EVALUATION OF THE *'PREPARING FOR LIFE'* EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION PROGRAMME

A Process Evaluation on the Development of the *'Preparing for Life'* Programme

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UCD GEARY INSTITUTE

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1. Introduction[1]

Summary of the 'Preparing for Life' (PFL) Programme

PFL is a community-led initiative operated by the Northside Partnership (NSP) in Dublin, Ireland. The *PFL* programme aims to improve levels of school readiness in several designated disadvantaged areas of North Dublin, beginning during pregnancy and lasting until the children start school. The purpose of the programme is *to* assist parents in developing skills to help their children across the following five domains of school readiness:

    i)   cognitive development

    ii)   physical health and motor skills

    iii)   social, emotional, and behavioural development

    iv)   approaches to learning

    v)   language development and literacy.

The programme is being evaluated by the UCD Geary Institute using a mixed methods approach, incorporating both a longitudinal experimental design and a process evaluation. The experimental component involves the random allocation of participants from the *PFL* communities to either a high (Green) or low (Blue) treatment group for the duration of the five year programme. All 200 participating families receive facilitated access to pre-school and public health information, the services of a support worker, and age-appropriate educational materials. Half of these families are randomly allocated to receive enhanced services including a home visiting mentoring programme and the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme, a group parent training programme (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003).

What is a Process Evaluation?

Process evaluations are designed to assess the internal validity of an intervention by evaluating how well a programme is executed compared to how it was designed (Bouffard, Taxman & Silverman, 2003). Therefore, process evaluations allow for the identification of deviations from programme protocol (Cunningham, Michielutte, Dignan, Sharp, & Boxley, 2000) and help maintain programme fidelity. Process evaluations concentrate on documenting the programme, key decision points, and features of the intervention. As part of a process evaluation, programme reach and delivery of programme services can be tracked, elucidating intervention effectiveness and identifying any problems, successes or failures

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of the programme. This information can provide guidance for future applications of the programme (Cunningham et al., 2000) and aid the understanding of the relationships between specific programme elements (Saunders, Evans, & Joshi, 2007). Additionally, process evaluations help to determine whether a programme can be replicated and transferred to different situations. Furthermore, process evaluations can determine the long term impact of the intervention on society, which may help to establish if the intervention should be replicated (Matthews & Hudson, 2001).

The *PFL* process evaluation aims to assess programme fidelity and to identify methods of good practice for early childhood interventions. The evaluation will help identify any problems, successes or failures within the intervention, provide guidance to the programme staff, and support the replication of the programme in other disadvantaged areas. This initial report documents the creation and early development of the *PFL* programme. Future reports will analyse the dose, reach, programme fidelity, recruitment, staff and participant satisfaction with programme implementation.

Methodology

Data collection for the process evaluation was conducted between July and October, 2008. Qualitative data were collected through 1) semi-structured interviews with *PFL* staff, managers, funders and other stakeholders to track the evolution and aims, success to date and concerns of the programme and 2) via the collection of key programme documents. A database of stakeholders' contact details was created. Prior to contacting each stakeholder, potential participants were emailed to determine if they were interested in participating. A UCD researcher then phoned or emailed the potential interviewee to ask if he/she was willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or by telephone. Each interviewee consented to participate in the research by reading an information letter and signing an informed consent form (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted with 15 individuals who were involved in the development of *PFL* including programme staff, funders, external agencies and members of the various development committees.

Outline of the Current Report

This report is structured by the central themes of a) the development of *PFL*, b) programme funding, c) programme governance, d) programme management, e) programme fidelity, f) programme satisfaction and barriers and g) conclusions.

2. The Development of *'Preparing for Life'*

The *PFL* programme was developed over a five year period between 2003 and 2008. While this development period was considerably longer than anticipated, it was, in retrospect, viewed as necessary in order to fully engage the community and develop a programme that was grounded in evidence. The need for the *PFL* programme was instigated by those working in the local community who recognised that there was a need to provide parents with structured support as some children in the Darndale/Moatview/Belcamp area were starting school with poor school readiness skills. Through a number of local agencies, the creation of *PFL* was initiated. The primary driver of the programme was the Northside Partnership who also identified the need to support families through inter-agency work and to create a programme that specifically targeted the needs of both children and parents. Responsibility for developing the *PFL* programme was given to a staff member of the Northside Partnership who is currently managing the programme.

With support from a philanthropic funding agency, which was developing an early intervention/prevention initiative in Ireland at the time, these community agencies were mobilised and brought together to form a Planning/Steering Committee in 2004. The Planning/Steering Committee included 40 individuals from a wide range of agencies, such as schools, voluntary organisations, youth workers, health service providers, and family centres. The goal of this group was to bring the initial plan to the implementation stage, through the full-scale development of a parenting programme. The group consulted with a wide range of stakeholders about the design of the programme. While the group decided that a programme which started during pregnancy was needed given the high incidence of low birth weight babies in the community, the group recognised that they required more advice and expertise about the specific components of the programme.

At this time, a number of other communities and voluntary groups across the country were also initiating programmes targeting disadvantaged children and their families. The funding agency, which was working with many of the sites, brought in the services of an external research unit to help the sites develop preventative programmes for children. The research unit was to provide external advice to the sites in regards the specific form and development of their programmes. The unit had previous experience in developing intervention programmes in the UK and had developed a Common Language Methodology which helps sites develop tailored interventions programmes with identifiable objectives. *PFL,* therefore, also engaged the services of the research unit to help them develop their programme in

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a robust, evidence based manner. The research unit worked with the Planning/Steering Committee to devise the programme framework, guided by a Logic model, and helped develop the evaluation plan and programme manual. They also facilitated meetings with agencies and local people, and helped design a proposal to fund the programme.

Using the methodology of the external research unit, the development of the PFL programme was guided by the principles of the Logic Model and Common Language Methodology. The four stages to the methodology (strategy development, services design, service manual, and evaluation) gave *PFL* a strong structure with clear aims, potentially leading to greater programme fidelity and an opportunity for replication in the future. The aim of this methodology is to help agencies design strategies to improve child outcomes by establishing programme aims via a needs analysis, devising how to achieve programme aims, deciding what inputs were required and establishing expected outcomes. The Common Language Methodology was used to direct the design of the *PFL* programme, while the Logic Model[2] described the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the programme and captured the connections between desired outcomes and proposed programme services. The local agencies developing PFL, along with the other sites developing intervention programmes in Ireland, were trained by the research unit in this methodology, part of which involved visiting early intervention sites in the US.

As this methodology was new to the agencies guiding the development of PFL, a number of difficulties arose, particularly in respect to the PFL Logic Model. The PFL agencies initially found the methodology difficult to work with as it was a radically different approach to their standard practices, however they began to recognise that such as model was intuitive and that identifying the outcomes to be achieved from the start, and developing services to achieve those outcomes, was an effective planning model. While the final PFL Logic Model took a somewhat different structure to the one envisaged by the external research unit, they recognised that the *PFL* programme has inherent logic, a clear target group, specifies impacts and outcomes expected, even if the specific design chosen may not be the optimal strategy for maximising children's outcomes.

One of the key principles of the Common Language Methodology is that it promotes the use of experimental evaluation, or Randomised Control Trials (RCT), unless there are good ethical or practical

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[2] A description of the PFL Logic Model can be found in the PFL manual.

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reasons not to do so. The approach places emphasis on the fidelity of the implementation of strategies and services, which is achieved through the creation of a programme manual (Renshaw, 2008). Both the funders and the external research unit encouraged the PFL agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme using an RCT. The agencies did not initially support the idea. There was a strong level of resistance which was largely fuelled by a lack of knowledge and experience around experimental programmes. *PFL* was one of the first projects in Ireland to confront the issues of using a RCT therefore such challenges were to be anticipated. However, a gradual shift in attitudes towards RCTs began after *PFL* consulted external experts on the benefits of this design, visited RCT sites and reported back to the governance bodies in an open and objective manner. Providing full information to the governance bodies about the benefits of an experimental design, and agreeing to implement an RCT that encompassed a high and low treatment group as opposed to a no-treatment control group, were the key factors in ensuring local support for the RCT.

Another component of the Common Language Methodology was to conduct a formal needs analysis to determine the level of programme need in the community. The process involved conducting a survey of the teachers and parents of junior infant children in the community to gain a picture of the skills and capabilities of the children when they started school. The needs analysis involved a number of different external agencies working together which caused some difficulties and led to a significant delay in the production of the final report. The rationale for involving multiple agencies was to encourage knowledge transfer between agencies. These difficulties primarily arose due to time constraints and the different research approaches adopted by each agency. The initial report had to undergo significant development to improve its quality, such that the final needs analysis report was completed in July, 2006, almost two years after the primary research had taken place. However, the report served its purpose in that the research confirmed *PFL*'s views concerning the low levels of school readiness in the *PFL* communities, thus highlighting the need for the programme.

The final stage of programme development involved designing the PFL Manual which would describe *PFL* services and programme objectives, thus helping to ensure programme fidelity. An Expert Planning Team (EPT), consisting of individuals from the health service, a local agency, Irish universities, and the Northside Partnership, was brought together by the external research unit to contribute to the development of the manual. The programme manual was designed using interviews and structured discussions with relevant local service providers, including representatives from education, health, social care and voluntary organisations, interviews and structured discussions with experts in the field and

those involved in designing and/or implementing similar services elsewhere. Additionally, the programme manual was designed using analysis of national and international literature on school readiness, together with relevant policy documents, and structured discussions as a manual development team, focusing on clarifying and elaborating the service designs and ensuring that the service designs are in line with the existing evidence or, in cases where the scientific evidence was weak, that service designs are logical (*PFL* Programme Manual, 2008). Work on the manual commenced between March and June, 2006 and the first complete draft was circulated in September, 2006. Tasks were allocated to individuals on the EPT based on expertise, with certain individuals focusing on providing evidence on best practice to improve children's school readiness outcomes, and others using this evidence to develop the specific *PFL* services using the *PFL* Logic model. The manual describes the individual components of the programme including the mentoring service, the group parenting classes, the duties of the information support worker, the developmental packs, the one year free access of childcare, the public health campaigns (Stress Control Programme, Stop Smoking Programme, Healthy Food Made Easy Programme), the family portraits, and baby massage classes. Full details of these services can be found in the PFL Manual.

