



Learning Through Play!

## **The Playgroup Workforce: A Part to Play!**

*Ian McLaughlan, SPPA's Chief Executive, discusses the development of the early years workforce. This article originally featured in Issue 4 of the 'Working it out: help shape the future of Scotland's Children's Sector workforce' newsletter from Children in Scotland.*

As an organisation that supports community based early education and childcare services, SPPA welcomes Children in Scotland's 'Working it out' series of discussions. SPPA believes that these will inform the development of the workforce.

Notwithstanding the growth in other types of pre-school and childcare services, playgroups and toddler groups remain an important part of communities. They are a valuable resource well worth sustaining, and play an important role in delivering the Government's Early Years Framework, with its call for transformational change in how services are delivered. These groups have a history of developing the capacity of children, families and communities and of offering a springboard to improving the wider environment in which children grow develop and learn. It is a successful record built on an approach which focuses on the child in the context of their family and community, underpinned by close partnership working with parents and other agencies.

Voluntary sector community based providers have faced a number of challenges, not least the drive to up-skill its workforce. This workforce should be applauded, as it has moved from provision which was largely staffed by individuals who held no formal qualifications, to one where more than 73%<sup>1</sup> hold a Level 2 or more qualification. SPPA subscribes to a degree led, highly skilled confident workforce. Much has been achieved with similar resources in Northern Ireland where 25% of the voluntary sector workforce are now graduate qualified as early years specialists, not just as managers! SPPA is aware that many small providers, particularly in rural communities, will struggle to meet the aspiration for all services to be led by a manager, qualified to degree level or equivalent, and indeed many have posed the question of whether it is really needed. SPPA believes that it is needed, not only to ensure all children have equality of opportunity to reach their potential, but also to ensure the future sustainability of the sector. SPPA acknowledges that current models of playgroup service delivery will have to adapt, and is introducing peripatetic management models as a way of supporting change.

However, the management of the group has to be looked at alongside the work that is undertaken with service users. It is evident that most staff in playgroups and toddler groups have highly developed practice based, transferrable skills, which enable them to work successfully with children from birth to five with their families, informally and formally. Strong relationships are formed not only with the children and families, but also with community networks and other professionals in support of integrated and multi-disciplinary work. The 'playleader/assistant' role shifts across the divides between caring and learning and children's health, and their skills are applied in response to the varying and changing needs of families. They engage solely, and in partnership with others, not only in children's learning, but also in their social, emotional and creative development, health and welfare, whilst supporting adults in

their roles as parents and contributors to their communities. Many staff wish to enhance their knowledge and skills in these areas rather than working towards leading or managing a service.

SPPA believes that the sector must ensure that opportunities continue to exist in the qualifications framework that offer choice and flexibility to enable staff to choose career pathways, and undertake continuous professional development opportunities, that capitalise on their expertise. The framework should help them to reflect on practice and reach new solutions to address the complexity of the work. It will be detrimental to the sector if these 'assistant' level staff in community led provision, perceive that there is only a narrow 'degree or equivalent' professional development route for them to follow, or that their contribution is valued less than others, who choose this route.

We suggest there could be room within the qualifications framework for a more flexible and broader approach that integrates a common set of skills and knowledge for all who work with children, and for the establishment of a pathway which nurtures this section of the workforce and enhances their cross sector role, thus recognising them as the valued, competent practitioners that they have been since the pioneering days of pre-school education and childcare of the 1960s. Without this, the future of the playgroup workforce and indeed playgroups in Scotland may be in jeopardy, unlike other parts of the UK in which they continue to flourish, and society would be impoverished without them.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Publication Notice Education and Training Series Pre-school and Childcare Statistics 2008

More information and discussion about the early years workforce development can be found in a series of articles featured in Children in Scotland's Working it Out: help shape the future of Scotland's Children's sector Workforce, Issues 1- 4 found at [www.childreninscotland.org.uk](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk)