

Sustainability Learning Review 2015

Early Years

Media Initiative Respecting
Difference Outcomes for Children



The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Background to Early Years

Founded in 1965, Early Years is an organisation that provides childhood services that look to promote positive outcomes for children, families and communities. It is currently the largest voluntary sector provider of early childhood services across Northern Ireland, with more than 1,200 affiliated member groups. The organisation has 240 direct employees and provides support for more than 30,000 children and families on a daily basis.

Early years is also accountable for a number of Sure Start projects across the province and is a member of more than 50% of Sure Start project committees. It also operates in the Republic of Ireland under High Scope and currently supports more than 100 members. It has a growing international presence and provides early childhood support and consultancy services across Eastern Europe, South America, the Middle East, Turkey, Nepal, South Africa, the United States and Southeast Asia.

Grant history and the role of Atlantic

In 2004, Early Years presented a 10-year strategy to The Atlantic Philanthropies with the long-term aim of significantly improving the quality of services for young people and their families across Northern Ireland. To achieve this goal, the organisation proposed to carry out research that would provide evidence to create more effective policy and practice, locally and overseas. It also looked to develop an integrated children centre model that could be nested in communities across the province. Finally, Early Years proposed to take responsibility for developing this model but service delivery would be co-ordinated in partnership with various government agencies.

The strategy was born out of an assessment of need in three key areas:

- The need to substantially enhance the evidence base in Northern Ireland on the impact of service interventions on young children
- The need for effective transmission of evidence into policy and practice development
- The need for a provision of additional innovative early years services that address the needs of children in a holistic way; enhance the skills of parents; and promote environments that are tolerant, inclusive and capable of celebrating diversity.

A review of policy, literature and secondary data was completed to identify the issues affecting young children across Ireland and overseas. A consultation process took place with key stakeholders, including Early Years staff and members; the Regional Early Years Network of Senior Social Workers; members of DHSS&PS, DE and OFMDFM; local childcare partnerships; and pre-school advisory groups. Achievable outcomes were discussed and three broad objectives were agreed:

- Children are physically and emotionally healthy.
- Children are eager and able to learn.
- Children respect those who are different.

The detailed logic or theories of change model – including activities, inputs and outputs underpinning the proposal – are presented in the annex at the end of this report.

Impact and successes

Since 2006, Atlantic has invested £4,024,870 in the Early Years programme. This funding and expertise has increased the capacity of the organisation to gather evidence and deliver programmes that have attempted to influence policy and social change. Examples of programmes delivered under Atlantic include 'Respecting Difference' and 'Eager and Able to Learn'. Two service design manuals have also been developed and Early Years has used a significant amount of the Atlantic investment to test these service innovations with random control trials. These trials demonstrated how programmes like the 'Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference' improved young children's socio-emotional development, as well as their awareness and tolerance of cultural differences. They have also 'added value' in pre-school environments in comparison to previous methods and resources. Currently the Media Initiative is being implemented in more than 600 pre-schools and primary schools, targeted at children aged two to eight years old and their families.

Early Years has also started a similar implementation process with the 'Eager and Able to Learn Programme'. This consists of full daycare services for two-year-olds and is currently nested in the Sure Start developmental programme. Early Years are also currently reshaping a number of existing services such as the 'Traveller Toybox' project. This has involved looking to improve the educational performance of Traveller children.

Two other programmes; 'The Family Health Initiative' (which targets obesity in young children) and 'HighScope' have drawn on the application of implementation science to help with delivery. Collectively these programmes represent the legacy of the Atlantic investment and demonstrate a capacity to transform existing services and deliver positive outcomes for young children. Diagram 1 and 2 represents the overall approach taken by Early Years based on implementation science.

