the organisation for young children

THE ORGANISATION FOR
YOUNG CHILDREN



ANNUAL REPORT
2025–26

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Introducing our new Mission, Vision & Values

For 60 years, Early Years has worked with and for young children and their families across Northern Ireland, promoting high-quality early childhood education and care.

As we mark this milestone and reach the end of our current strategic period, we have taken time to reflect on what we have achieved and where we go next. Since January 2026 we have worked with our staff, Board of Directors, members and partners to shape a new mission, vision and values to guide our next strategic period and beyond. They will be formally launched at our AGM in October 2026.

OUR MISSION

To make a positive and lasting difference in children's lives.

OUR VISION

A thriving and resilient society where all children flourish.

Our values

EQUITY
Meeting people where they are, and working towards fair outcomes for children, families, staff and communities.

INNOVATION & IMPACT
Adaptive and evidence-informed; willing to test new ideas and measure impact in ways that are meaningful.

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY
Promoting respect, accessibility and belonging, within the organisation and through our work.

JOY
Valuing play, laughter, connection and safety for children, families and staff.

COLLABORATION
Building partnerships, sharing learning and working with others towards shared goals.

NURTURE
Growing child-centred learning and responsive care so that children, people and practice flourish.

CHAMPION
Championing children's rights and needs, amplifying their voices and advocating for the sector.

Chair's foreword

> **"Together, we will continue to lead and innovate to ensure high-quality early education and care services that support resilience for children, families and communities."**



Early Years – the organisation for young children continues to champion excellence in quality provision throughout the childcare sector. Through on-going collaboration with the NI Executive, the organisation continues to secure and deliver much-needed funding at a time of rising costs and intense financial pressures. Despite these challenges the organisation continues to maintain high standards of delivery across all programme areas. This year, our focus has been to advocate and participate in the extensive consultation on the Department of Education's draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland, and we look forward to seeing the benefits of these ambitious plans for children, families, carers, the Early Years sector and workforce in the years ahead.

I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to and acknowledge the dedication, hard work and leadership of our previous Chair, Maria McDonagh. I would also like to welcome all our new Board members to the organisation. It is an honour and privilege to be entrusted to follow Maria as your new Chair.

I intend to continue to work with the Board of Directors, our CEO and the Senior Management Team in our mission to lead and innovate to ensure high quality shared early education and care services that support resilience for children, families and communities.

The Board of Directors would like to express our sincere appreciation to our Chief Executive Officer, Pauline Walmsley, and to the entire senior management team, colleagues, volunteers, members and partners. Your hard work and dedication have again made this year another success for the Early Years Organisation. We were especially delighted earlier this year when the valuable work of our CEO, Pauline Walmsley, was recognised by the award of the prestigious Order of the British Empire for her contribution to the education and development of young children.

And finally, on behalf of the Board of Directors and the Senior Management Team of Early Years – the organisation for young children, I am pleased to present the annual report for 2025/2026.

Nemonie Fulton

Nemonie Fulton
Chair, Early Years

CEO's foreword

> **"Together, we are able to shape the ecosystem in which children, families, professionals and providers thrive."**



I am enormously grateful for the support of our new chair Nemonie Fulton and her colleagues on our Board of Directors, volunteers, members, and staff who continue to work collaboratively in the interests of young children, families and communities. I want to especially thank my Senior Management Team colleagues for their unwavering commitment and support throughout this very productive year.

We were delighted to see the launch of the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy for consultation and to engage with huge numbers of members across Northern Ireland to robustly debate and consider the document. We are deeply disappointed that there is no (at time of writing) budget approval for the proposed strategy. The sector urgently need to see an ambitious, comprehensive early learning and care strategy that brings stability and security to the sector and supports us to plan and manage change effectively. In addition to the stabilisation and expansion of existing initiatives, the strategy needs to focus on workforce in order to provide a lasting transformation for young children in Northern Ireland.

We are pleased to continue our partnership with Stranmillis College to progress the formation of a professional association that champions the early years workforce and contributes to the development of career pathways and a sustainable workforce.

We continue to support SureStart, Toybox, Pathway Fund and Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme. We are delighted that the community, voluntary and independent sector play a lead role in the standardisation of the pre-school day.

We continue our focus on respect for diversity and look forward to the launch of a new programme. I would like to acknowledge and thank our partners, sponsors, and funders for the essential support they provided to both the organisation and the sector.

We have undertaken a robust consultation on our new strategic plan which will be launched at AGM 2026. As we close out on the old plan, this annual report pays tribute to the Early Years staff, members and the wider community, voluntary and independent sector for their commitment to delivering on good outcomes for children, parents and communities.

Early Years is a unique membership organisation based on a community development model, together we are able to shape the ecosystem in which the child, families, professionals and providers exist. It is our collective responsibility to drive informed policies that are designed to make young children, their families and communities a priority. I look forward to working with you to implement our new strategic plan and deliver on our mission to make a positive and lasting difference in young children's lives.



Pauline Walmsley OBE
Chief Executive Officer, Early Years

The year at a glance

A snapshot of what Early Years achieved for children, families and the sector in 2025–26.

