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# Sunnyside Afterschool Club

## A Case Study



STORI  
RIGHT  
LIMERICK



The Club is currently run mainly from the local community centre and it caters for 71 primary school children aged from 4 to 12 years. It opens during the school term from 1.15pm to 5pm, Monday to Thursday and 1.15pm to 4.30 on Fridays. It also runs camps during Halloween, Easter and summer breaks.

The service operates under the Community Services Programme (CSP) which is funded by the Department of Social protection (DSP) and managed by Podal. It is run by a Voluntary Management Committee of seven representatives. Staff are made up of a manager, an administrator, six female site leaders and thirteen male and female staff on DSP Community Employment (CE) schemes.

# Sunnyside Afterschool Club- A Case Study

## Overview

'Sunnyside Afterschool Club' is a School Age Childcare (SAC) service that has been in operation in the Southside area of Limerick city since 1997. It started out in one room of a local authority house, staffed by local people who were responding to a need identified by the local school.

The club was set up to:

1. Provide homework support for children
2. Provide a place where children could have fun with their friends, through social and educational activities
3. Support parents and the wider community to access training and work experience opportunities
  - Parents could access an affordable School Age Childcare (SAC) service which enabled them to take up training and work opportunities
  - Local people who were accessing back to work schemes through the Department of Social Protection (DSP) could take up work experience in the club.

In recent years some concerns had been raised about the quality of care, homework and activities in the Club. While much discussion about it was taking place in the community, no professional or agency had successfully managed to negotiate access and support the service until Start Right Limerick developed a partnership with the Club in 2012.

# **PARTNERSHIP** with 9 Early Years Services and 1 Afterschool Club





# School Age Childcare- Nationally and Locally

## Background and Context

School Age Childcare services (SAC) are designed to offer safe, secure places that children can go to on a regular basis when schools are not in session. They can run before and after school, and often during non-school days, for example summer holidays and when teachers have in service days.

School Age Childcare (SAC) services in Ireland are unregulated. This means there:

- Are no minimum standards for the care of school age children
- Is no official system of registration
- Is no minimum level of staff qualification to work in SAC services
- Is no inspection system for such services (as is the case with services that provide childcare for children from birth to six years who must notify Tusla, the Child and Family Agency under the Childcare (Preschool) Services Regulations, 2006).

Children attending school age childcare services can range in age from 4 to 12. In the absence of specific afterschool guidelines/regulations, some services use current pre-school regulations or international best practice models to guide and support them in the management of their service (Early Childhood Ireland).

In the absence of national policy or a regulation framework for afterschool services:

- *“Provision of School Age Childcare has developed in a very limited, piecemeal manner in Ireland”.*
- Many services are delivered in an ad-hoc manner; the level of training, qualifications and quality vary enormously



# A Service Under Pressure: Challenges for Sunnyside prior to Start Right Support

## Premises

Sunnyside has relocated a number of times over the years. Premises included:

- A number of different local authority houses
- A space in the local church
- It currently operates from two locations: the local Community Centre and a local Primary school.

## Snapshot of one location

One of the previous premises was a semi-detached house. The front of the house had to be barricaded because of constant burglaries. The house was lightly furnished with chairs and couches and the children could only enter through the back door. Staff now describe those conditions as being very difficult to work in and far from ideal for children.

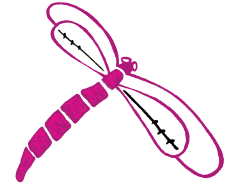
The opening of the local Community Centre (in Autumn 2008) provided the Club with a new purpose built premises in which to operate. The majority of the children attending the Club were relocated there in 2009. Club numbers were high so 15 children remained occupying two rooms in the semi-detached house, which neighboured the Community Centre.

### **Serious Health, Safety and Welfare Concerns were raised by Start Right about the condition of the house**

- Lack of fire safety procedures
- Blocked fire exits
- No central heating: the only means to heat rooms was an electric 'plug-in' heater

## Interaction between Sunnyside and other Agencies

The Club had limited contact with statutory agencies and community supports and services. The two main agencies that the Club did engage with were Pobal and the Department of Social Protection (DSP).



## Pobal

The Club provides child care places under the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme. This is a support programme for community-based childcare services, to provide childcare places at a reduced rate to parents. To monitor this scheme, Pobal carry out on-site compliance visits once a year, or at a very minimum once every two years. Pobal would prioritise a site visit if a request was made from another agency such as the Child Care Committee (CCC).

If a concern came to light during a visit (i.e. child protection), Pobal, as is the case with all agencies, would be obliged to notify Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The site visits from Pobal involve purely administrative tasks such as reviewing child attendance registers and records of payments.

## The Department of Social Protection (DSP)

The DSP carry out site visits at least once a year, which focus on the CE (Community Employment) Programme. This programme is designed to help those who are long-term unemployed and people experiencing disadvantage to get back to work. Again, these visits are mostly administration focused.

## Qualifications & Training

During the first contact with Start Right it was clear that while some staff had achieved FETAC training, most had inadequate qualifications and training to work with children.

### **As a result:**

- There was a lack of knowledge on child development and play
- Understanding of roles and responsibility was unclear
- There was a lack of awareness in how afterschool clubs can improve long-term child outcomes
- There was an absence of training and knowledge in positive behaviour management
- There was inappropriate use and timing of language (i.e. discussing children in their presence)
- There were inconsistent approaches to potential child protection issues (e.g. serious concerns were raised when a young child was observed to be leaving the Club without an adult)
- Staff found it challenging to work with children who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyspraxia, and language delays
- While the Club supports staff to develop their own literacy and skills, there is still significant variation in the capacity of staff to support the children (particularly older children) with their homework.

## Levels of Parental Education

**“How are Our Kids?”: Experiences and Needs of Children and Families in Limerick City with a Particular Emphasis on Limerick’s Regeneration Areas** found that levels of parental education and literacy were significantly lower in the Regeneration areas than in non-Regeneration areas.

Staff believed that this low level of parental education had an impact on the children as many parents had difficulty helping children with their homework.

This meant that there was a greater reliance on the Club to support the completion of homework than might be the case in other areas.

## Club Programme, Policies and Procedures and Practice

Apart from being a place where children could do their homework and have fun, the Club's programme was largely unstructured, informal and unplanned. There were no standard policies and procedures to guide the delivery of the programme..

