

An evaluation of

Sure Start's Developmental Programme for 2 to 3-year-old children and the effectiveness of its play-based activities in achieving positive outcomes for the children's development

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Empowering Improvement

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Introduction

The importance of children getting access to high quality provision in the Early Years and of early intervention for those children who require support with their learning is well documented across a number of publications commissioned by the Department of Education (DE), such as [A Fair Start](#), the [Independent Review of Education](#) and the [Review of Department of Education Targeted Early Years Interventions](#).

Identifying and addressing potential barriers to a child's development as early as possible, providing additional support to families, children and communities, and working in partnership across disciplines and sectors is key to delivering DE and wider Executive priorities.

DE's overarching Early Years Policy Framework (2013), [Learning to Learn](#), highlights the importance of responsive, holistic and coordinated services for families and children. Sure Start is one of DE's key targeted early intervention initiatives which supports parents/carers* and children under the age of four. It aims to "give every child the best possible start in life" by supporting families and children from the early stages of development, particularly those families living in disadvantaged areas.

Since the establishment of Sure Start in Northern Ireland 25 years ago, the number of Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland has increased to 38. Sure Start is targeted towards the 25% most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland, identified using the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM 2017). Some areas outside of this threshold also receive services due to historical arrangements, prior to the NIMDM being in place. An additional 22 Super Output Areas* (SOA) have been included in the programme on a permanent basis since April 2025.

DE is the policy lead for Sure Start and oversees and allocates the annual Sure Start budget. DE administers funding via the Department of Health's (DoH) Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) and seeks assurances that appropriate arrangements are in place to deliver the projects and to safeguard the use of public money. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is in place between DE and the SPPG which sets out the accountability and governance arrangements. The administration and operational oversight of delivery of the projects is managed by the SPPG. The SPPG delivers the operational aspects of Sure Start on behalf of DE, working closely with the staff in the 38 projects to oversee local delivery. The SPPG, through the work of the Childcare Partnership Managers (CCP), monitors project performance and supports programme development on a regional basis.

In March 2025, the [TransformED NI Strategy](#) was launched and a key priority of this Ministerial Strategy is investing in the early years, and the alignment of early years education with the Executive's [Early Learning and Childcare Strategy](#).

This evaluation, the fifth Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) evaluation of Sure Start provision since 2018, focuses on its Developmental Programme for 2 to 3-year-old children (the Programme) and the quality of play-based activities within the Programme in achieving positive outcomes for children's learning and development, including for those children with diverse and additional needs. A key aspect of the Programme is the provision of integrated services that include early education, child development, and health and family support to improve outcomes for the children and the families.

Context and background – The Programme

Sure Start aims to “give every child the best possible start in life”. It is designed to reflect and respond to local need and context, while maintaining fidelity to the six core elements which feature in all Sure Start projects. The six core elements are: outreach and home visiting services; family support (including befriending and parenting information); good quality play, learning, and childcare experiences; primary and community health care support; speech, language, and communication support; and support for all children.

The Programme is specifically designed to support children who would most benefit from additional assistance in the year before they start pre-school education. Through age-appropriate, positive, play-based learning experiences, children’s early personal, social and emotional and communication skills are to be developed. The Programme aims to provide opportunities to: develop improved language skills; improve their physical development; improve their social and emotional skills to enable their interaction with peers and adults; foster greater independence; increase the levels of attention and concentration; and enable them to settle in quickly to their pre-school setting. There is also a focus on supporting parents and providing ongoing support and development for practitioners.

Last year, through the additional funding provided by DE, under the Executive’s Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, Sure Start projects were able to increase the number of settings delivering the Programme. During 2024-2025, there were 144 settings implementing the Programme as part of the 38 Sure Start projects. Each setting runs three sessions per week over 38 weeks, with 12 children at each session and a ratio of one adult to four children. For 2025-2026, DE has allocated £6.8 million for the provision of 149 settings to deliver the Programme in Northern Ireland.

The staff develop partnership working with the parents through home visits and ‘stay and play’ sessions to enhance parental understanding of their child’s play, learning and development. In June 2023, a parental survey was carried out by SPPG across the 38 Sure Start projects. There were 4,450 responses, with 90% of respondents rating their Sure Start project as ‘excellent’.

