

StartBright

DCU

Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



**Early Childhood
Research Centre**



StartBright Early Learning Centres Evaluation Report

www.startbright.ie

December 2025



About the DCU Early Childhood Research Centre

The DCU Early Childhood Research Centre (DCU ECRC) is an interdisciplinary research centre led by Professor Mathias Urban, Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education.

Research and academic activity within DCU ECRC involves the investigation of policies and politics, pedagogies and practices in early childhood, locally and internationally, from a critical perspective informed by a shared interest in the transformative potential of collaborative research. We actively promote close collaboration between research, policy and practice in the field.

DCU ECRC has a particular focus on work with young children (from birth to 8), families, and communities, from a critical theory perspective, with an emphasis on diversity and social justice.

Following a competitive tendering process, DCU ECRC was commissioned by StartBright to undertake the research for the evaluation of the StartBright Model.

This evaluation was designed and conducted in conjunction with a separate research project conducted by DCU ECRC and funded by Taighde Éireann (Enhancing Civic Society: Towards alternative community-based models of early childhood education and care).

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This report was produced by members of the Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) at Dublin City University as a summary of the work carried out from January to December 2025. Information given in this document, as well as conclusions drawn from it, represent only the views of the authors.

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Executive summary

Whole-organisation participatory process

This report presents the design, process, findings, and recommendations of a 12-months participatory evaluation process, conducted by DCU ECRC in close collaboration with members of the StartBright community. For the purpose of this report, 'StartBright community' refers to members or representatives of all elements of the StartBright Early Learning Centres organisation. The evaluation focused on the organisation's strategic orientation, the StartBright Way, and aimed at identifying key factors that characterise StartBright as a model of best practice.

StartBright Community

The report documents the views of members of the groups that constitute the StartBright community, as expressed and gathered in series of evaluation workshops, conversations, group discussions, and interviews. These first-hand perspectives were complemented by substantive documentation provided by StartBright.

The evaluation was designed, developed, and carried out as a comprehensive, inclusive, and community- and whole-organisation-wide process.

Therefore, for the purpose of this report, 'StartBright Community' refers to a wide range of stakeholders and partners including educators, service managers, family facilitators, quality mentor, CEO and senior management, voluntary board of directors, ancillary teams (cooks, cleaners) and families.

The evaluation design is guided by principles of *Empowerment Evaluation* (Fetterman et al) and *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (Patton), as defined by the American Evaluation Association (AEA). Therefore, this report is neither a traditional academic piece of writing, nor is it a mere technical report. Instead, it is written for two audiences:



Who this report is for

1. Internally, to support all members of the StartBright community in gaining better insights into the coherence of the StartBright model, and to inspire their individual and collective agency in continuous improvement.

2. Externally, for those shaping the external operational context and conditions for early childhood education and care services in Ireland at national and local level (e.g. policy makers). The aim here is to provide insights into the combination of value-based, strategic, and operational success factors that characterise the organisation. In short, to put a spotlight on what makes StartBright unique. We address the critical contextual and systemic conditions (e.g. policy, funding) that would be required to sustain the organisation. We point out how the existing reality of the wider early childhood system puts unnecessary strain on the organisation and, in consequence, puts its sustainability at risk.

Ensuring that external decision makers recognise and proactively address these contextual factors is critical not only for the organisation at the centre of this report. It will be fundamental for realising the full potential of community-based non-profit early childhood services as a critical part of the solution to an early childhood system in crisis. But only if developed and supported at scale.

Addressing the two groups of intended users of the evaluation, the report provides two sets of recommendations, one for consideration by the StartBright community, and one for external decision makers. Drawn from the participatory evaluation process and presented in this report are high-level but actionable conclusions and recommendations. They are meant for consideration by the StartBright community as well as external decision makers, to help orient further discussion and planning for concrete action. We suggest that implementation of high-level recommendations of this report should be underpinned by additional sources, for instance the report of the research project Enhancing Civic Society: Towards alternative community-based models of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (DCU ECRC 2026, Taighde Éireann NF/2024/11766).

Purpose

This report presents the design, implementation, and findings of an evaluation led by the DCU ECRC to review and document the StartBright Way and StartBright as a model of best practice. This evaluation is intended to validate current strengths, identify areas for strategic enhancement, and provide a roadmap for future development.

Conceptual Framework

The evaluation design intentionally moves beyond a traditional assessment model, adopting a robust conceptual framework rooted in Empowerment Evaluation and Utilization-focused Evaluation. This approach ensures that the review not only produces reliable data but also serves as a catalyst for organisational learning and strategic implementation.

Key learnings from the evaluation

I. Cohesion and shared understandings across diversity

This sums up probably the most critical finding regarding the unique characteristic of the StartBright Early Learning Centres organisation. Critical factors that enable StartBright to provide early childhood services of consistent high quality are shared, and expressed in similar terms, by all groups that took part in the evaluation. The level of shared understanding was evident in three aspects:

1. Self-image and community perception

A critical success factor for making a complex organisation like StartBright not only 'work' but thrive in unique and dynamic ways is a strong cohesion between the self-image of the organisation expressed at central level (e.g. mission, strategy, practices) and the way this is perceived by all members of the organisation regardless of their respective roles and locations

2. Shared understandings of key areas to focus on

The coherent identity as expressed across the organisation in all its complexity enables a shared focus on the key areas necessary to realise the StartBright mission:

- Excellence
- Inclusivity, Respect and Values
- Holistic and child-centred approach
- Environment and Wellbeing

3. Shared understanding of critical activities

Equally evident is that participants from across the organisation agree on a set of critical activities – i.e. practices that create and maintain the uniqueness of the StartBright organisation:

- Reflecting
- Adapting
- Respecting
- Planning
- Listening

II. Critical contextual conditions

StartBright 'works' first and foremost because of the strong commitment of all members of the StartBright community to providing the best possible quality of early childhood services to children and families in underserved communities. However, realising the quality and level of service provided by StartBright depends on critical contextual conditions both inside and outside the organisation. Early on, StartBright made the strategic decision to centralise strong leadership, and to free up leadership capacity at the level of the individual early childhood services combined under the StartBright umbrella. Key elements of this strategy were:

- Centralising leadership responsibility, expertise, and capacity in one Board serving all StartBright centres
- Creation of the roles of CEO and Quality mentor
- Centralising finance and administration

These pillars enable coherent strategic development for the entire organisation and, at the same time, remove reporting and administrative burden from managers of the individual ECEC services, thus increasing their capacity to focus on realising excellent care and education experiences for children.

While the resulting (and highly effective) governance structure is grounded in strategic decisions made internally, by StartBright, it is impacted by external conditions. Most critically, the existing public funding and administration system does not sufficiently recognise the roles necessary to run a multi-site non-profit, community-focused early childhood organisation like StartBright. That means resources to create and maintain the model have to be found within existing funding streams and through constant, time-consuming applications for various alternative funding sources.

Key recommendations

In line with the *Key Learnings* (above) the recommendations drawn from the evaluation process address both *internal* and *external* factors. Both sets of recommendation draw on the documented views of the StartBright community (see section four). The recommendations voiced by the community inform the consolidated set of recommendations, as suggested for consideration by the evaluation team, in section six.

Internal factors can be considered and addressed by the StartBright organisation in line with future strategic development. They are concerned with critical questions of organisational sustainability, including addressing (over-)reliance on individuals occupying pivotal roles and succession planning.

External factors require addressing at policy level. They are concerned with the conditions necessary to create and sustain an 'effective' ('competent') early childhood system for ALL children and families, as envisaged in First5. *A whole-of-government-strategy for babies, young children, and their families.*

With the StartBright model of Social Enterprise, if brought to scale, government can make an important contribution to resolving the persistent crisis and dysfunction of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care system. This requires clear and long-term political commitment by government, resourcing and funding structures that recognise the requirements of Social Enterprise modelled on StartBright, and sustainable, long-term funding at the very least.

Structure of the report

Following a short introduction, this report contains six sections and complementing appendices.

Section 1 of the report introduces the StartBright Early Learning Centres organisation, its mission (StartBright Way), its organisational structure, and strategic orientation (Strategic Plan). Included in this section is an overview of the individual early childhood services that are currently combined under the StartBright umbrella. The purpose of this section is to provide a thorough introduction to StartBright and its unique practices to an external audience, including policy makers, who may not be familiar with the model.

Section 2 presents the conceptual framework and practical design of the evaluation.

Section 3 considers the governance structure of the StartBright organisation, and its role in creating and sustaining the high quality and effectiveness of services provided.

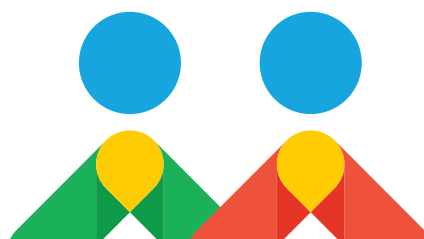
Section 4 documents how members of the StartBright community perceive and describe the StartBright model, drawing on their everyday lived experiences in their respective roles in the organisation. The views presented in this section are the results of two interactive workshops, open to all members of the community. Following the presentation of participants' general perception of the StartBright Way the section then presents and discusses the views of members of the StartBright community, drawing on further information gathered from documentation, and in interviews and group discussions on each of the four goals of the StartBright Strategic Plan 2024-26:

Optimisation-StartBright Way-Community access and inclusion-Governance

The *success factors, challenges, and initial recommendations* identified by the community are listed in detail in Appendix 5.

Section 5 draws on the voices of the community, combined with further analysis by the evaluation team. It outlines two sets of recommendations, aimed at the intended users of this report:

- 1. The StartBright community, for consideration and reflection**
- 2. External agents including policy makers** with responsibility for shaping the conditions under which community-based non-profit early childhood services like StartBright can thrive and gain long-term sustainability.



Introduction

This report documents the design, implementation, and findings of an independent evaluation led by the DCU ECRC under the StartBright commission.

The primary purpose of this evaluation was to review and document the StartBright Way and StartBright as a model of best practice. This evaluation is reflective and supportive of the StartBright Strategic Plan 2024–2026, which was developed based on staff expertise and experience, as well as their thorough understanding of the communities' interests. This assessment is intended to validate current strengths, identify areas for strategic enhancement, and provide a roadmap for future development. For these purposes, the evaluation has been intentionally designed as a community-wide, whole-organisation process to ensure broad input and engagement from all stakeholders.

This evaluation report is structured to fulfil the following five specific objectives and scopes the findings accordingly:

Review and evaluation.	To critically review the way StartBright delivers high-quality services and determine the organisation as a model of best practice.
Whole-organisation process.	To document the development of the evaluation as a comprehensive, community-wide, and whole-organisation process, incorporating the voices and perspectives of relevant stakeholders and partners (educators, service managers, family facilitators, administrative and ancillary teams (cooks, cleaners), senior management, voluntary board of directors, families, through the entire evaluation process.
Strategic alignment.	To ensure the evaluation process is reflective of and supportive of the strategic priorities outlined in the StartBright Strategic Plan 2024–2026.
Empowering assessment.	To employ an empowering evaluation methodology that assesses StartBright as a model of best practice, while simultaneously identifying critical challenges and capitalising on emergent opportunities for improvement.
Social impact documentation.	To develop specific, actionable recommendations for designing and implementing a robust model to document StartBright's social impact within the community.

In what follows, this report first establishes the organisational context and the participatory methodological approach to the evaluation. It then details the community's main inputs regarding their understanding of the StartBright model, as well as the key factors of success, challenges and recommendations for improvement named by the community. The report concludes by presenting a set of key recommendations, suggested by the research team, and designed to be practical and to directly support StartBright's commitment to delivering high-quality, impactful ECEC services.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation report is the documentation of a collective effort. As such, it very much represents the 'StartBright way', based on supportive relationships and partnerships.

As a research team, we are indebted to the StartBright community, who freely gave their time to respond to our questions and engage in various activities suggested by us. We are sincerely grateful for the active involvement and assistance of all of you during the evaluation process. Sincere thanks to all the StartBright staff who gave so generously of their time to share their enthusiasm and expertise for this report. Thank you for sharing your insights and perspectives, individually and collectively. Thank you, too, for providing feedback to our reading of your views and our (always preliminary) conclusions, and for listening with interest to our suggestions. You own this evaluation!



Section One

StartBright Early Learning Centres

StartBright is a non-profit, charitable organisation that provides early childhood education and care services to children, families, and communities in south-west Dublin. StartBright operates a social enterprise model, overseen by a voluntary Board of directors, and directed at a central head office by the chief executive officer, operations manager, accounts manager, finance controller and quality mentor.

The StartBright head office centralises services (strategic leadership, operational oversight, quality mentorship, finance) for seven early childhood education and care services in south-west Dublin.

StartBright operations are guided by a comprehensive value-based model, the StartBright Way.

Organisational development follows a Strategic Plan 2024-2026.

The section below sums up the key components of the StartBright organisation.

