

Kinder Kids

Kinder Kids Day Care
5 Churchill Street
Belfast
BT15 2BP
T: 028 9074 2255 (ext 222)
F: 028 9074 2255
E: info@ashtoncentre.com
www.ashtoncentre.com

Contacts

Paul Roberts
Christine McKeown (childcare manager)

Financial information

Turnover (2005): £320,000
Childcare places: 60 per day
Employees: 21

In the midst of one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas of Belfast you will find Kinder Kids Day Care, one of the first community-owned and managed full daycare projects in the city.

Situated in the New Lodge area, it provides a high quality childcare provision for 60 children aged between six months and 12 years per day. Fully registered with social services, this is a much needed service in an area characterised by high levels of socio-economic deprivation with a high proportion of lone parents. Statistics show that New Lodge area has a higher than average proportion of children and young people, and a higher level of unemployed households with dependent children, than most other areas of Belfast.

To facilitate parents, the centre is open between 8am and 6pm each weekday, providing both part time and full time quality care and development to suit individual circumstances. To deliver such a significant service, the centre currently has a workforce of 21 including a manager, an administrator and 19 qualified staff.

Early days

This impressive initiative is the brainchild of Ashton Community Trust (ACT), a registered charity formed in 1992 under a trust deed before being established as a company limited by guarantee in 1998.

According to Paul Roberts, who has been with the trust as overall manager of the Ashton Centre since 1994 and the driving force behind Kinder Kids Day Care, the need for a quality daycare centre was a natural progression from the trust's role in the local community.

"It kicked off because, from the very start when the Ashton Centre was set up, we were providing jobs, but local people weren't able to access them because they didn't have the skills.

"We therefore set about providing training and realised there were problems about accessibility. Accessible and affordable childcare became a major issue so initially we provided a small crèche in one room. That's where it developed."

From those early days of providing much needed crèche facilities, an afterschools club was established in 1998, operating as a separate project. It was at this stage that the organisation began to explore the potential for an amalgamation of the various childcare support projects into a more effective and sustainable operation.

Reacting to funding opportunities, research in the form of a feasibility study was carried out to identify the potential of Ashton providing a full daycare facility. The study indicated the need not only for additional and significant space but the potential for a large financial commitment to the project from Ashton's financial reserves.

In 2000 Kinder Kids Day Care was set up and, using reserves which had been built up over the years through various income generation schemes, Ashton decided to employ a childcare manager to take the project forward.

As many social economy projects have discovered, the decision to employ a full time professional manager was to prove crucial in the overall development of the project. The manager was able to focus entirely on managing and developing the fledgling Kinder Kids Day Care initiative, establishing a close and important working relationship with the local social services department and effectively targeting the project for local people, primarily women, from inner north Belfast.

As a result of the its community base, the service also provides a link with other local training and employment providers. In this way it acts as a signpost for local people to access training and employment opportunities, while at the same time providing local, accessible and affordable childcare provision ‘on the doorstep’.

Future plans

The initiative has been such an overwhelming success, obviously meeting a clear need, that Kinder Kids doesn’t need to advertise for children to take up available places. Indeed, there is currently a waiting list that could double the present number of children if the facility had the space.

As a result of the experience gained from running Kinder Kids Day Care, there are plans to open up a similar centre on the Cliftonville Road, in an adjacent area of north Belfast. The new initiative will be run as a viable social enterprise offering quality childcare for up to 70 children.

Lessons learned

According to Paul Roberts, the appointment of a full time day care manager was probably the most important strategic decision they made in addressing the growing demand for childcare provision: “The manager brought commitment, passion, skills and a professionalism to the overall scheme of things. To be honest, the project would probably have not happened without her.”

This appointment ensured the running of the project in a professional and efficient manner. It also meant going the extra mile to guarantee a safe and quality service in an industry where guidelines staff to children ratios are often exceeded.

The Ashton board of directors were conscious of the need to run the daycare facility as a financially viable social enterprise. “We needed to do it in such a fashion that it wouldn’t always be a matter of relying on grant funding or a drain on our hard earned financial reserves,” revealed Paul Roberts.

Another important factor in Kinder Kids’ development was the introduction of the working family tax credit, which for the first time made full daycare affordable in areas such as New Lodge. It also enabled the project to ‘wash its own face’ and in 2005 it made a slight profit from a turnover of around £320,000.

Yet unlike some private sector daycare facilities, the working conditions for staff are very impressive: the facility employs a fully unionised workforce and pays better wages and pensions than similar private schemes. This is certainly not daycare ‘on the cheap’ just because it is in a disadvantaged community.

The involvement of the local community has been another critical factor in the success of the venture to date. The Ashton vision of “a safe, prosperous and caring community where residents have pride and a sense of ownership” is central to the running of the daycare centre.

The marketing approach of the centre is based upon the community ethos of the trust, which has an established profile within the area. This has meant that word of mouth has been the most effective means of advertising the service and ensuring that places are filled with support from local residents thereby ensuring future sustainability.

This is certainly the case with the afterschools provision, an essential element of a comprehensive daycare service as it removes barriers for local people who may wish to access training or employment or become involved in community development activities. Childcare is thus seen as central to the work of the trust and key to the social and economic regeneration of the area.

A visit to the daycare centre where dozens of local kids learn and play in a safe and healthy environment would certainly convince visitors that the trust is living out its mission “to promote positive change and improve the quality of life of the north Belfast community”.