

AN EVALUATION OF THE BARNARDOS BALLYBEG PLAYGROUND SERVICE.

2023

FINAL REPORT

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

Overview of the Evaluation

An evaluation of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service was conducted to explore the experiences and impact of the service on the children, families, and the local community of Ballybeg, Waterford. A case study evaluation was conducted using qualitative methods, involving detailed interviews with children attending the service, their parents¹, staff and volunteers, as well as the gathering of fieldnotes. The objectives of the evaluation are:

1. To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the service and what this means / how it has impacted on their lives.
2. To explore parents' experiences of the service and evaluate their perceptions of their child's involvement.
3. To explore how the programme is delivered in order to understand "what works" for children attending the service, as well as potential barriers to achieve service goals and objectives.
4. To examine the culture of the service and its delivery of child-centred, play-based supports.
5. To explore the impact of the service from the perspective of staff and volunteers within the service.
6. To examine the links with the local community and the impact of the service on the local community.

Summary of Key Findings

Case study research was the chosen methodology for this evaluation, the hallmark of which is that it uses 'multiple sources of evidence' to explore the phenomenon of interest. One of the main objectives of the evaluation was to explore children's experiences of their involvement in the service, what it means to them and how it has impacted on their lives thus the voice of the child was a key aspect of this evaluation. Drawing from the 'multiple sources

¹ In this report the word(s) parent(s) refers to parent(s) and / or guardian(s)

of evidence' gathered for this evaluation the findings indicate that the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service has an exceptionally positive impact on the lives of the children who use it. This is evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive accounts expressed by the children, parents, Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders who participated in the evaluation.

The evaluation identified 4 main themes:

Theme 1: Supporting children now and into the future

Theme 2: Inclusion through play

Theme 3: Supporting families

Theme 4: Invested individuals

Recommendations

The recommendations from the evaluation are:

Recommendation 1	Children highly valued their time and engagement in the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. We recommend that subject to funding, the service should be extended so that it is available to children for longer hours at the weekend and on weekdays after school.
Recommendation 2	Barnardos services and the Barnardos Playground service are viewed as pillar services by stakeholders and the local community of Ballybeg, Waterford. The unique Barnardos Playground service is a source of significant direct support for the families who use it. Furthermore, it acts as a catalyst for families to seek additional supports from Barnardos and local voluntary, community, and Health Service Executive (HSE) services. We recommend that Barnardos continue to maintain their presence and level of activity in the community of Ballybeg Waterford and continue to work in collaboration with voluntary, social, and primary care services.
Recommendation 3	Barnardos have established a steadfast relationship with the community of Ballybeg, Waterford and this relationship is based on an ethos of inclusivity. Through the provision of a unique child-centred play service, Barnardos have created a feeling of belonging within the community for the families who use the service. We recommend that Barnardos continue to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in its playground service where each child feels a sense of belonging and where all children's play needs are enabled.
Recommendation 4	The Barnardos Playground service is based on a robust ethos of inclusivity which encourages and facilitates child and family engagement with the service. We recommend that Barnardos

	maintain this ethos and continue to maximise the range of play opportunities available to children, particularly children who have a disability or neurodivergence.
Recommendation 5	The Barnardos Playground service is facilitated and delivered by invested and committed Barnardos staff and volunteers. Children and families who use the service have very positive relationships with the Barnardos staff and volunteers and it is clear that staff and volunteers are committed to operating a child-centred service. We recommend that Barnardos staff and volunteers continue to listen to children and to give children a voice in the design and implementation of the play policies and facilities at the playground.
Recommendation 6	Evaluation and monitoring allow organisations to map resources to services and provides a sound foundation for documenting the process and impact of service provision. We recommend that Barnardos continue to document the processes and impact of change within the service as this will provide vital information for future evaluation and monitoring of the Ballybeg Playground service. Furthermore, it will inform Barnardos of the issues and potential challenges associated with upscaling of the service and replication of the service in other communities of need.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Barnardos and the Ballybeg playground

Barnardos was first established in Ireland in 1962. Since then, it has grown and evolved and today it is Ireland's largest children's charity. The core mission of Barnardos is to transform the lives of children who are affected by traumatic life situations such as poverty, abuse, neglect, separation, bereavement, poor parental mental health, and parental addiction. Barnardos provide a wide range of frontline services for children and families, including universal and targeted provisions, in family homes, schools, early learning and care settings and communities (Barnardos 2023). In 2022 Barnardos worked with almost 21,000 children and families across its 54 service locations (Barnardos 2023). One such service provided by Barnardos is the Ballybeg Playground service which has served the community of Ballybeg in Waterford since it opened in 1999.

This supervised playground service is open to all families in the community / living in the area and caters for children aged between 4 and 12 years who may be experiencing adversity and trauma, be a member of the ethnic minority community, have special educational needs, neurodiversity / sensory or processing needs. The playground operates as a drop-in weekly service where indoor and outdoor supervised play is facilitated. The service is a universal intervention available to children at level 2, level 3 and level 4 of the Hardiker Model of Need (Hardiker et al 1991) see Figure 1 on the next page.

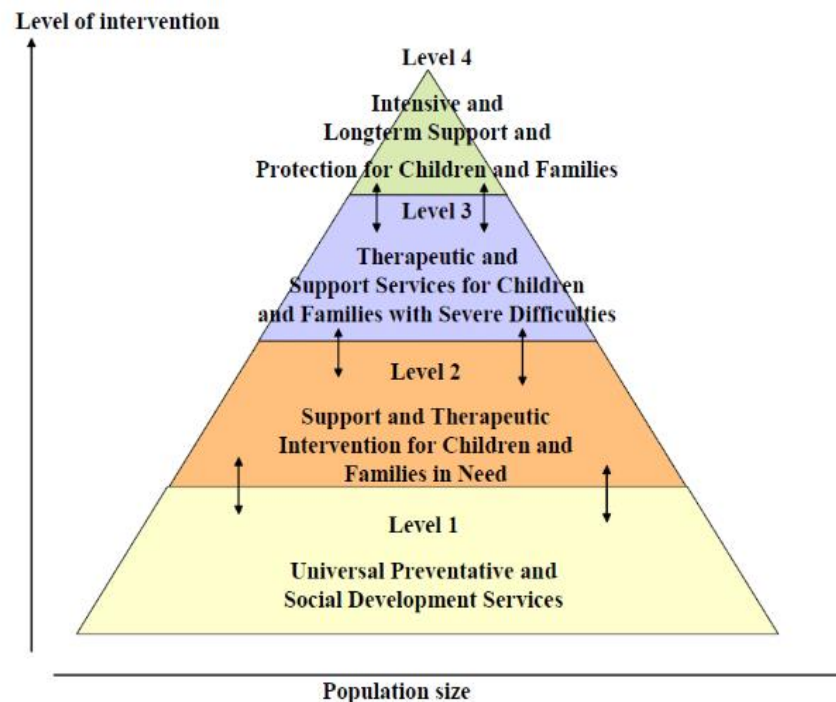


FIGURE 1: THE HARDIKER MODEL OF NEED (HARDIKER ET AL 1991)

The Ballybeg Playground service is based on the understanding that play is a vital aspect of child development, and that it can be used as a tool to support children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. A variety of structured and unstructured play activities are offered to children under the direct supervision of Barnardos staff and with support from volunteers. Children who attend the playground are empowered to choose the activities that they wish to engage in, and these vary from cooking to gardening, to sports, drama, music and arts and crafts. The playground also facilitates seasonal activities and an annual tour for the attending children. The overarching aim of the service is to provide a safe and supportive environment where children can relax, play, learn, and express how they feel and what they think.

It is currently well understood that play is essential to a child's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development as it allows children to express their feelings and work through difficult experiences. Play-based support services such as the Ballybeg Playground service are particularly valuable for children who are exposed to adversity such as children who come

from disadvantaged communities, children who have experienced trauma or children who come from families who are experiencing challenges. Play-based support services are valuable for all children as they provide opportunities for children to develop important skills, such as social skills and emotional regulation. Furthermore, play-based support services can help children to build resilience, as they learn to cope with difficult experiences and build positive relationships. Since the Ballybeg Playground service is viewed as a positive community service that is available to every child who wishes to attend, it can aid in removing any stigma that may be associated with participation. Moreover, this service is also an effective means of providing an entry and exit point for children and families who may require additional assistance.

In order to help Barnardos respond to the changing needs of the surrounding communities it serves, it is essential that services such as the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service are evaluated. Additionally, it is imperative that the voices of the children who use such services are incorporated into any service evaluation. Therefore, the evaluation set out in this report is very important as it provides a valuable insight into the experiences and perspectives of children and families who participate in the Ballybeg Playground service and contributes to the wider understanding of the benefits of play-based support services for children and families who are exposed to adversity in their lives.

1.2 Research aim

The aim of the evaluation set out in this report was to evaluate the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service which serves the community of Ballybeg in Waterford, Ireland.

1.3 Research objectives

The purpose of the evaluation was to capture the experiences of children attending the playground service, the meaning of the space in children's lives and for their families, and the success of the service in terms of improving the lives and wellbeing of children and their families. The evaluation also looked at the links and relationships between the Barnardos

Ballybeg Playground service and the wider community. To achieve this, the independent research team set the following evaluation objectives:

1. To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the service and what this means / how it has impacted on their lives.
2. To explore parents' experiences of the service and evaluate their perceptions of their child's involvement.
3. To explore how the programme is delivered in order to understand "what works" for children attending the service, as well as potential barriers to achieve service goals and objectives.
4. To examine the culture of the service and its delivery of child-centred, play-based supports.
5. To explore the impact of the service from the perspective of staff and volunteers within the service.
6. To examine the links with the local community and the impact of the service on the local community.

Chapter 2: Play in Childhood

Play and recreation have been recognised as a universal right for children under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Parrott and Choen (2020) believe that play has significant cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for school-aged children. Play can also help to foster a child's resilience by building confidence, self-esteem and teaching the child to be responsible (Sahlberg and Doyle 2019). Resilience building is an important factor for children who have adversity in their lives or who have been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs). Asmussen et al. (2020) describe the 10 original ACEs as: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, physical neglect, psychological neglect, witnessing domestic abuse, having a close family member who misused drugs or alcohol, having a close family member with mental health problems, having a close family member who served time in prison and parental separation or divorce on account of a relationship breakdown. It is widely acknowledged throughout the literature that exposure to ACE's during childhood can have a detrimental effect on a child's mental, physical, and emotional health, indicating that this is a major public health concern (Boullier and Blair 2018, Marie-Mitchell and Kostolansky 2019, McEwen and Gregerson 2019). ACEs also put children at risk of numerous inequalities.

Inequalities have a profound effect on the development of children, and this is even more apparent in the world's richest countries where poorer children have unfavourable health outcomes (Spencer et al. 2019). Social Justice Ireland (2022) found that 1:7 children residing in Ireland are living in a household experiencing poverty. Services like the Ballybeg Playground offer a play-based service to children from diverse backgrounds such as children experiencing adversity and trauma, ethnic minorities, special education needs and neurodiversity / sensory, whose level of need is assessed using the Hardiker Model of Need (Barnardos 2018). Play creates a context for self-expression, self-care and healing that promotes the development of post-traumatic growth following childhood trauma (Pliske et al. 2021).

2.1 The benefits of play

Play and community playgrounds have been shown to have multiple benefits for children and in particular children who experience adversity and trauma. Play is a child's work (Montisori 1916) and it has been defined as "freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child" (Scottish Government 2013 p.g 14). Playgrounds provide opportunities for children to make new friends, share connections and interactions and to positively work on their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Community supervised playgrounds are a safe destination for children to gather and the inclusive nature of community playgrounds promotes psychological wellbeing. Children interact with and have influence upon their environment through play if they have the opportunity (Feran and Howard 2012). Play is the medium through which children learn about their environment, play is an Integral part of childhood and is a universal activity across all cultures. The skills children develop through play, such as social skills, can be beneficial and not only throughout childhood, but also into adulthood (Milteer and Ginsburgh 2012). Every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their own unique potential, and the opportunity to play is integral in reaching that potential (Milteer and Ginsburgh 2012). Milteer and Ginsburgh (2012) further outline that above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood. In order for children to have an opportunity to engage in healthy emotional development, play must be part of their life.