Diagram 1. Overall approach taken by Early Years based on implementation science

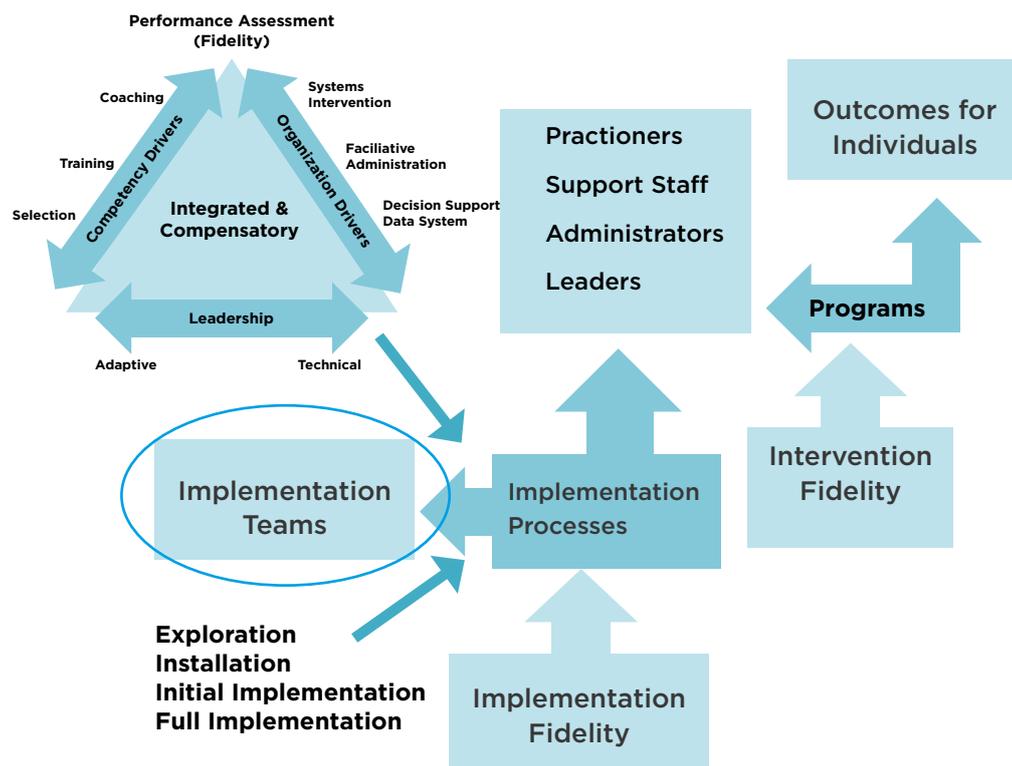
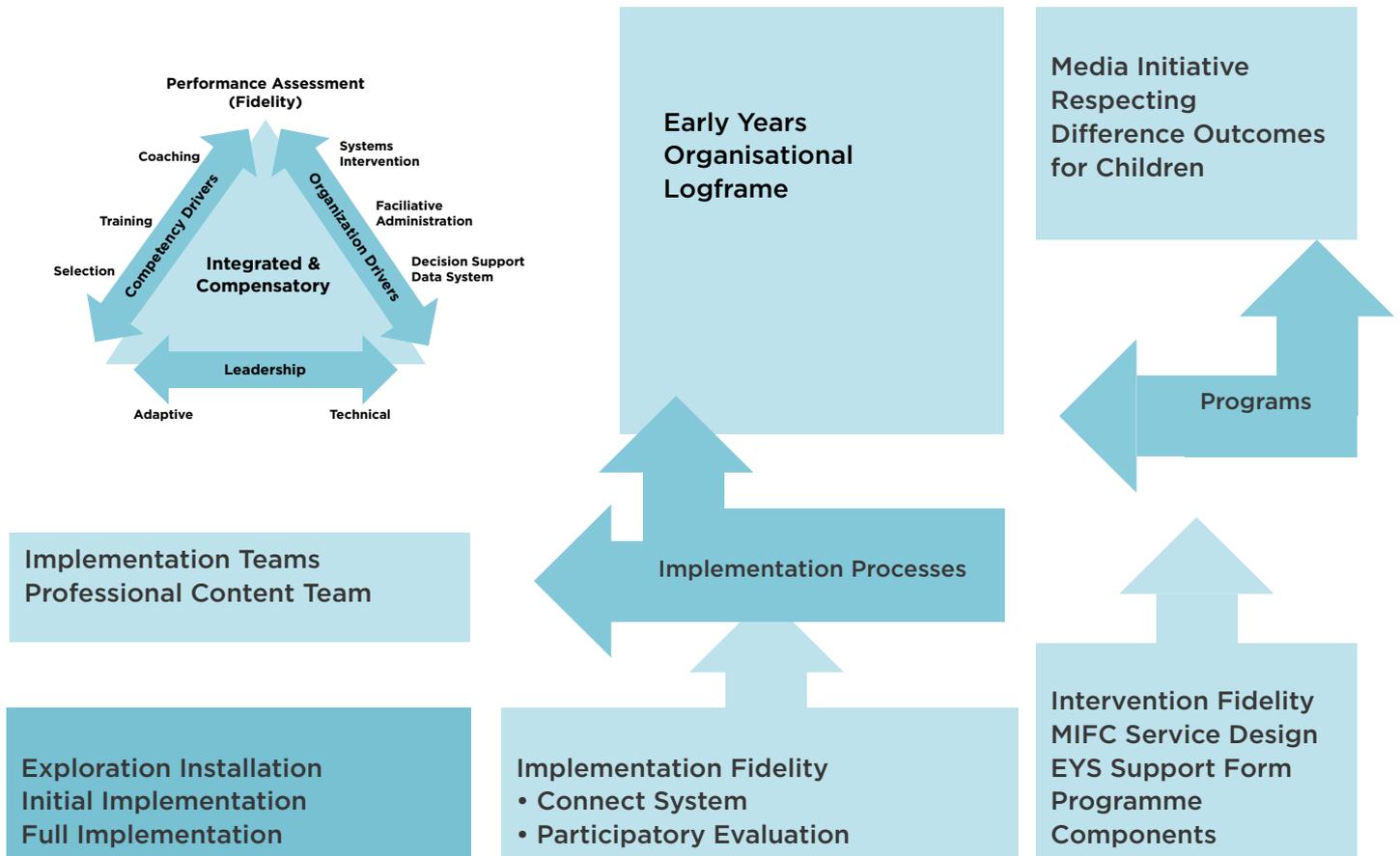


