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**An Evaluation of Barnardos Early Years
Services**

Undertaken by

The Centre of Social and Educational Research, DIT

on behalf of

Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin.

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1. ABOUT THE EVALUATION

1.1 Evaluation Aims

Barnardos is currently conducting a review of all its work, (i.e. Childcare, Finance, Administration, Governance, Management, Human Resources and Communications) and has commissioned The Centre for Social and Educational Research, DIT to undertake the evaluation of its Early Years Services. It is envisaged that this evaluation will feed into the broader review process. The main anticipated outcome of the organisational review is that it will identify any gaps in the current work of Barnardos and make recommendations to bring work into line with standards of best practice.

This evaluation focuses on the current structure of the Early Years Services, examining areas such as curriculum, resources, assessment process, profile of service users, staff qualifications and training needs. It also takes account of any other issues which emerged in the course of the evaluation which impact on the effectiveness of the early years services.

The aims of this evaluation are:

- to conduct a small scale examination of a representative sample of Barnardos Early Years Services
- to make recommendations regarding these services in the future.

An underlying philosophy guiding the evaluation is that of the ecological systems model of development described by Bronfenbrenner (1979;1992) which looks at the child, the family, the services, and the wider community and how they interact with each other in influencing children's development.

1.2 Research Methodologies

Information in this evaluation has been compiled using a number of research methods:

- 1) *Documentary research*: literature always serves to inform the services/area being reviewed, and can provide information in relation to the early years services which may benefit Barnardos in their current evaluation or future development. Documentary research for this review included analysis of the policy documentation which was provided

by Barnardos as well as a review of any other documentation relating to the early years which was considered relevant to the evaluation.

- 2) *Observational Research*: is the most commonly used research tool when working with children, largely because it is unobtrusive in nature. Observational research allows the researcher to get a clear picture of the day to day running of children's services, children's participation etc. The methodologies followed in the course of this evaluation were based on non-participant observation in a natural setting. This method basically involves being in the same room as children under observation but not interacting with them (Hayes, 1993; 53). The advantages of this procedure are that it yields information about behaviour in the real world and allows for the detailed description of what a child or a early years worker is actually doing (Hayes et al., 1997: 61). Observational research was conducted in all of the selected early years services. The researcher visited each of the selected early years services (see Section 1.3 below), and observed the general day-to-day activities such as activities of the children, staff activities and staff/child interaction.
- 3) *Qualitative Research*: One of the best methods to evaluate a service is through discussions with those who know that service best. 'Interviewing allows the researcher to gain insights into others' perspectives about the phenomena under study: it is particularly useful for ascertaining respondents' thoughts, perceptions, feelings and retrospective account of events' (Goodwin, 1996: 134). This review involved interviews with pre-school workers (3), pre-school co-ordinator (1), staff of parent and toddler groups (2), and staff of the crèche service (1), as well as the Barnardos Director of Child Care, based in Christchurch Square (Appendix A provides names of those who were interviewed). Their experience, their day to day presence, their continual work with the parents and children who use the early years services made these interviews invaluable.

While recognising that children are the primary stakeholders in early years services, the time-scale of the evaluation did not allow for accessing their views directly. The methodologies necessary for working directly with young children require careful development and implementation and the CSER did not believe there was sufficient time to undertake such a process.

1.3 Selection of Services to be evaluated

In order to ensure that a broad and representative mix of its services were included in the evaluation, three early years services were selected by Barnardos. These are:

1. Pre-school Service, Tallaght, Dublin 24
2. The Crèche Service and Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library, Mulhuddart, Dublin 15
(Both are separate services, taking place in the same premises and have been evaluated separately)
3. Parent and Toddler Group, Edenderry, Co. Offaly

These three services were selected in collaboration with Barnardos to represent the broad range of locations, community contexts and services in which Barnardos have made an impact to date. Information obtained seeks to inform on current issues and recommend developments for the future. The issues arising in these services are likely to reflect issues arising in other similar early years services, and therefore act as an indicator for wider service provision. However, while these services provided invaluable information into the general running of the early years services, it must also be noted that the number of services evaluated is quite small, and while information obtained for the evaluation is both accurate and relevant, the limitations of a small scale evaluation should also be acknowledged. Results should therefore be treated with caution, as they merely act as indicators of current efficiencies (problems) of the early years services. More detailed or comprehensive information would require a more wide scale evaluation.

1.4 Evaluation Outline:

Section 2: provides a general background to early education and the early years services, as well as background information on the three different services being included in the evaluation.

Section 3: looks at the various aspects of service delivery, including referral and assessment procedures, record keeping structures and curriculum/programmes in the various services.

Section 4: examines the organisation issues of the services, such as staff/pupil ratios, staff qualifications and training needs, resources within the centre and parental involvement in the services.

Section 5: takes account of external factors which impact on the services, such as the location of the service within the community, link ups with head office and issues regarding excess demand and waiting lists.

Section 6: provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Early Years Services

It is widely accepted that the first five years are critical in terms of human development. This is the period in which the foundations are laid for all later learning... These are also the years when children are most dependent on the care and education provided by adults. By the time children start statutory schooling (between 4 and 6 years), they have become, given good care and sufficient stimulation, highly competent learners.

(Action Research Project, 1999; 15)

Bloom observed that fifty per cent of mental development takes place between the ages of 0 and 4 alone (INTO, 1995: xii). A child's capability and opportunities to learn are affected by a number of factors. For example, social and economic background, household size and composition and occupation of parents are just some of the factors which impact on the learning opportunities of a child. It is now widely accepted and supported through much research evidence that 'children do not start school with equal chances of benefiting from it. Many young children, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds¹ begin formal schooling not ready to learn, thus jeopardising later academic achievement' (Action Research Project, 1999: 18). A number of factors may affect a child's readiness to learn. Just as social and economic circumstances vary between households, so too do opportunities for learning and development prior to school entry.

'Unemployment, low pay, poor housing, inadequate nutrition and stressful family environments can create impediments to the satisfactory care and education of children' (National Forum Report, 1998: 11). Children who grow up in such environments are often poorly prepared to meet the demands of schooling. Research has shown that lower income homes 'are different from middle class homes on a number of variables presumably significant in a child's development, such as type and pattern of stimulation, language style, pattern of parent child interaction, motivation etc.' (Kellaghan et al., 1993: 88). Such differences have implications on the child's educational ability now and in later life. 'By the time they are half way through

¹ A disadvantaged child, as the term is usually used, is one who, for socio economic reasons, comes into the school system with knowledge, skills and attitudes which make adjustment difficult and impede learning (INTO, 1995; 5).

primary school, many of them are unable to take advantage of the education that would equip them for later life' (INTO, 1995: 20). Furthermore, although evidence is not entirely consistent (Martin, 1979), the achievement gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds tends to widen through school' (Kellaghan et al., 1993: 28).

