



# **PLAY YOUR PART**

## **Evaluation Report of Pilot Impact**

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## 1.0 Introduction

'Play Your Part' was a one-year pilot project developed and delivered by PlayBoard NI and funded by the Education Authority (EA).

'Play Your Part' was developed to support ten youth groups to embed a culture of effective participation and practice with children aged 4-8 years during the year 2021/22.

The project goal was to develop a training framework alongside a set of participatory tools to support youth workers to create an environment that ensures the views, opinions and voices of children aged 4-8 years are heard within youth settings.

The project was split into two discreet phases:

- Phase 1: Completion of secondary research and broad literature review exploring a range of methodologies that enable children's active participation in decision making, as well as the conceptual underpinnings surrounding participative practice in youth settings.
- Phase 2: Based on the secondary research element; the development and delivery of a focused training programme aimed at Youth workers, enhancing both conceptual understanding and practical application of participative approaches for the 4 to 8 age group within ten participating youth groups.

### 1.1 Policy Context and Guidelines of Youth Work

'Play Your Part' was based upon, and developed within, the existing policy context and guidelines of youth work, namely the Priorities for Youth (PfY), the Engagement framework (EA), and the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for the youth work sector in Northern Ireland.

As described within the Engagement framework, active participation involves assessing the needs of children and young people; involving them in decision-making, and 'planning and problem solving either around a single activity or within the club, unit, or project generally'<sup>1</sup>. To promote a process of active and meaningful participation where children and young people feel a sense of belonging and where they are empowered to advocate for change on issues that impact on their lives, the 'Play Your Part' project worked in collaboration with ten youth centres to develop a set of tools aimed at enhancing children's participation within the setting.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Authority (2019) *Engagement Framework Guidance*, Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/6.%20Engagement%20Framework%20Guidance.pdf>.

In addition, the 'Play Your Part' project, developed a training framework to help youth workers understand the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of children and young people's participation and to help them embed the skills required to be able to use play as a mechanism to seek engagement with children and young people, especially within the 4–8 age group.

## **1.2 Evaluation Overview**

This evaluation has been undertaken based on a broad range of information that has been collected throughout delivery of the project including:

- An initial baseline questionnaire with participating youth settings
- Feedback gained during the delivery of online training sessions
- Training session evaluation feedback
- Exit baseline questionnaires
- A three-month review for impact with participating youth settings, and
- Feedback gained through a focus group session with children within one of the participating youth settings.

The report seeks to provide an overview of participant feedback on the underlying approaches adopted during delivery; the impact of training sessions in terms of enhancing understanding, knowledge and capacity to facilitate enhanced children's participation in decision-making; alongside their views on the overall impact of the framework in elevating and capturing the voices of 4–8-year-olds within their settings.

Overall, the evaluation report highlights that 'Play Your Part' pilot project was well-received by participants who specifically noted its role in increasing understanding of participative processes and in enhancing active engagement of the target 4 to 8-year age group within decision making. The evaluation also notes some impediments which participants felt restricted the impact of the project including the limited 1-year timescale for delivery which limited the opportunity for PlayBoard to support participants as they worked to fully embed the underpinning principles and approaches outlined within the project. Beyond the timescale for delivery, participants also noted impediments arising from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic which limited face to face delivery opportunities.

## **2.0 Background Information**

'Play Your Part' was funded by the Education Authority for Northern Ireland, and was developed in response to a number of key drivers and indicators at both policy and operational levels:

- Recognition that training and support for youth workers is fundamental to achieving and maintaining a consistently high quality of service to young people (PfY)
- An understanding that specialised training is critical in supporting young people's active and meaningful engagement in a variety of youth work settings (PfY)
- Acknowledgement that the provision of youth work activities is primarily targeted at child age ranges of 9–13 and 14–18 (PfY)
- Acknowledgement that Play work is considered to be the best strategy for working with young children aged 4 to 14 (Department of Health, 2018)
- An understanding that approaches to children and young people's participation should be adapted to their age and capacities (UNCRC General comment No. 12, 2009)

## **2.1 PlayBoard NI**

Established in 1985, PlayBoard is the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. The organisation's mandate was and continues to be guided by our constituent membership, i.e. children and young people, their parents, the communities in which they live and those organisations (public, private or voluntary) that provide for, and meet, their play needs.

PlayBoard provides a range of services which are designed to strengthen the accessibility and availability of individual and community play opportunities. In addition to direct service delivery, over the past 30 years PlayBoard has campaigned, lobbied, raised awareness and developed partnerships in order to put children and young people's play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers.

PlayBoard is a membership organisation which exists to promote, create and develop quality play opportunities aimed at improving children's play experiences, holistic development and overall quality of life.

PlayBoard's work is focused across the children and young people's sector from the ages of 0 through to 18 years, aligning with Priorities for Youth (PfY).

## **2.2 'Play Your Part'**

As acknowledged within PfY, the developmental needs of children are not static, therefore youth work activities need to be adapted to children's ages and their capacities. The 'Play Your Part' project enabled PlayBoard to support PfY, developing a range of participatory tools alongside a training framework aimed at enhancing participation and engagement with children in the lower to mid age range.

'Play Your Part' was developed based on PlayBoard's extensive experience in programme development and delivery within the realms of participative practice. This has included delivery of the regional Play Quest programme and development of a Young Researchers group, both of which enabled service providers to embed a process supporting the comprehensive assessment of need based on the direct views and experiences of children, whilst supporting children to shape those services that aim to meet their needs.