SURESTART

7,093

children accessing SureStart services

4,663 home visits · 8,388 sessions

p.18

THE PATHWAY FUND

15,405

children benefiting from funded projects

£5.86m to 217 projects and 659 childminders

p.13

CHILDCARE SUBSIDY SCHEME

21,000+

families benefiting

£18m+ in savings passed to families to make childcare more affordable

p.12

PEACEPLUS ASPIRE

5,000+

children learning together through shared education

170 settings in 83 partnerships

p.15

TOYBOX

269

Traveller, Roma and newcomer children supported

183 families · 1,369 advocacy interactions

p.25

FERMANAGH CENTRE

135

children attended our Centre of Excellence

80 full-time equivalent places

p.17

MEMBERSHIP & SUPPORT

52%

of the PSEP sector are Early Years members

8.5% growth · 1,039 support engagements

p.11

ADVOCACY

2,073

parents shared their views with us on the Draft ELC Strategy

plus 85 children and 182 provider and policy groups

p.27

OUR PEOPLE

97%

of colleagues say they do interesting work

Investors in People Gold accredited

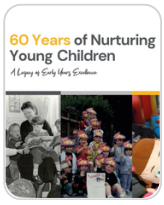
p.30

Behind every number is a child, a family, a practitioner, a provider and the Early Years team who stand beside them.

Celebrating Our 60th Anniversary

Sixty Years of Nurturing Young Children

Across 2025, we have been marking the 60th anniversary of Early Years from our formation in 1965. We have also issued a commemorative publication to celebrate ***60 Years of Nurturing Young Children*** which captures some of the highlights of the last six decades.



READ

Commemarative publication here







60th Anniversary Conference

In June 2025, We held our annual conference at Stranmillis University College. Our keynote speakers included Dr Mark Ginsberg, President Towson University Maryland and Professor Emer Ring, Mary Immaculate College, Ireland. The conference also included a series of workshops focused on policy and practice including speech, language and communication in early years settings, working with the community and daycare business fundamentals.

WATCH

Conference highlights video here

"In sixty years, we have collaborated with thousands of people who worked tirelessly as advocates for young children. Early Years carries your values and commits to use evidence and experience with principle and purpose to ensure all children reach their full potential."

Pauline Walmsley, CEO

Our Year In Events

April–Sept 2025



PEACEPLUS ASPIRE **APRIL**

PeacePlus ASPIRE launch

ASPIRE PEACEPLUS launched at Monaghan Peace Campus, with Early Years leading the pre-school element to help build positive connections among children and young people from diverse backgrounds.



EARLY YEARS **MAY**

All Party Group

The All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare met in May to discuss recent developments, including a £55 million package of measures and the extension of the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme to school-age children.



EARLY YEARS **JUNE**

Early Years Professional Association

Early Years and Stranmillis University College have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a new professional association for the early learning and childcare sector.



EY SPECIALIST SUPPORT SERVICE **JULY**

Play and learning in action

Quality Mentor Michele Long observed children at Jack and Jill Community Playgroup, Plumbridge, who welcomed a visit from the local fire service, giving children hands-on opportunities to develop risk-taking, language and problem-solving skills.



EARLY YEARS **AUGUST**

60 years of nuturing young children

Early Years marked its 60th anniversary with the publication of *60 Years of Nurturing Young Children*, celebrating highlights from the organisation's first six decades.



EARLY YEARS **SEPTEMBER**

International advocacy

Early Years at the ECPC's 'Stop the War on Children' event in New York, held at Ireland's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, highlighting the importance of investing in early childhood development and children's rights.

Our Year In Events

Oct 2025 - Mar 2026



PEACEPLUS ASPIRE **OCTOBER**

Good Relations Week

Early Years and the National Childhood Network led an engaging workshop at the PEACEPLUS ASPIRE Good Relations Week Symposium, highlighting the power of play in building connection, understanding and belonging.



CLOGHER VALLEY SURESTART **NOVEMBER**

Team connections

Early Years CEO Pauline Walmsley visited Clogher Valley SureStart, including the SPRING Centre and Augher offices, to see first-hand the excellent support, services and play-based programmes available for young children and families.



TOYBOX **DECEMBER**

Supporting families at Christmas

With support from Cash4Kids, Toybox helped make Christmas a little brighter for families by delivering presents and festive joy throughout the season.



DUNGANNON & COALISLAND SURESTART **JANUARY**

Reggio Emilia

Practitioners from SureStart Edenballymore and Dungannon & Coalisland SureStart came together through the Communities of Practice Forum to share learning, strengthen practice and explore the Reggio Emilia approach.



EARLY YEARS **FEBRUARY**

Draft Executive Early Learning & Childcare Strategy

Between January and March, Early Years led an extensive sector and country-wide consultation, engaging with stakeholders across Northern Ireland to help shape the Draft Executive Early Learning & Childcare Strategy.



RAINBOW SURESTART **MARCH**

New SureStart premises in Belleek

The new Rainbow SureStart premises in Belleek were officially opened by Education Minister Paul Givan, expanding access to vital early learning and family support services in the local community, including a dedicated Developmental Programme.

02

Our Work

- Membership & EY Specialist Support Service
- Pathway Fund
- NI Childcare Subsidy Scheme
- PEACEPLUS ASPIRE Project
- Fermanagh Early Years Centre
- SureStart Programmes
- Toybox Project
- International Work, Partnerships & Advocacy





02 · OUR WORK

Membership & EY Specialist Support Service

Our Membership team and Early Years Quality Advisors and Mentors support early years providers across Northern Ireland through quality improvement, professional learning, practical guidance and sector engagement.

MEMBERSHIP

8.5%
growth in membership

52%
of the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) sector are Early Years members

This reach gives us a clear picture of local needs and challenges, so the support we offer stays relevant and accessible. We engaged members and stakeholders through branch activity, consultation events and digital communications, including discussions on the draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy that gave providers a voice in its development.

SPECIALIST SUPPORT

1,039
provider support engagements

688+
hours of support for Quality Improvement via WHSCT contract

1,482
training and learning engagements

Our Quality Advisors and Mentors take time to understand each setting's context, challenges and aspirations. They work alongside providers to make realistic, sustainable improvements to quality and pedagogy, at a pace that suits each setting.