Diagram 2. Overall approach taken by Early Years based on implementation science



This approach has focused on being explicit about the ownership of the outcomes, both internally and externally. A name change in November 2007, from NIPPA to Early Years – the organisation for young children, marked the shift in focus to outcomes for children and away from science provision. This was accompanied by a clear articulation of a new vision based on outcomes. This vision acknowledges that children are:

- Strong, competent and visible in their communities
- Physically and emotionally healthy
- Eager and able to learn
- Respectful of difference

Internally, the organisation established a multi-disciplinary implementation team that has focused on creating commitment at all stages of the implementation journey. This has extended from the pilot stage through to the full implementation of programmes such as the ‘Media Initiative for Children’ and ‘Eager and Able to Learn’. This team has also been responsible for leading the professional development of Early Years staff in line with existing and emerging evidence.

Collectively the Early Years organisation has also used the period since 2006 to develop a knowledge management capacity, as well as establish and develop relationships with key stakeholders across government. It has also looked to perform a greater advocacy role and has successfully lobbied the Department of Education to create a clear 0-6 category and to

recognise the growing importance of the 0-3 age group. Early Years has also advocated for both the Shared Education and the Integrated Childcare Strategy. It would hope that in the future it is able to influence the implementation of these policies.

Investment from Atlantic has allowed Early Years to increase the capacity to complete internal participatory methods of evaluation. It has also enhanced its public reputation and developed stronger networks with policy makers and the media, and encouraged a broader membership base across the grassroots.

In addition to support from Atlantic, funding from the European Union has allowed Early Years to consolidate its relationships across Europe, Eastern Europe, Africa, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, the US, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. These relationships have helped to enhance practice, improve advocacy capabilities and showcase Northern Ireland as a promising area in early childhood care and education. It has also highlighted the positive contribution the early years sector can make in terms of helping areas that have been affected by conflict.

Although much has been achieved from 2006 to 2013, Early Years maintain that further support is required to fully embed a culture of evidence, implementation science, and innovation within the organisation. This knowledge will continue to influence policy development and ensure a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

To summarise, grant funding totalling £650,000 from Atlantic for the period 2013 to 2016 has enabled Early Years to:

- Consolidate the learning and development of the past number of years
- Embed a culture of implementation science and evidence within the organisation

- Implement a robust process of participatory evaluation across the organisation
- Use the growing evidence base and knowledge to support practice change within its own network and beyond
- Influence government policy in relation to the needs and rights of young children and families

During this period, the work themes of Early Years are represented by:

- A focus on furthering programmatic development and implementation within the organisation and beyond. This will involve extending an evidence-based approach to all services delivered by Early Years and its partners in the field of early care and education, both nationally and internationally.
- The need to develop an evidence base that can assist the Early Years team translate good practice on to the ground and mobilise the early years grassroots movement.
- A focus on implementation science and participatory evaluation within the organisation as well as across the early years sector.

