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# Our Opinions Matter: an Action Research Project with Parents and Children in the Canal Communities: Final Report

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**‘Our Opinions Matter’**

**Action Research Project with Parents and Children in the Canal  
Communities**

**Final Report To  
Canal Communities Partnership  
2008**

**Prepared by**

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The Bluebell, Inchicore, Islandbridge, Kilmainham and Rialto Partnership Company,  
trading as Canal Communities Partnership

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## ***Foreword***

Development of meaningful and effective supports for parents and children is an important focus in the work of the Canal Communities Partnership (CCP). In 2006, the CCP brought together statutory, community and voluntary agencies working with parents and children across the Canal Communities Area to explore the range of supports available to parents. In the course of these discussions, the question arose about whether what was on offer was helpful and if it was meeting parents' needs. It was also identified that there was a need for an integrated approach to be taken by the services offering this support. Consequently it was agreed that in order to determine how to best support families living in the Canal Communities Area they needed to be consulted.

To oversee this consultation process, a steering group which included representatives from Rialto Family Centre, Rialto Community Drug Team, Inchicore Community Drug Team, Fatima Regeneration Board, Local Drugs Task Force and CCP was established. This Steering Group felt strongly that the consultation process needed to be about directly hearing the voices of young children and parents living in the Canal Communities Area. It was envisaged that a research project using participatory action research methodology would give a true 'voice' to those being consulted. The Centre for Social and Educational Research was subsequently then commissioned by CCP to undertake the research using this methodology.

The research is timely and important for a number of reasons. It has given an opportunity for children and parents to talk about the important issues that impact on their lives. It outlines their experiences of living in the CCP area, their needs in general and specifically those needs they feel are not being met. The report articulates frustrations from parents about their voices not being heard and opinions not being valued about the developments within their communities. A wide range of issues are raised in this report including safety, adequacy of housing and accommodation, play areas, access to childcare and access to employment.

The report emphasises the huge level of need which exists within the canal communities' area. It identifies that ongoing effective communication with residents needs to be established in order for services to successfully address parents' needs. In this report a model is proposed in which services and residents work in partnership to ensure the effective flow of information within the Canal Communities Area. It is expected that if this model is adopted it will inform strategic planning and service development. In addition the issues raised will be brought to the attention of policy makers.

The initial discussions for this work focused on whether, the supports on offer were helpful and meeting the needs of children and parents. Through the research, parents and children have enlightened services to the complexity of the issues impacting on family life, that can prevent or make it difficult to access supports including parenting support programmes. The key learning from this research identifies the importance of taking families needs into account when designing support programmes for parents and children. This poses particular challenges in the context of a changing economic climate.

The Steering Group hopes that this study will lead to communication channels being further developed between residents and community, voluntary and statutory services to address the issues raised. It will work towards the creation of an accessible forum for children and parents to communicate their ongoing needs.

*Research Steering Group  
September 2008*

### ***Acknowledgements***

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- Noirin Hayes, Jonathan Ilan and Sinead Kelly, CSER Dublin Institute of Technology, for their comprehensive, detailed and committed work in preparing this study.
- All Parents and Children who gave their time so willingly to assist us in hearing their voices.
- All schools, crèches and community groups who happily opened their doors to assist the research team.
- The wider group of community services which was actively involved in promoting the topic of family-work and whose work resulted in the establishment of the steering group.
- The Rialto Family Centre, Fatima Regeneration Board, Rialto and Inchicore Community Drug Teams and the Local Drugs Tasks Force for willingly making their staff available to take part in this project.
- The study steering group – Olivia Carr, Barbara Coates, Catherine Dowling, Lucy Harrington, Tina McVeigh, Sharon Moore, Vicky Probert, Claudia Vulont – for all their work in supporting and steering the project.
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## ***Introduction***

This report details the collaborative action research conducted by the Centre of Social and Educational Research (CSER) on behalf of the Canal Communities Partnership (CCP). Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has been adapted to achieve two principal aims:

- i. Gathering limited qualitative data on the experience of parenting and childhood in the Canal Communities Area, through hearing and reinforcing the views and voices of the relevant residents.
- ii. Building on the experiences and opinions of young children and their parents in the Canal Communities Area to develop a model of meaningful communication between the CCP and its clients on an ongoing basis.

This research is the first step of a process through which the CCP as agency and various residents as members of the community can work in partnership to ensure the effective flow of information to better inform current strategic planning and promote continued, effective communication. The content of the report provides data as to the manner in which young children and parents in the Canal Communities Area (CCA) experience their lives and the needs which they feel are going unmet. The report goes on to probe the manner in which members of the communities communicate with the CCP and considers the degree to which meaningful *Partnership* can be actualised through a collaborative approach to addressing the articulated issues of young children and their parents in the locality.

### ***1.2 CSER Profile***

**CSER** is a well established research centre located within the Faculty of Applied Arts, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). It is an independent research centre, dedicated to supporting the improvement of the quality of life of families and children in Ireland and the communities in which they live. Established in 1997 the Centre has a strong track record of research on early childhood care and education (ECCE), social care/alternative care, juvenile justice, contemporary youth and children in the information society, work patterns and family structure. It is the Center's view that quality research involves ongoing consultation with those most affected by the research. A key objective of projects is the inclusion of the voices of those directly affected by the issues under study and the incorporation of their input into research findings and recommendations. Since its establishment, participatory research has been a core goal of the Center's research. Research teams within the centre conduct participatory research with children and their parents on an ongoing basis. The CSER is dedicated to a rights based approach to research.

### ***1.3 Executive Summary***

**1. Introduction & aims:** The report details research conducted by the Centre of Social and Educational Research on behalf of the Canal Communities Partnership, gathering data on parenting and childhood and developing an effective communications model between the partnership and community on an ongoing basis.

#### **2. Methods:**

- The innovative Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach has been adopted to involve a cross-section of the community in expressing their experiences and needs as parents and young children and to participate in an ongoing process of communication and consultation.
- Sampling was achieved through collaboration between the researchers, the research Steering Group and various local agencies and was designed to ensure cross sections of community voices are represented.
- Initial research with parents took the form of focus groups and individual interviews involving approximately 33 parents of children under twelve years of age, contacted through services they attend.
- Initial research with children between the ages of three and six was facilitated through the innovative 'Mosaic' approach, a combination of focus group, interviews, drawing, mapping and constructive play.
- High ethical standards were maintained throughout the research and with one notable exception the names of participants and Canal Community Areas have been omitted to protect anonymity.

**3. Parenting in the Canal Communities Area:** A variety of differing experiences of parenting were expressed throughout the Partnership's catchment area, roughly corresponding to different geographic and demographic distinctions. There are furthermore, a number of experiences and needs that were articulated across the board.

#### **Parents across the Canal Communities Area:**

- Comment on the challenges of parenting and demonstrate resilience in response.
- Access different services from childcare to adult education and express their approval of them. There are identifiable sections of the population which this study did not have the scope to consult who are recognised as attending no services.
- Utilise informal supports such as friends and family for the bulk of their childcare needs.
- Express the need for more and better maintained playgrounds for their children.
- Express the need for 'after hours' childcare services for the periods following the closing of schools and crèches. The lack of such services seriously inhibits the degree to which parents can seek services, education and employment or become further involved in community development.
- Express the need for more recreational and sporting facilities for adults.

- Express dissatisfaction at the level of support afforded to voluntary initiatives and community development campaigns organised by community members themselves without the involvement of outside, professionalized entities.

**Parents in pre-regeneration flat complexes** express particular concerns relating to the physical conditions of their area and its levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, which they say restrict uptake of available services. They express further concern at the management structures in place at both municipal and community development levels. They call for improvements in the condition of their area and the accountability of those in leadership positions around it.

**Parents in regenerated flat complex** express issues less immediately concerned with the physical conditions and security of their area. They question rather the over-zealous management of anti-social behaviour they believe to prevail and cite further the volume of traffic and procedures in certain local schools as causes for concern.

**Parents in Bluebell** (in consultation with its residents and other relevant participants it was decided to name this area specifically) report that the area suffers from particularly low levels of service provision and community development. They report particular shortages in available childcare as well as problems with estate management, crime and anti-social behaviour.

**Parents from the new communities** report that due to having little or no extended family living in the country cannot to the same extent access informal sources of parenting support and childcare.

**Young mothers** are said to have particular needs bearing the responsibility of raising their own children whilst remaining young people themselves.

**Fathers** report on some occasion feeling a sense of discrimination with many parenting services being geared towards mothers, and child services and the legal agencies seemingly inclined to defer to female parents.

**‘Granny carers’** report the difficulties of returning to full time caring in order to prevent their grand children from entering the care system having already raised families of their own. They do this without any additional state support: financial or otherwise.

#### **Contextualising Comments:**

- There is a perceived tension in many accounts between the quality and affordability of services for children. It can be a financial struggle to access commercial sources of childcare and leisure.
- Participants speculate that barriers exist preventing the take up of services by certain local parents including: lack of confidence, distrust, language issues, internalised exclusion, local social and kin divisions. Outreach work is posited as a means of overcoming these barriers.
- There is a tension around the ‘targeting’ of services to those with particular issues such as drug use or offending behaviour to the exclusion of provision on a more general basis.

**4. Young Children in the Canal Communities Area:** expressed a preference for dramatic play activities in educational, peer and community settings, which is standard for the stage of development of those consulted. A number of the young participants exhibited an awareness of surrounding levels of anti-social behaviour and violence; others recognise the danger represented by traffic levels. They illustrate their social world through drawings and cite a desire for safe play and recreational spaces.

There is a strong resonance between the children's expressed wishes and those which their parents hold for them.

#### **5. Communication:**

- The vast majority of parent participants consulted feel that they are not heard in the context of community development.
- The Canal Communities Partnership as an organisation does not enjoy particularly good brand recognition within the community, with participants confused as to its location, role and membership.
- Participants demonstrate a preference for communicating with agents with whom they have built a positive relationship of trust, and question the manner in which certain agencies manage information and complaints, citing examples of perceived breaches of confidentiality and lack of due process. They seek advocates within the field of community development.
- Involvement with community activities and services and informal networks of friends and family are the prime means of receiving information around available services and community development issues. There is disagreement over the effectiveness of posters and newsletters.

#### **6. Communications Model:**

- A model is proposed based on consultations with the various parties to the research which provides a mechanism for the community's voice to be amplified by the agents of community development and is in accordance with the principles of CBPR.
- The first tier of the model comprises of a **Parenting and Childhood Reference Group** which would conduct information between members of the community and the agents of community development.
- The **Parenting and Childhood Inter-agency Network**, a further tier of the model facilitates service providers and agencies to share information in an open manner which includes representatives of the community.
- The CCP Steering Group is recognised as the ideal body to facilitate the application of the model.
- It is recognised that actualising the model will be challenging, but there is a need to involve people from the Canal Communities in the development of their own locality and build their capacity to do so increasingly in the future.

## ***2.1 Research Aims***

Through a process of collaboration between the CSER researchers and a Steering Group of the CCP, the specific aims of this research have been refined as follows:

- To gather robust qualitative data and conduct rigorous and detailed analysis of the expressed views of identified groups of participants in the Canal Communities Area, specifically:
  - The parents of children under 12 years of age
  - Young children between three and six years of age
- To focus on the experiences of these parents in relation to the specific areas of parenting supports, adult education and personal supports.
- To focus on the experiences of these young people in relation to their wider school, peer and family lives and use of services.
- To analyse the existing communication that exists between the CCP and these specific residents and through adapting the philosophy of CBPR, developing a model to listen effectively and promote community voices.
- To promote active consultation with community residents and active community participation in the production of knowledge for official use.

## ***2.2 Methodology***

The ‘Our Opinions Matter’ project is notable in the context of Irish community research for its employment of principles derived from the innovative Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model. More than a set of practices, CBPR is a philosophy for research which seeks to redress the power imbalance inherent in traditional modes of inquiry (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). This is achieved through transforming ‘subjects’ into ‘participants’ in a literal sense of the term: active collaborators in all stages of the research from design to publication, and emphasising ‘action’: generating tangible benefits for those participating in the research (see: Israel et al., 2003). The specifics of CBPR are considered in greater detail below. The model is well placed to achieve the aims of the ‘Our Opinions Matter’ project: gaining an accurate picture of the needs of parents and young people in relation to education and support in the Canal Communities Partnership area, through recognising that:

- i. Community members are the ultimate arbiters of their experiences of parenthood and childhood.
- ii. The research merely channels knowledge that pre-exists in the community.
- iii. Facilitating the articulation and communication of community needs in an organic fashion, thus contributing to the empowerment of research participants.

This section further sets out the manner in which the Canal Communities Partnership (CCP) as funders of the research, the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) as researchers, and the members of the community as true participants have collaborated in order to produce this report.

### **2.2.1 Community Based Participatory Research**

CBPR has emerged in the field of public health as a progressive means of researching 'hard to reach' populations (see generally: Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). In this context it is seen as a means towards addressing the difficulties faced by participant communities: social, cultural and economic marginalisation manifesting in below average health, through a collaborative research process which 'turns problems into issues' (Minkler & Hancock, 2003: 148), and utilises the partnership to produce solutions. Israel et al., (1998) have set out a number of principles which define CBPR as it is generally understood in the field of public health (Reece & Dodge, 2004: 238):

1. CBPR recognizes community as a unit of identity.
2. CBPR builds on strengths and resources within the community.
3. CBPR facilitates collaborative, equitable partnerships in all phases of the research.
4. CBPR promotes co-learning and capacity building among all partners.
5. CBPR integrates and achieves a balance between research and action for the mutual benefit of all partners.
6. CBPR emphasizes local relevance of public health problems and ecological perspectives that recognize and attend to the multiple determinants of health and disease.
7. CBPR involves systems development through a cyclical and repeated process.
8. CBPR disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners and involves all partners in the dissemination process.
9. CBPR involves a long-term process and commitment.

The degree to which a piece of social as opposed to health research can fit into this model will be considered below. The application of the CBPR approach in social research is innovative but there is much to recommend it as a tool in this form of research.

First, local community knowledge increases our understanding of the complex interactions among economic, social, and behavioral factors that contribute to disparities and, therefore, should inform the design of interventions aimed at reducing these disparities. In addition, there is a gap between the knowledge produced in research and practiced in these communities. Finally, members of these communities are increasingly reluctant to participate in research and are organizing to monitor and/or prevent such activities<sup>1</sup>.

Thus CBPR can be deployed to examine issues of parenting and childhood in the Canal Communities area in such a way that local networks are accessed to form focus groups in which research questions can be developed and local knowledge expounded. This has produced data that is faithful to the experience of residents. The research directly feeds back to local service providers generating potential tangible benefits for participants through initiating a community-focused process of communication with state and voluntary agencies operating within the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Community-Based Participatory Research. Conference Summary, June 2002. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Rockville, MD. <http://www.ahrq.gov/about/cpcr/cbpr/cbpr1.htm>.

### **2.2.2 Adapting CBPR for Social Research in the Canal Communities Area**

It has been recognised that the CBPR model identified above will not apply universally across sites and topics, indeed ‘no one set of community based research principles is applicable for all partnerships’ (Israel et al., 2003: 59). Rather there are a number of problems which must be addressed including: defining community, defining the terms of the research topic, defining the terms of ‘partnership’ and ‘collaboration’ and allocating tasks and responsibilities (Israel et al., 2003). The specifics of this particular research project provide ready solutions to some of these issues, whilst leaving other issues which must be resolved in collaboration with research participants. Consideration must first be given to the characteristics of this project, which differs in many ways from the American public health studies in which the CBPR model has been developed.

Firstly, the bulk of CBPR projects have tended to be funded by state agencies removed from the immediacy of the community and detached somewhat from the issues at hand. This project, however, is funded by the Canal Communities Partnership, a community development agency seeking to facilitate the improvement of services to parents and young children. As such the funder has become a central collaborating partner to the research, stating its requirements and concerns along with connecting the researcher to service providers who can provide access to research participants. A Steering Group consisting of CCP coordinators and local service providers was formed with the purpose of ensuring that the research reflects their data needs. The steering group thus lend their particular ‘assets’ (see: Minkler & Hancock, 2003) to the process: knowledge of the data that is required to refine service provision in the area and knowledge of suitable field sites and participants to approach.

Secondly, this research project operates under a tight time-frame: September – December 2007 and there is, therefore, no opportunity for the researchers to become directly involved in a process that is long-term, cyclical and iterative. This should not however, be seen as defeating the potential for effective CBPR. One of the stated requirements of the CCP is a communications model that will facilitate meaningful collaboration between agency and community going forward. The CSER researchers thus initiate a process of CBPR to obtain a limited amount of data and set in place a paradigm of interaction that posits responsibility for disseminating the supplied results, generating positive change and maintaining the cyclical nature of the collaboration process between agency and community with these parties, and the CCP research Steering Group in particular.

Thirdly, the Canal Communities Area encompasses a wide range of geographic areas and demographic types: effectively several different communities. This research must abandon embeddedness in any one particular community for the sake of gaining a clear picture of the relevant issues across different groups.

Fourthly, community participants must be actively sourced. This process is mediated by the CCP and their service provider members through collaborative process of initial research design. ‘Participation in all stages of the research does not mean that everyone is involved in the same way in all activities’ (Israel et al., 2003: 63). The process might be understood as a necessary step which identifies likely community participants who, through an iterative forum process set out below, become actively

involved in collaborating with the CCP in facilitating local residents to articulate their experiences and needs to service providers and agencies. It is recognised that true community participation and consultation render needs assessments accurate and effective, through guiding the research from an experiential as opposed to speculative perspective.