The final stage of the pre-implementation process involved designing the evaluation of the programme and appointing an evaluation team through a competitive tendering process. The UCD Geary Institute was awarded the contract in July, 2007 and the period between August and December, 2007 was spent designing the specific components of the evaluation. The programme evaluation consists of four components: 1) Impact Evaluation, 2) Process Evaluation, 3) Service Integration, and 4) Children's Profile at School Entry. For more details on the programme evaluation please refer to the UCD Tender.

Themes & Lessons Concerning Programme Development

The creation of *PFL* was highly organised and collaborative. The openness and drive of the initiators of the programme in regards the design of the programme led to a high level of engagement with the local community and agencies from an early stage. This facilitated strong support and community 'buy in' for the *PFL* programme. *PFL*'s strong grounding in the community has also been achieved by placing *PFL* as part of the NSP which has a long standing and credible position in North Dublin. Additionally, the Planning/Steering Committee represents a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, allowing many aspects of the local community and government to be involved and represented in the development and implementation of the *PFL* programme. In 2007, however, the Planning/Steering Committee ended its

work and the *PFL* Sub Board Group and a smaller Steering Committee were formed out of its members, allowing for easier management of the groups (see Section 4: Programme Governance for detail).

The programme design was rigorous and succinct, creating a needs analysis and Logic model. The methodology has a clear set of stages which have a strong emphasis on logic and programme outcomes. The area which evoked the greatest discussion and resistance from many of the local agencies involved in the development process was the use of a randomised control trial design. However, attitudes towards RCTs changed after a thorough consultation process where the governing bodies received in-depth information about experimental designs. While there were also some disparities over the development of the needs analysis, the final report showed a clear need for the *PFL* programme, which has helped *PFL* gain community, agency, government and funding support.

The successful development of the programme during this phase was attributed, by many, to the positive approach and enthusiasm of the *PFL* programme manager. The theme of the governance bodies gaining clear information regarding programme design recurred throughout the design process, leading the governance body members to have high levels of programme engagement and support towards the programme. However, this process was not without its challenges. The development phase of the programme was a long, and at times, a difficult process. The coming together to such a diverse group of individuals including community groups, funders and researchers to develop a programme of this scale, created tensions at times due to a lack of common ground. However, all agencies recognised the importance of the process and appreciate the positive and rewarding relationships that emerged, which would be sustained throughout the life of programme.

3. *PFL* Programme Funding

As the development of PFL involved significant investment in both time and resources, external funding was required to conduct a needs analysis and hire external consultancy to aid the development of the programme. The planning phase was initially supported by a philanthropic funding agency and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2005 for a 17 month period. *PFL* also received in kind contributions during the planning phase including resources such as office space, programme manager time, Steering Committee time and assistance from a number of external agencies. This initial planning period resulted in the development of a full funding proposal which set out the objectives of the programme and the specific services required to achieve those objectives. This proposal was first submitted to the

philanthropic funding agency in late 2005 where it was presented to the Board and Investment team of the agency. They agreed to co-fund the programme (50%), conditional on the Irish Government contributing 50% of the total funding. Further conditions included applying a rigorous evaluation and having a role in the selection of the evaluators. The philanthropic agency wished to involve the Irish Government in the funding stream to build a relationship with them in the area of children's preventive programmes.

In order to fulfil the first condition of funding, *PFL* were invited to submit a funding proposal to the Government, which they did in October, 2006. At this time, the Government were developing a new programme funding heading to fund a number of childhood prevention programme in Ireland. The Government developed their own Expert Panel to review the funding submissions received from multiple community sites. The panel was made up of international experts in evidence based policy making and proven international models for children. The role of the panel was to make recommendations to the Government regarding which programmes they should support. The PFL proposal was recommended for funding subject to some changes suggested by the Expert Panel, and the funding began in February, 2007. This delay in funding arose as new policies to facilitate 5-year funding streams had to be introduced, as prior to this the maximum duration of any Government funding period was 3 years. When the *PFL* funding proposal was refined, both funders signed a SLA and a Memorandum of Understanding, which sets the parameters of roles of the funders for *PFL*.

The total cost of *PFL* over the 6 year period is €5,731,045, with half provided by the Government and half by the philanthropic agency. The budget is broken down into four sections: 1) improving parenting skills (€2,058,110), 2) development and integration of services (€443,328), 3) evaluation (€1,182,432), and 4) programme management (€2,047,175). In 2006, the *PFL* intervention was estimated to cost €28,000 per child over the course of the five year project, which is approximately €5,600 per child per year.

Themes & Lessons Concerning the Funding Process

Overall, the brokering process between PFL and the two funding agencies was smooth, with effective and supportive relationships between the brokers being established. The solid relationship between the brokers led them to collectively work together to lobby the government to support the five year programme. The brokers built up lobbying support from local politicians, the health service and voluntary agencies which proved to be highly effective. It is believed that PFL was successful in securing

funding as the idea was new and full of rigor, and that *PFL* had made the programme outcomes clear via the Logic Model. There were high rates of communication with ad hoc and formal meetings in place to provide *PFL* updates. The ethos of trust and openness should carry stead for a long term positive relationship. The *PFL* funding process was transparent and effective with matched funding gained from two credible and highly valued funders in Ireland, leading to increased status in *PFL* and increased 'buy in' from voluntary agencies and the community.