History and beginnings: From Dublin West Childcare & Learning Services to StartBright Early Learning Centres

StartBright Early Learning Centres

StartBright began in 2011, when it was founded as Dublin West Childcare & Learning Services. Over the past 15 years, they have grown from four centres to seven. Today, StartBright is a registered charity (20075026) that aims to provide excellent early childhood education and school-aged childcare to over **480** children and their families across seven centres based in Clondalkin, Lucan & Tallaght. StartBright employ **more than 85** professionals, with head office leadership support for operations and strategy delivery.



Mission

Empower and enable children, their families and communities in South-West Dublin, through the delivery of exceptional early education services.

Timeline

2011

StartBright ELC (formerly known as Dublin West Childcare & Learning Services) was formed when four community services in Clondalkin & Lucan merged to improve financial accountability and sustainability, HRM, and governance of community providers.

2016

Dublin West reopened the recently closed St Mary's Childcare service to continue to deliver Early Childhood services to children and families across the Greenhills Road community in Tallaght.

2019

The organisation rebranded to StartBright ELC with a revised vision, mission and strategic plan for future growth and development as a community educational organisation.

2022

StartBright Brookview and StartBright St Finians joined the organisation, bringing the number of community centres to seven, located in Dublin South West.

2024

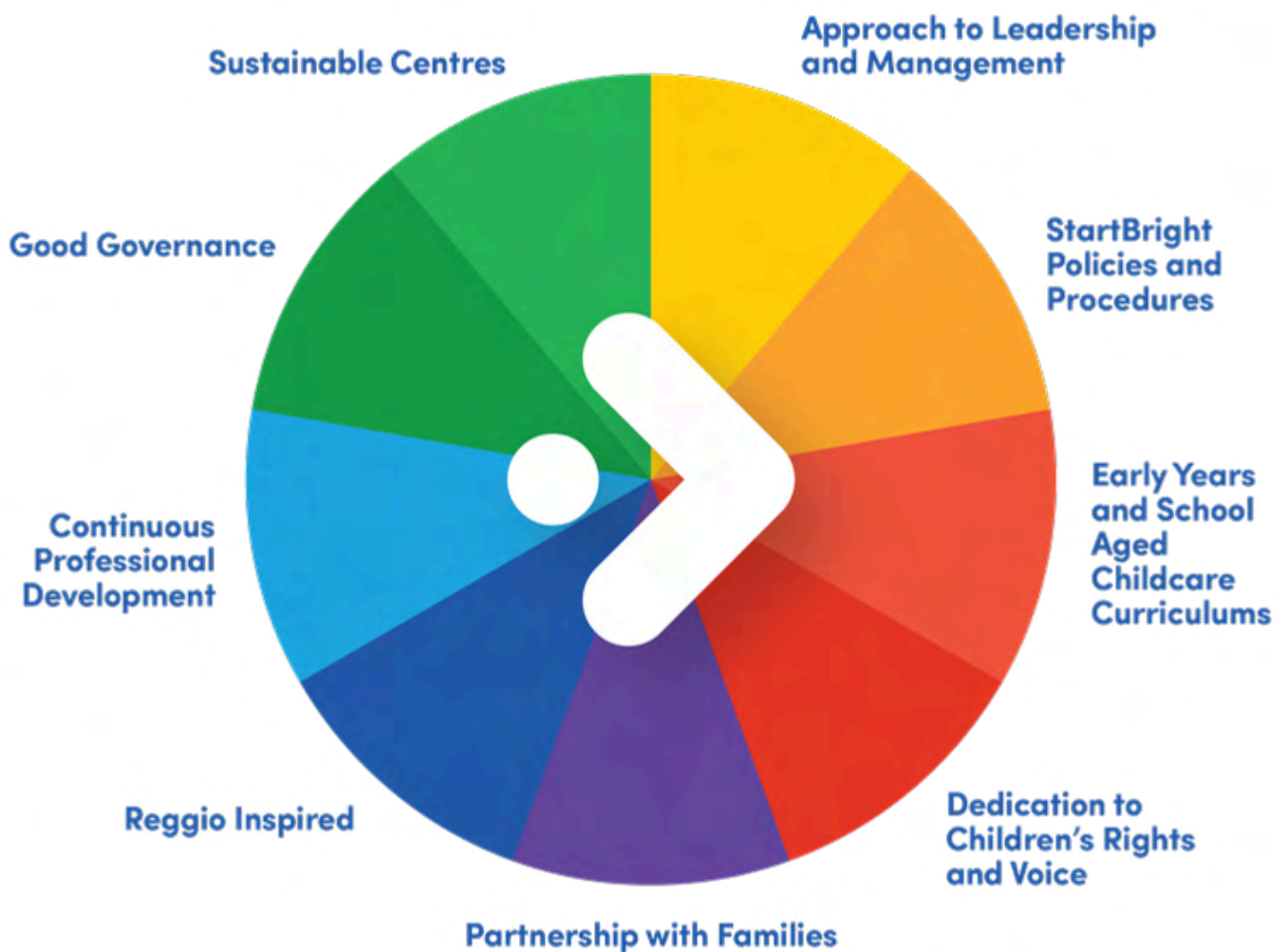
The organisation presented a new strategic plan under the aim of establishing the StartBright model as one of best practice through championing and delivering a model of excellence through continuous improvement in early education.

2025

By 2025, StartBright ELC supports 480 children and their families.

A value-based operational model: the StartBright Way

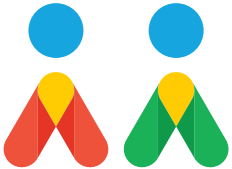
StartBright Way – a model that represents the StartBright approach and how it works across every aspect of the organisation. The StartBright approach is based on the notion that the relationship among the early years setting, the families, and the children is crucial in supporting each child to reach their full potential and to equip them to realise their best outcomes in life. These supportive relationships and partnerships with families, together with the exceptional skills, compassion and care of the staff, enable StartBright to deliver a holistic curriculum in an inclusive and welcoming setting where children can thrive.





Child Centered

Nurturing healthy relationships, strengthening emotional resilience, empowering children to think, grow and explore in a fun and creative way and to be active agents in contributing to their World.



Inclusive

Respectful, impartial, accessible, and affordable early education services.



Families as Partners

Working in partnership with every family to achieve the best outcomes for every child.



Striving for Excellence

In collaboration with families, staff, and professional bodies in the sector, StartBright focuses on developing its philosophy, knowledge, and professionalism.



Honest

Operating to the highest possible standards - honest, professional, transparent and accountable.



StartBright organisation and governance structure



StartBright Strategic Plan 2024–2026

Goal 1 Optimisation

Optimise the responsiveness, quality, range and delivery of the services across the seven centres to meet the needs of more children and families.

- Develop and optimise our services so that we continue to meet the needs, and support our children, families and communities.
- Deliver personal development, learning and education opportunities for every child and their family.
- Optimisation - within and adding services - as a guiding principle and key to the sustainability of services and quality.
- Develop a comprehensive overview of StartBright centres, services, capacity of facilities and staff, together with areas for potential optimisation.
- In partnership with key local and national agencies/ service providers, we will deliver streamlined and timely services and respond effectively to all children's individual needs.
- Design and implement a model of social impact measurement which delivers evidence of the StartBright model in South West Dublin.

Goal 2 The StartBright Way

Champion and deliver a model of excellence through continuous improvement in early years education through training, development, quality assurance, impact assessment and better use of technology.

- Capture and document the StartBright Way and its development and practice over time.
- Continue to be informed by evidence-based and evidence-informed practice and participate in research studies that are relevant to our mission.
- Immerse services further into the Reggio Emilia approach in ways that support our communities.
- Supporting families through the appointment of a Family facilitator role in each centre
- Deliver professional development for all staff across the key skills and competences required in our centres.
- Develop digitalisation of services to increase effective record and reporting, improve access for families, enhance transparency, and reduce environmental impact.
- Promote our StartBright philosophy, centres and services.

Goal 3 Community Access and Inclusion

Develop access to StartBright services to reflect the profile of the children and families in their communities, and respond to their needs at the right time.

- Develop a StartBright access strategy that
 - a. recognises the demand for services in South West Dublin with a particular focus on Early Intervention and Prevention
 - b. is well aligned with the capacity of StartBright to deliver a model of excellence to meet the needs of the children and their families in the communities
 - c. is underpinned by policies and practices effective in supporting access and needs-led services
- Reduce StartBright waitlists throughout the optimisation strategy
- Establish a StartBright growth strategy that defines and sets the criteria for choosing the right opportunities to bring the StartBright way to more children and families
- Continue to engage and consult with local and national organisations sector-wide to access the information and investment necessary to maximise Early Years Opportunities

Goal 4 Governance

Govern an organisation so that it is a strong, sustainable organisation capable of delivering quality services in community based centres.

- Invest in actions to sustain and develop the StartBright Way and Culture – the driver of governance, management and constant service improvement.
- Develop a ‘great place to work’ model for StartBright which is steeped in the culture, staff commitment and determination to make a difference in the community.
- Prioritise staff engagement in strategic thinking, operation development and impact measurement.
- Plan and invest in Board and Management Team succession to sustain StartBright as a model of excellence.
- Enhance the management structures with the skills to further their capacity to lead the organisation to deliver the strategic priorities and manage excellent services.
- Broaden the funding model:
 - to maximise service capacity and quality.
 - to provide for investment in the development of services and team

StartBright services in south-west Dublin

StartBright Balgaddy

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

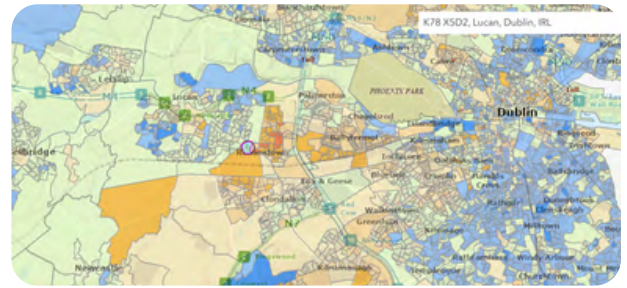
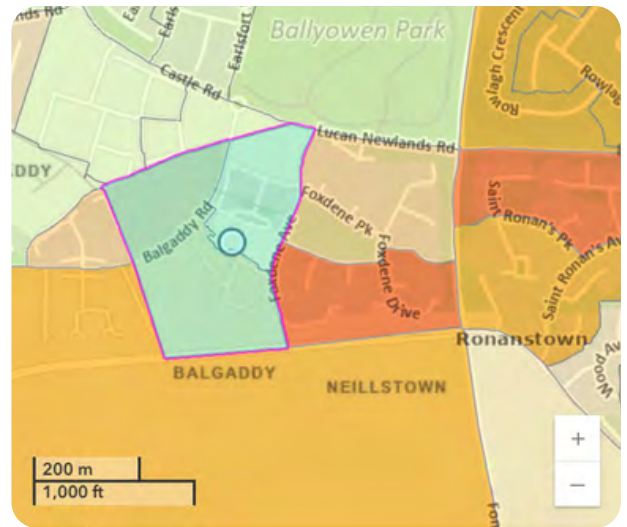
- Total Population: **601**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Disadvantaged**
- Unemployment Rate-Female: **14.69%**
- Unemployment Rate- Male: **20.12%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **43.75%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **20.64%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **7.90%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **17.52%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **62**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 7
- 1 Centre Manager, 6 Educators, 1 Auxiliary staff
- Average tenure – 7 Years



StartBright Bawnogue

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

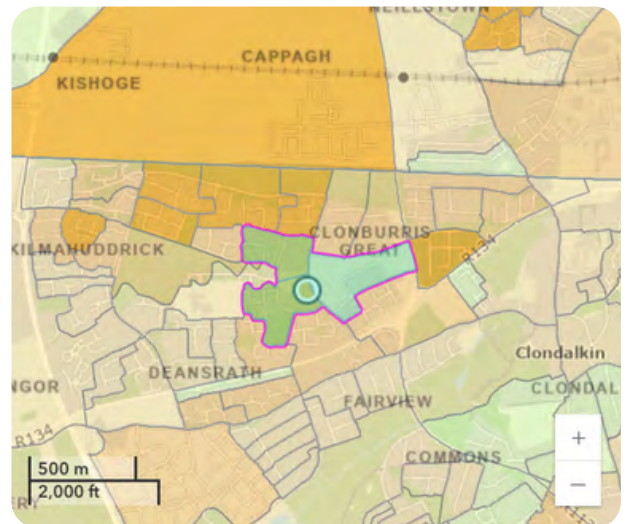
- Total Population: **791**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Very Disadvantaged**
- Unemployment Rate-Female: **13.88%**
- Unemployment Rate- Male: **15.73%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **29.49%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **40.29%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **23.36%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **15.62%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **51**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 16
- 1 Centre Manager, 12 Educators, 3 Auxiliary staff
- Average tenure – 6.5 Years



