

1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1 Context

‘Engaging Parents in the Childcare Partnerships’ was a one year pilot project developed by the Parenting Forum NI in partnership with the four Area Childcare Partnerships commencing in August 2001.

Parenting Forum NI is a voluntary organisation established in 1999 to bring together all those with an interest in parenting. The aims of the Parenting Forum NI are:

- To raise awareness of the importance of parenting
- To listen to the needs and wishes of parents
- To create a network of parents and organisations concerned with parenting support and education

‘Children First’, the NI Childcare Strategy established four Area Childcare Partnerships to take forward the strategy. The key tasks for the Area Childcare Partnerships are to:

- Assess the demand for child care and family support for all children and the supply of places and services available to meet it
- Set achievable local targets for filling the gap between existing supply and demand across the range of services
- Ensure that child care information services are available and meet national standards
- Raise the quality of childcare

Each Area Childcare Partnership is required to produce a Childcare Plan setting out how it will undertake these tasks. *Children First guidelines place an obligation on them to consult with parents.*

The Area Childcare Partnerships supported the project because:

- (a) they are committed to involving parents in the work of the Area Childcare Partnerships
- (b) they have a requirement to involve parents in the work of the Area Childcare Partnerships under the Children First guidelines
- (c) they recognised the Parenting Forum NI, who had developed the model for engaging with parents, as a regional body with the expertise and remit to carry out this work
- (d) the project offered the opportunity to take a co-ordinated regional approach to learning how best to work with parents

The Parenting Forum NI Steering Group wanted to become involved with this project because

- (a) it believes that it is important to consult with parents
- (b) the project enabled it to implement part of its’ development plan
- (c) it felt that it was in a unique position to bring a range of skills and expertise to the project including:
 - a measure of independence and overview as a regional organisation
 - the insight of a collective view from the steering group and all their constituents

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- giving a voice to parents by piloting a model that came from parents themselves
- links with National Family and Parenting Institute and the Parenting Education Forum in England
- facilitators who are well versed in policy, practice and the views of various stakeholders

1.2 Aims and Objectives of the Project

- ◆ To pilot a mechanism for engaging parents with the Childcare Partnerships
- ◆ To produce training materials, programmes and support/mentoring systems to facilitate parents' input
- ◆ To set in place an independent evaluation leading to the development of a transferable model for consulting with parents by April 2002
- ◆ To make a range of information available to parents to allow them to participate in the Childcare Partnership's processes
- ◆ To establish two reference groups in each Partnership area ensuring the involvement of a wide range of parents including working parents, fathers, non-traditional family structures, ethnic minorities, rural and urban experiences and parents reflecting a broad range of support needs
- ◆ To promote an environment that will facilitate meaningful parental involvement with the Childcare Partnerships
- ◆ To establish linkage between parents and other groups being consulted by the Childcare Partnership

1.3 The Roles of the Partner Organisations

Role of the Parenting Forum NI

- ◆ To produce a booklet aimed at informing parents about the role of the Childcare Partnerships in conjunction with the Childcare Partnership Co-ordinators
- ◆ To work with groups charged by the Partnerships to carry out research into parents' support needs or engaged in consultation with other sectors on behalf of the Partnerships
- ◆ To link into existing networks promoting interest in the Partnerships and engaging parents active involvement
- ◆ To establish and service two reference groups in each Partnership area reflecting a broad range of parents; each meeting four times in the pilot year
- ◆ To facilitate the input of parents unable to attend reference groups
- ◆ To provide support and training to members of the reference groups including mentoring and capacity building
- ◆ To liaise with the Childcare Partnership Co-ordinators to ensure that the needs of parents and the Partnership are met
- ◆ To participate in the external evaluation of the project

Role of the Area Childcare Partnership Co-ordinators

- ◆ To facilitate the Parenting Forum NI in accessing information on local networks, Partnership priorities, etc.
- ◆ To produce a Partnership newsletter that will promote the participation of parents

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- ◆ To attend meetings of the reference groups with the role of promoting discussion on the work of the Partnerships and allowing meaningful input by parents into the Partnerships' programmes of work
- ◆ To set in place an independent evaluation process

1.4 The Key Stages in the Project

<u>Date</u>	<u>Action</u>
August 2001	Agreement of Childcare Partnerships (CCPs) & Parenting Forum NI (PF) and funding in place
September	PF & CCPs to agree priority areas for reference groups and content of booklet PF to begin promotion of reference groups PF to establish links with existing network groups PF/CCPs to negotiate brief for evaluation
October	Production of booklet PF ongoing contact with parents and networks CCPs to appoint evaluator
November	Initial meetings of reference groups and identification of training and resource needs
December - January	PF – ongoing distribution of booklet. PF - the development of training materials/programmes and mentoring support
February	Meetings of reference groups and continued development of groups
March	Interim evaluation of booklet, reference groups and support mechanism
May - June	Ongoing meetings of reference groups
July	Final evaluation of groups

2 THE EVALUATION PROCESS

2.1 Aims and Objectives of the Evaluation

An independent evaluator was appointed by the steering group in November 2001.

The aim of the evaluation is to :

- examine the process, outputs and initial outcomes of the pilot project ‘Engaging Parents in the Childcare Partnerships’

The objectives of the evaluation are to:

- assess the effectiveness of the pilot project in engaging parents initially with the Parenting Forum NI and then the Childcare Partnerships in the eight pilot groups
- identify the enabling and constraining factors faced by the parents in the eight pilot groups in engaging with the partnerships
- examine the extent to which parents have participated in the work of the childcare partnerships over the period of the pilot project
- examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of the materials and structures used in the pilot project
- draw on evaluation findings to make recommendations on engaging parents in future work

2.2 The Findings of the Interim Evaluation

An interim evaluation based on the self evaluation material, work reports and interview with the development worker was conducted in February/March 2002. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify the key issues in introducing and running the pilot programme and suggest priorities for the final phase of the pilot. A copy of this evaluation is included in Appendix One.

The recommendations included:

- The timescale originally envisaged is ambitious. The project has established 6 parent reference groups in the 8 target areas. In the next phase the challenge will be to provide quality mentoring support for parents, given the number of hours available and the substantial proportion of time used by travel.
- The materials produced for the project are generally not parent friendly and do not give an identity to the project or sufficient information about its’ aims and objectives or benefits for parents.
- The range and level of co-operation with existing networks is very good. Adequate time for this phase should be built into any future project.
- The number of parents involved in parent reference groups at the end of February was modest, however experience of other projects would indicate that this is not unusual. Numbers are increasing at second meetings. Frequency of meetings, venues, childcare and timing should be reviewed on a continual basis to ensure they are meeting the needs of parents.

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- Representation at meetings may be broadened by tapping into other networks eg health visitors, employers although the time constraint on the worker would also have to be considered. The interim evaluation does not address how fully the two parent reference groups within one Area Childcare Partnership can represent the views of parents within the Partnership area. The next stage of the evaluation will address this point.
- The initial meetings are well structured and provide opportunities for parents to engage with the worker and other local networks in their area.
- The level of preparation, travelling time and follow- up work for each of the eight areas needs to be considered for the future. The appropriateness of a N Ireland wide operational approach requires consideration. Parents identify with their own localities. It is clear from the example of the work undertaken in Ards that the development worker was creating a “localness” for the project.
- The main role of the pilot is to identify strategies for engaging parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships. Future meetings must address the research nature of this project and gather parents’ views on appropriate ways for them to engage with Childcare Partnerships. The continuation of the pilot to April 2003 would enable this work happen.
- The Area Childcare Partnerships and the Parenting Forum NI will need to develop mechanisms for dealing with the issues raised in the Parent Reference Groups.

2.3 The Methodology Used in the Final Evaluation

The final evaluation of the project was conducted in June and July 2002. A comprehensive process that involved review of project materials, reports and interviews with the main stakeholders was undertaken. Appendix Two provides a list of those interviewed and the aide de memoirs used to guide the interviews.

In a project of this nature, there is a range of stakeholders. Within the local communities targeted by the project, the principal stakeholders are the parents. Parents views were sought using feedback sheets at each Parent Reference Group meeting and directly through interviews with four groups by the evaluator. Other local stakeholders are the professional project workers already active in these communities with local parents. Representatives of this group were interviewed by telephone.