Despite the evidence from previous programmes of delivery which highlight the intrinsic benefits of enhancing participative approaches, the voices of children, particularly within the younger age group often remain excluded from the assessment of need within service units. This is often due to the perceived challenges of engaging with and involving younger children in decision-making, and the need to adopt a more creative approach than those often employed with older age groups.

Beyond the impact on the 10 participating youth settings, in the longer term 'Play Your Part' and the approach adopted within the programme offers significant opportunities for embedding the views of younger children as part of future EA 'Regional Assessments of Need'.

### 3.0 Overview of Delivery

'Play Your Part' was developed and delivered during the year 2021/22 through a three-phase approach.

With a view to providing the project with academic oversight, at the outset a steering group was established consisting of a PlayBoard Senior Manager, the 'Play your Part' project coordinator, a representative from Ulster University (Professor Victoria Simms) and a representative from Queens University Belfast (Dr Mary-Louise Corr).

The purpose of the steering group was to provide guidance and support in the delivery of all research elements and to oversee the establishment of the evaluation framework.

### 3.1 Phase 1 – Primary Research

As part of the initial developmental stage, primary research was undertaken across the youth sector with a view to identifying existing participatory practice for the younger age group (4 to 8 years).

The questions in the survey were based on QAF (EA), Ask First (CiNI), Engagement framework (EA), Youth Work Core Principles (CDU) and Priorities for Youth (DfE). Whilst the response rate was low (41 participant responses), the findings provide an indicative baseline for participatory practice at the outset of the programme whilst also identifying existing good practice.

The survey was undertaken using the SurveyMonkey platform and was active from the 21st of July to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2021.

Key findings arising from the research include:

- 60% of respondents indicated that their setting had a designated person 'in charge' of participatory activities for children and young people
- Respondents were asked to indicate the level of participative practice for the 4 to 8 year age group within a number of pre-defined areas as outlined in the table below:

| Area Identified                         | Always | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|---|--------|-----------|--------|-------|
| Organisational decision-making          | 0%     | 50%       | 20%    | 30%   |
| Day to day decisions                    | 30%    | 40%       | 20%    | 10%   |
| Planning/ development of small projects | 10%    | 60%       | 10%    | 20%   |

|  |    |     |     |     |
|--|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Changes to internal/external environment | 0% | 60% | 10% | 30% |
| None at present                          | 0% | 33% | %   | 67% |

As shown, half of all settings never or rarely included 4 to 8 year olds in organisational decision making; whilst nearly a third of settings never or rarely included 4 to 8 year olds in day to day decision making, the planning/development of small projects and changes to the internal or external environment.

- With regards to the stage at which children (4 to 8 years) became active in terms of their participation within youth settings:

| <b>Stage of Active Participation</b>                    | <b>Always</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Rarely</b> | <b>Never</b> |
|---|---------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|
| At the start (design stage)                             | 0%            | 75%              | 12%           | 12%          |
| After initial scope (planning stage)                    | 12%           | 62%              | 12%           | 12%          |
| Once the decision-making has taken place (review stage) | 12%           | 62%              | 12%           | 12%          |
| At the end (evaluation)                                 | 25%           | 37%              | 25%           | 12%          |
| Throughout the entire process                           | 0%            | 75%              | 12%           | 12%          |
| Not involved in decision making                         | 14%           | 14%              | 28%           | 42%          |

- 80% of the respondents indicated that they currently used participation guidelines with the most common identified being the Participation Model, the Girlguiding Programme, the EA Engagement Framework and the Local Assessment of Need.
- Respondents were asked to identify which participatory methodologies they used with different age groups. As reflected in the table below, the methods most used in the age group 4 to 8 were games, talking and listening, graffiti walls and discussion groups.

| <b>Methodology</b> | <b>4 to 8</b> | <b>9 to 13</b> | <b>14 to 18</b> | <b>19 to 25</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Talking/listening  | 44%           | 55%            | 0%              | 0%              |
| Surveys            | 0%            | 50%            | 37%             | 12%             |
| Discussion groups  | 22%           | 22%            | 55%             | 0%              |



|                       |     |     |     |    |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|
| Graffiti walls        | 33% | 17% | 50% | 0% |
| Children's committees | 0%  | 29% | 71% | 0% |
| Games                 | 55% | 33% | 11% | 0% |
| None                  | 0%  | 0%  | 0%  | 0% |

- When asked about the challenges experienced when applying participatory methods and/or approaches with the 4-to-8-year age group, respondents noted issues with resourcing, evidencing practice, engagement, and age profile:
  - *"We are not resourced to work with this age group anymore"*
  - *"Sometimes difficult to evidence as a lot of participation is not done" via surveys or digitally with this age group*
  - *"The resources required at times"*
  - *"Getting engagement to try new ideas"*
  - *"Listening"*
  - *"We only work with young people 8+"*
  - *"We only start at 8 and are changing that to 9 year olds"*
- A key aspect of facilitating participation within a youth setting is that youth workers need to have mechanisms in place to meet and address the needs of children and young people attending their setting.

Respondents were asked to indicate what mechanisms were in place in their setting at the time of the survey. The table below reflects a range of mechanisms across the majority of settings.

| <b>Answer Choices</b>               | <b>Responses</b> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Focus groups                        | 78%              |
| Individual conversations/interviews | 100%             |
| Surveys                             | 67%              |
| Observation practice                | 78%              |
| Verbal or written feedback          | 89%              |

- In the process of ensuring meaningful participation, it is important to give age-appropriate feedback on how the views and experiences of children are being collected and taken into consideration, as well as what are the outcomes of the participation process.

