

Time 4 Us

Evaluation Report

November 2008



The **One** Foundation



Department of Social and Family Affairs
An Roinn Gnóthaí Sóisialacha agus
Teaghlaí



COMMISSIONING AGENCIES

This Research has been commissioned by a number of agencies involved in the management of Time4Us. These agencies are:

- Health Service Executive (HSE)
- Galway City and County Childcare Committee
- The One Foundation
- Department of Social and Family Affairs
- Mr. Frank Fahey, T.D.
- Representatives from the Business Sector in Galway

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all those who were so giving of their time and support to the research team in doing this evaluation. In particular, a big thank you to the users of Time4Us – non-resident parents and children – who were so giving of their time and who allowed the evaluation team into their access visits. Many thanks also must go to the resident parents who were so willing to engage with the research team. Thanks to the individuals and organisations that allowed us to interview them and responded with great frankness and honesty. Thanks also are due to the members of Time4Us management for their support, time and willingness to clarify particular points or issues the evaluation team had. Particular thanks must go to Fionnuala Foley for liaising with the management in this regard. Thanks to the project staff – Deirdre, Majella, Thelma and Tara – who played an important role in facilitating the evaluation team’s requests and who were so supportive of the entire process from the outset. Finally, many thanks to Erin Pawelek at the CFRC who provided great assistance in the finalisation of this report.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chapter 1 Introduction

Background to the Evaluation of Time4Us

Time4Us Play Centre was opened in March 2007 on a pilot basis in response to a need identified by a number of key actors and organisations in Galway City. The absence of a place where non-resident parents could meet and play with their children in a safe, secure, conducive environment was the particular need identified by this group. The aims of the centre are numerous, and include the facilitation, development and deepening of relationships between non-resident parents and their children through the provision of a non-expensive child-friendly facility with suitable activities and equipment. The centre also provides information on a wider range of services available in Galway. It operates as a universal free service and is funded under a public-private partnership arrangement by a number of public agencies and private donations. The agencies involved are:

- The Health Service Executive (HSE);
- The Galway City and County Childcare Committee (GCCCC);
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA);
- The One Foundation;
- Representatives from the Business Sector in Galway;
- And Mr. Frank Fahey T.D.

As part of the pilot process Time4Us management issued a request for tender for an evaluation of the centre as it operates in Summer 2007 with a view to further developing the service while also documenting the impact of the service on its users. The Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), NUI Galway undertook the evaluation, producing an Interim Report in November 2007 and a Final Report in August 2008. The overall aim of the evaluation was to undertake a formative study of the centre and make preliminary recommendations regarding the value of the Time4Us intervention and to learning necessary to improve its effectiveness.

The evaluation team devised a multi-method research strategy to complete the process, comprising of:

- A literature review focusing on changing family life in Ireland and the development of services relating to such change;
- Self-administered questionnaires completed by Time4Us non-resident parents, resident parents, and legal guardians;
- Interviews with service users i.e. non-resident parents and children;
- Interviews with key stakeholders, including Time4Us management, staff and key referrers;
- Observational sessions of the service in operation.

Chapter 2. Theoretical and Policy Review

The Changing Pattern of Family Structures, Implications for Child-Parent Relationships, Welfare Discourse & Service Provision

In line with trends in other developed countries, family life in Ireland is undergoing significant change in the past two decades or so, with an ever-increasing move away from the traditional nuclear family structure of children being reared in married households, towards alternative patterns of parenting whereby more and more children are being raised in one-parent households, or cohabiting households. Based on the 2002 Census figures, just over four out of five children aged under 15 (81%) were living with both parents, with most of the remainder (14%) living in a lone parent family. While the reasons for this changing family type are complex and varied, in terms of the focus of this report, the implications of parental separation in terms of affecting poor outcomes in children is a central concern of this report. The loss of contact with the non-resident parent, which in the main tends to be the father, is one of the core outcomes of parental separation. It follows that the role of fathers in the lives of their children comes under immense strain following marital or relationship breakdown.

In Ireland, very little if any relevant legislative or policy discussion on the complex issues surrounding post-separation and post-divorce parenting has occurred to date. It is not surprising therefore, that service provision facilitating non-resident parent – child contact is quite limited. Hence Time4Us represents an innovative service in this regard.

Chapter 3 Overview of Time4Us Project Implementation and Monitoring

The Time4Us pilot programme commenced in December 2006 and was service opened to service users in March 2007. The service operates at purposely equipped premises in a Retail Centre on the Tuam Road, Galway city, and can operate on a seven day a week basis, with flexible working hours, to meet the needs of families. An operational committee is responsible for the day to day running of the service, including financial arrangements and support and supervision of Time4Us project staff.

Analysis of Monitoring Data

One of the core purposes of the evaluation was to monitor the Time4Us service. This was done by the evaluation team requesting a number of data sources from staff to develop an evaluation monitoring database. The Time4Us catalogue records the number of inquiries made about Time4Us each month since March 2007. The database reveals that over the period March 2007-April 2008 there were 94 inquiries made about the service. These inquiries arose from three sources: professionals inquiring on behalf of a client; resident parents; and non-resident parents. Regarding the former, social workers and the legal domain (solicitors and the courts) made up the bulk of inquiries. The vast majority of

inquiries were deemed suitable and accepted to use Time4Us. The most common sources of hearing about Time4Us were via social workers and the legal domain.

In total, 48 service users have used or continue to use Time4Us over the period covered by this report (March 2007-April 2008). Analysis of the data reveal that service use has increased since the interim report of November 2007, with numbers almost doubling in the intervening six months. Specifically significant here is the high number of professional inquiries made and the resulting service use from such inquiries. It would appear from these figures alone that there is a demand for such a service. The increasing level of awareness of the service amongst a variety of service providers has served to strengthen its base and increase its numbers. Indeed the recent media coverage has also played a role. The growth of service users from outside Galway city and county has also served to further illuminate the need for such a service nationally.

The majority of Time4Us users are male, although the numbers of female service users is increasing. The current status of service users was categorised by the evaluators as follows: 'ongoing', 'ceased', 'closed', and 'yet to attend' the service, with most falling into the ongoing category (59%). For the most part service users are from Galway city or county. When examining *service use per parent* it is interesting to note the great variance in usage hours. For visits per service user the median value is 4. For hours per service user the median value is 8 hours. Turning to examine *service use per week* the disparity between values is significantly less. Examining visits per week we can see that the average is 9.51. The average number of hours per week is 19 hours.

In total, 89 children have used or use the centre with their parents up to the end of April 2008. The number of children varies with each parent. Although ages have not been provided for seven of the children in total, if these are removed the average age of the children using the service is 6 years.

The number of activities available to Time4Us service users, as described in the log sheets, includes: arts and crafts; creative play; tabletop games (e.g. pool, air hockey, board games); reading; sensory play; education (homework); and food preparation.

The log sheets provided to the evaluation team describe many different tasks undertaken by the staff of Time4Us, not only in the 'delivery' of the service but also in providing supports to parents and children, and liaising with ex-partners of service users and referrers. Broadly speaking, an analysis of the relevant information indicates the role of staff falling into three main areas:

1. To provide direct and indirect support to service users and their children;
2. To liaise with referrers regarding arranging access and providing feedback to the relevant authorities if and when required;
3. To liaise with the child/ren's other parent/foster parents/legal guardians.

The evaluation team received information from the management committee regarding the costs associated with the service. The total operational costs for the year 2007 amounted

to €180,000. Capital costs for the renovating and equipping of the building amounted to a further €60,000.

Chapter 4 Findings of Non-Resident and Resident Parent Questionnaires

All non-resident parents who use, or have used Time4Us since it began operation were requested to complete a self-administered questionnaire. In addition, questionnaires were also sent to resident parents/guardians. A response rate of 33 per cent (n=16) was obtained from non-residents parents while the corresponding response rate for resident parents/guardians was 19 per cent (n=9). Both surveys aim to enhance our understanding not only of those who use the service but also how they use it and for what reasons. Moreover, the survey data also serve to detail the reported impact of using the service on service users, their children, and their children's other parent.

Socio Demographic Profile of Non-Resident Parents

All of the non-resident parents using Time4Us were male. Most were aged 30 years or over, with almost even numbers falling into the 30-39 years and 40-49 years age range. None of the service users were over 50 years old. Over half of the fathers were single, while the next largest category comprising a third of respondents were separated. Most (62%) of the non-residents were of were from the Republic of Ireland, while small numbers were from Nigeria, Britain and Northern Ireland. The vast majority (81%) of non-resident fathers lived in Galway, with just three living in other parts of the country. Most non-resident fathers (63%) lived in a house, while just under a third (31%) lived in an apartment/flat. Most (69%) of the non-residents rented their accommodation, while under a third owned their property with a mortgage. The largest proportion (38%) of non-resident parents who participated in this study lived alone, compared to just 19% that lived with a partner, while similar numbers shared with tenants or friends (31%). A large variation was found in terms of the educational background of non-resident parents, with the largest proportion (36%) having some third level education, while even proportions had Leaving Certificate, Inter/Junior Certificate or Primary Level education (19% respectively).

Non-Resident Parents' Feedback on Time4Us

The vast majority (86%) of those who participated in the research started using Time4Us between March and December 2007, while 14% started using the service in January 2008. The legal system, comprising either the courts and/or solicitors, was the most commonly cited source of hearing about the service (42%). Three quarters of non-resident respondents were formally referred to the Time4Us service, while just a quarter self-attended. Of those that were referred, the legal system, comprising the courts or solicitors, was by far the most common source of referrals (72%).

The most common reason given by respondents for using Time4Us was because it is a safe place to meet their child/ren (30%), while to spend more time with one's children

was also commonly referred to (26%). Referrals from court in particular, and other agencies such as social work, accounted for over a fifth (22%) of the reasons mentioned. While a broad variety of activities are engaged in by non-resident parents and their children when using Time4Us, the most common of these include general play, arts and crafts, and games (69%).

Impact of Time4Us Service on Relationships, Access & Overall Benefits

Overall, the data reveal a noticeably positive impact on relationships between non-resident parents and children, and non-resident parents and resident parents/guardians. For instance, there is clear evidence that relationships between non-resident fathers and their children have greatly improved, with all citing positive relationships with their children since using Time4Us. Particular positive changes were documented by non-resident parents with their children since using Time4Us, in terms of having better relationships, finding it easier to play with and talk to them, and the children generally seeming happier. Moreover, the findings reveal a similarly affirmative picture with regards to changes in the relationship between non-resident parents and their child/ren's other parent/guardian since using Time4Us. Additionally, the majority of non-resident fathers agreed that there was less conflict, more trust and better communication with their child/ren's other parent/guardian since using Time4Us.

The situation regarding changes concerning access of the non-resident parent to their child/ren is also very positive. The most striking change is the improved access which the fathers who participated in this study now have to their child/ren since using Time4Us. Most of the non-resident parents indicated that since using Time4Us, they now see their child/ren four times per month or more.

Non-resident parents opinions of the main benefits of Time4Us

The most commonly mentioned benefit by non-resident fathers was that the Time4Us service has provided a physical place where they can have access to their children. Some of the non-resident fathers mentioned the benefit of Time4Us being a conducive environment providing various recreation activities and the facility for their children to play. The suitability of Time4Us was described in terms of being neutral, comfortable and safe. The fact that it is a free service was also highlighted. Finally, the positive role of staff at Time4Us was referred to as a key benefit of using the service.

Satisfaction Levels with Time4Us

All respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with Time4Us, and particularly with support provided by staff. The facilities and location were also positively rated. The most commonly mentioned facilities currently not at Time4Us that service users would like, were an outdoor green / play area and kitchen / cooking facilities.

Socio Demographic Profile of Resident Parents

In terms of the resident parental status regarding children using Time4Us, seven were biological parents while two were legal guardians. All of the resident parents/guardians were female. Most were aged 30 years or over, with almost even numbers falling into the 30-39 years and 40-49 years age range. In terms of marital status, over half were single, while similar numbers were married or separated, and one was cohabiting. Most (67%) of the resident parents were educated up to third level. All of the resident parents were Irish with the exception of one who was Zimbabwean. All resident parents lived in Galway city or county (66% and 33% respectively).

Resident Parents Feedback on Time4Us

Respondents were asked where they initially heard about the Time4Us service. Over half mentioned the legal system, comprising either the courts or solicitors. Respondents were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with the Time4Us location, facilities and staff. Most (on average 71%) of the resident parents rated these positively, while none were dissatisfied with any of these aspects.

Impact of Time4Us Service on Relationships, Access & Overall Benefits

A clear improvement was documented by resident parents in terms of their relationship with the child/ren's other parent since using Time4Us. Furthermore, less conflict with the child/ren's other parent was reported by the vast majority of respondents (88%). However, the fractious nature of these relationships was reinforced with two thirds of resident parents reporting no change in the level of trust between themselves and the non-resident parent, and opinions were split 50:50 with regards to perceptions of better communication with the non-resident parent. Over half of the resident parents agreed that 'in general the child/ren seem happier' since using Time4Us.

Resident parents were asked about the level of access which the non-resident parent had to their child/ren prior to and since using Time4Us. The most notable change is the reported improved level of access which non-resident fathers now have to their child/ren.

Resident parents opinions of the main benefits of Time4Us

In response to an open-ended survey question, nearly all of the resident parents listed ways in which the service has benefited themselves and their children. These benefits can be summarised into four main headings: conducive environment, children's play aspect, Time4Us staff, and contact with the children's other parent.

Terms such as safe, secure, structured, and supervised were variously used by resident parents to describe the conducive environment provided by Time4Us. A number of resident parents mentioned the play aspect as an important benefit of the service. The staff were commended by resident parents, in terms of being "helpful", "flexible", "professional", "supportive", and "caring". Some resident parents mentioned the benefit of the service in terms of making contact with and in some cases improving the relationship with the child/ren's father.

A number of diverse issues were raised by resident parents in this regard. The most commonly referred to aspect in need of change was the physical space/building, with suggestions made regarding the need for a bigger play area, and an outdoor play facilities for different age-groups.

Summary

It is clear from this data that Time4Us is meeting a need according to the families using the service. A consensus was found amongst both resident and non-resident parents in terms of the benefits of the service and its impact on their families, with some of the more notable benefits including: increased happiness levels amongst children, and increased amounts of access between children and non-resident parents as a result of using Time4Us. Interestingly, both resident and non-resident parents report less conflict in their relationship since using the service. In addition, both sets of parents are very positive about the service, in particular its layout and staff. Specifically, the professionalism and supportive nature of the staff was mentioned by a significant majority of both cohorts. Any suggested changes to the service relate to the facility rather than staff or the model of support provided in the centre.

Chapter 5 The Experiences of Parents and Children Using the Time4Us Play Centre

The evaluation team was keen to ascertain in detail the views of service users regarding a number of issues. As part of completing the self-administered questionnaire service users were invited to complete a consent form and self-select for a follow-up face-to-face interview. In total, seven non-resident parents participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the views of some of the children using the service are documented based on three face-to-face interviews.

What emerges from these interviews is a very positive picture of the Time4Us play centre as portrayed by the interviewees. Having been made aware of the service through two main channels – the legal system and the social work department – Time4Us offered the first real possibility for most of these non-resident parents to have access to their child/ren for some time. It was explained that the service offers a possibility of seeing their children in a secure, safe environment where previously this was not possible. A number of the non-resident parent interviewees described a broadly positive experience of using Time4Us, in particular through its facilitation of improved relationships with children and also the children's other parent. The possibility the centre offers to participants to be a parent is the most cherished aspect of the service. Additionally, service users spoke very positively about the role staff play in their service use, describing their role as helpful, non-invasive, supportive and encouraging. The neutral stance which staff maintain between non-resident and resident parents was identified as a key element of the success of the centre. The welcoming and warm atmosphere at Time4Us was highlighted.

Interviewees were asked to identify what changes, if any, they would like to see made to the service. A small number of participations suggested changes to the centre, comprising improved kitchen facilities to enable non-resident parents to cook meals for their children when using the centre, extra toys, and an outdoor facility comprising a green area. Others proposed the introduction of feedback from the resident parent to the non-resident parent via Time4Us staff on key aspects regarding their child/ren's in the intervening periods between access. Mediation was also suggested in order to improve non-resident parent and resident parent relationships. In terms of the future scenario, most interviewees were of the opinion that despite the opportunity Time4Us presents to develop bonds and strengthen relationships, the legal situation they currently find themselves in regarding access and financial constraints will limit their ability to develop a relationship with their child/ren outside the Time4Us service for the foreseeable future.

Finally, the interviews with the children using Time4Us, indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the centre. Understandably, the centre is very much associated with positive interaction between the children and their fathers.

Chapter 6 Other Stakeholders Views of Time4Us

In total, four members of staff at Time4Us, four members of the management of the Centre, and three referral actors were interviewed, using a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews, as well as two observation sessions of parents using the service. What is apparent from the interviews undertaken for this evaluation is the overall positive light which Time4Us is viewed in by its stakeholders. It is viewed as an innovative, worthwhile service which offers a solution to the needs of many separated families and improving on access arrangements in child-centred way. The lack of and need for such as service in Galway was identified via a number of sources including the former Minister for Children, Mr. Frank Fahey T.D., the HSE, and Galway City and County Childcare Committee (GCCCC), the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) and the Courts Service – Galway division. Time4Us was established at the end of 2006 and officially opened to the public in March 2007.

Time4Us adopts a cross-sectoral, inter-agency approach to its governance. Interviewees explained that good contact is maintained with all partner organisations such as the DSFA, the HSE, GCCCC, and the One Foundation, who are all members of the Time4Us management committee.

A public-private partnership approach was adopted at Time4Us whereby private sector individuals were approached with a view to part-financing the centre and becoming members of the board and management structure. The financial situation of the centre is currently in a precarious situation, with private funding sources becoming increasingly difficult to secure since the inception of the service. Interviewees explained that the future of the service will be dependent on securing funding from additional statutory sources such as the Departments of Justice, and Education.

The staff at Time4Us were very clear about the objectives of the centre and consciously work towards creating a fun-filled environment where access can occur between non-resident parents and their children. In particular, they stressed a trait of the centre as being a neutral ground for parents to arrange access, and for such access to occur in a non-judgemental, non-intrusive manner.

It was explained that the intention was always to provide a universal service, catering predominantly for self-referral or 'walk-in' inquiries while also allowing for a number of referrals from agencies in the locality. However, in practice most of the referrals to the centre come from the legal or social work domains. The degree of contact between the staff and key referral agencies such as the Social Work Department, the Courts Service, or individual solicitors and Time4Us both before and after making referrals tended to vary a lot, with follow-up tending to be more regular for the former as opposed to the latter.

In identifying the role of the Time4Us staff terms like 'facilitating,' 'enabling' and 'supporting' were used by interviewees. Most prominent in these interviews was the role identified for staff to create a positive atmosphere for access to occur so that positive relationships between children and their non-resident parents could develop, as well as maintaining positive links with resident parents. Other key staff roles identified included promoting and publicising Time4Us, supporting service users during particularly difficult times such as during court hearings, and when conflict arises between parents.

Based on a series of discussion with Time4Us staff and management, a detailed description of the criteria used by staff in determining the level of support provided to non-resident parents, and the actual model of support which is provided at the centre can be viewed at the end of this Executive Summary.

With regards to the future of Time4Us, all interviewees agreed that Time4Us was making a difference, irrespective of whether such difference was measured in terms of numbers through the door, numbers who have progressed on to access outside the centre, or whether access visits have increased over the period of service use. However, as mentioned earlier, members of the management committee identified the issue of finance as the defining factor regarding the sustainability of the service.

Chapter 7 Discussion and Recommendations

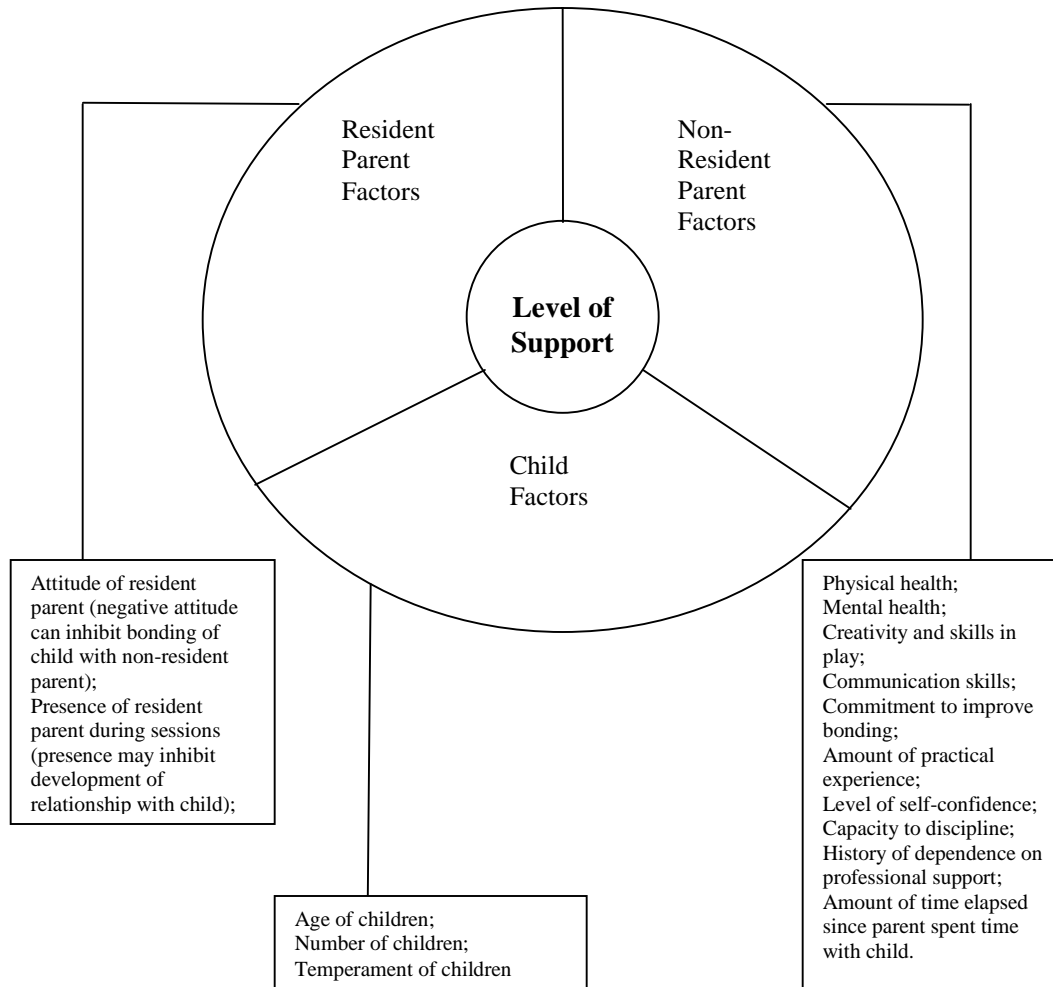
The overarching conclusion of this evaluation is that Time4Us is delivering a valued, constructive, worthwhile and beneficial service to a population cohort. Indeed, its success is indicated by increased service use since its inception and the views of both resident and non-resident parents, and increasing numbers of inquiries and referrals to the services, particularly by social workers and the legal system. The evaluators have proposed a series of recommendations so as to assist Time4Us in maintaining and building on the service into the future:

1. The development and adoption of an electronic database system incorporating details and visits by service users and children so as to provide a picture of current use while permitting further planning for the future. Additionally, such a move would lessen the loss of institutional memory which may occur when staff members leave their posts and new staff come on board. Finally, the collation of information – particularly at the outset – could lend itself to a more outcomes-focused approach to each non-resident parent and child using the service, acknowledging that this will not be possible for all;
2. Management and Staff should explore the potential for long-term service users to engage with other play/activity organisations in addition to Time4Us. Where transition from Time4Us is not an option for the service user engaging with other organisations such as youth clubs, sports clubs could offer the opportunity for further bonding between parent and child, supported by Time4Us staff. In addition, this may also serve to offer more age-appropriate activities to children who may outgrow Time4Us in terms of play activities;
3. As part of disseminating information about other services and activities management and staff should explore the potential for an information wall/notice board to be located in the centre. While service users did highlight the willingness of staff to provide any information requested a notice board could serve to pre-empt requests, provide a series of alternatives or suggestions to service users while also informing them wider statutory and voluntary services in the city and county;
4. Staff and management should work to formalise contact and relationships with key referrers, including the courts service, but not so formal to affect the flexibility of the service which has been responsible for much of its success so far. Such contact could serve to reduce the number of long-term users through the development of a plan for each parent, where appropriate. It could also serve to further embed Time4Us in the work processes of referral agencies such as the courts and social work departments;
5. If finances permit, staff and management should explore the possibility of purchasing a cooker and making necessary alterations to the kitchen to take account of this;
6. In the context of the future of the service, the feasibility of moving to another location so as to facilitate outdoor activities should be examined. However, this needs to be weighed against the overall high levels of satisfaction with the existing location, it's conducive atmosphere, the many positives that it already provides, and the significant investment which has already taken place;
7. As part of a regular feedback process, management and staff should work to formally incorporate the views of all stakeholders into the planning and review processes for the service at regular intervals;

8. Future evaluations might consider the use of baseline and follow-up measures to assess the success or otherwise of the service in achieving positive outcomes for children and their parents. Such measures could be either standardised or service-based. The use of comparison groups in future evaluations might also be considered.

The Criteria Used by Time4Us in Determining the Level of Support

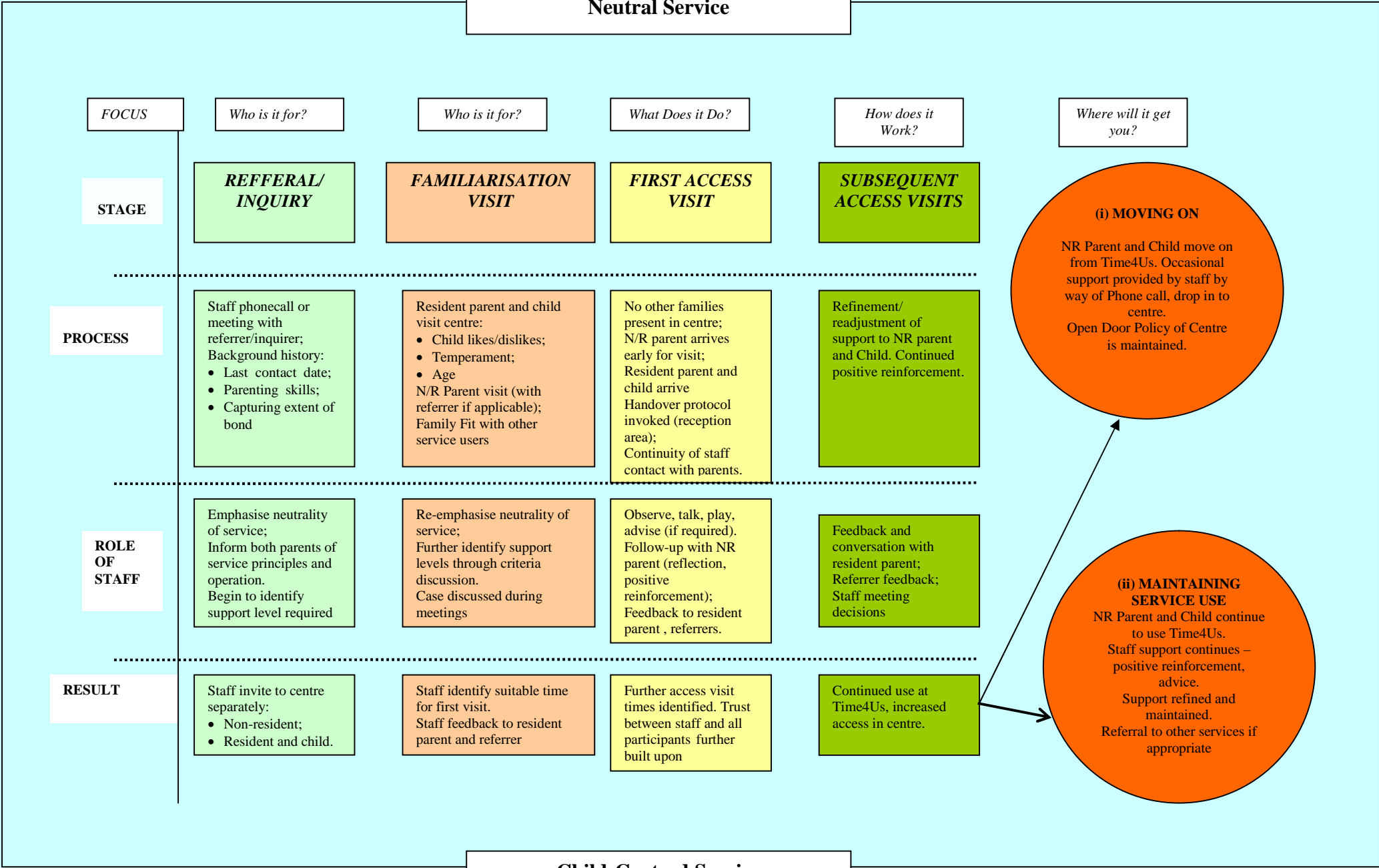
The staff at Time4Us use a number of criteria in determining the level of support to be provided to each family attending the centre. These criteria are set out below:



The Model of Support Provided at Time4Us

The model of support provided by Time4Us staff can be split into a number of stages. What follows is a graphical and descriptive account of this model of support. The next page features a full model of support followed by individual stages described. A map of the centre is also provided.

Neutral Service



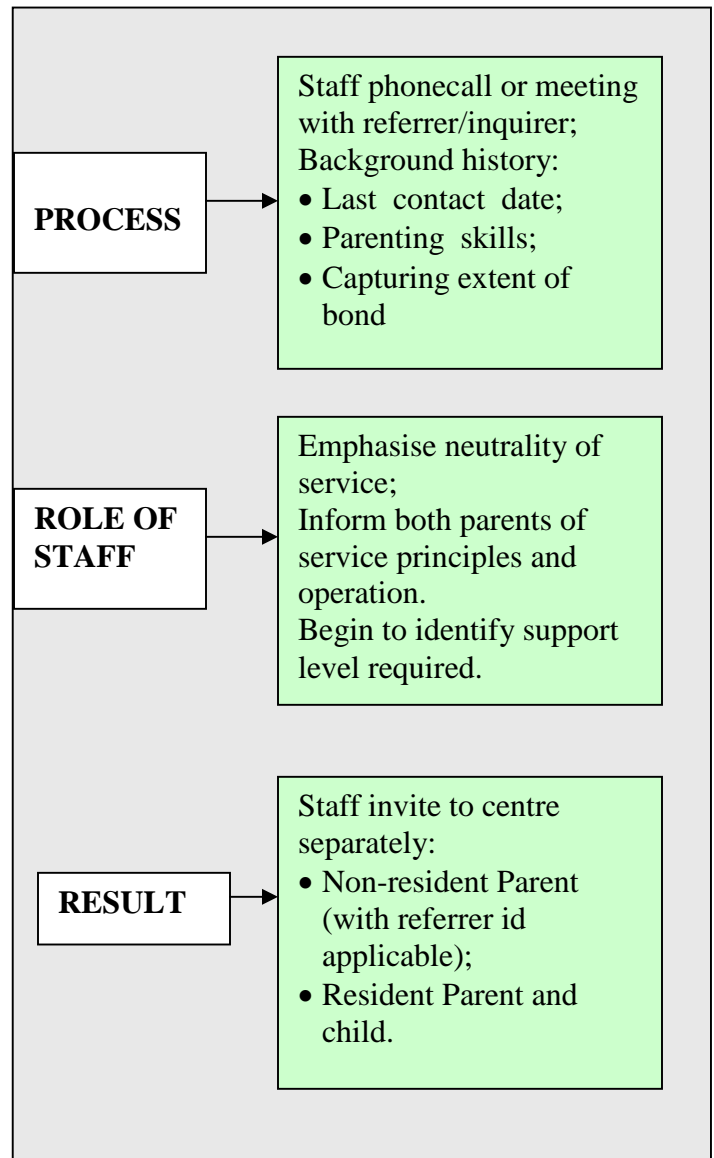
Child-Centred Service

Stage 1A: Inquiry or Referral

The initial referral or inquiry is usually dealt with by staff over the phone. This stage involves staff informing inquirers about the principles of the service – most notably its neutrality and child-centred approach - and the particulars of its operation (for example the handover policy in the reception area – see stage 1B on the next page), times of operation, facilities available and so on.

Much of the contact between potential service users and staff is concerned with informing parents - resident and non-resident – about how the service operates. In particular, the importance of the **handover policy** in reducing potential conflict or confrontation, and thus reducing the stress experienced by parents and the potential for children to witness such confrontation, is crucial (see stage 2 for a description of the handover policy).

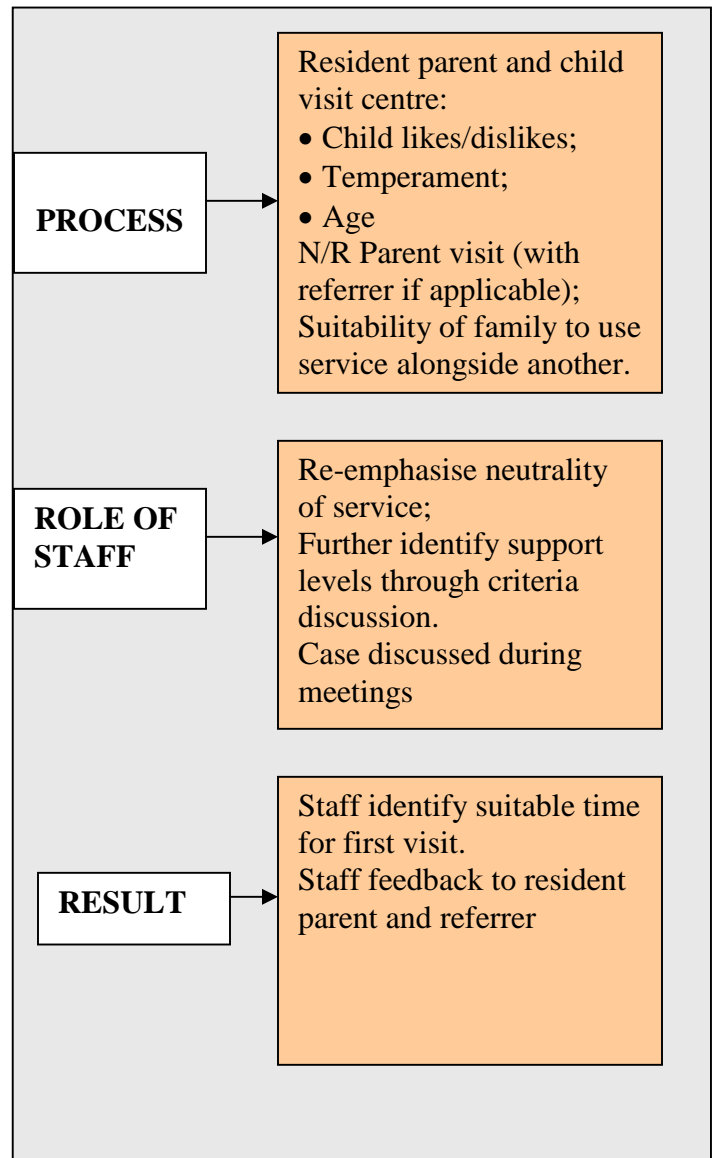
The focus of this stage is also to capture the extent of the bond between the potential service users, i.e. the non-resident parent and children. Therefore, staff begin to inquire about the various criteria detailed the graph above. Subsequent to this, staff invite the resident parent and child to visit the centre, as well as the non-resident parent on their own of with a referrer if applicable.



Stage 1B: Familiarisation Visit

Upon the identification of a suitable time, the non-resident parent and, where applicable, the referrer visit the centre to familiarise themselves with it. Staff further discuss with the non-resident parent particulars of the determining criteria for the extent of support to be offered. At a separate time the resident parent and child, children also visit the centre. Staff liaise with both parent and children so as to further build trust between themselves and the resident parent and children. This also serves to permit staff to gauge the suitability or otherwise of the family to use the centre alongside other families.

If both parties are satisfied with the centre and its operation a suitable time is identified for the first access visit to occur. Staff prepare for the family's first visit through incorporating family needs into their weekly review meetings.

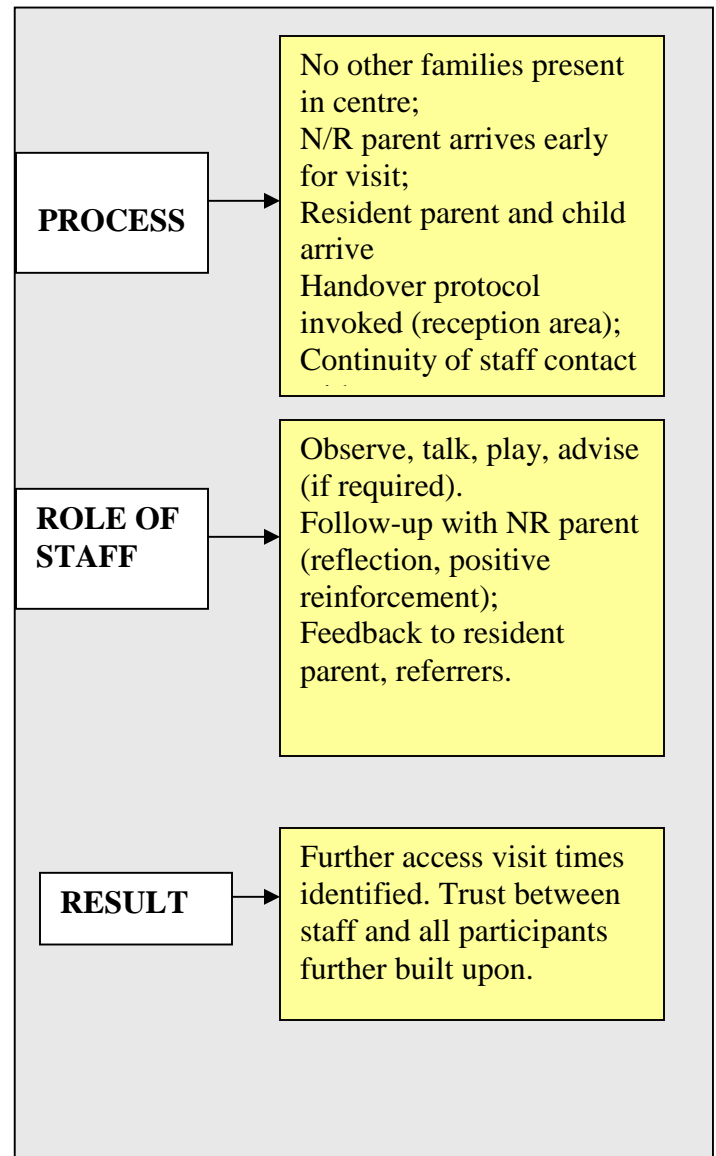


Stage 2: First Access Visit

The first access visit usually takes place when no other families are using the centre. The non-resident parent is asked to arrive 15 minutes early. Once the resident parent and child arrive staff put the **handover policy** into action, where the child is collected in the reception area and brought into the main play room to the non-resident parent. One staff member usually remains with the resident parent for a few moments to generally chat or answer any questions.