During this period Early Years will also look to support the development of a highly skilled workforce within the organisation, its member groups, and across the early years sector. It will work with others to create the institutional change necessary to support training and professional development and hopefully deliver outcomes that will improve the lives of young children across Northern Ireland. This will involve:

- A continued focus on the translation of evidence into a format that is useful to politicians, policy makers, service developers, training institutions and parents
- The use of a stronger evidence based policy that leads thinking in the development of early years legislation policy and service development across Ireland and beyond
- Celebrating the contribution of Early Years (NIPPA) 2015-2016

Early Years believes these strategies and actions will lead to improvements in the wellbeing of children and families by shifting policy to focus on prevention and early intervention in both the North and Republic of Ireland. The organisation will look to improve over the next two years by:

- Embedding within the organisation and beyond a culture of evidence, implementation science and participatory evaluation, and a focus on outcomes
- Involving children, families, communities and the constituencies Early Years serves, and creating consensus about appropriate investment and positive outcomes for young children
- Building public awareness and support
- Developing strategic alliances and relationships across sectors with a particular focus on higher education institutes and the Sector Skills Council
- Supporting the development of evidence-based policy implementation
- Maximising existing resources and leveraging new ones – Early Years will use its own existing resources, secure new sources of European funding, and utilise the investment from Atlantic
- Using the 50th anniversary of Early Years (NIPPA) in 2015/16 to build consensus around

a vision for children, a sustainable Early Years organisation and a viable early years sector in Northern Ireland

Obstacles and challenges

Some of the critical issues Early Years must monitor if it is to move forward sustainably include:

- Supporting ownership within a context of licensing
- Maintaining time commitment and a long-term focus within the context of competing demands
- Developing staff capability (internally and externally)
- Considering the use of financial incentives
- Undertaking regular data collection and evaluation which should help inform the development of participative evaluation methodology across the organisation
- Promoting the concept of sustainability
- Raising wider global interest and demands while continuing to pay attention to the needs of the home market
- Demonstrating the importance of commitment to all its programmes.
- Enhancing leadership skills across all levels and driving institutional change by utilising the Master's programme.

Practices of sustainability

Scaling up the MIFC programme

By the end of 2009, Early Years began to scale up its MIFC – Respecting Difference programme with the aim of ensuring every child aged three to six years across Northern Ireland participated in the programme. Based on the work of Richard Kohl, the new Early Years strategy involved:

