Linking Schools and Early Years Project

Outcomes Framework

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Table of contents

1. Project background

Children are always ready to learn and do not distinguish between early education and care
(Council of Australian Governments, 2007, p.40).

The Linking Schools and Early Years project (hereafter referred to as the project) was established with the aim of ensuring that all children enter the formal primary education system ready to engage and be successful in school. The project also aims to ensure that schools are prepared for children of all abilities and backgrounds when they first attend and that families, services and communities are ready to support their child's learning.

Reaching the long-term desired outcome – that all children arrive at school ready to engage and be successful – is of course dependent on many factors outside the control of the project. Because of this, the project goals take into account the scope and limitations of the project and are linked to the long-term desired outcome. The project goals are further explored in Section 4 of this document.

The conceptualisation of the project has been influenced by the United States National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, which was based on the following assumption:

> *Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and preschool children. (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005, page 7)*

The project is being conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) and is funded by The R.E. Ross Trust. It is based on research conducted by CCCH (supported by The R.E. Ross Trust) since 2001, which has explored the refocusing of community-based services for young children and their families. This research found there was potential to bridge a gap between early years services (such as kindergarten, child care, and maternal and child health) and primary schools to ensure adequate planning for the individual needs of children entering school. In 2006 CCCH conducted a study of the issues involved in linking schools and early years (CCCH, 2006a). This study investigated the following:

- Evidence that supports the desirability of links between schools and early years services
- A review of the policy directions in early years services and schools in Australia
- Models overseas and in Australia for linking schools and other services

In response to this investigation the current project commenced in 2007. Planning is the focus for the first year (2007) of this six-year project, which will be externally evaluated by the Social Policy and Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

An advisory group with representatives from both the education and early years sectors has been established to provide expert advice and technical guidance for the project. The advisory group has representation from the following:

- Faculty of Education, Melbourne University
- Office for Children, Department of Education and Early Childhood
- Catholic Education Office
- Department of Education and Early Childhood, Regional and Head Offices
- Department of Human Services, Head Office
- Educational Institute, Royal Children's Hospital
- Social Policy and Research Centre, University of NSW
- Education Foundation Australia
- Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services, Housing and Indigenous Affairs

2. Project rationale

In Australia, a significant proportion of children, especially those from disadvantaged communities, arrive at school developmentally vulnerable. For example, results from the use of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) indicate that numbers of children begin school vulnerable in the areas of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge (CCCH and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007).

Children benefit in many ways from participating in high quality early years services before entering school (CCCH, 2006). For example, they engage with others and develop social skills, which increases their ability to adapt to a formal learning environment and routine. Evidence indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit the most from attending early years services. Children participating in early years services who are at risk of developmental delay are more likely to have their additional needs identified, enabling appropriate prevention and intervention strategies to be put in place before they start school. However, not all children participate in early years services, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often less likely to participate.

The Victorian Government estimates that 94 per cent of four year olds (those children in the year before starting school) participate in kindergarten. Many children who are not enrolled in a funded kindergarten program attend long day care centres or other forms of care such as family day care or occasional care.

The project will build on both the significant resources already invested in children and their families through their participation in early years services and the expertise of primary school teachers by strengthening links between early years services and schools. Further, it aims to support schools to engage with families that have not participated in formal early years services through school entry transition arrangements and other strategies that actively connect with families.

The rationale of the project is that forming stronger links between early years services and schools can help to overcome the barriers faced by vulnerable children when starting school.

The aim of the project is to contribute to the long-term desired outcome that children arrive at school ready to engage through achieving three goals:

- Children and families make a smooth transition from early years services to school
- Early years services and schools actively connect with families
- Schools respond to the individual learning needs of all children

It is anticipated that enhancing the links between schools and early years services will be a key strategy for achieving each of the project goals.

3. Project conceptualisation

The project is based on the Ready Child equation (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005):

> **Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools**
> **=**
> **Children Ready for School**

This equation is based on the following assumptions:

- Ready Families can support children's learning more effectively
- Ready Schools develop effective strategies for identifying children requiring additional support and use teaching methods appropriate for each child
- Ready Services connect with other services to address barriers to child learning and development
- Ready Communities engage with early years services and schools in the delivery of integrated services to families

A number of models have been trialled in Australia and overseas to strengthen the link between schools, early years services and local communities, including co-locating early years services on school grounds as well as developing effective communication strategies across the two sectors. To date there has been limited conclusive evidence about the most effective strategies.