4. *PFL* Programme Governance

PFL has a structured and organised governance body which provides advice and accountability to the programme. The figure below, adapted from the *PFL* strategy document (Kelly, 2005), displays how the *PFL* governance bodies are structured and linked together to aid programme delivery. Figure 1 displays how the *PFL* programme components are delivered by *PFL* (direct delivery) or by contracted external agencies, i.e. UCD Geary Institute (evaluation). Both forms of delivery are monitored by the *PFL* governance bodies and the *PFL* staff team and management to create accountability and ensure programme efficiency.

Figure 1: *Preparing for Life* Governance Structure
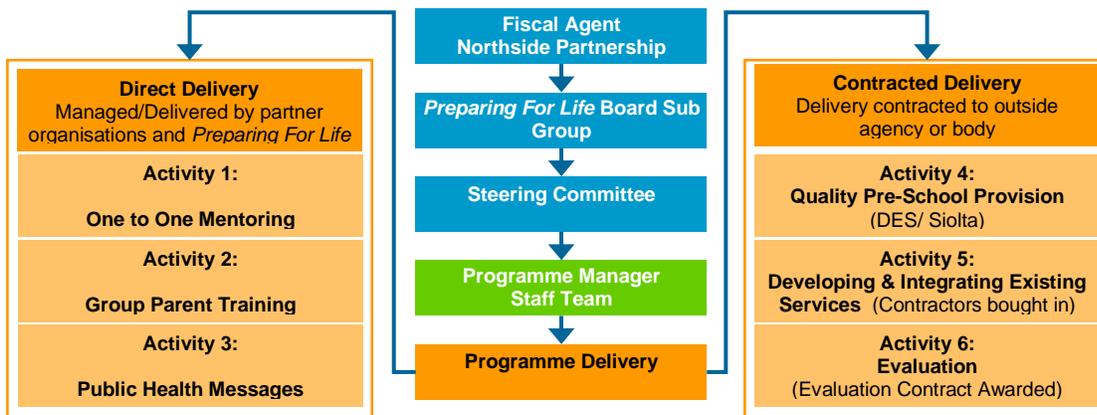
The governance system provides a corporate structure headed by the Northside Partnership (NSP) who have a strong standing in the local community and bring credibility to *PFL*. The NP has a 17 year track record in managing programmes and proving financial management to external organisations. The final decision over *PFL* matters lies with the NSP Board. The NSP Board established a number of Board Sub-groups to govern various programmes under its management. The Preparing for Life Board Sub-Group,

referred to in this document as the PFL Sub-board, is a sub-group of the NSP Board and it chaired by a NSP Board member. The NSP Board meets with *PFL* after the discussions have filtered through the Steering Committee and the *PFL* Sub Board.

The *PFL* Sub Board was formed in April 2007 and consists of 13 members chosen by the *PFL* Programme Manager to represent a wide range of local agencies. The Sub Board was formed after the PFL planning stage, when the large Steering/Planning Committee, described earlier, was split into a smaller Steering Committee and a Sub Board, to create more manageable entities. The role of the Sub Board is to provide advice, discuss issues related to the implementation of *PFL* and to offer views of the community and local agencies. The Sub Board also provides an outlet for *PFL* to promote the programme to external agencies and build up local support for the programme. Decisions related to issues such as expenditure, strategic decisions and policy decisions go to the Sub Board after discussion by the Steering Committee. The Sub Board operates under a philosophy of 'collective leadership,' which refers to the belief that every member of the Sub Board has a role to play, and that he/she has a particular level of expertise to bring to the project. The *PFL* Sub Board holds five to six meetings a year which are highly efficient. All decisions are communicated through an agenda, the meetings involve frank and open discussions and decisions are made in a consensual manner, leading members to feel supported and empowered. The effectiveness of the Chairperson of the Sub Board was particularly noted. The key reasons provided for becoming a member of the Sub Board include the willingness to provide expertise in the areas of inter-agency work, health, early childhood education and social issues, administration and community work and the belief in the importance and necessity of the PFL programme. The members of the Sub Board are committed to the programme and the diversity of the representatives promotes active discussion and development of ideas, while providing accountability to PFL.

The Steering Committee was formed in April 2007 out of the larger Steering/Planning Committee which was considered too unmanageable once the implementation phase began. Members of the Committee believe that the smaller structure is now more effective than the larger structure. The Committee is comprised of nine representatives from a wide range of organisations working with children and families in the *PFL* catchment area, in addition to community representatives. The Steering Committee provide their opinion on *PFL* ideas and micro issues, such as recruitment and marketing ideas. It also provides an access point to local and partner agency's knowledge and expertise. The views of the Steering Committee are reported to the Sub Board and NP Board for them to make informed decisions. Steering Committee meetings are held every two months and are chaired by the *PFL* Programme Manager who

goes through minutes from previous meetings, the *PFL* report, and the financial report and any decisions made by the Sub Board and NP Board.

Members of the Steering Committee became involved in the structure for a variety of reasons including the willingness to represent the local community, the need to keep the community informed about the programme, and to promote the programme among their agencies. While members appreciate the opportunity to voice their opinions at the Committee meetings, there is some concern that there should be more time for group discussion. It has also been suggested that attendance needs to be addressed as it was initially very strong but is currently about 50-60%. Consequently, the Steering Committee could be argued to have lost some of its focus and purpose. Thus the head of the Committee needs to recreate a strong identity for the group, create a clear structure to the meetings with more time for open discussions and re-engage and energise the members. The head of the Committee has since addressed these issues.