This is in line with the national picture where School Age Childcare (SAC) service provision is unstructured and varies in quality standards. Children were grouped according to their gender and each room had a varied mix of ages. One staff member noted

*“It was chaos, there was no routine; one child might be doing their homework, another playing, another wandering and three adults standing up talking among themselves”.*

Club policies and procedures were limited and operated in an unstructured way.

For example:

- There was no standard policy to address child safety issues.
- There was no register and daily log of children in attendance
- There was no formal registration process of children,
- There was little information available for parents about the Club itself. Parents had very little contact with the Club; the primary means of communication was through the homework journal
- There was no written fees policy and procedure; Club fees were paid to various staff members on any given day
- There was no healthy food policy. The food provides was of little nutritional value and varied on a daily basis. It could consist of any two of the following items; *a bag of Taytos, a chocolate bar, a breakfast bar, an apple, a sandwich, toast, a cup-a-soup, and juice or diluted drink.*





# Working Together for Change

## Introducing the Start Right Approach

Sunnyside did not fall entirely under the remit of Start Right as the Club provides a service for children up to the age of twelve. It was decided, however, that Start Right would support the club for a number of reasons:

- A group of children were in the age bracket between 4 and 6, and attending local primary schools
- A number of families accessing the Club were also accessing local Early Years services
- The Club is an important part of the community and a place where people connect
- There was agreement among Start Right and the Family Resource Centre (FRC) that Sunnyside should be supported and facilitated rather than continue to operate as an island, separate from all other services.

One key stakeholder said

*“From my point of view it was a local service run by local people and it deserved to be supported...If an offer of support is rejected, then by all means go down the official routes...but offer an alternative and offer help first and give them an opportunity to come along.”*



*The Start Right approach to supporting the Club was very much a collaborative effort from the start and it continues to be. Since 2012, Start Right Limerick has been working in partnership with the Club and a number of other services and supports on up-skilling staff and enhancing the quality of the service.*

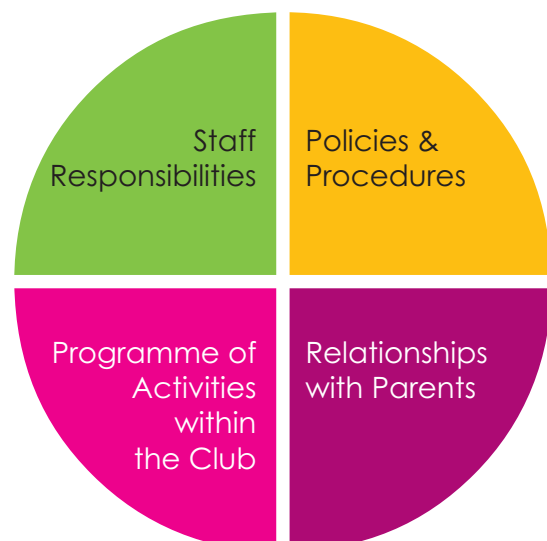
*Key stakeholders include:*

- *The Afterschool Club (staff, children and parents)*
- *Start Right Professional Development subgroup*
- *Start Right Staff and Community Outreach subgroup, including*
  - *Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker*
  - *Start Right Community Wraparound Programme Coordinator*
  - *Start Right Speech and Language Therapist*
- *Family Resource Centre- Children's Services Coordinator*
- *The Department of Social Protection (DSP)*
- *Pobal*
- *The Community Centre*
- *Local Primary Schools*
- *Barnardos*

## Building Relationships

The Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker facilitated a number of consultation sessions with staff. The consultations provided a forum for staff to reflect on their work and to explore ways Start Right might support them.

Themes Explored with Staff





Initially Start Right was met with resistance from Club staff and much of the initial work was around relieving fears. It was clear that in order to minimise staff fears and to develop a good relationship with them, the key supports “*had to join up quite tightly*”.

Through informal interviews with all Club staff, they later explained that there were a number of reasons for their underlying resistance:

### No previous experience working with other agencies

In its 14 year existence, the Club had never worked collaboratively or had support from another service or community support. Previous experiences were mostly with Pobal and the DSP.

Staff talked about how Start Right was their first experience of working in partnership with anyone to support their service. One staff member said

*“We didn’t have a lot of people interacting with us over the years. Start Right would have been the first”.*

Staff gave the example of how for the first time in 2013, with support from Start Right and the Family Resource Centre, they “turned to Barnardos” for support, even though Barnardos had been working in the area since 1997.

### Lack of Trust in Start Right

Staff didn’t know or trust Start Right, and they felt a lot of apprehension and fear towards working with them. They thought the Start Right staff were social workers. They were **nervous** and felt **threatened**.

It was difficult for them to understand **why** Start Right wanted to offer support and work with them. They thought they would be inspected and initially feared Start Right was sent in to shut them down.

One staff member explained, *“When someone’s coming, you think it’s a negative...you think you’re being assessed and nobody likes being assessed, even though you may need it”.*

Another said

*“First, when they came in...we were being asked questions we didn’t know what way to answer them”.*

### Feeling Undervalued

There was a general feeling that the Club had a negative reputation in the community and that it was undervalued. There was a sense that staff were seen as

*‘babysitters’.*

One staff member felt there was not a professional emphasis on the service, that it was

*“just like a bunch of people minding a group of kids and happened to do their homework as well”.*

## Engaging Community Supports

### Working with Start Right and the Southill Family Resource Centre (FRC)

The FRC Community Support Worker played a key role in building relationships between the Club, Start Right, Parents and the local primary schools.

The Community Support Worker had previously established working relationships with each of the other parents, and she was able to help the Club staff to understand what Start Right was about. She clarified its role as supportive as opposed to inspection, and emphasised how working in partnership would benefit the Club. The Community Support Worker explained to Club management that this was an opportunity to create a support structure that would benefit the service in the long run.

It was important that staff were empowered to make decisions for the benefit of the service and ultimately for the good of the children. Start Rights approach to support was about

*“Giving the responsibility back... valuing their opinion... putting trust in them”*

There was a critical point in developing relationships with the club during a meeting when Start Right openly recognised the level of resistance and fear that was present among staff. During these discussions, the Start Right staff emphasised that without cooperation from the staff they could not support the Club and outlined some of the serious issues within the Club and again stressed their support role.

From that point, staff began to see Start Right differently. For many, it was a relief that they could engage openly for the first time. Staff recognised that Start Right:

- Had come to help and support them, not judge or criticise
- Were not just paying lip service, but were sincere
- Were in a position to act on their word and would provide support.

