

Sutton Trust Evaluation Project (STEP): Phase 2

Interim Research Report

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I Introduction, aims and methods

This report summarises the second stage in the evaluation of Room to Play, an innovative three year project run by the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP). The research was carried out by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and funded by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation. The first phase of the evaluation was completed in June 2006 and the research report is available from www.peep.org.uk.

i Context

Since 1998, when the National Childcare Strategy was announced there has been an increase in pre-school services for families and initiatives to lift children out of poverty. In 2000, the Children's Fund was launched to tackle disadvantage among children and young people and to identify those at risk of social exclusion. The Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI), also launched in 2000, saw the development of childcare places for children in disadvantaged areas alongside early education and other forms of family support, such as family learning and health services. The last decade has seen parenting support for the early years emphasized in family literacy initiatives, such as Bookstart as well as in the development of Sure Start local programmes. Parental outreach and family support services are integral elements of Children's Centres and the Extended Schools agenda.

As well as the development of services for families, there have also been significant changes affecting the ways in which these are delivered. The Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda (published in 2004), underpinned by the 2004 Children Act, introduced a new approach for professionals to work together in the interests of those aged from birth to nineteen. Every Child Matters recognised the crucial role of parents, carers and families in improving outcomes for children and young people, as well as the importance of the local community. The government has also reaffirmed its commitment to early intervention and prevention: in July 2007, £396 million was pledged to continue the Children's Fund over a further three years, supporting projects that specialise in early intervention and prevention. By 2008, all areas are expected to have children's trusts, expected to produce integrated working at all levels, from planning through to delivery, and by 2010, there are expected to be 3,500 Children's Centres supporting young children and their families.

However, there is evidence that use of family support services may be in inverse relation to need, with those who are most vulnerable least likely to take up offers of support. Typically, those who do not participate are younger, less well educated and in less stable relationships (Barnes et al 2006) and are sometimes referred to as 'hard-to-reach'. Consequently, developing services that are more in sympathy with the needs of isolated families has become a primary focus of policy and for established early interventions such as PEEP.

ii Rationale for a Room to Play

The Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) has a commitment to supporting parents and carers in promoting their children's language, literacy, learning

dispositions and self-esteem through increasingly flexible modes of delivery. In 2005, PEEP began collaborating with the Sutton Trust which led to the opening of Room to Play in April 2006.

Room to Play is an innovative ‘drop-in’ style provision underpinned by the PEEP ethos and curriculum. Based in a shop in a busy community shopping centre in one of the most deprived areas in a city in the Midlands, the drop-in aims to welcome and value all parents and carers, and to support their involvement in their child’s learning. The project was designed to run for three years and is funded by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation.

Room to Play seeks to appeal to families who may otherwise reject a more ‘obvious’ form of delivery. Although open to all parents, the shopping-centre based drop-in has a special focus on young parents and those who are termed hard-to-reach. The emphasis is on making initial contact more accessible for these groups, and then referring them on to other support services where appropriate. Room to Play aims to be a drop-in with a difference in that it:

- makes no attempt to recruit target families, but is situated where families go already (shopping centre)
- is in a public premises, but one that feels like home
- is staffed by professionals who are perceived as friends

Room to Play appeals as a ‘home from home’ with the single rule that parents and carers are responsible for their own children at all times. It offers the usual nappy-changing and bottle-warming facilities associated with a drop-in, and there are play resources and activities for children. However, the play activities on offer are part of a well-established programme (PEEP), founded on a clearly-documented, structured curriculum designed to support parents and carers in understanding and facilitating their children’s learning through everyday play and interactions.

Aims

- to engage parents who are often termed ‘hard-to-reach’
- to develop a model for a drop-in centre based in a neutral venue that should be easier to access for more isolated families

Objectives of the provision

- to offer a welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day
- to provide an opportunity for parents to talk to practitioners about their children
- directed and undirected play and learning activities
- information about local services

iii The evaluation

PEEP has a long-standing commitment to research and evaluation. Over the past ten years it has worked with Oxford University’s Department of Education, the University of Sheffield and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to establish the effects of its programme on adults and children within the community it serves.

The Sutton Trust has commissioned an independent evaluation of the Shopping centre project. The Principal Investigators are Dr. Maria Evangelou and Professor Kathy Sylva from the Department of Education, University of Oxford. The study is coordinated by the PEEP Research Consortium which also includes representatives from PEEP and the Sutton Trust. The evaluation is taking place in three discrete phases over the duration of the project.

The shopping centre project is scheduled to run for three years, ending in 2008. The evaluation consists of two strands running concurrently:

- formative research undertaken to inform practice (strand 1)
- critical description of the project and how it is perceived by both the user and the provider in such a way that its relevance and value can be generalised to other situations (strand 2)

A literature review of existing research into hard-to-reach families, programmes or initiatives is a third strand. During phase 2 this was a preliminary exercise, with a more detailed, comprehensive and conclusive literature review in Phase 3 (2008), coinciding with the publication of the final report.

Aims of Phase 1 of the evaluation:

- to 'evaluate' the first four months of the initiative against its projected aims and objectives. To identify any unexpected outcomes/successes/shortcomings;
- to provide recommendations for the next 9 months of the initiative and to offer advice on the creation of a transferable model of a drop-in centre.

Summary of findings from Phase 1

Preliminary findings from the first phase of the evaluation (covering the first six months of the project) found that the project was well-used by a cross-section of the community and was effective in attracting and engaging with a number of 'hard-to-reach' families. Initially, while premises were sought, the project had a stall as a temporary base, which raised awareness of the shop (Evangelou, Smith and Sylva, 2006). When the project moved to the shop premises, it provided a distinctive welcome and homely atmosphere, with the PEEP curriculum as the basis for all the play activities. Leaflets and flyers about a range of local services were well used, and information was also passed on by word of mouth by the staff.

Some issues arising from this first phase, and which will be revisited in this second report were:

- *Definitions of hard- to- reach:* staff had a pragmatic understanding of this term; however, it has been difficult to establish an objective measure of which families could be categorised by this term.
- *Curriculum Delivery:* adapting a curriculum based on a structured delivery to groups of individuals, and delivering it flexibly and unobtrusively within the unstructured setting of the shop has been a challenge.

- *Inter-agency working*: it was originally intended that practitioners such as midwives and health visitors might be invited to offer some support from the shop in certain circumstances. This has been piloted a few times, and the effects monitored and will be returned to at a later stage.

Evaluation of Phase 2 (January- July 2007): aims and objectives

The core aims and objectives of Room to Play as described above remain unchanged. In discussion with PEEP it was felt that the second phase of the evaluation should discover as much as possible about the users of Room to Play, in order to ascertain whether the provision is indeed attracting those parents it aims to target. Detailed information on users, including sensitive demographic data such as family composition, income and benefit entitlement, was considered to be a crucial, if challenging task facing the second phase. The first phase had avoided questioning users, acknowledging that this might potentially compromise levels of trust on the part of users in the early stages. For the second phase it was agreed that this was needed to gauge whether the project was meeting its central aims and objectives. It was also necessary to resubmit an application for ethical approval to the University's Central Ethics Committee in order to question the users about sensitive issues, such as benefit entitlements.

iv Research methodology of Phase 2

The second phase used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

1. *Semi-structured qualitative interviews* were carried out with eight staff members, project manager and CEO of PEEP. It was decided to keep these as similar as possible to the preceding year, although questions probing for any changes, progress and development were added.
2. The research officer undertook several periods of *observation* in the centre, during which time a sign was also placed in Room to Play letting families know. A photograph of the research officer was added to the 'gallery' of staff photographs in the room.
3. In order to find out more detailed information on those using the centre a week-long 'user snapshot' of the centre was created. A *quantitative questionnaire* (see Appendix A) was devised which aimed to assess the socio-economic profile of users; whether they fell into the target group of 'hard-to-reach'; their patterns of use of Room to Play and possible use of other services. It was acknowledged that collecting this data from those using this type of centre ran the risk of alienating the very users that the provision sought to target: however it was decided that the benefits outweighed any possible disadvantages. An important element of the questionnaire design was striking a balance between obtaining vital demographic data and producing an interview schedule that would not be too intimidating for users or too lengthy to complete.

In order to minimise the impact of the snapshot on parents, it was decided to restrict this survey to a single week in May. By this time, the research officer had attended the provision over a three-month period and many users were familiar with her. A

bilingual member of staff was present for the week of the survey to assist parents if needed. Ethical approval for obtaining this sensitive data was secured from the University's Central Ethical Committee and a poster advising parents of this period of data collection was displayed for a week in advance in Room to Play.

4. A more *in-depth qualitative interview* was also devised for those users who were willing and available to talk further to the research officer. These in-depth interviews were carried out with six users who were identified with the assistance of staff as hard-to-reach. In order to preserve confidentiality in this one, highly visible setting, the interviews have been used to create composite parent sketches, where individuals cannot be identified, rather than case studies of unique users.

Research Design of Phase 2: Aims and objectives of the evaluation and where these are addressed

Aims and Objectives	Methods	Where these are addressed within this report
<p>1. To critically describe Room to Play for a period of its second year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'week in the life' 5 day snapshot of Room to Play, including observation of sessions • Diary notes- research officer and staff • Observations and semi-structured interviews with staff and users • Analysis of curriculum material 	<p>II, III (ii)</p>
<p>2. To identify whether target groups are using Room to Play and whether they are accessing any onward services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with staff • Analysis of PEEP's own monitoring data on usage • Interviews with users to ascertain usage of this as well as other services • A week in the life quantitative user snapshot including basic demographic information on users, benefit entitlement, qualifications 	<p>II (iii)</p>
<p>3. To identify who else is using Room to Play.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PEEP's own monitoring data and attendance records • User snapshot • Staff interviews 	<p>II</p>
<p>4. To document providers' and users' perceptions of the service.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual semi-structured qualitative interviews/questionnaires with staff and users • User snapshot • Parent sketches with due regard for data protection 	<p>II, III</p>

Research Design of Phase 2: Aims and objectives of the evaluation and where these are addressed

<p>5. To document how the service is perceived by families who do not use it (this will be carried out in Phase 3).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Questionnaire with families in the shopping centre who are not using the service) • (Interview with others in the centre e.g. shop owners about perceptions of service will be undertaken in Phase 3) 	<p>Phase 3</p>
<p>6. To analyse available monitoring data about service usage in relation to both target groups and other users.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain data on numbers using the shopping centre (where possible) • Collect data on postcodes and basic demographic information of users (including numbers of children etc) and possibly compare with Index of Multiple Deprivation • Compare usage with other local/national data on target groups 	<p>II</p>
<p>7. To identify issues for future development and to draw conclusions about the performance and quality of service.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview with staff and CEO • Observations • Analysis of data collected 	<p>IV (iv) (Performance and quality of provision: Phase 3)</p>
<p>8. To revisit the issues identified for development in phase 1.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with staff and CEO • Observations 	<p>IV (i-iii)</p>
<p>9. To identify what the evaluation can contribute to the development of a transferable model for a drop-in centre.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis • Literature Review (Phase 3) 	<p>Phase 3</p>

II Findings from observations and interviews

This section offers a critical description of Room to Play over the period of its second year.

i Physical description of Room to Play

Room to Play aims to engage hard-to-reach parents and carers by providing a welcoming and neutral place for them to interact with their children and engage in directed and undirected play and learning activities (Evangelou, Smith and Sylva 2006).