Themes & Lessons Concerning Programme Governance

PFL is governed by several committees, each with its own responsibilities and roles. Together, the Committee and Boards provide governance for *PFL* on multiple aspects and provide *PFL* with an insight into the local agencies and resident views of *PFL*. This provides an outlet in which *PFL* can promote and educate people on the programme. The Sub Board and Steering Committee also help to create community 'buy in,' as they involve a range of committed individuals and agencies. The *PFL* governance structure is open and respectful, which helps to cultivate agency and community ownership of *PFL*, empowering the governance members to freely discuss their views and promote *PFL* in their professional and personal networks.

All of the governance bodies help ensure that *PFL* is accountable to both the participants and the funders. They also help to ensure programme fidelity and have helped *PFL* gain. The three governance bodies' work well together, proving a clear filtration of information and decision making capabilities. This process is efficient as the *PFL* Programme Manager and team are open, engaging and provide clear information on all *PFL* matters.

5. *PFL* Programme Management

The *PFL* team are led by the *PFL* Programme Manager with a supportive and open management style. The recruitment process for the implementation team began in December 2006. *PFL* utilised the skills of an outside agency, which had experience of implementing parenting programmes, to help with interviewing the candidates. They wanted multi-disciplined mentors who had a background in education, psychology, social work, social sciences, and/or youth work. Additionally, they required a team leader with managerial skills. The interview process involved an individual interview and some group activities to test observational skills. Seven PFL team members were recruited between April-May 2007. The team consists of four mentors and one team leader, one administrator/information support worker and one PR/recruitment worker. There have been some changes in personnel since the original positions were filled, with the original mentor team leader and one of the mentors leaving the team. Both positions were re-filled. Two of the staff also went on maternity leave, however they have now rejoined the team.

As PFL is a manualised programme, the staff received substantial training on the *PFL* programme model. They also received training in Child Protection (HSE), drugs awareness, suicide risk, first aid, working with families, record keeping, the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme, and supervision training. Members of the team stated they appreciated the breadth of training, however it was suggested that training in the *PFL* manual should have occurred within the first week as there was initially a lack of clarity among the team about the programme which led to some challenging times for the team. However, many of these issues were resolved when the team became familiar with both the objectives of the programme and the individual personalities on the team. Many of the agencies involved noted that the original team received substantial training due to the delay in implementing the programme, and question whether new staff will receive as much training.

Overall, the training and supervision offered to the *PFL* team links to the ethos of support, empowerment and openness of the PFL programme. PFL team meetings are held once every two weeks and provide an opportunity for all team members to share information, agree on policies and protocols and to carry out the duties of the programme. All staff members participate with a rotating chair ensuring everybody has an equal opportunity to participate. In addition, the *PFL* mentors have regular *PFL* mentor staff meetings, adhoc support, and supervision times.

Another essential part of the on-going mentor training is working with PFL pilot families. A pilot study began in September 2007 with the aim of testing the implementation of the mentor home visits and further development of the Green group services including the Tip Sheets. Each mentor is working with two pilot families from the PFL catchment area. The research team also pilot their questionnaires with these families. A review of the pilot study found that it helps to enhance the mentoring service and provided the mentors with real-time experience in dealing with the realities of working with families. Another benefit of the pilot study was that it provided the team with practical work during the first few months, which was important as staff morale was somewhat low due to the delay in starting programme implementation.

A key component of the PFL model is effective supervision of the mentoring team which is undertaken by an external agency which has provided family support services in Ireland for 25 years and has a long history of working with families and delivering parenting programmes. The team are supervised under the Tony Morrison Supervision Social Care Model, which is also used by the Irish health service (HSE). The model includes supporting the mentors in regards to management, case plans, systems such as contracts, reflective practice, recording and dealing with risk, accountability, development function, and impact of work on the individual. The non-clinical model allows the mentors to have a supportive space to talk about difficult and sensitive cases and also monitors attachment. The external agency trained the PFL mentor team leader in these supervision techniques and has meetings with the team leader once a month to talk about quality standards, recruitment, cases plans, policies, feedback from clients and the community, file audits, recording of case information and any issues regarding cases, child protection and staffing. The team leader also holds confidential supervision meetings with each mentor once a month to talk about any concerns they have about the families or the programme and to and agree on a family case plans. *PFL* also use the agency's case file system to track the participants and the implementation of the services. While it took some time for the mentors to become familiar with this system, the record system is standardised, time effective and creates accountability and promotes programme fidelity.

Themes & Lessons Concerning Programme Management

The PFL team had a high level of input in the formation stage and have a level of autonomy which leads to efficient teamwork which helps create a friendly and positive environment. Although there have been some staff changes since *PFL* began, the staff turnover has not been high and has been handled very well. The delay in programme implementation was utilised effectively as the *PFL* team undertook a

substantial amount of high quality training. The pilot study also provided training and an opportunity for the programme team to be reflective and improve the programme.