Depending on the support criteria staff may play with the non-resident parent and child (ren) or may simply casually observe the visit.

Once ended, staff put the **handover policy** into action again, with the non-resident parent remaining in the play room until the resident parent and child have left the centre. Staff may discuss the visit with the non-resident parent if desired by the latter. Staff will also contact the resident parent to see how the visit went for the child and parent.

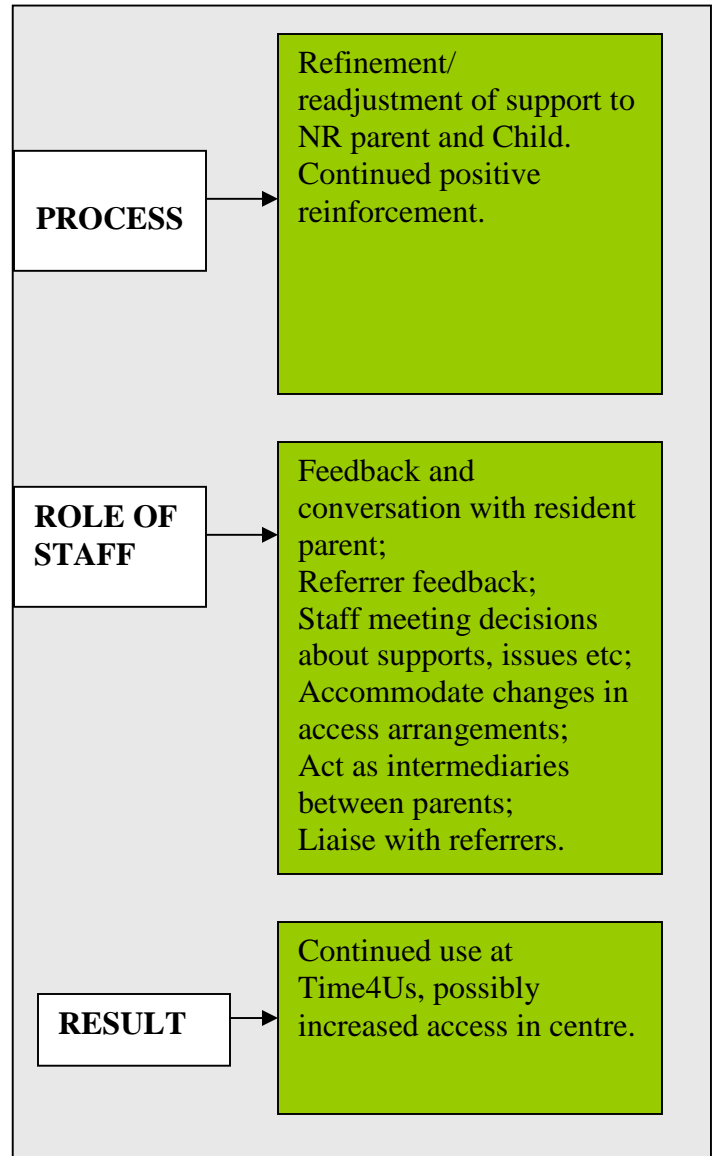


Stage 3: Subsequent Access Visits

Subsequent access visits are arranged in conjunction with resident parents. For the most part, however, access times become fixed, although staff are accommodating of rearranging visits for parents and children.

Staff continue to support both the non-resident parent and children who use the service, although at this stage the level of support required by the family has been well established. However, advice and information are provided when requested, and more generally maintaining trust between staff and families is a continuing focus of the relationship between staff and all family members.

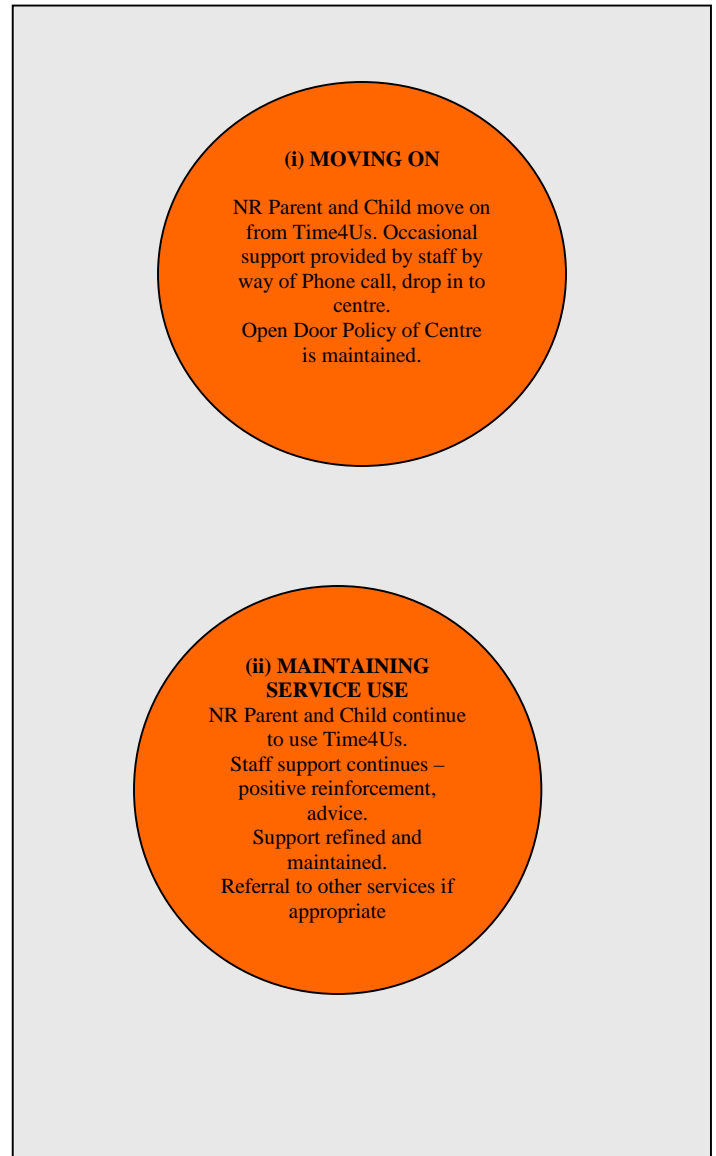
If so desired by family members, or warranted through referrer input (e.g. court decision) staff facilitate changes in access arrangements as far as is practicable and with consideration to other service users.



Stage 4: Exiting Time4Us or maintaining service use

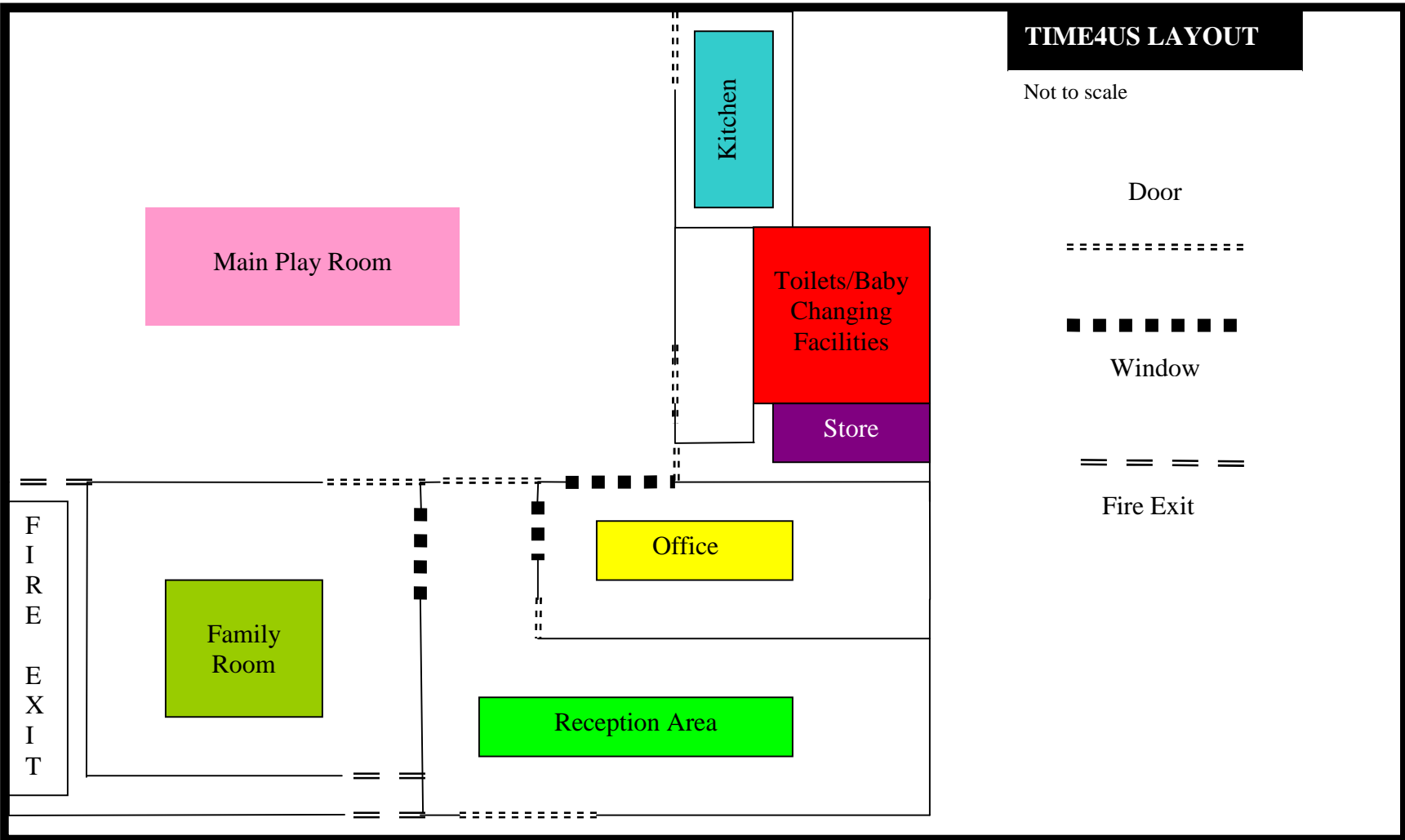
Depending on a number of factors, non-resident parents and children may either continue to use the centre for access arrangements or exit the centre. Regarding the former, staff continue to provide required support to the non-resident parent and their children whilst they use the centre, and in a wider context through the maintenance of contact, either through parents dropping into the centre or staff contacting parents over the phone. Should it be required, staff also refer non-resident parents to other services if appropriate. Contact and trust is maintained with the resident parents also.

In the case of the non-resident parents and children exiting the service or moving on, staff still maintain contact through occasional phone calls or when parents and children drop into the centre. The centre operates an open door policy to such families, so while they may not require the centre for access visits parents and children are always welcome to use the centre on a sporadic basis if they so wish and the centre is available.



TIME4US LAYOUT

Not to scale



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Evaluation of Time4Us

Time4Us Play Centre was opened in March 2007 on a pilot basis in response to a need identified by a number of key actors and organisations in Galway City. The absence of a place where non-resident parents could meet and play with their children in a safe, secure, conducive environment was the particular need identified by this group. The aims of the centre are numerous, and include the facilitation, development and deepening of relationships between non-resident parents and their children through the provision of a non-expensive child-friendly facility with suitable activities and equipment. The centre also provides information on a wider range of services available in Galway. The play centre is open to all to use and is funded by a number of public organisations and private donations. The organisations involved are:

- The Health Service Executive (HSE);
- The Galway City and County Childcare Committee (GCCCC);
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA);
- The One Foundation;
- Representatives of the Business Sector in Galway;
- And Mr. Frank Fahey T.D.

As part of the pilot process Time4Us management issued a request for tender for an evaluation of the centre as it operates with a view to further developing the service while also documenting the impact of the service on its users. The Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), NUI Galway won the evaluation tender.

1.2. Evaluation Aims and Objectives

The evaluation plan and methodology was designed and finalised in consultation with members of the management committee of Time4Us. The overall aim of the evaluation was to undertake a formative study of the centre's preliminary recommendations regarding the value of the Time4Us intervention and to learning necessary to improve its effectiveness. The specific objectives of the evaluation were to:

1. Provide detailed description of the model, clarifying among other dimensions its:
 - a. theoretical, empirical and policy underpinnings
 - b. specific objectives; activities;
2. Develop and implement project monitoring systems leading in turn to data for use in the evaluation as well as for ongoing project management purposes
3. Provide a detailed description and analysis of project implementation including:
 - a. use levels, frequency, amount, nature of service users (age, gender, ethnic background)
 - b. staff – nature of work, time to different tasks
 - c. attitudes toward the project process – i.e. what people think about the project in operation
 - d. costs;
4. Identify and document project outcomes, to include:
 - a. continuity / stability in family relationships/ life-long parenting / sustain growing relationships
 - b. increasing parent knowledge services / supports
 - c. development of skills / capacity in playing / interacting with child
 - d. deepening relationship;
5. Develop recommendations

1.3. Methodology

This evaluation took place over a 12 month period. The initial phase involved clarifying the objectives of the plan and identifying information collected by the centre which could be used in the study. Further to this, the study consisted of two core elements:

1. A theoretical element, underpinned by a literature review so as to locate the centre within its policy and service landscape. In particular, the literature review examined

the development and role of contact centres in the UK and elsewhere with a view to identifying comparative and contrasting elements of such provision in Time4Us;

2. An empirical element which in turn required the adoption of a multi-method strategy to collect our data. This involved:
 - The collation and analysis of data recorded by centre staff for the purposes of monitoring service provision and usage levels;
 - The distribution of questionnaires to both resident and non-resident parents using the service;
 - The undertaking of a number of interviews with non-resident parents who use the service;
 - A number of observation periods at the centre;
 - The undertaking of interviews with project management and staff, and representatives of key referral agencies in Galway City.

In completing this study the research team was cognisant of not intruding on the space and time non-resident parents have with their children. To this end, interviews with non-resident parents were arranged at a time and location of their choosing. Similarly, with observations undertaken, the evaluation team desired not to create an unfamiliar environment while a parent and child were using the service. Therefore, observations were only undertaken for part of the visit of each parent who consented.

1.4.Ethics

This research was guided by key ethical requirements of firstly doing no harm, and secondly gaining informed, voluntary active consent of those participating in the research. To this end the evaluation team was guided by the processes and recommendations of the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee. This committee, established to guide all researchers operating under the auspices of the university, its constituency colleges and institutions, meets to consider the ethical concerns of each project submitted for its approval. The application for the Time4Us evaluation was considered positively overall, yet some additional information and clarification of methods was required at one point which, when submitted, satisfied the committee.

Although an interim report was provided to the management committee in November 2007, the reporting mechanisms of the ethics committee - by which written permission is granted to the researchers to proceed with particular aspects of the project - delayed implementation of the study and, hence, the submission of this draft final report by two weeks from the end of May to mid-June 2008.

The work of the Time4Us staff – Deirdre, Majella, Thelma, and Tara – in aiding the fieldwork to be undertaken promptly and efficiently, particularly considering the delay to the project given the ethical issues outlined above, is to be highly commended and warmly appreciated by the evaluation team. At all points the evaluation team found the staff facilitating, welcoming, supportive and positive about all aspects of the evaluation.

1.5.Methodological Limitations

Although wide ranging in its scope this study has particular methodological limitations. The most significant of these is the absence of the voice of the child in the research. Crucial to the ethos of Time4Us is the centrality of the child in service provision and development. Positioning the child at the centre of its work and committing to including it in its research is also critical to the work of the CFRC. As this study is still in draft stage the CFRC is committed to undertaking additional work to overcome this limitation and will discuss with management and staff the best way to do this at the earliest possible instance.

Relating to other potential limitations, the surveys elicited a 33% response rate for non-resident parents and an 18.75% response rate for resident parents. Such response rates are satisfactory for such a study, particularly when one considers that some service users surveyed may have engaged with the service infrequently, some time ago, or may now live in another location. Additionally, non-resident parent interviewees were invited to self-select for interview upon completing the survey. Such self-selection indicates a degree of comfort with both the centre and the research which some potential respondents may not have had. As this research reveals, issues pertaining to access can cause great

distress and anxiety which may influence potential respondent's willingness to engage with the research.

1.6. Report Structure

Following this introductory chapter, chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review of national and international research pertaining to the changing nature of family structure in Ireland and the development of 'contact' centres in other jurisdictions, notably the UK. The third chapter presents data on project implementation, including those to usage levels, rates of inquiry, and activities undertaken by service users. Chapter four presents findings from completed surveys of both resident and non-resident parents involved with Time4Us, while chapter five outlines findings from the qualitative interviews undertaken with non-resident parents who use the service. Chapter six details interviews undertaken with management, staff and key referrers regarding aspects of the service and is also informed by structured observations of the service in practice. Chapter seven discusses the findings presented in the preceding chapters and make a number of preliminary recommendations to inform the project's future operation.

2. Theoretical and Policy Review

2.1. The Changing Pattern of Family Structures & Implications for Child-Parent Relationships

In line with trends in other developed countries, family life in Ireland is undergoing significant change in the past two decades or so, with an ever-increasing move away from the traditional nuclear family structure of children being reared in married households, towards alternative patterns of parenting whereby more and more children are being raised in one-parent households, or cohabiting households. Based on the 2002 Census figures, just over four out of five children aged under 15 (81%) were living with both parents, with most of the remainder (14%) living in a lone parent family.

Accounting for this trend, Dunne *et al* (2007) state that whereas lone parenthood in the past was most commonly due to widowhood, in recent decades the main paths to lone parenthood are childbearing outside marriage and marriage breakdown. Regarding the latter, while there was no system of registration of marital breakdown prior to the advent of divorce legislation enacted in 1996, nonetheless evidence suggests that this had been increasing slowly in Ireland prior to 1996. Expressed as a proportion of the ever-married population, the percentages of separated and divorce trebled between 1986 and 2002, rising from 2.8 per cent to 8.4 per cent when the divorced who remarried are excluded from the count, and from 3 per cent to 9.5 per cent when the latter are included (Fahey and Layte 2007).

Moreover, in terms of lone parenthood, the number of births outside marriage rose six-fold, from 5 per cent in 1980 to 31 per cent in 2000, and levelling at between 31-32 per

cent between 2000 to 2005 (Fahey and Layte 2007). The vast majority of lone parent households are headed by women. Cohabiting couples with children under 15 make up 6.5% of all families with children (Dunne *et al.*, 2007).

A prominent factor in relationship breakdown and separation is that of domestic violence and child abuse. For instance, a recent report by the Economic and Social Research Institute, on behalf of the National Crime Council, has carried out a nationally representative statistical sample of 3,000 adult women and men which highlighted a clear link between domestic abuse and marital breakdown with almost 60% of separated or divorced women and 30% of such men having experienced severe abuse (NCC, 2005). This association between violence and/or abuse and parental separation in turn poses serious policy and service challenges from a parental-child contact perspective, as shall be discussed later.

This social change in the constitution of the family structure is associated with a broad range of complex relationship consequences for both parents and children. This is acknowledged in the National Children's Strategy (2000) which asserts that increasing non-marital partnerships, marital breakdown and lone parenthood have implications for the stability of family life and the welfare of children. Regarding the latter, factors critical in affecting poor outcomes for children include:

- the level of family conflict;
- multiple changes in family structure;
- the quality of contact with the non-resident parent;
- the level of parental recovery from the distress of separation; and
- the level of economic hardship experienced

(Rodgers and Pryor 1998 cited in Aris *et al.*, 2002).

Most especially, the loss of contact with the non-resident parent, which in the main tends to be the father, is one of the core outcomes of parental separation. Risk factors for absent fathers include age, the father's relationship to the child's mother at the time of the

birth, and education, with younger fathers, cohabiting fathers, and fathers with lower educational levels at greater risk of becoming absent fathers (Clarke et al 1998).

The role of fathers in the lives of their children comes under immense strain following marital or relationship breakdown. In a recent article, Parkinson (2006) refers to the problem of the disappearance of fathers from their children's lives in the aftermath of separation and divorce. A general trend of child-separated parent contact decreasing significantly with time, was highlighted in a study by Blackwell and Dawe (2003 cited in Flouri, 2006) who revealed that only 32% of children saw their non-resident parent at least once a week three years after their parents separated. Such a trend prompts a questioning of the role of fathers in contemporary society. Engle (1997) notes that in the US and Europe, studies have reported that fathers who were involved with their children contribute greatly to their children's intellectual, social, and emotional development. More specifically, four of the major contributions men make to family life are:

1. taking economic responsibility for children,
2. building a caring relationship with children,
3. reducing the chances of 'unpartnered fertility', and
4. ensuring gender equality in the family

(Family Impact Seminar, 1995; Richardson, 1995, cited in Engle 1997).

It is argued that the absence of any of these will represent a problem for children's development; while taking such roles can enhance the lives of men (Engle, 1997). Similarly, Juby and Le Bourdais (1998) point out that separation and divorce weaken links between children and their fathers who may henceforth assume neither the provider nor the carer role.

Additionally, fathers are well-recognised as playing an important economic role in the family structure, with the financial hardship and higher rates of poverty and deprivation risk associated with lone-parent families indicative of this (National Children's Strategy 2000; Combat Poverty Agency 2002). According to Dunne et al., 2007 nearly one-third

(32%) of children in lone parent households are likely to experience consistent poverty¹, while over half of children in lone parent households are ‘at risk of poverty’ at the threshold of 60%. The National Children’s Strategy (2000) highlights the emergence of new challenges regarding housing and other service provision in the light of the extent of lone parenthood through marital breakdown or the absence of a partner.

Notwithstanding the significant changes in non-traditional family forms as a result of relationship breakdowns, to date, relevant research and evidence regarding non-resident parents, of which most are fathers, remains scant. For instance, Jenkins and Lyons (2006) comment that within the new landscape of the contemporary family, non-residential fathers are a growing yet largely neglected group. Seltzer (1991 cited in Juby and Le Bourdais, 1998) suggests that separated parents are uncertain as to the role of the father, and that this ambiguity in expectations may account for sporadic and diverse patterns of paternal involvement. Paternal transitions are stressful, emotionally and economically, for all involved (Juby and Le Bourdais, 1998). Similarly, Daly and Clavero (2002) highlight the limited extent to which public policy has addressed the issue and meaning of fatherhood, both in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, the exception being the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway and Sweden, that have undertaken this as an explicit social (rather than economic) goal of policy.

2.2. Welfare Discourse and Service Provision for Child–Parent Contact

Child contact after parental separation is a complex issue, often fraught with disagreements and tensions. In Ireland, most applications about continuing matters in family law disputes – domestic violence, guardianship, custody of and access to children, maintenance – are heard in the District Court which processed almost 21,000 such applications last year (Coulter, 2007). The remaining affected families sort out contact

¹ Consistent poverty is the principal measure used by the Irish Government in setting targets to reduce poverty. This measure focuses on people who are both on low incomes and experiencing deprivation in terms of a set of eight basic items they cannot afford to have or do. This figures uses the 60% median income threshold, and is based on data from the EU-SILC Survey 2004.

arrangements on an informal basis, and do not seek external legal or statutory intervention.

Vast social scientific literature on the ‘effects’ of divorce on children that has been produced since the 1970s, generally supports the dominant discourse that children do best when they can maintain relationships with both parents and hence the argument that contact with a non-resident parent is generally in children’s best interests has passed the realms of incontestable ‘truth’ (Kaganas and Sclater, 2004). Reinforcement of this discourse is found at international level, whereby in the advent of parental separation, the maintenance of a child-parent relationship is acknowledged in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)² which states that:

Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child’s best interests (Article 9. 3).

Challenges are presented in terms of providing a range of supports to families with children experiencing relationship breakdown, so that children have positive experiences of their family environments, including positive interaction and shared interests with their parents and between siblings (National Children’s Strategy, 2000). Similarly, a report by Hogan *et al.*, 2002 on *Children’s Experiences of Parental Separation* recommended that family policy should encourage continuity and stability in family relationships, should promote an ethos of lifelong parental responsibility and facilitate long-term contact or involvement between children and non-resident parents (Cousins, 2006). As part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, core considerations relating to nature, amount, and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children (Smyth, 2002) are paramount.

² Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49

In response to the growing phenomenon of marital and relationship breakdown, services have evolved to address the needs of children and families that are separated. One of the most common developments in this regard has been the development of contact centres for a minority of parents who cannot amicably agree on post-separation parental-child contact/access arrangements. These have been rooted in what is termed a “pro-contact discourse” whereby non-resident parents, which in the vast majority of cases tends to be fathers, are encouraged to continue with on-going emotional and financial support for their children following separation (Humphreys and Harrison 2003). A rights-based reasoning pervades this discourse, underpinned by the presumed benefits of contact for children, as noted earlier. However, it should be borne in mind that assumptions about children’s best interests are interpreted by mothers and fathers according to their own criteria (Kaganas and Sclater, 2004).

The issue of child contact has received much attention in the legal and policy frameworks of the UK in recent years. For instance, in England, the Children’s Act 1989 defines Government policy as pro-contact (Halliday 1997). Additionally, the UK Government report *Making Contact Work* (2002) examined various means for facilitating contact between non-resident parents and their children. More recently, the issue has featured prominently in the headlines, largely as a result of the campaigning efforts of fathers’ rights groups who complain of injustice and demand changes in the law. Hence, in the UK child welfare legislation and policy places co-operative parenting and contact with the non-resident parent at the centre of children’s well-being (Kaganas and Sclater, 2004).

However, the situation in Ireland is much different, and very little if any relevant legislative or policy discussion on the complex issues surrounding post-separation and post-divorce parenting has occurred to date. For instance, while Objective L of the National Children’s Strategy ‘Children (2000) states that ‘*children have the opportunity to experience the qualities of family life*’, it makes no reference to children of separated or divorced parents in this regard. It is not surprising therefore that service provision for non-resident parents in the form of contact centres in Ireland are very new phenomena.

The literature discusses a broad range of purposes for contact centres. Some of the most common include:

- maintaining psychological and emotional links between the child and non-resident parent (Dickens 1999)
- fostering parental responsibility (Halliday 1997)
- educational, support and counselling role to parents going through separation (Parkinson 2006)
- assisting more non-resident parents (and particularly fathers) to remain involved in their children's lives (Parkinson 2006)
- reducing the reliance upon lawyers in resolving post-separation conflicts (Parkinson 2006)
- reducing the debilitating effect of conflict on children (Parkinson 2006)
- an early intervention initiative to help parents work out post-separation parenting arrangements and manage the difficult transition from parenting together to parenting apart (Parkinson 2006)
- a neutral space/meeting place to enable the maintenance of family ties
- providing a transitional/short-term contact arrangement for separated parents and their children.

The concept of neutrality pervades the literature with regards to such centres (Simpson, 1994; Halliday, 1997; Dickens, 1999; Kroll, 2000; Knox and Orr, 2001; Aris et al., 2002; Humphreys and Harrison, 2003; Sproston et al., 2004; McConnell-Trevillion et al., 2004). In other words, contact centres and their staff take an impartial stance with regards to the families which use their services. Such an approach could be regarded as appealing in family breakdown situations, where conflict is frequently high.

The issue of safety in contact centres is complex, as is apparent in the literature. On the one hand, the need for contact centres has arisen in response to issues of domestic violence and child abuse, with a heavy emphasis on ensuring the safety of the child and vulnerable parent (Dickens 1999). Supervised centres in particular would have an

important role to play here, although other types of centres may also deal with cases involving a history of domestic violence or abuse. On the other hand, the challenge of providing safe contact for separated parents and their children, and the potential risks that contact centres pose, is a recognised problem as mentioned above. This problem is further reinforced given the predominance of a pro-contact discourse over the last twenty years (Smart and Neale, 1999 cited in Aris et al, 2002). One way of meeting the safety needs of families using contact centres would be the development of screening and assessment procedures in the centre (Furniss, 2000; Aris et al 2002).

Moreover, contact centre involvement, either supported or supervised, has generally been regarded as short-term, transitional provision, with the aim of moving contact on to a more self-managed, less formal arrangement, while supervised centres are viewed as being required for only a small proportion of cases (Aris et al 2002). In determining service users' outcomes, there is a need for service providers to reflect on the extent to which the use of contact centres is regarded as a transitional phase with a view towards more informal access arrangements, or is seen as a long-term service.

The purpose(s) of the contact centre determine the type of contact that is provided. The literature is dominated by two principal types of contact/service: supported and supervised. Definitions of 'supported' contact describe a situation where families can come for meetings on neutral territory (Kroll 2000). Services offering supported contact tend to be centres which are formed on voluntary basis or by religious organisations (Dickens, 1999), with volunteers in the form of relatives or friends (Halliday 1997) who are somewhat distanced from the children in question, in the sense of being outside the immediate family or friendship/community network (Sproston et al. 2004). The venue itself is supervised in order to provide a safe venue for maintaining contact.

However, there is no consensus in the literature with regards to whether staff take a passive or active role in relation to the families using the centres. For instance, some centres are truly neutral in the sense that no supervision of the parents takes place (McConnell-Trevillion et al 2004), no feedback is given and no court reports are prepared

(Kroll 2000). In contrast, other centres take a more active role providing low-key assistance for parents if appropriate (Dickens 1999), assisting either parents or the children in maintaining contact, and centre staff will intervene where there is perceived danger of abuse of the child (McConnell-Trevillion et al 2004). Support contact is described as low vigilance, typically with more than one family per room and more than one family per worker. The venue itself is supervised but there is no supervision of the parents (McConnell-Trevillion et al 2004). The majority of contact centre services in the UK are strongly associated with this approach (see Dickens 1999).

‘Supervised’ contact (alternatively referred to as ‘statutory supervised contact’), in contrast, involves formal supervision and intensive work by at least one member of staff who is a guardian/social worker or other statutory worker (Halliday, 1997; Sproston et al. 2004). Supervised contact is high vigilance contact, typically with one family per room and with at least one worker monitoring contact (McConnell-Trevillion et al 2004), including conversations and behaviour (Kroll (2000). Assessments and reports of contact visits are produced (Mitchell 2001). Child safety risks are usually at the centre of this type of contact which is most often ordered by the court or social work departments in cases where it is felt the child is at risk from contact with the parent (Sproston et al. 2004; (McConnell-Trevillion et al 2004). Australian and American contact centres are mainly based on this approach (Dickens 1999). Supervised provision has tended to be funded directly or indirectly from the statutory sector, and generally form a small minority of contact centre types.

It is evident that there are significant differences regarding form of contact being offered in the different types of centres. A potential problem regarding confusion or a lack of understanding as to the services on offer on the part of referrers (in particular the courts service) and parents have led or may lead to situations concerning mistaken or inappropriate usage and unsuitable referrals, and safety issues (Valios, 2007; Sproston et al. 2004; Humphreys, 2003; Humphreys and Harrison, 2003; Furniss, 2000; Kroll 2000; Dickens, 1999). These developments indicate the need for suitably qualified staff to conduct rigorous family history/background screening and risk assessment procedures

necessary to inform decision making on the appropriateness of use by parents of such centres. Such occurrences raise serious questions as to the nature of communication, information sharing and knowledge between contact centre and potential referrers (such as solicitors, judges, guardians, social workers) and service users.

From an evaluation perspective, it is important to make the distinction between the components of parent-child contact since different patterns of care result in different child and parent outcomes. Smyth (2002) points out that parent-child contact can vary along many dimensions, including frequency, nature, quality, flexibility, regularity, and continuity (ongoing, start-stop, re-start). He notes that “day only” contact versus “sleepovers”, and “holiday” versus “term-time” arrangements have psycho-social implications. Likewise, contact centres which by nature are ‘non-natural’ settings for parent-child interaction and are circumscribed by limited space and time, will have different child and parent outcomes. For instance, Jenkins and Lyons (2006) note that non-resident parents have limited opportunities to participate in a range of important routine family activities such as doing homework, preparing and eating meals, travelling to school, showering, dressing, cleaning, and cuddles and reading before bedtime. Moreover, the role which leisure and recreation plays in the relationship between non-resident fathers and their children is another important consideration, since in most formal contact arrangements, opportunities for leisure are circumscribed by the type and nature of contact. To date little research exists in this area (Jenkins and Lyons, 2006). It is crucial therefore, in assessing the quality and outcomes of child-parent contact, to have information on the context of contact, and what activities non-resident parents and their children engage in (if and) when they are together (Smyth, 2002).

3. OVERVIEW OF TIME4US PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the Time4US service as it has operated since March 2007 when the service began operation. This chapter is divided into a number of sections. The first section provides a description of the proposed service as described in Time4Us documents provided to the evaluation team. These documents are the Time4Us centre proposal (2005), the criteria for determining the level of intervention drawn up by Time4Us staff and management, and correspondence clarifying the governance structure of the organisation. The second section describes the development of an evaluation monitoring database by the Child and Family Research Centre, NUIG, (herein after referred to as the evaluation team) and outline information provided by Time4Us staff to the evaluation team. The third section provides information and analysis relating to the use of the service under the following headings:

- The gender of each service user;
- The number of service users currently using the service;
- The type of inquiries received by Time4Us staff;
- The main referrers to Time4Us;
- The number of children who use the service;
- The geographical spread of service users;
- Current status of service users;
- Reasons for discontinuing use of the service (where applicable);
- Service use levels of each user (including cancellations);
- Service use by week;
- Number of children using the service and activities engaged in by children.

The fourth section of this chapter provides a more descriptive account of the role of the staff and tasks engaged in by them when interacting and engaging with service users.

3.1. Description of Time4Us

The Time4Us programme (proposal 2005) sets out a total of nine objectives, as follows:

- i. To provide a non-intrusive, non-expensive facility where non-resident parents can spend time with their children
- ii. To provide a child friendly facility with activities and equipment that facilitate improved bonding with parents through the medium of play
- iii. To provide a safe, caring and fun environment that will help sustain and grow child-parent relationships
- iv. To provide a service for certain targeted families referred through the legal and health services (no more than 30%)
- v. To provide an accessible service with a location and opening hours to meet the needs of service users
- vi. To facilitate the improvement of formal and informal links between service users and the wider community
- vii. To provide the opportunity for referral to other agencies to meet needs identified by service users
- viii. To operate and maintain the highest professional standards with suitably qualified and trained staff
- ix. To carry out ongoing evaluation of the service using evidence-based research so that the service is tailored to meet the needs of service users.

Time4Us operates within the premise that parents and children do better when parents are supported and remain fully involved in their children's lives. The core features of the programme are designed to support continuity and stability in family relationships and promote an ethos of lifelong parenting and involvement between child and parent. It identifies itself as a play centre for parents who do not live with their children.

Time4Us describes its model of intervention as facilitatory – the purpose being to improve bonding between children and parents. It explains that it is a universal, non-stigmatising service providing a play-based environment for service users. The service explains that it will maintain links with resident parents.

The Time4Us proposal (2005) outlined a menu of programmes, ranging from no support and/or intervention through to high support and/or intervention, based on individual or group activities as follows:

- Individual parent and child open play sessions
- Informal/optional educational low support group activity
- Individual one to one low support
- Individual one to one high support
- Individual one to one intervention.

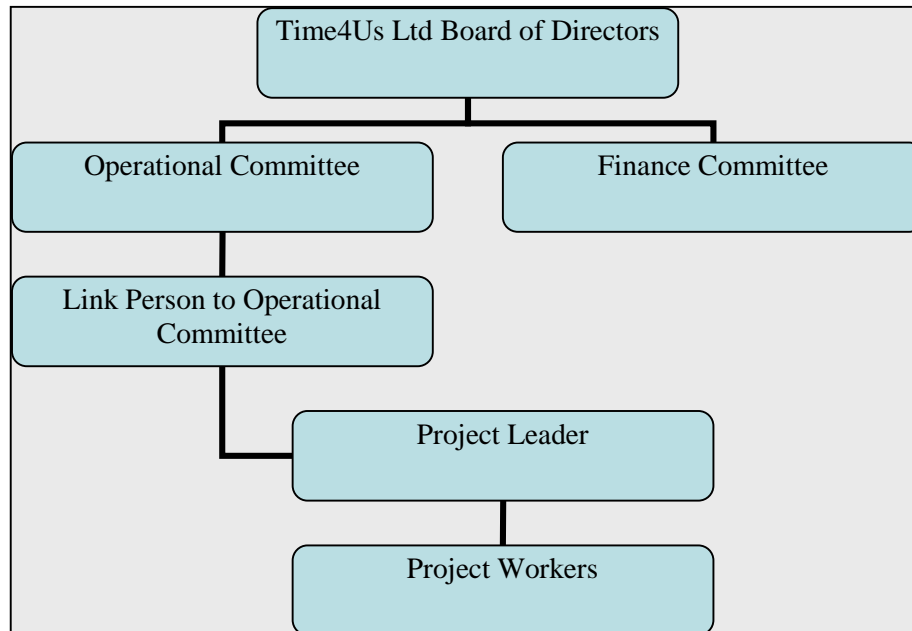
It noted that the Play Centre will facilitate other professional service staff to use the facility for access or supervised visits.

