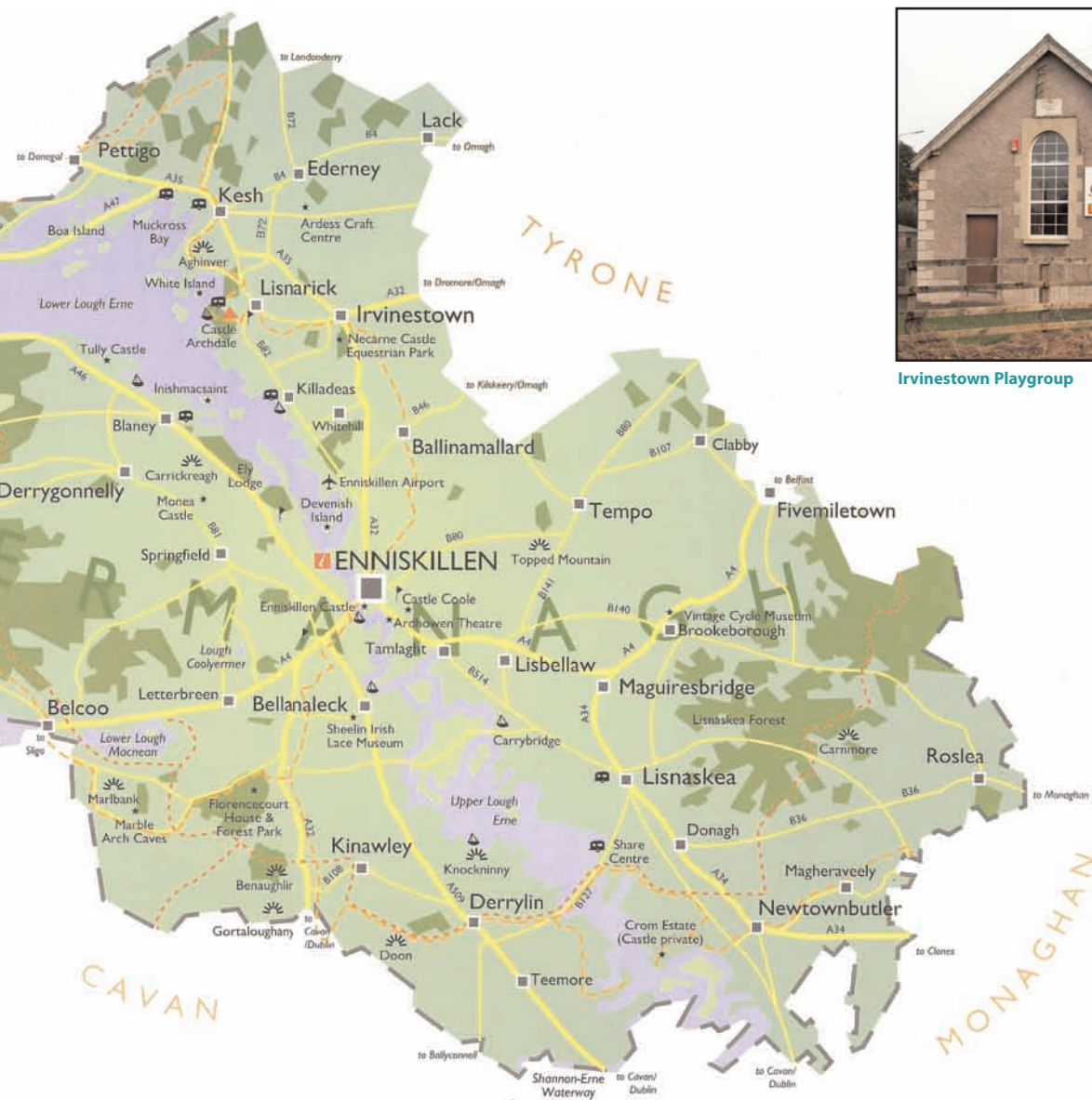
Cross Community playgroups are located
the length and breadth of County Fermanagh,
providing an invaluable resource in local
communities. Some examples include...



Little Smarties Playgroup, Garrison



Little Treasures Playgroup, Kinawley



Irvinestown Playgroup



Kindertee Playgroup, Derrylin



Brookeborough Playgroup



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Photographed and Designed by Michael Brown of the Community Media Workshop, Enniskillen (c.m.workshop@btinternet.com).

PHOTOGRAPHS

Except where indicated, all images throughout this report were taken at:

Brookeborough Playgroup

Irvinestown Cross Community Playgroup

Kindertee Community Playgroup, Derrylin

Little Smarties Playgroup, Garrison

Little Treasures Playgroup, Kinawley

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