Some settings which are purpose-designed for families, notably Sure Start provision and Children's Centres, tend to favour play equipment and modern furnishings in bold, primary colours. By contrast, the décor of Room to Play is understated, comfortable and homely, with colour provided by displays, mobiles and artwork by children and parents. It appears child-centred but also provides a welcoming environment for adults. Although new equipment has been added since last year, and the space reorganised, the sensation of 'stepping into someone's living room' has been retained. Furniture in the main room divides it into different areas or zones which are designed to promote an informal atmosphere, as well as to encourage parents to engage with their children and to facilitate the implementation of the curriculum. Room to Play includes:

- an information area for parents near the door as they arrive with leaflets displayed at eye level and various parent information folders arranged on a bookshelf; a comments book
- a sitting area with a large sofa at right angles to the front window of the shop: the bottom half of the window is covered by a blackboard with chalks available
- directly opposite the sofa, a child-height display system for books with different sized display 'pockets' and another bookshelf wall display
- two child-sized tables in the centre of the room with child-sized chairs with the day's curriculum activity and a third table nearby which can be added if needed
- a baby area in a corner enclosed by two corner walls and a bookshelf. On one wall there is a large low mirror for babies to see themselves in; a duvet provides a soft floor cover which is spread with treasure baskets, shakers etc
- another table which can be used for resources and reference materials relating to the curriculum, including sheets that parents can take away
- a second, smaller sofa ideal for breast-feeding with more books placed in a basket within arm's reach
- an area set up for role play with dressing-up costumes and other role play equipment such as a shop
- a 'messy' area in the kitchen with water/sand or 'gloop' activities
- the kitchen
- toilet and baby changing area
- lockable storage cupboard

- cupboards with labelled storage containers for equipment such as duplo
- an outside yard with activities like sand and bricks, balls; some large play equipment.
- photocopier, scanner and digital camera
- computer with internet access available upon request

Changes to the physical environment since last year include the re-positioning of the book corner to give books a greater prominence. Any parent who chooses to sit down on a sofa is now in the immediate vicinity of books and there are many more books displayed at the child's eye level on bookshelves and displayed in different-sized pockets for children to access. The outside play area has been further developed since last year. In the PEEP tradition, play equipment reclaimed from everyday objects has been secured at child-height to the fence. For example, plastic guttering has been placed at an angle at child-height so that children can roll balls along it. Different-sized door handles and cupboard door handles as well as other items for pushing and pulling have been added to the fence. A number of parents commented that they had been inspired to imitate this in their own gardens at home. A large canopy and some smaller ones provide shade, and a large, safe storage cupboard for equipment has been built into one of the walls.

Room to Play is open on Mondays to Fridays between 9.30am and 3pm, and on Saturdays between 10am and 1pm. Unlike a number of drop-in facilities, it remains open during half-term and the school holidays, although it is closed on Sundays and public holidays. In term-time it caters mainly for parents and carers of children who are not yet in full-time school, however, in the holidays it also welcomes children of all ages. This means that numbers of those visiting the centre can increase substantially during the holidays, with school-aged siblings accompanying younger users. Activities also have to be adjusted to accommodate the broader age range.

Three PEEP practitioners and four assistants work in Room to Play on a rotational basis. Responsibility for planning the curriculum is shared by the practitioners, with input from the PEEP curriculum co-ordinator and support from other PEEP practitioners. A practitioner and an assistant are always present and at certain times there is a third member of staff. Since January a PEEP practitioner has visited Room to Play for two hours a week to undertake more directed activities with families to extend the curriculum. There are certain sessions when a bilingual practitioner is always present: however for the remaining sessions a balance is struck between having some regularity in staffing patterns and ensuring that members of staff do not always cover the same sessions, although the rota system also depends on staff availability and preferences. Line management is provided by a project manager who offers regular supervision to all staff. There are weekly team meetings and regular staff development days take place with other PEEP staff.

ii Location

One year on, it is clear that Room to Play continues to appeal to a broad range of families who feel comfortable using the provision. It is increasingly apparent in the views of staff as well as users that the location of Room to Play in a busy shopping centre which serves a number of disadvantaged areas is successful in terms of attracting parents and carers who would not otherwise use the provision. One of the

objectives of Room to Play was to develop a model for a drop-in centre in a neutral venue that should be easier to access for more isolated families. Many staff and users commented that the shopping centre had been a successful location for Room to Play.

I think a lot of the people we do get in, is because of where it is; people who wouldn't necessarily go to family centres and things particularly. [staff member]

Parents arriving by bus from one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city need to walk directly past Room to Play to access the shopping centre. One user from this deprived area remarked that she found it far easier to take her children by bus to the drop-in at the shopping centre than to access play facilities on foot within her own neighbourhood.

Staff noted that as well as attracting a range of users, having a drop-in facility in a shopping centre, which is used by all kinds of people means that users do not feel the shop to be 'owned' by a particular community or locality group, as is sometimes the case with neighbourhood-based facilities such as family or community centres. Room to Play was perceived as being open to and accessible for different communities who visited the shopping centre.

I think it's in the right location. It's a shopping centre, it's something that isn't your own...like [names area A] people tend to stay there, and [names area B] people tend to stay there; you stay in your own little communities, whereas this isn't anybody's ...and maybe it works because you have just such a mixture of people, and people coming from all over, as well as from just up the road... [staff member]

Both staff and users commented on the atmosphere of Room to Play, which was consistently described as homely, friendly and comfortable, offering a structured curriculum and varied opportunities to children and carers with a degree of freedom.

It does feel homely and most of the time you can wander around, do what you want more or less. Families have formed friendships in there. It's the laidback attitude: it's relaxed and easy - no hard or fast rules - free and easy to play. [staff member]

The set up of the room as a 'home from home' was perceived as inclusive as well as conducive to users getting on, building relationships and interacting with each other. The layout and seating arrangements within the room means that opportunities for socialising occur naturally.

...and like I say you sort of have that sofa, and then the conversation sort of starts there, and the whole room joins in...I think it's nice because it's not too big and so you get that atmosphere, there's not lots of rooms for people to sort of go off into. [staff member]

The best thing is that everyone talks to each other. The kids all play together: sometimes they fight but that's a bit like family, isn't it? [parent of two children aged 3 and 5]

One year on, staff perceived the shop as better organised. On a practical level, organisation and storage had improved and staff felt systems were in place. During

the course of the evaluation, the interior layout of the shop changed with the book area moving nearer the large sofa. This change, combined with the introduction of a new system for displaying books gave far greater prominence to books and book-sharing. Those who chose to sit on the sofa were in closest proximity to the books. The improved storage systems made it easier for staff to manage day-to-day practicalities such as getting out play equipment and curriculum materials.

We've all found our feet more, lots of teething problems have been sorted out. There's better equipment, storage and cupboards - practical stuff. [staff member]

We've got cupboards, computer and photocopier, proper paper trays- things have been organized and labelled, which is a lot better and as you go along you find out different things you need - like a toaster... having a bench outside, getting another sofa, so they can sit comfortably and breastfeed or sit and read a book with their child. [staff member]

All of the staff members interviewed had worked in Room to Play since the beginning of the project. After a year's experience of the setting, staff felt more confident and better equipped to deal with the challenges of a drop-in centre where anyone can walk through the door at any time.

I suppose from my point of view I sort of know more what I'm doing... I'm more experienced because you know, we didn't know what to expect when the shop first opened and I suppose at the beginning it was like mentally hard-going. It's not so much now, we've got more information in the shop, the computer... [staff member]

All staff members interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the first year of Room to Play, which was perceived as an exciting and constantly evolving project and a rewarding place to work.

It's gone beyond my expectations. I'm really really pleased with Room to Play - it's been fantastic. It's got a really good atmosphere, loads of people coming in, loads of positive stuff going on. [staff member]

iii Range of users, patterns of use, and reasons for using Room to Play

Variety, both in terms of the range of families using the centre, and the way those families made use of the provision, was a key theme that emerged from interviews with staff and users. Room to Play is used by parents, childminders, grandparents, relatives and friends looking after others' children, nannies and au pairs. It is used by those with no qualifications as well as those with postgraduate qualifications. Some parents come in for five minutes to change a nappy, others choose to stay for a few hours, and a small number of families stay for much of the day. The user snapshot in part III provides more detailed information on the families who used the centre in a given week. The cultural and linguistic diversity of families using Room to Play is apparent from visiting the centre: from the user snapshot, around 63% of families were of White British origin and around 35% were not. The diversity of families using Room to Play, their range of motives for accessing the provision and their different needs and level of engagement with their children whilst in the setting was a recurrent feature of both staff interviews and research officer observations in the centre.

Some people come here just to sit down on the sofa, have a drink and switch off. Other people want to play with their child, some come in as groups - they've arranged to meet there, that's quite nice. Some come in to have lunch. Some people end up staying just for an hour and other people can be there all day. [staff member]

Based on observations, the majority of the users were mothers, with a small number of fathers who attended either alone with their child, or with the child's mother or other relatives. In addition to parents, a number of grandparents used the shop on a regular basis, particularly those who were looking after children while the child's parents worked or shopped. Parents and grandparents were often accompanied by friends whom they had arranged to meet at the shop. Several parents and carers commented that the closure of a neighbouring family centre which had temporarily moved to new premises during refurbishment had further decreased the opportunities in the area. A number of people timed visits to coincide with lunchtime which sometimes put pressure on facilities at the 'peak' times between 11am and 2pm. The shop was perceived by staff to be acquiring a reputation as a useful resource for local childminders, who valued having a safe place for children to play and access the curriculum. Others using the shop included nannies and au pairs. Occasionally an older child would come into the shop in charge of younger siblings or cousins and a number of parents used it purely as a base to feed and change children.

Many parents and carers had incorporated Room to Play into their weekly or daily shopping routines. Some parents used the outing as an incentive to 'get through' the task of shopping while others hoped that after a period of play children would be more amenable to visiting the shops. Parents also clearly came in exclusively to seek information: on a number of occasions parents 'popped in' to look something up or to browse for information on pre-school facilities or school and nursery catchment areas. Based on observations, the local education authority's manual on nursery and school places seemed to be the most commonly-requested resource. Information relating to activities to do with children – such as the PEEP playdough recipe- also seemed to be well-used by parents. A file seeking and advertising council house exchanges is well-used and updated frequently by parents and during the time the research officer spent in Room to Play, there were many discussions between users on the subject of housing which was clearly a pressing concern for many.

You may have somebody coming into the shop that's really needy, and wants to speak and you're with them for half an hour... somebody might come in and want information about such and such, or maybe about their housing, or if they need to look something up on the computer...we've got files on different things. People mainly come in to be with their children but they do come in for other reasons as well, or to meet friends in the shop [staff member].

Access to a laptop and internet facilities is provided if parents request it and a number of parents use this to look up information, from health and dietary information for their children to low-cost holidays and furniture exchange schemes. After a trial period with a computer available, it was decided that access to the computer should be regulated. It was observed that if it was available on an unregulated 'unlimited access' basis it was sometimes used excessively by some parents, and potentially became almost like a television, preventing parents from interacting with their children. The

computer is therefore available upon request for anyone wishing to use it, and is brought out regularly, as well as when it is requested by parents.

It was striking that families from very different cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds felt welcome and comfortable within the small space. While users were different, the shared experience of parenthood was felt to be a unifying experience.

It's a place where you don't feel that someone is more skilled than you, as a parent you are all vulnerable at some point. [parent of 1 child, aged 18 months]

Some parents felt that one of the opportunities offered by Room to Play was specifically that of being able to socialise with and talk to other parents, as well as staff about their experiences and challenges as parents.

This is a place where you can go and chat to people about what it's like to be a mother; you can go there to talk to other mothers. It's a good place to go to talk about your problems. I like to go to talk about the problems I have as a mother. [parent of child aged 1]

It was acknowledged by staff that although the 'feel' of the shop varied depending on who was in there, the atmosphere was consistently welcoming. On one occasion, a group of six mothers, of whom four were young parents talked spontaneously together about how friendly and inviting they found the provision. One mother contrasted her experience at Room to Play with a negative experience of visiting a toddler group, which she perceived as 'cliquey'. A few others shared experiences about occasions where they had attended groups and felt 'wrong' or 'looked down upon'.

I've made friends here. Everyone talks to everyone. They're friendly. If you go to mother and toddler groups you can feel left out, everyone's cliquey. They have their own groups and don't talk to anyone. [single parent of 1 child, aged 2 years]

While some of the parents using the provision were clearly willing and able to access other services for children, it was also apparent that some of the parents and carers visiting Room to Play were exclusively using this service. One young parent had been told about the provision by her midwife when she was pregnant and described how she had plucked up the courage to enter the centre and now came regularly each week to offer her child learning and social opportunities.

The first time I came I was a bit afraid, but you get used to it. I don't have any other places where I go, I just come here. They try to help you teach your kids to do things; it's good to get them used to sharing, get used to the idea of playschool and nursery. It's a nice place for kids to come. [young parent of child aged 2]

Another young parent described how the staff had made her feel at ease. She now came to the centre every few weeks and felt able to chat casually to other parents she met there.

The staff help the kids to play and they talk to you. When I first came here I was really shy, but they were very friendly. You can talk to people here- sometimes you don't see them again, but you still get on. [young parent of child aged 1]

Staff members are very aware, however, that regular use of the centre by the same parents might result in Room to Play appearing 'cliquey' to others who used the provision less frequently. This had been identified as a possible obstacle in Phase 1. However, while there may be periods of intensity of use for certain families, the natural trajectory of children's lives - with transitions to playgroup and school - means that there appears to be a natural cycle and turnover of users, with some parents moving on when their children do. One parent who had used the shop extensively as a young parent had now registered on a course but continued to come in on her days off. While she was at college, the child continued to attend with a childminder.

