

A Case Study into Existing Multi-Site Non-Profit Early Childhood Education & Care Provision in Ireland

This research was undertaken by

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Researcher and Research Institute Profile

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Dublin City University (DCU) is a young, dynamic and ambitious university with a distinctive mission to transform lives and societies through education, research and innovation. Since admitting its first students in 1989, DCU has grown to a student body of over 20,000 from over 120 different countries across five campuses.

The **DCU Institute of Education** is the newest faculty of Dublin City University and is based in DCU St Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra. The Institute brings together students of education across all sectors from early childhood to primary and post-primary, and further and higher education. As well as providing a range of undergraduate programmes in education, the Institute offers a rich menu of taught and research-based postgraduate programmes, at doctoral, masters, diploma and certificate levels.

The DCU Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) actively promotes close collaboration between research, policy and practice in the field. The ECRC engages in interdisciplinary research with members investigating policies and politics, pedagogies and practices in early childhood locally and internationally from a critical perspective that is informed by a shared interest in the transformative potential of collaborative research.

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Table of Contents

01	Chapter One: Introduction and Methodology
01	– Introduction
01	– Case Study Services - StartBright and Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
01	– Research Methodology
03	– Report Structure
04	Chapter Two: Policy Context
04	– Introduction
06	– Are There Alternatives?
09	Chapter Three: Case Study Organisations and Contexts
09	– Introduction
09	– StartBright
10	– Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
13	– Conclusion
14	Chapter Four: Research Findings
14	– Introduction
14	– Research Findings - StartBright
31	– Research Findings - Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta
53	Chapter Five: Discussion - Implications Arising from this Research
53	– Introduction
53	– Key Features of Multi-Site Non-Profit ECEC
55	– Finances and Resources
67	– Challenges
69	– Conclusion
70	Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusions
70	– Introduction
70	– Summary of Irish ECEC Context
72	– Key Features and Recommendations for Future Developments
74	– Recommendations Arising
77	– Conclusion
78	References
83	Appendices

Chapter One: Introduction and Methodology

Introduction

“Enhancing Civic Society: Towards alternative community-based models of early childhood education and care (ECEC)” is a community-level collaboration involving two not-for-profit ECEC organisations: the Dublin based StartBright, and Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNnG), with its head office in County Galway, along with academics involved in researching the Irish early childhood field. This Irish Research Council: New Foundations funded project counters what Moss (2018) calls a ‘Dictatorship of No Alternative’ and instead addresses the question of alternative ECEC models of practice and governance. This report explores by way of two case studies, operating models of ECEC that differ from what is considered “the norm” in the Irish early childhood context. Working in partnership, researchers and members of the two ECEC organisations brought together their knowledge and experiences, collaboratively identifying and articulating sustainable community-based models of ECEC. Reported on herein, these documented models of provision will support the development of the broader ECEC field, offering alternatives for consideration and prioritisation.

Case Study Services - StartBright and Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

Start-Bright is a not-for-profit or social enterprise, community based provider of early childhood services, operating seven centres in areas of suburban disadvantage in Southwest Dublin (Appendix A). The StartBright philosophy is that every child has a right to the life enhancing possibilities that excellent early education and care can deliver and works closely with families to achieve best outcomes.

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNnG)

provides the infrastructure for early years services through the medium of the Irish language, and provides administrative, support and training services to the Gaeltacht services, parents, committees, and communities. CNnG operates in rural Gaeltacht areas, which are frequently under-served.

Reflecting their histories and contexts, the participating civil society organisations present different operating models, with differing service aims and perspectives; however, both prioritise high quality early learning experiences for children attending, and privilege strong relationships with families and their communities.

Research Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine existing sustainable models of community based ECEC provision. The purpose of this exercise was to highlight current alternative ECEC models, operating in Ireland today, as well as to inform the recent political discourse of “public models” of ECEC in the Irish context. So that we would privilege the tacit local knowledge and rich lived experiences of key actors involved in the two Community Service Organisation CSOs, a participatory research approach, within an ethnographic methodology, was developed.

Participatory research seeks to raise lesser heard voices, challenging power imbalances, intentionally reducing the power-difference between the researcher and the researched (Wallerstein *et al*, 2019). As it is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, this approach seeks multiple perspectives on a particular phenomenon, offering new ways of understanding. The participatory nature of such a study typically leads to useful, actionable research outcomes with practical applicability (Minkler and Salvatore, 2012). As we sought to learn from these two CSOs, with the intention of informing current state policy through this research, a participatory ethnographic methodology was appropriate.

The following research questions guided the project:

- What are the key features of the participating not-for-profit, community-based and/or social enterprise models of ECEC?
- How might a greater understanding of such models inform future policy direction in respect of the publicly funded/public system developments?

A short literature review, focusing on social enterprise and its characteristics was undertaken and this guided the development of the schedule of questions, or areas explored with each participating group (Reed, 2025; O'Sullivan, 2023; Malacarne Bravim *et al.*, 2025). Key issues of economic sustainability and social equity, strong features of social enterprises, offered key topic areas to explore in the research field work. These included questions of values, governance, finances, networking, leadership, management and staffing. Due to the nature of these participating services, the core areas of early childhood pedagogy and family engagement were also addressed.

Prior to commencing data collection, visits to the CSOs by researchers, as a process of familiarisation and relationship formation, was crucial. Conversations supported the identification of key documents/reports to be reviewed, while offering an opportunity to explore the topics to be examined through the data collection as well as agreeing suitable methods.

Participatory research draws from a variety of data collection methods, responding to the particular context, seeking participant agreement and/or leadership on the methods of data collection (Jokelea-Pansini and Thieme, 2024). In this study, data collection included individual interviews and focus

groups with key actors, between June 2024 and June 2025. In exploring the features of the StartBright approach, researchers engaged with the Family Facilitator, parents attending the Parent & Toddler group, managers, educators, management team and Board of Directors. Participants from CNnG included members of the senior management team, early childhood educators and development officers. In addition, documentary and digital analysis was undertaken (reviews of websites, policy documents, staff and family handbooks, etc.) for each, providing a more rounded picture of the aims and objectives of the two organisations.

Reflecting the qualitative nature of this study, and drawing on the preset topic guide, collected data was analysed thematically, within a framework model of data analysis (Klinberg *et al.*, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2021). In respect of the ethos of participatory, collaborative and community-based research, a check-back with research participants occurred between January and March of 2026 leading to some revisions of the findings. Analysed data is presented herein as two distinct "findings" sections, with a merged "discussion" following.

This project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Dublin City University and was guided by a research steering group, made up of members of the DCU Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC). Through this study, we sought to elicit robust, evidence-informed characteristics of two distinct ECEC organisations, each of which were grounded in community with a strong sense of their specific purpose. To achieve this aim, we drew initially on literature to explore social enterprises in the context of early childhood centres. More importantly we drew on the tacit knowledge and lived experiences of a broad range of stakeholders in CNnG and StartBright to inform this work.

Based on the described engaged and participatory methodology, the project initially established networks between academia and the civic society partners. Secondly, the collaborative network analysed the elements of their current community-based models, identifying strengths and challenges of provision. Finally, through this report, the findings are disseminated, with plans for further dissemination underway. It is the intention of the research collective, that the publication and promotion of these sustainable, accountable and community-led models offer a stark contrast to the current Irish ECEC landscape, increasingly dominated by a financialisation and corporatisation imperative, and a starting point for the development of a “public system” of ECEC for Ireland.

Report Structure

This report is structured in six chapters, beginning with this Introduction and Methodology Chapter. Chapter Two presents the Policy Context for ECEC in Ireland. This includes a discussion of alternative ECEC models, drawing on current research and literature. The third chapter offers an introduction to the two case study organisations, including the unique contexts which influenced the establishment of each. Chapter Four – Research findings, presents two distinct sets of findings, drawn from engagement with the 2 CSOs. This chapter ends with a merged conclusion which sets up the Discussion, following as Chapter Five. Chapter Six offers Recommendations and Conclusion, including implications for policy in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, as the final chapter.

Chapter Two: Policy Context

Introduction

A robust system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provides a foundation for children's learning and development, supports parents and families, and contributes to a more equitable society (Lloyd & Penn, 2013). The ways in which ECEC is organised and delivered is always political: decisions are taken by key actors that have economic, societal and educational implications. The provision of ECEC in Ireland was, until the 1990s, driven primarily by the voluntary sector (Hayes, 2006) with some standalone private early years services operating. The introduction of the Child Care Act (Ireland, 1991) saw, for the first time, the regulation of the sector, which paved the way for subsequent policy developments. A growing economy, increased levels of maternal employment, and a policy focus on early childhood education arising from the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999) spearheaded investment, primarily in the form of the European Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), into what was a sector of community and small private services (Douglas, 1984). The case of community provision for children and families was recognised in the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000-2006) funding scheme. While private for-profit services could apply for limited or 'capped' grants, the community/voluntary sector could access up to €1 million in capital grants with staffing grants made available only to not-for-profit organisations. The aim in targeting investment to community or voluntary bodies was to meet local needs and in so doing to support families in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Learning from the EOCP indicated that without public funding, the majority of community services, specifically in the most disadvantaged areas would be forced to close (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2007).

Since the 1990's a mixed market model of provision has thrived; however, across the OECD, Ireland is noted as having the highest level of private ECEC provision (Oireachtas, 2020). The policy landscape has been well seeded, with 96% of young children enjoying two years of funded pre-school and 4,300 services (preschool, creche, school age) registered with Tusla. Levels of state investment in ECEC have grown steadily with a 114% increase between 2021 and 2023 alone (Oireachtas, 2025). Although Ireland has seen a record spend of €1.537 billion in 2025, this represents just 0.14% GDP or 0.27% GNI (DCDE, 2025). The OECD, the UN/UNICEF and others recommend states commit a full 1% of GDP investment into ECEC. Presently the EU average is 1.0% and a high of 1.7% in Iceland, another small island nation (UNICEF, 2024; OECD, 2024).

In recent times, an ambitious reform agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), establishing a strong policy base and investing incrementally in a range of funding streams has been progressed by the Government. The launch of *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* provides an actionable vision for the future, while *Nurturing Skills* (DCEDIY, 2021) guides the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce. *Partnership for the Public Good* (DCEDIY, 2021) sets out the blueprint for a funding model, incorporating Core Funding, Equal Start, ECCE programme, and the National Childcare Scheme, (NCS) as an approach to reduce parent fees. *Shaping the Future* (DCDE, 2025) launched at the end of 2025, outlines a two-staged plan to deliver the current government's ECEC strategy, including, for the first time, an exploration of a public model in the Irish context.

Despite the progress of policy and investment, significant challenges remain in respect of the affordability, access and variable quality of provision, as well as challenges in relation to the

workforce, and the sustainability of settings. While investment in ECEC has increased, this up-lift has not automatically translated into fair levels of recompense for those in the workforce. SIPTU (2024) report that low pay, pressure due to staff shortages and accompanying stress and burnout contribute to the current exodus of staff from the sector, high rates of staff turnover and low levels of graduate retention. The insufficiency of pay and conditions within the sector is widely recognised by the Government (Oireachtas, 2025) and more widely across Europe as a barrier to recruitment and retention (OECD, 2021). The sustainability of settings remains precarious, with capitation/funding levels, fee freezes and administrative burdens impacting on viability. Many of these issues are actively being addressed with, for example, the recently launched *Action Plan for Administrative and Regulatory Simplification* (DCDE, 2025), complimenting *Shaping the Future*. However, there is a recognition and recommendation that funding models be adjusted and be sufficiently flexible to ensure the viability of small and medium enterprises (Oireachtas, 2024).

Tensions arise where the demands of a structured policy system are overlaid on a sector and profession that comprises community, private and corporate settings or services, each with its own set of drivers, enablers and barriers. In Ireland, over 75% of ECEC is delivered by private-for-profit businesses which range from small, local independent enterprises to large multi-site corporations. Despite the comparatively low level of government investment, increased funding in recent years has begun to change the mix and has attracted the attention of global equity funds, seeking to benefit shareholders rather than privileging children and families. One prolific UK-based chain (majority owned by a global investment fund with net assets of \$247.5 billion) has acquired over 30 large, full-day settings across Ireland since 2019¹.

This is a worrying trend. International evidence consistently shows that when ECEC becomes a playground for private equity, the quality of education and care suffers, parent fees increase, accessibility is reduced and the terms and conditions of those working in the sector are degraded (Haspel, 2024).

A recent review of direct filings to the Companies Registration Office by economist Michael Taft (2025), demonstrates the impressive profitability and cash holdings of Ireland's multi-site providers. Rather than benefitting the children attending, the educators or families, profits accrued by corporate ECEC fund generous rewards for shareholder and director remuneration. Further, high-value, high-interest equity investment and property financing, particularly from offshore sources, are fuelling rapid acquisition and mergers, rather than the development of new additional services, among lucrative ECEC corporations. Janet Yelland, Secretary of the US Treasury, famously stated: "Childcare is an example of a broken market"², reflecting the inherent conflict of interests in the market-driven approach which dominates the Anglosphere. Profit driven corporations privilege profit, whereas high quality ECEC privileges the child. You cannot have both.

This increased market reach within a fragmented early childhood infrastructure means that multi-site providers can target the most profitable parts of the market, creating childcare deserts, holding families to ransom for a coveted child-place, as parents wonder what their childcare fees are actually funding (UCL, 2025). As Moss and Mitchell (2024) state, the market driven approach to ECEC has left us with 'early childhood systems that are increasingly flawed and dysfunctional' (pg. 4).

1 Growth spurt at PE-backed nursery group | Insider Media.

2 Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen on Shortages in the Child Care System | U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Are There Alternatives?

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality have made ambitious commitments to reform our early childhood and school-aged systems, in recent years. Previously, policy development and programme reforms have merely tweaked the existing system that is in place. Moss and Mitchell (2024) note this is a common history across Anglosphere ECEC markets: systems grow in an ad hoc manner, with limited examples of reviews, evaluations or structured forward planning. This is further exacerbated by a worldview or manner of constructing ECEC as a private concern, one to which the markets will respond. This leads to the dominance of profit oriented ECEC across particular states (ibid).

It is apparent alternative ways of understanding and constructing our ECEC system are needed. Many civil society voices – trade unions such as SIPTU, the National Women's Council of Ireland, researchers and academics, among others – have been calling for the enactment of current policy recommendations to explore a public system of ECEC. A public system of ECEC is characterised by government involvement in all aspects of the system from regulating and planning to service delivery and evaluation (Urban, 2024).

An alternative approach, within a public or hybrid structure, could seek to build a strong, sustainable early childhood system, inclusive of ethically operating independent business and non-profit, social enterprise, while introducing a publicly operated element. Such a system must include tighter controls on profiteering, and limits to the number of settings any one entity can amass (Haspel, 2024). It is critical that state investment remains within the system, privileging high quality education and care that profits everyone in society, rather than feathering equity-fund nests.

The case is made that left to the markets, current models of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision do not adequately serve children and families (Lloyd & Penn, 2013; Jitendra, 2024; Haspal, 2024; UCL, 2025).

The development of ECEC in Ireland mirrors that of the UK where there has been a long historical evolution, highly ad hoc in nature, rather than a deliberate system design (Reed, 2023; Moss & Mitchell, 2024). Mirroring the Irish context, the current dominant UK model has led, despite increased levels of investment, to sufficiency gaps, poor pay and conditions, limited career pathways for the workforce, and variable quality of early learning and care (Jitendra, 2024). In the UK, there is a call for re-envisioning of the sector, for the Government “to take the reins of the market and unleash social value” (Jitendra, 2024, p.5). Here in Ireland the discourse is shifting and expanding to include a move towards having ECEC within a public system. Voluntary groups such as Alliance for Public ECEC (National Women's Council, 2024) have garnered support from over 40 civil society organisations calling for a public system that meets the needs of children and parents while valuing and respecting the ECEC workforce. There is much talk and some action of re-shaping ECEC in Ireland; there is also an acknowledgement by the Government that ELC and SAC should serve the public good. *Partnership for the Public Good* (DCEDIY, 2021) recommended that an element of public provision should be examined and introduced alongside existing provision, with a view to addressing areas of potential market failure. More recently this same department (renamed the Department of Children, Disability and Equality/DCDE) made ambitious commitments to reform our early childhood and school-aged systems. *Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan* (DCDE, 2025) commits to progressing state-led provision and creating additional capacity in areas where there is unmet demand.

This is intended to occur in Phase 2 of its lifetime (2027-2029).

Is ECEC in Ireland in the process of transformation? In order to meet these new objectives, in this shift in policy direction and implementation, the DCDE would be wise to take account and learn from the existing evidence base, from alternative models that currently operate, to ensure that public funding follows public need.

Social Enterprise Models

Despite the early progress of the ECEC system development through the early 2000s, there is a sense of dysfunction and stagnation in Ireland and elsewhere. However, alternative models in ECEC are emerging, drawing on the values and histories that inform social enterprise and rural community development practices. While these models, along with cooperatives and other civil society organisations (CSOs) are constituted differently, they share some common characteristics (Bravim *et al.*, 2025).

Social enterprises are driven by mission, committed to improving the lives of people and bringing about social, societal, environmental and in respect of early childhood, educational change or transformation. Typically, they are associated with communities that are under-resourced (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010). At the heart of social enterprise is change, collaboration, community and leadership, which reinvest surpluses (profit) to address social problems within the community and effect positive social impact. To achieve the goals of social enterprise, organisations typically establish partnerships with Government, academic and civil society (Bravim *et al.*, 2025). As an approach, social enterprises are hybrid models, bringing together commercial business rigour and a strong social purpose (O’Sullivan, 2023),

Social enterprise as a philosophy and model has been long-standing in Ireland, but has little profile in practice or from research within the ECEC field. In England, the recently launched *Early Years Social Enterprise Collective* aims to broaden the discourse of ECEC governance models. Further, the collective aims to influence Government policy in supporting disadvantaged children and families in under-resourced communities. This group defines an early childhood social enterprise as,

“An organisation with a core mission to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and their families and communities. It achieves this through delivering high quality, affordable and accessible early childhood education and care – particularly to the underserved. It is guided by social leadership and grounded in a social pedagogy that promotes learning, relationships and community networks, opportunities and connections” (Reed, 2025).

The main characteristics of social enterprises rest on governance, infrastructure and professional training. Social entrepreneurship is not a one-size-fits-all, rather it takes many forms. A common characteristic in social enterprise is that ‘everyone in the sector is small and nobody in the sector has any money’ (Martin & Osberg, 2015, p.62). As such, social enterprise depends on contributions and grants, both of which are precarious, generally unstable and often come with constraints (restricted/unrestricted funds), which negatively impact on sustainability and growth. Social enterprises must be able to demonstrate their impact in financial terms, developing credible metrics to measure their performance.

Strong governance measures, for example holding both social enterprise and charitable status are central to robust accountability mechanisms. Having a strategic and sustainable plan highlights issues pertaining to service-mix, locations and staff salaries. In respect of early childhood as a social enterprise, characteristics of good practice are critical with pedagogy and curriculum central to children's learning and development, staff support leading to retention and professionalisation of educators, and family engagement that builds relationships and creates possibilities for greater social and cultural capital.

Why a Social Enterprise Model

Reed (2025) suggests that arguments for a social enterprise model centre on:

Intrinsic public value benefits – There is a social value in recycling surplus back into the community or children, making ECEC more affordable for parents with more equitable wages/salaries for educators. The point is well made that up-scaling in social enterprises is not merely maximising growth for its own sake but maximising growth for impact.

In-built characteristics which support quality in ECEC – ECEC delivered through a social enterprise has the mission prerogative to focus its business on the child and not merely on the parents' need to work, or the profits to be accrued. In short, a commitment to young children having the best educational start in life is not framed solely or primarily by the State or parents' need to work.

A counter-factual argument considering current trends and risks – a social enterprise model counters the growing trend (Ireland, England, America, Canada, Australia) of private equity and investor-backed chains entering the childcare market (Haspel, 2024). These investor/corporate services are shown to have a higher workforce churn with a lower proportion of spending on staff (Dept. for Education, 2022). Involvement of private equity in the childcare market presents as a significant, potentially destabilising emergence (Jitendra, 2024) and the question arises if this is the appropriate model for something that is better framed as a public good (Haspel, 2024). Social enterprise presents an opportunity to re-balance the childcare market.

Developments in the UK saw a recently launched strategy, *Best Start in Life*, commit to working with social investors and partners in the 'Impact Economy', which explicitly includes social enterprises, to bring additional funding and provide access to capital.

In Ireland there are opportunities for early childhood social enterprises to develop with funding support, through for example, social innovation funding from *Rethink Ireland*, which seeks to support promising social enterprises. One particular strand of *Rethink Ireland* relates to education as they recognise the interconnected nature of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, health, demographics and education. Social enterprises are an essential approach or model in providing the infrastructure for a fair, inclusive, and effective early years system. At this point of policy and funding development in Ireland, it is critical to examine existing models be they community, not-for-profit or social enterprise to ensure that the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater.

Chapter Three:

Case Study Organisations and Contexts

Introduction

As a central focus, both participating civic society organisations (CSOs) - CNnG and StartBright - centre on the provision of high-quality, inclusive, and accessible early childhood education and care; however, the history, development and underpinning missions of each, vary considerably. This section presents a historical and contextualised introduction to both groups.

StartBright

StartBright is a community based, not-for-profit, social enterprise which offers early childhood education and school age services across West and South-West Dublin.

StartBright had its origins as part of Dublin West Childcare & Learning Services and was formalised in 2010 with the inclusion of four core Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres in Southwest Dublin, namely Balgaddy, Bawnogue, Deansrath, and St Ronan's, all located in the Clondalkin/Lucan area. A process of rebranding and collaboratively developing a Strategic Plan saw the launch of StartBright in the Autumn of 2019 with the inclusion of the Greenhills centre in Tallaght.