Governance and accountability of the Programme was under review by DE at the time of this evaluation.

Methodology

This evaluation involved engagement with five of the 38 Sure Start projects spanning across Northern Ireland. It focused on delivery of the Programme in settings which had not been involved in the four previous ETI Sure Start evaluations (see Appendix 2).

The five Sure Start projects work with 16 settings to deliver the Programme. Within those settings, five other targeted programmes were also being implemented to support a small group of children with additional and diverse needs. Inspectors observed the provision within the settings and observed a small number of monthly 'stay and play' sessions; 149 children were observed at play. In addition, ETI engaged in discussions with SPPG representation, the five project managers, settings' staff and 96 parents. Inspectors also reviewed the documentation shared by the project staff which included strategic action planning, session planning and observation documentation, individual learning plans, and child protection policies and procedures.

Views of parents

Almost all of the parents who spoke with inspectors highlighted that they have accessed a wide range of Sure Start play experiences prior to their child's entry into the Programme. They report the multiple benefits of these in improving their own understanding of how high-quality play experiences can assist their child's learning and development.

Many of the parents reported that Sure Start was a "lifeline for them". They spoke very positively about how the Programme provided support in a "non-judgemental and safe" manner and how "staff meet you at your point of need". In discussions with a small number of dads, they reported how the Programme has provided them with the strategies and tools to become "a better dad". They discussed how they had a clearer understanding of their child's development and learning needs and the importance of promoting early language skills.

The parents also discussed how the 'stay and play' sessions help them at home to reinforce and extend their child's independence, language and physical development. They highlighted the supportive relationships which have been fostered both with each other and with the staff through their participation in the Programme. The parents emphasised that being able to observe the staff model effective interactions has helped them to get more involved in their child's play activities. The parents also affirmed the excellent progress their child has made as a result of their participation in the Programme, notably helping them and their child to be better prepared for their transition to pre-school education.

The parents highlighted the regular communication and ongoing support they receive through: informal conversations with the staff; the monthly newsletter; termly home visits during which time the staff discuss their child's progress; and an online digital platform where they share pictures of their child playing, reminders of events and wider learning opportunities, such as support in promoting positive behaviours.

Appendix 3 provides an overview of the parents' views and experiences of their local Sure Start project.

Views of staff

Inspectors engaged in discussions with the staff in the settings and across the projects involved in delivering the Programme. They spoke positively about providing a whole team approach to “wrap around” and nurture families and “wanting what is best for the families and children in their community”. All of the staff spoke positively of the support they receive from the project’s Early Years Co-ordinator (EYC) in the planning for, and implementation of, high-quality early years practice. They discussed the opportunities to engage in professional learning opportunities through modelling, mentoring, and reflective discussions, such as involvement in peer assessment of the settings’ staff interactions with the children. The staff also affirmed the work of the Family Support Worker as vital in building and fostering positive relationships with families and children from the moment they first access the Programme.

Summary of key findings

The Programme and Provision

- The staff from the 16 settings and the five Sure Start projects visited are committed to the **Sure Start vision** to give every child the best possible start in life. They are proactive in their assessment of need and delivery of support to families living in disadvantaged areas.
- There is excellent **collaboration and communication** between the Sure Start project staff, the staff in the settings and those families who require support. There are well established relationships at all levels which provide a valued support network, through which the children and their families participating in the Programme are enabled to thrive.
- The Programme includes home visits from the project staff. There is an inconsistent approach to **monitoring and review** of the impact of the home visits and any additional family support visits on the children’s learning and development.
- The **play-based learning experiences** within the Programme are mostly high quality and are enhancing the children’s learning through: a balance of structured routines and creative exploration; purposeful adult interactions; authentic and stimulating resources; and the provision of a wide range of opportunities to develop language and curiosity in meaningful contexts.
- Through participation in the Programme, almost all of the children are making very good **progress** from their individual starting points. The children show high levels of concentration and engagement resulting in sustained play and have well developed independence, social skills, and fine and gross motor skills. Consequently, they are well prepared to transition to their pre-school placement.

