Supporting Parents and Early Childhood Services
A New Way of Working
“SPECS has brought something into Bray that is different...
a new way of working”
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# Glossary of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Area Based Childhood Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAP</td>
<td>Bray Area Partnership</td>
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<td>BCAT</td>
<td>Bray Community Addiction Team</td>
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<td>BFRDP</td>
<td>Bray Family Resource and Development Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Cognitive Behavioural Therapy</td>
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<td>CEART</td>
<td>Centre of Education and Resourcing Travellers</td>
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<td>CES</td>
<td>Centre for Effective Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuous Professional Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>CYPSC</td>
<td>Children and Young People’s Services Committee</td>
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<td>DAISH</td>
<td>Traveller-specific Drug Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Education</td>
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<td>ECERS</td>
<td>Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale</td>
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<td>ED</td>
<td>Electoral Division</td>
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<td>GUI</td>
<td>Growing Up in Ireland study</td>
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<td>HSCL</td>
<td>Home School Community Liaison</td>
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<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health Service Executive</td>
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<tr>
<td>KIDI</td>
<td>Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory tool for parental knowledge</td>
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<td>LDATF</td>
<td>Local Drugs and Alcohol Task Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCT</td>
<td>Primary Care Team</td>
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<td>PFL</td>
<td>Preparing for Life Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>PHN</td>
<td>Public Health Nurse</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pobal</td>
<td>Pobal is an intermediary for community programmes funded by the Irish Government and the European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPFS</td>
<td>Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) Programme</td>
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<td>SCP</td>
<td>School Completion Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDQ</td>
<td>Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire</td>
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<td>SFP</td>
<td>Strengthening Families Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLCN</td>
<td>Speech, Language and Communication Needs</td>
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<td>SLT</td>
<td>Speech and Language Therapist</td>
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<td>SPECS</td>
<td>Supporting Parents and Early Childhood Services</td>
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<td>TOPSE</td>
<td>Tool for Parenting Self-Efficacy</td>
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<td>TUSLA</td>
<td>Tusla Child and Family Agency</td>
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**IMPACT**

All 65 stakeholders who participated in the evaluation stated that SPECS had had a positive impact.

All programmes showed positive trends, with the majority showing statistically significant improvements for children and families.

**OUTCOMES**

- **Parents reported:**
  - Their stress decreased significantly
  - Conflict with their child decreased significantly
  - Closeness with their child increased significantly
  - Improvement in reaching their goals

- **Teachers reported:**
  - Significant improvements in prosocial behaviours emotional difficulties of children

- **Early Years Practitioners reported:**
  - Positive trend in school readiness

**CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS**

- Consortium of diverse membership
- Relationship building with a wide range of stakeholders
- Ability to respond with flexibility

**CHALLENGES**

- Level of need identified among families
- Retaining parents’ engagement in the PFL
- Staffing capacity and turnover

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**SPECS MISSION**

“To have strong local alliances with the capacity and resolve to build and sustain more cohesive communities where all children are able to realise their full potential.”
CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS

Preparing for Life Programme

- **26.7** Average age participating in the PFL programme
- **23.8** Average age when they had their first baby (National average=32)

- 65% were expecting their first child

- 26% were single
- 37% were either married or co-habitating
- 34% had a partner but were not living together

- **43%** were unemployed
- **37%** had paid work

- **67%** stated their pregnancy was not planned

- **69%** had a medical card which is over double the national average

Group Parenting Programmes

- **90%** FEMALE
- **10%** MALE

Parent Education

- **13%** LEAVING CERT
- **37%** NON-DEGREE
- **36%** POST 2nd LEVEL
- **15%** 3rd LEVEL
- **15%** NOT COMPLETED 2nd LEVEL

Parents Work Status

- **54%** Home-maker
- **16%** Full-time employed
- **9%** Part-time employed
- **7%** Unemployed
- **4%** Edu. or training
- **1%** Other

Type of Household

- **73%** DUAL PARENT HOUSEHOLDS
- **27%** LONE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

"We got so much from it. We're much closer now, we find it easier to communicate and say how we feel"

"SPECS has brought something into Bray that is different, a new way of working"
“It made me feel differently about how to approach things, makes you focus on the good rather than the bad”
The Supporting Parents and Early Childhood Services Initiative (hereafter referred to as SPECS) is one of 13 Area Based Childhood (ABC) programmes based in disadvantaged areas around Ireland. SPECS is funded under the Government’s Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, with co-funding from the Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs and Atlantic Philanthropies. The ABC Programme invests in evidence-based interventions with a focus on prevention and early intervention that have been shown to improve outcomes for children and families living in less advantaged communities.

SPECS has been operational since May 2015, delivering a range of prevention and early intervention initiatives in the Greater Bray area. This report presents the findings in relation to the impact SPECS has had from 2015 to 2017 on stakeholders including children, parents and service providers. The report also looks to examine the key successors and challenges of implementing an area based approach and the learning from this process.

This evaluation includes primary research findings from consultations in the form of 39 interviews and 3 focus groups with 65 participants conducted by independent researcher Sarah Murphy. The consultations included representatives from members of the Consortium and the Steering Committee, service providers and parents. Children were not included in the primary research. The evaluation also includes local data from the ABC National Evaluation including demographic information and outcomes from a range of measurement tools.

This evaluation covers the key findings from stakeholder consultations and from the outcomes data for SPECS as part of the ABC National Evaluation, key learning in terms of direct service delivery, capacity building and interagency working before outlining key recommendations for the future of SPECS and the continuation of interagency work in the area.

**Outline**

- Chapter 2 outlines a brief background to the research and policy around prevention and early intervention and the ABC programme in Ireland as well as background information about SPECS
- Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used to collect and analyse data as well as the research limitations
- Chapter 4 presents a summary of the perspectives of the impact of SPECS from stakeholder consultations as well as the specific impact and outcomes of the 5 main programmes implemented as part of the SPECS implementation plan
- Chapter 5 explores the key learning from the set up and implementation of SPECS in terms of direct service delivery, capacity building and interagency working
- Chapter 6 looks at the challenges identified as part of the SPECS implementation experience and areas where development is needed
- Chapter 7 identifies areas for future work for SPECS going forward
- Chapter 8 makes recommendations identified as a result of the local evaluation and concluding remarks of the work of SPECS
“SPECS has absolutely made a difference. It’s a hub in the community for parent support and early intervention, also a hub for interagency work in general. It’s the only one of its kind. SPECS has really been a leader in Bray over the last two years”
BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Making the case for early intervention: An overview of related literature and policy commitments

It is important to situate SPECS in the wider context of national and international literature and policy framework enshrining the value of the early intervention and preventative approach.

Research increasingly supports the vital contribution of early intervention approaches to address early indicators and precursors of issues which could lower children's outcomes, and as a result, their families' outcomes and those of the wider community. Some research draws attention to the physical development of children and the fact that an infant's brain is fully developed by the age of three years to highlight the value of intervention at an early stage to maximise child development and capacity for learning in later years:

"The foundation for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional, are laid in early childhood. What happens in these early years (starting in the womb) has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing."
Marmot Health Inequalities Review (2010)

Neuroscientific research has linked positive early experiences and supportive early childhood relationships and environments to improved brain development (Winter, 2010). Research from Irish longitudinal study, Growing up in Ireland (GUI) has found that 1 in 4 children were overweight or obese by the age of three and the quality of a child's nutrition and diet in these early years had implications for risks of being overweight or obese (2011).

Supporting parents as part of early intervention has been found to have significant implications on outcomes for children, as well as for parents themselves (Guralnick, 1997). Parents are now recognised as the first educators of their children, and their relationship with their child exerts a profound influence on their children's wellbeing and future life progression. Analysis of Growing Up in Ireland data has also shown that the quality of the early parent–child relationship predicts how well children will get on with their peers later in life. Results from the equivalent longitudinal study for children in the UK, the Millennium Cohort Study show that positive parenting styles can help improve early child development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage.

The ABC programme builds on the learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) 2006-2013, which was co-funded by DCYA and The Atlantic Philanthropies. One of the main learnings from the research carried out on the outcomes of the PEIP was that direct work with parents had had a positive impact on their children:

"Assisting parents in their parenting through support programmes not only helps parents directly, but offers an opportunity to promote the most important factor influencing child development”
(CES, 2014)
Specific research carried out in Bray has also found similar results (Haase et al, 2008). Parenting support programmes have been found to have brought about significant improvements in reducing parental depression and stress levels, improving parents’ confidence and skills, reducing social isolation and improving children’s behaviour (Allen, 2011; Nixon, 2012; Sneddon and Owens, 2012; and Statham, 2013). In relation to the importance of reducing social isolation among parents and the importance of community-based services and supports, it is now widely acknowledged that parental and community engagement is a critical element of effective child development outcomes (OECD, 2012).

In the context of disadvantage, in 2013, the European Commission’s Recommendation ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage’ acknowledged that: “Children that grow up in poverty are more likely to suffer from social exclusion and health problems in the future, and also less likely to develop to their full potential later in life”. Research commissioned by the European Union has found that early childhood interventions work to tackle inequality and help break the cycle of disadvantage (Guerin, 2014).

There has also been international and national research making the economic case for an early intervention and preventative model. Barnardos in the UK have applied a Social Return on Investment (SROI) method to quantify the value of interventions at an early stage in both a child’s life and in the development of the parent-child relationship. This research found positive returns of at least double the investment in the services (Barnardos UK, 2012). Similarly, US-based research has found returns of Cost-benefit analyses conducted in the US of high-quality early care and education programmes have reported returns of $2.50-$16 for every $1 invested in early care and education programmes. In an Irish context, the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) estimated the benefits of investment in early care and education in Ireland to be between €4 and €7 for every €1 invested (NESF, 2015). These analyses are significant in a national and local context of limited resources.

In terms of policy commitments, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the Irish national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020, states that:

“Investment in the very early years (0-3) yields the highest returns, with significant returns incurred throughout childhood and early adulthood”

The policy document goes on to state that Irish investment in early childhood education is low at 0.1% of GDP compared with an average of 0.5% across OECD countries.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures acknowledges that a shift in policy has taken place. This shift involves “putting early intervention into action”, through, among other developments, the expansion of the ABC programme in 13 disadvantaged areas around the country. Irish policy has prioritised the use of evidence-based interventions, espoused by the ABC programme, in this increased focus on early intervention:

“Ensuring that the road to a better future for Ireland’s children is not just paved with good intentions means basing investment in evidence-based policies. The evidence tells us that investment in early years care and education reaps significant dividends throughout a child’s life and to society as a result of better outcomes. The evidence confirms the importance of parents particularly in the early years of a child’s life”

There has been an emphasis on the efficacy of cross-sectoral and cross-departmental strategies and initiatives in the development of early intervention approaches to address disadvantage. The ABC programme itself is a cross-departmental programme and its governance structures include an interdepartmental project team, consisting of nominees from relevant government departments and agencies. The Early Education Policy Unit involves both the Department of Education and
Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. There is an increasing acceptance among both academics and policymakers that cross-sectoral strategies are best suited to meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups and can best address and remedy the challenges and complexities of poverty, vulnerability and social and economic exclusion. To break the cycle of disadvantage, the European Commission has called for a more holistic and integrated approach to bring about multi-dimensional action against disadvantage and stressed the importance of early intervention and preventative approaches (European Commission, 2013). To address disadvantage, it is necessary to have a balance of universal supports with appropriate and responsive provision for the most marginalised children, young people and their families. This is in line with the aims of ‘Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures’ to support parents, listen to children and young people and promote effective transitions and interagency collaboration and coordination, as well as the policy’s commitment to:

“Provide and commission both universal and targeted evidence-informed parenting supports and early identification of ‘at risk’ children and families to strengthen families and reduce the incidence of children coming into, and remaining in, care”
(Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2014)

National Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme

The Programme for Government in 2011 stated the intention to “adopt a new area based approach to child poverty, which draws on best international practice and existing services to tackle every aspect of child poverty”.

As a result the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme was developed and a call for funding proposals was launched in 2013. The ABC programme is a prevention and early intervention initiative targeting investment in effective services to improve outcomes for children and families living in areas of disadvantage. The Programme is co-funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), and The Atlantic Philanthropies, with an investment of almost €32 million between 2013 and 2017. It builds on the work of the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) 2007-2013.

The aim of the programme is to test and evaluate innovative prevention and early intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children and families at risk of poverty. It offers programmes in 13 sites around the country, most of which are led by local consortia who co-ordinate the planning and delivery of services in their area. The focus of the work under the ABC Programme covers in the main: Child Health & Development, Children’s Learning, Parenting, and Integrated Service Delivery.