StartBright Deansrath

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

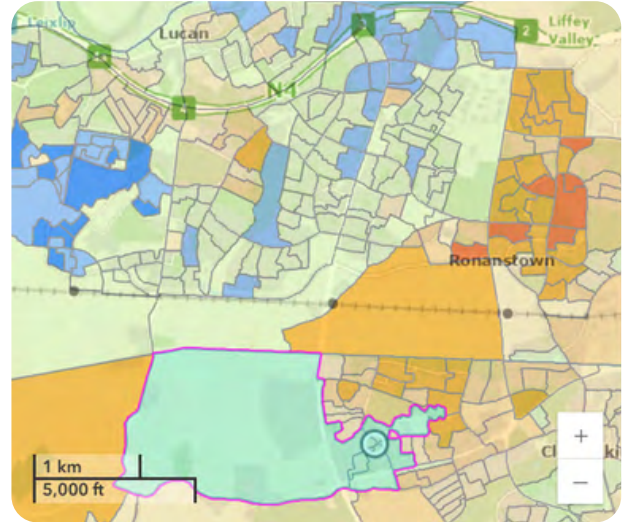
- Total Population: **1818**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Marginally Below Average**
- Unemployment Rate–Female: **10.51%**
- Unemployment Rate– Male: **9.94%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **28.94%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **28.76%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **7.98%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **32.83%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **80**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 9
- 1 Centre Manager, 8 Educators, 3 Auxiliary Staff
- Average tenure – 7.5 Years



StartBright St Ronan's

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

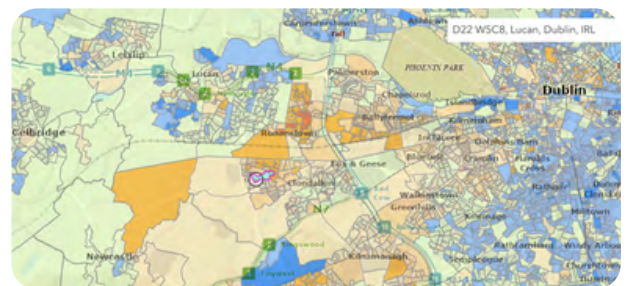
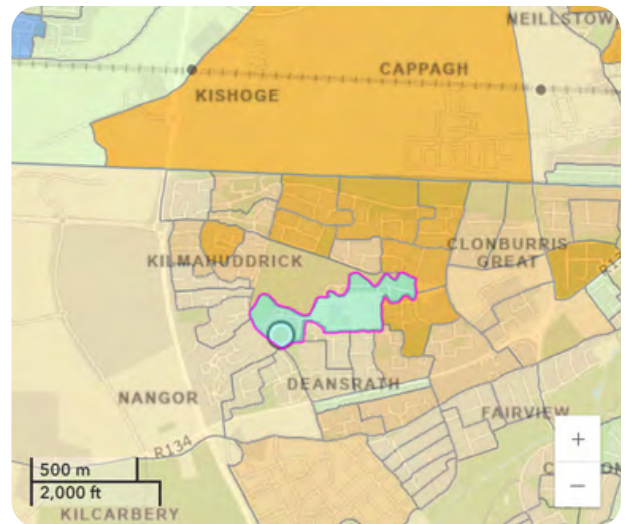
- Total Population: **466**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Marginally Below Average**
- Unemployment Rate–Female: **14.68%**
- Unemployment Rate– Male: **12.38%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **41.27%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **32.83%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **13.50%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **30.67%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **58**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 6
- 1 Centre Manager, 5 Educators, 1 Auxiliary Staff
- Average tenure – 6 Years



StartBright Greenhills

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

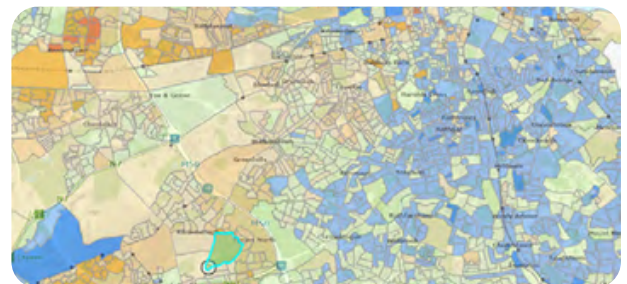
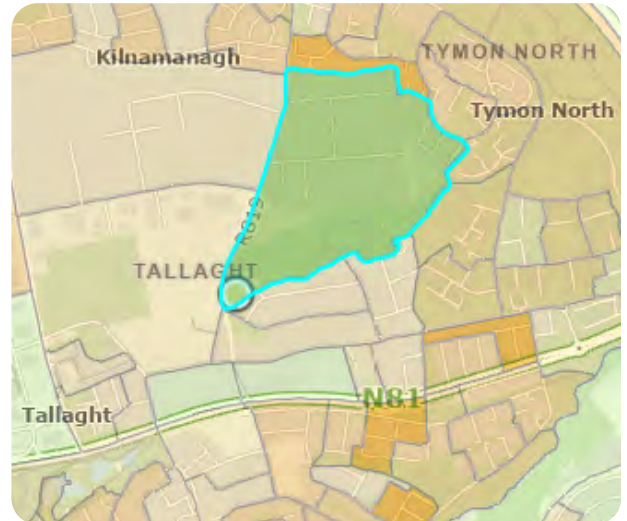
- Total Population: **255**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Very Disadvantaged**
- Unemployment Rate-Female: **13.79%**
- Unemployment Rate- Male: **22.58%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **31.58%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **37.65%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **22.99%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **16.67%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **105**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 18
- 1 Centre Manager, 17 Educators, 3 Auxiliary staff
- Average tenure – 5 Years



StartBright Brookview

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

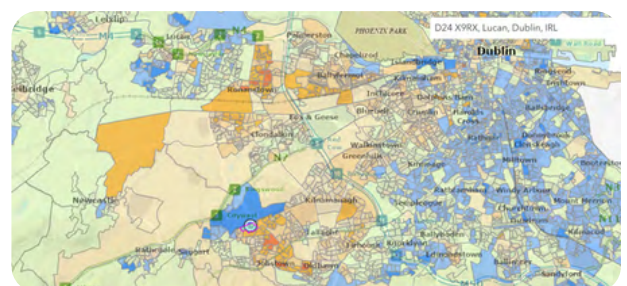
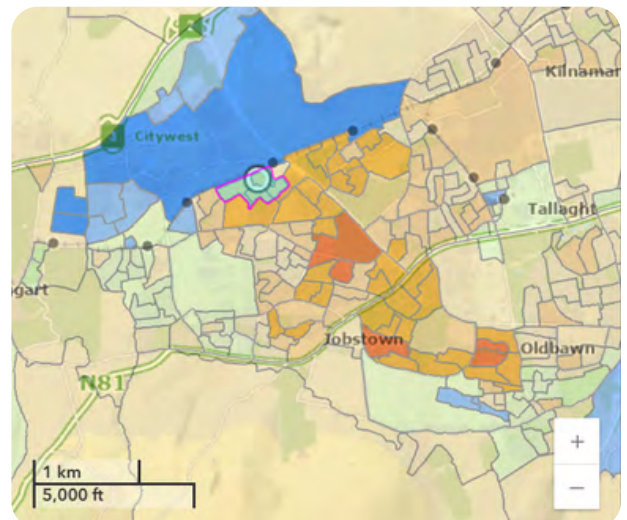
- Total Population: **1209**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Disadvantaged**
- Unemployment Rate-Female: **16.73%**
- Unemployment Rate- Male: **27.10%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **46.31%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **24.60%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **13.62%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **24.60%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **66**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 8
- 1 Centre Manager, 7 Educators, 1 Auxiliary staff
- Average tenure – 5.5 Years



StartBright St Finian's

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

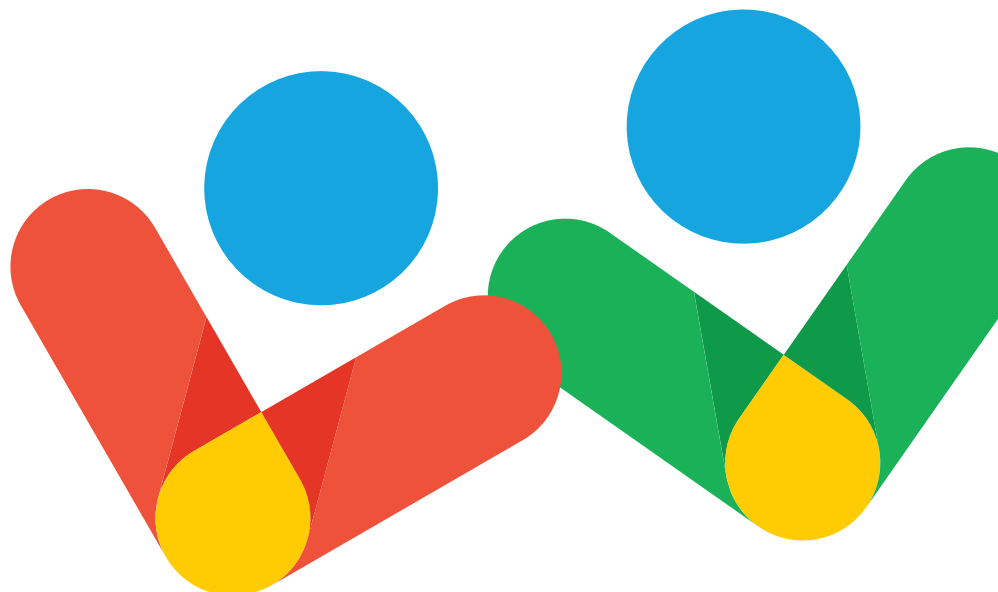
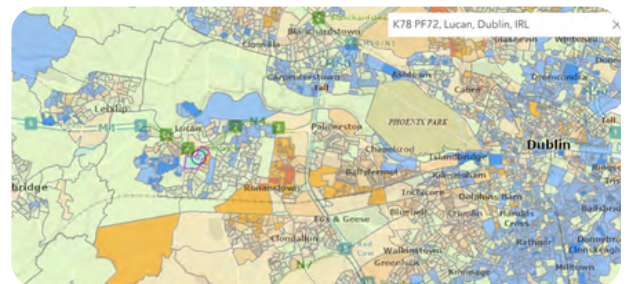
- Total Population: **584**
- HP Deprivation Indices: **Marginally Below Average**
- Unemployment Rate–Female: **10.50%**
- Unemployment Rate– Male: **17.62%**
- Lone Parent Rate: **30.93%**
- Age Dependency Rate: **25.97%**
- Proportion Primary Education Only: **14.47%**
- Proportion Third Level Education: **29.76%**

Children & Families

- Total number of enrolled children and families (2024): **67**

Staff

- Total number of employees and roles – 8
- 1 Centre Manager, 7 Educators
- Average tenure – 10 Years



Section Two

Evaluation design

Given the objectives of critical assessment and positioning the organisation as a model of best practice, the evaluation demanded an approach that was both rigorous and deeply collaborative. For this purpose, the design intentionally moves beyond a traditional assessment model, adopting a robust conceptual framework rooted in *Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilisation-Focused Evaluation*. This approach ensures that the review not only produces reliable data but also serves as a catalyst for organisational learning.

The evaluation was also designed to enable researchers to work with members of the StartBright community (staff, families and stakeholders). This approach recognises the importance of context and represents a commitment to collaboration in the design and development of the research, 'on the basis of stakeholder information, needs and interests' (Cousins, Whitmore, Shulha, Al Hudib & Gilbert, 2015). Stakeholder-oriented engagement in evaluations enables critical reflection that may challenge long-standing biases and allow more culturally responsive, grounded approaches.

The following sub-sections outline the integrated conceptual framework, the specific research design and process activities employed, and the ethical considerations that govern the engagement of all community stakeholders.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for the development of this impact evaluation draws on elements of two internationally well-established approaches to programme evaluation: *Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilisation-focused Evaluation*.

Both approaches to evaluation are well-established internationally and recognised, for example, within the standards of the American Evaluation Association (<https://www.eval.org/>), the European Evaluation Society (<https://www.europeanevaluation.org/>), and influential national evaluation associations, including the German Evaluation Society (<https://www.degeval.org/>).



Empowerment evaluation

Empowerment Evaluation is an approach originally developed in the US by David Fetterman (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996). It has been used widely by agents including the National Aeronautics and Space Agency and the US Department of Education, and in diverse contexts including community health initiatives in South African townships, Native American peoples and Schools in academic distress (Fetterman, 2001, 2013; Fetterman, Rodriguez-Campos, & Zukoski, 2017; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005).

Empowerment evaluation is an evaluation approach that aims to increase the probability of achieving program success by (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organization.

(Fetterman, 2013, p. 30).