When asked which mechanisms they had in place, the majority (87%)

stated that they conducted information sessions. Half indicated that they used information sheets and other resources, and a minority (37%) indicated the use of visuals and infographics. The table below shows the answers of the respondents.

| <b>Feedback</b>                        | <b>Number of Settings</b> |
|--|---------------------------|
| Informative sessions                   | 87%                       |
| Information sheets and other resources | 50%                       |
| Visuals and infographics               | 37%                       |

- Taking action refers to the process of influencing change or taking the necessary steps to translate what children have shared during the participation activity into action. Their views can be translated into action within the organisation (day-to-day or management) or into recommendations as part of a consultation.

When asked about how settings ensure that young people's views inform change in the youth setting, respondents noted that youth workers engaged in a range of both formal (e.g. sitting on board/member forums and informal (e.g. talking/listening mechanisms) practices:

- *"Through the members forum."*
- *"Young people involved in all levels of the organisation and two young members are on the Trustee board at Ulster level."*
- *"The main area is around the regional assessment of needs but locally if a child or young person doesn't like something that they have tried, we would either act quickly on the spot or change up for the next time they are with us."*
- *"Talking and listening and putting any necessary changes into action they are highlighted at end of session debriefing and during staff meetings."*
- *"The junior and senior committees provide an opportunity for young peoples to inform change."*
- *"Listening and acting on responses."*
- *"Through reflection and evaluation from feedback given."*
- *"We engage with our wider membership through a range of platforms."*

### **3.2 Phase 2 – Secondary Research**

The second phase of delivery focused on the undertaking of secondary research aimed at:

- Assessing the level of current participative practice with the 4 to 8 age group within the youth sector in Northern Ireland (primary research)
- Exploring the conceptual underpinnings surrounding participation (secondary research)
- Undertaking a review of a wide range of participative methodologies and approaches (secondary research), and
- Determining the appropriateness and applicability of reviewed methodologies in terms of youth settings (secondary research).

Secondary research covered a broad range of areas deemed central to enabling the development of an effective participatory model for youth settings including:

- Approaches to Participative Practice
- Barriers to Participation
- Participative Approaches within Youth Settings
- Participatory Methods and Techniques
- Participation Frameworks and Guidelines

Key findings arising from phase 2 research are not covered in detail within this evaluation report as PlayBoard produced a separate, detailed overview document entitled 'Play Your Part – The Voice of a Child: Participatory Methodologies'.

A copy of the secondary research document has been provided separately and should be considered alongside the evaluation report as a key element of the programme delivery narrative.

### **3.3 Phase 3 – Training Development and Delivery**

Based on the secondary research undertaken during phase 2, phase 3 of 'Play Your Part' focused on developing and delivering a series of training sessions aimed at enhancing participative practice for the 4 to 8-year age group within youth settings.

Development of training sessions was undertaken by an assigned team of play development officers within PlayBoard. In addition to utilizing the findings emerging from the secondary research, play development officers used their experience of developing and delivering effective, play based participation programmes to develop training sessions that would best meet the needs of the target group.

### 3.4 Participant Youth Settings

In line with the expressed requirements of the funding programme, 'Play your Part' was targeted at EA local registered voluntary youth organisations across Northern Ireland.

The target was to identify and secure 10 youth settings to engage within the training programme with a view to their embedding participative practice for the 4-to-8-year age group.

Groups were identified through a promotional flyer which was distributed by the Education Authority to relevant groups.

Following the expression of interest process, 10 groups were identified for participation within 'Play your Part':

1. Antrim Beaver Scouts
2. Ballyhornan YC
3. The Glens Community Association
4. Kingdom YC
5. Ledley Hall
6. Lettershandoney YC
7. New Lodge YC
8. Pennyburn YC
9. Resurgan YC
10. St John Bosco YC



### 3.5 Impact of Covid-19

As a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and in-line with ongoing government guidance regarding the limiting of personal contact to reduce infection risk, training sessions were undertaken on an online basis using the Zoom platform.

Further support for those participating within the programme was provided in between training sessions through the provision of learning materials, email and telephone-based support as required.

Towards the end of the programme, as Covid restrictions began to be lifted and face-to-face delivery became possible, PlayBoard provided an additional on-site visit to each of the participating groups. The purpose of the additional visit was to provide further support to those who had undertaken the training whilst observing participative practice and providing guidance as required aimed at maximising impact of the programme.

### 3.6 Sessional Delivery

Training sessions were delivered to the 10 participating youth centres divided into two cohorts with all 10 groups in attendance.

Cohort 1 was made up of 4 groups:

1. Ballyhornan YC
2. St John Bosco YC
3. Antrim Beaver Scouts
4. Lettershandoney YC

Cohort 2 was made up of 6 groups:

1. The Glens Community Association
2. Ledley Hall
3. Pennyburn YC
4. Kingdom YC
5. New Lodge YC
6. Resurgan YC

Across cohort 1 average sessional attendance was 12–14 persons whilst across cohort 2 average sessional attendance was 14–16 people.

The programme consisted of three online training sessions per cohort which were delivered via the Zoom platform and one additional on-site visit which allowed for further support in the embedding of participative approaches.

