

A YEAR IN NATURE AND BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

EVALUATION

PREPARED ON BEHALF OF SLIGO COUNTY CHILDCARE COMMITTEE

FUNDED BY HIF, ROUND 4, ACCESSED THROUGH SLIGO/ LEITRIM CYPSC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation examines the implementation and outcomes of the *A Year in Nature* and *Balance Bike Programme*, two initiatives delivered by the Sligo County Childcare Committee (Sligo CCC) under the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4. These programmes aimed to enhance children’s well-being and development through outdoor learning, physical literacy, and professional development for early years educators.

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The *A Year in Nature* initiative fostered environmental awareness and outdoor learning through workshops, communities of practice, and soil health education. Educators gained practical skills in nature-based education, inspiring them to integrate environmental themes into their teaching. Children benefited from sensory-rich activities like foraging, crafts, and water play, promoting both mindfulness and physical engagement.

The *Balance Bike Programme* developed motor skills and confidence in young children through cycling activities. Providing, training for educators, balance bikes, and structured lesson plans to support physical literacy, the programme encouraged active play while building foundational skills for lifelong physical activity.

KEY FINDINGS

The programmes delivered significant benefits for children, educators, and communities:

- Educators reported increased confidence and inspiration to incorporate nature-based and physical literacy activities into their teaching.
- Children demonstrated improved physical coordination, environmental curiosity, and emotional well-being.
- Feedback highlighted the value of collaborative learning and professional development through Communities of Practice sessions.

Despite minor challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and resource limitations in larger preschools, both initiatives exceeded many of their targets. Participants consistently praised the practical tools and knowledge gained, underscoring the programmes’ relevance and impact.

ALIGNMENT WITH HEALTHY IRELAND OBJECTIVES

The initiatives successfully advanced the objectives of the Healthy Ireland Fund:

- Physical and Mental Health: Activities supported physical development, mindfulness, and emotional resilience.
- Inclusivity: Programmes provided equitable access to diverse participants, fostering inclusion.
- Sustainability: Soil health education and outdoor activities promoted environmental stewardship.
- Collaboration: Strong networks among educators enhanced shared learning and professional growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To build on the success of these initiatives, a few key improvements are suggested. Expanding the programmes to include more early years settings, including larger preschools with multiple classrooms, would ensure more children have the chance to participate. Providing extra resources and adapting activities to better support children with diverse needs would also help make the programmes more inclusive for everyone.

Encouraging parental involvement is another important step. Creating simple, engaging resources or activities for use at home could help families extend the benefits beyond the classroom. For educators, follow-up sessions or additional resources would support them in building on what they’ve learned, ensuring the programmes have a lasting impact.

INTRODUCTION

A YEAR IN NATURE AND BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

The **A Year in Nature** and **Balance Bike Programme** represent two innovative initiatives aimed at improving children's well-being through outdoor learning and physical literacy. These programmes were developed to engage children, educators, and communities in meaningful activities that promote environmental awareness, physical development, and professional growth for early years practitioners. By focusing on these areas, the initiatives sought to provide holistic benefits to participants and create a lasting impact on the wider community.



Both programmes were supported under the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4, facilitated by Sligo/Leitrim Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC). The Healthy Ireland Fund, part of a government-led initiative, channels resources to community-focused projects that encourage health and well-being through collaborative action. The funding allowed these programmes to grow into structured projects, tailored to meet the needs of early years services, families, and children across Sligo and Leitrim.

This report evaluates the implementation, reach, and outcomes of these programmes, focusing specifically on the work carried out by Sligo County Childcare Committee (Sligo CCC) within the overall initiative.

PROGRAMME CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

In alignment with the goals of Healthy Ireland, the programme sought to address key areas of child development, physical activity, and environmental awareness. Specifically, the initiative aimed to:

- Promote physical activity and develop motor skills in through the Balance Bike Programme.
- Cultivate environmental stewardship and engagement through outdoor, nature-based learning experiences in "A Year in Nature."
- Build capacity for delivering nature-focused, child-centred curricula via the Communities of Practice.
- Enhance soil health awareness and practical learning opportunities through the Soil Collective.

IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

The programme was led by the Sligo County Childcare Committee (Sligo CCC), which acted as the contracting authority responsible for planning, coordination, and delivery. Sligo CCC played a central role in engaging early years services, managing resources, and ensuring the successful implementation of the initiatives.

Funding for the programmes was channelled through the Sligo/Leitrim Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC), which facilitated access to the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4. While CYPSC supported the allocation of resources, Sligo CCC managed the day-to-day operations and ensured the projects were tailored to meet local needs.

Several key partners contributed to the delivery of the initiatives. The Sligo Woodland School provided expertise and led many of the nature-based learning activities as part of A Year in Nature, while the Soil Collective delivered hands-on workshops focused on soil health. For the Balance Bike Programme, qualified cycling tutors worked directly with early years educators, providing training and support. This programme was further supported by the Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership, which facilitated logistics and promotion.

Educators, children, and families were central to the success of the programmes. Early years practitioners played a pivotal role in implementing the activities and sharing their learning with colleagues, extending the reach of the initiatives across multiple services. Families and children directly benefited from engaging activities designed to promote well-being, physical development, and environmental awareness.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The primary beneficiaries of the programme included:

- Children aged 2–5 years: Participating in physical activity and nature-based learning experiences.
- Early Years Educators: Engaging in professional development to incorporate innovative teaching.
- Families and Communities: Benefiting from awareness-building and participatory learning opportunities.