The proposal explains that referral information and contact details of other services and agencies, such as local community supports, networks, events and activities, are provided where appropriate to assist parents and children. It notes that the service is to be established in an accessible location, with flexible working hours, and minimal costs, based on each family's circumstances.

The estimated level of need for the service was not specified in documentation provided to the evaluation team, rather this service was founded on the basis of consultation with various professional health and social service groups, informal community groups, and separated parents who identified a growing social problem and demand for a "child-friendly facility" which provides "non-professional, non-stigmatising, generic service". The duration of the service and exit strategies were also not specified.

Time4Us envisages that the majority of referrals (70%) will be self-referrals, whereby parents walk in off the street or phone to make an appointment. 30% of places will be open to professional referral from a wide range of services including: family and criminal law courts, family mediation services, learning disability sector, social work departments, and family support services.

The governance/management arrangement of the Time4Us programme is set out below:



The operational committee is responsible for the day to day running of the service, including financial arrangements and support and supervision of staff. The staff report on a weekly basis to the designated link person from the Operational Committee. The Operational Committee reports to the Board of Directors at regular meetings.

The original proposed start date for the pilot programme was 1st April 2005. However, due to delays in completion of the renovation of the premises, the staff did not commence employment until December 2006 and the service opened for families in March 2007. The service operates at purposely equipped premises in a Retail Centre on the Tuam Road. The service operates on a 7 day a week basis, with flexible working hours, to meet the needs of families.

3.2 Developing the Evaluation Database

As outlined in the interim report of November 2007, the evaluation team requested a number of data sources from staff to develop an evaluation monitoring database. These data sources were:

- The Time4Us catalogue drawn from the log book/diary maintained by the staff. This catalogue contains details on the number of inquiries, date of each inquiry, where each inquirer heard about the service, whether other agencies referred the inquirer to the service, and whether each inquiry is new or a second inquiry relating to a previous one. The latest version of the database was received on the 17th May 2008. The evaluation team decided that the 30th April would be the cut-off point for service users for the purposes of the evaluation, hence any subsequent service use does not feature in this report;
- Enrolment and referral forms for each service user. These forms were anonymised by Time4Us staff and each service user was given a parent number. These forms provide for the identification of contact details, where the service user heard about the service, whether each service user is receiving services from other particular agencies, how often each user would like to use the service, and the names and ages of the user's children. Additionally, the referral forms permit the recording of details such as whether access is court ordered or not, special dietary requirements of the children involved, and existing agencies providing supports to the family. During the monitoring phase the evaluation team found that not all referral forms were fully completed by Time4Us staff – some families may not have other agencies supporting them for example, while other forms did not detail any reasons for referral;
- Hard copies of individual log sheets for each service use. Such log sheets provide details on the time and date of service use, the number of children involved in each service use, the activities engaged in by the child (ren), and a descriptive account of what occurred over each service use. These log sheets also provide an insight into the role the staff play in facilitating access between parent and child (ren) and in the wider relations within families. It is important to note that not all log sheets were supplied to NUIG staff. The exact figures are presented in table 3.1 below. However, it is clear that the vast majority of log sheets for visits was

received, thus permitting a detailed picture of service provision to be described. The last set of log sheets was received from staff on the 15th May 2008;

Table 3.1: Log Sheets Versus Database Figures

	Log Sheets	Database
Service Uses	498	581 (including 21 drop offs)
Cancellations	67	86
Total Service Use Hours	927	1130

- Data provided from the staff and the link person to the operational committee on the criteria determining the level of intervention and support provided to each family. Additionally, a programme comprising of the projected level of support provided to each parent, the number of children, background information on each parent and child (ren) and the proposed timeframe for each intervention. This data was received for the first 24 service users only. The evaluation team did not receive similar documentation for subsequent service users;
- Email and regular phone contact by the evaluation team with the staff of Time4Us, particularly regarding clarification of issues pertaining to the database and log sheets.

As a result of these datasets the evaluation team established an evaluation monitoring database to manage, quantify and analyse the information. This database consisted of a number of parts:

- The first section comprised of information drawn from the enrolment and referral sheets provided by Time4Us. This information included dates, number and age of children related to each service user, geographical location of service user, and where he/she heard about the service;

- The second section comprised of a log for each service user drawn from the log sheets provided to the evaluation team. Each user’s log detailed the number of visits, length of each visit, an account of each visit, information pertaining to each family situation (for example correspondence or contact between parents via the staff), and activities engaged in by service users and their children over the course of the visit.

3.3. Analysis of Monitoring Data

3.3.1. Rates of Inquiry: Monthly Rates

The Time4Us catalogue records the number of inquiries made about Time4Us each month since March 2007. The database reveals that over the period there were 94 inquiries made about the service. These inquiries arose from three sources: professionals inquiring on behalf of a client; resident parents, and non-resident parents. The complete set of inquiries, sources, total inquiries and resulting service users are provided in table 3.2 below:

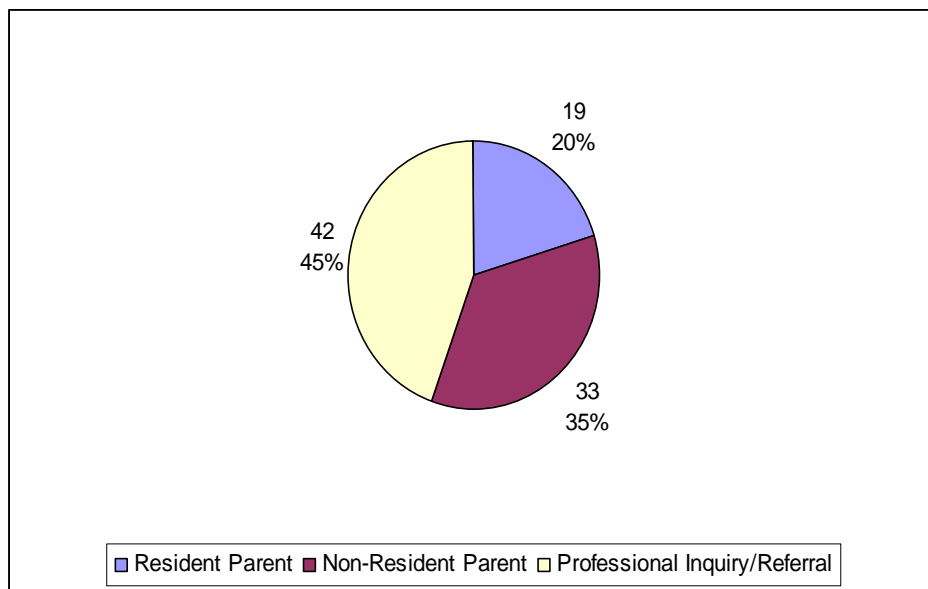
Table 3.2: Rates Of Inquiry, Sources of Inquiry And Resulting Service User Figures

Month	Resident parent	Non-resident parent	Professional	Multiple* inquiries	Total	Resulting service users
Mar 07	1	4	1	2	6	3
Apr 07	1	4	2	0	7	4
May 07	1	4	5	2	10	5
Jun 07	1	3	8	1	12	5
July 07	2	2	3	0	7	5
Aug 07	1	0	0	0	1	1
Sep 07	1	1	5	0	7	4
Oct 07	2	3	5	0	10	5
Nov 07	3	0	4	0	7	1
Dec 07	1	1	1	0	3	1
Jan 08	1	7	4	0	12	7
Feb 08	1	3	1	2	5	2
Mar 08	2	0	2	2	4	2
Apr 08	1	1	1	1	3	3
Total	19	33	42	10	94	48

* ‘Multiple inquiries’ refers to different inquiries made by or on behalf of the same potential service user. For example, an individual may have an inquiry made on their behalf by a referrer and then make another inquiry themselves.

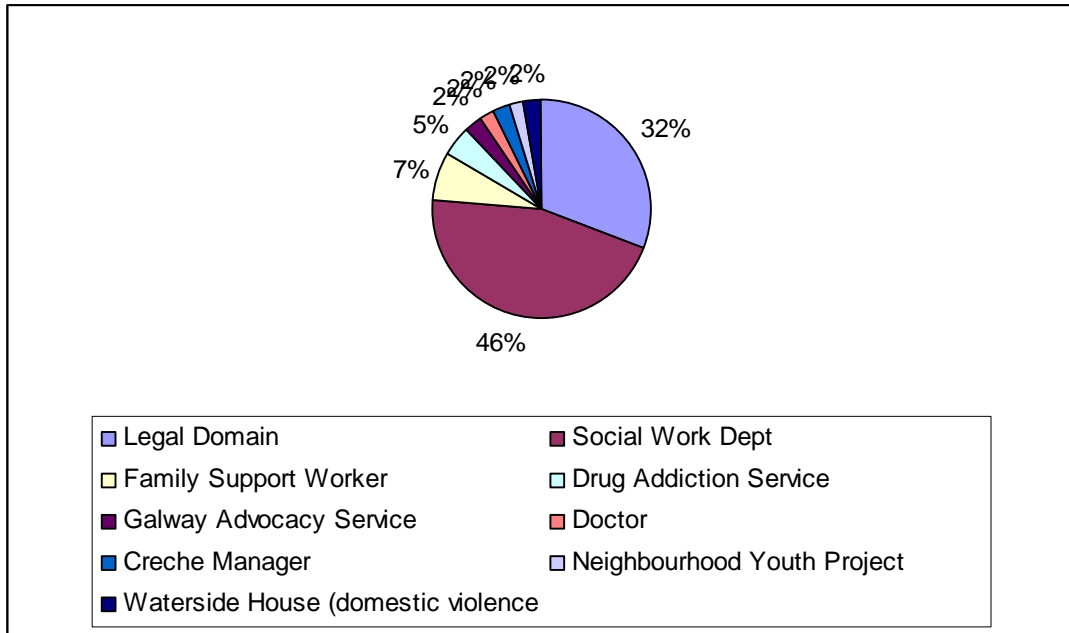
As can be seen from these figures, the total number of service users account for 57% of single inquiries and 51% when multiple inquiries are included in the figures. Due to the voluntary nature of the service professionals can inquire on behalf of a client but not compel such a client to contact Time4Us and begin using the service. In some cases inquiries are made with no subsequent follow up by parents, while in other cases inquiries are made by professionals only to be followed up by parents some months afterwards. On the parental side, months have elapsed in some cases between resident parents inquiring on behalf of their child(ren)'s other parent and the non-resident parent contacting the service. A graphical description of inquiries by category is presented in chart 3.1 below:

Chart 3.1: Total Number of Inquiries by Category



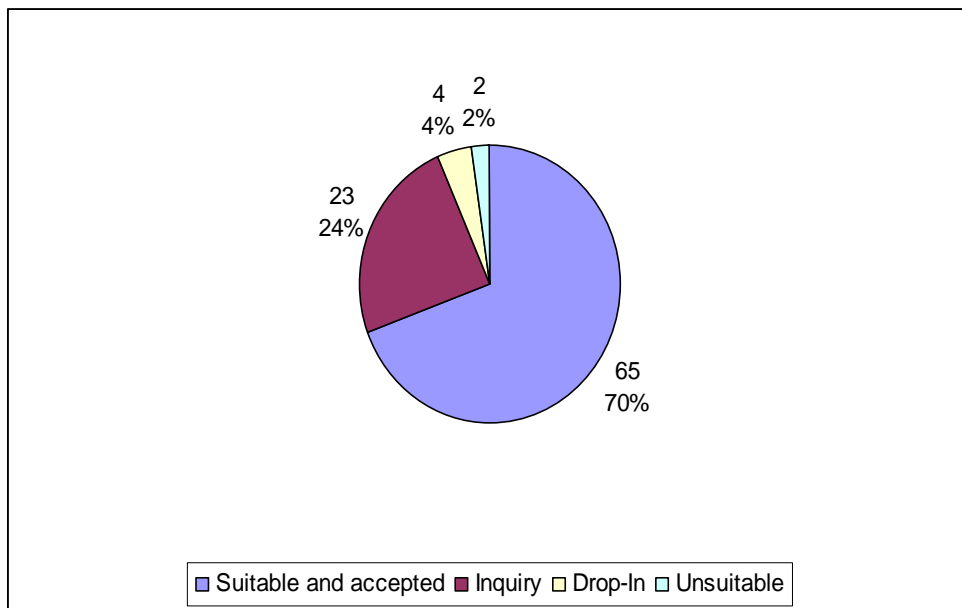
Despite the high number of inquiries from children's parents – both resident and non-resident – a significant proportion of inquiries arose from the professions, particularly the social work departments and the legal domain who together accounted for over three-quarters of all professional inquiries. The full breakdown of the sources of professional inquiries (45%) is presented in chart 3.2 below:

Chart 3.2: Professional Inquiries by Category of Professional/Service



Additionally, and discounting the presence of multiple inquires as listed in table 3.1 above, it is significant that over half (57.1%) of all inquiries result in service use at Time4Us. In fact, of the 94 inquiries made about Time4Us 65 were accepted by staff as suitable candidates for service use, 23 were labelled ‘inquiry’ with no subsequent follow up from either staff or inquirer, two were deemed unsuitable for using Time4Us and four were labelled ‘drop-in.’ These figures are represented in chart 3.3 below:

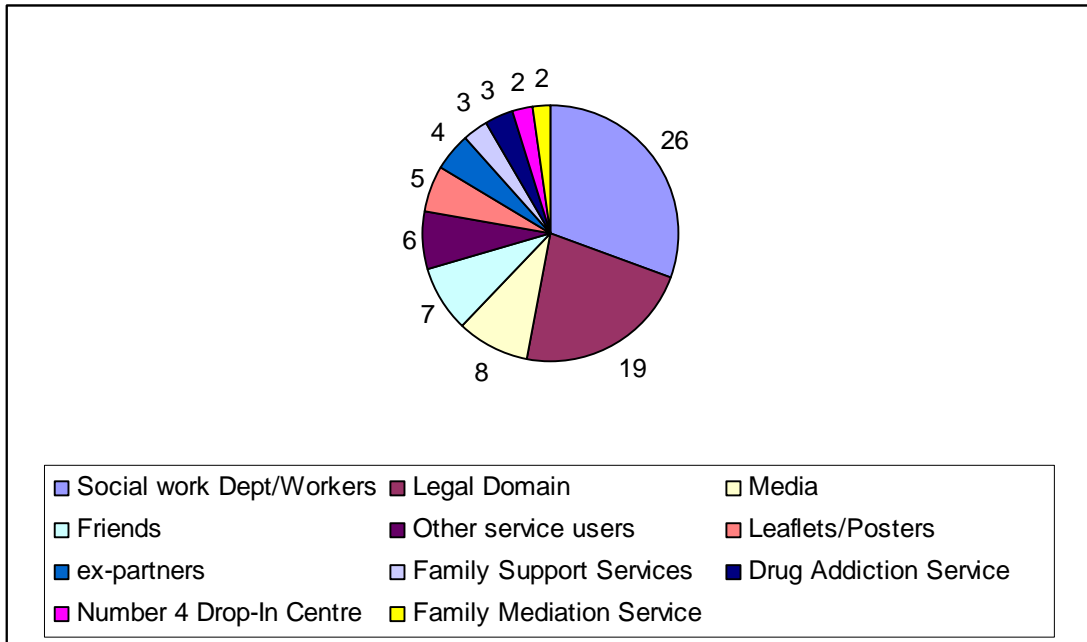
Chart 3.3: Categorisation of Inquiry by Time4Us Staff



3.3.2 Awareness of service

Inquirers, both parental and professional, identified to staff where they heard about the service upon inquiring about it. In total, 99 responses were received and some are grouped into certain domains. For example, 'legal domain' accounts for family law centres, solicitors and the courts. It is interesting to note that the two major referrers are social workers/social work departments and those involved in the legal domain. The breakdown of responses with a value exceeding one is presented in chart 3.4 below:

Chart 3.4: Where Inquirers Heard About the Service



In addition, inquirers also identified the following services/sources as providing information about Time4Us. Each service or source was listed once in the staff database.

These sources were:

- Child Access Centre, London;
- The Galway City and County Childcare Committee;
- A crèche; a men’s homeless centre;
- A family member; foster family;
- HSE;
- Galway advocacy centre;
- A school;
- A neighbourhood youth project;
- play therapist;
- other person;
- and Time4Us staff.

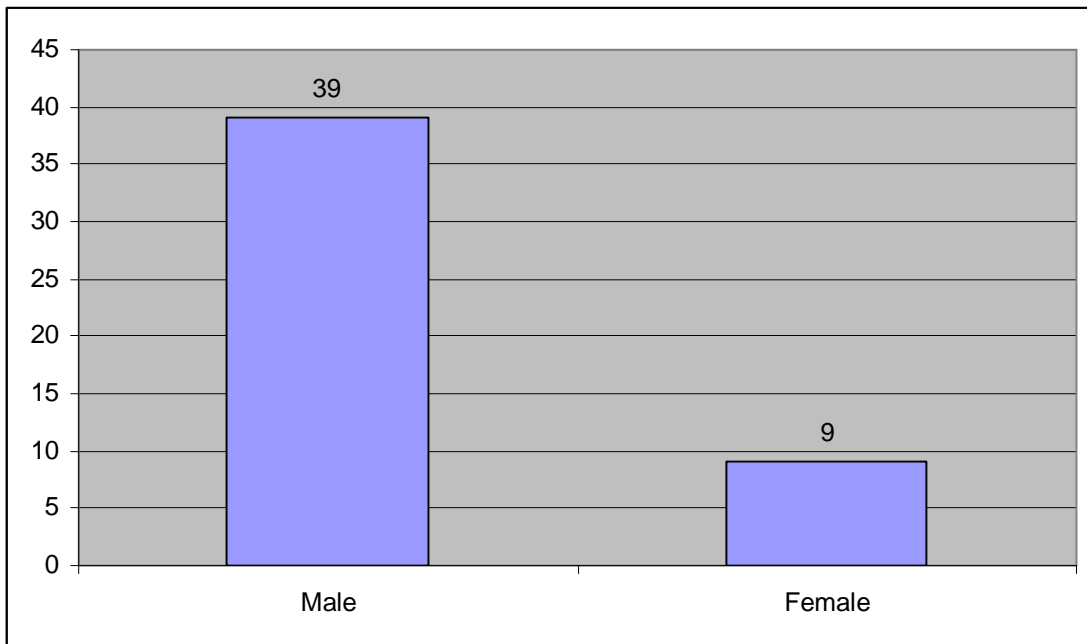
3.3.3 Time4Us Service Use and Profile of Service Users.

3.3.3.1 Time4Us Service Users

In addition to permitting the compilation of statistics pertaining to Time4Us in a general sense, the Time4Us catalogue permits the quantification of total service use hours per user and per month while also allowing the determination of the number of cancellations per service user.

In total, 48 service users have or continue to use Time4Us over the period covered by this report (March 2007-April 2008). The majority of Time4Us users are male, although the numbers of female service users has increased since the interim report. The total number of service users categorised by gender is displayed in chart 3.5 below:

Chart 3.5: Gender of Service User



Additionally, it is worth noting that of the 48 parents who have used, or are using, the service, four sets of two parents see the same children at the centre (i.e. they were former partners).

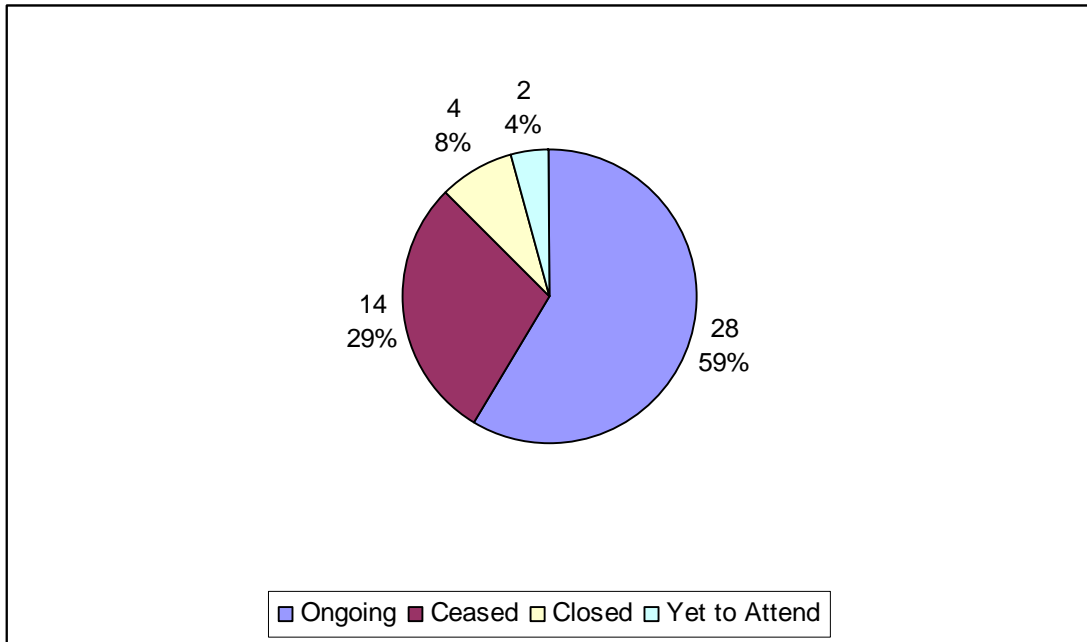
3.3.3.2 Current Status of Time4Us Service Users

After examining the staff database and periodic reports, and the anonymised log sheets the evaluation team categorised the status of each service user. Such status is determined by the date of the last visit recorded by the Time4Us staff and a review of the history of each service user since the service began operation:

- *Ongoing* indicates a service user who has attended in the last two months of the period of inquiry (1 March – 30 April 2008);
- *Ceased* indicates a service user who has stopped using the service but is open to return. The cessation of such service use can be due to many factors. In some cases service users may suffer from particular medical conditions or illnesses which can cause irregular access visits – e.g. they may only see their children once a year. In other cases service users may reside in a different country and therefore only use the service intermittently. In other cases again a small number of service users are temporarily incarcerated but free to use the service once they are released. Other parents could no longer attend due to financial constraints. Finally, one ceased service user has gained access to their children outside the play centre as a result of using Time4Us;
- *Closed* indicates cases whose service use has been terminated, either by staff due to safety concerns or the amount of upset being caused to the child, or by professionals involved in the case. In some instances cases are closed due to the wishes of the resident mother or the withdrawal of the service user themselves from the service;
- In three further cases service users have been registered in the past month and allocated a timeslot but have *yet to attend*.

A total of 28 service users continue to use the service on an on-going basis as of the end of April 2008. The full breakdown of status of service use is presented in chart 3.6 below:

Chart 3.6: Status of All Service Users

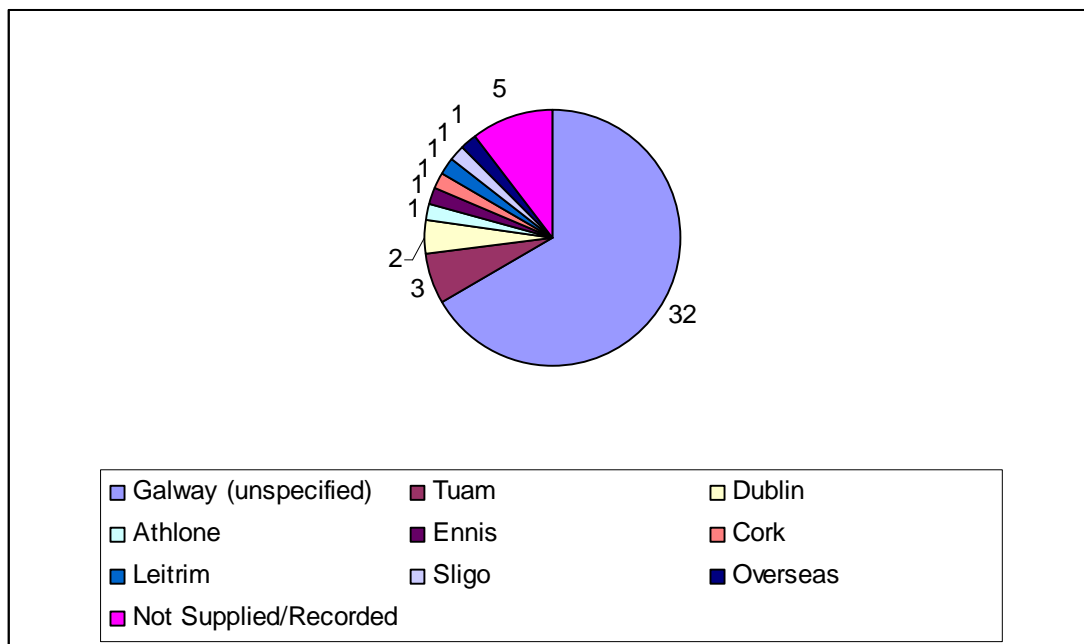


Interestingly, of those 28 service users who currently use Time4Us, the way in which they use the service differs and, for many, has changed over the usage period. For example, one parent (as referred to above) has gained access to their children outside the service as a result of using the service. Another five service users have outside access to their children and use the service on a drop-in basis as an alternative place to play. Log sheets reveal that such service users call beforehand to inquire as to the availability of the centre. A further four parents have used the service for some time before being allowed to take their children outside Time4Us. As a result Time4Us has become a pick-up/drop-off location for both parents to collect or drop off their children for access. In such instances parents and children often use the centre for a short period of time prior to children being either picked up or dropped off. In one case Time4Us provides a space for supervised access to occur between a parent and their child (ren). The access is supervised by the other parent; Time4Us do not keep any records, anonymised or otherwise, on this case. The remaining *ongoing* service users (18) have access in Time4Us solely.

3.3.3.3 Geographical Spread of Time4Us Service Users

The evaluation team was able to determine the geographical spread of the majority of service users from the enrolment sheets completed by staff. For the most part service users are from Galway, either city or county (the exact location is not always recorded on service documentation). However, other service users travel from a variety of locations to see their children. The total geographical spread of Time4Us service users is outlined in chart 3.7 below:

Chart 3.7: Geographical Spread of Service Users



3.3.3.4 Service Use per User and per week

There is great diversity in the usage levels of Time4Us service users. Some are sporadic users calling in to the centre with little or no notice while others are regular users with fixed slots every week. The total amount of service use per parent is presented in charts 3.8A and 3.8B on pages 15 and 16. The total amount of service use per week, including visits, hours, cancellations and drop offs (where applicable) is presented in charts 3.8C and 3.8D on pages 17 and 18.

When examining service use per parent it is interesting to note the great variance in usage hours. There are many explanations for this: service users withdrawing from the service;

service users only visiting once and not returning; and service users gaining access to their children outside the centre, therefore not using it as much. The utility of providing mean scores is devalued here due to such variance. However, we can deduce median (that value which occurs in the middle of the range) and mode (the value which occurs most often in the range) values for service use per parent. For visits per service user the median value is 4. For hours per service user the median value is 8 hours. For cancellations the median value is 2 (if the zero values are excluded). Turning to the mode values of each category, the mode value for visits is 2, the mode value for hours is 4 and the mode value for cancellations is 1 (when zero is excluded).

Turning to examine service use per week the disparity between values is significantly less. Therefore, calculating averages is a more fruitful form of statistical analysis. Examining visits per week we can see that the average is 9.51. The average number of hours per week is 19.08 hours and the average number of cancellations per week is 1.53. The median score for visits per week is 9 and the mode is 5. The median score for hours per week is 17.5 and the mode is 3. Finally, the median score for cancellations is 0 and the mode is 0.

Chart 3.8A: Service Use Per User Parents 1-24: Visits, Hours, Cancellations and Drop-Off/Pick Up Visits

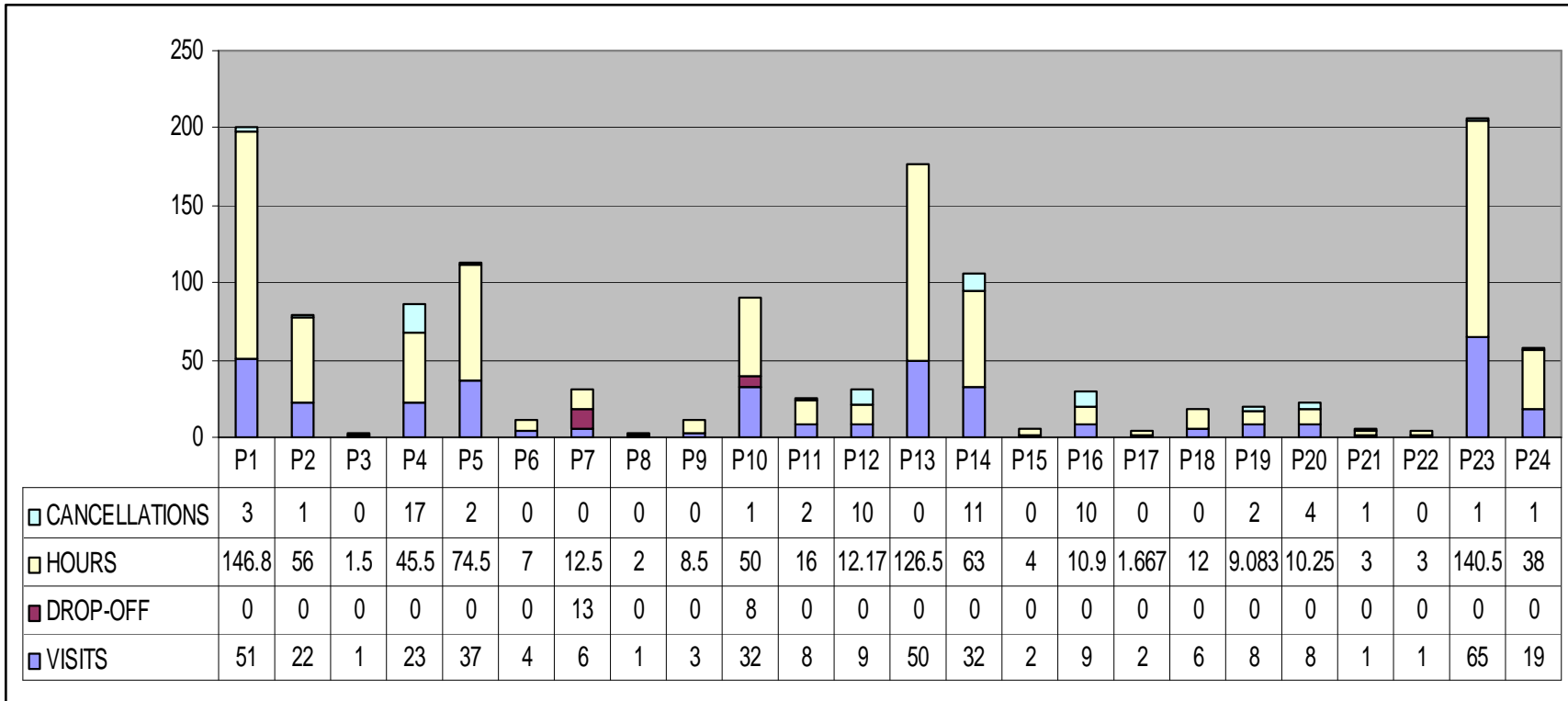


Chart 3.8B: Service Use *Per User* Parents 25-48: Visits, Hours, Cancellations and Drop-Off/Pick Up Visits

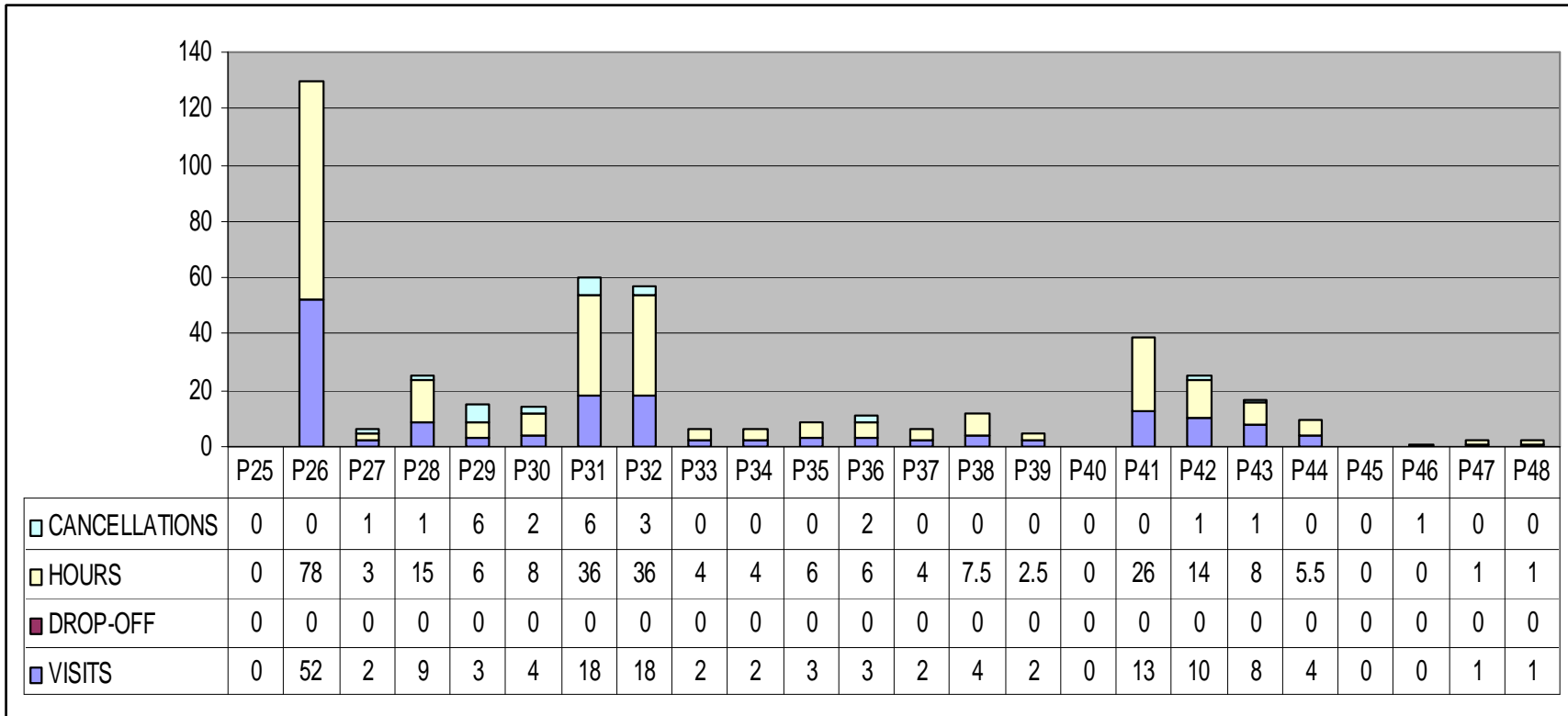


Chart 3.8C: Number of Visits, Hours, Cancellations and Drop-offs *Per Week*, Period March –October 2007

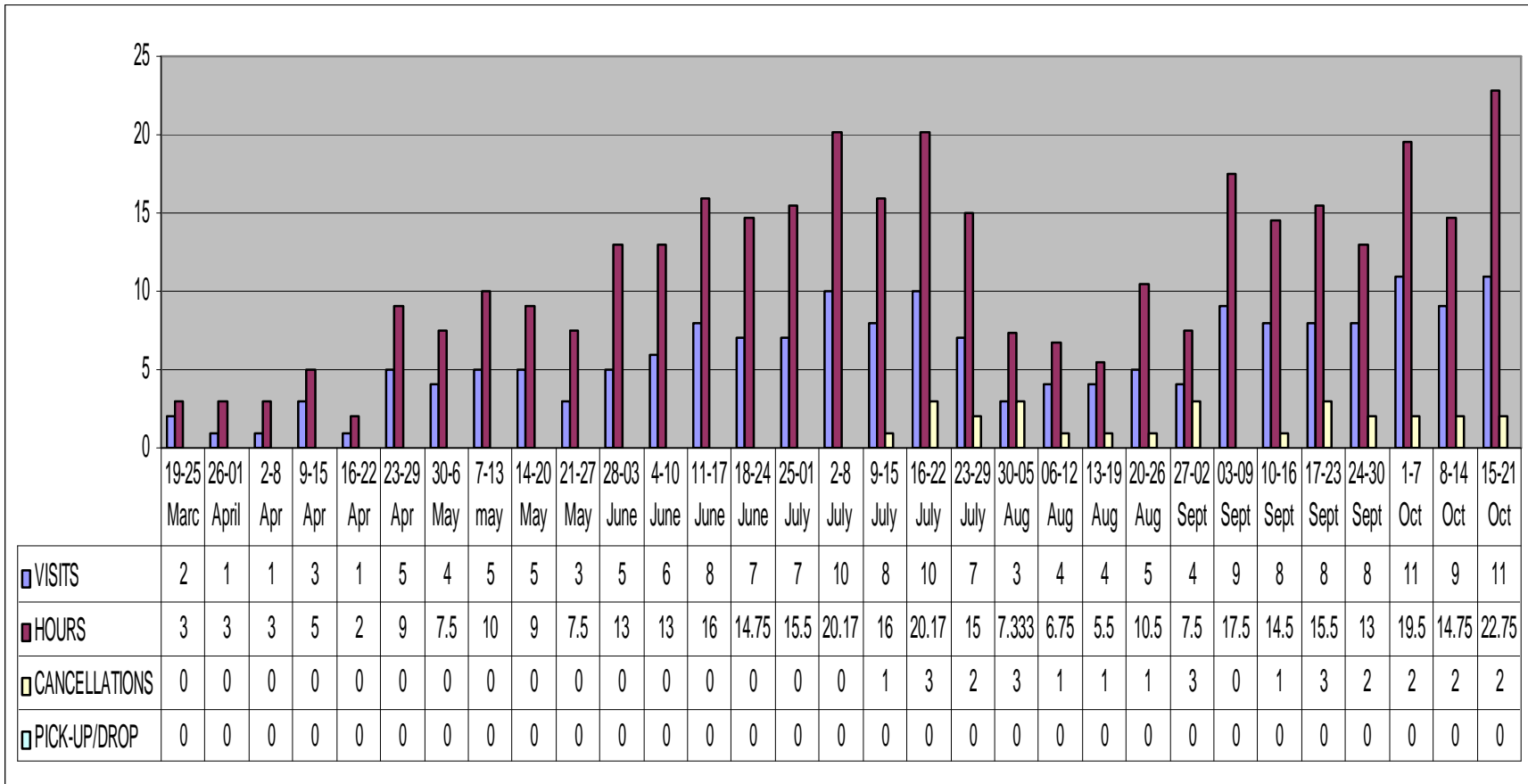
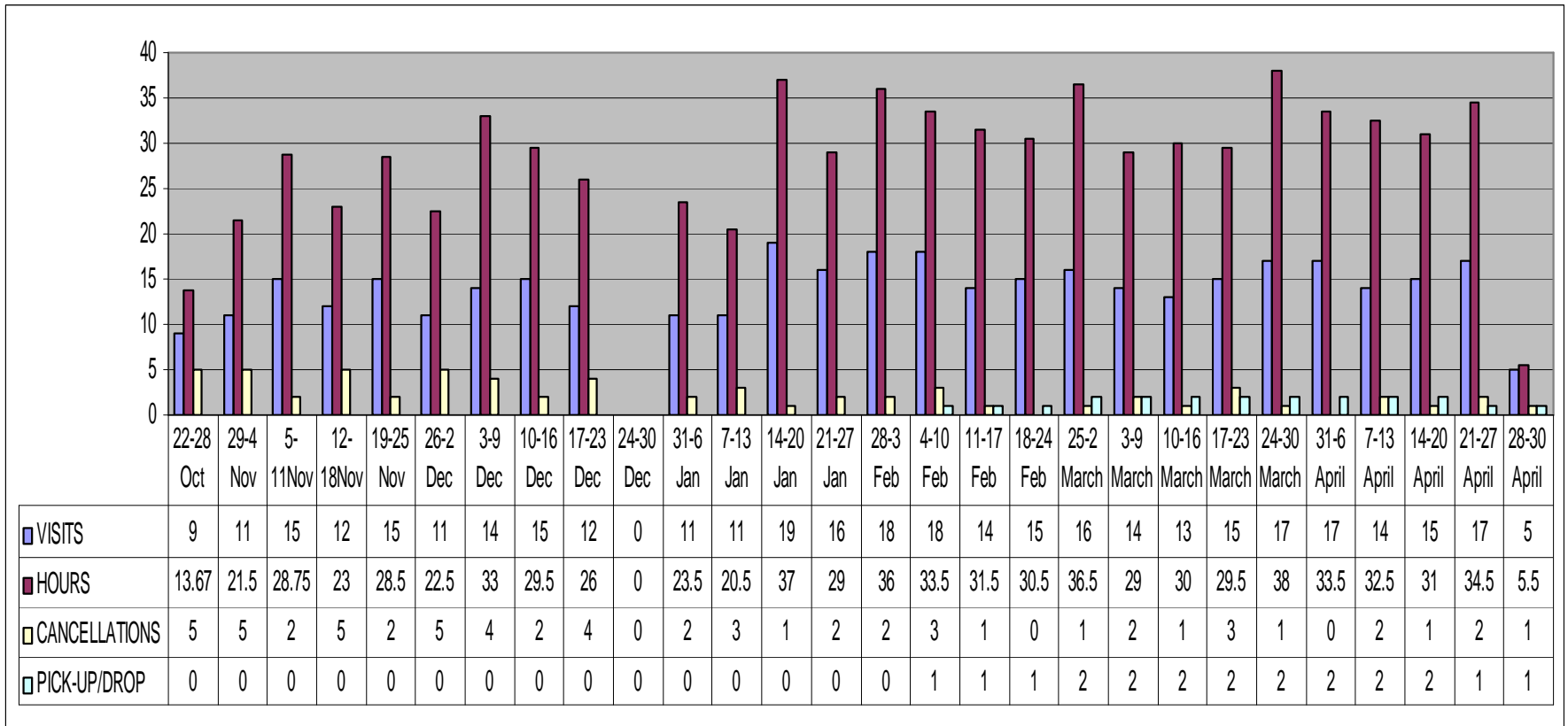


Chart 3.8D: Number of Visits, Hours, Cancellations and Drop-offs *Per Week*, Period October 2007 –March 2008



3.3.4. Children Involved in Time4Us

The number of children using the service has, understandably, continued to rise with the number of service users. In total, 89 children have used or use the centre with their parents up to the end of April 2008. The number of children varies with each parent. This is presented in table 3.3 below:

Table 3.3: Number of Children who Use the Service

Number of parents	Number of children
19	1
18	2
6	3
4	>4

Although ages have not been provided for seven children in total, if this number is taken from the total the average age of the children using the service is 5.9 years.