The development worker took a lead in working on behalf of the project within the target area and was interviewed as part of the evaluation. Access to her reports was provided for the evaluator.

The members of the project steering group (the four Co-ordinators with the Area Childcare Partnerships and the Chief Executive of the Parenting Forum NI) were also interviewed by telephone as part of the process.

Representatives of the Area Childcare Partnerships and the Parenting Forum NI Steering Group were interviewed by telephone.

3 FINDINGS

The findings of the evaluation are described under four headings – Inputs, Process, Outputs, Outcomes

3.1 Inputs

3.1.1 Financial and Material Inputs

The principal contributors to this project in financial terms are the Area Childcare Partnerships and the Parenting Forum NI. Total project costs of £24,000 were met by the four Area Childcare Partnerships at a cost of £6,000 each. In addition the four Area Childcare Partnerships agreed to collate the information packs meeting costs internally. The Parenting Forum NI provided office accommodation for the development worker at Franklin House, Belfast. *In addition, Parenting Forum NI managed the selection and recruitment process and provided management and support for the development worker.* The project costs are outlined below:

	£
INCOME	
DHSS	24000
TOTAL INCOME	<hr/> 24000
Salary	9865
Employers NIC	819
Admin backup 6hours per week @ £6.65	2075
PAC management support 2 hours per month @ £13.5	324
PAC supervision 3 hour per month @ £23	828
Rent	625
Training Staff	30
Travel Employees	1474
Postage	250
Photocopying	300
Printing	460
Stationery	200
Telephone Mobile & Fax	500
Insurance	50
Heat & light	250
Publicity	195
Out of pocket expenses ref group members @ £2.50 per meeting	465
Hospitality - reference group meetings	443
Conference exp	265
Evaluation	2000
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	<hr/> 21418
Net surplus to carry forward for group facilitation & salary <i>(For holding period in August and September)</i>	<hr/> 2582 <hr/>

It was recognised by all the stakeholders in the project that the resources allocated towards worker time was inadequate for the tasks required given both the length of lead-in time required to establish each group and the regional nature of the post.

The level of resources allocated to out of pocket expenses for reference group members and reference groups matched well the requirements of the project and were valued by parents who attended and project workers from other organisations working with parents in the target area.

Production of leaflets by the Area Childcare Partnerships involved extra liaising for the development worker with four Area Childcare Partnerships. Not all the Area Childcare Partnerships produced leaflets.

3.1.2 Non-financial Inputs

Non – financial inputs to this project are principally in the form of time given by the stakeholders that has enabled the project benefit from their knowledge and expertise.

The time given by parents to this project must be highlighted. This was a voluntary contribution that involved attending and participating at Parent Reference Groups. For many parents, the Parent Reference Groups were their first experience of this type of work. Parents also gave time outside of the Parent Reference Groups e.g in Kircubbin, parents amended and circulated a survey to local schools and groups.

Project workers with other agencies in the target areas promoted the project to parents they worked with. This took the form of distribution of leaflets and word of mouth to persuade parents to attend the Parent Reference Groups. They also provided local information about venues and creches that helped with organising the meetings. In some cases they provided information about local services that was passed on to parents and in a few cases co-facilitated the meetings.

For Parenting Forum NI a range of staff members have been engaged in this project. This included the Chief Executive who provided on-going line management and support and supervision for the development worker. Other staff involved, in addition to those costed for, included the finance manager and administrator who provided services to the project using work time as part of their duties with the Parenting Forum NI.

Additional work time provided by the Area Childcare Partnerships varied. The Southern Area Childcare Partnership took a lead role in co-ordinating the overall project and organising the finance. The Co-ordinator was involved in working to refine the original proposal and agree the proposal for co-ordinating the project finance. In addition the Co-ordinators worked with the development worker within their own Partnership areas to develop and organise the Parent Reference Groups. The level of involvement of each co-ordinator varied and is described in more detail under process.

3.1.3 Development Worker Input

The project appointed a part-time development worker. As discussed in 3.1.1, resources allocated to the project allowed for ten days per month for the first three months and 8 days per month input from the development worker thereafter.

The worker was tasked with developing and organising 2 Parent Reference Groups per Area Childcare Partnership. The development worker was responsible for providing a report to the Area Childcare Partnerships on each Parent Reference Group meeting. The development worker undertook additional work e.g. development of parent surveys, fact finding and support for individual parents. Based on the experience of the project, all stakeholders in this project have highlighted that the allocation of development worker time to these tasks was unrealistic. The developmental nature of the work required a longer time scale (two years minimum) and greater contact time between development worker and parent reference groups to discuss the process required to deliver on the objectives. The level of development required varied across the groups. Some groups did not need the same level of development to understand the Area Childcare Partnerships and some parents had the ability to articulate views and opinions even from the first sessions while other groups needed more support and additional preparation to move through the process.

The project experienced a change in staff in the final quarter when the first development worker appointed moved to a new post. Both development workers were well matched in terms of skills and experience to the tasks required to effectively develop and organise the Parent Reference Groups. (The report will refer simply to the development worker as only one development worker worked on the project at any stage.) The Parenting Forum NI allocated the development worker duties to a member of its' core staff at a more senior level. The appointment of a development worker with this level of skills, experience and contacts was important in minimising the difficulties of establishing a new worker. It also highlighted the need for an appointment at this level to ensure that skills and experience are matched to tasks such as reporting back to four Area Childcare Partnerships Co-ordinators and networking across a wide range of agencies. This, of course, raises issues in terms of the resources allocated for the employment of a development worker.

3.1.4 The Management of the Project

The Project Steering Group comprised the four Area Childcare Partnership Co-ordinators, the Chief Executive of the Parenting Forum NI *and the development worker*. The group met quarterly and was responsible for the management of the project and the overall strategic direction of the project.

The steering group did not have a structure to these meetings e.g pre-agreed agenda, written report tabled and reporting on budget. These processes should have been initiated and agreed by the members of the Project Steering Group at an early stage to help facilitate a shared understanding of purpose, progress and achievements amongst members. The steering group tended to focus on management issues e.g finance, evaluation, workload of the development worker at the expense of more strategic issues e.g refining mechanisms for feedback from Parent Reference Groups,

developing agreed approaches to dealing with the issues emerging from Parent Reference Groups. This point is explored further under process.

The make-up of the steering group did not give full opportunity for local stakeholders e.g parents and project workers from other agencies to have an input to the management and overall strategic direction of the project. Likewise, it did not give full opportunity for members of the Area Childcare Partnerships and the Parenting Forum NI steering group to have an input to these issues. While this is obviously related to capacity and pressures of time, the project could have benefited from the development of mechanisms to facilitate their input.

As discussed under 3.1.2, the tasks of line management and support and supervision of the worker were provided by the Chief Executive of the Parenting Forum NI. *The Parenting Forum NI Steering Group brought an additional level of support and expertise to the project through their support of the development worker and the Chief Executive.* The Parenting Forum NI was well placed to undertake this work given its' central role in talking with and working with parents and its' track record in managing other projects that worked directly with parents.

The development worker also met with each of the Area Childcare Co-ordinators to agree a programme of work within the Partnership areas. This is discussed in more detail under the section dealing with process.

3.1.5 The Key Findings

- Future projects will require a greater allocation of resources (both in terms of staff time and level of appointment) to enable the achievement of the tasks set by the project.
- Resources allocated to organise Parent Reference Groups and enable members attend are in keeping with local needs and should be similarly allocated in future initiatives
- There was a range of non-financial inputs from all the stakeholders in the project. These included non-financial inputs from parents and other project workers active in local areas. The non-financial inputs from members of the Project Steering Group (Chief Executive, Parenting Forum NI and Childcare Co-ordinators, Area Childcare Partnerships) were substantial. A formal costing of this would raise the costs of the project significantly.
- The development worker's tasks were at different levels and have differing requirements in terms of skills and expertise – one being face to face development work and the other, an ability to network, negotiate and report through a range of levels in community, voluntary and statutory agencies.
- The management of the project through the Project Steering Group could be enhanced through the earlier development of procedures and the provision of a mechanism that allowed the involvement of a greater range of stakeholders in the process.