ABC’s primary objective is:

“…breaking the cycle of child poverty within areas where it is most deeply entrenched and where children are most disadvantaged, through integrated and effective services and interventions in the following areas: child development, child wellbeing and parenting and educational disadvantage”

Three former Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) sites transitioned into ABC Programme ‘areas’. Proposals from other areas around the country were invited in April 2013. Following a competitive process 10 additional areas, one of which was Bray, were selected to participate in the programme. In order to qualify for the Programme, the ten new areas completed a ‘service design’ stage, during which they assessed local needs, developed a theory of change, and a high-level implementation plan for their area. The purpose of the service design phase was to ensure that the programmes and approaches proposed met community needs, fit with the objectives of the programme, and had a strong evidence base. It also provided time and space for planning and developing relationships among key stakeholders in the area.
According to the 2016 Census there is a total population in the Greater Bray area of 42,944, however the area is extremely mixed, with wide variation between small areas and housing estates. There are 2,200 families in the area with the age of their youngest child 4 years or under, and 1,433 families with the age of their youngest child between 5 and 9 years.

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index (Haase and Pratschke, 2017) provides a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area using data compiled from various censuses. A score is given to the area based on a national average of zero and ranging from approximately -40 (being the most disadvantaged) to +40 (being the most affluent).

The highest level of affluence in the Greater Bray area is 19.65 side by side with the highest level of disadvantage at -23.12. This mixed nature of the area can often distort or hide the acute levels of deprivation that exist. There have been significant challenges in terms of gathering data which accurately reflects the realities depicted during the consultations by families and the professionals and service providers who are working with them. Deprivation figures are often hidden in Census data as private rented accommodation is registered under the name of the landlord.

This is also true for large privately rented apartment complexes which are known to accommodate families with very high needs or families new to Ireland. The issue of the ‘hidden homeless’ is also a huge factor as many people who are living with relatives are not considered homeless for the purposes of this data. Many of these people have not been able to join housing lists as they are deemed to be in reasonable accommodation, notwithstanding extensive overcrowding and problems for parenting and family relationships arising from these housing situations.

Poverty in these areas is often intergenerational which can create more complex challenges for families, with poorer developmental challenges for children from birth and lower expectations for the future.

Analysis of data at wider and small area levels in Bray identifies significant disadvantage. While it is a mixed area in terms of wealth, education, employment, and family composition, there are neighbourhoods where individuals and families are experiencing significant disadvantage. This is often very concentrated in particular housing estates. Needs and particular gaps in terms of service provision within the area were highlighted by participants during the consultations.
The Bray Family Support Working Group had been running since 2008 and was set up to take a collaborative approach to addressing the gaps in family supports in the Bray area. In answer to the dearth of services for families the working group, with Bray Area Partnership as the lead agency, submitted an application to the Area Based Childhood Programme in April 2013. In November 2013 the application was successful in being selected to proceed to the design stage which included an agreed Logic Model and three year implementation plan. The plan was designed in collaboration with local stakeholders to meet identified need and was approved by funders to proceed to implementation stage in 2014. Facilitated sessions took place in the latter part of 2014 to establish the SPECS Consortium and relevant supporting governance structures. SPECS staff were recruited by Bray Area Partnership between November 2014 and April 2015 with initial implementation beginning in May 2015. Full Implementation stage began in September 2016.

SPECS was set up to support improved outcomes for children and parents in the Greater Bray area through a range of early intervention and prevention programmes with families and practitioners from pregnancy to school age.

The vision statement for SPECS is:

“to have strong local alliances with the capacity and resolve to build and sustain more cohesive communities where all children are able to realise their full potential”

SPECS is overseen by a local Consortium of 18 organisations from the area and a lead agency, Bray Area Partnership. Consortium organisations include local schools and community early years settings, community organisations, as well as statutory agencies including HSE, Tusla and Children and Young People’s Services Committee (CYPSC). SPECS works with families, services and practitioners and provides a range of different supports in the local area. SPECS strives to improve outcomes for children by supporting key adults in their lives and working collaboratively with services to achieve a systems wide impact. It enables this through a 3 layer approach:

- **Direct service provision:** Providing direct evidence based supports to families in a range of ways including group settings, one to one and home based work

- **Capacity Building:** Building the capacity of practitioners in schools, early years services, community and statutory agencies by embedding best practice and evidence based programmes to make work with children and families more effective

- **Interagency approach:** Promoting interagency collaboration and enhancing systems wide impact by bringing services and practitioners together to identify gaps, share practice and develop plans to best meet the needs of children and families

**Overview of the programmes**

To help achieve improved outcomes for children and families SPECS implements a number of evidence based programmes which are proven to have positive impacts and were identified to meet gaps locally and included as part of the SPECS three year implementation plan. The programmes that constituted SPECS plan were deliberately selected by the Consortium with a view to the identified needs in Bray and to building on the interagency and programme delivery that was already in operation and delivering successful outcomes.

The following is an overview of the main evidence-based programmes implemented as part of the SPECS ABC initiative.
These include:

**Preparing for Life** - family mentors work alongside parents from pregnancy and visit families in their homes to provide support and information on a range of relevant topics including child development and parenting. The programme was developed to address the need to support parents in the key developmental window of birth to starting school.

**Parents Plus** - provides a suite of practical and positive parenting programmes developed in Ireland. Through SPECS the Parents Plus Early Years Programme (1-6 years) and the Parenting When Separated programmes are being delivered.

**Strengthening Families Programme** - in collaboration with community partners, SPECS is supporting the implementation of the Strengthening Families Programme. The Programme works simultaneously with parents and their children, supporting improved communication and enhances life skills including setting boundaries, resisting peer pressure, recognising feelings and solving problems.

**Roots of Empathy** – an in school programme that has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression among school children by raising social/emotional competence and increasing empathy. A baby and parent visit the classroom every three weeks where the baby is the “Teacher”, which the instructor uses to help children identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others.

**Early Years Quality Programme (EYQP)** - 5 community based early years services are participating in the programme which is providing training and mentoring to improve quality and develop capacity around implementing Aistear Siolta as well as developing a transition programme between early years services and primary schools.
Governance

Consortium
SPECs has taken a consortium approach to working with families and Bray Area Partnership (BAP) is the lead agency. The SPECs Consortium includes local schools, community childcare settings, community organisations, as well as statutory agencies including HSE, Tusla and the CYPSC in Wicklow. A full list of member organisations is included in the appendices.

These organisations signed a Consortium Agreement which detailed the structures guiding the implementation and development of SPECs. The aim of the Consortium is stated in this agreement as to “provide oversight to SPECs and to ensure that resources are channelled to where they will have the greatest impact”. BAP as lead agency, has managed the budget and has employed up to 6 staff, with a mix of full and part-time positions. A number of Consortium members are also involved with implementing the programmes as part of the SPECs implementation plan.

Steering Committee
The Steering Committee consists of membership from Consortium partner agencies and organisations, including BAP, Tusla and the HSE. A full list of members is included in the appendices. Facilitated sessions held in November and December 2014 found the need for a streamlined decision-making body to relieve the Consortium of the day-to-day operational decisions and the Steering Committee was established in response to this.

Subcommittees
Two subcommittees have been established to progress specific work streams in the areas of maternity and early years interventions. These meet approximately four times per year.

The SPECs Early Years Subcommittee was set up to provide guidance on developing a work plan for the SPECs Early Years Quality Programme, reviewing progress of the work and assisting with transitions and school readiness. Members include representation from SPECs, BAP, Wicklow County Childcare Committee, local community early years services and primary schools.

The SPECs Maternity Subcommittee was set up to further the possibilities of interagency working at a crucial time for families and the work of the committee focuses on highlighting the needs of the local population from antenatal stage and exploring pathways to establish early intervention supports for families. Membership includes practitioners relevant to supporting parents and children from pregnancy including maternity services, family support and Meitheal coordinators.

Lead Agency
Bray Area Partnership (BAP) is the lead agency as part of the consortium of community based projects and statutory agencies involved in the development of SPECs. BAP is responsible for the day-to-day management and administration of the Programme on behalf of the Consortium with responsibilities including:
- Legal responsibility for adherence to all contractual conditions of the funding
- Employer and management of programme staff
- Financial and non-financial returns to programme managers
- Maintains records and retains documents and records subject to audit and verification
"I've seen parents come out of themselves, they've even got jobs, they've totally changed"
CHAPTER 3

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodology taken in collecting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a wide-ranging picture of the impact of SPECS between 2015-2017. The evaluation has employed a mixed approach methodology, combining findings from qualitative data collected and analysed by an independent researcher and quantitative data collected and analysed as part of the ABC National Evaluation.

Terms of reference

The stakeholder evaluation was conducted by Sarah Murphy, independent research consultant, and was commissioned by the SPECS Consortium to review the operation and impact of SPECS in the Greater Bray area, with a view to embedding the learning from the initiative and informing and shaping the direction of related work in the future. This has involved assessing the impact of evidence based programmes which have been provided by SPECS to ensure that children get the best start in life and that parents receive the appropriate supports. This evaluation covers the work of the SPECS programme from 2015 to 2017 and looks at these activities at three levels: direct service provision, capacity building and interagency working.

Limitations of the research

The independent stakeholder research has been limited by the fact that participants in the consultations were self-selecting and do not necessarily represent a proportionate representation of all families accessing SPECS supports. Rather, participation in the consultations has been determined by the availability and willingness of families to share their experiences. It is important to note also that parents who had dropped out of SPECS courses were not included in the research due to the fact that they were no longer in contact with SPECS. Given that children were excluded from the potential sample, this evaluation includes the opinions of parents and professionals working with children regarding the benefits of the initiative for children, as well as including quantitative data where this was possible. Given the qualitative nature of the consultations, limitations relating to self-reporting and subjectivity apply. It is also possible that the local context of uncertain funding for SPECS may have influenced participants’ feedback. Finally, this evaluation relates to a two-year implementation timeframe and as such the impact and positive improvements reported by stakeholders are short-term in nature. To ascertain long-term benefits a longitudinal research approach would be required which has not been possible for this evaluation.

Methodology

This evaluation has employed a mixed approach methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

This has involved secondary research in the form of analysing demographic and service data and research and policy publications relevant to prevention and early intervention theory and models of work.

Primary research has also been carried out in the form of one to one semi-structured interviews and focus groups to further explore relevant themes related to the development and delivery of the initiative to inform the evaluation. All data collected has been analysed according to key themes, taking into account any gaps or important areas for future focus. All research has been carried out within a human rights conceptual framework. All interviews and focus groups were conducted and information stored in line with ethical and data protection standards. The information sheet and consent form used with participants in the consultations are included in the appendices.
There has been a concerted effort to include feedback in participants’ own words wherever possible. The importance of qualitative research in evaluating social supports in the context of marginalised and disadvantaged groups has been recognised in the research which has highlighted its capacity to engage directly with stakeholders to ascertain the perceived social impact of services and supports (Jarvie, 2012; Leko, 2014).

The research has assessed the key strengths and challenges arising from the delivery of the initiative, in particular in its capacity to promote social inclusion and address disadvantage for children and families. It has also focussed on the various organisational and interagency structures supporting the delivery of the initiative in Bray.

This evaluation report identifies where models of delivery in SPECS’ work to date have been effective and highlights opportunities for embedding and mainstreaming learning and effective practice. Data collected and analysed as part of the ABC National Evaluation has also been included to enrich the understanding and context of the work carried out through SPECS.

Finally, the report makes recommendations regarding future development and implementation of the initiative in Bray, as well as future collaborative working across sectors engaging with vulnerable children and families.

Sample

The potential sample consisted of Consortium members and stakeholders who have engaged with or been impacted by the SPECS programme. Given that children were excluded from the scope of this evaluation, this included:

- Members of the SPECS team, Consortium, Steering Committee and Subcommittees
- Parents who had participated in the programmes or whose children had participated
- Teachers from participant schools who had taken part in training or facilitated programmes
- Managers and staff from community childcare settings who participated in the Quality in Early Years Services programme
- Staff from community organisations within the area who had coordinated, facilitated or participated in the programmes.

Response rate for stakeholder evaluation

There was an excellent response rate with 65 people participating in total. This implies that Consortium partners and stakeholders were both willing and enthusiastic about sharing their views and experiences of SPECS. Practitioners and participants were interviewed from each of the five programmes. This included representatives from members of the Consortium and all members of the Steering Committee.

65 people were interviewed in total

20 face-to-face interviews

19 phone interviews

3 focus groups
Interviews and focus groups

39 interviews were conducted in total with parents, principals, teachers, managers and staff from community childcare settings, managers and staff from community organisations and other Consortium organisations, and all Steering Committee members. 20 of these were face to face interviews and some of these were group interviews. 19 phone interviews were carried out. At least 6 participants from each of the five programmes were interviewed, including:

- 29 parents
- 2 teachers
- 3 principals
- 5 childcare managers and staff
- 9 health and allied professionals including midwives, public health nurses and a public health nursing manager, social workers, family support workers, and SLTs
- 12 members of staff from community organisations
- 4 members of staff from other Consortium member organisations and other stakeholders.