3.3.4.1 Activities Undertaken by Children and Time4Us Service Users

The number of activities available to Time4Us service users, as described in the log sheets, includes:

- Arts and Crafts
- Creative Play
- Tabletop Games (e.g. pool, air hockey, board games)
- Reading
- Sensory Play
- Educational
- Food Preparation

From the log sheets it appears that the activities undertaken by service users and children are somewhat dependent on the age of the child. Amongst service users with younger children arts and crafts and creative play are quite popular activities, as is exploring the

centre itself, examining toys and generally having fun. Amongst the older children tabletop games, especially pool and air hockey, are pursued with parents. In addition, the log sheets also describe school-aged children sometimes doing homework with their parent in the smaller room in the centre. Reading and writing practice has also been a feature of interaction between parents and children.

A feature of many visits at Time4Us, irrespective of the age of the child, is the emphasis placed on food preparation and eating together. Numerous parents bring food with them to the centre and prepare a meal (however there are no cooking facilities at the centre beyond a microwave) to eat with their child (ren). Others temporarily leave the centre to purchase food for them and their child (ren) which is consumed on the premises. This has been a feature of almost all service user-child interaction documented in the log sheets provided to the evaluation team.

Parents also tend to bring new toys into the centre as gifts to their children. These form part of the play activities undertaken by parent and child. Sometimes parents also bring in other toys or activities not supplied by the centre, such as portable TVs and DVD players and watch films or cartoons during visits. However, this is not a feature of the majority of visits which occur in the centre.

3.3.5. The Role of the Time4Us Staff

The log sheets provided to the evaluation team describe many different tasks undertaken by the staff of Time4Us, not only in the ‘delivery’ of the service but also in providing supports to parents and children, and liaising with ex-partners of service users and referrers. Broadly speaking, an analysis of the relevant information indicates the role of staff falling into three main areas:

- To provide direct and indirect support to service users and their children;
- To liaise with referrers regarding arranging access and providing feedback to the relevant authorities if and when required;
- To liaise with the child (ren)’s other parent/foster parents/legal guardians.

Each of these is now discussed in turn.

3.3.5.1. Staff Support to Service Users

The log sheets provide a good account of the supports staff provides to service users, and much of this is in line with their own model of intervention as discussed in the staff interviews section and the model of intervention criteria set out in the interim report. The log sheets detail a number of specific supports provided to a range of service users.

All parents – both resident and non-resident – and foster parents are encouraged to call in to the service and familiarise themselves with it. In particular, non-resident parents are prompted to engage with the centre and its staff from the first visit in an effort to make them more comfortable and settled in the service. Parents are made tea and coffee, invited to examine the toys and facilities in the centre, and discuss access arrangements with staff.

The extent of the bond between child (ren) and parent very much appears to influence the role of staff during visits. For example, in one instance staff actively engaged with a parent who had not seen their children in some time and encouraged the parent to play with their child; on another occasion staff sought to reassure a child about how the centre operated prior to them meeting their parent. On another occasion again staff engaged with a parent who was very nervous about seeing their children for the first time in a while in an attempt to make them more relaxed. Such interaction involved discussing their situation, reassuring the parent about the service, and more generally having tea and a chat with the parent.

It is also clear that for those parents whose parenting skills may not be as advanced as they wish the staff play a crucial role in assisting parents develop such skills. For some parents, particularly those who may have more than one small child, access can be a challenging, stressful time. Changing babies and toddlers can consume all of a parent's energies and focus and, therefore, they require the staff to occupy and engage the other children for that particular time. Other parents again find numerous children a challenge, regardless of whether one requires changing or not. In these instances – those labelled as 'high support' in the log sheets – staff are constantly providing support to parents by playing with children and advising parents on particular things, such as discipline, tidying

up after the visit, or assisting with putting the children into the car. In some cases staff have assisted in preparing food with parents and children also. On one occasion staff have spoken with children outside the centre who have refused to enter the premises, while on another occasion staff are specifically requested by the resident parent to change a child's nappy. Despite these instances, the log sheets record that staff are always positive about encouraging parents to attempt certain tasks with their children so as to build their confidence and develop their parenting skills.

Once service use has begun the staff provide further supports to parents dependent upon the extent of the parenting skills of the parent. The log sheets reveal that some parents are very comfortable with their children and require 'little or no support' from staff. While staff may observe or enter in and out of the playroom from time to time, their role is documented as supporting any requests each parent using the service may have. For example, some parents who can see their children outside of the service have requested suggestions from the centre staff about suitable activities to pursue with their children – swimming and music lessons are recorded in the log sheets as examples. On another occasion again a homework space was requested by a parent and facilitated by staff. Also, and as mentioned above, many parents like to eat with their children while in the service. Such happenings often only occur with the support of staff, who play with children while the food is being prepared or, in some cases, while the parent has temporarily left the building to purchase food.

However, staff also provide a form of indirect support to parents who use the service. Often, parents who use the service are engaged in legal proceedings regarding access to their children, and stresses and strains associated with such situations can cause parents great distress. Many parents tend to remain behind after access visits, or arrive early, to talk over particular situations with centre staff seeking advice. On other occasions parents have remained behind to talk about financial pressures, medical illnesses or worries they may have, or simply to retrieve information from staff on services or courses they may be considering pursuing. In one particular instance a parent asked the staff to write a letter for their solicitor regarding a particular legal issue (not pertaining to custody, guardianship or access) which would reflect their current situation vis-à-vis their child as

an indicator of good character. It is clear from the log sheets that some parents very much trust and confide in the staff, not just relating to their children but to other personal issues as well. There have been occasions where this has spilled over into parents requesting that staff take a particular side (if, for example, the conflict is about custody) but the log sheets demonstrate that staff have remained neutral in disagreements between parents.

The safety of children is also a concern of the staff while access visits are taking place. On a couple of occasions staff have been required to address the issue of alcohol consumption with parents when they arrive at the centre, but no major issue arose out of either of these occasions. On another occasion staff treated a child who had cut themselves while in the centre. On this occasion staff called the primary carer immediately after access to inform them of the situation. In another instance a service user informed staff that their partner had threatened to 'beat' the children if they played with the parent while in the centre. Staff advised the service user to contact their solicitor if this was the case.

3.3.5.2 Staff liaising with Children's other Parent/Guardians/Foster Parent.

Despite not being the primary users of the service staff still spend a significant amount of time liaising with resident parents regarding access arrangements. All cases for which log sheets were provided detail an extensive amount of phone calls or personal contact in the centre with the resident parent regarding access times, issues arising during access, or issues between parents themselves which can all result in some form of conflict. The foremost role played by staff is as intermediary between parents. The majority of contact with the resident parent relates to the scheduling or rescheduling of access times at the request of the non-resident parent, although changing access times is not always one-way. Staff treat resident parents in the same manner as non-resident parents: they are invited in to view the centre, ask any questions, familiarise themselves with how the service operates and maintain contact with staff at all times. Indeed, many resident parents also discuss personal issues with staff members during contact with the centre. Staff actively seek the opinions of resident parents on how access is going and have they noticed a difference in the children as a result of access at Time4Us. Indeed, many resident parents speak to staff about personal issues as well as those pertaining to their children.

It is clear, however, that conflict has occurred between service users and resident parents /guardians/extended family at the centre. As a result, staff have developed a handover policy at the centre. The handover policy requires service users to arrive before access and position themselves inside the centre. Once the resident parent has arrived staff proceed to the door of the centre and bring the child into the main play area. Once access is finished the child is brought out to the resident parent, some of whom stay in the reception area for the period of the visit. Others depart the centre for the period of the access. However, despite the implementation of the handover policy it appears not always possible to maintain such distance. On one or two occasions service users have refrained from adhering to the policy and caused distress to the resident parent with their presence. Similarly, on one or two occasions resident parents have been requested to vacate the main play area to prevent distracting the children. Similarly, staff have been required to remind both resident and non-resident parents of the terms of court orders referring to who is permitted to accompany the child to and from, and in, the play centre.

Over and above issues relating to conflict between parents, it is clear that in many cases staff are effectively intermediaries between parents. Staff are used to carry messages between parents, whether it be related to transport costs, schooling needs or medical expenses associated with their children. Additionally, staff often facilitate requests from resident parents regarding the activities of their children in the centre, such as play, or the types of food they eat while there. However, again staff refrain from taking sides and instead offer to exchange information between parents and work with both to come to some form of arrangement. It is clear from the log sheets that staff work with both parents to arrange the most appropriate access agreement for all concerned.

3.3.5.3 Staff liaising with Referrers

Although understandably not as extensive as the direct role outlined above, staff have a certain function in liaising with referrers regarding access. On a number of occasions staff have spoken with social workers regarding the success or otherwise of a particular parent's access visit and have provided information regarding the access for case conferences. On one particular occasion staff have accompanied a social worker to a parent's house to ensure the well-being of the parent. On another occasion a solicitor has

requested a court report regarding access arrangements for a particular family, while on another occasion a parent has requested a short letter for their solicitor relating to the timing of access.

3.4. Costs of Running the Service

The evaluation team received information from the management committee regarding the costs associated with the service. The total operational costs for the year 2007 amounted to €180,000. Capital costs for the renovating and equipping of the building amounted to a further €60,000.

3.5. Conclusion

The presentation of the data in this section of the report provides an in-depth descriptive account of the Time4Us service. It is clear that service use has increased since the interim report of November 2007, with numbers almost doubling in the intervening six months. Despite the fluctuations in inquiries over the 13 months that the service has been running it is important to note the number of overall inquiries and the resulting service use emanating from such inquiries. Specifically significant here is the high number of professional inquiries made and the resulting service use from such inquiries. It would appear from these figures alone that there is a demand for such a service.

Related to this is the high number of answers provided to staff about where inquirers heard about the service. The increasing level of awareness of the service amongst a variety of service providers has served to strengthen the base of the service and increase its numbers. Indeed the recent media coverage has also played a role here. The growth of service users from outside Galway city and county has also served to further illuminate the need for such a service nationally. The continuance of many of those in the service, despite travelling some distances, is a positive indication of both the service and its impact.

In assessing the role of the staff as described in the log sheets it is clear that they play a vital role and perform a number of functions, direct and indirect, relating to the service. In providing direct support to parents in meeting their children, through encouraging

them, cajoling them, and in some instances showing them how to do certain things, the staff impact on service users in a way which is difficult to simply quantify. The support provided to, and energy expended by staff in maintaining contact with, resident parents is noteworthy. Moreover, the intermediary role played by staff – exchanging information, passing messages, rearranging access times – appear to contribute in no small way to the maintenance of access visits, and in most but not all cases, the development of bonds between parent and child (ren). To the extent that we can say this with any great measure of clarity we must turn to the views of the non-resident and resident parents.

4. FINDINGS OF NON-RESIDENT AND RESIDENT PARENT QUESTIONNAIRES

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the findings of surveys sent to all non-resident parents who use, or have used Time4Us since it began operation. In addition, surveys were also sent to resident parents/guardians. Both surveys aim to enhance our understanding not only of those who use the service but also how they use the service and for what reasons. Moreover, it also serves to detail the reported impact of using the service on service users, their children, and their children's other parent.

The response rate for each cohort is presented in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1. Response Rate to Surveys

Cohort	Total Number of Service Users	Surveys Received	%Response Rate
Non-resident Parent	48	16	33
Resident Parent/Guardian	48	9	18.75

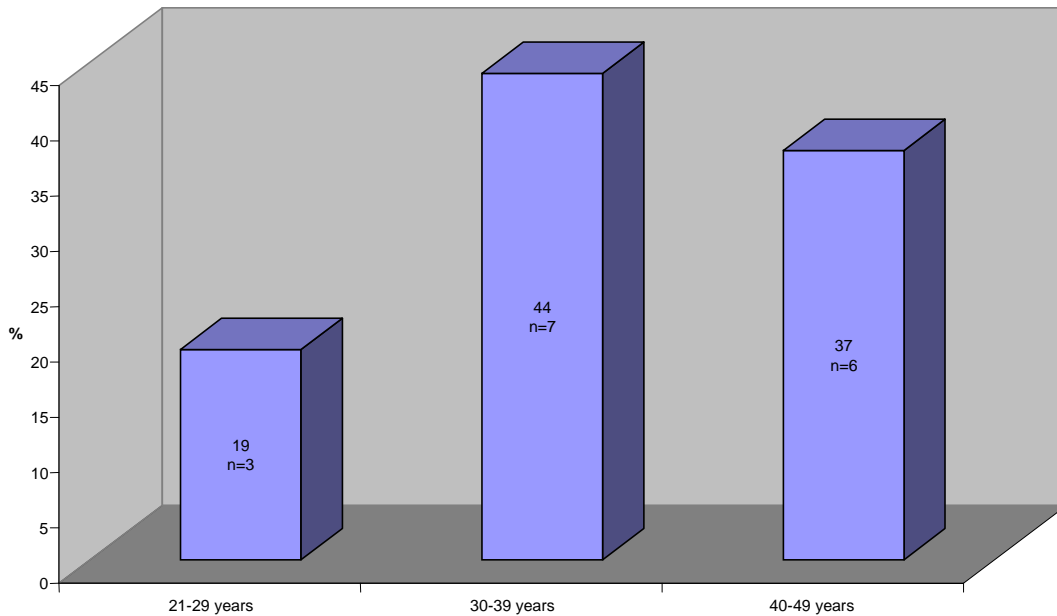
The remainder of this chapter is split into two parts. The first part details the responses to surveys by non-resident parents while the second part provides details on responses from the resident parents.

4.1. FINDINGS OF NON-RESIDENT QUESTIONNAIRES

4.1.1. Socio Demographic Profile of Non-Resident Parents

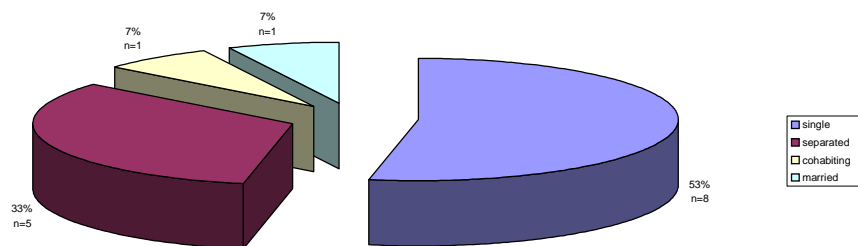
All of the non-resident parents using Time4Us were male. Most were aged 30 years or over, with almost even numbers falling into the 30-39 years and 40-49 years age range. None of the service users were over 50 years old. These figures are presented in chart 4.1 below.

Chart 4.1: Age Range of Non-Resident Parents



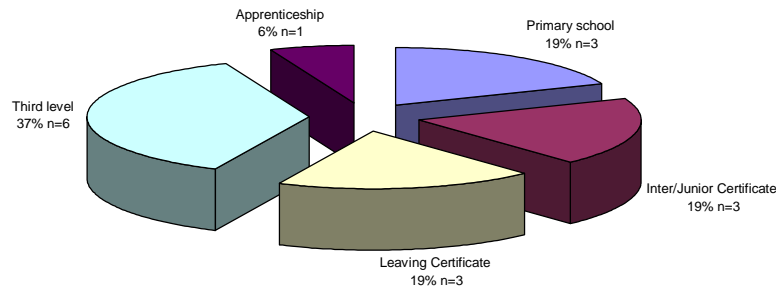
In terms of marital status, over half of the fathers were single, while the next largest category comprising a third of respondents were separated. This is presented in chart 4.2 below:

Chart 4.2: Marital Status of Non-Resident Parents



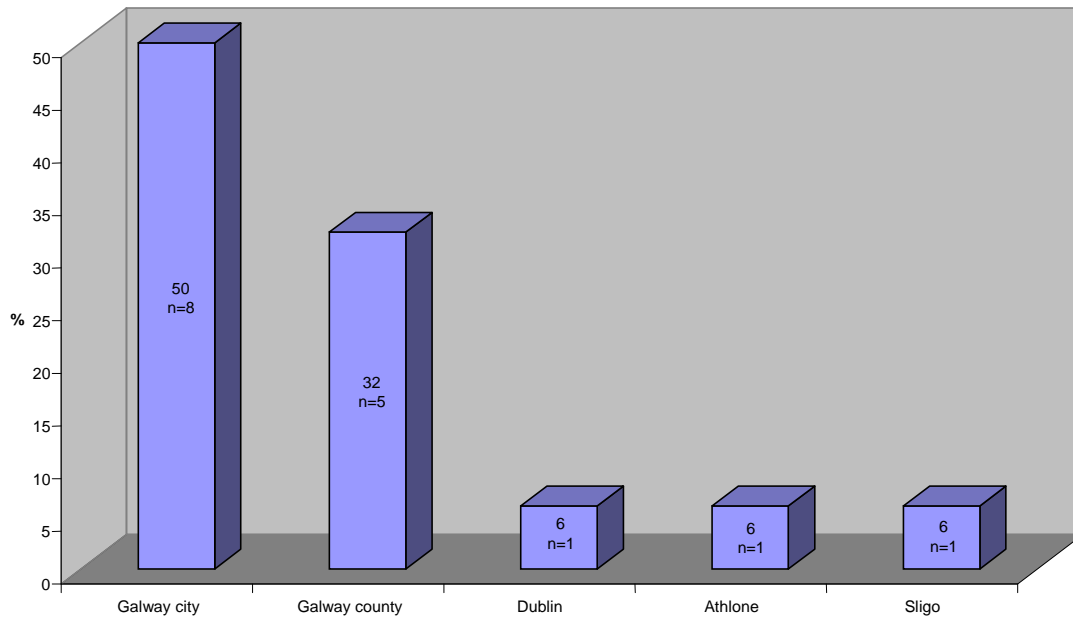
A large variation was found in terms of the educational background of non-resident parents, with the largest proportion (36%) having some third level education, while even proportions had Leaving Certificate, Inter/Junior Certificate or Primary Level education (19% respectively). This is presented in chart 4.3 below.

Chart 4.3: Education Level of Non-Resident Parents



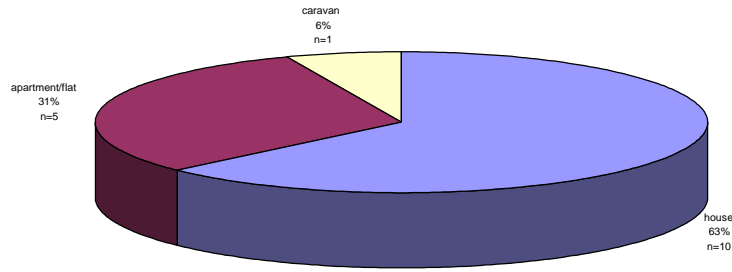
The vast majority (81%) of non-resident fathers lived in Galway, with just three living in other parts of the country. This is presented in chart 4.4 below.

Chart 4.4: Where Non-Resident Parents Live



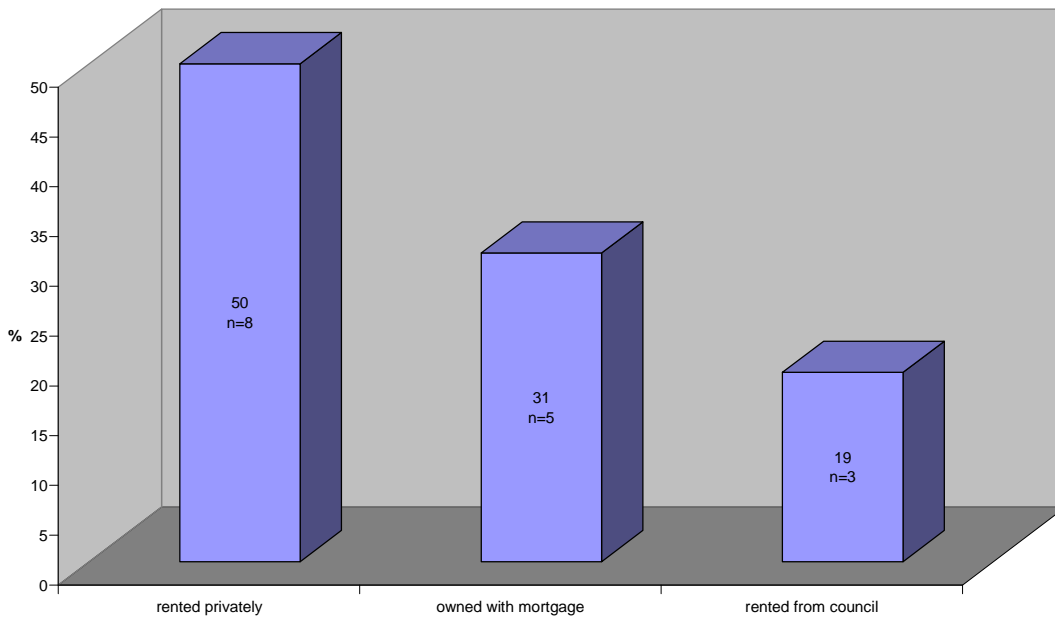
With regards to the type of accommodation of non-resident fathers, most (63%) lived in a house, while just under a third (31%) lived in an apartment/flat. This is presented in chart 4.5 below:

Chart 4.5: Type of Accommodation Non-Resident Parents Live In



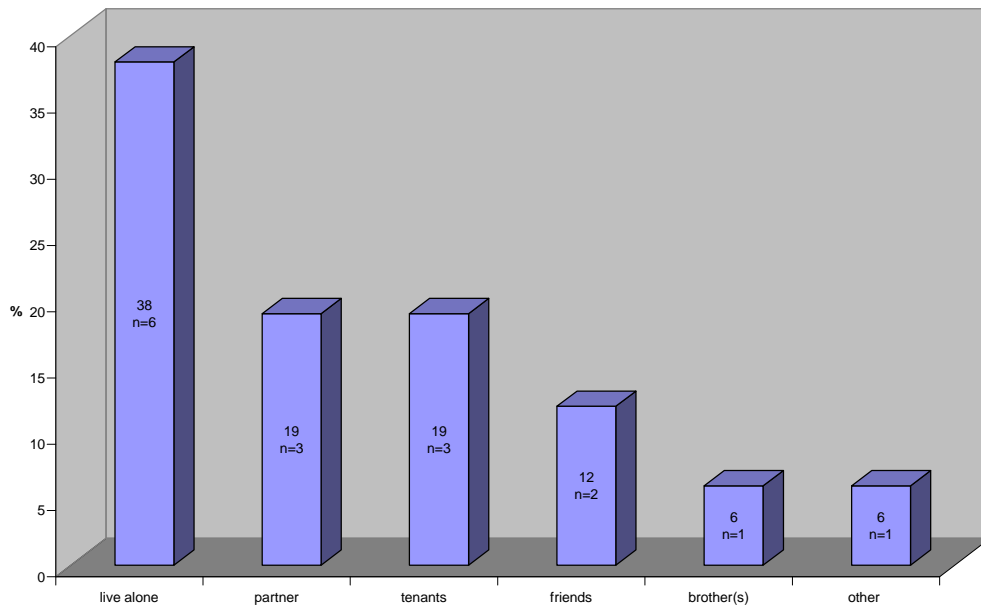
Most (69%) of the non-residents rented their accommodation, with half renting their accommodation privately and under a fifth renting it from a city or county council. This compares with under a third who owned their property with a mortgage. This is presented in chart 4.6 below:

Chart 4.6: Housing Status of Non-Resident Parents



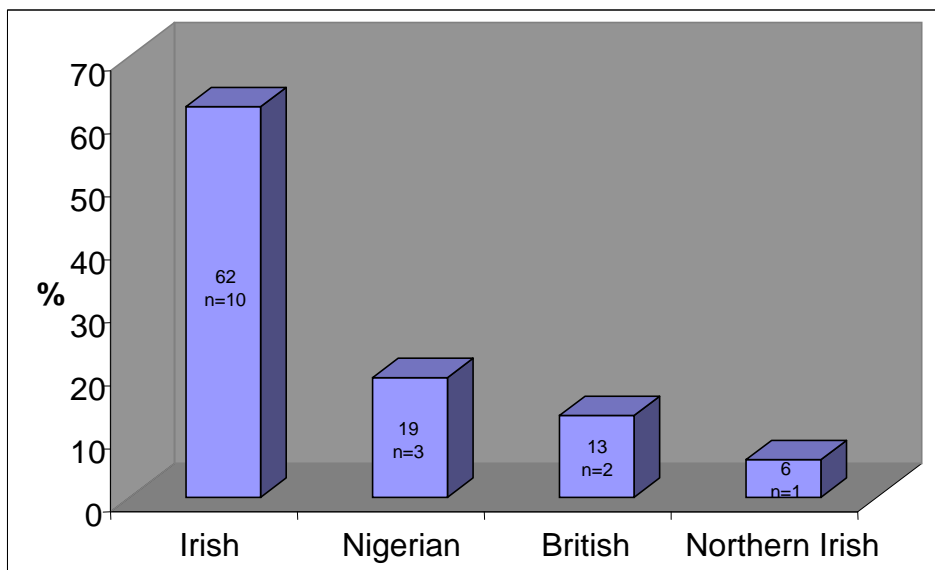
The largest proportion (38%) of non-resident parents who participated in this study lived alone, compared to just 19% that lived with a partner, while similar numbers shared with tenants or friends (31%). This is presented in chart 4.7. below:

Chart 4.7: Who Non-Resident Parents Live With



Most (62%) of the non-residents were of were from the Republic of Ireland, while small numbers were from Nigeria, Britain and Northern Ireland. The nationality of respondents is presented in chart 4.8. below:

Chart 4.8: Nationality of Non-Resident Parents

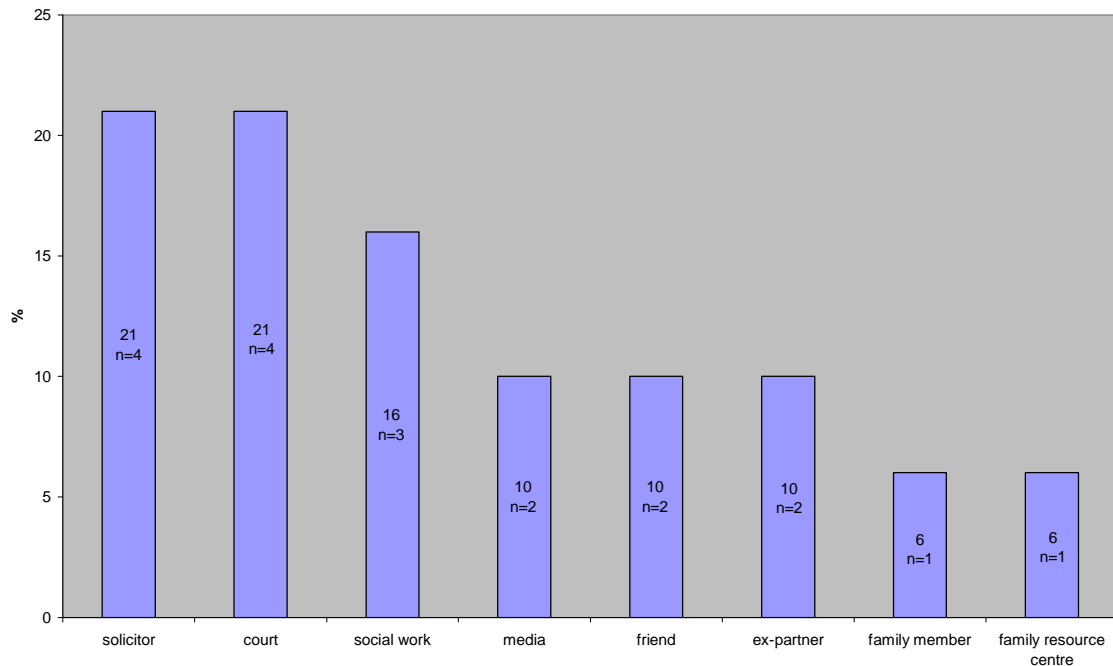


4.1.2. Non-Resident Parents Feedback on Time4Us

The vast majority (86% n=12) of those who participated in the research started using Time4Us between March and December 2007, while 14% (n=2) started using the service in January 2008.

Respondents were asked where they initially heard about the Time4Us service. Some mentioned more than one source in relation to this question. Overall, the data indicates that the legal system, comprising either the courts or solicitors, was the most commonly cited source of hearing about the service (42%). This data is presented in chart 4.9. below.

Chart 4.9: Where Non Resident Parents Heard About Time4Us



Three quarters of non-resident respondents were formally referred to the Time4Us service, while just a quarter self-attended. Of those that were referred, the legal system, comprising the courts or solicitors, was by far the most common source of referrals (72%). These figures are presented in chart 4.10 below. The source of referrals is presented in chart 4.11.

Chart 4.10: Were you referred to Time4Us?

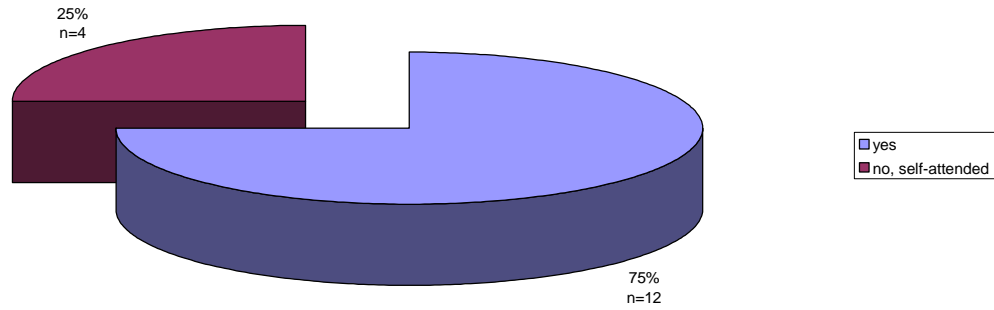
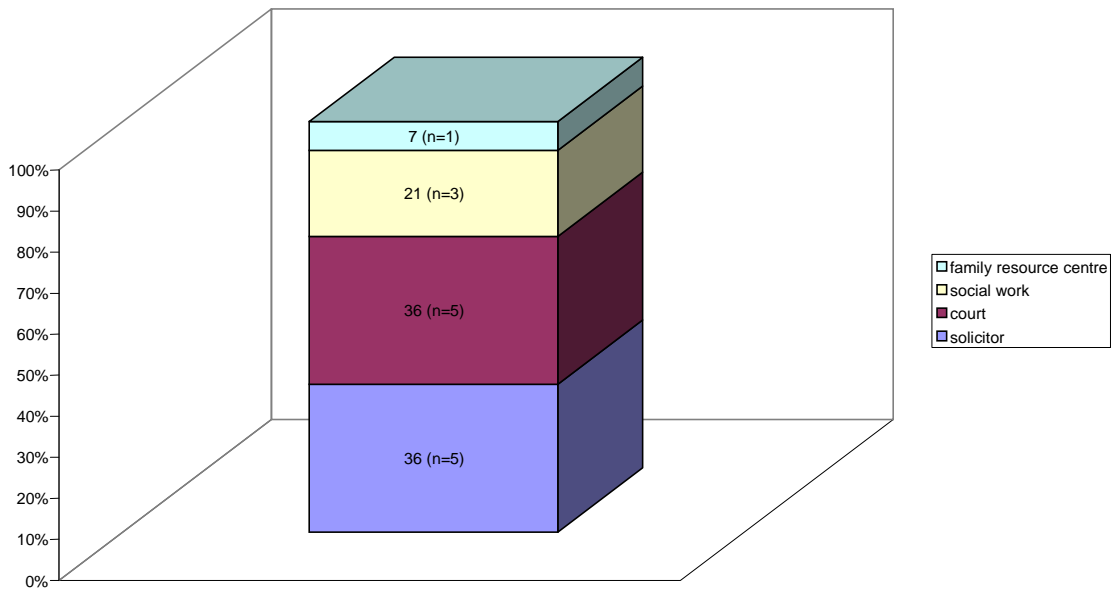


Chart 4.11: If referred, who were non-resident parents referred to Time4Us by?