MAIN PARTIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

The implementation of the A Year in Nature and Balance Bike Programme involved a small but key group of stakeholders who contributed directly to the success of the projects.

SLIGO COUNTY CHILDCARE COMMITTEE (SLIGO CCC)

- **Role:** The contracting authority and central coordinator of the programmes.
- **Contribution:** Sligo CCC managed the planning, delivery, and oversight of both initiatives, ensuring their alignment with local needs and the objectives of the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4.

2. SLIGO/LEITRIM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES COMMITTEE (CYPSC)

- **Role:** The channel through which Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4 funding was accessed.
- **Contribution:** CYPSC supported the administrative and financial aspects of the initiative and provided guidance, when required, in its day-to-day delivery.

3. SLIGO WOODLAND SCHOOL

- **Role:** A key delivery partner for A Year in Nature.
- **Contribution:** Provided expertise and led the nature-based learning sessions, offering practical activities such as crafts, foraging, and outdoor play to educators and children.

4. SOIL COLLECTIVE

- **Role:** Delivery partner for soil health education.
- **Contribution:** Conducted workshops aimed at both children and educators, focusing on sustainable environmental practices and the importance of soil health.

5. BALANCE BIKE TUTORS

- **Role:** Trainers and facilitators for the Balance Bike Programme.
- **Contribution:** Delivered training sessions for early years educators and supported them with structured lesson plans and practical guidance on implementing the programme.

6. SLIGO SPORT AND RECREATION PARTNERSHIP (SSRP)

- **Role:** Supporting partner for the Balance Bike Programme.
- **Contribution:** Assisted with programme promotion, coordination, and resource provision, including the distribution of balance bikes and helmets.

SUMMARY OF PROGRAMMES

The A Year in Nature and Balance Bike Programme were two complementary initiatives designed to inspire children and educators while promoting health, physical activity, and environmental awareness. These programmes, led by Sligo County Childcare Committee (Sligo CCC), focused on engaging early years educators and children through creative and practical activities.

The A Year in Nature programme included three components; immersive nature-based workshops for educators, collaborative Communities of Practice sessions, and soil health education through the Soil Collective. Together, these elements aimed to reconnect children and educators with the natural environment, equipping practitioners with the tools to foster outdoor learning and play in their settings.



The Balance Bike Programme was designed to support children's physical development and motor skills through early cycling. It provided training for educators, balance bikes and helmets for preschools, and resources to ensure the activities could be successfully implemented. With an inclusive approach, this programme encouraged physical literacy for children of all abilities.

TARGETED OUTPUTS OF PROGRAMMES

A YEAR IN NATURE

- Delivery of **8 sessions** for 25 educators, representing Early Years, School Age Childcare, and Childminding services.
- Sessions conducted by Sligo Woodland School, focusing on nature crafts, foraging, cooking, water play, storytelling, and other seasonal activities aligned with the eight Celtic festivals.
- Each session aimed to equip educators with practical tools to foster outdoor play and learning.
- Projected indirect impact on **950 children**, as educators cascade their learning within their services (based on an average of 38 children per service).

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

- Organisation of **4 quarterly meetings**, each accommodating 25 educators, hosted by early years services.
- Sessions included:
 - Peer-led discussions on outdoor learning and nature play.
 - Guidance and expertise provided by representatives from Sligo Woodland School.
 - Tours of the hosting service's outdoor spaces, showcasing practical examples of nature-based education.
- Projected impact: **3,800 children** indirectly benefited, as educators shared knowledge and practices within their services.

SOIL COLLECTIVE

- Delivery of **1 immersive workshop** for 25 educators on soil health, conducted by the Soil Collective.
- Facilitation of **3 classroom-based workshops**, each targeting 22 children in ECCE rooms, directly reaching a total of **66 children**.
- Anticipated cascading of knowledge within services, amplifying the impact beyond the initial participants.

BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

- Implementation in **15 pre-school sites**, including 5 new and 10 refresher sites from previous programme cycles.
- Provision of:
 - **30 training sessions** (2 sessions per site) delivered by Balance Bike Tutors, each lasting 2.5 hours.
 - **10 balance bikes and helmets** on loan to each site for a 3-week period, with 2 bikes retained for long-term use.
 - Structured lesson plans and classroom booklets for educators.
- Estimated to reach **400 children**, promoting motor skills, balance, and physical literacy.
- Needs-inclusive adaptations with modified bikes included.

BUDGET: ALLOCATION AND EXPENDITURE

The Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4 programme received a total available budget of €38,440.18, which included a carry-forward of €1,273.18 from 2023 and an additional allocation of €37,167.00 for 2024. This funding was managed by Sligo County Childcare Committee (Sligo CCC) as the contracting authority, and it supported the delivery of the entire A Year in Nature and Balance Bike Programme initiatives.



A significant portion of the budget was allocated to key partners and programme activities. The Sligo Sports Partnership, which played a supporting role in the Balance Bike Programme, utilised its full allocation of €7,286.00, leaving a minor balance of €0.88 unspent. (Similarly, the Leitrim County Childcare Committee expended its entire allocation of €11,660.00, reflecting full engagement, although the Leitrim portion of the programme is outside the scope of this evaluation.)