Thus with some modifications specific to this research, Community Based Participatory Research can be used to achieve the goals of this project, through facilitating a more organic and precise means of needs assessment than would otherwise be available.

### **2.2.3 Designing the Research**

As alluded to above, the design of this research has been premised on collaboration with different partner groups, each of which brings its own particular strengths. The CCP steering group in collaboration with the researchers have defined two broad target participant groups:

- i. Parents/carers of children below 12 years of age
- ii. Children between three and six years of age

Positioned as they are at the nexus between municipalities, state and community, the CCP is best placed to define the type of data that is required for the purposes of improving service provision and attracting further resources to their catchment area. In addition, this collaboration has produced a list of participant categories and localities to guide a selection of research participants that would form the next layer of partners in the research design.

#### Participant Categories:

- Working mothers
- Parents on community employment schemes
- Stay-at-home parents
- Granny carers
- Fathers
- Parents who access no services
- Parents with addiction issues
- Parents from new communities
- The children of these various participants

#### Geographic Sub-divisions:

- Bluebell
- Inchicore - St Michael's
- Inchicore - Upper
- Rialto - Dolphin
- Rialto - Fatima
- Rialto - SCR

It was agreed that key service providers within each sub-division would constitute field-sites in which client members of the community would be approached to

participate in the research. Field-site selection was calculated to ensure an even spread of geographic areas. Six separate sites, along with suitable contingencies, were agreed between the researchers and CCP, which represent a sample that cover as many of the above participant categories as was possible within the limited research period. This collaborative research design process furthermore yielded a strategy for engaging participants in the research and a number of topics that are important to both researchers and funders.

Initial contact was made with service providers to ensure the suitability of the field-site to host collaborative research design meetings, focus groups and individual interviews with adults and children. Once this was established, arrangements were made to introduce the researchers to potential participants who were invited to discuss the goals and topics of the research and contribute their narratives and opinions. The overall sample achieved reflected a variety of parents and children throughout the CCA in terms of geographic area and identity group. In total 33 parents and 27 children participated in the research. The parents consulted through the general services were overwhelmingly females between the ages of 20 and 35. Special effort was thus made to interview fathers, young mothers and ‘Granny’ carers.

#### **2.2.4 Applying Adapted CBPR**

The active involvement of community participants in the development of the research agenda is facilitated through both the design and underlying philosophy of the research sessions. Research with the parent groups was organised to encompass four distinct functions:

- i. *Consultation on research design*: Initial contact with the community residents in each field site doubled as an opportunity to inform them of the terms of the research and to secure their input in identifying the key issues for them and their opinions on direction of inquiry.
- ii. *Focus Group Interview*: Based on these identified issues and suggestions, the researcher facilitated a recorded group discussion. Further topics of interest to the research and Steering Group were introduced to supplement the group’s organically selected issues.
- iii. *Individual Interviews*: During the group sessions, invitations were issued for participants to step forward for involvement in one-on-one qualitative interviews, which are further calculated to elicit a response that is natural to the respondent and not simply the manifestation of the researcher’s brief (see: interview schedule at end of report).
- iv. *Recruiting for Reference Group*: Through involvement in the combined research process above, individual participants may be approached to join the proposed reference group.

#### **2.2.5 Ethics & Representation**

This research received ethical clearance from the Dublin Institute of Technology Committee on Ethics. All participants were informed of the terms of confidentiality under which the research operates, of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage, and the researchers made themselves available to answer any queries. In working with the young children the highest standards of ethics were adhered to, including obtaining written consent from parents. All formal interviews were preceded by a formal agreement which set out the terms of the research and

confidentiality associated with it, ensuring that all participants made informed consent.

Ethical treatment of participants goes beyond informed consent and extends to faithfully representing the accounts offered. Care was taken to ensure that the data featuring in the section below accurately represents the input of participants. To this end, where views are expressed as general, this is where there has been genuine consensus, whereas more specific group and individual opinions are marked so.

## ***2.3 Researching with Children***

This section of the report outlines the methods utilised to consult with children between the ages of three and six in the CCA. In a manner similar to the sampling of parents, the young people were contacted through relevant local services with parental consent to participate secured in all cases.

### **2.3.1 Mosaic approach to data collection**

A mixed method of data collection was used in this research with the aim of hearing the voices of young children in the CCA within the overall findings of this report. The Mosaic approach is a multi dimensional method of data collection which ‘starts from the premise that gathering young children’s perspectives is an essential part of working with young children, not an added extra’ (Clark & Moss, 2005:73). In addition to this Clarke and Moss advise the researcher that they should start with the expectations that; young children are knowledgeable about their environment, have important insights to give and that young children can express their opinions if they are given an appropriate medium in which to do so (2005:73). Observation and child conferencing are the tools used within the mosaic approach and within this research child conferencing takes a lead role. In addition to this, mapping, tours of the community and photography can also be utilised which aim to ‘play to the strengths of young children, methods which are active, accessible and not reliant on the written or spoken word’ (Clark & Moss, 2001:12). When using the mosaic approach the researcher should allow for the child to be given both time and opportunity to express their opinion in a variety of ways. The approach is more than a data collection tool, it is a ‘bridge for adults and children to view perspectives together, to discuss and negotiate meaning’ (Clark & Moss, 2005:76).

### **2.3.2 Child conferencing**

Talking with children is an important part of the mosaic approach. Within this research, semi structured interviews focussing on family/community life, school and peers were conducted in both individual and focus group format. The semi structured interviews are conducted in a conversational format in which the participants are requested to answer the researchers’ questions in both a verbal and visual way through creative play, maps or photography. Semi structured interviews were conducted with each participant of the study through individual (one to one) questioning or through focus groups. These interviews were used to gather facts, assess beliefs about facts, identify the participants’ feelings and motives and elicit the children’s rationale for situations (Manion & Cohen, 1994). Using mixed methods when interviewing children the researcher can form a ‘living picture of what being in this place is like for these children’ (Clark & Moss 2001: 12).

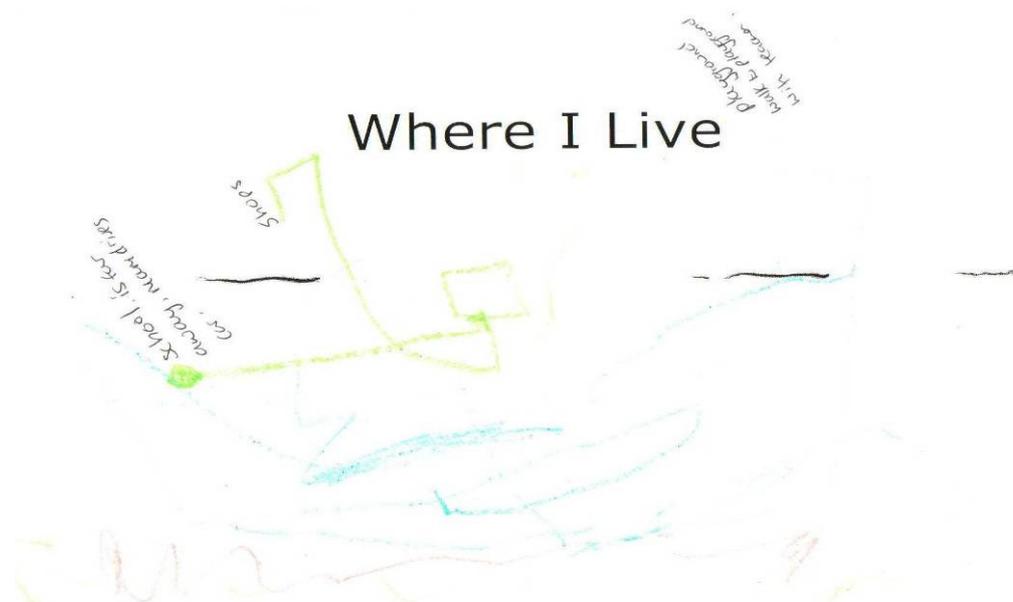
- **Semi Structured interviews**

Participants are asked a series of open ended questions relating to home/community life, school and peer relations. The questions are based on what the child likes; does not like and would like to do or change. When conducting research with young children one should be aware that the questions that the interviewer phrases may not be the questions the young child wants to answer, the researcher should motivate the participants to ‘take the lead in expressing their own experiences and concerns and take time to allow them to find a comfortable medium through play and talk (Moore, Sixsmith & Knowles, 1996:6). During the interview process the researcher is

acknowledging the child is the expert on their own experiences and the extra dimension of play allows the child to transmit their opinion in a clear and succinct way.

- Individual interviews

Individual interviews with children were conducted within two field sites. The child and the researcher sat within the play area at a sectioned off table. The child was given paper and crayons to draw pictures of their experiences while the interviewer asked questions relating to the participants family/community, school and peer life. Each interview lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes, however this varied depending on the child's developmental level and ability to concentrate. It was found that similar themes emerged from these discussions in comparison to the focus group meetings. Although one hypothesis put forward by Mauthner (1997) would classify individual interviews as being for older children within this research it worked exceptionally well and children's opinions were sufficiently gained. If the child's peer group were engaging in alternate activities in the room they were free to wander over to peers and then return to the interview. Children's responses, verbal and visual were probed to elicit additional information from the children. Moore Sixsmith & Knowles (1996: 7) remind the researcher to recognise that a non responsive answer or an 'I don't know' can mean 'I don't want to say' or 'I don't know how to say', and in turn the researcher should rephrase the question, and observe how comfortable the child is with the interview process. These interviews were conducted on an individual basis due to a language difficulty as these participants were either speaking English as a second language or had developmental language barriers. As the individual interview is a more private setting than the group interview, it allows the child to expand on feelings and opinions in an unrushed and unpressured environment, Greig & Taylor (1999). In the picture below, child 13 went into great detail about their home and community and put across their opinion about where they can play at home and in school in detail.



- Focus Groups

Focus groups were used within four field sites, with groups of between five to seven children. The children were asked open ended questions, as was the case in the

individual interviews, regarding family/community, school and peer life. Each focus group interview lasted approx thirty minutes, with the children given the opportunity to play creatively with crayon or construction blocks to aid their verbal answers. The added dimension of play within a focus group setting ensured the researcher was able to gain insight into individual children's perspectives. Focus groups can be an unnerving environment for the child and to counteract this, the researcher encouraged the children to take part in 'ice breaker' songs before the interview was conducted and the children were encouraged to speak as openly as they wished. 'Let's pretend' questions were posed for future tense scenarios such as: 'let's pretend you're a builder, what would you build on your road?' Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2006) find this style of interviewing particularly useful with young children as it aids in developing the children's responses as well as holding the participants attention.

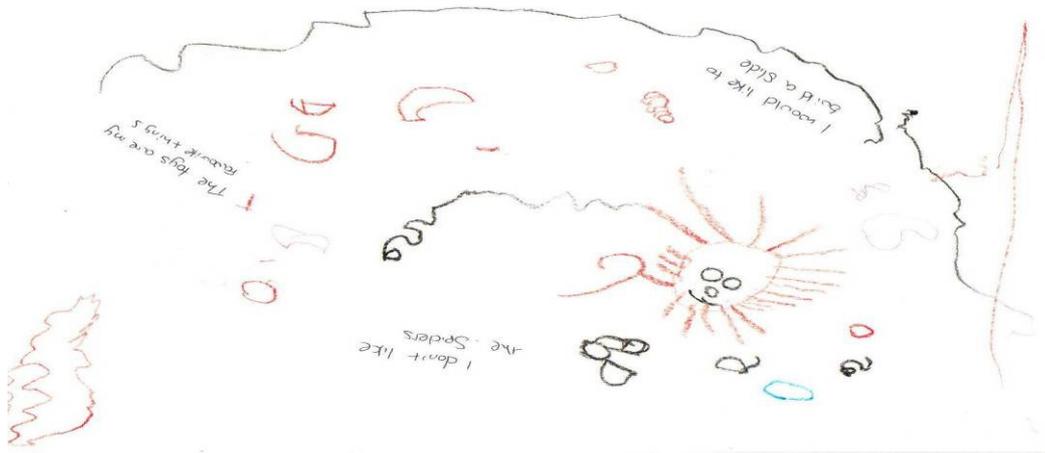
Each group varied but ranged from between four to seven participants. The focus group format works well with children who have limited confidence as it encourages open and frank discussion (Greig & Taylor, 1999). However focus groups do have drawbacks and one observed main drawback observed was a "group effect" described by Greig & Taylor (1999) as being where one voice is heard more than others, either through one child who is naturally more expressive than others or through children repeating the answers of others. This occurrence was monitored by the researcher and when children were observed to be repeating the responses of other children's questions, the subject was rephrased to ensure results were accurate and valid. In addition to this time is an issue within the focus group format as one is aware that the individuals within the group have a limited concentration span, (approximately twenty five to thirty five minutes depending on age range). One should allocate a set amount of time per topic to ensure that each subject is given ample opportunity to be discussed.

### **2.3.3 Drawing & Constructive Play: Visual listening**

Within this research the children's age range, from three to six years, presented the researcher with a question, how do we hear the voices of children who are not yet fully verbal? This was answered through the use of drawing and construction play. The aim of this method was to firstly gain insight into children's opinions through the use of play methods and secondly to ensure children's imaginations and interests were engaged during the questioning. During the interviews participants were asked to develop their answers using play tools such as drawing or building. Following an interview question the children were invited to draw/build their answer and then explain their piece to the researcher. Within two field sites the children were asked to build their answers using construction blocks. The child then explained to the researcher what their piece was about and then the child took a photograph of their work. When using creative play activities within a research setting the researcher should be aware that they may over interpret a drawing or observation, to counteract this the child should be probed into the meaning of their work using open ended questions such as: 'what is happening in your picture/building?' This type of questioning can empower the child as well as giving them the 'freedom to express views, imagination and interpretation of the surrounding world in their own terms' (James, 2000: 140).

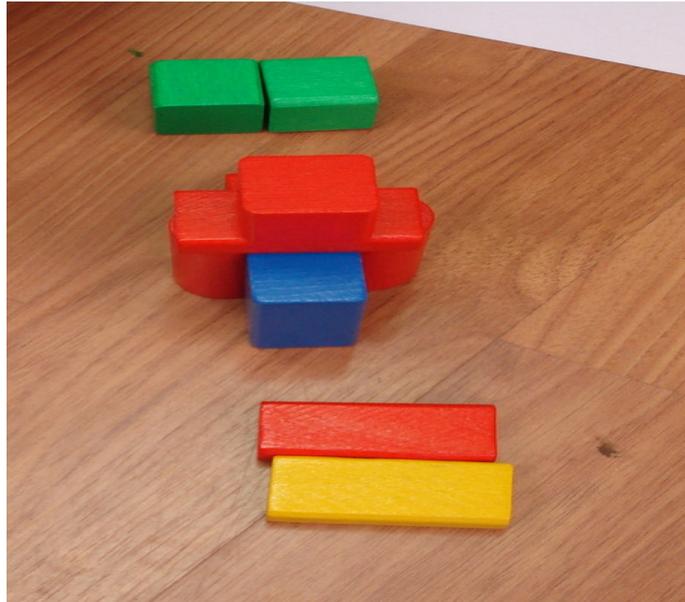
- Drawing

This method of data collection was well received between the individual and focus group participants with only two children refusing to comply; these two children chose to answer questions verbally. Children were given approximately ten minutes to complete a picture and explain to the researcher the meaning behind their representations. Einarisdottir & Wagner (2003) describe children's drawing as a way of thinking using the hand, pen and paper. Drawing interpretation however should only be completed by the child as an adults view of a piece can vary from the thoughts the child was trying to evoke. The drawing below completed by child 5 looks to the adult eye about a picture about the children's poem "Insey Wincey Spider", however following discussion with the child one discovers that the child has represented the toys she enjoys playing with in her school, how she does not like the spiders in her classroom and how if she made a wish she would build a slide in the school yard to play with.



- Constructive play

Constructive play was used within two field sites to gain insight into children's thoughts and feelings regarding their school, home/community and peer life. This form of data collection is very similar to the drawing activity however it can give an extra dimension to children during the conditional form of questioning, such as what you would want to build, do etc. This method of eliciting thought proved effective however children's focus needs to be frequently brought back to the topic of conversation as the new experience of block play can split children's concentration from the topic at hand to "building". In addition to this it was found that it was best to ask each child what the blocks represented as they were building their pieces as children's representations of their opinions often resulted in looking like towers. In the construction piece below completed by child 26, they built an area in which children can play leap frog. As with the drawing representations for this form of questioning to be successful the key to achieving meaningful results is probing the participants about the relevance of their work.