Three focus groups were conducted in total with the following groups:

- Traveller parents and community development workers who had participated in Parents Plus
- Parents who had participated in Parents Plus, Strengthening Families and whose children had participated in Roots of Empathy
- Parents who had participated in Parents Plus and whose children had participated in Roots of Empathy.

Characteristics of participants and service level data

Demographic information has been collected as part of direct work with parents using the ‘About you and your Family’ form used as part of the data collection for the ABC National Evaluation and the Preparing for Life baseline survey. Where additional service level data is available this has also been included to provide further context and information relevant to the work of SPECS.

ABC National Evaluation: SPECS Outcomes Data

The evaluation also includes the analysis of pre- and post-intervention data submitted to the Centre for Effective Services (CES) by SPECS for work carried out between 2015 to 2017 for the outcomes strand of the national evaluation of the ABC Programme. This data was collected by practitioners on the ground including SPECS staff, early years practitioners, teachers and staff from statutory and community services. The data was analysed by research staff in the Centre for Effective Services (CES). Local data was made available to each ABC area with aggregated data available for national outcomes as part of the ABC national evaluation which is currently in the process of being finalised.

SPECS interventions included as part of the ABC national evaluation are aimed at three outcome areas:

**PARENTING**
Focusing on changes in Parent-Child relationships measures collected by practitioners before and after parenting groups include:
- Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS)
- Parental Stress Scale (PSS)
- Tool to Measure Parenting Self-Efficacy (TOPSE)
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

**CHILDREN’S LEARNING**
Focusing on children’s school readiness using the Santa Barbara School Readiness Scale (SBSRS) collected by early years practitioners

**CHILDREN’S HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT**
Focusing on children’s social and emotional wellbeing using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) collected by class teachers
“We got so much from it. We’re much closer now, we find it easier to communicate and say how we feel.”
Chapter 4

Key Findings

This chapter focuses on the perspectives and experiences of the stakeholders involved in SPECS as well as exploring the impact the main programmes implemented through SPECS have had over a two year period. It looks at the process of developing and implementing SPECS and on the qualitative experience of its stakeholders as well as quantitative data, where available, of programmes implemented as part of the SPECS implementation plan. This Chapter is divided into two sections:

Section 1: Programmes Impact and Outcomes

This section discusses the findings from qualitative and quantitative data in relation to the impact of and areas for development for each of the main programmes that formed the SPECS implementation plan. This section also includes suggestions made by participants during the consultations for the potential future roll-out of the programmes.

Preparing for Life Home Visiting Programme

Preparing for Life (PFL) is a home visiting programme which aims to improve levels of school readiness among children. The programme begins during pregnancy and can continue up until children start school. The programme supports parents to develop skills to help their children in five main areas of school readiness including:

- Cognitive development
- Physical health and motor skills
- Social, emotional and behavioural development
- Approaches to learning
- Language development and literacy.

Family mentors visit families in their homes and give ‘tip sheets’ with information on child development and parenting, with the aim of improving school readiness. Visits are generally monthly but there is some flexibility and frequency can be varied according to the needs of the families.

The programme was developed by Preparing for Life in Northside Partnership in North Dublin. When preparing for their application to Pobal to form an ABC programme, BAP and the Bray Family Support Working Group formed a working partnership with Northside Partnership to learn from their experiences and explore how implementation might best be pursued for the Bray area. The PFL programme in North Dublin has been in operation since 2008 and in 2016 its evaluation by University College Dublin’s Geary Institute in the form of a randomised control trial was published. The findings included that the programme had improved children’s cognitive development from 18 months of age onwards. By school entry, the PFL programme had a:

“...significant and large impact on children’s cognitive development. Children who received the high treatment supports had better general cognitive functioning, spatial abilities, non-verbal reasoning skills, and basic numeracy skills”

(Orla Doyle, Did Preparing for Life Improve Children’s School Readiness? 2016).
The timing and nature of the PFL programme have been very important when analysing its implementation and impact. SPECS began to deliver the programme at a similar time that Meitheal and PPFS models were launched. The local context was also one of limited family support services and an absence of antenatal interventions. These themes are further outlined and discussed in Chapter 6.

Characteristics of programme participants

There is currently no local outcomes data for the PFL programme in Bray due to the longitudinal nature of the programme, however demographic information using the PFL baseline survey has been collected with participating mothers (35 completed the survey) which shows that:

- **26.7** Average age participating in the PFL programme
- **23.8** Average age when they had their first baby (National average=32)
- **65%** were expecting their first child
- **69%** had a medical card which is over double the national average
- **26%** were single
- **37%** were either married or co-habiting
- **34%** had a partner but were not living together
- **43%** were unemployed
- **37%** had paid work
- **67%** stated their pregnancy was not planned

Impact

Unique intervention at antenatal stage

PFL was the first programme of its kind in Bray, offering intervention and support at the antenatal stage, which is often a very vulnerable time for expectant parents. All participants in the consultations felt that PFL had had a huge impact and had provided support to women and families who had not previously been receiving similar supports focusing on the 0-3 cohort.

“SPECS are providing the antenatal support which is the most difficult to find, we refer to PFL all the time”

“It would be a huge loss if their funding was not continued, they’re a niche group, one of the few services that exist for young, vulnerable mothers in the antenatal stage, need to be minded, more than just the medical, they teach them about time management, really broad and practical”
Benefits for parents

Parents themselves and organisations and services working with parents were hugely positive about the impact that PFL had had on parents. Benefits included gaining practical skills and knowledge about parenting and managing a household, social and emotional support, advocacy, referral to and assistance navigating other services. The main cohort reported to have benefited most were young mothers. Support was also provided in more complex cases where social work was involved, some of which included mental health, as well as mothers with intellectual and sensory disabilities caring for their babies.

“It definitely benefits the young vulnerable women, it makes them feel like they can do this, gives them confidence, that’s often the difference between coping and not coping. It’s often those that don’t need social work, they might be living at home with their Mum but they just need an extra bit of help, TLC, that’s what women in other areas don’t get, more personal input, it’s great support that wouldn’t be available otherwise”

Parents mentioned the importance of having the support of the PFL mentor during the various milestones from pregnancy to birth and beyond. Some of the parents had been involved in PFL with SPECS since they were five weeks pregnant.

“It was brilliant. She’s great. I was only 15 and I was living with my Dad, I didn’t know anything. She was able to answer all my questions”

“I had post-natal depression and she was there for me through that as well, she even helped me to get a house, she didn’t have to do that”

Parents also mentioned the support they got from SPECS staff in implementing the suggestions received at developmental appointments with their local PHNS.

Engaging with marginalised parents and families and those with the highest needs

The SPECS PFL programme has had success in terms of reaching and meeting the needs of some of the most marginalised parents and families in Bray. With some families, while they were referred into PFL, they have been in a crisis situation and it has not always been possible to follow the programme with them. Other individual work has been done with these families by SPECS development workers to address their specific circumstances.

“In Bray, because of the gap in the town they got a lot of high need families very quickly”

Parents also spoke of learning more about the supports that were available, with one family initiating a Meitheal as due to their interaction with SPECS they had learned that this was an option open to them.

Recruitment

Recruitment worked well with referrals coming from maternity staff, PHNs and local service providers and increasingly happening via word of mouth between parents as PFL has become more embedded in Bray. It was reported during the consultations that Holles Street midwives are routinely referring mothers of 21 years of age and under to SPECS. As mentioned above, SPECS staff have also attended Bray antenatal clinics to link with mothers.

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Areas for development

Retaining engagement
While recruitment has not been a problem, there were some challenges reported in terms of retaining engagement of families and parents.

“Where have lost some families along the way, some drop in and out of contact, others we have managed to carve out a specific support role with them like their parenting or their child’s development”

Families have dropped off due to homelessness and moving out of the area, staff turnover, parental capacity, level of need of families and the changing lives of families e.g. going back to work.

Level of need
As mentioned above, the fact that PFL has engaged with some of the most marginalised families in Bray has also created issues in terms of scope to appropriately implement the PFL programme given that sometimes families are in crisis situations and this hinders effective delivery. It has also raised some concerns in terms of the level of needs in Bray being higher than had been expected and the capacity of SPECS to meet these needs in the local context of limited family support services.

“PFL is ideally for those with no high needs, it’s very hard to go in with a tip sheet when there are very high needs you can’t ignore. It can be too chaotic. You might go in with a tip sheet on nutrition and healthy eating but that person might be struggling to get a weekly shop in or the electricity might be about to get cut off, the programme itself doesn’t meet a lot of the higher needs”

Staff reported that often the non-programme individual support work with families with the highest needs was the most time-consuming and that while funding was area-based, it was tied to the implementation of early intervention programme-based initiatives, and this work was not reflected in the funding system.
Parents Plus

Parents Plus is a parenting programme which uses practical steps proven to help parents work through any stresses or difficulties they are having with their child and explore new ways to help their child learn and develop. There are different Parents Plus courses available depending on the children’s age and family circumstances. SPECS has delivered Parents Plus Early Years (1-6 years) and Parenting when Separated, a specific course addressing parenting needs in families where the couple has separated.

While there was a history of the Incredible Years programme being already implemented in Bray, a decision was made by the Consortium that Parents Plus was more suited to the needs in Bray. The reason for this was that it had been difficult to retain parents’ engagement for the 14 weeks required for Incredible Years and the shorter 6-8 week timeframe in the Parents Plus programme was seen as more manageable.

Consortium member organisations reported that behaviour management was the main need being reported by parents in Bray and Parents Plus was seen as a more suitable approach addressing these identified needs earlier in the course along with the development of play techniques.

SPECS began by delivering Parents Plus Early Years (1-6 years) in May 2015. A need for parenting courses specific to separated parents was reported to the Consortium by schools and a decision was taken to run Parenting when Separated. Since May 2015, SPECS have trained 34 practitioners in parenting programmes including Parents Plus Early Years programme and Parenting When Separated. 25 parenting groups have been delivered either directly by SPECS staff or by practitioners who have been trained and supported through SPECS. Over 260 parents have participated in Parents Plus programmes, including 34 families receiving one to one support.

Parents Plus Early Years Programme (PPEY)

PPEY is an evidence-based parenting course promoting confidence, learning and positive behaviour in young children aged 1 to 6 years. Drawing on well-researched ideas about child development, and parent-child communication, the Parents Plus Early Years Programme supports parents to maximise their children’s learning, language and social development, as well as reduce behaviour problems, while ensuring their children grow up happy and emotionally secure. The programme is suitable both for children within the normal range of development as well as children with special needs, such as ADHD, speech and language and other development difficulties.

As part of the Parents Plus Early Years programme, parents set two goals for their child and two goals for themselves as a parent and rate themselves on a 0-10 spectrum before the programme starts and again at the end. Over 97% of parents who completed the PPEY programme reported improvements in their goals from an average score of 3.65 to 7.4 for goals set their children and 3.9 to 7.5 for goals set for themselves. These results compare favourably with national and international evaluations of the Parents Plus programme (Carr et al, 2016).

Fig 1: PPEY Parent and Child Goals
Parenting when Separated

Parenting when Separated is a practical and positive evidence-based course for parents who are preparing for, going through or have gone through a separation or divorce. Topics covered in the programme include:

- Solving co-parenting problems in a positive way that focus on the needs of children
- Cope with the emotional impact of separation and learn stress management techniques
- Help your children cope with the impact of the separation both emotionally and practically
- Enhance communication with their children and with their children’s other parent

As mentioned above, it was identified by schools locally that there were additional parenting needs arising among parents who were separated. Parents from a range of situations have participated, some newly separated, some who have been separated for over ten years, and some thinking about separating and wanting to learn more about the realities of parenting when separated. Some participants have also come from violent circumstances where court orders have been issued. While it has been more difficult to recruit men, every course has had at least two men to ensure a balanced perspective.

Positive results were reported by parents. Parents who completed the course reported progress in terms of attaining their goals from an average score of 3.4 to 7.5 for goals set for their children and 2.6 to 7 for goals set for themselves.

“It was excellent, really fantastic. Realised I wasn’t doing too badly; it could be a lot worse. For a long time, I didn’t want people to know I was separated, so going to the course was a real acknowledgement that that was my reality and it’s not a crime”

“It was really interesting to hear the male perspective as well, everybody was at a different stage of separating, one woman was just thinking about separating. Everyone was trying to make the best out of their relationship with their ex and sharing their ups and downs”

Parents Plus has also been run with a women’s Traveller group in Wicklow Town. There was not yet a group in Bray and women from Bray were attending this group. However there are plans to develop a group based in Bray. While the SPECS facilitators implemented the Parents Plus curriculum it was necessary that this was done in a flexible way that was responsive to the needs and preferences of the participants in relation to topics they were willing to discuss and the pace that they were comfortable with.