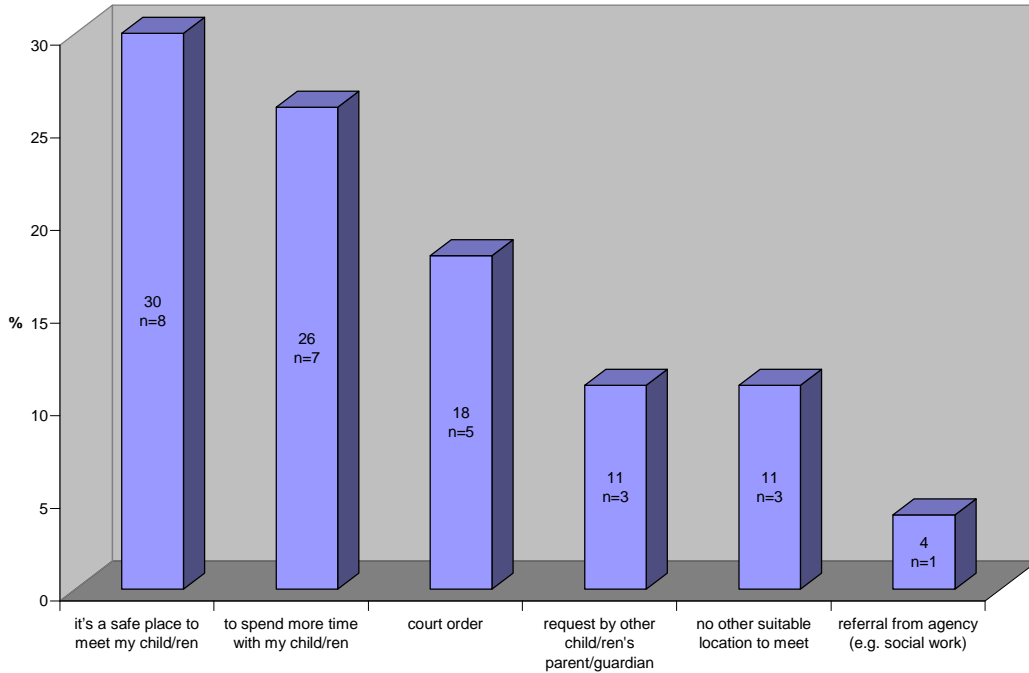


* Some respondents listed more than one source of referral

Non-resident parents were asked to specify the main reasons why they started using Time4Us. The most common reason given was for safety (30%), while generally to

spend time with one’s children was also commonly referred to (26%). Referrals from court in particular, and other agencies such as social work, accounted for over a fifth (22%) of the reasons mentioned. These figures are presented in chart 4.12 below.

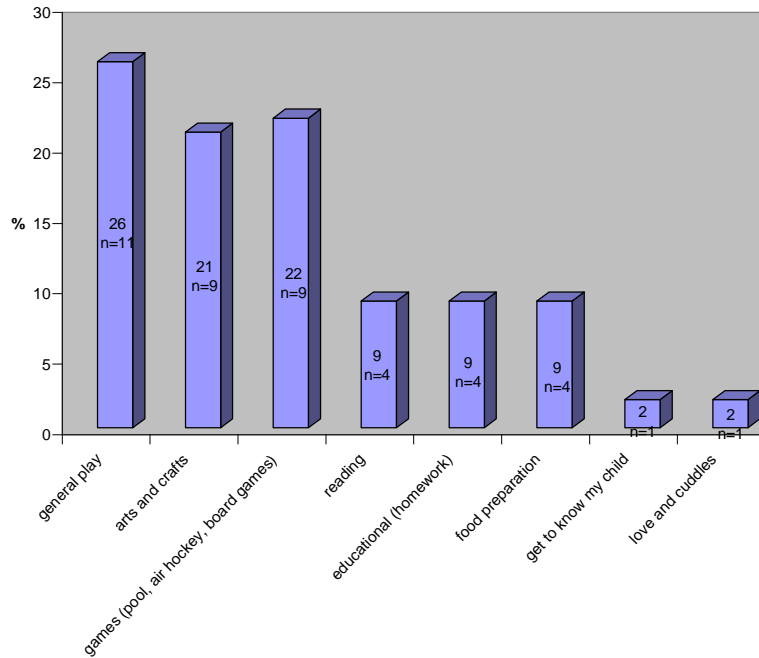
Chart 4.12: Reasons Why Non-Resident Parents Started Using Time4Us



* Multiple reasons were given by some respondents

While a broad variety of activities are engaged in by non-resident parents and their children when using Time4Us, the most common of these include ‘general play’, ‘arts and crafts’, and ‘games’ (69%). The full range of activities engaged in are presented in chart 4.13 below.

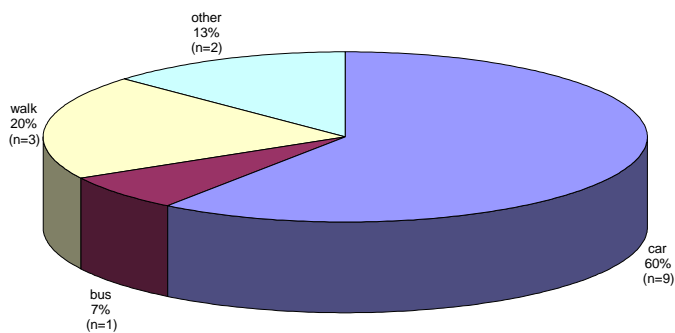
Chart 4.13: Activities engaged in at Time4Us



- Multiple activities were listed by most respondents

The majority of service users use a car to get to the Time4Us. This is probably unsurprising, as the service is located in an industrial estate facility approximately 2 miles outside the city. This is presented in chart 4.14 below.

Chart 4.14: Mode of transport used to get to Time4Us

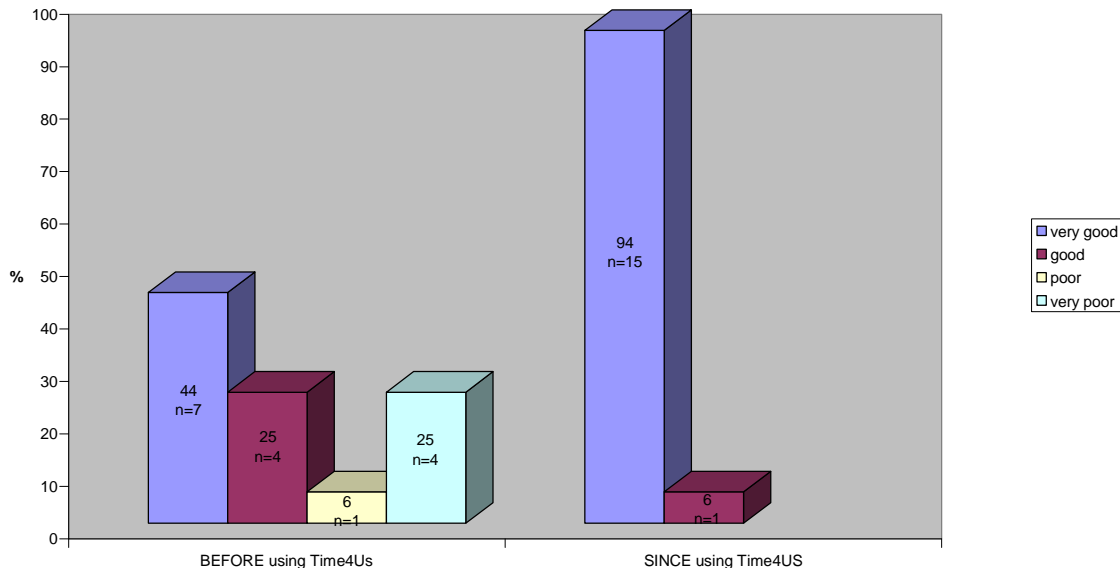


4.1.3. Impact of Time4Us Service on Relationships, Access & Overall Benefits

A key area of interest with regards to this research is the effect of Time4Us on relationships between non-resident parents and children, and non-resident parents and resident parents/guardians, as well as access issues and perceived overall benefits of the service.

Overall, the data reveal a noticeably positive impact on such relationships. For instance, there is clear evidence that relationships between non-resident fathers and their children have greatly improved, with all non-resident fathers citing positive relationships with their children since using Time4Us. More specifically, an overwhelming majority (94%) of non-resident fathers classified their relationship with their children as very good since using Time4Us, compared to just 44% before using the service, and almost a third (31%) rated it negatively before using Time4Us, while none did so since using the service.

Chart 4.15: Relationship Between Non-Resident Parents and Their Children Before and Since Using Time4Us



More particular positive changes were documented by non-resident parents with their children since using Time4Us, in terms of having better relationships, finding it easier to

play with and talk to them, and the children seeming generally happier. These changes are presented in charts 4.16 and 4.17 below.

Chart 4.16: SINCE Using Time4Us.....

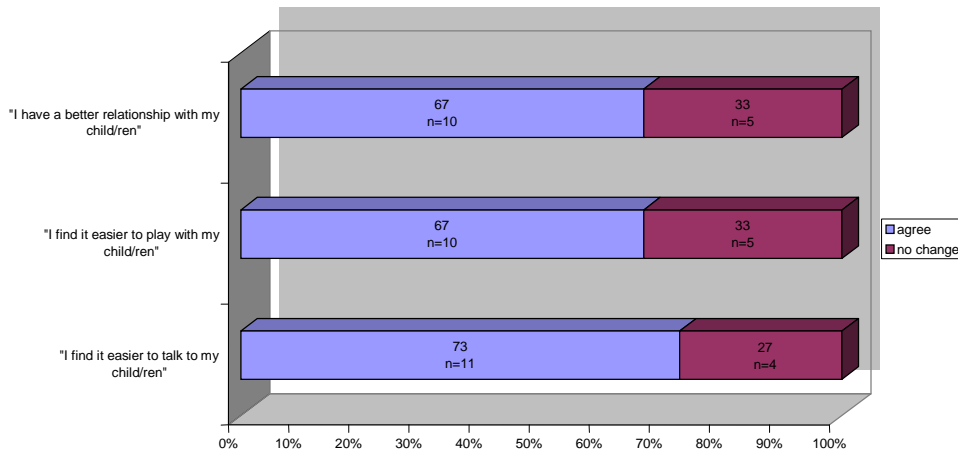
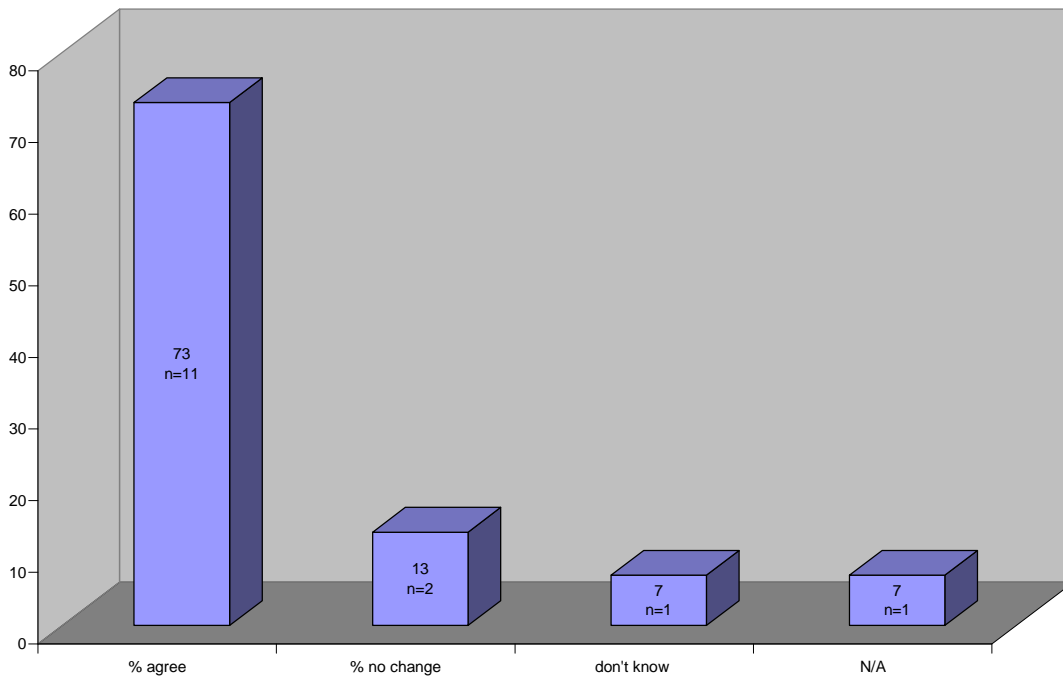


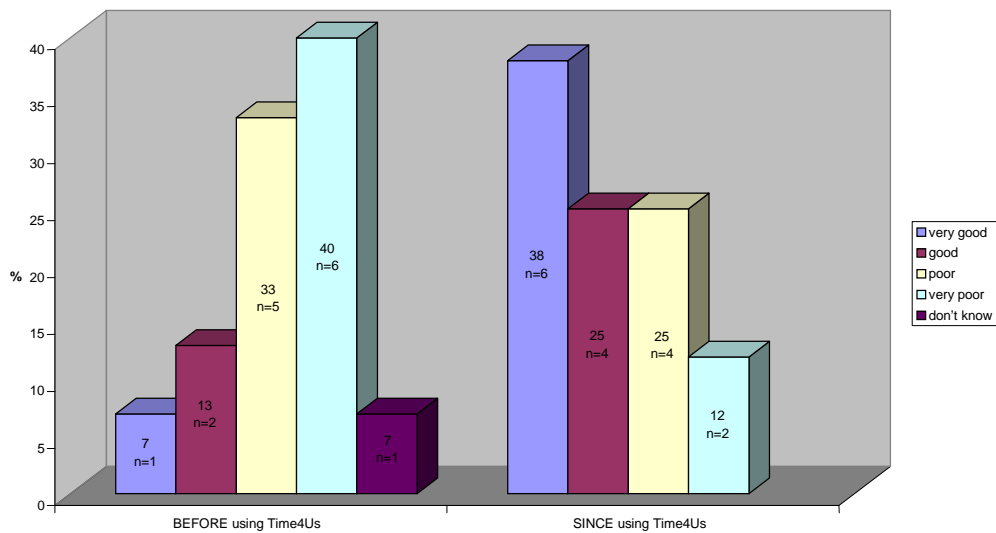
Chart 4.17: Since Using Time4Us "In General, the Children Seem Happier."



Moreover, the findings reveal a similarly affirmative picture with regards to changes in the relationship between non-resident parents and their child/ren's other parent/guardian since using Time4Us. Whereas before using the service this relationship was rated negatively by almost three quarters (73%) of respondents, and positively by just a fifth

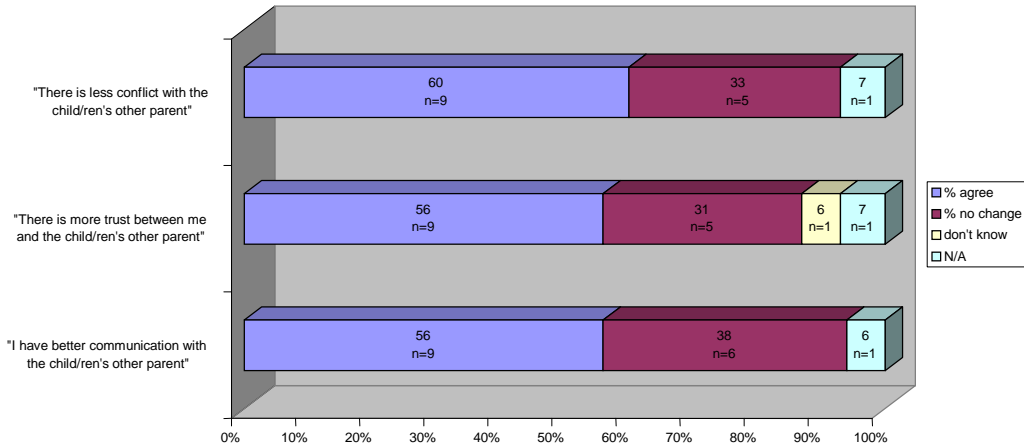
(20%), the situation has been reversed since using Time4Us, with almost two thirds (63%) rating this positively, and the percentage of those rating it negatively has fallen to 37%. These figures are presented in chart 4.18 below.

Chart 4.18: The Relationship between Non-Resident Parents and their Children's Other Parent.....



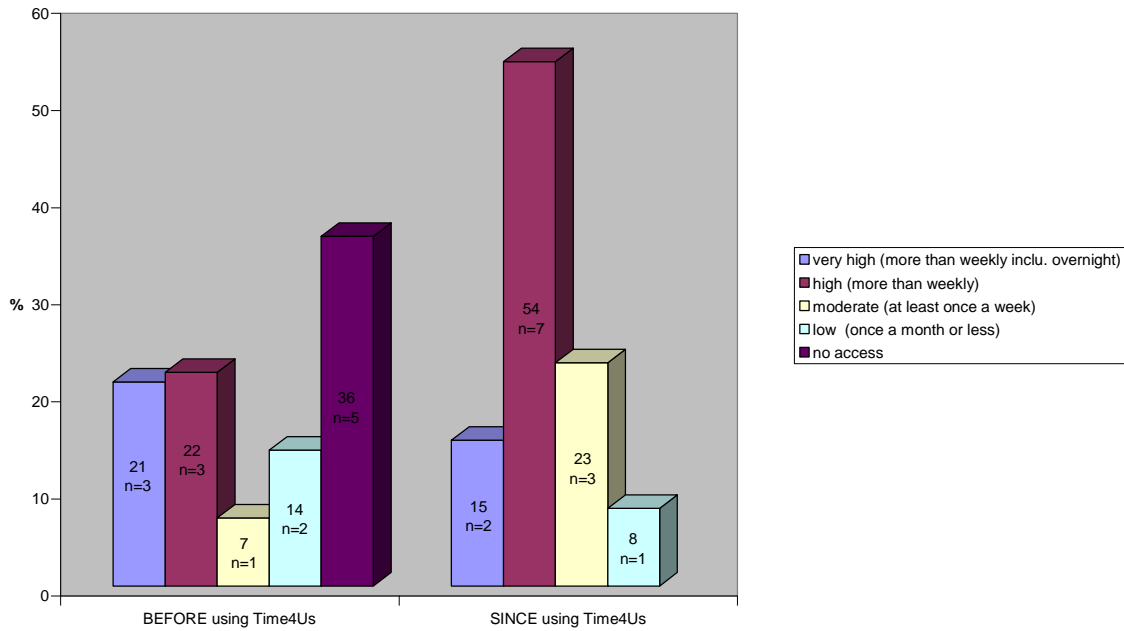
Additionally, the majority of non-resident fathers agreed that there was less conflict, more trust and better communication with their child/ren’s other parent/guardian since using Time4Us. However, it is noteworthy that over a third indicated that there was no change in these areas, highlighting the strained nature of many familial situations using Time4Us (see chart 4.19 below).

Chart 4.19: Changes to the Relationship Between Non-Resident Parents and the Children's Other Parent/Guardian Since Using Time4Us



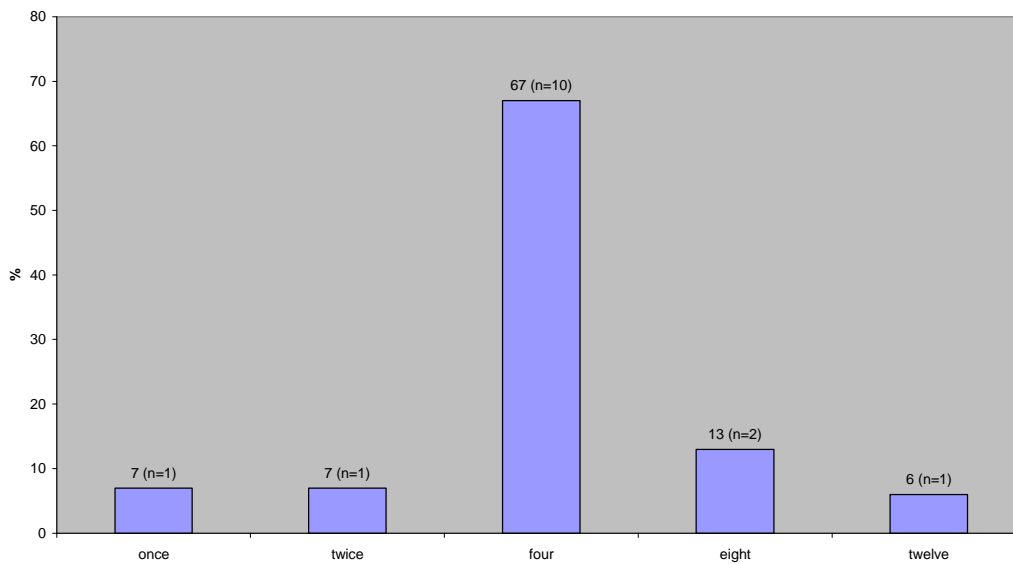
The situation regarding changes concerning access of the non-resident parent to their child/ren is very positive. The most striking change is the improved access which the fathers who participated in this study now have to their child/ren since using Time4Us. Prior to using the service, half (50%) of respondents had no or low access to their children, whereas since using the service, *all* have some access, and only 8% classified such access as low, compared to 69% who classified it as high-very high. These figures are presented in chart 4.20 below

Chart 4.20: The Level of Access Between Non-Resident Parents and Their Children Before Using Time4Us



Most of the non-resident parents indicated that since using Time4Us, they now see their child/ren four times per month or more (see chart 4.21 below).

Chart 4.21: Number of Times Per Month Non-Resident Parent See Their Children



4.1.4. Non-resident parents opinions of the main benefits of Time4Us

All but one of the respondents listed how the service has benefited themselves and their children in an open-ended question. The responses can be grouped into four thematic headings: relationship formation and access; play and recreation area for children; suitable environment; staff.

4.1.4.1: Access and Relationship Formation

The most commonly mentioned benefit by non-resident fathers was that the Time4Us service has provided a physical place where they can have access to their children. It was explained that this ability to see and meet their children more regularly has provided non-resident fathers with the opportunity to form closer relationships with them. One respondent stated that it has also provided an opportunity for his children to meet their grandparents.

“My three children are in care and I wouldn’t see them only for this place”

“Improved my relationship with my son”

“I have more time for myself and the kids together”

“Without Time4Us I wouldn’t have any sort of relationship with my child”

“.....Time4Us proved ideal for one to one quality time for all”

“Get to see them [my children] while go through court”

“Without this place I would not get to see my kids”

“Place to meet”

“I get to see my children more often”

“More regular visits”

“My parents also get to see them”

4.1.4.2. Play and Recreation Area for Children

Some of the non-resident fathers mentioned the benefit of Time4Us being a conducive environment providing various recreation activities and the facility for their children to play.

“It’s a good environment for the children. The children enjoy playing with other children. The books and toys are very educative”

“Great activities”

“Gave my son a chance to play with other children”

4.1.4.3. Suitable Environment

The suitability of Time4Us was described in terms of being neutral, comfortable and safe. The fact that it is a free service was also highlighted.

“Neutral venue to spend time with the children. Comfortable surroundings”

“Before Time4Us I had supervised access. Now that is gone because it’s a safe place”.

“I can see my child in a safe environment”

“It’s a good environment for the children”

4.1.4.4. Time4Us Staff

Finally, the positive role of staff at Time4Us was referred to as a key benefit of using the service.

“It’s friendly and you receive some good advice when needed”

“[Staff] provide support when required”

“Staff are very reliable, friendly, cooperative and accommodating”

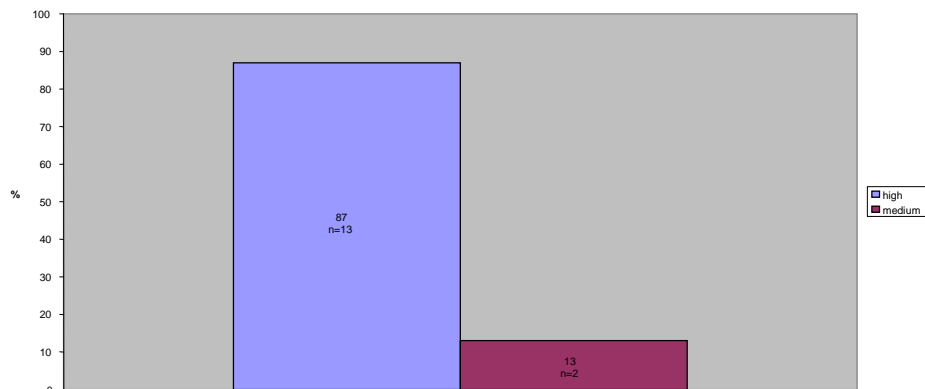
4.1.5. Satisfaction Levels with Time4Us

Respondents were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with the Time4Us location, facilities and staff. The work of the staff was highly endorsed, with all respondents

indicating that they were very satisfied with this aspect of Time4Us. The facilities and location were also positively rated.³

Returning to the staff, the intensity of staff support given to non-resident parents using Time4Us was rated as high by the vast majority (87%) of respondents. These figures are presented in chart 4.22 below.

Chart 4.22: Level of staff support given to non-resident parents at Time4Us



More specifically, the survey included an open ended question, asking respondents to give examples of the types of things the staff do when non-resident parents and their children use Time4Us. The bulk of respondents described the types of things staff do, from the general to the specific. Regarding the former, the supportive, helpful and friendly attitude of the staff was highlighted by several of the non-resident fathers:

“They [staff] are friendly and seem to understand what you’re going through emotionally, and they help you and your child, and for me I can be a dad again, which is something I didn’t think I’d have again”.

“The staff’s attitude towards to children is excellent. The staff try to put in their best for all the children. They have become my friends”.

“The staff are very supportive and understanding in helping both me and my kids feel very comfortable within Time4Us surroundings”.

“Reliable, friendly, accommodative, helpful, cooperative and always ready to assist when needed and necessary”.

³ See discussion later in this Report on activities/facilities or other things respondents would like to see changed or suggest based on feedback from two open-ended survey questions

“I find that they offer support and advice when required”.

“[Staff] always phone me to see how I am when I am not feeling well. Great with the kids. Full of fun but good to talk to for advice”

More specific examples of how staff interact with the service users were also described, in terms of helping with child care, playing games, joining in various activities, providing refreshments and helping with food preparation.

In terms of activities/facilities at Time4Us, these were rated positively in general terms. However, when asked specifically if there were any activities or facilities currently not at Time4Us that they would like, 38% of respondents indicated that there were, with an outdoor green play area (n=3), kitchen/ cooking facilities (n=2), and a TV/DVD (n=1) specifically mentioned.

Such suggestions parallel with those made by several non-resident fathers in terms of things they would like to suggest or see changed at Time4Us. The desire for an outdoor green/play area was most commonly mentioned. To quote one father:

“Yes, I would like to see a green area with green around the centre where I could bring him out to play, instead of at present constantly in an industrial type complex”

Others stated they would like improved cooking/kitchen facilities, and more toys.

One non-resident father stated he would like to see a similar facility in Dublin, so that:

“the children could come once or twice a year and meet their cousins”

Generally though, the respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with the service, as the following quotes clearly indicate:

“The facility(ies) at Time4Us are fantastic, the staff are excellent (kudos to them when it comes to emotional support)”.

“No, I think it’s a great place. The girls that work there are so helpful and thoughtful towards your needs and your child’s”.

“I feel Time4Us currently offers the perfect place to facilitate myself and my children - the time and surroundings to bond and have some sort of relationship”

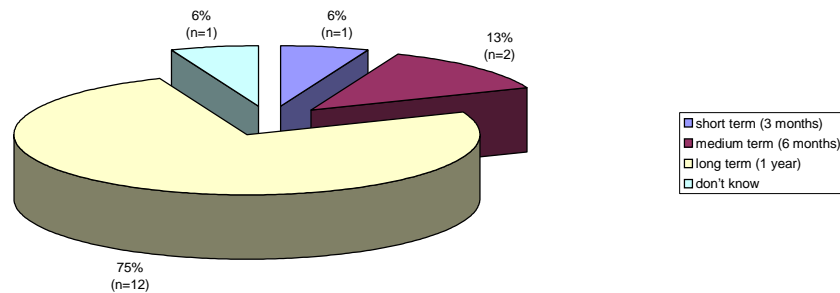
“No I think it’s a great place. I feel very comfortable there, not judged, very relaxed atmosphere”

“...most find it ideal even as a stepping stone for future access”.

“I would be happy to pay to use this service”.

Finally, with regards to likely future use of the service, three quarters of non-resident fathers indicated that they intended to use Time4Us over the long term – i.e. one year.

Chart 4.23: Future Use by Non-Resident Parents of Time4Us



4.2. FINDINGS OF RESIDENT/GUARDIAN QUESTIONNAIRES

4.2.1. Socio Demographic Profile of Resident Parents

In terms of the parental status regarding children using Time4Us, 7 were biological parents while 2 were legal guardians (see chart 4.24 below). All of the resident parents/guardians⁴ were female. Most were aged 30 years or over, with almost even numbers falling into the 30-39 years and 40-49 years age range. This is represented in chart 4.25 below. In terms of marital status, over half were single, while similar numbers were married or separated, and one was cohabiting. This is presented in chart 4.26 below. Most (67%) of the resident parents were educated up to third level. This is presented in chart 4.27 below.

⁴ Hereafter, the term ‘resident parent’ will be used to cover ‘resident parent/guardian’

Chart 4.24: Status of Cohort

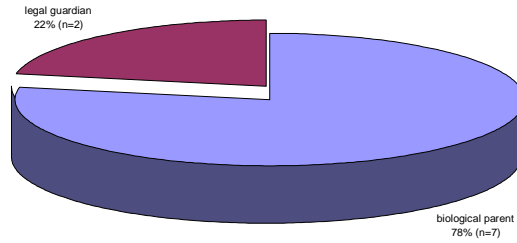


Chart 4.25: Age Range of Resident Parents/Guardians

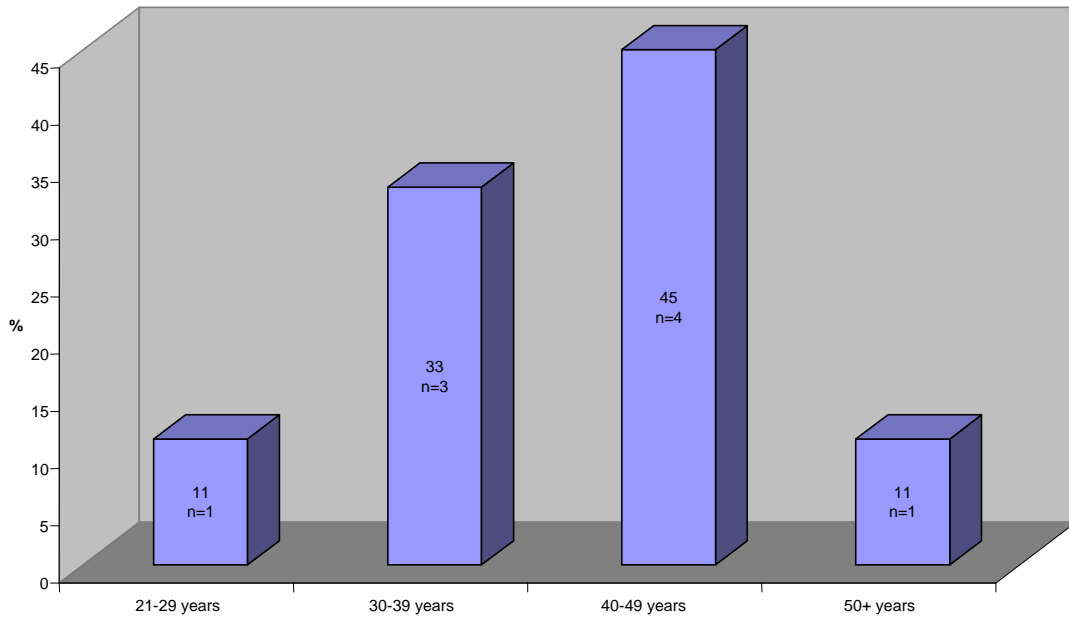


Chart 4.26: Marital Status of Resident Parent/Guardian

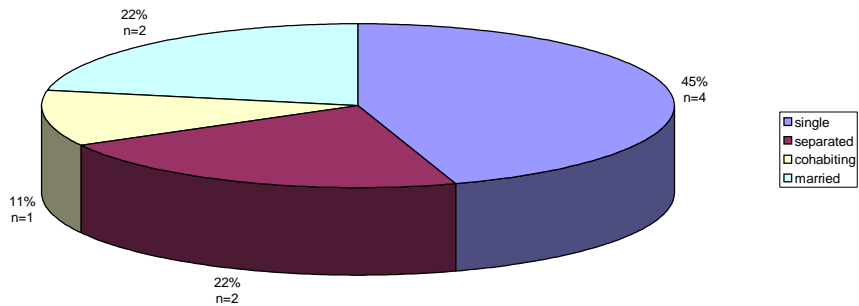
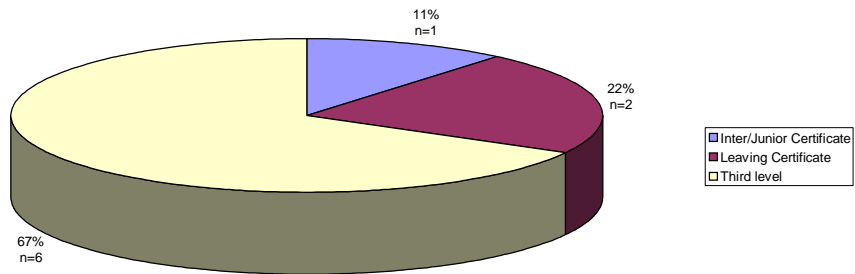


Chart 4.27 Education Level of Resident Parent/Guardian

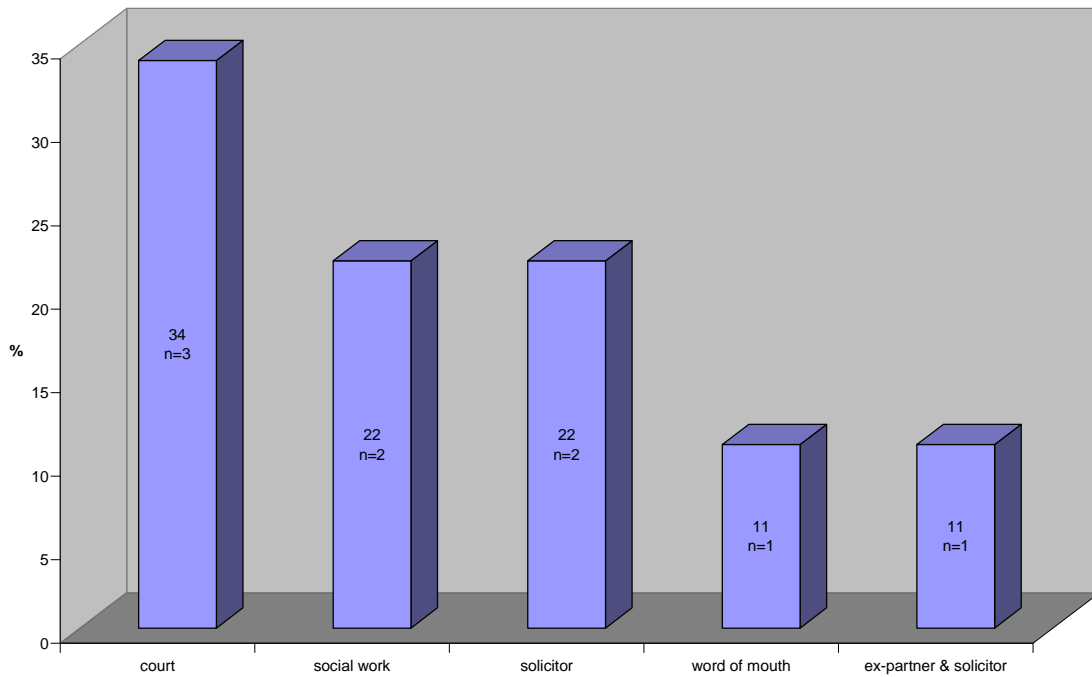


All of the resident parents were Irish with the exception of one who was Zimbabwean. All resident parents lived in Galway, with 66% (n=6) living in the city, and 33% (n=3) living in the county.

4.2.2. Resident Parents Feedback on Time4Us

Respondents were asked where they initially heard about the Time4Us service. Over half mentioned the legal system, comprising either the courts or solicitors. These figures are represented in chart 4.28 below.

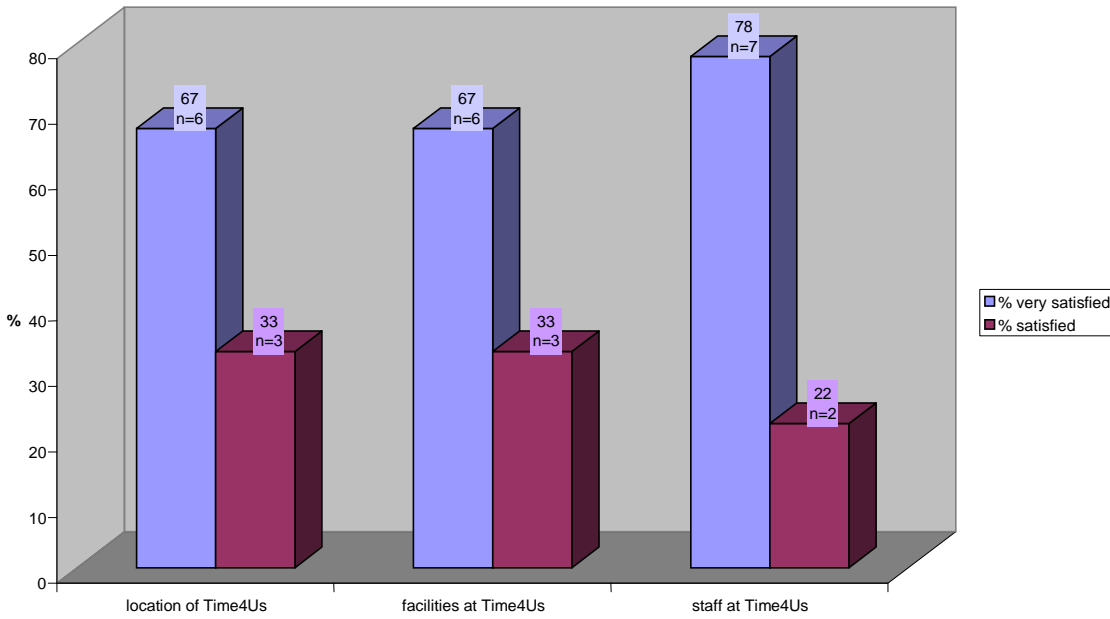
Chart 4.28: Where Resident Parents/Guardians Heard About Time4Us



4.2.3. Satisfaction Levels with Time4Us

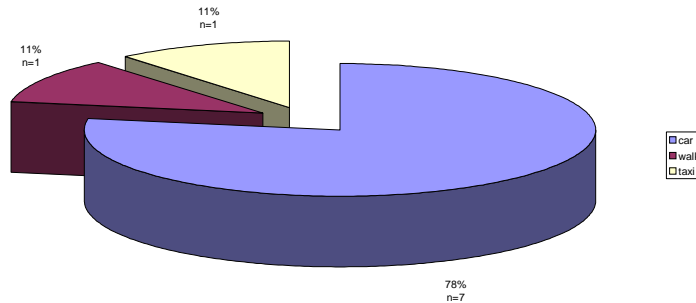
Respondents were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with the Time4Us location, facilities and staff. Most (on average 71%) of the resident parents rated these positively, while none were dissatisfied with any of these aspects. These figures are represented in Chart 4.29 below.