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3.2 Process

The project tested out a methodology for engaging parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships. The proposed methodology, developed by the Parenting Forum NI in consultation with parents, included developing and organising focus groups made up of parents called Parent Reference Groups in two localities within each Area Childcare Partnership. It also included making a report from these Parent Reference Groups to the Area Childcare Partnership to enable meaningful input by parents into their programme of work.

The interim evaluation (March 2002) focused on the establishment phase of the project. Its' main findings focused on the level of lead-in work that was required in each area before a Parent Reference Group could be established. This was far in excess of that envisaged by the stakeholders represented on the steering group. The report also highlighted the need for the Project Steering Group to consider mechanisms for dealing with the issues raised in the Parent Reference Groups.

3.2.1 Selection of Target Areas and Getting Started

The areas originally selected by the Area Childcare Partnerships were Ards and Lagmore (EACP), Bushmills and Larne (NACP), Clogher Valley and Banbridge (SACP), Omagh and Derry (WACP). One further area was added, Bangor (EACP). Area Childcare Partnerships identified areas that were challenging and that provided a contrast given the pilot nature of the project. Contrasts included:

Urban/rural

Reasonably/less well off

Reasonable/very little community development infrastructure

Evening/morning meetings

The ACP Co-ordinators met with the development worker to provide background information on the ACP and the target areas. Contact information for other agencies and organisations in the area was also given and in some cases networking meetings were facilitated.

The publicity materials for the project were also agreed between the ACPs and the Parenting Forum NI at this stage.

3.2.2 The Parent Reference Groups

Parent Reference Groups were established to provide a mechanism for communication between parents and the Area Childcare Partnerships. Parent Reference Groups were facilitated by the development worker in most areas. While the remit and the basic structure (an icebreaker, information giving and parent-led discussion) was similar, the actual working and practicalities was very different across each area. The process in each area is described below along with feedback from the key stakeholders locally.

Eastern Area Childcare Partnership (EACP)

Two groups were established in this area at Lagmore in Belfast and in the Ards Peninsula. Following initial meetings in Lagmore a decision was taken not to continue in this area because of the lack of infrastructure in the area and the fact that a newly launched Surestart was trying to establish itself and target the same parents. The Ards group, based in Kircubbin with a target area including five villages continued to meet and four meetings were held in total. Another group was formed in Bangor that has held two meetings.

The Eastern Area Childcare Partnership employs District Co-ordinators that work locally on the ground to implement the EACP childcare strategy. The development worker worked closely with the district co-ordinator for Ards Peninsula and Bangor on all aspects of planning, delivering and follow-up for the Parent Reference Groups. The Co-ordinator with the Area Childcare Partnership has supported the process by photocopying promotional material and providing additional support for a parent's survey in the area. The Co-ordinator also gave a presentation on the EACP action plan and took feedback from the parents present.

The Kircubbin group initially familiarised themselves with issues – discussing issues that affected them as parents. They then undertook a survey of childcare needs in their area. The group was assisted with the design, administering and analysis of the questionnaires by the development worker and the district co-ordinator. As a result of this process, the group identified a need for holiday provision in the area. The group formed a sub-committee to develop proposals further and seek funding and have successfully secured a small amount to pilot a scheme this year.

When interviewed, a project worker for the area felt that the development worker had provided excellent facilitation skills and a range of useful contacts for the group. She felt that this development work needed to happen across a much wider area in more communities. She also felt that the nature of this work is more long-term (a time-frame of two years was suggested based on her own experience of community development work).

The use of the parent reference group technique was supported given that it helped parents develop their confidence to participate in meetings with professional workers and developed their awareness of the EACP. It was suggested that the technique needs to be supplemented by other methods that include questionnaires to parents (as happened in Kircubbin), going out to parents in places where they are as part of their day e.g. work, parent and toddler groups. These other methods are needed to overcome the difficulties many parents have with time commitments. Many parents have the confidence, ability and views but not the time.

Parents in the Kircubbin group were also consulted as part of the evaluation. They liked the process of the parent reference groups because:

- (a) they felt that the development officer and district co-ordinator were listening to what they had to say
- (b) childcare needs are constantly changing and the on-going process in the group provides an opportunity to see this
- (c) they felt free to say what they felt or thought and that every-one was given an opportunity to have an input

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- (d) the group meetings were held centrally within the area and were open to all parents
- (e) the group meetings allowed professionals from organisations working in the area to get a feel for the culture of the area and what living in a rural community means
- (f) the meetings were structured and the facilitators motivated

Another Parent Reference Group was developed in Bangor using contacts from a database of parents developed as part of the Article 20 Review. This group was co-facilitated by the District Co-ordinator and the development worker. Parents are at an initial stage of familiarising themselves with the process and are raising issues such as quality, accessibility and affordability. This group would like the work to continue and would require no further lead-in time as they understand the process and are already discussing issues directly linked to Area Childcare Partnership planning.

Northern Area Childcare Partnership (NACP)

Three groups of parents were met with in this area at Bushmills and Larne. The Bushmills group was not ready to run with the process and a decision was taken to signpost them to another women's project and to provide other support through the Parenting Forum NI. *Two groups were established at Antiville in Larne. The group at Antiville P.S. met four times in the mornings and another group based at the Care Centre met three times in the evening. This arrangement allowed the project to meet parents who work out of the home and those who work in the home. The development worker has continued to facilitate a Parent Reference Group in the Antiville P.S. Three meetings were facilitated by the development worker at the Care Centre. During this time the Care Centre faced a threat of closure due to lack of funding and was subsequently given a reprieve. Staff at the Care Centre are currently working with the group of parents to identify an appropriate mix of services that will meet their needs using a questionnaire developed jointly with the development worker. The Care Centre manager attends the meetings in Antiville P.S. and reports back to parents. It is hoped to re-instate the meetings at the Care Centre in the near future.*

The development worker arranged the venue, creche and did the ground work in relation to these meetings. She was also responsible for facilitating the meetings and undertaking follow-up tasks. *The Co-ordinator provided extensive background information and publicity at the beginning of the process. She supplied contacts and organised for the development worker to attend a meeting of the Causeway Childcare Advisory Group to promote the project. The Co-ordinator also attended most of the meetings. (It should be noted that in the earlier stages of the project, it was not possible for the development worker and the Co-ordinator to agree dates for the meetings because the first development worker was appointed for 16 hours per week and was not office based. Communication links were therefore weaker than in later stages when the second development worker was based full-time at Parenting Forum NI where she was also responsible for work other than this project).* An agenda and format for the meetings was agreed between the development worker and the co-ordinator in advance of the meetings that the co-ordinator attended. *At the meetings the development worker was a lead facilitator and was supported by the co-ordinator with group processes. The Co-ordinator provided information about the Area Childcare Partnership and listened to the views of parents. She also accessed information from other agencies as follow-up activities from the meetings.*

The Antiville meetings were set in a very deprived part of the borough of Larne where there was no infrastructure for children and families. Parents who attended these meetings were consulted as part of the evaluation. They liked the meetings and attended because:

- (a) they felt comfortable to speak at them (at other meetings in their area e.g the resident's association they felt intimidated).
- (b) they felt that the Parent Reference Groups brought people (parents) with a common interest, who knew each other, to-gether
- (c) they were well facilitated.
- (d) they felt that they were listened to at the meeting.
- (e) they enjoyed the fact that most of the communication in the meeting was verbal. (Parents felt that they remember things better when they are told them rather than reading a lot of material).
- (f) they felt a sense of relief at discovering that other parents felt the same way about issues as they did.

The Parent Reference Groups were linked to a Barnardos project in Antiville. The Antiville Community Resource employs two development officers and works to provide services for children and parents/carers in Antiville Primary School and the local area, which enhance children's educational experience. The understanding of local staff working on the ground at Antiville was that the aim of the project was to inform the Childcare Partnerships of local parents' views. The staff felt that this was met to a degree, but really only getting there. Parents, after the second meeting in the area, actually felt that they were being listened to.

The Barnardos staff contributed to the project by promoting the project to parents they had direct contact with letting them know what the aims of the project were. They also helped facilitate the project by providing a venue and a creche for the meetings.