The table below provides an overview of sessional delivery including an indication of the key learning focus areas for each session.

| Session   | Focus Area  |
|---|---|
| <b>Session 1</b><br><br>Introduction to Play and Participation<br><br>(Online Delivery) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enhanced understanding of the importance of Play Based approaches in a youth setting</li><li>• Enhanced understanding of the importance of play within Youth Settings for the 4 to 8 age year age group specifically</li><li>• Exploration of the similarities and differences between a playwork and youthwork approach.</li></ul> |
| <b>Session 2</b><br><br>Participation and The Toolkit                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To consider participation and participative practice through the lens of play for 4–8-year-olds</li></ul>   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| (Online Delivery)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To understand how to best embed participation for children aged 4-8 years within youth settings</li> <li>• To explore participation frameworks and models applicable for Youth Settings and the 4-to-8-year age group.</li> </ul>   |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Session 3</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Play,<br/>Participation &amp; The Toolkit<br/>(Online Delivery)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recap on importance of Play</li> <li>• Further exploration of participation and participative practice</li> <li>• Overview of the Play Your Part Toolkit</li> <li>• Planning for additional onsite session (review of learning to date)</li> </ul>  |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Session 4</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Face to Face Session held in each participating Youth Setting</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstration of participative practice and modelling of good practice within Youth Setting</li> <li>• Practical exploration of play-based approaches as a mechanism to seek engagement and participation with the 4-to-8-year age group</li> <li>• Capturing children’s voices through play</li> </ul> |

## 4.0 Criteria of Evaluation

To measure the effectiveness of the pilot, a number of evaluative methods were used over the project life cycle. These were initial evaluation, process evaluation, and impact evaluation. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were applied at each stage of the assessment.

Initial evaluation was a brief assessment carried out at the outset of the programme to glean baseline information. This section used data gathered from a baseline questionnaire, which was rolled out at the beginning of the training programme to assess participant settings, establish a baseline for current participatory practices, and provide a means for comparison at the end of the training session to see the progress and impact.

Process evaluation was used to measure the activities of the programme and their inherent quality. This part of the report covers the verbal and written evidence collected from the training sessions, face-to-face support, and the evaluation form. It used an Outcomes-Based Accountability (also known as Results-Based Accountability) approach to assess how the programme developed based on expected outcomes and to understand what practical steps are going to be taken to make changes and achieve the goals.

Impact evaluation was used to measure the immediate effect of the programme and is aligned with the programme's objectives. This section used an exit baseline questionnaire, focus group feedback, and a 3–6-month review questionnaire to gain insight into individuals' experiences of how they perceive and are impacted by the programme before it begins, as it runs, and after it ends. This also helps to reflect on the value of the project and also help answer questions such as:

- Has the overall programme goal been achieved?
- What further actions might be needed to support it?

This evaluation report therefore presents an overview of the 'Play Your Part' programme regarding what has been done, what challenges were encountered in the process, and what should be involved in the future delivery.

### 4.1 Outcome-Based Accountability (OBA)

OBA is widely recognised as a way for communities to think and act strategically in order to better the lives of children, youth, families, adults, and the community at large<sup>2</sup>. It is also used by organisations to monitor and enhance the performance of their programmes. OBA starts with the ends and works backward, towards the means.

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<sup>2</sup> National Child Bureau (2022) *Outcomes Based Accountability*, Available at: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/ncb-northern-ireland/outcomes-based-accountability>.

With clear goals in mind for the end of this project, the project and the process were evaluated by answering the following performance measurement questions:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?

| <b>Project Outcomes</b>  |
|--|
| Development of an increased knowledge and understanding of the importance of play.                               |
| An increased awareness and use of a playwork methodology.  |
| An ability to apply the play work methodologies within a youth work context to promote children's participation. |
| Embedding a culture of effective participation and practice with children aged 4 to 8 years.                     |



## 5.0 Evaluation Review

### 5.1 Initial Evaluation:

Following development of the Youth Worker Participation Toolkit and Facilitators Guide, PlayBoard developed and delivered a baseline questionnaire to participant groups with a view to assessing existing participatory practice with the younger age group (4–8 years) in each setting.

The baseline questionnaire was sent to the 2 cohort groups prior to the commencement of training sessions. Of the 10 participating groups, a total of 7 representatives from different youth centres across Northern Ireland participated, completing the survey.

Whilst the baseline survey allowed the measurement of current participatory practices within settings, accuracy was affected as a number of the participating youth centres acknowledged that they did not engage much (if at all) with 4–8-year-olds attending their setting at the time of the questionnaire.

Since youth work is predicated on relationships and participation, for the success and effectiveness of the project, it was vital to engage with stakeholders and build a relationship that allowed the programme facilitator to glean specific and deep information about the youth setting with a view to tailoring the particular service to promote children’s participation.

**Recommendations:** Looking ahead, should the programme be rolled out further with the recognition that youth settings are unique, rather than sending a generic baseline questionnaire, the programme should be customised to include an initial on-site visit prior to the training session. Such a visit at the outset would enhance the baseline information collection process, adding value to the project and helping to cement organisational commitment.

#### Initial Evaluation Findings

Participants groups reported a number of common themes through the baseline survey process including:

- A lack of awareness of the different approaches available to enhance children’s participation within decision making
- A lack of resources aimed at supporting and enhancing participation with the 4 to 8 years age group
- A lack of focused training on participatory practice within settings, in particular training aimed at the 4 to 8 years age group
- Staff capacity within settings has been affected because of the COVID-19 pandemic
- A number of individuals reported that they had no or limited experience in working with the 4 to -8 years old age group.