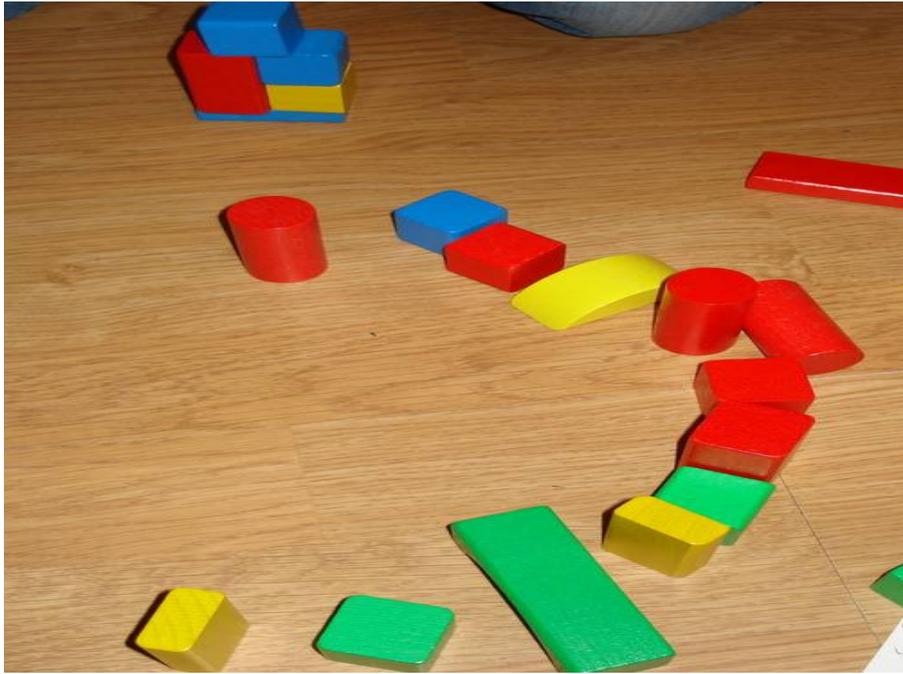


- Map making

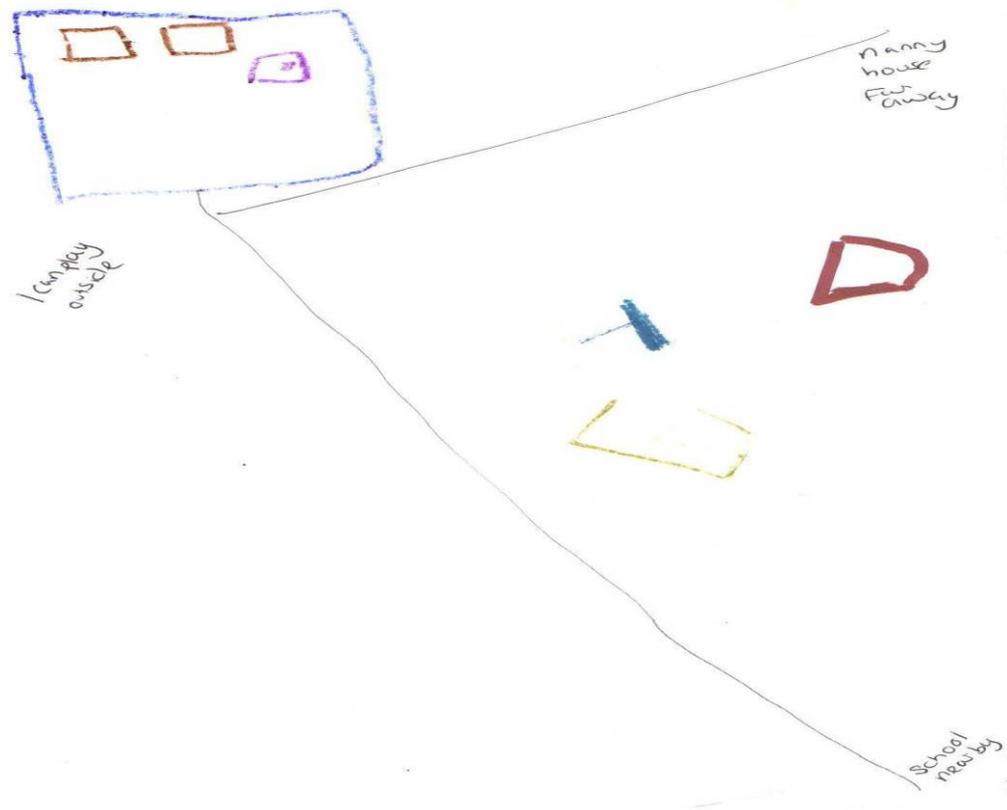
During the interview process the participants were asked to represent significant places in their lives through map making. Acknowledging the children as the experts of their own experiences, the researcher asked the children to draw where they lived and make a map to places where they go every day, like to visit or would like to go. The children were then probed into aspects of their drawing to ensure the researcher could accurately interpret the children's opinions. The maps provided insight into places that were of most relevance to the children in terms of where they go to every day and where they would like to go if they had a choice. Clark as cited in Lewis (2004) describes map making as a risk, a 'try and see' approach, as the 'spatial awareness demanded in map making is not generally associated with 3-4 year olds' (Lewis et al, 2004:159). The map making was particularly beneficial with the children in the four- six year age range who had the developmental ability to link the concept of a map to the questions posed to them and visually represent their answers on a page.

Drawing maps gave a fantastic insight into how the children involved in the research saw their world. Each child was asked to represent what they see on the way to school, to friend homes or to places that they go on the weekend through the form of drawing or constructive play. The mapping activity allowed the participants to reflect on all the areas in their lives that are significant to them due to frequency of visits, such as school or preschool or places of interest that evoke positive feelings such as peers/relatives homes.

Child 20 below builds an intricate road, with each block representing a separate place such as their home, shops, homes, builders, and traffic with the final building being a representation of his grandmother's home.



Child 2 below draws their map showing simply the block of flats, with their flat highlighted, and two roads one leading to where they play and one leading to their grandmothers home. Additional buildings featured include their school, their after school facility and the shop.



Both maps featured here show clearly indicate where these children's priorities lie, and the use of mapping was clearly able to translate these feelings into concrete thought.

**Summary:**

This research has been based on a CBPR philosophy, which seeks to emphasise the role of young children and their parents in the CCA in consultation over unmet needs and community development in their locality. The next section of the report sets out the data gained through the first stage of the research, while the following section describes the manner in which the residents of the CCA and the Partnership communicate. Through a continuous process of communication and the building of community capacity to respond to issues identified that the requirements of ongoing partnership and tangible change which are demanded by CBPR are realised.

### ***3. Parenting and Services in the Canal Communities Area***

Having regard to the terms and collaborative development of the research, the following section articulates the voices and opinions of parents in the Canal Communities Area (CCA). The participants, having been accessed through existing services, universally express approval for the centres they attend. Their responses, however, highlight a number of outstanding needs and issues both general and specific to their locality and identity. Furthermore, on analysis a number of general issues arise relating to contradictions within individual narratives and through cross comparison of testimonies. Overall, the parents tended to refer principally to the service needs of their children, especially childcare, seeing this as a principle block to taking up education and employment opportunities they identify exist locally. The vast majority of parents consulted and interviewed were female, thus the needs of fathers constitute a separate sub-section. There are considerably different issues emerging from 'regenerated' and 'pre-regenerated' areas, and unique concerns voiced by 'Granny' carers and foreign nationals resident in the district. In order to maximise the confidentiality of participants, the specific areas in which they were consulted are generally not cited in this report. The area of Bluebell is identified specifically, as it appears to be under-serviced and in particular need of support in community development. Ultimately, it would seem that there is considerable complexity involved in assessing the needs of the parents of young children in the Canal Communities Area.

#### **3.1.1 Parenting in the Canal Communities Area**

There are aspects of parenting that are similarly articulated by all of the participants. Parenting is a universal aspect of the human condition, which is undoubtedly experienced in both positive and negative terms but which overall brings fulfilment and joy to the vast majority of individuals. When given the opportunity to speak to a sympathetic listener, however, parents may use research participation to 'unload' and there can thus be a tendency to frame the experience of raising children as a challenge:

'The easiest thing (about parenting) is when they (children) go to bed; the hardest is when they wake up. It's hard to keep them entertained and do all other things, you know?' (M 28)

The level of challenge, however, varies according to social and individual circumstances and the level of supports, both formal and informal, available to parents and their children.

'It can be hard 'cos sometimes you are alone, without any family members here, and you can't... we all have phones and computers and everything but that's not it, you want information, the child is sick, what do I do now? He's sick! And you need people around you, and people who have kids your own age ... For me personally, most of the things (she can do) would be in the mornings, when he is in crèche. For me the afternoons, the evenings, it's absolutely impossible. And it would be possible, but I want to sort of be part of the baby's upbringing, not to be a good night mummy' (F 36).

The parents report furthermore, that despite the challenges, they tend to ‘just get on’ with their tasks as parent despite the difficulties they experience, indicating a high level of resilience. This should not however, be taken as an indication that the present level of service provision is sufficient. As will become clear later in this section, the experience of living with socio-economic disadvantage exacerbates these difficulties, rendering the services provided by state and voluntary bodies increasingly important, and the gaps in service provision increasingly grave.

### **3.1.2 Existing Services**

Participants across the board tend to express approval of, and gratitude for the services they and/or their children access, which include: schools, crèches, parent and toddler groups, drug treatment centres, men and women’s groups, young mothers’ groups, youth centres and homework clubs<sup>2</sup>:

‘The group is great for me. I can meet lots of my friends who I just meet in this group. I can sit even for one hour a week. It is for me, you me, a long time ... At the group we can get a lot of information about crèche for example, I found out about the crèche she is at from group, for example [group volunteer] gave me all the information, all the application forms. Because it is difficult even for me to find something, you know, I didn’t know about crèche in the area. Because even in crèche they told me I had to wait one year maybe two year, and when I told them that I am from this group it was quicker’ (F 29).

Services for parents provide vital supports: information about other services, occasionally access to childcare, a break from constantly attending to their children, and adult education, which in turn allows them to advance their careers and move away from dependence on social welfare. Across the board, participants have cited the services through which they were contacted as catalysts in the improvement of their lives. Participants in various field-sites have favourably compared both the quality and quantity of services available in the CCA to various suburbs in which they were previously resident. The parents expect certain standards in what is available for their children. Those who express dissatisfaction around particular schools and crèches add that they moved their children out as soon as was possible. As will be discussed later in the report, however, there is not an even distribution of quality services within the CCA itself.

The parent participants recognise that services for young children, such as they exist, visibly improve behavioural and educational development, though some parents have noted their peers expressing concern at the ‘different approach’ professional childcare workers take to communicating and disciplining young children:

One mother talks about how her friend did not want to put her child into the crèche. She was perturbed by the sort of language the workers used when tending to the children, for example, they wouldn’t tell a child she was being ‘bold’, but being ‘silly’. The participants laugh when one of their number recalls an incident where she shouted at her child. The child responded with a phrase she had picked up in the crèche: ‘you shouldn’t talk to me like that,

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<sup>2</sup> The benefits of Homework Clubs in the area of Rialto have been set out in previous research, see: (Skehill, 1998).

even if you are cross'. They agree there is a big difference in the manner in which young people are treated in the crèche than they would be in the flats and note that this has had a powerful effect on them. One child who had difficulties with speech has become more fluent. Another who would never eat fruit is now very fond of it, likewise with a child who did not like milk. 'It brings them along great'. Another participant has a child with ADHD who after crèche will sit down and listen. It has prompted a huge transformation. Kids are also said to really enjoy the experience the activities, songs etc. The parents talk about how the kids have turned around in the way they speak to their parents: 'don't roar at me', coming out with very adult sounding phrases and 'big words'. The parents speak about the valuable social mixing ground crèche is for their children (extract from focus group notes).

Services to parents and young children thus perform crucial functions in terms of developing cultural capital, actively challenging socio-economic marginalisation through allowing both groups to avail of educational opportunities to a greater extent.

### **3.1.3 Education & Employment for Parents**

Participants across field-sites discuss the benefits they have gained directly from participating in education and/or the employment market. In particular field-sites parents are observed to have progressed through Community Employment Schemes, adult education and training. From a community development perspective, this indicates a key potential for parenting and childhood service providers in accelerating capacity building amongst community residents, enabling them to progress in employment markets and/or to work directly in the improvement of their own areas. Certain participants have cited Community Employment Schemes as an ideally flexible and manageable combination of employment and training, taking place while their children attend school and crèche. Other participants have described them as 'something to look forward to', a welcome break from attending to children and the home. One group of participants similarly describe their participation in a training scheme as 'something for ourselves', emphasising the degree to which so much of their time is spent caring for others. Education and employment contribute to a sense of independence:

'I have to work ... The most important thing is that I can earn. I can do something for my future, even for example like a pension. Even because, I don't know, I would like to be with my husband until the end of my life but, if we one day will be divorcing or something, I will not have a pension probably, I won't have any money. This feeling like I am doing something for my pension and if I am leaving, I will find a job more easily because I won't have a break' (F 29).

As will become increasingly clear through this section of the report, the dearth and affordability of childcare particularly outside of schools and crèches are cited by all as a significant factor which prevents them from making further use of the opportunities available.

### **3.1.3 Formal and Informal Supports**

In particular, the much mentioned lack of after-school care for young children creates the need to rely on family and friends to assist in childcare on a day-to-day basis.

These informal networks must be seen as the principal source of support to the majority of residents consulted. Participants from across the field-sites report utilising various relatives to collect their children from school or providing supervision while the parents attend regular courses or attend to various tasks. A number of the participants state, however, that they must be sparing in their requests. Their relatives have families and jobs of their own in many cases and a balance must be struck.

‘If I would have a problem I would talk to friends from here about the problem. That would be the first group I would go to and ask. The girls from here, some of them having been living here in this area for a long time and they seem to know everyone in this area, so you can go to them if you have any problems and they are very helpful in that sense. If you have any problems you can always ask’ (F 30).

Informal networks are cited as a primary source of information on issues ranging from children’s health, the quality of various crèches and schools, and the availability of various educational and other services. Indeed, informal networks are often more effective than formal organisations (Mancini, Martin & Bowen, 2003: 324) in providing the support sought by parents.

Thus the parents consulted across the CCA favourably cite the performance of both ‘formal’ service providers and ‘informal’ networks of friends and family in supporting them in the difficult task of raising their children. There are nevertheless a number of unmet needs within the area, which will be considered further below.

### **3.2 Expressed needs throughout the Canal Communities Area**

Whilst there are a number of service lacunae for parents and young children in the CCA which are specific to their area of residence or identity, those which present generally are set out below:

#### **3.2.1 Provision of Playgrounds<sup>3</sup>**

‘It’s like a desert here, nothing. There needs to be a sandpit, good facilities, there is no place to bring my children; it’s a big problem. The playground, in the winter it is closed, on the bank holidays it’s closed’. (extract from focus group notes).

Parents across the CCA are concerned about the lack of suitable, well maintained playgrounds for their children. This situation compounds an already difficult position, not only is there a lack of childcare, but also a shortage of non-commercial activities that parents and young children can use together. In a flat complex undergoing regeneration the parents consulted raised the following issues:

There is nowhere to send their children, no playground, as such, the children are forced to manufacture leisure in the streets and ‘wind up getting up to mischief’. They say that there is provision for a playground in the regeneration

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<sup>3</sup> Creating a ‘child-friendly environment’ in which to play is a priority under The National Play Policy (National Children’s Office, 2004).

plan, but do not know where it will go, or even if there is going to be sufficient space. The main space for young people to use is a square of black tarmac, which the young people must give up when the older ones want to play football (extract from focus group notes).

In a flat complex which has not as yet been regenerated the parents report that the newly installed playground has been destroyed by vandals. In another part of the CCA, parents complain that such playgrounds as exist are unusable due to the presence of broken glass and needles, or dangerous structural features which have not been repaired despite repeated requests to Dublin City Council and local TDs. Overall the parents express concern that the needs of young children are not being heard at an official level, nor that decisive action is being taken.

### **3.2.2 Provision of After-school/crèche Childcare; Recreational Facilities for 0-6s<sup>4</sup>**

‘You want to go to a class and give it your all, but you can’t if there is nowhere for your kids’ (extract from focus group notes).

Across the CCA, parents report that the only time they generally have available for a range of activities including: working, studying, shopping and attending services, is the morning while their children are attending school or crèche. Admittedly the overwhelming majority of parents consulted are primary care givers and would, in some cases, have partners who are employed full time. Others, however, report that they have the additional task of caring for partners with physical disabilities. The limited duration of childcare available draws a definitive boundary on the options available to the parents of young children in the CCA, and can place them under increased stress:

‘I do have to run out of the CE scheme down at lunch time, grab the baby out of school, run her up to the club, or run her up to the homework club, run back to work, get someone else to collect her. It’s chaos. It’d be handy if there was just something there to keep them busy and keep them happy. It’s very, very hard, you know juggling around, you know, you have to juggle: what time is she off school at? She gets half days, and its even harder, you know, half-twelve ... My day is bringing the child around, collecting her from school, bringing her here and there, dress her for this club, dress her for that club. That’s my whole day’ (M 26).

A group of foreign born women, who constituted a focus group, make comparisons to their countries of origin in Eastern Europe where schools provide a wide and varied after-school programme, run by parents and teachers on a voluntary basis. Indeed, a number of the participants consulted consider those existing services for young children as somewhat limited in both duration, frequency and in the quality and nature

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 - 2010 is a major programme of investment in childcare infrastructure. €575 million has been allocated to the 5-year programme, including €358 million for capital investment. It is anticipated that the programme will create up to 50,000 new childcare places, with the objective of assisting parents to access affordable, quality childcare’ (www.nco.ie).