“The pace has to be sensitive to their needs, it takes time to build trust, SPECS have been very flexible, some weeks we may not get too much of the prescribed course, the discussion would be led by issues the women are talking about, it might be housing one week and maternal health the next”
Women reported finding it much easier to speak to the SPECS facilitators and ask questions and share information about their baby and their parenting that they would be afraid to share with other professionals. They also spoke of learning from each other’s experiences. In some cases the women heard about their sisters’ and friends’ experiences that they had never shared before.

“It’s the funniest thing, you might look at the video they’re showing you and you’ll see something and I don’t say it inside the group but I say it in my own head that I didn’t know I was doing it wrong with my baby and I go home and change what I’m doing. You feel like you can talk to her (facilitator), say things I’d be afraid to tell the nurse when we go to the appointments, afraid of what she’d do”

As a result of the programme other issues were discussed including maternal health which were identified by the group. It is not culturally acceptable to speak about sex, reproduction, pregnancy or the aftercare necessary and as such many of the women spoke of never having discussed these issues with anyone before.

“We learned a lot of things here that we didn’t know before, the education has been the most important thing. We’ve learned things about childcare, contraception, learned about newer kinds of contraception, the more modern things work better, it’s also sometimes easier to listen to a professional”
**Impact**

**Positive impact on parents**

Positive effects for parents were reported by parents themselves, as well as staff from organisations facilitating the course, referring to the course and working with parents. Benefits included additional knowledge and skills, increased confidence, personal development and peer learning and improved relationships among parents.

“It’s really built up my confidence. I still use the techniques”

“It made me feel differently about how to approach things, makes you focus on the good rather than the bad. Now she’s sleeping alone for the first time”

Parents also reported a significant decrease in stress (from 40.71 to 37.52) as recorded by Pre and Post scores utilising the Parental Stress Scale (PSS). For context, it is interesting to note that GUI data show that the average parental stress score was 32.2 for mothers, and 30.8 for fathers. Parents also reported significant improvements in their ability to discipline and set boundaries for their children (from 35.44 to 39.95) as measured by pre and post scores using TOPSE.

Some parents had obtained jobs and gone back to education since and credited the increased confidence they gained from doing the course with this positive development.

“I’ve seen parents come out of themselves, they’ve even got jobs, they’ve totally changed”

Many parents reported peer learning as having been one of the most effective elements of the course and that they valued learning from each other’s experiences.

“The best part was talking to other parents, we became good friends, really brought us together, realised we weren’t alone”

There were also some grandparents participating on the course whose children were living with them with their own families. It was reported to have been beneficial to hear grandparents’ perspectives and as such there was intergenerational peer learning also.

“It was useful to have grandparents’ perspectives too, it helped me understand my own parents who I live with”

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*Fig 3: Parental Stress Scale (PSS)*

*Fig 4: Tool to Measure Parenting Self-Efficacy (TOPSE)*
Improved relationship between parents and their children

Significant improvement in parent-child relationships in terms of an increase in closeness with their child (from 29.43 to 31.21) and reduced conflict (from 22.21 to 20.14) was reported by parents. For context, it is interesting to note that GUI data shows that the average closeness score for parents of children aged 5 years was 33.73, and the average conflict score was 14.95.

Among children aged 2-4 years; significant improvements in social and emotional difficulties (from 13.00 to 10.38), but no significant change in pro-social behaviour (from 6.90 to 6.95) were reported by parents using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionaire. For context, it is interesting to note that GUI data shows that the average total difficulties score for children aged 3 years was 7.98, and the score for pro-social behaviours was 7.94.

Enhanced capacity of facilitators

Early years managers and staff, principals and facilitators themselves reported enhanced capacity in terms of additional skills and has improved their work with families as part of their roles.

"Delivering the course has also enhanced our own capacity in terms of facilitation skills and working better with adults"

"We are using the materials on the floor, we can also use them one to one with parents who haven’t done the course but might be struggling"
Improved relationships between parents and the school

Principals and Home School Community Liaison Teachers reported improvements in their relationships with parents as a result of their attendance at the Parents Plus course.

"The course increases parents’ confidence, it shows them that the school isn’t a scary place, this is important especially if they didn’t have a positive school experience themselves. They’re much more likely to volunteer and do other courses”

Manageability of the programme

The selection of Parents Plus as a SPECS programme was praised by facilitators due to the manageability of the preparation time compared with other courses.

"Parents Plus has done wonders for Bray, it’s very manageable in terms of preparation time, you can easily fit it in and that’s important”

Recruitment

Recruitment was reported to have gone well, in most cases successfully getting the right mix of high and more moderate needs that is required for ideal peer support. Parents are increasingly recommending the course to other parents and recruitment is happening more by word of mouth. It was also noted how accessible and relevant the course is at a universal level for all parents.

"Parents Plus works brilliantly when parents engage, sometimes those that need it most don’t”

Areas for development

More review and booster sessions

Parents said that they would value more review and booster sessions as sometimes they forgot some of the techniques and strategies they had learned from the course.

Parenting courses for parents of older children

Parents of older children said that they would welcome parenting courses relating to parenting older children as in their experience the parenting challenges had changed, and in many cases increased, as their children got older.

Engagement

A minority of service providers reported that it had been difficult to recruit parents and that sometimes those parents that they felt needed the course most had not wanted to do it.
The Strengthening Families Programme (SFP) is an evidence based programme with proven outcomes for families where parents and children and teens learn together. This programme was selected as it focuses on family skills and works with the children, young people and their parents simultaneously. The programme aims to remove all barriers to a family’s participation, providing funding for transport and childcare for example. It is a 14 week skill-based programme which involves families learning and developing knowledge and skills with a view to making them stronger, closer and more able to cope with life’s challenges. It includes:

- A family meal every week
- A Parent Programme
- A Children’s Programme (6-11) and/or Teen Programme (12-17)
- A Family Programme

SFP has been proven to delay the onset of adolescent substance use; reduce levels of aggression; increase the resistance to peer-pressure in youth; and to increase the ability of parents or caregivers to set appropriate limits and show affection to and support of their children.

The Teen Programme of Strengthening Families had previously been delivered by the Bray Family Resource and Development Project (BFRDP). It was decided by the Consortium that the programme would be extended to include the 6-11 years age range with SPECS funding to meet the need of younger family members. It has been delivered four times since 2015 with funding from SPECS, with 35 families, over 35 parents and 70 children and young people engaged through the programme.

**Impact**

**Improved relationships within families**
Positive and lasting changes were reported in families that participated. Benefits were reported by parents themselves, referral agencies and organisations, and other professionals working with members of the families, including teachers, social workers, family support workers, community development workers and SCP staff.

Benefits reported during the consultations included having been brought together more as a family, learning techniques regarding how to deal with everyday issues and problems they were having, and improved communication skills.

“I'm glad we did it, we learned about how to deal with issues”

“We got so much from it. We're much closer now, we find it easier to communicate and say how we feel”

In relation to increased connectedness, the meal and the graduation ceremony and photograph were mentioned as especially important.

“It’s unusual for the three of us to do something together, we really enjoyed the meal together, we always came home chatting, we enjoyed the exercises, it was fun, the communication ones were especially interesting, how easy it is for wires to get crossed, topics always interesting”

**Positive impact on children and young people**
It was reported by parents, facilitators and members of referral agencies that children and young people had benefited from their participation in Strengthening Families:

“I can actually see the difference, even in the young people who did it two years ago; you can also remind them of things from the course”
Among children aged 4-17 years; positive trends were reported in social and emotional difficulties (from 14.56 to 13.00), and pro-social behaviour (7.56 to 8.33). The results were not statistically significant however these results may be affected by the small sample size. For context, it is interesting to note that GUI data shows that the average total difficulties score reported by parents of children aged 5, 9 and 13 years were 7.44, 7.98 and 7.09 respectively. The scores for pro-social behaviours were 8.43, 8.88 and 8.8, respectively.

**Positive impact on parents**

Parents themselves reported having learned practical parenting skills and techniques which had had a positive impact on them and their families. They reported improved communication, decreased conflict and an increased sense of connectedness among the members of their family. Parents are still using the strategies and they felt that the course had brought about long-term changes in their families. Parents also reported a decrease in stress indicated by pre and post scores using the Parental Stress Scale.

**Improved relationships among parents**

Parents reported benefiting from new and strengthened relationships among parents, peer learning from the experiences of other parents, as well as a sense of solidarity and realising that they and their family were not alone in having difficulties.

**Recruitment**

Recruitment was said to have been very successful. As the course has become more embedded in the area, recruitment is now happening more through word of mouth between parents.
Areas for development

Recruitment of families and facilitators
While recruitment had not been challenging, getting families with the right mix of needs had been. Sometimes despite the information provided by the referral agency or organisation, it was not clear until later how high a family’s needs were. At times the referrer had not been aware either. In terms of the recruitment of facilitators, while initial recruitment was not problematic, at times facilitators had been trained who had then not committed to facilitating the course.

Budget
It was reported to have been difficult to estimate all additional costs involved in this programme. Transport, for example, had ultimately cost more than had been estimated in the programme budget.

Acute needs
The level of needs was a challenge reported. These needs included addiction, mental health and suicide. There were reports of young children on the course who had previously been taken into care and others who were being exposed to substance misuse in the home environment. One of the participating parents died during one of the courses and this was very upsetting for the group.
Roots of Empathy

Roots of Empathy is an evidence based programme that has been shown to have had a significant impact on reducing levels of aggression among school children by raising social and emotional competence and increasing empathy. The programme was developed in Canada and is rolled out in Ireland through Barnardos.

A baby and parent, ideally from within the school community, visit the classroom every three weeks over the school year. A trained Roots of Empathy Instructor coaches students to observe the baby’s development and to label the baby’s feelings. In this experiential learning, the baby is the ‘Teacher’, whom the instructor uses to help children identify and reflect on their own feelings and the feelings of others. The Roots of Empathy Instructor also visits the class before and after each family visit to prepare and reinforce teachings using a specialised lesson plan for each visit.

The programme was chosen to address social and emotional literacy of children in primary schools. Ten instructors have been trained through funding from SPECS in five schools in Bray, impacting on over 330 children.

Impact

Positive impact on the children

Positive effects on children were reported by principals, teachers, parents and SCP staff, including improved relationships among children and improved behaviour and compassion in the classroom.

“It has definitely led to more gentle behaviour; I notice it especially among the boys”

“Observationally it is making an impact. It has led to positive interaction between children. It is very valued by parents and class teachers and has enhanced instructors’ capacity in working with the children”

Outcomes from the data collected by class teachers as part of ABC evaluation using the Strengthens and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) show very positive impact including:

- All changes were statistically significant.
- Improved social and emotional difficulties (from 7.04 to 4.13) among the children, in terms of conduct disorders, hyperactivity, emotional problems, and peer problems. For context, it is interesting to note that GUI data shows that the average total difficulties score for parents of children aged 5, 9 and 13 years were 7.44, 7.98 and 7.09 respectively. The scores for pro-social behaviours were 8.43, 8.88 and 8.8 respectively.

Note:

For contrast, it is interesting to note that GUI data shows that the average total difficulties score for parents of children aged 5, 9 and 13 years were 7.44, 7.98 and 7.09 respectively. The scores for pro-social behaviours were 8.43, 8.88 and 8.8 respectively.

Fig 10: Changes in Children’s Social and Emotional Wellbeing (4-17 Year Olds)
score for parents of children aged 5, 9 and 13 years were 7.44, 7.98 and 7.09 respectively meaning scores from the SPECS data show a significant improvement to below the national average.

- Improved prosocial behaviours among the children (from 7.59 to 8.96). GUI data shows that the average total scores for prosocial behaviours were 8.43, 8.88 and 8.8, respectively meaning scores from the SPECS data show a significant improvement to above national average scores.

**Extension to other schools**

While Roots of Empathy had been implemented in some schools in Bray prior to SPECS, as a result of SPECS, its implementation has been expanded and it has been extended to other schools and cohorts of children that it would not otherwise have been. These new schools have included a traveller specific school, a large local primary school and the first special school in Ireland to run Roots of Empathy. It has also been possible to increase the offering of the programme within two local DEIS schools.

It was mentioned that the SPECS Consortium provided an optimum platform for this extended roll-out as it had access to a wide network through which resources could be shared and instructors found and trained. It was also reported to have been very beneficial that SPECS staff had the time to do outreach to schools who had not yet run the programme to inform them of its benefits and build relationships, given that the national coordinators of the programme would not have time or resources to engage locally at such an intense level.

**Traveller-specific school**

Initially there were concerns as to whether or not it would be possible to engage a Traveller parent to participate with their baby. It is preferable for the baby to come from within the school community so that the children can empathise with it as one of their own and relate to its environment, and so that the baby’s parent can relate to the lives of the children. The first year the parent was a non-Traveller and the second year a Traveller parent participated and it has been reported to have improved relationships between Traveller parents and the school and also improved the personal development of the participating Traveller parent.