PFL have used the expertise of voluntary agencies to improve programme management. The use of proven strategies, such as the NSP disciplinary procedures and the external agency's case plans and supervision system, provides effective programme management. The supervision system has been successful with the mentoring team, leading staff to feel supported and listened to. It has also helped maintain high morale even if a mentor is having difficulties with a family. The supervision system is an excellent source of management as it helps the mentors to maintain professional relationships with participants, aiding helping to display the *PFL* programme as proficient and reliable.

The mentor team have faced some challenges, for example having to realise that they cannot place their own family views and expectations on to their case families and having to learn how to write concise case reports. However, due to the substantial support from the management structure they have built up a strong team, who communicate effectively and enjoy their work. This has been achieved through consistent programme management that uses proven managerial strategies and consults long standing local agencies for guidance.

6. *PFL* Programme Fidelity

Programme fidelity refers to the internal validity of a programme. It measures the extent to which the programme is being implemented as intended and seeks to address whether fidelity to the programme model/manual is being achieved. *PFL* is highly manualised and provides clear goals, strategies and a Logic model for the *PFL* staff to follow. The programme manual and Logic model provide a structure for the programme which aids reliable implementation, programme and staff accountability and future replication. It is important to address programme fidelity as it is insufficient to determine the effect size associated with *PFL* outcomes without documenting the processes that led to those outcomes. The *PFL* team must provide all participants with the same services (treatment) in order to assess how effective the *PFL* programme has been. For example, monitoring programme fidelity will establish if a low effect size on the group parenting component is due to an ineffectual programme or because parents missed the parenting classes. Procedures to ensure programme fidelity are listed below and future reports will address whether these steps have being effective in ensuring fidelity.

- **PFL Programme Manual**

The PFL manual is a work in progress as it represents the natural evolution of the programme and allows for programme improvements and changes. The integrity, values and service methods, however, will remain constant to maintain fidelity to the logic model. The manual sets out programme objectives and values which are in line with the *PFL* Logic Model.

- **Mentor Case Plans and Case Plan Meetings**

The mentoring team follow case plans and hold case plan meetings to ensure that the high dosage (Green) group participants are receiving the same information. The team leader sets up case meetings in which a case is presented to the mentoring team and then three questions are discussed: 1) are they following the case plan which is set out, 2) are they working to the *PFL* manual and 3) if not, then the group challenge the case plan and work out how to change it. A case meeting agreement was signed in 2007 which sets out guidelines for the meetings.

- **Mentor Policies**

The mentoring team follow guidelines which act to ensure fidelity. These policies focus on family contact time, child abuse, transporting clients, accidents, gifts, family functions, drug and alcohol use, domestic violence and staff safety.

- **Mentor Supervision**

The mentoring team is supervised by an external agency which acts as an external quality control, ensuring that everything is being done to a professional standard.

- **Database Management System (DBMS)**

Communications with participating families were originally documented on a paper file which came from the external agency. However, in early 2008 a database management system (DBMS) was designed in conjunction with a website design company. Although the system was difficult to develop and use, it will help track programme implementation. With this system, it takes about 10-15 minutes to write a case note.

Themes & Lessons Concerning Programme Fidelity

The importance of maintaining programme fidelity has been the underlying theme to *PFL* from the development stage. Ensuring and monitoring (through the DBMS) programme fidelity will provide a valid picture of why and if the *PFL* programme is successful or not. The programme manual provides a clear format which can be easily followed by the *PFL* staff to help ensure programme fidelity. It is also flexible and can be edited if needed. Strategies to help ensure fidelity appear to be effective as all of the staff understand the process and are empowered to use and create the strategies to help maintain fidelity. The strategies have a clear logic and many were developed by the supervision agency, who have been using them effectively for a substantial period of time. *PFL* have adopted this agency's case filing system and created a comprehensive Database Management System (DBMS) which allows all *PFL* services to be tracked in a clear and formal manner.

Future reports will seek to establish if programme fidelity is being maintained, as even with such strategies in place it can be difficult to ensure fidelity as interventions are fluid and the deliverance of *PFL* is affected by the relationships between the *PFL* staff and participants and external factors such as participant needs and lives. Additionally, future reports will analyse the DBMS and conduct focus groups with participants and staff to determine whether programme fidelity is being achieved.

7. *PFL* Programme Satisfaction and Barriers

While it is difficult to discuss satisfaction with the programme after a relatively short implementation period, there appears to be a high level of satisfaction among the agencies involved in developing and funding the programme and the *PFL* team involved in delivering the programme. There is considerable support for the *PFL* services. The evolution of a style of mentoring based on building a solid relationship with families is laudable, while the materials from the Triple P Positive Parenting programme have been found to be highly relevant for the programme population. The Tip Sheets, which are used to deliver the programme in the home, are considered comprehensive, easy to understand, and attractive. While allowing participants to choose the Tip Sheets to work from each week ensures flexibility and empowerment for participants. However some agencies note that *PFL* is primarily focused on the individual child rather than a needs-led service that serves the whole family.

There is also positive support for the programme within the wider *PFL* community. A number of agencies have received positive feedback about the programme from voluntary organisations and

community figures. Overall, the agencies believe that *PFL* is gaining support due to the credibility of the programme, emanating from the *PFL* Programme Manager, the recognition that *PFL* is needed in the community, and the enthusiasm and strength of the *PFL* team.