2.2 The positive impact of child-centred play

Play plays a major role in children's development and acquisition of social, emotional and physical skills. It is the one way in which children can work through and explore feelings and emotions enabling them to understand and cope with them (Howard and McInnes 2013). Childhood is a vulnerable time and what happens in childhood can have a long-lasting effect and impact on an individual's future well-being. Children who live through adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are likely to encounter negative health outcomes in adulthood. ACEs are particularly traumatic experiences that can have lasting effects right into adulthood. The experience of ACEs can negatively impact the neurological, immunological, endocrine, and genetic regulatory systems. Brain development can also be negatively impacted, resulting in

abnormal stress responses (Scott, 2021). Toxic stress (prolonged stress without protection) is thought to result from adverse experiences. Young school-aged children, toddlers and infants affected by trauma may feel unsafe and too frightened to play; however, when they are encouraged and facilitated to play through a supportive environment, they often feel a sense of joy, adventure, discovery, and imagination (Nicholson, 2019). Children need to feel safe when they play, so that the play can provide the child with an effective outlet and a means of expression (Binns and Hicks, 2012). Children require play to make sense of the world around them and children can find safety and respite from adverse experiences while also being able to explore and process their experiences with the world when they can play in a safe environment (Scott, 2021). More generally, play provides a platform for children to express and develop imagination and creativity, which are key skills for coping with ACEs. Play can be a powerful tool for helping children cope with, and heal from, trauma through the promotion of understanding and the development of resilience (Nicholson, 2019). Furthermore, it has been suggested that access to safe spaces to play may promote emotional well-being for young children who experience disadvantage (Flouri, Midouhas and Joshi 2014).

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the research methods which were adopted in the evaluation of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service and provides the rationale underpinning the methodological decisions which were employed.

3.2 Research design

Case study approach was utilised for the evaluation set out in this report. Case study research is a type of empirical inquiry that sets out to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in-depth, and within its real-world context (Yin 2018). Case study research was deemed suitable for this evaluation since the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service is a unique and one-of-a-kind service that exists within a real-world context.

3.3 Case study research

One of the most fundamental aspects of engaging case study research is the identification of ‘the case’ and the identification of ‘the context’ which both need to be established at the outset of any study (Tight 2010, Yin 2014, Thomas 2016). Within the case study presented in this report ‘the case’ was the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service and ‘the context’ was the community of Ballybeg in Waterford, Ireland where the service is located. The context in this case study research is comprised of and influenced by economic, social, political, and historical elements which were all considered in the evaluation. The hallmark of case study research is that it uses multiple ‘sources of evidence’ including but not limited to; interviews, focus groups, direct observation, participant participation, archival records, documents, and physical artifacts.

In case study research it is the designated ‘units of analysis’ that form the case, and for this evaluation the main units of analysis were the parent and child interviews. In total, there were two main units of analysis and three sub-units of analysis. The main units of analysis were:

Main unit of analysis 1: Child interviews utilising creative participatory art techniques. A collage activity (for children between the ages of 4 and 6 years) and a task-based drawing activity (for children between the ages of 7 and 12 years) were used to capture the voices of the children who attend the service. The interviews accompanying these participatory techniques focused on the children's experiences of the service, what meaning the service had for them and how it impacted their lives.

Main unit of analysis 2: Parents of children who attend the service were interviewed about their experience of having their child attend the playground service. Parents were asked about how the service impacts on the life of their family and specifically on their child.

The sub-units of analysis were:

Sub-unit of analysis 1: Stakeholder interviews were conducted with relevant personnel to explore the theoretical underpinnings of the service and how they translate into practice. The stakeholder interviews also focused on how stakeholders communicate with the service and what impact they think the service has had on the local community of Ballybeg in Waterford.

Sub-unit of analysis 2: Fieldnotes in the form of direct observations were collected by the researcher in the field. The focus of the fieldnotes was on the facilities and amenities that are available to children who attend the playground service.

Sub-unit of analysis 3: Interviews with staff and volunteers who work in the service were conducted. The focus of the interviews was on the impact of the service from the perspective of staff and volunteers. An evaluation exercise was also conducted with staff and volunteers who work in the service. The focus of the evaluation exercise was on how the service is delivered and how it links with the local community.

Figure 2 provides an outline of ‘the case’ and ‘the context’.

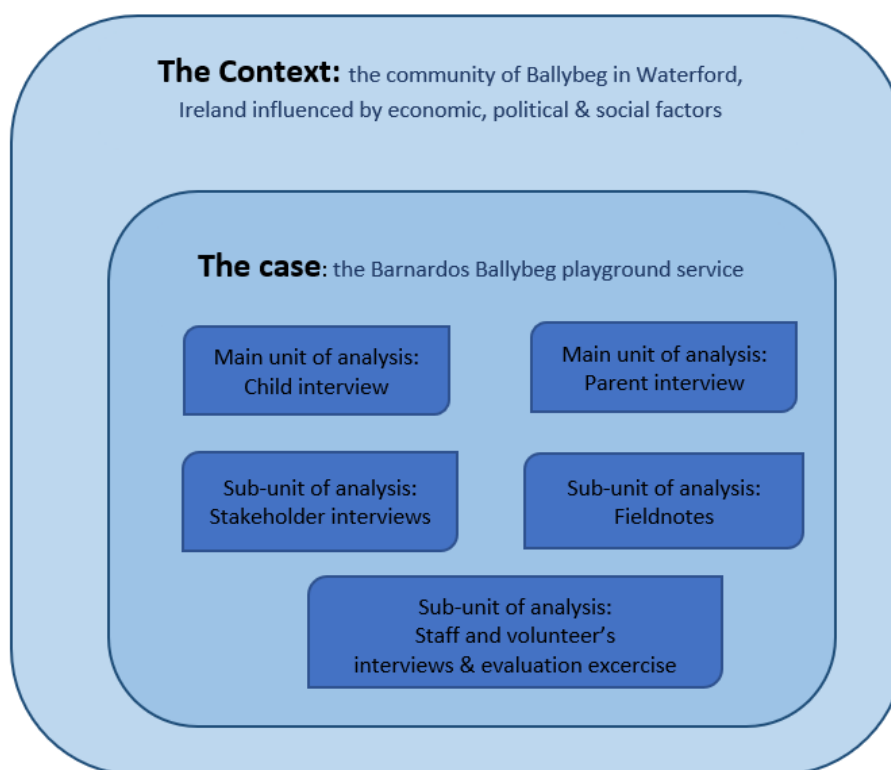


FIGURE 2: THE CASE AND THE CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION

3.4 The voice of the child in this research

The evaluation presented in this report utilised a qualitative research approach in the form of case study research. Qualitative research approaches focus on understanding the meaning, experience, and perspectives of individuals or groups. The utilisation of case study research for the evaluation allowed for the examination of the experiences and the perspectives of the children who attend the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. It also facilitated to evaluate how the service is delivered and how it links with the local community.

Differences exist when conducting research with adults and research with children, and these variances relate to ability and power (Hollywood 2020). When conducting research with children, it is important to consider their unique developmental stages and abilities, as well as the power dynamics between adults and children. A qualitative research approach can be

particularly useful when working with children as it allows for the use of a variety of data collection methods that are appropriate for children's ages and abilities. These methods can include interviews, observations, and participatory techniques, such as art-based activities.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that the research is conducted in a way that respects children's rights to participation, and that the data collection methods are designed to elicit children's own views and perspectives, rather than imposing adult perspectives on them. This evaluation used participatory techniques informed by the Lundy Model of Child Participation (Lundy 2007) and incorporated its four elements of space, voice, audience, and influence (Figure 3). This model provides a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation as laid down in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1992).



FIGURE 3: THE LUNDY MODEL OF CHILD PARTICIPATION (IMAGE FROM TIERNEY ET AL 2018)

The data collection methods chosen for the research incorporate art-based techniques since such techniques are a recognised conduit for children to express their views on a variety of topics (Hollywood 2020). Art-based techniques and visual methods are specifically helpful for children to recall and explore both positive and negative experiences (Kleine, Pearsons and Poveda 2016). This is an important consideration by the research team since participating children were from families who were either level 2 (children with additional needs), level 3

(child's family required support due to chronic or serious problems) or level 4 (child's family required due to temporary or permanent breakdown) of the Hardiker scale (Hardiker et al 1991). Research to date has found that task-based activities direct children's attention away from the researcher and to the 'task at hand'; this, in turn, bestows greater control to the child over their participation (Coad 2007).

3.5 Implementation science framework

Implementation science is the scientific study of methods to apply research and evidence-based practices into routine practice and service delivery to enhance service provision (Bauer et al. 2015). Comiskey and Sheehan (2017) note that implementation has been described as "making it happen", rather than simply "letting it happen" or "helping it happen" (pg. 238). Implementation science most recently has been used in research to understand factors that facilitate and hinder successful implementation of services (Galligan, Banka, Earls and Comiskey, 2020).

3.5.1 Stages of implementation

There are various implementation science frameworks available, however for the purpose of answering the aims and objectives of this research, Burke, Morris and McGarrigle's (2012) framework of implementation enablers and stages was used. Within this framework, the focus is on factors which facilitate or hinder effective implementation. Such factors are often called implementation enablers, drivers, and facilitators. In this research, they will be referred to as enablers (Galligan, Banka, Earls and Comiskey, 2020). Burke et al.'s (2012) framework is a combination of Fixsen's Four Stages of Implementation (2005) and key implementation enablers (Table 1 on the next page).

TABLE 1: IMPLEMENTATION ENABLERS AND STAGES, ADOPTED FROM BURKE, MORRIS AND MCGARRIGLE (2012)

Implementation Enablers	Stages of Implementation			
	1. Exploring & Preparing	2. Planning & Resourcing	3. Implementing & Operationalising	4. Business as Usual
Stakeholder consultation and buy-in				
Leadership				
Resources				
Implementation teams				
Implementation plan				
Staff capacity				
Organisational support				
Supportive organisation culture				
Communication				
Monitoring and evaluation				
Learning from experience				

Fixsen’s first two stages focus on the exploratory and preparation, and the planning and resourcing aspects, followed by the innovation being implemented in stage 3. Once implementation is complete, the system/service is evaluated in stage 4. Within the current evaluation, the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service is at stage 4, called business as usual, indicating full implementation (Galligan, Banka, Earls and Comiskey, 2020).

Figure 4 also illustrates the key implementation enablers developed by Burke, Morris and McGarrigle (2012). These range from stakeholder buy-in, leadership, staff capacity, organisational culture, monitoring and evaluation to learning from experience. Along with enablers of implementation, Burke et al. (2012) discusses the three main types of barriers to implementation, and these are external environment, vested interests, and resistance to change. The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) quality improvement cycle (Figure 4) is a tried and tested cycle which has been described as the cornerstone of model improvement that encompasses significant advantages when put into practice Leis and Shojania (2017). Staff and volunteers who work in the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service were introduced to the PDSA cycle during the data collection phase through a short reflective diary note. The objective of introducing staff and volunteers to the PDSA cycle was to explore the “how” and

“what” of service delivery and also to introduce staff and volunteers to a cycle that they can utilise in the future to improve service structure, content and delivers as required.

