

From: **Clair Bell, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services**
Simon Jones, Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 11 September 2024

Subject: Playground Early Years Programme

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: n/a

Future Pathway of report: n/a

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary: Playground is a pioneering programme of high-quality creative engagement for babies and young children delivered by the Culture and Creative Economy Service (CCES) and Libraries, Registration and Archives (LRA) working in partnership.

Playground recognises that the first years of life are crucially important for the development of the child's brain, and that the first three years are the most critical in having lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and succeed at school and in life. Playground aims to ensure that all young children and their families in Kent can realise and share their own creativity.

This paper summarises the key achievements of Playground's busy and inspiring period of activity.

Recommendation(s): The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note and endorse this report and make comments to the Cabinet Member.

1. Background and Strategic Context

- 1.1 Playground achieved the prestigious status of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) with Arts Council England (ACE) in April 2023. An NPO is a cultural organisation considered to be of national strategic significance and the status is held by organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, Jasmin Vardimon Company, and Turner Contemporary. There are 16 Kent based organisations in the current Arts Council National Portfolio.
- 1.2 Playground embodies a shared commitment to the United Nations Rights of the Child Article 31 - *All children have the right to access high quality cultural activity*. Playground recognises that this should start from the earliest years when a child is developing most quickly so that the benefits of cultural engagement can have a lasting positive effect on a child's development. [Scientific evidence](#) shows that engagement in cultural activities at this early age gives young people better chances later in life as described in [The Early Years](#)

[Healthy Development Review Report](#). Playground is designed to make a vital early intervention in supporting children to get the best start in life.

“Yes, so the first few times he came he really didn’t want to engage he was a bit shy and quiet and quite reserved and gradually as we have come over the few weeks it’s just built up his confidence. He ends a session by running around bouncing and he’s so happy afterwards, his mood completely changes. This morning before we actually came, he’d had multiple meltdowns at home and then to see him come here he’s a completely different child. It’s just amazing.” Parent attending Family Playground with two young children.

- 1.3 Inspired by the Starcatchers model in Scotland, which is recognised by the Scottish government and across the national and international cultural sector as an exceptional model of innovative early years creative engagement, Playground is a high-quality baby and child-led creative programme that seeks to engage young children and their families, and to develop artists and library staff with specialist skills and understanding of early childhood development.
- 1.4 Sessions comprise of artist led sensory activities which are shaped individually in each session in response to the reactions of the babies and children.
- 1.5 Libraries are an ideal venue for Playground, with their experience of established early years programming and being welcoming spaces that families from all backgrounds are comfortable to access. Playground underpins LRA Ambitions of Enriching People's Lives and Connecting Communities by supporting the service to continue to be very focused on the local community as well as providing a way for the service to enable everyone to access cultural activity in all its forms. At the heart of Playground delivery is transformative activity that supports early development, growth of engagement and social skills which forms a further new way LRA and CCES can support enabling children to get the best start in life.

“It is absolutely brilliant; I really look forward to the session and make a special effort to make myself and baby available. I’ve never seen my little boy so happy. The artists are fantastic, so welcoming and kind and excellent at what they do. When the sessions finish, we really miss them. They have been invaluable. I was even planning my return to work around the days they playground is run as I know how beneficial it is for my little one.”

Playground Parent

- 1.6 Playground supports the ambitions of the Kent Cultural Strategy contributing to its aim to create a place *“where culture becomes a part of everyday life with more people engaging with, experiencing and being inspired by excellent art”*; and delivers on the strategic aim that children are entitled to high quality cultural experiences from the very earliest age.
- 1.7 Playground aligns with Let’s Create, Arts Council England’s Strategy 2020-2030, which has a strong focus on the value and strength of work with, by and for babies and young children.

- 1.8 Liz Moran, previously Director of Arts and Culture at University of Kent is Playground's Creative Director.

2. Playground Progress to Date

- 2.1 Playground's first year as a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) with Arts Council England (ACE) has seen creative engagement with, by and for families with young children develop at a rapid pace.



- 2.2 A range of national and international partners including from Scotland, Finland and Norway are now in place, all with a shared vision and ambition to ensuring all young children have access to the highest quality of creative activity to share with their family.

- 2.3 To ensure Playground engages with and can be accessed by the widest and most diverse range of children and families, alongside our work in twelve libraries across Kent, we offer Playground in three Family Hubs, refugee settings, a diverse range of summer festivals across the county, and, through investment from Rose Bruford College, we work with children with additional needs in Wyvern School and 3 MASH Centres (Multi-Agency Specialist Hubs).

"The security lady said she'd never ever seen the mums and dads like that - together with the children, playful and laughing. It really was joyful. She said, which we found interesting, it's the music, the drums and making music together and remembering together if that makes sense. But to see some of the dads leaping around with their daughters so carefree was an eye opener."
Casey – Playground Artist after a Playground session with Afghan refugee families

- 2.4 The number of Playground artists has increased from 12 to 21 all of whom are actively engaged in a professional development programme developing skills

and understanding of engaging young children and the adults who accompany them. The impact of this is evident from the number of our artists who have successfully secured Arts Council investment to create their own work for early years and gained work with other early years creative companies, whilst continuing to work as part of our Playground team.

- 2.5 Our first “Playground Presents” event was a sound and Light installation (First Light) created for babies by Playground Lead Artist Daniel Naddafy. This took place in Dartford and Gravesend Libraries.