Some staff *“felt a weight lifted”* and others realised that, *“ [they] were here to do us good”*. In terms of ongoing changes within the service, there is now a positive mix between staff being consulted and Start Right recommending changes. Staff felt there was *“a balance between consulting and recommending... [they might say], ABC needs to be done, how would you like us to help you with DEFG?”*

### Working with the Local School and Barnardos

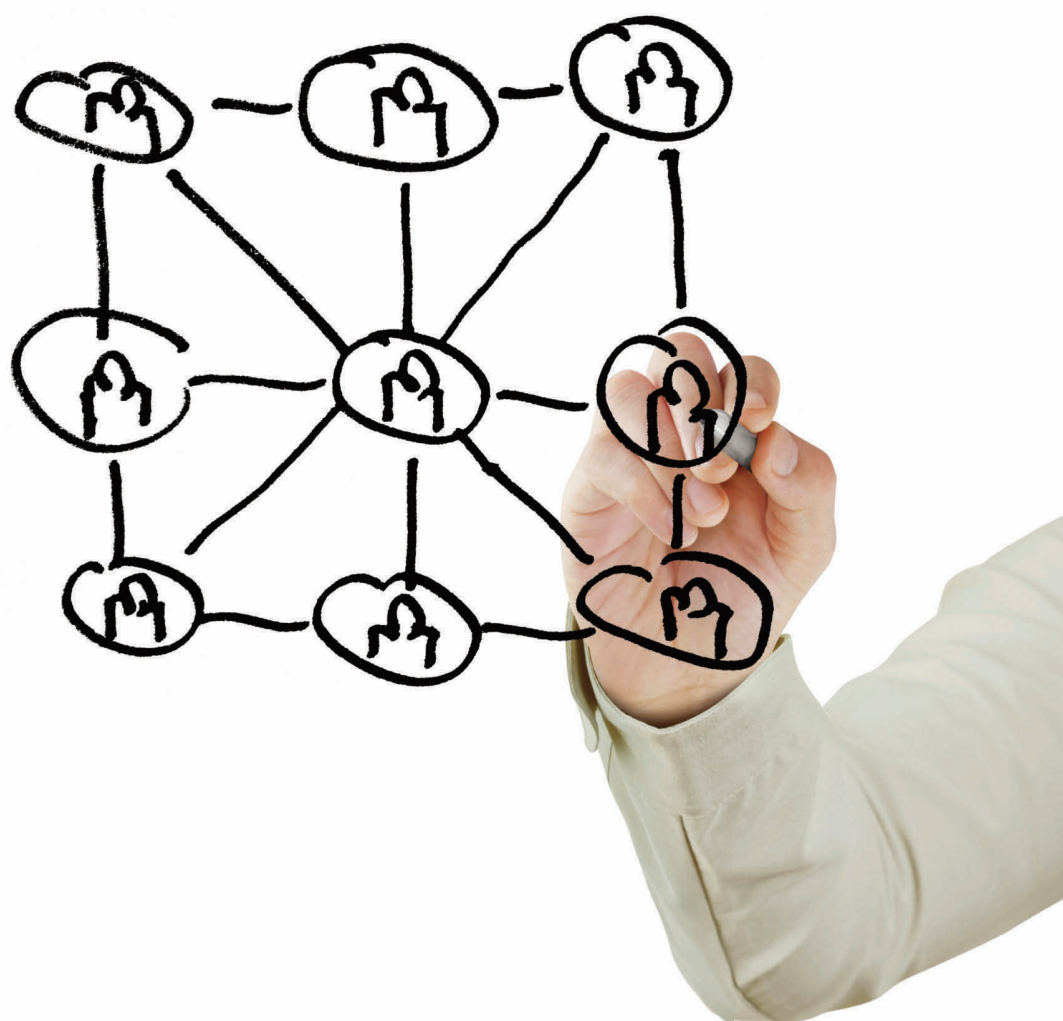
While there were a number of quality issues within the Club that needed to be addressed, one of the first was to move the 15 children out of the local authority house and into a more suitable afterschool premises.

With support from Start Right and the FRC Community Support Worker, the Club worked with the local primary school to negotiate a space to use within the school. The school itself had been operating a homework club as part of the School Completion Programme (SCP). Barnardos had also been operating a separate homework club in the same location. It was agreed that Sunnyside could also operate from the school, although all programmes remained separate initially.



This move by the Club to team up with the local school was a first, and it laid the groundwork for a later decision to merge part of the Club with the Barnardos Club. The move into the school was encouraged and supported by Start Right and the FRC Community Support Worker as a mutually beneficial agreement that would achieve the following:

- Provide a better quality service for the children
- Maximise existing resources (i.e. personnel and materials etc.).





# Making Changes, Improving Outcomes

## Developing Policies and Procedures

Start Right and the FRC Community Support Worker worked with the Club on developing their policies and procedures, and there is now a comprehensive policy handbook available which is informed by up-to-date legislation and guidelines. For example, child protection policy and training is guided by 'Children First: National Guidance For the Protection and Welfare of Children' and 'Our Duty to Care', the principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people.

The development of standard policies and procedures has resulted in the following outcomes:

- Everyone (parents and staff) have access to consistent information about the service
- Staff have access to consistent information that was developed in line with policy and best practice
- There is now standard method and a designated staff member for collecting fees and issuing receipts.

## Improving Food and Nutrition

Concerns had been highlighted by Club staff and Start Right around the quality of food provided for children in the Club. When Start Right consulted staff about what changes they wanted to see for the children, food provision was top of the list.

Publicly funded School Age Childcare (SAC) services are mainly provided in areas of disadvantage. After school clubs can play a major role in protecting children from poverty and social exclusion. A large number of children accessing the Club also access the School Completion Programme (SCP), and many children have breakfast provided through a 'breakfast club' in their primary school. Lunches are supplied at school. It wasn't clear if the parents of children in the Club were aware of what kind of food, if any, was provided in Club.

SAC services have a role to play in providing a service that caters for children's physical health and nutritional needs. Given the length of time children spend out of home during the school day, it was agreed that it was a priority for the Club to provide children with a nutritious meal.

Making changes to the food provision required a number of key people working together:

- The Club manager and staff
- The Community Centre manager
- The Community Centre kitchen staff
- The HSE Community Dietician
- Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker.



The Community Centre, in which the club operates, has a Community Café on the ground floor. The possibility of the Café and the Club working together to provide hot healthy meals was seen as very positive. It took a short negotiation and planning period between the club and the management of the Community Centre, and since 2012 the Café provides hot nutritious meals for the children every day. This involved a period of learning for all.