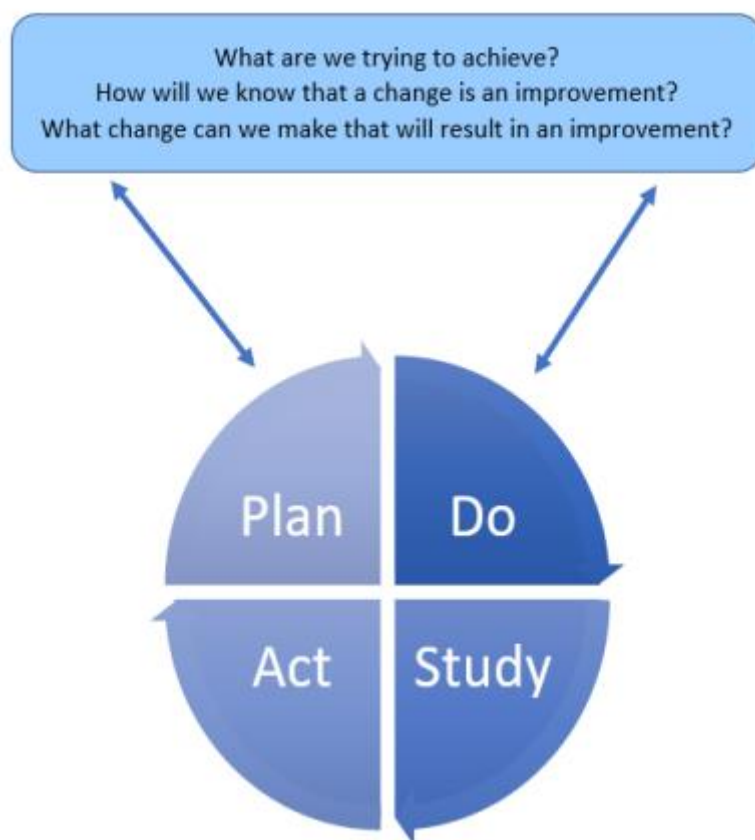


FIGURE 4: PLAN, DO, STUDY, ACT (PDSA) QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CYCLE

The methodological approach of case study design allowed us to gather a range of data sources which captured sufficient evidence to map the process of implementation of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. To ensure data accuracy and to reduce bias, a triangulation approach was used to analyse the wide range of data sources. This is a process of collecting and cross-checking information to check for contradictions, conflicts, or consensus between different data sources. The full research team repeatedly compared the results to ensure that any inconsistencies in the data were identified (Galligan, Banka, Earls and Comiskey, 2020).

3.6 Ethical considerations

This research was informed by the Ethical Review and Children's Research in Ireland (Felzmann et al 2012) and guided by the principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice. It was also underpinned by article 3.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC1989), which states:

“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.

The principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice were all considered in detail during the design and data collection phases of the study.

Ethical approval was sought and secured from the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin, approval was granted on the 25th of August 2022. The study was also reviewed, and approval was granted by the Data Protection Officer in Trinity College Dublin on the 31st of May 2022. All project team members underwent Garda clearance with Barnardos Human Resources Department and completed GDPR training provided by Trinity College Dublin in accordance with EU child protection and research policies. Obtaining informed consent and assent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring that the children's rights to participation were respected, as set out in the Declaration of Helsinki, were all adhered to in this research.

3.7 Sample

The target population included all children and families who attend the Barnardos Playground service at Ballybeg, all staff and volunteers at the service and relevant stakeholders. At the time of data collection approximately thirty children were attending the service every weekend.

3.8 Participant selection procedure

Participants were recruited through the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. During the recruitment phase of the study a poster was displayed at the playground bungalow hub where

parents could view during drop off and collection of their children (Appendix 1). Smaller leaflet versions of the poster were also distributed via communal areas of the Barnardos site in Ballybeg. 'Study Information Packs' consisting of; a letter of invitation, a consent form and a participant information leaflet were prepared and sent to the gatekeeper for distribution to families who met the inclusion criteria. The gatekeeper advised potential participants to contact the researcher directly if they require additional information. If participants wished to participate, they were instructed to sign and return their consent forms to a sealed consent form collection box located in the main office at Barnardos.

3.9 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

3.9.1 Inclusion criteria:

- ✓ Parents and children who use the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.
- ✓ Children between the ages of 4 and 12 years who use the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.
- ✓ Staff and volunteers who work at the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.
- ✓ Stakeholders associated with the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.

3.9.2 Exclusion criteria for women and children:

- ✓ Parents and children who do not use the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.
- ✓ Children younger than 4 years.
- ✓ Children older than 12 years.
- ✓ Parents who do not speak English proficiently.
- ✓ Barnardos staff and volunteers who do not work at the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service.

3.10 Data collection

Data collection with participating children comprised of face-to-face interviews which took place at the playground bungalow in Ballybeg, Waterford. Data collection with participating parents consisted of interviews which were conducted over the phone. Data collection with Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders comprised of interviews which took place either

face-to-face at the main office building used by Barnardos or over the phone. Data collection with the children took place over two separate days and with two groups of children on each day. Younger children attend the playground for the morning session and older children attend for the afternoon session thus data collection took place in line with this arrangement at the playground. Data collection with Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders took place on the same days as the children and on subsequent days via telephone as convenient for participants. Table 2 below provides an outline of the data collected.

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTED

Participant Category	Data Collected	Number of Participants
Child	Collage artwork 'The Wheel' drawing activity Face-to-face interview	18
Parent	Telephone audio interview	4
Barnardos Staff	Telephone audio interview or Face-to-face interview	3
Volunteer	Telephone audio interview or Face-to-face interview	2
Stakeholder	Telephone audio interview or Face-to-face interview	6

3.10.1 Data collection with participating children

In total 18 children participated in the research. The research team were conscious of the level of understanding of participating children, and also of individual children's interests when engaging with participatory research techniques. For this reason, the team planned two different art based participatory techniques. A collage activity entitled 'how I spend my time here at the playground' (Figure 5) was used for children aged 4 - 6 years, and a task-based drawing activity called 'the wheel' (O'Connell 2015) was used for children aged 7 – 12 years (Figure 6 on next page).

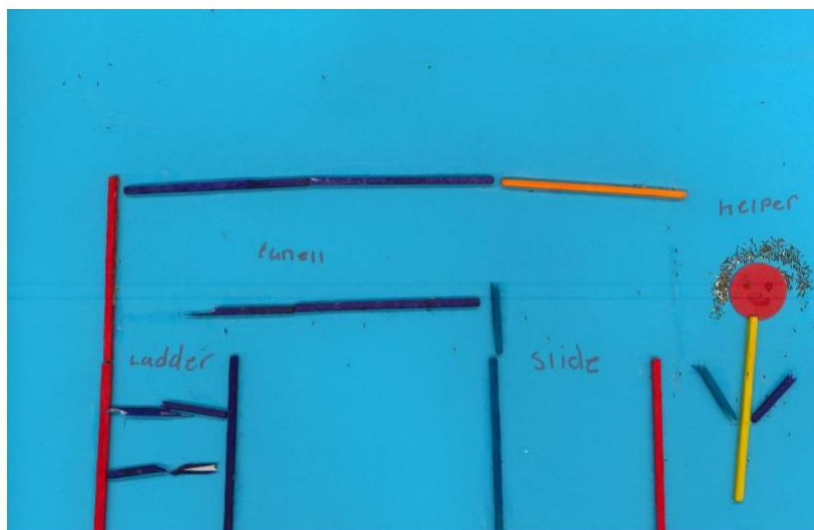


FIGURE 5: COLLAGE 'HOW I SPEND MY TIME HERE AT THE PLAYGROUND' BY CHILD AGED 10 YEARS

Older children could opt for the collage as an addition if they wanted to and vice versa for the younger children with 'the wheel' activity however all the younger children engaged with the collage activity. Some children completed both art-based activities. Both participatory techniques were accompanied with a child interview, conducted by one researcher that was audio recorded. The interview focused on the child's experiences of the service, what meaning the service has for them and how it impacts their lives.

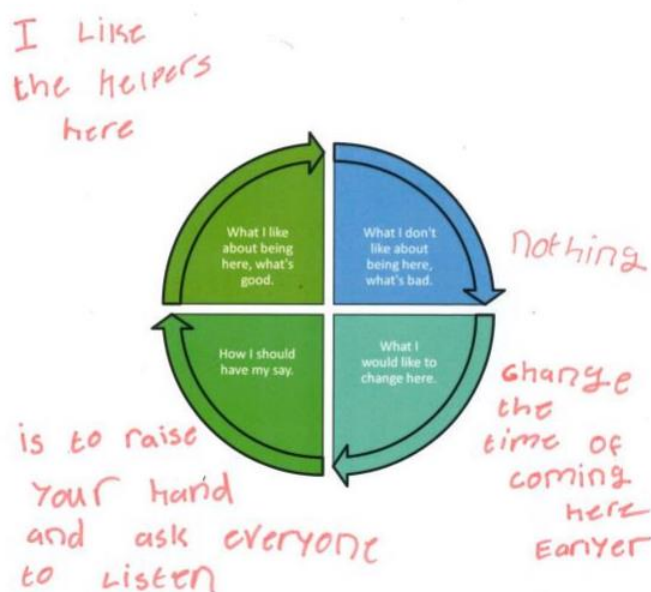


FIGURE 6: DRAWING ACTIVITY 'THE WHEEL' BY CHILD AGED 10 YEARS.

During the individual interviews with the children the researcher utilised a ‘traffic light’ system (Hollywood 2020). The ‘traffic light’ system is a set of laminated traffic lights that were presented to the children at the commencement of each interview. The objective of the ‘traffic light’ system was to provide participating children with a non-verbal means of bringing the interview to a standstill (red light) if they wish to not answer a question and skip to the next question (green light). The working mechanism of the traffic light system was explained and demonstrated to the children at the commencement of the interview. The inclusion of the ‘traffic light system’ adds to the study’s credibility because it ensured that children only answered the questions that they wanted to answer and wanted to talk about. Its inclusion also ensured that children were not coerced into answering questions that they did not want to answer or discuss topics that they did not want to talk about.

3.10.2 Data collection with participating parents

In total 10 parents consented to be contacted for participation in the study. A pre-arranged phone call was made to each of the ten parents however due to a variety of reasons such as ‘something came up’ or the phone going into voicemail it was only possible to interview 4 parents. The parent interviews focused on the parent’s experience of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service, the impact of the service on their child and on their family. The interview also explored parents’ views of what the service means to them and to the community of Ballybeg and their experiences of engaging with the organisation of Barnardos. The parent interviews took approximately 10 min each and an interview guide was followed.

3.10.3 Data collection with participating Barnardos staff and volunteers

In total 5 Barnardos staff and volunteers participated in the research. Interviews were based on the implementation science framework (Table 1). Implementation science focuses on the strategies that can promote implementation success and on for this research focused on the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of the service delivery. Interview guides were devised and followed for the interviews and the duration of the interviews ranged from 10 to 15 minutes.

3.10.4 Data collection with participating stakeholders

In total 6 stakeholders participated in the research. The stakeholder interviews were also based on the implementation science framework (Table 1) to explore the strategies that can promote implementation success and on the 'how' and 'what' of the service delivery. Additionally, these interviews focused on how stakeholders communicate with the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service and on the impact that stakeholders believe the playground service has on the community of Ballybeg, Waterford. An interview guide was developed and followed for the stakeholder interviews.

3.11 Data management

Due to the large volume of data and the various data sources within the evaluation data management was aided by the use of computerised qualitative data analysis software NVivo (version 20) produced by QSR International. All data sources including child interview audio, children's artwork, adult interview audio, fieldnotes and handprint evaluations (Appendix 2) were imported into an NVivo software file. NVivo is a pragmatic means of maintaining an audit trail which is an essential component of case study research (Bergin 2011). The maintenance of an audit trail is an important means of developing confirmability within a qualitative research study.

3.12 Data analysis

Data within case study research can be analysed by perusing various means since analytic procedures within case study research have not been 'set in stone' or prescribed. Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-step approach (Table 3 next page) was chosen as the analytic strategy for this case study research since all of the data gathered was qualitative in nature.