Early childhood care and education can provide children with opportunities to learn and develop in a safe and comfortable environment, thus helping to prepare and improve their chances for educational benefit in the formal schooling system. There is much research evidence to support the theory that early intervention² in the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds will improve their educational capabilities and life chances in later life. In fact, 'several studies suggest that while the impact of early education is found in all social groups, it is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds' (National Childcare Strategy, 1999: 56). Longitudinal evaluations of the Headstart pre-school programme³ in the USA have shown that participating children have higher incomes, increased property wealth and higher levels of education, than the control group who had not attended a pre-school programme (O'Flaherty, 1995: 15). Similarly, a longitudinal follow-up of children who attended the Rutland Street Project⁴ found that participants were more likely to take public examinations and to complete second level education than children who had no such pre-school experience (O'Flaherty, 1995: 11). 'The most rigorous studies show that high quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children which persist through adolescence and adulthood' (National Childcare Strategy, 1999: 56). Indeed the need and importance of such services is supported and emphasised in the *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (1998: 77): 'there was a wide consensus at the National Forum on the need to provide early intervention programmes for young children in disadvantaged areas. Attention was also paid to the serious need to consider forms of provision in rural areas in this context'.

² Broadly speaking, early intervention can be described as action by agencies other than the family to facilitate the development of young children and to improve their life chances at an early age, before they come into contact with formal education.

³ Headstart is a high quality, active learning pre-school programme developed in the USA in the 1960s. The belief underlying the Headstart programmes was that providing young disadvantaged children with experiences that were common place for their advantaged peers would create an equality between the two groups when it came to later educational experiences (Hayes, 1993: 21).

2.2 The Role of Barnardos in Early Years Services

Since its establishment in Ireland in the mid 1960s, Barnardos has been one of the principal leaders in early education services. In 1974, it set up its first pre-school service in Dublin. Barnardos aim to provide innovative, high quality services that offer children and families the best possible assistance and support, and are committed to providing services, which adhere to standards of best practice.

According to one of the Directors for Child Care, the objectives of Barnardos Early Years Services have been outlined as follows:

- to give children chances and opportunities which they may not otherwise have had in their communities;
- to work with children in terms of development to increase their chances in the schooling system;
- to work with children to express what is happening in their lives through play and learning;
- to work with parents in the areas of welfare and safety to enhance their capacity as parents;
- to liase with social services where necessary;
- the primary aim is the health and safety of the child.

2.3 The Settings

2.3.1 *Pre-school service - Tallaght*

The pre-school service in Tallaght has been in existence for twenty one years, and opens its doors to children four days a week from September to July. The average age of children attending the pre-school is between three and four years. The pre-school aims to provide social and educational development services to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Activities in the pre-school are based on the High/Scope curriculum (Discussed in Section 3.4).

All of the children attending the pre-school are classified as children 'at risk' and have been referred to the service by the Eastern Health Board⁴. The majority of children attending the pre-school are from West Tallaght, an area characterised by high levels of local authority housing and high levels of unemployment. More recently, drug related problems are also

⁴ The Rutland Street Project was established in 1969 to cater for 3 - 5 year olds living in particularly disadvantaged areas of Dublin City.

⁵ Referrals are generally made through a community care team, consisting of two public health nurses, two senior social workers, and a home help service in the area.

emerging. The co-ordinator of the pre-school service estimates that eighty per cent of children attending pre-school are from families with drug abuse problems. As social problems have become more intense, so too have their repercussions on the children.

Pre-school workers cited behaviour, learning and language problems as daily issues amongst the children. The number of children experiencing language difficulties is exceptionally high; one pre-school worker stated that 'there can be as many as six to seven children with speech problems in any one group' (maximum number per group is eight).

Three pre-school groups run concurrently, and the maximum number of places available in the pre-school at any one time is twenty seven (three of the pre-school places are shared between six children). There are three pre-school workers and a project co-ordinator employed at the centre in Tallaght.

2.3.2 Crèche Services - Mulhuddart

There are two crèche services in operation in Mulhuddart at present. These are a 'drop in crèche' and a 'crèche service'.

The drop-in-crèche has been running for the last four years and caters for children between the ages of six months and five years. This session runs once a week. The function of the group is to provide a good quality crèche where parents can leave their child(ren) when they need to attend medical appointments, do shopping, etc. The parents come and register their child in the morning, leave the child in the care of the crèche worker and can return up to two and a half hours later to collect their child. This service is only open to people who are using other Barnardos services (families are referred to this service by other Barnardos staff) and allows staff to offer further support to the families referred by Social Services.

Similar to the drop-in-crèche, the crèche service runs once a week and has been operational for the past eleven years. It caters for children between the ages of three months and five years. The function of the service is to provide a good quality crèche service for children while parents attend parent/women's groups in the centre. The parents, therefore, are always on the premises at the same time as their children and can be called on if required. The numbers using the service are quite small, with the maximum number of children at any one time being eight.

Observation for this evaluation was conducted on the crèche service only. The majority of information contained within will therefore refer to this crèche service only unless otherwise stated.

2.3.3 Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library - Mulhuddart

Originally referred to as the "Toy Lending Library", its title has since changed to the "Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library" to reflect the needs of both parents and children. The parent and toddler toy lending library gives children an opportunity to play with other children in a safe, stimulating environment. They also have a wide choice of toys (toys related to fantasy play, construction play, early learning play, jigsaws and games) from the toy lending library which they can bring home for a week or fortnight. Based on children's play during the group, advice is given about how the child may be supported. This increases the child's opportunity for exploration and creative play, as well as providing the opportunity of social contact with children who do not attend play groups. The primary aim of the toy library service is to help parents realise the potential that their child possesses and take pride in their child's achievement. Parental and community involvement are essential requirements in the functioning of the toy library' (O'Flaherty, 1995: 66). The parent and toddler toy library also provides parents with an opportunity to meet other parents in the area, to seek advice and support from qualified staff about issues of concern which they may have.

Parents attending this service can also avail of parent education courses which run in six week sessions twice a year. These courses are run separately to the parent and toddler toy lending library session, a decision taken based on discussions with parents which found that parents wanted to spend the toy lending library session with their child and preferred to attend the education course separately. A crèche is organised for children on the day of the education course, and topics covered throughout the course are discussed and decided with participating parents beforehand. Topics covered include child development, child health etc. There is a very high attendance rate at these sessions highlighting their success.

Fifty per cent of the children attending the service are through referrals from the public health nurses or social workers. Other users tend to be self referrals from parents who have heard about the service through an alternative channel and have an interest in participating. Unlike many other services provided by Barnardos, the specific focus group of the parent and toddler toy library is not confined to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but is open to parents and children from all sections of society. This has created a good social mix, and has no doubt

assisted in avoiding the 'socially deprived' stigma which may act as a deterrent for some service users. It is estimated that the client group is divided about fifty-fifty between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and non disadvantaged backgrounds. The system is non discriminatory, the only common factor is that they are all parents with young children.

2.3.4 Parent and Toddler Group - Edenderry Family Centre, Co. Offaly

Edenderry Family Centre has begun its sixth year of operation as a community based support service to vulnerable children and families in the Edenderry area. Established in 1994 as a partnership initiative between Barnardos and the Midland Health Board, its objective has been to provide a service which "was responsive to local needs, facilitated community ownership and participation, and promoted and stimulated the development of other family support services in the area".