TARGETED PROGRAMMES

10
daycare settings completed Eager and Able to Learn

8
settings in the Regional 0–2 Quality Improvement Initiative

Delivered through the Early Years Development Fund (EYDF) on behalf of Childcare Partnerships (CCP), with two further Eager and Able to Learn programmes delivered directly to individual settings. The 0–2 initiative, developed in response to CCP priorities, supports practitioners to improve experiences and outcomes for babies and toddlers.

NEW THIS YEAR

Early Years Insights

Bespoke onsite support and tailored in-house training, built around each setting's development needs.

> *We develop bespoke programmes based on the voices of children, practitioners, settings and families. We take the time to understand the challenges that you face.*
>
> **Emma Magowan, Quality Mentor**

The Pathway Fund

Early Years administers the Pathway Fund on behalf of the Department of Education. The Fund supports projects that help children aged 0–4 reach their full educational potential through quality, sustainable services.

£5.86m
invested across three funding streams

217
projects delivered by early years providers (Streams A & B)

659
childminders and Approved Home Childcarers supported (Stream C)

Three funding streams

A **Awards of £20,001–£40,000**
For registered providers and facilitators of early years (0–4) education and learning.

B **Awards of up to £20,000**
For registered providers and facilitators of early years (0–4) education and learning.

C **Up to £500 a year** NEW IN 2025–26
For registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers (AHCs).





Targeting need

£2.41m
invested in 82 projects in the top 25% most disadvantaged areas

£1.85m
invested in 86 settings in rural locations



WATCH
Atlas Women's Centre case study

The Pathway Fund

Reach and impact

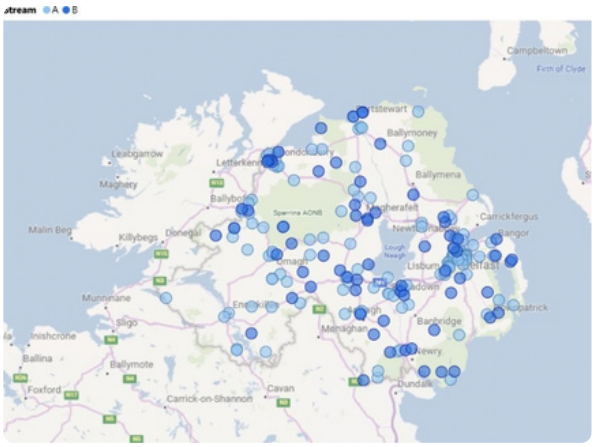
15,405

children benefitting across Streams A, B and C, including:

- **5,797** took part in evidence-based programmes
- **5,190** from areas of social disadvantage
- **5,081** from rural areas
- **1,978** with additional needs
- **1,196** identified as at risk of harm
- **741** from minority ethnic backgrounds

Children may be counted in more than one group.

876 projects, childminders and AHCs funded across Northern Ireland (217 projects + 659 childminders and AHCs)



Project locations: Streams A & B



Locations: Stream C (approximate)

INVESTING IN THE WORKFORCE

Streams A &B

- **316** staff attended Governance and Leadership training
- **42** trained to deliver evidence-based programmes
- **72** completed additional needs training
- **19** achieved a Level 3 or Level 5 professional qualification

CHILDMINDERS & AHCs

Stream C

- **130** attended professional training through their Training Award
- **75%** said the funding improved children's development
- **78%** said the funding improved their learning environment

Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme

Early Years delivers the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) on behalf of the Department of Education, helping to make registered childcare more affordable for families across Northern Ireland.

£18m+
in childcare savings passed on to parents

21,000+
families benefiting from reduced childcare fees

220,000+
claims made during the year

1,900+
registered childcare providers taking part

MILESTONE 2025–26

Extending support to school-age children

From September 2025 the scheme was reformed and expanded to include school-age children, extending financial support to many more working families. This required substantial changes to the systems and processes that underpin the scheme.

Quality of service

Feedback from providers and parents shows strong satisfaction with registration, claims processing, payments and the support available from our NICSS team.

Our NICSS team

Our teams in Belfast and Trory, Co. Fermanagh, lead the operational delivery of NICSS, supporting providers and families as the scheme grows in scale and complexity, through strong systems, responsive support and close partnership with the Department of Education.



> *A great scheme... Thanks to the team who are always very prompt in responding and helping.*
>
> **Parent, NICSS Survey Feedback**

PEACEPLUS ASPIRE

PEACEPLUS ASPIRE brings young children from different backgrounds together through shared education. Led by the Education Authority in partnership with Early Years, National Childhood Network (NCN), Léargas and Fermanagh Trust, it promotes peacebuilding, reconciliation, inclusion and respect for diversity across Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

YEAR 2 AT A GLANCE: PARTICIPATION MORE THAN DOUBLED

5,000+
children taking part
+130%

170
preschool settings
+107%

83
partnerships, including 6 North–South
+113%

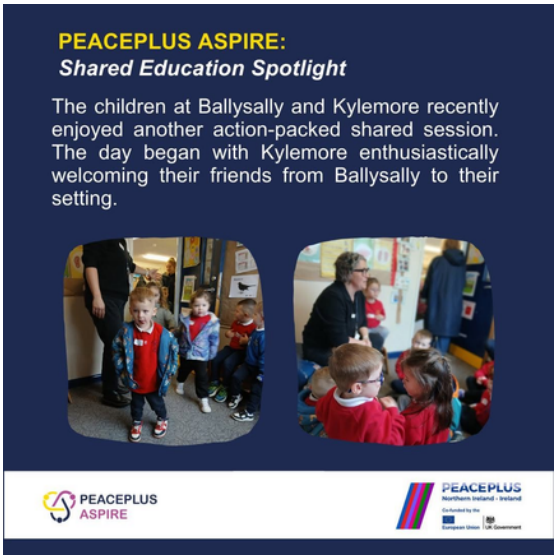
4,800+
hous of shared education

Percentage change compared with Year 1.