The Sligo Woodland School, a key partner in A Year in Nature, was allocated €9,620.00 to deliver nature-based workshops and support educator training. As of the latest records, €6,790.00 had been spent, leaving a remaining balance of €2,830.00 for additional activities or final programme phases in early 2025.

Administrative costs were allocated €2,000.00, but no expenditure had been recorded for this category. Likewise, €2,500.00 was earmarked for evaluation purposes, the role of this report prepared by Meehan Tully and Associates Ltd.

Another partner, Colour Strings, was allocated €3,600.00 for specific programme contributions. By the end of the reporting period, €1,900.00 had been spent across several months, leaving a remaining balance of €1,700.00.

In total, the programme reported an expenditure of €27,636.00, leaving a remaining balance of €10,804.18. This balance includes unspent allocations for evaluation, administration, and ongoing activities, providing flexibility for further programme delivery or future adjustments.

OUTPUTS

A YEAR IN NATURE

The A Year in Nature project hosted workshops focusing on outdoor education and nature-based activities. Sessions were held primarily at the Sligo Woodland School, with one at Cosy Cats Childcare. Each session was designed to accommodate 23 participants, with actual attendance varying slightly.



- **May 27, 2024:** 23 attendees participated at Sligo Woodland School.
- **June 24, 2024:** 21 of 23 booked participants attended at Sligo Woodland School.
- **September 23, 2024:** 17 of 23 booked participants attended at Sligo Woodland School.
- **October 21, 2024:** 19 of 23 booked participants attended at Sligo Woodland School.
- **December 9, 2024:** 15 confirmed attendees (out of 23 booked) participated at Cosy Cats Childcare.

Additionally, future sessions are scheduled at Sligo Woodland School on January 27, March 24, and May 26, 2025, with all 23 places booked for each.

TARGETS VS ACTUAL



The programme's original targets aimed to engage 25 services and impact 950 children, based on an average of 38 children per service.

The actual outputs are expected to reach 23 services and 722 children, based on an average of 19 attendees per session. However, if measured by the total number of services completing the programme, the actual outputs rise to 23 services and 874 children. Using this second metric,

the programme achieved 92% of its target for both the number of services and children impacted.

While the programme fell slightly short of its original target by just two services, 23 services are considered the maximum realistically achievable for this initiative.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The Communities of Practice sessions brought educators together to share ideas and learn from one another in various childcare settings across Sligo. Each session included a tour of the host service's outdoor spaces and discussions on best practices for incorporating nature-based education.

- **May 13, 2024:** Held at Creative Corner, Farmhill Manor Childcare, with 18 attendees.
- **May 29, 2024:** Hosted at Sandcastles Childcare, attended by 15 participants.
- **October 7, 2024:** Held at Tír na nÓg Childcare, with 14 attendees.
- An upcoming session is planned for January 2025 at Holy Family Childcare.

TARGETS VS ACTUAL

The programme initially aimed to impact 3,800 children, based on the assumption that each of the four sessions would engage 25 services/ educators, with each service impacting an average of 38 children.

To date, 47 participants have attended the sessions, with an average of 16 participants per session across three sessions. By the end of the programme, the total attendance is expected to reach 63 participants, potentially impacting 2,381 children if the original target assumptions are applied.



However, the actual number of services represented at the sessions so far is 12. Many of these services have chosen to send multiple staff members to attend, which has proven to be a more effective way for them to gain value from the programme. This approach allows the services to benefit more comprehensively but differs from the original assumption of 25 different services participating in each session.



This difference highlights the need to adjust future programme targets to better reflect what is achievable and practical. By aligning targets with actual participation patterns, future versions of the programme can set more realistic goals and ensure its success is measured more accurately.

SOIL COLLECTIVE



The Soil Collective project comprised multiple events, including a theatre-based experience for children and educators, immersive sessions delivered directly to early years services, and a CPD workshop for educators, all aimed at promoting soil health education and environmental awareness.

The project featured a creative and educational theatre piece, **Soil Story**, performed at the Hawk's Well Theatre on August 22, 2024. The event was divided into two sessions, engaging children and educators from three early years services. In **Session 1**, Inspiring Minds brought 15 children and 3 educators, while Lilliput participated with 16 children and 3 educators, for a total of 31 children and 6 educators. In **Session 2**, Tubbercurry Family Resource Centre attended with 31 children and 7 educators. Overall, the theatre event engaged 62 children and 13 educators, fostering curiosity about the environment and raising awareness of soil health.

The immersive experience was also brought directly to two early years services:

- **Sandcastles Quigabar Childcare** on September 27, where it reached 22 children and 3 educators.
- **Holy Family Preschool** (serving children with additional needs) on September 26, involving 22 children and 8 educators.

In addition to the theatre sessions, the **Soil Story Educator CPD (Continuing Professional Development)** workshop took place on November 7, 2024, at Tubbercurry Family Resource Centre. This session gathered 17 educators and provided them with practical tools and strategies for integrating soil health education into their teaching practices.

TARGETS VS ACTUAL

The original targets for the Soil Collective were as follows:

- One educator workshop, with 25 educators, impacting 950 children (based upon an average of 38 children per service/ educator.)
- 3 classroom-based workshops, with 22 children, totalling 66 children.