The parent and toddler group is a drop in facility which takes place in the Family Centre in the centre of Edenderry town. The service aims to provide parents and children with an opportunity to integrate with other parents and children in the neighbourhood. While the initial objective was to provide a service for all children in a rural area, the centre currently focuses more on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was estimated (by the Co-ordinator of the Centre) that about half of all children attending the group are from one parent families. Some of the benefits of the project are the development of friendships and social skills for children as well as the additional support provided through the project for parents.

Age group of children in the group ranges from three months to five years. Referrals from the Midland Health Board account for just over half of all children attending the group. Initially, the parent and toddler group operated under an open door policy, whereby anyone resident in the community or its environs were invited to attend the group as they desired. It was hoped that an open door policy, together with the strong emphasis on group work activities, involving self targeted referral process, would ensure involvement in the centre would not result in stigmatisation for families within the area and would ensure its widespread acceptance as a resource to families from the town and its environs. However, increased demand for the service has made this difficult. At present, priority is given to children who have been referred by the Health Board and are classified as 'high risk'. The increasing number of places absorbed through Health Board referrals jeopardises the continuation of a social mix in the project, as the number of places for those wishing to participate in a voluntary capacity continue to decline.

3. SERVICE DELIVERY

3.1 Opening Hours of Services

All of the services surveyed took place in the morning hours. The crèche and the parent and toddler groups run from approximately 10.00 am through to 12.30 p.m. on just one day a week. The pre-school service opening hours are longer, running from 9.30am to 1.30 p.m. (with an extra hour each side for bus runs). It operates four days a week. The pre-school service operates under a service agreement with the Health Board which is currently under review. With the exception of the pre-school, where hours are quite long, given the age of children attending, there was general satisfaction amongst all other staff regarding the appropriateness of the opening hours.

3.2 Referral and Assessment Procedures

Referral and assessment procedures varied across the three service types evaluated. For example, the number of places taken up through Health Board referrals varies from fifty per cent of places in all of the services and rises to one hundred per cent in the case of the pre-school service. Health Board referrals are usually on behalf of children who are 'at risk', the majority of whom are children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Naturally, there are consequences for children living in households which are classified as 'disadvantaged', one being that the opportunities for social and educational development may be more limited than they are for children from middle class backgrounds (Section 2.1). Pre-school workers reported that behaviour, learning and language problems affect a number of children. The number of children experiencing one or more of these difficulties has risen in the past number of years, according to staff. These problems are most evident in the pre-school service, possibly due to the numbers of children using the service and the high percentage of Health Board referrals, thereby excluding the 'social mix' apparent in other early years services such as the parent and toddler groups.

3.2.1 Referral and Assessment Process in Pre-school Service

Children are referred to the pre-school service in Tallaght through a Referral Board consisting of: a senior social worker, two senior public health nurses, Tallaght home help service, the coordinator of the pre-school and where possible the special needs public health nurse attached to the service. Referrals are made all year round: there are four referral meetings each year. If

the pre-school is not in a position to offer the child a place at the time of referral, they try to refer to the child (and their parent, where appropriate) to another service which may suit their needs until a place becomes available.

Once a child is referred to the pre-school, the co-ordinator of the pre-school, the pre-school worker and where possible the special needs public health nurse visit the household to meet the child and family. This home visit acts as an initial assessment of the needs of the family. If the manager feels the family has particular needs which may be addressed through other services, she/he refers the family to these services. A decision is also made about the child's suitability for the pre-school service at this meeting. Decisions in this initial assessment are based on observation of the child and family throughout the visit, as well as discussions with the parents. There is no formal assessment on the education or development needs of the child in this visit. A meeting is then held between the various parties who have attended the home visit and a home visit assessment form is completed for the referrals/allocations board.

Once a child has commenced the pre-school, in cases where staff feel that a child may need specialist care, a base line assessment⁶ is conducted one month after the child commences pre-school to assess the education and development needs of the child. This assessment is conducted by the pre-school worker and the co-ordinator of the pre-school service. A second assessment is conducted four months later to establish changes in the child's development.

Despite the various stages and detail involved in the assessment procedure as outlined, it is interesting to note that none of the pre-school workers made significant reference to the process or how it informed their practice in the course of their interviews.

The assessment procedure as outlined above should be considered as just one part of an universal formative assessment which needs to be undertaken by pre-school staff on an ongoing basis in order that the needs of the children and families availing of the service are adequately catered for. Such formative assessments would include recordkeeping and observations (see Section 3.3 on record keeping for further comment).

The benefits from a clear assessment procedure should not be underestimated. An assessment system, where all the necessary parties are involved from the very initial stages means

⁶ This base line assessment was designed by a psychologist on placement in the pre-school under the guidance of Barnardos clinical psychologist.

increased clarity of information. A meeting between the pre-school workers and the various other parties involved in the assessment process to discuss and review the assessment approach and its implications for practice and planning may lead to greater clarity and satisfaction with overall the assessment process.

3.2.2 Referral and Assessment Process in Parent and Toddler Groups and Crèche Service

Assessment procedures in both the parent and toddler groups and the crèche service differ somewhat from the pre-school service. The crèche worker/child care worker of each of these services arranges an appointment to meet with the family of the child in the case where a child has been referred⁷. During the course of this meeting, the family is informed of the early years service, and the child's suitability for the service is discussed. In the case of the Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library in Mulhuddart, the staff member notes particular issues which may impact on the child's development and recommends toys materials to the parent, which may support the child's development. Other needs of the child, e.g. speech problems may be identified by either the staff member or the parents. Staff can then refer parents onto the appropriate service to help address the child's needs. Although children and parents attend these services just one day per week, as in the case of the pre-school services the value of ongoing formative assessment should not be underestimated.

3.3 Record Keeping

Given the high rate of referral, and the varying needs and circumstances of children, it is of utmost importance that services catering for young children (particularly when parents are not present throughout the service) operate a viable and transferable record keeping system which informs practice. While the extent of record keeping varies according to the service, the more accountable a service is the more efficient it is.

Records are kept in all services, but the detail of record keeping varies according to the function of the service. Basic information (e.g. name and address of child and parent etc.) is kept in the parent and toddler groups. Such information is also maintained in the crèche service as well as additional information in relation to contact numbers for parents and medical records of the child. Where deemed appropriate by staff, child daily records are kept which

⁷ In cases of self-referral a home visit is not conducted. Once it has been confirmed that a place is available for the child in question, the parent and child meet with the crèche worker/child care worker when they first attend the service.

detail health and hygiene, language, personal and social development as well as physical development. (This is also the case in the drop-in-crèche).

In the pre-school service (where the parents are not in attendance on a regular basis) more detailed records are kept. Daily diaries are kept on the children and specific forms are filled in and discussed at the weekly team meetings. General information and medical records are maintained which are similar to those maintained in the crèche service. Records are also kept in relation to the child's progress, general health, development, behaviour, assessments with other services, social workers meetings, eating habits and interests. As all of these children are referred from the Eastern Health Board, and liaisons with other social services (e.g. social workers, speech therapists) are quite common, the maintenance of such detailed records is essential.

As referred to in *Section 3.2 Referral and Assessments*, it is worth highlighting the value of the initial referral and assessment procedures, in addition to the ongoing formative assessments and evaluation in informing practice in order that the best possible service be provided for the children and families availing of all three service types.