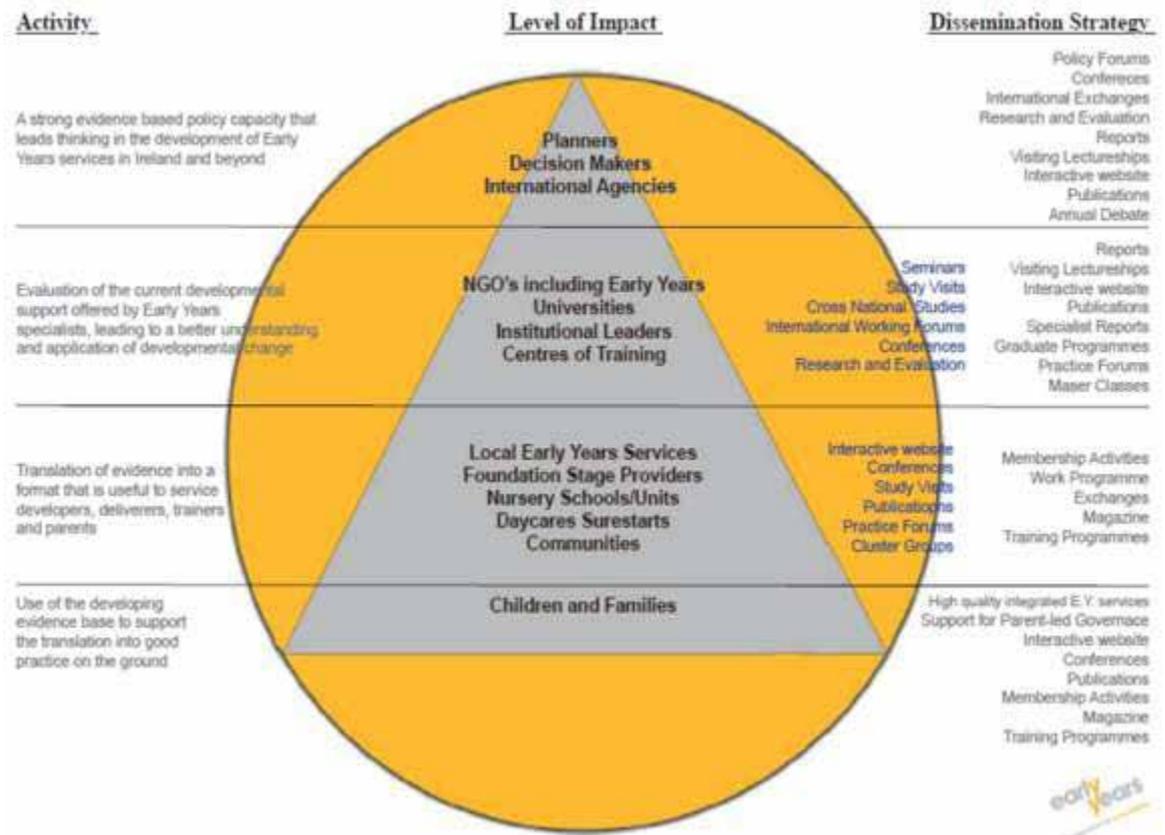
- Developing a ‘scaled up’ strategy
- Promoting advocacy and sensitisation (convincing others to resource and support implementation)
- Modifying and strengthening external organisations (largely through licensing)
- Encouraging cooperation from stakeholders (ETI inspectorial support)

- Developing systems for monitoring and feedback for fidelity and adaptation.
- Promoting the concept of sustainability (politically, financially, and at institutional level)
- Expanding its reach across different regions and countries
- Focusing on the impact of key outcomes
- Ensuring efficiency/cost per beneficiary

Adapted from the work of Richard Kohl (Learning and Leading from Large Scale Change)

Diagram 3 outlines the dissemination strategy put in place to grow champions at a number of levels of impact for the programme.

Diagram 3. Early Years dissemination strategy



Inclusion in the shared education strategy

Based on the findings of this research, Early Years secured more than £6m for the implementation of the programme across a range of settings for two- to eight-year-olds in NI and the Republic of Ireland. These programmes demonstrated how attitudes can form at an early age and the strong influence early childhood or school-based initiatives can have in creating real, measurable change. This led to the inclusion of early years as a key component within the Shared Education Strategy.

Licensing the MIFC programme

Early Years has also established a licensing model for the MIFC programme which is now available as a franchise. This move has supported the wider delivery of the programme and ensures any income generated can be used to sustain the development of the programme in the future.

Creating an international network

Early Years currently leads the International Network on Peace Building with Young Children. This represents a collective of early childhood organisations, teachers, specialists, practitioners and academics from conflict and post-conflict regions throughout the world. Current and future actions include:

- Designing an international programmatic toolkit that supports practice and research innovation in the field of peace building in early childhood care and education
- Piloting of the toolkit across five international ECD networks
- Delivering an international Master's programme on ECD and Peace Building with Early Childhood, in partnership with INCORE at the University of Ulster.
- Promoting an advocacy toolkit to support

with campaigning and lobbying activities.

- Devising an International campaign for the establishment of a UN Resolution on peace building with young children.

Developing a centre for Early Years

A final grant awarded by Atlantic 2015 has helped to facilitate the future development of a new headquarters for Early Years. Based in North Belfast, the headquarters will also include a centre for young children and their families. This proposed move is in line with the 10-year strategic proposal that was submitted by Early Years to Atlantic in 2004.

On completion, the centre will offer high quality services that are aligned and functionally integrated with a range of other wider community, voluntary and statutory health, care and family support services. Some of these already operate in the local area and include a local pre-school, a parent and toddler group, full daycare services, and an afterschool service. Early Years envisages the centre would be able to service the needs of 50-70 children aged from 0-12 on a daily basis.