I thought one of the problems possibly could have been that it might become a bit cliquey, the shop, just having the same people back but that hasn't really been the case, not really. We did have a spell where we had the same people in day after day, and meeting, but obviously people's lives change, their children start school, go to nursery, you know they're going in different directions but that hasn't really been a problem. [staff member]

It hasn't changed: how it was at first, there's still that nice atmosphere. I think it changes with different families, you know the atmosphere, you do in any place get regulars...and then you worry they might be taking over a bit... but then something changes with schooling or pre-school or a new baby... and you're always going to get another family along the line . [staff member]

A small number of families used the provision for several hours a day several days a week. On the plus side, this can be taken as a measure of its success. Staff felt that Room to Play was meeting the needs of a number of families who used no other provision and felt comfortable and at home within that environment. Additionally, staff felt that those families using the provision for long hours on a daily basis fell into the target group of hard-to-reach parents, and a small number of these had significant needs that did not appear to be met elsewhere. It should also be noted that with the exception of a small park opposite the shopping centre, and a few toddler groups locally, there are very few facilities for families within walking distance of the shopping centre. Much of the social housing in the immediate vicinity of the shopping centre consists of flats without gardens. It is possible that the recent temporary closure of the family centre closest to Room to Play (which moved to alternative premises during refurbishment further away) had some impact on usage of the centre.

I suppose it's been used more for a longer period, whereas families used it for a couple of hours or an hour....I think there's a few more families that tend to see it as an all day thing really. [staff member]

We began to think - they're here ever such a lot. I don't think we really expected that, to that extent. I suppose it's because it is very friendly and relaxed- it's very different to what they're offering outside,... and I suppose people do feel more comfortable and do stay longer. [staff member]

Central to the discussion on patterns of use is the observation that it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many families are using Room to Play, how frequently they come, and the length of time they stay. The set-up of the provision as a 'home from home' precludes this kind of rigorous data collection, which might deter the target group. Currently, very basic information on the number of visits made by adults and children is collected on a weekly basis by staff in Room to Play on a simple 'tick-box' sheet. It is not possible to record whether this is a 'repeat visit' and therefore data collected calculates the number of visits rather than the number of users. This information has been collated by PEEP to show numbers of male, female and child visitors (see Appendix). This is discussed more fully in the section on 'other challenges' in Part IV (iv).

One parent who used the provision frequently acknowledged that she felt isolated at home, and constrained, in some ways, by the experience of parenting. Room to Play gave her a reason to leave the house each day.

It's very important to me. It helps me get out of the house. You have a limited social life as a mother: your life is really narrowed down. [parent of child aged 2]

For some parents, the periods of intensity of visits coincided with difficult periods in their life. When these passed, the frequency and duration of visits decreased. One parent of two pre-school aged children described how she had been advised to visit the shop by her health visitor when her second child was three months old. She had recently been diagnosed with post-natal depression, and found that although she could 'just about cope' with meeting the needs of the baby, she felt unable to offer her older child the stimulation and play opportunities she needed. This in turn made the parent feel increasingly helpless. She described the shop as a 'life-line' to her during this period, and believed that these visits, combined with the support of staff had enabled her to recover from the depression. Although she continued to visit after her depression had lifted, she now felt able to access other play facilities with her children, and came to Room to Play for a few hours at a time on a fortnightly basis when she visited the shopping centre.

When things were really bad I felt that if at least I could make it here, then that was something. Even if I was only watching her, she was safe. She had lots of things to play with and could interact with the other children and adults. [parent of 2 children]

The 'things to play with' in Room to Play are based on the PEEP curriculum which explores five developmental areas: self-concept and learning dispositions, oral language, reading, writing and numeracy. Each of these is developed by the use of 'core activities': singing (songs and rhymes), talking and listening (sharing books and stories), and playing. The core activities are part of everyday living for both parents/carers and the children.

The activities set out in the shop do engage the families, but it is true that when families regularly stay for whole days at a stretch, additional demands are placed on staff. This includes the need to provide additional activities because those set out in the shop come from the nine-theme format used for multi-level groups. This format provides session plans containing activities for groups that run for one hour per week

for thirty-three weeks per year, which is more limited in scope than Room to Play. Some staff also observed that children who stayed all day were more likely to tire of the environment and play resources, although extra efforts were made to rotate equipment and activities on these occasions. These factors have been taken into account for future curriculum planning, discussed in the section on curriculum delivery, part IV (iii).

Staff members were very aware of how the provision was used by families, and there was a general consensus among staff that Room to Play did not want to find itself dominated by any one group of users. This group could include families with complex needs, but members of staff were equally sensitive to the fact that the centre might find itself ‘taken over’ by what one staff member described as:

...the middle- class families who are very good at making use of what’s on offer- something on a Monday, something different on a Tuesday... It hasn’t become dominated by that group of people, although we do have some who fit into that bracket. It would be off-putting to have it dominated by that particular group... but then I think it would also be problematic to have it dominated by families that are very needy... [staff member]

Consistent with the first phase of the evaluation, staff still felt that striking a balance amongst user types was the desirable solution. However, discussions about how to best help families ‘move on’ to other provision are thoughtful and ongoing. As Room to Play is dynamic and constantly evolving in nature, the situation needs to be reviewed and monitored regularly. As one staff member observed, it was hard to do anything about those who stayed for long periods of time:

It’s difficult because once you’ve welcomed them in - you don’t want to say, look you’ve got to go now... [staff member]

iv Parent sketches

The user snapshot survey (section III) offers some information on those who used the centre in a given week. Below, six composite parent sketches have been created, based on in-depth interviews with users. These are not intended as biographies of unique individuals, but as ‘thumbnail sketches’ of the kinds of people who are using the service.

Parent Sketch 1

Parent 1 was a twenty-year old single parent with one child aged 18 months. She used to attend Room to Play two to three times a week, but had now moved into a part-time training course although she still received some Income Support and Housing Benefit. She had heard about Room to Play from a friend, and felt it offered a safe environment for children to play as well as a place for adults to have a break with their children, do activities and chat with other families. She found the staff particularly supportive when her child had sleep problems in her first year. In the summer and at weekends she made an extra effort to visit Room to Play as she was in a flat on the fifth floor with no garden and her local park was too far away and unsafe. She had made several friends through Room to Play whom she regularly met up with

both inside and outside the shop. She had taken a number of ideas from activities in Room to Play to do at home with her child.

Parent Sketch 2

Parent 2 was in her early thirties with girls aged 2 and 4, recently separated from her daughters' father. She had visited the stall, and now came to Room to Play at least three times a week, sometimes every day if she was having a 'bad week'. Her four year old had been given a full-time state nursery place from the age of three because she was unable to cope. She had suffered from depression and anxiety for the past two years and had not worked since the birth of her first child. She had no qualifications but had just signed up for a six week computer course with a crèche via a leaflet she had picked up in Room to Play. She walked for almost half an hour each way to reach the shopping centre. She had never played with corn flour or playdough as a child, and since visiting Room to Play had become aware of different activities she could do with it, and made playdough with her children at home. She had made some friends in the shop, but didn't socialise outside of Room to Play: it was the only place she felt comfortable, and where she didn't have panic attacks.

Parent Sketch 3

Parent 3 was in her late twenties, of Turkish origin, and had been living in the UK for the past 5 years. She had a boy and a girl aged eighteen months and three and came to Room to Play around twice a week, specifically so that her children would be able to hear English spoken, and could be encouraged to speak to others in English. Both parents spoke to their children in Turkish; additionally, the child's father worked long hours in a restaurant and the mother had few friends in the area. She lived in a rented home in an area characterised by properties of multiple occupancy, where turnover of neighbours was high. The family received working tax credit and some housing benefit. She also came to Room to Play in order to meet other women, so that she could practise her English. She had some qualifications in the hotel industry from a college in Turkey and hoped that she might be able to improve her English enough to take a part-time job when her children were at school.

Parent Sketch 4

Parent 4 was in her mid-thirties, had lived in the area for seven years but was originally from China. She worked part-time at weekends while the child's father looked after her daughter. She came to Room to Play with her two year old daughter once a week and also attended a PEEP group, where she had first heard about Room to Play. She came to Room to Play more frequently in the winter months when it was too cold to play outside. She perceived her child as being very energetic, and felt that she lacked space at home to use up her energy. At Room to Play, she allowed her child a free rein and to choose activities: at home she gave her child structured activities. Her child particularly enjoyed being able to throw balls and using the play equipment in the garden - an activity that wasn't possible at home - and making a mess in the kitchen. She had found the staff particularly supportive when her child began having tantrums, and had also sought their advice to help her child get rid of her dummy, which she had found a struggle.

Parent Sketch 5

Parent 5 was 19, mixed-race and had lived in the area since birth. She had left school at 16 without any qualifications, which she regretted. After a year working in a hairdressing salon she had left to have her daughter, now aged 18 months. She was told about Room to Play by her midwife, and was initially accompanied there by her health visitor. She alternated a visit to Room to Play one week with a trip to a family centre and had used some Sure Start facilities for young parents in the past. She had made some friends at a group for young mums, although she often felt quite isolated in the evenings. Although the child's father lived in another city, they were on good terms and he saw his daughter around once every three weeks. She received income support and other related means-tested benefits. She was interested in going back to college to get some qualifications but was concerned about finding suitable affordable childcare that she could access by foot. She lived on an estate with very few childcare facilities and was dependent on the bus for transport: many buses would not permit buggies and she felt it would be too far to walk.

Parent Sketch 6

Parent 6 was a mother in her twenties of a baby boy aged three months old. Originally from Pakistan, she had come to the UK a few years ago when her husband was offered a job here. She had only recently begun visiting Room to Play and had been told about the provision by her health visitor. She came to the centre two to three times a week and on these occasions used Room to Play mainly as a place to breastfeed and change her son. Her baby also enjoyed looking at the lights and the mobiles. She acknowledged that with her family abroad she felt quite isolated, and was hoping particularly to meet other Pakistani women through Room to Play. She usually attended when there was an Urdu-speaking practitioner there who could answer queries on child development. She was also keen to improve her English. She did not attend any other places, although she had just finished a post-natal group at her local GP surgery and was beginning to access information about other drop-in centres locally.

v Relationship building, friendship, social support

One feature of Room to Play that emerges strongly is the contribution of the setting in facilitating friendships between parents from different backgrounds who supported each other in the common task of parenting. The success of this was considered unprecedented by staff: there was a sense that nobody had anticipated that the social support aspect of the shop could be this powerful. One member of staff described how a group of young mothers who had met in the shop were now beginning to arrange to meet each other both in the shop as well as outside, arranging picnics and outings.

There's a lot of relationship building going on, between children and between adults. And even if it started in Room to Play, it's gone beyond that. I'm quite aware that people do meet up and do things outside of the shop. [staff member]

Another staff member commented that she had been really impressed when parents, had taken the initiative to put up notices offering or requesting baby equipment.

Parents in Room to Play regularly exchanged phone numbers and shared stories and experiences. One parents described how she had made friends through the provision.

I've made lots of friends here. I arrange to meet up with them for lunch, or we meet to take our kids to the park. [single parent of child aged 2]

Observations in the centre also showed that parents clearly valued the advice and assistance of staff members, many of whom were local mothers themselves. Parents specifically sought local advice, for example, relating to playgroups, free nursery places and school catchment areas from staff members who often had personal, as well as professional experience of these. One young mother described the various ways that she felt staff had been able to help and support her:

The staff can help you with lots of things. When I had my phone connected I had a lot of problems with the phone company, they helped me with that. They listen to you. When you've been up all night with a screaming child you can come in here and have a good whinge and a gossip. They can also help you if you have problems, like if your child has tantrums, they can give you advice. [young parent of child aged 2]

While some families came in explicitly to engage with their children, others used the provision as a place to meet their friends.