3.4 Curriculum and Programmes

3.4.1 Curriculum and programme in pre-school service in Tallaght

The Pre-school curriculum at Tallaght is based on the HighScope model of education. Barnardos introduced HighScope⁸ to Ireland in the 1980s and 'have remained its chief exponent, introducing it, in part, to their community play groups in Dublin' (INTO, 1995; 25). While aspects of HighScope were evident in all of the early years services evaluated, the pre school curriculum is based most definitively around this model of education.

A typical pre-school programme is outlined as follows;

9.30 - 10.00 : Breakfast

10.00 - 10.45: Group Work (usually art, play dough, jigsaw, board games)

10.45 - 12.00: Free Play/Choice of Play (children are encouraged to do something different)

12.00 - 12.15: Tidy Up

12.15 - 12.30: Story Time

⁸ High/Scope curriculum involves high degree of child initiated activity, including play and experimental learning activities. Resources are selected and the room organised in order to allow self chosen activities based on a plan/do/review sequence.

12.30 - 1.00 : Lunch Time

1.00 - 1.30 : Outdoor play (weather permitting)

Appropriateness of HighScope in Pre-school:

HighScope has been praised for promoting independence and autonomy, encouraging children to think for themselves, make decisions and value control of their own learning. Children make choices about what they will do, carry out their own ideas, and then reflect on their activities with adults and peers (Smith, 1999: 10).

There was a general consensus amongst those interviewed that there are certain aspects of HighScope which are beneficial, the most noted of these being the room layout, which encourages children to make choices about their activities and plan their own time. However throughout the evaluation it became clear that a number of issues appeared to impact on the effective implementation of HighScope in the pre-school in Tallaght.

According to the pre-school workers interviewed, the changing profile of children attending the Barnardos pre-school over the years, has led to a situation where many have behavioural, developmental and language problems which they felt made the effective implementation of HighScope Curriculum difficult. Behavioural problems mean it is difficult to facilitate free play, particularly with current staff/pupil ratios of 8:1⁹ (Section 4.1). In one of the pre-school groups observed, the worker's role continuously altered from one based around the encouragement of the children's activity to a supervisory role, due to behavioural problems. Some of the pre school workers have had to modify the curriculum structure given the high care needs of the children.

Impact of Ratios on HighScope:

However, while issues have arisen in relation to the HighScope curriculum, the suggestion is not to abandon HighScope altogether, given that there was a general consensus amongst those interviewed that the curriculum format had many advantages. The difficulties mentioned in relation to the programme tended to focus more on difficulties of implementation because of the high attention needs of children and the staff/pupil ratio. Should recommendations in Section 4.1 be implemented (these relate to improvements in staff/pupil ratio), some of the

⁹ The staff/pupil ratio is alleviated somewhat through the assistance of a student who works under the supervision of the pre-school worker throughout the session, and acts as an extra 'pair of hands'. However, despite this assistance, even in observed pre-school groups where a student was present, issues still arose in relation to staff/pupil ratio, and effective curriculum implementation was

difficulties surrounding HighScope could be overcome. However, the success of HighScope is dependent on a number of important factors such as the integration of curriculum development and assessment, appropriately trained staff, staff who are skilled in observation, planning and evaluation, parental involvement and managerial support for on-going curriculum development, training and implementation. Given the difficulties the pre-school staff are experiencing with the High/Scope approach, it may be appropriate to undertake a more focussed evaluation which looks at its implementation in conjunction with ongoing assessment (see Section 3.2.1), staff training (see Section 4.2), managerial support (see Section 5.3) and parental involvement (see Section 4.4).

3.4.2 Curriculum and programme in the Crèche service in Mulhuddart

According to the crèche worker interviewed, the crèche service curriculum is loosely based on the HighScope model, although it is much more flexibly run to suit the needs and wishes of the children. The difficulties in relation to implementation of the model that are apparent in the pre-school are not visible in any significant form in the crèche service. The crèche operates as follows:

10.00 - 11.00: Planning time and free play

11.00 - 11.20: Outdoor play

11.30 - 11.45: Break and recall play

11.45 - 12.15: Group time (planning activity, arts and crafts)

12.15 - 12.30: Free play

The crèche staff interviewed were satisfied with the structure and curriculum being followed. The current maximum number of children allowed participate at any one time is eight, which given that a student and crèche worker works with this number allows for participation, encouragement and individual attention (Section 4.1). It should also be noted that the behavioural problems and high attention needs of the children observed in the pre-school were not evident throughout observation in the crèche service.

jeopardised due to the high attention needs of the children and the shortage of qualified staff to work with the children (Section 4.1 details staffing).

3.4.3 Curriculum and programme in the Parent and Toddler Groups

Parent and Toddler Groups operate through a more flexible curriculum base. Activities throughout the session were suggested by either a staff member, a parent or the children themselves. The numbers in these groups are quite large (up to 28 participate in Mulhuddart and 22 are currently involved in Edenderry), and may have consequences for type and frequency of organised group activities. Observations and interviews revealed a number of differences in the organisation of the two parent and toddler groups evaluated.

Mulhuddart Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library Group:

On the day of observation nine parents and nine children attended this drop-in group facility. The underlying philosophy of the group is that parents can use the session for what they feel is of most benefit to them and their child. Activities were generally undertaken following a suggestion by either a parent, child or staff member. A number of parents spent the session working on a one to one basis with their child. Other children played in groups. Activities in which children partook varied from play with construction toys to arts and crafts to jigsaws and stories. The majority of children also played in the outdoor play ground for a while, either in small groups or on their own with their parent. A staff member was present and available to talk to and advise parents throughout the session. The majority of parents present chose to talk to the staff member. A small number of parents chose to observe.

Parent and Toddler Group, Edenderry:

The structure of the parent and toddler group in Edenderry was quite different. Observation showed that activities for this group are based around a semi-structured curriculum with the first hour focusing on interactive play between the parent and child, with the outlined objective of 'encouraging parental involvement'. In the second hour, a planned activity for parents takes place in a room adjoining the playroom of the centre. This varies from arts and crafts to a speaker attending the centre to discuss certain parenting topics (e.g. public health nurse attending and speaking about the necessary vaccinations for children). While parents are participating in the group activity, a volunteer works with the children, assisting them in a number of activities such as arts and crafts. Doors are opened between the two rooms, and children can move between the play room and the room where their parents are as they wish.

While curriculum structure varied significantly between the two groups, both groups aim to provide parents with an opportunity to meet other parents and discuss whatever concerns they

may have. The needs of parents will obviously differ, and both groups seem to function in a way which takes account of the needs of parents and their children.

4. ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

4.1 Staff / Pupil Ratio

4.1.1 Staff / Pupil Ratio in Pre-school service in Tallaght

The current staff / pupil ratio in the pre-school services is 8:1¹⁰. A number of issues in relation to this ratio emerged throughout the course of the evaluation:

- as the profile of the children attending the pre-school has changed, so too have their needs. Many of the children currently attending have specialised difficulties and consequently have special needs. A staff / pupil ratio of 8:1 does not therefore allow appropriate attention to be given to these needs.
- Many of the children require one to one work, which is not really feasible given the current staffing structures
- All of the pre-school workers interviewed felt that working with a 'high demand' child without assistance can disrupt the curriculum structure. Such children require individual attention, which takes away from the time which can be spent with other children, and from activities of the group in general

The problems of the children attending the pre-school services have placed additional demands on staff - this has impacted on the effectiveness of the current curriculum. A possible reason for difficulties with the HighScope curriculum in the centres can be attributed to the behavioural problems of children, which makes free play more difficult to facilitate. This is compounded by the staff/pupil ratio, which makes it very difficult to work with children on their own. As a consequence, staff interviewed felt that their role has become mainly supervisory rather than an encouraging, participatory one which they highlighted as essential in the High/Scope curriculum (see also Section 3.4.1).

Length of day: Given the intense needs of the children, the length of the day is also an issue. Pre-school commences at 9.30 am and runs until 1.30 p.m. However, as children are collected on the bus from 8.30 am on and the last child does not reach their home destination until 2.30

¹⁰ While it has been mentioned in Section 3.4 that a student works with the pre-school worker they have not been included in the Staff / pupil ratio section as they are under the supervision of pre-school workers and are not as yet qualified staff. Similarly, one day a wee, a volunteer in the pre-school works with a child with high attention needs, and notwithstanding the assistance this provides, the volunteer has not been included in this section as they too are unqualified.

p.m., the day can be quite long¹¹. As has already been referred to, these hours are part of the Health Board Service Agreement which is currently under review. Efforts have been made to change the structure (programme) in pre-school somewhat in the past year to try and allow for a short break of fifteen minutes. However, this break is not actually written into the curriculum structure for a typical day and as a result does not always occur. This can in part be attributed to the staffing structures in pre-school; sometimes there is no one available to fill in for a worker on their break.

The length of the session is therefore creating some problems. Given that many of the children are coming from highly dysfunctional families and have very high care needs which, consequently increases demands on staff. There is a need to review current ratios and structures:

- staff / pupil ratio needs to be reduced through the provision of an extra staff member who will provide temporary relief and fill in for staff members when they are on break. An extra staff member would also facilitate work on an one-to-one basis with children who are in need of more specialised attention without compromising the operation of the High/Scope Curriculum structure.
- Length of day and the high care needs of the children can place a strain on staff. It is essential to ensure that all staff receive a short break during the working day. This will benefit both staff and children, as staff will be less strained throughout the session and more able to respond to the needs of the children.

4.1.2 Staff / Pupil Ratio in Crèche Service

The adopted staff/pupil ratio in crèche service is 8:2. This higher ratio is due to the ages of the children, (a number of children are under age three) and also due to the fact that the changing room is two rooms away from the room where the crèche service takes place, which means that anytime a child needs to be changed the crèche worker must leave the room with the child. It is proposed that once children in the crèche are aged three or over, the ratio could fall to 8:1. The current ratio appears to work quite well for this service; children are afforded sufficient individual time and attention, and are also encouraged to participate in group activities. The only concern arising from such a structure is the small number of children who can actually

¹¹ Every week a different member of staff must go on the bus run, which implies an 8.30 start for staff every third week. While staff are given a half hour break on their return from the bus run, all staff cited that the bus run was tiring, and made the length of day quite long for them.

avail of places in the service due to limited ratio. The possibility of increasing numbers and catering for a greater number of children could be addressed through extending the service in a number of ways, which will be addressed in Section 5.4.

4.1.3 Staff/Pupil Ratio in Parent and Toddler Groups

Staff/pupil ratio is not as applicable to parent and toddler groups, given the number of adults present throughout the session. The success of parent and toddler groups is to a large degree based on the skills of the staff members in facilitating communication with parents and gaining their trust in addition to parent's willingness to participate throughout the session. A number of factors, such as confidence and social capability can influence an individual's capability to participate. Naturally, not all parents will possess such characteristics; some may be more vulnerable and less comfortable with group interaction and conversation initiation. The current numbers participating in such groups is quite high. According to the child care worker, there is a risk that the needs of some of the more vulnerable families using the service cannot be adequately addressed within the larger group session. It would appear that some minor adjustments could be made to ensure that the needs of all families accessing the services are being met. A number of solutions could be implemented:

1. A reduction in the maximum number of families using the service to take more account of the needs of parents in the group (however, issues may arise from trying to reduce groups where there is already high demand)
2. An extension of the service to two days a week, perhaps allocating a second day as a bridging group session, to allow those more vulnerable service users to adjust, to gain in confidence and become comfortable in group situations within the service.

While both of these suggestions have validity, the advantages of each differ. Recommendation number one involves reducing current group size, which given the already high demand for the service, and the fact that many parents may be members in the groups for quite some time could pose problems. Recommendation number two may bridge the gap and assist in providing the necessary support for parents.

4.2 Staff Qualifications and Training Needs

All of the staff in the early years services have at least a 2-year qualification in childcare. While there is general satisfaction about the appropriateness of qualifications on arrival, a number of issues arose in relation to in-service training for staff. The current system of in-service training operates through a staff training and development group. This group is in place to address and organise the provision of courses for staff working in the various services.

All staff recognised the benefits of in-service training for improving and updating their skills, and the majority felt that additional training would be of benefit to them personally. However, despite staff from Barnardos Head Office also recognising the importance of in-service training and making efforts to provide such training as much as possible, few of the interviewed staff felt that they had actually been afforded the opportunity to attend courses. Some of the pre-school workers felt that the opening hours and the staffing structures made it unfeasible for them to undertake in-service training.

Given the proportion of places taken by Health Board referrals and the subsequent issues arising out of this, there is an absolute need to ensure that staff are prepared for and capable of dealing with the challenging issues that face them. All pre-school workers agreed that there was a need for training in areas of child development. They felt that the changing circumstances of the children attending the pre-school and the new and growing amount of social and behavioural problems they have to deal with on a daily basis have created a need for training in areas of child development and developmental psychology. Other staff in more rural settings mentioned a need for additional training in the HighScope curriculum.. Additional training in HighScope would improve staff expertise and boost confidence both of which would impact positively on outcomes for children.

There is a need to ensure improved contact and discussions between staff and the training and development groups, so that in-service training can facilitate the needs of staff. There is evidence that issues such as timing of courses and variety of courses which staff want to undertake need to be discussed in more detail with the group in order to ensure that appropriate training courses are made available. The benefits of staff training are multiple; staff are afforded an opportunity to improve their skills thus increasing their knowledge and expertise, which naturally impacts on the experiences offered to children and their parents, and ultimately leads to improvements in their developmental outcomes and later educational achievements.

4.3 Resources within the services

Resources within a centre have a major impact on the type and variety of activities that take place and the quality of service provided. Resources include staff resources, materials and equipment, and the amount of space available for children, parents and staff. According to the National Childcare Strategy (1999), a quality service is one that "offers both care and educational opportunities appropriate to individual children's age and stage of development; and provides a high quality environment with equipment, materials, activities and interactions appropriate to the aged and stage of development of each child been catered for" (1999:49)

The focus of this section is on the adequacy of toys, materials and equipment in the services evaluated. Staff issues have already been addressed in previous sections, and space issues will be addressed in Section 5.4.