- The children's **transition** from Sure Start to pre-school is not as effective as it could be; there is evidence that some pre-school settings are not building effectively on the children's learning from the Programme.
- A key strength of the Programme is the improvement in the **children's language skills**. Comparison with baseline assessments following speech and language intervention demonstrates that almost all of the children are making very good progress in their language and communication skills.

Programme Planning

- Most of the projects involved in the evaluation have developed appropriate **strategic plans** and were at the early stage of reviewing the effectiveness of the Programme. To enhance DE oversight of the Programme, it would be beneficial for the PSS to share the evaluations with SPPG and DE, in addition to the submission of their PSS report.
- The project managers and the SPPG report that the one-year nature of Sure Start **funding** and the uncertainty over confirmation of funding at the start of each financial year impacts adversely on strategic planning of services, and staff recruitment and retention.
- The Programme provides a helpful framework for the **settings' planning for learning**. The planning for learning ranged from effective to highly effective. In the highly effective practice, the planning is annotated with specific strategies for individual children, evaluated robustly and informs appropriately changes to the provision, impacting positively on the progress that the children are making.

Partnership

- The staff from the Sure Start projects liaise to varying degrees dependent on the children's needs with health visitors, social workers, occupational therapists, educational psychologists, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and child development teams. This **partnership-working** enables multi-disciplinary, integrated support to meet effectively the needs of the children and their families.
- Across the five Sure Start projects, **recruitment challenges** and vacancies at project level impacts adversely on the planning and the provision of high-quality play experiences for the children. **Financial constraints** are also impacting negatively on the availability of the various supports for the children and the progress they make.

Parents

- The **'stay and play' sessions** delivered within the Programme are developing well the parents': understanding of child-led play; use of natural, cost-effective or cost-neutral play materials; confidence and skills in supporting their child's independence, communication and language; and knowledge of strategies which sustain their child's engagement in play. As a result, the parents report improved play experiences with their child and value greatly the opportunity to meet other parents.

- Regular **parental attendance** at the ‘stay and play’ sessions is a challenge across many of the settings providing the Programme. Those settings which have high levels of parental participation are well placed to share strategies which are effective in sustaining parental engagement.

Professional Learning

- The settings’ staff who deliver the Programme are provided with a range of effective **professional learning opportunities** by the Sure Start project team and through regional cluster sessions, which they evaluate positively. These include professional learning on outdoor play, sensory regulation and general training to deliver the Programme which is influencing and improving their practice.
- In one project visited, there had been no regional training for the Programme for five years due to recruitment issues. **Regional Cluster training** in the Southern and Western areas has been impacted adversely by vacancies in the post of Programme Support Specialist (PSS).
- Within the 16 settings visited, a small number are delivering the Programme to a small group of six **children who have been identified with more complex needs** and who require targeted and specialist support within sensory-rich environments. The provisions are at various stages of development, and opportunities to collaborate and disseminate effective strategies have not yet been fully exploited.

Child Protection

- At the time of the evaluation, the evidence provided by all of the projects demonstrates that the **arrangements for child protection** align to the current statutory guidance.

Conclusion

- Overall, the Programme is successful in meeting its outlined aims with clear benefits for the children, their families and staff. These include:
 - the effectiveness of early intervention in the early years and support from education and health professionals for parents and children;
 - a good programme of professional learning for staff supports them to provide high-quality play experiences, as well as developing their understanding of complex needs; and
 - parents are growing in confidence to support their child and are gaining knowledge and understanding about child development matters, how children learn and the importance of play in the early years.

Main findings

Strategic planning to meet the needs of the children and families

The staff from all five of the Sure Start projects are committed to the vision to give every child the best possible start in life by supporting families and children from the early stages of development. Most of the projects have a strategic annual business plan which is written collaboratively and in consultation with the project manager, project and settings' staff and is submitted to the SPPG through the CCP managers. The available business plans are fit for purpose and align with the overarching objectives of the Sure Start programme. There is, however, a significant challenge in the successful achievement of these aims due to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining appropriately skilled staff. In one project visited, there had been no regional training for the Programme for five years and in another, despite additional support from the EYC and the speech and language therapist when no PSS was in place, there were some inconsistencies in practice with new staff.