The actual outputs achieved were:

- One CPD workshop, with 17 educators. Using the original assumptions for the target outputs, this provides an indirect impact of 646 children, 68% of the target output.
- Workshops with children, involving 106 children and 24 educators, representing 160% of the target:
 - Two workshops provided in the format of a theatre piece (two-parts), directly impacting 62 children and 13 educators.
 - Two on-site workshops, reaching 44 children and 11 educators

Like the other projects in the overall programme, this initiative required some adjustments to its approach to meet the needs of early years services and maximise attendance. If the programme is to be replicated, it is recommended that the target outputs be revised to reflect the practical realities of the early years sector. It is also important to clearly distinguish between educators and services in the targets, as they are not interchangeable.

BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME OUTPUTS

The **Balance Bike Programme**, was delivered across multiple early years settings in Sligo. The programme included two components: a full programme for participants new to the initiative and a refresher course for those who had previously participated.

The full programme was delivered to five childcare settings, involving 16 staff members and 86 children. Sessions were held weekly over a four-week period in each setting, with activities including initial theory sessions for staff, practical balance bike training, and follow-up implementation support. For example, sessions at Sligo Springboard CLG ran from 9th to 30th September 2024, accommodating 15 children and one staff member.



The refresher programme was conducted in 10 childcare settings, reaching 36 staff members and 187 children. These sessions were tailored to build on previous training and included two practical sessions per setting. For instance, Skreen/Dromard Community sessions were held on 30th May and 13th June 2024, involving two staff members and 18 children.

Outputs	Actual Full	Actual Refresher	Actual Total	Target	Notes
Services reached	5	10	15	15	Achieved
Number of sessions	20	20	40	30	Achieved, above target
Staff trained	16	36	52	40	Achieved, above target
Total children	86	187	273 (direct) 400 (ongoing)	400	Achieved, original target based upon an average number of children per service accessing ongoing use of the Balance Bike. The actual programme reached 273 directly, with over 400 (average of 27 children per service) to access on an ongoing basis.
Services provided with loan of balance bikes	5	10	15	15	Achieved
Modified bikes for children with additional needs	--	--	Not required	As required	No services required the modified bikes
Health message to parents/guardians	--	--	400	400	Achieved based upon the target average of 27 children per service

FEEDBACK: A YEAR IN NATURE AND BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

This section presents feedback from 25 people involved in the A Year in Nature and Balance Bike Programme, including participants, presenters and supporting agencies. The feedback was collected through four tailored surveys, each designed to gather insights specific to different aspects of the programmes. These surveys provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, reflect on the impact of the initiatives, and suggest areas for improvement.



The Year in Nature Survey focused on participants' experiences with the nature-based workshops and seasonal activities. Respondents were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the training, the practical application of the activities in their early years settings, and the overall benefits for children's engagement with the natural environment.

The Communities of Practice (CoP) Survey explored the collaborative aspects of the programme. Participants were asked to share their views on the value of networking with other practitioners, the usefulness of the expert guidance provided, and how these sessions influenced their professional development and teaching practices.



The Soil Collective Survey sought feedback on the soil health workshops. This survey examined the relevance of the content, the hands-on learning experiences provided to children and educators, and the potential for integrating these concepts into early years curricula.

The Balance Bike Programme Survey gathered responses on the physical literacy initiative. It focused on participants' perspectives on the quality of training, the

accessibility and usability of the balance bikes and resources, and the observed impact on children's motor skills and confidence.

This section summarises the key findings from these surveys, providing a detailed view of the programmes' reach and impact.

FEEDBACK SUMMARY: A YEAR IN NATURE

The following provides a summary of feedback on the A Year in Nature project, focusing on its impact, practical applications, and areas for improvement.

CONFIDENCE AND SKILLS IN NATURE-BASED EDUCATION

Participants overwhelmingly indicated that the programme significantly improved their confidence to incorporate nature-based learning into their settings. Half of the respondents rated the impact on their confidence as "Very High," while an additional 30% rated it as "High." These results suggest that the programme successfully empowered educators to embrace outdoor learning practices.

"Trisha reminded us all of the wonderful experiences we had with nature as children, and how simple it can be to ensure the children in our care are exposed to these open-ended natural materials and environments."

IMPACT ON EDUCATORS' APPROACH TO OUTDOOR LEARNING

The feedback indicated a noticeable shift in how educators approached outdoor and nature-based learning. Several respondents mentioned integrating natural materials, such as pinecones and leaves, into art and sensory activities.

"Attending these sessions has motivated us to act upon the children's natural curiosities and interest in the outdoor environment."

"In the preschool room, we are more confident in including nature-based activities in our planning."

WELL-BEING AND MINDFULNESS

The programme was also seen as effective in promoting well-being and mindfulness for both children and educators. Sixty percent of respondents rated its impact as "Very Effective," while 20% rated it as "Effective."

"The children seem to enjoy using natural resources, enhancing their sense of calm and focus during activities."

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE GAINED

Participants highlighted several skills and knowledge areas gained from the programme, including:

- Using natural elements in storytelling, such as games like "The Migrating Swallow."
- Understanding the life cycles of plants and saving seeds.
- Employing nature-based arts and crafts, such as observational techniques and safety protocols for outdoor play.

"We loved the idea of stories and action games to teach the children about nature and our ecosystem."

"I am more confident discussing nature with the children. We've explored topics like the equinox, hibernation, migration, and the changing seasons."

INCLUSIVITY AND ENGAGING DIVERSE GROUPS

When asked about engaging children with different needs or backgrounds, participants described nature as a universal tool. *"Nature is universal. Children of many different abilities, cultures, and backgrounds are free to explore an environment that suits their needs."*

"Planting and caring for plants together has a positive effect on the intellectual and social development of the child and contributes to increasing emotional intelligence."