Initially, there were a few challenges:

- Food was brought upstairs on trollies, and children had their meals in their Club rooms
- There was no set time for meals - food could arrive at any time
- Meals were served in small plastic bowls with spoons.

The impact of these issues on children's social and personal development was discussed and the Club worked with the Community Centre Manager and kitchen staff to develop a mealtime plan. At the same time the Start Right Development Worker liaised with the Community Dietician to provide information for the Club on:

- Healthy meals
- Appropriate tableware
- Portion sizes for school age children.

The following outcomes were achieved:

- Children are involved in menu planning, and a weekly menu is available
- Children now have a variety of hot dishes including stew, sausages and mash, chicken and wedges, and spaghetti Bolognese.
- Set meal times provides consistency for children as they know what time they will have their dinner each day
- Eating in the Café provides a sense that children belong in the community
- The Afterschool Club is a safe and social environment where children can have a nutritious meal and interact with their friends and staff; this social interaction helps to build their communication and language skills and can be a forum to support children's personal development, health and well-being
- Knowing children are fed brings peace of mind to the staff, as one staff member noted; *“Even though they’re not your kids, you know they’re going home with a hot meal in their system”*.
- Parents know what kind of food their children are eating and they have noted that this makes things more manageable for them.

## Partnership with Parents

Parents and guardians are the primary players in children's care and education so it is essential to work in partnership with parents and to involve them in decisions concerning delivery of child care services .

A number of changes were made within Sunnyside that had a direct impact on parents. For example, the introduction of the Child Care Subvention (CCS) Programme brought with it an increase in children's fees.

**Parents were not happy about this change at first, so it was important that:**

- Information was freely available for parents on the schemes
- Time was available to discuss the changes with parents.

Given the high number of children in Limerick City Southside doing most of their homework outside of home, there was a particular need to work with parents.

## Homework within Sunnyside

- The majority of written homework is done in the Club
- There is a maximum timeframe for children to complete homework in the Club
- Parents are responsible for supporting the child's reading and signing of the homework journal





The Club developed a parent handbook with all relevant information for parents. In order to open communication and strengthen the foundation for working with parents, Sunnyside organised an information and registration event for parents and launched the handbook.

This event was the first time parents were invited to an open Club event and the first time parents had access to written information about the Club. It was an important event in which information was shared and parents had an opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns. The message Start Right and the FRC Community Support Worker wanted to communicate to parents was that parents have a right *“to know exactly how services should be working.”*

Encouraging parents to have expectations of services is an important factor in improving the quality of services and outcomes for their children.

The event itself marked an important change for Sunnyside in working with parents and the wider community.

### The Club prioritised working with parents in order to:

- 1 Provide access to clear information about Club changes and promote positive communication with staff
- 2 Create awareness of the role of the Club so that parents could further support their child at home
- 3 Promote the idea that services can work together to give children better outcomes
- 4 Promote open communication about a child, between Club, parents and school (Part of this was the introduction of a new registration procedure where parents meet with the Club manager)
- 5 Support recognition and respect of each other's roles (the role of staff, parent's role in their child's education)
- 6 Empower parents to become actively involved in the service (i.e. help with reading)

## Site Location

Children were relocated from the Local Authority house into the local Primary School. The new premises is a more appropriate space for children's needs, and children can now learn and play in a safe environment

## Room Layout and Club Programme

Before the engagement with Start Right, children were grouped into different rooms based on gender. Girls were in one room and boys in another. Children of mixed ages would occupy the same room. Today, the Club is more child-centred, and children are grouped according to age and stage of development.

- There is a structured age and stage-appropriate programme of activities and routines in place; staff are better able to meet all children's needs based on their age and ability
- Children have access to a variety of activities and use of the Community hall and outdoor sports facilities
- Activities are more appropriate, and children help to choose the activities
- Photos of children are displayed in their individual rooms which fosters a sense of belonging.

## Planning and Teamwork

There is now a greater emphasis on working together as a team in Sunnyside. Each room has a site leader and at least three staff members. Site leaders talked about how every staff member has a different set of skills to bring to the job. As a result of this increased focus on planning and working as a team, weekly planning now takes place, and programme activities are coordinated based on children's age, ability and interests.

In consultation with Sunnyside, it was suggested by Start Right that all staff would have a uniform. The combination of high turnover in CE staff and the other non-Club staff in the Community Centre meant that staff were not always recognised by parents, children and others.

The introduction of a uniform has resulted in staff having a shared sense of identify. It also helps parents and others to recognise who is working in the Club.







## Staff Up-skilling and Development

Staff and management have worked hard to upskill in order to improve the quality of the service and child outcomes. They have undertaken a range of training and development both formal and informal.

**Accredited Training** All six site leaders embarked on accredited Childcare training at FETAC Level 5.

**Start Right Training and Workshops** Start Right facilitated a number of on-site training events that centred on Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Training sessions were for approximately three hours each and addressed a number of important areas:

**Workshop 1**

- Children's Safety, Health, Welfare and Nutrition
- Voice of the Child
- Partnership with Parents, Families, Schools and other agencies
- Speech and language:
- Difficulties, modelling, referrals
- Communication
- Child Contacts

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**Workshop 2**

- Child Protection
- Organisation, Planning and Evaluation
- Positive Behaviour Management
- Policies and Procedures
- Role of Adult
- Professionalism
- Confidentiality

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**Workshop 3**

- Developing a Daily Schedule
- Homework Support
- Arts and Crafts
- Activity Planning
- Developing an Afterschool Programme: routine, space, layout
- Reading Activities
- Writing Activities
- Jolly Phonics

## Staff Consultations

A number of on-site staff consultations and reflective discussions centred on staff roles and responsibilities and explored themes such as:

- How staff saw their role in the Club, their own roles as parents and identifying the common ground
- How staff could improve in their role in order to provide a better service for the children
- What staff expectations were for the service and how staff felt Start Right could support that.

## Changes in Staff Outlook

As a result of ongoing up-skilling and training, staff are much more aware of their own roles and responsibilities. They take their work more seriously and they feel that their practice is more child-focused.

Throughout training, Start Right continuously emphasised staff as professionals and they now identify themselves as childcare 'practitioners' delivering a professional service.

Staff members engage more fully with planning an age and stage-appropriate afterschool programme, and they are more knowledgeable on a range of topics including child development, play and positive behaviour management.

síolta

**Aistear**  
Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



# Sunnyside Today: A New Look, A New Attitude

With a renewed focus on the purpose of the Club and how it promotes positive outcomes for children, the function of Sunnyside has become more defined and more focused on the children.