The project managers and SPPG report that the one-year nature of Sure Start funding, and the uncertainty over confirmation of funding at the start of each financial year, impacts on strategic planning of services and creates anxiety for staff recruitment and retention. The delay presents a challenge for project managers in recruiting replacement staff on a temporary and short-term contract and impacts adversely on the delivery of services. In addition, there is variation of terms and conditions in contracts across organisational bodies such as charitable organisations, Health and Social Care Trusts and Voluntary and Community organisations which can hinder further the retention and recruitment of staff. These challenges impact negatively on the establishment of a stable and experienced staff team and the quality of the play experiences provided. Collective agreement is required between DE in their oversight role, the CCP managers in SPPG and governance structures within projects, on a more strategic and operationalised approach to support projects which are short-staffed and experiencing recruitment difficulties. Identifying and sharing strategies which have been effective in addressing recruitment gaps and challenges is key to this work.

The PSS for each of the 38 projects completes and submits a PSS report to the SPPG, which is collated into a PSS team report on the Programme and shared with DE. The report details quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the Programme but changes and improvements required to support the delivery of the Programme and inform professional learning needs, are not identified. The impact of actions taken to address arising issues is also not clear. Further analysis is also required to understand the impact of early identification of developmental delay and improved access to integrated services on the children's longer-term learning, development and outcomes. The Sure Start Go database is used to collate and collect the information to inform the annual report card submitted to DE but there is variation in use across the individual projects, with one project creating an additional database due to perceived inadequacies with Sure Start Go, in linking more effectively the support provided to children and their families on a longitudinal basis. A review of the use of the Sure Start Go database across all 38 Sure Start projects is required to understand better user experience and data insights, identify gaps in what insights the database can provide and share effective practice in using the database, to support consistency across the Sure start projects.

Play-based activities are developing well the children's skills, learning and development

The sessions in the Programme are well structured and there is an appropriate balance between adult-initiated play experiences and child-led play. Across the 16 settings, the children participate in a welcome circle time, free play, adult-led activity, snack time and outdoor activities. The sessions are supporting the children's learning and fostering secure attachments with the staff, promoting the children's sense of routine and belonging.

A key strength observed across all of the settings is the engagement of the children in their play. The children interact happily with each other and confidently with the adults. They take turns during activities and share resources with support from the adults. The children ask staff for support, such as, to help them build a carpark with the blocks and manipulate dough to mimic food at mealtimes. A balance of child-led and adult-initiated play experiences are incorporated, so that each child can freely access resources to extend and develop their play, supported effectively by the adults when required.

It is evident that caring and nurturing relationships have been fostered between the settings' staff and the children. The staff are developing very effectively the children's independence by encouraging them to change their shoes for outdoor activities, pour their own water during snack-time, put on costumes to dress-up for role play and place items in their personal trays to take home and share with parents at the end of the session. In the more effective practice, the children engage in sustained play with adult support and select materials independently to explore and investigate, for example, when playing in the mud kitchen or using herbs and citrus fruits in the 'tuff spot' to make 'potions'. The children are curious learners, enjoy exploring the materials with their senses and use creatively the materials in other areas to extend their play experiences.

The staff role model appropriately early mathematical language which develops well the children's learning and understanding when investigating which items will float and sink, using language such as full and empty when transferring water between jugs and teapots. Early mathematical language, such as shape, colour and positional language, is used spontaneously and accurately by the children during play in the home corner as they role play making dinner, for example putting food on a plate, setting the table with porcelain cups and placing cloths under the sink. The children are careful when playing with the authentic resources within the home and show respect for their environment.

There are very good opportunities for the children to develop their gross and fine motor skills and their spatial awareness, for example, their co-ordination, balance, core strength and stability as they ride tricycles on a sloped path and run with control. They move materials skilfully between areas using wheelbarrows, balance on small blocks and carefully carry buckets full of water to use in the mud kitchen. Fine motor skills such as dexterity, hand-eye co-ordination and control are

developing well through using: knives safely during snack to butter toast and crackers; a range of writing tools to early mark make; jugs and funnels to transfer water between containers; scissors safely and with control to cut tissue paper for pictures; and manipulating dough by squeezing, rolling and squashing it to make sausage rolls to strengthen the small muscles in their hands.