To support with the development of the project, it has been proposed that all early childhood care, education, development and family support services will follow pre-existing evidence-based programmes such as the HighScope model, the Media Initiative for Children and the Eager and Able to Learn Programme. It is also envisaged that the local Sure Start project will relocate to the new building on completion. This would further support the integration of service provision in line with Department of Education policy called 'Learning to Learn'.

There is also an opportunity to align developments with the proposed Childcare Strategy, which is currently out for consultation by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. This proposed site could bid to become one of the proposed learning hubs outlined in the Learning to Learn Strategy. On completion the site would also function as

Diagram 4. Community Management Team



a training centre for all Early Years' support activities in the Belfast area and beyond. All branch training and support activity would be housed in the new building and potentially benefit from the presence of actual services for children and parents on site. The building would also provide similar support and training activities for the Early Years' NI regional branch network, as well as function as a designated venue for activities affiliated to the regional Early Years Council.

Over time Early Years also hopes to develop the site into a major international centre for innovation, practice, research and training for early childhood care, education

and development. This would replicate developments by Reggio Children in Italy, which has created a centre of excellent practice for young children. This centre currently attracts hundreds of visitors and students from around the world on an annual basis.

A Northern Ireland development would also dovetail with the current and future activities of Early Years as it looks to host large numbers of study visits from international agencies based overseas. The organisation feels that the development can showcase the successes of the Media Initiative for Children in terms of supporting peace building and conflict resolution.

The development of the site also provides an opportunity to work with an international architect and the building design process will also look to involve local parents and children in shaping the future design of its services. The development of this innovative centre for children and families as a demonstration model for evidence-based practice will hopefully create a positive long-term impact on improving outcomes for young children. Early Years will look to ensure young children using the centre are confident and happy, eager and able to learn, physically and emotionally healthy, and tolerant of others who are different. The organisation will also look to ensure parents involved with centre have access to appropriate information, advice, training and support, so that parents can ultimately become advocates for themselves and their children.

The keys to sustainable action

The organisational model outlined in Diagram 5 is based on the application of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Framework. This framework identified a series of environments – from the family (micro) right through to economic and political structures (macro) – that are influential in a child’s development. The sustainable approach of Early Years is influenced by this ecological model as well as a ‘Child’s Right’

approach. Diagram 6 represents the child at the centre of society and the layers that can impact and surround the child at any given time. The Early Years approach to sustainable action looks to consider all of these respective layers.

Early Years look to ensure sustainability through the following actions:

- Programmatic and resource development for work with young children in group-based settings and school environments
- Parental support, training and outreach programme with accompanying resource development for age and developmentally appropriate support and interactions in the home environment
- Early Years practitioner and teacher training, and manual development to support work with children and parents in group-based and school settings
- Whole-school and setting approaches to child development that are supported by appropriate governance
- Advocacy, training and shared learning opportunities for inspectoral and advisory staff that is evidence-based and outcomes-focused

Diagram 5. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Framework



Organisational Model



- Institutional change at higher and further education level to provide transformative training and CPD opportunities for those who support and deliver services for young children
- Use of and contribution to international expertise in relation to young children
- Influencing the policy and funding environments at Northern Ireland, UK and international level to support evidence-based, outcomes-focused policy and resourcing
- Optimisation of entrepreneurial and funding strategies

Diagram 6 provides an example of how this approach was used to grow the delivery of MIFC – Respecting Difference from a programme targeted at three- to four-year-olds in voluntary pre-schools to a programme targeted at two- to eight-year-olds in SureStart, pre-school, nursery school and school environments.

Implications for sustainable grant making

For the organisation to continue to grow and develop we have identified the following actions as critical for future success. The team at Early

Years believes the combination of a commitment to implementation combined with an informed advocacy strategy will be critical. Key features of this strategy include:

- Growing and sustaining champions across civil society
- Developing a broad advisory group comprising of local and internationally respected and connected people
- Engaging with parents and mobilising practitioners and broader civil society
- Using the power of evidence to support change
- Anticipating/neutralising the opposition, as well as recruiting unlikely allies
- Demonstrating the value of the programme and making the work visible in these challenging economic circumstances

The recent advocacy strategy in response to the proposed cuts in the DE Fund is an example of how Early Years are looking plan to ensure sustainable growth in the future.

Diagram 6. Delivering the MIFC - Respecting Difference from a Programme



Annex: Inputs and outputs underpinning the proposal

