

Another Generation Awaiting Regeneration

Needs Assessment of Children Aged 0–5 in Dolphin House

Executive Summary

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This document is the report of a study into the needs of children aged five years and under in the Dolphin House Estate of Dublin 8. The study, which took place between September 2022 and March 2023, was commissioned by the Dolphin House Community Development Association (DHCA), on behalf of the Dolphin House Social Regeneration Group with grant support from the Katherine Howard Foundation and the Dublin City South CYPSC.

Context

Dolphin House is a community in transition. For the last 20 years, the community of Dolphin House has been in the shadow of an urban regeneration programme, living with the hopes of a revitalised community on the one hand, coupled with the uncertainty that has surrounded the full implementation and completion of the programme on the other. In that period, the community has witnessed de-tenanting of families and the transition of households from the community to facilitate demolition of existing buildings and the construction of new homes. The programme of regeneration in the area is expected to continue for another ten years.

This study is not about the Dolphin House Regeneration project, but the regeneration process provides an important backdrop to the research. Organisations working closely with children and families in Dolphin House observe that the start-stop nature of the regeneration programme has had substantial negative impacts on children and families in the area. Equally, local organisations working with children in the community have highlighted the impact of the intergenerational effects of poverty and trauma on many families and have pointed to real challenges in children and parents accessing fundamental services in accordance with their respective needs. Consequently, this study set out to satisfy the following objectives:

- To assess current needs of children in the antenatal to five years of age category in the Dolphin House Estate
- To consider the extent to which those needs are being met by existing service providers in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors
- To identify the barriers experienced in accessing services for their children by families in Dolphin House.

Methodology

The study was anchored in national and EU policy directives in respect of all children and, in particular, in respect of the pre-natal to 5 cohort. Critical elements of the research methodology involved qualitative consultations with parents of children under six years of age in Dolphin House, alongside consultations with providers of services to children and families in the area.

The Antenatal to 5 Cohort in Dolphin House

The study pertains to the needs of approximately 50 children aged five years and under in Dolphin House. Naturally, other children will be born in the community in the coming years as the current cohort will also progress out of this age group. This figure of approximately 50 children will not remain static.

Because the number of children is so small, there may be an immediate tendency to suggest that children in the early years cohort in Dolphin House don't warrant particular attention, that their needs will be adequately met within local and wider mainstream service-provision, and that any particular prioritisation of their needs would be an inefficient use of State resources.

However, there is a level of complexity in this community that will not be encountered in many other communities in Dublin, or indeed across the country. Young children in Dolphin House are being born and raised in a community that has experienced a long history of trauma, inequality, marginalisation and deprivation. Equally, they are being born and raised in a community undergoing a programme of regeneration, a programme that has been start-stop in nature for the last twenty years and a programme that is anticipated to continue well into the teenage and/or early adult lives of the current cohort of under six year olds. Though a renewed Master Plan for the completion of the programme was published in 2021, the community inevitably continues to find itself in a period of transition. There is also an inevitable level of scepticism within the community, with fears of further false dawns and further delays in the regeneration programme. Parents and service providers alike have acknowledged in this research that regeneration has left families in an uncertain position, and with uncertainty comes vulnerability.

National policy states that the first five years of a child's life are to be enjoyed as a distinct period of the life cycle. But they are also recognised as the foundation stone for all further stages of that life cycle. A rich and successful antenatal to five year period is a good indicator of a resilient and competent adulthood. The importance of this period in the life of a child, and the complexity of the life circumstances of children and families in Dolphin House Estate, should diminish any concern for numbers and raise concern for the needs and opportunities of all young children from this community.

Key Findings

1. Family and Community Environment

Similar to all communities, some children and families in the antenatal to five age category in Dolphin House are thriving. Others are not. On a positive note, children in Dolphin House are being reared in a supportive community with strong, intergenerational family ties.

Evidence from interviews with 29 parents of young children in the community indicates that all want the best for their children. As with their children, some parents are thriving in their caring roles while others are finding the experience very challenging. Those struggling include parents parenting alone, parents caring for children with additional needs or who are frequently ill, and parents not originally from the area and with limited social networks and supports. Primary challenges facing the above families include feelings of isolation, for both children and parents; a perceived absence of support and difficulties juggling priorities. Approximately two out of three parents in this study claimed that the most difficult stage in their parenting journey was the antenatal to perinatal (12 months) period.

2. Physical and Mental Health

Ten percent of parents interviewed during this study referred to their young children's ongoing experiences of illness, though local service providers working directly with children and families in the community indicated that the number was in fact higher. The impacts of inappropriate and overcrowded accommodation was highlighted as a contributor to child ill health. The wider neighbourhood environment within Dolphin House and Park was also described as impacting negatively on community health. While the recent installation of a children's playground alongside the community centre has been a major addition to the community, increasing children's capacity for play, being active and outdoors, reference was made on a number of occasions to the ongoing presence of fear, intimidation, addiction and antisocial behaviour in Dolphin House.

The principal health concerns within the community relate to mental health, particularly the mental health of parents struggling with the challenges of living in and raising children in Dolphin House. Parental mental health challenges will inevitably impact on parents' capacity to parent effectively. Optimal parental mental health is essential to the health and wellbeing of their children.