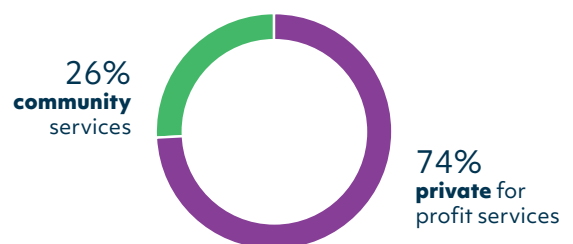
In 2022 two additional centres joined StartBright, Brookview in Tallaght and St. Finian's in Lucan. The seven centres work closely with children and families offering full and part time places for 480 preschool and School Age Childcare (SAC) and employing 85 professionals, which include six staff members in Head Office, along with a centralised operational and financial management team all of which are governed by a single voluntary Board of Management. From its inception StartBright has been underpinned by a strong value base and has prioritised high quality early learning experiences for participating children,

as well as privileging strong relationships with families and their communities.

A strength of StartBright is that it is led by a voluntary Board of Management which governs all seven ECEC centres within the Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan areas. This enables shared learning, economies of scale and centralised financial, management and administration functions. The organisation attained Charitable Status in 2024 (RCN 20075026), establishing its governing and operating approach as a public benefit and providing accountability and transparency for its wider community. The StartBright Board of Management comprises a Chairperson, Treasurer, Company Secretary, plus five Directors. The Board has a diverse membership base in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, along with distinct skill sets and diverse perspectives, which inform and enrich the workings of the group.

Collecting and analysing data from the annual early years survey, Pobal (2026) provides insights into the characteristics and contexts of early years provision across the state. The survey reveals that StartBright, is part of the one quarter of services operating under a community, not-for-profit governance structure. The existing system breaks down as a mix of private or independent (74% or 3,387) settings and community services 26% (1,140) (Pobal, 2026; DCDE, 2025).

Figure 3.1: Private/Community service breakdown (Pobal, 2021)



Pobal further situates services within socio-economic designated areas, using the Pobal Haase-Pratschke (HP) Deprivation Index³. Drawing on Census data, along 10 metrics, such as educational attainment and employment levels, this Index categorises areas from “extremely disadvantaged” to “extremely affluent”. Being aware of the relative levels of affluence or deprivation of an area should support the State in developing and enhancing services and resources targeted at improving social inclusion, and ameliorating the pernicious challenges of living in consistent poverty.

It is worth noting that within the non-profit/for-profit division and according to Pobal (2021) no private ECEC services operate in areas that are “extremely disadvantaged” or “very disadvantaged”, according to the HP Index. Further, in areas of “disadvantage” almost 58% of services identify as community.

StartBright operates across the geographic areas of Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan, each of which have pockets of disadvantage, measured in terms of “extremely disadvantaged, very disadvantaged, disadvantaged and marginally below average” (Pobal, 2021). This means that many of the children and families connecting with StartBright experience social inequality and intergenerational poverty. These children and families depend on their local community-based early childhood education and care centres as few, if any, alternative options exist. StartBright is critical to the fabric and infrastructure of the areas they serve.

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

With its base in Ireland’s Gaeltacht regions, Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNnG) is an umbrella organisation supporting the provision of Irish language ECEC services. Found in cities, towns, rural hinterlands, and islands, these services include full day, sessional and school age services, delivered through this not-for-profit, community-based model. CNnG also promotes the cultivation and transmission of Irish within families and communities, through parental language support initiatives and language interventions for ECEC settings in Gaeltacht areas, which are not part of CNnG, and may not be operating through the Irish language.

Brief History of Irish language ECEC

The focus on cultivating the Irish language through early educational provision emerged out of community activism of the 1970s in Ireland. Inspired by the Welsh language revitalisation movement of the 1960s, Conradh na Gaeilge took a leading role, pursuing a number of initiatives with other key actors, to promote the provision of early education through a language-immersion model. The first Gaeltacht-based naíonra opened in 1978, in An Cheathrú Rua, Contae na Gaillimhe. Over a 20 year period, the community based organisation, An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, a precursor to CNnG, emerged, and strengthened over time. The intention of An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta was to support the further establishment of independent, not-for-profit early childhood

³ Read more about the Pobal Haase-Pratschke (HP) Deprivation Index here: [Pobal HP Deprivation Index Launched - Pobal](#).

services, delivered through the medium of the Irish language, across Gaeltacht regions.

In 1997 Údarás na Gaeltachta (Údarás) became an important partner in the further development of ECEC in the Gaeltacht areas. As a regional development authority, though with a unique and dedicated Irish language and Gaeltacht remit, Údarás offered a robust administrative structure, just as the national ECEC system moved into a critical time of growth and regulatory change.

By 2004 CNnG was established as an independent, not-for-profit company to manage all aspects of the growing Irish language ECEC system, though still within the Údarás community of supported companies. Over a number of years, the management of standalone services merged under the CNnG umbrella, gradually shifting administrative, financial, HR, training and other tasks to a central office. This facilitated ECEC service managers and educators to focus their attention on the children and families attending, on pedagogy and professional practice, to language immersion and transmission, to a greater degree.

At present CNnG employs 236 Early Childhood Educators based in 135 early years and school age services, located across Ireland's Gaeltacht regions. A number of Oifigigh Forbartha (Development Officers) provide an important layer of support and enrichment for local services, promoting quality early childhood experiences through a play-based and Irish language immersion model. While each setting has a community-based committee, CNnG's Board of Directors provides essential structural oversight and strategic direction. Further, the senior management team supports the Chief Executive Officer to ensure the organisation's

annual and strategic aims and objectives are achieved effectively.

Irish Language Use in Ireland

Although Irish is recognised in the Constitution as Ireland's first official language, its use and popularity has suffered from historical decline. While this report does not delve deeply into the influences and barriers imposed on Irish language use, Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin (2015) argue a complexity of historical and contemporary reasons for this decline, many with political, legislative and social origins. Of course colonialism initiated and sustained the decline over centuries.

The most recent Irish census, Census 2022 (CSO, 2022), offers statistical insights into the presence of spoken Irish in Ireland today. Currently, 1,873,997 people in Ireland, or 40% of the population, claim to speak the Irish language: a 6% increase from the previous 2016 census.

Interestingly, when analysed by age cohorts, the younger the population, the higher the Irish language capacity appears to be. For example, while only 30% of 30-34 year olds claim to speak Irish, 35% of 25-29 year olds and 47% of 20-24 year olds indicate Irish language use. However, for those of prime school going ages, 6 to 19 years, 67% claim to speak Irish.

The census finds that location matters when it comes to Irish language usage: of the 102,973 people living in Gaeltacht areas, Census 2022 reports 66% of these speak Irish, compared to the national level of 40%. The State categorises a Gaeltacht as an area where Irish is the dominant language of the majority of residents. Gaeltacht areas can be found in large parts of Counties Donegal, Galway, Mayo, Kerry, and to

a lesser extent, in Cork, Meath, and Waterford. CNnG supports early years services across all



these regions.

Figure 3.2 Map of An Gaeltacht⁴

Language as Culture

A language is, of course, so much more than a means of communication, though it is that. Traditional indigenous languages are part of and reflect the unique culture and history of a region, and of a people. As Ó Ceallaigh and Ní Dhonnabháin note, 'Irish is a vehicle of cultural expression and intangible cultural heritage, essential to identity' (2015, pg. 180). The *UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* concurs, noting that the loss of heritage languages also means the loss of local culture, oral traditions and spoken

histories. As such, recent increases in Irish language usage are a welcomed change in direction from the historic decline.

Ireland's 20 Year *Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Ireland, 2010) commits to increasing the use and knowledge of Irish, to promote bilingualism in the population, and to strengthen the linguistic identity of Gaeltacht regions. Currently, UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme classifies Irish as a vulnerable language, an improvement from the previous 'definitely endangered' status (Ireland, 2010, pg5). The State recognises this linguistic peril, in stating that the 'language's viability as a household and community language in the Gaeltacht is under threat' (pg 3), hence the commitment to not only promote the language, but to seek the 'preservation of Irish language and the Gaeltacht' (pg. 4).

Language Strategy: Early Education and Family Support

The recognition that educational environments offer rich contexts to promote and nurture our traditional language, reflects Ireland's current language strategy. That 67% of the school-going population are Irish speakers, is indicative of this contextual opportunity. Unfortunately, despite acknowledging it is 'easiest to acquire new language in the earliest years' (pg. 13), primary, post-primary and tertiary education levels dominate the Strategy's discussion. In a brief section of the Strategy exploring the ECEC context, the dual tact of early educational language immersion, along with parental language support initiatives, is promoted. A review of the written policies that guide CNnG's services, this same dual-purpose approach is included in the settings' functions. Along with promoting children's overall development,

⁴ <https://data-osi.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/osi::gaeltacht-language-planning-area-boundaries-ungeneralised-national-administrative-boundaries-2015/explore?location=53.414160%2C-8.652037%2C7>

nurturing the natural use of Irish, ensuring an inclusive and welcoming environment, CNnG settings also “provide support for parents and guardians and for young Gaeltacht families”. Irish language acquisition and Irish language preservation must be supported in all the contexts in which young children are present; in the early years this is primarily the home, the community and early childhood education and care settings. Intergenerational transmission of the language is at the heart of the language flourishing beyond simply a method of communication, but as a repository of culture, story, history and tradition.

Research indicates that early language immersion plays a critical role in establishing language usage patterns and in developing competence in the language (Hickey, 1997; Hickey, 1999). Hickey and de Mejía (2014, p.141) argue however that the most significant challenge for the future of naíonraí relates to recruitment and retention of a unique sub-set of educators. Early Years Irish immersion provision requires a workforce with early childhood qualifications, who not only have fluency in the Irish language, and possess an understanding of immersion pedagogy but who have ‘the empathy and personal qualities required for working successfully with very young children’ (p.141). As will be explored later in this report, considerable time and resources have been drawn on to address the challenges of recruitment and retention by

CNnG in recent years, with unique employee-centred strategies emerging.

Conclusion

Together these two very different organisations have commonalities that characterise their governance, structure and operation. CNcG based in the rural Gaeltacht areas endeavours to support early childhood education and the Irish language. StartBright, located in urban and partially underserved communities in West Dublin, aims to support early childhood education but also emphasises engagement with parents as critical in achieving positive outcomes for young children. It appears that these two organisations centre their operations on the social purpose that drives them.

There is little research on such models that are grounded in community, are not-for-profit, and act as social enterprises. This study sets out to explore an alternative model, which at a turning point within the Irish system, would inform developments, scalability and replicability so that similar ECEC social enterprises could be established.

Values and Mission

The espoused values and mission of StartBright are clearly laid out in the *Strategic Plan (2024-2026)*.

Values: For every child and their family in Southwest Dublin, to have access to excellent early years education as a right and a key to realising their full potential.

Mission: StartBright will empower and enable children, their families and communities in Southwest Dublin, through the delivery of exceptional early education services.

Values that consistently emerged from the research across all StartBright actors or groupings, BoM, CEO, Management Team, ECEC Managers, Educators and ancillary staff were those of **respect, relationships and listening**. The Kick-off Event or focus group, which had broad representation from across the organisation, identified the following as being central to the values of StartBright:

- **Empathy and care:** The importance of empathy, care, and genuine interest in their interactions with children, families, and staff.
- **Community and inclusion:** The significance of being a community hub, promoting inclusion, and giving families a voice.
- **Support and supervision:** The provision of support and supervision, which ensures that everyone involved feels valued and supported.
- **Staff mentoring:** The importance of quality mentoring and professional development.
- **Staff well-being and development:** The need for staff well-being, including appreciation, training, and opportunities for career progression.

'Service' is valued as

"looking after the needs of the community that StartBright serve"

and these values are evident in the genuine care extended by management and staff. The lived values of StartBright are exemplified, for example, in how opening hours are configured to suit families and not simply the organisation. In many cases managers in other services might decide that they are closing the week before Christmas. In contrast the question posed by StartBright is

"how can we manage to keep open as long as possible to facilitate children and families?"

Equally, values of community and care were exemplified during Covid, where meals and play items were delivered regularly to local families.

Within StartBright, staff value their role as advocates for children and families. In one service, the LINC coordinator has spent months supporting the mother of a young boy who has autism. The staff member worked closely with the mother, bringing her through the process of recognising the child's need and helping with the necessary paperwork. In this case the mother was not left alone but felt supported and was very grateful for the help, as her son has recently got his first diagnostic appointment.

Staff value the everyday support and mentoring in their work, in having a voice and input to the operation of StartBright, and in having opportunities for upskilling and career development. Educators across all services in the StartBright family share a central focus and value on collegiality: as one staff member suggests

"I left and came back because we work well together as part of a team".

Values centring on inclusion, respect, being non-judgmental, listening, being responsive to the voice of the child and their families, being a hub or central point for the community and building authentic relationships emerged strongly in respect of working with children and families.

Governance, Structure and Processes

StartBright is led by a voluntary Board of Management and attained Charitable Status in 2011 (RCN 20075026). This was part of establishing its governing and operating approach as a public benefit and providing accountability and transparency for its wider community. The StartBright Board of Management comprises a Chairperson, Treasurer, Company Secretary, plus five Directors. The Board has a diverse membership base in terms of age, gender and ethnicity, along with distinct skill sets and diverse perspectives, which inform and enrich the workings of the group. Staff recognise that “having a Board of Directors makes a [positive] difference”. The Board of Management governs the seven ECEC settings within the Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan areas.

To support the operation of the Board, a professional induction pack and board handbook have been developed. New directors receive training relevant to their role as part of their induction to the board of management. They are also encouraged to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) relevant to their role in the organisation throughout their term. The Board is structured for effective working and to ensure compliance. Subgroups have been developed as required in respect of, Audit and Risk; Corporate governance and Board Development; Company Communication; ELC Policy and Procedure;

Organisational Growth and Strategic Development and Review; and Remuneration Subcommittee and HR Management.

Building the capacity of the Board is a continuous process and a challenge. Currently, a gap that has been identified is that of a family representative on the StartBright Board; there is a need to ring-fence a number of places to ensure the voice and experiences of families are at the decision-making table. Introducing people to the Board, who have the background and skills in areas of legal, accounting or finance is difficult as they may have no concept of ECEC or the sector in general. The strength of the BoM lies in its strategic role and diversity of expertise present at the decision-making table.

A Culture of Self-evaluation and Change

The concept and practice of self-evaluation and impact assessment is part of StartBright’s plan. Self-evaluation occurs at the organisational and individual levels. Together the Board and Management team engage in structured evaluations, reviewing the operational processes and systems as part of their ongoing approach. The Board reviews performance and compliance in line with the Charities Regulator requirements.

At an organisational level, StartBright looks beyond itself, working with organisations such as ‘Quality Matters’ to assess employee engagement and employment conditions. Change has been a constant in the evolving StartBright model. Change is considered and is implemented on the basis of needs analysis and evaluations, for example, the internal communication and technology systems, with funding support from Microsoft, has seen the organisation migrate from an internal drive to SharePoint/Teams, an upgrading of all IT systems across services and head office and a

change of phone systems to VOIP for ease of access in rooms across services. Contracts with broadband suppliers were changed and upgraded for improved IT services to ensure quality improvement during work hours across all sites. Another significant change was the outsourcing of payrolls to a specialist company which had resulted in reduced workloads for internal finance and accounts, freeing up time to focus on strategic developments.

In respect of the ECEC centres, an internal quality assurance system (ASPG) has replaced the more generic ECERS evaluative model. The Quality Mentor works with staff reviewing practice and performance on an annual basis, setting goals in collaboration with educators and managers. Annual parent surveys provide invaluable feedback on levels of satisfaction and future recommendations, which inform organisational planning.

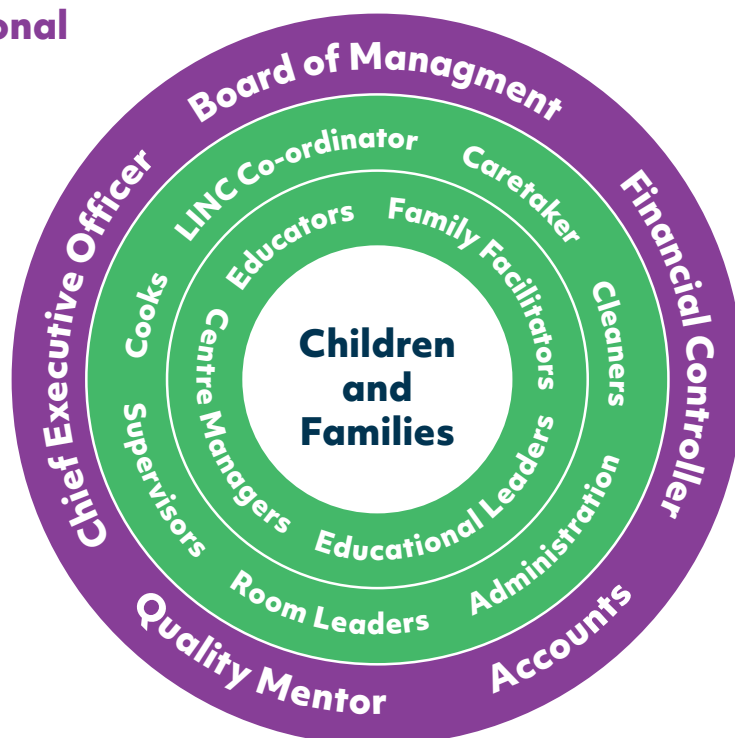
Structure

The organisational structure is dynamic: its depiction reflects an interactive, bio-ecological model (Image 4.1), which places children and families at the heart of StartBright's operations. The current and previous Strategic Plans provide a shared blueprint for growth, bringing a shared clarity on purpose and roles. This empowers staff to signpost families to external services, outside of the StartBright scope, rather than to try and be all things to the community. For example, role clarity raises awareness that

"StartBright is not a family or addiction centre, we are not occupational therapists, and we are not therapists".

Figure 4.2: Organisational Structure presented in StartBright Strategic Plan (2024-2026)

Organisational Structure



The range of roles that support the work of StartBright has and continues to grow as the organisation evolves. The Board of Management has pursued an agenda of investing in people and environments. The Quality Mentor, Family Facilitator, and Operations Manager are roles that emerged to support the work and quality of the ECEC teams across seven locations with 480 children and their families. These roles have been resourcefully funded, some out of organisational reserves. This evolving structure allows for experience to be developed within each role. Having a strong finance and management team enables the CEO, for example, to have a stronger outward facing role, to lobby and advocate for the organisation, and to have space for strategic thinking.

In horizon scanning the Board recognises challenges and risks to the organisation, some of which are retaining key management members, developing a succession plan, and proactively investing in the professional growth and development of staff, particularly the management team. They want to ensure that “key people in the organisation are happy in their jobs”.

The governance and structure of StarBright have grown with the needs of the organisation. The Board of Management recognised the need to create a senior management group and in particular to have a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) role as opposed to a manager post. This structural development recognised that a general manager could often:

“be plugging gaps, driving the bus, doing the finances, cooking the dinners and ending up working 70-80 hours per week”.

Instead, the BoM aimed to create a sustainable structure with clear boundaries and areas of financial, operational, administrative and pedagogical expertise.

Finances, Resourcing and Sustainability

Sustainability for non-profit organisations such as StartBright can be described as providing solutions for social, economic or environmental problems that are not being addressed by the market or by Government (Kamaludin et al., 2021). Sustainability for StartBright is a complex concept that in the current context is characterised by tensions and trade-offs. How sustainable is StartBright? And is financial sustainability alone sufficient?

The consensus at management level is that If StartBright is merely to meet but not exceed regulatory standards, then the new finance role, the family facilitators and additional educators who are lowering ratios in the centres would not form part of the StartBright way. So, while in this revised context the organisation would be financially sustainable, it would be unable to meet its goals in improving outcomes for children and their families and building a great place to work for all. Financial sustainability without embedded quality services relinquishes mission and becomes a technocratic checklist which only serves to meet minimum regulatory requirements.

Learning from and with others

Connecting with other successful social enterprises has emphasised that strategic development and organisational growth can only happen with a strong finance and management team. Reaching out to other like-minded organisations enables StartBright to consider what they are actually resourced to do, and the current implications of managing shortfalls when being “pulled from pillar to post”.

As a result of engaging with a successful model of social enterprise, the Board of StartBright has approved the drawdown of a percentage

of the organisation's reserves to invest in roles that will support service optimisation and measured growth.

Developing a strategic approach

The first StartBright *Strategic Plan* (2019-2023) delivered on its mission to develop, deliver and champion excellent early childhood education and school aged childcare services for children and their families in communities across South-West Dublin. The more recent Plan (2024-2026) has a focus on developing and optimising services and mapping the StartBright model. In this phase of development, there is a greater emphasis on the distribution of shared responsibility for organisational/centre sustainability.

While decisions are made for services at a board level, the strategy is sufficiently flexible to allow individual centres meet emerging local needs. The current *StartBright Strategic Plan* has an emphasis on optimisation (making the most of what StartBright has) and this includes, for example, a review of operations and fees in each centre to maximise income and occupancy. At a basic level this means centres encouraging the registration of children for 52 weeks instead of 38 to support consistent funding, which in turn allows for staffing and quality non-contact costs. It also supports children to attend for longer periods of time, and for out of term interventions, and family supports.

A strategic approach sees responsibility being shared with individual settings so that they have an ongoing responsibility for "understanding their own sustainability". For example, managing their budget or reviewing ratios to ensure the Family Facilitator role can be maintained. This approach reflects the

strong value that all members of the StartBright community are invested in the success of the organisation - they all have a role, a voice and a stake in the community.

Expansion of StartBright

StartBright was formed in 2010 with the coming together of four community services in Clondalkin and Lucan. Six years later in 2016, St. Mary's Childcare service in Tallaght joined, and more recently in 2022, Brookview and St. Finians brought the number of services under the StartBright umbrella to seven. Prior to the incorporation of Brookview and St. Finians there was much discussion in relation to the capacity of StartBright to manage this expansion. The process of bringing new services and staff groups on board, with the necessary training and induction required time and a gradual approach that brought staff along with the changes and to ensure that the services were providing what the local communities needed.

The growth of StartBright has been slow and considered. The Board has not focused on "empire building" with vast expansion plans. However, there is a strong desire to understand the elements of the StartBright approach and to determine its impact on the children and families within the community, hence the current mapping and evaluating of the organisation.