However, there have also been a number of barriers to programme implementation. The greatest barrier during the first year of programme implementation has been in the area of recruitment. It proved very challenging to recruit families in Year 1 and rates of recruitment did not reach the targets expected. Explanations provided for the slow up-take of participants include families having prior negative experiences with services or schools in the area which make them apprehensive about joining a new service; the sense among families that services such as *PFL* are only for those experiencing difficulties; the reluctance to share family business with outsiders; and unfamiliarity with the programme. However, as experienced by other programmes and services, it was believed that recruitment would start to pick up once positive experiences and word of mouth filtered through the community.

To address the recruitment issue, *PFL* engaged in a range of strategies including devising a 'walkers and talkers' scheme, holding meetings for local service agencies and holding open coffee mornings. In addition, the *PFL* catchment area was extended in January and June 2009 to help increase recruitment rates. The catchment area has been extended to include communities which are demographically similar to the original *PFL* areas. These strategies have proved successful, with Year 2 experiencing a doubling of the recruitment rate compared to Year 1. The target is to have all 200 families recruited by the first quarter of 2010.

The programme has also experienced some difficulties in programme implementation, particular in regards to missed appointments with families. However in recognition that weekly home visits are not feasible for all families, the mentors are delivering the programme bi-monthly for some families. Another potential barrier to programme implementation may arise from the changing economic climate, particularly in regards to inter-agency work and retaining families with financial difficulties. However, these issues have not created any major difficulties to date. Some agencies also noted that long-term programme retention may prove difficult given the profile of targeted families, while others suggested that the division of groups into high and low treatment may also challenge programme retention. However, again, these issues have not yet arisen.

Themes & Lessons Concerning Programme Support and Implementation

At this stage there appears to be a high level of satisfaction and support for services from *PFL* stakeholders, governance representatives, funders and *PFL* staff, however participant satisfaction with the programme is key and future reports will examine this issue in detail.

The largest barrier to programme participation is recruitment. Thus, *PFL* need to continue to build up trust and relationships in the local community. *PFL* also have to continue to work hard in order to maintain programme retention given the long duration of the programme. Due to the length of the programme, some participants may become inactive for periods of time, therefore it is vital that *PFL* staff maintain the DBMS to track programme dosage for families. There have been some barriers to implementation due to the delays in *PFL* gaining funding and ethical approval which has caused periods of low staff morale. The staff have survived such periods by strengthening their teamwork and training. Subsequently, the *PFL* team recognise any barriers or problems and are proactive and creative in combating any issues.

To conclude, the *PFL* team and stakeholders are reflective about the *PFL* programme and thus recognise its strengths, problems and barriers. The *PFL* team and its governance bodies are strong, transparent and committed to combating any problems and barriers, whilst recognising the strengths and using them to create a positive atmosphere surrounding the *PFL* programme.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this report is to document the creation of *PFL* as described by the key stakeholders and programme staff involved in the early development of the programme. The report serves as a useful tool for determining how and why *PFL* evolved as an experimental programme delivering specific services to parents as a means of improving children's school readiness. The development of *PFL* began in 2003, when local agencies and service providers first developed the idea of the programme. Through the philanthropic funding agency, *PFL* began working with an external research unit to tailor their ideas and create a clear Logic Model, an RCT design, programme manual and conduct a needs analysis in order to create a robust and attractive programme that might appeal to potential funders and participants. The early development of *PFL* went through several stages including brainstorming the ideas (2003), creating a Planning/Steering Committee (2004), engaging with funders for advice and funding opportunities (2004), creating an Expert Planning Team (2006) and an Expert Advisory

Committee (2007), contracting an Evaluation Team (2007) and finally programme implementation (2008).

The development of *PFL* has several positive aspects including a succinct, logical programme design with clear objectives, proficient manual and a robust evaluation. A key feature of the development process has been the engagement of a wide range of individuals from local voluntary agencies, community residents, and experts. The breath of views collected from the individuals and groups has helped *PFL* become a highly supported programme. This engagement has helped to embed *PFL* in the community and should lead to higher recruitment rates. Another positive aspect of *PFL* is its organised governance bodies, which provide programme accountability and a credible corporate structure. After the initial creation of *PFL* in 2007 a formal governance body (Steering Committee and Sub Board) was created out of the original Planning/Steering Committee, headed by the Northside Partnership (NSP) Board. The Sub Board and Steering Committee members have voiced positive opinions on the development of *PFL* and on the *PFL* Programme Manager's fair, organised and accessible manner.

Although there were several positive aspects to the development of *PFL,* there have also been challenges. For example, there was opposition surrounding the use of an RCT, the needs analysis, recruitment levels and the two year delay in programme implementation. Nevertheless, *PFL* also have benefited from these challenges and have created a unique, potentially replicable programme which has a strong logic, succinct programme manual, highly trained staff and a robust evaluation. The challenges were overcome due to the positive attitude and teamwork of those involved in the development of the programme. *PFL* forged a strong relationship with the philanthropic funders who granted planning and programme funding and helped *PFL* secure Government funding, thus gaining substantial funding for the length of the programme from two highly experienced bodies. *PFL* has built up a strong working relationship the funders who have provided support and advice to *PFL* from their meetings, reports, and Expert Panel.