> “It was so great to have a Traveller baby, the kids need to be able to relate, it needs to be feasible that the baby will be sitting behind one of their desks in a few years time”

**Special school**

As mentioned above, this was the first time that Roots of Empathy had been run in a special school in Ireland and it was necessary to obtain formal approval from the developers of the programme in Canada. While it was decided that the same curriculum should be used, the learning from the school was that it worked better with older children than is recommended

> “Schools are offering to help other schools in different parts of Bray find babies so they can run the course, we’ve had a parent from North Bray going to South Bray. I have worked in Bray for years and that doesn’t normally happen, it’s not usually heard of in Bray: SPECS has had the power to do this”

> “It really has made a difference to have people with energy and time to put in the effort, to build on local resources, that has made a massive difference and we wouldn’t have got those additional schools if not for that”
for regular schools due to reduced cognitive ability in the younger children at the school. This feedback was given to the international management team for the programme.

**Improved personal development for participating parents**

Principals, teachers and parents themselves reported improved confidence and personal development as a result of their participation.

> “The mother really came out of herself, I’ve known her for years, at first she was staying at the door, very self-conscious, it’s been great for her personal development”

**Improved personal and professional development for instructors**

Capacity building in the form of improved personal and professional development was reported by instructors that had been trained in Roots of Empathy as part of SPECS. These included parents, teachers, and SCP staff.

> “It’s really interesting, the resources are great, it’s very easy to deliver and the children respond really well. I can use the techniques in my practice with the children, remind them about the baby’s temperament”

**Areas for development**

**Suggested increased flexibility in special school setting**

The one suggestion for the future was that the age range for children with special needs be reconsidered as it was felt that it worked better with older children than was recommended, due to increased cognitive ability.
Early Years Quality Programme

This programme involves mentoring and support for 5 local community childcare settings. SPECS aimed to support early years staff in further understanding and implementing national policies including Aistear and Síolta to ensure that the best outcomes for children engaged with services were achieved. The programme focused on supporting services to implement and reflect on learning from the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide by providing training and mentoring in the 7 Aistear Síolta Pillars of Practice.

Initially this programme was run by a part time Early Years mentor employed by SPECS. This staff member moved on to another role in August 2016 and in November 2016 it was decided by the Consortium that it would be prudent to contract the implementation of this programme out to the Wicklow County Childcare Committee (WCCC). The WCCC are a Consortium member and have the requisite expertise to coordinate the training and mentoring, as well as established relationships with the participant community childcare settings. Over 35 early years practitioners have participated in training and mentoring through SPECS since 2015, impacting on over 400 children across five community childcare settings.

Supporting the transition from preschool to primary school was also identified as a key activity under the EYQP. As part of the work of the Early Years Subcommittee to develop the work stream for this part of the programme, a Transitions Form was developed to improve and formalise information sharing to better support the transition from pre-school to primary school.

Impact

Improved Quality

Improvements in the quality in early years settings were measured using Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant/ Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS). The Scale consists of 43 items organised into 7 subscales rate from 1-2.9 (inadequate) 3-4.9 (minimal) 5-6.9 (good) 7 (excellent). The Subscales include:

- Space and Furnishings
- Personal Care Routines
- Language-Reasoning
- Activities
- Interactions
- Programme Structure
- Parents and Staff

Two sessions have taken place rating the 5 community early years service in November 2016 (Time 1) and November 2017 (Time 2) to measure any improvements in the settings under 6 out of the 7 subscales. The scales show there has been an overall increase in scores with particular improvement in areas such as the physical environment and interactions. Areas such as learning activities and language and literacy are areas where further development is needed.

Fig 11: Total ECERS/ ITERS subscale scores for 5 EYS
Positive impact on children
Benefits for children attending the settings involved were reported to have included more free play time, more time outside, and more child-led activities. These improvements were expected to improve development outcomes for children attending the service.

"I've seen changes in practice and this is benefiting children"

"We have more child-led play now and more time outside"

"We’re more child-led now, if a child takes an interest, the staff can run with that"

School Readiness Outcomes
Data was collected by early years practitioners working directly with children using the Santa Barbara School Readiness Scale (SBSRS) as part of the ABC national evaluation. Over the two years where outcomes data was collected, practitioners involved in children's learning interventions reported:

• Improvements in children's overall school readiness, but these changes were not statistically significant.

• There were statistically significant improvements in children's language development.

![Fig 12: Changes in Children’s School Readiness](image)

Note:
For contrast, it is interesting to note that in an Irish study (Carr & Hamilton, 2013), the total school readiness was 38.66 at pre-intervention and 41.26 at post-intervention.
Improved professional and personal development of staff
Benefits for staff were mentioned by Consortium members and by managers of early years community childcare settings in terms of professional and personal development and increased confidence.

“*It definitely has made a difference, before they wouldn’t have attended training like this, now they are because they are being supported, we wouldn’t have been able to give this level of support without SPECS*”

Improved networking
The Early Years Subcommittee was seen as having improved networking among settings and local primary schools. The fact that the committee met approximately three or four times per year was seen as manageable for people to attend. It was mentioned that it was important that there was a representative from a primary school on the Early Years Subcommittee. Opportunities for building relationships and mutual learning between early years professionals and primary school teachers have been identified as key.

“It has definitely helped me in my job”

“The staff are more confident now, they’re getting ideas from it, reassurance that they are doing things right. Sometimes it’s easier to listen to an external person”

Improved transitions from pre-school to primary school
The Transitions Form was seen by many participants in the consultations as the most positive outcome from the Early Years Subcommittee. This was something that was happening in Bray and was formalised by SPECS. A template form has been developed and is now used in the transition of children from community early years settings to primary schools.

Again, the direct participation of schools in the drafting of this form was praised as important:

“Transitions has been very important. It was great that our staff could feed into the design, we were asked what information would be useful to receive. It was recognition of the need to hear primary school teachers’ voices, it was a great example of cross-sectoral cooperation with a focus on improving outcomes for children”

Improved relationships with parents
In addition to the mentoring programmes, managers of early years settings spoke of the importance of being able to refer parents to other SPECS programmes and how SPECS’ work had improved their relationships with parents. The fact that SPECS was a locally-based service that also did outreach to people’s homes was said to be very important for referring parents and families and making it easier for them to engage. With the consent of parents, early years staff could focus on things with children in the setting that SPECS staff were working with them on at home. In this way, a collaborative approach was taken whereby learning and behaviour change could be reinforced by SPECS staff, parents, and early years staff.
This approach was reported to have improved relationships between parents and early years settings. In some cases, parents began sending their children to settings as a result of their engagement with SPECS.

“Before they wouldn’t have sent their children here because they were suspicious about accessing any services, now because of SPECS the parents feel more supported and the children are getting more developmental opportunities”

**Areas for development**

**Time constraints**
The view was expressed that the number of hours contracted to the WCCC had in hindsight not been sufficient to allow for the amount of visits to settings that was ideal and as a result feedback had had to be given over the phone in some cases. It is worth noting that this criticism did not come from the settings, all of whom welcomed the engagement that they had had with WCCC as part of the programme. The time constraints of WCCC staff together with this lack of a SPECS staff member, had the implications of limiting the hands-on support that was available to services in implementing the learning from the training.

“The contracting model worked well but unfortunately there hasn’t been enough time for engagement with the settings”

**Implementation**
Some of the settings reported varying levels of engagement with the training in terms of staff attendance. There was no backfill provided for and staff in some settings were doing the training outside of working hours in their own time. Where staff were given payment or time in lieu for attendance this led to better attendance at the training.

**Maintain momentum of the programme**
It was felt that it would be important to maintain the momentum that had been developed by the programme and ensure that there was capacity going forward for regular review of the settings to sustain the focus on quality and further implementing learning. Managers in early years settings also called for regular contact with a mentor and said that they would value this support. This may involve a review of the staff capacity necessary to undertake this.

**Improve information and extend reach of Transitions programme**
It was felt by some schools that the Transitions form was not as informative as it could be as parents were seen to be withholding information and not disclosing their children’s speech and language issues for instance. It was also felt that the reach of the Transitions programme should be extended to private early years settings and non-DEIS schools as currently there was an unequal situation whereby children were missing out on the improved information sharing.

**Peer learning and improved networking**
There was some disappointment expressed that the Early Years Subcommittee had not brought about the level of networking that had been hoped for. Engagement in the Subcommittee was seen as an area that could be developed further to enhance relationships between settings.

It was suggested that a community of practice model would be very beneficial in bringing about improved peer learning and information sharing. This was an original objective of the Subcommittee and it was reported that there were varying levels of openness to this reported, with some settings citing workload and limited staff availability as challenges.

“It would be great if we could all come together and share learning, discuss challenges, it’s a shame there hasn’t been more connection between the settings”
### Section 2: Stakeholders Perspectives on the impact of SPECS

#### Satisfaction levels

Satisfaction levels were very high with all 65 participants stating that SPECS as a whole had been a positive experience and had benefited themselves and the wider community in the Greater Bray area. Participants referred to SPECS as having made a tangible difference in providing the area with additional support for children, parents, and families and those practitioners working with them. This was particularly important given that Bray does not have a dedicated family support project like exists in Wicklow Town and Arklow and it is widely accepted that there is a gap in terms of family supports available in the area.

- All of the teachers (2) and principals (5) felt that the programmes had had positive benefits for the principals, teachers, parents, children and the school as a whole
- Childcare managers and staff (6) also said that their participation in the Quality in Early Years Quality Programme, as well as in the wider initiative, had been a positive experience and had benefited them, the children they care for and their parents, and the childcare setting in general
- Health and allied professionals including midwives, public health nurses, social workers, family support workers and SLTs (9) said that they had seen gains for children, parents and families and that SPECS had also assisted them in doing their job
- All of the parents (29) interviewed expressed high satisfaction levels and reported benefits for themselves and their children as a result of their participation with the programmes
- All staff from community organisations (12) interviewed reported that the initiative had benefited their organisation and the local community
- Staff from other Consortium member organisations and other stakeholders (2) all perceived benefits for families in Bray, their own organisation and the wider community.

#### Impact

It was reported that SPECS has had a positive impact on a range of stakeholder groups, including children, parents, teachers, childcare managers and staff, managers and staff from community organisations, allied health and social care professionals, and the community as a whole.

- **Children**
  - Positive results for children were reported by parents, principals, teachers, early years managers and staff, community organisations and other organisations and agencies working with children. Children have benefited from directly participating in Strengthening Families and Roots of Empathy programmes, as well as benefiting from the participation of their parents, teachers and childcare staff in the other interventions.
  - Benefits reported for children have included improvements in social, emotional and communication skills as a result of the Roots of Empathy programme. Positive improvements in relationships between children and their parents and families who participated in Preparing for Life, Parents Plus and Strengthening Families Programme were also reported. Positive results for children were reported in settings where staff had participated in the Early Years Quality Programme. Children have already been seen to benefit from improved transition to primary school and increased information sharing as part of the Transitions programme, arising from the work of the Early Years Subcommittee.

- **Parents**
  - Parents directly participated in Preparing for Life, Parents Plus programmes and the Strengthening Families Programme. Parents reported having gained knowledge and practical skills, improved experiences of bonding with their child and improved relationships with their children, reductions in their stress levels, increased personal
development, confidence and wellbeing, increased social integration and improved relationships among parents and between parents and teachers, and improved engagement with local health services.

- **Teachers and principals**
  All of the teachers and principals interviewed felt that the programmes had had tangible benefits in terms of their professional development. Teachers and principals reported improved professional development and working relationships; additional skills, especially communication and facilitation skills; and improved relationships between parents and teachers.

- **Childcare managers and staff**
  Childcare managers and staff reported that their participation in the Early Years Quality Programme had been a positive experience and had benefited them, the children they care for and the childcare setting in general. These benefits have included additional skills and education, especially in the areas of improved child-led play, environment, and curriculum development; increased confidence of staff; and increased personal development of staff. Early years managers and staff also spoke of the benefits of being involved in the wider SPECS initiative and being able to refer parents to other SPECS programmes and collaborate with SPECS on issues relating to the children which has led to improved relationships with parents.

- **Community workers and community organisations**
  Community workers and organisations reported benefits and increased opportunities that had come with the ABC programme. These included the fact that new relationships had been formed and existing relationships strengthened through SPECS, increased information sharing among organisations, and increased professional development and additional skills learned through training and participation in Parents Plus, Strengthening Families and Roots of Empathy programmes.

- **Health and allied professionals**
  Feedback from public health nurses, midwives, social workers, family support workers and speech and language therapists (SLTs) regarding their involvement in the initiative reported benefits including enhanced relationships with other organisations and service providers in the area, and improved relationships and engagement with parents and other individuals accessing their services, as well as welcoming the opportunity to be able to refer families to SPECS services and supports in a context of a lack of a local dedicated family support project.