Staff, parents and children define the purpose of the Club as:

1 A homework support

2 A social outlet where children can meet their peers, relax, have fun and feel like they belong

## Staff Perspectives

### Homework Support

Staff see their role as:

- Supporting and supervising children to do homework
- Encouraging children to be motivated to learn

Where some children may come from families with poor levels of education and literacy, the homework function of the Club is particularly important. Other parents are doing courses or working and some have other children to care for. Having a place where children can do homework makes things more manageable for them.

If children have a lot of homework, the priority at Club is given to written homework and the cut off for homework is 4pm. While the majority of homework is completed at Club, parents are informed of their responsibility to check and sign homework.

### Activities and Social development

The Club maintains a child friendly environment, which encourages children to develop socially, emotionally and educationally, according to their different abilities and interests. The activities of the Afterschool Club (both indoor and outdoor) include opportunities for:

- Sport, physical exercise and play (football, basketball, hockey, skipping)
- Art, craft and creative activities (sometimes staff and children make up their own games and stories or make homemade board games)
- Quiet time
- Time and space for socialising with peers and talking with staff
- Table top activities such as board games, cards
- Use of television, DVD and video gaming.

There is a balance between structured working time and activities. While the introduction of structure is new, some children like it and others do not. Staff members feel that children are respectful and understanding of each other and give time and space to others to do their homework.

Staff members talked about children presenting with various behavioural, emotional, social and cognitive issues. Some children who have additional needs, require extra support to manage conditions such as Dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and language delays. One staff member talked about the hidden issues that children carry with them every day (e.g. family issues) and how important it is to think about the whole child when they come into the service. She said:

*“When a child comes in that door, you can see their school bag right, but they’ve another bag on their back that we don’t know about...”*

*So, when they come in you have to let them have freedom, space.*

*You’ve got to remember that child walking in, they’ve a bag on their back that we can’t see”.*





## Engagement with Children

Children have a right to have their views taken into account in matters affecting them. Children of school-going age should contribute to and have a say in services they spend a lot of time in. Start Right provided training for staff on 'the Voice of the Child' including the importance of taking children's opinions into account in the running of the Club and the organisation of programme activities. This has been a strong theme in all training provided by Start Right to date. Staff now provide opportunities for children to have an active say in the day-to-day planning of Club activities and decisions are generally made through a 'majority rules'.

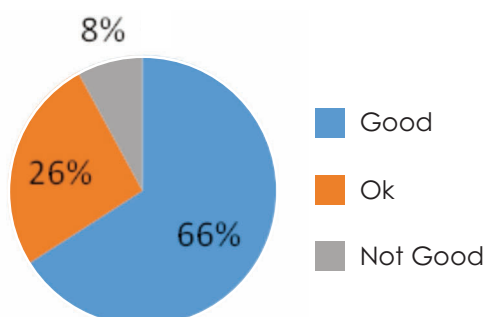
In early 2014 Sunnyside, Start Right and the FRC Southside Children's Coordinator held a child consultation and pizza day to get feedback on children's views of the Club. Floor charts, stickers and markers were available for children to document answers to a range of questions about the Club. This child-friendly way of including their opinions was exciting for children. Staff said children went back to their rooms afterwards talking in delight with their friends and staff.

### Children indicated:

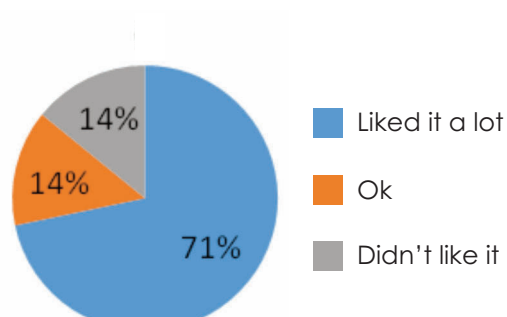
- The things they liked best were the leaders, sports and games, outside play, arts and crafts and summer camp
- Food was the thing they liked least about the club (60%)
- Food was also the one thing they would change about Sunnyside (44%)

- The consultation provided constructive feedback on how the Club was run
- It highlighted areas children wished to see changed (i.e. food and sports related games)
- Staff take these views into account when planning programme activities and developing the service
- Children see they are valued and have a valid contribution to make. This promotes their sense of belonging and resilience. It lays important building blocks such as self-confidence and can protect them from anti-social behaviour.

### Help they Receive from Staff



### Help with Homework



Article 12, in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; "State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."



## Engagement with Parents

In Sunnyside there is now more of an emphasis on parental engagement and a specific 'partnership with parents' policy operates. Having good policies and procedures in place provides clarification for staff and parents, and this information is now communicated to parents verbally and in written form.

Club changes include the following;

- 1 An annual event where information is shared and families can access information on the Club
- 2 An official registration process where the parent and the Club manager sit and discuss;
  - The needs of the child and family
  - Fees and if a payment scheme applies (i.e. CCS)
- 3 Aim to have regular discussions with parents about their child's progress
- 4 Parents are invited into the Club to become involved in activities
- 5 Staff communicate with parents in person and over the phone when needed. Feedback indicates that:
  - Some parents enjoy chatting with staff
  - Others find it uncomfortable, especially when discussing sensitive issues
- 6 Staff recognise the importance of making parents feel comfortable, they reassure parents, invite communication and there is a developing spirit of cooperation between staff and parents.

The changes in the club motivated parents to become more interested. With the increase in fees and the professional focus on the development of the club, parents seemed to expect more of the service. They were asking for receipts, becoming more aware of the policies and procedures and they questioned aspects of the service.

Start Right and the FRC emphasised parents as central to children's wellbeing, education and development. They encouraged parent's right and responsibility to ask questions of a service and parents ability to be their child's advocate.