Parents are supporting each other, talking to each other, making friends- I think that's a really important thing in a community. There are so many parents out there- young parents that haven't got any friends - with children, they get moved to this area for temporary housing, away from their family, and because it's in the shopping centre they can see it and they come in, and because they're made to feel welcome, they'll come again you know, and they'll end up talking to people, making friends... and it's been fantastic. It's been a really big thing in Room to Play, the sort of social aspect for families, making friends and doing things together outside of Room to Play. That's been really good for the hard-to-reach families. [staff member]

One parent who visited Room to Play for the first time expressed concerns to the practitioner about her child's tantrums and language development. She was concerned that her child's language might be delayed because at home, two different languages were spoken. Another mother joined in the discussion, reporting that when her first child was young she had shared similar anxieties, as her husband was also from a different cultural background. The two mothers began to share experiences. The staff member later observed that while she felt she had played a role as a listener and facilitator, it had been the exchange of experiences between parents that had been most supportive and empowering for the individuals. The PEEP community empowerment model (see Appendix C) illustrates how this type of empowering experience can move families from isolation through to participation.

vi New experiences and messy play

For many parents and children, one of the appeals of Room to Play was that it offered new experiences. These ranged from the more messy experiential activities such as playing with 'gloop' to everyday activities that were nonetheless often new for both parent and child. One staff member described how the very simple experience of her

child holding a crayon had been a revelation for the parent, and described the impact of this on the child:

I was sat with a little boy last Friday. And he must have been about two and a half-ish and just by the way he was holding a crayon, I said to his mum - is that the first time he's done any and she said – yeah, look at him! Two and half, that was the first time he'd held a crayon. So that experience was brilliant, and mum loved it - she was saying- I'll get him some crayons now - I hadn't even thought of that. So something like that, you've made a difference there. She was like really proud of it: "We'll put that up on the wall when we get home - it's really nice!" I think there's a sense of achievement with parents. Quite a few parents have sat down and made stuff with their children here, and they've had a really nice time and it's sort of showing parents that they can do this and they can do that and they can have a nice time - it doesn't have to be all telly and play on their own. And a sense of pride as well - seeing what their children are doing, you know what they're going to take home, and seeing their children play with other children. [staff member]

The function of Room to Play as a space where children could engage in 'messy' activities that parents didn't want them to do at home emerged as a recurrent theme. As well as the more obviously messy activities as painting, other activities such as playing with rice, pasta, salt and sand were mentioned by parents. For a number of parents it was clear that Room to Play had provided both parent and child with their first experience of messy play, as well as their first explanation of why this was important. Many parents appreciated that their child could take part in these activities without the inconvenience of clearing up after them:

Things like playing with playdough and painting. For lots of children it's been their first time in here. And mums think about getting some, or they take the playdough recipe to make at home. It's these experiences: spending time, with an adult which they don't always get at home. [staff member]

Taking things home for display, or to show to other parents and relatives was also considered important. One parent described how staff had shown her how to make a comfort blanket for her child using recycled materials, and how her child had also created a book of her experiences.

It gives you ideas for games you can play. I've made books here with the digital camera so my child can show her dad what sort of things we do, like cutting and sticking. [parent of 2 year old]

Several parents commented that the shop had given them ideas for things to do at home with their children, by recycling objects that they had rather than spending money on toys.

The staff showed me how to make a shaker out of a bottle with water and glitter in it, stuff like that. They get you to play with things at home, use up things you've already got. [parent of children aged 3 and 5]

For some parents Room to Play was their first experience of sharing books with their child. One young parent described how she had not realised that even babies could

enjoy books: this had been explained to her by staff. Now her toddler looked forward to choosing books from the book corner to share. While many spoke of the opportunities for play, there was an understanding among parents that this was a place where children and parents could learn together. Another parent described how her two children aged two and four perceived Room to Play:

My children are very happy to come and play here. They call it their school. [parent of 2 children]

vii Staffing Issues

Room to Play was perceived by staff to be an extremely rewarding, if challenging place to work. Perhaps exceptionally for a setting catering for pre-school children and staffed exclusively by women, staff turnover was low to non-existent. It is to the credit of the management and to PEEP itself that the original staff employed when Room to Play opened are still delivering the same frontline service to families. All the practitioners and assistants interviewed had been working in Room to Play since it opened, and being able to offer this degree of stability to families in often unstable circumstances themselves is an achievement to be applauded, particularly in a sector where staff turnover is often high.

While the job clearly had its challenges, participating in the successes of families was also rewarding for staff.

When you help someone get on a course, or you help someone go into a preschool and find a school nearby...someone that was really lonely and they met someone through Room to Play and they come each week and enjoy the activities ...or they'll bring things in, the junk modelling and start using it as their own, and really get into what you're doing and why you're doing it and start asking questions which is nice. [staff member]

It's been really, really enjoyable and it's really nice to see that some families have moved on, it's so different from week to week. [staff member]

A number of staff and users commented that the shop appeared non-judgemental and one observation made by a few staff members was that the set-up of Room to Play was non-hierarchical for staff as well as parents. While in a PEEP group, the contrast between leaders and assistants was more marked, in Room to Play some staff members perceived a greater sense of parity, with staff supporting each other on an equal footing.

When you're in a PEEP group, you have a leader and an assistant. When you're in room to play there doesn't seem such a big difference - your opinions count as much as theirs. [staff member]

I feel more confident in dealing with people, definitely. You find you're as much a leader as an assistant really. In the shop it's definitely different: people see you more as an equal and they'll just talk. Conversations start and that's how it goes on. [staff member]

At times the shop became extremely busy, and on these occasions staff found it harder to meet children's needs, and in particular, deliver the curriculum. Half-terms and holidays were usually busy, but other periods remained unpredictable. Knowing when to put on extra staff to deal with this was difficult for management.

I feel that it's quite difficult. You get 2 staff in there, and if its quiet, and you've only got 3 or 4 families in there- which isn't very often- that's quite capable. But when you've got 10, 12 13 families in there, all at once, and there's only 2 staff, there isn't enough staff there to sit and do stuff, the curriculum. But there isn't a specific time or day of the week when you can guarantee that you'll have that busy period. So it's very difficult, you might end with having 3 staff and for the first 2 hours of the morning only having 3 or 4 families in. [staff member]

As well as having to manage when Room to Play was very busy, staff also had to be adaptable and resilient enough to be able to cope with the disappointment of inevitable lulls in attendance.

Because it's a drop-in, sometimes you go in and you can be quite enthusiastic, and set up ready for the day, and then you might sit for an hour and nobody comes. [staff member]

Room to Play relies upon a highly skilled staff base to engage with parents. Most staff working in Room to Play had substantial experience of working with families in disadvantaged circumstances, and additionally, all were parents themselves, mainly living locally. The specific skills and qualities required, and the particular challenges facing staff and management are key issues that need to be taken into account when considering the notion of a transferable model for a drop-in centre.

There are specific professional and personal qualities which dispose staff to working in Room to Play, and evidently a unique skill base is needed in order to deliver a frontline service to families with complex needs in a setting with few rules. Dealing with families in extreme circumstances, sometimes in distress, could be challenging and upsetting for staff. Similarly, staff also needed to possess the ability to prioritise: to know when it is possible and appropriate to mention the curriculum, as well as being able to anticipate and prevent incidents from occurring and to react appropriately when they do. Confidence and experience were some of the attributes cited by staff. As one staff member remarked:

I don't think you can be trained actually in working in Room to Play: I think it can be quite hard, it's something obviously confidence and stuff you get used to, it's more building up that relationship and trust. [staff member]

Delivering the curriculum to families living in often adverse circumstances was consistently challenging. There was a genuine understanding among staff that the real difficulties faced by some parents made it very difficult for them to engage with their child.

If someone is so troubled how can they engage? Their heads are full of other things, they come and they sit on the sofa and it's difficult for them to engage with their child, because they're so exhausted. [staff member]

Staff clearly needed the resilience to be able to cope and adapt to different situations, as well as the underlying optimism that if they weren't able to deliver the curriculum today, then they would be able to try again on another occasion:

It can be quite a challenge, for different reasons really. I mean, if it gets too busy, if you get someone that comes in that's got a problem and wants to speak to you, it can be a problem, you can't just leave that person...A lady came in last night, she'd just lost a parent and she came in to talk to someone... she was really upset... those sort of situations, you can't sort of leave her and say you know, this is what we're doing in the shop today... her children were quite happy and went off to play, that was the time to speak to her, that helped her but like I said the next time, she'll come in again, so that time you'd be able to do the curriculum, possibly... you know you would be able to do it with her and her children. [staff member]

As well as being able to face the challenges of implementing the curriculum in an unstructured setting, staff needed to be able to deal with the greater daily pressure of handling families with complex needs, living in often difficult circumstances. The emotional impact of this could be hard and at times painful for staff.

I think it's been very hard with people's problems, and I mean a lot of stuff that they bring in that they have to cope with in their life...I think the pressure of that is very hard, and not having the time to offload or speak to other people at the end of the day. Or you sort of have clumps of it...and then they say we can arrange some sort of counselling and then you won't have anything for weeks... it's fine. So I think the difference from day to day and sometimes the pressure you're under is really hard...it's very mentally draining sometimes. [staff member]

Sometimes specific incidents or situations occurred that staff needed to discuss. All were aware of the need to debrief: many relied on each other for support, but also felt well supported in supervision sessions and meetings. A staff development day where all PEEP staff talked in groups about possible scenarios that might occur in Room to Play was considered very helpful.

Although staff had been given the opportunity for formal counselling to help them debrief, they had not considered it necessary at this stage. However, it was agreed that this should be regularly reviewed, and offered to staff. PEEP as an organisation is fully aware of the demands on staff of working in Room to Play. Support systems and training for staff should be an important core element of a transferable model. It would be helpful to unpack further the specific skills required by staff for working in a setting of this nature, articulated below by one staff member:

You need to cut yourself into 6 pieces sometimes I suppose. And again I mean children are very... they might need you... it's quite good, the majority of people tend to come back so you can involve children and carers in the activities we've got... but then you've got times where you possibly can't, because you're seeing somebody else, you're in counselling mode and that can be quite difficult. [staff member]

Some skills which emerged as important for staff were:

- dealing with unpredictability: unlike a day nursery setting, where numbers are regular, staff need to be able to cope with not knowing who is going to turn up or when
- being able to deal with incidents such as challenging behaviour from users as well as ‘ad hoc’ incidents involving people using the shopping centre
- flexibility- both in terms of attitude to the curriculum- and the ability to think on your feet

There was also the awareness that staff needed constantly to revise and revisit on a weekly basis the way the shop was staffed and functioning, exploring issues such as:

- striking a balance between having a regular and predictable staff pattern and ‘spreading the strain’ across different staff members – juggling the need for the comfort of a recognised member of staff with the need to change dynamics in order to help families ‘move on’
- reviewing the need for staff counselling
- reviewing patterns of use and continuing to have discussions around issues such as the possible introduction of a time limit for families during ‘peak’ periods
- building up a ‘bank’ of casual staff who could be called upon at short notice when the shop needs cover or when it becomes exceptionally busy
- the possibility of further developing the outside area, as suggested by staff so that for example some of the sand and water play can be extended to make full use of the opportunities
- the possibility of repeating the experience of the stall on an occasional basis as means of engaging with those families who find it difficult to cross the threshold of the shop

III Findings from the user snapshot

i Introduction and methods

In order to find out more about the families using Room to Play, a quantitative survey of users (user snapshot) was made over a 5 day period in May. To comply with the University’s ethical guidelines, a sign was displayed in Room to Play for the week preceding the snapshot. In order to preserve the anonymity of users and to guarantee confidentiality, the research officer explained the consent form verbally to parents. The consent form was then signed and dated by the research officer so that the participant did not have to give their name, but “witnessed” the record of the event.

A user snapshot questionnaire was completed via one-to-one interview for 46 visitors to Room to Play. The questionnaire consisted of 26 multiple choice and open-ended questions. Answers were recorded by the interviewer. Open ended responses were then coded and entered along with the multiple choice ones into SPSS for analysis. The areas of question reflected adult service user characteristics, family characteristics, child and description of Room to Play.

It was noted by staff that the week chosen for the snapshot appeared to be considerably quieter than other weeks. There are a number of possible reasons for this:

- The snapshot took place during the week before the summer half-term, which is an attractive time for families with pre-school aged children to take a cheap holiday (this is one of the last cheap periods for a holiday before prices rise at half-term and into the summer). A similar dip in attendance figures was noted in the same week of 2006. Staff were aware of some families who had used this opportunity to go away.
- It is possible that some parents who were not comfortable answering questions had seen the sign and had decided not to visit Room to Play during the period of the snapshot.