TABLE 3: SIX-STEP APPROACH TO THEMATIC ANALYSIS ADAPTED FROM BRAUN AND CLARKE (2012)

Table 3: Six-step approach to thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2012)	
Step 1: Familiarisation with the data	Involves the researcher becoming completely immersed in the data by listening and relistening to the audio. Initial analytical observations are noted.
Step 2: Generate initial codes	This is the commencement of the systematic analysis of data through coding. Codes, as building blocks of analysis, identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that may be relevant to the evaluation.
Step 3: Searching for themes	A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the evaluation and represents a patterned response or meaning within the data set.
Step 4: Reviewing potential themes	Developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and the entire data set. Essentially this is a quality check of potential themes against the data set.
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	The researcher defines the theme and states clearly, what is unique about the theme. This phase requires deep analytical work, the crucial shaping-up of the analysis into specific themes.
Step 6: Generating the report	Within qualitative research, writing and analysis are interwoven activities. The purpose of the report is to produce a compelling story of about the data based on the analysis.

3.13 Summary

This chapter discussed the research methods employed in this evaluation of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service in Ballybeg, Waterford. It also provided a detailed account of the study design and procedures, recruitment, data collection and management and ethical issues associated with the evaluation.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the evaluation of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. When reporting on 'the case' in case study research the aim is to tell the story of the evolution, development, and experience of the case of interest. In this evaluation 'the case' is the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service and 'the context' is the community of Ballybeg in Waterford, Ireland where the service is located, as detailed in Chapter 3. The reporting of findings in case study research has been described by Yin (2018) as 'composing' and this he attributes to the fact that case study research does not follow any specified conventional format. The case in this evaluation is a single case, comprising of two main units of analysis and three sub-units of analysis which together are embedded into the case and its context. The units of analysis and data sources have been explained in Chapter 3. The findings of this evaluation research are organised under four themes which were formed following a complex triangulated analysis of the various data sources. The data sources which contributed to the development of each of the four themes can be viewed in the Table 'Themes by data Source' (Appendix 3) downloaded from the study NVivo database. In line with the final step of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) each theme has been given a name and a description. Theme names and descriptions are provided in Table 4 on the next page.

TABLE 4: THEMES AND DESCRIPTION OF THEMES

Theme	Description of theme
Theme 1: Supporting children now & into their future	This theme provides a detailed account of how the Barnardos Playground Service provides support for children and families who use the service. The service is a significant source of emotional and learning support for the children who attend it. In addition to providing support in the here and now timeframe, the service is also a source of support for children moving forward as they grow and develop through the stages of childhood and adolescence.
Theme 2: Inclusion through play	This theme showcases how the Barnardos Playground Service, through the facilitation and promotion of play, brings children together to socialise with one another and helps families, especially new families, to integrate into the local community. By providing a play orientated service for all children and families, a feeling of belonging is created within the community. The theme explores the relationship that Barnardos has carved out within the community of Ballybeg, and the relationship is based on an ethos of inclusivity through this unique play service.
Theme 3: Supporting families	This theme provides an account of how the Barnardos Playground Service is a source of direct support for families. The service provides parenting and practical support for families who use it. This theme also details how being engaged with the playground service acts as a catalyst for families to seek additional support from Barnardos and other services available in the area.
Theme 4: Invested individuals	This theme explores the roles of significant people affiliated to the Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg. It highlights the interest, dedication, and commitment of Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders associated with the service. It also emphasizes the child centeredness of the Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg.

4.2 Theme 1: Supporting children now and into the future

This theme details how the Barnardos Playground Service provides support for the children and families who use the service. The focus of this theme is on the experiences of the children and families who use the playground, and on the impact that the service has on families from the perspective of children, parents, Barnardos staff and stakeholders. The data sources

which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the 'T1 explore diagram' downloaded from the NVivo study database (Appendix 4).

It is very clear that the Barnardos Playground Service is a child-centred service and a source of significant support for the families who use it. All of the eighteen children interviewed unanimously expressed their absolute delight in attending the playground and many expressed that it was the highlight of their week. Children took time to explain why they like and enjoy the playground so much. Barnardos staff and volunteers, referred to by the children as 'the helpers', featured in the children's responses when asked what it was about the playground that they liked. Children described the kindness shown to them by the Barnardos staff and volunteers at the playground. Children also described how they feel listened to at the playground and how they enjoy the various activities that the staff and volunteers do with them when they attend each weekend. This is depicted in a collage by a child aged 10 years and explained in her interview, see Figure 7.

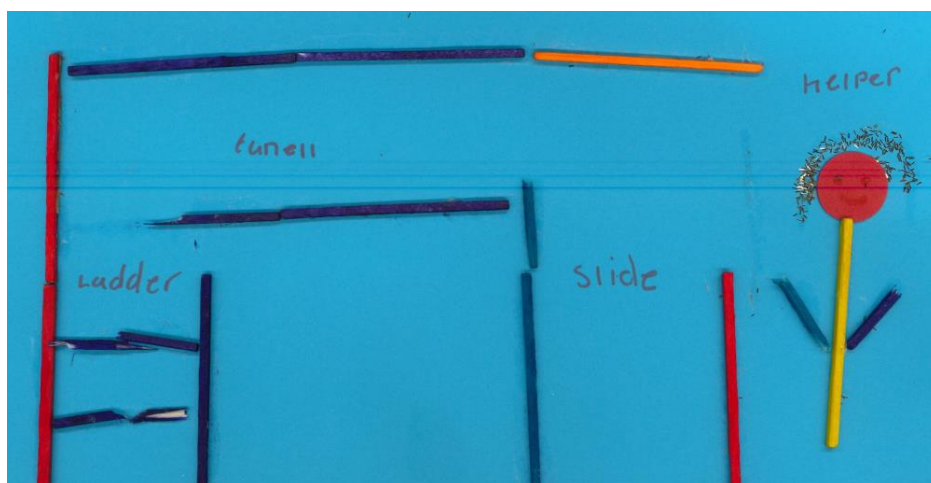


FIGURE 7: COLLAGE 'HOW I SPEND MY TIME HERE AT THE PLAYGROUND' BY CHILD (C02_10) AGED 10 YEARS.

Researcher: And what do you like about them ['the helpers']?

C02_10: That's they're kind and they let us do what we want to do, and they do good stuff with us here.

Researcher: Really and what kind of stuff do they do with yee here?

C02_10: *They do like, art and fun games with us.*

(Child aged 10 years)

Findings show that the playground is a source of considerable support for the children who attend. Children described feelings indicative of emotional support and safety that they experience as a result of attending the playground. The emotional support described by the children is facilitated by the Barnardos staff and volunteers through the use of play at the playground and this is something which the children enjoy very much. One child explained in her collage and interview how 'the helpers' assist her in the navigation of challenging emotions such as anger. Furthermore, she details how the playground is a haven of calm for her in her life as when she attends. She had this to say:

Researcher: *What do you like about coming here?*

C01_10: *I like the helpers here.*

Researcher: *What do the helpers here help you with?*

C01_10: *If I was angry.*

Researcher: *What would they do if you felt angry about something?*

C01_10: *They, they would make me feel nice when I come in here.*

Researcher: *Oooh I see.*

C01_10: *Like when I come in here all my worries go away.*

Researcher: *All your worries go away. And what do they do to make you feel nice?*

C01_10: *They do nice things like (pause) we do all the games or something.*

(Child aged 10 years Figure 8)



FIGURE 8: COLLAGE 'HOW I SPEND MY TIME HERE AT THE PLAYGROUND' BY CHILD (C01_10) AGED 10 YEARS.

Children who attend the Barnardos Playground Service reported feelings of happiness, feeling safe and being able to relax. As previously highlighted in this theme all of the children interviewed expressed great pleasure and excitement that they get to attend the playground each week. Indeed, many children expressed that they would like if the playground was open for longer hours at the weekend or open during the week so that they could attend after school. One boy explains how attending the playground makes him feel:

Researcher: *So, tell me, how do you feel when you come here?*

C13_10: *Happy, always happy.*

(Child aged 10 years)

This boy elaborated to explain how the fun nature of the activities available to him at the playground make him feel happy to attend every weekend. He also emphasised during his interview that he 'only' gets to attend at weekend since the service operates on Saturdays and Sundays only. When asked by the researcher if he would like to attend the service on a more regular basis, he had this to say:

Researcher: *Would you like to come here during the week?*

C13_10: *Yeah! Most definitely.*

(Child aged 10 years)

Attending the playground is a welcome familiar activity for the children and one that fosters feelings of safety for them. Although children were not asked about safety or feeling safe during the interviews many of the children described their eagerness to attend the playground because of the feelings of familiarity and safety that it creates in their lives. One boy had this to say:

Researcher: *So, tell me, how do you feel when you come here?*

C17_9: *Safe.*

Researcher: *And what is it about Barnardos that makes you feel safe?*

C17_9: *It's that there's grown-ups that can protect us, there's loads of people and, and I know most of them.*

(Child aged 9 years)

Attending the playground is also a source of relaxation for many of the children. Children reported how they like to relax and enjoy time through play at the playground. One boy explained how he likes to relax at the playground during his interview:

Researcher: *So, tell me, how do you feel when you come here?*

C12_10: *Nice and chilled.*

Researcher: *So, its chill time?*

C12_10: *Yeah, like fun, chill, you know what I mean?*

(Child aged 10 years)

Attending the playground service has a positive impact on the children's learning and knowledge development. Although learning was not asked about during the interviews participating children described the learning support and knowledge development that they receive and gain as a result of attending the playground. Children described learning how to be amongst their peers which helps them with their socialisation. One child explained during her interview how she has learned to wait her turn and listen to others before speaking herself. This lesson is also represented in her collage below (Figure 9).

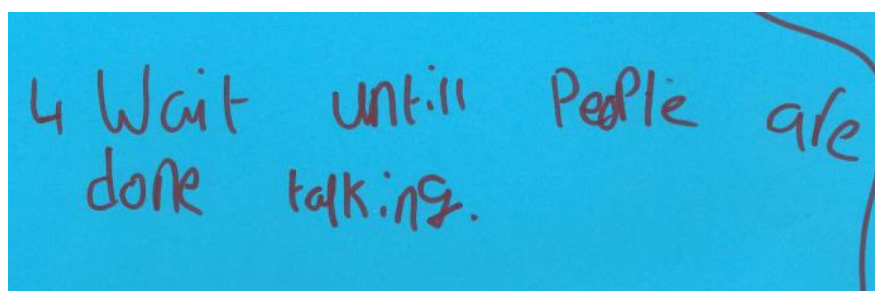


FIGURE 9: COLLAGE 'HOW I SPEND MY TIME HERE AT THE PLAYGROUND' BY CHILD (C01_10) AGED 10

At the playground the children learn through art, craft, and board games; however, many of the children also detailed how they have learned new skills such as the process of growing vegetables, harvesting their crops, and cooking with their home grown produce. These life skills of knowing where food comes from and how it can be prepared for eating that the children learn at the playground could have a very positive impact on their health and well-

being as they continue to grow and develop. When asked if there was anything that they would like to change at the playground one boy explained how he would like to participate in more cooking (Figure 10).



FIGURE 10: 'THE WHEEL' BY C13_10 AGED 10 YEARS.

During his interview this boy describes what he has learned through the cooking club at the playground.

Researcher: So, tell me about the cooking here on your wheel?

C13_10: Well, when [name], she does the cooking club, it's grown in the garden.

Researcher: So, ye grow your own vegetables out the back?

C13_10: Yeah.

Researcher: What did ye grow?

C13_10: Mmmh potatoes, tomatoes, scallions and a few other bits that I can't remember.

Researcher: And is it easy to grow them?

C13_10: It's a bit of work now, so it's not that easy.