One staff member explained how training has given her confidence to engage with parents. She said:

*“I wouldn’t have known how to approach the mother a few years ago. I wouldn’t have had that confidence and that assertiveness. That goes back to being told you’re a professional and you can act like a professional and you actually start to believe it”.*

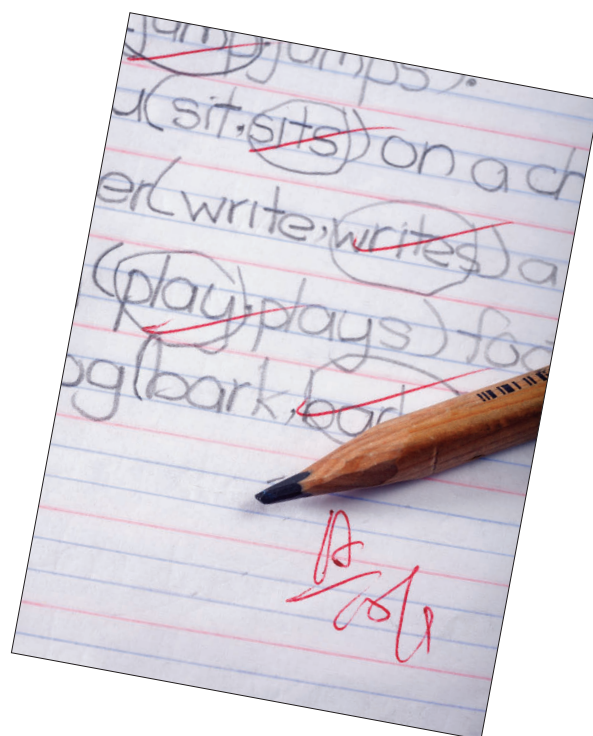
- While there is no parent representative on the Management Committee currently, there is a move towards including parents in the future.

## Engagement with Other Agencies

- While communication between staff and school teachers is not fully developed there have been developments in this regard. Out of four feeder schools, the Club now has contact with two
- A proposal has been put forward for meetings each term between the Club and the three Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Officers from schools of children attending the Club
- While the homework journal is the major ‘link’ between school, Club and parents, in some situations, staff need to be the link between families and school
- Staff occasionally have met with teachers about particular issues relating to children (i.e. homework, behaviour, etc.)
- Sunnyside now has a network of community agencies and supports which they have tapped into and can continue to in order to access support, enhance their service and improve outcomes for children.

## Agencies include

- Pobal
- Primary School
- Barnardoes
- Community Centre
- Family Resource Centre
- Limerick Childcare Committee
- HSE Community Dietician
- Department of Social Protection (DSP).



# Into the Future: Opportunities and Challenges

Sunnyside Afterschool Club has undergone a lot of change over the last two years. While this has been positive for the Club, there are a number of challenges that affect its sustainability.

## Local Changes

A new full-service extended school is being built in the southside of Limerick City Southside. Two local primary schools will amalgamate and move to the new site; a third will be co-located on site. This will have implications for the Club group that operate with Barnardos from this primary school. It may also have implications for the children attending that school who may have another option for School Age Childcare within the new campus.

## Offsite Manager

Sunnyside operates from dual locations (the local Primary School and the Community Centre). The manager's office, however, is still located offsite in the previous Club location, which is about a five minute walk to the Community Centre. This poses a difficulty in terms of best practice.

For example under the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulation 2006, a preschool service should have a designated person in charge and a named person who is able to deputise as required. This person should be on the premises at all times.

There is no responsibility on School Age Childcare services to adhere to this standard and while the manager does spend a lot of time in the Club, not being present at all times can be a barrier to staff management and service development.

## Training

There is a commitment from staff to continue to up-skill. While all six site leaders are completing FETAC Level 5 in Child Care, many of them are committed to continuing that qualification to FETAC level 6.

On-site training and development workshops have played a significant part in staff development and how staff now emphasise the professional status of their 'practitioner' role. The manager and staff now identify their own training needs and have the ability to ask and plan for their own training. The manager uses natural gaps in the year, such as summer, to organise training events for staff.

Staff training impacts upon the quality of the programme on offer to children. As staff continue to up-skill, have frequent planning meetings and reflect on their practice, the service continues to develop. Some challenges in training and consistency of staff are identified:



## Barriers to Staff up-skilling

### The CE Scheme

The majority of staff (13) access CE Schemes and most of these have a maximum term of one year. This means that turnover is high which makes any long term changes in practice difficult to sustain. This reflects on the quality of the service.

It is felt that

*“you just get people to a point where they’re really engaged with the children and really understand their role, and they’re out and the next person is in”*

### The DSP New developments

Since 2013, a CE Childcare Programme is available for CE participants who would like to have a career working with children.

- It takes place over 3 years
- Offers a combination of work experience and formal learning which leads to a formal qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education.

This new programme is not yet fully working in practice and many services may choose not to participate.

In terms of the long term sustainability of the Club and improving outcomes for children, this option would be an important consideration for the service.

## A Shared Space

Operating from a shared space in the Community Centre has its advantages and disadvantages for Sunnyside:



Children now have the stability of a suitable premises

They are part of the community and have their meals in the Community Café.



Sharing the space with other community groups means that displaying children's artwork, hanging mobiles etc. is not always possible.

Equipment and materials cannot be left out overnight, they must be locked away:

- Staff feel this is a barrier to doing project work with the children and can also impact on children's sense of belonging if their art is not displayed in the centre.



## Outcomes for children

While Start Right's initial engagement with Sunnyside focused on improving the quality of the service, the ultimate objective was to support the service to improve outcomes for children.

The Club facilitates positive outcomes for children and families in a range of ways.

*'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, A National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020' presents five interconnected national outcomes for all children and young people.*

### Children will be active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing

Sunnyside Afterschool Club provides;

- Activities that help children develop physically
- Nutritious food
- Play, leisure, Sports activities

- Trained Staff who are more prepared to identify developmental concerns

Club helps children develop:

- Good social networks
- Resilience
- Self-esteem

(These promote good mental health, social and cognitive development)

- Club supports

Early experiences of friendships and positive relationships with adults

(This is a protective factor in emotional well-being and lays the foundations for positive relationships later in life).

1





## Children will achieve full potential in all areas of learning and development

2

- Staff are trained in a broad range of areas including:
  - Child development, child protection, health and safety,  
(This impacts on the quality of the service children receive)
- Staff are motivated to learn and understand their role. They support;
  - Children's educational and
  - Developmental achievements
- Good relationships between the Club, parents and community improves children's engagement in learning, behaviour and educational achievement
- Club provides a balance between formal and informal learning opportunities through
  - Homework
  - Fun activities
  - Socialising
- At Sunnyside children develop social and emotional skill  
(These contribute to their ability to learn)
- Working with other agencies and supports such as Pobal, DSP, Start Right, HSE gives children a better chance of achieving positive outcomes in all areas of their learning and development.

## Children will be safe and protected from harm

3

- Trained staff know how to respond to situations of child safety and protection
- The Club is an important environment where children can
  - Feel and be safe
  - Explore and represent their own thoughts and feelings
  - Learn how to deal with conflict
  - Develop friendships
- Be consulted about matters affecting them
- Club promotes:
  - A culture of Inclusion
  - Children's sense of identity and belonging  
(These support stability in the child's life)

Factors such as a strong sense of belonging and having their views taken into consideration builds resilience and protects children against anti-social behaviour.