All adult service users of Room to Play with responsibility for children were asked to participate, however there were some exceptions:

- Parents visiting the centre for the first time were not asked to participate as this was felt to be off-putting.
- The snapshot was restricted to service users who had responsibility for children. For example, if a parent came into Room to Play with her child and another parent (to have a cup of tea together), only the parent of the child was interviewed. The parent without a child was not interviewed, but was counted as an 'accompanying visitor'.
- Parents who visited Room to Play more than once in the same week were only interviewed once; however numbers of repeat visits were logged.

Over the 5 day snapshot period:

- 57 adults visited the setting
- 10 of these 57 adults were 'accompanying visitors' and not eligible for interview (3 were grandparents accompanying their children and grandchildren and 7 were friends of adult users)
- 47 adult users were therefore eligible to participate in the survey, and only one refused, therefore a total of 46 adult users participated.

Of the 46 adult users who participated in the survey:

- 9 visited twice in the snapshot week
- 1 visited a total of 3 times
- 1 visited a total of 4 times

This shows there were 35 'once a week' visitors, and 11 'multiple visits'.

Over this 5 day period, a total of 62 children visited Room to Play.

(ii) A week in the life of Room to Play: a user snapshot

Adult service user characteristics

Age, gender and relationships

The average age of adult service users at the time of interview was 32 years, with ages ranging from 17-54 years. Of those questioned 44 (95.7%) were female and 2 (4.3%) were male, with the majority being the parents of the children they were with (84.7%). Other carers included childminders and grandparents (See Table 1). The majority (65.3%) of those questioned had two or more children, with 34.8% having only one (see Table 2).

Table 1: Relationship of adult service user to child/ren

Relationship	n	%
Mother	37	80.4
Father	2	4.3
Grandparent	1	2.2
Friend of parent	2	4.3
Childminder	3	6.5
Other	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Table 2: Number of children (total)

How many children do you have?	n	%
One	16	34.8
Two	23	50
Three	5	10.9
Four	1	2.2
Not Stated	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Ethnicity

The majority of interviewees (63%) were of White British origin, although a wide range of ethnicities were represented in the sample (See Table 3).

Table 3: Ethnic origin of interviewees

Ethnic origin	n	%
White British	29	63
White Irish	1	2.2
White Other	6	13
Indian	1	2.2
Pakistani	3	6.5
Asian Other	1	2.2
Mixed Race	2	4.3
Other	2	4.3
Not Stated	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Level of qualifications

As Table 4 shows, interviewees had a wide range of qualification levels, from no formal qualification (15.2%) to postgraduate qualifications (10.8%). Interviewees were also asked their school leaving age. The majority (32.6%) left after O-levels/GCSEs aged 16, whilst 23.9% continued until after completion of A-levels at the age of 18. 10.9% continued to post-A level studies while 15.2% left school before they were 16, in line with the same proportion of interviewees with no formal qualifications.

Table 4: Interviewees' highest qualification

Qualifications	n	%
No formal qualification	7	15.2
GCSE grades D-G	3	6.5
Equivalent level 1 qualification	1	2.2
GCSE grades A*-C	6	13
O Level grades A-E	2	4.3
Equivalent level 2 qualification	7	15.2
A level	1	2.2
Equivalent level 3 qualification	3	6.5
Certificate of higher education	1	2.2
Bachelors degree	4	8.7
Equivalent level 4 qualification	4	8.7
Masters degree	3	6.5
Postgraduate certificate/Diploma	2	4.3
Not stated	2	4.3
Total	46	100

Employment

A large proportion of interviewees (46%) stated that they were full-time carers, while none were in full-time employment (see Figure 1). Of those currently in employment (50%) the main proportion worked in the childcare sector, e.g. teaching assistant. The healthcare sector was also quite well represented with 10.9% working in this area e.g. nursing (see Table 5). Of those who were not currently working but had previously been in employment (see Table 6), the majority of jobs were in retail and service (15.2%) e.g. retail assistant. One interviewee had never worked. Of those interviewed with partners/spouses, 65.2% had a spouse currently in employment.

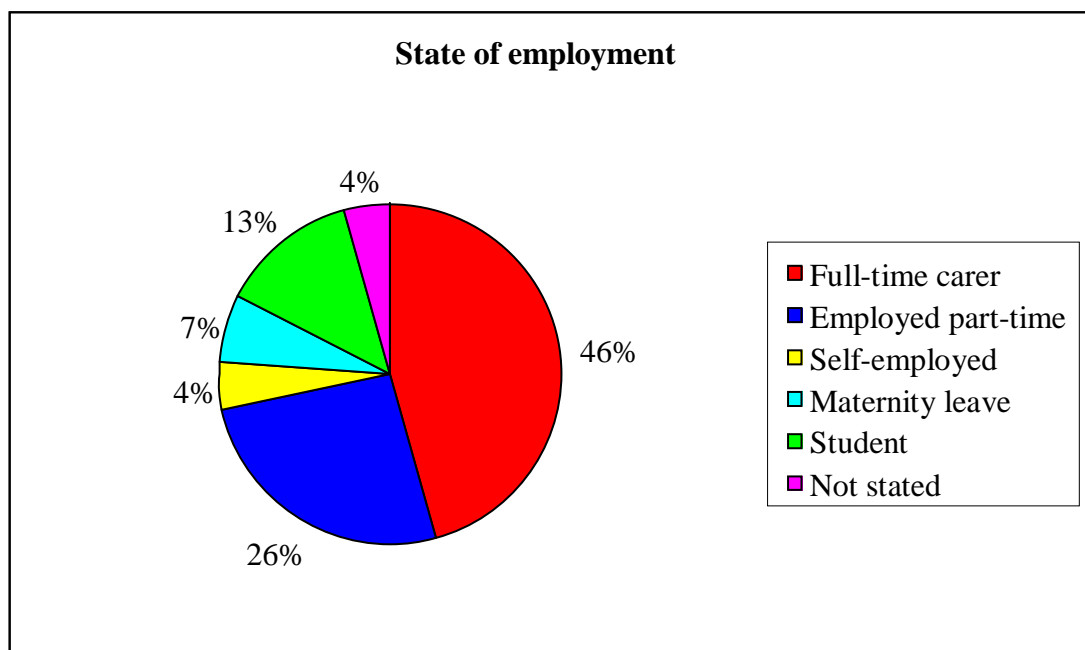


Figure 1: Current state of employment of interviewees

Table 5: Current area of employment

Area of employment	n	%
Childcare	9	19.6
Healthcare	5	10.9
Clerical/admin	1	2.2
Retail/service	3	6.5
Management	3	6.5
Construction/housing	2	4.3
Not stated/Non-applicable	23	50
Total	46	100

Table 6: Previous area of employment of those currently not working

Previous area of employment	n	%
Childcare	3	6.5
Healthcare	2	4.3
Clerical/admin	1	2.2
Retail/service	7	15.2
Construction/housing	1	2.2
Student	1	2.2
Professional	1	2.2
Other	2	4.3
Never worked	1	2.2
Not stated/Non-applicable	27	58.7
Total	46	100

Family characteristics

Family living arrangement

67.4% of those questioned lived with someone else in the family home, 24.4% lived alone with their children, 62% lived with their partner.

Benefits

Table 7 shows the benefits received by the interviewees. Benefits relating to children were the most widely distributed e.g. child benefit, child tax credit while employment and housing benefits were also common e.g. working tax credit, housing benefit, council tax benefit. The n value and percentage for each type of benefit is out of the total sample of 46.

Table 7: Benefits received

Types of benefit	n	%
Child benefit	40	87
Child tax credit	30	65.2
Housing benefit	15	32.6
Council tax benefit	14	30.4
Working tax credit	12	26.1
Income support	9	19.6
Child support	3	6.5
Child care tax credit	2	4.3
Local housing allowance	2	4.3
Disability living allowance	2	4.3
Job seekers allowance	1	2.2
Lone parent benefit	1	2.2
Maternity/paternity pay	1	2.2

Table 8: Number of benefits claimed by users

Number of benefits claimed	n	%
.00	6	13.0
1.00	3	6.5
2.00	16	34.8
3.00	5	10.9
4.00	5	10.9
5.00	6	13.0
6.00	5	10.9

Child characteristics

Language spoken at home

A large proportion of parents/carers stated that they spoke to their children solely in English (69.6), while 10.9% of children lived in bilingual households. Table 8 shows the variety of languages spoken at the children's homes.

Table 9: Language spoken at home to child

Language spoken at home	n	%
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English	32	69.6
Japanese	1	2.2
Urdu	2	4.3
Arabic	2	4.3
Polish	1	2.2
Lithuanian	1	2.2
German	1	2.2
English + other language	5	10.9
Not stated	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Ethnicity

As with the parent/carer ethnicity, the majority (63%) of children were classed as White British; however a variety of ethnicities was represented in the sample (see Table 9).

Table 10: Child ethnicity

Child ethnicity	n	%
White British	29	63
Black Caribbean	1	2.2
Pakistani	3	6.5
Mixed Race	7	15.2
Other	5	10.9
Not stated	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Childcare

Half of the sample children attending Room to Play also attended another form of childcare/centre with 21.7% attending playgroup, 15.2% nursery and 13% a childminder or nanny. [Similarly 65.2% of interviewees said they took their children to similar places to Room to Play].

Room to Play

Travel to Room to Play

The most common mode of transport to Room to Play was by foot (58.7%) followed by bus and car. Many people however used more than one form of transport to the centre. The total percentages are shown in Table 10. Most people visiting Room to Play (65.2%) were there with one child while the rest (34.8%) were with two.

Table 11: Modes of travel to Room to Play

Travel to RTP	n	%
Walk	27	58.7
Bus	15	32.6
Car	14	30.4
Bicycle	1	2.2

Frequency of visiting Room to Play

Of those questioned, most people visited Room to Play once a week (34.8%) with fewer visiting more frequently as Table 11 shows. When asked about how they found out about Room to Play most said they were just passing, although some had first heard about it from the stall (See Table 12).

Table 12: Frequency of visits to Room to Play

How often do you attend Room to Play?	n	%
First visit	3	6.5
Every day	2	4.3
2-3 times a week	12	26.1
Once a week	16	34.8
Once a fortnight	9	19.6
Once a month	3	6.5
Not stated	1	2.2
Total	46	100

Table 13: How did you hear about Room to Play?

How did you hear about Room to Play?	n	%
Just passing	14	30.4
Word of mouth	6	13
Health visitor	1	2.2
The stall	6	13.0
A PEEP practitioner	3	6.5
Not stated	16	34.8
Total	46	100

Reasons for visiting Room to Play

Figure 2 shows the coded responses of why the interviewees said they came to Room to Play. When asked why they came to Room to Play 33% said their main reason for coming was for the child;

“My child loves it”
“My boy loves to come here”

Another popular reason for visiting Room to Play was that they were in the shopping centre shopping already so decided to drop in;

“Came shopping so decided to come in”
“I come here when I go shopping, it makes shopping bearable for the children”

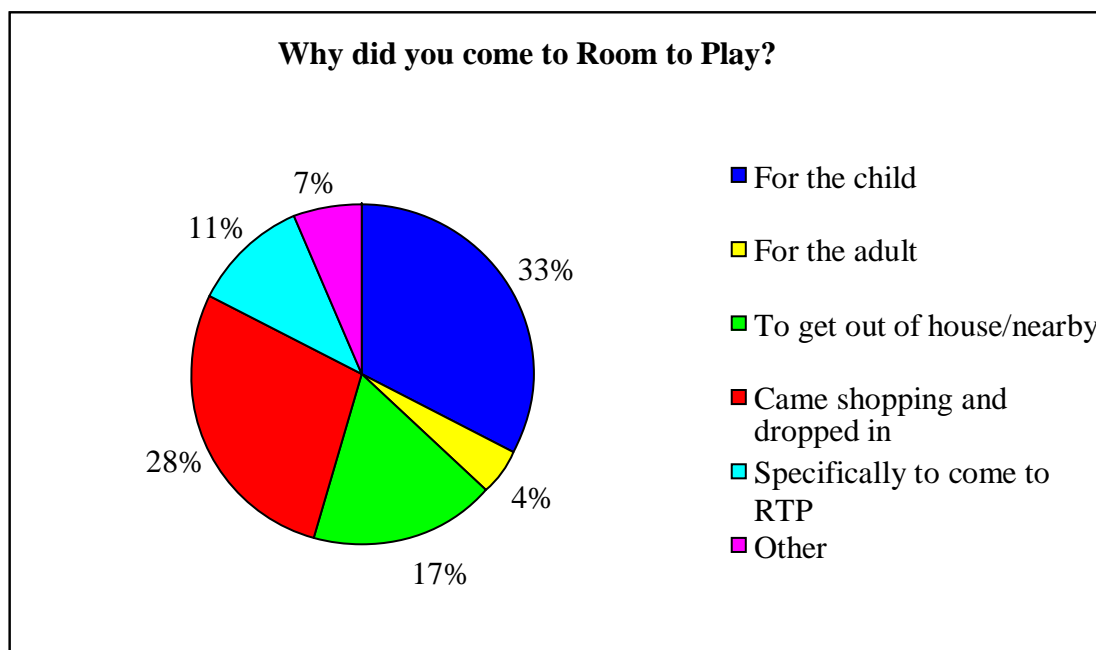


Figure 2: Coded reasons for coming to Room to Play

What do you like about RTP?