Learning together

Through curriculum-based shared learning, children explored identity, culture, diversity and belonging while building friendships, confidence and positive attitudes towards others.

Partnerships brought children together for sports days, cultural celebrations, beach clean-ups, art exhibitions and planting flowers for local care homes, often alongside families and community groups.



What changed

Settings reported more learning opportunities, better understanding of diversity and more positive behaviour towards others.

Practitioners saw growing confidence, better social and emotional wellbeing, and friendships that might not otherwise have formed.

Parents valued introducing children to diversity and inclusion from an early age.





Year 2 highlights

INVESTING IN DIGITAL: TECH2SETTINGS

€180,000
invested in digital equipment, software and support

150+
settings supported with digital technology and equipment

Laptops, projectors, televisions, speakers, connectivity support and Microsoft 365 licences, alongside digital upskilling workshops that built practitioners' confidence in using technology for shared learning.

TWO NEW STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, READY FOR 2026–27

PEACEPLUS ASPIRE Digital Portal

Development began on a new PEACEPLUS ASPIRE Digital Portal, a central platform for planning, communication, monitoring, evaluation and professional learning across participating settings. Design, build and testing started in the latter part of the year, ahead of rollout in 2026–27.

Respecting Diversity Programme

We began refreshing the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme, developing train-the-trainer materials, implementation resources, persona dolls and practitioner guidance ahead of rollout in 2026–27.

ALSO THIS YEAR

Quality Mentors

Early Years and NCN mentors helped settings develop shared education practice, strengthen partnerships and embed children's participation.

ASPIRE Talks

Our podcast series continued to grow, sharing practice and children's voices with a wider audience.

Professional learning

Collaborative learning opportunities strengthened the quality and consistency of delivery across settings.

LOOKING AHEAD

As participation grows, PEACEPLUS ASPIRE is well placed to create lasting positive outcomes for children, families, practitioners and communities, and a more inclusive, connected and peaceful society.

OUR CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Fermanagh Early Years Children and Family Centre

Our Fermanagh Centre provides high-quality early learning and care, nurturing children's curiosity, creativity, wellbeing and sense of belonging. This year has been one of continued growth, innovation and achievement.

135
children accessing the centre

80
full-time equivalent places

6 wks – 12 yrs
age range we care for

Reggio Emilia
principles guide our practice

Learning shaped by children

Children's voices, interests and ideas shape what we deliver. Guided by Reggio Emilia principles, staff use sustainable and recycled materials to help children grow as confident, capable learners.

Caring for the natural world

Regular nature walks and visits to local parks and National Trust sites give children the chance to explore, investigate and learn about caring for the environment.

Investing in reflective practice

Staff have taken part in professional learning in inclusion, trauma-informed practice and child-centred pedagogy.

Bringing families together

Annual events such as Santa Saturday reflect the strong sense of community at the centre.







SureStart

Early Years has been closely involved with SureStart for more than two decades.

SureStart is a targeted programme for children under four and their families living in the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. Funded by the Department of Education, it supports parents from pregnancy until their child's fourth birthday.

7,093
children accessing services

650
children in 28 two year-old programmes

8,388
programme sessions delivered

4,663
home visits undertaken

SPOTLIGHTS FROM OUR SureStartS

Six of our SureStarts share a project they are proud of from 2025–26.



Clogher Valley

More crèche sessions, fewer barriers for parents

Read more: p.19



Dungannon & Coalisland

Creativity at the heart of early learning

Read more: p.20



Newry

Low cost, no cost: better play for less

Read more: p.21



Rainbow

New premises open in Belleek

Read more: p.22



South Armagh

Fathers matter: building stronger families

Read more: p.23



Splash

Working towards Gold Togetherness accreditation

Read more: p.24

SureStart

Clogher Valley

SPOTLIGHT: YOU SAID, WE DID

More crèche sessions, fewer barriers for parents

Parents told us in our satisfaction survey that bringing siblings was a barrier to attending our 2–3 year-old developmental stay-and-play sessions. In response, we increased crèche sessions, so parents can now take part while their other children are cared for.

The crèche also supports parents attending Cook It, post-natal Pilates and speech and language therapy workshops.

This year the team created a welcoming, sensory-rich environment, with light and shadow play, clay and messy play, and a new outdoor space for exploring nature.



> *"I think it's amazing! It's a service I would happily pay for. The smile on the staff faces, the way they remember your child's name and interests! Wonderful staff, who clearly put the work into their job!"*
>
> **Parent, satisfaction survey**

ALSO THIS YEAR



10-week Nurturing Programme

Our 10-week nurturing programme, delivered by the family support team, achieved positive outcomes this year, improving parenting confidence, relationships and emotional wellbeing.



Eager and Able to Learn

This year, the play team introduced Eager and Able to Learn, helping children develop key skills through activities that can also be continued at home.



Two's Company

Children visited local community settings with their families, including a trip to the fire station to try out the equipment and firefighter uniforms!



World Breastfeeding Week

We celebrated World Breastfeeding Week at CVSS, where our dedicated team continues to support parents throughout their breastfeeding journey.

SureStart

Dungannon & Coalisland

SPOTLIGHT: CREATIVITY AND THE ARTS

Creativity at the heart of early learning





Children as capable learners

Dungannon and Coalisland SureStart delivers creative, play-based services that encourage children to learn through exploration, self-expression and meaningful experiences, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach.