They identify the main outcomes of the project as:

- providing a lot of links for the Barnardos project – the development worker was able to attend two of their meetings and feed back to the parents about the Barnardos Project at the Parent Reference Group meetings
- helping consolidate the work of the Barnardos project in that they were now able to link parents to another agency – the Parents Advice Centre
- giving parents some-one to sound off to
- providing those involved with an insight into what it is really like to live in the area – an independent organisation was able to bring this about as parents would not have been so honest with representatives of a project working in the area
- providing the Barnardos project with a platform that enabled them to strengthen their partnership with another project in the area by looking at how they could work to-gether to improve the situation
- A new project open in Larne, Larne Parental Support, attended the last meeting to provide information about what they were doing and found this very useful

Southern Area Childcare Partnership (SACP)

Parent Reference Group meetings were held at Banbridge and Clogher Valley. In total two meetings were held in Banbridge through different link organisations with different groups of parents. *The first meeting was held in Banbridge Health and*

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Social Services Building in late November and was attended by one parent. The lack of a community development infrastructure in the area made the process more difficult in this area. After extensive work by the development officer, a second meeting held in the evening, was organised through the local day-care in June at the end of the pilot. It provided an opportunity to try out a different mechanism in the SACP and was attended by 18 working parents. The mechanism used proved a useful technique for making contact with working parents. Parents who attended the meeting said they wanted the process to continue.

In total 4 meetings were held in Clogher Valley. The meetings were held in Clogher, drawing parents from neighbouring Augher and Fivemiletown which together with Clogher form the target area for the Clogher Valley Surestart. Much of the focus of these meetings was around giving parents information in response to queries raised by them. Where possible, an effort was made to give this information directly to the group by inviting speakers to the meeting. *The Area Childcare Co-ordinator requested that other professionals be invited to the meetings. Both the development worker and the Area Childcare Co-ordinator felt that at times there were too many professionals at the meetings and this may have actually been confusing for parents. Parents on the other hand reported that they enjoyed this element of the meetings.*

The Area Childcare Partnership produced leaflets. Information packs were compiled and sent to the development worker for distribution at meetings. The Co-ordinator attended all the Parent Reference Group meetings in the area. The development worker was responsible for organising the venue and creche, distributing all materials and PR for the meeting, facilitating the meeting and undertaking follow-up tasks. Staff from the Clogher Valley Surestart Initiative and other groups in the area promoted the meetings by distributing leaflets and word of mouth. Clogher Valley Surestart provided a creche for the meetings and provided information on childcare services available locally.

Staff from Clogher Valley Surestart attended the meetings and were interviewed as part of the evaluation of the project. They felt that parents appreciated that their views were being sought and that their concerns were being addressed as a part of the process. Surestart staff also felt that the meetings had developed the confidence of parents to express their views and make their needs known (a change detected when Surestart held its own consultation meeting with parents in June). They also felt that the process used had given parents from different parts of the Surestart area the opportunity to come together and identify common needs therefore reducing rivalry between groups in the area.

Parents who attended the Parent Reference Group meetings felt that they were:

- (a) allowed to put their point of view across
- (b) listened to
- (c) not ridiculed or talked down to
- (d) able to ask questions and have things explained
- (e) relaxed in a small group

Western Area Childcare Partnership (WACP)

Omagh and Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty were the two areas initially targeted as part of this process. The group in Omagh did not get off the ground and was later replaced

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by a group hosted through the Derry City Children's Commission. The group in Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty held a total of four Parent Reference Groups and the Derry City Children's Commission held one meeting.

The Co-ordinator with the Area Childcare Partnership did not have a hands-on role with the preparation for Parent Reference Groups in his area and did not attend any of the meetings. The development worker was responsible for organising the production of leaflets and information packs and their distribution. The development worker and staff from other projects (Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty Surestart and Derry Children's Commission) worked closely to prepare for meetings and agree agendas beforehand.

The development worker and the Surestart co-ordinator jointly established the Parent Reference Groups in the Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty area. Meetings were held monthly with the development worker attending every second month. Discussion at the meetings covered a range of issues for parents including the level and range of services available, the availability of courses for parents, access to services for children and families and parents as volunteers in services. This group also conducted an assessment of need in the area that showed the need for a creche. The group secured funding for the creche. They are involved in all aspects of planning the building and the service.

The Surestart Co-Ordinator was very positive about the process used to develop and organise the Parent Reference Groups in her area. She felt that the community development approach taken to enable parents to bring their needs to the table was in keeping with what Surestart were trying to achieve. She felt that the development worker had excellent facilitation skills for working with parents. In the later stages of the project, the development worker, was able to provide a broad range of contacts for the Surestart Co-Ordinator. These enabled her address issues raised through the meetings that were outside the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships but were important in addressing the holistic health and social needs of families. She felt that the increasing numbers of parents attending meetings reflected their acceptance of the two development worker and their response to the process. The Surestart Co-Ordinator felt that parents were taking ownership of the Parent Reference Groups and were better able to vocalise what they want as a result of the process used.

Parents who attended the Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty meetings felt that they:

- (a) allowed them to put their views across and to support the views of other parents
- (b) were able to exchange information and ideas with other parents
- (c) able to speak freely
- (d) felt respected by others at the meeting e.g 'people take turns to speak' and 'I feel that at these meetings my views are important'
- (e) realised that other parents are the same as themselves

The Parent Reference Group in Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty met monthly and parents attending felt that it was important that meetings were held monthly.

A second group, hosted by the Derry City Children's Commission, met once. The Derry City Children's Commission is a well established parents' group. The group

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met with the development officer with a view to providing a link between parents and more strategic or regional issues. The meeting was facilitated by the development worker. The meeting covered a wide range of issues and parents were keen to ensure that their voices would be heard as a result of the meeting. These parents had taken part in other consultation processes in the past and were quite adamant that this would not be a tokenistic gesture. This group of parents wanted the process to continue and would like the Area Childcare Partnership Co-ordinator to attend from time to time.

3.2.3 The Parent Reference Groups - The Key Findings

- *Four groups of parents (Antiville, Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Clogher Valley) met four times. One group (Care Centre, Antiville) met three times. Two groups (Bangor and Banbridge) met twice and one group (Derry City Children’s Commission) met once. In total six Parent Reference Groups were established with groups at Banbridge and Derry City Children’s Commission both expressing the desire to meet again as part of a continuous process. In all eight areas the groups have been developed and organised in different ways in response to local situations. The adaptability and flexibility in approaches shown by the development worker and the Area Co-ordinators in responding to local needs within the framework of a regional project is a key factor in this success.*
- Of the four areas where Parent Reference Groups were meeting most frequently, two areas were urban, two were rural; three areas were the lesser well off, of the areas selected by each Partnership; two areas held evening meetings, two held morning meetings and all four had a community development infrastructure with professional project workers, active at a local level, from other organisations working with parents who promoted the Parent Reference Groups locally. This highlights the importance of networking effectively and building on what is locally available in areas of existing infrastructure. It also highlights the need to target areas with low levels of community development infrastructure with an appropriately resourced programme that takes account of the developmental nature of this work.
- The input of the development worker was valued by all stakeholders, both local and regional, as providing highly skilled and motivated facilitation and follow-up work for the Parent Reference Groups
- Local stakeholders, including parents on the ground and other professional project workers valued the Parent Reference Groups highly for the reasons below:

Parents valued the process of the Parent Reference Groups because:

- (a) the meetings were held within their own areas
- (b) the meetings were well facilitated
- (c) they felt they were being listened to
- (d) they felt safe and free to say what they wanted
- (e) they felt important
- (f) they met other parents and realised they were not alone
- (g) felt relaxed in small groups
- (h) they were able to ask questions and have things explained

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- (i) they felt part of an on-going process and because of this they felt they were able to give more honest feedback than at one-off meetings

Other professional project workers valued the process of the Parent Reference Groups because:

- (a) they used an on-going developmental process to support parents identify their needs and vocalise them
 - (b) they provided a conduit for communication with the Area Childcare Partnerships
 - (c) they were facilitated by an intermediary body
 - (d) parents valued them
 - (e) they noticed changes in how parents articulated their needs that were beneficial to their work with them
 - (f) they were able to improve their networks of contacts
- *The level of involvement of the Area Childcare Co-ordinators in the preparation of materials and PR for meetings varied across the areas. The development worker and Area Co-ordinator time used in arranging this across four areas placed an additional burden on the post. Allocation of resources to allow this work to be carried out centrally within Parenting Forum NI would have been more efficient.*
 - *Area Co-ordinator provided extensive background information, contacts, initial publicity and support locally for the development officer. The level of direct contact work between Parent Reference Groups and the Area Co-ordinators varied from high in Clogher Valley (SACP) and Antiville (NACP), medium in Kircubbin and Bangor (EACP) and none in Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty (WACP). This did not impact in any way on the development and organising of groups in these areas. (The way in which it influenced parents' perceptions of how information flowed to and from the groups is discussed in Section 3.2.4).*
 - There is a need to complement Parent Reference Groups with other methods to engage parents from a range of backgrounds in a way that is time efficient for parents. Parent Reference Groups actively and successfully used other techniques e.g questionnaires to consult more widely with parents in their localities. This work should be further resourced and developed in the future.