The argument has been made that the majority of this funding is capital for the building of centres for younger children.

of activities on offer. There are homework clubs that in some cases accept infant age school children. A number of different parents express disappointment that there are not more sporting and recreational services provided for their children, there can be a focus on homework and sedentary activities such as 'colouring in' to the neglect of pursuits that the children might find more exciting. The activities made available during the year are compared to various summer groups, which are said to organise excursions which are said to appeal greatly to the children. Another participant in another area complains that there is nothing available that is not physical, which does not suit her child who prefers less active pursuits.

There is a concern expressed by various different participants that much of youth service provision excludes their children, either due to their young age, with much of what is available targeted at pre-teens and teenagers, or indeed due to the 'targeting' of 'bold boys' or the children of those attending drug treatment. This will be discussed in further depth at a later stage. Evidently, a balanced approach to the provision and availability of services to young people is desirable in order to offer the maximum benefit to both parents and children.

### **3.2.3 Provision of Recreational Facilities for Parents<sup>5</sup>**

The parents consulted generally spoke in far greater detail about the service needs of their children as opposed to their own educational and recreational needs. Many of the participants engage in some form of education or training. It often took some effort on the part of the researcher to draw them into speaking about their needs as people. Those attending groups valued the experience of having time to themselves. Women's groups reportedly provide their members with a number of health, relaxation and beautification opportunities, other groups have become so ad hoc through lack of funding that it is often just the opportunity to sit with peers and enjoy a quiet cup of tea or meal.

They say that apart from their group, they are attending a leadership course, there is not a lot available for adults in the area: a computer course and women's group. The women's group is cited as an important resource, the women have an opportunity to have some time to themselves that they cannot obtain in their busy lives (extract from focus group notes).

Men's groups reportedly provide opportunities to fish and provide a forum for its members to discuss their lives. Both types of group provide an opportunity to draw support from one's peers, and are a nexus point for service providers to provide information about further services and educational opportunities. Both mothers and fathers, however, comment on the lack of publicly available sporting facilities available to them. Concern is expressed at the manner in which some allegedly public amenities restrict access to those who are not resident in particular flat complexes, or refuse to allow community/individually organised participation, insisting on the paid professionals as intermediary agents.

### **3.2.4 Provision of Funding and Support for Voluntary Initiatives**

Other issues that arose in consultations throughout the field-sites are the lack of investment in services for young people and parents, and boundaries to establishing

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<sup>5</sup> It is not immediately clear which state body is responsible for adult recreation facilities.

organic support structures from within the communities themselves. There was widespread alarm expressed at a recent Government decision to cease paying the staffing costs to community based childcare organisations for parents who are not in receipt of social welfare.

It has shaken their sense of stability around arrangements for their lives:

‘What’s to stop fees going up again?’

‘I’m just trying to get on with my life’

One mother is sending her child to school a year earlier than she would like to, she is in work and college and could not afford to pay for fees. She wonders whether she has to give up college. Another mother is finishing up her C/E scheme; again she cannot afford to pay the fees.

There is a general sense amongst the women that the government were ‘not thinking’ and that this could have a wide ranging effect on how they live their lives. They say that they are ‘being pushed into poverty’, being ‘punished for working’ (extract from focus group notes).

It would appear that there has been a certain retraction of this decision<sup>6</sup>. The parents in the CCA generally report that they consider themselves secondary on the agenda of governance to economic and infrastructural development and that there is a greater need for investment in services for them and their children. In particular, in a number of different field-sites it is reported that when the participants themselves have attempted to organise events, clubs and services, they have on many occasions received no funding or support:

‘A load of what’s here in these flats is run by people from around here’. They look for funding and support (for example for a disco for young people) ‘it’s like talking to the wall. People aren’t listening’. They are still waiting to hear back about insurance for this disco project. ‘They put a brick wall in front of you every time and it’s not fair on the kids, its all for the kids.’ One of the parents says that ‘there’s a lack of opportunities for us to do something positive around here. There’s dedication, we are willing to do the work, but no one is hearing our voice’ (extract from focus group notes).

Universally across those participants consulted there is the feeling that there are insufficient facilities for young children, limited childcare services, a lack of recreational facilities for themselves, and a lack of will to fund these sorts of initiatives or support attempts by community members to organise within their areas. There are furthermore specific issues which have been raised pertaining to the particular identity of participants and the areas in which they live. These are described below, a number of the issues raised may also apply in a wider context and may reflect simply the variety of participant attending focus groups in a particular area, this will be stated explicitly where this is the case.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘The tiered system of charges which will operate in community childcare facilities mean that:

- Parents on social welfare will receive a €100 a week subvention for childcare, up from €80 a week;
- Parents on Family Income Supplement will see the benefit increase from €30 a week to €70 a week;
- Low income parents who are above the threshold for the supplement will receive €45 a week.’

O'Brien, Carl, *Further funding announced for community childcare*, The Irish Times, 19/12/07.

### **3.3 Categories based on Geography**

This section of the report considers the differences in the articulated needs of young children and their parents in the CCA, based on the particular area in which they reside.

#### **3.3.1 The Flat Complex Pre-Regeneration**

The group consulted in a larger flat complex within the CCA which has not been regenerated as of yet, express concern at the manner in which their estate and local services are managed. They articulate a general sense of unease and suspicion, making the point that the following difficulties both impact greatly on the quality of life in the complex and the upbringing they wish to give their children. The testimony of these residents often addresses issues of community management as opposed to development and support. This, nevertheless, highlights a desire to be supported in developing the capacity to participate meaningfully in local decision-making and action. At certain points, furthermore, the respondents' accounts highlight some resentment of the heightened levels of service provision in areas where regeneration has occurred at a more accelerated pace<sup>7</sup>.

**Crime / Anti-Social Behaviour** is the primary concern cited by these participants. Parents report that they cannot allow their children out to play on account of the crime. There are fears for their safety and thus they are confined to home when school finishes.

The residents feel very powerless to deal with the problems of crime and anti-social behaviour and feel that their voices on the issue aren't being heard. They refer back to a period when their kids could be let out to play in the flats, but say that things have changed completely and gotten to the stage where this is not possible in any way. Participants state that after six pm the flats become dominated by gangs of young men, hanging around, selling drugs, intimidating elderly residents, robbing cars, robbing the washing off lines, cutting down washing lines. This continues until the early hours of the morning. It is described as an 'ongoing problem'. The police are said to drive through during the day when there aren't any of these issues going on: 'the police pass by'; 'nothing is being done, Dublin City Council are doing fuck all!' They add that when complaints are made, confidentiality is compromised through the identity of the complainant being relayed back. I am told that the estate manager doesn't want to deal with real problems, is only interested in 'living a quiet life' and that: 'he/she talks down to you, laughs at your complaints, wouldn't be bothered about doing anything for you. One of the women counters that there are community employees starting who will deal specifically with anti-social complaints. There are wardens they are only on duty during the day (extract from focus group notes).

The provision of security is tied to notions of urban regeneration, combating the perception that control of an area has been ceded to criminal elements and fostering the stability necessary to focus on other facets of community development (Karn, 2007). It can thus be difficult for these parents to feel a sense of progress and

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<sup>7</sup> This issue highlights a need to reflect on the degree to which urban renewal in Dublin occurs on a piecemeal basis, and in particular the role played by philanthropic as opposed to nationally applied policy initiatives.

development in their community. Fear restricts the mobility of both parents and children, limiting their abilities to take up services, as well as creating heightened stress and generally lowering their experienced quality of life.

The **Management of the Flat Complex** generally, as opposed to specifically the governance of its security is an issue that the participants agree impedes their quality of life and that of their children.

Their community centre is described as: ‘falling apart. It should have been sent to Bosnia’, one participant states that its kitchen has been closed on account of rats and vermin. They say that in relation to crime and estate maintenance that nothing is ever resolved, nothing ever changes. It’s the same conversation in every meeting. Many elements of the conversation centre around the value of the land of the estate with the accusation that the council is trying to run down the flats: ‘squeeze people out’ to develop the land privately: ‘We’re sitting on millions here’. The participants say that the estate is widely mismanaged, that there are ‘too many chiefs’. There is the feeling that they are discriminated against, referring to the fact that the canal in other areas have been cleaned up and some of the council accommodation around those areas is ‘beautiful’. They say that the council is happy to allow their area to decline, because they don’t have the same kind of middle-class neighbours.

There is criticism of the fact that the community centre is no longer run by local women, when mothers felt that they could leave their children their for a few hours during the day while they attended to other tasks. I am told that this no longer the case. Due to increased anti-social behaviour and changes in staff, the parents don’t feel comfortable with this arrangement, nor is it encouraged by the management of the Community Employment workers who operate what community amenities that exist (extract from focus group notes).

When operated on a community basis the centre thus seems to have better served local mothers. Through the above narratives of impotence, frustration and perceived prejudice, the participants demonstrate a sense of internalised marginalisation. Where youth and parenting services are attempting to tackle disadvantage through the promotion of education, health and wellbeing, the conditions and management of the flat complex must be seen as counter-productive and indeed an issue that runs to the heart of locally experiencing childhood and parenthood.

Following from this issue is an articulate dissatisfaction of the manner in which **Community Employment (CE) Schemes are Managed**. This is an issue that may have wider implications throughout the CCA as it was briefly mentioned in a further focus group.

Many of the participants work in local CE schemes but state that they are micro-managed and patronised. It is reported that some work in the kitchen, but have been moved over the summer to work on the youth programme. Others are ‘outreach workers’ but in reality ‘do everything’: cook meals, wash windows, put up curtains, and generally perform tasks for elderly residents. I am told that their tasks can often change on a seemingly random basis. I am told that generally they are able to work in the morning while their children are at school, but that they can be switched to the afternoon shift with little

notice, this can create childcare problems. They say that they have been threatened with being fired when they complain too vocally and have been threatened with withheld references. They say that the discipline applied to them made it seem as if they were still in school. They also cite bias, believing that certain other employees are treated better than they are. They cite the stress that is associated with their positions as unpleasant. They are further aggrieved by the fact that: 'we have no one to go to; we can't go over [their manager's] head.

They say that they are 'put down' when they try to use their own initiative that FAS management place barriers in their way. They say that the CE schemes are supposed to be about getting them back into the workplace and that they want to work within their own community. When they try to go on courses they feel would be of benefit, they are told that there is no funding. They complain that, although the scheme is supposed to benefit the community, they are 'bossed around' an awful lot, and their ideas are given short shrift. They state that they are not encouraged to take action for their area, but to follow the management agenda. They say that they feel that they are being 'suppressed' and that no one hears their voice (extract from focus group notes).

Whilst this account is by its nature one-sided, serious issues are raised around the administration of such CE schemes and the degree to which they are interested in self-perpetuation over building the capacity of residents to provide services to their own community in accordance with sustainable community development. This account must also be contrasted against that from another field-site, in which their CE scheme is praised for its usability (with hours allocated whilst children are in school and crèche), and emphasis on 'training up' its clients.

As a remedy to the perceived problems of management the participants call for greater **Accountability**:

They say that they would love some sort of 'outside', 'confidential', impartial body to monitor the management of the estate and their community employment, a body which would follow 'procedures' and 'fire' the people who are failing to do their job properly (extract from focus group notes).

The participants in this area seek fairness and accountability. They feel powerless, hedged in, essentially the victim of outside forces. As will become apparent later in the report participants seek an effective advocate who will respect their confidentiality, a system where complaints can be raised without there necessarily being repercussions for the complainant. This is an issue which is echoed by other participants in other CCA field-sites.

### **3.3.2 The Regenerated Flat Complex**

The participants consulted within a flat complex undergoing major regeneration display high levels of cultural capital, most are in employment and are undergoing further education. They straddle to the worlds of the professional worker and community resident. In general the services they praise most are those which are locally based and receive high levels of input from community residents. The respondents seem relatively satisfied with local service provision and the issues they

raise are thus often qualitatively different to those which concern the wider group consulted within the CCA.

The **Over-zealous Management of Anti-social Behaviour** by Dublin City Council is an issue which concerns these parents, as well as a number of fathers interviewed at a separate field-site.

Participants report that there are ‘anti-social letters’ going out to some very young children. One parent talks about a four year old child receiving a letter and being called in for a meeting. There is also the issue of young people receiving notices for playing sports, with one parent citing the example of a group getting called in for playing hurling. These notices can bring young people into conflict with their parents. The anti-social letters are also becoming badges of honour for the older young people. One woman reports overhearing young people discussing who should be getting the letters and concluding that they all should. The letters are described as coming far too frequently: ‘it’s all the houses in one block one week, and all the houses in the other the next.’ The mothers call for lenience for young people playing around, they understand targeting older kids who would be ‘hanging around on corners, drinking and fighting’, but for kids playing sports they cannot understand. They understand that there is a big effort to preserve the regeneration work, but there is a concern that a fair balance has not been struck (extract from focus group notes).

This theme is echoed in the British literature on the governance of security, where it is argued that an emphasis on maintaining order over the health and wellbeing of local youth is an indication of an approach which does not adequately share power with local residents (see: Karn, 2007). Indeed, the participants make the point that Dublin City Council ‘are worrying more about the kids and anti-social behaviour than health and safety issues for the children’, when discussing the issue of **Traffic**. Concerns are expressed around the volume and speed of passing traffic, the presence of heavy vehicles connected to ongoing building work and the fact that the Council is slow to install speed ramps and pedestrian crossings. This means that parents cannot allow their children to leave the flat complex without an adult or walk to school alone.

These participants, possibly due to their heightened understanding of educational issues through employment in childcare and youth services, have particular issues in relation to local **Schools**:

There is a lot of criticism around local schools, one in particular: ‘They don’t pick up on the kids who’ve fallen behind. Like one kid who couldn’t read properly was just given this big book to read’. The parents say that there is a very alarming trend going on where girls will be given homework, but not boys. They say that the teachers tend to be committed to some kids but not others. That many, boys in particular, with learning difficulties or just a backlog of underperformance are not getting the help that they need. They feel that the teachers tend to know local families and concentrate their energies on, and that there is real discrimination going on. This lack of homework is said to be affecting their confidence and educational development. Participants who volunteer in a local service have searched bags and homework journals and

confirm that although some of the kids are making excuses many boys are not in fact being set homework.

One parent describes how she removed her child from a particular school. She felt that the school authorities did not listen to her at all, and due to the bullying her child suffered, which was causing her a lot of distress, she had to take her out of school for six weeks. During this time she received absolutely no communication from the school or anyone connected to education whatsoever. 'They didn't give a shite, they didn't do nothing'. The last straw for her was when her teacher said to her child: 'if you don't have a colouring book you don't get any lunch'. The parent was outraged that they would cause such distress over something as trivial as a colouring book. She says that the new school has had a huge impact on the child who is now much happier and looks forward to going in the morning, getting up and dressed without prompting whilst before she would have cried all the way there (extract from focus group notes).

The participants are concerned around the quality of educational support offered to those children who are in particular need of it and also the degree to which schools respond to the issues of individual parents. The participants call for: more teaching assistants, class sizes are too large for a single teacher to maintain control, mixed ability classes and homework support. In the latter regard the participants praise their local homework club.

### 3.3.3 Bluebell

'Put us on the map, show people that we exist. We have nothing, nothing to support us like in Dolphin, or Fatima or St. Michaels. We have a voice but its not being heard. We want the same courses that all of the rest of them have, we want everything the others have. We are no less, so we shouldn't be getting less. If they get one course, we should be getting it, but we don't get anything.'

This sentiment expressed throughout focus groups in Bluebell, highlights the fact that those consulted in the area, feel that they **lack the basic community services** and even commercial amenities that exist elsewhere in the CCA<sup>8</sup>. This account is echoed by a leading local service provider, and the research Steering Group, and it has been agreed by all that Bluebell, as an area would be named specifically in this report, to highlight its heightened marginalisation relative to the other parts of the Canal Communities Area. One group of residents state that the area is one of the five most disadvantaged in the whole of Ireland. Certain participants articulate the concern that as a community they lack the members with sufficient capacity and/or clout to ensure that the area is well serviced, but state nevertheless an intention to continue seeking greater levels of funding and service provision:

'We'll keep fighting until we're up on our feet like everyone else, until we're equal in their eyes. You have no idea of the terrible life it is here. The ones on

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<sup>8</sup> Previous research identifies the area as suffering from a 'high degree of structured, material inequality (Costello & Corr, 2003: 6). Earlier research has been conducted into the needs of the area (Unique Perspectives, 1999).

drugs are the only ones that get help. You have to cause trouble to move on. Is it any wonder people feel bad?’

The area’s popular women’s group collapsed due to the withdrawal of funding, causing the former service users to pay for private dance classes together, in order to maintain some elements of what they had lost. Indeed, the participants articulate anger and frustration at the manner in which initiatives in the area are often funded for the short term, collapse, and locals who have come to rely on the service must volunteer their time and/or spend their own money:

‘Why did they even start it? Women need something constant, if only just once a week, if only for an hour, something constant. Its wrong the way they do it, they put something on, then they drop it, it’s like dangling the carrot, they get people up and then take it away. It needs to be constant here like it is in other areas.’