A review of the models currently operating in Australia and overseas suggests that a set of common features exist among schools that have partnerships with other community resources that lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. These schools are commonly referred to as 'community schools' (Blank et al, 2003 in CCCH, 2006a). The common features include that these schools:

- Offer programs that support parents in the school setting (such as engaging parents in running programs and providing adult education classes addressing barriers to learning)
- Adopt a collective philosophy of what the school can offer the community beyond the traditional education model
- Engage with families in the years prior to children starting school
- Co-locate services on school sites where possible
- Engage in diverse educational programming that revolves around a curriculum that is responsive to students' needs and a holistic approach to teaching and learning that integrates different disciplines
- Promote the development of positive relationships among services, families, communities and schools, for example, through encouraging community use of school facilities
- Deliver a program that is responsive to local and emerging needs
- Implement a system of governance which seeks integration and local representation, including having parents on school management committees
- Offer before and after school child care, vacation care (including programs in extended summer holidays) and weekend care

Adelman and Taylor (2002) present a conceptual model of how schools can be ready for all students. This model identifies three components that must be addressed in school improvement. These are:

- The instructional/developmental component (for facilitating learning and development)
- The management component (for school management and governance)
- The enabling component (to overcome barriers to learning and development)

The project will concentrate on the enabling component. Adelman and Taylor (2002) argue that this component is not typically part of school reform models.

Overcoming barriers to learning and development is complex, as they have a variety of sources. Because of this, Adelman and Taylor (2002) argue that schools and communities need to develop a set of diverse, integrated and systemic responses to overcome the barriers, while at the same time concentrating on putting in place effective prevention strategies.

4. Project outcomes

4.1 Definitions

The following definitions are being used in the project.

Outcomes: the ultimate end result. Outcomes reflect the desired achievements from an initiative. They form a global statement that answers the question 'What is it that we want for children and their families in our community?' Outcomes should be framed in terms of the overall effect that is being sought.

Goals: tangible outcomes (rather than global statements) that are able to be achieved within the scope and time frame of the project.

Objectives: the components of outcomes and goals, specific targets that need to be met in order for an outcome to be reached. Objectives address the question, 'To make progress toward the outcomes, what do we need to achieve?' Objectives need to be measurable, achievable and realistic.

Strategies: long-term plans of action that describe how the outcomes will be achieved, that is, what will be done.

Activities: the more specific operational details of what is going to be done within each strategy. Each strategy will have one or more activities.
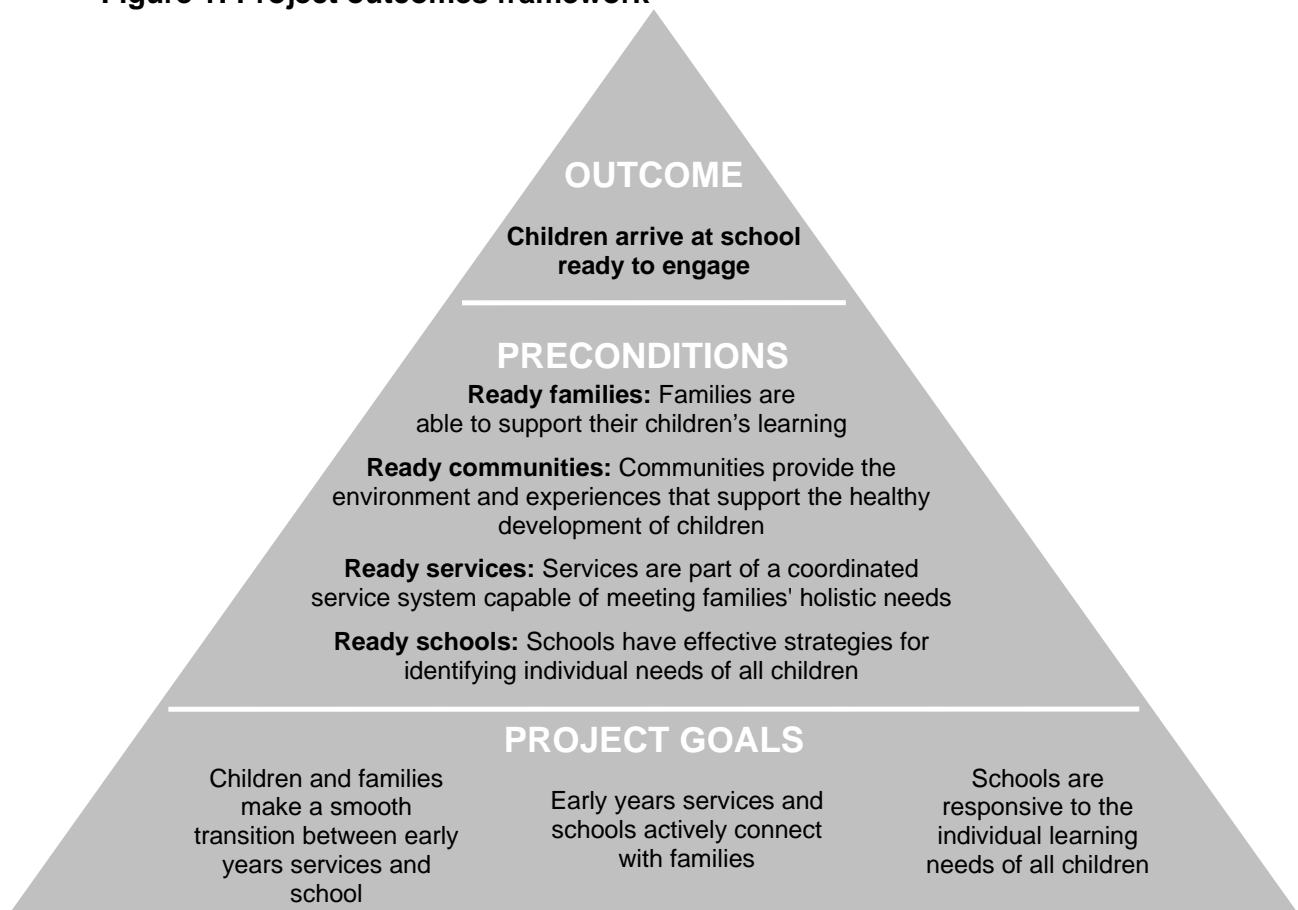
Indicators: measures to determine what has been achieved or what change has occurred, such as broad changes in behaviour, attitude, condition or status.