Families are central to this work, helping to shape support that reflects each child's needs while celebrating the area's rich cultural diversity.

Groups delivered this year

Art Ventures **Baby Museum** **Child's Eye View** **Playtime** **Open-ended exploration**

Throughout the year, groups have used natural, recycled and everyday resources sit alongside paint, clay, fabric, light and loose parts, so children can investigate, solve problems, make choices and express their ideas in many ways.

SHARING PRACTICE

Welcoming Edenballymore SureStart

Colleagues from Edenballymore SureStart joined one of our Developmental Programmes for 2–3 year-olds to share practice. The visit reminded both teams of the value of taking time out of busy schedules to reflect together.



Clare talks to Edenballymore staff about the importance of the environment.



A learning environment built around light, shadow and open-ended materials.

SPOTLIGHT:OUR PLAY JOURNEY

Low cost, no cost: better play for less

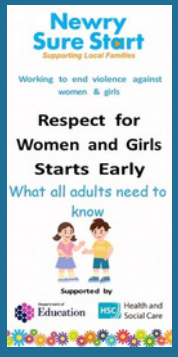


When we opened in 2001, like most services at the time, Newry SureStart invested in brightly coloured plastic and battery-operated toys, a toy library bus and a multi- sensory room. Over time we asked whether this sent parents the right message, how much children really learned from these toys, and what it cost the environment.

We switched to a low-cost, no-cost approach using recycled items, nature and homemade resources. It saves money, shows parents they don't need to spend much on toys and, most importantly, gives children richer learning. We have produced a booklet of low-cost play ideas for parents and use the approach across all our services.

OUR TWELVE STEPS FOR FAMILIES FOR A LOW-COST, NO COST APPROACH

1. **Cut back on plastic toys: they offer little sensory value**
2. **Avoid battery toys: busier toys mean less learning**
3. **Never buy something you can make**
4. **Use recycled materials and reduce landfill**
5. **Use everyday items like cups, plates and forks**
6. **Extend play by changing an activity slightly**
7. **Let children choose, so they grow in confidence**
8. **Be flexible and follow the child's lead**
9. **Don't worry about the mess**
10. **It's the process, not the product, that counts**
11. **Think before you bin it: boxes and tubes make great toys**
12. **Interact, interact, interact**



RESPECT STARTS EARLY

Helping to end violence against women and girls

Children learn about relationships, fairness and kindness long before school, mostly by watching the adults around them. Our new parent leaflet, Respect for Women and Girls Starts Early, explains what respect looks like, how to talk about it with young children and which gender-based phrases and actions to avoid.

Staff model respectful, non-gender-based play across all our services, and every member of staff has completed Domestic Abuse Awareness training.

MILESTONE OF THE YEAR

New premises open in Belleek



Education Minister Paul Givan officially opened Rainbow SureStart's new premises in Belleek, Co. Fermanagh.

The centre brings valuable new services to the rural community, including a Developmental Programme for 2–3 year-olds starting in September 2026.

We were delighted to welcome our families into this warm and inviting new space which will further strengthen the services and support we provide.





DELIVERING FOR FAMILIES

Our programmes matter most for children and parents in disadvantaged areas, who would otherwise have limited access to developmental support.

Our targets are agreed with the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) and The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), based on the needs identified in our areas.

We are proud to report that all targets for 2025/2026 were successfully achieved, a reflection of the dedication and commitment of our staff and the strong partnerships we have built within the community

SPOTLIGHT: FATHER ENGAGEMENT

Fathers matter: building stronger families through inclusion

Fathers and male carers play a vital role in children's emotional wellbeing, language, confidence and learning. For many years we have worked to make sure fathers feel welcome, respected and valued across all our services.

Father engagement has been part of our work from the early years of SureStart. We built services around fathers' lives, with evening and weekend programmes, parenting initiatives, developmental services and family events, and have kept them accessible ever since.

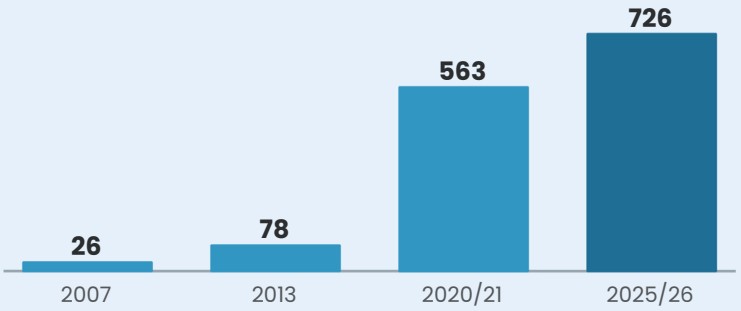


FATHERS REGISTERED WITH OUR SERVICES

726 registered fathers in 2025/26

28x as many registered fathers in 2025/26 compared to 2007

361 fathers estimated to be actively taking part in 2025/26



More than father-focused groups

Just as encouraging as the rise in numbers is how widely fathers now take part. As well as our father-focused programmes, fathers are involved in parenting support, outreach and play-based sessions, and increasingly see themselves as active partners in their child's development.

> ***"What stood out was that staff spoke directly to me. That made me feel recognised as a parent."***
>
> Father, SureStart South Armagh

> *At first I thought SureStart was mainly for mums and children. Once I attended a session, I realised there was a place for me too. The staff made me feel welcome from day one.*
>
> **Registered Father**

> *The programmes gave me ideas and confidence to spend more quality time with my son. Things that seem simple, like reading, playing and talking together, have really strengthened our relationship.*
>
> **Registered Father**



WATCH

Our Early Years fatherhood video

SPOTLIGHT: EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Working towards Gold Togetherness Accreditation

This year, Splash SureStart have been working towards Gold Togetherness Accreditation (formerly the Solihull Approach Accreditation), a nationally recognised quality framework.

