**Report from the Chair to**

**Upstart Scotland AGM, 18/6/22 Via Zoom**

In last year’s report, I mentioned growing concern about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on early child development. Evidence on this subject was already beginning to emerge and we’ve reported regularly on research findings in our Newsletters throughout the year. In March, a report from Public Health Scotland suggested that the long-term effects could be ‘catastrophic’ so we’ve invited two experts (one from public health, one from early childhood education) to discuss the situation at this year’s AGM.

Thanks to Scotland’s increasing commitment to outdoor learning in early years and continued work around our wonderful guidance document *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* (2020), Scotland is better placed than other UK countries to provide developmentally-appropriate support for the under-sevens. But there are still problems in ensuring high quality nursery provision for all children (see our current newsletter) and practice in the early stages of primary school is still patchy so Upstart will continue to aim for the introduction of a statutory, rights-focused, relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage for children between the ages of three and seven, as often as possible outdoors.

**Online events**

During 2021-22, we’ve continued to provide online events, notably the Book Groups, which covered the 15 chapters of our book *Play Is the Way,* all of which are now available as films via the website (www.upstart.scot).Thanks to Kate Johnston, we have also broadcast two inspirational training sessions by Anna Ephgrave and another by Julie Fisher and have embarked on a series of *Play is the Way* Book Group PLUS, events, looking at particular aspects of principled play-based provision.

Increasing online activity due to COVID also led to Upstart presentations at a number of national online conferences, including the Early Education National Conference 2022, the ISA Early Years Conference and a Holyrood conference on ‘Curriculum for Education Beyond OECD’, as well as providing online training sessions for a number of local authorities and colleges.

We’ve also been able to contribute to online discussions with Play Scotland, Children in Scotland, Parents Across Scotland and Together (Scotland’s Children’s Rights organisation), making the case for increasing attention to early child development, play and children’s rights during early childhood.

**Government consultations**

It’s been a bumper year for government consultations related to early years and play. Upstart has responded to (very long) consultations about the National Care Service, the OECD/CfE Review and the National Planning Framework 4, as well as a review of UK compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We are currently producing a response to a consultation on Enhanced Data Provision regarding the Educational Attainment Gap, and are deeply depressed at how little the civil servants leading the National Improvement Framework have learned over the last seven years. Despite the failure of NIF’s original plans for closing the gap, and the horrific increases in developmental delays recorded due to the pandemic, they still have no plans for statistically reliable data-collection on early childhood development.

**Play is the Way**

Given the ‘COVID effect’, we’re very glad that Upstart’s book *Play is the Way: child development, early years and the future of Scottish education* has been out in the world since late 2020, helping spread the word about the centrality of play to children’s healthy development and well-being. In December 2021 we organised an online launch for its offshoot - the *Play is the Way Little Book of Quotes* by Bryony Date (published by Cosy, along with a *Play is the Way* poster sent to all UK ELC settings) – with contributions by a number of international experts quoted in the book. Bryony’s delightful illustrations/quotes continue to appear on our social media as further inspiration.

The original *Play is the Way* book continues to sell (around 4000 copies have now been sold), and we’re hoping that, as we’re increasingly able to get out and about again in the coming months, we can take copies with us to help spread the Upstart message.

**The way forward**

After the excitement of last year (*Play is the Way*, a Parliamentary debate on Upstart, support for a kindergarten stage from three opposition parties at the Scottish parliamentary election), 2021-22 seems to have been a year of online activity, paperwork and consolidation. We’ve continued to publish monthly Newsletters and at least one blog per month (often by guest authors) and to grow our following on Upstart’s Facebook pages and Twitter (currently 12.1K followers).

Scotland is making huge progress in terms of early years and it’s invigorating to see the level of enthusiasm for play-based pedagogy and outdoor learning increasing across the country. However, until rights-focused, relationship-centred, play-based practice is established for all Scotland’s under-sevens on a statutory basis, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. The challenge, now that real-life meetings are back on the agenda, is to take our message to a much wider audience.

In the near future, therefore, we have the following engagements: on 11-6-22 we hope to take part in a discussion session about ‘well-being in an age of adversity’ at the Children’s Wood in Glasgow; immediately after the AGM, we’ll be heading over to Princes Street Gardens to participate in a Mind Be Kind Festival (18/19-6-22); and in July I’m booked to talk about Upstart for Common Weal at a music festival in Doune.

If you know of any other events at which Upstart speakers would be welcome, please let us know via info@upstart.scot. Kate and I are also considering organising another ‘roadshow’ for schools and settings around Scotland so please get in touch if your organisation would like to be involved.

**Thank you**

Grateful thanks to all Upstart supporters for seeing us through another year, especially the members of our splendid Board of Trustees. We were sorry to lose Sarah Latto from the Board when she left the Secret Garden Outdoor Kindergarten to take another post, and wish her much success in the future.

Finally, my own heartfelt personal thanks to Kate Johnston for all her wonderful ideas, unstintingly hard work for the campaign and unshakeable optimism throughout the year. She is a tower of strength and I’d be lost without her.

***Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland, 31-5-22***