A number of lessons have been learnt in considering future expansion or scaling up:

- Understanding and retaining a strong community focus so that "we kind of know how to do what we do in the areas that we were working". In other words, having a deep understanding of the community, their needs and strengths.

- Creating local employment opportunities as experience to date is that “the vast majority of educators that work for StartBright come from the local areas in which we work”.
- Incorporating new services slowly, giving time for training, listening to staff, creating a common set of values and nurturing culture.

One aspect of work currently underway, aimed at supporting decision-making in terms of expansion, is the development of criteria and conditions for future incorporations. A forensic understanding of incorporation or take-over criteria, in terms of space and environmental layout, occupancy mix, staffing levels, management structures, and the balance sheet, all need to be quantifiable and mapped to support StartBright in decision making. Ultimately, any expansion must contribute to the sustainability of the overall organisation.

A second aim of expansion has its roots in social enterprise and a commitment to share learning with other like-minded not-for-profit entities. This is about facilitating StartBright to support other community groups in developing a sustainable and high-quality approach to the provision of early childhood education and care.

Centralising of core services

StartBright has outsourced payrolls and has centralised finance and administration functions. Centralising services not only provides opportunities for economies of scale, but also relieves individual services of stress, and allows for clearer role definition. The focus of ECEC managers can be diverted from funding and reporting and instead be on ‘delivering excellent care and education’.

Funding

StartBright is 89% publicly funded, primarily through the DCDE. Core funding flows through the following programme streams: ECCE, NCS, and Equal Start (for six of the seven StartBright services). The remainder comes from parent fees, grants and small donations. Legacy funding comes through School Meals and CSP of which last year there was a €45,000 surplus. Legacy sources will disappear over time and StartBright will be “in a breakeven situation”. There will be significant implications for this loss, for example, ratios in the centres, which currently operate at a lower adult:child ratio, will revert to the standard minimum levels.

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As with all early childhood centres, the most significant expenditure is on staff salaries. In a ‘Review of the Cost of Providing Quality Childcare Services in Ireland’ Crowe (2020) estimated 70% of the overall operating cost goes to staff salaries. StartBright has a staff cohort with a mix of experience and qualifications. Salary rates and increases in the ECEC profession are low and slow to materialise; these are overseen by the current Employment Regulation Order (ERO) system, which is unwieldy and lengthy; annual negotiations result in minimal increases. Consequently, StartBright

has introduced its own salary scales that aim to respect the skills, knowledge, experience and qualifications that staff bring.

StartBright takes a unique approach to salaries in that all graduates are paid a Lead Graduate wage, irrespective of whether they have a lead educator role or not. Currently Government funding only covers one lead graduate per room and so StartBright incurs the additional costs across all seven settings. In addition, all staff with a QQI Level 6 qualification are placed on the lead educator wage scale on the basis that they are expected to be leaders. This development aims to incentivise those with a Level 5 qualification to upskill. The Inclusion Coordinator's (LINC) role comes with an extra €2/per week in capitation per ECCE-eligible child in a pre-school room. In StartBright there is an additional salary increment allocated to the Inclusion/LINC coordinator and some non-contact time to ensure that reports are completed within the day's work. These measures are efforts to enhance staff retention and reflect the value placed on staff within the organisation.

Due to shortfalls in funding (what is received versus what is needed for a quality service), the StartBright management team puts significant time and energy into applying for grants from statutory and non-statutory sources, while also keeping abreast of additional funding and how it might be accessed. Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) Capital Development grants, for example, are applied for yearly and StartBright generally have a high success rate; this allows specific initiatives to be realised.

An advantage of strong networking means that StartBright can occasionally join consortia and apply for funding that would not be open to individual organisations. For example, the organisation joined with six other organisations

in Clondalkin for Non-Violence Resistance (NVR) training through the Dept. of Justice.

Community initiatives such as CDI and Blue Skies fund training opportunities for educators and support for parents, thus minimising expenditure for StartBright. StartBright has been successful in being awarded €15,000 from Microsoft to support IT migration and software upgrades across the organisation. It should be noted that grant applications and the resultant reporting on spend is a highly time-consuming endeavour. While StartBright has a successful track record in applying, the human resources required must be factored into overall planning.

The most significant challenge for StartBright is the lack of adequate, long-term funding that would enable planned, sustainable growth. Government funding strands are timebound, for example, Equal Start is of two years duration and therefore staff are on short-term contracts. This does not give certainty and does not allow for strategic planning. Consequently, a five- or ten-year StartBright vision cannot be planned. In addition, the restricted nature of funding does not allow for a responsive approach to the diverse needs of local communities.

Networking and Collaboration

A U2 song suggests 'sometimes you can't make it on your own'. Networking and collaboration are critical elements that are woven through the work of StartBright, primarily led by the CEO and the management team, but more recently by staff in the individual centres. The staff recognise the importance of looking outwards and are conscious that the CEO is

"always looking out to see what best practice is, and always looking for training and for funding, she just has her eye on the ball".

A strategic decision was made after Covid to more actively engage with outside bodies to bring networking benefits to the organisation, but also, to highlight the work of StartBright and begin to externally build the brand image. Networking had the benefit of spreading the organisation name and reputation, but also in developing staff. The Management Team participated in external conferences, meetings and events. Actively encouraging and delegating appropriate networking responsibilities to staff within the services has built capacity. Staff now “own, live and breathe a culture of networking”.

StartBright forges relationships with key stakeholders and consults with key groups to access resources, to learn from others, to share with others, to provide opportunities for professional development and to engage in advocacy. Membership is maintained with key influential voluntary and statutory groups relevant to the early years sector (e.g., PEIN, NCN, ECI and DCEDIY (now DCDE), NPC and consultation groups). Collaborations and connections with universities are fostered, bringing benefits for both partners in terms of research and student placement.

At a local ECEC level, individual services reach out into their local communities, giving visibility to the StartBright centres as they actively engage with key stakeholders, such as Barnardo's, Blue Skies, Better Start and Tusla, who work closely with the communities they serve. An ongoing partnership with Focus Ireland enables StartBright to better support children and families experiencing homelessness, are in crisis and in need of high quality, responsive ECEC. Staff also take initiative in reaching out to local enterprises to support the work with children and families (e.g., Lidl for vouchers, local business providers for paint, maintenance and gardening materials). In these ways, reaching out and

networking also occurs at a more local level in individual communities. One such example was the engagement with artists who worked with children on a sea life project. This was subsequently exhibited in the local library, furthering local connections and visibility.

Strong and reciprocal links have been made with schools to provide a continuity of care as children (and their families) transition into the next level of the education system. Further connections and extended links with the local primary schools have been made to facilitate the delivery of training for families. StartBright centres are active in connecting with parents through host open days, parent evenings, Stay and Play sessions, all of which aim to highlight the advantages of early learning and to enable parents to build relationships. Recognising the need to network with parents has resulted in the development and sharing of newsletters, curriculum handbooks, parent handbooks, StartBright website and social media platforms to promote the benefits of early childhood education and a play-based curriculum. Feedback from the staff team indicates that “all services have seen an increase in parental engagement highlighting the understood importance of the benefits of early learning” and that “the level of increased visibility in our communities supports understanding of the importance of early learning and active citizenship”.

Staffing, Management and Leadership

This section responds to the question “in respect of staffing, management and leadership, what elements and processes frame the StartBright approach”? The areas of governance and structure, networking and collaboration, finances and resources, families and pedagogy/ curriculum illustrate core elements of the StartBright operation. However, findings

suggest that it is the people, their attitudes, skills and commitment to the mission and values of the organisation that exemplify the StartBright way.

Structure supports staff

Each ECEC centre has a manager, an educational lead, room leaders, supervisors, educators along with support ancillary staff. Since January 2025, educational leaders have been afforded between 10- and 15-hours non-contact per week to support pedagogy. Room leaders support the centre manager and supervisors support room leaders. This approach continually builds capacity within each centre and consequently

“in the absence of the manager, someone assumes that position and is trained to step into that role”.

“Quality doesn’t just happen” but is supported and promoted from the recruitment stage, where there are high expectations of prospective employees. Inductions, team meetings, in-service training and continuing CPD, all contribute to supporting excellence in practice. As part of staff induction there is a strong focus on educators’ well-being and self-care. Goal setting is undertaken with educational leads who in turn work with educators in agreeing personal and professional objectives.

A consequence of supporting and building staff capacity has meant shifts in culture and practice. In terms of CPD, it is no longer a case of training being offered to staff but rather, staff being proactive and clear as to what they want and need to improve practice. In setting goals staff are more invested in their roles, more willing to put themselves forward and get engaged, for example in recent ECI Leadership Training.

Staff feel supported and have a sense of agency

A number of practical actions have led to the staff sense of being supported:

- Being involved in decision making (e.g., input to Handbooks)
- Being cared for (e.g., three privilege days, mentoring and award events)
- Being and feeling respected (e.g., being supported and encouraged to join a trade union)
- Having access to organisational information (e.g., financial information being shared at team meetings)
- Having opportunities for career progression and development (e.g., access to funded CPD)
- Having pay scales that are “always ahead of most settings”
- Having a system that allows staff manage their own local budgets

The work of the CEO, the Senior Management Team and the Board of Management support the staff in aligning to the overall mission of the organisation. Where staff have a sense of professionalism and experience a supportive environment, they recognise and value the investment in them as individuals in the workforce. Staff appreciation days, and participating in conferences, reflects how they are valued by management. Ongoing mentoring, opportunities for career progression, funded CPD and other forms of training are evidence to the staff of how they are valued.

Staff view themselves as professionals

The structure of the organisation, allied with ongoing access to training, support and management (Quality Mentor and CEO), has resulted in the staff recognising themselves as professionals. The sense of professional identity emerges consistently across the seven centres:

“As educators we are one of the most flexible, dynamic and adaptable sectors in the working environment. We lend our hand to almost anything that is put in front of us and come out being successful, more determined and with an increased passion for our job and the children we work with”.

The research highlights staff having “a confidence level that has taken years to happen” and this is evidenced for example in how they relate with and respond to inspectors coming into the centres. Staff are open to constructive critique; they view themselves as dealing with inspectors based on professional parity and engaging pedagogical discussions.

Staff see themselves as being accessible to families, being non-judgmental, and as giving families a voice: “we’re the hub of the community. We are the link to the community”. This is borne out by parents who feel relaxed and comfortable walking through the doors of StartBright and that, according to staff, is the difference.

A hallmark of StartBright is an organisation with a culture of belonging and collegiality. The staff group has pride in their work, worth and value, as evidenced by the following quotes:

“There’s a common baseline of interest and knowledge amongst everyone.”

and

“the communication between everyone as a whole and as a team is amazing”.

StartBright is a

“nice place to work, a place where everyone has permission to bring in their skills”.

Having a shared ethos, professionalism and purpose introduces and embeds new staff members into a culture that is open, progressive and caring. Long term commitment to StartBright is evident in the high level of staff retention and commitment. It is also noteworthy that the vast majority of StartBright educators come from the local community.

Strong leadership

Leadership within StartBright is valued by staff and the Board of Management. The CEO and the Quality Mentor, as two longer established senior roles, have played a key role in the development of the StartBright approach. The CEO is respected in having an early childhood education background which staff believe gives her insight to the realities of working with children and families. She is understood as promoting a solutions-focused approach and securing the long-term commitment of staff. She “looks at the bigger picture and is very approachable”.

Staff believe that both CEO and Quality Manager

“fight for the staff and their wages, they are doing their best”.

There is a trust in the leadership that “they keep the finances ticking over” and a sense of pride that the CEO has developed an organisational structure that allows her

“to do what she needs to do and be out there on our behalf”.

Staff believe that the CEO is forward thinking

“always ahead and always looking out to see what best practice is and always looking for training and funding, she just has her eye on the ball”.

Pedagogy, Curriculum and Family Engagement

The demand for early childhood education and care services across all seven centres has grown incrementally. With good support for children and families staff highlight that “we now have big waiting lists. We have a great name locally and that is the reason for the waiting lists”.

Contributing factors to the success of ECEC include:

Curriculum and pedagogy - with a strong adherence across all seven centres to Aistear, Siolta and a Reggio inspired approach and a child-led curriculum that focuses on following interests.

“We ensure that the children are safe, supported and feel secure in our setting. We provide them with wonderful opportunities and possibilities of learning. We champion their voice, their time and their learning throughout the curriculum we provide. Underpinned by Aistear, Siolta, the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide and the Reggio Emilia Approach, we champion play and work towards every child reaching their full potential”.

There is a commitment to non-contact time for educators to document children’s learning and to complete the required paperwork.

Building capacity - StartBright has a strong culture and practice of CPD for staff, e.g., Outdoor Play, Planning, and Using the Reggio approach, which extends to supporting the upskilling of staff, responding to staff training requests, and piloting new approaches such as educational leadership.

StartBright has engaged in multiple CPD sessions to support the changing needs of the children and families within our community. *ACEs, Lámh, Trauma Informed Practice, Diversity and Inclusion, and Neurodivergent* training are some examples. Educators have also been provided with resilience training and secondary trauma CPD, to support their needs in working with a diverse and changing profile of families. Five of the StartBright centres have engaged in the *Healthy Ireland Smart Start* programme and there is an aim to extend the hot meals provision across all centres in time.

In building capacity, specifically during the life of the first Strategic Plan which focused on the development and embedding of quality within all services, turning points have arisen. One such moment was when staff took a step back and began to appreciate the cumulative improvements that had been made. This was evident at the annual StartBright conference, where every example of practice and every photo/image came from the seven centres. It appeared as though no longer were StartBright solely reliant on examples of quality from Reggio or other settings, they now had capacity to draw on their own learning and practice.

Enabling Environments - Staff, management and the BoM recognise the importance of environments for children’s learning and development. Consequently, there is a clear focus on environments within the centres, with strong support from the BoM. All construction projects within centres have been modelled on *Universal Design Principles (UDP)* to support

access and best quality practice within the services. In addition, a caretaker role has been added to the teams to ensure maintenance and aesthetics of all centres are kept to high standard. StartBright has added transitional spaces to five centres to support children's autonomy and ensure their freedom of choice between indoor and outdoor provision. Investment in all outdoor and indoor environments has continually supported the environment to work as a third teacher supported by both national and international best practice. Educators have availed of CPD, valuing topics such as risk, outdoor play, loose parts, and open materials, to support development and learning. These developments ensure all environments are being maintained and are continuously developing to support best practice.

Building relationships with parents – parents feel comfortable in approaching staff because of the open-door policy. Staff take opportunities to build relationships:

“we have conversations at the door even though it's busy. We take that time”.

Consequently, parents value staff, recognise that they have knowledge and look to them for advice (e.g., information on available services, on breastfeeding classes). Staff are also conscious that “parents build their own parent network outside the door”.

Family Facilitator

Children, families and community lie at the heart of the StartBright ethos. The Strategic Plan (StartBright, 2024) values *Families as Partners* and commits to working in partnership to achieve the best outcomes for every child. A key goal for the 2024-2028 period is the optimisation of services that will enable StartBright to meet the needs and support their children, families and communities. StartBright has long recognised the importance of engaging with parents and families as a means of supporting child and family-wellbeing (Sabol *et al.*, 2018). While ECEC staff have and continue to engage closely with parents, a dedicated role was required to build responsive relationships and consequently, the role of Family Facilitator (FF) was developed. StartBright currently employs two Family Facilitators who cover Clondalkin and Lucan, supporting five centres and two who are funded through Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in West Tallaght.

Findings from this study, which drew on feedback from parents, educators and parents themselves, highlight key points of learning that have emerged to date. The purpose of the Family Facilitator role is to support parents in StartBright Early Education Centres and School Aged Childcare, leading to improved outcomes for children and families. The FF has multiple roles, informing and supporting parents, initiating activities or sessions that help parents and young children, acting as a bridge between educators and parents, and linking with the community to build partnerships and effect change.

Seven key areas emerged from this study which highlight that FF presence and availability, time and trust were critical in the process of building relationships with parents.

Being attuned to parents

A key finding that emerged was the concept and practice of being attuned to parents which means active listening, taking time and giving space. The study also suggests that having specific outcomes and pre-organised parent programmes is not a successful approach,

“as people or organisations push their own agenda and that might not be what the parent wants at that time”.

This raises questions of positioning: is the work of the FF for parents or with parents? Is the parent perceived as a recipient of services or as an engaged partner in the supportive process or programme? Tensions can arise, as was found in respect of Sure Start in the UK, when parents found the attention of programme providers stressful and intrusive (Belsky et al., 2006). Findings from this study suggest that “pushing” parenting programmes can leave parents feeling that there is nothing for them. While the FF requires a work plan, flexibility to respond to emerging parent’s needs is critical because “the most important part of this role is to be on the lookout”. Working with parents is slow emotional labour.

Ultimately attuning to parents means that:

“The best help is not the help you think someone needs. What I (FF) have been trying to do is to follow the Mums to know what they need, accept the different stages people are at and respect that. For example, I have been trying to help a Mum get a medical card, but she does not have a phone number or an email. While I struggle with this, I am still respecting her and trying to find a solution. It is not on me to force anything on her, my role is to support her. I am trying to follow the parents and share information”.

Responding practically taking initiative

Attuning to parents is the first step for the FF, but to build trust and satisfaction requires follow-up actions that have been identified by the parents themselves. Examples that arose highlighted the need to support parents in respect of their children but also as it pertains to their own wellbeing. For example, yoga was organised because “the moms want something for themselves”.

Providing information and signposting parents to supports that are available was the most significant and constant demand on the FF. Helping parents in respect of entitlements (e.g. social welfare, childcare schemes) formed a key part of the FF work, for example:

“organising a SENO from Tallaght to come up and so any parents who wanted to get advice”.

“helping a parent who is having financial difficulties at the moment fill out a supplementary welfare form”.

“contacting St. Vincent De Paul food bank to see what can be done for a family”.

One key initiative that parents wanted, and which commenced at the St. Ronan’s centre, was the Baby & Toddler group. This was supported through a grant which the FF accessed along with the 7 Mills Community grant for the School Age Childcare (SAC).

Building relationships / Working to parent time and not 'outcome' time

The role of the FF is to support parents; but how are relationships authentically made with parents? This question revealed that:

"Finding a way to build trust is different for everyone. For parents to trust me, I need to be approachable, but I also need to be professional, yeah, and I need to be genuine".

Educators believed that the first step in building relationships with parents was to take the time to be present and they suggested that consideration might be given to the time of the year the role starts. Where for example the FF starts their role in the middle of a term is challenging.

"The parents knew all of us and suddenly there was someone else there. Some of the problems that the parents have are very personal and so they are naturally reluctant to talk with someone they don't know".

Making the effort for the FF to be at the ECEC centre at drop off and collection times and to greet them are useful starting points. Working to build relationships with the educators was central to the success of the role in the beginning. Educators signposted parents to the FF with queries that extended from

"where they are on the housing list to getting medical cards, GP cards, and Chic numbers".

The feeling of managers, educators and the family facilitators is that it takes time to develop trust and relationships with the parents, and in the words of one manager, "it is a slow process, but it's working".

Communicating

Communication with parents occurred initially through in-person contact at the ECEC centres. This happens both outside, so that the FF becomes familiar in a non-threatening way to the parents, or inside, in the parents' room when more sensitive or confidential discussions can take place.

Communicating with the parents of younger children, who have siblings attending StartBright was initially challenging. Communication with parents was via email and in the beginning with the FF sending out

"over 200 emails to highlight the Toddler Group and this did not work – no one was responding".

A move to texting parents saw a different response, with increased attendance at the Baby & Toddler Group.

Clondalkin has a high diversity of families and ethnicities, which is characterised by a mix of long-term residents, a large population of Travellers and a growing international community. Given this landscape, the importance of the language used to engage and communicate with parents is critical. There is a need to simplify language, and the FF emphasised the need to be conscious, and mindful of how the message is being understood. The parents valued the approach stating that:

"We have never been so informed about anything that is going on. I know the information is up on a poster, but you don't always take the time to read the information. Information is everywhere but you have to go looking, she helps us feel more involved".

Taking the time, being present, supported by the deliberate approach to communication, has meant that parents have

“a sense of being listened to because she follows up on things – if she says she will find out something, she does”.

This has been relevant for first time moms, and for new community members.

From the parents’ perspective their engagement with the FF “is about the personal touch”. For one mother it was the challenge of filling in forms because her literacy skills meant “I just can’t write it”. For another parent, it centred around the FF explaining NCS, the subsidised fee scheme, and how it works. Still, for another, it was information about getting a place in the creche.

In considering the importance of communication, the findings suggest that listening to parents, using accessible language that is understood, and sharing information as necessary and appropriate, underpinned the relationships that developed. Findings indicate the forms of communication that work and the right attitude or professional approach. This emphasises, as one parent suggested: “even if you have personal or financial issues to discuss you don’t have any fears in talking with her, I’m not nervous about it”.

Connecting parents into the community

As is evident from the above findings, the value of the FF is also in how they connect parent to parent, connect parent to services for their child, and how they connect the StartBright group (children and parents) with the wider community.

Organising coffee mornings, walks with the parents around the locality, talks with the parents in the community centre, helped connections be made even before the children enter the StartBright centre. As one new Mother shared that:

“to get to meet and talk with other moms, to hear their stories and to know that you are not on your own – it is definitely worth it”.

Another Mother highlighted the value of connecting with others, in building up a social network that can support and help out, when necessary (e.g., when a hospital appointment comes up).

Working with parents where they have a child with additional needs was not an uncommon focus for the FF. In one case helping parents to secure a place in primary school, and while waiting, to be made aware that home tuition was applicable for early years as well as primary aged children.

The family facilitators work closely with the after-school children and the wider community. One little boy was enjoying the kick-boxing club that the FF had organised for him. Three other children were interested in martial arts and the FF reached out to three clubs in the area to see if they would provide sponsored places. The three interested children got free access to the club and facilities and more importantly, the clubs have allocated 3 places to StartBright on an ongoing basis. In all instances the FF supported connections which built a sense of belonging in the community.