Throughout the challenges and the brokering process, *PFL* have engaged in an open manner with governance bodies, providing them with full information on any decisions made. In turn, the governance bodies have provided *PFL* with a corporate structure, insights into the community/local agencies, expertise and contacts. In addition, the Steering Committee has provided *PFL* with an arena where they can brainstorm ideas and gain local views. The Sub Board has provided input on important macro decisions, such as funding and programme changes and the NSP Board has provided an over arching

body to make final decisions. The *PFL* governance structure also provides accountability to *PFL* and helps to maintain programme fidelity. Programme fidelity is well understood by the *PFL* team and clear steps have been put into place to ensure its maintenance, of which many strategies have been provided by experienced agencies. The *PFL* programme is highly organised as the *PFL* team have created and adapted a range of staff policies and communication channels (team meetings, case plan meetings, supervision, DBMS). The proficient communication between members of the *PFL* team has led them to proceed through staff changes, programme delays, periods of low morale and low recruitment levels. The high levels of teamwork, programme understanding and flexibility are key to the future of *PFL.*

In conclusion, the five year development period of *PFL* demonstrated clear and dynamic organisational strategies which, if continued, will help maintain *PFL* as a professional, positive and empowering programme. For example, the development stage of *PFL* clearly highlights that *PFL* have a transparent and accessible ethos. This is evident from the involvement of a wide range of experts, voluntary bodies and community figures throughout the evolution of the programme from brainstorming the initial ideas to governing the programme. By involving a wide range of local voluntary body representatives *PFL* gained worthy advice and embedded themselves in the community from an early stage, which helped develop support for the programme at a local level. This was further enhanced by locating *PFL* as a body within the NSP which has long-standing status in the community. This support contributed to *PFL* gaining funding from two agencies and in the creation of a strong *PFL* identity in the local and wider community.

This process evaluation report has also highlighted some issues which the *PFL* team must address, such as low recruitment levels and programme retention. The report raises a number of issues such as repercussions of the economic crisis and the need to maintain programme fidelity and funding, which may need to be addressed. Nevertheless, if *PFL* continues to implement its organisational strategies of strong leadership, openness, structured and organised design and implementation, highly researched decision making and flexible teamwork then they should rise to any challenge and provide a successful programme to the local community.

9.   References

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10. Appendix A: Process Evaluation Consent Form

Informational Letter:

Dear Sir/Madam,

As part of the Preparing for Life (*PFL*) programme evaluation, the UCD Research Team are conducting a process evaluation designed to provide feedback about the effectiveness of the programme as described by those involved with its design and implementation.

To achieve this, the UCD Research Team are conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with staff, participants, stakeholders, and other individuals involved with the design and implementation of the *PFL* programme. This letter is an invitation for you to participate in one of these interviews or focus groups. Each interview will be done in person (when possible) or via a telephone interview and will last about 45 minutes. If you agree to take part, an outline describing the main topics and questions to be covered in the interview will be emailed to you in advance. Although the main topics vary depending on your role in the programme, examples include programme development, barriers to the programmes implementation, staff training, participant's satisfaction and concerns about the programme, budget and funding information, and the fidelity to the programme manual.

The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by the UCD research team. All information you give us during the research interviews and will be kept private and confidential. Your information will be safe and secure and not given to anyone outside of the UCD research team. The data will be kept on a password protected file in UCD and deleted from the audio recording device. Anyone who sees the written records of your interview or group discussions will not see your name. Additionally, your name will never be used in any reports of the research. If you agree to the audio recordings of the interview or focus group, while your name will not be used, people who know you may be able to recognise your voice. Therefore, these recordings will not be heard by anyone outside the UCD research team.

The requirements of the Data Protection Acts (1988 and 2003) and the Statistics Act (1993) will be fully met in this project. The project approach is outlined in the context of the eight data protection rules enunciated by the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) - that one should: 1) Obtain and process the information fairly; 2) Keep it only for one or more specified and lawful purposes; 3) Process it only in ways compatible with the purposes for which it was given to you initially; 4) Keep it safe and secure; 5) Keep it accurate and up-to-date; 6) Ensure that it is adequate, relevant and not excessive; 7) Retain it no longer than is necessary for the specified purpose or purposes; and 8) Give a copy of his/her personal data to any individual, on request.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you are free to not answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any stage without notice or reason. If you decide not to participate it will not have any effect on your relationship with UCD or the *PFL* programme.

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact Orla Doyle (orla.doyle@ucd.ie) at 00353 1 7164637.

Your participation is highly valued and key to the success of this project. If you decide that you would like to participate please complete the form on the next page and we will send a copy of this agreement to you.

Thank you in advance for your interest and support in this project and we look forward to working with you in the approaching weeks.

Regards,
UCD Research Team

*************************NEW PAGE************************

<u>Consent:</u>

I, _____, understand the nature and purpose of this study. I fully understand that the interview will be tape recorded and transcribed. I understand that the data from this study will be analysed and may be submitted for publication in a scientific journal.

I understand that all information that I provide will be kept confidential and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

I understand the data will be deleted from the audio recording device once the data are stored in a secure file on UCD research computers in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1988 and 2003) and the Statistical Act (1993) and that no-one outside of the research will be able to hear the tape recording.

I voluntarily consent to taking part in an interview or focus group with a UCD researcher on the topic of Preparing for Life programme. I give consent for the recordings to be used for the purpose of this research only.

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Signed _____   Date _____