Each centre is allocated a specific budget for the year, which is to be spent on toys and equipment. There was general satisfaction with the standard and variety of materials available in the various services. A varied range of equipment is available to provide opportunities for all types of play: creative, imaginative, social, imitative, adventure and constructive. While it was suggested that more regular reviews of the budget need to take place, to keep in line with changing costs, the general consensus amongst all groups was that the current budget and resources within the services sufficed.

4.4 Involvement of Parents

Target 34 of the 40 Quality Targets in Services for Young Children developed by the European Commission Network on Childcare states that:

Parents are collaborators and participants in early years services. As such they have a right to give and receive information and the right to express their views both formal and informally. The decision making processes of the services should be fully participative, involving parents, all staff, and where possible, children (1996:29).

The nature of parental involvement in the services evaluated in this study varies according to the function of the service. Some of the services are built around and focus on the attendance, involvement and the supporting of parents (i.e. parent and toddler groups), while parental involvement in other services consists of a small number of meetings (both formal and social) during the year (i.e. pre-school).

It is generally acknowledged that early years services run much more effectively when parents are involved.

'Early evaluations indicated that children in Head Start and similar programmes made substantial initial gains in cognitive performance and school readiness skills. Those who participated in programmes with a parent - or home-based component sustained these gains three to four years after the programme had ended. Such reports solidified the popular consensus that involving and educating parents should be an integral part of early childhood intervention' (Kellaghan et al., 1993: 88).

The importance of the role of the parents in early education programmes was also emphasised in the Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education(1998: 34 - 45):

It is the view of the National Forum that in planning the way forward for early childhood education for a changing society, the principle of parental involvement should be a guiding one... Early development programmes work much more effectively when parents are actively involved, as well evidenced in some Irish projects such as Rutland Street Project, Barnardos, and Muintearas.

The success of parent and toddler groups is to a large degree based on the skills of the staff members in facilitating communication with parents and gaining their trust in addition to parents' willingness to participate throughout the session. Numbers of parents attending such groups highlights their importance and popularity amongst service users. The benefits of these groups have been outlined. However, if services are to be based around parental involvement, there is a need to ensure that services run in an efficient and effective way for parents as well as for children. Reference was made in Section 4.1 to the issues arising out of different characteristics of parents in parent and toddler groups. Parents who could be described as 'shy' or 'vulnerable' are not always capable of independent interaction with others and risked 'exclusion' as a result. It can be difficult for some parents who have not been involved in social groups before to join parent and toddler groups and feel comfortable with general interaction. It is therefore highly important to ensure that the service design takes account of all user types, and is designed in such a way to ensure maximum participation from all parents. Given all the evidence to date through other research studies involving parents, the priority needs to be on shaping the service to suit the needs and capabilities of parents, as well as the needs of the

children, in an effort to ensure maximum benefits are obtained through the service (Also note recommendation in 4.1 which take account of this).

None of the other services evaluated necessarily require a parental presence when the service takes place. However, parental involvement isn't only about the direct presence of the parent. It also refers to the quality of communication and the level of partnership and collaboration evident and perceived.

The role of parents within the crèche is quite different to that outlined for the parent and toddler groups. While parents are on the premises throughout the duration of the crèche service, they are attending a parent and toddler support group in a separate section of the building. If children are in need of their parent's attention, a worker will notify the parent who can come down to the child in the crèche.

There was a general consensus amongst pre-school workers and the co-ordinator that parental involvement in the pre-school was limited. Staff felt that there were difficulties in getting parents more involved. This may in some ways be influenced by the social problems of many of the families involved. The fact that the co-ordinator estimated eighty per cent of parents whose children attend the pre-school have drug abuse problems will naturally impact on the level of parental involvement. Children are collected and returned to their homes through the school bus. Parent-staff meetings¹² take place once every school year either in the pre-school or in the home of the child. A number of social events are organised for occasions such as Easter, Christmas and Summer. According to the pre-school manager, attendance at these social events is quite high, which may be partly accounted for by the fact that all the family is invited for the day and transport is organised to collect and return families to their home. However excluding these social events, and the annual parent staff meeting, the only other 'contact' the pre-school has with the majority of parents is through the bus run¹³. All of the pre-school teachers agreed that parental contact was insufficient, contributing to the difficulties of their work. The problems and levels of disadvantage experienced by some households may create extra obstacles to participation. This can be illustrated through the fact that although a parent support group runs for parents of children attending the pre-school in Tallaght,

¹² The parent - staff meeting is attended by the pre-school manager, the pre-school worker and the parent(s) of the child. Where applicable, the meeting is also attended by any other social services representatives who are involved with the child (e.g. speech therapist, psychologist etc.)

¹³ A pre-school teacher travels on the bus every week with the children, and sees the parents briefly as he children are collected from the home.

attendance numbers are low. This may in part be accounted for by the level of disadvantage and problems in some of these households, as well as the location of the centre (discussed above).

A number of issues impact on parental involvement in pre-school:

- the structure and management of the service is based around children and pre-school teachers. There is no specified role for parents within the day to day running of the centre.
- the location of the centre is some distance outside its catchment area (in the case of Tallaght pre-school, others may be within the area). Parents therefore do not have easy access to the service, as they might have where the service is located nearby. Lack of familiarity with the pre-school or its environs may impact on a parent's willingness to frequent the service.
- Social and environmental factors may impact on parental contact or involvement in the pre-school service. Background situations (e.g. personal problems, time constraints) mean it is not always possible for parents to participate or become involved.

The value of communication and collaboration between service providers and parents cannot be underestimated. There is therefore a need to ensure that all efforts are made to examine new ways to encourage parental involvement. The emphasis must be on new ways to increase parental involvement in services where participation is currently low. The improvement of networks and contacts with parents may increase their knowledge and consequently their participation in the service. Improved channels of contact can provide the support and encouragement needed to increase overall general involvement. By increasing communication and information between parents and the early years services, possible methods of increasing involvement or participation and roles of parents within the services can be reviewed (with the assistance of the parents).

The provision of in-service for staff which focuses on developing skills and working with parents could also be beneficial in finding new ways to increase parental involvement.

5. EXTERNAL FACTORS

5.1 Location of services within the community

As stated in the Introduction Section of the evaluation, it is important to examine children's experiences of early years services not only in the context of their immediate environment within the family and within the early years service they attend but also in the context of the wider community. Two of the three services evaluated are within close proximity to the communities which they aim to target. Both the service in Mulhuddart and Edenderry are close to housing estates in the area, where many of the 'disadvantaged' households, whom Barnardos aim to target in their early years services reside. This close proximity facilitates the participation of many parents and children in the service. Indeed, the 'neutral' location of the Family Centre in Edenderry, on the main street in the town has consistently facilitated a high level of participation by children and families from the area and has helped avoid stigmatisation of the service, as it tends to be viewed as a service for all, regardless of background.

The pre-school service in Tallaght is some distance away from its target community¹⁴. Due to the problems distance may cause, a bus service has been organised by the pre-school to collect and return children home after school. While this has alleviated accessibility problems, there are a number of subsequent problems resulting from the situation:

- as the pre-school is in a different location to the community which it services, contact with parents is much lower, and has been cited as a problem by the pre-school workers
- familiarity with the neighbourhoods is also reduced which can deter parents from visiting the area
- the length of the day for children is increased through the journey time, thus changing what could be a reasonable length of day into a very long one (which may affect child's attention span etc.).