“Thank you for bringing something different and artistic to Gravesend. My baby really enjoyed the experience, and it was a lovely thing for us to do together.”
Parent after attending First Light

- 2.6 Arts Council England national and regional Officers have made frequent visits to observe Playground and in our Annual Review the work was described as “unique and innovative”. They are impressed with the pace of Playground’s development and potential impact and influence on the wider cultural sector.
- 2.7 We take a robust approach to evaluation and work with a professional independent evaluator to assess the impact of all activity and produce comprehensive and detailed research documents that support and inform Playground’s ongoing development. Our most recent report, [Family Playground – Moments of Togetherness](#), drew on both quantitative and qualitative data, with the main focus of the evaluation being the impact on the family.
- 2.8 The evidence shows that the vast majority of parents/carers and their children thoroughly enjoy Playground, and value its welcoming atmosphere, inclusivity and accessibility. 99% of Playground families would recommend Playground to others and their descriptions of Playground are overwhelmingly positive. Words such as engaging, calming, baby led and inspiring were commonly seen as responses and reflect the ethos of Playground well.
- 2.9 As well as overwhelming positivity towards the sessions themselves, Playground is clearly having a positive impact on attitudes towards accessing art for children and babies and on creative engagement in the home. 62% of the participants reported that Playground had changed their views about creative play, and over 4 out of every 5 adults (83.3%) indicated that it had challenged them to engage with their child/children in a different way
- 2.10 The qualitative data provides a rich picture of what Playground means to families and the profound impact it has on relationships. The themes which emerged centralised around the increasing confidence of children and adults to engage in creative activities, the interactions that they experienced both within and between families, and an appreciation of the time and space that Playground provided for this. The proportion of parents/carers who engaged creatively with their children at least once per day rose from 39.6% before Playground, to 59.7% after playground. This supports more anecdotal evidence that Playground is inspiring parents/carers to participate in creative activities more frequently in the home.

- 2.11 The evidence from Playground SEND families is particularly impactful and gives an important insight into the lack of accessibility to art experienced by these families, but also the joy that Playground gives them. Central to this experience was a sense of inclusivity and belonging, and a way of understanding their relationships through creativity.

“The sessions are beautifully constructed it was really overwhelming to watch. Our interventions with children are very clinical, we rarely get the opportunity to sit back & watch the magic of a child in awe & wonder of their surroundings & experience. It is a beautiful opportunity for parents to experience their child’s joy when normally their day consists of meeting the basic care needs & trying to keep their children healthy & safe. It really should be part of every parent’s day.”

KCC Social Services observing Playground session with children with additional needs

3. Looking Forward

- 3.1 Year 2 of our NPO will see even more exciting and innovative developments with the recent launch of the Playground website www.playgroundkent.co.uk With support from Kent Family Hubs we will launch Digital Playground which will include films and podcasts enabling even more families to engage with Playground.
- 3.2 Playground Presents will develop with international work alongside work specially created by Playground artists to tour to libraries and children’s centres. The next tour will take place in November with OvO, a version of The Ugly Duckling from internationally renowned Norwegian dance company Dybwik Dans.
- 3.3 Sector leadership is a key element of the development of Playground. In November 2024 we will bring together local, national and international organisations and individuals who share our commitment and ambition to ensuring equality of access with, by and for very young children and their families to the highest quality of creative activity. This will include exploring how we might collaborate with the aim to influence future early years policy and practice.
- 3.4 A priority is to secure investment for an action research project to evidence the powerful and transformational impact Playground has on families with babies and young children with additional needs. We plan to submit a major project bid to Arts Council to work with families, teachers, artists and strategic partners to create a scalable model of practice igniting significant positive change in the quality of creative learning and engagement opportunities for all young children with additional needs.
- 3.5 We plan to deliver a Playground early years festival in 2026 celebrating the creativity of babies, young children and their families. This will feature a programme of the most inspiring national and international work created for young children and their families. The festival will include an event bringing families, academics, early years practitioners, artists and decision makers

together to increase understanding and awareness of the need for all young children to have access to the highest quality of creative activity. Ultimately the event will aim to ignite positive and powerful change to make this ambition a reality.

- 3.6 Work will shortly begin to develop a five-year strategy and business plan for the future development and sustainability of Playground to inform our next bid for National Portfolio Funding from 2027.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 Playground achieved National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status with Arts Council England in April 2023 providing annual funding of £285,290 (total £885,270) until March 2026. The NPO application includes an additional £20,000 contribution from each of CCES and LRA budgets. Governance of the programme is contained within the revenue budgets of CCES and LRA. ACE is extending the 2023/26 NPO programme for an additional year until March 2027 through a non competitive application process launching in September 2024. There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

5. Data Protection

- 5.1 The existing privacy notice covers the operation of the service and no new data protection issues arise due to the contents of this paper.

6. Equality and Diversity

- 6.1 There is an ongoing [Equality Impact Assessment](#) that covers the programme which is regularly reviewed and widely contributed to. An equality action plan derived from the mitigations identified is an important tool that artists, staff and partners can refer to ensuring Playground is fully inclusive and accessible.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 This report has highlighted some of the key successes and positive developmental outcomes that Playground has achieved in its first year as an NPO as well as the ambitious and exciting plans in place for the next period, all delivered through Arts Council funding.
- 7.2 Playground will continue to provide an innovative, unique and high quality service to give early years children the best start in life. Through the development of a five year strategy, we will explore ways to sustain and develop delivery beyond the life of the current Arts Council NPO funding. This includes an application to the NPO extension year 2026/27 and to the next round of NPO funding from 2027.

8. Recommendation(s):

The Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is asked to note and endorse this report and make comments to the Cabinet Member.

9. Contact details

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