Utilization-focused evaluation

Developed by Michael Quinn Patton and team from the 1980s, *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (UfE) systematically draws attention to the uses of programme evaluations by internal and external stakeholders of an organisation. The premise of Utilization-focused Evaluation is that any evaluation should be judged by its utility and actual use, and that any evaluation design and process should take careful consideration of how everything that will be done, from beginning to end, will affect use. UfE insists that the actual use of an evaluation is not necessarily the same as elements that are common to most evaluation processes, i.e. production of reports and dissemination. Use, according to Patton et al, does not occur naturally or automatically; the groundwork for it has to be carefully laid. UfE, as a fundamental orientation, applies a five-step framework to the evaluation process.

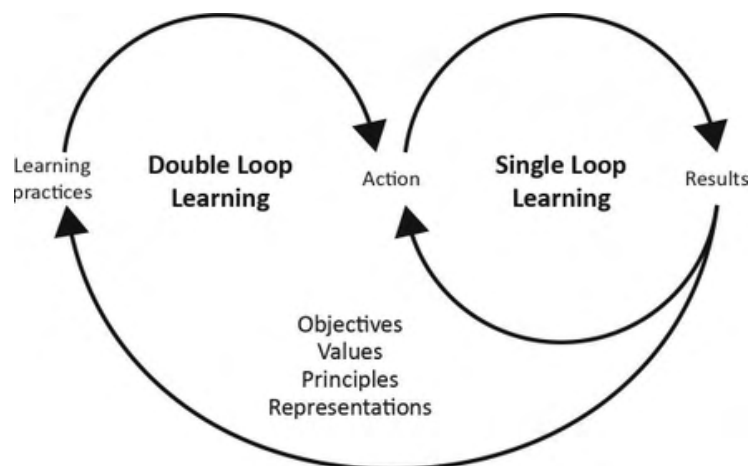
UfE five-step framework (Patton, 1984, 1997, 2001, 2008)

- Step 1** Identify primary intended users
- Step 2** Gain commitment of key stakeholders
- Step 3** Decide on evaluation options
- Step 4** Analyse and interpret findings, reach conclusions
- Step 5** Disseminate findings

Theory of action and double-loop learning

Empowerment Evaluation and *Utilisation-focused Evaluation* both draw on theories of action and organisational learning that emphasise the necessity—and capacity—of organisations to adapt to critical developments in their context. Most prominently, this has been expressed by Donald Schön and Chris Argyris in the concept of Double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Most organisations regularly engage in what Schön and Argyris call Single-loop Learning: they ask what they need to do in order to better achieve their stated goals. While useful to some extent, such activities often take the organisation’s goals or mission for granted, therefore carrying the risk of ignoring crucial developments and changes in the organisation’s wider context and environment (think Nokia’s response to Apple’s invention of the smart phone). Double-loop learning involves a process of asking critical questions about the taken-for-granted assumptions the organisation or programme is based upon, enabling re-adjustment and re-invention.

Figure 1. Double-loop learning



Adapted from Argyris and Schön (1978)

Processual evaluation

Considering the complexity of the project, with a multitude of actors and stakeholders in markedly different roles and different locations, the character of the evaluation has necessarily been processual, allowing for adaptation and adjustment as the project evolves.

The challenge was to keep a firm eye on the overall aim of the project while striking a balance with the inevitable unpredictability and uncertainty that characterise all learning in and from evolving and complex situations. For a project like this, the StartBright evaluation, unpredictability is a potentially productive force. Therefore, during the evaluation process, we oriented the design of the evaluation around the desired impact stated in the invitation to tender, as well as the unintended and surprising experiences that occurred, making them accessible for more generalised organisational, policy and practice learning.

Research design

The research design for evaluation was purposefully crafted to align with the core principles of *Empowerment Evaluation* and *Utilization-focused Evaluation* (as detailed in the previous section).

The design was distinguished by a commitment to non-extractive and responsive methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), ensuring a collaborative process. To this end, all methodological approaches and data collection materials were discussed and fine-tuned in partnership with the StartBright team from the inception of the evaluation process. A Steering Group was established, consisting of the PI, two members of the DCU-ECRC research team, and two representatives from StartBright, to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Evaluation process and activities

The evaluation process was structured in three phases, guided by the five-step Utilization-Focused Evaluation framework.

StartBright Early Learning Centres - Evaluation of Model

Phase 1

1. Project setup	1.1	Kick-off meeting
	1.2	Establishment of the evaluation Steering Group
	1.3	Review of key documentation
2. Discussion and fine-tuning of the methodological approach	2.1	Whole-community workshop
	2.2	Evaluation steering group meeting (methodological approach fine-tune)

Phase 2

3. Evaluation process	3.1	Data collection
	3.2	Evaluation steering group meeting (evaluation process)
4. Evaluation report draft	4.1	Data analysis
	4.2	Evaluation report draft
	4.3	Evaluation steering group monthly meeting (evaluation process and report draft)

Phase 3

5. Plan for action	5.1	Whole-community workshop
6. Evaluation report final document	6.1	Evaluation report final document
	6.2	Evaluation steering group meeting (final report)
7. Project competition and further steps	7.1	Evaluation steering group reflection meeting: final report and outlook towards further steps for the organisation.

Data collection

The primary goal of this evaluation -to document and evaluate the StartBright delivery of high-quality services and its model of best practice through a whole-organisation process- required a **qualitative approach**. Following the evaluation conceptual framework, the data collection was organised in three phases:

PHASE 1 Kick-off workshop

- **1 whole-community kick-off workshop** to fine-tune the evaluation methodological approach, gain commitment and receive initial input.

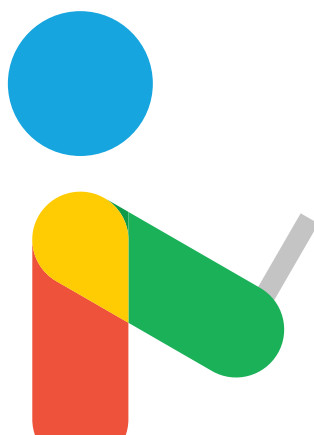
PHASE 2 Data Collection

- **4 focus groups** with Educators, Centres Managers, Management Team and Board to gather in-depth insights.
- **7 semi-structured interviews** with Centres Managers, Operations Manager, Family Facilitators and families.
- Families and staff to gather in-depth insights.
- **1 parent survey** to gather insights into how families value the StartBright model.

PHASE 3 Reflective workshop

- **1 whole-community reflective workshop** to present evaluation main results, validate experiences across the organization, and set the stage for an action-planning discussion.

Further details about the data collection process are provided in the Appendices of this report, where the Kick-off and Reflection workshop agendas and focus group and interview protocols are located.



Data analysis

The complex dataset generated from this whole-organisation evaluation, comprising survey results, qualitative transcripts, fieldnotes, and organisational documents, required a systematic and integrated approach to analysis. The process was designed to facilitate triangulation across data sources, ensuring that key findings are robustly supported by multiple streams of evidence.

All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed to ensure accuracy and facilitate rigorous qualitative analysis. Organisational documents were sourced and stored as searchable digital files wherever possible to allow for systematic desk review and triangulation with primary data. All generated data were entered into a centralised database for future reference and to support the systematic analysis of the combined dataset.

As a first step, a [documentary analysis](#) was conducted, and key organisational documents were reviewed against the derived themes to provide contextual depth and validate emerging findings, particularly regarding alignment with the Strategic Plan 2024–2026.

Then, the qualitative data, including interview and focus group transcripts and fieldnotes, were analysed using rigorous [thematic analysis](#). As a first stage, the evaluation team conducted initial and repeated readings of all transcripts to achieve full immersion in the data. This was followed by the coding process, which involved generating initial codes to capture fundamental concepts and ideas related to the evaluation objectives. The thematising stage involved grouping similar codes into potential themes and sub-themes, thereby enabling the identification of broader patterns and connections across the entire community-wide dataset. Finally, the themes underwent a review stage to ensure they accurately reflected stakeholder experiences related to the 'StartBright way' and best practices.

The final stage involved integrating findings from the different sources. This [triangulation process](#) was critical for confirming findings and building recommendations grounded in and supported by a unified body of evidence from all stakeholder groups.



Ethical considerations

The integrity of the evaluation was underpinned by a strong commitment to ethical practice, particularly given the community-wide, whole-organization nature of the process. Guided by a commitment to non-extractive and responsive methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), the methodological approach and materials have been discussed and fine-tuned with the StartBright team from the beginning of the evaluation process. The approach was guided by principles of respect, beneficence, justice, and non-maleficence, ensuring that the rights and well-being of all participants were protected throughout the evaluation lifecycle.

Informed and voluntary consent

Participation in all evaluation activities—including interviews, focus groups, and surveys—was strictly voluntary. All participants (staff, board members and families) received information about the evaluation's purpose, the nature of their involvement, the expected duration, and a guarantee that their decision to participate or withdraw at any time would have no impact on their employment, relationship with StartBright, or access to services. Written or verbal consent was obtained prior to any data collection.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Strict protocols were established to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, thereby promoting open and honest feedback.

No individual or StartBright centre can be identified in this document in relation to specific comments or critical feedback, particularly concerning sensitive or challenging issues. Findings are reported in aggregate form to ensure anonymity while maintaining thematic richness.

Data protection and storage

The data collection resulted in a complex dataset comprising quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources, including fieldnotes, documents, interviews and survey data. Data was collected, stored, and analysed in compliance with relevant data protection regulations.

All data (physical and electronic) was stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the core evaluation team. Documents were sourced and stored as searchable files wherever possible. Interviews and group discussions have been audio-recorded and transcribed. DCU-ECRC was responsible for anonymising data and ensuring no subject identification was possible. All identifying information was stripped from transcribed data, and participants were assigned pseudonyms or codes for group discussion transcripts.

Feedback and utilisation

Reflecting the tenets of Empowerment Evaluation, an ethical commitment was made to share preliminary findings with key stakeholder groups to validate interpretations and ensure the recommendations are relevant and useful. This process embodies the principle of giving back to the community that contributed to the evaluation.

Conflict of interest

The evaluation team maintained independence from the StartBright operational and governance structures to ensure objectivity. Any potential conflicts of interest were declared and managed transparently.



Section Three

StartBright model: social enterprise and governance

StartBright operates as a value-based social enterprise, providing high-quality early childhood services to local communities on a not-for-profit basis. The central office provides strategic and operational leadership and services to currently seven early childhood settings in southwest Dublin under the StartBright umbrella.

The model of centralised head office with locally-led and embedded early childhood services is highly efficient as it combines the benefits of larger organisation ('economy of scale') with the ability to respond to diverse local needs.

However, as mapped out in section two and detailed in section four, the strength of the StartBright model is grounded in providing much more than centralised administrative support to a group of early childhood services.

The evaluation shows that the strategic leadership and the formation of a shared identity based on values of community service are highly valued across the StartBright community. The StartBright identity also creates a highly recognisable external profile, enabling the organisation to stand out in a diverse and changing early childhood sector.

StartBright operationalises its model through a specifically developed governance structure. It involves the creation of dedicated roles, overseen by a voluntary board of management. Critical elements of the governance structure are the chief executive officer, financial controller/ finance team, and the quality mentor at central office, recently complemented by the role of operations manager.



Establishing these key roles was—and continues to be—critical for the sustainability of the organisation. In line with the value-based orientation (the StartBright Way), ‘sustainability’ transcends basic financial security. The StartBright Way aspires to move beyond minimum standards as required in the regulatory environment of Irish ECEC. This has meant the creation of additional but critical roles at central and local level, including the family facilitators, educational leaders, and additional educators (to reduce adult-child ratios).

These roles are critical for the realisation of the StartBright Way (see section four) but they are not fully recognised by the external funding environment that Irish ECEC providers find themselves in. While the Equal Start programme recognises the need for these roles in areas of disadvantage, they are not adequately funded. StartBright made the strategic decision to create these roles. This involved developing reserves and building an optimisation strategy to improve centre finances, which in turn enables the organisation to absorb the additional costs.

In consequence, much of the capacity of central office is bound by constant and time-consuming acquisition of additional funds, e.g. through accessing potential funding streams and repeated grant applications. To give just one example, the organisation’s audited accounts list 12 different public funding streams alone. This does not include the variety of external, non-state grants and project supports pursued by central office on a regular basis.

Public funding streams operate on a variety of timelines and conditions. Additional resources, if available, are often short-term or one-off project funds.

Operating in such an environment severely restricts the organisation’s ability for reliable forward planning and exposes it to sustainability risks.