The project identifies outcomes in three categories:
- overall outcome
- broad outcomes or preconditions
- goals

These are presented in Figure 1 below. A detailed explanation of each follows.

Figure 1: Project outcomes framework

OUTCOME

Children arrive at school ready to engage

PRECONDITIONS

Ready families: Families are able to support their children's learning

Ready communities: Communities provide the environment and experiences that support the healthy development of children

Ready services: Services are part of a coordinated service system capable of meeting families' holistic needs

Ready schools: Schools have effective strategies for identifying individual needs of all children

PROJECT GOALS

Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

Early years services and schools actively connect with families

Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

4.2 Outcome

The outcome for the project, that **Children arrive at school ready to engage**, is the ultimate aim for the whole project. The overall outcome is the hardest to measure and requires the longest time to reach. Being ready to engage at school means that children have the social, emotional and learning skills and attitudes that will enable them to benefit from the school environment. In order for this to occur, a number of things need to take place before they get to school:

- They need to attend high quality early childhood services
- Early childhood services and schools need to develop strong links so that children's transition to school is smooth
- There needs to be support for children's learning from their families. This includes families being actively engaged in early years services and being welcomed into school settings

To achieve the ultimate aim, research suggests that certain outcomes or preconditions need to be achieved.

4.3 Preconditions or broad outcomes

There are four preconditions in the project framework that contribute to the overall outcome outlined above. These preconditions or broad outcomes are also hard to measure and are beyond the scope and impact of the project.

The broad outcomes are:

> **Ready Families: Families are able to support their children's learning.**

In order to achieve this outcome parents need to understand how they can support their child's development and learning in general and how their children's learning needs are met by early years services and schools.

> **Ready Communities: Communities provide the environment and experiences that support the healthy development of children.**

Families and children are supported best when their local community has accessible local facilities (for example, libraries and community centres), opportunities for children to play and meet one another, and an overall child- and family-friendly environment.

> **Ready Services: Services are part of a coordinated service system capable of meeting families' holistic needs.**

Families' general and parenting needs are met most effectively in an integrated child and family support service system.

> **Ready Schools: Schools have effective strategies for identifying individual needs of all children.**

Schools need to have a variety of strategies to meet the diverse individual learning needs of children.

4.4 Project goals

Three specific goals based on research evidence have been identified which are within the scope of the project timeframes to achieve and to measure. Project sites will need to address all three of these goals, which are as follows:

> **Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school.**

This goal focuses on linking schools and early years services so that there is a seamless transition for children and their families. Research has demonstrated that transition points in children's lives can be challenging. Smoothing transitions will require dialogue and shared effort between early years services and schools.

> **Early years services and schools actively connect with families.**

This goal is based on the research finding that the greater the parent's presence in schools, the more improvement there is in child school-related outcomes (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Achieving this goal will involve reaching out to families in which children have not had any involvement in early years services prior to starting school. It will also involve trying to engage parents who had negative experiences themselves at school and helping them to support their child's learning.

> **Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.**

There is enormous diversity in children's experiences, backgrounds and learning styles when they start school. Schools that link with early years services, parents and community services prior to the start of the school year are in a position to develop tailored learning solutions.