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Participants offered constructive suggestions for enhancing the programme, including:

- Providing more activities focused on soil development, such as wormeries or composting.
- Creating take-home information sheets to share with colleagues and families.
- Adjusting scheduling to avoid late hours or overly physical activities.

"... let the children get more mucky."

OVERALL SUCCESS

The programme was widely regarded as a success. Half of the respondents rated it as "Extremely Successful" in connecting children and educators to nature, while 40% rated it as "Successful."

"I hope that the attendees were inspired to connect with nature themselves and learned how to encourage children to do so through games, crafts, storytelling, and other activities."

FEEDBACK SUMMARY: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The following summarises feedback on the Communities of Practice sessions, highlighting their impact on professional development, collaboration, and nature-based learning practices.

SHARING IDEAS AND LEARNING

All respondents found the sessions helpful for sharing ideas and learning from others, with 100% rating them as either “Extremely Helpful” or “Helpful.” Participants valued the opportunity to exchange experiences and discuss common challenges.

"It is so nice to share ideas and worries with like-minded practitioners."

BUILDING CONFIDENCE WITH NATURE-BASED ACTIVITIES

Every respondent indicated that the sessions helped them feel more confident about incorporating nature-based activities into their services.

"We love the outdoors at (our service)... but felt a bit flat lately, so it was lovely to feel enthusiastic again."

PRACTICAL INSPIRATION FROM OTHER SERVICES

Participants shared examples of outdoor activities or approaches observed during the sessions that inspired them. These included attracting wildlife to gardens, creating free-use play areas with wooden planks, and using homemade kitchens and plants to enhance natural play.

"How they set out their play areas, developed them with the children in mind, and allowed more nature-based play spaces."

"I really liked the use of wooden planks for free use by the children and the homemade kitchen."

SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH DIVERSE NEEDS

Half of the participants found the sessions useful for supporting children with different needs, abilities, or backgrounds, while the other half felt neutral about this aspect; indicating potential for greater focus on inclusivity in future sessions.

PROMOTING WELL-BEING AND A LOVE FOR NATURE

The sessions significantly influenced participants' approaches to fostering well-being and a love for nature in their settings. Respondents noted improved moods among children and more vibrant imaginative play when outdoors.

"It has reminded us of the joy of being outside with the children, how their mood is better and their imaginative play really comes to life."

"Promoting well-being and a love for nature is very important for children's development. The session gave me a much better approach and so many ideas to promote nature in my service."

LASTING IMPACT AND NETWORKING

Seventy-five percent of participants felt the sessions would make a lasting difference in their work, citing ideas and inspiration that they planned to develop further. Additionally, all respondents noted that the sessions helped them build a supportive network with other local educators.

"Connections made with a lot of different services and co-educators so we can network ideas and funding and activities."

"Yes, it has encouraged us to think more about the outdoor space and learning opportunities for our children."

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Feedback on improvements was overwhelmingly positive, with most respondents stating they had no suggestions as the sessions were already enjoyable and effective. However, one respondent suggested offering more sessions in the future.

".. it was a lovely session—really supportive and inclusive."

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

All respondents rated the sessions as either "Very Effective" or "Effective" in supporting their work as educators. The positive feedback underscores the value of the Communities of Practice in enhancing professional development and collaboration.

"Thank you for offering such lovely and relevant training."

FEEDBACK SUMMARY: SOIL COLLECTIVE

The following summarises feedback on the Soil Collective workshop, focusing on its impact on educators' knowledge, teaching practices, and engagement with sustainability.

UNDERSTANDING OF SOIL AND THE ENVIRONMENT

All participants rated the workshop as either "Extremely Useful" or "Useful" for building their understanding of soil and local ecosystems. The presentation style and content resonated strongly with attendees.

"Very enjoyable and thought-provoking presentation."

"I have always been interested in the 'underworld' and went home with new ideas on how to share with children."

PREPARING EDUCATORS TO TEACH ABOUT SOIL

The workshop effectively prepared participants to teach children about soil in engaging and understandable ways, with all respondents indicating they felt well-prepared. The blend of scientific knowledge and practical application was particularly appreciated.

"It was one of the best workshops that I ever attended, and as I have a science background, I really loved it."

ACTIVITIES INSPIRED BY THE WORKSHOP

Participants shared several ideas and activities they introduced to children following the workshop. These included lessons on using magnifying glasses, wormeries, and sensory games such as listening to underground sounds. Others planned to create habitats like houses for worms and snails.

"A lesson on the correct use of magnifying glass and wormeries after Christmas... Silence games listening to sounds of underground when spring comes."

"We have been bringing the outdoors indoors more, using our tuff trays to explore natural items."

"I am planning to make our house for worms, snails, and other bugs."

CONFIDENCE IN LEADING OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Most participants felt confident or very confident in leading outdoor activities related to soil and nature. The hands-on elements of the workshop helped educators feel equipped to engage children with these topics.

"Great experience, lots of room for more learning about this topic."

ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CARE

Seventy-five percent of respondents indicated that the workshop encouraged them "A Great Deal" to integrate sustainability into their teaching, while the remainder found it encouraged them "Quite a Bit." Several participants reported initiating sustainable practices, such as composting and creating worm ecosystems.

