

From: Michael Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services

Simon Jones, Corporate Director Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee

Subject: Playground Early Years Programme

Classification: **Unrestricted**

**Past Pathway of report:** N/A

**Future Pathway of report:** N/A

**Electoral Division:** County wide

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

Playground is aimed at very young children (0-24mths) and their families. Its focus recognises that the first five 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. Scientific evidence shows that engagement in cultural activities at this early age gives young people better chances later in life. Playground is designed to make a vital early intervention in supporting children to get the best start in life.

**Recommendation(s):**

The Cabinet Committee is asked to comment upon the report.

## **1. Background and Strategic Context**

- 1.1 Playground embodies Article 31 of the United Nations Rights of the Child - *All children have the right to access high quality cultural activity*. Playground supports the principle that this should start from the earliest years.
- 1.2 The pilot of Playground co-led by Libraries, Registration and Archives (LRA) and the Culture & Creative Economy Service (CCES) was successfully delivered in 2018/19 in partnership with University of Kent and with investment from Arts Council England. The learning and evaluation from the pilot has informed each step that the subsequent programme has taken, resulting in a programme with a very specific focus on children aged 0-24 months, where there has been a clear gap in provision. Playground now complements other interventions that are already available, for example storytime and baby rhyme time in libraries, which are for older children.
- 1.3 Inspired by the Starcatchers model in Scotland, which is recognised as an exceptional model of innovative early years creative engagement nationally and

internationally, Playground is a high-quality creative programme for families with very young children that, through artist led creative play, strengthens communication, child development, and parent-child bonding; whilst also developing the skills of artists and library staff and enhancing their understanding of early childhood development.

- 1.4 Playground responded directly to the impact of COVID lockdowns felt particularly keenly by children. It secured £200,000 of investment from KCC's Reconnect programme and leveraged a further £50,000 from Artsworld Bridge organisation to support delivery of Playground as part of the Reconnect 'Learning Missed' theme from summer 2021 to summer 2022. Playground underpins LRA Ambitions of Enriching People's Lives and Connecting Communities by developing a service that increasingly focuses on the local community with a deeper understanding of what is needed to shape services to reflect community need. It supports libraries' aspirations to be accessible creative and cultural hubs for Kent communities.
- 1.5 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, and has particular reference to libraries as key to the delivery of the strategy. From the pilot phase onwards, Playground has so far been successful in securing £138,000 of Arts Council England funding, including a successful application to Arts Council England in May 2022 for £85,000 to support the current phase of Playground delivery from June 2022 to March 2023.
- 1.6 Recognising that learning begins from the time that babies are born, Playground's development was designed to reach families from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds, particularly those with babies born during lockdown who have been significantly affected by the pandemic with no or limited social contact other than with their immediate families. This identified a particular need to target those lockdown babies as Playground was developed beyond the pilot phase.
- 1.7 11 artists were selected to work in Libraries and Children's Centres with mentoring from highly experienced artists and professionals to develop the artists' understanding, creative skills, and confidence in working with young children and their families. Weekly artist led sessions for up to 10 babies (per session) age 0-24 months took place in twelve Libraries and six Children's Centres across Kent from November 2021 to June 2022.
- 1.8 Working alongside Libraries and Children's Centre staff, the artists aimed to empower parents and carers of very young children with the confidence and enthusiasm for sustained creative engagement with their children.

*"I think it has helped some parents and guardians see what they CAN do with their children, at home and in the session, as opposed to what they thought they COULDN'T do. Playground offers those, especially in deprived areas, things that they wouldn't normally have access to, while also showing them what's possible at home to help stimulate and bond with their baby." (Library Staff Member)*

- 1.9 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.
- 1.10 The LGA invited submission of a [case study](#) on Playground for their website, and Playground is featured in their Early Years Library/Family Hubs report as an example of good practice.
- 1.11 Playground co-leads are Sarah Bedingfield (LRA) and Lucy Keeley (CCES). Liz Moran, previously Director of Arts and Culture at University of Kent, was appointed as Playground’s Creative Director on a freelance basis in July 2021.