(Child aged 10 years)

Learning and knowledge development was also highlighted by participating parents. During the parental interviews several parents remarked about the learning and development that

their children have gained from attending the playground. Parents described how their children learn social and emotional skills through the medium of play at the playground and also how attending the playground has enhanced their child's development. One parent explained how attending the playground has been a significant factor in the enhancement of their child's speech development. They had this to say:

Researcher: *How important is the playground to your child?*

Parent 3: *She likes it, she really really likes it because the people there they are friendly because my daughter, she didn't speak very well before but by going there [to the playground] mixed with the children there and you know they do lots of activities it's very helpful for her.*

(Parent)

Attending the playground service provides support for children and families not just in the here and now but also into the future. Findings suggest that when families engage with the Barnardos Playground Service there are more likely to engage with other Barnardos services available in their community. Barnardos staff explained how children who utilise the playground were also encouraged to attend the book club that was held mid-week after school. The aim of the book club was to encourage reading among the children and promote confidence and literacy skills; however, unfortunately this initiative was impacted upon negatively by the Covid 19 pandemic. Barnardos staff hope to get it up and running again in the future. One Barnardos staff member explained:

BS_A02: *We used to do a book club but that's on a break now because of Covid we didn't get back into the library and actually it was really good to promote literacy so a lot of the kids who would go to the playground would come up here [Barnardos main centre] after school [during the week] and do the book club.*

(Barnardos Staff)

The children's participation in the book club, while it was available, shows that there is a need for a child orientated support service mid-week for the afterschool hours. In addition to supporting the development of literacy skills amongst children the book club also acted as a

support point for learning that took place in school. One Barnardos staff member explained how children might need learning support for school projects as they may not have the internet or printer access at home. They had this to say:

BS_A02: *If they were looking for any information for projects that they wouldn't have access to a printer I would do all that for them I would support them with the project because a lot of them wouldn't have printers at home.*

(Barnardos Staff)

The various supports described in this theme are all provided for families as a direct result of the presence of the Barnardos Playground Service. The support experienced by children and their families is beneficial in the present time however it is also beneficial for children and families into their future since such support has a positive impact on the children's emotional, social, and psychological development and well-being. Learning life skills, gaining knowledge about where food comes from, gaining knowledge about how to deal with challenging feelings, getting support with schoolwork, and feeling safe and secure collectively will have a positive impact on the children's lives. The level of support provided by the playground to the children who attend is remarkable and this is evident in the data.

4.3 Theme 2: Inclusion through play

This theme describes how, through the medium of play, the Barnardos Playground Service brings children together to socialise with one another and helps families new to the area of Ballybeg to integrate into the local community. Through the provision of a child centred play service Barnardos have created a feeling of belonging within the community for the families who use the service. This theme showcases the relationship that Barnardos has carved out within the community of Ballybeg in Waterford and this relationship is based on an ethos of inclusivity through the unique service that is the Barnardos Playground Service. The ethos of inclusivity operated by Barnardos is strongly represented in this theme. The data sources which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the 'T2 explore diagram' downloaded from the NVivo study database (Appendix 3).

Barnardos is an organisation that is very well embedded into the community of Ballybeg, Waterford. Interview with various participants indicate that Barnardos is recognised by families and the wider community as having a long-standing presence in the Ballybeg area. One parent described how their family has engaged with the Barnardos Playground Service for a considerable length of time:

Researcher: *Tell me, how long have your children been attending the Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg?*

P1: *Well, all my kids have been through it, but the ones currently have been going there for two years. My two youngest are there but my eldest is now in college and actually went to Barnardos years ago also. So yeah, we have, we have always used it.*

(Parent)

The service welcomes children and families from the Ballybeg area and from areas outside of Ballybeg as per family needs. Many of the children who attend are related to one another as extended family members have settled in the same area. Several children spoke about familiarity, knowing one another and this has created positive group comradery amongst the children at the playground. One child detailed how she, her brother and cousins all attend the playground service and depicted this in her collage as seen below: Figure 11



FIGURE 11: COLLAGE 'HOW I SPEND MY TIME HERE AT THE PLAYGROUND' BY CHILD (C03_9) AGED 9 YEARS.

During their interview they explained:

Researcher: *So, tell me who is this?*

C03_9: *My cousins [name] and [name].*

Researcher: *And who is this, is this your cousin as well?*

C03_9: *No, that's [name] my brother.*

Researcher: *And do yee all get to come here?*

C03_9: *Yeah!*

(Child aged 9 years)

At the Barnardos Playground Service attending children are divided into two separate play sessions depending on their age and developmental level. Younger children (aged 4 – 7 years) attend for the morning play session and older children (aged 8 – 12 years) attend for the afternoon play session. All children from both age group sessions indicated that attending the playground is a highlight for them in the week and all children enjoy attending for their play session. When asked if they like attending the playground older children answered in the context of how the playground makes them feel from an emotional perspective. One child from the older group had this to say:

Researcher: *Do you like coming here?*

C02_10: *I love coming here.*

Researcher: *Really, how does it make you feel?*

C02_10: *Happy!*

(Child aged 10 years)

Younger children remarked about the fun aspect of the playground and how it affords them the opportunity to play freely with their friends. Attending the playground also helps the children to foster and maintain friendships. One child from the younger play group had this to say:

Researcher: *Do you like coming here?*

C04_6: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *How does coming here make you feel?*

C04_6: Fun!

Researcher: Yeah? What is the best part?

C04_6: Playing on the playground with my friends.

(Child aged 6 years)

Being together with friends and cousins and having time to play and talk was highlighted by many of the participating children as being a source of comfort and enjoyment for them. This development of friendships via attendance at the playground is indicated in 'the wheel' drawing activity and interview by a child from the older play group: Figure 12.



FIGURE 12: 'THE WHEEL' BY CHILD (C11_9) AGED 10 YEARS.

Researcher: So, do your friends all come here?

C11_9: Yeah.

Researcher: And what do yee talk about?

C11_9: Fortnight and video range rover, basketball. My best friend is here and he's also my cousin.

(Child aged 9 years)

Findings indicate that the playground service is based on an ethos of inclusion. All families in the area and those in need in the surrounding area areas are welcomed to the service.

Furthermore, the service caters for children with special needs thus confirming that inclusion and inclusivity are at the heart of the Barnardos ethos and culture. The inclusive ethos of the playground was observed by a variety of the study's participants. When asked about the meaning of the playground one parent highlighted this and detailed the very special environment that the playground provides for her child and how the playground has impacted on her child and her family. She had this to say:

Researcher: *What does the playground service mean to you?*

P1: *Well right now for my youngest boy it's a fantastic social experience for him in an understanding environment because he has autism, and then for my other boy... he gets to go over just to have time for himself, one goes on a Saturday and the other on a Sunday, so they have their own time to make their little friends.*

(Parent)

In relation to her son with autism this parent placed emphasis on the positive environment provided by the playground and how the staff at the playground have an in-depth understanding about her sons' specific needs. She also notes how the playground provides a very special playtime for her son that differs from home or school play time:

P1: *To him it means that he has an understanding environment, and he gets to play, and the staff there are just so good that they know, they can judge when something is too much for him or they can facilitate him to play in an environment that's not home or that's not school so there's not that pressure on him. There's no performance pressure on him.*

(Parent)

The inclusive ethos of the playground extends beyond the inclusion of children with special and additional needs to children and families who may be new to the Ballybeg area or who may have come to Ireland from another country. One stakeholder describes the value of the playground service as an adjunct service to their own service and explains how they refer families to the playground as a means of helping children to make friends and for parents to integrate into their new community:

SH_A11: *We would have a lots of families coming to us for support and you would often find, particularly if it was a family coming from another country, they're not familiar with the area, and their children may be struggling with making friends and that so we would always kinda refer them up to playground service at weekend as a way of getting to make friends and also for the parents to start getting a bit more settled in the community.*

(Stakeholder)

Another stakeholder remarked that many of the young people they work with would have come through the Barnardos Playground Service as younger children and he has seen first-hand the benefit of the service to the children before they enter the adolescent and youth follow on services. He places great emphasis on the value of the Barnardos Playground Service in breaking down barriers relating to social integration via play amongst children and young people of different social and cultural backgrounds.

SH_A10: *It's a great integration service for the kids because you have many different families from many different backgrounds and it just kinds breaks down, it's great for breaking down the barriers through the play and through fun.*

(Stakeholder)

The inclusive nature of the Barnardos Playground Service also shines through from the referral pathway perspective. This stakeholder remarks on the inclusive approach of the service, the enjoyment experienced by the children who attend the service and the exceptionally positive impact that the service has on children and families in addition to the community. This stakeholder also highlights the significance of the impact of the Barnardos Playground Service and how it bridges a service gap that currently exists for school-aged children who are experiencing need. They had this to say:

SH_A08: *For one thing, I find that with the playground any referrals that we give them they are very inclusive, they have good communications with parents, the young people very much enjoy the attention there, everything from getting breakfast there to getting the attention to getting a sense of belonging would be very strong in terms of the*

playground. The playground core kids would always talk about the playground and how much they enjoyed it ... they'd get up early in the morning to attend ... so in terms of impact it's really good that there are services in the community that young people freely engage with on a very strong level. That then sets up, from a Barnardos perspective it sets up a good relationship then in terms of the community perception of Barnardos, for us then it allows us to be able to refer younger people to a service where there is probably a void in service in that age group.

(Stakeholder)

Children were asked during 'the wheel' drawing exercise if there was anything that they did not like about the playground. Children universally expressed that there was nothing that they did not like about the playground. During the child interviews many children emphasised how they felt welcome at the playground, they feel included at the playground and attending the playground provides children with a sense of inclusion and acceptance amongst their peers and community. The satisfaction of the children for the playground is overwhelmingly evident in the figures presented on the next page which contain sections from a number of the children's 'The Wheel' exercises (Figure 17) on the next page.

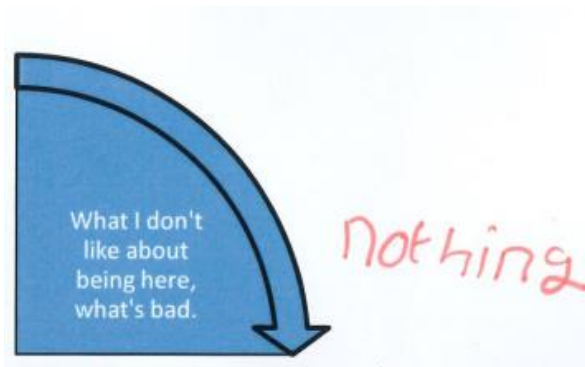


Figure 13: 'The Wheel' by C02_10 aged 10 years.

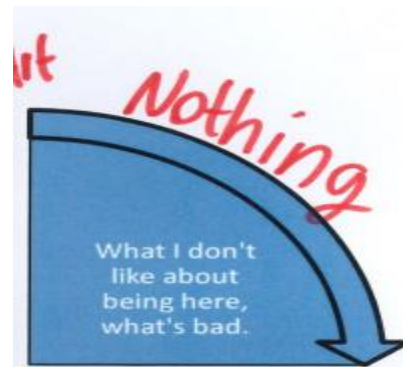


Figure 14: 'The Wheel' by C15_12 aged 12 years.



Figure 15: 'The Wheel' by C13_10 aged 10 years.

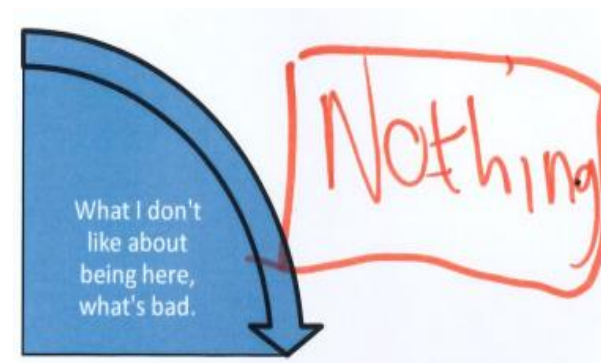


Figure 16: 'The Wheel' by C11_9 aged 9 years

FIGURE 17: 'THE WHEEL' BY VARIOUS PARTICIPATING CHILDREN

4.4 Theme 3: Supporting families

This theme provides an account of how the Barnardos Playground Service is a direct source of parenting and practical support for families. The theme also explores how being engaged with the service acts as a catalyst for families to seek additional support from Barnardos and other services available in the area. The data sources which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the 'T3 explore diagram' downloaded from the NVivo study database (Appendix 4).