## 5.2 Process Evaluation:

All participants indicated that whilst children’s participation within their settings was critically important (average rating of 5 out of a maximum score of 5), the level of existing participation prior to the project was lower (average rating 3.2 out of 5).

| Questions Asked   | Average (Low 1-5 High ) |
|---|-------------------------|
| How important do you think it is to include children’s participation within your setting?       | 5                       |
| How would you rate the level of children aged 4-8’s participation in your setting? Low 1-5 High | 3.2                     |

Based on information collected during the first training session and through the baseline questionnaire, practitioners displayed an in-depth knowledge of the benefits of both play and participation. The issues mentioned by respondents are summarized in the table below.

| Benefits of Play   | Benefits of Participation   |
|--|---|
| have fun, freedom, laughter, communication skills, language skills, building confidence, cooperation skills, motor skills, good mental & physical health, social interaction, self-esteem, improves imagination, new friendships, explore self-boundaries, physical fitness, learn diversity, learn new culture... | increases confidence, sharing, feeling of belonging, taking part, getting involved, respect, social interaction, engagement, a sense of responsibility, new experiences, improves communication & collaboration skills, develop new interests, learn through participation, express their feelings... |

However, even though participants showed an awareness of the value of children’s participation within youth centres, they struggled with using age-appropriate and playful methods to approach young people.

Quote from a participant:

- ❖ *"We consulted all parents with a questionnaire to see how young people learn, how they play, and what they like to do. [However,] we found out parents don't know their children, so that idea is now out the window..."*
- ❖ *"We want to let them get involved, but sometimes I think it's hard for young people to understand because they are not being asked at school or at home. They don't know how to think and look at the big picture. So, it is great this year to attend this training as it gives us an idea of what needs to be changed."*

Children know about themselves, about how they feel, and what is important to them. There is therefore a need for adults to understand children's abilities, support children's needs, and 'enable them to decide for themselves, wherever possible, what they would like to happen and then be able to make it happen'<sup>3</sup>.

With the aforementioned aims and objectives in mind, three online training sessions were held covering a broad range of information regarding the use of playful activities as a means of enhancing children's participation. To supplement the information received through the baseline and to build a more detailed overview of the use of play and children's participation levels in youth settings, online training sessions allowed discussion between participants and encouraged the completion of two focused tasks aimed at involving children aged 4 to 8 years from their setting.

### ***Participant Tasks***

Play Your Part had a goal of supporting youth workers to better enable the participation of children in the 4–8 age group in their settings. In assessing the impact of the programme, it was therefore important to listen to children's perspectives on "participation". This enabled us to determine whether there has been a change in the way the settings operate and how children and young people are experiencing that change.

To do so, youth workers were required to complete two tasks with 4–8-year-olds after their first and second online training session, using playful activities and gathering the children's ideas on how they felt about the play offer and participation within their youth centres.

Participants who completed the tasks with children reported seeing the positive impact of the play work activities and stated their setting's satisfaction with the training programme.

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"We are glad we did this session with 4–8-year-old group because we did not think about doing a consultation with young people with that age [before] as we thought they can't understand... However, it [baseline activities] give us the idea of what children like and what they don't like".*

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, J. (1996). Never too young: How young children can take responsibility and make decisions. National Early Years Network, UK.

- ❖ *"We interpreted and showed them [children] the method of Graffiti Walls, we gave all young people sticky notes and asked them four questions about play in our setting. They came to the front and read their sticky notes. Normally, with that age they are a little bit shy and do not want to speak in front of their mates. This time is bit weird those children started to express themselves".*

Feedback highlighted that the playful activities and activity descriptions within the toolkit were both appropriate and useful for carrying out the tasks within the setting. However, it was noted from feedback on the materials that further adaptations were required to make them more youth-setting-friendly.

Quote from a participant:

- ❖ *"From our point of view, I thought the first two questions of task 2 were much like our first week's task. I thought the last two questions were a little bit tough. 4–8-year-olds have no clue about that and can't understand the question. [Do you feel there are people in the setting to tell your ideas and opinions to? Do you take part in decision making in your setting?] If we worked with an older group, they would answer with no bother, but it is just too complicated for 4–8-year-olds. "*

### **Programme Delivery**

*"If this project hadn't been designed for remote delivery in a COVID world, it would have been focused on site-based delivery to enhance its impact and ability to achieve transformational change within youth settings!"*

PlayBoard Senior Management Team Member

Delivery of the project was impacted by the ongoing Covid pandemic which restricted the initial delivery of the project to online platforms. As engagement and relationship building were key elements of the project, as Covid restrictions were lifted an additional on-site visit session was added to the programme. This session was held at each youth group following the final online training session.

To evaluate the impact of the online training an Outcomes-Based Accountability method was used. This started by assessing participants' expectations of the training programme, which were collected at the start of the first online session and comparing them with an evaluation form which was completed by the end of the online sessions.

The purpose was to gain insight into what the participants thought was the most relevant to them in terms of working with 4–8-year-olds within their setting and to check whether it had been met by the end of the training. The evaluation also considered what the programme's expectations were for the participants i.e. that by undertaking the training, participants would develop an increased knowledge of the importance of play and an ability to apply the play

work methodologies within a youth work context to capture children's voices and act on them.

At the outset participant expectations of the programme were focused on developing their knowledge, understanding and skills:

- To develop a good understanding of play work theories and methodologies.
- To learn how other groups use participation methods in their youth clubs.
- To develop an increased understanding of the importance of play.
- To gain more information about how to approach 4–8-year-olds in youth clubs.
- To gain the ability to plan and approach play-based participation.
- To develop the skills for working with young people.
- To understand young people's needs.
- To develop the ability to communicate effectively with 4–8-year-olds.
- To learn about a more child led approach and how it can be applied in their setting.

After the 3 online training sessions, participants were asked to complete an evaluation survey to get an insight into their experiences in relation to the quality of the online programme delivery.