While StartBright has managed to operate successfully in this complex environment, it raises critical questions about the future development of the Irish ECEC context. Challenges persist that can only be addressed at national policy level. Adopting the StartBright model of Social Enterprise, if brought to scale, government can make an important contribution to resolving the persistent crisis and dysfunction of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care system. This requires clear and long-term political commitment by government, resourcing and funding structures that recognise the requirements of Social Enterprise modelled on StartBright, and sustainable, long-term funding at the very least. Creating these conditions is government responsibility, and a precondition for achieving and sustaining an ‘effective’ (‘competent’) early childhood system for ALL children and families, as envisaged in *First5. A whole-of-government-strategy for babies, young children, and their families.*

Section Four

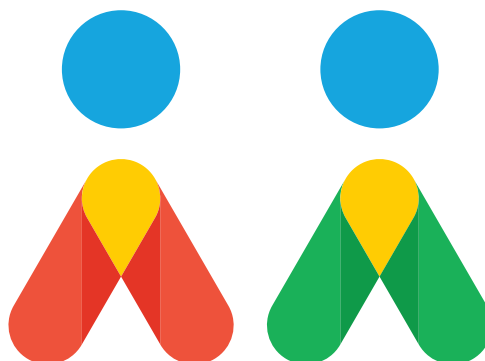
StartBright Way: community perceptions

Initial community perspectives

As outlined in section two ('Design') the focus of this project was to undertake an evaluation of the StartBright Model that is a) useful and b) empowering to the entire organisation and all those affected by its operations, be it internally or externally. Such an approach necessarily pays strong attention to what the StartBright Way refers to as a community. The quality of the relationships between all actors in the complex setup of the organisation ultimately determines its success.

The StartBright approach is based on the notion that the relationship among the early years setting, the families, and the children is crucial. It was a central part of the evaluation process to examine and document whether—and how—this aspiration transcends the actual activities of the organisation.

The StartBright Way (see section 1) presents a clear, value-based self-image of the organisation, that translates into an ambitious Strategic Plan (see section 1). The critical question for the evaluation is whether the organisation's self-image aligns with the perceptions and perspectives of the constituents of its community. We gathered and documented these perspectives throughout the evaluation process, through conversations, interviews and survey data with educators, centre managers and family facilitators in StartBright services, with board members, management and families (see appendix 3). Critical, and most productive in the process, were two interactive community workshops (see appendix 1). While this evaluation foregrounds the perspectives of the internal StartBright community, we are confident that the findings are supported and confirmed by the views of families gathered in the survey (see appendix 4).



The workshops, facilitated by DCU ECRC, brought together a diverse group of participants from across the StartBright organisation. Taking the StartBright Way and Strategic Plan as a starting point, participants explored, discussed, and documented their own individual and collective views on the values, unique characteristics, and practices of the organisation. To start off, we asked participants to describe the characteristics of StartBright, using their own words and seen from their own experience:

What is the StartBright Way, and what makes it unique?

A second question discussed by the group focussed on how participants, in their various roles in the organisation, realise the aspiration of the StartBright Way in their day-to-day work:

Which are the critical activities that you are doing as a StartBright community?

We present the outcomes of the community workshop in more detail below in this section. In summary it is evident that the **organisation's self-image and the way StartBright is perceived and described by its community members are very much aligned**. We see this as an important factor for the success of the Model.

Critical Success Factor

Coherence between self-image and community perception



<p>Holistic and Child-centered Approach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and family at the center: A whole-encompassing approach that keeps children and families at the heart of all operations. • Holistic support: Provides holistic support not just for the children, but for their families and the staff as well. • Community driven: The model is rooted in the community and driven by community needs.
<p>Environment and Wellbeing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe and welcoming spaces: Described as a "safe and caring space," "welcoming," and a "supportive community." • Staff wellbeing: Explicitly mentions "caring about staff and staff wellbeing" as a key pillar of the organization. • Emotional support: Characterized by "caring," "rewarding," and "supportive" engagement.

Key areas of the StartBright Way as identified by the StartBright community

What makes StartBright unique?

<p>Empathy and care</p>	<p>Support and supervision</p>	<p>Community and inclusion</p>
<p>Empathy, care, and genuine interest in their interactions with children, families, and staff.</p>	<p>Providing support and supervision, ensuring that everyone involved feels valued and supported.</p>	<p>Significance of being a community hub, promoting inclusion, and giving families a voice.</p>
<p>Quality mentoring</p>	<p>Staff well-being and development</p>	
<p>The importance of quality mentoring and professional development.</p>	<p>Staff well-being, including appreciation, training, and opportunities for career progression.</p>	

StartBright's unique aspects as identified by the StartBright community

Which are the critical activities that you are doing as a StartBright community?



StartBright's critical activities as identified by the StartBright community

Community perspectives in detail: success factors, challenge, recommendations

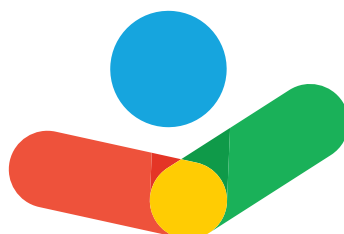
The following section presents the perspectives of the various groups that constitute the StartBright community that took part in this evaluation: educators, service managers, family facilitators, quality mentor, CEO and senior management, voluntary board of directors, ancillary teams (cooks, cleaners) and families. The section consolidates information gathered from a variety of sources including the community workshops, interviews and focus group discussions (see appendices). It is important to note that what follows are the perspectives of the StartBright community. Their views and initial recommendations (see appendix 5) have been consolidated by the evaluation team into the sets of key recommendations in the final section of this report.

We have organised the community information following the structure of StartBright's four Strategic Pillars and Goals:



Community members identified *factors of success and challenges* for each of the four goals. They also voiced several *initial recommendations* for consideration and action connected to each goal (see appendix 5 for details). These insights provided by the community are both supportive and reflective of the StartBright Strategic Plan 2024–2026—they represent an informed insider perspective. They are encouraging as they clearly show the deep level of commitment by all community members and groups to the overall thriving of the organisation. Clearly, community members care deeply for the way StartBright serves children and families, and for the values the organisation represents. Crucially, this ensures a broad alignment of the organisation's current trajectory with its long-term mission of whole-community empowerment.

Broadly, the section also aims to support the ECEC community by providing informed insider perspectives of the StartBright model of best practice. By documenting how the StartBright community values their model, this report aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the critical importance of coherence between values, practices, and organisational structures.



Goal 1: Optimisation

Optimisation is mainly achieved through centralised roles – the multi-site model allows for the same roles, quality, and resources across all centres, which is a major efficiency. The multi-site model allows for standardized processes (e.g., procurement, HR), which is presented by participants as a key to optimization.

The diverse and high-level needs of different communities mean that optimization of service delivery itself is complex, often requiring tailored responses that challenge standardisation. The Operations Manager and the Centre Managers are mentioned as key roles to balance optimisation with timely, high-quality responses to the specific needs of each community.

At ground level, optimisation is supported by a hands-on approach that ensures services respond to families' immediate needs. Educators manifested a deep child-centred philosophy, valuing the fact that the organisation is 'all for the children' and 'responsive to their specific needs and interests'. The diversification of family support through the role of Family Facilitator – e.g. helping with housing, insurance, medical card applications and GP appointments – further supports the StartBright model in effectively responding to the individual needs of all children and families.

Internally identified risks to the optimisation goals focus mainly on external, contextual factors including administrative demands (documentation, compliance), capital investment, and challenges to meet children's growing additional support and educational needs. Unsurprisingly, the initial recommendations identified by the community focus on remedying these contextual factors, not least by improved integration of workstreams between government agencies.

Goal 2: StartBright Way

The *StartBright Way* is a core philosophy based on deeply embedded values, centred on the child (see section 1). It shows the organisation's strong grounding towards whole community responsibility for the care and education of young children as a political project and common good, inspired by the work of Loris Malaguzzi and the public preschools in Reggio Emilia. Educators strongly affirm that the organization is genuinely child-focused and prioritizes the needs of the child first. This philosophical alignment is presented as a major strength and retention factor.

The model's focus on "families, the voice of the child, [and] inclusion" is central to its identity. This is evident in parent feedback (see appendix 4), which demonstrates the success of the relational, holistic approach that is central to the *StartBright Way*.

In terms of organisational structure, the *StartBright Way* is linked to centralisation, ensuring consistent quality and resources across all centres. Financially pooling from consolidated unrestricted funds ensures that all centres, even those that are less commercially viable, can deliver the *StartBright Way* and maintain the same high standard. The organisation's values are explicitly operationalised through this shared resource model.

Participants recognise the challenges posed by realising these values in every practice with children and families. They identify external recognition of the task as crucial, e.g. in better resourced non-contact time and CPD.

Goal 3: Community Access and Inclusion

Educators confidently report deep roots in the community and achieving "generational trust" (catering for children whose parents attended a StartBright service themselves). Fostering open-door relationships with parents clearly supports the goal of community immersion. All participants stated that educators effectively create a "welcoming" environment that actively encourages families to walk through the doors and participate.

The Family Facilitator role is presented as a critical human link that enables access for families, specifically the vulnerable ones. Creating the role of family facilitator (based on CDI parent carer facilitator) is an example of StartBright's commitment to evidence-informed practice. The FF acts as the initial, trusted point of contact that breaks down access barriers. Parents—particularly those unfamiliar with the system or facing literacy/language challenges—rely on the FF for personalised help with forms, applications, and general information. This confirms the FF role is essential for supporting service managers with the increased needs of families in underserved areas. However, the sheer volume of need for support for external services (particularly for early intervention) in a context where waitlists are a major challenge, means FF's are often playing a "firefighting" role.



In terms of organisational structure, the amalgamated model facilitates increased community access by sustaining centres responding to high needs that would otherwise not be viable on their own. The StartBright model enables redistribution resources across the entire organisation according to strategic priorities. The multi-site model creates synergies and economies of scale in areas of operational and strategic leadership, management, and quality assurance. However, it is important to emphasise that this practice is much more than a tool for organisational efficiency. It is at the centre of StartBright's identity as a community-committed social enterprise. The key challenge is balancing this growth with financial risk and ensuring full cost recovery for services.

Participants point out that possible further initiatives to strengthen the inclusive nature of the organisation can be taken internally, e.g. through active recruitment of family representatives to the board of management. Links to contextual factors (that can't be changed directly by StartBright but rely on external actors) underscore the systemic characteristics of the approach. For instance, there is a clear expectation that the workforce development plan for the early childhood sector ('Nurturing Skills') needs amending to include recognition of qualifications such as SNA and social care for AIM supports.

Goal 4: Governance

Governance is a key strength and contributor to sustainability. The multi-site (amalgamated) model is the fundamental basis for financial sustainability and for delivering the StartBright Way. While some of the centres would not be sustainable in delivering the StartBright Way on their own, the organisation as a whole is viable because income can be redistributed from stronger centres to support weaker ones. This model is based on a strong central governance and financial oversight.

Management structures are developing and becoming increasingly effective but require further delegation to support the multi-site model effectively. The CEO acts as a vital conduit between the board of management, senior management, and the centres. While educators feel supported by their immediate management, which is evident not least in high staff retention, some express uncertainty and a lack of clarity about their involvement in broader strategic decision-making. Participants generally expressed strong agreement with the statement that StartBright is 'a great place to work'. However, there are also some concerns that the recruitment and retention crisis of the wider ECEC sector can result in a lack of flexible work options.

Investment in management capacity is seen as essential for future sustainability and reducing key-person dependency. There is a clear need for succession planning and broadening the funding base to ensure future resilience and sustainability.

The complexity of external funding streams poses a significant challenge. The numerous and fragmented funding streams are difficult to manage, and the organisation often struggles to recover the full costs of projects. E.g. sponsored funding for children does not cover full cost of fees and centres operate at a loss for those registrations. The Family Facilitator role plays a key part in optimising resources at centre level. Family facilitators, and centre managers, supported by the quality mentor, actively seek and secure external resources through grant writing and soliciting donations of materials, vouchers and funding from local businesses, which supplement the organisation's central budget and provide enhanced resources without relying on core income. However, the financial challenges highlight the need for a systemic solution from the public policy area to secure sustainable funding and consolidate fragmented funding streams for complex services and arrangements (e.g. StartBright), enabling secure medium- and long-term planning (see section 5).



Section Five

Key recommendations

Addressing the two groups of intended users of the evaluation, this section provides two sets of recommendations, **one for consideration by the StartBright community**, and **one for external decision makers**. Drawn from the participatory evaluation process and presented in this report are high-level but actionable conclusions and recommendations. They are meant for consideration by internal and external stakeholders, and to help orient further discussion and planning for concrete action. We suggest that implementation of high-level recommendations of this report should be underpinned by additional sources, for instance the report of the research project Enhancing Civic Society: Towards alternative community-based models of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (DCU ECRC 2026, Taighde Éireann NF/2024/11766).

The recommendations presented in this section are written for two audiences:

1. Internal recommendations aim at supporting all members of the StartBright community to gain better insights into the coherence of the StartBright model, and to inspire their individual and collective agency in continuous improvement.

2. External recommendations address those shaping the external operational context and conditions for early childhood education and care services in Ireland at national and local level (e.g. policy makers). The aim here is to provide a better understanding of what makes StartBright unique, and what conditions are required to make community-based non-profit early childhood services sustainable at scale.

Although the evaluation team summarised the key recommendations presented in this section, it needs stressing (and is encouraging!) that many of them were already identified by members of the StartBright community during the various activities carried out as part of this evaluation (see section 4, and appendix 5 for details).