Bringing about community change

Connecting with the community has also highlighted the way in which the family facilitator has begun to engage politically for the benefit of one of the local StartBright centres. The FF was working with the local TDs and counsellors in trying to get a pedestrian crossing or zebra crossing up outside the building. As the centre manager suggested:

“She has progressed the issue with her persistence. She is focused on targeting the politicians and counsellors to get the job done. She is almost like a bridge between the ECEC setting, the community and the local politicians”.

Peter Moss (2007) spoke of the need to bring politics into the nursery and to recognise the power of early childhood and those working in it to promote democratic practice. In other words, to find and use voice and power to bring about change for the common good. This one example highlighted how StartBright was affecting community improvement through the democratic actions of the family facilitator.

Working as a team

The family facilitator has become central to the StartBright centres. The manager in one centre affirms the value of the FF role in suggesting that

“the one-person approach is better – you don’t want to be talking to multiple people about your problems or queries. It is better to deal with one specific person”.

This is corroborated by the parents who agree that “it makes a difference having that one person, as your own business is kept private”. The managers and educators have built trust with the family facilitators and so when they

“point them in the direction of the Family Facilitator, they know that she is also trustworthy”.

The belief amongst ECEC managers and educators is that the family facilitator is an invaluable position, particularly in a DEIS area, where the needs of families can be high. The consensus is that as an ECEC centre:

“we don’t know what we would do without the role”.

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta

This section follows on from the earlier historical and contextual introduction to Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta/CNnG. Presented below is the analysed data garnered from field work in the spring and summer of 2025. Interviews and focus groups took place with staff of CNnG, including members of the Executive, Oifigigh Forbartha and Bainisteoir of early years settings. Based on a framework analysis approach, this section is structured around the key themes as was the preceding section, sharing the StartBright findings.

Governance, Structures and Processes

Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta is a non-profit organisation committed to providing high quality early childhood education and care and school age childcare, across all Gaeltacht regions, and through the medium of Irish. At the time of this research, CNnG operated 135 services including full daycare, after school care, breakfast clubs, and sessional/naíonraí services. Close to half of all services are sessional/naíonraí services. Nationally, CNnG employs over 230 staff within these services. These include early years educators, AIM workers and service managers. In addition, an executive team of nine people and a group of seven Oifigigh Forbartha (Development Officers) are also employed by CNnG. The head office of CNnG is located in An Cheathrú Rua, in Contae na Gaillimhe, in the southern Gaeltacht region. Regional offices are found in Dún nan Gall, Maigh Eo, with services supported in these counties as well as in Ciarrai and An Mí.

CNnG is an independent company, and a registered charity. The Board of Directors / An Bord offer strategic visioning alongside operational oversight, which guides the Chief Executive Office/CEO and a centralised

Management Team of eight employees. The Early Years Development Executive, part of the Management team, has responsibility for seven Oifigigh Forbartha who are regionally based supporting local ECEC services. In addition to this management structure, CNnG has responsibility for the operation of over 130 early years and school age services, employing educators and ancillary staff. The various roles and functions of the 230 staff of CNnG will be discussed in a later section.

An Bord

CNnG takes a strategic approach to maximise the representativeness across the eight members who make up An Bord. CNnG seeks three nominations from services, with one each from Ulster, Munster and then one from the other areas CNnG operates. A range of skills, knowledge and backgrounds are also sought, for example, knowledge of education, HR, finance, legal structures and processes. Representation from other Irish language organisations is also sought, with one Director being a representative from Údarás Na Gaeltachta.

Strategic Visioning

The current Strategic Plan for the organisation runs from 2024 to 2027 and was developed over a 6-month period. At the heart of the plan is the view that the most valuable gift a child can be given is the Irish language. All aspects of the strategic plan were developed with that overarching goal.

The goal of attaining charitable status for CNnG highlighted the need for a strategic plan. In addition, the organisation had gone through a period of change and growth, due to the natural ending of some directors' terms of

office, some retirements, and the expansion of service delivery. This created a need to regroup, reflect and look to the future. As one participant stated:

“So, lots of different people came on board. Different people changed. All the different members changed and became very, very, I suppose, obvious that we needed to have a strategic plan going forward”.

CNnG sought the support of an external organisation to drive the work of developing the plan.

The highly consultative process engaged with members of the Board and the Executive staff. Surveys were undertaken with staff in all roles, and across services, to ensure the results reflected the whole organisation. The ability for participants to engage in a confidential process, offering uncensored views, was a priority for the board and executive.

“Our board were very, very heavily involved, as were the management and the Development Officers, everybody in the office and, and, then also then staff on the ground.”

The resultant plan sets out six strategic goals, focused on:

- Providing a range of high quality, safe, inclusive early years and school age services in all Gaeltacht regions
- Promoting, strengthen and enrich the use of Irish language, heritage and culture by providing early childhood education and care
- Being fully compliant with statutory regulations

- Developing best practice in organisational and governance structures and processes, while being adaptable to meet changing needs
- Attracting and retaining high quality staff
- Ensuring high quality facilities are available for services

A further set of objectives underpin each goal, enabling the attainment of the strategic goals.

As an overarching philosophy, the Strategic Plan states:

“Tugann ár bplean léiriú ar an acmhainn inspioráideach atá ag Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, díríonn sé ar an bhfís an-láidir atá againn go mbeadh na leanaí ag Croí-lár ár n-obair. Tugann sé léiriú freisin ar an gcumas cruthaithe atá againn dul in oiriúint agus treoraíocht a thabhairt i dtimpeallacht shóisialta, pholaitiúil agus gheilleagrach atá ag athrú go leanúnach. Tabharfaidh an plean treoir dár seirbhísí, beidh muid éifeachtach agus éifeachtúil inár n-obair agus lenár n-acmhainní, agus leas na leanaí mar chéad chuspóir agus mar phríomhchuspóir againn i gcónaí. Prionsabal lárnach sainiúil atá ansin dár n-obair go léir agus dár ngníomhaíochtaí go léir”.

Or, as bearla,

“Our plan shows the inspirational potential of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, it focuses on the very strong vision we have that the children would be at the heart of our work. It also demonstrates our proven ability to adapt and lead in an ever-changing social, political and economic environment. The plan will guide our services, we will be effective and efficient in our work and with our resources, with

the welfare of the children as our first and main objective at all times. That is a defining central principle of all our work and all our activities”.

Management Structures

Flowing from An Bord, the CEO leads the 16-member Executive Team, including the Early Years Development Executive, Human Resources Manager, Language, Policy and Communications Executive, and Financial Manager. The Administrative Support Team includes a financial administrator, office administrator and a communication, development and policy administrator.

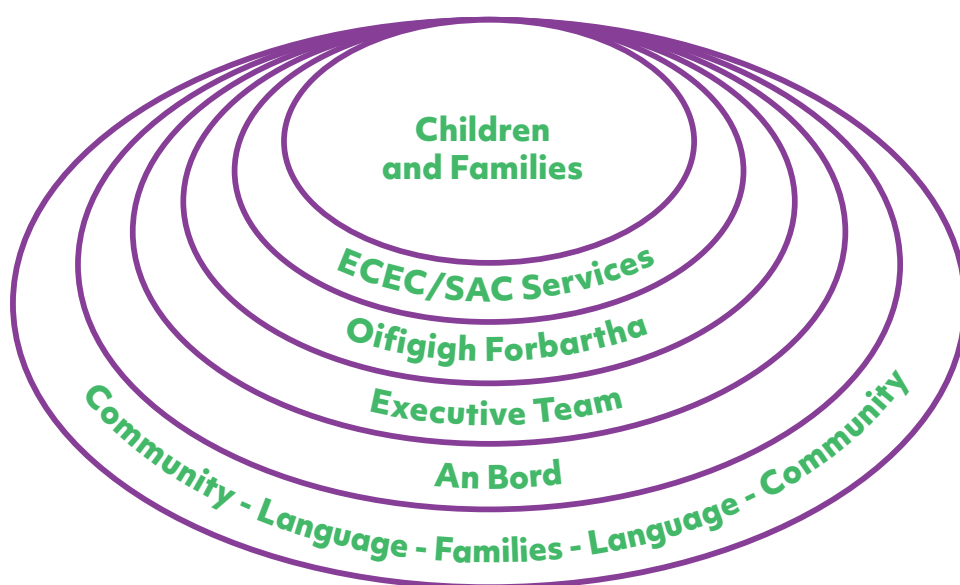
It was noted during the research that the management team has grown rapidly in recent years, although additional resources are needed to support an organisation of this size. There was a view that the effective operation of 130+

services and all the related staff, requires a strong executive team. In addition, it was pointed out that an organisation employing 230 staff should have a HR team, whereas CNnG has one HR manager and with support from the Administrative Support Team.

An additional element of the management team are the regionally deployed group of seven Oifigigh Forbartha, supported and managed by the Early Years Development Executive. Each of the early years and school age services within CNnG receives support from their assigned Oifigigh Forbartha, in their local region. According to a research participant:

“their main role is to ensure the quality and compliance of all our services... they also emphasize in the promotion of our language, support within our services, and ensure that the developmental needs of the children are met”.

Figure 4.3: Organisational Structure of CNnG.



Charitable Status

In recent years, CNnG became a registered charity. The steps needed to achieve that status became a process of examining their operating systems, in order to ensure best practice in governance, management and financial accountability. While this process can create additional unexpected work, members of the executive described how these were important actions that really facilitated a cleaning up of structures and processes. One area that needed attention was the full merging of original standalone services within CNnG. As CNnG expanded over the years, many standalone community ECEC services, based in Gaeltacht areas, approached the organisation seeking to become part of the 'umbrella' structure of service support and development. These would have had independent structures, and as such, had their own boards of management, bank accounts, payroll, etc. These were historical irregularities, highlighted by the Charity Regulator process as needing to be streamlined.

While formal merging and 'assimilation' into the CNnG organisation was required, members of the executive spoke of the importance of retaining local involvement in the service operation. So, while formal oversight now rests with CNnG, local services each have parents' committees, facilitating that local voice and support for managers and staff by families and others in the community. Reflecting that best practice approach, committee handbooks outline the roles, and the separation of responsibilities between the local managers, parents' committees and CNnG as the overarching body with responsibility under legislation, and funding agreements.

Financing and Resourcing

Funding for the extensive and varied work of CNnG comes from a number of sources, reflecting the unique dimensions of the organisational aims and actions, as well as the specific geographic locations of services.

As with all regulated early years and school age childcare services, CNnG receives Core Funding from the Department of Children, Equality and Disability (DCDE). Grant aid provided through Core Funding is aimed at supporting the delivery of ECEC/SAC services, promoting access for all children, improving quality, with the intention of making services and the wider system, more sustainable. These funds fall under a number of streams: the universal ECCE preschool is funded through Core, as is subsidies to offset parents' fees through the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). Support with staff wages, aligned to pay scales determined by the Employment Regulation Order (ERO) and agreed wage premiums based on the qualification levels of educators (ie. a "top up" for graduate lead educators) are funded. Additional streams related to focused quality, inclusion and improvement measures, include the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), Equal Start and the Building Blocks scheme.

Universal supports to improve the quality of practice can also be accessed by CNnG, including the Better Start mentoring service, support and training through local County Childcare Committees, and development under Nurturing Skills, the workforce strategy, to support CPD. The difficulty posed to CNnG with some of the universal supports, is the limitation when it comes to the Irish language. During the research, participants reported that some material is produced in both languages, and some mentors are Irish speakers, however, it is more often that training events are only offered

through English, and that resources are first published through English, with the Irish version delayed for some time.

CNnG has a close working relationship with Údarás Na Gaeltachta⁵, who offer both financial and operational support. As a state development agency, and like other such agencies, Údarás is tasked with driving economic development, though Údarás has a specific remit of the Gaeltacht regions. Supporting local businesses, social enterprises, and employment schemes, while also seeking to attract enterprise and investment into the regions, are some of the responsibilities of Údarás. Unique to Údarás, as a development agency, is their remit in relation to supporting social development, such as reducing rural isolation, supporting community projects and infrastructure, and their critically important role in supporting the cultural and linguistic development of the Gaeltacht regions.

The provision of high quality, affordable and accessible early childhood and school age services is a support to regional employment, enhancing the culture and language, while enabling the intergenerational and community-based transmission of the Irish language, in Gaeltacht regions. CNnG is also a significant employer in the communities it serves. The CNnG/Údarás relationship is mutually beneficial, due to the alignment of CNnG with the aims of Údarás.

CNnG is considered a 'funded subsidiary' of Údarás. In their most recent financial statement, Údarás noted that "€619,500 was approved for Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta who provide a support service for a range of early Gaeltacht education services". These funds support the presence of an executive team, administrative offices, including the regional sub-offices, and allows for the presence of

Oifigigh Forbartha. Funding from Údarás also supports professional development of educators across the 135 services. Without this additional funding from Údarás, CNnG would be unable to meet many of its strategic goals, and offer the additional services and community supports that enrich early learning and strengthen the Irish language, across the Gaeltacht.

"So, we have been lucky enough to get the funding to get more support workers, because that support is really needed on the ground".

As is being outlined through these findings, CNnG is a flexible, dynamic, committed organisation, responsive to community needs, drawing on a variety of resources, to meet its strategic goals, and service the many communities within its remit. It is important to acknowledge that not only are they the primary provider of ECE and SAC services across many regions of the State, CNnG provides employment opportunities: employment in ECEC, in administration, in support and development roles in the Gaeltacht regions. Such dynamism is afforded through financial acumen, determination in seeking out funding streams, and creativity in stretching funding across a range of needs. As one executive member shared, this was common across Gaeltacht area organisations and service providers, "every organisation is under-resourced and stretched".

5 Funding is also received from Department of Rural and Community Development, indirectly, through Údarás na Gaeltachta to support CNnG.

Networking and Collaboration

Connecting Across Agencies

Across Gaeltacht regions, networking among various organisations is important. For CNnG, this includes representation on their An Bord from other Irish language organisations, including Údarás. Those working to promote the Irish language and enhance Gaeltacht areas have shared goals and flexible ways of working; working in partnership, sharing knowledge, or connecting people to the right service, networking to extend resources, are all actions towards those shared goals. During the research, members of CNnG spoke of their relationship with Irish Language Officers - Offig Pleana na Teanga⁶, who will contact CNnG to share local information. At the time of this study, there were 26 regional planning areas.

One example was an Officer's awareness of a primary school in a village that was struggling with student-numbers, and fearful of its future. Exploring the issue, the Officer reported many local parents, who were commuting for work, needed to use a school that provided afterschool care; hence several had enrolled their child in a bigger school in the larger town in which they worked. The potential to provide school age childcare at the local school could "hold" children locally and ensure the school's future was secure. CNnG, the local school, parent representatives, and the Language Officer explored the potential of a SAC service being established.

"Planning Officers will approach us, suggesting a service is started. We ask, where is demand? So this new setting, for September, 9 children registered before we opened. The challenge is getting staff."

Maintaining a local school is critical for the wider community. Schools bring parents and others into a village, with spillover effects for shops and services. This is an excellent example of the contribution the services delivered by CNnG are making in supporting the Irish language and the Gaeltacht region.

Language Outreach Support

Drawing on the ethos to promote the Irish language, CNnG operates a language outreach programme to early years services that are in the Gaeltacht regions. These services are not part of their organisation, and are not Irish immersion, or not confidently Irish immersion. It may be that their educators do not have Irish, or are not confident in their Irish, they may be private or community-based services – these issues are irrelevant. What is important is that they are Gaeltacht based early years services that wish for an enriched language experience for children attending.

Facilitators from CNnG provide workshops and support materials to these services and they visit settings, delivering a 40 min session weekly over a period of months. Facilitators deliver a programme of language and culture activities that includes singing, dance, sport, storytelling, puppetry, drumming, drama, etc. The aim is to share culture and language in a natural, fun and enjoyable atmosphere.

"Well, yeah, like, just to give them a taste of the Irish language ... and give them the tools... just get them interested in it...some of the teachers, they would have basic Irish, but they're not competent in using it".

The approach is aimed at encouraging parents, children, staff in Gaeltacht based services to develop and use Irish. Thirty services currently

⁶ Language Officers are employed by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

benefit from this outreach support which is sponsored by the government department responsible for promoting the Irish language⁷.

Staff, Management and Leadership

As noted earlier, CNnG operates as a registered charity with An Bord supporting an executive management and administrative structure, who in turn support the operation of 135 early years and school age childcare services. An additional group of local facilitators work with non-CNnG early years services as language and cultural ambassadors. This section will outline the various roles and responsibilities across CNnG, while discussing leadership and management innovations.

Front Line Staff

At the heart of CNnG is the operation of high-quality services that support children and families in the Gaeltacht. Reflecting the face of ECEC in Ireland, each early years service is staffed by qualified educators, from QQI Level 5 to degree holders, and some at MA level. These staff take on the roles of Educators, Lead Educators, Managers. Reflecting national strategies to enhance inclusion in ECEC, CNnG also employs AIM workers.

School age services have less restrictive criteria for staff qualifications. CNnG seeks out staff with QQI levels, however, they are not opposed to bringing people into these programmes who may not have a qualification, but have strong Irish, and an interest in the field. From experience, participants shared that this has been a way to “grow” staff whose interest increases through their working experience. The overall approach to support upskilling has meant that workers who came to the

organisation with no qualification, but an interest and the language, are now qualified Early Childhood Educators, some progressing to leadership roles in the organisation.

Local service managers have the overall responsibility for the effective running of their individual setting. This includes supporting staff, having oversight of pedagogical plans and practice, engaging and supporting parents. Critically, it falls to the manager to ensure the setting is compliant with regulations and educational standards. As noted earlier, the role of Oifigigh Forbartha is an important level of support and mentoring for setting managers.

Operational Support

The operation of a regulated early years service in Ireland is a complex undertaking, involving a range of tasks from pedagogical (children’s learning), to relational (with families, with staff) to financial and administrative. In a highly regulated context, ensuring compliance with current regulations, being up to date with the inspection processes and educational standards, recruiting and inducting staff, while providing real time data to funding bodies, is a multi-skilled highly demanding role. The majority of early years services in Ireland are single, standalone operations, meaning these tasks typically fall to a single person.

The CNnG model, bringing together a number of services under one management structure, allows for an economy of scale that standalone services could never create. Establishing a central administrative structure facilitates the ‘lifting’ of the administrative tasks from local managers to specialised administrative staff who possess the necessary skill-set to manage these tasks more effectively. It is the role of all members of CNnG to support the development and delivery of high-quality early years services,

7 This is currently the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

through the medium of Irish. This includes the executive team and the administrative support group. As one Oifigigh Forbartha pointed out:

“And I think, as we said earlier on. We take the burden of the paperwork from the staff..... the expertise are educators that have the expertise. They’re focusing on the children and their parents. And I think that’s why a lot of our services have a very high-quality standard of education and care”.

The ECEC system in Ireland is one that is heavily subsidised by the Department of Children (DCDE), and while welcomed, this funding comes with significant reporting expectations. This area is one which benefits from a centralised executive team, with specialist skill sets. In this instance, reporting to funders, along with the day to day financial management tasks, are “lifted” from the work load of early years managers, by those with financial acumen, efficiently undertaking these tasks on behalf of local services. In conversations with Development Workers, their observations of the impact to the settings, by the removal of these tasks was a point of conversation:

“Staff supported in completing HIVE, funding, questionnaires, so staff can give time to children, staff, and families. Paperwork offloaded to administrative time...”

“That’s definitely something I would try and make sure that the hive funding all that kind of thing is left to one side and given to a different person to deal with, and that the educating and working with the children and their parents is left to, to the educators.”

“You know that administrative burden is dealt with by an administrator who has those skills and then the pedagogical knowledge and the working with families... the managers are able to just, you know, fill that space and dedicate their time to that space.”

Leadership in Recruitment and Retention

In another example, rather than individual services recruiting and inducting new educators, a centralised human resource manager with the specialised knowledge of employment law and best practice in recruitment, onboarding and retention, manages this across the organisation in a strategic systematic manner. This was a focus of discussion during the research.

It is well known that the ECEC field has a recruitment and retention crisis. Staff turnover can be as high as 40% in full daycare services. While all settings struggle to recruit qualified early childhood educators, CNnG has the additional challenge that the educators must be fluent Irish speakers. During this study, it was reported that significant effort has gone into recruiting and retaining staff. Due to the presence of a HR manager, a structured process of recruitment, induction, ongoing support and supervision was put in place to ensure staff settle into the organisation and to their own role, feel supported, and are enabled to adapt the ethos and approach of CNnG. It was also highlighted that the organisation values staff contributing to the organisation’s ongoing development.

“We have, obviously, a human resources manager at the moment and every member of staff will receive a contract and their duties, and then the Oifigigh Forbartha go through the contract and

their duties with them when they start with us. So then, that incorporates your code of behavior, everything that needs to be dealt with straight away support meetings, so that works from the ground up”.

The question of retention is addressed through a multi-pronged strategy. A goal of CNnG is that all staff have regular support and supervision meetings. The structure of Oifigigh Forbartha within the organisation, who regularly visit settings, enables this process.

“So our staff know that once a month, if you’re an educator, you’re going to be sitting down with your lead educator, and you’re going to go through everything and anything that, from positive to the negatives to what really worked, what didn’t work ... where we need to improve what we need to add. So that happens once a month. That’s recorded. Then the Development Officer comes in... she will sit down with the lead educators then, once a month, and go through what they bring forward to her.”

“So I think that’s probably one of the best things that does work for us... constant support and, and support meetings that then really works on the ground because everybody feels that they’ve a voice or they’re heard, and that they have an input into the actual service and services generally.”

“So we have that opportunity to work with the staff. But also we get feedback from them as to what they need to help them throughout the year, you know. So that’s very, very important.”

A positive culture of professional development is enhanced through funded upskilling at QQI levels 5-8. Employees wishing to upgrade their

formal qualification have their full tuition fees paid by CNnG and An Roinn (each organisation contributing 50% of costs). During the research it was reported that staff might join the organisation through a school age service, an area that currently does not require a formal qualification. They can then be supported, through upskilling, to move into one of the early years services; others may join with a level 5 or 6 and upskill to a degree, moving into leadership roles in settings, or into development officer positions. This evidences the organisation’s recruitment strategy - seeking early years educators that are fluent in Irish; or recruiting local Irish speakers with an interest in this area of work, then supporting them to upskill into the profession.