The outdoor areas in almost all of the settings are small in size but proportionate to the number of children attending the sessions. The staff have adapted the areas to provide the children with a rich variety of sensory and exploratory activities which motivate the children to participate in collaborative, creative and independent play. The children freely access the resources and use them imaginatively to problem solve and extend their language and learning. In all of the settings visited, the children engage in effective outdoor play experiences which develop well their gross and fine motor skills.

In the better practice, the planning for learning supports effectively the provision of high-quality play experiences

The Programme provides a sufficient framework for the planning for learning and is appropriately structured to support the children's holistic growth across the key areas of communication and language, physical development, social and emotional development, and early learning. The planning is appropriately informed by ongoing regular observations of the children and their individual needs. In the better practice, the planning is annotated with specific strategies for individual children, evaluated robustly and informs appropriately changes to the provision which impact positively on the progress that the children are making. The staff provide the children with activities that are age-and-stage appropriate, engaging, and are designed to stimulate curiosity and learning during play.

There is time allocated for the setting staff to engage in a collegial approach to planning and the EYC provides effective additional support when required to support the staff to develop the provision. This responsive and reflective approach enables the staff to provide a child-centred, nurturing and safe environment for each child to learn. The opportunities facilitated by the EYC are welcomed by the staff as they discuss first-hand evidence of what is working well and what they need to develop further within their practice.

In one project, due to staff shortages, the EYC leads the session to maintain safe ratios with qualified staff in place; this limits the time available to the EYC to provide staff professional learning and support for the team. To alleviate staffing challenges the Programme was also outsourced to external providers through a Service Level Agreement. All requirements of the Programme must be met, including the daily session length of 2.5 hours. The PSS also plays a key role in supporting these settings but due to recruitment challenges, this oversight role was not in place to support planning and professional learning. Across the five Sure Start projects, recruitment challenges are creating instability within the staffing complement and impact adversely on the consistency in the planning and the provision of high-quality play experiences for the children.

Each of the settings also has access to support from a PSS from the Sure Start projects. Their role is to provide support for the staff in relation to planning and practice and to ensure that provision is aligned with the developmental needs of the children and the overall objectives of the Programme. The PSS delivers focused and appropriate professional learning and support through clusters and provides coaching and mentoring opportunities for staff across various programmes. Regional Cluster training in the Southern and Western areas has been impacted adversely by vacancies in the PSS post. Consequently, there are inconsistencies in the professional learning opportunities provided to staff. Regular liaison between project managers and SPPG is needed so that the necessary mitigations can be put in place.

The parents benefit from ‘stay and play’ sessions but regular attendance is a challenge

Inspectors observed three ‘stay and play’ sessions in which the children and parents were fully immersed in the play experiences, for example, planting flowers and looking after vegetables in the outdoor environment. The parents and children demonstrated high levels of enjoyment and welcomed the opportunity to engage with other adults during the activities. The ‘stay and play’ sessions are developing well the parents’ understanding of child-led play, their use of natural, cost-effective or cost-neutral play materials, their confidence and skills in supporting their child’s independence, communication and language, and their knowledge of strategies which sustain their child’s engagement in play. As a result, the parents report improved play experiences with their child at home and that they value greatly the opportunity to meet other parents.

In a previous ETI [Evaluation](#) (2020), it was recommended that further clarity was needed on the expectation of attendance and participation of parents in the Programme. To mitigate parental absence, DE guidance for the Programme outlines that a grandparent or significant other can attend the ‘stay and play’ session, enabling them to also learn new play strategies which can later be shared with the parent. This is an appropriate solution which has the potential to enrich the child’s wider learning experiences, beyond their parent.