## 2. Playground Progress to Date

*“Playground is an example of genuine community engagement practice for our youngest children and the adults who care for them. This initiative demonstrates the importance of giving babies and their grown-ups the opportunity to participate in positive, rich, shared experiences that bring joy and inspiration as part of early childhood experiences. Coupled with the innovative approach that the artists are taking in developing and delivering Playground, it is clear that a new model of creative engagement for the very young is emerging in Kent and there is much we can learn from the work that is taking place” Rhona Matheson, Starcatchers*

### Playground in Numbers: summer 21 to summer 22

311 Playground sessions were delivered across 26 weeks

12 libraries and 6 children’s centres in Kent were involved in the project

In total there were 1537 visits by children aged 0-2 years

In total there were 1665 visits by adults

The majority of babies were aged between 3 and 15 months



The youngest Playground attendee was just 7 days old!

- 2.1 Supported through Arts Council England project grant investment, Playground for babies aged 0-24 months is currently being delivered in twelve Libraries and two Children's Centres through to March 2023.
- 2.2 Playground artists are also working in partnership with the KCC Refugee Resettlement Team and delivering Playground sessions for Afghan refugee families currently residing in a hotel in Canterbury. Playground does not rely on verbal communication and can therefore be easily accessed by families for whom English is not their first language.
- 2.3 An additional £148,310 has been secured through Reconnect to support further Playground activity which will be delivered from January 2023 to March 2023 as part of the Reconnect programme. This will include:
  - the creative engagement of families with young children with complex needs including SEND,
  - support for families whose children are approaching the start of formal education through activity in Libraries and childcare settings,
  - developing our work with Afghan families; sharing and celebrating their culture and supporting their resettlement into Kent communities and linking them to their local library service.
- 2.4 £20,000 has been secured from Royal Opera House Bridge to support additional Playground activity in Swale from January to March 2023. Our learning and experience to date has demonstrated the need to review the age range of Playground as the development between 0-24 months is so rapid and the needs of a two-year-old are very different to a one-year-old. The investment from ROH Bridge will enable us to introduce Baby Playground (0-18 months) and Playground (18-36 months) in Sheerness Library and a new Playground venue Sittingbourne Library. In addition, we recognise the value of shared learning and creative play within families and will introduce Family Playground sessions in both locations.
- 2.5 We take a robust approach to evaluation, and work with a professional independent evaluator to assess impact of all Playground activity, to produce comprehensive and detailed research documents that support Playground's ongoing development.

### **3 Looking Forward: National Portfolio Status**

- 3.1 Kent Libraries and Playground has recently been successful with an application to become an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation 2023-26. This provides core funding of £285,290 per year for three years from 2023 and enables delivery of:
  - Baby Playground for children aged 0-18 months
  - Playground for children aged 18-36 months
  - Family Playground for 3 and 4-year-olds
  - Playground for children with complex needs

- Expansion of the Playground(ing) professional development programme for artists and library staff
- An artist exchange programme working in partnership with Starcatchers (Scotland), The Spark Arts (Leicester), and Graffiti Arts – BEAG (Ireland),
- The development of a national Early Years Network in partnership with these organisations which will champion the importance of early years strategy, the development of artist practice in this field, and the commissioning of new work with, by and for very young audiences with a view to increasing and sustaining creative family engagement.
- Development of Playground resources, digital and physical
- A new baby and children’s festival across Kent Libraries in 2025/26

#### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 An allocation of £80,000 per year (for 3 years) has been identified as KCC match for the total ACE NPO investment of £855,970. This comprises £40,000 cash and £40,000 in kind contribution split equally between LRA and CCES and contained within existing resources

#### **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 The existing Equality Impact Assessments underpinning the breadth of the service’s work apply to the work and roles described in this paper.

#### **7. Recommendation**

**Recommendation(s):**  
The Cabinet Committee is asked to comment upon the report.

#### **8. Contact details**

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