## Children will have economic security and opportunity

4

- Universal services that provide:
  - Quality food
  - Opportunities for children to build on their educational development
  - Access to play and recreation; offer children a chance to participate as equals in society
- A strong link exists between parental education and participation in the labour market and child outcomes

Through the provision of CCS and CETS, the club provides affordable SAC which supports:

- Parent's transition and access to further education
- Training
- Work opportunities.

## Children will be connected, respected and contributing to their world

Sunnyside is a place where children build friendships and social networks that include friends, staff, families and other members of the community

These networks;

- Are essential for good mental health, emotional and social development
- Promote educational outcomes
- Help children learn to share and how to relate to others

5

Sunnyside promotes

- Respect of diversity, values each child's culture and identity and is inclusive in its admission policy
- A structured routine that encourages children to work both independently and in groups
- This fosters children's sense of personal responsibility which in turn encourages them to care about and respect others
- Children feel respected and connected when they know their parents and afterschool staff are communicating and working together with their school.





# Lessons for the Future

## National Regulation of School Age Childcare (SAC) services

There is recognition at government level that quality SAC services support children's educational achievement and can protect children from poverty and social exclusion. SAC also plays a role in removing barriers to employment for parents. The introduction of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 means there is now a legal basis to regulate SAC services. To inform regulation and to achieve the five national outcomes for all children and young people, there are a number of measures to take into consideration.

In particular, there is a need to

- Provide a system of professional development and training for staff
- Increase the affordability of quality SAC services.

In addressing the deficit in quality SAC services in Ireland as outlined in the European Commission Report (2013) there are two important considerations: **Quality** and **Affordability**.

### Quality

Quality relates to the aspects that contribute to the emotional, cognitive and development of the child. With the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 there is now a legal basis to regulate SAC services in Ireland.

- 1 Regulations should specify a system of official registration, notification and inspection.
- 2 Regulations should set;
  - Minimum standards for the Care, Health, Welfare and Development of school-age children
  - Minimum qualification for staff working in SAC services
    - Training and qualifications should appropriately reflect the stages of growth and developmental abilities of children who access SAC services
    - A commitment from services to engage in ongoing professional development
  - Minimum requirements for adult/child ratios and groups sizes
  - Appropriate and safe premises and facilities.

Until such time that School Age Childcare (SAC) services are regulated, it is recommended that a voluntary notification process be put in place in which SAC services can notify the relevant authority and therefore be inspected and supported more fully.

## Affordability

As seen throughout this case study, School Age Childcare services have an important role to play in:

- 1 Supporting children's care, health, welfare and development in a broad range of areas
- 2 Supporting parent's transition and access to employment and training opportunities through subsidised programmes/schemes such as Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) and Childcare Employment and Training Support (CETS)

Public funding for SAC services is limited and mainly aimed towards services in areas of disadvantage. Quality SAC services should be affordable to all families and in particular to families with low incomes who depend on subsidised SAC provision.

## Parent and Community Engagement

School Age Childcare (SAC) services can play an important role in encouraging parents and schools to engage with the wider community. For example, given the high proportion of children in this community doing homework in homework clubs, combined with low levels of parental literacy and education, there is a need for strategies that encourage and empower parents to be active in their child's education.

Strategies could include:

- 1 Activities that involve parents in Club and other community events
- 2 Provision of shared community spaces with culturally appropriate books and materials for all families.

The government commitment to achieving national outcomes for children takes a co-operative approach involving all government departments. National outcomes will only be realised when the relevant departments and agencies work together not just behind the scenes, but also at the frontline.

Given the role of Pobal in managing funding, there is a further role to broaden the funding framework to include conditions beyond administration. Factors in child outcomes such as parental engagement, connecting with schools and linking



with other professionals (i.e. Public Health Nurse and Speech and Language Therapist) could be incorporated into SAC service provision. This would place such services in an ideal situation in which to connect communities and contribute to positive outcomes for children. Afterschool Clubs who work closely with other professionals and with schools, have an impact on children staying in the education system for longer. They can:

- Strengthen cooperation between services (schools and clubs, etc.)
- Support continuity for children
- Enables siblings to connect and stay together.



# Partnership

In terms of putting support structures in place and building relationships with community services, a number of important lessons can be learned from Start Right's partnership approach with Sunnyside Afterschool Club.

## Being Present in the Community

Good working partnerships benefit services and the wider community. One of the factors that contributed to the Club building a good working relationship was Start Right's continuous and visible presence in the Club and in the community. The Start Right Coordinator, the Development Worker and the FRC Family Support Worker regularly visit the club and informally chat with staff, children and parents alike. Being present in the community meant that staff became comfortable talking to Start Right staff. Being visible in the community sends the message that there is an interest in building relationships and in being hands-on in terms of support.

## Supporting the Full Service

Supporting the full service provides opportunities for development of all related Club activities. An approach that combines working with management, staff, parents and children is an effective way of achieving better child outcomes.

## Being Open and Available

It was important that Start Right were available and open to being asked questions and through that, staff saw them as a support. Staff feel comfortable asking for support on a range of issues (e.g. child protection and safety, programme activities, etc.).

There is an instant connection with Start Right now, whether through a phone call, making a requested site visit at short notice or approaching any member of Start Right in person. This benefits the Club as Start Right staff are now seen as *"part of the furniture, part of the community"*.



## Building Trust

Being open and honest with staff helped them to develop trust in Start Right over time and in their ability to provide the support Sunnyside needed. Resistance in working with Start Right was strong in the beginning. However, staff now talk openly with Start Right and call on them for advice and support. Where previously staff would be less likely to talk to Start Right in public, they now understand Start Right's role and openly talk with them in front of parents and in the Community Centre.

The combination of building trust, being fully supportive, open and available and present in the community means that resistance has been replaced with a welcoming, positive working relationship and a foundation in working with others has been laid.

*“It’s gone from dread to total respect...  
clearly they were here to help and they did”*

## Empowering Staff

Empowering staff to value their role as a professional can motivate and encourage further interest in providing a quality service. A partnership approach that meets the individual needs of staff can have a positive impact on practice and therefore on child outcomes.

## Engaging Families, Schools and Communities

Afterschool Clubs can play an important role in promoting engagement with parents, schools and the wider community. Through the development of a positive working relationship with Start Right, Sunnyside is better equipped to promote engagement with parents and staff now have the ability to link with statutory and community services and supports when needed.