3.2.4 Information Flow to and from the Area Childcare Partnerships

The project steering group agreed a mechanism for feeding back to the Area Childcare Partnerships. This involved the production of a written report by the development worker after each Parent Reference Group that was circulated to the relevant Area Childcare Partnership Co-ordinator. This process is described in detail for each Area Childcare Partnership. *Mechanisms for feeding back to parents on the information they provided were not developed and agreed. This part of the communication loop should be addressed by the Area Childcare Partnerships as a priority for future work.*

Development worker reports were examined as part of the evaluation of the project. Reports provided information on the date, venue, numbers of parents and others in

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attendance, information inputs to the meeting by the development worker and others and inputs to the meeting by parents. Inputs by parents were quoted directly by the first development worker and paraphrased by the second development worker. In describing these both workers focused on issues raised by parents about the availability of services including flexibility and choice, access to services including affordability, transport and information, and quality of services. The reports also highlighted issues about how agencies and others dealt with matters of interest to parents and children. Reports identified the full range of issues discussed at meetings.

Eastern Area Childcare Partnership

The development worker submitted a report in the first instance to the Co-Ordinator. This was copied to the District Co-Ordinator for the Ards Peninsula and Bangor area. The 'Engaging Parents with the Childcare Partnerships' was a running agenda item at District Partnership level. The development worker also made one presentation to the District Partnership.

It was felt that the Parent Reference Groups are now at a stage where they want to see something more concrete coming from the process – they are raising the issues, but the Area Childcare Partnership does not have the resources to deal with them e.g. holiday childcare provision. It was felt that this is generating expectations amongst parents and that the Area Childcare Partnership must give more consideration to how this is dealt with.

Parents attending the Kircubbin group felt that their issues were being passed on to the Area Childcare Partnership and were being responded to by efforts to get a holiday scheme up and running through the development of a sub-group to take this piece of work forward.

Northern Area Childcare Partnership

The development worker submitted a report to the NACP Co-ordinator. This was summarised and given to the members of the Area Childcare Partnership. The development worker made a presentation to the Area Childcare Partnership in the initial stages of the project. The Co-Ordinator felt that this worked well and could have been used more throughout the project.

The Co-ordinator felt that the issues coming from the two Larne groups were very different. One group was focussed on developing one particular service and the other was focussed on issues affecting vulnerable families. The NACP Co –ordinator has responded to these by discussing some of the issues raised by the Antiville group with the Children's Services project manager and by providing information on the work of the local LSP and Education and Library Board in the area. In relation to childcare issues raised information on childcare training was issued to the group. She felt that some of the issues were outside the direct remit of the Area Childcare Partnership.

The Chair of NACP felt that the issues raised were of local concern and it was difficult to translate these into a broad strategic issue. He felt that another level of work is needed to turn localised issues into broader strategic issues. This would include tapping into a greater number of groups and a wider range of groups to identify key issues for parents that are within the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships. He felt that parents involved in other groups would need access to a

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worker (possibly employed by the Parenting Forum NI) dedicated to supporting them make contact with the Area Childcare Partnership. He also felt that parents would need to be made aware of the issues that are up for change and the issues that are not.

The Co-ordinator felt that the Partnership needs to promote itself in a way that parents can identify with.

Southern Area Childcare Partnership

The development worker provides a written report on the Parent Reference Groups to the Childcare Co-ordinator. This was circulated to the members of the Area Childcare Partnerships and used to feed into a discussion at Partnership meetings. The Co-ordinator was disappointed with the reports as she felt that they were brief and written from the perspective of the worker – she did not feel that the voice of the parent was coming across clearly from the reports.

The Co-ordinator felt that issues raised by parents in the Clogher Valley Parent Reference Group were picked up locally by Surestart e.g the issue of childminding is being addressed by the Clogher Valley Surestart with the development of an information pack. This pack was developed as a result of parents raising this and a presentation given by NICMA at the following Parent Reference Group meeting. Parents in Clogher Valley also commented on a draft information pack for parents. These comments were passed on to those developing the pack and have impacted on how this is being taken forward. Issues raised at one of the two meetings in Banbridge around the provision of childcare places were responded to in writing by the Area Childcare Partnership. She felt that the level of discussion at the Parent Reference Group meetings was still at an early stage and had therefore not impacted on planning within the Area Childcare Partnership. She felt that this was because the Parent Reference Groups had not been running long enough.

The Chair of the SACP felt that the issues had been fed back to the Area Childcare Partnership. These were mainly around process e.g the level of engagement of parents in the early stages was low, the need to build on existing local partnerships and the need for the Area Childcare Partnership to facilitate some of that and help maximise opportunities. The initial findings of the pilot had also been clearly referenced within the Childcare Plan. Some of the issues raised had led to specific and targeted work e.g childminding in Clogher Valley. He felt that the pilot was valuable and had provided an opportunity to listen to the views of parents. The Parent Reference Groups complemented other methods of listening to parents in the SACP that include:

- *Building on the consultation exercise undertaken as part of the Article 20 review*
- *Community development teams within the Trust*
- *Preparation of a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary parenting information pack (the evaluation of this is on-going)*
- *Local forums have a remit for needs assessment and engagement of parents (currently holding Facts and Fun days)*
- *Area Childcare Partnership development team*
- *Early Years Family Support and Child Protection reference group*

The parents attending the Clogher Valley Parent Reference Group understood the links between the Parent Reference Group and the Area Childcare Partnership. They

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identified the Co-ordinator with the Area Childcare Partnership and felt that they would approach her directly if they had any issues. They felt that the on-going process of the Parent Reference Groups had enabled them develop trust. This trust in turn lead to more honest feedback – they wouldn't just say what they thought the Area Childcare Partnership or their neighbours wanted to hear in the future.

Western Area Childcare Partnership

The development worker provided a written report on each meeting to the Area Co-ordinator highlighting the issues that have arose. The Area Co-ordinator made a report to the Area Partnership on the progress of the project. The Co-ordinator felt that, while the basic structure is now in place to facilitate communication between parents and the Area Childcare Partnership, there was a need for more development work with parents to enable them vocalise their needs. The Parent Reference Groups started later in this region and therefore the Area Partnership have not developed a mechanism for dealing with the issues emerging. The Area Co-ordinator feels that an appropriate way of doing this is to appoint a sub-committee with responsibility for this.

Parents attending the Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty meetings clearly understood the links between the Parent Reference Groups and the Area Childcare Partnerships and were aware that a report was made to the Area Co-ordinator. This was particularly the case with parents who had attended all meetings. The Surestart Co-ordinator felt that although, she was a member of the Area Childcare Partnership, the Parent Reference Groups and the independent reporting mechanism was important. She wanted to see this process continue.

The Derry City Children's Commission felt that the project needs to help parents focus more on the issues that are within the remit of the Area Childcare Partnership. It could assist this process by disseminating strategic documents (both Area Childcare Partnership and regional level) to parents in a way that they understand and creating a balance between bombarding parents with documents and consulting all the time. The project needs to be able to help parents, through an on-going process, make connections between strategies and local issues. The Derry City Children's Commission felt that this communication between parents and the Area Childcare Partnership needs to be on-going and is best facilitated by an intermediary body.

3.2.5 Information Flow to and from the Area Childcare Partnerships – The Key Findings

- The agreed mechanism for feedback to the Area Childcare Partnerships (a written report from the development worker to the Area Co-ordinator) was implemented by the development worker. In the EACP and NACP areas, the development worker also made direct presentations to the partnership. This method of feedback was considered useful and could have been used more throughout the pilot.
 - The mechanism for feedback to the Area Childcare Partnerships was understood by the parents that attended the Parent Reference Groups and they were confident that this was being implemented by the development worker. The level of understanding of this was less in the NACP area than other areas. Parents in the
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SACP area identified very closely with the Area Co-ordinator who had attended all meetings. They felt they would contact the SACP directly through her. This has resource implications for the SACP, particularly if there were further Parent Reference Groups in the future.