3. Play-based Learning

Local learning initiatives, such as Dolphin Crèche and the Dolphin House Homework Club (an initiative of the Rialto Youth Project), are appreciated by parents and service-providers alike. In the context of children in the antenatal to five cohort, these services are viewed as critical enablers of school readiness and educational participation for children from Dolphin House.

Local primary schools point to children from Dolphin House achieving in school and to being well supported by parents and the aforementioned local learning initiatives. That said, concerns were expressed about home learning environments in the community. There is also a tendency within the community to send children to primary school from the age of four, a practice that may undermine the preparation of children for primary school.

Considerable concerns were observed in relation to a significant minority of children with additional educational needs, arising particularly from substantial waiting lists for assessment of need and subsequent delays in the provision of therapeutic supports.

4. An Effective Childhood System

Dolphin House emerges as a small cog in a big wheel. It is the view of this research that, because of the breadth of catchments in which mainstream services are organised and provided, there is little or no prioritisation in mainstream services of the needs of children and families from Dolphin House, in spite of the ongoing programme of regeneration in the area. Children and families from Dolphin House are on services' radars to some degree, but they are certainly not receiving prioritisation in accordance with the complex and vulnerable position of the community.

This in turn raises considerable questions about where the regeneration of Dolphin House fits on the agenda of the State. More specifically, it raises questions regarding the role of social regeneration within the wider regeneration agenda in Dolphin House. What additional investment does social regeneration provide to Dolphin House and which departments/agencies contribute to that additional investment? How do State commitments within the European Child Guarantee manifest within the programme of regeneration?

It seems particularly odd to this research team that no statutory representatives participate in the Dolphin House Social Regeneration Group. It is the observation of this study that, if the Social Regeneration Group is made up only of community and voluntary interests, its focus will inevitably be on small-scale, short-term, compensatory, projects. It will not focus on prioritising the rights and entitlements of all children and families within the context of a thirty-year community upheaval. Similarly, given that it will take at least another decade to conclude the physical regeneration of Dolphin House, the social regeneration of the community must assume at least equal importance as the physical.

Recommendations

This study therefore recommends the following:

- That due recognition would be given to the importance of social regeneration in Dolphin House, reflected in i) the development and agreement of a new, fully-funded three year Social Regeneration Plan, backed and approved by the Dolphin House Regeneration Board, and ii) in the strengthening of the Social Regeneration Group by including representation from Tusla, the HSE, Dublin City Council, the Education and Training Board and An Garda Síochána, thereby building a collaboration of statutory, community and voluntary stakeholders in the social regeneration effort. In fact, many of the subsequent recommendations below are left intentionally broad to allow for a strengthened and informed membership to consider the proposals below and ensure a level of specificity that both matches community need and service capacity.

- That a revised Social Regeneration Plan for Dolphin House would recognise the importance of the early years and prioritise this stage of the life cycle for investment, in keeping with the provisions of national policy and the European Child Guarantee.
- That all proposals contained within a new Social Regeneration Plan relating to children and families should be submitted to the Dublin South City Children and Young People’s Services Committee (CYPSC) for endorsement, thereby ensuring statutory commitment and follow-through on priorities relevant to children and families in Dolphin House, particularly those operating from a prevention and early intervention framework.
- That a strategic and coordinated approach to parent and family support in Dolphin House would be developed and implemented, an approach that would:
 - provide universal services to all children and families in the first year of a child’s life; and
 - offer heightened supports, in accordance with expressed needs, to those parents that have self-identified and/or have been identified by services as struggling to parent effectively.
- Considerable detail on how this approach would materialise - and by whom it would be delivered - is offered in the main body of the report. Features would include:
 - an early identification and referral mechanism for vulnerable pregnant women and vulnerable mothers in the postnatal period;
 - a coordinated and coherent information strategy for parents of babies and young children in Dolphin House;
 - social supports for parents in the form of social groups and gatherings;
 - an extended home visiting parent-support service;
 - a multi-agency coordinated wrap around support system, including an early identification and intervention approach, for families in need of family support;
 - a concerted effort by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, to increase trust in its family support function and, by extension, increase community access to family support services.
- That a strengthened and mandated Social Regeneration Group would not only act as an enabler of public service provision, but would act as an advocate for the community’s needs, particularly in the context of:
 - inadequate and inappropriate housing conditions for children and families and most particularly in the context of children experiencing illness arising from sub-standard housing;
 - reducing delays in waiting times for assessment of need for children in Dolphin House.
- That a commitment to natural beauty and exposing children to nature in the community, both now and into the future, should be an important feature of the regeneration process.

- That investment and training in trauma informed approaches would be delivered across all organisations and disciplines working directly with young children and families in Dolphin House to ensure a consistent, evidence-informed approach and to sustain a professional and effective workforce.
- That, in the context of learning, the benefits of delaying admission to primary until five years of age would be shared with local parents, alongside information on optimising the ELC facility in the community.
- That the Social Regeneration Group would investigate the possibilities of initiating evidence-based interventions in local schools/community initiatives that would provide additional prevention or early intervention capacity in respect of children with additional needs in the community.
- That the Social Regeneration Group would convene local interests to create a programme designed to support the enhancement of home learning environments for young children.