Through training, reflective practice and service development, we are embedding an evidence-based, relationship-focused approach across our work, building our team's understanding of emotional health, early brain development, behaviour and relationships.



BUILT ON THREE CORE PRINCIPLES

- **Containment**
- **Reciprocity**
- **Behaviour management**

EMBEDDING THE APPROACH

Led by Janet Cameron

Project Health Visitor Janet Cameron is leading our accreditation journey. Through workforce development, reflective discussion sessions and consistent approaches across all our services, we are embedding the Togetherness principles in everything we do.

NEXT STEP: OCTOBER 2026

Understanding Trauma training

The Gold accreditation requires staff to complete advanced training. To meet this, Project Manager Grainne McHugh and Janet Cameron will deliver a whole-team seminar exploring how trauma affects children's development, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and relationships.

WHY GOLD MATTERS

External recognition of our commitment to emotional wellbeing.

A shared language and framework across the whole team.

Stronger partnerships with parents and carers.

Consistent, evidence-based support for every family we work with.

OUR WORK

Toybox

Toybox provides culturally sensitive, home-based early learning support for Traveller, Roma and newcomer families across seven project areas. In 2025/26 we formed new partnerships, expanded our resources and introduced new ways of working at a time of increasing need.

2025/26 AT A GLANCE

183
families registered and supported

269
children registered and supported (80 new)

2,331
successful interactions with parents

1,369
advocacy interactions

292
primary caregivers in play sessions

70
fathers in play sessions and events

176
funded early education places

10
Project Workers, plus our Project Manager

ADVOCACY AND PARTNERSHIP

- **Omagh Traveller Interagency Forum**
  moved closer to a Traveller-led support group, with an action plan developed with Toybox.
- **EastSide Learning Community**
  Toybox played a central role in identifying needs and improving outcomes for children and families.
- **Interagency picnics**
  A new initiative helping Traveller families play outside the home and connect with services.



NEWCOMER PROGRAMME

Our newcomer programme grew significantly this year, with more families engaged and strong partnerships across the sector. Toybox is recognised as a key partner among agencies supporting newcomer families in Belfast.

NEW RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

Translated resources
for Arabic-speaking families

Audio books
for Bulgarian and Romanian families

School transition resource
for consistent practice across the team

Mother and baby resources
promoting play in pregnancy and early engagement

Our advocacy year

From evidence to influence: building better futures for young children

Evidence research and data **Convening** the sector **Engaging** decision-makers

ALL YEAR

All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare

Across 2025/26, the APG, chaired by Cathy Mason MLA , brought MLAs, the Department of Education and the sector together on promote best practice policy and provision in the delivery of early education and childcare in Northern Ireland.

APR 2025

Community and Voluntary Sector Review

Our review assessed the current state of the sector, identified key challenges, and set out recommendations to support its long-term sustainability.

JUN 2025

A Professional Association for the Sector

We agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with Stranmillis University College to establish an Early Years professional association.

AUG 2025

Four-Nation Workforce Research Study

We contributed to a Nuffield Foundation-funded research study to inform early years workforce policy development across the UK.

SEP–OCT 2025

Political Party Conferences

We hosted a stand at the autumn Northern Ireland political party conferences to advocate for young children and early learning and childcare sector.

OCT 2025

agendaNi Round Table

We brought sector leaders together to discuss affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare.

DEC 2025

Engaging with Ministers

We met the Education Minister on the Pathway Fund's impact, and joined the Communities Minister at the Halifax Foundation's Stormont event.

MAR 2026

Workforce Findings Launched

Our CEO, Pauline Walmsley, joined Stranmillis and Early Years Education to present the Northern Ireland findings of the Nuffield Foundation-funded *"It IS rocket Science"* workforce study.







PSEP & DAYCARE FORUMS

10 PSEP Forum meetings

9 Daycare Forum meetings

Bringing voluntary, community, independent and pre-school providers together to share practice and stay informed on policy, funding and workforce issues.

MAR 2026

Our response to the Draft Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

Informed by 2,073 parents, 85 children and 182 provider and policy groups. See page 27

Shaping the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

In March 2026 we responded to the Northern Ireland Draft Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, drawing on direct engagement with the sector, parents and children.



WE LISTENED TO

85 children

2,073 parents

182 provider and policy groups/members

12 regional engagement events

THE CORE ISSUE

Ambition alone will not deliver change

We welcome the ambition for more affordable, accessible, high-quality early learning and childcare. But there is a significant gap between ambition and funding: without sufficient investment, workforce support and system reform, the strategy risks being aspirational rather than deliverable.

OUR FIVE PRIORITIES FOR THE FINAL STRATEGY

1

Fund the true cost of delivery

Reflect real operating and staffing costs.

2

Protect the mixed market

Ensure parity across all providers.

3

Ensure equality of access

Timely support for children with additional needs.

4

Invest in the workforce

Pay, progression and professional recognition.

5

Act now, not later

Bring forward key actions to avoid loss of capacity.

WHAT CHILDREN TOLD US

Play, friendship, kind adults and safeplaces matter most. Quality must reflect children's lived experience.



Read our full response

We stand ready to work with Government and partners on a practical, equitable final strategy shaped by lived experience.

Our International Work

Northern Ireland's experience, contributing to global action

Early Years plays an important role on the international stage, sharing our experience from Northern Ireland and working with partners across the world to show the vital contribution early childhood development can make to more peaceful, inclusive and resilient societies.