¹⁴ Since the assessment of the pre-school took place, there has been confirmation that the centre is planning to relocate, however it is beneficial to include these points here, as they highlight some of the difficulties distance can have on the success of a service.

In summary, the convenience of the centre in Mulhuddart and Edenderry have contributed to the successful running of the services, while the distance of the centre in Tallaght from its target group has contributed to its difficulties.

5.2 Links with other Agencies and Organisations

There was general satisfaction amongst staff regarding the links between the early years services and other social services which it may need to use or refer children on to, such as social workers, speech therapists, public health nurses etc. In general, all services were satisfied with these communication links. A number of staff mentioned the extending waiting lists of the speech therapists, due to increasing demand, which has naturally impacted on speed with which referrals are answered. However, overall the contact and communication with other relevant services is deemed to be satisfactory.

5.3 Contact With Head Office

Perhaps the most important link in the whole organisational structure is between Barnardos Head Office (Management staff) and Barnardos staff in the community. It is the staff who work directly with the children and families whom Barnardos aim to assist. Staff in the various services possess the knowledge of the day-to-day issues which affect the running of the centres such as the changing needs of children. If adequately maintained, this is a link which can make a service one of the most effective through the sharing of knowledge from ground level, which can in turn inform the needs and direction of the service at central level. If poorly maintained it is the absence of this link which may contribute to the problems and inefficiencies of a service.

The current structure of liaisons operates as follows:

- staff in the early years service report to their manager
- the manager of the early years service reports to the regional manager
- the regional manager reports to the Director of Child Care Services.

A number of staff expressed dissatisfaction with the current communication system. One pre-school worker in Tallaght mentioned that frustrations were being added to through a lack of coherent information on the management and running of services, claiming that staff did not know what was happening or what the plans were for the centres. However, this situation has probably been compounded by the uncertainty about the location of the centre (which has since been resolved), as a fire in July of 1998 has reduced the available space, and the need to change premises was under discussion.

Another staff member from the Edenderry centre believed that increased communication between head office and the early years services would help ensure that the early years services reach their full potential. Despite the fact that a regional structure was established sixteen months ago in an effort to decentralise services and provide support at a local level, it is interesting that this structure was not referred to throughout the course of the interview in Edenderry.

Indeed, a number of problems arise from the current communication structure:

- A system of communication based upon information being transferred through a number of people before reaching its destination is time consuming, and can slow down the speed of response.
- There is a possibility that the value and details of the comment may be reduced, as it passes through a number of individuals.
- Long communication channels have the effect of alienating staff from management and can lead to a breakdown in communication, where otherwise information, experience and ideas may lead to improvements in services.
- Despite the establishment of a regional structure of management in the more rural services, the true value of such a service does not seem to have impacted greatly on staff. There is a need to examine possible ways of making this service more user friendly so that it can reach its true potential.

Improvements in communication between staff and management will lead to greater efficiency, improved knowledge distribution, and increased awareness about issues affecting services.

5.4 Excess Demand and Waiting Lists

All of the services surveyed reported maximum participation and nearly all have waiting lists of children and families wanting to participate. Decisions in relation to the existence, design and development of waiting lists are left to the discretion of the service manager, locally. According to the Director of Childcare, this is a deliberate decision in order to develop autonomy locally. There can be no doubt that it is the staff in each of the services who can best determine the 'need' for the service in their area, and have the most up-to-date and on-the-ground knowledge of demand and waiting list needs. As a result of the current system however, waiting lists have been developed on an informal basis, and exist in some services but not in a universal or accountable manner.

Given the extensive demand for all of the early years services, there is a need for formal discussions on how best to approach waiting list issues. While ground staff's knowledge can contribute to design and development of waiting lists, preliminary decisions on such issues need to be taken in a structured and informed way in order to respond in the most appropriate manner to the excess demand. There is a need to look at the capacity of the service, reviewing current maximum numbers, and examining how feasible it is to extend the service. If waiting lists are to exist in services, decisions need to be taken on the length of waiting lists, and the likely waiting period involved.

Many of the services (parent and toddler groups and drop-in crèche) reported on the consequences of excessive demand. The drop in crèche (which was not included in observations) now runs on a 'first come first serve basis', where parents are required to call beforehand and book a place for their child, should there be one available. In one of the parent and toddler groups, it was felt that the more vulnerable parents were not receiving the necessary attention or support, partly due to the high numbers in attendance. Given the target group of the majority of services, the variety and extent of need amongst parents and children must be borne in mind. There is therefore a constant need to examine and address the demand for services, current maximum numbers allowed participate, possible extension of services where deemed appropriate and the compilation of waiting lists. The current strategies in relation to these issues are ill-defined and given the continual increasing demand need to be reviewed and formalised.

6. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- This evaluation focused on three types of early years services: a pre-school, parent and toddler groups and a crèche service. The services were selected in consultation with Barnardos and were deemed to be representative of the type and geographical spread of the early years services currently on offer by Barnardos. Therefore the outcomes of this evaluation are likely to be relevant to other similar services provided by Barnardos.
- The majority of services are targeted at children from disadvantaged communities. Referrals from the Health Board take up at least fifty per cent of the available places in all of the services. One hundred per cent of pre-school places are taken up through referrals.
- *Assessment:*
Assessment procedures varied across the service type. Once a child is referred to the pre-school service, the pre-school co-ordinator, pre-school worker and where possible the special needs public health nurse make a home visit to meet the child and parents. An assessment is made of the needs of the family in general, and of the child's suitability for the attendance at the pre-school service. Assessment decisions are based on observation of the child and family throughout the home visit, as well as discussions with the parents.

In cases where staff feel that a child may need specialist care, a base line assessment is conducted a month after the child commences pre-school to assess the education and development needs of the child. This assessment is conducted by the pre-school worker and the co-ordinator. A second assessment is conducted four months later to establish changes in the child's development. While appropriate assessment procedures are in place, a number of issues arose about the clarity of the assessment procedure in the pre-school. Furthermore, the initial assessment procedure should be considered as just one part of an universal formative assessment which needs to be undertaken by pre-school staff on an ongoing basis in order that the needs of the children and families availing of the service are adequately catered for.

(Section 3.2)

Recommendation:

While quite detailed assessment procedures are in place, it is important to note that none of the pre-school workers referred to these processes or how it informed their practice in any great detail throughout the course of the evaluation. A meeting between the pre-school workers and the various other parties involved in the assessment process to discuss and review the assessment approach and its implications for practice and planning may lead to greater clarity and satisfaction with the assessment process.