This is a theme in Bluebell, where services come in and out of existence in response to **funding of limited duration**. This is a problem, considering the beneficial effects of sustained and long-term relationships with service providers. **Childcare**, furthermore, is cited as particularly lacking, with the area’s two crèches holding long waiting lists. Those afternoon youth services which exist, participants explain, tend to be reserved for older children and teenagers, with the major facility ‘targeted’ at young people at risk of offending. One parent reports that she must bring her children to various other parts of the city to participate in recreational activities. Another mother expresses concern that even on a wider basis there is a paucity of range in after-school activities, where her son is not interested in sports or dancing.

Participants report that there is absolutely no local healthcare provision: no doctor, no public health nurse, no dentist, no optician, and no chiropodist. Participants report that the best tactic to receive health treatment is to present an Accident & Emergency room at a hospital. Participants state that there are few local amenities of any kind:

‘It would be easier to tell you all we do have: two shops, a post office, a chemist and hair dresser, a primary school, no secondary school and a church.’

The **condition of the local primary school** is also a cause for concern for participants, and they worry about the influx of new populations with the construction of private apartment complexes and wonder what additional strains this may create.

The participants, moreover, express concern at the manner in which their flat complex is managed and housing is allocated. Crime and anti-social behaviour is cited as a particularly serious issue, which has lead to a serious deterioration in the quality of life. The participants cite a large number of incidents which illustrate this point, and question the manner in which Dublin City Council and the Gardaí are responding. High levels of crime and the poor conditions of the flats combine to make life particularly difficult:

‘You can’t let the kids out; it gets claustrophobic in the flat. You can’t put your clothes out on the line. You don’t know how bad things are. The clothes

just walk off the lines. And it would be one thing if you could dry the clothes indoors, but the flats are damp in anyways!

Overwhelmingly, participants within Bluebell report that they do not know of a body to whom they can communicate their problems, complaints, aspirations and ideas, though this is common reported by most participants across the CCA, in Bluebell this adds greatly to the existing levels of frustration. Participants in Bluebell report that there are high levels of voluntary community involvement in the area, owing to the low levels of state support. It is suggested that if these positive initiatives were to receive funding and support from the state that a sustainable model for community development could be allowed to emerge.

### **3.4 Categories based on Identity**

This section of the report considers the differences in the articulated needs of young children and their parents in the CCA based on the particular identity of the participants.

#### **3.4.1 The ‘New Communities’**

There are particular issues that pertain to those foreign nationals who are bringing up their children in the CCA. Without the structure of an extended family, the women consulted find childcare particularly difficult to source.

‘Yeah that is the major problem we don’t have aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers and its hard because you only have your friends. Its hard because you can’t always ask them to look after your child when you want to do something. Very often we can’t do something because of our kids, like courses or something like that. We don’t have relatives here’ (F 30).

The group they attend, therefore, represents an unrivalled resource to them, but they report that there are many parents of foreign nationality who do not access such services:

I ask if they know of parents that are not involved in the group. I am told that they made a lot of their friends through the group and that without extended families it has been a vital facility for them. They speak about it in glowing terms but they do mention parents who work so hard that they don’t have time to attend. They report that sometimes there are difficulties because one has to have some community involvement before one finds out about what is available in the community. People they know of mightn’t have the confidence to attend, others would not be confident in their English, or wouldn’t really know about the service. One participant reports bringing new people there on there first day, she feels like there is a real need for this type of support (extract from focus group notes).

Groups for newly arrived parents also bestow benefits to their children and form key point of integration for these new families into the community:

‘I got here, and that was the start point and for my son. He spent you know 24/7 with me before. So he started crèche, but when he was a baby, all those years. So it was a good thing for both of us, it was a good help for me because

he was screaming everywhere we went. I couldn't go into the kitchen! So the improvement I could see in him was absolutely amazing. And the group itself was start for me to get involved in other things in the area' (F 36).

Services for foreign nationals thus provide them with a wide range of benefits, the mothers consulted, however, articulate the same challenges and general issues set out earlier in the report.

### **3.4.2 Young Mothers**

Although the young mothers consulted over the course of the research did not raise issues particular to their identity, a service provider working closely with them makes significant points.

She says that young mothers represent a group that are particularly in need; that they aren't taken into account sufficiently in service provision: 'They are not being represented; they aren't being recognised as adults in their own rights. They are seen sort of as teenagers and on the other hand society places all this pressure on them to be good mothers, but they haven't really had the chance to develop an identity.' She says that they really need extra support as parents because they don't necessarily have the depth of life experience, the confidence and wisdom that comes with adulthood, yet have the massive responsibility and task of raising a child. They are sort of trapped in limbo, not quite adults and not quite teenagers. It is a very difficult experience. Parenting courses are sometimes provided through schools, but they don't reach those who drop out.

Furthermore, young mothers can suffer as a result of means tests. They may, simply by virtue of their age, have their parent's income taken into account in means assessments for maintenance grants for education. A sort of one size fits all test that does not take into account individual circumstances. Young mothers, she says, sometimes don't recognise the deficiencies in the services available to them, their heightened needs, or indeed the degree to which their voices would not be heard (extract from handwritten notes of conversation).

### **3.4.3 Fathers**

Many of the issues raised by fathers in particular highlight the fact that they are often under-represented in popular conceptions of parenthood and in the allocation of services to parents. Though certain services may be advertised for 'parents' generally, men do not always feel welcome. One participant articulates the following reaction on reading a notice for a parent and toddler group:

'That's for women like, that's what it's targeted at. You couldn't call it a campaign but it's advertised with like, the picture is sort of women sitting around drinking tea with babies on their laps and stuff like that.' He speaks about being the only male alone with a child in the doctor's, complete with a large bag and containing baby paraphernalia: 'It was bit... I just felt a bit... I wouldn't say awkward, I love me children! I love spending time with them, you know what I mean, but eh, just a bit mad. It's like throwing a pear into a bleedin' barrel of apples! There's nothing to break that down around the area. There's nothing for men, especially for men' (M 32).

The fathers consulted are not always the primary care givers to their children. Those who are not report sharing a relationship based more upon 'special time' they allocate to their children, although they would also perform day-to-day parenting functions. The fathers consulted report being forced to access commercial activities (e.g. the zoo, cinema etc.) on account of the lack of locally available public amenities which would allow them to create a safe and fun environment for them to spend this time with their children. Another significant theme which emerges from the consultation is the degree to which fathers' voices can be overlooked by service providers who would automatically contact mothers unless they are aware of a reason that they should not. In particular, where fathers do not have regular or agreed access to their children they report frustration, and a total lack of service provision to support and advice them around the process of seeking access:

The participant says that the courts do not look favourably on the fact that he is on methadone, and he protests to this, saying that he is stable. He has presented letters from the staff at his drug treatment centre, but he has left the court process, feeling quite pessimistically that it won't do him any good. He says that his 'ex girlfriend' just won't let him see his child. He says that it shouldn't be up to her because they aren't talking any more... 'Even if you had someone who you could sit down with and tell you what you'd have to do, to take them (children) up. There should be something there for fathers, but there's nobody. Like the situation that I'm in, like there's nothing at all I can do, only go to the courts and that's getting me nowhere like. There should be someone you can sit down with, someone like a social worker even that can sit down with you and say like whether you are fit to take them for a weekend or even a day. It shouldn't just be left to the mother to decide' (M 32).

Another participant states that there is a particular need for outreach work for fathers, perhaps because men may be less likely than women to access local services. Those fathers who have a history of drug use and/or offending behaviour can feel that this will stand against them in custody disputes. This history can also make them reflect on what was missing from their childhood and prompt them to desire greater amenities for their own children:

'I do think they can do a little bit better, just for the kids because at times they have nothing to do, and when they have nothing to do they're getting into trouble basically, and smashing windows and smashing walls. You know yourself when a child gets bored they can do anything and it's basically down to boredom all that damage there, you know? I grew up all my life in [flat complex], at the time it was a total dump, it's a lot better than it was now, its changing, they're telling us there's going to be this, that and whatever, hopefully there will be. Growing up in this area meself, there's definitely not enough for kids, all there is in this area for kids is either leading into drugs or leading into violence, or crime. I know that. I can actually see it in the kids, you walk around and you see them throwing stones at coloured people, its brutal: smashing cars, robbing cars' (M 26).

One father furthermore explains how his experience of parenting has prompted him to take better care of his own health. Overall, the fathers consulted imply that there would be benefits to themselves, their children and the wider community from

services which would facilitate interaction between fathers and children. One father points out the ease in which such a situation could be created:

‘It’d be nice if once or twice a week, you know, if you could set up some sort of group for fathers, you know, with kids, where they could come, and let the kids, you know fucking get out, you know, you could just throw a box of you know, balls and toys and you know a couple of board games, a couple of jigsaws and the kids’ll just sit there and play and be happy as Larry. Throw out you know what I mean, an urn, some hot water, a few tea bags. We can get together as well for you know a chat. I’m sure it’s only a matter of getting space, getting time and getting space. Set up something like that, you know I’d personally do it on a voluntary basis myself. I would. Myself personally I would take out two three hours twice a week. I would take it, because I personally think that it’d be a good thing. After a while it would run itself. It wouldn’t have necessarily be fathers it could be couples as well (getting very enthusiastic about the idea). But actually getting support to do something like that, you know, who do you go to? Where do you start? Me personally, I’m always coming up with ideas in my head, but its getting the resources to actually put them into action, it’s really hard, and do you know what I mean?’ (M 32).

In such a manner fathers could informally advise and support each other, and such a space would provide an opportunity to access information about wider services. Again, there is an issue of a CCA resident feeling that he is not supported to organise services from a community-voluntary as opposed to professional standpoint.

#### **3.4.4 ‘Granny’ Carers**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there a large number of ‘Granny’ Carers, or grandparents as primary care givers to their grandchildren, within the CCA. This finds resonance in a popular saying often uttered when the CCA was faced with an unmanaged drug epidemic: ‘The grannies are taking over’. Where their own children battle with addiction issues, these grandparents are faced with the dilemma of assuming responsibility for their grandchildren or resigning them to state care. In addition to the issues of childcare and amenities (where their experiences are similar to those set out earlier in the report), the grandparent carers experience a sense of injustice, and in some instances concerns over their physical capacity going into the future. The participant consulted reports also on behalf of her close friends, who have similar domestic arrangements but could not attend the focus group. The participant’s account highlights the manner in which those who have laboured hard all their lives are now compassionately raising what is in effect a second family, without any extra support, financial or otherwise, from the state:

‘Your whole life is gone ... I worked all my life. I worked seven days a week. That’s before I had the young fellah, and I wouldn’t get home till nine or ten, ‘cos I never got a shilling off him (her ex-husband), so when me daughter was two or maybe three, I thought well I have to go out there. I didn’t have a choice ... So it was a struggle, like it’s a struggle all the way down the road. So, I came that far, I’ve left that lot behind me. (Now) there’s nothing there ... I mean they’re (‘Granny’ Carers) taking the role on of looking after their grandchildren; they’re doing the state a favour. Its like carer’s allowance, you

know for looking after your mother or father or whatever, your doing that, and I mean I only get the (children's) allowance (despite taking on a carers role and keeping the children out of a state funded home). You're just in the background and then you're worried if you'd go any further with it you'd be rocking the boat. You don't want to worry the kids. I mean the kids have had to go through enough you don't want to shatter their nerves and have to drag it to court for just a lousy few bob. There's a lot of them that are older than I am and maybe have two or three of kids, and maybe their daughter might be getting the money and they have to depend on that coming across (which does not always occur).'

Thus, though they are relieving the state of massive expense, these grandparents must often remain in employment as they grow older to provide for those expenses which child allowance does not cover. Whilst the participant and her friends attend a service to deal with the emotional effects of living close to addiction, primarily low self-esteem and a tolerance of abuse, they feel that they would appreciate the services of a group dealing with their issues as carers, including the massive lacuna in carer's allowance provision, identified above:

'They'd want to pick groups or something, and you'd want groups in each area to kind of know what they're dealing with, everyone is in the same pot. You know. put down the basics like of what they should need, what they do need. I think that there should be a group set up for grandparents (to establish needs and provide mutual support).'

The participant speaks passionately about the need to hear the voice of grandparents who are willing to make sacrifices to prevent their grandchildren entering the care system, but who in some cases do so without any form of financial assistance or emotional support, and may lead otherwise lonely lives or may encounter difficulties engaging in some of the more physical tasks demanded of carers as time progresses.

### **3.5 Contextualising Comments**

A number of themes attach to the above data and must be considered in order to present it in its proper context.

A tension is apparent in certain participant accounts, between those services available through the public and voluntary sector, and those offered by the private and commercial sector. Parents are concerned both with the **quality** and **affordability** of services for their children. Whilst there is a recognition that their children enjoy commercial amenities from the cinema to the 'amusements', concerns are expressed at their cost. Ultimately by seeking an increase in the quality and quantity of playgrounds, the parents seem to be indicating a preference for locally available, public recreational facilities that are free of charge. Despite the financial pressures that it must be assumed many of the participants face, quality of service continues to represent a key factor in determining where parents will bring or leave their children.

All participant groups report knowing of many parents, in the same geographic or demographic 'groups', that **do not access services**. A number of different explanations are offered: lack of time and/or interest, a lack of available childcare, lack of confidence to participate, whether due to low levels of spoken English or

feelings of low self-esteem. Significantly a number of different participants across different field-sites opine that their services and those that attend can become constructed as an exclusive group to which others would not feel welcome:

The participants talk about how service users can be perceived of as a closed group with one quoting another member of the community who commented that 'it's no wonder people don't get involved' when they can feel frozen out and unwelcome. '[their area] can be cliquey, it's not the easiest community, for new people and there's not always great scope for people to get involved. We've tried loads to get around it, and I suppose the thing to do is to keep trying' (extract from focus group notes).

Other participants state that some residents in their community can associate services with state authority such as the Gardaí and/or Dublin City Council. This would represent a barrier to those who have disputes with these particular organisations or a suspicion of state authority generally, such individuals would not wish to associate with those they consider to be 'rats'. The service providers consulted over the course of the research, along with a number of the community respondents, express the need to employ greater numbers of outreach workers for this reason. That there are barriers to taking up service provision that requires work to overcome. As will become clear later, involvement in community services and activities increases the degree to which residents are informed about and begin to participate in further services and other aspects of the community. Thus the tasks described by one service provider as 'knocking on doors' and 'trying to get people out' is central to combating social exclusion on a micro scale.

There are, furthermore, **inconsistencies** in the assessment of service provision between those in different areas, but also participants in the same areas, and indeed within single interview scripts. One participant, for example, speaks about the after-school childcare available to his children through his drug treatment centre, whilst also pointing out that there is nothing in the area for young children and their parents. These inconsistencies indicate a number of issues which impact on the manner in which parents in the CCA perceive of what is available for them, and indeed the manner in which services are provided. Firstly, the immediately articulated needs of parents are somewhat linked to the degree to which their areas have been regenerated. In the field-sites considered above, those in the regenerated flat complex reported issues around building works, over-zealous management of anti-social behaviour and the quality of local schools. Those in flat complex that have not as yet undergone regeneration tend to report issues around the management and poor condition of their housing, the prevalence of anti-social behaviour, the lack of amenities for themselves and their children. This suggests that as improvements are made to flat complexes, the residents are afforded some opportunity to build their cultural capital, in other words, that as the most immediate of their issues are tackled, and these residents can proceed to examine a further layer of disadvantage to which they can then seek solutions.

Secondly, it would appear that there is a theme of **targeting** in the provision of services within the CCA. In other words, that heightened levels of service are made available to those sections of the population identified as particularly vulnerable, for example, drug users and young people who criminally offend or are at risk thereof.

This is recognised by some of the participants who are in receipt of these extended services:

‘But what would I do if I hadn’t been on drugs? I haven’t heard of anything else like this. I come here I can get me methadone, I’ve started a computer course, but if I hadn’t been on drugs I’d not be able to bring the kids here. There’d be nothing for me if not for the drugs’ (M 26).

Thus certain participants can recognise that, whilst they themselves and their children, have a number of services, these do not exist for the community more generally. This system of targeting can create resentment amongst the general population, who may be struggling and yet have very little made available to them, yet live in close proximity to those who through what would be perceived as ‘bad’ behaviour ‘earn’ the right to services otherwise unattainable. The sense of justice that this model of service provision creates is felt particularly in areas where there is little else made available, and thus no real form of facilities for young children and their parents. During one focus group, one participant jokes throughout that she is ‘going on drugs’, as ‘If you’re not on drugs you get nothing’. In the same session participants complain that the youth services in the area tend to be targeted at ‘bold’ children, with nothing for the well behaved. The participants are careful to point out that to some extent they do appreciate the necessity of supporting particularly vulnerable groups. They do not however, feel that this should be achieved to the exclusion of the general population.

There is talk of how service provision should be more universal, that an integrated service should be delivered ‘across the board’. This would ‘eliminate the bitchiness’. There should be mainstream activities on par with what is available to those in targeted groups. There is a need not to be critical of those getting a heightened service, but there is a need for greater balance (extract from focus group notes).

It may also be noted at this point, that general service provision does not require the same level of staff training and professionalism as targeted services provision and there could be scope to involve community volunteers in this facet of community development to a greater extent.

#### ***4. Young Children in the Canal Communities Area***

This element of the research aimed to listen to children opinions and concerns about matters affecting their everyday lives and in turn hopes these children had for the future of their community. The following section highlights the most popular themes encountered when children were asked to discuss areas such as school, peers and home/community. Interviews took place in a variety of early education settings ranging from drop in centres to national school infant classrooms within the CCP area. Of the twenty seven children interviewed fourteen were female and thirteen were male and all participants aged between three and six years of age.