- Across both cohorts, 48 survey responses were collated with 100% of participants answering 'Yes' to the question, 'Did the sessions meet your expectations'.
- When asked to evaluate how satisfied they were with the overall training session on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 represents very little and 5 represents a lot, 93% of participants rated it as 5, and the remaining 7% rated it as 4. This indicates that the play work online training has benefited youth settings by enhancing youth workers' understanding of the value of play work approaches and their capacity to interact with 4–8-year-olds.

In terms of the face-to-face on-site support session, the aim was to support youth workers to develop the skills to be able to use playful activities to aid participation and apply knowledge acquired through online sessions to their engagement with young children.

The initial plan was for activities to be demonstrated by the PlayBoard trainer with an expectation that they would be mirrored/jointly facilitated by youth workers in order to provide direct experience. However, at the sessions some of the youth workers were reluctant to participate or felt they needed the assistance of the PlayBoard team in order to deliver.

Whilst delivering the training online was necessary due to the impacts of Covid-19, and acknowledging that it provided an opportunity to allow clusters of

geographically distant centres to receive training together enhancing contact and peer support, the fact that only one on-site support opportunity was available restricted impact in terms of embedding the level of cultural change required.

Engagement with participants further highlighted a need for more on-site delivery to provide them with the confidence to deliver the learning from the project within their setting; any future roll-out should ensure that additional support sessions are factored into the delivery plan.

Through engagement in training, the desire shown by participants to enhance practice with the younger cohort and to embed participative practice the effectiveness of the approach adopted has been demonstrated.

However, to achieve the level of change and long-term impact wherein youth workers develop a good understanding of play work theories and put those skills and ideas into their own practice, our research suggests that there should be a more long-term commitment (perhaps over the span of a year) to ongoing mentoring and monitoring processes.

It is obvious that this pilot project had to be delivered quickly, but in an ideal world, from an evaluation and reflection perspective, neither toolkits nor remote delivery can replace the effectiveness of face-to-face support. Thus, this programme should be designed as a complete face-to-face or hybrid model with more in-person interactions.

Considering the geographical location of the ten groups and the need for project efficiency, groups could be clustered by geographical area allowing for peer learning and sharing. If the ultimate goal is to secure greater depth of knowledge and skills, future this project needs a longer timescale and further investment.

### **Online Training Evaluation Survey**

The participants of both cohorts were asked to complete an online survey (using Microsoft Form) to get an insight into their satisfaction with the training sessions' delivery and quality.

In total, 48 youth workers participated and completed the questionnaire. On average, the majority of respondents evaluated sessions positively. The answers were given on a rating scale of 1 to 5 (i.e., very little – a lot).

| <b>Area Evaluated</b>                                      | <b>Average scores<br/>(max = 5)</b> |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| The session has increased my knowledge the subject matter. | 4.81)                               |
| Did the sessions meet your expectations?                   | 4.81                                |

|   |      |
|---|------|
| The session was relevant and useful to me.        | 4.88 |
| The session was relevant and useful to my work.   | 4.93 |
| How well was the session organised?               | 4.93 |
| How would you rate the quality of delivery?       | 4.90 |
| Overall, how satisfied were you with the session? | 4.93 |

Quotes from participants noted what they found particularly useful and the ways in which they will use what they learned to inform future practice:

- ❖ *"It has increased my confidence in starting to work with younger kids".*
- ❖ *"The combination of approaches that can be used, all of which can have a place in our setting at different times."*
- ❖ *"Breakout rooms were great as it gives the chance for thoughts and ideas to be brought together."*
- ❖ *"we will aim to encourage participation in a way that includes all of our young people."*
- ❖ *"Planning will incorporate time for children to be consulted about what games they would like to play and what activities they would like to do. Each session will allow children to have a voice and make decisions instead of an adult led approach. We will review participation much more often now and make sure the children are doing what they want to do as opposed to what we think they might like to do."*
- ❖ *"We are going to incorporate more child led play and incorporate what we have learned about the do and don'ts of play and risk."*
- ❖ *"Think about benefits of play more and observe our juniors more and include them in more in decision making to build on participative structures in the club."*

### **5.3 Impact Evaluation:**

Impact assessment is used to determine the efficacy of a programme immediately upon its completion and for up to six months afterwards. The impact of the PYP pilot project has been further assessed through an exit baseline questionnaire, focus group feedback, and 3–6-month review questionnaire, which were carried out at a later stage of the programme to assess how the learning was implemented and how the children were involved in the setting.

Exit Baseline Questionnaire:

Participants from both cohorts were asked to complete an exit baseline questionnaire, providing a comparison with the entry baseline to determine the progress and impact of the pilot project. The survey was prepared on Microsoft Word and sent to participants via e-mail, with a total of six representatives from different youth centres completing the survey.

The increased awareness of youth work sectors regarding children's participation in the decision-making within the settings was evaluated in relation to before and after having taken part in the Play Your Part project, since this helps to show the change within the setting after the completion of the training.

For example, when asking the questions about whether they are familiar with any models or different approaches to participation for children, on average, the majority of the respondents answered "No" on the entry baseline. In contrast, not only were there no "No" answers to the same questions on the exit baseline questionnaire, but the various instances of participatory methods they listed on the questionnaire demonstrate their complete confidence in the subject matter.

|                        | <b>Are you familiar with any models of participation?</b> | <b>Are you aware of the different approaches to participation for children?</b> |
|------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Before training</b> | 50% said No   | 83% said No   |
| <b>After training</b>  | 0% said No  | 0% said No  |

Similarly, on the entry baseline questionnaire youth workers were asked what the most important reason for children's participation in their setting was. Youth workers responded with reasons such as participation being good for children's overall development, children feeling ownership, building confidence, developing social skills, and making friends.