- *Record Keeping:* the extent of record keeping varies according to the type of service. Basic information (name and address of child/parent etc.) is maintained in parent and toddler groups. Such information is also maintained in the crèche service as well as information medical records of the child, and where deemed appropriate by staff child daily records are also maintained which detail health and hygiene, language, personal and social development as well as physical development. Records in pre-school are quite detailed including information on the child's progress, general health, development, behaviour, assessments with other services, social workers meetings, eating habits and interests as well as general and medical information. Given that these children are all referred from Health Boards and liaisons with other social services is quite common, the maintenance of these detailed records is essential
- *Curriculum and Programmes:* the pre-school curriculum is based on the High/Scope model of education. While aspects of High/Scope have been beneficial in the pre-school service, all of the pre-school teachers felt that difficulties arose in its effective implementation due to the variety of problems and individual needs of some of the children in addition to the staff / pupil ratio. However, the success of HighScope is dependent on a number of important factors such as: the integration of curriculum development and assessment, appropriately trained staff; staff who are skilled in observation, planning and evaluation, parental involvement and managerial support for on-going curriculum development, training and implementation.

Recommendation:**(Section 3.4)**

Given the difficulties the pre-school staff are experiencing with the High/Scope approach, it may be appropriate to undertake a more focussed evaluation which looks at its implementation in conjunction with ongoing assessment, staff training, managerial support, parental involvement and adult-child ratio.

The parent and toddler group in Edenderry is based around a semi-structured curriculum where interactive play between parent and child takes place in the first hour, and a planned activity for parents takes place in the second hour. The curriculum in Mulhuddart is based on the philosophy that parent can use the session for what they feel will be of most benefit to themselves and their children. Activities were generally suggested by parent, child or staff member. A staff member was present throughout the entire session and available to talk to and advise parents.

- *Staff / Pupil Ratios:* the staff/pupil ratio of 8:1 may need to be reassessed in the pre-schools given the high care needs of the children. The current ratio has contributed to problems in curriculum implementation, it has added to the pressures on pre-school teachers and may delay responses to the needs of children.

Recommendation:**(Section 4.1)**

Some of the problems which arose in relation to curriculum implementation could be alleviated through a review of the current staff/pupil ratio. There is a need to increase the number of adults working in the pre-school. A new member of staff could conduct one to one work with the children, allowing the pre school worker more time to work with the overall group, as well as ensuring that 'cover' is available for teachers' breaks.

- The success of parent and toddler groups is to a large degree based on the skills of the staff members in facilitating communication with parents and gaining their trust in addition to parents' willingness to participate throughout the session. Factors such as confidence and social capability can influence a person's ability to participate. While the group in Mulhuddart worked quite well, it was noted on the day of observation and also discussed in the interview that the size of the group and the vulnerability of some of the parents reduced them benefiting from the session.

Recommendation**(Section 4.1)**

The more vulnerable parents participating in the parent and toddler groups may benefit from a bridging group session on a second day of the week, to allow them adjust and become more comfortable with social and group interaction.

- *Staff Qualifications and Training Needs:* all of the staff in the early years services have basic child care qualifications on recruitment. While there is general satisfaction amongst staff about the appropriateness of qualifications on arrival, a number of issues arose in relation to in-service training for staff. While all staff (as well as Barnardos Head Office staff) recognised the benefits of in-service training, a number of staff interviewed in the evaluation felt that they had not actually been afforded the opportunity to attend courses. Some of the pre-school staff felt that the opening hours and the staffing structures made it unfeasible for them to undertake in-service training.

Recommendation:**(Section 4.2)**

There is a need to ensure improved contact and discussions between staff and the training and development groups, so the in-service training can facilitate the needs and wishes of staff. There is evidence to suggest that timing and variety of available courses which staff wish to undertake need to be discussed in more detail with the training group in order to ensure fuller participation on training programmes.

- *Resources:* there was general satisfaction amongst all of the services about the standard and variety of materials and equipment.
- *Involvement of Parents:* As one would expect, parental involvement varies according to service on offer. While the parent and toddler group requires the participation of parents, direct parental involvement in other services is quite limited. Parents are on the premises throughout the crèche service, but are based in a separate part of the building attending a parent support group. Parental involvement in the pre-school is also limited and has been cited as problematic by a number of the pre-school workers. Parent staff meetings take place annually and a number of social events are organised for occasions such as Easter,

Christmas and Summer. However, outside these organised activities, pre-school workers have little other contact with parents.

Recommendation:

(Section 4.4)

There is a need to examine various ways to increase the involvement of parents in services, given that benefits which can result from such involvement. Initiatives directed at increasing the communication and collaboration between parents and early years workers should be considered. The provision of in-service training for staff which focuses on developing skills in working with parents may also act as a catalyst to increased parental involvement.

- *Location of service:* with the exception of the pre-school (it has since been confirmed that this service will be relocating), all services are located close to the communities which they aim to serve. A number of difficulties arose in relation to the distance between the pre-school and its target communities (e.g. reduced parental contact, increased length of day for the children due to hours spent travelling) which highlight the difficulties distance can have on the success of a service.

Recommendation:

(Section 5.1)

Evidence highlighted the benefits of locating a service in close proximity to its target community. Not only is the service accessible to its target community, but parental contact is automatically increased. The importance of locating a centre nearby to its target group should not be underestimated.

- *Links with Other Agencies:* there was general satisfaction amongst all services with the links with other social services and agencies.
- *Links with Head Office:* a number of difficulties were reported in relation to contact between staff in the services and management. Some staff felt that they were not properly informed of the changes or happenings within the organisation, others felt that their 'contact' with head office was not sufficient given the ever changing circumstances in the early education area.

Recommendation:

(Section 5.3)

There is a need to review the current communication structures between management and staff in the early years services. More regular contact can lead to improvements in communication between staff and management which can lead to greater sharing of information and greater efficiency.

- *Excess Demand for Services:* all of the services reported maximum participation and the majority of services also had waiting lists. Decisions in relation to the development of waiting lists have been made locally, and as a result have been developed on an ad hoc basis.

Recommendation:

(Section 5.4)

Given the extensive demand for all of the early years services, there is a need for formal discussions on how best to approach waiting list issues. While ground staff's knowledge can contribute to the design and development of waiting lists, preliminary decisions on such issues need to be taken in a structured and informed way in (with all parties involved) in order to respond in the most appropriate manner to the excess demand.

There is a need to regularly review and address the demand for services, current maximum numbers allowed participate, possible extension of services where deemed appropriate and the compilation of waiting lists

Services offered by Barnardos most definitely contribute to the improvement of conditions for young children. However, societal changes in the past number of years have naturally affected children's needs. In a society with clustered pockets of unemployment, welfare deprivation, drug abuse etc., groups aiming to work with disadvantaged families need to be constantly aware and updated on the issues affecting them. This evaluation provides information on the changing needs of services for children in an ever changing society. The recommendations contained within aim to act as guiding principles in any future development of Barnardos Early Years Services.

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Appendix A

Interviews were conducted with the following Barnardos staff throughout the course of the evaluation:

Barnardos Head Office, Christchurch Square:
Director of Child Care- Grainne Burke

Pre-school Service, Tallaght:
Breda Kennedy - Manager
Maria McKeown - Pre-school worker
Valerie Hannon - Pre-school worker
Marie Kearney - Pre-school worker

Drop-in Crèche, Mulhuddart:
Teresa Byrne - Crèche Worker

Parent and Toddler Toy Lending Library:
Marianne Casey - Childcare Worker

Parent and Toddler Group, Edenderry:
Ann Goodwin - Manager