##### **4.1 Education settings within the CCP area**

Over half of the participants chose socio dramatic play activities such as playing house and role play games as activities they most enjoyed. As the age range of the participants involved in the research ranges from three to six years of age this form of play corresponds with developmentally appropriate practice and cultural norms (Karpov, 2005).

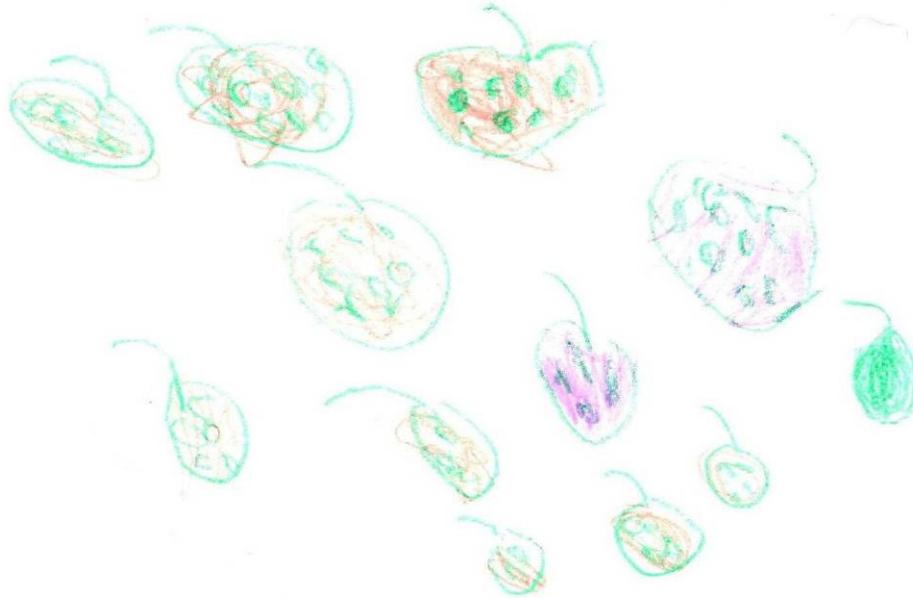
Child 18 (below) identifies her priority as going to the playground and pretending to be a princess.



Other activities such as playing in the yard or the park were also popular. With the majority of children citing small group play activities as what they enjoy doing in school it is evident that a large proportion of the participants viewed their education setting as an environment to interact socially with peers and play. The age range of

the participants again has a role to play here with as young children during four to six years experience their “first adolescence”, where peer relationships become especially important and the formation of friendships crucial for normal social development (Olfman, 2003).

Child 7 (below) represents their classmates in the form of apples, identifying each child by name and where they sit in relation to them.

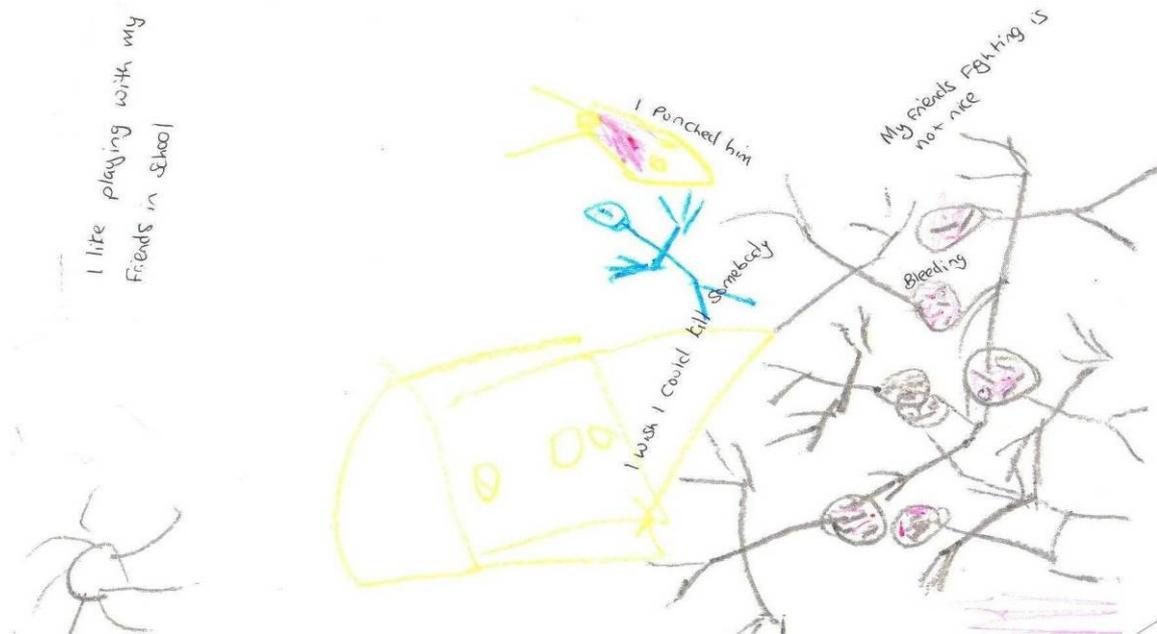


‘I don’t like it when I’m on the slide and my friend punches me off it’ (C4).



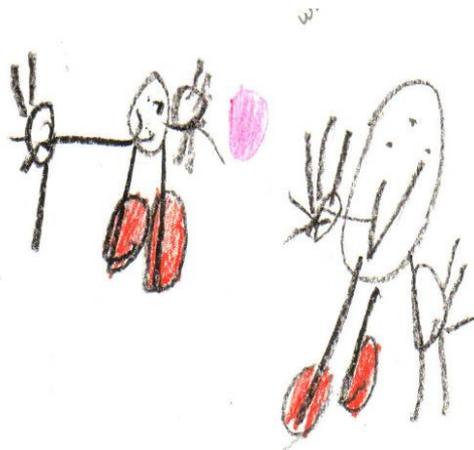
When the participants were asked what they did not like about school a large percentage of the group highlighted deviant behaviour such as defiance, aggression and social exclusion as a point for concern. Kemple & Renek (2003) describe early childhood aggression within the school environment as being developmentally relevant as children of this age range have limited verbal abilities. However “hostile

aggression”, behaviour which is intentionally aimed to hurt others which is left unchecked such as playground fights can result in children feeling that they have to protect themselves which in turn leads to a fearful and venerable environment. On this issue of violence within the learning environment the fourteen participants who discussed anti social behaviour had first hand experience of aggression towards themselves. Two children in particular (C7 & C2) expressed that they enjoyed fighting and viewed it as a social activity: ‘Kill somebody, punch him and he bleeds’ (C2).



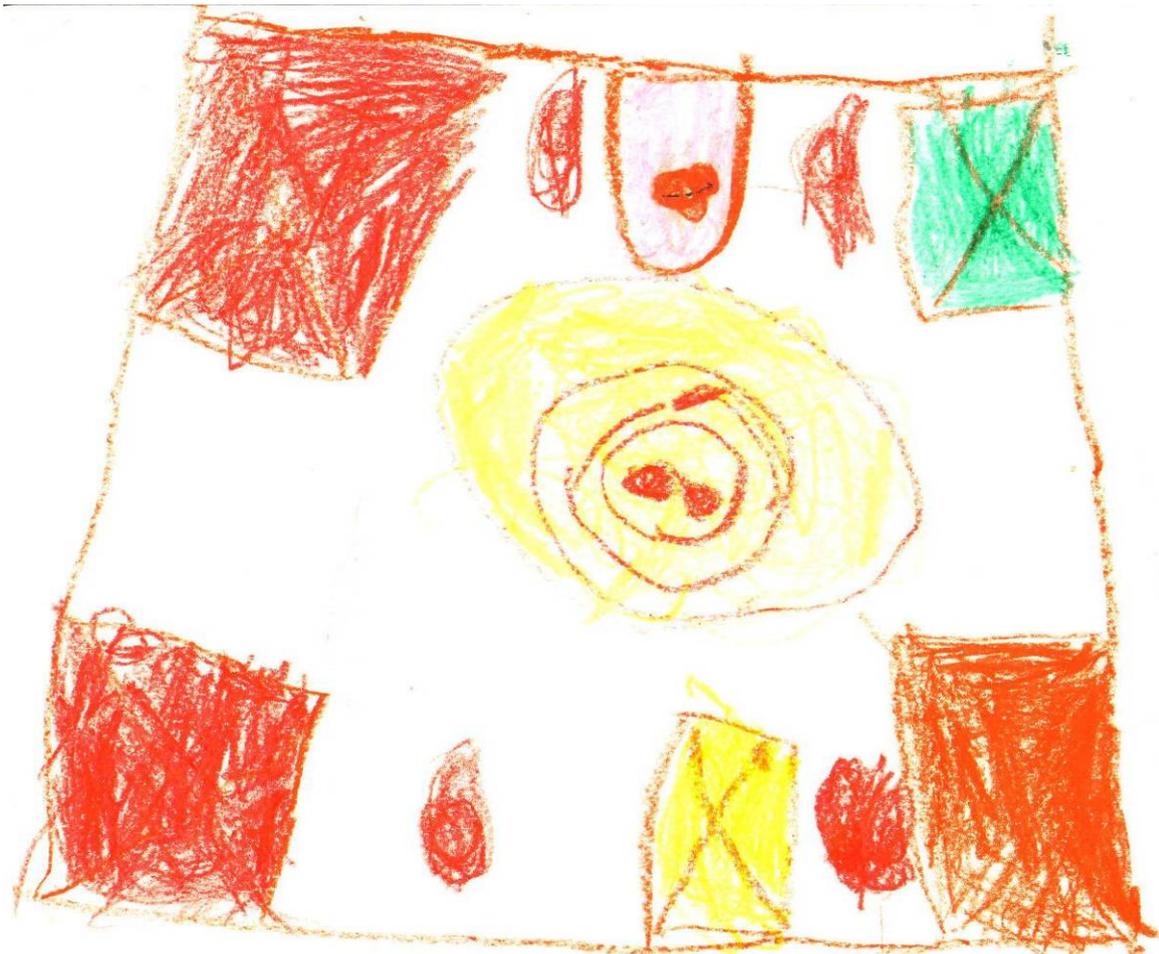
Other issues highlighted included vermin within centres such as spiders and other insects within classrooms. When participants were asked what they would like to change, build or do in their education settings the majority of children would expand their opportunities for dramatic play experiences. Children also cited outside play such as park facilities as a priority. Other resources such as shops, restaurants and extra parking spaces were also mentioned as well as opportunity for extra curricular activities such as swimming, bowling and cooking within the education setting.

‘I would dress up in the yard with my friends; I would build a park in school and a slide and see saws and swings’ (C3).



The children's hopes for the future correspond with what they presently enjoy doing, playing with their peers in a social and active way in a variety of inside and outside environments which at present is not available to them.

Child 7 (below) draws an intricate community within her school grounds including a homework club, shops and swimming facilities as a future wish list.



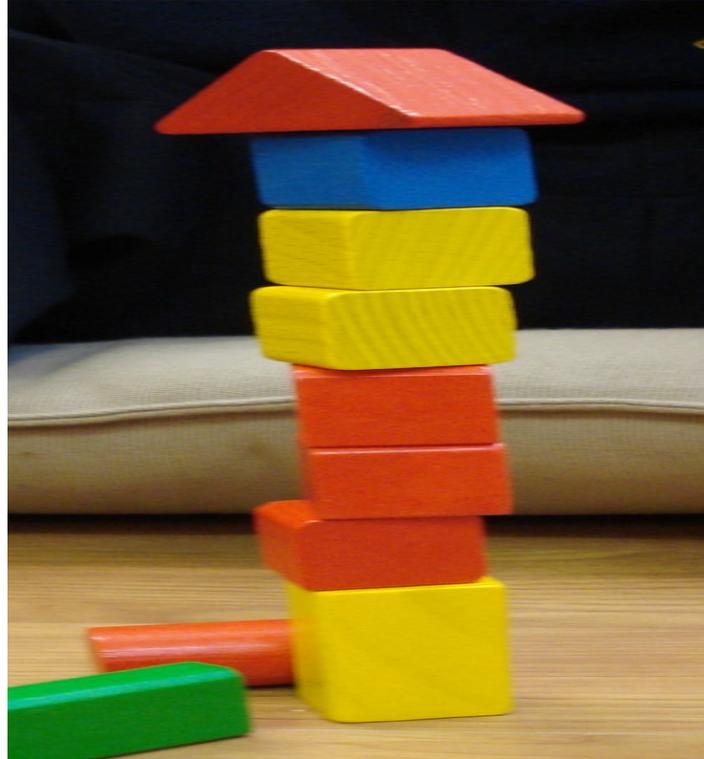
#### 4.2 Home & Communities within the CCP area

Participants were asked to describe significant areas/objects in their community and around their homes. Answers varied however the majority of responses related to schools/preschools and shops within the children's community. Vehicles outside the participants homes caused concern for children as seven children cited them as a reason why they could not play outside, 'you are not allowed to play on the road because the cars will knock you down' (C20).

Additionally participants identified friends/ relatives' homes and play areas such as parks and football pitches as being significant places in their communities. Child 4 (below) details an intricate map which includes the local park, the canal, the shopping centre, the swings, friends and relatives' homes, and a football pitch.



When the participants were asked to consider what could be changed or built in the community to make it better the responses varied however a proportion of participants favoured playground facilities and other suitable outside play areas. Child 22 (below) built a tower for children to play in outside his home.



In addition to this participants discussed cleaning or fixing roads as current building work interferes with their play areas:

‘I want to be able to play in the lane way but you can’t walk down anymore that way, it’s blocked off’ (C8).



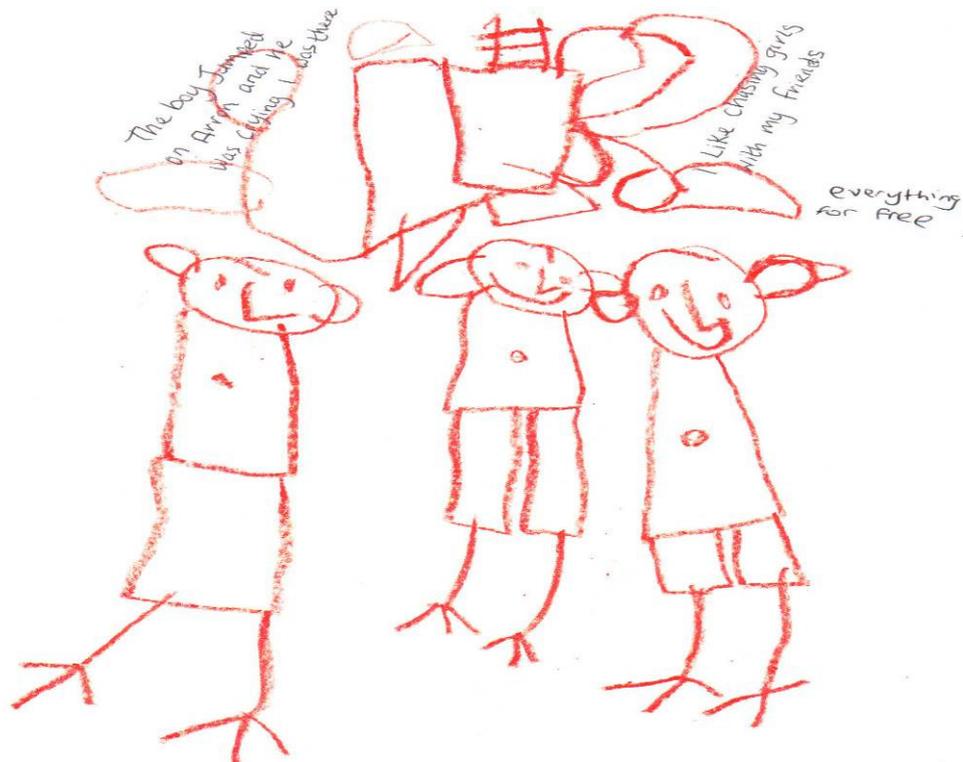
These findings indicate that the children interviewed want suitable safe play areas in their communities which are easily accessible, safe, clean and fun. Clarke & Moss (2005) in a similar study found that a recurring theme within early childhood is children's desire for suitable outdoor play provision. Outdoor play is essential for children's overall physical development and holistic growth; however a rise in highly urbanised areas and fear of children's safety has led to a cultural decline in outside play (Wellhousen, 2002). These findings indicate that the children interviewed want suitable safe play areas in their communities which are easily accessible, safe, clean and fun<sup>9</sup>.

#### **4.3 Peer relationships within the CCP area:**

Participants in the study were questioned about where they socialise with friends. Over half of respondents named their education settings as the environment in which they meet and play with their peers. In or around homes and in the park were also identified as frequent meeting areas with additional responses pointing towards after school settings. As the participants interviewed were under six years of age they do not play with peers without adult supervision and in turn they depended on parent/guardian's to provide suitable environments for meetings with peers. Child 12 (over) describes how he enjoys playing in the school yard with his peers chasing girls. With this in mind participants identified the majority of their peer activities within a school/preschool setting which leads to the question; where do children who do not attend education settings socialise with peers?

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<sup>9</sup> These findings are in line with other research with children where play and play facilities come to the fore (see: National Children's Strategy, 2000).