- Project workers active in the local areas also clearly understood the mechanism for feedback from the Parent Reference Groups to the Area Childcare Partnerships. They felt it was particularly important for an intermediary body independent of their projects and the Area Childcare Partnerships to undertake this work. One project worker also felt that the project needs to focus on helping parents make a link between local and more strategic issues.
- The reports presented by the development worker provided information to the Area Childcare Partnerships on the date, venue, numbers of parents and others in attendance, information inputs to the meeting by the development worker and others and inputs to the meeting by parents. Parents raised issues about the availability of services including flexibility and choice, access to services, quality and information. They also raised many other issues outside the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- Area Co-ordinators in all four partnerships fed back to the Area Childcare Partnerships based on the content of the reports. In the SACP, the report was circulated to members and in the other three areas it was summarised by the Area Co-ordinator initially and then passed on to members. The content of the report was used as the basis for discussion at Area partnership meetings.
- Feedback from the Parent Reference Groups was valued by the Area Childcare Partnerships because they provided learning about engaging with parents, highlighted some of the potential difficulties, raised the profile of the issue amongst members of the Area Childcare Partnership, raised awareness of the different ways in which consultation with parents is already happening within Area Childcare Partnerships
- Feedback from the Parent Reference Groups did not provide the Area Childcare Partnerships with a comprehensive set of views of parents for use in a planning process within the time-scale of the project pilot. The Area Childcare Co-ordinators felt that the information coming out of the Parent Reference Groups was local and could not easily be used in a strategic planning process where a broader view is required. They felt that this was because of the short time-scale of the pilot and the small number of Parent Reference Groups. Consideration, by the Project Steering Group, of the level and nature of information emerging from the Parent Reference Groups in the final quarter of the project was required to enable the best links possible with the level of planning undertaken by the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- The opportunity to look at issues emerging on a N. Ireland wide basis was not fully utilised because of time pressures across all levels of the project. Reporting systems that facilitate this analysis are required in the future.

- The four established Parent Reference Groups in particular are now at a stage where they are raising issues and have expectations that they will be responded to e.g. the Kircubbin group identified the need for holiday provision in their area. Area Childcare Partnerships have not give consideration to the resource implications that could potentially come from parents expressing their needs as part of this process – this needs to be considered carefully in future. The resource implications for local projects and their programmes of work must also be considered. Parents need to know what is up for change and what is not.
- Mechanisms for feeding back to parents on the information they provided were not developed and agreed. This part of the communication loop should be addressed as a priority for future work.

3.3 Outputs

One of the first principles of community development work is to start where people are at. For many of the parents involved in this process, this was the first time they had been asked to identify needs in their own localities or influence and contribute to strategic planning processes. They needed to be empowered and resourced to do so. This project has started that development process but much of this work remains to be done.

3.4.1 Number of Parent Reference Groups

Four groups of parents (Antiville, Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Clogher Valley) met four times. One group (Care Centre, Antiville) met three times. Two groups (Bangor and Banbridge) met twice and one group (Derry City Children's Commission) met once. In total six Parent Reference Groups were established with groups at Banbridge and Derry City Children's Commission both expressing the desire to meet again as part of a continuous process. Meetings were also held in Lagmore, Bushmills and Omagh.

3.4.2 Characteristics of Parent Reference Groups

The size of the groups is in keeping with the task in hand. Attendance at groups has increased over the duration of the project. The development worker and other project workers report parents attending on a repeat basis in all four of the more established Parent Reference Groups. Feedback from other project professionals indicates that confidence and capacity amongst group members has been built up over the duration of the project. The groups are all at the stage where they are broadly exploring issues that effect members, however they will need to focus more on the issues that are within the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships. *The Parent Reference Groups are closely linked to existing projects that can also address some of the issues raised, provided they have the resources to do so.*

3.4.3 Activities of Parent Reference Groups

The Parent Reference Groups are still at a very early stage of development, consequently the activities they are engaged in and the level at which they are involved reflects this situation. Despite this caveat, it is possible to point to a number of significant activities that have been embarked upon:

- *The Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Antiville Care Centre groups have undertaken a needs assessment in their areas*
- The Kircubbin group have *successfully* completed applications for funding for projects in their area
- The Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty group have contributed to the planning of a major capital development to deliver creche places in their area
- The Clogher Valley group have looked at the issue of childminding in their area and have provided local people with information on how to become a childminder and how to access a childminder
- All groups have provided information and discussion for members

3.4.4 Efficiency

Any attempt to measure the efficiency of a project such as this will be tempered by the realisation that the time-scale is very short. The project has represented a learning curve for all involved, the Area Childcare Partnerships, the Parenting Forum NI, parents and other agencies involved in the Parent Reference Groups. The Project Steering Group and development worker have made the best use possible of the available money and focused the development of the project in a flexible way.

3.5 Outcomes

The key objectives of this project were both process and product focused. They were set as:

- To pilot a mechanism for engaging parents with the Childcare Partnerships – a process*
- To promote an environment that will facilitate meaningful parental involvement with the Area Childcare Partnerships – a product*

The project has been successful in piloting a mechanism for engaging parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships through the development and organisation of Parent Reference Groups using a community development approach.

The objective of any community development approach is to bring about real change, in this case the meaningful involvement of parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships. Such change takes time, to date the stakeholders in the project have only had the benefit of the support of the development worker *on a part-time basis* for one year. Most authorities/practitioners would recommend a longer period (two to three years). The project has not yet facilitated meaningful parental involvement in the processes of the Area Childcare Partnerships. *(Area Childcare Co-ordinators have been unable to identify examples of how the feedback from Parent Reference Groups has influenced planning in the Area Childcare Partnerships within the time-scale of the project. No mechanism has been developed to enable feedback to parents in the Parent Reference Groups on how their views have been dealt with).* It is now accepted by stakeholders that it was unrealistic to expect it to do so, within the timeframe allowed. These outcomes can only be achieved with continued developmental support to the Parent Reference Groups.

3.5.1 Outcomes for Parents

Parents participating in the Parent Reference Groups have benefited from informal training and experience within the Parent Reference Groups that has led to a growth in self confidence on their part. In practical terms this has empowered them to take ownership of the Parent Reference Groups.

Those participating in the Parent Reference Groups are growing in their understanding of the needs of parents and children in their community. Growth in political awareness and an understanding of how parents can effect change is only beginning in very small steps in the groups. The vision of the groups is focused on the immediate and the local – a view of the broader picture will only come with time and continued support.

Parents' expectations of a consultation process have been broadened. They expect the commitment they make to the process to be respected and responded to. They want to see their views reflected at policy level.

3.5.2 Outcomes for the Area Childcare Partnerships

More parents are aware of the Area Childcare Partnerships and what their remit is.

Area Childcare Partnerships are clearer about the difficulties and the long-term nature of the work. All four have more understanding about how and where the process is difficult and complicated e.g. how to stop things being tokenistic, how to establish a meaningful relationship with on-going dialogue with parents, how to identify parents with the time and the capacity, how to tackle complicated issues, how you can make parents feel valued without being patronised. The Area Childcare Partnerships also recognise the difficulties with presenting their plans to parents in a way that makes it accessible and getting information from parents that is useful for planning.

Area Childcare Partnerships also realise some of the implications of consulting with parents e.g conflict between what parents identify as needs and Area Childcare Partnership policy, conflict between needs identified and resources available. The Area Childcare Partnerships are more aware of the work other organisations in their area are doing to consult with parents and the need to link with this and build on what is already there.

The project has raised awareness amongst members and stimulated discussion. Each of the Area Childcare Partnerships have considered how they will involve parents in the future based on learning from this project. All four Area Childcare partnerships have identified this evaluation document as an important source of reference that will inform any decisions they make in the future about engaging parents in their work. Area Childcare Partnerships recognise that involving parents in their work will need to be supported and resourced using a community development approach.