The Barnardos Playground Service provides practical parenting support for families through its supervised play sessions. Through the utilisation of the service, which the children overwhelmingly benefit from and enjoy, parents are afforded time to take a break or complete necessary household chores. Several participants voiced issues related to children in the community being able to play safely when not under the direct supervision of an adult. Barnardos help to alleviate this concern for parents on a practical level thorough the provision of its supervised play service. Keeping children under constant direct supervision is challenging for many families therefore having a supervised play service is a source of positive practical support for parents. One Barnardos staff member explains:

Researcher: *What do you think the service means to the families who use it?*

BS_A02: *Well, I think it's good, it's a relief for some of them, it gives them a break and they know their children are safe when they're in there [in the playground] They know they're safe and they're been looked after and they're been entertained and hopefully they are learning a new skill.*

(Barnardos Staff)

The service provides a safe place for parents to bring their children to play enabling them to take some time out for themselves, to catch up with household chores or even go out to work as explained by one child:

Researcher: *So tell me, what does your mammy do while you are here?*

C01_9: *Clean and go to work!*

(Child aged 9 years)

The Barnardos Playground Service is a practical support to the parents who use it since it is a free service and parents do not need to make a payment to avail of the service. The fact that the service is a free service available to families was raised by various participants as being a very helpful and practical way of providing support to families. As previously highlighted in this report families who use this service are at level 2, level 3 and level 4 of the Hardiker Model of Need (Hardiker et al 1991). This means that they are families who may be experiencing a variety of challenging needs and situations including financial constraints. Being a free service

means that there are no barriers or obstacles to availing of the service when families want to or need to use it.

The support provided directly to children by the service has been explored in Theme 1 however, several participants addressed the support offered to parents indirectly, as a result of their child attending the playground service. Parents reported their eagerness to avail of the service as it provides parenting support in the form of enabling them to 'take a break' or to spend focused time with other children in their family. Furthermore, a participating child provided detail on how the service indirectly provides parenting support to their parent by helping with sibling rivalry within the family. They had this to say:

Researcher: *And what would they [Barnardos staff and volunteers] help you with?*

C01_10: *Mmmh they'd help me with ideas or [name] helped me with my brother because when we only used to come on one day, they split me and my brother up, because we were always fighting, he was hitting, and that [organising for the siblings to attend on different days] helped me.*

Researcher: *So they saw that he was hitting you and annoying you, so they split yee up to come of different days?*

C01_10: *Yeah.*

(Child aged 10 years)

The suggestion by Barnardos staff for the siblings to attend the service on different days during the weekend helped to reduce the level of sibling rivalry that was occurring within this child's family, and this indirectly acted as a parenting support for the children's parents.

Although as the name suggests, the service is a play-based service for children however, it also provides breakfast and snacks for the attending children. This is both a practical and a parenting support for the families who use the service. The service caters for children who have adversity in their lives, and this can sometimes mean that the children and their family might be experiencing food poverty. Food poverty can be the source of stress and anxiety for parents if they are not able to afford food for their children and it can also be harmful for

children who do not have enough to eat. The playground service helps to eliminate this by providing breakfast and snacks as explained by one child:

C04_6: *I have my breakfast.*

Researcher: *You have your brekkie [breakfast] when you come here?*

C04_6: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *And tell me, what do you have here for brekkie [breakfast]?*

C04_6: *I have rice crispies.*

(Child aged 6 years)

The provision of breakfast to children who attend the playground is a source of practical and parenting support since it means that parents have one less meal to provide for their children. Barnardos also provide food bags to families via their main centre and families who use the playground can be linked in with the main centre to receive this additional help as required. This is a strong source of parenting support that occurs as a result of being engaged with the playground as it means that parents know that there is help available if they are struggling to provide food for their family.

The Barnardos Playground Service provides a safe place to play as detailed in Theme 1. Feeling safe is not something that children and families in the area automatically feel which can be the source of worry to children and their parents. One Barnardos staff member explained how the playground service enables children to feel safe within their community and this is an indirect parental support to families. They explain:

BS_A07: *To see the young people feeling safe to come in there [into the playground service] and you know not having to worry and all that kinda stuff you 'know...*

Researcher: *Yes, so what your saying is that it has a positive impact on the area?*

BS_A07: *Yeah, it has a positive impact on the area and like everyone minds it, even all our older group like they'd let no one go I there in the evenings like, they'd mind it.*

(Barnardos Staff)

Not only is the playground service providing practical and parental support to families in the here and now, but it has historically provided this type of support for the families who use it. This historic presence of Barnardos in the community frames the organisation as a reliable source of support for families and families trust the service and the organisation of Barnardos.

4.5 Theme 4: Invested individuals

This theme explores the roles of significant people affiliated to the Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg. It highlights the interest, dedication, and commitment of Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders associated with the playground. It also showcases the child centeredness of the service at Ballybeg. The data sources which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the 'T4 explore diagram' downloaded from the NVivo study database (Appendix 5).

The Barnardos playground service is a child centred service delivered and facilitated by Barnardos staff and volunteers. Part of the success of the service is that the staff and volunteers associated with the service are committed to the children and families who use the service, and they have a very good level of knowledge about the area of Ballybeg and the challenges that families may be experiencing in their everyday lives. Furthermore, Barnardos staff and volunteers demonstrate commitment and dedication to providing the service which positions the service as a dependable service within the community for children and families who need it.

The needs of children and families who use the playground service have changed considerably since it opened in 1999. The service has remained steadfast within the community and the continuous need for the service is clear from the participating children who adore attending, their parents who all reported a high level of satisfaction with it and also the Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders affiliated to the Barnardos Playground Service. However, with time comes change and many participants reported their experiences of the increasing needs of the children who attend the service. Furthermore, these increasing needs have been intensified by the recent Covid 19 pandemic as reported by several participants. Irrespective

of increasing needs, the Barnardos staff remain focused on the experiences of the children who use their service and focused on doing their very best to meet the needs of all children and keeping their doors open to all children who want to attend their playground service. One Barnardos staff member had this to say about responding to the changing needs of children while maintaining an ethos of inclusivity within the playground service:

Researcher: *You have mentioned children with additional needs, how do you provide support for those children with additional needs at the playground service?*

BS_A07: *Some children might need a little bit of one to one and we would provide that within the work, and if we were doing activities we would always adapt to what the person can do and like we would have, if we needed any extra support, we would have that with the workers on board with us you know, it's like everyone works together for the young person basically.*

Researcher: *So, their needs are met no matter what?*

BS_A07: *No matter what yeah. And like no one is told you have this, you cannot come here, it's open for everyone we would have like maybe children who are non-verbal who come to us and just enjoy playing and you would have children who might have anger or anxiety or whatever, but they still come in, they're not told they can't come in.*

(Barnardos Staff)

The Barnardos services and the Barnardos Playground Service in Ballybeg, Waterford are considered to be pillar services by the surrounding community. As a result of this well established and assured reputation, the foundation of which is based on the services' consistency and the commitment of the people who work at Barnardos, the referral pathway to Barnardos has evolved. One staff member had this to say about how families are referred to the Barnardos playground service:

Researcher: *How are families referred to you?*

BS_A09: *Sometimes it's by word of mouth because most people living in Ballybeg, they know Barnardos. Any new child that moves in; the first thing that they hear about is*

Barnardos, and we would be very involved with the school, the local school would often refer families to us or Tusla could also recommend Barnardos.

Researcher: *And could families refer themselves if they wanted to?*

BS_A09: *Absolutely, and a lot do.*

(Barnardos Staff)

Many of the participating stakeholders explained in detail how they liaise with Barnardos and encourage families to connect with the Barnardos services. Stakeholders detailed how Barnardos have a fundamental role within the community in terms of engaging families who are experiencing need, focusing on children who are experiencing need and making connections for families with other services as required. Barnardos staff are skilled in the identification of family need and skilled in engaging families to come and use the Barnardos services that are available. This all comes down to the invested people who work with Barnardos in Ballybeg, Waterford. One stakeholder who works in a service for older children explained why their partnership with the playground service is so important to their work:

Researcher: *So how important is the playground service in that partnership?*

SH_A08: *For us it plays a very pivotal role in terms of the staff in the playground being able to engage young people during the weekend and what they do then with that engagement is very important in terms of liaising with other groups and being able to identify the needs of the service user for the playground from our organisation then in terms of a two-way referral then we found it very useful.*

(Stakeholder)

Barnardos services, including the playground service, are viewed as important 'go-to' services by relevant stakeholders for families who are experiencing need in the community. Barnardos staff are completely focused on the needs of the children and are regarded as being invaluable for children who attend the service. Such is the significance of the service provided, one stakeholder explained how they would go out of their way to reach out to a family in need and encourage them to engage with Barnardos:

Researcher: *Would you reach out to families [to engage with Barnardos] as well as families contacting you?*

SH_A06: *If I felt there was a need yeah, I would. If a young person informally mentioned that there might be a need for one of their younger siblings or the family itself might need support, then we could have an informal conversation with them [the young person] to see what way we could approach it if we were to reach out.*

(Stakeholder)

Another stakeholder placed emphasis on the staff at the Barnardos Playground Service and explained how their commitment to the service and community has created a situation whereby they are highly knowledgeable in relation to the needs of the families who live in the surrounding community. This stakeholder believes that the commitment of the Barnardos staff is of significant relevance to the success of the playground service. Furthermore, they believe that having invested staff like the Barnardos staff at the playground, helps children to progress onto other community services as they reach their adolescent years since children and families are happy to be referred on by the playground staff at Barnardos. They had this to say:

SH_A08: *This person [Barnardos staff] lives in the community and has a great finger on the pulse and is a huge asset in terms of knowing the young people that need extra assistance and extra help and having that kinda [kind of] liaison person within the two projects really helps an awful lot then when we get referrals from the playground, we run services mainly for secondary school for 12 onwards also it's a natural progression on for a lot of the young people from the playground once they leave at 12 to come on down to our service as well.*

(Stakeholder)

4.6 Mapping stakeholder findings to the implementation enablers

Objectives 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the evaluation presented in this report were:

- ✓ To explore how the programme is delivered in order to understand “what works” for children attending the service, as well as potential barriers to achieve service goals and objectives.
- ✓ To examine the culture of the service and its delivery of child-centred, play-based supports.
- ✓ To explore the impact of the service from the perspective of staff and volunteers within the service.
- ✓ To examine the links with the local community and the impact of the service on the local community.

These objectives were achieved via interviews with Barnardos staff, volunteers, and relevant stakeholders. The interviews were based on the implementations science framework as detailed earlier. Implementation in this evaluation refers to the Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg in Waterford. It refers to the activities undertaken by the playground service at Barnardos in the community of Ballybeg. The findings presented in this report provide insight into the experience of the service delivery from the perspective of the staff and volunteers involved and also the processes involved in the service implementation. Findings indicate the ‘what works’ enablers of success within the service such as the level and range of support provided, the consistent ethos of inclusion through the medium of play, the provision of support for families and the presence of invested staff and volunteers associated with the service. Potential barriers to service delivery and processes related to service implementation have also been identified in this evaluation and they are the limited availability of the playground service (weekends only) to children and families, the need to consistently promote and raise awareness of the playground service to relevant local voluntary, community, and Health Service Executive (HSE) services. Potential areas for development include consideration of service extension to include mid-week service provision in addition to weekends, development of a networking strategy for Barnardos in the area of Ballybeg so that awareness of the service can be increased and development of the range of play

opportunities available to children who attend the play service (to include children with disability and / or neurodivergence). Findings from the evaluation presented in this report indicate that the playground service delivered by Barnardos in Ballybeg has a positive impact on the children who attend the service, the families who use the service and the wider community of Ballybeg. The table below (Table 5) page presents a summary of the implementation enablers and barriers and the evidence of the enablers and potential barriers or considerations that will need to be addressed as the service continues.