‘Stay and play’ sessions are a core part of the Programme, with the parents who participate agreeing to attend four ‘stay and play’ sessions throughout the year. In all of the settings visited, it was highlighted consistently by the staff that the most challenging part of delivering the ‘stay and play’ session is ensuring regular parental participation which is impacted by parents’ working patterns, commitments to other siblings and anxiety in larger group situations. During the three ‘stay and play’ sessions observed, a majority of parents attended and participated actively in the activities with their child. Those settings which have high levels of parental participation are well placed to share strategies which are effective in sustaining parental engagement. There were also differences in the delivery of the ‘stay and play’ sessions with pre-planned monthly themes organised or the sessions were organised on a ‘month by month’ basis informed by the needs and interests of the parents.

Through effective delivery of the Programme, the staff are successful in improving the children's language skills

A key strength of the Programme is a focus on the children's speech and language development and the evident improvement in the children's language and communication skills. Comparison with baseline assessments following speech and language intervention demonstrates that almost all of the children are making very good progress with their language and communication. The five projects use the [GL Wellcomm Speech and Language Toolkit*](#) to identify appropriately those children who may require support with their oracy, comprehension and communication skills, and in some instances those who may require immediate referral to a community speech and language therapist. Practical and universal strategies to develop the children's speech and language are used consistently by all of the project and settings' staff which includes modelling, turn taking and child-led play and interaction. In one setting, all of the children and their families receive a speech and language 'message of the month' as well as a Makaton 'sign of the month' which is supporting well the parents to assist their child's speech and language development at home.

The settings' staff value the role of the speech and language therapist to provide them with strategies to support the children with their speech and language needs. One project, however, had limited speech and language support which provided additional challenges for the staff delivering the Programme. They report that if the speech and language therapist is absent from work, they are without speech and language support until the staff member returns from work. Financial constraints mean that a temporary speech and language therapist cannot be employed. This arrangement undoubtedly impacts adversely on the frequency of the support the children receive and the progress they make, and on the staff's development of effective strategies.

The children talk confidently about their families and the activities they complete when at home. They can select books independently to share with the adults. The children's listening skills are being well-developed during story time as staff use open-ended questions to develop further the children's understanding and oracy skills, using age and stage appropriate language. During these interactions, the staff model language well and encourage the children to discuss their creations. On regular occasions, almost all of the staff use incidentally songs and rhymes to further promote and develop the children's speech and language skills.

The staff identify early the needs of the children

Across the Programme, the staff adapt the activities to support the individual needs, interests and developmental stage of each child. In the 16 settings visited, the children with additional needs benefit from tailored strategies such as visual cards/timetables and Makaton to support children who are non-verbal, small group support and calm structured environments.

In three of the five Sure Start projects, a bespoke programme of support was in place for approximately six children with more complex and diverse learning needs. These programmes were at varying stages of development. Individualised support strategies are shared with parents and in discussions with parents, they reported that the support provided by the staff was invaluable and empowered them to use the same strategies at home to provide the children with opportunities to reinforce the learning. During the sessions observed, the children enjoy: participating in sensory activities with materials such as glitter, water, soil, rice and sand which help the children sustain focus and participate in collaborative play with the supporting adult; repeating play activities with adult support to alleviate anxiety; and having safe and calming spaces to help them when they are feeling emotionally overwhelmed. The children required adult support to transition between activities but were able to sustain play for short period of times with adult support and could at times share resources with their peers.

The project staff participate in home visits which are highly beneficial in identifying the strategies within the programme that will best support the needs of the child. The project staff support parents through advice, meetings and interactions with external professionals, such as the educational psychologists, health visitors, social workers, occupational therapists, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and child development teams. This approach provides effective multi-disciplinary*, integrated support to meet effectively the needs of the children and their families and enables timely and early intervention. Currently, there is inconsistent analysis on the impact of home visits and additional family support visits on the children's learning and development. It would be beneficial if the evaluations of impact focused on quality of parental engagement and/or the children's learning rather than on quantitative detail, such as the number of visits that have taken place.

The children's individual learning plans are written with support from the speech and language therapist and have appropriate targets and success criteria which the staff use to monitor and evaluate effectively the progress of the children. As these bespoke programmes of support continue to develop, the staff across all 38 Sure Start projects require appropriate and consistent opportunities for professional learning to inform their practice in working with children with complex needs and to ascertain if early identification and subsequent intervention reduce the likelihood of the children developing more complex needs that later require statutory assessment and supports.