"Focus more on composting and food for the worms."

"Collecting egg cartons to make worm ecosystems."

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Suggestions for enhancing the workshop included providing more activities tailored for very young children aged 1–3 years. Overall, however, feedback indicated high satisfaction with the content and delivery.

"To show us some more activities for the smallest children between 1 and 3 years old."

OVERALL SUCCESS

All participants rated the Soil Collective workshop as either "Extremely Successful" or "Successful" in increasing environmental awareness among both educators and children. The positive feedback underscores the workshop's ability to inspire and empower educators to bring soil and environmental topics into their teaching.

"I love that experience, and I would like to join in future activities like these last two!"

FEEDBACK SUMMARY: BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

The following summarises feedback on the Balance Bike Programme, focusing on its impact on children's physical development, engagement, and potential areas for improvement.

CONFIDENCE IN LEADING ACTIVITIES

The majority of respondents felt confident in leading balance bike activities after completing the programme. Seventy-five percent rated their confidence as "Very Confident," with the remaining selecting "Confident." This suggests that the training successfully equipped educators with the necessary skills, with a number of respondents emphasising the safety benefits arising from the programme.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Respondents observed clear improvements in children's physical development, particularly in balance, coordination, and confidence. Seventy-five percent rated the improvements as "Significant," while the remainder noted general improvement.

"Yes, noticeable improvements in lots of children. Some kids are very nervous at first if they haven't used balance bikes before and struggle to even sit on the saddle, by the end of the program most of these kids are trusting the saddle and striding on the bike and much more confident. The kids that were comfortable starting out improved balance in lifting both feet across 'puddles' and cornering etc."

ENCOURAGING PHYSICAL PLAY AMONG INACTIVE CHILDREN

The programme was rated as “Very Effective” or “Effective” by 100% of respondents in engaging children who might not typically participate in physical activities. Educators noted that the fun and interactive nature of the sessions motivated children to become more active.

"I have received positive feedback from centres, and they have mentioned to me that the children have loved using the bikes."

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

The programme encouraged parents to support physical activity at home, with 75% of respondents agreeing it had a positive influence. Parents were reported to have purchased balance bikes after seeing their children's enthusiasm for the sessions.

"I am aware of people I know personally getting their children balance bikes after they participated in the programme to use it at home."

VALUE OF RESOURCES

Programme resources, including the balance bikes and lesson plans, were widely regarded as effective, with all respondents rating them as either “Extremely Valuable” or “Valuable.” The practical guidance provided in the lesson plans was highlighted as particularly useful.

SUCCESS IN PROMOTING CYCLING SKILLS

Eighty percent of respondents rated the programme as “Extremely Successful” in promoting cycling skills and active play among young children, while the remaining 20% rated it as “Successful.”

"Cycling is a life skill, and the programme gives equal opportunities to all children to start the journey of learning to cycle, also gaining confidence."

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

While feedback was overwhelmingly positive, some participants suggested catering to larger preschools with multiple classrooms. This could involve increasing the programme budget to allow more children to participate in practical sessions.

"Often, we try to train staff together so they can deliver it with their rooms, but not all rooms experience the practical element of the programme."

"Would love to see it delivered in more preschools."

OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECTS (FROM FEEDBACK PROVIDED)

The outcomes of the programme's four projects highlight significant contributions to early years education, health, and environmental engagement, with each initiative offering distinct but complementary impacts.

A Year in Nature empowered educators to embrace outdoor learning with confidence and creativity. Practical skills in storytelling, sensory play, and seasonal activities inspired educators to transform their settings into hubs of natural exploration. Children thrived in these enriched environments, enjoying activities like water play, foraging, and exploring local ecosystems, fostering mindfulness and emotional well-being. *"Attending these sessions has motivated us to act upon the children's natural curiosities and interest in the outdoor environment."* Another educator reflected, *"I am more confident discussing nature with the children. We've explored topics like the equinox, hibernation, migration, and the changing seasons."*



The **Communities of Practice sessions** sparked collaboration and professional growth among educators. By connecting practitioners from diverse settings, these gatherings encouraged the sharing of practical ideas, like enhancing play areas with natural materials and supporting child-led exploration. Many participants described these sessions as transformative for their teaching approaches. *"It is so nice to share ideas and worries with like-minded practitioners."* Another participant noted, *"Connections made with a lot of different services and co-educators so we can network ideas and funding and activities."*

The **Soil Collective** workshops brought sustainability to life, embedding environmental responsibility into early years settings. Educators were inspired to create wormeries, composting systems, and soil exploration activities that captivated children's imaginations. Activities like *"collecting egg cartons to make worm ecosystems"* introduced children to the wonders of soil health while promoting sustainable practices. One participant remarked, *"Focus more on composting and food for the worms,"* reflecting the workshop's practical influence. Another added, *"I have always been interested in the 'underworld' and went home with new ideas on how to share this with children."*



The **Balance Bike** Programme boosted children's physical literacy, encouraging even the most hesitant participants to embrace active play. Improvements in balance, coordination, and cycling confidence were widely observed, laying a foundation for ongoing physical activity. The programme's inclusive approach ensured all children, regardless of ability, could participate. Educators praised the clear, practical resources. *"Cycling is a life skill, and the programme gives equal opportunities to all children to start the journey of learning to cycle, also gaining confidence."* Another participant commented on the impact on children's growth, *"Some kids are very nervous at first... by the end of the programme, most of these kids are trusting the saddle and striding on the bike with much more confidence."*

Together, these projects had a broad impact, enhancing early years settings while also reaching families and communities. By supporting educators, engaging children, and encouraging sustainability, the programme achieved outcomes that align with the objectives of the Healthy Ireland Fund Round 4, fostering confidence, collaboration, and a shared focus on creating healthier environments for young learners.

BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAMMES IN ADVANCING HEALTHY IRELAND FUND OBJECTIVES

The programmes, **A Year in Nature** and **Balance Bike Programme**, funded under the Healthy Ireland Fund (HIF) Round 4 collectively contributed to achieving its goals. This section links the benefits of multiple initiatives to each HIF objective, demonstrating their shared and overlapping impacts.

ENHANCING PHYSICAL HEALTH AND ACTIVITY (HIF GOAL 1: INCREASE THE PROPORTION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE HEALTHY AT ALL STAGES OF LIFE)

The **Balance Bike Programme** was central to promoting physical activity among young children. Educators observed significant improvements in balance, coordination, and confidence, with 75% of respondents rating these as “Significant.” Children who were initially hesitant about cycling showed increased participation and enthusiasm, setting a foundation for lifelong physical activity.

The **A Year in Nature** initiative also contributed to this goal by encouraging outdoor play and exploration, which participants noted positively impacted children’s physical and emotional development. Children engaged with nature through activities such as water play and foraging, enhancing their connection to the outdoors while supporting active play.



Together, these programmes fostered healthier lifestyles by engaging children in enjoyable and developmentally appropriate physical activities.

PROMOTING MENTAL WELLBEING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION (HIF GOAL 2: REDUCE HEALTH INEQUALITIES)

The **A Year in Nature** project stood out for promoting mindfulness and well-being, with 60% of respondents rating its impact as “Very Effective.” The programme created inclusive environments where children of diverse needs and backgrounds could freely explore and engage with natural settings. Nature-based activities were reported to enhance children’s focus and reduce anxiety.

The **Communities of Practice** sessions supported this goal by creating spaces for educators to network and share strategies for addressing the needs of all children, including those with additional needs. Participants valued the inclusive practices highlighted during these sessions, which encouraged more equitable approaches to early years education.

These combined efforts reduced inequalities by promoting well-being and inclusivity for both children and educators.

SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH (HIF GOAL 3: PROTECT THE PUBLIC FROM THREATS TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING)

The **Soil Collective** workshop advanced this goal by fostering sustainability through soil health education. Participants gained practical knowledge on composting, wormeries, and sustainable gardening, with 75% reporting that the workshop significantly encouraged them to integrate sustainability into their teaching. Many educators implemented these practices within their services, indirectly influencing children and their families.

The **A Year in Nature** programme also supported sustainability by teaching children and educators about ecosystems, seasonal cycles, and environmental stewardship through hands-on activities. This not only enhanced environmental awareness but also promoted behaviours that protect public health by encouraging outdoor activity and a connection to nature.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND COLLABORATION (HIF GOAL 4: CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERY INDIVIDUAL AND SECTOR CAN PLAY THEIR PART IN ACHIEVING A HEALTHY IRELAND)

The **Communities of Practice** sessions excelled in strengthening professional networks and collaboration among early years educators. All participants found the sessions helpful for sharing ideas and learning from others. These connections supported a ripple effect, where knowledge and practices shared in the sessions were implemented across multiple services.



Similarly, the **Soil Collective** workshop empowered educators with new skills to teach sustainability effectively, which they shared within their teams. The **Balance Bike Programme** reinforced this goal by equipping educators with confidence and resources to deliver structured physical literacy activities, enhancing their capacity to promote active play in their settings.

Together, these programmes strengthened the early years sector's ability to deliver impactful, health-focused initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The combined benefits of the A Year in Nature, Balance Bike Programme, Communities of Practice, and Soil Collective demonstrate a cohesive and strategic alignment with the goals of the Healthy Ireland Fund Round 4. By addressing multiple objectives through complementary initiatives, these programmes collectively contributed to improving health, fostering inclusivity, promoting sustainability, and building capacity in the early years sector.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

This section outlines the challenges identified during the implementation of the programmes, offering insights into areas for potential improvement and growth.

- Some projects were based on targets that didn't fully match practical realities. For example, confusion arose between counting services and educators, which made the targets harder to meet and track.
- To maximise attendance, the programme had to adjust its approach to fit the schedules and needs of early years services. This balancing act between ambitious goals and the realities of the sector remains a key challenge.
- One of the key issues identified was time constraints and scheduling conflicts. In the Communities of Practice sessions, some participants noted that balancing their work and other commitments made it difficult to attend. While the sessions were highly regarded, more flexible scheduling options could make them accessible.
- Resource limitations, e.g., the number of bikes, were another challenge, particularly for larger preschools involved in the Balance Bike Programme. In settings with multiple classrooms, ensuring all children had an equal opportunity to participate was difficult. While the resources provided were appreciated, increasing the number of bikes or expanding the programme's capacity would make it more inclusive.
- For the Soil Collective workshops, some participants highlighted a need for more age-appropriate activities for younger children, especially those aged 1–3 years. While the content was engaging for older children, developing additional resources tailored to younger age groups could enhance the programme's reach and effectiveness.
- Inclusivity also emerged as an area requiring more attention. Feedback from the Communities of Practice sessions suggested that participants would have welcomed more strategies to support

children with additional needs or from diverse backgrounds. Strengthening this focus could ensure the programme's benefits are accessible to all children, regardless of their circumstances.