FOUNDING MEMBER OF TWO GLOBAL NETWORKS

Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC)

We helped shape the Consortium's new direction, contributing to the ECPC Strategic Agenda for Global Action.

International Network on Peace Building with Young Children (INPB)

We funded the development of the INPB Strategic Plan 2025–2030, continuing a relationship that began in 2004.

2004

At World Forum Belfast, Early Years (then NIPPA) helped bring together early childhood professionals and researchers from conflict-affected regions, leading to the establishment of the INPB.



HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR · SEPTEMBER 2025

At the United Nations General Assembly

As part of the ECPC, we helped bring the message "Stop War on Children NOW!" to a high-level event at the Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations during UNGA80 in New York. It brought together international missions, UN agencies, policymakers, researchers and practitioners, including the Holy See.

Protecting children from conflict and investing in evidence-based early childhood development are fundamental to breaking cycles of violence and building sustainable peace.

Through these partnerships, we make sure the experience, learning and expertise developed in Northern Ireland contribute to global action for young children, families and peace.

04

Our Organisation

Everything in this report is delivered by our people. **We believe in childhood, and we invest in the people who make it matter.**





04 · OUR PEOPLE

Life at Early Years

Behind every project in this report is a team who care deeply about young children. We want Early Years to be a place where people feel valued, supported and part of something bigger.

97%

say they do interesting work

97%

say their roles help people work well together

> ***"I feel respected, valued and heard."***
>
> Early Years colleague, Investors in People assessment

JUNE 2025 · OXFORD ISLAND

Staff Day 2025

More than 100 colleagues came together at Oxford Island for a day of reflection and connection. Our CEO, Pauline Walmsley, opened with highlights from the year, and keynote speaker Shane Martin of Moodwatchers spoke on building resilience at work and beyond. The programme also included team-building activities, wellbeing workshops and a celebration of colleagues' long service.



Bronze Diversity Mark

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE® We invest in people Gold

We hold Investors in People Gold for how we lead, support and develop our people, and the Bronze Diversity Mark for our commitment to an inclusive workplace.

Giving back together



60 YEARS, 60K

Alan's 48-hour challenge

To mark our 60th anniversary, Alan Taylor from our Fermanagh Centre ran 5km every four hours for 48 hours, raising over £2,500 for Sands, a charity that works to support anyone affected by pregnancy and baby loss.

> ***"I wouldn't have been able to do it without the support of all the people coming out and helping me."***



COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Operation Wildflower Way

Over 20 colleagues, joined our neighbours at JMD Training to litter pick around our Belfast office. A huge thanks to the organisers and to Pizza-Co Belfast and Sundaes Ice Cream for keeping us fueled!



ON THE RUN · ST PATRICK'S DAY

SPAR Craic 10k

Big congratulations to Matthew, Kevin, Aisling, Damian and Margarida who completed the SPAR Craic 10k in Belfast on St Patrick's Day. They joined more than 5,000 runners for a celebration of sport, community and culture.



JUNE 2025

Charity Raffle

Our annual raffle at Staff Day raised £369 for Sands, with prizes donated by teams across the organisation, demonstrating the generosity and community spirit that make Early Years such a special place to work.

JOIN US

Make a lasting difference in children's lives

We're always looking for people who share our belief in childhood. See current vacancies and register for job alerts at early-years.org/work-for-us

Our Board of Trustees

Our volunteer Board, whose members are also directors of the organisation, sets our strategy, oversees performance and risk, and makes sure we meet our legal and charitable obligations.



Nemonie Fulton

Chair

Trustee since 2018 · Chair since 2026

Nemonie is a solicitor with over 30 years' experience in commercial and property law across the private and public sectors. She joined the Early Years Board as a Trustee in 2018 and became Chair in 2025, providing strategic leadership, governance oversight, and legal expertise to the organisation.



Teresa Canavan

Trustee

Trustee since 2026

CEO of Rural Action, with over 30 years' experience in rural development. Rural Action delivers programmes for central and local government, is a Managing Agent for the International Fund for Ireland and has helped design PEACEPLUS- supported rural initiatives.



Bernie O'Neill

Trustee

Trustee since 2026

Deputy CEO of Magherafelt Women's Group, with over 20 years in the community and voluntary sector, including early years provision and community development. Bernie represents the Northern Branch on the Early Years Council.



Sarah McCambley

Trustee

Trustee since 2022

A leader at Jolly Rodgers Day Nursery, with a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies and an M.Ed. Sarah chairs the PSEP Forum and represents Lisburn & Down on the Early Years Council, bringing expertise in early years practice and sector leadership.



Francis Loye

Trustee

Trustee since 2023

Co-owner and director of Giggles Early Years Hub in Newry, which recently marked 20 years. A former teacher and ETI associate assessor with a Master's in Education Leadership and Management, Francis chairs the Early Years Daycare Forum.



Dr Will Burton

Trustee

Trustee since 2026

Lecturer in Journalism at Ulster University and a former BBC broadcast journalist, published in The Sunday Times and The Irish Times. Will brings expertise in communications, media and public engagement.

CHANGES DURING THE YEAR

Across 2025-26, we welcomed Teresa Canavan, Bernie O'Neill and Dr Will Burton to the Board, and Nemonie Fulton moved from Trustee to Chair. Our thanks go to Maria McDonagh, our outgoing Chair, and to our outgoing trustees, Ronan Park and Jenni Barkley, for their service.

Early Years Council 2025–26

The Early Years Council brings together representatives of our member branches and forums, giving members a direct voice in our work. Each representative is nominated and seconded by members of the branch or forum they represent.

