



PRESS RELEASE

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LAUNCH OF PRE-SCHOOL SHARED EDUCATION PROJECT 'SHARING FROM THE START'

Pre-school settings on both sides of the border will benefit from a new €4.2million project and have the opportunity to take part in shared education activities.

The 'Sharing From The Start' project, launched in Omagh today, is supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). It involves early years settings throughout Northern Ireland and the Southern Border counties forming cross-community and/ or cross-border partnerships, and the children taking part in joint curricular classes, improving educational outcomes and promoting good relations.

It will run to June 2021 and aims to bring about positive attitudinal and behavioural change among children, parents, teachers and the wider community. This will be achieved through the implementation of purposeful, direct and sustained curriculum-based contact between children of predominantly different religious backgrounds and different ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds.

Already in this first year of the project over 1800 children and 67 pre-schools have been involved and this will increase year on year.

Sharing from the Start is administered by Early Years working in collaboration with the National Childhood Network and the Fermanagh Trust. Together these three organisations have a strong track record of working for the benefit of children and good relations development.

Match-funding for the project has been provided by the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland.



Speaking during the launch Siobhan Fitzpatrick, Chief Executive Officer, Early Years said **“All the research shows that helping children understand the importance of enjoying good relations with friends from different communities is critical to building stronger, better communities both now and into the future. We are very excited about the Sharing from the Start Project. We believe it will contribute significantly to the Shared Education agenda and our objective of making sharing a reality for all preschool children in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland.”**

Welcoming the project Gina McIntyre, CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body, which is responsible for the EU’s PEACE IV Programme said **“Shared education will help us transition into a confident, outward-facing society which has the ability to celebrate its differences. By giving pre-school children an opportunity to have meaningful, sustained contact with young people from another background they will become positive agents for change influencing their own families, peers and friends outside of the pre-school environment.**

“It has also been proven that children participating in shared education initiatives benefit from an increase in self-confidence, self-awareness and self-reflection,” she continued. Alison Chambers, Department of Education said **“The Sharing from the Start project, with a budget of over €4.2m, and targeted exclusively at pre-school children, is an exciting opportunity to make a real difference, both in Northern Ireland and in the border counties. The project’s targets of almost 10,000 children sharing in 100 settings by December 2021 represent a significant leap forward. Equally important is the project’s target of 157 early years practitioners trained with the capacity to facilitate shared education. We cannot hope to embed sharing as a normal part of school life without a skilled workforce. Similarly, we need parental and community buy-in and I know that this is a key element of Sharing from the Start.”**

Ian McKenna, Department of Education and Skills added **“At a time when there are so many expectations on an education system at all levels, a holistic and positive early years’ experience for children lays their foundation for positive personal development and building relationships which become life-long. Whether this happens along a border or in the middle of Belfast or Dublin, we must reflect on learning from this**



initiative and ensure that it becomes the norm rather than the exception. The Department of Education and Skills is committed to supporting this initiative, and commends the willingness of all early years' educators to ensure its success."

For more information visit www.sharingfromthestart.org or contact Audrey Rainey, Programme Manager (E: audreyr@early-years.org)

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Notes for the editor:

SEUPB

- The Special EU Programmes Body is a North/South Implementation Body sponsored by the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in Ireland.
- It is responsible for managing two EU Structural Funds Programmes, PEACE IV and INTERREG VA which are designed to enhance cross - border co-operation, promote reconciliation and create a more peaceful and prosperous society.
- The Programmes operate within a clearly defined area including Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and in the case of INTERREG VA, Western Scotland.
- The PEACE IV Programme has a value of €270 million and aims to promote peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland.
- For more information on the SEUPB please visit www.seupb.eu