- **Wider community**
  In general, it was felt that SPECS had had a positive effect on the community and had met the needs of families for whom there were not currently sufficient supports available. The initiative also highlighted levels of need among families in Bray which were greater than had been originally expected. The initiative has led to very successful interagency cooperation and collaboration in bringing together organisations, services and agencies working with families to address these needs.
Critical success factors and challenges

Critical success factors include:

- The establishment of a Consortium of diverse membership with a wide range of skills and expertise
- The contribution of the Consortium in terms of programme delivery and support
- The relationship building with a wide range of stakeholders which enabled programmes to be developed and delivered
- The skill set of the SPECS team and ability to respond with flexibility where needs were identified.

Challenges in relation to the implementation of the initiative include:

- The level of need identified among families in the area was significantly higher than had been originally expected. Work with these families necessarily took the form of one to one crisis management rather than early intervention programme-based work
- Recruitment was a challenge at times in terms of retaining parents’ engagement in the PFL programme
- Staffing capacity and turnover was a challenge due to the levels of needs of families being referred to SPECS and the fact that funding was uncertain and it was not possible to guarantee staff job security with consequences for maintaining staff team continuity.
“There was great support from the other families and it was great to hear that you weren’t the only one, you feel normal and part of something, it’s brilliant”
Background: Local Context and Governance

The local context and governance structure of community-based organizations are factors which have important impacts on the way in which services are delivered. An understanding of the local context is key in terms of understanding the implementation of SPECS over the last two years. There is no dedicated family support project in Bray, as exists elsewhere in the county. This has resulted in a large gap in service provision for families and significant needs in the area of family support were often unmet. The shortage of other dedicated family support services in Bray has meant that SPECS has filled an identified gap and has been seen as both complementary and as taking the pressure off existing services, as well as meeting the needs of families who would not have any other services or supports available to them. However the lack of a locally based family support project has had knock on impacts for service delivery which are highlighted below. As mentioned previously, in addition to the context of limited family support services, SPECS’s early intervention focus on antenatal supports in PFL has been a unique and niche offering in Bray.

The SPECS Consortium engaged in a series of facilitated sessions with an external organisational consultant in November and December 2014 to assist in developing the governance structures for the initiative. As a result of these sessions, it was identified that there was a need for a streamlined decision-making body and the Consortium decided to establish the Steering Committee. Feedback from the consultations was positive in relation to governance structures and processes established and utilised in the implementation of the programme. The members of the Steering Committee and the wider Consortium have worked well together. A significant enabling factor in this was the fact that most of the members had worked together as part of the Bray Family Support Working Group which had been running since 2008.

Two subcommittees were established to focus on progressing activities in the areas of early years and maternity issues and feedback from the functioning of these and the collaborative work that has been generated has been very positive.

This section discusses the key learning from the consultations and analysis of the relevant programme data available for SPECS under the following headings:

- Direct service delivery and support
- Capacity building
- Systems change

“SPECS has absolutely made a difference. It’s a hub in the community for parent support and early intervention, also a hub for interagency work in general. It’s the only one of its kind. SPECS has really been a leader in Bray over the last two years”

“It’s delivering crucial programmes to families at an early stage from pregnancy; they work with families in different ways, depending on levels of need”

“The Steering Committee has led to more efficient decision-making on behalf of the Consortium, it’s led to improved delivery of programmes”
Direct service delivery and support

SPECS has been very successful in terms of service delivery to parents and children. SPECS’ objectives for service delivery were very much informed by the local context and the lack of a family support project locally. As a result, from the beginning SPECS was engaging and working with families at local level where other complimentary services such as family support and ante natal support were not readily available.

Parents, children, young people, and early years staff have all benefited from services and supports provided by SPECS:

- Parents have received parenting supports through programmes including PFL, Parents Plus, Strengthening Families.
- Children have received the Roots of Empathy in schools with more marginalised school communities including the Traveller-specific school and the Special school. It has been identified that neither of these schools would likely have received the programme if not for SPECS ABC Programme funding and the capacity to put the necessary time and resources into the engagement required. Children and young people have benefited from their participation in the Strengthening Families programme and the positive impact it has had on their families’ lives.
- Early years staff in Bray have benefited from the mentoring support provided by the SPECS’ Early Years Quality Programme, which has in turn benefited the children they care for in their settings.

The positive experiences communicated by stakeholders can also been illustrated by the outcomes data which on the whole showed positive trends in relation to the impact on children and the key adults in their lives, with the majority of measures showing statistically significant improvements.

With regard to engagement, it was reported that SPECS has maintained a very family and child-centred approach in their implementation of the programmes and in their casework and that this has been a factor in their high levels of engagement. SPECS have developed very strong relationships with stakeholders in a relatively short timeframe.

“They are established and rooted in the community, that’s a huge achievement in two years, they’re recognisable, known to schools, PHNs, it’s a very easy way of working when there are all those connections”

“There is always such positive feedback from parents, you really see the difference, programmes are so worthwhile, they get so much out of it”

The progressive universal approach that SPECS has employed has enabled it to engage in targeted work where necessary while avoiding both stigma and discrimination and all participants in the consultations confirmed that SPECS had developed a very positive reputation in Bray. This has been vital in an area such as Bray with a very mixed socioeconomic demographic where needs can remain very much hidden. With regard to targeted work, SPECS has succeeded in reaching and providing services and supports to some of the most marginalised families that are the most in need of their services. This is testament to the trust and relationships that SPECS has formed in a relatively short time frame in Bray. It should be noted that reaching the most marginalised families has highlighted the level of needs in Bray and at times it has been challenging to meet these needs, especially in the context of a lack of other services. In this sense, while it has been a hugely positive development, through its work SPECS has shown that the needs in Bray are higher and more acute than had been originally expected, especially at the 0-6 years stage, and this presents issues for sustainability of both SPECS and the capacity of services in general to evolve and respond to these highlighted needs.
The selection of programmes and the service delivery and support provided by SPECS has been very positively received by children and their families and the professionals and service providers working with them. All of the participants in the consultations acknowledged that the services provided were ones that families would not be receiving if not for SPECS.

It was reported that SPECS have taken an innovative approach to finding new and collaborative ways of working and are consistently engaged in assessing what the changing needs are in the area.

“*They are always trying to find out what the needs are and see if they can help, I mentioned a problem once at a meeting and they rang me the next day to offer help, they’re always looking at areas of need in the town, they’re very proactive*”

**Responsive and Flexible**

SPECS was considered to have been responsive and flexible in the way that it operated and that plans were adjusted when emerging needs came to light. As such it has led to more effective use of resources to meet identified need more appropriately.

“*SPECS are very future-focused; they’re always thinking and planning what to do next*”

There are several examples of this responsiveness and flexibility:

- When schools fed back that there were particular needs among parents who were separated, SPECS decided to implement Parenting when Separated in response
- The creation of the Maternity Subcommittee was also an example of SPECS identifying that there was a need for more joined up working at the prenatal stage to address layers of need and explore how services could better work together
- The development of the Circle of Security training was a response on the part of SPECS to an increasing number of instances of referrals for aggressive behaviour in young children. Circle of Security is a relationship based parenting programme which aims to increase secure attachment and positive relationships between children and their parents.
- The Infant Mental Health Framework seeks to promote social and emotional development, prevent mental health difficulties and provide intervention to challenged parent-infant relationships from pregnancy to three years
- The establishment of a part-time Speech and Language Therapist post seconded from the HSE was in response to the need for a more preventative approach to addressing Speech Language and Communication needs (SLCN)

**Capacity building**

Through Preparing for Life, Parents Plus, Strengthening Families and the individual work with parents and children SPECS have built the personal capacity of parents, children and young people to learn parenting and life skills that contribute to effecting long-term change in their families and improved their personal development and ability to deal with often very difficult situations. As many participants noted in the consultations, the practical and emotional support provided by SPECS has been an empowering experience for them and has often made the difference between them coping or not coping when a crisis happens.

In terms of professional capacity-building, SPECS have provided training in evidence based programmes to a wide range of individuals, professionals and service providers in the community, including: parents, principals, teachers, community development workers and managers,
PHNs, SLTs, staff from the SCP programmes, and early years staff and managers. Of those professionals working with children, all of them said that the training had contributed to their professional development and enhanced their skills and knowledge and capacity to meet the needs of the children and young people they work with.

While capacity building has been a huge achievement it is also important to recognise the role that SPECS have played in terms of motivation, coordination and follow-up to interventions, which is often necessary to sustain engagement and ensure ongoing momentum. It will be important in the future for further work to be developed to build capacity and promote understanding around the importance and benefits of early intervention and preventative approaches as mentioned previously.

Members of staff from community organisations and agencies providing services in Bray reported enhanced capacity in their roles and additional skills and knowledge.

**Interagency working and systems change**

Interagency working has been very successful and is one of the primary achievements of SPECS, in addition to the service delivery and capacity building it has achieved in Bray. All participants of the consultations reiterated the contribution that SPECS has made to interagency working. A number of enabling factors were identified to support this including the fact that there is no dedicated family support service based in Bray and as a result there was a positive attitude to the setup of the initiative from the outset. Equally, previous working relationships had been established between members of the SPECS Consortium through their membership of the Bray Family Support Network since 2008. This had a very positive impact on the capacity of the initiative to enhance interagency working and realise systems change. With the exception of one group, all stakeholders reported very good relationships with SPECS. The opportune timing of the development SPECS was also a key enabling factor in terms of achieving this, given the fact that it was established at approximately the same time as the development of the Meitheal model and PPFS in the Bray area meant that ways of working could be developed synchronously and in partnership.

Notwithstanding these enabling environmental factors, SPECS has significantly enhanced and progressed the extent to which service providers, agencies and organisations work together to meet the needs of children and families. They have instilled impressive levels of trust and confidence in the community in a short period of time and central to this has been the high level of services and support the SPECS team has provided. This has resulted in strong levels of referrals and recruitment of families and staff to SPECS programmes, including from HSE services and national maternity services. This has been a two-way process as SPECS have also referred out to agencies and services in Bray where appropriate. A crucial outcome of the interagency working has been increased awareness of and information about services that are available in Bray.
The secondment of staff from statutory agencies such as the HSE to SPECS, was also highlighted as an affirmation of the level of interagency cooperation and collaboration that has been achieved. This represents considerable buy-in, especially considering that there are lengthy waiting lists for services in the community. There has also been positive engagement with regard to releasing staff for training and facilitating SPECS programmes despite a context of diminished resources. Similarly the coordination of SPECS programmes by other organisations and the delivery of programmes by staff in schools and other community settings has been successful. The decision to contract the implementation of the Early Years Quality Programme to the Wicklow County Childcare Committee has been a strategic move in terms of embedding development within existing statutory structures within Bray, albeit with challenges in terms of allocation of sufficient staff time to work in the community settings. If this model is maintained going forward, it will be important for there to be sufficient allocation of time for appropriate engagement with the settings.

Increased coordination and sharing of resources was another positive impact reported which has been testament to the level of interagency working that has been brought about by SPECS. The formation of the Early Years and Maternity Subcommittees has been a positive development and has provided dedicated time and structure to interagency working and information sharing, as well as the exploration of further projects and areas on which to collaborate. The Early Years Committee has provided a space to progress and formalise the transitions programme which is working well in schools. The potential for networking and peer learning is an area that could be improved on however. The fact that due to time constraints on the part of the early years staff, it was not possible to engage in joint training together has limited the peer learning and information sharing which could have been achieved across the community settings in Bray. There is scope to develop this through the establishment of communities of practice for instance. The Hanen training, an evidenced based programme which helps build language and social skills in preschool settings, was delivered in November 2017 to a group including staff from all community childcare settings as well as two DEIS schools. This is a positive development in terms of peer learning.

Importantly, while interagency working and the systems change it results in are essential to the success of community-based interventions such as SPECS, it is also time-consuming and requires ongoing engagement and outreach by SPECS staff. These implications for staffing and capacity will need to be considered for the future development of the initiative.