From our perspective as evaluators, it is important to differentiate between the internal recommendations that have been designed to be practical and to directly support StartBright's commitment to delivering high-quality impactful ECEC services, and the external ones.

Internal factors can be considered and addressed by the StartBright organisation in line with future strategic development. They are concerned with critical questions of organisational sustainability, including addressing (over-)reliance on individuals occupying pivotal roles and succession planning.

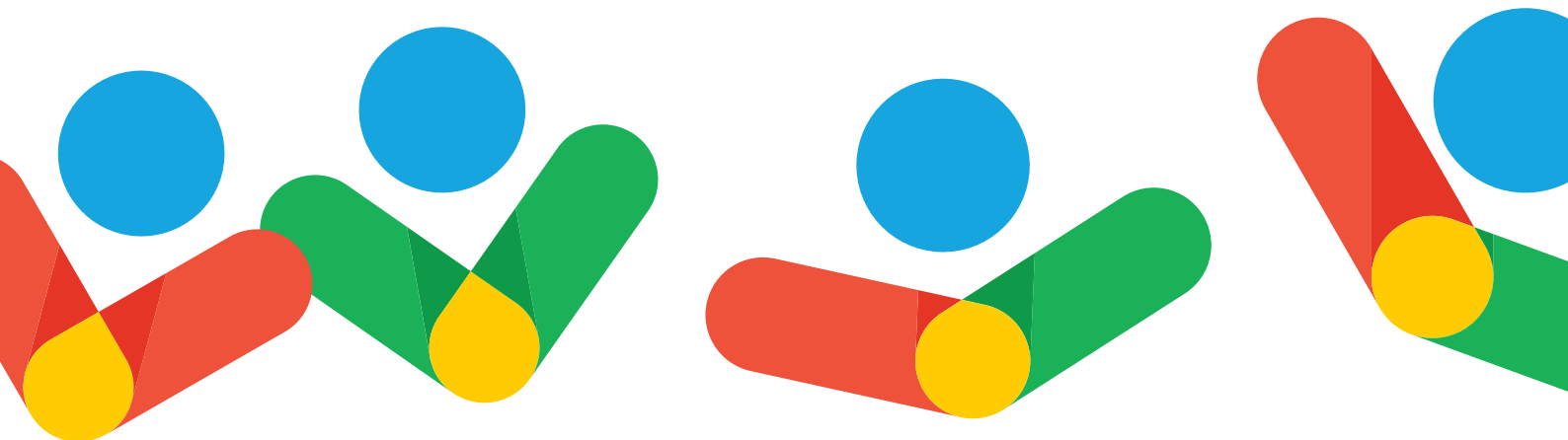
External factors require addressing at policy level. They are concerned with the conditions necessary to create and sustain an 'effective' ('competent') early childhood system for ALL children and families, as envisaged in First5. A whole-of-government-strategy for babies, young children, and their families.

While StartBright has the agency and competence to translate the internal factors identified in this section into a practical roadmap, the organisation's capability to influence external factors is limited, as they require wider systems change. Recognising StartBright as a model of best practice for the wider ECEC sector therefore inevitably requires consideration, political will, and action in the arena of public policy. Our general conclusion is that the StartBright model of social enterprise, if brought to scale, can make an important contribution to resolving the persistent crisis and dysfunction of the Irish early childhood education and care system. However, realising this potential requires clear and long-term political commitment to social enterprise by government, resourcing and funding structures that recognise the requirements of social enterprise modelled on StartBright, and sustainable, long-term funding at the very least.



Internal recommendations (for consideration by StartBright)

- Develop a formal succession plan for key leadership and invest in management capacity. This is essential for future sustainability and reduced key-person dependency.
- Consider developing a StartBright operation model handbook to facilitate operational continuity.
- Review communication between board and StartBright community, including on key strategic decisions.
- Actively recruit for family representation on the Board to ensure the access strategy is underpinned by the actual lived experience of the families.
- Review and (re)consider collective critical reflection as a part of whole-service professional development strategy.
- Continue to document the FF model's processes and specific practices (e.g., outreach strategy, grant-seeking, strategies to communicate with families) to ensure consistency.
- Continue to document social and community impact with evidence from children and families. Consider the following activities:
 - Map key community actors and
 - Host open community days
 - Hold annual town hall meeting with community actors.... to collect continuous feedback from the community on StartBright's social impact.
 - Use the existing family groups (e.g. 'Yoga for Families' and 'Baby and Toddler') to record families' perspectives on the social impact of StartBright.



External recommendations (for enactment by government)

- Foreground not-for-profit, community-based models of ECEC provision and shared governance models.
- Provide sustainable funding and consolidate fragmented funding streams for complex services and organisational arrangements of social enterprise (e.g. StartBright) to enable secure mid- and long-term planning.
- Consider (reduce and streamline) administrative demands on services.
- Invest significantly in community-based infrastructure to support children and families.
- Roll out national public awareness, recruitment and retention campaign - linked to significant investment in pay and working conditions.
- Recognise and include specialized supportive roles (e.g. Family Facilitator) in the overall ECEC workforce structure Nurturing Skills (includes recognition and funding of 'non-contact' time).
- Integrate systemic thinking and practice in initial and continuous professional preparation and development (e.g. through national CPD strategy)
- Consolidate and integrate Early Childhood Education and Care policy making responsibilities across departments (ideally under the responsibility of one Ministry or Government department) (OECD, 2004).
- Rethink public policy development and decision-making to systematically learn from experiences of organisations like StartBright (e.g. through continuous and meaningful consultation).
- Reconsider departmental (internal) operations to establish supportive structures for integrated community-based services (like StartBright).



Concluding thoughts

This report traces and summarises a participatory and collaborative process that took place over a period of 12 months in 2025. It brings together the diverse views, voices, and perceptions of many actors in what we believe is a coherent picture: a consolidated insight into a complex organisation dedicated to community service and children’s right to the best possible care and education from an early age. The process was neither technical assessment nor purely ‘external’ evaluation. Instead, it was a communicative engagement to which we (the evaluation team) offered a structure that invited the expression of thoughts and personal and collective experiences. It gave space for the collective reassurance of the commitment to the values and practices that make StartBright. More importantly, it created the possibility for collective action for the future—something the sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010) has called ‘viable utopias’.

As is to be expected in a dynamic environment like StartBright, the process of developing the organisation has not come to a conclusion with the publication of the evaluation report. Since the ‘recommendations’ made in this report were identified by the participants, several of them are already being implemented. For us, the evaluation team, StartBright proved to be an excellent example of a ‘learning organisation’.

We are convinced the process documented in this report has implications that reach far beyond StartBright Early Learning Centres. First5. A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children, and their families (DCYA, 2018) aspires to building an ‘effective’ early childhood system for Ireland. This can only be achieved with the active involvement and empowerment of all groups and individuals that constitute ‘the system’. It is made up of people who in turn create and shape the conditions, structures and practices that make the aspiration real. StartBright, as documented in this report, operates under real-world conditions that are the result of political choices. Going forward, it will be crucial to build professional, political, and civil society alliances that affect those choices. Better outcomes for children and communities are possible; there is no excuse for inaction.



Appendices

Appendix 1. Kick-off workshop

Wednesday 29 January, 2025

AGENDA

10.00 – 10.20: Welcome and introductions.

- Focus on setting the scene—permission for pictures.
 - Short round of introductions.
-

10.20 – 11.20: Workshop I: What makes StartBright unique?

- Focus on re-stating StartBright's key values and mission.
 - 3 to 5 groups. Flipcharts and markers.
-

11.30 – 11.30: Coffee break.

11.30 – 12.15: Workshop II: Which are the critical activities that you are doing as a StartBright community?

- Focus on actions and activities.
 - 3 to 5 groups. Flipcharts, markers, and Post-its.
-

12.15 – 12.45: Ranking the activities.

- Re-group the participants by actor type (e.g., educators, managers) and invite them to rank the activities from 1 to 10.
 - Markers and small Post-it (different colours).
-

12.45 – 13.00: Open discussion.

- Focus on circling the activities that should be covered throughout the evaluation process.
-

13.00 – 13.45: Workshop III: What don't you know, that if you did know, would make a difference to what you do?

- 3 to 5 groups – Flipcharts, markers
-

13.45 – 14.00: Open discussion.

- Workshop feedback.
- Next steps.

Appendix 2. Reflection workshop

Monday 20 October, 2025

AGENDA

18.00 – 18.10: Welcome & Shared Purpose

- Welcome and set a collaborative atmosphere.
 - Quick icebreaker ("What are you hoping to gain tonight?")
 - Main goal for the workshop (Double-Loop Learning / Future Action).
-

18.10 – 18.20: Context & Starting Point

- Why the evaluation happened, who was involved and what has been done.
-

18.20 – 18.40: Core Findings

- Highly impactful themes (strengths and challenges).
-

18.40 – 19.00: Recognition & Deep Dive

- "Affirm & explore" (small groups) – Divide into mixed groups. Discuss the findings: What elements of this finding resonate with your experience? Which ones surprise you or need more exploration (explore)?
-

19.00 – 19.30: Further steps: Generating Recommendations

- "How might we...?" (small groups)
 - a. Brainstorm and write down (flipchart) specific recommendations and actionable ideas (one per sticky note).
 - b. Groups then review their notes and select their "Top 3" most impactful and feasible recommendations to present.
-

19.30 – 19.50: Prioritisation & Synthesis

- Groups share their "Top 3" recommendations, followed by a quick group vote (dot-voting) to prioritise the institutional focus (consensus).
-

19.50 – 20.00: Next steps and thanks

- Summary of the workshop. Next (final) steps.

Appendix 3. Focus groups and interviews: guiding questions

Participant	Focus groups and interviews guiding questions
Directors	<p>General/Overview</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. From your perspective, what are the key aim, focus, priorities for you, for the organisation? 2. What values underpin the operation of the organisation? 3. When you think about quality ECEC and sustainability of this model, what elements of the organisational model or approach support this work? 4. In a few words, how would you define the SB way/philosophy/culture? 5. How would you describe the social impact of StartBright? <p>Organisational Structures</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What internal systems support Directors in decision making and governance roles? 2. What are the processes (relational/communication etc) that support your work? (at all levels of the organisations) (Is there a visual of the organisation – can we make one) 3. Where could improvements be made to the work of the organisation? <p>Financial Operation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. To what extent does multiple sites (7 services) create synergies or economies of scale – does this support viability/sustainability – in what ways? Does this create greater challenges – in what ways? 10. Is expansion necessary, desirable or part of the plan? <p>Networking/Collaboration</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Is networking /community engagement important to the organisation? What added value does this offer? <p>People/Staff</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. To what extent does the Board’s relationship with the Leadership and Management team support strategic progress (optimisation)? 13. What are the risks/challenges to the organisational model? 14. To what extent does the future quality and viability of StartBright /CNnG depend on the management leaders?
Management	<p>General/Overview</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. From your perspective, what are the key aim, focus, priorities for you, for the organisation? 2. How are values lived or operationalised within the organisation? 3. What general elements of your model contribute to its quality and sustainability? (When you think about ECEC quality and sustainability of this model, what general elements of your model or approach support this work?) 4. In a few words, how would you define the SB way (philosophy/culture)? 5. How would you describe the social impact of StartBright?