BRANCH REPRESENTATIVES

ARMAGH & DUNGANNON
Jayne McCarragher

BELFAST
Ashlea Berryman

CRAIGAVON, BANBRIDGE, NEWRY & MOURNE
Rebecca McCartan

FERMANAGH
Caroline Meehan

FOYLE / NORTH WEST
Jacki Connolly

LISBURN & DOWN
Sarah McCambley Trustee

NORTHERN
Bernie O'Neill Trustee

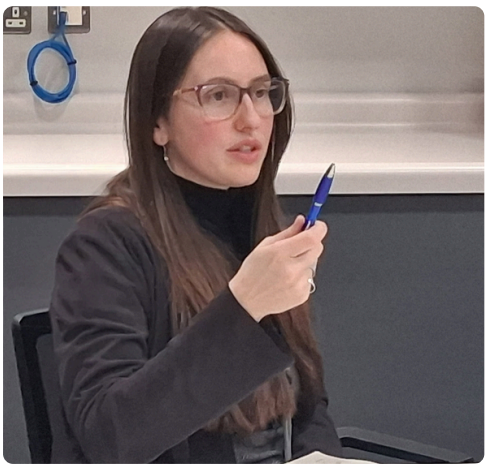
OMAGH & DISTRICT
Melanie O'Kane

FORUM REPRESENTATIVES

DAYCARE FORUM
Francis Loye Trustee

MEMBERS' VOICE ON OUR BOARD

Three Council representatives, Sarah McCambley, Bernie O'Neill and Francis Loye, also serve as trustees, making sure the experience of our members informs decisions at Board level.





05

Governance & Finance

- Financial Review
- Income and Expenditure



Financial Review

Year ended 31 March 2026 · presented on behalf of the Board of Trustees

£16.9m
total income
2024/25: £12.7m

£16.2m
total expenditure
2024/25: £12.5m

£14.9m
spent directly on charitable activities
2024/25: £11.3m

10 weeks
reserves cover, in line with target
of unrestricted spending

Overview

2025/26 was a year of steady progress for Early Years. We continued to administer the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme, now extended to school- age children, and completed the second year of the PEACEPLUS ASPIRE shared education programme. Our key funder relationships remain strong, and the Fermanagh Early Years Children and Family Centre continues to perform well.

We continue to manage costs closely, monitoring expenditure against budgets and maintaining a cost-conscious approach across the organisation.

Income and funding

Delivery commitments continued for the Pathway Fund, SureStarts and Toybox, and the PEACEPLUS ASPIRE programme grew in its second year.

Our core activities, including membership support, training, publications, management services and day care, continue to support the organisation's financial wellbeing.

Restricted income was £12.4m and unrestricted income £4.5m, a ratio of 74:26 (2024/25: 75:25).

Financial results

Total income rose by 32% to £16.9m. Most of the increase reflects programmes we deliver, where grants pass directly to early years settings. Expenditure for the year was £16.2m.

Unrestricted expenditure represented 85% of unrestricted income, compared with 93% in 2024/25. The result for the year was net income of £0.68m, almost entirely from unrestricted activities.

Reserves

The Board's reserves policy, most recently reviewed in 2026, aims to hold unrestricted reserves equivalent to 10 weeks' worth of unrestricted expenditure to cover short-term setbacks or cash-flow pressures. This target was met at 31 March 2026.

The result for the year has also allowed the Board to set aside a designated fund of £0.4m for future priority work in the sector, and the Board remains committed to growing reserves to support the long-term sustainability of the organisation and the sector.

Outlook and risk

Financial projections indicate that the organisation has adequate resources to meet its commitments as they fall due. The Board oversees the principal risks, including funding pressures on the voluntary sector, through the Corporate Risk Register, which is reviewed regularly by the Senior Management Team and the Board.

The Board thanks our finance team, Senior Management Team and funders for their support throughout the year. These figures are extracted from our audited financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2026 and are approved by the Board. The full accounts are available on request and from the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and Companies House.

Income and expenditure

Year ended 31 March 2026, with 2024/25 for comparison

92p

of every £1 we spent went on direct charitable activities

WHERE OUR INCOME CAME FROM



Restricted £12.4m
Funding for specific programmes

Unrestricted £4.5m
Core activities and fees

Total income £16,856,891 (2024/25: £12,734,430)

Analysis of income

	2025/ 26	% of total income	2024/25
The Pathway Fund	**£5,871,374**	35%	£3,938,026
Health and Social Care Trusts, including SureStart	**£4,681,795**	28%	£4,333,639
Core business activities	**£4,385,288**	26%	£3,102,751
PEACEPLUS ASPIRE	**£880,641**	5%	£174,403
Project funding	**£523,175**	3%	£527,896
Department of Education Core Grant	**£274,000**	2%	£265,000
Health and Social Care Trusts advisory service	**£91,410**	<1%	£110,056
Other	**£149,208**	<1%	£282,659
Total	**£16,856,891**		**£12,734,430**

Analysis of expenditure

	2025/ 26	% of total expenditure	2024/25
Direct charitable activities	**£14,925,829**	92%	£11,278,889
Support costs	**£1,237,610**	8%	£1,210,980
Governance costs	**£11,750**	<1%	£13,750
Cost of generating funds	**£5,979**	<1%	£725
Other expenditure	**–**		£708
Total	**£16,181,168**		**£12,505,052**

THANK YOU

Sponsors & acknowledgements

Our work is only possible with the support of our funders and partners.

Thank you

To everyone who made this year possible: our supporters and volunteers for your time and generosity, to our host venues for opening your doors, and to our photographers for capturing the moments that matter. Above all, thank you to the families who trusted us with their stories and images. You are at the heart of this report.





LEARN MORE

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