Although most participants held a view of "I thought this age group was too early for doing this programme (Focus Group Session)" and "we didn't think 4 to 8-year olds would have been capable of understanding what we were saying (Focus Group Session)" at the outset of the programme, it was inspiring to see how they came on board in the exit baseline questionnaire and how they started to give sufficient credit to this early age group in decision making.

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"In line with the Model for Effective practice, one of the core principles is preparing young people for participation. If this is encouraged at an early age, then it will be easier for individuals to engage and participate as they travel on their interpersonal journey."*



- ❖ *"We feel engagement at this age sets the standard for them to continue and thrive in the youth setting."*

Overall, the exit baseline questionnaires showed that all respondents confirmed knowing more about practical approaches to participation for early age group children as a result of completing the Play Your Part training sessions. However, it should be noted that while all participants expressed satisfaction with the overall training content and enthusiasm to apply what they have learned with 4–8-year-olds, half of the respondents believed and recommended that face-to-face delivery would enhance the overall quality of the programme.

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"The only thing that could have improved it, and this was out of their [PlayBoard] control, was for the training to be delivered face-to-face."*
- ❖ *"Maybe more collaborative interaction with the assessor and the youth workers."*
- ❖ *"I think they were ok [...] but realistically, face-to-face practice is the best source of training."*

#### **5.4 Participant Group Focus Group Session**

As part of the evaluation, the focus group meeting allowed PlayBoard to ask more in-depth questions regarding how participants felt the project had impacted on their setting and whether children aged 4 to 8 have benefited from it. This assisted in determining what worked and what didn't work within the process.

In this section, by evaluating different elements of the programme with the help of the focus group, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) diagram of the project has been developed. The SWOT gives a sense of how to pursue opportunities by overcoming project weaknesses and how to use project strengths to make it less vulnerable to external threats.

Focus group sessions allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the project leading to several important recommendations for the project with a view to future roll-out.

At the commencement of the meeting, participants were asked to identify the main challenges they faced when working with 4–8-year-olds were. The purpose of this question was to gain insight into what was most relevant to them in terms of implementing the learning from the project into their work. This allowed PlayBoard to determine whether the training sessions met their needs.

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"I think we never maybe gave young people value for what they could do or what their ideas were, because we never really thought about having consultations with young people that young because we didn't think they would be capable of understanding what we were talking about [...] So, for me, your programme [Play Your Part] has really widened my ambition for the young people, just so you know, and we are doing far far more with them now than we ever did."* (Pennyburn)
  
- ❖ *"Our biggest issue was that, as we were doing more structured activities, we let them [children] sit there and shut up and listen to us for long enough to explain the game. [...] But now we're actually having our chat with them, asking them if they enjoyed it and if they wanted to do it again, which is something we've never done before. We had the same three-year rotation of a program, but now we're actually not planning the full year in advance. We shouldn't plan so much in advance and do let children have their pinions."* (Scouts)

A SWOT analysis, based on input obtained at the focus group meeting about various aspects of the programme, is presented below, showing the program's quality and room for growth.

| <b>Strengths</b>   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet the high demand for training for youth workers</li> <li>• Effective participatory tools and activities in padlet</li> <li>• Cluster all youth centres across NI on Zoom to benefit from sharing experiences</li> <li>• Face-to-face support within each setting</li> <li>• Success in letting participants see the benefits of early intervention</li> <li>• Beneficial and easily accessible documents on padlet</li> <li>• Materials have been beneficial for training new staff in setting</li> </ul> |
| <b>Weaknesses</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of mentoring and support in the training process</li> <li>• Lack of engagement with youth workers and children due to the limited timescale</li> <li>• Too many documents on padlet</li> <li>• Participants' capability to use online technology (Zoom)</li> <li>• Lack of time for settings to get the tasks done with children</li> <li>• The project was delivered at the busiest time of year for youth workers</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Opportunities</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appetite for this training programme</li> <li>• A growing global awareness of child-friendly environments</li> <li>• Lack of resources for youth workers</li> <li>• More face-to-face delivery and more interaction with children would be beneficial</li> <li>• Participants' need for the practical resource packs</li> <li>• Picture examples of the ideas in the toolkit</li> </ul>   |

### Threats

- Lack of time and funding could be a threat to future project
- Participants' attitudes towards change
- Participants can easily fall back into old ways if there is not sufficient support
- COVID-19

To evaluate the usage of the toolkit and other documents shared via the Padlet app, participants were asked how they found these materials. All those who participated in the meeting stated that the materials were ideal for "taking ideas and activities" (Scouts, Pennyburn & Ballyhornan) when working with young people, and also found them "beneficial for training new staff" (Kingdom), and "made their job easy" (Portrush).

Although they credited the documents provided through padlet as being suitable for the youth work sector, not all of them had actively implemented all of the activities by the time of the evaluation. The reason given for this was it being the "end of the financial year" (Pennyburn) as well as the "busy time schedule" in youth settings for preparing for Easter Holiday (Pennyburn, Ledley Hall & Kingdom). Nevertheless, youth workers emphasised that it will be the main resource they are going to look out for and use more, especially in the summer scheme (Pennyburn & Ledley Hall).

Quote from a participant:

- ❖ *"We have two new staff members, so it's been really beneficial for them to go through this material and grab ideas from it. So, I have to say it's gotten a lot of use so far. It has been beneficial for training new staff in our setting."* (Kingdom)

From the perspective of future delivery, participants were asked for their views on how the documents could be enhanced. Although they said "it [the toolkit] has too many pages to print" (general consensus), it was felt that having documents on padlet as well as having a hard copy would be doubly beneficial (general consensus). Additionally, the youth workers believed that the more practical basic resource pack with sample valuation and sample programme planning alongside visual illustrations of the concepts and activities, would assist them in moving ahead and intensifying children's engagement within their centre.