Participant	Focus groups and interviews guiding questions
	<p>Organisational Structures</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. What are the internal systems that support Management in operating viable, quality services? Processes? 7. What resources and efforts are required to support progress towards your strategic goals? <p>Financial Operation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. What makes the organisation financially sustainable? 9. What are the range of funding strands/packages that you draw in – do you get full cost recovery on the projects (is admin/management costs included in the funding) 10. Are the funding strands sufficient to operate the service? 11. How is the shortfall addressed? 12. What is the level of additional grant writing that is required to maintain or develop the service? 13. What are the risks or challenges to your model? 14. To what extent does multiple sites (7 services) create synergies or economies of scale – does this support viability/sustainability – in what ways? Does this create greater challenges – in what ways? 15. Is expansion necessary, desirable or part of the plan? <p>Networking/Collaboration</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. How important is networking and community engagement to the operation of the organisation? (a list of organisations/bodies that SB work with) 17. To what extent does the organisation meet the needs of the community it serves? How do you know this? What are the gaps? <p>People/Staff</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. How are staff skills and competencies developed and how is this managed from an organisational (financial/admin) perspective? 19. What is the full range of early intervention services? 20. To what extent is the quality/viability of StartBright dependent on you?
Educators	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you value within the organisation? 2. How would you describe the social impact of StartBright? 3. What makes this a good place to work (from a staff perspective)? 4. How are you supported in your work? 5. How is quality ECEC supported by the organisation? 6. When you think about ECEC quality and SB model, what elements of the organisational model or approach support this work? (ie evidence based approaches, Reggio Emilia) 7. In your role how do you connect with the community? 8. Nature of curriculum/relationship with parents – what works 9. Where could improvements be made to the work of the organisation? Processes? Communication? Strategic Planning? 10. Are there opportunities for professional development in the organisation? (Examples)

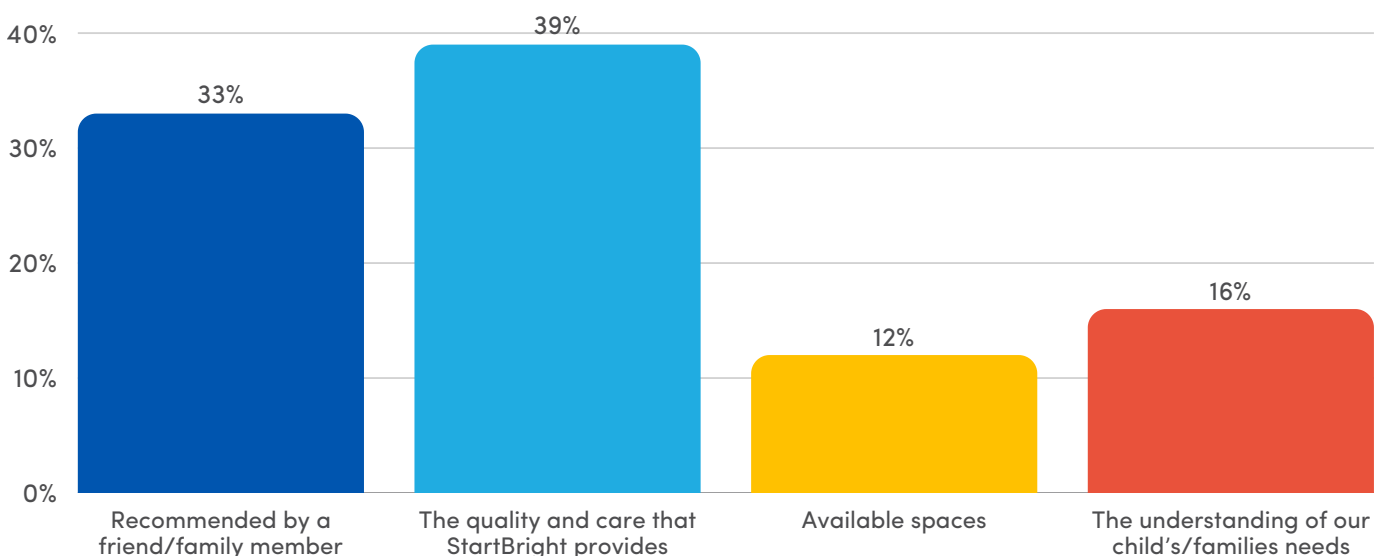
Participant	Focus groups and interviews guiding questions
Parents	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In what ways does the organisation support you and meet your family needs? 2. In what ways does the organisation meet the needs of your child/children? 3. Does the organisation support you in being part of the community? 4. Where could improvements be made to the work of the organisation? 5. How effective are the services they provide? 6. What do you think about the role of the family facilitator? Have you been in contact? Did you find it useful/supportive?

Appendix 4. Parent survey results

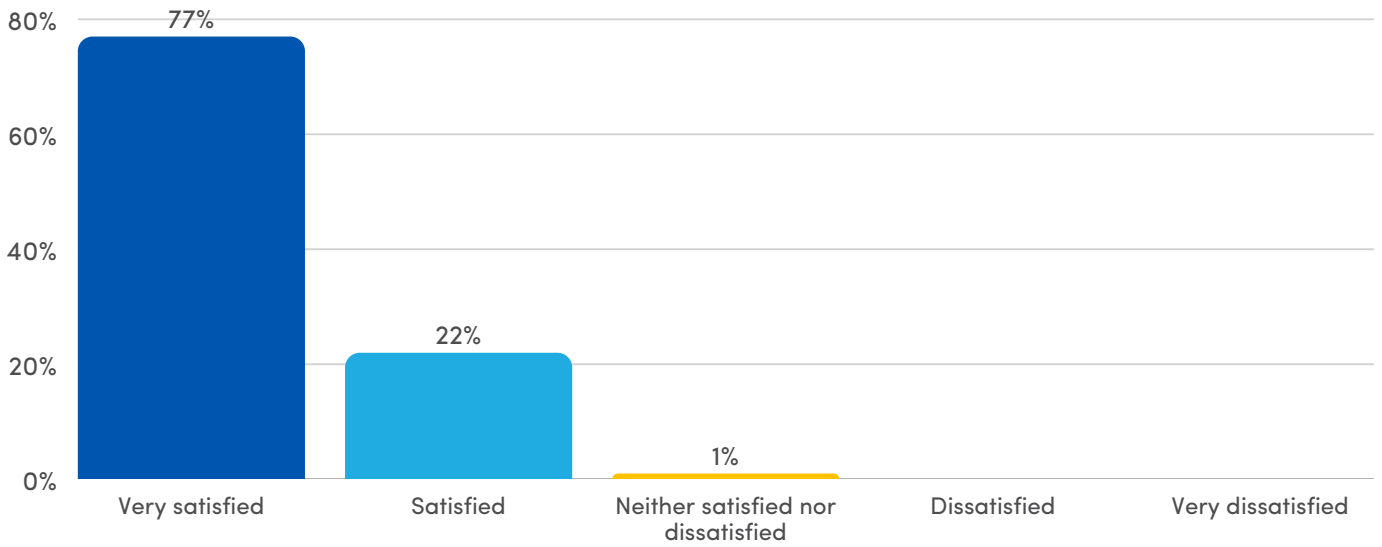
The graphs below summarise responses given by parents when asked about their views on, and experiences with StartBright early learning centres. Parents were asked about

- their reasons for choosing a StartBright early learning centre for their child
- their satisfaction with the care and education provided, and communication with staff
- their views on staff responsiveness and information about their child’s progress and development
- their experience with staff understanding and respect of children's individual needs
- their perception of feeling valued as a parent/family member/carer, and their satisfaction with the contribution of the learning centres to the children

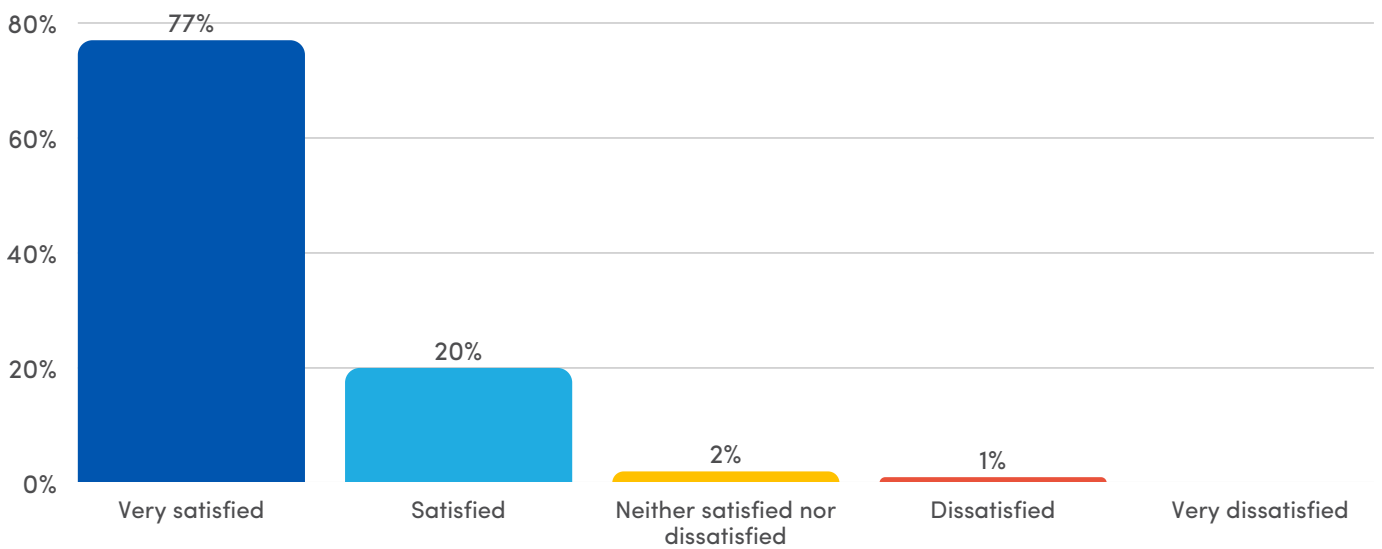
Responses confirm the trust StartBright has gained in the community, as parents reach the service through recommendations and prior knowledge of the quality of service. Levels of satisfaction are decisively ‘very high’ and ‘high’ throughout (99%), with little to no indifference.



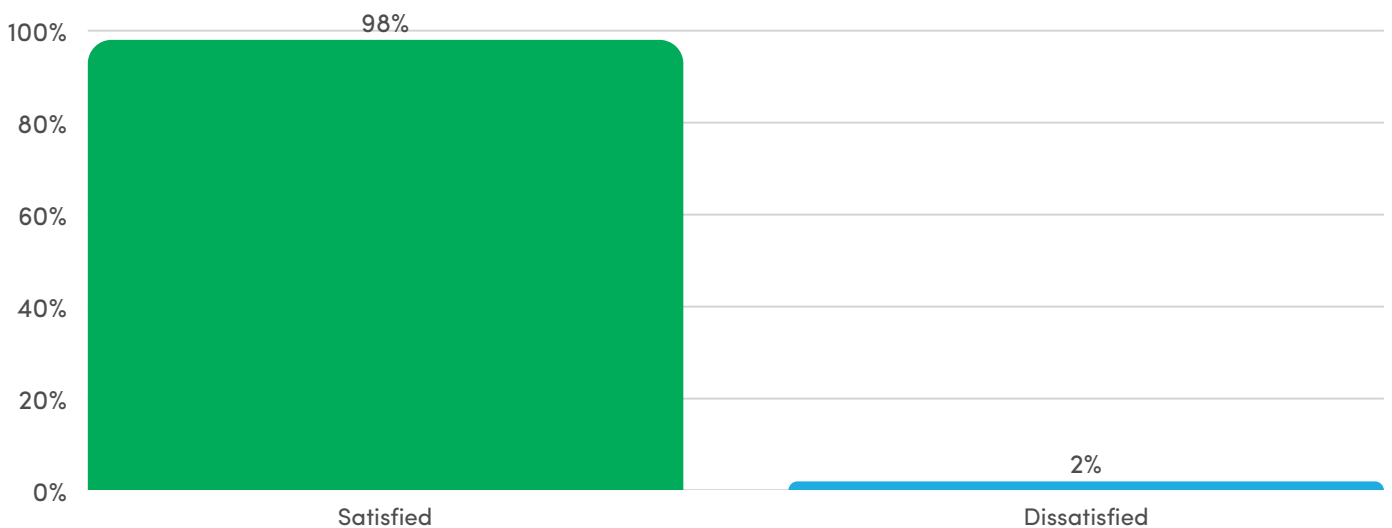
Reasons for choosing StartBright Learning Centres