## Including Children's Views

Successful services involve children in and encourage children's participation in planning. When children feel involved it benefits their social and emotional wellbeing, motivation and learning. It promotes equal participation and inclusiveness of all children and children have a stronger sense of belonging.

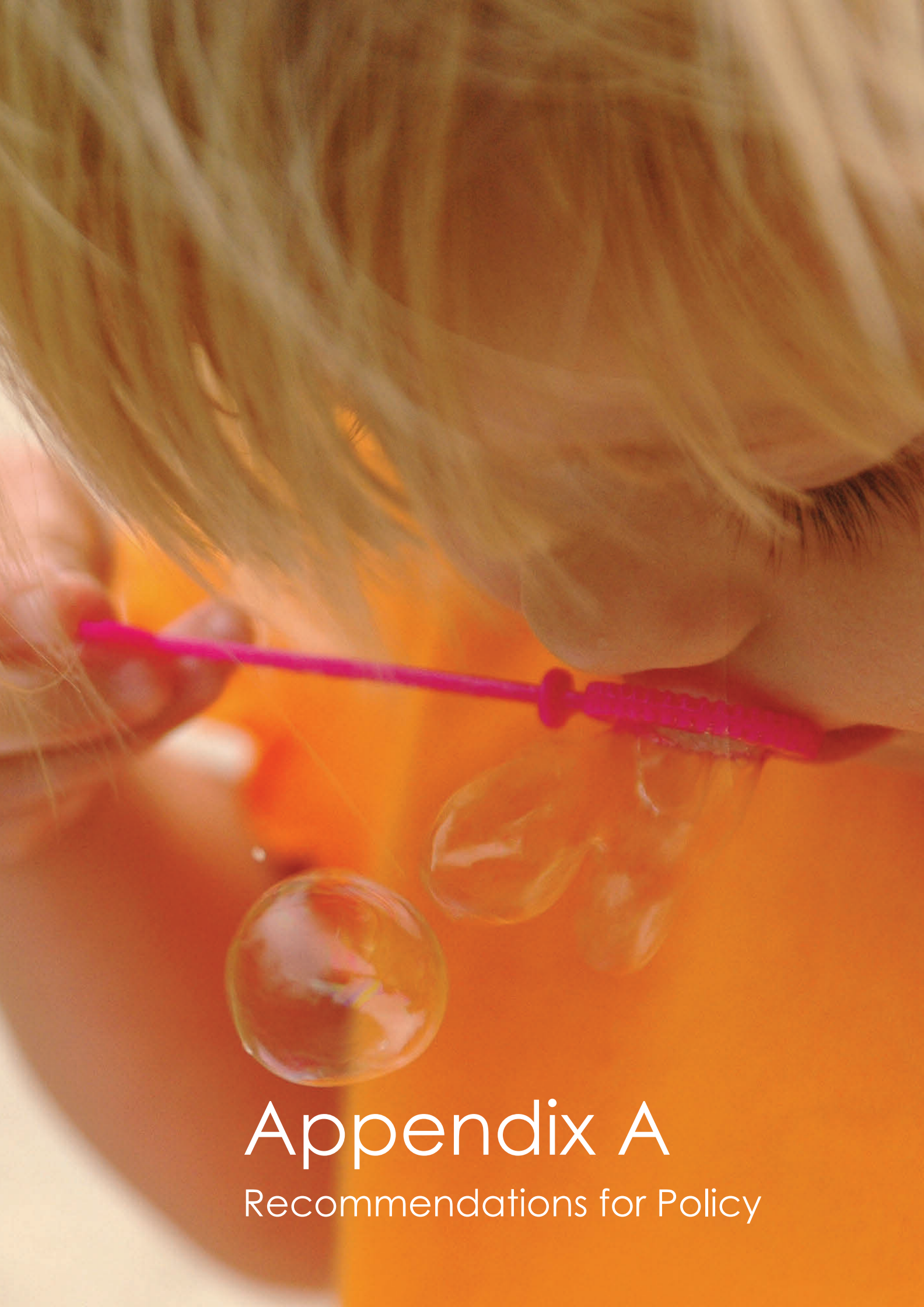


## Final Thoughts

School Age Childcare services support children's education and can protect them from poverty and social exclusion. They play an important role in providing continuity for families in supporting children's education and care. As such they need to be fully supported and cannot operate successfully in isolation from other services and supports.

While quality improvement is a continuous process within Sunnyside and a number of areas still need to be addressed, the Club has come through challenging times; they have overcome obstacles and they are focused on putting children first.

*“They[children] are very happy here.  
It means everything to them”.*



# Appendix A

Recommendations for Policy

# Appendix A

## Policy Path (2005-2014)

The European Commission published the first European study of school age childcare provision in 33 countries . The study published in 2013, found;

- School age childcare across Europe is limited and even more so in Ireland
- Ireland comes second last in Europe, in terms of quality, because of;
  - The absence of qualification requirements to work in school age services
  - The absence of regulation that addresses adult/child ratios and group size.

The recent introduction of the Child and Family Agency Act (2013), and its relevant amendment to the Child Care Act 1991, to include SAC, means there is now a legal basis for the Irish Government to regulate SAC services.

While details are yet to be decided, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) have said that regulation will be "*subject to a reasonable lead-in time and discussions with key stakeholders*".





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Start Right Limerick aims to improve outcomes for children under 6 years of age living in the Southside of Limerick City. Start Right is governed by 3 core principles:

### 1 Sustainability:

The programme will leave a strong legacy of improved quality of practice and service capacity, as well as through the introduction of new practice.

### 2 Service integration

### 3 The involvement of parents

The Start Right Programme serves children by applying these principles in

- a Building quality and professionalism in early years services
- b Offering an improved range of services accessible through both statutory and voluntary services, such as Art Therapy, Infant Massage, and Home-based supports to parents
- c Improving communication and coordination between agencies to ensure that the children are at the centre of needs led, rather than supply led, service provision.

These case studies aim to highlight what statistics cannot: that for practitioners, parents and carers the quality of relationships and interaction between people is as important as the changes being introduced. Whether in the context of improving quality through a practice manager, building confidence in early years practitioners to engage with parents and other services, and learn from each other, or taking the time to support parents who would not have otherwise engaged with services, the stories contained in the case have two common themes:

- Parental engagement is essential to effective intervention
- Quality services require quality relationships

We hope you find these studies both interesting and practical.



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