With regards to overall programme merit and the findings of the SWOT analysis, if we review the identified programme weaknesses, most were caused by external threats<sup>4</sup> such as the global Covid-19 health crisis, a lack of timescale and funding limitations. Whilst these factors were outside of PlayBoard's

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<sup>4</sup> Reichwein, B.& Hearn,S. (2020) *SWOT Analysis*, Available at: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/swotanalysis>

control trying to ameliorate these issues would significantly benefit youth settings as it would allow more face-to-face interaction during the programme .

With regards to face-to-face delivery, all participants felt it would be preferable to online with quotes including "the programme would have been far better, and we all would have gotten far more out of it [Play Your Part]" (Pennyburn) if this were delivered physically rather than through Zoom (Ballyhornan, Pennyburn, Kingdom, Portrush).

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"Behind the camera, it's not the same. You can just see the notice board behind me, you can't see the rest of the office. It is like tunnel vision; you are not getting the full picture. "* (Pennyburn)
- ❖ *"Face-to-face meeting with other youth workers is hugely beneficial."* (Kingdom)
- ❖ *"I don't like Zoom. If it was only Zoom, I would do anything else than sit here in front of this camera."* (Portrush)
- ❖ *"Zoom works quite well for us sometimes, [but] I get the benefit of face-to-face communication. Maybe some of the training could be done face-to-face and a mixture is better sometimes because you get to meet more people from different areas."* (Scouts)

From this we can extrapolate that off-line training would enhance the merit of the programme since it would be able to provide youth workers with additional practical skills and resources. If time and funds are available, and given the geographical distribution of youth centres across NI, it would be preferable to cluster groups from a certain geographic region and maintain a balance between offline and online training sessions for future project delivery.

Overall, the focus group session has successfully achieved its goal by guiding PlayBoard to perceive the youth workers' progress, attitude change, and enthusiasm to work with 4–8-year-olds within each youth club. It also brought PlayBoard some great feedback and appreciation from people who took part in the Play Your Part pilot project.

Quotes from participants:

- ❖ *"I think it is a really beneficial programme and raises a lot of knowledge for people. Kids need to be involved at this age, and it's important for people to realise it."* (Kingdom)
- ❖ *"Thanks for all the training and for the resource packs. They are excellent to have."* (Pennyburn)

## **5.5 Children's Focus Group**

A children's focus group took place on 25<sup>th</sup> April in 23<sup>rd</sup> Antrim Beaver Scouts, Lisburn. The session was delivered by two members of PlayBoard NI staff to a group of eight children aged 7-8 years old.

The session consisted of different games and activities designed to gather information about whether or not the children in the setting felt their ideas and opinions were listened to and how they felt if this was the case.

The session started with the children sitting in a circle and each child had a certain colour of sweet. The PlayBoard staff member then asked them a range of different questions, starting with some simple questions, such as, 'those with a red sweet, tell me your favorite game at Scouts' and then more questions focusing on participation were asked, such as, 'those with a green sweet, do you like coming to scouts and why?'

The next activity was an arts and crafts activity where the children were asked to design two posters. One was based on 'their favorite thing to play in scouts' and the other 'what would they like to play in scouts?'

The third and final activity was based on how being listened to made them feel and they were given post it notes to write down describing words about their feelings if they are listened to at Scouts. These were then stuck down on a flip chart page and a discussion was had on why this made them feel words like 'wonderful' and 'listened to.'

A photographer attended the session, recording the activities which were then used to support the design of the Play your Part poster, designed as part of the media pack.

## 6.0 Conclusion

'Play Your Part' was a one-year pilot project led by PlayBoard and funded by the Education Authority (EA). The project aimed to assist youth groups to embed a culture of effective participation and practice with children aged four to eight. The project goal was to develop a training framework alongside a set of participatory tools aimed at supporting youth workers to create an environment in which 4–8-year-olds' views, opinions, and voices could be better heard within youth settings.

Evaluation of the project has included:

- Entry baseline questionnaire
- Online training session feedback
- Face-to-face support
- Training evaluation questionnaires
- Exit questionnaires
- Focus group meetings, and
- 3–6-month reviews (Ongoing)

This report highlights that there exists a clear appetite for PyP training in the youth work sector and outlines how the pilot project has built on the capacity of youth workers to facilitate playwork in youth settings for 4-8-year-olds.

❖ *" I initially thought it [PYP project] should have been catered to an older age group and think all these guys [4-8-year-olds] are too young for this, but now I realized that it's the perfect age group.[...] This programme probably made us pay a little more former with them and treat them a wee bit more as we would treat the older ones [because] it made us realise that they're never too young to let them know we respect and value them. "(Kingdom)*

By evaluating the overall project journey, this report reflects the eagerness of youth families to learn playful approaches to engage with the younger cohort. It also justifies the efficacy of the training programme, in conjunction with a set of participatory tools, in assisting youth workers in meeting the needs of young children.

However, to achieve the level of change and long-term impact where youth workers develop a good understanding of play work theories and put those skills and ideas into their own practice, there should be a longer journey, over the span of a year, of ongoing mentoring and monitoring processes as neither toolkits nor remote delivery can replace the effectiveness of face-to-face support, as approved once again by youth workers' valued input and ideas. This implies that if EA wants more depth than breadth from the future roll-out project, it will need a longer timeline and more expenditure to make the programme more durable and adaptable to a variety of settings and circumstances.