“We apply for funding from Roinn to support us with our training, and, for example, the courses that are level 5 or 6. Indeed, any courses we’re providing throughout the year, half fund those. So they pay 50% and CNnG pays the other 50%.”

Continuing Professional Development for the educators is supported through formal qualifications, as noted, but also through the Oifigigh Forbartha creating and/or sourcing facilitators to deliver sessions of interest to staff. A week of dedicated CPD is delivered in June and August, at the end and before the start of the ECCE programme. These weeks also allow time for end of year and start of year paperwork, reporting and then, planning. The topics are both driven by staff interests and to cover practice areas that emerged through the year, as needing additional attention. As noted by a participant:

“But also we get feedback from them as to what they need to help them throughout the year, you know. So that’s very, very important.”

Summer Salary Initiative

On the question of retention, analysing patterns of staff leaving, it was evident that the break in employment through the summer was a critical point of staff loss. While CNnG operates many full year services, the many sessional services that close for the summer, led to staff "signing on" to unemployment benefits over the 8 week break. Although their positions were held for these staff for the coming September, this time period represented the greatest rupture in employment and an area that needed to be addressed. The challenge was that while out of work, some staff may take roles elsewhere - in retail, in hospitality, and then not return in September. While they were "signing on" they were also restricted from travel. The scenario was not ideal for anyone involved.

Following an analysis of the difficulties posed for both staff and the organisation, CNnG proposed a new approach to the board and to the staff, as a way of retaining and supporting staff and services generally. Sessional services are funded for 38 weeks per year, leaving a short fall of 12 weeks to be covered. The strategy involved four weeks of holiday pay, three weeks of CPD, paid time, then five weeks of "summer pay". While this summer pay is offered at a reduced rate, it is better than what benefits would offer, and crucially, educators are kept on the payroll.

The argument in support of this initiative, was that significant time and resources were dedicated to recruiting and inducting staff, that similar resources needed to go into retaining good staff who were valued by CNnG. However, in order to achieve this, resources had to be pulled from other pockets. The executive team went to each setting, talked to them about the strategy, proposed the pooling of resources to make this initiative work. As described by one of the executive:

"We created a formula that is fair to all services, and runs off the budgets of the setting's own budget. We also top up maternity pay, over 26 weeks. Encourages staff to stay with us."

Further, this person talked about the valuing of staff, of making that explicit that they want to retain the good people they have working with them:

"Mat pay is not a large amount; summer pay is doable. It's about valuing staff, about rights, respect, equity for staff".

Another member of the executive team spoke generally about the retention issue, setting it out more broadly for the wider sector, than just CNnG:

"Acquiring and retaining staff - challenge of language as well as qualifications. But the retention is huge and getting people to come into early years is huge, and until such time, I think, as they have the same equal status as our national school primary school teachers, and until it's valued, I think, by our Government enough to put money where mouth is, give us equal recognition."

Best Practice Support

A unique role that is present in CNnG is the Oifigigh Forbartha (OF). As mentioned previously, this group of staff are managed by a member of the Executive Team and are regionally situated. Each Officer is assigned a group of ECEC/SAC services within their region and has the responsibility to support each service to operate to a high quality, while promoting the Irish language. An additional role of the OF is to provide resources to settings, to be shared with families. CNnG takes a family-based approach to language support, with

bespoke resources distributed through settings to local families.

Services can expect to be visited by the OF every 4 to 6 weeks, however more frequent visits will be planned as the needs of the service dictates:

"Between 4 to 6 weeks. It depends again, like you could go into service twice in the month, 3 times in the month, depending on need, they might have an issue. They might need support. Maybe they might have difficulty, even with behavioral issues, with the child or transition or something so just really, in general, we try to be as fair and equal to everybody as we can. We want to have the same level of support across the board."

The range of areas the OF focus on, include: strategies to welcome new families and settle children in to their setting; the planning and delivery of appropriate pedagogical practices; ensuring services are well prepared for inspections from the various oversight bodies; supporting managers in their role of staff supervisors; to support new staff through their induction process; to identify, with staff, suitable training needs; and to identify supports and resources needed by the staff or service to underpin best practice. As one service manager highlighted:

"And, but I do think it's the next layer, its not enforcing, the Development Officers aren't there as enforcers, but they're, they're there to ensure that there's quality there."

The approach taken by OF was discussed with research participants. The OF role is presented very much as a mentor, supporting good practice, drawing on their own experiential knowledge, at times modelling approaches in line with the CNnG ethos and values. Developing

rapport, so that educators can openly discuss challenges is an important part of the role. That the OF was an educator in the past, working in settings, supports rapport building, empathy and understanding. One OF shared an approach she will take, if an educator was to share a practice-based challenge:

"Look, I'm struggling with this. I'm not really strong in this area. And then, when you know the areas are not strong ... So then, we tune into those areas that they're struggling with and find ways of supporting that, whether it be to look at for their training, or actually physically doing the activity with the kids on our next visit ...being there and being on the same level and showing them like, well, this is how you do it. So it's just exposing them to different ways of doing things so that they can feel the confidence".

Another OF shared a typical visit:

"I would go visit the service. I would go into the room. I would speak to the girls. I would speak to the children, you know. You'd get, you know. They might have something going on that day, you might just, you know, take part and be involved in things like that, and then you would have your like. [Name] mentioned your, maybe your meetings. Then after and you know you'd go through, you know, if they had any recommendations, or if they had anything that they might need a bit of help or support with, and you'd sit down with them."

A conversation about the beneficial role of the OF and the differences between ECEC/SAC services under CNnG and standalone services, was had with participants. They spoke of the important level of support given to service managers, that they check in with challenges, on queries, they are a sounding board and a source

of reassurance and encouragement. It was noted that managers of standalone services don't have that level of support.

"They take a lot of weight off me if I have any problems or anything."

"...but it's I think it's in the back of your mind to know that the support is constantly there. There is someone above you at all times."

Participants shared that services that have joined CNnG have remarked on the level of support that they previously did not receive and have welcomed; that this was an attraction to joining CNnG.

"A lot of the services that approach us to maybe come under our umbrella, they are struggling with that maybe external support ... People want to have somebody that they can fall back on, to stand with them and, and work out the issues."

Staff Development

As part of the strategy to deliver high quality child-centred services, CNnG has a strong focus on supporting the professional development of staff. As noted earlier, opportunities to upskill to formal qualifications are fully funded for staff. A structured approach to deliver training for staff groups, based on identified areas, has also been developed. Oifigih Forbartha seeks out topics from educators and/or note areas that require attention, from their visits to settings. These are delivered through workshop style sessions.

"You get a lot of chances to better yourself, to upskill with financial support."

"I suppose to talk of the high quality, education, and care. I think maybe it's the training and support on the ground. So I think that that definitely works towards the education, the quality of education and care that our children are getting. Because we have more. We have a system that we can support a little bit more."

An interesting characteristic of CNnG is the common experience of staff moving through the organisation, from entry level positions, up to leadership roles, all the way through.

"...my role as, as the teacher. ...then I went on to become the manager of the service, but the training was provided... CNnG was always there to support you to upskill and to grow... complete my degree..."

Many of the Oifigih Forbartha began as educators in early years settings, then became managers, before moving into the officer role. Having that working knowledge of life in the services was highlighted as a benefit for the officers, and for service managers to know they have sat in their chair, walked their path, and can draw on that experiential knowledge when mentoring and advising other staff.

"...getting an opportunity to start, maybe at a certain level, and then grow with the company. And I think ... understanding how teachers feel, and being an educator yourself being in that role and then gradually growing, then into management. I think that really helps us be the support."

Several participants spoke of the sense of CNnG as a collective place, a space where all members of staff feel they can contribute, that their voices are welcomed.

"We're all together in this, like, we may have different levels of support and responsibility. But everybody's valued and everybody's... seen, heard and has a voice and has an input, they're basically stakeholders in the organization with us".

This sense of cohesion can be seen in how staff contribute in various ways, beyond what their title or job description may outline. In particular, when discussing the organisation and delivery of local settings, and quality improvements, the sense of sharing knowledge and ideas across the community of practice arose.

"So I suppose that's how a lot of our policies and procedures are compiled, and how they're tweaked, because we're learning from different things that are happening in all the different regions, in all the different settings".

Challenges to Upskilling

Supporting children's early learning and development is a specialised profession; within that field, working in language immersion contexts is a further specialty that is well recognised in literature, research and policy (Jones, 2023; Ó Duibhir & Thuairisg, 2019). The need then, for early childhood educators, working in Irish language immersion contexts to study and upskill through in Irish-medium courses, learning themselves about best practice in early language immersion, is of critical importance. The Education & Training Boards, state bodies that focus on vocational training, deliver QQI level 5 and level 6 early childhood education courses across the country. The Galway Roscommon ETB have been able to offer upskilling through the Irish language in south Connemara, and some staff have availed of this. Educators outside of Contae na Gaillimhe, and those seeking to upskill to a degree level, must progress in English language

courses. This was identified by research participants as a particular challenge and barrier for the Irish speaking ECEC workforce. CNnG who would prefer all training occurs were delivered through Irish.

"...but accessing courses through the medium of Irish has been difficult. Language can be a barrier..."

When planning for their own in-house training, the professional development they plan with and for educators, ensuring this is delivered in Irish is again, a priority. Training staff in the language of their day to day practice is critically important to enable new approaches to be more readily applied in practice. It also respects Irish as the language of the organisation, and the overall strategy of nurturing the language.

"That's why we really try to have our training through the medium Irish, where possible, as much as possible, would be very and I suppose, strict on that as much as possible. But that's why I said earlier, it can be a challenge, you know, to get trainers that have the, the language. The reason for it is, we try and we conduct all our business through Irish, we do our practice through Irish, and if we, we feel it by doing that, we're being true to the ethos of the organization and what we're trying to do, and that's to keep nurturing the language and keep it going because something we're passionate about."

The possibility that an Irish Early Childhood lecturer was to be recruited by the local university also came up in the research discussions. The post was funded by An Roinn, to be based at the University, in the School of Education. The aim was for the development of degree-level modules and micro-credentials, leading to certificates or full degree awards through the Irish language. Unfortunately, a

restrictive hiring process limited the candidate pool, and after several attempts, the post was never filled. This was cited as another lost opportunity to build the capacity of the Irish early childhood profession.

The Irish language is cited in the Constitution of Ireland as the State's first language. The current State strategy to promote the Irish language (referred to earlier in this report) highlights the responsibilities that fall to the State to strengthen the language through a range of objectives. Despite this, a further challenge faced by Irish language educators and Irish language organisations relates to the provision of resources and materials developed or funded by the State, being produced in the Irish language, or in having the Irish versions of resources released simultaneously with the English language versions. This was highlighted by one member of the Executive team, during this study:

"...and I suppose we do struggle, to be honest with, and we're constantly referring back to the organisations, such as the Department of Children, Pobal, Tusla. We are referring back to them all the time, saying, "we need these documents in Irish the same as everybody else gets them in English at the same time".

Pedagogy and Curriculum

The provision of high-quality child-centred learning experiences, through the Irish language, is the main priority for the CNnG organisation. The opportunity to move some of the administrative responsibility from the local setting (i.e. parents fees, and reporting to the DCDE) allowed managers to give greater focus to supporting educators and their practice, to build relationships with families, and to ultimately ensure children can participate in rich and meaningful early learning experiences.

The pedagogical approach at CNnG draws on four tools or frameworks to support quality early learning that enhances the Irish language. Although this approach is designed at an organisational level, it is delivered locally, with the opportunity to reflect emerging interests and local culture in each setting.

Loinnir, meaning brightness or radiance, was developed by CNnG in conjunction with DIT/Dr Maire Mhic Mathuna, in the early 2000s, before Aistear had been established. Loinnir takes a developmental approach to supporting children across key domains. Loinnir provides a year-long structure for planning children's learning and play-based experiences.

Borradh, referring to growth and development, is a specific language development strategy, to support children with different levels of Irish to engage with the language. Recognizing that not all children attending CNnG settings have Irish as a first language, it was identified that an approach to support the varied language levels of children was needed.

"It enabled our educators to enhance their ability to teach the language to the children in a fun way. It is also full of games and Irish phrases for learners and also native Irish speakers".

Aistear and Siolta, the national curriculum and quality frameworks for early childhood, are the other tools used to develop the curriculum approach. While the organisation promotes an overall approach, based on these four tools, local interpretation and application are encouraged, to ensure child-centred and child-led pedagogical practices, in all services.

"But you know the way that we, you know, we have planning every planning daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, going on in our services. I think that's very helpful, because, you know..... You can really bring it back to what you want on the ground, you know, if you're talking high standards, you're working on all the interests of the children, when it's child centred, when it's based on observations and planning and things like that, I suppose, and then the staff are on the same page, you know, when you have regular meetings with the staff to a plan".

The model of managers supporting educators, and OF supporting managers, provides an important set of checks and balances to really look at best practice, at children's needs, and work to deliver high quality early learning and care.

Language Immersion

Another area of discussion during the research was the varying levels of Irish that families may have, when they join the service, and how that impacts on practice. While Gaeltacht areas have a majority of Irish speakers, it is not the sole language of family life. Many families have English as a first language; reflecting inward migration patterns, others may have different languages.

The role of managers in inducting new families, and in reassuring them, during that process, of the immersion philosophy and the ability of young children to learn new languages, comes to the fore here.

"And you know, I suppose sometimes we might have problems where parents are saying, you know, well, if they don't understand you, how do you keep saying it to them in Irish? I suppose we've become really really good at explaining this"

"So the younger you get children to immerse themselves in the language then the easier it will be for them, like".

Conversations with families may highlight the many ways children communicate, and the multiple ways educators engage children, and their absolute priority to ensure all children's wellbeing is supported, as they settle and acquire or strengthen their understanding of Irish.

"You're talking about your body language, your props. There's no child left in any distress or not looked after, they become aware, and they acquire the language in a really natural, loving environment. So, but it would be our priority."

The importance of language immersion being a positive experience was also discussed during the research. Several participants recalled their own childhood experiences of language learning, not being joyful - far from it. There is a strong belief, underpinned by immersion education theories, that Irish early years experiences need to be relaxed, supportive, while intentional that the goal is to instil a love of the language from an early age:

“Yes, it is. It is our ethos. As an organization like the language, 100% is at the heart of everything we do. And I suppose what we’re trying to do is not. It’s not that we want to force children or to speak Irish... I think the beauty of our organization is that we recognize...that it’s a language we want children to love, so it’s nurtured, and it’s not forced. And if a child speaks English, no one says, don’t speak English, they just give them the they... I suppose they use a lot of repetitive but and body language and repetition and nurture the natural love and give them a lot of praise and basically equip them with the phrases and the vocabulary that they need and teach them the language in a fun way. And then it’s very natural.”

Parental Engagement

CNnG has a strong focus on working with parents and families, supporting children’s early learning and development while also supporting families to engage with the Irish Language. Written policies and procedures in both languages are provided to families prior to starting. These are reviewed and signed when the child commences the service.

Partnerships with families are based on the view that parents are the first educator, “the child’s first contact with the world”, and particularly with the Irish language. All plans, themes, activities are shared so that parents can bring that learning home and compliment what the child engages with during their day.

“Also language support aids and providing these aids to the parents, as we understand that not every parent can speak Irish, and so we guide them to various resources to learn the Irish.”

CNnG encourages an open-door understanding with parents. It is the ethos of CNnG that parents should feel they can approach staff at the service with any matter they wish to discuss. In addition, annual structured parent-educator meetings take place every January, focused on the child’s development and progress in the service; however, outside of this annual event, parents have the prerogative to seek out such a meeting, should they feel the need.

“I think that that’s really nice. I think that the parents really appreciate things like that”.

“And things like that is a great support and a needs to parents who are who are putting in the time and the effort to have their children raised through Irish to know. So I suppose that’s, that’s important to them as well, and it’s part of our job then to help them and support them through that.”

ECEC is a relationship-focused field; relationships matter. The managers of individual settings have the responsibility to develop strong relationships and a good morale among staff. Equally, ensuring parents feel welcomed, feel they are part of the organisation, falls to the manager. Having good staff morale creates a positive environment in the setting, and this lays the foundation on which positive relationships between parents and staff of the settings can be built.

“Added Value”

Through the research a number of themes arose that spoke to the “added value” of CNnG in Gaeltacht communities; these include children’s rights, and the organisation’s economic contributions.

A Child’s Rights Enabler

During this research, members of the executive shared that there are about 10 naíonraí that have less than 10 children attending; a few have only 5 children attending. Distinct funding received by CNnG enables the continuation of these small preschools, supporting very rural and island communities. Financially these are not viable, however a distinct funding stream and the overall organisational economy of scale, ensures these remain open.

In conversation about this, with members of the Executive, the importance of holding these smaller services open, and the shifting demographics of communities arose. The view was shared that a service may have a few “lean” years, when numbers are low, but that often self-corrects. Examples were shared of settings where numbers rise, due to new children being born or families relocating to these communities. Holding a service with low numbers for a few years was a strategic decision, as it was felt, once you close a preschool, it is very hard to restart it.

“I think that’s very important when it comes to community, and that’s something that we would really focus on. We try to ensure that every community has a Naíonraí, at least, because it’s very important that they have that sense of community, and that they have that opportunity to avail of a service in their own in their own area.”

Through this strategy, underpinned by a language-privileging ethos, CNnG ensures children across the Gaeltacht regions have access to quality early education in their first language, in their local community.

“... with CNnG, regardless where you are in the country, and I think that’s a really a statement piece in itself, that you know, the level of the level of care and education that they can, that they can be guaranteed to get when they come to our organization.”

The importance of this non-profit model was quite stark during this conversation. No private for-profit service would maintain a service of such small numbers for a few years, awaiting a turn of the tide; this will only happen in non-profit models. And in this example, it is the greater commitment to children, families and Gaeltacht communities to enable early education through Irish, that supports this particular strategy.

Following a constitutional referendum in 2012, the child as a distinct rights holder became enshrined in the Irish Constitution. This important recognition of the young child as rights holders is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 30 of the UNCRC refers to children who are part of ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities, highlighting that ensuring access to education and cultural activities in their own language is the obligation of the state. From this position it is clear that CNnG is a critically important service as an enabler of children’s rights: rights to early education in their own community, in their own language.

An Economic Contributor

Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Childcare are well documented supports for parental employment. Having reliable high-quality childcare enables parents to participate in the labour force improving a family's economic situation. As noted above, CNnG maintains services in smaller communities, where profit-oriented services wouldn't set up; or where standalone services wouldn't have the economy of scale to be sustainable.

In addition, CNnG is a significant employer. Close to 250 people are employed, making CNnG one of largest employers in the Gaeltacht regions. That it is spread across the region means many areas benefit from employees living locally, spending locally, sustaining local shops and services.

Under Core funding, providers receive contributions to the wages of staff, based on qualification levels. The Labour Relations Court, through an Employment Regulation Order, sets minimum rates of pay for the ECEC field. As a result, the efforts of CNnG to encourage the upskilling of educators, those who attain a degree also see their wages improve. As noted by a member of the Executive team:

"If you want to progress from a level 5 to 6 to 7 to 8, that you have that financial support as well, and recognition. And that's reflected on your pay, too".

Values and Mission

"I think, having a joint vision and a goal to ensure that every child has equal access and opportunity, but also gets the opportunity, learning the language, and being able to have that invaluable gift going forward, and contributes to them, having the best care and education."

As expressed throughout these findings, at the core of CNnG is the effort to preserve, nurture and strengthen the Irish language, through the provision of quality early childhood services, ensuring young children are confident, natural Irish speakers. This is very much a child-centred organisation.

As the Strategic Plan states:

"Tugann ár bplean léiriú ar an acmhainn inspioráideach atá ag Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, díríonn sé ar an bhfís an-láidir atá againn go mbeadh na leanaí ag Croí-lár ár n-obair."

As bearla:

"Our plan shows the inspirational potential of Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, it focuses on the very strong vision we have that the children would be at the heart of our work".

The Strategic Plan also sets out the organisational Mission Statement:

"Our mission is to provide a quality service for children to develop holistically through the medium of Irish in the Gaeltacht areas."

As Gaeilge:

"Is é an misean atá againn ná seirbhís ardchaighdeán a chur ar fáil do leanaí le forbairt go iomlánaíoch trí mheán na Gaeilge sna ceantair Ghaeltachta."

A set of Core Values underpin the Mission Statement; these are:

- Child Safety
- Trust
- The Language
- Professionalism
- Comprehensiveness.

Further, the Strategy states:

"It is our vision to develop the whole child through the medium of Irish."

or

"Tá sé mar fhís againn forbairt iomlán an linbh a dhéanamh trí mheán na Gaeilge."

During this research project, it was highly evident that the mission, values and vision of CNnG are expressed in the day to day work of the organisation. The Strategic Plan is a true reflection of the lived values of those connected with CNnG. In conversations during the research, many participants made statements that capture these values.

This quotation reflects the central role of children as safekeepers of the Irish language:

"For the Gaeltacht, the children, they're the next generation like. So we need to invest into the children for the next generation. So if they, it's like building a house, you need to have a strong foundation. So at least, if they have the strong foundations at an early age, you know, it benefits everyone in the long run."

Similarly, this participant shared their views on the importance of CNnG to nurture the language among children attending their services:

"When it comes to the language, we're, we're critically important, we have a serious impact on, on the future language of that child going forward. So that's how important it is, like. ...its critical, the work we do really".

The intentional effort of CNnG to build an organisation that is well placed to support quality early years settings, was a further reflection of the ethos of CNnG. In order to achieve your goals, reflect your values, and achieve your mission, attention to the foundations is critical, as this participant highlighted:

"We do, do put the infrastructure in place. Just we're there to support all our teachers, and the rules and regulations and everything that goes with it, like, to, to set up a name and to have, you know, a high quality standard".

As well as the structural assurances, knowing the settings are sustainable, and the organisation has effective fiscal and management processes in place, people are central to the success of any organisation. It was evident through this research that CNnG recognises and values their staff. This includes the significant efforts to create attractive terms and conditions for early childhood educators as a signal of how they are valued. The following quotes reflect this awareness and this ethos:

"So there's been, you know, lots of positives, with all the positives, staff morale is boosted, and, like all staff depending on where they are, and like any job, not just with us at any organization, you know, it depends on staff themselves and how they're feeling".