Chart 4.29: Levels of satisfaction with....



Most used a car to get to Time4Us. Transport data is presented in chart 4.30 below.

Chart 4.30: Transport used to get to Time4Us

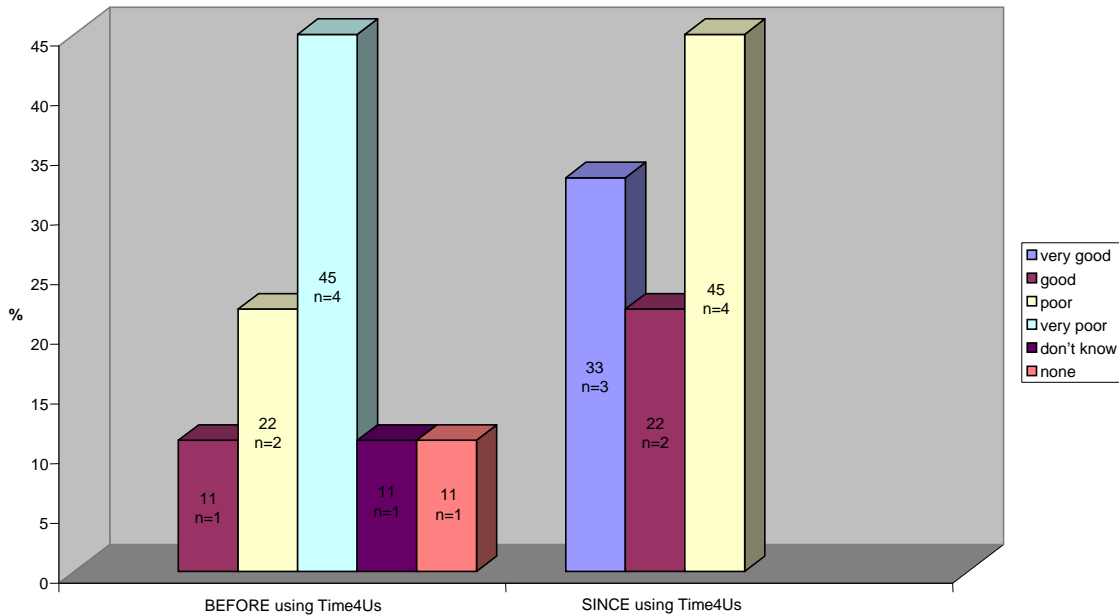


4.2.4. Impact of Time4Us Service on Relationships, Access & Overall Benefits

A key area of interest with regards to this research is the effect of Time4Us on relationships between the resident and non-resident parent, and the impact of the service on children, and its perceived overall benefits. Regarding the former, a clear improvement was documented by resident parents in terms of these relationships, with those classifying this positively rising from 11% before using Time4Us to 55% since using Time4Us. Similarly, those who classified their relationship with the non-resident

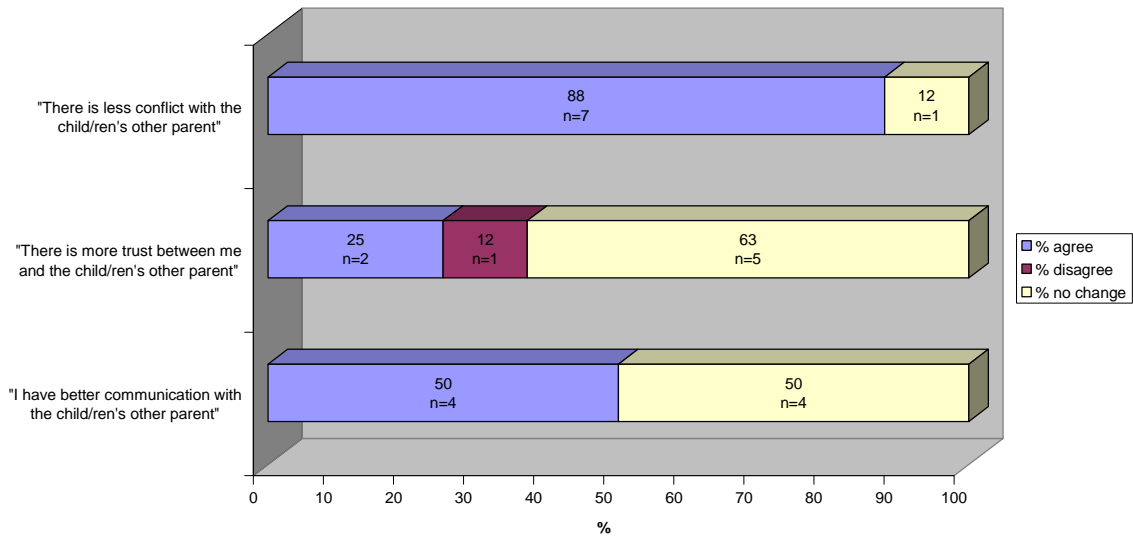
parent negatively has fallen significantly from 78% to 45%. This is presented in chart 4.31 below.

Chart 4.31: The relationship between you and non-resident parent.....



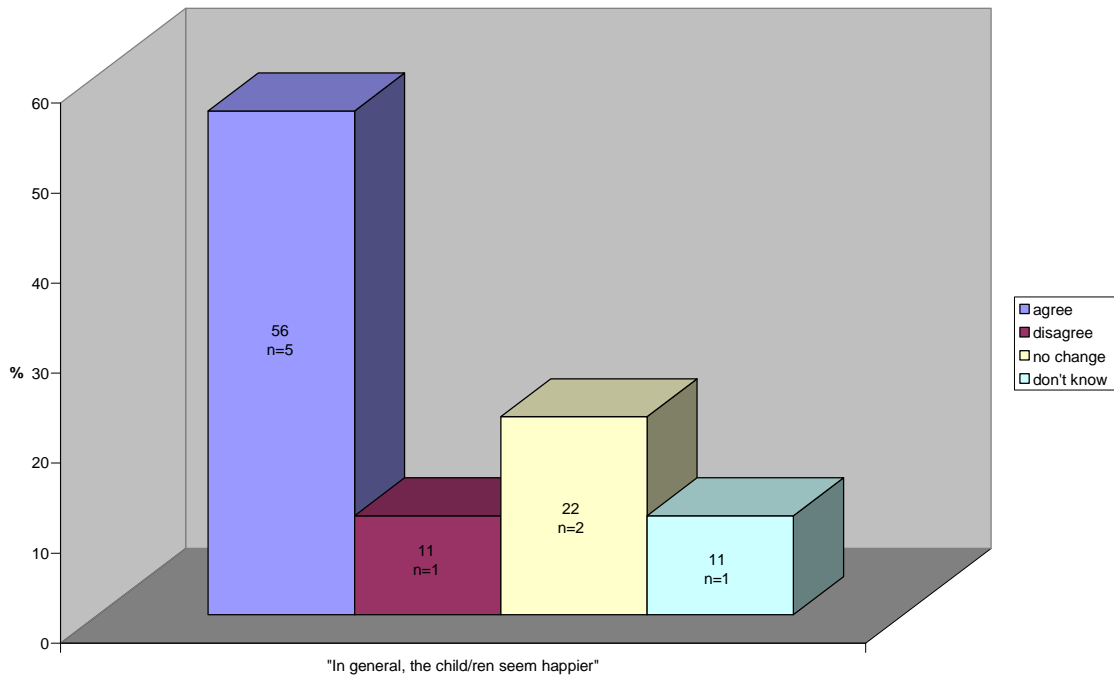
Additionally, more specific aspects of changes in the relationship between resident and non-resident parents were also examined, with respect to issues concerning conflict, trust and communication. Less conflict with the child/ren’s other parent was reported by the vast majority of respondents (88%). However, the fractious nature of these relationships was reinforced with two thirds of resident parents reporting no change in the level of trust between themselves and the non-resident parent, and opinions were split 50:50 with regards to perceptions of better communication with the non-resident parent. This data is presented in chart 4.32 below.

Chart 4.32: Changes in the Relationship Between Resident Parents and Non-Resident Parents Since Using Time4Us



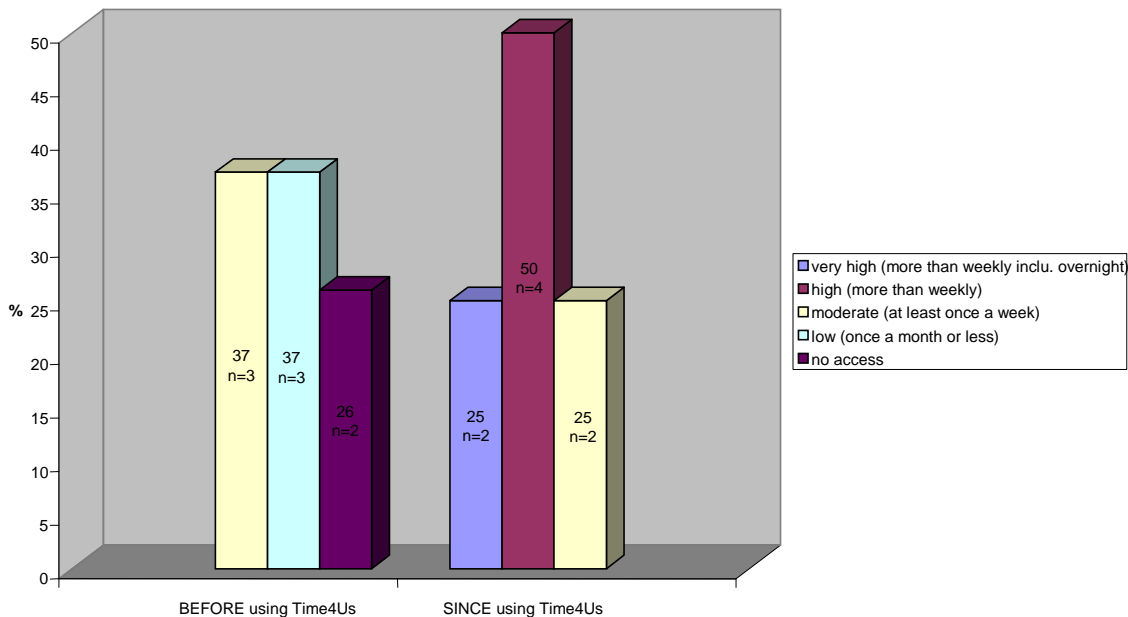
Over half of the resident parents agreed that ‘in general the child/ren seem happier’ since using Time4Us.

Chart 4.33: Since Using Time4Us



Resident parents were asked about the level of access which the non-resident parent had to their child/ren prior to and since using Time4Us. The most notable change is the reported improved access which fathers now have to their child/ren. Prior to using the service, nearly two thirds (63%) of resident parents stated that the fathers of their children had no or low access to their children, whereas since using the service, *all* have some access, with the vast majority (75%) classifying such access as high-very high. These figures are presented in chart 4.34 below.

Chart 4.34: The level of access between non-resident parents and their children....



4.2.5. Resident parents opinions of the main benefits of Time4Us

In response to an open-ended survey question, nearly all of the resident parents listed ways in which the service has benefited themselves and their children. These benefits can be summarised into four main headings: conducive environment, children’s play aspect, Time4Us staff, and contact with the children’s other parent.

4.2.5.1. Conducive Environment

Terms such as safe, secure, structured, and supervised were variously used by resident parents to describe the Time4Us service.

“Structured and supervised visits.... I am worry-free when my daughter is there”

“Feeling safe for the kids to be left there.....Other people around so I feel safe”

“I have peace of mind knowing that my children are supervised there”

“Secure environment.....Provides an environment for quality time as a family routine”

4.2.5.2. Children’s Play Aspect

A number of resident parents mentioned the play aspect as an important benefit of the service.

“More room for the child to play.....The child has more toys to play with”

“The children get to see their father in a very beautiful, peaceful place where they enjoy playing games.....the children are happy”

“The child’s first introduction to another play environment”

4.2.5.3. Time4Us Staff

The staff were commended by resident parents, in terms of being “helpful”, “flexible”, “professional”, “supportive”, and “caring”.

4.2.5.4. Contact with the Child/ren’s other Parent

Some resident parents mentioned the benefit of the service in terms of making contact with and in some cases improving the relationship with the child/ren’s father.

“Enabling me to trust other parent.....Having a third party involved i.e. communication”

“By phoning the other parent when I wasn’t talking to him”

“It made my ex-partner to realise his mistakes and the pain he caused to the family and he apologised, and we are now very happy”

4.2.6. Things Resident Parents would like to see Changed or Suggest Regarding the Future of Time4Us

A number of diverse issues were raised by resident parents in this regard. The most commonly referred to aspect in need of change was the physical space/building, with suggestions made regarding the need for

“a bigger facility for play”

“an outdoor play area and larger premises with designated areas for different age groups”

One noted *“outside the premises is not a very appealing looking environment”*.

Others suggested the need for *“more things to play with”*, *“more toys”*.

Concerns around safety were mentioned by some with calls for

“supervised access by staff” and

“more secure where there is a risk of abduction”

Finally, one resident parent pointed out that *“some staff members need to work on objectivity”*.

4.3. Conclusion

It is clear from this data that Time4Us is meeting a need. It is notable that there is a consensus amongst both resident and non-resident parents in terms of the benefits of the service *and* its impact on their families. Some of the more notable benefits of the service include increased happiness levels amongst children, increased amounts of access between children and non-resident parents as a result of using Time4Us. Interestingly, both resident and non-resident parents report less conflict in their relationship since using the service. In addition, both sets of parents are very positive about the service, in particular its layout and staff. Specifically, the professionalism and supportive nature of the staff was mentioned by a significant majority of both cohorts. Any suggested changes to the service relate to the facility rather than staff or the model of support provided in the centre.

5. THE EXPERIENCES OF NON-RESIDENT PARENTS USING THE TIME4US PLAY CENTRE

As part of completing the self-administered questionnaire service users were invited to complete a consent form and self-select for a follow up interview. In total, eight non-resident parents identified themselves as willing to participate in an interview. However, upon contacting these service users one subsequently withdrew from the interview process. Thus, this left seven service users who partook in the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. Service users were asked specific questions but also provided with an opportunity at the end of the interview to raise any particular issues or themes which they felt had not been covered adequately in the set of questions put to them.

The evaluation team was keen to ascertain in detail the views of non-resident parents regarding a number of issues. These included: how they came to use Time4Us; the way staff engage with them while they are in the service; the impact of Time4Us on the relationship with their children, and their ex-partner; the impact using Time4Us has had on their knowledge of wider services available in Galway city and county; what they would like to see changed – if anything - regarding the service; and their anticipated future use of the play centre.

What is presented here are the findings of the interviews with service users covering the themes set out above. In short, what emerges is a picture of a broadly positive experience of using Time4Us, one which for many improves relationships with children and provides somewhat more stability in relationships with the child (ren)'s other parent than previously. Additionally, participants speak very positively about the role staff play in their service use, the different things they do for service users, and the importance service users place on the attitudes of staff towards both them and their children, and their ex-partners.

5.1. Profile of Time4Us Interview Participants

Of the seven participating service users all were male. Two participants are Nigerian, one is Scottish, one is from Northern Ireland and the remaining three are from the Republic of

Ireland. Of these three, one participant identified himself as a member of the Travelling Community. In relation to geographical distance only one participant travels from outside Galway City and County to use the service; two travel from the Tuam area to use the service while the remainder access the service from Galway city. All but one participant identified themselves as separated with the final participant identifying himself as single. Of those who are separated, the length of separation ranged from ten months to five years.

Participants are engaged in a variety of forms of employment: two are self-employed, one works in gardening, one refrained from identifying where they work, two are currently unemployed, and one is in full-time education. Interestingly, of those interviewed few have any form of family support in Galway. Of those who reside in the county, all but one remarked on the absence of family connections in the area.

Participants have been using the service for between five months and approximately one year. The majority have one child who uses the service with them, although two participants have two children. Service use per week ranges from one visit to three, although for some respondents it could be more dependent on the child's other parent. Most visits last for two hours, although again, this could increase at short notice.

5.2. Awareness of – and Reasons for Using – Time4Us

Many of the participants spoke of the importance of having a good relationship with their children and the desire to see them as often as possible. However, this desire has been frustrated by the conflictual nature of the process through which they have gained access. Of the seven participants only two had access to their children prior to using Time4Us. In one case the access was organised in local health centres through the social work department (both in the city and the county), and in another case access took place in a city centre hotel, although this also came within the remit of the legal system. Of the remaining participants, four gained access to their children for the first time post-separation through the legal system, with either their solicitor or the child's other parent suggesting Time4us in court as an option for access. In many cases spoken about during

the course of this research Time4Us was the only method by which access would be granted and the participants could see their children. As one parent notes:

“So then it was venue, and we heard about Time4Us through, actually through the court, through some solicitor who actually used it beforehand, I think it was [name removed] and through what he’s saying, he recommended it and all but saying that, it was the only chance I was going to get to see my child.” (IV 1)

Of interest here is the familiarity of the legal system with the service – one respondent noted that their access hearing occurred outside the Galway legal district; however the local judiciary was familiar with the service. In all other cases the social work department played a pivotal role in arranging access visits at Time4Us while, additionally, one participant highlighted the role of friends and the child’s other parent in informing them about the service. Indeed, of the five participants who did not have access to their children prior to using the service, the centre offered the only option to them in seeing their children.

Clear amongst all participants is the overarching reason for using the service. It offers a possibility of seeing their children in a secure, safe environment where previously that often was not possible:

“It’s a nice place for people – parents – who have difficulty meeting their kids to meet. I think most parents who meet them down there, they feel happy, they feel secure down there, that’s a big, big thing, the main part.” (IV 3)

5.3. Participant’s Relationship with their child(ren) before using Time4Us

Participants were invited to comment on the extent of their relationship with their child(ren) prior to using Time4Us. Many participants spoke of having a very good relationship with their children in so far as possible given the constraints on seeing them. In one instance a respondent indicated that he had no relationship at all with his children, and in another instance the relationship was defined as “*not good.*” Another participant identified the break up of his relationship as having a negative impact on the relationship he had with his child, one which was not addressed until they began using Time4Us. Understandably, many participants felt that not seeing their children would have a detrimental affect on their relationship. Yet, despite this the same participants felt that,

overall, the relationship they had with their children prior to seeing them in Time4Us was good.

5.4. The Role of the Staff in Time4Us

It is possible to group participant's responses in relation to the activities of staff into two categories: those relating to support provided to service users specifically while in the centre; and those comments relating to wider activities and assistance provided to service users.

5.4.1. Support Provided to Service Users While in the Centre

In addition to comments made in the section above on the impact of Time4Us on the service users themselves, participants spoke in general terms of being supported by staff when using the centre. All spoke of a very welcoming atmosphere upon first visiting the centre. One participant spoke of the homely atmosphere, while others commented on how staff make participants and their children feel comfortable, and introduce them to the centre, how it operates, the facilities it has and so on:

“[The staff] read the situation, you know like with the kids and whatever, you can see where the kid is nervous or you can see where the parents are nervous, a parent mightn't have seen their kid for a while, so of course they're going to be a bit nervous there, so they break in and start playing and do you know, make them feel welcome, that sort of stuff. So when you actually get to play, your child is not nervous anymore, just that small little step. So they do all that as well.” (IV 1)

Beyond this, participants spoke of specific times they could recalled when the staff assisted them. One participant recalled:

“And if I'm trying to spend a little time with [one child], to do their homework and just to actually have a bit of one-to-one time then one of the girls will take [second child] and they'll go to one of the tables and do whatever the child wants to do, if she wants to play house then they'll play house.” (IV 4)

Other participants spoke of the hands-off role the staff play in providing the service, and how participants are left to play and interact with their children in the centre. Staff are always there to support and offer advice if asked, but participants reported them operating in a non-invasive manner:

“They (staff) wouldn’t have to be [in the room] because they’re in their office like but they’d just be in and out or if someone wants something done or they’d be over playing with the kids, you know. [...] that in their kind of day-to-day work they’re there, in and out you know. (IV 2)

“They come and go. Like, they always keep an eye on things like, there are a lot of windows in the place so I mean they don’t actually have to be right on top of you but I mean you’re aware they they’re there if you need to speak to them or whatever. Like, if you have any recommendations then they do take them on board.” (IV 4)

“They are always around anyway you know, you can get them as often as you want. There is an office there, you can go to the office and tell them you want this or that. Sometimes even the kids go to the office you know and drag them out! [...] This is what the staff are for, they know how to deal with the situation, they come with the kids and start playing with the kids. [...] with the kids they are always happy, the kids are happy with them and they are always happy with the kids. They help in changing pampers too sometimes. (IV 2)

Participants also spoke of the role staff play should the non-resident parent need to leave the centre for a short period (either to go to the shop for their child, or simply go out to the car for an item such as a camera).

5.4.2. Wider Activities and Assistance Provided by Time4Us Staff

A particular thrust of many comments in the interviews was the role played by staff in acting as a communication channel between service users and the child’s other parent. The terms ‘neutral’ and ‘not taking sides’ were used by the majority of participants through the course of the interviews. Some participants spoke of the upsetting aspect of seeing the child’s other parent at the centre, and how the staff act in such a way so as to reduce any conflict or potential conflict as much as possible. One participant remarked on the role staff play at the very outset of the access visit in relation to this point:

“The staff are very neutral actually. They bring the child from the door, from the [other parent], just bring them through. She [child’s other parent] can see there is a neutral area, bring them into me and then after that I look after [child’s name] for two hours and I try and focus on fun and play.” (IV 5)

Another participant spoke of the role the staff play in sometimes persuading the child's other parent to permit the child to engage in, or attend certain things, like for example a Christmas party:

“There was something to do with the Christmas party, like we had to organise a date for that, so [child's other parent] wasn't totally happy about it but we eventually talked her into it and that was genuinely through the staff.” (IV 4)

Communication between parents can often be quite poor or non-existent, hence staff tend to play a role in passing messages relating to access between parents, often covering subjects like re-arranging access times, purchasing items for children, or particular dietary concerns of the child. Even in this aspect staff are identified as remaining neutral:

“I relay through them and they pass the message on and they'll speak to (child's other parent), do you know what I mean. It wouldn't be necessarily taking my side because the child is the most important thing but they arrange it.” (IV 1)

Another participant spoke of a particularly difficult access visit, and the role staff played afterwards in talking to them about it:

“I had a bad time with my child and they copped on there was something wrong when my child went home. She (staff) came over and talked to me for about half an hour after that. She was very helpful. If I wanted to come back and talk she would talk to me again. [...]A chat, but nice and friendly, [...] and helpful, not nose.” (IV 3)

Other participants commented on the understanding and supportive nature of centre staff in relation to particular predicaments around access. Even in these exchanges participants remarked on the neutral aspects of such support:

“They're very friendly and they'll have a chat and make you a cup of tea. They're very good in their own way because I'm sure it is hard to be neutral with all people but they are actually. That seems to be their objective, just be as neutral as they can.” (IV 5)

Another aspect of the communication role played by staff is liaising on behalf of service users with referrers, such as social workers or solicitors. The latter, in particular, is

viewed as an important problem-solving aspect of the work of the staff, as one respondent remarked:

“I’ve got a problem here now so go talk to one of the staff and you’re guaranteed getting some solution before you’re finished, and if you’ve got something they’ll ring the solicitor for you.” (IV 1)

5.5. Activities Undertaken by Participants and Children when in Time4Us

As alluded to elsewhere in this chapter, activities undertaken by participants can include school tasks, homework, or simply talking to children about particular things. The educational aspect of play is very much to the forefront of some participant’s activities, as one noted:

“They set up a table just so I could help [child] with their homework. [...] I bought him a mobile phone [...] so like I had him in there and I showed him how to use it, just like I had him at home. I taught him how to read or tell stories from a book [...] if I didn’t have the time that I have there then I mean that would have been impossible if I was still in monkey business or like if we were going to the cinema once a week or that type of thing.” (IV 4)

Over and above this however, the focus of most of the participants is on play when they are with their children in the centre. A variety of things are done in the centre, from playing with the toys provided, to watching DVDs on personal players brought in by service users. It appears from the interviews that activities engaged in are very much dependent on the age of the children, with younger children engaging with toys and playing ‘make believe,’ while older children are more focussed on arts and crafts, although not exclusively so. Another activity mentioned by some participants is the role food plays in their visits to the centre. Two participants mentioned that they prepare food in the centre. Overall, all participants mentioned the emphasis on fun and play and, in the words of one participant, children often end up playing with each other, other service users and staff:

“yeah, draw, play, take photos, go hiding behind seats, hide and go seek stuff, all that sort of stuff, and no one passes any heed. And the staff play along with it too. They go ‘where is he? Or ‘where is [child’s name]? They play along with it and, all the kids, you can see them, they’re all so happy and sometimes just doing their own things [...]. I wouldn’t have got this anywhere [else]. It means a lot like, brings tears to my eyes.” (IV 1)

5.6. Obtaining Information about other Services while Using Time4Us

Participants were asked about the extent to which they learned about other services or facilities since using Time4Us. All participants commented that such information is available should they want it and the staff are very willing to provide it no matter what it is. However, most participants acknowledged that the extent to which they need such information is determined by what type of access they have – whether it is solely in Time4Us or whether they have the opportunity to take their children outside the centre. As one participant remarked:

“I did find out about – well for my kids – about swimming classes and piano and music classes, these kinds of things, you know. And one of them [staff] gave me a list, she actually gave me a list of what the kids can do you know, after class activities.” (IV 2)

Two participants commented on learning about the group Fathers for Justice while using the centre, while one of these also identified learning about the HSE social work department not providing something along the lines of Time4Us. Generally, however, most participants viewed the provision of information as being on a need-to-know basis: if they asked about it they would receive information on it:

Interviewer: If you needed to get that information would you be able to get it in Time4Us?

Participant: Yes, I think so because all the staff, they are very helpful [...] and if I need anything from them I can get it.” (IV 7)

5.7. Participant’s Relationship with their children since using Time4Us

All participants cited the positive impact using Time4Us has had on the relationship between them and their children. In particular, the role Time4Us plays in enabling users to be parents was cited as a strong factor by participants in their continual use of the service. However, at a fundamental level the service has enabled access to occur where previously it would have been denied or severely limited. As one parent remarked:

“For me it’s [access] something I wouldn’t have had, no way would I have had it because as I said I couldn’t afford to go to anywhere.” (IV 1)

Another parent shared this sentiment when speaking of what Time4Us does for the relationship between them and their child. The regularity and frequency of access which

the centre permits to emerge is an important factor in improving relationships between participants and their children:

“Yes it’s improved you know, greatly improved because I see them every week now. To spend time with them and they’re happy you know, very happy. It’s actually improved.” (IV 2)

For other parents the bond was strong between them and their children prior to using the service. Yet, again the regularity of access which the service affords is the primary benefit:

“The only advantage it has [is] that I see him regularly now, every week, every [day removed], that’s the advantage. (IV 5)

Yet, while some participants simply described the bond they had with their children as better or improved since using the service, for other participants it is the different parenting roles that the centre enables them to undertake with their children that provide most satisfaction with it. Specifically, the possibility the centre offers to participants to be a parent is the most cherished aspect of the service. For example:

“Without Time For Us I would never have been, got a chance to be a dad and I’d have had to wait till she was sixteen, fourteen, sixteen whatever, till she got old enough to decide because her dad wasn’t doing that, her dad wasn’t that bad. I would never have got that so, what more is it? It means so much, you become a dad, for, for that two hours.” (IV 1)

Another participant commented that

“It’s given me the opportunity to relate, talk to my children and to really interact with them actually, you know, because this is a one-to-one basis now, so I do have that. Yes, actually it has given me that opportunity.” (IV 2)

For those with older children, the opportunity the centre presents to develop relationships with them, and the importance of engaging in various activities resonated with two participants in particular:

“It’s given me a different perspective. It’s definitely given me – like because of what happened and the way it happened – it’s definitely given me a different perspective and if it wasn’t for Time4Us we probably wouldn’t be at the stage we are at now. As Is said, I do help him with his homework, talk to him about things that are happening at school, if you get into trouble and this, that and the other you know. (IV 4)

“I think it’s working, it’s bringing us together. Like, we go up there and play pool. If we don’t want to play pool he can talk to me and I pay heed to him now. And we are getting on, I think, that bit better. We get more friendly and understanding of each other [...] I think we are closer. Going to take a bit more time but it’s getting there.” (IV 3)

5.8. The Impact of Using Time4Us on the Participants Themselves

Related to the impact the service has had on the relationship between the participants and their children, the service has also had a reported impact on the service users themselves. One participant spoke about the negative financial impact attending the centre has had on him given the distance he has to travel every week. However, the majority of participants interpreted this question through the impact it has had on them *and* their children together. Hence, many of the same points as outlined above were reiterated. However, a couple of parents did identify particular ways in which Time4Us has positively impacted on them. One participant spoke of the confidence it gave him as a result of the camaraderie which has developed amongst some service users:

“In the last year I suppose it made me go out more believe it or not [...] as in talking to people. I don’t feel as uneasy since I started going there talking to people as I did. [...] You know, you’re not the only person in that boat.” (IV 1)

Another participant spoke of the positive impact it has had on his knowledge base and being able to play with his children. In particular, the role the staff play here was cited as being significant. There appears to be a certain amount of learning that occurs between service user and staff:

“Yes actually I’ve learned a lot from Time4Us, a lot of things I didn’t know [before]. There are some puzzles that I don’t know and these are puzzles that are very knowledgeable, it helps education-wise, you know. I mean they [staff] come here, they put this together and I learn from that you know. Like childcare, the way they talk to the children, the way they handle the children you know. There’s so much to learn from them you know, so I learn some bit of childcare from them.” (IV 7)

5.9. The Impact of Using Time4Us on the Relationship between the Participant and the Child (ren)’s other Parent

Participants were asked whether using Time4Us has had any effect on the relationship between them and their child (ren)’s other parent. For the most part, participants remarked that there was little or no change, and in some cases, there was even less contact now as a result of using Time4Us than there had been in the past, although the participants emphasised that this was despite the service and not because of it (existing conflict, the invoking of barring orders etc). One parent did comment that the service has resulted in a greater degree of trust between both parents as both parents engage with the staff to a certain degree:

“She’s not afraid to leave the kids there, do you know what I mean? Before it was ‘no, I can’t trust him, I can’t do this’ but now she can go off and leave them there and know they’re going to be there and know there’s nothing wrong. This wouldn’t have happened before [using Time4Us]. So they [staff] gained her confidence as well.” (IV 1)

While other participants did not speak in such direct terms about trust, a number of participants commented on the willingness of the child (ren)’s other parent to rearrange access times since using Time4Us. The role of the staff is viewed as important here (see section on the role of the staff). One participant spoke of the improved relationship he has with his child’s foster parents since using Time4Us.

5.10. Suggested Changes to the Time4Us Service/Centre

In the main participants felt the centre was well equipped and did not suggest any further additions or alterations to it, and were very satisfied with the centre as it currently stands. However, three participants did suggest the provision of a cooker so full meals could be prepared by them for their children. Additionally, one participant did identify extra toys being provided while another suggested the provision of some outdoor facility, such as a green area and was critical of the centre’s location:

“Another thing is, I think, the idea, like the centre is designed beautifully and all the rest but it is in an industrial setting. I feel it shouldn’t be, it should be in a more child-orientated setting, say with a green area and something like that. I think the setting could be a lot better.” (IV 5)

Additionally, changes to the model of support that the staff currently operate. An information service was suggested, whereby the child's other parent informs the staff of weekly developments in the child's life (for example, first words, first steps). Also, mediation was mentioned as a potential addition to the service after three or four visits:

"I think there should be mediation, it should be established, set up either by the centre or be included as part of it, after maybe a certain number of visits. I would think it would have to be staff that would initiate it, like say it would be one of the conditions of them (child's other parent) bringing the child." (IV 5)

5.11. Future Use of Time4Us

The majority of participants felt that due to financial and legal constraints their use of the centre will continue for the foreseeable future. In total, four of the seven interview participants cited their legal situation as requiring them to continue using Time4Us. For some, it was the perceived control exerted by the child (ren)'s other parent that would require them to use Time4Us:

"No, I see myself using it, I'll be honest with you I'm always going to be kind of using it because there will always be that lack of trust between me and [child's other parent] so I'll always need Time4Us. [...] All [child's other parent] got to do is phone up, 'could you tell them to be back by two.'" (IV 1).

The cost of pursuing greater access outside the centre is viewed by some as preventing them from moving on from the centre, while maintenance payments was also cited by one participant as being a prohibitive factor:

"I do still see myself using it until I can get back to court and either make some other increase on access or arrangement, yeah. [...] Every time I went to court it was €500 per solicitor, whether a case was adjourned or not they had to be paid." (IV 5).

"Yeah, basically the reason I'm not out of here is financial [...] It's basically because of the maintenance payments which are not, haven't caught up." (IV 6)

Other participants cited the lack of suitable alternative locations for their anticipated use of the centre into the future. In particular, their own place of residence was viewed as being unsuitable:

“I’m not in a position to. I’m in a sort of one bedroom flat thing and there are outstanding matters with that as well so like I don’t really have anywhere else to take them if you know what I mean, which a few of the fathers I think are in that position as well you know.” (IV 4).

All participants see themselves using Time4Us for the foreseeable future (six months to one year). However, the reasons for this are varied. Some participants had begun using the centre as a pick-up and drop-off location for access visits outside the centre, but still prefer to have the option to use the centre from time to time should the need arise, due to inclement weather for example, and because it’s simply a pleasant place to be. Other parents see themselves using it as their children have become familiar with the centre and like it but see it as a stepping stone to greater access outside the centre:

“I think [child’s name] has gotten used to it, they enjoy coming here and so do I. I do hope, like, within the next few months that we could start doing stuff (outside) again. [...] Yeah, but I wouldn’t mind calling in now and again, you know?” (IV 6)

This was echoed by another parent who felt, in addition to him and his children liking the centre, it offers a particularly impartial, secure place to see their children:

“I don’t see myself – because it’s the most secure place, it’s an impartial place – I would not see myself using, seeing my children outside Time4Us for now.” (IV 2)

One participant in particular was cognisant of the potential Time4Us has in enhancing access to his children outside the centre:

“Like, I mean, it has been very beneficial to myself and even a few of the other parents, I mean it’s a stepping-stone as well to a lot more freedom with [child’s name]. ” (IV 4)

5.12. The Views of Children who use Time4Us

The evaluation team undertook three interviews with children who use the Time4Us service along with their parents. Although seven non-resident parents provided consent for their children to be spoken to, consent was not forthcoming from either the child or the resident parent in four cases. The children were between six and thirteen years of age and have been using the centre for between six and 10 months. The team was cognisant

that these interviews were taking place during the access visits and so was eager not to prolong the interview process for too long. On average, the interviews took 8 minutes. While ideal to interview children alone, this was not possible in two of the cases. In both cases the fathers remained in the room but did not speak to the children unless to prompt them to.

The participating children were asked about what they liked and disliked about the centre; what they did when they were with their parents in the centre; and anything they would like to see added to the centre. Children were also invited to draw a picture depicting what they do when they are with their parents in Time4Us. One child completed a picture for the research team.

All participating children indicated that they were happy using the centre and liked the staff. They used terms like “fun” when asked about the centre. In addition, some of the children identified particular toys – such as the tractor, the ice hockey table, the pool table and the dart board – when asked specifically what they liked about the centre. One child responded that seeing their Dad was the most positive thing about their experience of the centre.

Regarding what each child did with their Dad when in the centre, the same answers were forthcoming. Additional activities mentioned by the children included painting and drawing, watching DVDs, playing pool, talking (about sports and school), and general play. Two of the three children indicated also that they had or prepared food and/or drinks with their Dad when in the centre. One child did indicate that it was “fun to play pool *with* Dad” when they visited the centre together. Additionally, one of the children who participated also sees their Dad outside Time4Us. For instance, on the day of the interview they had just returned to the centre from spending the afternoon in Salthill where they played on the beach and enjoyed the sun.

All children were asked if there was anything they didn’t like about the centre. Two of the children mentioned nothing in response to the question, while the third child identified the disappearance of the dart board from the centre as being a negative. When

asked if there was anything they would like to see changed about the centre, one child said no, another responded with “more toys” while the third child mentioned the replacement of the dart board.

Overall, the interviews with the children using Time4Us, although short, indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the centre. Understandably, the centre is very much associated with interaction between the children and their fathers. Indeed, the observations of the research team in conducting these interviews reinforce this point – two of the three interviews would not have taken place without the assistance of the children’s fathers.

5.13. Conclusion

What emerges here from these interviews is a positive picture of the Time4Us play centre as portrayed by its participants. Having been made aware of the service through two main channels – the legal system and the social work department – Time4Us offered the first real possibility for participants to meet with their child (ren) for some time. These participants have identified the secure, safe, impartial nature of the centre as being its key attributes, along with helpful, supportive and neutral staff who together facilitate a space where relationships are built upon, improved and deepened on a weekly basis. Participants reported the role of staff as helpful and non-invasive, supportive and encouraging. While some participations suggested changes to the centre mainly in relation to kitchen facility and outdoor space, all participants expressed satisfaction with the service overall. Yet, despite the opportunity Time4Us presents to develop bonds and strengthen relationships, most participants feel that the legal situation they currently find themselves in regarding access constrains their ability to see beyond using Time4Us for the foreseeable future.

6. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS OF TIME4US

This chapter of the report will present issues arising out of a number of interviews with the management and staff of Time4Us, and individuals from agencies who are key referrers to the centre. Four members of staff at the Time4Us Centre, four members of the Time4Us management committee and three referral actors were interviewed for the purposes of the research.

The evaluation team were interested in a number of different aspects of the centre including:

- the origins and evolution of Time4Us, the governance arrangements of the centre;
- the views of the centre from organisations and agencies who refer parents to it;
- the model of support operated by the staff;
- the views of the staff, management and referrers regarding the service and its impact;
- the future of Time4Us

This chapter presents the views of a number of stakeholders regarding the Time4Us play centre. It is based on the findings extracted from a number of data sources:

- Individual interviews with staff of Time4Us, namely: the project leader, two project workers and a relief worker;
- Individual interviews with three individuals from two referral agencies;
- Face-to-face interviews with two members of the management team of the centre;
- Telephone interviews with a further two members of the management team;
- Two observation sessions of parents using the service;

The first section discusses the views of stakeholders mentioned regarding the development and evolution of the centre, its management structure and cross-sectoral, inter-agency characteristics. The second section details the views of all stakeholders regarding *their* understanding of the service. The third section provides details on the users of Time4Us – what types of families use the service. The fourth section provides an account of the role of the staff at Time4Us and the model of support they provide while

the fifth section details the relationship between the centre and other referral agencies in Galway City and County. The final section looks to the future of Time4Us and the issue of its sustainability.

6.1. The Origins of Time4Us

6.1.1. Identifying Need

Interviews revealed that Time4Us emerged from a number of sources which, when combined, provided the impetus to develop the service. Specifically mentioned by all relevant interviewees was the role the then Minister for Children, Frank Fahey T.D.⁵ played in putting the issue of services for fathers on the agenda and instigating a preliminary meeting about providing a service. Interviewees commented on the influence of other services – such as the Teen Parenting Initiative and Springboard – as a prompt for developing this service. They also revealed an awareness of research which highlighted how children are affected in a number of ways when marital problems emerge, alongside research which suggested the positive role both parents can play in a child's life.

In addition, organisations such as the then newly established Galway City and County Childcare Committee (GCCCC) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) both recognised through their planning procedures a need for some form of service for fathers, as did other family service organisations working in the locality. Thirdly, the experience of the social work department HSE Galway in attempting to arrange access visits outside of operational times was a spur towards establishing Time4Us. The absence of any place at weekends or evenings for access to occur was identified as a gap in current service provision, hence the intention of the service to operate at weekends. It was agreed that Time4Us service would not duplicate services provided by the HSE, create as little upheaval as possible in the lives of families, and be non-political regarding any issue of being aligned to fathers rights groups.

⁵ Frank Fahey TD was Minister of State with responsibility for Children at the Department of Health from 1997-2000.

Over a period of time ideas began to crystallise into a concept for a service which would provide a “place where parents could meet their children and where both parents would know that they (children) were safe and secure, and allow that relationship to nurture”. Upon being approached by Minister Fahey the HSE identified a number of families who could possibly benefit from such a service. Other organisations, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA), and representatives from the Galway Courts, who attended the preliminary meeting, confirmed from their work that such a service was also needed. Finally, a group of business people who had been recognised as wanting to contribute to a service in a philanthropic fashion identified a lack of services for non-resident fathers as a gap which they were aware of and a need which they were interested in making a financial commitment towards.

In exploring options for a service underpinned by the ideas set out above a steering group was established which engaged the expertise of an individual who acted as a support to a Contact Centre Network in the UK. In identifying what a contact centre was the steering group made the decision not to pursue this line but rather develop a play-orientated, non-stigmatising centre which would be non-HSE aligned. Furthermore, the new centre would be available to all free-of-charge, and would actively seek approximately 30% referrals from other agencies in the locality. After drawing up a proposal for the centre in 2005 the centre was eventually established in December 2006 and began operation in March 2007.

6.1.2. The Management Structure of Time4Us

Time4Us adopts a cross-sectoral, inter-agency approach to its governance. Interviewees revealed that private sector individuals were approached with a view to part-financing the project and becoming members of the board and management structure. Additionally, many of those involved in the preliminary work on the concept of Time4Us remained involved, including DSFA, HSE and GCCCC. While other organisations – despite being invited to participate and become involved – took no further part in the development of the service.

Interviewees described the management structure as outlined in chapter one of this report. A board of directors meets between three to four times a year, while operational and

finance committees meeting more frequently, the former meeting once every four to six weeks. The operational committee also links with the project leader. Membership of the Time4Us management committee was described by many relevant interviewees as ‘overlapping’ and cited by many as a positive aspect of the governance arrangements which allows a complete picture and understanding of all aspects of the service to inform decision making. Many interviewees identified future finance for the centre as being a serious issue, with some doubt over future sources of finance for the service. However, such considerations are outside the scope of this evaluation.

6.2. Other Stakeholders’ Understanding of Time4Us

All interviewees were asked to describe their understanding of Time4Us. In general, most described in a similar manner to the service users as an alternative places of access:

“It’s giving a place rather than go to the likes of a fast food outlet or a cinema that may not be suitable, or bringing people around in the rain you know? That it’s a facility where access can be availed of [...] There are other situations for instance where access has to be supervised [...] but Time4Us doesn’t go that far. It’s more just a facility than anything else. That’s my understanding of it.”

Additionally, while another interviewee also described the centre similarly they also attributed particular child-centred characteristics to it which were echoed in other interviews:

“It provides a space for parents to meet their children where firstly [...] there is a bit of privacy in comparison to out of home situations. It’s fun for children. For the other parent I think it also provides security around where their children are going to be, what the building is like. I think it is a child-centred way of managing access. Prior to this there wasn’t a child focus on it (managing access) I think.

Another interviewee highlighted the free aspect of the service as being a significant characteristic, particularly if access involves travel from other parts of the country:

“If you’ve a father travelling from, say, Dublin, he may not be in good circumstances, he’s not under so much pressure to spend money like if he’s in the middle of the city, on fast food, then shops, or whatever.

This notion of the centre providing a friendly environment *and* an alternative to other play areas where access has occurred in the past was emphasised by interviewees. Particularly important is the ability Time4Us offers parents to be directly involved with their children as opposed to watching them play on a ‘child-only’ activity:

“I think if you somewhere like [a generic play centre in the locality] there are birthday parties and the like. The focus is very different and it’s very difficult for children to spend time with their parents, they are gone playing different things that adults can’t access [...] parents don’t see their children for the period of time that they have contact [in such an environment].”

The staff at Time4Us were very clear about the objectives of the centre and consciously work towards creating a fun-filled environment where access can occur between parent – and in some cases parents – and their children. In particular, they stressed a trait of the centre as being a neutral ground for parents to arrange access, and for such access to occur in a non-judgemental, non-intrusive manner. Additionally, the perception parents have of Time4Us is important in defining how they use the service and how it is understood by them. For example, the idea of Time4Us as being a stepping stone for some users was identified by staff as important:

“It’s like a stepping stone for a lot of parents, that their aim at the end is to have access outside of the centre. So what we would do is be there to help them build a relationship with their children [...] sometimes it’s also build a trust with the resident parent, that the next step after that would be using our service as a drop off service and finally then with hopefully the end result being that they have access with their children outside of the service, arranged by both parents. But it will differ from parent to parent. It’s not necessarily going to work.”

6.3. The Users of Time4Us

In general, the intention was to provide a universal service and this was reflected in all interviews with staff and management. The centre opened the evaluation team was interested in inquiring about who uses the service now.

Whilst those cases which are referred from either the legal or social work domain follow a set path into the service (in that they are referred) the interviewees were clear that as a

service, it is open to anyone to use. It is universal as opposed to targeted. In the words of two staff members:

“All types of families [...] all spectrums, if you talk about classes its all classes, all types, all ages....”

“It caters for basically [...] any parent that doesn’t live with their child. It goes across the board. There is no clientele that we ever aimed in on, it’s open to absolutely everyone. We would have parents on disability allowance, on social welfare payments, fathers and mothers with health problems, men that are working, that are businessmen, travellers, foreign nationals, its very even across the board, [...] right across the board which works quite well because everyone in there has a common purpose – all of them don’t actually live with their kids.”

This common purpose amongst users resonated with the referrers spoken to for the study. In particular, the unifying effect of such a trait serves, in some ways, to embolden those who use the service, that there is a sense of being directly catered for as opposed to fitting into a more generic family service:

“I think it’s considered by parents as a service that’s set up specifically for their families and families that are experiencing similar difficulties. I don’t think in any of the families I’m aware of that attend, they don’t go in and swap stories , yet they have an understanding of someone else who is in the same boat as themselves.”

However, staff also emphasised that, while the service was open to anyone, each case is assessed on its own characteristics before regular service use begins (see 6.4. below). There are cases where Time4Us is not a suitable venue for access to occur, and these could be for a number of reasons. Staff spoke of some access visits occurring which were detrimental to the child’s happiness because the child had become involved in conflict between parents at the centre. They also spoke of other forms of cases which Time4Us would not be suitable for. While supervised access has taken place in the past with social workers present in the room with the parent, generally such instances were deemed unsuitable for Time4Us use. Additionally, staff remarked that they try to avoid instances which may require them to take a particular side or jeopardise their neutrality in delivering a service. For example:

“I guess what we try and steer away from – the service works best if both parents are happy for the children and parent to be seeing each other. [...] Where the courts might be requiring court reports or solicitor reports, that was an area we wanted to steer away from because we wanted to maintain our sense of neutrality.”

This idea of maintaining neutrality was cited by referrers as a particularly important and positive aspect of the service which, when combined with other aspects, served to enhance the service:

“I think it’s a positive, it’s I suppose it’s neutrality, they (parents) are aware that Time4Us is not directly linked to social work or the courts or whatever. But I think people are aware of the limits [...] that there are good ground rules and boundaries around what happens as well within the service.”

6.4. The Role of the Staff at Time4Us and the Model of Support Provided

In identifying the role of the Time4Us staff terms like ‘facilitating,’ ‘enabling’ and ‘supporting’ were used by interviewees. Most prominent in these interviews was the role identified for staff to create a positive atmosphere for access to occur so that positive relationships between children and their parents could develop and/or further grow:

“The primary thing is how they can make children comfortable so that the trust and relationship between parent and child can begin to build up, and also for them (staff) to build and develop trust with the primary care givers also.”

Other interviewees were cognisant of the role the staff play in being the face of the centre and the importance this has for the uptake of the service by the parents. Thus the key role is to make service use as comfortable for parents and children as possible while also making it safe and secure. The role staff play in facilitating bond-building between some children and parents while overall ensuring the safety and well-being of children was also cited as a prominent function of the staff.

Members of management referred to the important role staff play in feeding into their planning processes and meetings through recounting experiences of particular service uses, flagging issues which may arise and need to be brought to the attention of management, or making recommendations regarding the operation of the service or new resources which may be required. Additionally, the work staff do in publicising the service and working with referral agencies was cited as important to the successful

functioning of the centre. The staff very much echo the views of management regarding the role they play in the centre. They see providing support, assessing the needs of each parent and child as they begin using the service, and reassessing this need as service use continues and increases. The importance of developing relationships with the resident parent is also critical to the success of the centre. Ensuring comfort and providing peace of mind to the resident parent during what be a difficult process is not underestimated or perceived as a secondary aspect of the service:

“I think it’s vitally important to have relationships with the resident parent as well. Sometimes for the resident parent it’s quite hard, you do have to put a lot of work into it [...] because they’re trusting you with your child, because they’ve no trust with their ex-partner. By chatting to them they’ll start to realise we’re neutral, non-judgemental. We’re not there to provide legal advice to the ex-partner about access – we’re very child-focused.”

In addition, the listening aspect of the staff role is also one which is emphasised. For instance, the upset and distress that conflict can cause, either in and around Time4Us or regarding court cases, can require staff to provide a listening ear and comfort:

“Listening to them and, I mean we have to try and remain neutral but at the same time there is a certain amount that a parent is going to divulge to you [...] they might want to say ‘look if I can get more access, can I sit down and talk to you and come back in after court and let you know how it went?’ Sometimes it mightn’t have gone their way, they might be a bit upset, they just want to talk to you and you just let them, give them their space.”

Other interviewees commented on the importance placed on the previous experience and qualifications of the staff in delivering the service, particularly where conflict between parents has been, or continues to be, a factor. The role of the staff play in managing such conflict is a skill much extolled in interviews:

“Managing conflict in such a way that they have to remain neutral and not appear to take sides with one parent or another, that’s a skill, and it’s not an easy thing to do, especially where there’s so much anger, emotion and hurt.”

This difficulty in remaining neutral in family conflict situations was monitored by referrers, who perceived the role staff play in adopting such a stance as a critical part of the model of support provided. It was pointed out that the staff do not take sides or

provide detailed feedback to referral agencies, one referrer remarked of the danger of changing the ethos of Time4Us:

“It would create a different dynamic with the people coming that are coming in [...] I think it would change the view that the parents have in terms of Time4Us if they [staff] did become involved in feeding back to the courts or in feeding back to social work teams.”

6.5 Model of Support

Staff described the model of support which is provided at the centre. Prospective users who have been assessed and deemed suitable for Time4Us are invited to visit the premises. Staff discuss with the prospective user the extent of the relationship with their children, the children’s age and the last time they saw their children. Upon the first access occurring staff might stay in the room and observe the access taking place so as to get a fuller picture of what the relationship is like. If extra support is required it is provided, or if the parent is comfortable on their own with the child/children then staff gradually withdraw to give them their space. The staff’s experience and instinct play a major role in deciding the level of support provided to, and desired by the parent.

Maintaining a dialogue with service users is an important part of the model of support. Ensuring that the service is working for them, asking them if there is any additional support required, or satisfying particular requests is viewed by staff as an important aspect of their role, as is providing encouragement and advice. Also, the opportunity an end-of-session chat between the non-resident parent and Time4Us staff presents to reflect with the parent on their experiences of the access visit is a valued part of the support provided, although not all parents take such an opportunity:

“The parents with the younger kids, sometimes they have concerns about should they be walking and things like that, and ‘do you think I need to do more of this with him?’ [...] Sometimes, with the older children it can be a little bit of parenting advice [...] without attacking them or anything, about their way of controlling or managing their child, just offer some suggestions, ‘maybe if you try this, maybe if you try that. [...] Oftentimes it’s a good time at the end of the session to have the chat with them about how it went.”

End of session conversations also provide an opportunity to discuss future access and plans for increasing access. Staff also spend a considerable amount of their time

managing appointments and arranging or rearranging access visits. This involves contacting and discussing such issues with both parents. Such a role can also extend to passing messages from parent to parent regarding the needs of the child or particular requests for birthday presents. The observations undertaken for this research revealed a model of support which aligns to what is described above. In all observation occasions staff tended to enter and leave the room sporadically, sometimes engaging with parents and children and on other occasions using the kitchen. On one occasion they played with the child while the parent prepared some food, while on another occasion they played with the child whilst the parent used the toilet facilities. However, for the most part, staff play a role in engendering responsibility by encouraging the non-resident parents to do most of the tasks with children, while being on hand to support if required:

“With Time4Us we put the responsibility on the parent. They’re responsible for all the cooking and everything like that. [...] As for going down on hands and knees, literally getting into the work, we had to in one case [...] but our aim is to once we’re in it and once the child is happy we pull back and we leave the room then.”

Additionally, during observation periods the handover of children from and to the resident parent/guardian was witnessed at the beginning and end of access sessions. Staff collect the child at the door from the resident parent. One staff member brings the child/children into the playroom while another will remain and speak with the resident parent for a while. Upon access ending the child is brought from the playroom through the reception area to the resident parent/guardian at the door while another staff member will stay and speak with the non-resident parent until the resident parent/guardian has left the premises. Adhering to this aspect of the model is an important role of the staff:

“One parent drops them off, we bring the children through and at the end of the access, the non-resident parent remains there, we bring the child out and generally the parents don’t even see each other. That’s probably one of the key roles of the staff as well is kind of taking charge of that handover and yes, we’ll ask you to remain in there, you know, being a little bit assertive about that.”

Such a handover ‘policy’ emerged after a process of reflection amongst the staff after a number of incidents outside the centre and is, therefore, as a result of concerns over

children's well-being and safety. The implementation of the handover policy relates to minimising the exposure of children to conflict which may occur between parents at the centre:

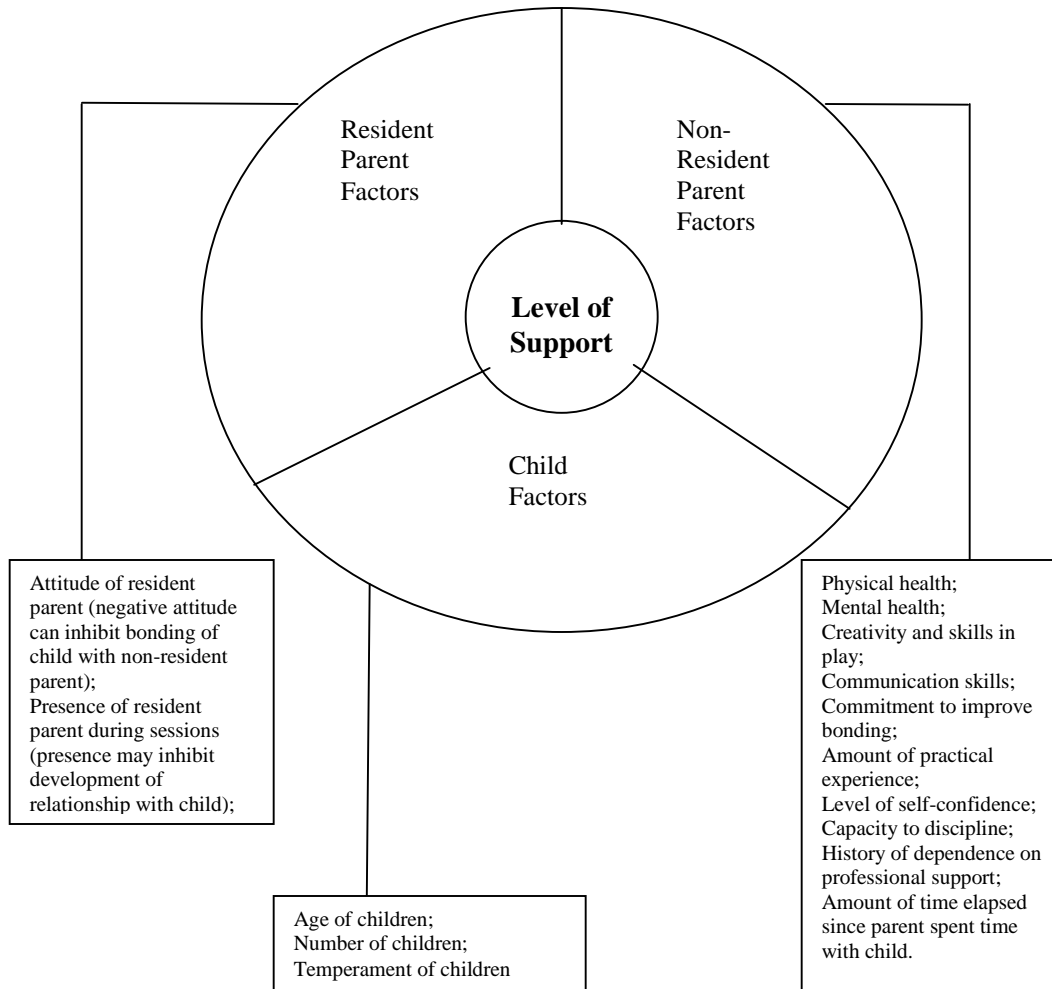
“So for that reason then we dealt with that safety issue by having the resident parent come to the door with the child, the non-resident parent waiting in the other room and we do the exchange. It stops the young child witnessing the parents arguing regularly and also protects, it just prevents any sort of aggro starting between the two of them. So we just keep them apart always and it seems to work. So that basically changed, it came in straight away as we saw it, something could have happened, potentially with a family. They were starting to verbally argue outside so we felt, ok, this is the way to shut it off quickly and prevent anything from happening.”

When asked about the safety of children staff were very much of the view that the children are predominantly the responsibility of the non-resident parents using the centre. Yet, as is the case with the handover policy, staff take all precautions to minimise physical and emotional injury to children when in Time4Us. If any minor accidents are incurred in the centre, first aid is administered and the resident parent/guardian is informed of the injury. If there are any issues of a child welfare or child protection nature in referred cases, staff are required by the project leader to write up such instances and contact the appropriate authorities.

A diagrammatic description of the Time4Us model is set out below:

The criteria used by Time4Us in determining the Level of Support provided

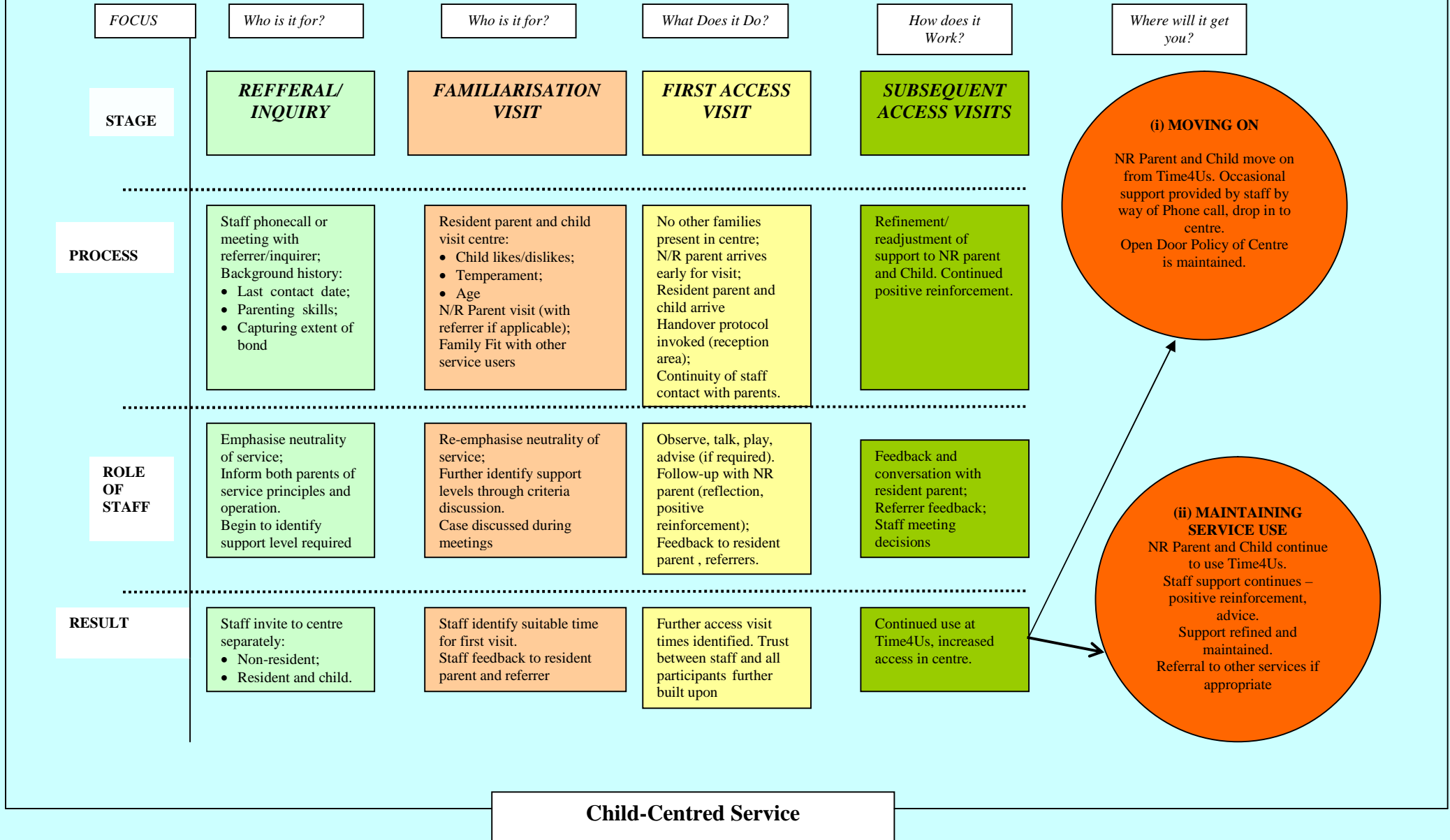
The staff at Time4Us use a number of criteria in determining the level of support to be provided to each family. These criteria are set out below:



The Model of Support Provided at Time4Us

The model of support provided by Time4Us staff can be split into a number of stages. What follows is a graphical and descriptive account of this model of support. The next page features a full model of support followed by individual stages described. A map of the centre is also provided.

Neutral Service



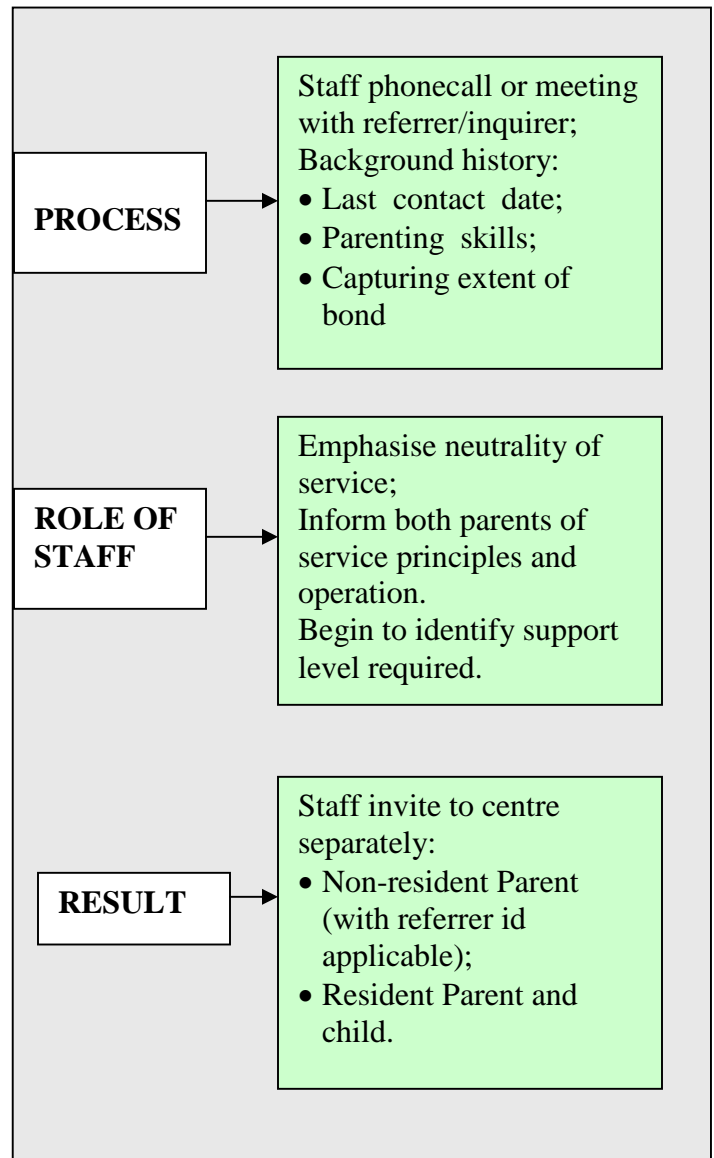
Child-Centred Service

Stage 1A: Inquiry or Referral

The initial referral or inquiry is usually dealt with by staff over the phone. This stage involves staff informing inquirers about the principles of the service – most notably its neutrality and child-centred approach - and the particulars of its operation (for example the handover policy in the reception area – see stage 1B on the next page), times of operation, facilities available and so on.

Much of the contact between potential service users and staff is concerned with informing parents - resident and non-resident – about how the service operates. In particular, the importance of the **handover policy** in reducing potential conflict or confrontation, and thus reducing the stress experienced by parents and the potential for children to witness such confrontation, is crucial (see stage 2 for a description of the handover policy).

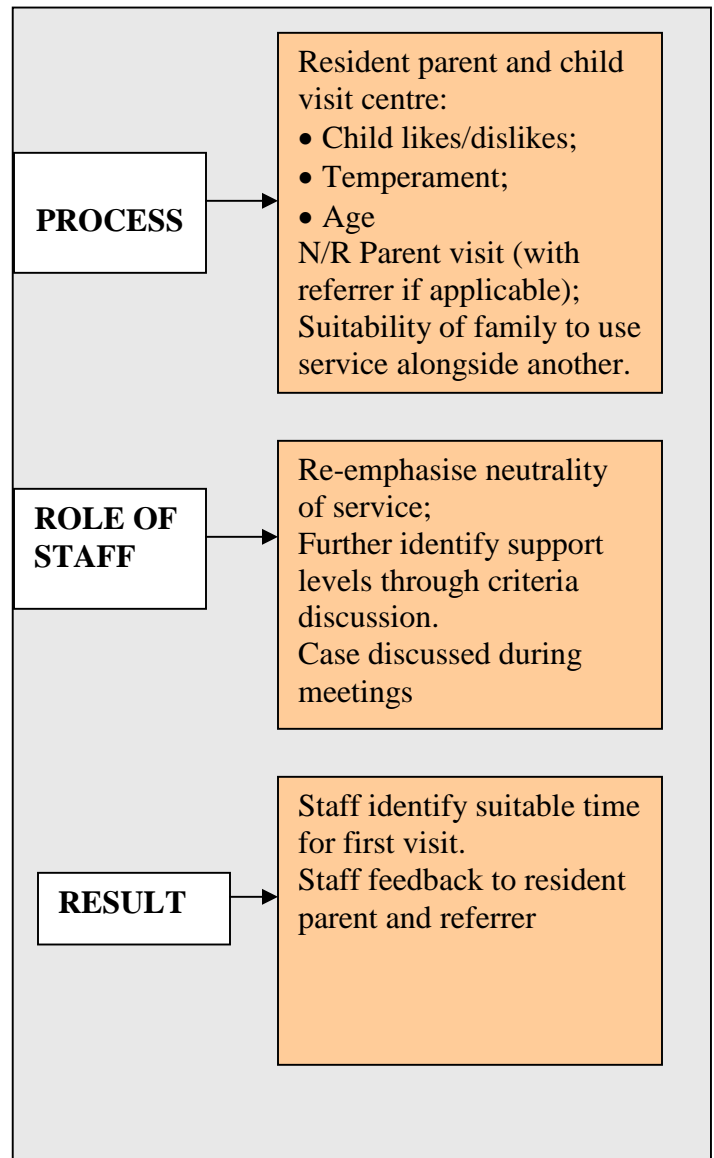
The focus of this stage is also to capture the extent of the bond between the potential service users, i.e. the non-resident parent and children. Therefore, staff begin to inquire about the various criteria detailed in graph X.X. above. Subsequent to this, staff invite the resident parent and child to visit the centre, as well as the non-resident parent on their own of with a referrer if applicable.



Stage 1B: Familiarisation Visit

Upon the identification of a suitable time, the non-resident parent and, where applicable, the referrer visit the centre to familiarise themselves with it. Staff further discuss with the non-resident parent particulars of the determining criteria for the extent of support to be offered. At a separate time the resident parent and child, children also visit the centre. Staff liaise with both parent and children so as to further build trust between themselves and the resident parent and children. This also serves to permit staff to gauge the suitability or otherwise of the family to use the centre alongside other families.

If both parties are satisfied with the centre and its operation a suitable time is identified for the first access visit to occur. Staff prepare for the family's first visit through incorporating family needs into their weekly review meetings.

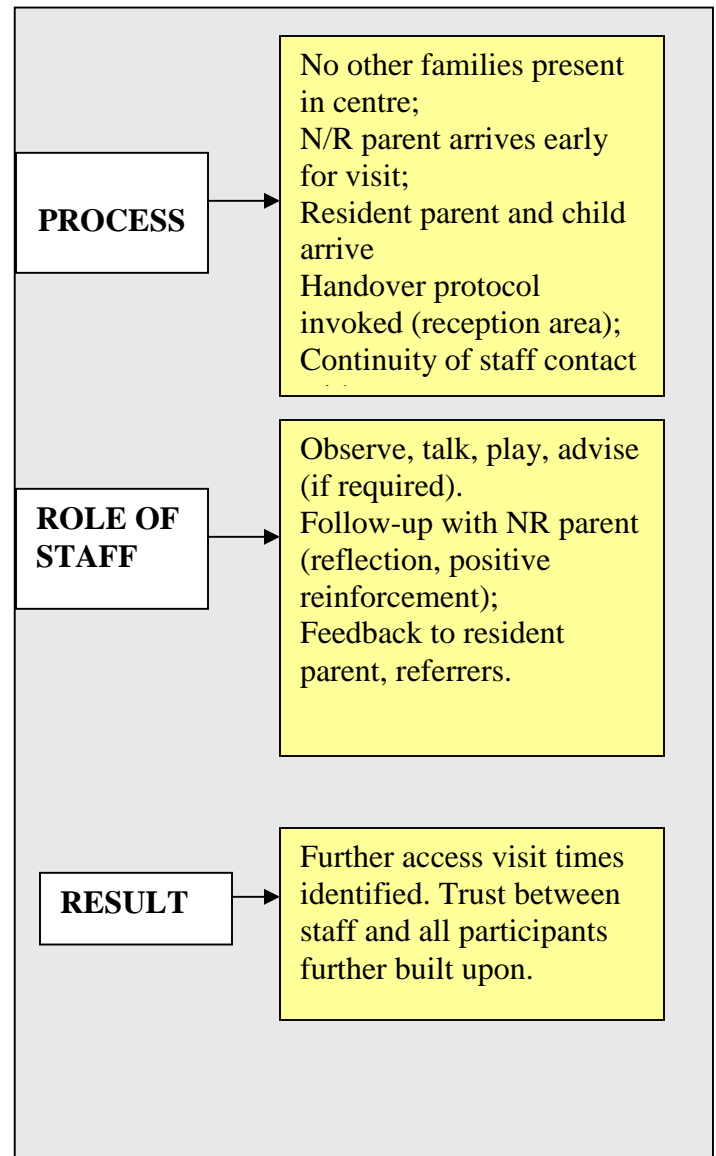


Stage 2: First Access Visit

The first access visit usually takes place when no other families are using the centre. The non-resident parent is asked to arrive 15 minutes early. Once the resident parent and child arrive staff put the **handover policy** into action, where the child is collected in the reception area and brought into the main play room to the non-resident parent. One staff member usually remains with the resident parent for a few moments to generally chat or answer any questions.

Depending on the support criteria staff may play with the non-resident parent and child (ren) or may simply casually observe the visit.

Once ended, staff put the **handover policy** into action again, with the non-resident parent remaining in the play room until the resident parent and child have left the centre. Staff may discuss the visit with the non-resident parent if desired by the latter. Staff will also contact the resident parent to see how the visit went for the child and parent.

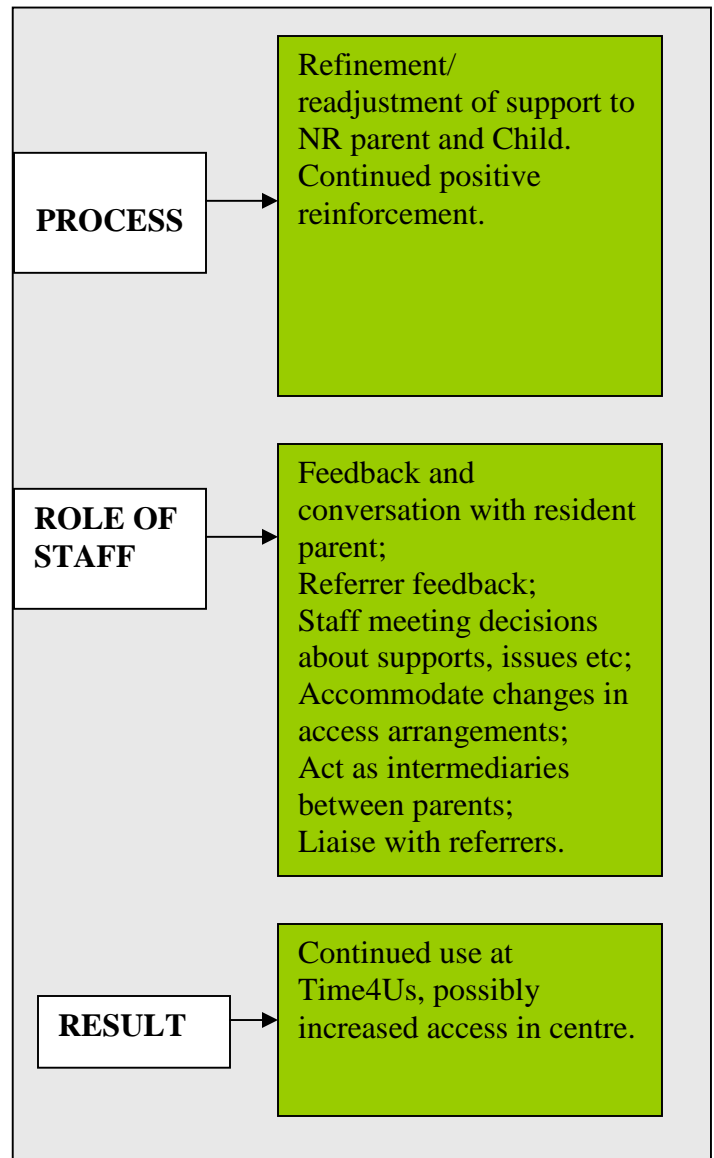


Stage 3: Subsequent Access Visits

Subsequent access visits are arranged in conjunction with resident parents. For the most part, however, access times become fixed, although staff are accommodating of rearranging visits for parents and children.

Staff continue to support both the non-resident parent and children who use the service, although at this stage the level of support required by the family has been well established. However, advice and information are provided when requested, and more generally maintaining trust between staff and families is a continuing focus of the relationship between staff and all family members.