- Parental engagement was highlighted as an area with untapped potential. In both A Year in Nature and the Balance Bike Programme, participants felt that involving parents more actively through workshops or take-home activities could extend the impact of the programmes beyond early years settings, fostering stronger links between families and educators.
- Several participants across projects suggested the need for follow-up support. While the workshops and sessions were impactful, ongoing support—such as check-ins or additional resources—would help educators sustain and deepen the practices learned during the programmes.
- Programme reach was also a recurring theme. Feedback indicated a desire to extend the initiatives to more preschools and early years services, ensuring that a wider range of educators and children could benefit. The Balance Bike Programme, for instance, was well-received but limited in its capacity to reach a greater number of participants.
- Finally, while feedback surveys provided valuable insights, there was a noted lack of a structured evaluation framework to measure the long-term impact of the programmes. Incorporating more comprehensive evaluation methods could help track outcomes and identify areas for future improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMME RENEWAL AND IMPROVEMENT

Based upon all the information gathered during the course of this evaluation, the following outlines recommendations for renewing and enhancing the programme, focusing on each of the four projects and their potential for greater impact.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMME MONITORING

- Future programmes should make a clear distinction between services and educators when setting target outputs. Treating them as the same can lead to confusion and inaccuracies in calculating the indirect number of children impacted.
- Targets should be realistic and consider the actual number of early years services likely to attend workshops, sessions, or events.
- Future programme designs and targets should align more closely with the practical realities of the early years sector. For instance, recognising that services often prefer to send multiple staff members rather than a single representative would better reflect how they engage with training opportunities.

A YEAR IN NATURE

PROGRAMME RENEWAL

- Continue offering seasonal workshops, as participants highly valued the alignment with nature and Celtic festivals.
- Maintain the focus on practical, nature-based activities that can be easily implemented in early years settings.

IMPROVEMENTS

- **Inclusivity:** Expand the range of activities to include more tailored options for children with additional physical or cognitive needs.
- **Parental Engagement:** Introduce take-home activities or workshops for parents to encourage a connection to nature beyond the classroom.
- **Sustainability Tools:** Provide more comprehensive materials, such as reusable nature kits, for services to continue nature-based activities throughout the year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Offer additional sessions or follow-ups to support educators in embedding these practices long-term.
- Include pre- and post-programme evaluations to measure children's developmental and emotional engagement with nature.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

PROGRAMME RENEWAL

- Continue hosting quarterly sessions, as educators found the networking and shared learning opportunities invaluable.
- Retain expert input from organisations like Sligo Woodland School to provide inspiration and practical advice.

IMPROVEMENTS

- **Inclusivity:** Increase focus on strategies to support children with diverse needs, which was identified as a less impactful area.
- **Scheduling:** Ensure session times are accessible to all participants, particularly those balancing work and personal commitments.
- **Resources:** Develop session summaries or digital toolkits to enable attendees to share key learnings with colleagues who could not attend.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the reach by offering online Communities of Practice sessions, enabling participation from a broader audience.
- Increase frequency, providing bi-monthly or monthly opportunities for networking and idea-sharing.

SOIL COLLECTIVE

PROGRAMME RENEWAL

- Retain the focus on soil health and sustainability, as participants valued the hands-on workshops and practical applications.
- Continue integrating scientific knowledge with early childhood education to empower educators with confidence in teaching environmental topics.

IMPROVEMENTS

- **Age-Appropriate Activities:** Develop additional resources for younger children (aged 1–3), addressing feedback on this gap.
- **Expansion:** Offer more sessions to include additional preschools and educators, as demand for these workshops appears strong.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create partnerships with local environmental groups to enrich content and provide additional expertise.
- Introduce interactive digital resources, such as videos or apps, to supplement in-person learning.

BALANCE BIKE PROGRAMME

PROGRAMME RENEWAL

- Continue delivering the programme to preschools, as it has demonstrated strong outcomes in improving children’s motor skills and physical literacy.
- Maintain the focus on engaging children of all abilities, including inclusive elements for children with additional needs.

IMPROVEMENTS

- **Resource Allocation:** Increase the number of bikes provided to larger preschools to ensure all children can participate equally.
- **Parent-Focused Resources:** Develop take-home guides or tips for parents to encourage cycling at home.
- **Advanced Training:** Offer refresher training for educators who participated in previous cycles, helping them build on their skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the programme to include after-school or community settings, reaching children who may not be in early years services.
- Partner with local sporting or recreational organisations to extend the programme’s reach and offer follow-up activities.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ENTIRE PROGRAMME

CROSS-PROGRAMME INTEGRATION

- Foster stronger links between the four projects to maximise their collective impact. For example, incorporating sustainability elements from the Soil Collective into A Year in Nature or Balance Bike activities into Communities of Practice sessions.

INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY

- Expand the programme to include more educators and preschools, particularly in underserved or rural areas. Providing online components could also enhance accessibility.

LONG-TERM IMPACT

- Enable past participants to share experiences and support each other in sustaining the practices learned, possibly through a simple online network forum, case studies or models of good practice.

PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Strengthen links between the programme and families or local communities by offering workshops or resources tailored for wider use beyond those attending early years services.