For nearly half of those questioned (48%), the thing that was most liked by the parents/carers about Room to Play was its friendly and helpful atmosphere and people;

“It’s relaxed and friendly. Staff are very nice”

“Casual, not judged by anyone”

“Positive atmosphere, professional staff”

Another popular response related to that fact that Room to Play was good for their children;

“There’s things for the children to do they may not do at home”

“It’s got so much for our child to do, she loves it”

“For my child it’s an opportunity to play with other children”

Other comments related to the location of the Room to Play in the shopping centre, the fact that it was free and a safe place to play (See Figure 3);

“Children can play alone but I can see them. I know they’re safe”

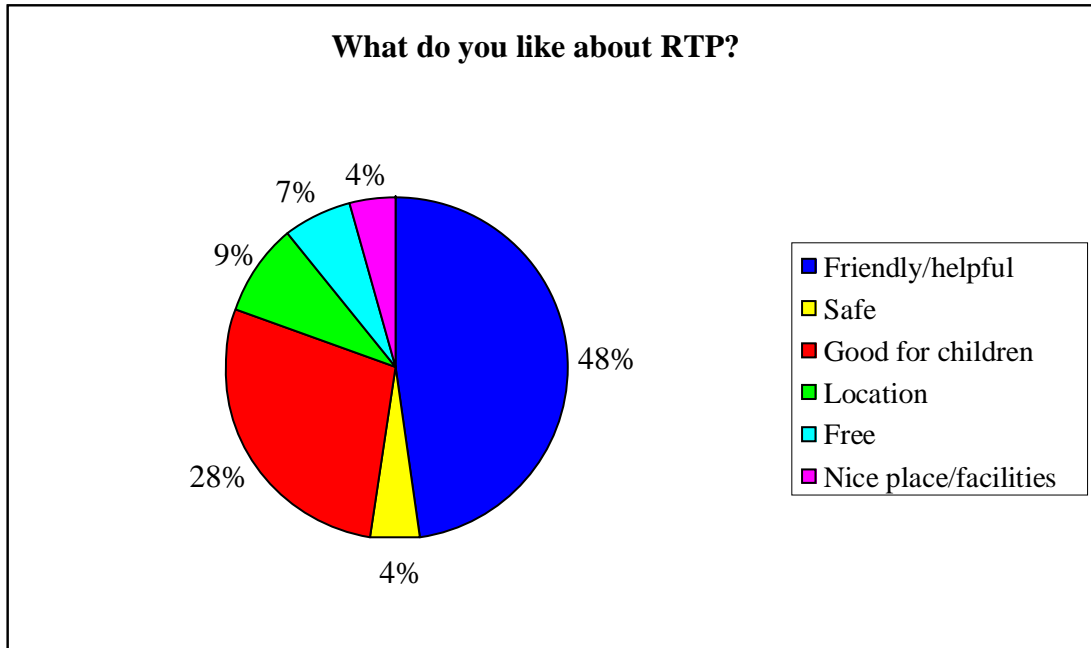


Figure 3: What do you like about Room to Play?

What do children like about RTP?

As well as commenting on what they liked about Room to Play, parents/carers also commented on what their children like about it. Most of the comments related to the provision of the toys/activities/books and art equipment (See Figure 4). The outside area was also explicitly mentioned by 13% as a favourite aspect. 11% were unable to pick a specific aspect of the Room to Play and stated they liked “everything”.

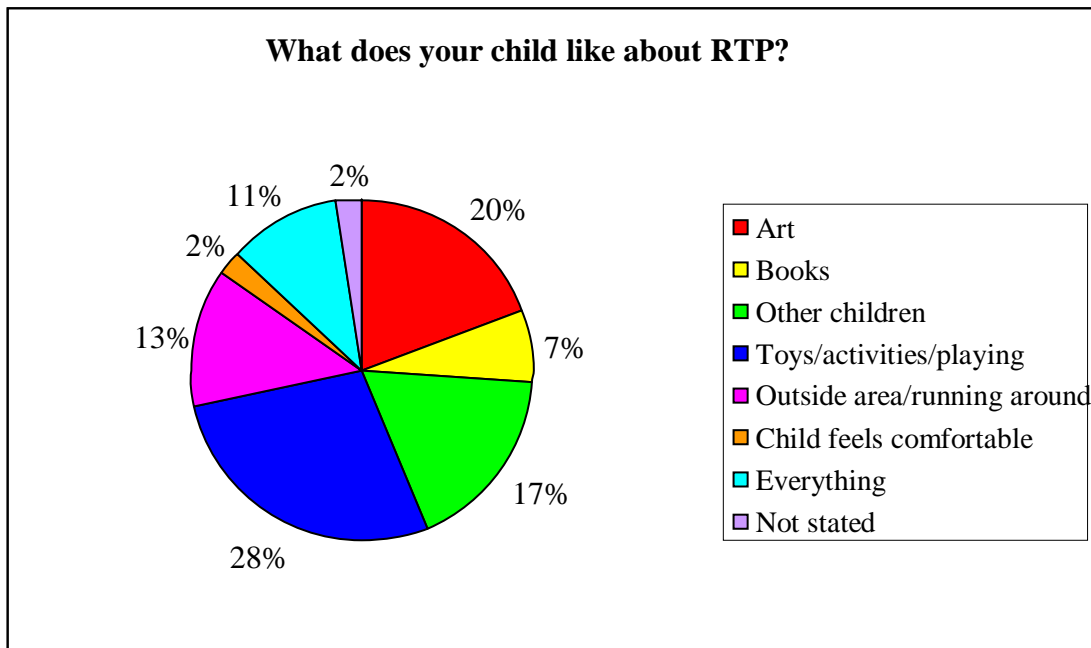


Figure 4: What does your child like about Room to Play?

Level of satisfaction with opening hours

When asked when they would prefer to visit Room to Play the majority (54.3%) stated that the hours were fine as they stood. However, 26.1% would like to see it open after 3pm and 8.7% said they would like opening hours extended to weekends.

Postcodes of users

Full postcodes were supplied by 42 of the 46 users. Over half of these users lived in postcodes that were ranked in the top 50% most deprived areas according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation and 13 of the 46 (28.3%) lived in postcodes that ranked in the top 25% most deprived areas.

iii Conclusions

Due to the small sample size, and the unexpectedly low usage of the week, it is not possible to conclude whether this was a representative sample of users. However, even with a small sample there are some observations that could be made concerning users and their relative levels of disadvantage.

- 7 of the 46 (15.2%) had no qualifications at all
- 47.8% left school at age 16 or under
- Just under a fifth of users claimed income support and just under a third claimed housing benefit
- Five of the six users who were not claiming child benefit (a universal, non means-tested benefit) were childminders; the sixth was ineligible due to immigration status
- Users were more likely to live in a ‘more deprived’ than a ‘less deprived’ area, with 28.3% living in areas ranked in the top 25% most deprived areas

There are further points that could be made specifically in relation to the collection of this type of sensitive demographic data within a drop-in context. It is possible that some families were deterred from using the provision during the snapshot week because of the survey. Additionally, there are some challenges in collecting this type of sensitive demographic data in a ‘home from home’ setting, even when provisions are made for anonymity. Although the researcher aimed to undertake the survey in a ‘quiet corner’, this was not always available. Parents may feel embarrassed discussing benefits or school leaving age in a crowded drop-in, although using a response card with numbers indicating benefits and qualifications rather than having to verbalise this was helpful. Only the researcher is bound by the limits of confidentiality, and it is difficult to guarantee confidentiality with other users, children and staff around. However, since parents have to be responsible for their children at all times, and all areas are accessible to all users of Room to Play, there are few alternatives available. These issues would need to be revisited if a ‘user snapshot’ were to be repeated in the third and final phase of the evaluation.

IV Revisiting key issues of Phase 1 and defining those of Phase 2

(i) Reaching the hard-to-reach

The first phase of the evaluation noted the difficulty of creating an objective measure, or even an acceptable definition of hard-to-reach, the target group of the shop. Unsurprisingly, this problem had not been magically resolved by this second phase, although the year's experience in the shop has resulted in a greater staff knowledge and understanding of the needs of those who make use of the facilities of Room to Play. Doherty et al (2004) used the following definitions of hard-to-reach:

- minority groups (often linked to population characteristics)
- those who 'slip through the net' (overlooked, invisible or unable to articulate their needs)
- the service-resistant (unwilling to engage, suspicious, over-targeted or disaffected, including families 'known' and potentially hostile to agencies)

Some key characteristics of hard-to-reach users cited by staff at Room to Play include:

- difficulty in engaging with other services
- difficulty in engaging with their own children
- isolation
- lack of confidence
- socio-economic deprivation and from a disadvantaged neighbourhood
- young parents and those with language barriers

A consensual opinion among staff appeared to be that defining users as hard-to-reach was not a decision that could or should be made on the spot. Additionally, it was not necessarily helpful to label parents in this way. In contrast, many observed that finding out as much as possible about the child's and the family's situation was of greater importance, in order to assess levels of need. This could in turn be useful in signposting other services and facilities. If users were made to feel welcome and comfortable by staff, they were more likely to reveal information about their home and family life which could enable staff to select the approach that would be most likely to lead to engagement, as well as find out whether parents and children were in touch with any other services.

I think it's getting to talk to people, and knowing more rather than judging what you see and hear, when you've made a bit of a relationship. [staff member]

Taking a very gentle approach with parents, listening to them and not asking too many questions on their initial visits was felt to be crucial in enabling parents to build up trust in staff and ultimately the setting.

You just go with what they say really, you don't ask too many questions, and I think they sort of volunteer what they want you to know. You don't want to frighten them away, usually you ask what other places they go to, do you live locally, and then they tend to open out a little bit. [staff member]

While the need to support young parents was recognised, staff felt that parental isolation, which might be accompanied by poverty and a general lack of support as well as the confidence to access other services were more accurate indicators of being 'hard-to-reach'

Being isolated, not having many friends, not possibly having the same language as us. I suppose with the younger mums, they find it difficult to manage with their children and the money side of it, not having money to do much. Some families definitely haven't got enough support. [staff member]

A number of staff members observed that being hard-to-reach did not necessarily mean being hard-up and vice versa: not all young parents were hard-to-reach, or needed support. Some noted a difference between those who were unable to access other provision, and those who did not want, or need to.

There's young mums, but not all young mums are hard-to-reach...some young mums aren't in dire need, they cope really well, just because you're a young mum it doesn't mean...so it's something we've talked about, how do we define hard-to-reach. To me, it would be that they've got needs. Because some people don't go to toddler groups, they don't go here, don't go there, but then they're coping really well, they've got family support and stuff and they're doing a really good job. [staff member]

Conversely, although they might not appear to be 'obviously' hard-to-reach, other parents who were more comfortable materially might still be unable to access services or engage with their children, for reasons such as post-natal depression, for example.

On the whole, staff felt that many of those using Room to Play on a regular basis fell into the target group of hard-to-reach:

I would say on an average day I work in there the majority of people I would say are what we'd class as hard-to-reach, I mean you do obviously get people that wouldn't be hard-to-reach and would access anywhere like family centres, drop-ins, places like that, but I think on the whole the people that come in would be classed as hard-to-reach.