TABLE 5: IMPLEMENTATION ENABLERS AND BARRIERS AND EVIDENCE

Implementation Enablers and Barriers	Evidence of Enablers and Barriers
Stakeholder consultation and buy-in	✓ Strong presence evident from stakeholder interviews.
Leadership	✓ Strong presence evident from staff, volunteer, and stakeholder interviews and fieldnotes.
Resources	✓ May need modification for service development.
Implementation teams	✓ Strong presence evident from staff, volunteer, and stakeholder interviews.
Implementation plan	✓ May need modification as service evolves.
Staff capacity	✓ May need expansion to continue to meet the needs of service users. This is evident from interviews with children, parents, staff, volunteer, and stakeholder interviews.
Organisational support	✓ Strong presence evident from child, parent, and stakeholder interviews and fieldnotes.
Supportive organisation culture	✓ Strong presence evident from staff, volunteer, and stakeholder interviews and handprint evaluations.
Communication	✓ Strong and effective evident from child, parent, staff, volunteer, and stakeholder interviews and handprint evaluations.
Monitoring and evaluation	✓ Continue to include the voice of children in service evaluation and development.
Learning from experience	✓ Strong presence evident from child, parent, staff, and volunteer interviews.
External environment	✓ Steadfast in the community evident from parent and stakeholder interviews and fieldnotes.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The aim of the evaluation set out in this report was to evaluate the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service which serves the community of Ballybeg in Waterford, Ireland. Barnardos commissioned this research to explore the experience and impact of the playground service for children, families, and the local community. The evaluation was conducted using case study research and a qualitative approach was maintained throughout the methodological process. The objectives of the evaluation were:

1. To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the service and what this means / how it has impacted on their lives.
2. To explore parents' experiences of the service and evaluate their perceptions of their child's involvement.
3. To explore how the programme is delivered in order to understand "what works" for children attending the service, as well as potential barriers to achieve service goals and objectives.
4. To examine the culture of the service and its delivery of child-centred, play-based supports.
5. To explore the impact of the service from the perspective of staff and volunteers within the service.
6. To examine the links with the local community and the impact of the service on the local community.

5.1 Overview of findings

The preceding chapters have presented the findings from this qualitative case study research which drew on evidence from interviews with children, parents, Barnardos staff, volunteers, stakeholders, fieldnotes recorded by the researcher and handprint evaluations gathered from stakeholders. Findings indicate that the playground has an exceptionally positive impact on the lives of the children who use it. This is evidenced by the overwhelmingly constructive accounts expressed by the children, parents, Barnardos staff, volunteers and stakeholders who participated in the evaluation.

All the children who participated in the evaluation expressed very positive experiences associated with attending the playground each weekend. Their positive experiences are reflected in the children's desire and requests to have the playground open and available to them on a more regular basis. Play is often defined as the medium through which children learn about themselves and their environment. It is the universal language of childhood, and we know that play facilitates physical growth, social, intellectual, and emotional development for children (Howard and McInnes 2013). The children in this research provided detail regarding the multitude of activities that they engage in from attending the playground. They also explained how they get to choose their activities which is something that the children enjoy very much as it fosters confidence building and the development of self-esteem.

In this research children who attend the service reported feelings of happiness and enjoyment that they get through the play facilitated for them at the Barnardos Playground Service. This enjoyment experienced by the children undoubtedly has a positive impact on the lives of these children and on that of their families. Being able to play and socialise with peers is a significant aspect of having a good and healthy childhood (Barnardos 2023). The Barnardos Playground Service at Ballybeg is a free service available to families and this is a key component to family engagement with the service since the recent cost of living crisis has had a significant impact on families from disadvantaged communities. Recent research by Amarach Research (Barnardos 2023) found that 57% of parents have had to cut back on their children's social and playtime activities so that they could afford energy and food bills. Play orientated services such as the Barnardos Playground Service that do not require payment are substantially impactful on the lives of children whose parents are unable to meet the costs associated with playtime activities.

Growing up in a low-income household or a disadvantaged area brings heightened exposure to risk (Turner 2006). The Barnardos Playground Service represents a place of safety for children to play and relax when they attend each week. Research by Hollywood (2020) found

that a primary concern of parents from disadvantaged areas is keeping their children safe while they play in their local area. Although children in this research were not asked about safety many of the participating children reported feeling safe at the playground which instilled feelings of security, comfort, and relaxation. The issue of safety was also addressed by Barnardos staff who highlighted that the playground service provides a safe place for the children to play. Furthermore, Barnardos staff also emphasised how the local community are protective of the playground since it is recognised as a safe space for children to go at weekends.

A strong ethos of inclusion emerged from this evaluation. Ensuring that families feel included and welcome at the Barnardos Playground Service is a key component to its success. The strength of the ethos of inclusion has transcended the community as evidenced by interviews with stakeholders who all commended the service for its ethos of inclusion and ability and willingness to welcome all families who need or want to avail of the service. For children and families who may be experiencing adversity and trauma, be a member of the ethnic minority community, have special educational needs, neurodiversity / sensory or processing needs the Barnardos Playground Service not only provides much needed support but also acts as a steppingstone for families to engage with other services provided by Barnardos or parallel services within the local area.

The ethos and culture of inclusion is also evident in the way in which the service operates with the child located at its core. All aspects of the service are child-centred from the identification of children who might benefit from attending the service, to the planning and preparation of the play and recreation activities provide for the children at the service to the active seeking out of the opinions of the children who attend the service. Although the service is centred on the child, this focus encompasses the child's family. This approach is a very worthwhile approach for the service to maintain since it is widely accepted and acknowledged through models of care, that the family is the one 'constant' in the child's life (Harrison 2010).

This evaluation has identified that staff and volunteers at the Barnardos Playground Service provide much support for children's emotional needs. Indeed, since the Covid 19 pandemic there has been an increase in children's emotional needs as recognised by survey research conducted by Barnardos (2023) which identified that 64% of parents were concerned about their child's emotional development and 58% were worried about their child's levels of anxiety. Although Barnardos staff and volunteers are very skilled at meeting the emotional needs of the children who attend the playground, it is important that this level of skill is maintained through education and training and / or continuous professional development.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations from the evaluation are:

Recommendation 1	Children highly valued their time and engagement in the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground service. We recommend that subject to funding, the service should be extended so that it is available to children for longer hours at the weekend and on weekdays after school.
Recommendation 2	Barnardos services and the Barnardos Playground service are viewed as pillar services by stakeholders and the local community of Ballybeg, Waterford. The unique Barnardos Playground service is a source of significant direct support for the families who use it. Furthermore, it acts as a catalyst for families to seek additional supports from Barnardos and local voluntary, community, and Health Service Executive (HSE) services. We recommend that Barnardos continue to maintain their presence and level of activity in the community of Ballybeg Waterford and continue to work in collaboration with voluntary, social, and primary care services.
Recommendation 3	Barnardos have established a steadfast relationship with the community of Ballybeg, Waterford and this relationship is based on an ethos of inclusivity. Through the provision of a unique child-centred play service, Barnardos have created a feeling of belonging within the community for the families who use the service. We recommend that Barnardos continue to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in its playground service where each child feels a sense of belonging and where all children's play needs are enabled.
Recommendation 4	The Barnardos Playground service is based on a robust ethos of inclusivity which encourages and facilitates child and family engagement with the service. We recommend that Barnardos maintain this ethos and continue to maximise the range of play

	opportunities available to children, particularly children who have a disability or neurodivergence.
Recommendation 5	The Barnardos Playground service is facilitated and delivered by invested and committed Barnardos staff and volunteers. Children and families who use the service have very positive relationships with the Barnardos staff and volunteers and it is clear that staff and volunteers are committed to operating a child-centred service. We recommend that Barnardos staff and volunteers continue to listen to children and to give children a voice in the design and implementation of the play policies and facilities at the playground.
Recommendation 6	Evaluation and monitoring allow organisations to map resources to services and provides a sound foundation for documenting the process and impact of service provision. We recommend that Barnardos continue to document the processes and impact of change within the service as this will provide vital information for future evaluation and monitoring of the Ballybeg Playground service. Furthermore, it will inform Barnardos of the issues and potential challenges associated with upscaling of the service and replication of the service in other communities of need.

5.3 Study limitations

Although the findings of this study are rich and they provide an in-depth account of the experiences and impact of the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground Service for children, families, and the local community, it is important to remember that there are limitations associated with all research (Polit and Beck 2008, Parahoo 2014) which will now be duly acknowledged.

While the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle was introduced during the data collection process with the staff members, it is evident that more time would be required to implement its use effectively within the service. An example of how this could be implemented on the ground in the future is for each staff member to complete one PDSA cycle per month to address any new issues or concerns and to enable a process that would facilitate a required practical change within the service while simultaneously documenting its impact for evaluation and monitoring purposes.

5.4 Conclusion

To conclude, the evaluation presented in this report has shown that the Barnardos Playground Service which operates in Ballybeg, Waterford is a unique and special service. Through the use of case study research, the hallmark of which is the use of ‘multiple sources of evidence’ to explore the phenomenon of interest, the experiences of children and parents who use the service have been explored and the impact of the service on the lives of families has been recognised. This evaluation has given voice to the children who use the playground service and their families. Furthermore, it has explored how the playground service is delivered and created an understanding of “what works” for the children who attend the service in addition to identifying potential barriers to achieve service goals and areas for further development. Barnardos is Ireland's largest children's charity, and its mission is to transform the lives of vulnerable children through the provision of services to children and families at home, in school and in the community. This evaluation has confirmed that the Barnardos Playground Service is a child-centred and play based service. It has also highlighted the impact of the service on the families who use it and uncovered the links between the service and the local community. Children who use the playground were positioned at the heart of this evaluation which has successfully shed a light on the magic that is the Barnardos Playground Service.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster

Title of research study: An evaluation of the Barnardo's Ballybeg Playground Service.

We would like to know about your experiences of the Barnardo's Ballybeg Playground.

Please take a study information pack from the reception desk if you like to learn more about this study.

Who can take part in this study?

Parents/guardians /children who attend the Ballybeg Playground Service.

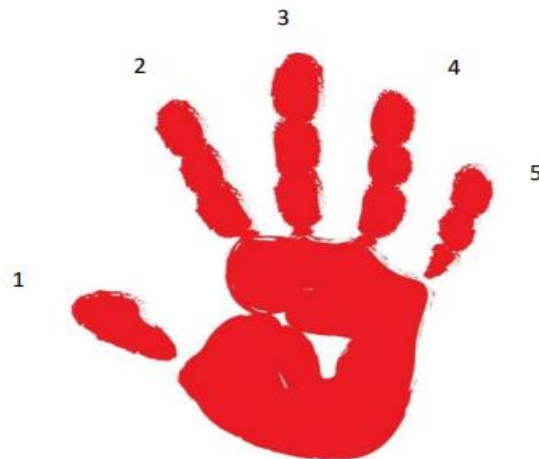
Staff/Volunteers and Stakeholders. .

- ✓ **For children:** some art activities. And a short interview
- ✓ **For Parents/Guardians:** One short interview
- ✓ **For staff/Volunteers/Stakeholders; A short interview**

For more details please take a study pack from reception.

Researcher contact details : hollywoe@tcd.ie

Appendix 2: Handprint Evaluation



Think about the Barnardos Ballybeg Playground Service and answer the following:

The thumb (1): something good, something I really like about the service

The index finger (2): something I learned about my child since they started going to the service

Middle finger (3): I think the service is important to the families of Ballybeg because..