The participants most enjoyed engaging in activities which involved physical action and games rules as well as socio dramatic play. These answers correspond with the developmental stage of the participants involved within the research and also showed a similarity to the activities enjoyed within their education settings: 'play with the doctor, and the baby and make the baby better' (C15).



The participants were asked what they did not enjoy doing with their friends, responses corresponded with findings from the education setting. The majority of responses were themed around ant social behaviour such as physical and verbal aggression as well as social exclusion: 'when they don't play with me and I get angry' (C17).

The children were finally asked what type of activities they would they wish to engage with peers, the majority of responses pointed towards dramatic activities and child lead games with rules. These responses again correspond with activities the participants wished to engage in within the education settings. Child 27 describes how she hoped to play with her peers in the park.



### **Summary:**

All of the above categories suggest that there are complex needs observable in the CCA and points to the effectiveness of a Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to gathering data. There are issues which are common across the CCA and needs which are very much particular to limited geographies and identities. It must be recognised that the needs expressed are from a community perspective and agencies involved in community development may view needs in a different light. The challenge remains to establish a model through which information on these needs can be received by community development agencies such as the CCP on an ongoing basis and dialogue can be sustained and meaningful. The presence, furthermore, of vision, selflessness and heightened community capital in the Canal Communities suggests that such a CBPR mechanism could be practised in such a manner as to support participants to gain training and proficiency in community development and various aspects of service provision. Services in the CCA could move towards the more locally participative model to which many participants express a preference for.

## **5. Communication**

There are a number of issues arising from consultation with participants which relate to the manner in which residents of the CCA communicate with the CCP and the various state and voluntary bodies involved in community development and service provision. Themes emerge relating to the levels of information flow from residents to agencies and vice versa. The free flow of information ensures that agencies and services providers are aware on an ongoing basis of what transpires in the communities and the existence of unmet needs. Equally, it ensures that members of the communities are conscious of the various ongoing campaigns to improve their area and the services that are available to them. Blocked channels of communication, however, necessitate costly 'needs assessment' research and publicity campaigns to gather and disseminate information respectively. Within this consideration of communication it must be noted that there are differing bodies with which residents of the CCA communicate, with varying levels of directness: service providers, state and municipal authority and the Canal Communities Partnership. In remaining true to the accounts of participants, this report must cite the experiences of community residents in relation to all of the above bodies, with the aim of better understanding the role the CCP may play in local communication. Levels of communication may relate to levels of connectedness between agency and community. A focus is maintained on exploring the degree to which a CBPR model may improve the manner in which these two groups identify and jointly pursue common goals.

### **5.1 Voiceless and Sceptical**

The vast majority of participants consulted feel that they are not heard in the context of community development. They believe that they have no mechanism to be heard by state and municipal authority. Most residents in both regenerated and pre-regenerated flat complexes report attempting to involve politicians in the advancement of their localities without success.

There is no-one to hear their needs bar [local woman who runs a group voluntarily]. A number of the women report contacting TDs and inviting them to the flats. They are convinced however, that due to the low voter turnout there is little interest in knowing about or acting on the area's problems: 'They promised to come but none of them did, all politicians are a joke' (extract from focus group notes).

One participant alone reports engaging in helpful communication with a politician. As a result, most of the respondents exhibit an attitude of scepticism. This manifests in a lack of belief in the positive intention of various 'outside' agencies, and to some extent the very process of community development as it is practiced in Dublin, with seemingly endless meetings and discussions:

Generally the women feel quite powerless to effect change, and they say that they get to the point where they think 'why bother?' bringing up issues if they aren't going to be acted upon. They believe that often at meetings (of which there are quite a few) that they are not always listened to: 'We are intimidated for raising our voices'. They say they have no one to go to, and fear creating trouble by raising issues (extract from focus group notes).

Thus an effective model of communication for the Canal Community Partnership would recognise that the residents of the area have expressed a desire to have their voice heard in a wider forum, and that the issues they raise should be addressed honestly. The CCP could highlight its potential as an organisation to address the perceived sense of political marginalisation through involving members of the community as partners in the pursuit of meaningful change.

## **5.2 The Canal Communities Partnership – Recognition**

The Canal Communities Partnership as an organisation does not enjoy particularly good brand recognition amongst the majority of participants consulted, many of which state that they have never heard of it, whilst those who are aware of its existence express confusion as to its role and function:

‘I know nothing about the Canal Community Partnership, I don’t know what it is, where it is, what it is for, who is it for. No, I don’t really know. I didn’t have the chance to find out anything ... I know that they are doing something for this area, but I don’t know what’ (F 30).

This lack of recognition shrouds the partnership in an invisibility which cannot be conducive to the realisation of its aims. In one particular field-site where the participants consulted attend a course run by the partnership, there is praise not just for the particular course, but for a particular service provider who has longstanding links with the partnership.

The CCP: ‘Who are they? What are their names? They never came to introduce themselves; they’re hidden away there in their little office.’ They recognise the benefits of the college grants that the CCP were involved with, agreeing that such schemes are needed (extract from focus group notes).

Overall the participants cite a willingness to become involved with the work of the Partnership, but suggest that the organisation become more locally visible, that the CCP work ‘in’ communities and not just ‘around’ them. This sentiment is expressed with particular poignancy in Bluebell, which suffers from probably the lowest level of community development in the CCA. The residents of the communities have become wary of ‘false promises’ and expect a level of performance from agencies who seek their support and cooperation. The CCP is in a certain amount of danger of appearing to be simply another facet of a political and municipal system which participants believe are failing them. In particular, certain service providers consulted during the research rate the input of the CCP in terms of sourcing funding and liaising with state bodies as ‘very poor’. Whilst others are more complimentary, the partnership should maintain awareness of the fact that since much of its relationship with the residents of its catchment area is mediated through service providers, maintaining their support is vital to building communication and trust with local residents.

## **5.3 Service Providers, Trust, Advocacy and Confidentiality**

A key component to the maintenance of open communication is trust. Overall, participants consulted across the field-sites report an open and trusting relationship with the service providers through which they were contacted. In most cases they state that if they have an issue, problem, complaint, or require advice, they would feel comfortable confiding in such service providers. In this regard, certain participants

state that this is due to a positive working relationship built over time. This is not a surprising trend, given that urban sociology has long described the residents of disadvantaged communities as interacting on the basis of 'primary relationships' (see: Park & Burgess, 1925; Suttles, 1968). Primary relationships are based on personal acquaintance and familiarity and define the interactions between those in close knit communities. On the other hand, secondary relationships exist on the basis of official position, such as the relationship between a Dublin City Council tenant and the DCC area manager, which can exist without any particular familiarity. The participants seem to seek 'advocates', those they trust, who also have the capacity to function in the realm of service provision and community development.

The participants report that a lot of their communication with outside agencies, in particular the council, is achieved through [a local support and advocacy group]. Issues are taken to the man who is charge of it. But a lot of people do not know that you can go to them. One participant cites how the group sorted out problems with running water when the council and builders were essentially passing the buck between them (extract from focus group notes).

The participants state that they would like to know who the appropriate people and bodies to approach for funding are. They call for advocacy: 'someone up there who knows where the money is, someone who knows the system and the people. We want someone speaking for us; surely someone should be employed to support us to look for funding' (extract from focus group notes).

Respondents are concerned that without such a trusted advocate to approach, due process and confidentiality may not be respected. In a number of field-sites participants express concerns over the manner in which issues they have raised have been treated. As noted earlier, participants in one field-site state that where they had complained in relation to anti-social behaviour, their names were disclosed to the alleged perpetrator. In another field-site a respondent mentions that information he disclosed as part of training connected to a CE scheme was not treated with the proper respect:

'I just didn't approve of them, there was back-talk, there was no confidentiality, and I've heard things back. I just walked out on them' (M 26).

In another field-site a participant believes that the making of a complaint resulted in an unfair eviction effort. Experience of communication processes that are devoid of confidentiality and due process would ultimately impede the willingness of CCA residents to impart information to the agents of community management and development.

The accounts of the respondents suggest that they prefer communicating with those with whom they have built trust, and thus certain service providers represent key points of interaction between the residents of the CCA and agents of community development. A question therefore arises as to the degree to which, for example, the coordinator of a woman's group defines her/his role as a conduit of information between residents and agencies and indeed the degree to which it is possible for them to perform this function. The proposed communication model will create an appropriate forum for community issues to be aired and information to be offered for

dissemination within local areas. As is demonstrated by this extract from the notes from one focus group, a CCP employee could be well placed to provide the desired level of advocacy:

The participants praise a representative of the CCP who they feel they can go to with their issues and that something will be done. There is a desire for this type of relationship to proliferate.

These themes impact on the manner in which residents of the CCA share information and thus will inform the model of communication set out later in this report.

#### **5.4 Receiving Information: Community Involvement**

All of the women say that they had found out about [the service through which they were contacted] through 'word of mouth', or 'insider' information: through working or knowing someone who worked directly in the community setting. They say they rarely have leaflets posted through their doors, but think that people don't really read them in any event (extract from focus group notes).

Participants in all field-sites were asked about the manner in which they receive information about what is available for themselves and their young children. Their responses demonstrate the varying penetration of publicity issued by the CCP and various services providers, and again point to the effectiveness of informal networks. There are mixed opinions around the effectiveness of paper based methods of communication: notices, flyers and newsletters. Some participants cite them as useful sources of information, whilst others insist that they are not always read. In Bluebell, respondents overwhelmingly report that publicity is generally late arriving in their area, so that if a newsletter advertises a course, they will often receive notice only after it has begun. Other participants recognise that whilst the CCP or local service providers might well publicise what is available, this alone may not be enough to overcome the impediments to taking up opportunities discussed earlier in this report:

'I think that they are doing a good job just people don't have time or are not interested, cos its been advertised all over the place, the co-ordinator, when she started came over here to introduce herself and to talk to people in the group and to see and I really think that is a nice thing to do, to get familiar with the people. But on the other hand I think you go somewhere if you are going to get something out of it' (F 36).

Indeed, other respondents throughout the field-sites point to the advantages of outreach work, that where representatives of a particular agency or service make door-to-door calls, it creates a greater impetus to attend. Many of the participants consulted state that they receive much of their information on what is available in the area through informal networks: friends and family, and crucially through services they or their children already attend. Community involvement would thus seem to contribute to further community involvement, or at the very least access to a greater level of information on what is available. Thus those who do not access service are at a further disadvantage in terms of acquiring information about what else is on offer in their areas. Interaction between residents occurs, furthermore, in numerous different

settings that are partially or unconnected with agents and community development, such as: local churches, pubs, shops and commercial amenities. These sites represent spaces in which those who do not access services on a regular basis can be reached. The importance of information flow through informal networks can thus be utilised to reach those who do not involve themselves with formal aspects of community development and services. Another advantage of informal publicity is the manner in which it can be presented to individuals in such a way as to resonate with their particular concerns as dictated by gender, locality, age, country of origin and so forth.

**Summary:**

In terms of the respondents' communication with agents of community development, including service providers and the Canal Communities Partnership, ongoing and trusting relationships would seem to be the most effective vehicle. Such relationships tend to arise through a positive working rapport and faith on the part of local residents that the agents will respect their confidentiality, take definitive action or at the least provide actionable advice. The Partnership is shown to be perceived as somewhat distant from the residents' lives. A more sustained relationship with members of the local community should increase the efficacy of communication: the Partnership would know more about needs on the ground, and could be more effective in the manner in which it disseminates information about what is available. This principle, the expressed needs of young children and parents in the CCA and the philosophy of Community Based Participatory Research combine to inform the communications model proposed below.

## 6. *Communications Model*

This section of the report draws on the issues discussed above to present an actionable model of communication between residents of the Canal Communities Area and the Canal Communities Partnership. The likely success of the model will hinge on the degree of goodwill, energy and resourcing that is invested in it. In keeping with the ethos of CBPR, care has been taken to consult with the participant members of the local community, service providers and the Research Steering Group of the Canal Communities Partnership in preparing this model. It represents a further step in the CBPR process through creating an iterative process of community and agency collaboration in the production of needs assessment data, quality service provision and ultimately community development. The model takes account of the role of the CCP as articulated by members of the Steering Group and seeks to fuse it with the approach of CBPR. The model contains a number of layers, based on identified existing patterns of communication and will contribute to a positive and effective model of community development for the whole CCA.

The role of the Canal Communities Partnership, *inter alia*, is to:

‘... Provide supports to individuals, to community groups and organisations to stimulate growth and development in the areas of Childcare, Adult Education, Enterprise, Employment, Education and Community Development’<sup>10</sup>.

Thus in the context of young children and their parents in the CCA, a communications model will be suggested that supports this role and thus addresses:

- a. Communication between the CCP and service providers in the CCA.
- b. Communication between service providers, with an emphasis on the provision of mutual support, integration of service and cross-pollination of ideas.
- c. Communication between the CCP and young children and their parents in their catchment area. It must be recognised that for practical purposes the focus of the model will be on communication with parents, who it must be assumed will speak also on behalf of their children. There is, however, scope to include the voices of young children, dependant on the degree to which the model can be resourced.
- d. Addressing the needs of young children and their parents as identified by this research.

Consultation with the Research Steering Group has highlighted the need for the model to promote the following:

1. *Agency collaboration and integration* (both locally and across the CCA).

Facilitating communication between service providers in each of the geographic subdivisions within the CCA would promote the integration of services, offer a structure to build on the quality of service provision and ensure that each organisation is aware

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<sup>10</sup> Per: [www.canalpartnership.com](http://www.canalpartnership.com) accessed on 10/01/08

of what is being provided elsewhere locally<sup>11</sup>. Whilst undoubtedly this occurs informally to a certain extent, service providers consulted state that it would be useful to create a formal structure to allow this to occur:

The service provider states that the Canal area is too large to create an effective system of cooperation and integration instantly, more needs to occur at a local level and then 'build from there'. The participant adds that there needs to be more work on getting service providers together locally and working together on what is available, co-ordinating their efforts. A suggestion is made that a community development worker should take responsibility for this process (extract from notes of conversation).

Collaboration and integration can be facilitated through creating *agency networks*, convened and supported by the Partnership in each geographic sub-division of the CCA: e.g. Inchicore Childhood & Parenting Inter-Agency Network. Where a similar structure already exists for services generally in a local area, perhaps a specific Childhood & Parenting sub-group could be created. These individual networks can converge on a Canal Communities Childhood & Parenting Inter-Agency Network, with the specific goal of sharing effective strategies and practices between service providers. Such a body would be, furthermore, well placed to consider the manner in which resources are allocated across the CCA as a whole. The disparity of available resources amongst the Canal districts could become an issue to collectively address rather than the subject of resentment. This network, moreover, will represent a forum through which the CCP can feed information to local agencies, ensuring that they are apprised of relevant developments. It is important, moreover, that network meetings take place in public, highlighting transparency and that 'ordinary' residents of the CCA are actively encouraged to attend. Local residents should be included as much as possible where the development of their community is being discussed. This network represents the first layer of the communications model (see: Figure 1).

2. *Support Canal Community Area residents to articulate, and build capacity to address, their issues as parents and children. Facilitating the building of effective and active groups of community residents who can make a direct and effective contribution to the provision of quality services and the development of their communities.*

The Canal Communities Partnership is well placed to support and amplify the 'voice' of local residents, where there is an identifiable perception amongst them that it is going unheard. Such a strategy is in direct accordance with the principles of CBPR cited earlier in this report. The CCP would collaborate with CCA residents in the production of needs assessment data. More than this however, this communications model could be used to redress the perceived imbalance of community development initiatives controlled and staffed by outside professionals as opposed to local volunteers. Whilst community development literature (see: Craig, 2000; Taylor, 1995) recognises that this is a tension internationally, it is a matter of concern for certain service providers who fear that without building capacity in local residents to respond to identified needs, agents are creating a dependency. Indeed, it could be argued, that

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<sup>11</sup> The benefits of integrated services in the CCA have been set out in previous research, see: (Rourke, 2001).

the unpopular ‘targeting’ of services is a result of a model of community development imposed from without, with community residents capable of contributing to general service provision but in many cases failing to receive the support they require. The communications model proposed, seeks to involve members of the community to participate in an ongoing process, at first ensuring that their issues and needs are being correctly identified, and later directly contributing to the manner in which agencies respond. This is to be achieved through the establishment of a Reference Group to which local parents would be actively recruited to act as representatives of their geographic and identity ‘group’. The process of nominating and maintaining representation will need to be carefully monitored by the CCP and community, recognising the power dynamics that can be created through such a process, and ensuring that genuine community participation is not hindered.

It is important to recognise that there can be a wide gulf in perceptions and expectations of the community development process between professional agents and the residents of disadvantaged communities. Whilst this is caused by complex social, economic and cultural factors, dialogue is an important step towards mutual appreciation and collaborative action. The proposed communications model would create a forum through which nominated members of the Partnership could form a positive working rapport with members of the local communities. Such relationships would create an atmosphere of trust which would facilitate the frank exchange of information. The Canal Communities Partnership would have a mechanism through which it can access ‘informal networks’, through which so much information is disseminated throughout the communities. For example, should the CCP wish to publicise an educational grant scheme, it could use the relationships with members of the reference group to ensure that networks of word of mouth are deployed to ‘spread the word’, in combination with the paper based methods of publicity it might otherwise utilise. Members of the local community thus become more actively involved in improving their communities and the lives of local parents and young children.