“SPECS has definitely made a difference, they’ve brought everyone together, that’s really positive, before we didn’t really know what was going on, what other people were doing, now if there is a course or a workshop happening we all know about it”

“SPECS has brought something into Bray that is different, a new way of working, it’s been really interesting to see the willingness to share resources”

“We have better relationships now because of SPECS, we’re more likely to pick up the phone, before there was a huge lack of knowledge re referral pathways, SPECS has improved this, it’s raised awareness about what services are available if any”

Finally, there were positive reports in relation to the impact of reaching out to other ABC programmes for mentorship and to share learning. SPECS have received some mentorship on PFL from Northside Partnership, this has included sharing a general supervision model and referral forms. SPECS is implementing the Infant Mental Health Framework in partnership with other ABC initiatives Young Ballymun and Young Knocknaheany. SPECS is also currently linking with other ABC sites in relation to approaches on speech and language therapy outreach and supports which may inform their future work in this area.
Key Learning Summary

Service Delivery

- The positive experiences communicated by stakeholders can also been illustrated by the outcomes data which on the whole showed positive trends
- SPECS maintained a very family and child-centred approach in implementation of the programmes supporting high levels of engagement
- The progressive universal approach enabled engagement in targeted work where necessary while avoiding both stigma and discrimination
- SPECS succeeded in reaching some of the most marginalised families that are most in need of support however this has highlighted the lack of family support available locally and the multifaceted level of support needed for families with complex needs
- SPECS have been responsive and flexible in relation to meeting emerging needs which has led to more effective use of resources to meet identified need more appropriately

Capacity Building

- It was reported that the personal capacity of parents, children and young people was enhanced as a result of programmes and supports provided through SPECS
- SPECS has supported professional capacity-building, by providing training in evidence based programmes to a wide range of individuals, professionals and service providers
- Practitioners reported that training had enhanced their skills, knowledge and capacity to meet the needs of the children and young people they work with
- SPECS provided the motivation, coordination and follow-up to interventions, which is essential to sustain engagement and ensure ongoing momentum of programmes

Interagency working and systems change

- Positive attitudes to the setup of SPECS from the outset and key working relationships previously established helped to instill impressive levels of trust and confidence in a short period of time
- Increased awareness of, and information about, services that are available was reported as a positive impact from the work of SPECS
- There has been increased coordination and sharing of resources as well as positive impacts as the result of the secondment of staff to SPECS, releasing staff for training and facilitating SPECS programmes proving successful
- There were positive reports in relation to the impact of reaching out to other ABC programmes for implementation support
“There is always such positive feedback from parents, you really see the difference, programmes are so worthwhile, they get so much out of it”
CHAPTER 6

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

This section discusses challenges or identified areas for further development which featured in the consultations. These include:

- High level of needs
- Staffing capacity and turnover
- Engagement
- Data analysis
- Sustainability

High level of needs

The work of SPECS in Bray has highlighted further the gaps in service provision and the needs of families in Bray. As Bray is a very mixed area of socioeconomic backgrounds, even within the same schools and residential areas, poverty and disadvantage can remain very much hidden. This has presented a challenge as SPECS have at times been responding to very high needs in the form of crisis management rather than the early intervention preventative approach that had been intended. Many of the families participating in the PFL programme either currently have or have had social work involvement.

In this way, while it is a programme-based intervention, at times SPECS has not been able to implement the programme with families as other priorities have presented. Continuing to respond to this unexpectedly high level of need has posed some challenges in terms of progressing and maintaining focus on the original objectives of this initiative where possible and also meeting the needs as they have arisen.

Homelessness, addiction and domestic violence were issues which families linking in with SPECS can face and which can impede the work in relation to evidence based programmes. Supporting parents and families with these high needs can be more time-consuming from a staffing perspective. Often these families are in crisis situations and have chaotic home lives and it can be difficult to make contact with them and arrange appointments.

“Courses are not so time-consuming, they’re more contained. The individual work is ongoing and very time-consuming, a lot of time chasing people when they don’t turn up to appointments, high needs, can be hard to contact them – it’s a minority of people but the highest needs take up most of the time, complexity of need, they’re usually linking in with us because they’re in a crisis – something major has happened so it’s crisis management”

As SPECS have become more established in the area, referrals have increased and this has added to the pressure on the delivery of programmes and supports. The fact that there is a shortage of other services increases this pressure as it was reported that there is nowhere else for these families to go. In the case of PFL, ideally the casework would be complimenting the work of a family support project. However due to limited family support services in the area, PFL casework is often the only family support available to families.

“PFL normally is an add-on to the work casework of a family support worker, but SPECS are playing this role too”
Homelessness was seen as a huge issue in Bray and one which is getting worse. There were several cases mentioned where the situation with relatives was problematic due to addiction problems or mental health issues. There were also situations reported whereby young parents have been forced to move back to their parents, having been in care, when they have children themselves as they have nowhere else to go. This is especially problematic as they were taken into care due to an abusive home environment which their own children are then being exposed to.

A significant number of single parents reported sharing rooms with their children for up to seven years in their parents’ houses. It was reported that often this overcrowding and living with grandparents is having a very negative impact on children, parents and family relationships as a whole. Many problems regarding family relationships were reported. These included situations where children have become confused about who is parenting them, resulting in clashes and an intergenerational tension between parents and grandparents regarding parenting. Often it was reported that parents have opted out of parenting rather than fight with their parents who are accommodating them. There was also an extreme lack of privacy reported which was having a negative impact especially on young people and young adults.

Addiction was named as an ongoing problem. The experiences that were related and the concerns expressed as part of the consultations, indicate that addiction is still very much a problem in the Greater Bray Area. Alcohol and substance misuse have been proven to have a corrosive effect on family relationships. Research has found particular harmful effects in relation to parents with addiction issues and their families, with negative implications for children’s wellbeing and emotional and academic development (Nair at al, 2003; Horgan, 2011).

Domestic violence was also raised as an issue, both for Traveller and non-Traveller families. Domestic violence occurs across socioeconomic backgrounds and cuts across class boundaries, causing marginalisation and social exclusion. Both Irish and international research has however found a connection between the prevalence of domestic violence and economic disadvantage (Benson and Fox, 2004; Kearns et al, 2008; Renzetti, 2009). There is currently a shortage of facilities available for those living with domestic violence in the Greater Bray area.

**Staffing**

As mentioned above, the needs of those referred to SPECS have had implications for staffing capacity. It was reported that the demand for SPECS’ support and the level of need have been much greater than expected and at times challenging given the size of the team.

“They’re completely going over and beyond in what they do considering how many of them there are”

Staff turnover was said to be an issue as due to the insecurity of funding it was not possible to offer staff secure positions. Highly skilled practitioners have been recruited for the SPECS team however the insecurity of tenure is an issue for the retention of personnel and as a consequence the continuity in delivery of programmes and supports.

“They can’t offer security because of the way the funding is, that’s a huge thing”

“The training is expensive and it’s hard when they move on, they’re a small team”

**Engagement**

While engagement with service providers has been very successful, there were some issues reported. There was some disappointment expressed on the part of one stakeholder group that felt that they had not been included since the beginning of the SPECS
initiative. There was also some concern raised by this stakeholder group that on one occasion they had perceived SPECS services to have encroached on services they were offering in the community. Such commentary was the exception across stakeholders engaged as part of the evaluation process.

It was reported that engagement with GPs was an area that could be improved upon. It was also acknowledged that GPs can be a difficult group to engage in general, given the patient focus nature of their time and limited capacity to attend meetings. It was felt that at times this has been true for other service providers as well. It has also been a challenge to sustain community representation and engagement on the Steering Committee.

Engagement with parents has also been very successful. There were however some challenges reported in relation to retaining parents in PFL, with some families coming in and out of contact, depending on their home situation. A minority of service providers reported difficulties in terms of identifying parents for referral as they might be less likely to attend appointments and may be suspicious of services in general.

**Data analysis**

Data was mentioned as presenting a challenge as while the SPECS team and Consortium partners have been collecting data, they do not possess the relevant skills to analyse the data and apply this analysis to developing their work. Some participants called for upskilling in data analysis to be provided by the ABC programme managers.

**Sustainability and future development**

Developments in 2018 welcome the proposed mainstreaming of ABC funding under Tusla for at least another 3 years. However, there are some significant issues around sustainability that will need to be addressed going forward as a matter of urgency. These will include exploring how best SPECS can continue to provide a prevention and early intervention service in a context where acute needs have been identified and there are overwhelming needs for crisis management and family support services. Considering further sharing of resources and collaboration among Consortium members will be important. Where SPECS is unable to meet certain needs, the initiative can still play a valuable advocacy role at both local and national levels. This can be done through collecting data that is illustrative of the needs and suggesting opportunities for policy change and service development.

The extent of capacity building that has been achieved will be important in ensuring the sustainability of SPECS in a context of limited resourcing. It will also be essential that SPECS can continue to attract and retain high quality staff with the required diverse skill sets to meet these needs. In this context, SPECS will need to be innovative in its thinking about options for its sustainability.
“It definitely has made a difference, before they wouldn’t have attended training like this, now they are because they are being supported, we wouldn’t have been able to give this level of support without SPECS”
FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECS

This section summarises the thematic suggestions made in terms of the future development of SPECS under the headings of:

- Further work to promote an understanding of early intervention and preventative approaches
- Support the development of additional family support services for Bray
- Mental health and bereavement support
- Speech and language therapy services and oral language development
- Additional direct work with children
- Extend the age range

Further work to promote an understanding of early intervention and preventative approaches

There was a need expressed to focus on further promoting an understanding of the importance and benefits of early intervention and preventative approaches at the 0-6 years stage and the importance of Infant Mental Health. As mentioned earlier in this report, research has shown that this is the most effective time to work with children and families in terms of child development and positive impact. There is also a direct cost benefit in adopting this approach. Further work is needed to promote understanding and build capacity in early intervention and preventative approaches among those working with children, young people and families in Bray.

Support the development of additional family support services for Bray

It was mentioned in the consultations that SPECS would be well placed to play a role in supporting advocacy activities to make the case for additional family support services for Bray. This has been an identified gap and these additional services and supports would complement the work of SPECS, as well as providing much needed support for families. SPECS could provide a proven framework to set up such a structure.

Mental health and bereavement support

Mental health support was cited as a big gap, both for parents and children.

The lack of mental health supports for parents and lack of diagnosis of intellectual disabilities was mentioned as a gap.

A major issue mentioned by many participants was the rising instance of anxiety among children. This leads to poor attendance in school and ultimately can lead to young people leaving school early. The lack of sufficient social and emotional support in schools was mentioned, with staff feeling ill-equipped to deal with the seriousness of some of the issues children were presenting with. Some suggested that increased pressure due to greater access to social media was contributing to this rise in anxiety.

“Anxiety in children has gotten significantly worse, increased tension at home, mainly due to relationship breakdown, substance misuse, or financial issues and it is having an impact on children. There is a complete absence of services for children with mental wellbeing issues. There are huge waiting lists and where they do get appointments there is often no follow-up and no frequency”

“A lot of them are so anxious they can’t walk into a classroom”
Parents spoke of emotional problems their children were experiencing, including anxiety, panic, insomnia, obsessive behaviour and suicidal thinking. They had been referred for assessments for autism but once it was ascertained that their child did not have autism there was no emotional support available.

Two parents spoke of their children saying that they wanted to kill themselves since the age of 6, one of whom tried to jump out of a window in school.

“He doesn’t act out in school so they don’t pick up on it, he has no fingernails and when he finishes his fingernails he bites the cuffs of his jumpers. He says he hates his life and he wants to kill himself. He’s very aggressive, I don’t know what to do”

“I’m on the waiting list for help with his anxiety and panic and I have been on the list for two years. I was told he was discharged from the Lucena clinic and his file has gone to the HSE but I’ve no idea where to go to find out where we are on the list”

Bereavement support for children was mentioned as a significant gap. One of the schools mentioned having lost four parents in the last year to suicide, three of those within the same six week period. There have also been a number of high profile tragedies in recent years which have had ongoing impacts for children and their communities.

Regarding diagnosis and intervention for autism or other disorders, waiting lists of up to eighteen months were mentioned for assessment and related services such as occupational therapy which was a serious problem.

“The elephant in the room is the waiting list of 18 months. We’re trying to convince parents that there is a problem and they should address it but when they finally try to they’re told they’ll have to wait at least 18 months”

Some schools expressed frustration with the information they receive on children starting school as often parents find it difficult to accept that there is a problem.

Speech and language therapy services and oral language development

The availability of and accessibility to speech and language therapy (SLT) services was cited as a gap. Where children are provided with appointments, non-attendance at such appointments was a problem. In terms of working with parents, some schools have engaged with the HSE directly by way of facilitating the child’s attendance at such appointments.

The lack of communication between parents and their children was reported as an issue for children’s language development and emotional wellbeing by speech and language therapists who took part in the consultations. In some cases, this was attributed to the social isolation of parents.

“If parents are isolated and have no support, it can be less likely that they will effectively communicate with their children. I’m seeing this all the time and even among affluent parents”

Critically, the lack of SLT support and limited vocabulary and language competence can also exacerbate the issue of mental health and anxiety among children and adults. Studies have shown that children from families experiencing disadvantage can be six months behind in terms of language acquisition and use by two years (Fernald et al, 2013). Speech and language difficulties have been proven to have negative impacts on educational attainment and its prevalence is most severe in disadvantaged areas, whereby up to 50% of children in such communities have been identified as having a Speech and Language need (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2001; Locke et al., 2002; Leitao & Fletcher, 2004). Traditionally children do not interact with speech and language practitioners until a need is identified. However we know the impact of intervening early to prevent speech and language issues can ensure children get off to the best start, especially children from areas with higher levels of need. Lack of ability to express feelings and emotions about situations can lead to frustration and anxiety.
Studies have found significant differences in language and vocabulary in children relating to their economic situation and whether or not their parents have received a university education and are employed (Risley and Hart, 1995; Hoff, 2003). The nature of the words has also been found to be significant. Children whose parents were employed heard twice as many new words and twice as many encouraging rather than “discouraging” conversations, meaning open dialogue rather than commands. More than 85 percent of the vocabulary, conversational patterns, and language complexity of three year olds came from their families, and children of parents who were employed had vocabularies more than twice as large as peers whose parents were unemployed (Risley and Hart, 1995; Hoff, 2003).