"I do certainly feel that all the positives are contributing to helping us as an organization be more of an attractive company for people to work in, and for, for parents to send their children to".

Further conversations on the valuing of staff led to comments about the collective nature of the organisation, the feeling that everyone, from children, families, educators to the executive team and An Bord, are a community with a shared goal. These last few quotes capture this essence:

"But everybody's valued and everybody's... seen, heard and has a voice and has an input, they're basically stakeholders in the organization with us".

"There's a big emphasis on empowering, empowering staff and motivating staff and getting them to feel that we're... that it's not Comhar Naíonraí and them. It's that we're all Comhar Naíonraí. We're all together in this, like, we may have different levels of support and responsibility."

"And we're all on the one journey and on the one mission. And I think that really helps and the company go from strength to strength."

Overview of Findings

CNnG and StartBright are both driven by a strong sense of values and purpose that are embedded in their work. Both organisations are, at their core, committed to delivering affordable, accessible, high quality, early childhood education and care and school age childcare across West Dublin and the Gaeltacht communities. The overall purpose of their services is to promote the holistic development of young children, providing equal opportunities so that positive outcomes are afforded for all.

Strong governance, coming from a single board and a centralised senior management team,

encompassing finances, administration, pedagogical and, in the case of CNnG, language support, are the basis for day-to-day operations. This centralisation of the business and management elements lifts additional pressures from the staff in the ECEC centres, allowing them to focus on pedagogical practice, family support and community connections. In addition, both organisations place a strong emphasis on collaborative working with their staff to ensure for example, that Strategic Plans are jointly developed, leading to greater levels of agreement and stakeholder 'buy-in' to values and mission.

CNnG uses a play-based immersion pedagogy to nurture and support the natural use of Irish, while providing support for families in Gaeltacht areas. StartBright draws on Aistear and the approach of Reggio Emilia to implement an interest-led, play-based pedagogy, and places great emphasis on supporting families. Both organisations are committed to the continual professional development of the respective staff cohorts, respecting them as professionals and demonstrating the ways in which they are valued, through the provision of professional terms, working conditions, and supportive benefits as is possible in their constrained circumstances. Staff in both organisations benefit from tailored CPD: in CNnG educators have opportunities to strengthen their language skills, building their confidence in positively impacting children's learning through Irish; in StartBright, the capacity of educators is built through pedagogical workshops and trauma informed training which helps them work more effectively with children and families who have experienced stress in their lives.

Participants spoke of the critical role that CNnG plays with the community, across a number of areas. Importantly the spread of services can be found throughout the

Gaeltacht, from larger towns to smaller communities, including the islands “we are everywhere we can be”. In contrast, the expansion of StartBright has remained firmly in West Dublin where marginalised communities, experiencing social inequities, benefit from the child and family services offered. CNnG has a clear focus on sustaining and enhancing the use of the Irish language, for families, and children through intergenerational and community-wide transmission; while StartBright operates within diverse communities where there is a mix of established and new families, with growing multilingualism.

Both organisations place high value on networking and partnering with other statutory and non-statutory bodies to maximise their efforts in outreaching their services and to support sustainability. For CNnG, this includes representation on their An Bord from other Irish language organisations, including Údarás, which is a sizeable funder, and networking with Irish Language Officers (Offig Pleana na Teanga), who have a strong relationship with CNnG in sharing local information. Employing local facilitators enables the delivery of language and culture activities in a natural, fun and enjoyable atmosphere, to early years settings outside the CNnG family, nourishing the Irish language further. StartBright places great emphasis and time in connecting with other local voluntary and statutory groups such as Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN), Barnardos, Better Start and Tusla to identify complementary support routes for families. An ongoing partnership with Focus Ireland for example, enables StartBright to better support children and families, who are experiencing homelessness, who are in crisis and in need of ECEC.

CNnG and StartBright maintain a strong community focus so that “we kind of know how to do what we do in the areas that we were working”. In other words, the organisations have a deep understanding of the communities within which they work, the needs and strengths of their communities. Both organisations, in the mode of social enterprises, also serve to create local employment opportunities which results in the majority of educators coming from the local areas.

Despite the common characteristics that emerge from both CNnG and StartBright research participant groups, differing challenges exist to both models. For StartBright the primary challenge to their sustainability is the adequacy and certainty of multi-annual funding. Without the security of multi-annual funding, planning for growth, quality and sustainability is not possible. For CNnG the key challenge is language related, with training events predominantly being offered through English and the lack of Irish resources and publications being available to staff or being delayed for some-time.

Another challenge, which manifests itself differently for both organisations, relates to staff recruitment, an issue which goes beyond them both. In a national context 93% of ECEC managers’ report that recruitment challenges are negatively affecting service provision (SIPTU, 2024). The challenge as perceived by some StartBright staff is that:

“right now the difficulty is in getting any sort of relief staff and so our standard of work might be slipping because we cannot manage to have non-contact time for example. Lack of staff cover creates burn out amongst the staff group”.

For CNnG, there is an additional challenge in that the educators must be fluent Irish speakers. One strategic approach is to enable interested and proficient Irish language speakers to join the school age team, as there is no current formal qualification required, and then, if they have an aptitude for and interest in the field, to upskill formally, transferring into the early childhood settings.

Findings highlight the impact of both CNnG and StartBright in their own communities and spheres but recognise that while prioritised challenges differ for both organisations, they have some similar features. Being sustainable and meeting the mission's aims relates to the balancing of financial security, ethical governance, strong pedagogy and social purpose. Advancements in one area must be balanced and supported by the others. Financial security without fulfilling the mission of the organisation ignores the community and their needs. Strong pedagogy is not possible without adequate care, recompense, training and progression opportunities for staff, in whatever language they require. Ethical governance requires ongoing commitment, strong leadership and management, and adequacy of professional roles. CNnG and StartBright must continually consider both financial and social impacts in business decision-making. It means not compromising core values and integrating mission into all aspects of the organisation.

Chapter Five:

Discussion - Implications Arising from this Research

Introduction

The project was a collaboration between two community service organisations and educational researchers with an interest in better understanding emerging models of non-profit ECEC in the Irish context. As previously outlined, Ireland has historically looked to the private for-profit marketplace to provide for families' care and early education needs. To a lesser extent, community-based, non-profit services have filled the gap in areas where private entrepreneurs have failed to venture. These providers were traditionally constructed as a social inclusion and/or early intervention strategy by the State.

Academics and researchers in the field, and organisations and advocates in civic society, have long called for expansion of the non-profit element of Irish ECEC; however, it is only in recent years that the political discourse has begun to give attention to this space. It was therefore the intention of this project to examine two innovative community based early childhood organisations, exploring what we can learn about public provision, from these two leading groups. This research has the potential to inform this growing discourse.

This project was guided by the following research questions, which will be used to structure this chapter:

- What are the key features of the participating not-for-profit, community-based and/or social enterprise models of ECEC?
- How might a greater understanding of such models inform future policy direction in respect of the publicly funded/public system developments?

Drawing on the topic framework of the preceding Findings chapter, the first part of this section will recall key features of both these multi-site ECEC models. Salient findings, those that have implications to inform the emerging discourse on public models of ECEC, will be considered. Key messages arising from this study will be set out.

Following this section, a set of recommendations will be presented. These will draw on the knowledge created through this project, on existing research, policy and theoretical literature, and borne out of the knowledge and experience of the key researchers.

Key Features of Multi-Site Non-Profit ECEC

Governance, Structure and Processes

The responsibilities of trustees or directors and the challenge within the community sector to assemble the right people with the right skill mix is ever-present. The fiduciary duties, oversight responsibilities and the legal consequences of failures at board level have seriously impacted on the recruitment of trustees or directors in the area of community-based organisations (O'Connell, 2018). Evidence suggests that boards rely on word of mouth and referrals to fill Board vacancies (Boardmatch and Goodbody, 2022). A key governance challenge for Irish charities is the recruitment and development of trustees (Directors on the Board of Management) (Ó Corrbuá, 2022).

Given the challenges of recruitment, development and retention of trustees or Directors for charitable and community-based services, StartBright and CNnG both benefit from having a single Board governing multiple sites. A single board is better positioned for

strategic decision making and affecting economies of scale. The approach sees the Board and CEO working closely together in respect of trustee recruitment, onboarding and training. The potential to draw from service users and/or local community representation is enhanced when looking across multiple services. A single board allows directors to build organisational/sectoral expertise and enables them to better meet the requirements of the Charities Regulator and statutory funders.

The Board/CEO relationship is critical in collaborative planning, and in having processes for the ongoing evaluation across all facets of the organisation. A theory of change approach, which underpins the StartBright culture of evaluation in terms of coherence, effectiveness, impact and sustainability in respect of Board, management and staff, has resulted in an openness to self-evaluation and adaptation. The CEO and Board are also active in horizon scanning to support the strategic development of the centres, while bearing in mind the need to embed quality and remain sustainable. Similarly, for CNnG, the recent experience of developing a strategic plan became an organisation-wide process. Circumstances of change and growth indicated a need for a clearer vision, goal setting, and forward planning. The decision to undertake a formalised process to complete the strategic plan, drawing on outside expertise, has provided CNnG with that clearer focus, while providing greater awareness and understanding for all members.

Processes of self-reflection, self-evaluation and forward planning provides the context to review roles and responsibilities of staff across these organisations. As community groups expand, ensuring critical responsibilities are met, that checks and balances are in place, enables best

practice in terms of governance, fiscal performance, and statutory adherence.

A key strength of StartBright, following the successes and achievements of the first Strategic Plan (2019-2023) has been embedding organisational celebrations in the annual calendar, in the form of awards, conferences and social events. The importance and power of celebrating cannot be underestimated. Scheduled celebrations serve as opportunities to recognise individual successes, to have staff see themselves as part of a bigger picture, to affirm shared values and to build community (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Key Governance, Structure and Process Characteristics of the Multi-Site, Non-Profit ECEC Organisation:

- A single Board of Management governing multiple ECEC sites
- Monitoring board composition; providing board induction and training
- Operating effective board structures
- Planning, and evaluating systems and processes, collaboratively, across the organisation
- Strategic horizon scanning
- Investing in people and investing in environments
- Celebrating and marking moments

Key Messages - Governance, Structures, and Processes:

A single Board of Management governing multiple ECEC sites, affects strategic decision making and economies of scale, while meeting the requirements of the Charities Regulator and statutory funders.

Strategic plans ensure all members of an organisation understand the vision, mission, aims as well as structures and processes. A collaborative approach to develop plans facilitates ownership and commitment by those involved.

Members can be intentional in performing their role, when the collective purpose of an organisation is co-constructed and clearly communicated.

Reviewing processes, structures, roles and responsibilities are necessary practices, to ensure continued good governance, as community groups expand.

The value of opportunities for celebration, for honouring members, and for coming together should not be underestimated.

Finances and Resources

StartBright plays a vital role in transforming the lives of children and families within their communities through the provision of quality early childhood education and care, underpinned by a strong family support ethos. Similarly, CNnG supports families and young children, by strengthening Irish speaking communities in mainly rural, island and coastal areas of the country. Both organisations provide public service and value, because they operate in under-resourced areas that may not

be attractive to private entities or investors. In addition, and central to the ethos of social enterprise, StartBright and CNnG ensure any surplus or profit is maximised through re-investment into their programmes, better serving children, families, and their communities. This is counter to the increasing trend of profits being transferred from settings, to investors, shareholders and directors (Taft, 2025) across corporate ECEC in Ireland. These models demonstrate their financial transparency and accountability to the taxpayer, for the funding that is received.

Financial resilience is critical for the long-term sustainability and impact of CNnG and StartBright. For StartBright, its day-to-day operation and long-term development faces very real challenges that threaten their ability to effectively fulfil their mission. The primary challenge relates to their dependency on short-term, inadequate and uncertain funding strands that mitigate against forward planning and limits their ambitions to grow for greater impact.

Similarly, CNnG threads together a number of funding strands to meet its commitments for service delivery. A rights-based approach to ensure children in smaller communities receive early education locally, through their first language, and that parents are enabled to participate in the labour force, is a costly venture. The return to the community is that the setting retains people and activity (social, cultural, educational and economic activity) in rural areas. Creative measures to retain staff through maternity leave top-ups, supported upskilling, and a summer salary scheme, are resource-saving measures, when you factor in the costs of recruitment and induction, when staff leave. These are but some examples of innovative service delivery and organisational management that occurs, even in the context of funding insecurity, year to year.

While Core Funding from the Department of Children provides the main funding stream, both organisations enhance the ECEC/SAC programmes, reflecting their mission statements and organisational values. Funding must be sought for these additional services, which are critical for the communities served. Seeking, applying and reporting on funding is a significant and ongoing draw on human resources. Uncertainty of year to year funding can limit forward planning

An alternative approach would be for an outcome driven, community budget for children which would see organisations such as CNnG/ StartBright submit a funding application with full cost recovery, that is, “the amount of money needed to run the organisation in a sustainable way”. The current model is considered unsustainable in the “hoops you have to jump through every year, and the amount of documentation required”. Due to both organisations being registered charities, as well as requirements under Pobal funding agreements, annual accounts must be prepared by external auditors, which is an expensive undertaking. There is a heavy administrative and financial burden on StartBright, CNnG and other community-based ECEC services. According to some research participants, funding levels are insufficient, “tokenistic and not enough”.

Centres within the StartBright portfolio are not sustainable as standalone entities, particularly the sessional services. The same can be said for CNnG. The larger services, and in particular, those offering school age care, enable care of younger children, and for smaller settings to remain viable. Reflecting a comment by one participant, some services are “keeping everybody afloat”. A community budget would allow StartBright, CNnG and other community

non-profit services to apply for realistic funding as a package across all centres.

Looking at the administrative elements of these organisations, we see for both, the economies of scale resulting in the bringing together of many settings, has enabled a structured, specialised administrative team to be formed. In both cases, the administrative burden has been “lifted” from local settings, facilitating greater local focus on professional practice and pedagogy, as well as family support. Centralising finance functions allows for improved centralised financial decision-making, and more effective reporting processes, which gives a unified voice when engaging with funders.

A stronger finance team allows for greater analysis of data and in the case of StartBright, this development has freed up the CEO for more strategic working. At the same time StartBright is focused on developing financial literacy skills across all centres, with financial transparency and with managers and staff having responsibility for localised budgets, which leads to more informed decision-making. Centralising finance functions but concurrently building financial knowledge and skills within each centre, has the effect of spreading responsibility, gaining greater levels of staff buy-in and building staff capacity.

Having an organisational understanding of resources, facilitated CNnG’s executive team to develop a creative approach to the ongoing challenge of staff retention over summer months. This innovation was a strong message that demonstrated the value the organisation places on staff.

While these examples evidence the benefits of a centralised administrative structure, organisational growth also presents challenges.

Both groups are often approached to take on additional services under their “umbrella” structure; CNnG is also approached to establish new programmes in underserved areas. However, while each acknowledges the view of the board and executives to wish to support additional communities, the overall needs of the existing organisation, its capacity to expand, and the impact on current service delivery, must be part of any such conversation.

Plans are in place for the development of criteria that would support StartBright in decision making for future acquisitions. This would include criteria in respect of, undertaking forensic due diligence, evaluating the financial health of the setting, examining its’ stability, in addition to assessing structural and operational factors such as building integrity, size, staffing requirements, occupancy mix and numbers and the potential for future viability and growth.

Both organisations expressed the view that while they have been able to create an administrative and executive structure, each feels these teams are stretched and overworked; additional staff are required. For example, at CNnG, a single executive member manages HR for a staff team of over 250; whereas a typical employer of this size would have an HR team. At StartBright, the need for an additional post, specifically to enable targeted work, and to progress the overall mission, was identified. Acknowledging the uncertain funding base, the BoM approved the use of organisational

reserves to fund the role of Operational Manager for two years. The impact of this role on centre operations will be monitored. Given the level of accountability and restricted nature of public funding, it is difficult for enterprises such as StartBright to build unrestricted reserves, which enable the organisation to manage risks and unexpected events, and which allow it to progress its work and mission with greater control and without interruption.

Key Finance and Resource Characteristics of the Multi-site Non-Profit ECEC approach:

- Provide public service, often in underserved areas
- Surpluses re-invested into services, enhancing provision
- Accountable for, and transparent with tax-payer funded resources
- Innovative service delivery strategies to maximise resources
- Seek out varied funding streams in order to deliver its mission
- Establish specialised administrative teams
- Educators focus on pedagogical practice and strengthening familial relationship
- Sustainable model due to economies of scale

Key Messages - Finance and Resources:

A more effective, reliable, and sustainable model of funding of non-profit ECEC/SAC organisations, committing to multi-annual funding, should be developed. Funding commitments over five-year terms will allow for greater forward planning, and will better service the relevant communities, families and children.

Consultation with provider groups will support the transparent identification of the full costs of service delivery, including the essential elements that allow these groups to make a real difference in their local communities.

As amalgamated organisations such as these expand, mechanisms by funders to assess the administrative and oversight needs, and to resource these adequately, is critical. These organisations offer sustainable models of good governance, leading to high quality pedagogical practice, in otherwise underserved communities. Additional organisational resources should be provided in recognition of these contributions.

These models provide an important and timely alternative to the increasing corporatisation and financialisation of childcare. The rationale for tax-payer funding of ECEC is intended to improve quality, increase access, improve affordability and stabilise the workforce; excessive profiteering models run counter to this ethos and to current government policy.

Networking and Collaborating

The importance of networking for social enterprises and community groups at the formation and in the development phases is undisputed, as it builds recognition, reputation and trust amongst stakeholders. Social enterprises such as StartBright and CNnG have a “double bottom line”, where creating social value is as critical as creating economic value (Folmer *et al.*, 2018).

Legitimacy for organisations like these two case studies is achieved through community building. This often starts through personal contacts and expands subsequently through a broader range of more complex partnerships (particularly with statutory bodies and local authorities), providing mutual gains and enabling greater access to resources. Ultimately, social enterprises must continually build and diversify their networks (local/national; voluntary/statutory) to generate higher-level social impact. Hence the work of StartBright in building local and national partnerships, which requires time and resources, are central to the sustainability and operation of the organisation. Similarly, CNnG have good connections and effective working relationships with other community organisations and state agencies involved in Irish language promotion and sustainability. This research has revealed the evolution and benefits of networking initially at a local community level and more recently in the context of national groups and internationally with like-minded organisations.

Literature (Bravim *et al.*, 2024) supports the importance of networking as a central activity for the sustainability and growth of social enterprises. In an early phase of operation, StartBright forged processes for internal communications which have built trust and credibility with staff across all services over

time. The staffing structures within each centre, connecting to the senior management team, enabled effective communication processes. The Oifigigh Forbartha (Development Officer) role enables strong connections between local services across all Gaeltacht regions, with the central CnNG organisation. Emerging from this study was a strong sense of organisational cohesion, and the view that the successful delivery of CnNG is made possible by a collective effort.

Across both case study organisations, at a community level, the managers and staff of the ECEC centres reached out to local organisations, schools and others to enhance services for their children and families. Securing, managing and reporting on Government funding positioned both groups as a safe pair of hands and critical contributors to the State reaching key targets related to children's services, family support and language protection. These reciprocal relationships build legitimacy with funders. Networking requires ongoing dynamic processes, with success contributing to effective operations and building organisational reputation. To strengthen this, StartBright is of the view that building the organisation brand is an important and logical next step. In a context of funding insecurity year to year, communicating the important role these entities play in their communities is of critical importance to underpin arguments for more sustainable and reliable funding. However, research on how organisations like these two exemplars communicate their activities, build brand identity and create impact remain in its infancy and without doubt a long-term marketing strategy is required (Becker *et al.*, 2023). While research identifies the need for external communication, what is not sufficiently foregrounded or considered within the literature is the cost in terms of staff and resources to engage in networking and dissemination. In

pursuing opportunities to engage with external committees, policy actors and other bodies, it can be considered that these organisations are victims of their own success.

In the example of StartBright, increasingly local authorities, County Childcare Committees, and other community-based services seek guidance and advice on operations and expansion within the social enterprise family. To date this expertise has been generously shared but the demand is such that StartBright could consider establishing a consultancy aspect to its operation.

Building the StartBright and/or CnNG brands and sharing knowledge/expertise promotes the establishment and capacity of social enterprise and community sector services more widely. Both groups are in the position to offer insights to others on financial and practical 'know how', identifying markers for success and pitfalls to avoid. In addition to showcasing "another way" of doing early childhood education and care (Moss, 2018) in Ireland, these actions build internal pride and loyalty turning educators, managers, board members and service users into passionate ambassadors.

Moss (2007) advocates bringing politics into the nursery; primed by a field/networking event in Reggio Emilia, StartBright has recognised the need to engage politically at a local and national level, organising meetings with politicians and local councillors. In this way StartBright has moved from operating as individual centres in Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan to a unified entity that engages with local and national policy makers, politicians and councillors. CnNG networks across Irish language voluntary groups, relevant government units, with local councils, across all Gaeltacht regions, communicating the contributions CnNG makes to these rural, often underserved areas.

StartBright and CNnG exemplify the power of networking and collaboration. Through these processes each centre becomes stronger and more embedded locally to the benefit of the children and families with whom they work. The combined brand of StartBright has brought recognition beyond the confines of the organisation and consequently has enabled the scaling up of social impact. The brand is becoming a symbol with which centres, staff and families can identify.

With a central focus on promoting the Irish language, and being an organisation that operates through Irish, may have limited the impact or greater awareness of CNnG across the early childhood education and care field. CNnG is likely the largest single ECEC entity in the state. That a social enterprise operates over 130 early years and school age settings, employs over 250 staff, yet appears to float under the radar, is remarkable; however, it reflects a parallel and often undervalued space Irish language organisations tend to operate. Drawing on the histories, challenges and achievements of both organisations must be a place of learning and understanding as we move towards the development of public models of ECEC in Ireland.