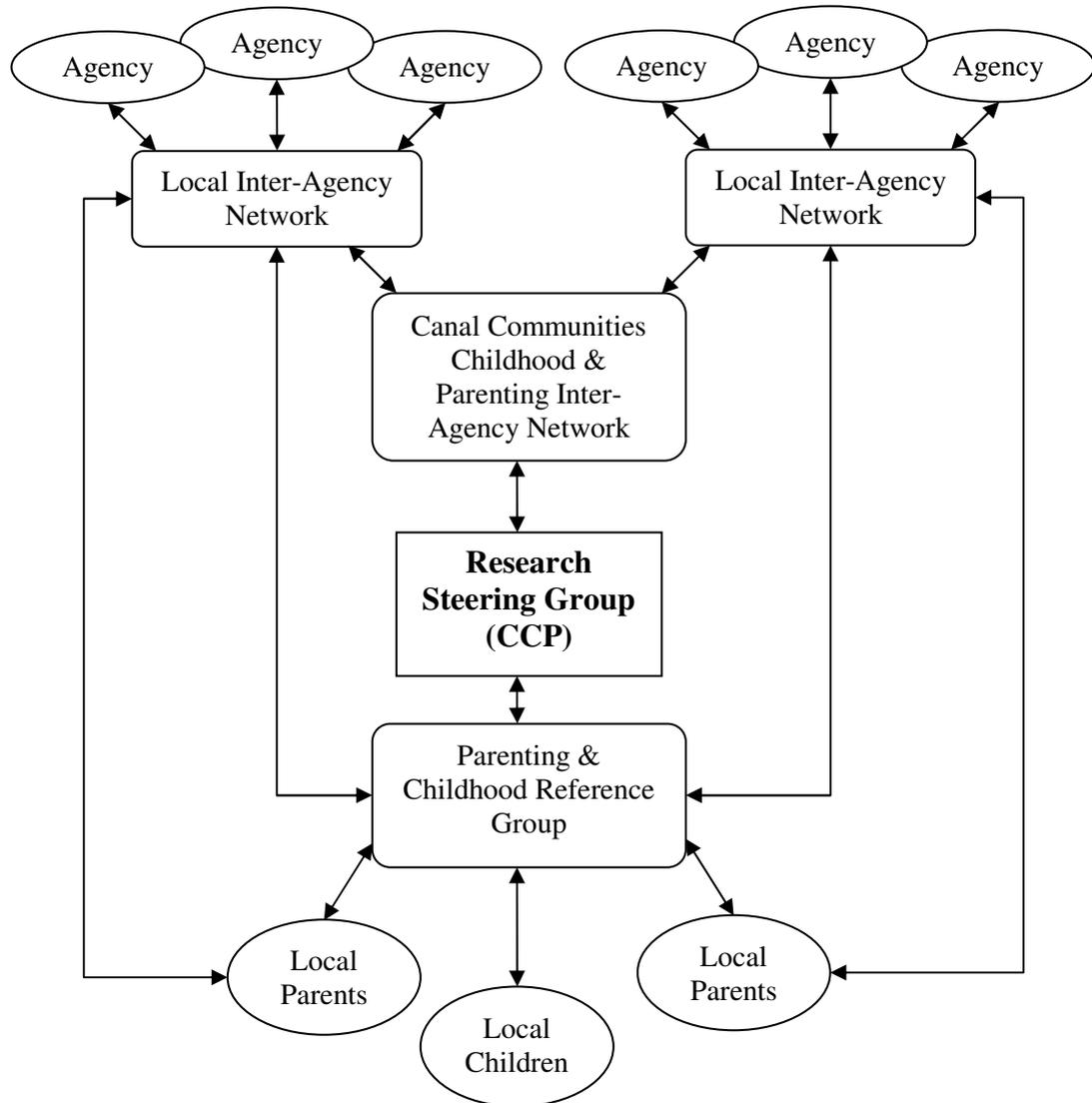
### 3. *Respond to the needs of young parents and children in the community.*

It is crucial that the communications model represents a *method* of maintaining a *focus* on responding to the identified needs of the community, the initial *content* of which has been set out by this research. The communications model is thus envisaged initially as a means of generating discussion and action around these issues:

- After-care for school and crèche age children
- Recreational facilities for younger children (including playgrounds)
- Recreational facilities for parents
- Support for voluntary initiatives
- The response of local schools to academic underperformance
- Responding to the governance of security & management of anti-social behaviour
- Responding to housing & estate management
- Traffic: health & safety for young children
- Support to parents of foreign nationality
- Fathers & access to their children
- Support for young mothers
- Support and a Carers’ Allowance for ‘Granny’ Carers

**Diagram**

The Figure 1 diagram below uses arrows to demonstrate the manner in which information would flow under the proposed communications model, placing the CCP Research Steering Group at the centre of a system of information flow which would support the delivery of quality services in the CCA in direct response to the expressed needs of representatives of local residents.



**Figure 1: Information flow in proposed communications model**

The Research Steering Group composed of CCP employees and partnership agencies are best placed to ensure the facilitation of this communication model, given that they have collaborated in the research from its inception and are committed to addressing its findings. As has been previously noted, community participants have placed a premium on continuity, feedback and tangible results. It is important that dialogue with the community around the results of the research and the proposed model begin

with minimum delay, and once again the Steering Group would be in the greatest state of readiness to respond with the required urgency.

### **6.1 Practically Actualising the Model**

Applying this communications model is a discretionary issue for the Partnership, nevertheless a number of practical steps can be suggested here, which would bolster its viability and provide a scaffold from which the functioning system could be built. An issue which arose in the course of consultation is the utility of a dedicated employee to oversee research, communication and outreach work in the CCA. A dedicated employee could ensure the effective execution of the model and pursue relationships of trust with service providers and members of the communities. The high cost of such a measure, must however be recognised and it is a commitment to working in partnership and collaboration with local residents, as opposed to resourcing another employee, which would see this model applied successfully. Recognising that this model represents an ‘ideal’ which would represent the culmination of an intensive establishment process, a number of practical ‘first steps’ are listed below:

1. The Steering Group may wish to internally consider the workload that facilitating the process would generate and allocate tasks between them and may wish to seek to formalise the process as a continuation of their initial brief.
2. In keeping with the CBPR model the group should initiate the process of dialogue and communication with participants and potential community representatives through presenting the findings of this study to them, discussing its implications, collaborating on a strategy to implement the communications model. The model may be refined through this process.
3. A similar process should be undertaken with relevant service providers in relation to the ‘top half’ of the model relating to inter-agency communication.
4. Decisions can be made as to the viability of the proposed model and timelines and action plans put in place to guide its implementation.
5. The needs identified within the report should be discussed from the outset, demonstrating that the voice of participants has been heard, seeking the active involvement from members of the community and local service providers in responding to them.

- **Facilitating Meetings**

The CCP is well placed to arrange suitable meeting places for the relevant meetings. Thought must be given, in relation to the Reference Group, to the degree to which childcare blocks parents from attending. It is suggested that the Partnership might think of providing on-site childcare during Reference Group sessions. If resources are available a researcher adept at communicating with young children might be brought in on these occasions to gain their opinions on their communities on an ongoing basis.

- **Childhood and Parenting Networks**

Whilst this structure will no doubt add yet more meetings to the already busy workloads of local service providers, it is thought that if meetings are timely, focused and useful, that it will contribute to efficiency overall. To this end, it is suggested that service providers are contacted to nominate one representative each who will liaise with the network, and can distribute its findings to others in their organisations. An

extended e-mail list would further this goal. The network could further establish 'working-groups' around the need categories established above. Community representation should also be sought, in the case of the network, to ensure transparency and a voice for local residents. Should this prove difficult to secure, the network could link in with the Reference Group as an alternative means of ensuring that the voice of local residents is heard. This is likely to be viewed as a respectful and thoughtful approach to community so that engagement at every level is seen to be inclusive and effective as well as efficient.

- Parenting and Childhood Reference Group

This group could be constituted of willing community participants drawn from the initial sample, representing the various categories of need according to geography and identity. Members of the reference group could be asked to discuss formally and informally, issues of relevance to their peers in their 'constituency' and relate these to the forum. The reference group will be a key factor in the success of the CBPR model, and will constitute an inclusive, ongoing forum that will facilitate the flow of information from community to community development agency and back. The role of community representative needs careful support and monitoring to ensure that the individuals remain an embedded mouthpiece of the community. The services which represent the field-sites could be called upon to facilitate meetings through which the community representatives can gather information from the community and relay back the actions that have been taken by the CCP in relation to data previously collected. Through this process, members of the community are directly contributing to the production of knowledge and thus to the direction of the development of services in their community. A representative of the CCP or the service provider at the field site, could maintain a relationship with the wider group of residents to monitor the continuing suitability of the representative. The group could be constituted with sufficient fluidity and informality to facilitate a diffuse composition to allow it to focus on particular issues where required. A formal commitment could furthermore be made to engagement with local young children with at least two consultations scheduled per school year.

- Capacity Building

Through the consultation process which this research has represented, residents in the different geographic and demographic categories have called for a voice and an opportunity to personally contribute to the development of their community. The Reference Group is an opportunity to foster genuine participation in the community development process and the provision of quality services to young children and their parents. Ultimately, members of the Reference Group should become increasingly embedded in this process and it is recommended that they and their peers are afforded all the necessary support and training to become instrumental contributors.

## ***7. Conclusion***

The research has been designed to incorporate the philosophy of Community Based Participatory Research, and as such is more than an exercise in gathering data, but seeks to reinforce the notion of community members as the ultimate authority on their own experiences of parenthood and childhood. The research is calculated to improve local service provision and, through developing a model for communication, to promote voices from the ground in strategic planning at CCP level.

The variety of the needs expressed by the participants consulted demonstrates that the needs of the young children and their parents in the CCA are complex and contingent upon geographic area and identity. Overall there are expressed needs for a greater number of serviced playgrounds, childcare after schools and crèches close their doors, recreational facilities for parents, greater support for voluntary initiatives within communities and greater investment in the lives of young children and their parents overall. The provision of greater, more integrated childcare would promote adult education and employment for primary care givers, which would contribute to their personal development and, if strategically provided, could bolster the development of their communities. Specifically, parents of young children in regenerated flat complexes point to the need for improvements in local schools, greater management of road traffic, and increased moderation in the management of anti-social behaviour. The parents of young children in flat complexes pre-regeneration call for physical improvements to their localities, greater amenities, greater management of security and their estate generally, with greater accountability and transparency. The area of Bluebell is particularly under-serviced in comparison to much of the rest of the CCA. Those in the new communities require heightened support due to the lack of family in Ireland, with childcare a particular issue. Young mothers can become trapped between identities as young people themselves with the serious responsibility of their own children to raise. Fathers, specifically, can have issues around access to their children, or can be automatically overlooked by those who provide services to their children or other parents. ‘Granny’ carers are faced with the task of raising their grandchildren without any state support, despite saving the state the massive expense of providing care places, where they may feel somewhat at a loss in terms of the physical and fiscal capacity to do so. Consultation with young children indicated the importance of safe play areas and the difficulties of growing up near anti-social behaviour and violence.

Whilst those consulted are complimentary about the quality of services such as they exist, pointing out the need for those which do not, there is concern overall that the availability of amenities is targeted at the most ‘vulnerable’, such as drug users and young offenders, to the exclusion of the community generally. It must be recognised, furthermore, that due to the nature of the sample involved in the study, there is a significant number of individuals within the CCA who do not access services at all, and who would therefore possess unmet needs in excess of those consulted, particularly in terms of engagement, an issue that would need to be specifically addressed.

The CSER are initiating a process which to be effective must be continued by the CCP, local service providers and members of the community, assuming joint responsibility. The communication model identifies the various ‘assets’ the various parties bring to the table, whether resources, expertise, strategic acumen, local knowledge, trust within communities and builds these into a set of practices which

will allow the flow of information from those at the forefront of community development to the agencies who oversee it. The success of the process depends on the willingness of all to embrace it. Engaging in the process outlined in this report constitutes a challenge. It involves community development agencies in the Canal Communities departing to some extent from established practice. This is an act of courage. Certain residents of the CCA have endured dashed expectations to the point where they can exhibit scepticism:

‘To get things up off the ground and running, you know I can sit here now and speak to you about it and stuff like that, but lets be honest about it, after you leave here this evening, you’re going to fold up your paperwork until tomorrow, and I don’t know what the scenario would be, you send on your stuff and that’s it then, you know what I mean? That’s the reality of it. I don’t mean it... (badly) I’d rather look at things realistically, not try and sugar coat it’ (M 32).

This is an opportunity to involve residents more directly in articulating and responding to their needs.

## ***Appendix 1: Research Documents***

### **Canal Community Partnership Interview Schedule**

#### **1. Short Question to Introduce Narrative:**

As you know, I'm looking at what's available for the parents of young children in the area, around: adult education, support as parents, and support 'as people'. What's around this area when you feel like you could do with a hand, for whatever reason? Rather than asking a lot of questions out straight, I'm interested in just asking you your story, what are your experiences and opinions? I'm also interested in how you find communicating with groups like this one we are in, and the Canal Communities Partnership.

So bearing all of this in mind, can you tell me your story of being a parent (and a person!) in this area?

#### **2. Interview Topics:**

**A** Availability of Services

**B** Accessibility

**C** Efficacy of Services

**D** Those not Accessing Services

**E** Communicating with Services

**F** Schools in the Area

**G** Barriers to Accessing Services

#### **3. Expansion Questions:**

1. Availability of Services
  - How do you feel about what is in this area around for you: adult education, support as parents, and support 'as people' services for their young children?
  - Do you feel that there is 'something for everyone'?
  - Do you know of people who you think could do with support and aren't getting it?
2. Accessibility/Efficacy of Services
  - How did you find out about / start using this group or other services in the area?
  - Could you describe the process of becoming involved? What was it like coming here for the first time?
  - Do you go to other groups?
  - What do you feel you are getting out of it?
  - How do you feel about coming here to other groups?

- Do you get support outside of services (friends, family etc.)?
  - Do you feel that you can get everything you need in this area?
  - Would you change anything about the groups and services in this area?
3. Those not accessing Services
- What are the groups and services that you think would be of benefit to you?
  - Is there anyone offering this type of group of service in the area?
  - Have you ever tried to access it?
  - What do you do to get support around childcare? Education? Support for yourself as a person? Someone to talk to? Get advice from (friends, family etc.)
4. Communicating with Services
- What sort of relationship do you have with people running groups/crèches/services?
  - How do you feel about approaching them with questions / suggestions?
  - Do you feel that they are listened to?
  - What are the most important issues for you and your community?
  - Do you think that people employed by groups and services feel the same way?
  - Can you get your opinions across through any group or forum (outside of the service providers?)
  - What have you heard about the Canal Communities Partnership?
  - What would you like to see a change in the way that service providers / agents of state and voluntary bodies communicate with you?
5. Schools
- How do you feel about schools in the area?
  - Can you think of anything else they could be doing that would make an impact on your life or your children's?
  - How do you find communicating with the schools in the area?
6. Barriers to Using Services
- Can you think of anything that stops people in the area coming to groups like this or having a more involved relationship with local groups or schools?
  - Do you think that there are services
  - How would you feel about travelling to other areas to find services or groups for you or your children?
  - Have you ever heard of situations where people feeling unwelcome have stopped them using a group like this, a school, or any service for the parents of young children?

**Canal Communities Partnership  
'Our Opinions Matter' Research Project**

**Consent Agreement**

This research is about parents and young children in the Canal Communities. It is about assessing what is available to these groups and the systems in place to communicate with them.

We are asking for your consent to allow your child to take part in a research session through their school/crèche/youth group, to gain a picture of how young people feel about what is available for them in the area. The sessions are conducted by a researcher who is trained and experienced in working with young children. The methods she will be using include play, drawing, conversation and possibly walking tours, all of which will only cover topics that are at an age appropriate level.

- Your child will at every moment be under the **care of qualified professionals.**
- **Real names will not be used in the research.**
- All care will be taken to store interview material in such a way that only the researchers will have access to it.
- The researcher is free to use interview material for use in published material.
- Care will be taken to ensure the meaning of any interview material used is accurate and fair.
- The child is free not to answer any questions and he/she or their parent/guardian is free to stop the session at any point.

We are happy to answer any questions you might have about the process.

This is an opportunity to improve the services available in the area for young children and their parents. We appreciate you allowing your child to take part.

The Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

The Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

**Canal Communities Partnership  
'Our Opinions Matter' Research Project**

**Interview Agreement**

This research is about parents and young children in the Canal Communities. It is about assessing what is available to these groups and the systems in place to communicate with them. Your story, experiences, opinions and insights are of huge value to the study.

- The content of the interview is strictly confidential. All care will be taken to protect the identity of participants. In all published material **real names will not be used**. The interview is anonymous.
- Confidentiality will only be broken where interviewees state an intention to harm themselves or others.
- All care will be taken to store interview material in such a way that only the researchers will have access to it.
- The researcher is free to use interview material for use in published material.
- Care will be taken to ensure the meaning of any interview material used is accurate and fair.
- The interviewee is free not to answer any questions or to stop the interview at any point.

This is an opportunity to improve the services available in the area for young children and their parents, please speak freely.

The Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

The Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

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