The importance of parent-child conversations has since been upheld as key in children and young people’s language development and wider social and emotional development. Parents’ capacity to practically and meaningfully engage in such conversations on a regular basis may need to be supported (Snow and Beals, 2006; Rindermann and Baumeister, 2015). Irish initiatives such as Happy Talk in Cork have had positive results encouraging parental communication with their babies and children. An evaluation of the initiative cited parental engagement as a vital factor in improving language skills among babies and children (Happy Talk Evaluation, Exodea Consulting, 2014).

**Additional direct work with children**

It was suggested that direct work with children, including older children, should be incorporated into future plans for SPECS to address the lack of social and emotional support available however, such a development would be dependent on additional resources.

“Parents are looking at us like we have all the answers but the supports aren’t there. There are no social and emotional supports for children”

**Extend the age range**

The view was expressed by the majority of participants that it would be important to extend the age range as many parents and service providers working with parents spoke of increasing needs as children grew older. Again in this instance, such an extension would require careful consideration and sourcing of the resources required to do so.
“It was amazing, even after three weeks I could see the difference at home.... I learned to listen to my kids, it gave me lots of insight and tools to work with”
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section includes recommendations for the future activities of SPECS and concluding remarks.

Recommendations

The following are the key recommendations for the future development of the SPECS programme and future collaborative initiatives of the Consortium:

1. **Further promote understanding and capacity building around the importance and benefits of early intervention and preventative approaches among those working with children, young people and families in Bray**

   Further promote understanding and capacity building around the importance and benefits of early intervention and preventative approaches in terms of making the most impact on children and families, as well as being the most cost-effective. This could be done through developing work already underway such as the inter-ABC Infant Mental Health Framework initiative. Additional ways should also be explored to promote understanding about the benefits of these approaches among those working with children, young people and families in Bray and build their capacity to apply these approaches in their work.

2. **Develop a Sustainability Strategy for SPECS work and related interagency activities**

   Develop a sustainability strategy for SPECS work and related interagency to develop a collaborative multi-stakeholder strategy to guide future activities. This strategy should involve all Consortium members and explore what services and supports can be continued, where prioritisation is required, and where Consortium partners or stakeholders in the community can participate in the continuation and further delivery of supports for families.
3. Consider the possibility of extending some supports to address identified needs of older children and their parents in the area

Consider the viability of extending the age range of the children eligible to receive support from SPECS to meet the identified needs of older children and their parents. This could be done through the delivery of parenting courses for parents of older children. Such an extension of service would need to be undertaken without losing SPECS’ early intervention and preventative focus of the ABC Programme. There is also potential to utilise capacity that has been built in the community around delivering parenting interventions and this could be considered a realistic option.

4. Explore options for widening active community membership and engagement at Consortium and Steering Committee level

In consultation with the consortium, explore options for widening active community membership and engagement at Consortium and Steering Committee level to ensure that community organisations are appropriately represented and involved in the initiative.

5. Consider including private early years settings and Non-DEIS schools in the Early Years Subcommittee and its Transition Programme

Consider the viability of including private early years settings more through the extension of access to the Transitions Programme, as well as possible invitation of membership of the Early Years Subcommittee, to these settings, so that children attending private settings could also benefit from the improved information sharing to ease their transition to primary school. This would be an acknowledgement that given the mixed demographic nature of Bray and the changes introduced by the ECCE system, there are children with high needs attending private settings. It would be important that work with private early years settings is collaborative and that expectations are managed in order to be realistic within SPECS’ resources and crucially to maintain SPECS’ targeted progressive universal approach.

Given that children from private settings may be more likely to attend non-DEIS schools, it would be a positive development for these schools to also be included in the Transitions Programme and Early Years Subcommittee to strengthen SPECS’ links with them and ensure their cooperation and participation. It would also provide opportunities to share learning and embed referral pathways for children with needs in non-DEIS schools to SPECS supports or other relevant supports within the community.
Further explore options for maximising networking and peer learning among community early years settings

Further explore the potential for joint training, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the development of a community of practice which would bring together managers and staff from all community early years settings to maximise opportunities for peer learning and information sharing. This could be a very positive development for early years services in Bray and as well as sharing experience and best practice, could also open up opportunities for sharing of resources, providing better value for money along with economies of scale.

Collaborate with Consortium partners and other relevant stakeholders to scope the development of service responses to meet the identified emotional and social needs of children in Bray and parental mental health

Collaborate with Consortium partners and other relevant stakeholders to scope the development of service responses to meet the identified emotional and social needs of children in Bray. Should a Jigsaw or a youth positive mental health and resilience service, or other related services begin to operate in Bray, these organisations should be considered as potential Consortium members to facilitate interagency working and effective referral pathways between SPECS and its services in this area.

Continue to develop early intervention and preventative to support Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)

Continue to develop early intervention and preventative SLT services and supports so that families are appropriately supported where additional SLT needs are identified. These interventions should continue to focus on the importance of building the capacity of parents and early years educators and adopt a universal model that is cognisant of the link between SLCN and economic disadvantage, with targeted supports where needs are identified. Future activities should adopt a collaborative approach to utilise the skills and expertise of Consortium members and their organisations and services.

Explore further ways of addressing emerging needs particularly the needs of parents from minority groups and parents of children with additional needs within SPECS work

Explore further addressing the needs of parents of children with additional needs within SPECS work. This may involve facilitating a social and peer support group for parents. This should be done in a sustainable way which enables parents to participate fully in the coordination of this group and minimises the need for ongoing SPECS resources where these are limited. SPECS could also engage in leadership of parents to act as mentors in this area with a view to them taking on an increased role over time. There is also a need to consider data collected through the ABC National Evaluation as well as service level data to plan strategically into the next phase of SPECS focusing on areas where gaps have emerged.
Further develop interagency data collection initiatives and consider training in data analysis to enable data collection to inform practice in future activities

Further develop interagency data collection initiatives to accurately illustrate the level of need and address the current deficit in data to represent the extent of disadvantage being experienced by children and their families in Bray. It would be beneficial in this regard for the Consortium to consider accessing training in data analysis to upskill SPECS staff and relevant Consortium members with a view to enabling data collection to inform practice in future activities.

Develop the advocacy role of the SPECS Consortium

Consider developing the advocacy role of the SPECS Consortium and programme. Given the level of needs in Bray that have been identified through the SPECS programme, it would be useful to explore how these could be highlighted through advocacy activities to bring further attention to these needs and gaps in services and supports to bring about policy change and service development in this area. Findings in this regard, supported by appropriate data, could raise awareness at both a local and national level. This could also include a focus on those areas where there are high needs but which are not specifically within the remit of SPECS, including homelessness, needs of older children and their families, and support for families with children who have additional needs.
Concluding remarks

This evaluation process has found that SPECS has made a truly valuable contribution to the lives of children, parents and families in Bray and the services and supports available to them. As mentioned in the Background context there is growing evidence in national and international research that interventions with parents of young children have the most impact on children’s wellbeing and should be prioritised to improve outcomes for children (Haase, 2008; Guralnick, 1997). SPECS has embedded this learning in its preventative and supportive model that focuses as a key priority on building the capacity of parents and those around them. This has been achieved through an evidence based approach which has built capacity among parents, families and professionals working with children and their families in Bray. The SPECS programmes have reached families coping with acute disadvantage and with needs that so often remain hidden. These families’ experiences have included suicide, homelessness, mental health issues, addiction, economic hardship and domestic violence. These needs have also impacted on children beyond six years and this should be given careful attention going forward.

In this way, the work of SPECS has surfaced the extent of the needs in Bray and the challenge to the Consortium is to continue its track record of flexibility, responsiveness and empathy and evolve to best meet these needs. As mentioned in Chapter 4, SPECS’ success in reaching the most marginalised groups has created challenges in terms of capacity and sustainability. While funded as a programme-based prevention and early intervention model, SPECS has been much more than that and this needs to be deservedly acknowledged and embedded in the future activities of the Consortium.

With limited resources and staff, SPECS has engendered an impressive quality of interagency working and cooperation and has fostered innovative developments in the areas of supports for children and parents from conception onwards. There are areas for development including the scope for increased peer learning among early years providers and staff and gaps for children’s social and emotional supports. In light of uncertain funding, there needs to now be a focus on reviewing options and ascertaining as soon as possible what level of resourcing will be possible so as to inform future planning and development and seek to retain the skilled staff team necessary for future SPECS activities.

The resilience and drive of the SPECS Consortium and its commitment over the years to work together to improve outcomes for families in Bray cannot be overemphasised and has been hugely important in achieving the success of this initiative. The hope now is that this drive and innovation can be focused on creating a new and sustainable identity for SPECS which can embody and further build on its achievements over the last number of years. Regardless of funding, it is essential that the SPECS Consortium continues as a visionary space for interagency strategic planning and advocacy for Bray in the years ahead.

In the context of worsening homelessness and economic disadvantage, children are particularly vulnerable. SPECS has brought together agencies and service providers, motivated them with enthusiasm and strategic vision and provided a safe space in Bray in which to empower families to change their own lives:

“Everything good in our family’s life started with me doing that course with SPECS”.

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Appendix 1: Members of SPECS Consortium and Steering Committee

Members of SPECS Consortium
Ballywaltrim SCP
Barnardos
Bray Area Partnership (Chair)
Bray Community Addiction team
Bray Family Resource and Development Project
Bray Local Drugs Task Force
Bray North SCP
Bray North Wicklow Primary Schools Principals Network
Bray Municipal District
Bray Travellers Community Development Project
Connect Bray Neighbourhood Youth Project
Fun Dayz
HSE
St John of Gods
The Marion Centre
Tusla
Wicklow Children and Young People’s Services Committee
Wicklow County Childcare Committee

Members of SPECS Steering Committee
Bray Area Partnership
Bray North Wicklow Primary Schools Principals Network (Chair)
Barnardos
HSE
Tusla
Wicklow County Childcare Committee
SPECS

LOCAL EVALUATION OF SPECS PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION INITIATIVE 2015-2017

Consent form

This consent form is to be signed by participants in the consultations that take place as part of the local evaluation of the SPECS initiative 2015-2017. The evaluation is being carried out by independent researcher, Sarah Murphy and will involve service providers and stakeholders that have participated with the initiative.

Consultations will consist of interviews and focus groups and will be carried out in line with research ethics of confidentiality, anonymity and respect. With the consent of participants, the consultations will be used to inform the final evaluation report and all responses will be confidential. The length of interviews and focus groups will depend on participants’ availability.

All record of the interviews and focus groups will be stored securely. Transcripts will be destroyed once the evaluation has been completed.

☐ I have been fully informed about the aims of the evaluation.
☐ I consent to participate in the consultations and understand that all information provided will be confidential.

Name…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
SPECS programme………………………………………………………………………………………………
Signature…………………………………………………………………………………………………………….
Date……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Many thanks for your participation.
For further information please contact:
Sarah Murphy
Email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com
Tel: 087 *** ****
LOCAL EVALUATION OF SPECS PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION INITIATIVE 2015-2017

Information Sheet

What are the objectives of the evaluation?

- **To assess the impact on service providers and stakeholders** of the following evidence based programmes, which have been provided by the SPECS initiative to ensure that children get the best start in life and that parents receive appropriate supports: Preparing for Life, Parents Plus, Strengthening Families Programme, Roots of Empathy, and the Quality in Early Years Services programme

- **To evaluate the process of implementation** of the SPECS initiative

- **To embed the learning** from the initiative

- **To inform and shape the direction of related future work.**

What will be covered in the evaluation? Research questions will include:

- Has your participation with the SPECS initiative resulted in benefits for you? (and for your children/ students/ clients/ organisation, as appropriate to the individual stakeholder/ service provider being interviewed)

- What has worked well? What have been the main enabling factors?

- What have been the challenges? Were there any barriers to implementation?

- Did you feel appropriately informed of developments?

- What could be improved on for the future? What has been the main learning?

- Are there any specific gaps in service provision/ unmet needs in the area that you would like to be addressed?

How will the evaluation be carried out?

The evaluation will be carried out by an independent researcher, Sarah Murphy, between October and December 2017.

Service providers and stakeholders involved in each programme will be asked to participate in interviews and/or focus groups as appropriate. A final evaluation report will be completed by 20 December 2017 and findings will be presented to the SPECS initiative sub-committee and Consortium.