3.5.3 Outcomes for the Parenting Forum NI

More parents are aware of the Parenting Forum NI and what its' remit is. The work has provided an opportunity to let members know that this is important and is something that they should also be doing (through newsletter articles). The Parenting Forum NI know that this is a model for consulting with parents that works and are clearer about how the model can be cascaded to other areas and used by other organisations to consult with parents. They also feel that the model can be used to target specific groups of parents e.g rural parents, ethnic minorities and disability groups. The Parenting Forum NI also recognise that parents who do not belong to existing groups or who do not have a tendency to join groups need to be consulted with as well.

3.6 Summary of Key Findings

Inputs

- Future projects will require a greater allocation of resources (both in terms of staff time and level of appointment) to enable the achievement of the tasks set by the project.
- Resources allocated to organise Parent Reference Groups and enable members attend are in keeping with local needs and should be similarly allocated in future initiatives
- There was a range of non-financial inputs from all the stakeholders in the project. These included non-financial inputs from parents and other project workers active in local areas. The non-financial inputs from members of the Project Steering Group (Chief Executive, Parenting Forum NI and Childcare Co-ordinators, Area Childcare Partnerships) were substantial. A formal costing of this would raise the costs of the project significantly.
- The development worker's tasks were at different levels and have differing requirements in terms of skills and expertise – one being face to face development work and the other, an ability to network, negotiate and report through a range of levels in community, voluntary and statutory agencies.
- The management of the project through the Project Steering Group could be enhanced through the earlier development of procedures and the provision of a mechanism that allowed the involvement of a greater range of stakeholders in the process.

Process – Parent Reference Groups

- *Four groups of parents (Antiville, Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Clogher Valley) met four times. One group (Care Centre, Antiville) met three times. Two groups (Bangor and Banbridge) met twice and one group (Derry City Children's Commission) met once. In total six Parent Reference Groups were established with groups at Banbridge and Derry City Children's Commission both expressing the desire to meet again as part of a continuous process. In all eight areas the groups have been developed and organised in different ways in response to local situations. The adaptability and flexibility in approaches shown by the development worker and the Area Co-ordinators in responding to local needs within the framework of a regional project is a key factor in this success.*
 - Of the four areas where Parent Reference Groups were meeting most frequently, two areas were urban, two were rural; three areas were the lesser well off, of the areas selected by each Partnership; two areas held evening meetings, two held morning meetings and all four had a community development infrastructure with professional project workers, active at a local level, from other organisations working with parents who promoted the Parent Reference Groups locally. This
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highlights the importance of networking effectively and building on what is locally available in areas of existing infrastructure. It also highlights the need to target areas with low levels of community development infrastructure with an appropriately resourced programme that takes account of the developmental nature of this work.

- The input of the development worker was valued by all stakeholders, both local and regional, as providing highly skilled and motivated facilitation and follow-up work for the Parent Reference Groups
- Local stakeholders, including parents on the ground and other professional project workers valued the Parent Reference Groups highly for the reasons below:

Parents valued the process of the Parent Reference Groups because:

- (j) the meetings were held within their own areas
- (k) the meetings were well facilitated
- (l) they felt they were being listened to
- (m) they felt safe and free to say what they wanted
- (n) they felt important
- (o) they met other parents and realised they were not alone
- (p) felt relaxed in small groups
- (q) they were able to ask questions and have things explained
- (r) they felt part of an on-going process and because of this they felt they were able to give more honest feedback than at one-off meetings

Other professional project workers valued the process of the Parent Reference Groups because:

- (g) they used an on-going developmental process to support parents identify their needs and vocalise them
 - (h) they provided a conduit for communication with the Area Childcare Partnerships
 - (i) they were facilitated by an intermediary body
 - (j) parents valued them
 - (k) they noticed changes in how parents articulated their needs that were beneficial to their work with them
 - (l) they were able to improve their networks of contacts
- The level of involvement of the Area Childcare Co-ordinators in the preparation of materials and PR for meetings varied across the areas. The development worker and Area Co-ordinator time used in arranging this across four areas placed an additional burden on the post. Allocation of resources to allow this work to be carried out centrally within Parenting Forum NI would have been more efficient.
 - *Area Co-ordinator provided extensive background information, contacts, initial publicity and support locally for the development officer. The level of direct contact work between Parent Reference Groups and the Area Co-ordinators varied from high in Clogher Valley (SACP) and Antiville (NACP), medium in Kircubbin and Bangor (EACP) and none in Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty (WACP). This did not impact in any way on the development and organising of groups in*

these areas. (The way in which it influenced parents' perceptions of how information flowed to and from the groups is discussed in Section 3.2.4).

- There is a need to complement Parent Reference Groups with other methods to engage parents from a range of backgrounds in a way that is time efficient for parents. Parent Reference Groups actively and successfully used other techniques e.g questionnaires to consult more widely with parents in their localities. This work should be further resourced and developed in the future.

Information Flow to and From Area Childcare Partnerships

- The agreed mechanism for feedback to the Area Childcare Partnerships (a written report from the development worker to the Area Co-ordinator) was implemented by the development worker. In the EACP and NACP areas, the development worker also made direct presentations to the partnership. This method of feedback was considered useful and could have been used more throughout the pilot.
 - The mechanism for feedback to the Area Childcare Partnerships was understood by the parents that attended the Parent Reference Groups and they were confident that this was being implemented by the development worker. The level of understanding of this was less in the NACP area than other areas. Parents in the SACP area identified very closely with the Area Co-ordinator who had attended all meetings. They felt they would contact the SACP directly through her. This has resource implications for the SACP, particularly if there were further Parent Reference Groups in the future.
 - Project workers active in the local areas also clearly understood the mechanism for feedback from the Parent Reference Groups to the Area Childcare Partnerships. They felt it was particularly important for an intermediary body independent of their projects and the Area Childcare Partnerships to undertake this work. One project worker also felt that the project needs to focus on helping parents make a link between local and more strategic issues.
 - The reports presented by the development worker provided information to the Area Childcare Partnerships on the date, venue, numbers of parents and others in attendance, information inputs to the meeting by the development worker and others and inputs to the meeting by parents. Parents raised issues about the availability of services including flexibility and choice, access to services, quality and information. They also raised many other issues outside the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships.
 - Area Co-ordinators in all four partnerships fed back to the Area Childcare Partnerships based on the content of the reports. In the SACP, the report was circulated to members and in the other three areas it was summarised by the Area Co-ordinator initially and then passed on to members. The content of the report was used as the basis for discussion at Area partnership meetings.
 - Feedback from the Parent Reference Groups was valued by the Area Childcare Partnerships because they provided learning about engaging with parents,
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highlighted some of the potential difficulties, raised the profile of the issue amongst members of the Area Childcare Partnership, raised awareness of the different ways in which consultation with parents is already happening within Area Childcare Partnerships

- Feedback from the Parent Reference Groups did not provide the Area Childcare Partnerships with a comprehensive set of views of parents for use in a planning process within the time-scale of the project pilot. The Area Childcare Co-ordinators felt that the information coming out of the Parent Reference Groups was local and could not easily be used in a strategic planning process where a broader view is required. They felt that this was because of the short time-scale of the pilot and the small number of Parent Reference Groups. Consideration, by the Project Steering Group, of the level and nature of information emerging from the Parent Reference Groups in the final quarter of the project was required to enable the best links possible with the level of planning undertaken by the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- The opportunity to look at issues emerging on a N. Ireland wide basis was not fully utilised because of time pressures across all levels of the project. Reporting systems that facilitate this analysis are required in the future.
- The four established Parent Reference Groups in particular are now at a stage where they are raising issues and have expectations that they will be responded to e.g. the Kircubbin group identified the need for holiday provision in their area. Area Childcare Partnerships have not give consideration to the resource implications that could potentially come from parents expressing their needs as part of this process – this needs to be considered carefully in future. *The resource implications for local projects e.g Surestart, District Co-ordinators, Early Years Forums* and their programmes of work must also be considered. Parents need to know what is up for change and what is not.
- Mechanisms for feeding back to parents on the information they provided were not developed and agreed. This part of the communication loop should be addressed by *the Area Childcare Partnerships* as a priority for future work.