Regardless of level of disadvantage, many staff felt that those parents who were unable to engage with their children, and who were unaware of the value of play should be redefined as the target group:

Hard-to-reach is a stereotype. The families we would most like to help through Room to Play are those who find it difficult to engage with their children, and you can see that that's for a variety of reasons- sometimes for not understanding that play itself can be helpful. We have these conversations around mess and getting dirty. Some people genuinely believe that a child getting dirty means they're being naughty and not playing 'properly'. [staff member]

A theme that emerged more strongly in this phase was the function of language barriers and how these could make a person 'hard-to-reach'. This could affect both a parent's confidence as well as their ability to make friends. One parent who had been taking English lessons described how her difficulties with self-expression made it hard for her to make friends in another language.

It's very hard: you love to meet other people, but when you have a language barrier it's the hardest thing. If that person smiles at me and if I finally open my mouth they will go away, there are certain fears. [parent of 2 children]

As well as making it difficult to make friends, language barriers could also reinforce parental isolation as one staff member observed.

When they say... it's the first time I start coming out, because I can't talk properly, I am afraid of saying things, I can't make an appointment... these are families who just keep inside because of different things. [staff member]

However, it was evident from interviews with both staff and users that a number of parents were using Room to Play expressly in order to help their child learn English, or to improve their own language skills. One Arabic-speaking mother described how she brought her children to the setting in order for them to hear English being spoken. When a relative visited her for three months, she brought her to Room to Play for the same reason.

The children come here to learn. My son calls this his school. I like them to come here because they can learn English here, by talking to other children. At home we speak Arabic. It's difficult for them to understand English. [parent of two children]

Parents who were unwilling to engage with services for reasons of confidence and self-esteem were thought to be 'hard-to-reach': however, some staff felt that rather than people actually being hard-to-reach, which was considered a value judgment, it might be the case that it was the services that were failing to reach families.

Linked to the debate about defining hard-to-reach families was the question of whether Room to Play needed to be seeking to attract more of these families. On the one hand, Room to Play is keen to attract new families to use the provision: on the other, staff and management are aware of the limitations on space and the challenges of delivering the curriculum when the setting is uncomfortably full. When ten or eleven families visit the provision at the same time, Room to Play was perceived to be at full capacity. It is very difficult to predict when these 'peak periods' will occur.

One task for the third phase of the evaluation could be to review the way data is routinely collected on families and on visits, and to explore models for predicting attendance patterns to see whether it is affected by factors such as, for example, the weather, bus services or other local information.

Although at certain times in the year staff delivered leaflets both within the shopping centre and to homes, the most effective way to publicise the service, in the views of staff and parents, is considered to be by word of mouth.

I think that we're doing all that we can now really...you can't make somebody walk through that door, can you? I think obviously it's getting back through word of mouth. You've got a lot of people who come in through somebody coming into the shop. [staff member]

There also appeared to be a clear consensus among staff that parents who did not want to access the service should not be 'forced' to:

It's not that hard-to-reach anyone really, if they're coming out to the centre, they're there. They might not want to be reached- I think that's a lot of it and I think we've just got to respect that. If they don't want it, then fine- somebody else does. [staff member]

Given the difficulties of predicting when the shop will be busy it is perhaps unsurprising that there was some anxiety among staff that trying to attract too many new families might possibly 'open the floodgates' to large numbers of parents and children that Room to Play would not be able to support. Discussions have taken place within PEEP around the idea of introducing a time limit (for example 2 hours) for families on those occasions when the shop becomes exceptionally busy. However, it raises the question that this might contradict the welcoming, 'open access' nature of the drop-in. It is evident that PEEP is constantly reviewing and reflecting on the numbers of people using the centre and their patterns of use: a task ahead is to develop robust mechanisms for collecting this information.

The stall: an accident worth repeating?

The 'accidental success' of the stall, located in the shopping centre concourse is documented in phase 1 of the report (Evangelou, Smith and Sylva 2006). It was acknowledged that a number of the shop's regular users had first accessed Room to Play via the stall. The stall has a number of pros and cons, which are summarised below.

Pros:

- less intimidating for parents who do not actually have to cross a threshold
- it is hard for parents to 'avoid' interacting with their child: for some parents it is easier to focus with a limited number of activities
- children may 'draw' their parents into an activity: parents who might not want otherwise go into Room to Play might allow their child to play for a short time
- families are likely to stay for shorter periods of time and overcrowding is unlikely

Cons:

- cold and uncomfortable for staff who feel exposed
- safety issues for children (parents may find it harder to supervise)
- inadequate facilities
- restricted by space
- delivery of curriculum even harder
- shopping centre may charge additional rates for setting up stall

Although staff were well aware of the difficulties involved in having the stall, most acknowledged that it had been a valuable experience, although few appeared keen to repeat it. There have been some discussions about whether it might be worth repeating the experience of the stall on an occasional basis in order to raise the profile of the provision and draw in new users who might find it difficult to access Room to Play. If this were to be repeated it would be beneficial to analyse any subsequent impact on attendance.

ii Inter-agency issues

One of the original ideas was that health visitors, midwives and other agencies might be invited into Room to Play when the provision became more established. As noted in the report of Phase 1, it was felt that if this happened too soon, it might deter those very families that Room to Play was seeking to attract.

Over the course of the past year some health professionals have used the shop as a base for activities. A health visitor experimented with a weekly group for Arabic-speaking mothers, over a number of weeks, assisted by one of the workers. This was felt to be successful. Staff felt that most health visitors locally were aware of the provision and were informally referring parents. Anecdotal information from staff and parents suggested that some midwives were also informing local parents about Room to Play. In addition, a few health visitors have accompanied parents on their first visit to the shop, introducing them to staff and assisting parents to 'cross the threshold' into the provision.

One health visitor has also made herself available on an informal basis in the shop for some sessions, offering parents the opportunity to discuss child development issues and for babies to be weighed. Again, this was felt to have been a success: staff commented that the health visitor had successfully 'blended in'. A relaxed and informal approach was considered to be crucial, as anything more 'official' might make parents feel uncomfortable. Although this arrangement was considered to be broadly successful, this has not been turned into a regular slot. There remains some concern among staff that if this kind of involvement were formalised, the provision might turn into 'just another family centre'. If there were too many professionals, and too many groups, Room to Play might lose its unique atmosphere and with it some of the users it has worked so hard to attract.

Some staff members felt a core difficulty was that other agencies, notably health professionals had their 'own agendas' which were not necessarily the same as those of Room to Play. As with so many other aspects of Room to Play, there are clearly no hard and fast answers: the challenge is striking a balance between inviting the involvement of other agencies, and ensuring that they do not 'take over'. Discussions have taken place about introducing different professionals at specific advice sessions or 'surgeries'. Some staff members felt that having information sessions on healthy eating would be useful: others felt that targeted sessions, such as benefits advice and basic first aid would be helpful and relevant to parents. However, other staff members held the view that such sessions were already being offered elsewhere. Staff and management are aware of the need to continue to experiment where other agencies are concerned; to allow enough time for changes to 'bed down' and for any impact to be noted, and to seek feedback from users and staff on these arrangements.

It is also difficult to ascertain the extent to which parents are being signposted to other services and facilities. Although anecdotally staff reported that they were able to advise parents of other relevant services, it is nonetheless appears difficult to evaluate this formally, without questioning parents excessively. Staff remained wary of what one staff member described as the 'Sure Start syndrome' - where parents are

constantly approached with questionnaires and asked for feedback on services. Again, it appears to be the case that it is through relationship-building that parents will disclose information about themselves, including their use of onward services.

Some parents who had built up a relationship with staff voluntarily shared information, including their use of other services. One parent came in to report how her child had fared on his first visit to a local playgroup that a member of staff had helped her to access. On another occasion, a parent who used the centre sporadically as a base for nappy-changing came in specifically to talk to one of the staff members about her child's recent hospital referral. The staff member was able to listen and support the parent, as well as suggest other potential sources of support. Another parent who came in regularly had also been referred to an education and employment service for young parents and discussed her options for training with staff.

As part of ongoing discussions within PEEP about helping families to 'move on' to other services, both within PEEP and to other services, it may be helpful to look at ways of recording and monitoring this information.

In a setting that aims to attract hard-to-reach families and those with complex needs it is perhaps unsurprising that as news about Room to Play has spread, requests have been made by other professionals for the shop to be used as a base for statutory assessments, as well as for contact and access visits. On the one hand this can be taken as a further measure of success: it is a sign that the shop is attracting parents with some needs who are not using other provision. However, over the course of the year it became necessary for the management to clarify that it was not appropriate for the shop to become a regular base for access or contact visits, for a number of reasons. It was considered appropriate for the shop to be used occasionally as a base for an educational assessment of a regular user, but this is something that needs to be considered on an individual basis and monitored. Similarly, staff understood that as parents were not formally referred to the service, and had not actually 'signed up' to anything, it was not appropriate for staff to answer questions from health visitors or comment on parenting practices for court orders, although there were clear procedures to be followed if there was a Child Protection issue and staff were familiar with these.

Formulating a clear set of policies to deal with requests of this nature from other agencies might be undertaken in the context of establishing a transferable model of a drop-in centre.

iii Delivering the curriculum

A year on, the single greatest challenge facing Room to Play remains engaging the parents in their child's development through the curriculum in a way that is unthreatening, accessible and flexible. The vast range of people who use the shop may be at very different starting points in terms of their engagement with their children. This makes the task challenging, exciting and rewarding.

Staff and management as well as other PEEP practitioners have continued to reflect upon the best way to engage the parents through the PEEP curriculum within the unstructured context of a drop-in. The assessment of the appropriateness of a formal and structured way of trying to engage the parents is ongoing.

The PEEP community intervention model for learning together (see Appendix C) shows the ORIM framework, PEEP curriculum, Core Activities and PEEP materials as components of the PEEP programme. The PEEP Community Empowerment model and the PEEP Parent-Carer Support Spectrum illustrates how families can be moved through empowerment from isolation to participation. Central to this is the understanding that parents and carers are at different starting-points on this spectrum: some families have further to travel to the point where they can be expected to engage with the curriculum.

I think it is about relationships and for some families it being a long term activity towards a point where you feel confident to say to someone - oh look come over here and see what they're doing ... oh have you thought of doing this at home... Some will engage with you and talk about an activity but where people clearly are not there you're just working towards it. I suppose that's the first thing. [staff member]

In some cases, this was a matter of staff modelling for parents how to interact with children. One staff member described how many parents instinctively told babies off for putting objects into their mouths, and how she dealt with this.

They say oh, the baby puts everything in its mouth. And then you sort of say oh that's because, you know, the way we feel with our hands they feel with their mouth and tongue... that's their way. You know it's like if I give you something with your eyes shut you'd feel it with your hand, a baby would put it to its mouth... you can sort of share, it's not like "get it out of your mouth, get it out of your mouth, get it out of your mouth"... we can say, oh this is why we use the treasure baskets, and if you use safe things it's quite alright...you can build up hopefully you know their understanding. [staff member]

Some observations on delivering the curriculum include:

- there may, in some instances, be a tension between encouraging parents to feel as comfortable as possible and actively engaging them in their child's learning and development in a 'structured' way
- the shop offers a wide range of opportunities for parents to engage with their children through the core activities which support children's development; however, it may be worth repeating the experience of the stall intermittently because in some ways it was easier for parents to interact with their child, and focus on that interaction in the simpler environment of the stall
- the most flexible way of engaging parents through the curriculum, particularly by using the structured nine-theme syllabus is a complex question
- spending 4 weeks on a theme such as 'supporting children's listening' has proved a challenge and can be too intense for those not yet comfortable with that level of engagement
- more limited experiential activities (e.g. 'gloop') seem to be most successful in drawing parents that are less able to engage with their children off the sofa
- children who spend long hours in Room to Play may tire of that day's activities if they are limited in scope because they are specifically linked to the theme

- the nine-theme syllabus has a session plan for each week which contains details of songs and rhymes, books and activities that can be used; however, the context of Room to Play is more complex as in effect multiple ‘sessions’ take place, lasting for different lengths of time with parents engaged at very different levels of intensity. The usefulness of session plans in their ‘group’ format is a complex question that needs further exploration.
- at times due to the demands (staffing, time pressure, numbers etc) it has been easier for staff to put out activities such as colouring or cutting out, which although expressive of the curriculum might not be specifically linked to the theme. A key dilemma here is that this may be the best or only way to get certain parents to engage with their child, because they are happy to sit and colour with their child but are not yet able to engage more fully with the curriculum.
- accommodating the curriculum within a child-centred approach: respecting what the child would like to do within the unstructured context of Room to Play can be a challenge

Successful support of the parents through the curriculum is largely dependent upon the skill of the staff in being able to find the ‘right’ moment to engage the parent, as one staff member described.