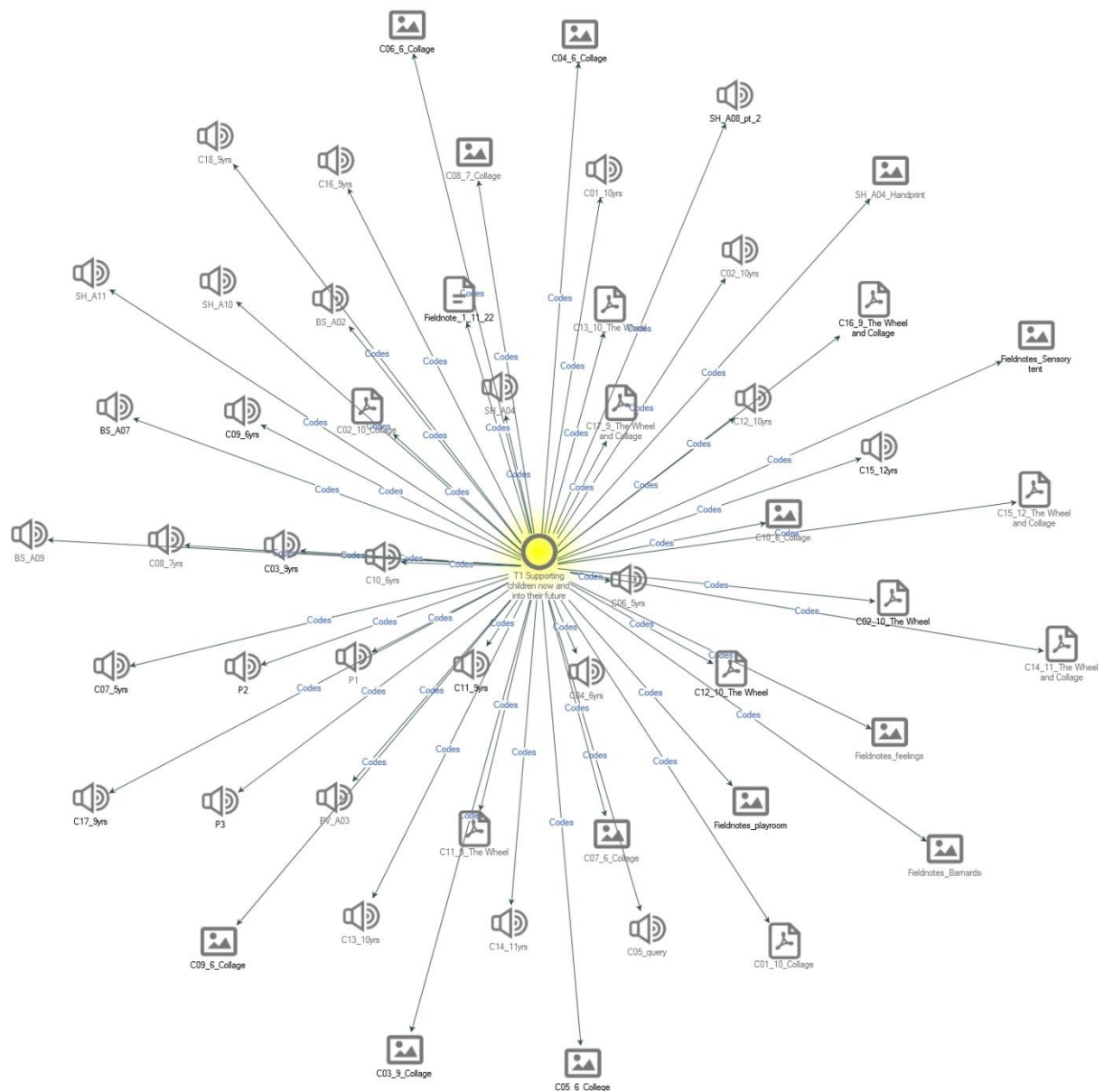
Ring finger (4): something that I think should be included in the service

Little finger (5): something else I would like to say

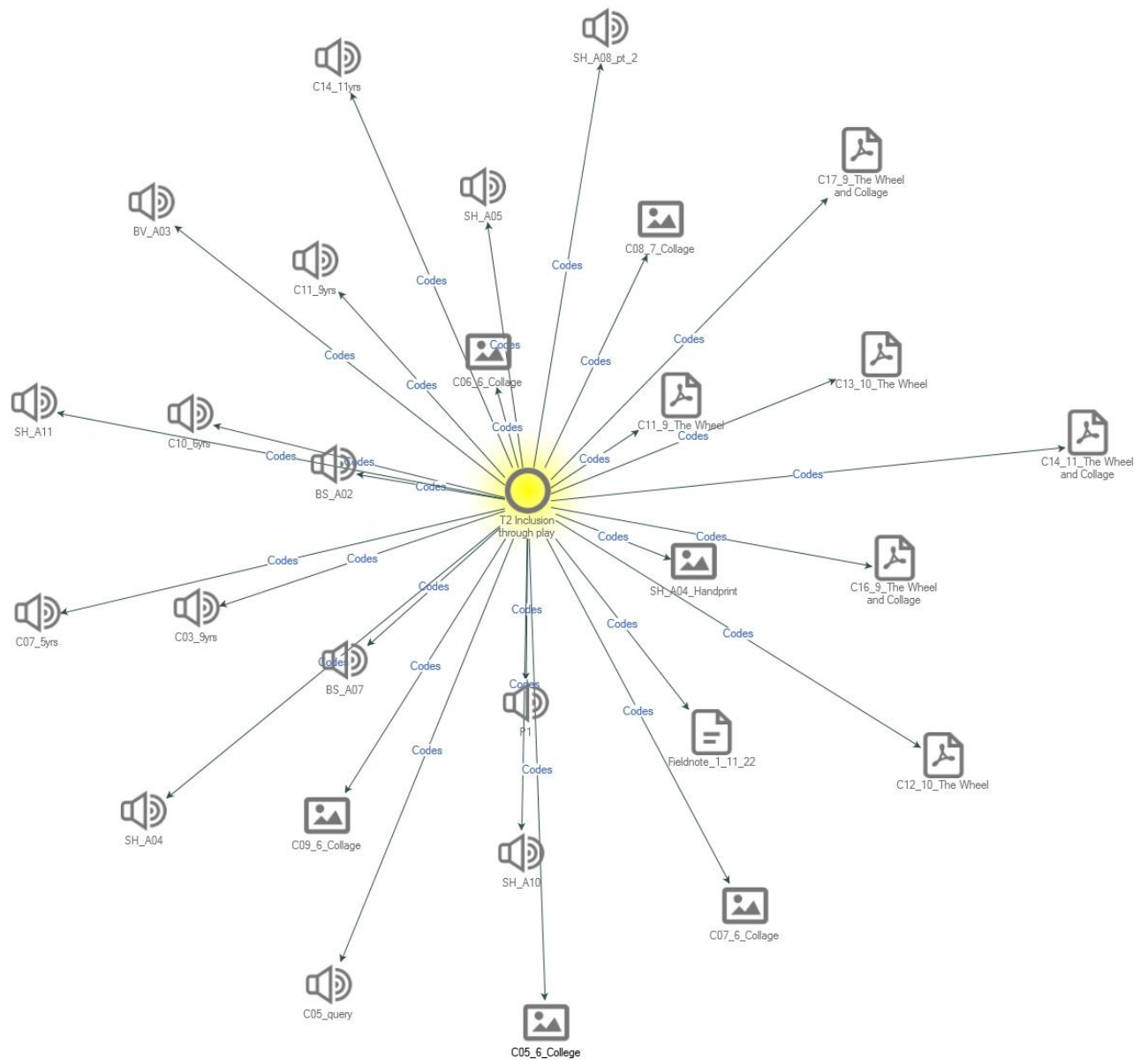
Appendix 3: Themes by Data Source

	Child Interviews	Children's Artwork	Fieldnotes	Handprint	Parent Interviews	Staff and Volunteer Interviews	Stakeholder Interviews
T1 Supporting children now and into their future	58	21	8	1	4	17	6
T2 Inclusion through play	6	11	1	1	7	11	11
T3 Supporting families	6	2	2	1	9	13	10
T4 Invested individuals	3	1	2	0	1	17	18

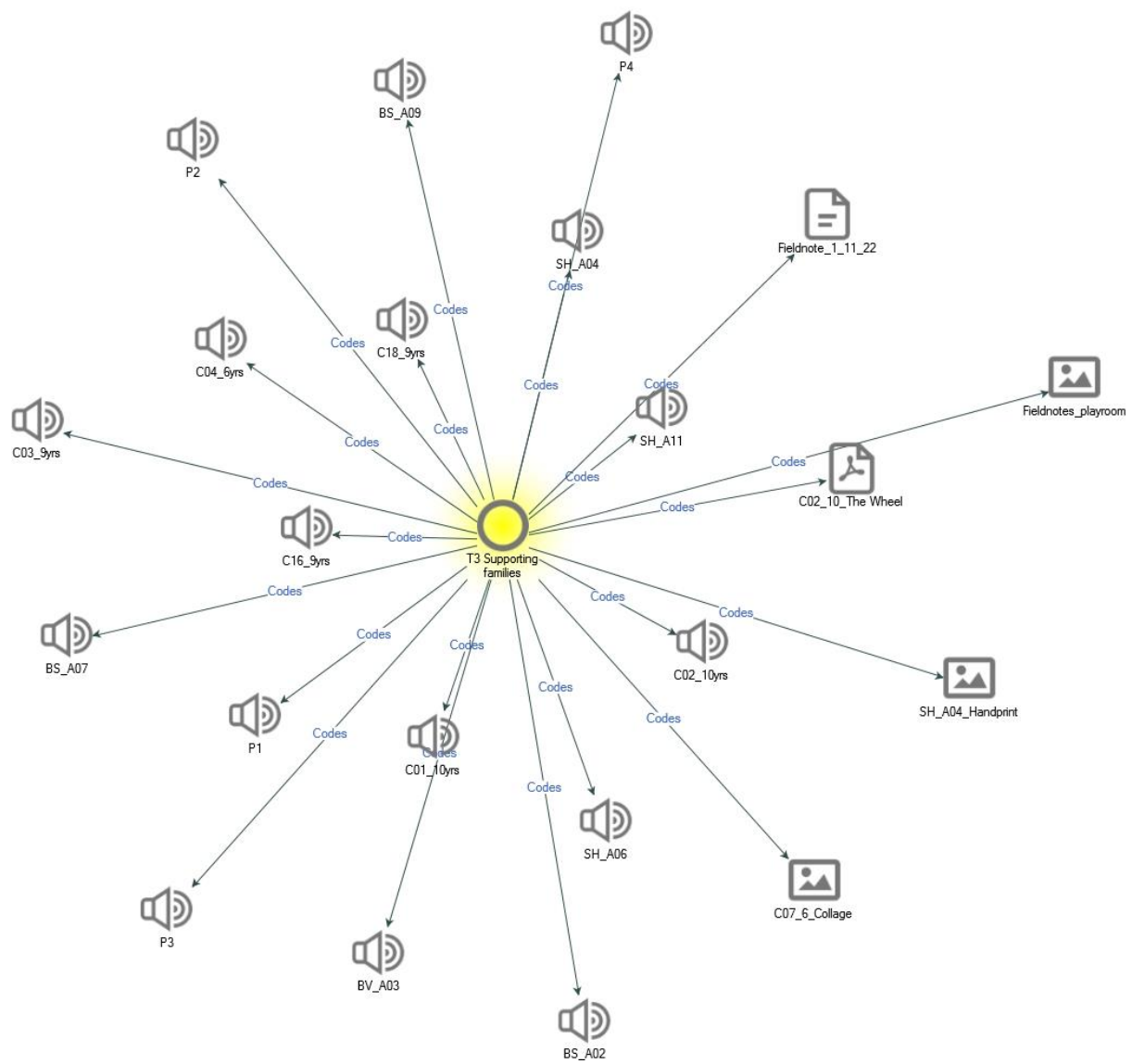
Appendix 4: Theme 1 Explore Diagram



Appendix 3: Theme 2 Explore Diagram



Appendix 4: Theme 3 Explore Diagram



Appendix 5: Theme 4 Explore Diagram