Outputs

- *Four groups of parents (Antiville, Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Clogher Valley) met four times. One group (Care Centre, Antiville) met three times. Two groups (Bangor and Banbridge) met twice and one group (Derry City Children’s Commission) met once. In total six Parent Reference Groups were established with groups at Banbridge and Derry City Children’s Commission both expressing the desire to meet again as part of a continuous process. Meetings were also held in Lagmore, Bushmills and Omagh. Meetings were also held in Lagmore, Bushmills and Omagh.*
- Attendance at Parent Reference Groups has increased over the duration of the project. The development worker and other project workers report parents attending on a repeat basis in all four of the established Parent Reference Groups.

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- Feedback from other project professionals indicates that confidence and capacity amongst group members has been built up over the duration of the project. The groups are all at the stage where they are broadly exploring issues that affect members, however they will need to focus more on the issues that are within the remit of the Area Childcare Partnerships. The Parent Reference Groups are closely linked to existing projects that can also address some of the issues raised, although this has resource implications for these projects.
- The Parent Reference Groups are still at a very early stage of development, consequently the activities they are engaged in and the level at which they are involved reflects this situation. Despite this caveat, it is possible to point to a number of significant activities that have been embarked upon:
 - The Kircubbin and Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty groups have undertaken a needs assessment in their areas
 - The Kircubbin group have successfully completed applications for funding for projects in their area
 - The Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty group have contributed to the planning of a major capital development to deliver creche places in their area
 - The Clogher Valley group have looked at the issue of childminding in their area and have provided local people with information on how to become a childminder and how to access a childminder
 - All groups have provided information and discussion for members

Outcomes

- The project has been successful in piloting a mechanism for engaging parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships through the development and organisation of Parent Reference Groups using a community development approach.
- The objective of any community development approach is to bring about real change, in this case the meaningful involvement of parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships. Such change takes time, to date the stakeholders in the project have only had the benefit of the support of the development worker on a part-time basis for one year. Most authorities/practitioners would recommend a longer period (two to three years). The project has not yet facilitated meaningful parental involvement in the processes of the Area Childcare Partnerships. (*Area Childcare Co-ordinators have been unable to identify examples of how the feedback from Parent Reference Groups has influenced planning in the Area Childcare Partnerships within the timescale of the project. No mechanism has been developed for feedback to parents in the Parent Reference Groups on how their views have been dealt with*). It is now accepted by stakeholders that it was unrealistic to expect it to do so, within the timeframe allowed. These outcomes can only be achieved with continued developmental support to the Parent Reference Groups.
- Parents expectations of a consultation process have been broadened. They expect the commitment they make to the process to be respected and responded to. They want to see their views reflected at policy level.

- Area Childcare Partnerships are clearer about the difficulties and the long-term nature of the work. The Area Childcare Partnerships also recognise the difficulties with presenting their plans to parents in a way that makes it accessible and getting information from parents that was useful for planning.
- Area Childcare Partnerships also realise some of the implications of consulting with parents e.g conflict between what parents identify as needs and Area Childcare Partnership policy, conflict between needs identified and resources available. The Area Childcare Partnerships are more aware of the work other organisations in their area are doing to consult with parents and the need to link with this and build on what is already there.
- The Parenting Forum NI know that this is a model for consulting with parents that works and are clearer about how the model can be cascaded to other areas and used by other organisations to consult with parents. They also feel that the model can be used to target specific groups of parents e.g rural parents, ethnic minorities and disability groups. The Parenting Forum NI also recognise that parents who do not belong to existing groups or who do not have a tendency to join groups need to be consulted with as well.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

- 1 The developmental nature of the work to engage parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships requires considerable resources. These include the financial means to employ enough suitably skilled and experienced development workers to work directly with parents. It also includes the time required to enable a Project Steering Group develop policies, procedures and practice to support these workers. This project has clearly shown the long lead-in time and time-scale required to effect change. In spite of limited resources and a short timeframe the numbers of parents that the project has made contact with both directly and indirectly is excellent.
- 2 Parent Reference Groups were successfully established as a result of this pilot project. Within the Parent Reference Groups, there has been a strong emphasis on using a community development approach that meets parents where they are at in terms of issues and seeks to build trust, confidence and skills. They provide a valuable mechanism for listening to the views of parents because they enable parents identify and articulate their needs. This approach has been highly valued by parents and other project professionals active in the target areas. These local stakeholders believe that this work must continue. The approach has also been valued by the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- 3 In areas of existing community development infrastructure the project has effectively networked and built partnerships to develop strong Parent Reference Groups. Local project workers have welcomed the project and identified the importance of an independent, intermediary body with experience of working directly with parents and a range of appropriate contacts in achieving this. This is clearly a model that can be used in other such areas. Accessing parents in these areas outside of existing groups is also an important priority for the future.
- 4 Areas with little or no community development infrastructure will require a longer lead-in time than the one year time-scale this project allowed. Parents in these areas where previous consultation is limited could benefit enormously from the use of this technique. The technique allows an opportunity for parents to participate in discussion and is particularly good for those with limited experience of meetings. It allows parents to share information and over a period greater insight and knowledge can be gained.
- 5 The technique of Parent Reference Groups could also be targeted directly at groups of parents with special interests e.g parents from the ethnic minorities, parents of children with disabilities, lone parents, rural parents.
- 6 Activities in Kircubbin, Hazelbank/Ballymagroarty and Antiville Care Centre where the groups developed and circulated questionnaires provide good examples of how Parent Reference Groups can adapt to reach parents who do not attend their meetings. The mechanism used to establish a group through a

local day-care in Banbridge provides another useful way of accessing working parents. Future work should explore this in more detail.

- 7 *The agreed mechanism for reporting to the Area Childcare Partnerships was successfully implemented. Greater use could have been made of direct presentations by the development worker to the Area Childcare Partnerships. The Parent Reference Groups were recognised by parents, other local stakeholders and Area Childcare Partnerships as a conduit for information between parents and Area Childcare Partnerships. This was less so in the area (Clogher Valley) where there was a high level of direct contact work by the Area Co-ordinator and parents felt they would contact the Area Childcare Partnership directly. The sustainability of this level of direct contact across a number of groups needs to be considered by the Area Childcare Partnerships.*
- 8 The vision of the groups is focused on the immediate and the local – a level that Area Childcare Partnerships feel does not easily contribute to their remit for planning. More consideration was needed by the members of the Steering Group as to how to make best links between the level of issues emerging from the Parent Reference Group and the level of planning undertaken by the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- 9 Mechanisms for feeding back to parents on the information they provided were not developed and agreed. This part of the communication loop should be addressed *by the Area Childcare Partnerships* as a priority for future work.

4.2 Reccommendations

- 1 Parent Reference Groups established as part of this pilot will need continued support to sustain and develop as mechanisms for involving parents using a community development approach. The continuation of this pilot project for a longer period of time is needed to allow Area Childcare Partnerships and Parenting Forum NI build on the learning from this project to develop meaningful and representative involvement of parents with the Area Childcare Partnerships.
- 2 Parent Reference Groups provide a mechanism for involving parents in an on-going developmental and consultative process. They, and the development worker, have also proved flexible enough to incorporate other methodologies within them. More Parent Reference Groups (by geographic community and groups of parents with special interests) are needed within each Area Childcare Partnership to achieve a representative view from parents. The development and organising of these needs to be supported using a community development approach and build upon existing projects where relevent. The time-scale for this work needs to be recognised and resourced. Areas without existing projects or those where there is limited experience of consultation must be given longer lead-in times.
- 3 More consideration is needed by the members of the Steering Group and the Area Childcare Partnerships as to how to make best links between the level of issues emerging from the Parent Reference Group and the level of planning undertaken by the Area Childcare Partnerships. A longer time-scale and increased support will be required to move the vision of the Parent Reference Groups to a broader one for the Area Childcare Partnerships to see the full potential and benefit of engaging with parents.
- 4 Mechanisms for feeding back to parents on the information they provided were not developed and agreed. This part of the communication loop should be addressed by the Area Childcare Partnerships as a priority for future work.
- 5 *Parenting Forum NI is well placed to provide an independent and intermediate role in working with parents and the Area Childcare Partnerships. This expertise is best used to develop policies, procedures and practice for the developing, organising and linking to Area Childcare Partnerships of Parent Reference Groups and other methodologies. The direct contact work with parents is best achieved through locally based development workers employed by the Parenting Forum NI.*