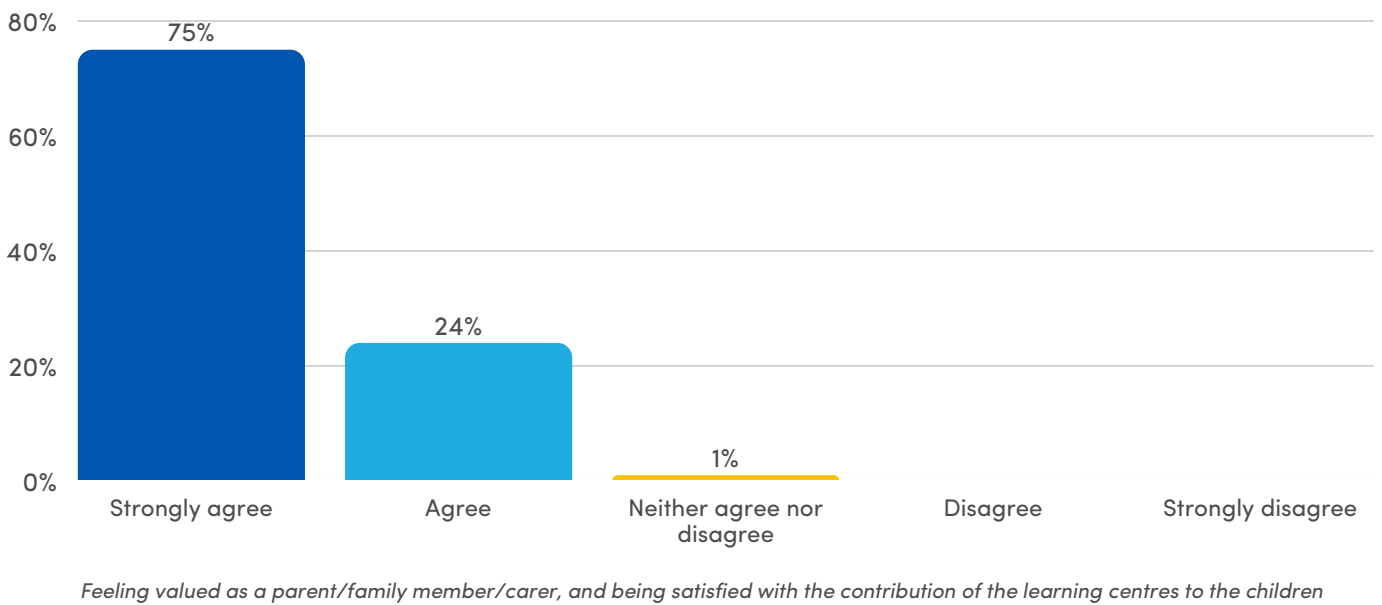
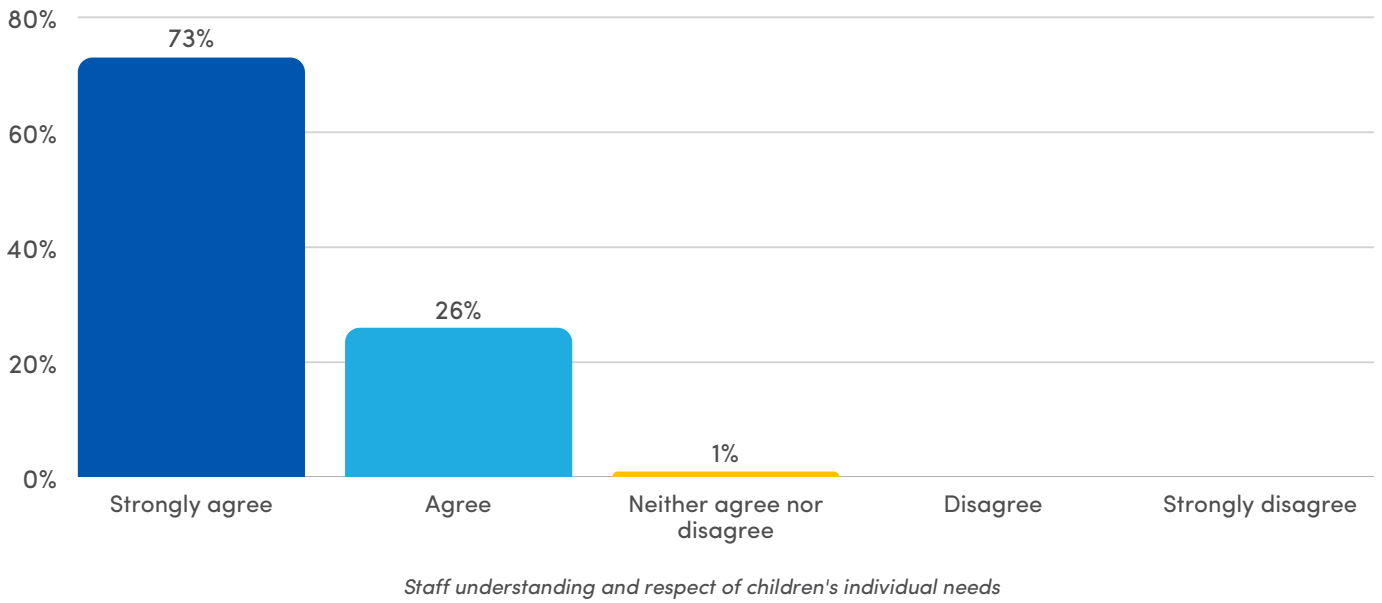
Parents' satisfaction with the quality of care and education provided for their children



Parents' satisfaction with communication with staff



Parents' satisfaction with how responsive the staff are and how much information they provide about the child's progress and development



Appendix 5. Community-identified success factors, challenges, and initial community recommendations

Goal 1 Optimisation Optimise the responsiveness, quality, range and delivery of the services across the seven centres to meet the needs of more children and families.

Factor of success	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The centralized management structure allows the organization to optimize resources and ensure that no single centre is left struggling in isolation. • The governance structure is cited as key to providing necessary support to centre managers so they can optimize their services. • The structure management level allows for clear reporting on service capacity and delivery. • The Operations Manager role is specifically designed to be accessible and help the staff in the centres optimize their performance and meet strategic goals. • Educators demonstrated a deep child-centred philosophy, valuing that the organization is "all for the children" and responsive to their specific needs/interests. • The hands-on focus on the ground ensures services are responsive to the immediate needs of families. • The diversification of the family support, including help with housing insurance, medical card applications, and GP appointments. • The successful acquisition of external funding (e.g. community developer donations for quality improvements/ community recognition funds from county councils to develop outdoor spaces, food poverty grants from the children's right alliance has directly supported the improvement of the service quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The significant "administrative noise" and high volume of compliance documentation sometimes act as barriers to efficient service delivery. • Physical infrastructure in some centres requires capital investment to maintain a high-quality environment. • Rising developmental/language delays and long waiting lists for external therapy (SLT) make it difficult to provide a "streamlined and timely" service that responds effectively to all children's individual needs. • The transition from ECE to primary school is currently a gap in service range. • The Family Facilitators are sometimes under administrative overload acting as a "resource centre" (e.g., printing 47 school applications), which may distract from higher-level facilitation.

StartBright community recommendations

- Streamlining interactions with government bodies (Pobal, Tusla, DCEDIY) to reduce red tape.
- Dedicated capital funding to ensure the "bricks and mortar" of the facilities match the quality of the education being delivered.
- Develop closer relationships with local primary schools to ensure a streamlined "personal development" journey for the child as they graduate from StartBright.
- Provide parents with "information packs" and guidance on child development.
- Prioritize the creation of a "proper community space" to support the mingling of families.
- Use the already set family groups (i.e. "Yoga for families" and "Baby and Toddler") as models for social impact measurement.

Goal 2
The StartBright Way

Champion and deliver a model of excellence through continuous improvement in early years education through training, development, quality assurance, impact assessment and better use of technology.

Factor of success

- The organization’s strong identity and values-led approach ensure that high standards are non-negotiable across all locations. The model’s focus on "families, the voice of the child, [and] inclusion" is central to its identity .
- There is a core focus on ECE quality, which is already embedded in the organisational philosophy.
- The stable Centre Managers are currently the keepers of the "StartBright Way" in practice.
- A critical success factor is the role of the educational leader, who works "off-floor" to provide consistent mentorship, quality assurance, and a safe space for staff to discuss and improve their practice.
- The close link between the Quality Mentor and operations ensures staff receive necessary training and support.
- Strong commitment to CPD and training.
- The "at the door" presence in the mornings and evenings is essential for establishing a bond.
- Success is rooted in "embracing the slow" process of building genuine, non-judgmental relationships (trust-based philosophy).
- Non-contact time is highly valued for research and observations (essential for the Reggio Emilia approach).
- Using "plain language" instead of academic jargon (like "scaffolding" or "facilitating") makes the service accessible to families.

Challenges

- Current government funding models (Core Funding) do not adequately recognize or fund the non-contact time and key roles like the Pedagogical Leader or Family Facilitator that are central to the StartBright Way.
- The absence of the Family Facilitator role in some centres, resulting in educators having to find additional time to dedicate time away from children with complex family situations ("chasing their tails").
- Translating the StartBright philosophy into consistent documentation for quality assessment and ensuring time for continuous professional development (CPD) across all 80+ staff remains a significant workload and capacity challenge.
- The "Child Voice" needs stronger representation to align with the model of excellence.

StartBright community recommendations

- Advocate for government specifically funds central specialized roles (i.e. Family Facilitator, Pedagogical Leader) to ensure the sustainability of high-quality early childhood education models.
- Increase Board engagement with Family Facilitators. These roles are key to capturing the evidence-based impact on families and identifying community-specific difficulties.
- Restore the Family Facilitator role in each centre as a priority to alleviate pressure on room staff and ensure the -StartBright model of support is fully realized.
- Documenting and reflecting on the "difference" and "impact" the model makes.
- Parent-Led Programming: Base the "StartBright Way" on what families actually want (e.g., self-care/yoga) rather than only pushing pre-set parenting agendas.
- Further integration of children's voices (i.e engage them in how they want funding/grants to be spent for their education).

**Goal 3
Community Access
and Inclusion**

Develop access to StartBright services to reflect the profile of the children and families in their communities, and respond to their needs at the right time.

Factor of success	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A philosophy that emphasizes supporting both children and families ensures a holistic approach to access. The organization is community-based, which is the primary driver for inclusion and trust. • The model is intentionally inclusive, focusing on meeting the needs of the child at the centre regardless of their location. Staff are trained to listen to families and value every individual without judgment. • Deep roots in the community and "generational trust" (teaching children of former students) foster an open-door relationship with parents, supporting the goal of community immersion. • Educators effectively create a "welcoming" environment that actively encourages families to walk through the doors and participate. • Extensive networking with local organizations (e.g., Blue Skies) allows the organization to be deeply "in tune" with the specific needs of communities. The FF acts as a "shameless" negotiator with local businesses and national agencies (St. John of Gods, HSE), expanding the organization's reach. • The Family Facilitator is a key role to identify hidden barriers (i.e. literacy issues, lack of valid ID, or fear of "Hive" financial forms), and for immediate families urgencies intervention (i.e. providing "sibling hour" or places for homeless families sponsored through NCS). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of direct family representation on the Board means the "profile of the community" is not fully reflected at the highest decision-making level. • The complexity of supporting families in disadvantaged areas requires more time and resources than current equal start funding allows. • The recruitment and retention crisis in the sector limits the organization's capacity to respond to children and families needs at the right time. • Increasing frequency of challenging behaviours and additional educational needs in almost every room (3-4 children per room). • Helping parents navigate the "lengthy" and "difficult" primary school application process is a major pain point.

StartBright community recommendations

- Actively recruit for Family Representation on the Board to ensure the access strategy is underpinned by the actual lived experience of the families.
- Funding should be adjusted to reflect the "complexity" of the community. Centres in areas with higher needs should receive targeted resources for intensive family support.
- Qualifications such as SNA and social care for AIM supports should be recognised. Nurturing Skills (the national workforce development plan) needs go beyond the level of qualification educators are trained in.
- Leverage the knowledge gained from local networks to participate more broadly in "change" within the ECEC sector as a whole.
- Focus on Early Intervention strategies within the centres to address the rising needs of children with challenging behaviours and speech delays while waitlists for external support remain long.
- Create a specialized support pathway for parents of children with additional needs to navigate school applications and SENO links.

**Goal 4
Governance**

Govern an organisation so that it is a strong, sustainable organisation capable of delivering quality services in community-based centres.

Factor of success	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance is bolstered by a voluntary Board of Directors providing a broad set of professional expertise in areas including legal, financial, and HR sectors, strategy development, community development, advocacy, and not for profit organisations. • Clear distinction between strategic thinking and key management. • The centralized governance ensures financial stability and a high level of strategic oversight. • A primary governance success is having a Board of Management with actual "experience and qualifications" in the early years sector, which ensures they "understand the whole make-up" of the work. • A "great place to work" is evidenced by the stable staff across centres. High levels of staff engagement. Staff feel valued (e.g. through educator and manager appreciation days, annual conference and awards events). • A culture of "no matter who you ask a question to, you're getting that support" ensures no one in the organization feels "alone". • A "safety net" culture where staff are flexible and supportive. • Leadership advocacy is strong, with the management team advocating for the sector in a multitude of external forums and networking alliances and memberships, engaging with groups, policy makers (local councillor, TD's), and area partnerships and initiatives • Management/mentorship is seen as a major improvement and a key role. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over-dependence on key management personnel threatens long-term sustainability. • Need for additional/broader funding sources (sustainability) • Staff retention is the most significant risk to organizational sustainability, driven by pay scales that are tied to limited government funding rather than the professional value of the work. The funding environment remains volatile, making long-term strategic planning difficult. • Staffing/relief shortages leading to "skeleton staff" and educators feeling under pressure; high stress when colleagues are absent, threatening the "great place to work" objective. • Services closure or reduced provision of services to families affects quality work time assigned to educators.

StartBright community recommendations

- Develop a formal succession plan for key leadership.
- Broaden the funding model to maximize service capacity and team development.
- Continue to advocate for government implementation of a professional, sector-wide pay scale that reflects the educators' qualifications and responsibilities.
- Maintain the "helpful layer" of operations management to provide a common baseline of support and feedback between the centres and head office (inclusive of union memberships and internal shop steward representation)
- Establish a dedicated relief staff pool to ensure sustainability and protect staff wellbeing; review and simplify shift patterns to better accommodate staff families and provide stability.
- Continue to capture and document family facilitators "knack" and specific community contacts to ensure the role's impact survives staff turnover.
- Continuous review of the alignment of internal resource allocation and service goals between ground staff and strategic management.

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