Key Networking and Collaborating Characteristics of the Mutli-site Non-Profit ECEC approach:

- Creating communication mechanisms with and between board, management, staff, and parents/families
- Connecting within the community and beyond
- Working in partnership with statutory and non-statutory organisations
- Building the organisational brand
- Looking outside of the organisation

- Sharing learning and contributing to external fora/conferences/ committees including units in relevant government departments

Key Messages - Networking and Collaborating:

This study has highlighted the importance of networking and relationship building, to strengthen the reputations of these organisations, communicating their critically important contributions to their communities. Reputation building strengthens calls for sustainable funding. Emerging messages are also “heard” internally, creating pride in key actors, as members and ambassadors.

Both organisations are in a reciprocal relationship with relevant state sponsors. The success of these two entities supports the attainment of key state targets in the areas of ECEC, social inclusion, and language protection; again, this should strengthen their hands in seeking out more reliable funding.

Evidencing the social enterprise model as a successful ‘alternative’ for ECEC in Ireland demonstrates that another way is possible; the stories of these groups should inform the early planning of the “public model” of ECEC for Ireland.

Demands on leaders in this social enterprise ECEC space cannot be understated; the success of both, their sharing and mentoring of others, could support the expansion of these models through additional entities emerging in the field. This would be good news for the State. Consideration to resource these leaders to “give back” to the community should be a consideration.

Staffing, Management and Leadership

A defining hallmark of the StartBright approach is the quality of leadership within the organisation, specifically the more established roles of Quality Mentor and CEO. There is a strong history at CNnG of people moving up through the organisation, being supported to develop and take on new roles. For example, many of the Oifigigh Forbartha joined as educators; the CEO began as the finance manager. This reveals a commitment to the organisation and deep institutional knowledge across many roles.

The complexity of 'jobs at the top' (Preston, 2013), the competency-mix required of leaders (EU, 2025) (Figure 5.1), the drive of mission in social enterprises (Reed, 2025) and the evolving nature of the Irish ECEC system highlight the many challenges that face leaders, managers and CEOs in the not-for-profit sector. Recent EU (2025) research highlighted the following challenges for ECEC leaders; too much administrative work, lack of a clearly defined role, competing demands on their time, low status, changing policy requirements and a lack of staff and resources. The Board of Management and An Board, in collaboration with their CEOs, have each addressed some of these challenges in the development of operations, structures and

strategies. and the actions taken highlight characteristics of these models.

The leadership and support structures required to effectively operate a significant number of ECEC centres is central to achieving organisational missions. The EU (2025) identifies the skills, behaviours and competences required of leadership roles in ECEC. What becomes evident is that the CEO must possess themselves, or must have in the form of support roles, operational, financial, administration and pedagogical knowledge. The Board of StartBright recruited a general manager post but recognised the specialist nature of the role. Consequently, and with a clear blueprint for the growth of the organisation the role was re-framed to that of CEO. Building a staff structure that enabled delegation and clear division of responsibilities has created space for the CEO to assume a more strategic role. CNnG has within its executive team the suite of necessary skills (EU, 2025); however, due to its extensive size, some of these areas (i.e. finance, human resources) need to be further resourced. The area of pedagogical knowledge, however, is well supported. The Early Childhood Education Executive Officer supports a group of seven Oifigigh Forbartha, who in turn, work with a regional portfolio of ECEC/SAC settings, ensuring best pedagogical practice and statutory adherence.

Figure 5.1:
Leadership
competencies
(EU, 2025).



The nature of organisational culture depends on the relationship to the environment in which it exists. According to Schein (2004) it forms in two ways, namely, informally or formally. Informally, cultural norms of how a centre or group operates develop spontaneously. Formally a leader may impose visions and values in respect of what should be done and how that happens.

The growth of StartBright saw 'collaboration' as the mechanism in building a shared culture, with the mission and values of the organisation as drivers. Collaboration across all centres and between staff, senior management and the Board of Management has forged a common culture, underpinned by a set of values and beliefs which allows everyone involved to have a sense of purpose and pride in their work. As outlined in the *Findings* chapter, trust has been built through collaboration but also through practical actions of sharing information (particularly financial), maintaining open communication routes, and providing support.

Similarly, with CNnG, a strong collective sense of ownership and of pride in what is being achieved in the Gaeltacht, was evident. The Oifigigh Forbartha role is a key connecting piece, maintaining the local connections to the management structure, so that settings feel part of the wider organisation, while ensuring the culture and values are reflected locally. A practice of ongoing support and supervision is an expectation in all settings; this is facilitated by the Oifigigh Forbartha for local managers. Messages are fed back to the Early Childhood Executive Officer, to inform ongoing CPD for the educators. The overall ethos of supporting educators to be their best, results in improved early learning experiences for young children, and staff feeling a sense of satisfaction in their roles, enhancing retention.

Under the leadership of the Quality Mentor, staff capacity at StartBright has developed through in-house CPD and attendance at conferences. A common structure of goal setting, reviews and support (mentoring and non-contact time) has also strengthened staff pedagogical skills and agency over time. The updated Aistear (NCCA, 2024) emphasises the role of the agentic educator and StartBright, through the work of the Quality Mentor and centre managers, has exemplified the steps they have taken to build an environment, culture and shared practices that have enabled staff to perceive themselves as professionals.

Key Staffing, Management and Leadership Characteristics of the Mutli-site Non-Profit ECEC approach:

- Providing strong, ethical leadership
- Embedding a culture of collaboration within the organisation
- Building staff capacity and career pathways
- Supporting and respecting staff as professionals
- Developing good staff terms, conditions and benefits as funding allows

Key Messages - Staffing, Management and Leadership:

Resourcing of an administrative team brings the specialised knowledge and skills required for the effective operation of these early childhood programmes.

The culture of the organisation is one that reflects the vision and mission, shaped by the effort made to develop a common sense of purpose, sense of ownership, shared understandings and pride in association, for staff and other members.

Leaders establish a culture of mentoring and staff support, communicating the value that organisations place on staff. The aim of ongoing structured staff supervision is to support best practice, identify training and development needs, and enhance staff retention.

Pedagogy and Curriculum

The culmination of all preceding characteristics focus on the pedagogical work with children and their families. This work lies at the heart of each organisation's mission. The hallmark of a StartBright approach within the ECEC centres commences with strong recruitment and induction processes. Senior management and centre managers acknowledge the challenges of the current workforce landscape (SIPTU, 2024; DCDE, 2025) but they also understand how to build culture and teams, recruiting for fit as well as qualifications and experience. Three key elements that support or underpin effective pedagogical practice relate to the role of Quality Mentor (QM), the staffing structure and the centralisation of many administrative and

financial functions. This has created time and space for managers to work with lead educators in supporting quality practice.

The same can be said for CNnG: reflecting the larger size, number of settings and geographical spread, where StartBright has one Quality Mentor, CNnG has seven Oifigigh Forbartha (OF), managed by a pedagogical specialist within the Executive Team. The OF role includes supporting good pedagogy, regulatory adherence and the induction of new staff into the "culture" of CNnG.

The importance of such mentoring roles, to work across centres, promoting quality, cannot be under-estimated. Both groups work with the Aistear and Siolta frameworks, supporting play-based, emergent and child-led curriculum approaches. CNnG also draws on two bespoke frameworks to support immersive language development, and connect with culture, story and traditions.

Continuing Professional Development is identified by the educators assessing their training needs and interests, in collaboration with managers, and the Quality Mentor (SB)/ Oifigigh Forbartha (CNnG). Both in-house and external professionals deliver CPD. This approach is advocated by Harcourt and Jones (2016) who have recommended that professional learning (and CPD) should become part of everyday practice, not a session that is landed on staff and the contents of which they forget about before they get to the car park.

Following a centralised recruitment process, a structured approach to induction and mentoring of new staff into settings and into the organisation has been identified as critically important. Firstly, this approach facilitates a strong understanding of the mission, values and purpose of CNnG is understood by the new

employee; secondly, the modelling of best practice, of the pedagogical approach, underpinned by the four key frameworks, is grasped; finally, from experience, CNnG finds better retention of staff if they are well mentored through this induction period.

Understanding and exemplifying best practice in regards to immersive language learning is an imperative for educators with CNnG. This relates to their observing, planning, and enacting of activities and daily routines with young children. Engaging with families, on their child's learning and development, but uniquely for CNnG, supporting approaches in the home to nurture the language further, is an additional aspect of the role of early childhood educators.

Key Pedagogy and Curriculum Characteristics of the Mutli-site Non-Profit ECEC approach:

- Dedicated role underpins best practice in pedagogy
- Working with current national frameworks to guide a play-based emergent child-led curriculum
- Recruitment and supported induction ensures educators understand and support the organisational mission/purpose
- CPD is at heart of best practice in pedagogy and curriculum design

Key Messages - Pedagogy and Curriculum:

Centralised structures support local best practice. Establishing an overarching pedagogical role (Quality Mentor/Oifigigh Forbartha) that supports the quality of pedagogical practice; enables educators to focus on curriculum and professional practice.

An intentional approach to recruitment, induction, ongoing support and supervision, with access to training and CPD for educators (in the appropriate language) underpins best practice with children and families.

Taking an evidenced-informed and contextually relevant approach, Aistear (NCCA, 2024) and Síolta provide points of reference and act as foundations, which support individual curricula (e.g., Loinnir and Borradh, Reggio and interest-led approaches).

Ensuring that curriculum approaches align with the mission of the organisation, as is exemplified in the case of StartBright as working closely to support families; in respect of CNnG the curriculum aligns with Irish Language immersion.

Working with Families

Literature provides compelling reasons why working collaboratively with parents in ECEC is critical (Dunst, 2025), as it plays a pivotal role in supporting children's learning, development and general wellbeing. Collaboration between educators and parents draws together different forms of knowledge, experience, and responsibility, all of which must be recognised and valued. Otero-Mayer *et al.*, (2025) have identified three aspects of parental partnership: involvement in the home and community environment; participation in school activities; and, reciprocal communication between educators and parents; all of which have relevance for this study.

CNnG has a strong focus on working with parents and families, supporting children's early learning and development while also supporting families to engage with the Irish Language. A challenge for CNnG is that while Gaeltacht areas have a majority of Irish speakers, it is not the sole language of family life. Many families have English as a first language; reflecting inward migration patterns, others may have different languages as a first language.

A starting point for CNnG in building partnerships with families is based on the view that parents are the first educators, particularly in respect of the Irish language. Consequently, engagement with parents is critical. Conversations with families may highlight the many ways children communicate, and the multiple ways educators engage children, and their absolute priority to ensure all children's wellbeing is supported, as they settle and acquire or strengthen their understanding of Irish. All plans, themes, activities related to the curriculum are shared so that parents can bring that learning home and compliment what the child engages with during their day.

CNnG encourages an open-door understanding with parents. It is the ethos of CNnG that parents should feel they can approach staff at the service with any matter they wish to discuss. ECEC is a relationship-focused field; relationships matter, with educators and managers having a responsibility to ensure parents feel welcomed, their contributions valued, and feel they are part of the organisation.

Aligned with the values and beliefs of CNnG, children, families and community also lie at the heart of the StartBright mission. The Strategic Plan (StartBright, 2024) recognises the importance of engaging with parents and families as a means of supporting child and family-wellbeing (Sabol *et al.*, 2018; Connolly & Devaney, 2018). Children are profoundly impacted by the context into which they are born and grow, particularly where they encounter social inequality, and experience a lack of stability in their lives (OECD, 2024).

As with CNnG, StartBright values the importance of educators collaborating with parents, but in addition the organisation recognises the differing needs of families in the communities they serve. Taking learning from their engagement with the Powerful Parenting and Parent/Carer Facilitator model from Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), StartBright has developed a Family Facilitator (FF) role, which supports parents in a number of the ECEC centres. The dedicated Family Facilitator, equipped with relevant qualifications and experience of working with families in complex situations, develops a toolbox of responses to meet the needs of families and to signpost additional support services within the community. Embedded within the Family Facilitator approach is the commitment to developing responses to situations and needs together, rather than pre-empting what might be required.

Key Family-Working Characteristics of the Mutli-Site Non-Profit ECEC approach:

- The approach to working with families reflects the organisational mission
- Promote ongoing communication with families
- Establish a genuine open door between families and settings
- Respect parents/families as first educators; support the home-learning environments
- Recognise differing family needs, strengths and interests
- Promote inclusion, respect and the valuing of families in true partnership working
- Act as a bridge to external services and supports

Key Messages - Working with Families:

The values, mission and purpose of the group is best reflected in how staff work with families; being parent-led, means ensuring collaborative work is developed with and not for parents; being attuned to parents and taking time to listen; building relationships by working to parent time and not 'outcome' time.

Valuing and having processes in place to support parents; creating formal and informal opportunities throughout the year to engage with parents/families.

Reflecting on intentionality in the work means responding practically and taking initiative to build trust and satisfaction; being conscious of communication approaches bearing in mind different languages, literacy skills and cultural practices.

Connecting parents with services in the community; advocating with local representatives on behalf of families for changes within the community; working closely and as a team with educators and managers in the centres to collaboratively support families and communities

Supporting parents to share their children's learning and development goals and achievements; recognising the diversity of languages, cultures and traditions by which families identify.

For CNnG, supporting families in understanding the immersive approach of the centre; supporting parents/families in introducing or deepening their Irish language.

Challenges

The previous two chapters presented and discussed findings from this research, identifying key characteristics and key messages which emerged through engagement with both StartBright and CNnG. However, the two case study models do not operate seamlessly and clear challenges arise for both organisations, in respect of sustainability and staffing issues.

Sustainability

The primary challenge for both the StartBright approach and CNnG is the adequacy and certainty of funding (multi-annual). Although Core Funding provides the bulk of the organisational budget for both groups, additional funding streams enable these two CSOs to respond to the unique needs of their communities and fulfill their mission. Creating an overall operating budget from a number of different sources creates an additional workload in terms of identifying, applying, and eventually reporting to funders. This in itself is a challenge and a drain on human resources.

For StartBright, a key risk relates to succession planning, specifically in respect of the CEO and Quality Mentor, both of whom have been driving and leading on StartBright strategies. Under their stewardship, the structure of the organisation is leaning toward practices of delegation and building staff capacity to enable the smooth handover of responsibilities. Having skilled board members, getting managers and the wider organisation involved in budgeting, strategy building, enabling structures and reviewing the risk register, all signpost a dynamic and prepared organisation.

For CNnG, a history of career pathways within the organisation has facilitated a strong institutional knowledge bank to develop. This stability lends itself to strengthening

relationships with key people across other Irish language organisations, as well as community leaders. This enables effective collaboration, the maximising of resources, and information sharing, towards their mutual goals of strengthening the Irish language and supporting rural Gaeltacht communities. However, as with StartBright, this work requires staff time and commitment, which takes them away from their operational roles. Without the security of multi-annual funding, planning for growth, quality and sustainability is not possible.

Challenges of Success

As both organisations have grown, the establishment of a core administrative/ executive team was critical to their effective operations, as well as underpinning their mission of high quality service delivery. The shifting of administrative tasks away from services on the ground, enabled greater attention to pedagogy, relationship building, meeting service users' needs, and community connections. However, as the organisations have grown, the need to expand the administrative team is more evident. For example, CNnG has more than 250 staff, yet only a single staff member to manage the human resources, whereas a small HR team would be typical of a company of similar size.

Further, the success of this model has resulted in pressure on both to "take on" more services under their umbrellas. Both organisations are more reflective, undertaking risk analysis prior to committing to support other non-profit settings; however, there is a deep desire in both to support other early years settings who are struggling with matters of resourcing and sustainability. The potential to offer consultation to other non-profit groups to support their shift to a collective model has real potential; but then again, this will draw on the limited resources in both organisations.

Staffing

A clear challenge relates to staff recruitment which is an issue that goes beyond StartBright or CNnG. In the national context, 93% of ECEC managers' report that recruitment challenges are negatively affecting service provision (SIPTU, 2024). The challenge as perceived by some StartBright staff relates to the difficulty in accessing support staff. Staff absences are filled internally, reducing opportunities for non-contact time that facilitates planning, meetings with colleagues, other professionals, or with families. Lack of staff cover has also been cited as the cause of burn out amongst the staff group, who are working with daily challenges and vulnerable families. Turnover impacts relationships and trust built between staff and service users.

For CNnG they have the additional challenge of Irish language proficiency, as well as an early years qualification, when recruiting educators. The ability to "grow" staff, from non-qualified members of the SAC programme, up through the service through commitment to staff development has been effective in many cases.

It is too early to establish if the new summer salary scheme, to retain the sessional staff, will be effective, but it will be important to track this. The approach required a commitment by educators across services, as the larger settings are in effect, subsidising smaller sites. The significant size of CNnG created the economy of scale required to enable such a scheme, though few if any ECEC companies are this large.

Within the StartBright context, challenges of shift hours were highlighted by some participants. Currently there are five shifts rotating within the StartBright approach and this is primarily to suit parents, but this does not always work for educators/staff who have their own children and care responsibilities of their own. This is a common problem which O'Sullivan (2024) in England suggests 'that to remain competitive and sustainable, part-time and flexible roles must be a cornerstone of a new national workforce strategy'. A cautionary note recognises the challenge of balancing staff flexibility with children's needs and family expectations, while maintaining ratios.

Conclusion

The findings and discussions emerging from this study highlight the benefits, challenges and pressures on social enterprises such as StartBright and CNnG, as they work to balance financial security, ethical governance, strong pedagogy and social purpose with their respective communities, be they rural, urban and/or underserved. The research suggests that the work of these two social enterprise models cannot be conceptualised as independent entities, rather they are part of a wider economic, social and political system which strongly define the operating environment, shape legal frameworks, determine funding availability and market opportunities. Adopting a systems-view highlights the interconnective nature of all elements surrounding the social enterprise, where movements or advancements in one area must be balanced and supported by the others. Hence, achieving financial security

without fulfilling the mission of the organisation ignores the community and their needs. Strong pedagogy is not possible without adequate care, recompense, training and progression opportunities for staff. Ethical governance requires ongoing commitment, strong leadership and management, and adequacy of professional roles. Sustainability for a social enterprise means considering both financial and social impacts in business decision-making. It means not compromising core values and integrating mission into all aspects of the organisation.

These models demonstrate that high quality early childhood education and care can be delivered within the Irish context, through sustainable, ethical and socially minded structures. These models serve children and families, rather than shareholders or profit orientated directors, as they reinvest any excess into their local communities, in fulfilment of their mission and purpose.

Chapter Six:

Recommendations and Conclusions

Introduction

As previously noted, the purpose of this research was to examine two case study models of non-profit early childhood provision, both of which operate as multi-site providers. The previous chapters outlined and discussed the research findings and the key features of these models, in response to the first research question.

- What are the key features of the participating not-for-profit, community-based and/or social enterprise models of ECEC?

The previous section also set out key messages arising from the study based on the thematic areas that have structured many sections of this report. In this final chapter prior to concluding the report, we respond to the second research question:

- How might a greater understanding of such models inform future policy direction in respect of the publicly funded/public system developments?

Summary of Irish ECEC Context

Initial policy, regulatory, workforce and funding strategies relevant to Ireland's early childhood system emerged from shifting economic activity and social behaviours of the mid 1990s to early 2000s. Early ECEC initiatives emerged in response to these changes, often benefitting from serendipity in policy alignment (such as European funding) and particular actors seizing opportunities at the moment. Over the 30 intervening years, there has been a clear movement from a child care discourse to support working mothers, to an early childhood education and care discourse, as a common good and societal service, as well as an economic stimulator. Furthermore, we have moved from perceiving childcare as a family's own responsibility, to understanding the State must play a central role if we are to achieve an effective functioning early childhood education and care system.

Throughout the intervening years, there have been short term strategies addressing matters such as workforce development to quality of provision. The landmark First 5 (Ireland, 2018) which set out a ten year strategy, accompanied by a detailed implementation plan, was symbolic of the shifting State-led discourse. First 5 provided the necessary strategy to drive a number of interconnected aims to enhance and strengthen the ECEC field in Ireland. These included improving access, increasing affordability, and enhancing inclusion measures, so all children/families can avail of an early years service in their community; improving the quality of early learning and care experiences for young children; strengthening the workforce and addressing retention issues.

A significant increase in state funding, as envisaged in *Partnership for Public Good* (DCEDIY, 2021), and enacted through Core Funding, was a necessity for these aims to be realised. *Shaping the Future* (DCDE, 2025) continues this strategic work. Phase 1 (2025-2027) aims to 'to strengthen affordability, access and quality' (pg. 6). Under Phase 2 (2027-2029), efforts to establish a "Public Model" of ECEC for Ireland should commence, following a public consultation process. It is to this public model phase that this report speaks most specifically.

Investment Orientation

There are many arguments for a state to develop an affordable, accessible, inclusive, sustainable and high quality ECEC system, underpinned by a professional and valued workforce. If done well, this is an expensive proposition, requiring at least 1% of a state's GDP, though some countries such as Iceland are spending up to 1.7% at present. Research evidence, however, consistently highlights the return on investment by a state in terms of enhanced parental employment and family stability, better educational, social and health outcomes over the lifetime of a child, and reduced need for costly interventions in school and beyond, for children experiencing high quality early learning and care⁸. In the long run, investing in effective ECEC is a cost saving exercise for a state as well as having life-long positive effects on individual lives (Social Justice Ireland, 2020).

Rapid increases in state funding to ECEC has seen an increase in multi-site providers, the majority of which are for-profit businesses mirroring what we see in other Anglosphere states (Moss and Martin, 2025). Many of these are backed by international investment funds. We are seeing the prioritisation of acquiring independent stand-alone services, and merging operators, rather than the creation of new services. This is of course, driven by profit-maximising models perfected by investment funds in other industries (Haspel, 2024; Taft, 2025). As our funding model is now structured, we are witnessing increasing profiteering by indigenous and non-national players raising ethical questions about the place of profiteering in early childhood services and the destination of tax-payer-funded investment into the ECEC field. It is worth noting this data can be difficult to track down, however, when it is, it reveals worrying practices.