Professional learning opportunities are effective in supporting the staff's understanding of play and developing the provision

The settings' staff who deliver the Programme are provided with a range of effective professional learning opportunities within their Sure Start project and through regional cluster sessions, which they evaluate positively. These include professional learning on the themes of outdoor play, sensory regulation, Hanen Training*, Fundamentals of Autism*, Solihull Training*, Autism and Emotional Regulation in Children* and general training to deliver the Programme which is influencing and improving their practice. Participation in these professional learning opportunities

has developed the capabilities of the staff and is impacting positively on the development of the provision for the children, particularly in the small additional support programmes. Ongoing collaboration with external agencies will be beneficial to develop further the quality of the children's play experiences and support newly recruited staff to deliver these.

The PSS has also provided professional learning across regions but due to a reduced PSS workforce, they have not had the capacity to provide support to all settings.

The children's transition from Sure Start to pre-school is not as effective as it could be

During the session observations, it is evident that the children are ready to transition to pre-school and have well developed skills for their age. Through participation in the programme, almost all of the children are making very good progress from their individual starting points. The children show high levels of concentration and engagement resulting in sustained play, and have well developed independence, social skills, and fine and gross motor skills.

All five of the Sure Start projects have established strong relationships with their local pre-school settings. The settings' staff are aware that parents may not be familiar with the pre-school enrolment process or the pre-school settings within the catchment area, so they encourage parents to visit local pre-school settings located within their community. A small number of the settings are located in the local primary school and principals are members of the Sure Start management team, which provides the children and parents with a continuum of support in their next stage of education. The settings' staff also facilitate visits from the pre-school leaders and nursery school principals to share information and provide the children with opportunities to meet with staff from other pre-school settings. However, the staff in the pre-schools do not always visit their local Sure Start project delivering the Programme to discuss the children's play experiences and outcomes, enabling them to build better on each child's individual progress. Consequently, the children's transition from Sure Start to pre-school is not as effective as it could be. There is evidence from inspection that some pre-school settings are not building effectively on the children's prior learning from the Programme.

Child protection

At the time of the evaluation, the evidence provided by all of the projects demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. In discussions with the inspectors, all of the staff are fully aware of the procedures to follow if they have any concerns when children attend the project or during home visits with families. The parents are all content that the staff are committed to providing the children with a safe and nurturing environment.

In three out of the five Sure Start projects visited, the child protection policy required further review to include signs and symptoms of domestic violence and to align better to the DE guidance. The Safeguarding Board NI policy does not currently include domestic violence within its policy. Given the strong relationships that are fostered between the Sure Start staff and families, they are well placed to provide support and referral when required.

Going forward

Conclusion

The staff from the 16 settings and the five Sure Start projects visited are committed to supporting children and families living in the catchment areas. Through the Programme, the children are provided with meaningful play-based experiences which are supporting them to develop as confident and resilient learners who are well prepared for their pre-school education. Parents are also supported and empowered by the staff to understand better their child's play and developing independence, as well as their child's individual needs and the strategies which support them to manage these needs.

Next steps

In moving forward, to facilitate continued high-quality play-based learning, there should be:

- between DE in their oversight role, the childcare partnership managers in SPPG and governance structures, collective agreement on a more strategic and operationalised approach to support projects which are short staffed and are experiencing difficulties with staff recruitment to improve consistency of support in delivery of the Programme;
- liaison between Sure Start project managers, DE and SPPG to ensure regional professional learning and support is provided consistently across all regions;
- an annual evaluation by the PSS team on what changes and improvements are required to support the delivery of the Programme and inform professional learning needs;
- enhanced partnership working with relevant external agencies to further develop the children's play experiences and support dissemination of effective practice;
- development of a system to monitor the longitudinal impact of early identification of need and timely intervention in improving the longer-term outcomes for the children and their families;
- collaboration between SPPG and the Safeguarding Board in Northern Ireland to review the child protection policy to include domestic violence; and
- review of the Programme which is now 25 years old, so that early years education can be better aligned with broader educational curriculum reform, the TransformEd strategy and the Northern Ireland Executive's Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Appendix 1: Notes

Page 1

parents/carers*

Throughout this report, the term 'parents' will be used to refer to both parents and carers.