And I suppose another challenge is feeling that it’s the right moment to actually discuss the curriculum. Because you can sit there playing with the child, doing stuff. Mum might be sat over there, chatting to her friend, and you’re waiting for her to stop talking to her friend so you can say oh - did you see so and so - what he’s done, he’s done this really well. And then if you can get her engaged in the conversation about it then you can go on, and drip in bits of the curriculum, like I don’t know - this is really good for his counting skills, you can take this home and you can have a go at doing this counting later - did you hear him doing that, just now? So it’s finding the right opportunity to pull Mum into the conversation when she’s sat there chatting to her mate. Because if you’re too pushy, they’re not going to want to keep coming back in. So it’s just, you know, little bits. [staff member]

In recent months, an additional PEEP practitioner has visited Room to Play for two hours each week, offering directed activities to extend the curriculum. This has included the occasional singing session, delivered in an informal, ‘ad hoc’ way. Although some concern was voiced by staff that this might become too much like a PEEP group, there are obvious benefits to having a third staff member to focus on the curriculum.

Following the on-going discussions between staff members and other PEEP practitioners, methods will be continued to be developed to support parents in a flexible way as they respond to their children in the context of Room to Play. Delivery will continue to explore how to engage parents in their children’s learning in a less structured way, by providing activities to support all five of the developmental areas of the curriculum on any one day in the shop.

It is important to remember that practitioners in Room to Play are not only supporting children with their play, but have the far harder task of supporting parents to support children with their play. The most vital tool in successfully introducing the curriculum

however remains the skills, experience and intuition of the staff in being able to seize opportunities at the right time at the parent's pace.

Sometimes it's just not appropriate; it's there and it's quite visual- the things you use, but it's not always appropriate if someone's in tears to start talking about, you know "we're doing senses this week" I mean, obviously you just don't! Whereas then another time when you're sat at the table with an adult and a child, and you're rolling the dough and you say, you know, can you smell it and they say- oh yeah we hadn't thought of cutting it like that, and you start talking about the senses and they're really interested and it's like 100 per cent to do with the curriculum so I think you've got to be quite flexible with that... [staff member]

So it's sort of that slowly drip-feeding with some families, perhaps never touching on it the first couple of times. With others, some are more focused and interested and wants to know a lot. It's about knowing when to, really. [staff member]

iv Other challenges and issues for future development

In supporting families with complex needs, staff members work hard to build up relationships with users and promote their trust, often initially through listening. It is perhaps unsurprising that at times, some parents may perceive staff as occupying a counselling role. PEEP is aware of the need to continue to reflect on ways to deal with this.

Another challenge for Room to Play, and for other potential drop-ins of this kind, and already noted in the first phase of the evaluation, remains the task of assessing exactly how many families are using the provision, how frequently they come and how long they stay, and whether they are accessing any onward services. The user snapshot covers only a single week in the project's life and may not be representative, as discussed earlier.

The set-up of Room to Play as a 'drop-in with a difference' makes collecting this sort of information very difficult. Users are not required to sign in or out, and one of the appeals of the provision is thought to be that no questions are asked.

Data on attendance is currently collected daily by staff on a simple tick box sheet (see Appendix). This sheet indicates numbers of carers and children visiting Room to Play on that day, which are counted as visits. The figures describe how many child or adult visitors came to the shop on a given day, totalled over the week and offers basic descriptive categories. However, it cannot indicate the frequency (for example, how many times those users have been in that week, that month or even that day). A difficulty that PEEP is fully aware of is that it is impossible to ascertain frequency or length of visits from these data. For example, fifty people visiting the centre five times each in a week would register a total weekly count of two hundred and fifty visits. The total number of adults counted per week does not make it possible to distinguish between parents and carers, and 'accompanying adult visitors' (for example, those who accompany a parent to Room to Play or meet them there). Additionally the basic descriptive categories are of limited use on information such as ethnicity, or English as an additional language.

Rather than questioning users, staff felt that the best way of finding out more information about the user, including frequency of use was to try to build a relationship with users as they met them. A ‘softly softly’ approach might mean they would be more likely to return to the setting, and be willing to share more information about themselves on future visits.

Obviously when someone's been a few times and you've built up a little bit of a relationship then it's showing a genuine interest you know, but you know on the first time you meet someone, you're trying to listen to their accent, figure out where they're from. [staff member]

Gauging whether or not the target group was accessing any onward services posed similar challenges. Again, the overriding message appeared to be that this information could only be discovered when a relationship had been made with the user. Although parents were asked in the snapshot whether they accessed other services, it was difficult to assess the frequency and intensity of visits.

Suggestions for phase 3 might include repeating the snapshot over 2 or 3 weeks, and including more detailed questions about frequency and intensity of use of other services. In order to estimate the approximate length of time users spend in Room to Play, one possibility might be for staff to undertake an ‘hourly census’ on selected days (for example, one day a month) and calibrate these statistics. An additional task is questioning other target users of the shopping centre who do not use the provision, to document how the service is perceived by those who do not use it.

v Strengths, threats and opportunities

Although some strengths of Room to Play have been identified, proven weaknesses have not. Preliminary observations on the strengths, opportunities and some possible threats of Room to Play include the following:

Strengths

- Right location
- Highly experienced and skilled staff base
- Low turnover of staff (consistency)
- Ongoing professional development and support
- Parents feel positive about the experience
- Absence of published rules makes parents feel welcome
- Evolving and prepared to adapt and experiment
- Social support through empowerment of parents

Some threats to Room to Play might include:

- The “over-use” of Room to Play, both by needy families and middle-class families
- Possible conflict between a comfortable and sociable environment and one which promotes and facilitates learning
- Challenges of delivering a curriculum in an unstructured setting

- Staff may be in a social work/counselling role as opposed to an educational role
- Inability to ‘move on’ those benefiting least from services
- Children of different ages and adults with different levels of engagement makes targeting of service difficult

Some opportunities which have been identified for Room to Play include:

- Multi-agency liaison and not co-location
- Redefining the PEEP curriculum to be relevant to this setting
- More effective means of moving parents between different PEEP delivery models as well as other services
- Prioritising users with needs closest to the aims of the centre
- Early recognition of those who would benefit most from core services

V Conclusions and looking towards phase 3

Room to Play has enjoyed a busy, challenging and successful first year, and staff and management deserve praise for the energy and enthusiasm they have brought to the project. Parents interviewed about their experiences of using the provision were overwhelmingly positive: the only real suggestion for change articulated by parents was to increase the opening hours of the provision.

Issues for future development include:

- Discussions about how to help those families who use Room to Play extensively to ‘move on’ into other types of provision. Some discussions have taken place about the possibility of seeking further funding to establish groups or home programmes for such families to help them ‘move on’ into a more intensive mode of PEEP delivery
- Exploring whether the experience of the stall might be repeated, on an occasional basis to draw in new users
- Exploring methods for collecting robust data on patterns of attendance and predictive models

Other topics to consider might include whether there is a need to introduce explicit rules for behaviour in Room to Play. Guidance for staff exists, but there are no published rules on display for users. The only exception to this is the rule, which is displayed and stringently enforced by staff, that every parent is responsible for their own child. However, it may be necessary to have some rules to guide adult users to define what is and is not acceptable behaviour. These might include: no smacking, respect for others, restricted use of mobile phones. With some of the proposed changes to the curriculum as well as the possibility of more input from other agencies, it is important that enough time is allowed for changes to ‘bed down’ before these are evaluated.

The third and final phase of the evaluation will include a comprehensive literature review of interventions with hard-to-reach families. It will also be important in the

final phase to attempt to draw some conclusions about the quality and performance of the provision. These will in turn help to identify the elements for a transferable model of the provision and of the evaluation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, Room to Play should continue to view itself as a dynamic and innovative entity, experimenting to find the best ways of supporting parents to engage with the PEEP curriculum.

It would be good to explore. I think the shop has a lot of potential, and unless you try different things, you're not really going to be able to get to the bottom of that potential. [staff member]

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APPENDIX A

Room to Play: User Snapshot

Parent number: Male Female

1. Brief introduction to the interview including anonymity and confidentiality

2. How often do you attend Room to Play?

First visit Every day 2-3 times a week Once a week Once a fortnight Once a month

3. How did you hear about Room to Play?

Just passing Word of mouth Health visitor The stall PEEP practitioner
Other (please write in)

4. Why did you come here today?

4. a) What do you like about Room to Play?

4. b) What does your child like about it?

5. How many children do you have?

1 2 3 4 5 5+

6. How old are they?

7. How many are here with you today?

8. Thinking about the child/ren with you today, do they go to...

Childminder/nanny Playgroup Nursery School

9. If you are not the mother for all the children you have with you today, then are you?

Father Grandparent Aunt Uncle Friend Childminder Other

10. Does anyone else live with you in the family home? Yes No

11. Can you tell me who?

Partner/Spouse Parents Parents-in-law other relative other

12. Which language do you speak to your children in at home?

- 13. Which ethnic group would you describe yourself as? (Prompt cards)**
- 14. Which ethnic group would you describe your child/ren as? (Prompt cards)**
- 15. Do you go with your child to any other places like this? (Prompt: for example, Donnington Doorstep, Rose Hill family centre, or any other places that parent go with their children)**
- 16. How do you travel to Room to Play?**
- Walk bus car bicycle other
- 17. When would you prefer to visit Room to Play? (Are there any times when it is not open and you would like to visit)**
- 18. What is your postcode?**
- 19. Are you:**
- Full-time carer
 - Employed full-time
 - Employed part-time
 - Self-employed full-time
 - Self-employed part-time
 - Voluntary work
 - Not working
 - Maternity leave
 - Sick leave
 - Looking for work
 - Student
 - Other
- 20. (If working) What is your job title?**
- 21. (If not currently working) What was your previous job title?**
- 22. (If spouse/partner mentioned) Is your spouse/partner working at the moment?**
- Job title**
- 23. What is your highest qualification?**
- 24. How old were you when you left school?**
- 25. Do you receive any of the following benefits (show cards)**
- 26. What is the year of your birth?**

Parent Interview

Introduction: thank parents for attending. Explain confidentiality and informed consent and check that they are happy for interview to be recorded.

Section 1: Room to Play experiences

Aims: to talk to parents about their experiences of Room to Play. Find out how long the parents have been coming to Room to Play and how often they visit. Ask what it is like for parents and children attending Room to Play and what they think Room to Play is trying to do. (*Example prompt: How might you describe/explain Room to Play to someone new to the area*)

Activities

Aims: to find out what sort of activities the parent and the child do at Room to Play, and what activities they both enjoy doing there. (*Example prompt: can you describe an activity you have done with your child here today/recently, and what have you learned?*). Ask what the parent feels they get out of attending Room to Play, and what they feel their child gets out of it; whether they have done any of the activities at home, or if it has given them any ideas for activities to do at home with their children etc. Try to find out about the kind of things the parent does with their child at home: what things do they think are important for helping children to learn?

Learning

Aims: to find out whether the parent has used any of the information resources in Room to Play- for example, the leaflets, information books and the computer. (*Example prompt: Can you tell me what sort of information you have found most useful?*)

Room to Play: relationships with staff and other parents

Aims: to find out about their relationships with staff and other users- what kinds of things the staff help families with; whether they have made friends with any of the other people who visit Room to Play; and whether they have arranged to meet any of them outside Room to Play.

Section 2: Background information

Health, Social support and networks

Aims: to find out more about parent's health, as well as that of their child/ren and whether they have anyone else who helps out with their children. Ask whether they consider they/their children have been in good health over the past year. Ask about whether anyone helps them out with their children (prompt: parents, relatives, partner, partner's relatives, other children, any groups or programmes etc).

Attendance at groups

Aims: to find out whether the parent takes the child to any other places (including family centres etc); whether the parent currently attends or has attended any groups both with or without their child

Information about home area

Aims: to find out where the parent lives (postcode) and how long they have been living there; what they think of the area and local facilities (prompt: eg shopping, parks, transport, how friendly/safe the area is); whether they have access to a safe outdoor play area e.g. park/garden.

Work, learning, personal information

Aims: to find out the parent's work situation (for example, if they are employed/unemployed etc); if they are working, what they do etc. Find out highest qualification, school leaving age, and training undertaken as well as whether they would like to work/do other training etc. Find out whether they are in receipt of benefits (show cards); who lives in their home, what their first language is, what language they speak to their children in, and whether any other languages are spoken at home. Ask if they will tell you the year of their birth and thank parent.