Further, the increasing complexity of funding programmes, in a highly regulated and workforce dependent service industry, makes the standalone provider model, whether private or community-based, sustainably challenging (Haspel, 2024). Overall, the landscape for ECEC in Ireland is rapidly changing, to one that Byrne⁹ describes as "increasingly structured by financialisation engineering" (Simon *et al.*, 2022). It is timely then for the Department of Children (DCDE) to be exploring public models as an alternative vision and ethical alternative for this important public service investment. And so, we turn to this study, the emerging messages and recommendations for future ECEC developments in Ireland.

⁸ evidencebasedprograms.org/document/abecedarian-project-evidence-summary/

⁹ Personal communication 10th March 2026.

Key Features and Recommendations for Future Developments

The two case study models offer a fresh way of understanding and envisioning ECEC in the Irish context. The contextual element is of critical importance: these groups have evolved here in Ireland, within the current funding, regulatory and policy context, which lends itself to reimagining the potential for ECEC here in Ireland. While it is always of benefit to look beyond our own context, to learn from best practice within effective systems elsewhere, it is of equal value to understand what is already working well, within the existing structures and systems - to look to our own backyard, as it were and to ensure that in future developments the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater.

It could be argued that both of these case study groups developed organically; it was not the intent at the start to create a multi-site operator, but here they are. As they grew, initially through trial and error, later through strategic planning, they have established models that are responsive, ethical, accountable, sustainable and grounded in community. There is great potential for this model to inform other elements of the Irish ECEC field.

Based on our time examining these case studies, we believe it is an imperative to understand them as systems, made up of critical elements that are interconnected (Urban *et al*, 2011). In seeking to influence future ECEC development, particularly the approach to 'public model' development, recalling the key features of this model is useful now:

Key Features of the Case Study Models

- Being driven by an identified social mission, underpinned by agreed values, focuses the work of each organisation
- Organisational commitment is founded on the shared understanding of its purpose
- The social mission, values and commitment are nurtured through organisational cohesion, which strengthens relationships; this takes time, resources, planning, and prioritising to develop, but is essential to attain shared understandings
- Support staff bring administrative, financial, human resource skills to the organisation; crucially this allows educators to focus on quality pedagogical practice, family relationships, and community ties, while streamlining financial responsibilities
- Staff structure has been developed so that the varied roles support the attainment of the social mission, service delivery, and organisational sustainability
- Respect and valuing of the staff is core to the organisation; this is evidenced through professional development supports, best possible conditions and wages, identified career pathways
- Additional funding strands are continually sought out; main funding is through DCDE Core funding, however this is insufficient to meet wider social mission and organisational aims
- As a social enterprise, any "excess" is returned into the organisation, to continue to enhance service delivery and meet their commitments to quality of service to children and families

- Multiple perspectives both within and external to the organisation are heard and considered
- Maximising resources, enhancing institutional knowledge base and improving service delivery is supported through developed networks of allied service providers

As previously outlined, these models face similar challenges, which can be summarised as:

- **Sustainability:** Instability of funding year to year; multi-annual funding would provide the necessary assurances for longer term strategic planning

- **Challenges of Success:** Rapid growth places demands on any organisation, and endangers sustainability as do requests from other settings to “join” these organisations
- **Staffing:** Throughout the early years field, the matter of staff recruitment and retention is the dominant challenge; both organisations face the additional challenge of “right fit” in terms of new staff understanding the underpinning values and committing to its social mission.

As the Irish ECEC field moves into the final years of First 5, and is influenced by the current policy proposals under *Shaping the Future* (DCDE, 2025), the messages emerging from this report offer ways to rethink and restructure many elements of the existing and emerging field.

Figure 6.1: Model of Multi-Site Non-Profit Early Childhood Education & Care.



Recommendations Arising

This research has revealed the rich, principled and committed approach to provision of early childhood education and care that already exists within the Irish social and educational landscape. How can these messages support the State as they move along the envisaging and enacting of plans under *Shaping the Future*, including development of a public model?

Based on our research experience and drawing on our own in-depth knowledge of the Irish ECEC field, our experiences and values - as researchers, academics and previously, as early childhood educators - we offer the following recommendations. These relate to the proposed public model; however, we also suggest ways these messages can better support existing standalone non-profit and independent private providers, as well as home-based provision.

1. A Pilot Startup of a Multi-site Service Provider

We strongly recommend that based on the success of this model of non-profit multi-site provision, this should be emulated as the structure for any pilot public model established under *Shaping the Future*. Creating new individual standalone community providers would be replicating a model that is challenged by issues of sustainability, quality and staff retention. There is no economic or social argument for such an approach; rather, this moment should be harnessed as an opportunity to establish a multi-site non-profit organisation(s), creating a new pattern of ECEC development for Ireland. The key elements of this model have been articulated, above and through this report.

In order to commence this pilot, we recommend the following initial steps:

- Establish a centralised Executive Board; initially this will have an operational role but will shift to a strategic role as the model is embedded
- Recruit a CEO; establish initial centralised administrative structure including an early childhood educational quality role and other team members; plan for growth as settings open
- Recruit educators; allow time ahead of child enrolment for cohesion building, pedagogical planning, and future visioning; build in annual opportunities to revisit, regroup and re-vision
- Collectively the members must establish what the social mission, values and aims of the organisation is to be. Families and children should have a voice as they become involved

2. Pilot a Local "Umbrella" Model to Merge Stand-Alone Non-Profit Settings

As revealed through this report, existing stand-alone non-profit services often approach these case study groups, seeking to join their organisation. The benefits of being part of a multi-site group is evident on the ground; however, these groups cannot grow indefinitely. Therefore, there is a need to shore up other community-based services, including ECCE services, crèches and school-age services, bringing them into a more sustainable multi-site operational structure.

Through engagement with County Childcare Committees, Pobal and DCDE staff, identify areas where a number of community providers may wish to come together under a pilot, to establish new multi-site non-profit operators.

- Commence at the Board level, establishing the interests, needs, potential of merged models
- Undertake a benefit and costs analysis; community analysis; establish staff, family and community views; reach a decision as to which services, if any are best positioned to merge
- Identify a staged plan of reorganisation/ restructuring; commence reorganisation
- It is an imperative that time is given (initially and annually) to build capacity and cohesion, for social mission “visioning”, underpinned by agreeing aims and values
- Evaluate through targeted research to identify lessons emerging for future “merged models” approaches

3. Recommendations Related to Private Independent Companies.

Within the corporate ECEC sector, acquisitions and mergers are a common exercise. It is well documented that private chain providers expand through acquiring existing spaces, more so than creating new spaces (Haspel, 2024). At present, small stand alone and small chain ECEC providers are attractive to these corporate entities: they offer a quick turnaround of profits as a going enterprise; they also offer potential for re-negotiation with the DCDE, as “new providers” can set new parent rates. These actions are counter to the aims of *Partnership for Public Good* (DCEDIY, 2021), particularly in expanding access to ECEC.

Over the years, ECEC services have been able to avail of ongoing DCDE investment, for infrastructural improvements. The *Building Blocks* grants scheme, among others, have supported private and community settings to upgrade their facilities, expand place-numbers, and enhance the environments, through renovations and purchase of equipment. The fee-freeze that is a criteria of Core Funding, also means these settings are more quickly to be converted into the lower fee model that is part of *Shaping the Future* strategy.

Based on these points, and drawing on this research, we make the following two recommendations:

3.1 Explore a “Buy-Out” Model to Convert Private into Community

As existing providers come to the natural end of their career, and are seeking to retire, or in other circumstances where they wish to cease providing their service, a “buy out” from the State, similar to what a corporate entity may offer, should be strongly considered. The tax-payer has funded improvements to these settings with the aim of enhancing young children’s experiences, supporting families, and benefiting the wider community. We are of the view that these settings should be retained for the community, rather than the benefits of financialisation engineering that go towards director remuneration and stock-market dividends.

A new multi-site entity should be created to ‘receive’ these converted private services, converting them into new community settings, through a similar process outlined in Pt 2 above. This will include capacity and cohesion building, collective visioning, with revisioning over time. In support of this initiative, future funding towards infrastructure (and possibly daily operating funding through Core) should include a caveat that the State has the first option to purchase, should the business choose to cease operation.

3.2 New 'Umbrella' Model to Support Independent Private Settings

A significant message arising from this study, was the very welcomed benefit of the "lifting" of the administrative work from front line settings to an administrative structure. This allowed early childhood educators and managers to focus on their strengths: pedagogical practice, relationship formation, and regulatory performance. This was facilitated due to the 'economy of scale' produced by the merging of many settings, and the pooling of "excess" funds. Few independent private standalone or small chain providers have the resources to enable such an administrative unit; however, all would benefit from that specialised skill set, as the study revealed.

We recommend the exploration of administrative "umbrellas" that would undertake a specific set of tasks on behalf of a group of independent owners, while allowing for autonomy of operations and retaining of individual cultures and characteristics. This would align with planned actions under the *Action Plan for Simplification* (DCDE, 2025) which compliments *Shaping the Future* and aims to streamline bureaucracy for ECEC providers. The call for a 'shared services expert to explore the potential for use of shared services to support ELC and SAC providers' (ibid, pg 7) should refer to the findings of this study, including this recommendation, in furthering this exploration.

4. Investigate an Umbrella Model for Childminders

Following the *National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028* (DCEDIY, 2021) all providers of home based/ family daycare, childminders in the Irish context, are required to register with Tusla and adhere to revised regulations related to their specific context. Previously, a significant number of childminders were legally exempt from the regulatory context. Due to this legislative lacuna, "exempt" childminders could operate as formally or informally as they preferred (DCEDIY, 2021). With the new regulatory context, any person operating a childminding service will soon be required to register with Tusla. Although we are in a transitional period until 2027, the new formalised system will require necessary administrative accountability, as well as good pedagogical and family partnership practices. Several relevant actors suggested this shift to increasing oversight, required administrative actions (i.e. paperwork), and online reporting, could drive many childminders from the field. Childminding Ireland believes a 'Major childcare crisis [is] imminent as childminders shut up shop' (Childminding Ireland, 2023). At a time when the State is seeking to expand child-places, particularly places for babies and toddlers, efforts to stem any loss of childminders from the current system, should be welcomed.

We propose the exploration of an 'umbrella' model for childminders, similar to what has been proposed above for private, independent providers. Under such a model, childminders would remain as independent small businesses, however, there would be administrative support for fees, funding, annual accounts, etc., Following international models, childminding could be further resourced through the DCDE funding of quality practice mentors, resource lending supports, and group training and networking, creating important communities of practice, for this unique but critically important element of the Irish ECEC field.

Conclusion

This study had two aims, firstly to identify the features of existing, successful social enterprise models in the early childhood arena. Too frequently, the success of organisations such as StartBright and CNnG remain under the radar, as their energies are focused primarily on meeting their mission and remaining sustainable, which render the characteristics of their operation almost invisible. As the ECEC sector transforms through policy developments and growth in investment, it is critical that the characteristics of existing social enterprises come to the fore, so that key messages can be shared with an influential audience and decision-makers.

The second aim of this study was to consider how greater understandings of the two models could inform future policy direction, as a publicly funded/public system moves from rhetoric to reality. The key messages drawn from this study are timely as the Government has been strong in following the strategic direction of *First 5* and ambitious in mapping a possible alternative in *Shaping the Future* (DCDE, 2025), paving the way for state-led ECEC with support of the recently launched *Capital Programme* (DCDE, 2026).

Understanding how StartBright and CNnG manage to collaborate and meet the needs of their respective communities, build local capacities, support families, actively promote culture, deliver quality education and care, and remain sustainable, while operating within a changing system should provide guidance for the next stage of sectoral development. Both StartBright and CNnG have evidenced, through this research, that early childhood education can provide not only positive outcomes for children but how parent, community and cultural needs can be met and enhanced when organisations are driven by mission and invest surpluses back into their stakeholder groups.

The value of this research is that it counters what Unger (2005, p.1) calls a 'dictatorship of no alternatives' or as Moss (2014, p.4) says 'there is no alternative'. The analysis of StartBright and CNnG highlights that alternative models of ECEC are in operation and that a reliance on international investment funds, driven by profit-maximisation, is not the way forward. Social enterprises primarily work with and for the community, while international investors work for profit and consider 'childcare' as business and a marketised commodity (Moss & Mitchell, 2024, p1). A growing chorus, at home (NWC) and abroad (Facer, 2011) is calling for ECEC to be provided as a public service and a public good. The partners in this study have presented and defended the case for an alternative model of early childhood education and care that serves communities and parishes.

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Appendices

Appendix A: StartBright Centres

StartBright centres cross Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan in Dublin West and Dublin South/West, and which are designated to areas of Very Disadvantaged, Disadvantaged and Marginally Below Average on the HP Deprivation Index.

Profile information for the seven StartBright centres are derived from:

<https://www.pobal.ie/research-analysis/>

<https://data.pobal.ie/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=4c84af35e84b434b842c59a03aca0b82>

Centres	No. of children & families in 2010 – 2016	No. of children & families in 2017 – 2024
Starbright Balgaddy	43	62
Starbright Bawnogue	40	51
Starbright Deansrath	57	80
Starbright St Ronan's	34	58
Starbright Greenhills	32	105
Starbright Bookview		66
Starbright St Finian's		67
Total	196	464

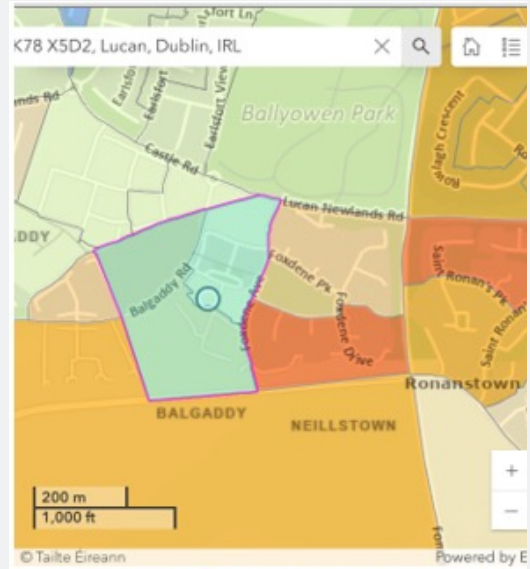
StartBright Balgaddy

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



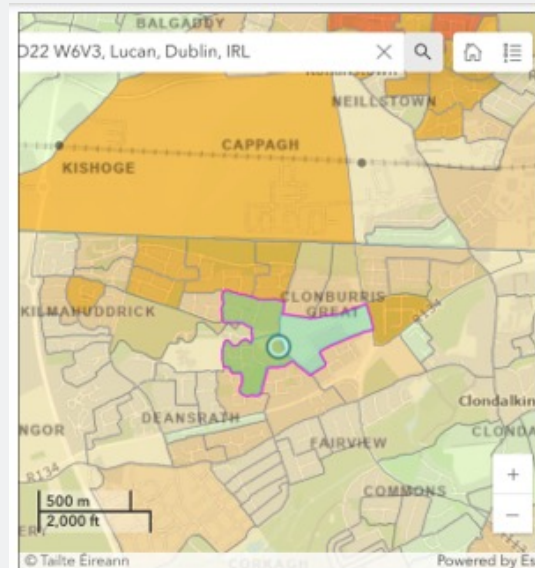
StartBright Bawnogue

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



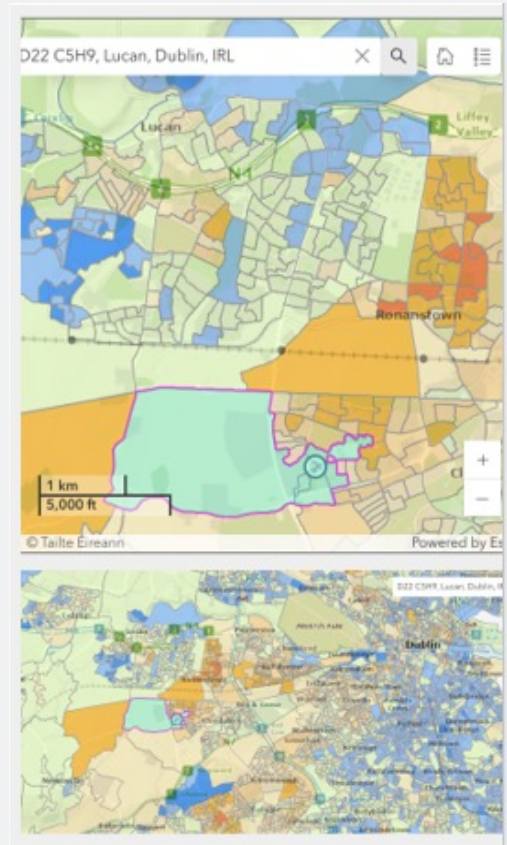
StartBright Deansrath

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

- Total Population: 1,818
- 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



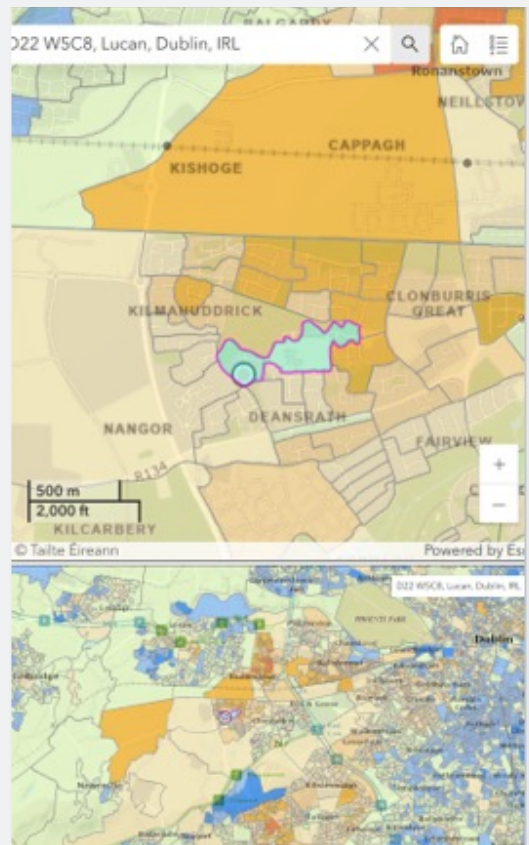
StartBright St Ronan's

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



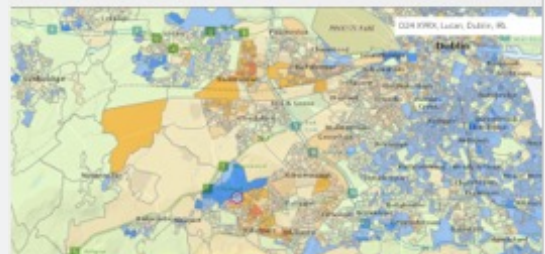
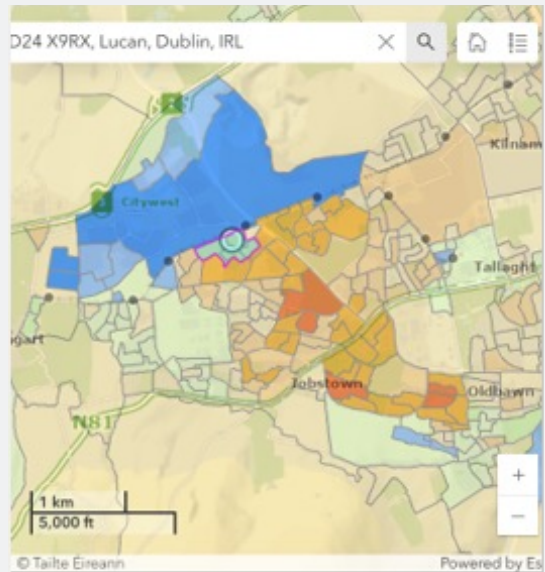
StartBright Brookview

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

- Total Population: 1,209
- 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



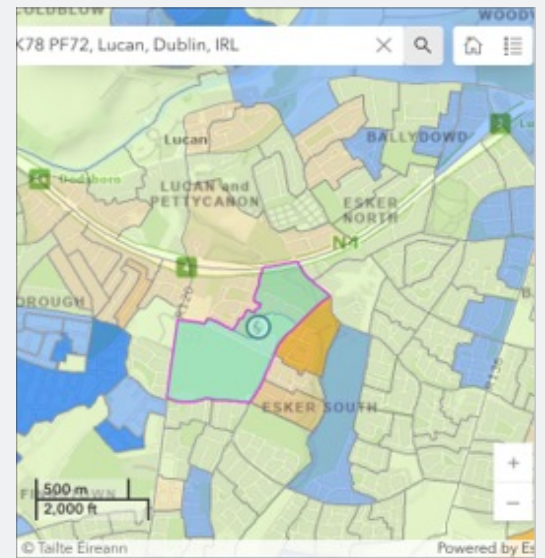
StartBright St Finian's

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



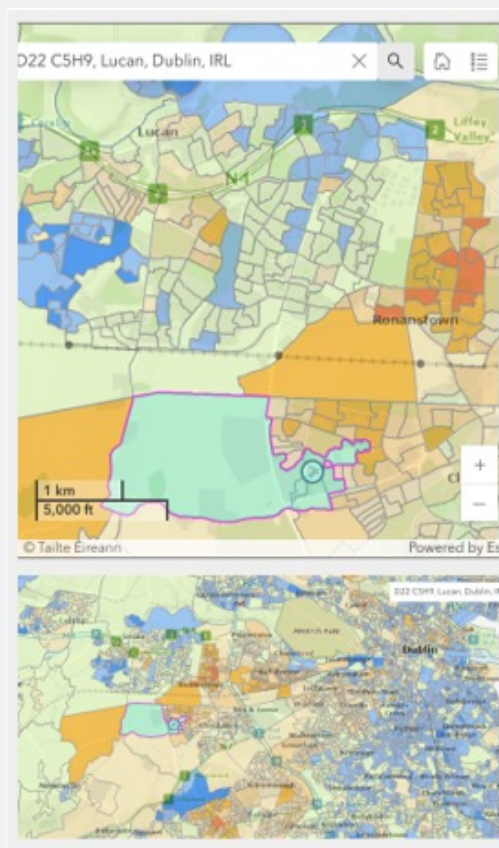
StartBright Deansrath

Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators

- Total Population: 1,818
- 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





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