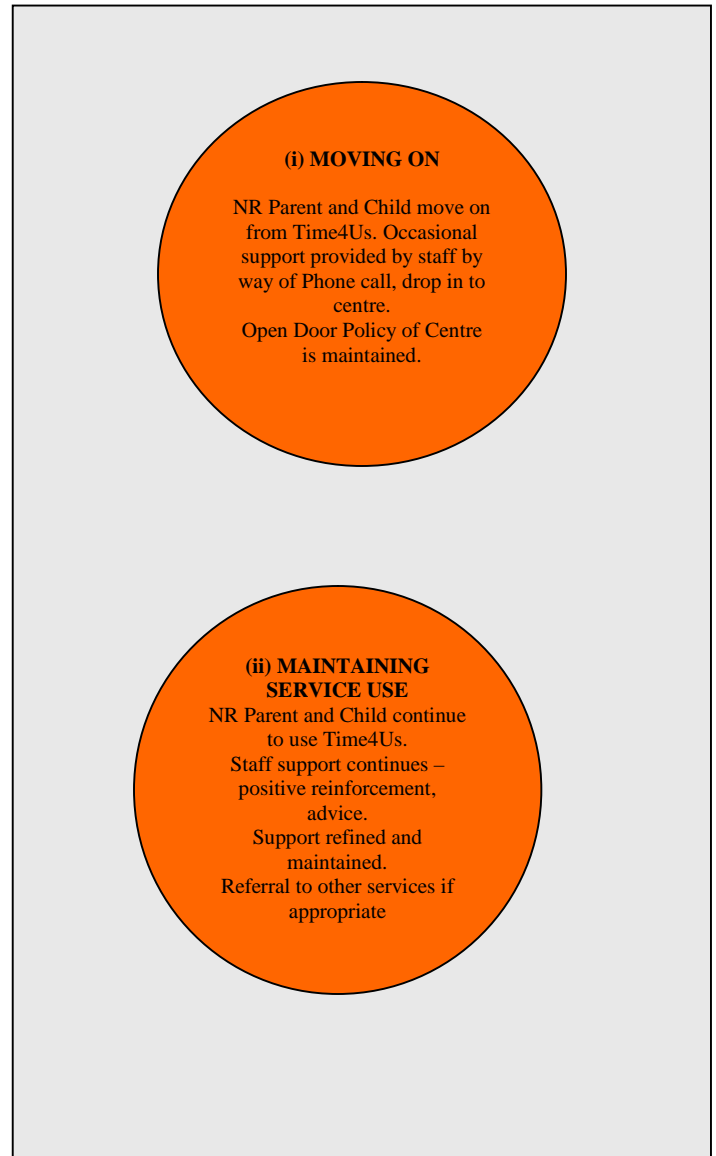
If so desired by family members, or warranted through referrer input (e.g. court decision) staff facilitate changes in access arrangements as far as is practicable and with consideration to other service users.

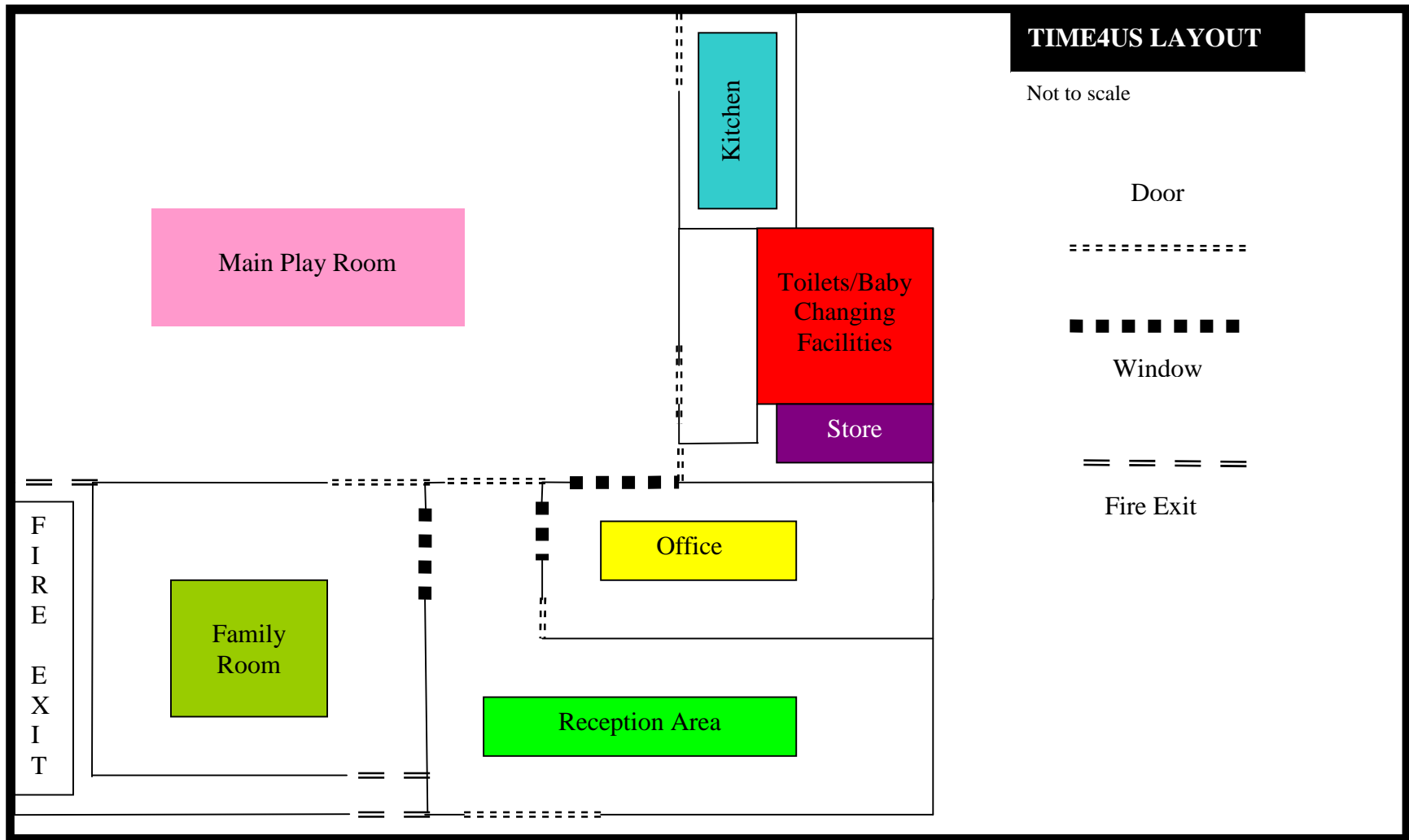


Stage 4: Exiting Time4Us or maintaining service use

Depending on a number of factors, non-resident parents and children may either continue to use the centre for access arrangements or exit the centre. Regarding the former, staff continue to provide required support to the non-resident parent and their children whilst they use the centre, and in a wider context through the maintenance of contact, either through parents dropping into the centre or staff contacting parents over the phone. Should it be required, staff also refer non-resident parents to other services if appropriate. Contact and trust is maintained with the resident parents also.

In the case of the non-resident parents and children exiting the service or moving on, staff still maintain contact through occasional phone calls or when parents and children drop into the centre. The centre operates an open door policy to such families, so while they may not require the centre for access visits parents and children are always welcome to use the centre on a sporadic basis if they so wish and the centre is available.





6.6. The Relationship between Time4Us and Referral Agencies in Galway City and County

Management and staff revealed the extent of the contact with other agencies in Galway City and County. Regarding the governance of the project, good contact is maintained with all partner organisations such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the HSE and the One Foundation, and Galway City and County Childcare Committee who all have management positions.

However, the degree of contact between the staff and key referral agencies such as the Social Work Department, the Courts Service, or individual solicitors is mixed. Indeed one referrer agreed that there is very little contact between their organisation and the staff of Time4Us, while the interviews revealed that the extent of contact with other agencies very much depends on the individuals within the organisation. Staff viewed the contact received from social workers relating to families who use of Time4Us as strong at the start but can decline as service use becomes more established:

“I would have presumed at the beginning that they would actually ring up the following week and say ‘how did it go?’ For a lot of them they actually haven’t or wouldn’t have [...] some ring up and some don’t. I’d actually follow it up with a call myself and just ring and say ‘look, this is what happened at the weekend,’ you know?”

More generally, the relationship with the Social Work Department in HSE West is described by staff as positive and facilitating. Notwithstanding a lack of contact with some social workers, staff describe a positive process with the social work team where the essential information regarding contacts of potential users and their children are provided to staff on a need-to-know basis. Staff will contact the social worker in question should a particular need arise, or if communication has not occurred for some time. Some staff members are also aware that access may occur during out-of-hours times for social workers and hence communication is not always possible.

Referrers are very appreciative of the contact and communication that does occur with Time4Us staff, and in particular, the staff’s opinion of how contact is going or has gone.

Such opinions and information can inform the decision making processes of referrers, be it solicitors, courts or social workers. In the words of one referrer:

“So that [information from staff regarding an access visit] gives a good bit of insight without it being judgemental, you know? [...] the fact that they can give a neutral impression of how things go or how things are helps an awful lot in terms of how you would work with [the parent] from then on.”

Other staff have commented that, while contact with referrers had not been extensive at the beginning of operation it has steadily improved over time. In other cases they have repeatedly contacted key referrers to invite them to the service but such invites have gone unanswered (something acknowledged by the referrers interviewed for this study). In some instances access times have been arranged by courts without due reference to the service or its staff. Parents sometimes turn up at Time4Us expecting access straightaway. However, the interviews reveal that staff adopt a pragmatic approach to such instances. If access can occur it does, and if the centre is booked then another suitable time is arranged and a letter drawn up for the parent’s solicitor informing them of the change.

6.7. The Future of Time4Us

All interviewees agreed that Time4Us was making a difference, irrespective of whether such difference was measured in terms of numbers using the centre, numbers who have progressed on to access outside the centre, or whether access visits have increased over the period of service use. In discussing the future of Time4Us with members of the management committee the issue of finance was identified as the defining factor in relation to the sustainability of the service. The desire to maintain the high standards adopted by the service in its pilot year, particularly regarding the investment in well-qualified staff was expressed in some interviews:

“we know parents want the service, children want the service, and there is a need for the service, so the only barrier at the moment is the commitment of funding [...]the only thing that will actually cause it to close is no long-term funding, and we want to hold on to the qualified experienced staff that we have.

In planning the future of the service some management members spoke of the need to assess the funding from private sources, and indeed they spoke of new ways of seeking such funding. Furthermore, the need for central government departments who, up to now, are not involved in financing the service to ‘get on board’ was also highlighted by many

management interviewees. Despite this financial need, one management member pledged that ‘Time4Us will continue.’ In doing so the idea of promoting the positive aspects of the service to government and other relevant bodies (such as the legal profession) was emphasised, with the potential of rolling out the service on a national level – possibly alongside existing mediation services – requiring further exploration.

6.8. Conclusion

In summary, what is apparent from the interviews undertaken for this evaluation is the overall positive light which Time4Us is viewed in by its stakeholders. It is viewed as an innovative, worthwhile service which offers a solution to the needs of many families while improving on previous access arrangements in child-centred way. The service was identified as particularly valuable by the referrers, meeting a need in the locality and filling a gap which existed in current service provision. The staff were spoken of very positively by management and referrers alike, and commended for their input and dedication to the service. Additionally, staff spoke of a generally positive experience of engaging with referrers.

7. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall aim of this study was to undertake a formative evaluation leading to preliminary recommendations regarding the value of Time4Us and to explore ways to improve its effectiveness. In meeting this objective the evaluation had a number of specific objectives. These were to assist the project towards the formulation and articulation of a model for its work, clarifying among other dimensions its theoretical, empirical and policy underpinnings, and specific objectives and activities.

Additionally, the evaluation aimed to develop and implement project monitoring systems leading in turn to data for use in the evaluation as well as for ongoing project management purposes. It provided a detailed description and analysis of project implementation including usage levels, staff duties and roles, attitudes towards project, and information pertaining to the cost of the service. It also aimed to identify and document project outcomes with particular reference to continuity and stability in family relationships, increased parent knowledge about services and supports, the development of parenting skills, and deepening relationships between non-resident parents and their children. The final objective of the evaluation was to make preliminary recommendations for the service.

As it currently operates Time4Us provides a space for non-resident parents to spend time with their children with a view to developing and further enhancing the relationship between parent and child. It also focuses on developing and building on parent's skills in interacting and caring for their children, and improving non-resident parents' knowledge of other services and supports available to them.

This research has involved documenting the development, current operation and usage levels of Time4Us by parents and establishing the extent of links between the centre and wider family services in Galway City and County. In doing so the evaluation team adopted a range of methods:

- A literature review detailing similar services in operation in other countries so as to locate Time4Us in the policy landscape;

- Documentary analysis of service data, including the service catalogue and log sheets of visits so as to establish the extent of service use, referral and inquiry rates, average service use per parent and per week, and other relevant information;
- Surveys of both resident and non-resident parents which examined, amongst other things, the impact of the centre on relationships between non-resident parent and child, and between resident and non-resident parent;
- Semi-structured follow up interviews with non-resident parents using the service;
- In-depth interviews with all staff members;
- Interviews with a selection of management/ board of directors;
- A number of interviews with representatives of key referral agencies;
- And a number of structured observation sessions of the service in operation.

In drawing together all the data emanating from these methods a number of high-level themes emerge:

- The need for Time4Us;
- The model of intervention developed by management and staff;
- The recording and use of information by the project staff;
- The use of – and progression through – the service by non-resident parents;
- The impact of service use on the relationship between non-resident parent and their child (ren);
- The impact of service use on the relationship between non-resident parents and resident parents;
- The extent of referrals from other services and agencies and the relationship between the centre and such referral agencies;
- Awareness of/receiving information about other services;
- Suggested changes to the service.

These themes are now discussed in turn.

7.1. Meeting Need

It is apparent that one of the positive aspects of Time4Us is its universal, non-stigmatising nature. The survey results reveal that over one-third of service users has some third level education while equal numbers have primary education, some secondary education or completed secondary education. Although we can't be certain, if education levels are taken as a proxy for socio-economic class, it appears that the service is not been targeted towards any one particular socio-economic group. Promotion of the service was enhanced by various means including regular leaflet drops to the main referral agencies and to locations and venues used by non-resident parents (mainly fathers) by staff, a public awareness campaign undertaken in November 2007 and word-of-mouth publicity. The numbers using the service, the extent of service use amongst the majority of parents, and the progression of some users to arranging access either on a pick-up/drop-off basis or completely outside Time4Us, would indicate that a need is being met by the service – that there is demand for it. Future planning processes might consider sourcing figures relating to children and parents who would be 'eligible' to using the service so as to inform prospective needs analyses.

7.2. The Model of Support at Time4Us

The literature review in chapter two discusses the development of contact centres as a service response to the issue of post-separation contact amid tentative debates about the concept and practice of co-parenting. In brief, a number of purposes ascribed to such centres were outlined. These include: assisting more non-residential parents to remain involved in their children's lives; reducing the debilitating effect of conflict on children; the provision of a neutral space to enable the maintenance of family ties; and the provision of a short-term contact arrangement for separated parents and their children. Furthermore, two types of contact centre are described: a *support* contact centre where families meet on neutral territory for meetings, with the involvement of wider family and/or friends, and the presence of project workers to supervise the venue but not the parents per se; and the (*statutory*) *supervised* centre where intensive project worker-family intervention occurs, characterised by a high level of vigilance within a stringently supervised environment aimed at reducing the risk to child welfare. Most of the cases involved in such centres originate from court orders and social work referrals.

The model of support at Time4Us adopts elements of both approaches outlined in chapter two. What is clear from this study is the fact that staff play a vital role in maintaining the ethos of the centre and work hard to do so. In reality, the model implemented by Time4Us staff appears to be an intuitive, fluid one, where staff build on information received at the beginning of service use, and experiences of individual parents and their children using the service, to offer a tailored form of support at every visit. Whether parents prefer to be left alone when playing with their children or require support with their children staff respond to each case on the basis of individual need and of-the-moment circumstance. Satisfaction levels reported with the service, both by resident and non-resident parents, tends to further corroborate the success of such an intuitive model.

The documentary analysis of data and log sheet descriptions, observations in the centre, staff and management interviews all reveal a model of support in Time4Us which is neither solely supported or supervised in the context of what is described above, but rather blends the various elements of each. For instance, all the purposes of contact centres outlined above appear to apply to Time4Us. When the level of intervention is examined Time4Us fits more with the supported model of contact centre rather than a supervised one. Staff establish a rapport with service users over initial visits, determining the amount of support needed based on the extent of contact prior to service use and strength of the bond between child and non-resident parent, and the parenting capacity of the non-resident parent. These in turn are determined by a number of criteria (as detailed in chapter 1) including number of children using the service with the non-resident parent, the physical and mental well-being of the non-resident parent, and the attitude and presence of the resident parent. After this has been decided staff engage to greater or lesser degrees with each non-resident parent as they use the centre, but always maintain a presence in the centre and, invariably, pass through the centre's main room in completing their work duties. In short, the staff supervise the centre while offering support – but not direct supervision – to parents and children who use the centre.

However, in contrast to the supported model, Time4Us is not a venue for family welfare conferencing or supervised access. While the staff do expend significant energies on

liaising with resident parents both directly at the centre and over the phone, the resolving of family disputes is not the primary focus of the centre. Instead, it focuses on providing a safe, impartial venue for play between non-resident parents and their children. When examining the path by which non-resident parents arrive at Time4Us, the high number of referrals – particularly from the legal and social work domains – tends to be more characteristic of the supervised model of contact. Yet this is countered by the fact that despite a referral being made, potential service users are still required to make contact with the centre and be provided with an access slot. Referral to the service does not imply service use, i.e. service use is not mandatory.

The non-resident parents surveyed and interviewed in this study report high levels of satisfaction with both the service itself and staff. The welcoming atmosphere established and maintained by staff and the support offered – directly in engaging with their children and indirectly in addressing requests and liaising with resident parents and referral agencies where involved – are critical factors in such satisfaction ratings. When examining the opinions of resident parents it is clear that there is also a high level of satisfaction with the service. Overall satisfaction is very much influenced by the character of the venue, being neutral and impartial, and the role of the staff in liaising with both parents, and referral agencies where applicable.

7.3. The Recording and Use of Information by Centre Staff

The Time4Us centre catalogue and anonymised log sheets provided the evaluation team with a rich source of material to further identify and describe the model of support adopted by the staff for each parent. It is clear that significant amounts of information are recorded by staff in addition to weekly meetings between staff themselves concerning all access visits, and regular contact between the project leader and management committee through the appointed link person. However, some issues arose during the course of the evaluation regarding the frequency of log sheet completion and the accuracy of such log sheets. In some instances log sheets were assigned to incorrect parents, while in other cases not all visits were logged, or log sheets not fully completed. The difference between recorded visits entered in the catalogue and the total log sheets visits supplied to the evaluation team underlines this point.

Interviews with project staff indicate that the forms in which they collate and utilise information have a positive impact on the implementation of the model of support for each parent. Additionally, essential information such as contact numbers, medical conditions of children and G.P. phone numbers are all collected. The project leader's emphasis on weekly meetings, and handover meetings prior to days off, indicates a strong focus on the parents and children who use the centre. The recording of details at the beginning of service use and the completion of referral forms by or in conjunction with social work referrers is a positive aspect of the information recording process.

Overall, the enhancement of recorded data could be facilitated by a move to an electronic log sheet system. While identifying information could be removed from such log sheets (as is currently the case with hand-written log sheets) an electronic log sheet noting significant events at each access visit would serve to further enhance exchange of information between staff members and regularise the completion of visit records. In addition, if progression through the service is a consideration, the recording of data at the outset of service use (e.g. current access arrangements) so as to establish a baseline to set future access against would be a positive development. While it is clear to the evaluation team that staff have a good personal knowledge of parents' situations any change in staff could cause the removal of such information currently not recorded.

7.4. The Use of – and Progression through – Time4Us by Non-resident Parents

It is clear from the data provided that usage levels differ noticeably from parent to parent. For instance, while some parents are regular users, others are more sporadic, and others again may have attended once and never again for a variety of reasons. In total, 28 parents have and continue to use the service in the last two months of the evaluation period. The reasons for service use amongst these non-resident parents differs widely. Some use the service as it is their only option of seeing their children. For others, the service offers a nice, but not the only, venue for access visits. This cohort is not bound by court orders to see their children at Time4Us and have the option of access outside the service, yet many appear to use it due to its convivial atmosphere and convenience.

Others again use the service as a drop-off and collection point, where they meet their children and head off to do other things.

Given the high number of referrals, and the numbers reporting usage of the service due to external factors (such as a referral, a court order or a request from the resident parent), progression through Time4Us to arranging access visits outside the service is not simply in the hands of either the parent themselves or the staff. Indeed, three-quarters of questionnaire respondents indicated their belief that they will be using Time4Us for the long-term (defined as 1 year or more). Many non-resident parent's use of the service appears to be dependent on the willingness of the resident parent to engage with the service or social work referrals based on court orders. While in some cases those using Time4Us have progressed to using it as a drop-off point, for others such transition will be very much dependent on the decisions of the courts and, as highlighted in the interviews, financial circumstances also. This is an important consideration for both project staff and management when plotting the future course of the service. Maintaining strong links with referrers and establishing links with other organisations so as to offer a structured progression from Time4Us (such as sports clubs, youth clubs) should be a consideration.

7.5. The Impact of Service Use on the Relationship between the Non-Resident Parent and their Children

One of the major objectives of the evaluation was to document and report on outcomes achieved by the Time4Us centre towards establishing continuity and stability in relationships between non-resident parents and their children. Documenting the development of parents' skills and capacity to play with children, and more generally the effect of the service on their relationships with children were also objectives. To this end both resident and non-resident parents were asked about their perceptions of the impact of using Time4Us on the number of access visits, the happiness levels of children the overall effect of service use on the child – non-resident parent relationship, and the nature of that relationship.

Overall, the high levels of reported impact of Time4Us are broadly positive in all regards. While 31% of respondents described the relationship with their child prior to using the

service as poor or very poor this figure fell to 0% after using the service. Additionally, where 69% rated the relationship they had with their child prior to using the service as very good or good, 94% reported the relationship as very good since using the service. While responses were more diverse amongst resident parent responses both before and after service use, the overall trend remains positive, with 89% reporting a poor/very poor/no relationship prior to the service and 45% reporting a poor relationship since using the service. Notably, 55% reported a very good or good relationship between the non-resident parent and the child since using the service.

Regarding stability of relationships, it is clear that use of the service correlates positively with an increased number of access visits and more time with children for non-resident parents. Fifty percent reported having little or no access prior to using the service while post-service use all respondents indicated having some access. Ninety-Two percent of respondents indicated that they now have access at least once a week, with 69% reporting access *more than* once a week. Significantly, the reported change in levels of access as a result of using the service are higher amongst resident parent respondents, with 75% reporting very high or high levels compared to 0% for these categories prior to using the service. These figures are also borne out in the interviews with service users where, although some spoke of simply having increased access since using the service, others spoke quite specifically about the increased opportunity the centre provides to be a parent and undertake parenting tasks above and beyond simply playing with their children. Although reported levels are high for solely play activities at 69%, a further 29% reported engaging in activities such as reading, food preparation, homework and ‘getting to know my child.’ Spending time with their children is a priority for these parents. Although having fun and playing is important, the opportunity to undertake activities more usually associated with home is a significant benefit to non-resident parents who use the service.

Both resident and non-resident parents report a perceived increase in the happiness levels of children since service use. Amongst resident parents the figure was 56% while amongst non-resident parents this figure rose to 73%. More notably, non-resident parents report very positive changes in terms of improved relationships and playing and talking with their children since using Time4Us. 73% reported that they found it easier to talk to

their children, whilst 67% reported that they found it easier to play with their children and have a better relationship with their children. It is clear that use of the service is a positive influence on the relationship between the non-resident parent and their children. Over two-thirds of users are benefiting from the centre's objectives beyond simply providing a space for meeting children. Service users are forming bonds with their children and interact to a higher degree, and more often than before.

7.6. The Impact of Service Use on the Relationship between the Non-Resident Parent and Resident Parent

Although not a direct focus of the evaluation it is notable that there is a broad consensus between both the resident and non-resident cohorts regarding the positive effect the centre has had, and continues to have, on their relationship. Amongst non-resident parents the majority reported less conflict, more trust and better communication with the resident parent/guardian since using Time4Us. Amongst resident parents/guardians reported levels of reduced conflict were even higher at 88%, although reported levels of trust were not as high. Despite the difference these figures are significant indicator of a secondary – yet nonetheless positive effect – of the service: a reduction in conflict between parents. Nevertheless, the positive impact the service is having on post-separation relations for some parents is noteworthy and commendable. A reduction in conflict has obvious long-term positive benefits for children also.

7.7. The Extent of Referrals from Other Services and Agencies and the Relationship Between Time4Us and Such Referral Agencies

It is clear that referrals play a major role in the number of non-resident parents using the service. Information from both the questionnaires and interviews underscore this fact. Three-quarters of those surveyed indicated that they were referred to Time4Us, with 93% of those being referred from the legal or social work domains. Interviews with staff and key referral agencies indicate that where contact does exist between Time4Us and agencies it is usually as a result of personal initiative on behalf of staff members and, in some cases, social workers or solicitors, although less so with the last group. Little or no contact occurs with the courts service despite the number of referrals which arise from family law cases before the district court.

Although referrals were proposed to be no more than 30% of all service use it is clear from the data presented that Time4Us is meeting a substantial referred need in addition to walk-in inquiries. Despite a lack of contact with some referral agencies the high number of referrals offers an opportunity for Time4Us to increase its use through collaborating with the courts service regarding how it refers parents to the service. Additionally, where it does not occur already, more formal contact, information exchange and review procedures should be established with the social work department so as to promote progression through the service. While this may not be possible in all cases the inconsistent nature of contact between the social work department and the service should be addressed. This would enhance the planning capacity of the centre and enhance the number of cases where progression through the service could occur. Where progression out of Time4Us is not possible staff and management could explore alternatives as mentioned in 7.3. above.

7.8. Awareness of/Receiving Information about Other Services

It is clear from the study that non-resident parents are confident in the ability of staff to inform them of services and provide them with information should they request it. However, the research tells us that in general parents do not find out about other services from Time4Us. Although not essential to the operation of Time4Us, information dissemination regarding other services provides an opportunity to build-in added value to the service and provide alternatives towards progression for those who can avail of access arrangements outside the centre. It can also inform service users of facilities and services which they may want Time4Us to provide but which may not be commensurate with its model of support. At a general level, such information provision may go some way to encouraging non-resident parents to be further involved in the many different aspects of their children's lives.

7.9. Suggested Changes/Additions to Time4Us

A number of suggested changes and alterations to Time4Us were mentioned through the course of the evaluation. It is important to note that no changes or alterations were suggested in the surveys in terms of staff or the way in which the centre operates, while

only one suggestion was mentioned in the interviews relating to how the centre operates. Instead suggestions predominantly related to the provision of additional toys, enhanced cooking facilities and an outdoor play area. It is clear from the log sheets of visits that much emphasis is placed on cooking and ‘dinner time’ by non-resident parents. The provision of a cooker in the centre would improve the experience of access for many parents and further extend both the parenting and relationship aspects of access visits with their children.

The provision of an outdoor area is also suggested in the research. Understandably, this has implications for the location of the centre in that there is no opportunity to have such a facility at the moment. Whilst this is a prominent request from many of the non-resident parents the evaluation team appreciates that such provision would inevitably involve a change of location, which it understands may not be feasible at this time. In the future planning of the service, this should be a consideration if the opportunity to change location presents itself.

7.10. Recommendations

The overarching conclusion of this evaluation is that Time4Us is delivering a valued, constructive, worthwhile and beneficial service to a population cohort. Indeed, its success is indicated by increased service use since its inception and the views of both resident and non-resident parents as outlined in this report. So as to assist in maintaining and building on such success the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The development and adoption of an electronic database system incorporating details and visits by service users and children so as to provide a picture of current use while permitting further planning for the future. Additionally, such a move would lessen the loss of institutional memory which may occur when staff members leave their posts and new staff come on board. Finally, the collation of information – particularly at the outset – could lend itself to a more outcomes-focused approach to each non-resident parent and child using the service, acknowledging that this will not be possible for all;

2. Management and Staff should explore the potential for long-term service users to engage with other play/activity organisations in addition to Time4Us. Where transition from Time4Us is not an option for the service user engaging with other organisations such as youth clubs, sports clubs could offer the opportunity for further bonding between parent and child, supported by Time4Us staff. In addition, this may also serve to offer more age-appropriate activities to children who may outgrow Time4Us in terms of play activities;
3. As part of disseminating information about other services and activities management and staff should explore the potential for an information wall/notice board to be located in the centre. While service users did highlight the willingness of staff to provide any information requested a notice board could serve to pre-empt requests, provide a series of alternatives or suggestions to service users while also informing them wider statutory and voluntary services in the city and county;
4. Staff and management should work to formalise contact and relationships with key referrers, including the courts service, but not so formal to affect the flexibility of the service which has been responsible for much of its success so far. Such contact could serve to reduce the number of long-term users through the development of a plan for each parent, where appropriate. It could also serve to further embed Time4Us in the work processes of referral agencies such as the courts and social work departments;
5. If finances permit, staff and management should explore the possibility of purchasing a cooker and making necessary alterations to the kitchen to take account of this;
6. In the context of the future of the service, the feasibility of moving to another location so as to facilitate outdoor activities should be examined. However, this needs to be weighed against the overall high levels of satisfaction with the

existing location, it's conducive atmosphere, the many positives that it already provides, and the significant investment which has already taken place;

7. As part of a regular feedback process, management and staff should work to formally incorporate the views of all stakeholders into the planning and review processes for the service at regular intervals;
8. Future evaluations might consider the use of baseline and follow-up measures to assess the success or otherwise of the service in achieving positive outcomes for children and their parents. Such measures could be either standardised or service-based. The use of comparison groups in future evaluations might also be considered.

Appendix 1



Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway, April-May 2008



Time4US Evaluation Draft Questionnaire - Resident Parent/Guardian

Part 1 Personal Details

Q1 Gender Male Female

Q2 Age range (tick \surd ONE box)

Under 20 years 21-29 years 30-39 years 40-49 years 50+ years

Q3 What is your current legal marital status? (tick \surd ONE box)

Single (that is never married)	
Separated from husband/wife	
Cohabiting	
Divorced	
Widowed	
Other (please specify)	

Q4 What did your education include? (tick \surd ONE box)

No schooling	
Primary School education only	
Inter (Junior) Certificate	
Leaving Certificate	
Third level education (college/university/RTC/IT)	
Vocational Training (please specify)	
Other (please specify)	

Q5 Where do live?

Galway City Galway County Other (please specify) _____

Q6 What is your nationality?

Irish

Non-Irish (please specify)_____

Part 2 Opinions of Time4Us

Q7 How did you hear about Time4Us? (tick \surd ONE)	
Ex-partner	
Social work	
Solicitor	
Court	
Family Resource Centre	
Workplace	
Media	
Other (please specify)	

Q8 Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following regarding Time4Us:					
	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
The location					
The facilities (e.g. play area, activities, games, space)					
The staff					

Q9 What transport do you use to get to Time4Us? (tick \surd ONE)

Car

Bus

Walk

Taxi

Other (please specify)_____

Q10 <u>Since</u> using Time4Us, would you agree or disagree with the following statements				
	<i>(please tick \surd as appropriate)</i>			
	Agree	Disagree	No Change	Don't know
I have better communication with the child/ren's other parent				
There is more trust between me and the child/ren's other parent				
There is less conflict with the child/ren's other parent				

In general, the child/ren seem happier				
--	--	--	--	--

Q11 Describe the relationship between you and the child(ren)'s other parent					
	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor	Don't Know
<u>Before</u> using Time4Us					
<u>Since</u> using Time4Us					

Q12 Can you list three main ways that the service has benefited you & your children?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q13 Please indicate the level of access between your child/ren and their other parent					
	<u>Very high</u> (more than weekly including overnight)	<u>High</u> (more than weekly)	<u>Moderate</u> (at least once a fortnight)	<u>Low</u> (once a month or less)	<u>No access</u>
<u>Before</u> using Time4Us					
<u>Since</u> using Time4Us					

Q14 Regarding the future of the Time4Us play centre, is there anything you would like to see changed/ or suggest?

PLEASE PUT COMPLETED SURVEY IN STAMPED ADDRESSED WHITE ENVELOPE, SEAL AND DROP IT INTO TIME4US CENTRE OR RETURN VIA POST TO NUI, GALWAY

Thank you for your cooperation in filling out this information.

Appendix 2



Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway, April-May 2008



Time4US Evaluation Questionnaire – Non-Resident Parent

Part 1 Personal Details

Q1 Gender Male Female

Q2 Age range (Tick ONE box)

Under 20 years 21-29 years 30-39 years 40-49 years 50+ years

Q3 What is your current legal marital status? (Tick ONE box)

Single (that is never married)	
Separated from husband/wife	
Cohabiting	
Divorced	
Widowed	
Other (please specify)	

Q4 What did your education include? (Tick ONE box)

No schooling	
Primary School education only	
Inter (Junior) Certificate	
Leaving Certificate	
Third level education (college/university/RTC/IT)	
Vocational Training (please specify)	
Other (please specify)	

Q5 Where do live? (Tick ONE box)

Galway City Galway County Other (please specify) _____

Q6 What type of accommodation do you live in? (Tick \surd ONE box)

House	
Apartment/Flat	
Other (please specify)	

Q7 Is your home..... (Tick \surd ONE box)

Owned with mortgage	
Rented from the Council	
Rented privately	
Other (please specify)	

Q8 Who lives with you? (Tick \surd as appropriate)

Spouse (husband/wife)	
Partner	
Mother	
Father	
Sister(s)	
Brother(s)	
Other (please specify)	

Q9 What is your nationality?

Irish

Non-Irish (please specify) _____

Part 2 Opinions of Time4Us

Q10 When did you start using Time4Us? Month _____ Year _____

Q11 How did you hear about Time4Us? (tick \surd ONE)

Ex-partner	
Social work	
Solicitor	
Court	
Family Resource Centre	
Workplace	

Media	
Other (please specify)	

Q12 Were you referred to Time4Us?

No, self attended Yes

Q12.1 If yes, by whom?

Family Resource Centre Social Work Solicitor Court

Other _____

Q13 Why did you start using Time4Us (tick as many as is applicable)?

To spend more time with my child/ren	
It's a safe place to meet my child/ren	
Court order	
Referral from agency (e.g. social work dept)	
Request by child's other parent/guardian	
No other suitable location to meet child	
Other (please specify)	

Q14 Can you list three main ways the service has benefited you & your children?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q15 Since using Time4Us how many times *per month* would you see your child(ren)

Q16 When using Time4Us, what do you do with your child(ren)? (Tick ✓ as appropriate)

Arts and crafts (painting, drawing etc)	
Games (pool, air hockey, board games)	
Reading	
General play	
Educational (i.e. homework)	

Food preparation (breakfast, lunch, dinner)	
Other (please specify)	

Q17 Describe the relationship between you and your child(ren)					
	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor	Don't Know
<u>Before</u> using Time4Us					
<u>Since</u> using Time4Us					
Q18 Describe the relationship between you and the child(ren)'s other parent/guardian					
	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor	Don't Know
<u>Before</u> using Time4Us					
<u>Since</u> using Time4Us					

Q19 Please indicate the level of access between you and your child(ren)					
	<u>Very high</u> (more than weekly including overnight)	<u>High</u> (more than weekly)	<u>Moderate</u> access (at least once a fortnight)	<u>Low</u> (once a month or less)	<u>No access</u>
<u>Before</u> using Time4Us					
<u>Since</u> using Time4Us					

Q20 When do you mainly use the service? (tick ✓ as appropriate)

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Q21 What transport do you use to get to Time4Us? (tick ✓ ONE)

Car Bus Walk Taxi Other _____

Q22 In general, how much support is there between you and the staff when using Time4Us?

High (every visit) Medium (most visits) Low (occasionally)

Q23 Is there anything that you would like the Time4Us staff to do that they currently are not doing?

No Yes Please specify _____

Q24 Can you give examples of the types of things staff do when you use the service?

Q25 Since using Time4Us would agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Agree	Disagree	No Change	Don't know
I find it easier to talk to my child/ren				
I find it easier to play with my child/ren				
I have a better relationship my child/ren				

Q26 Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following regarding Time4Us:

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know
The location					
The facilities (e.g. play area, activities, games, space)					
The staff					

Q27 On average, how many times a week do you use Time4Us?

Q28 Since using Time4Us, where do you and your child/ren generally meet?

At Time4Us At your home Other (please specify) _____

Q29 Do you see yourself using Time4Us over the: (tick ONE box)

Short term (3 months) Medium term (6 months) Long Term (1 year)

Q30 Since using Time4Us, would you agree or disagree with the following statements

(please tick as appropriate)

	Agree	Disagree	No Change	Don't know
I have better communication with the child/ren's other parent/guardian				
There is more trust between me and the child/ren's other parent/guardian				
There is less conflict with the child/ren's other parent/guardian				
In general, the child/ren seem happier				

Q31 Are there any activities/facilities not currently available at Time4Us that you would like to use with your child/ren?

No Yes Please specify _____

Q32 Regarding the future of the Time4Us play centre, is there anything you would like to see changed/ or suggest?

PLEASE PUT COMPLETED SURVEY IN STAMPED ADDRESSED WHITE ENVELOPE, SEAL AND DROP IT INTO TIME4US CENTRE OR RETURN VIA POST TO NUI, GALWAY

Thank you for your cooperation in filling out this information

Appendix 3
Time 4 Us Centre Photographs July 2008:

TIME4US FRONT ENTRANCE



OFFICE



RECEPTION AREA (FROM FRONT DOOR)



TIME4US MAIN PLAYROOM (FROM KITCHEN)



FAMILY ROOM



OFFICE VIEW OF THE TWO ROOMS



KITCHEN



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