Super Output Areas*

Super Output Area is small geographical area which is used for the collection, reporting and analysis of statistical data to inform the NIMDM.

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Wellcomm Speech and Language Toolkit*

Wellcomm Speech and Language Toolkit is a resource designed to screen and support children's speech and language development, particularly in the early years (6 months to 6 years). It helps identify children who may need extra support with their communication skills and provides guidance for targeted interventions.

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multi-disciplinary*

The Sure Start multi-disciplinary approach consists of health visitors, midwives, speech and language therapists, social workers, parenting support workers, early years co-ordinators and family support staff.

Hanen Training*

'Hanen' training is a programme which promotes language and literacy and social skill development. It is designed to provide staff with practical strategies to enhance children's communication and language skills while interacting and communicating with children during normal daily routines.

Fundamentals of Autism*

'Fundamentals of Autism' training outlines the basics of autism, communication strategies, sensory processing, and positive behaviour support, focusing on individual needs and preferences.

Solihull Training*

'Solihull' training focuses on developing parents' understanding of child development, relationships, and behaviour. The Solihull Approach focuses on three key principles: containment (supporting parents in managing their emotional responses), reciprocity (enhancing the parent-child relationship through improved mutual understanding), and behaviour management (providing strategies for managing challenging behaviours effectively).

Autism and Emotional Regulation in Children*

'Autism and Emotional Regulation in children' training is a child-led approach where the adult observes children's play and interests and then adapts their planning and teaching to extend those interests and learning opportunities in the moment.

Appendix 2: Previous Sure Start Evaluations

The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to evaluate aspects of Sure Start provision across projects in Northern Ireland. ETI complete evaluations using a thematic approach and to date have completed four thematic evaluations during 2018 to 2021.

The [first evaluation of Sure Start](#) (2018) focused on assessing how effectively Sure Start supported the development of children's speech, language, and communication skills, as well as the quality of support offered to parents. The evaluation highlighted the commitment of the staff and positive engagement with parents while recommending actions to improve consistency and maximise impact across all projects.

The [second evaluation](#) (2019) reaffirmed the strengths and noted early progress in addressing initial recommendations. It also emphasised the need for sustained focus to embed improvement across all projects.

In 2020, a [third evaluation](#) focused on 11 Sure Start projects, each presenting self-nominated case studies of improved practice that highlighted a growing culture of self-evaluation. Projects demonstrated a reflective approach and a commitment to strengthening leadership, provision, and outcomes for children and families. The report highlights examples of effective practice that can inform regional learning.

The [fourth evaluation](#) (2021), evaluated how effectively Sure Start projects adapted planning, delivery and monitoring of services for children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on evidence from 38 projects, the evaluation considers the adaptability, innovation, and resilience of staff in maintaining services for children and families during unprecedented disruption.

Appendix 3: Parents' views and experiences of their local Sure Start project

It is lonely as a parent at home alone – the stay and play sessions are brilliant for me, my child loves the staff and coming to the sessions every day. He has learned a lot of life skills and about healthy eating. He is eating more healthier at home now.

The home visits are brilliant. The staff come out to us once a term and they bring the child's folder of work with them. They have a welcome book and story books for the child. I can see how much my child has progressed.

My child's social skills and confidence has improved. She loves songs and has found her voice! She loves exploring outdoors and here physical skills have really developed.

The staff have been so supportive. My child was doing well at Sure Start but playing up at home. The staff helped me with Then & Now visuals for transitions and validated how I was feeling.

Sure Start helped me with my son. He had a speech stammer. The staff got him referred for speech & language support. We got useful strategies to use at home and when I struggle sometimes with my speech he says, "Dad, just take a deep breath".

At the stay & play, we can see that the activities are pitched at the appropriate level for the child and we have learned how to support our child's speech and language using the strategies shared with us by the staff. Our child is more confident now and is better at sharing and separating from us which we will know will help her when it is time for her to go to preschool.

Appendix 4: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	- more than 90%
Most	- 75% - 90%
A majority	- 50% - 74%
A significant minority	- 30% - 49%
A minority	- 10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	- less than 10%

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