5. Project methodology

The project team will work with selected schools, early years services and communities in three Victorian sites, Corio/Norlane in the Greater Geelong City Council, Footscray in the City of Maribyrnong and Hastings in the Mornington Peninsula Shire. Work will focus on developing a new model of working collaboratively to promote better outcomes and overcome barriers to learning and development. The first round of the project will be implemented in two or three schools and the associated early years services in each project site. Selection of the three project sites was based on:

- Relevant demographics (for example, classification as disadvantaged and number of children)
- Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) results: the proportion of children in the first year of school identified as developmentally vulnerable
- The capacity of the community to engage in the project (for example whether any other initiatives were operating in the area)

At each site a local community partnership group will be formed, comprising of key early years services and school representatives. This group will guide the project locally and work with a CCCH to create a local action plan. The steps involved in creating and reviewing the local action plan in each site include:

1. The formation of a local partnership group
2. Gather contextual information to inform the local action plan
   - Document community demographics
   - Map community assets and services
   - Conduct consultations with key stakeholders
3. Development of the local action plan
   - Selection of local strategies and activities
   - Workplan development.
4. Review of local action plans
   - Conduct consultations with key stakeholders
   - Reflection on external evaluation findings as they become available

5.1 Formation of a local partnership group

The steps involved in establishing a community partnership group, to drive the project locally in each site include:

- The selection of 2-3 schools to participate in the project according to the project School Selection Criteria∗ and the identification of all associated early years services and community stakeholders in each project site.
- Invitation to all of these stakeholders to attend an information session about the project, held locally by the project team
- An invitation for all stakeholders to join the project partnership group
- Establishment of a shared vision for the project partnership group in each site
- Establishment of regular meeting times for the project partnership group in each site

The partnership group should, wherever possible, build upon and link into existing partnerships within the community; such as Best Start.

It is anticipated that the partnership group will continue to evolve and grow throughout the project's lifespan. The project team will initially act as a facilitator for the partnership group in each project site, however, ultimately it is aimed that the facilitation of each partnership group will be driven locally and become self sustainable so that each partnership group may exist beyond the life of the project.

∗Schools were chosen in partnership with the Department of Education Regional Directors and Catholic Education Office according to a selection criteria developed by the project advisory group.

5.2 Gathering contextual information to inform the local action plan

5.2.1 Document community demographics

Community demographic information will be gathered through desktop research prior to the first partnership group meeting. The type of demographic information to be gathered will include relevant local demographic information such as the community's population profile, economic and social characteristics, as well as demographic information around early years service usage and attendance (ie. kindergarten enrolment rate, maternal and child health attendance). Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) results for the community will also be collected and summarised.

This information will be then presented to the partnership group, for the following reasons:

- Data versification, where data is not available at the local level (ie. local kindergarten enrolment rates)
- Identification of any missing additional existing data the partnership group is aware of that should also be considered
- To gain a shared group understanding of the community in which the project is operating. This will in turn inform the:
  - Partnership group shared vision for the project
  - Appropriateness of strategies and activities to be selected by the group

5.2.2 Map community assets and services

A map of all existing services and service providers operating in the community that are relevant to the project will be complied by the project team, information around additional community assets as identified by the local partnership group in each site will also be gathered.

It is considered important for the partnership group to reflect on their communities assets:

- To allow a focus on and celebration of what is good about the community
- To gain a shared group understanding of the community in which the project is operating
- To enable the action plan to build on the communities assets

5.2.3 Conduct consultations with key stakeholders

Consultation information for the project will be collected from key project stakeholder groups (such as early years service staff, school staff and local parents of children aged between 3-6 years old). All consultations will be undertaken by the project team for CCCH. The type of the consultation information collected from each key project stakeholder group will be informed by the projects goals which are:

- Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school.
- Early years services and schools actively connect with families.
- Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children.

The information collected will then be used to inform the development of locally relevant project action plans for each project site.

5.3 Development of the local action plan

An outcomes-based approach will be adopted in each site to develop the local action plan.

Adopting an outcomes-based approach involves the following steps:

1. Identify the goals (outcomes)
2. Translate these goals into specific objectives
3. Selecting strategies for achieving these objectives
4. Translate the strategies into specific activities or programs
5. Identify indicators to measure the progress made (to be conducted by the external evaluation team)

To ensure that the project has shared goals across each of the three project sites the goals and objectives for the Linking Schools and Early years project have been set by the project team in partnership with the project advisory group. Having shared goals and objectives across each of the project sites, will:

- Provide the external evaluation team with consistent project goals and objectives across the three project sites, around which the evaluation framework will be able to be constructed
- Provide the opportunity for key learning throughout the project to be shared amongst the three project sites

The shared goals and objectives that have been set are based upon preconditions that are known to be linked to the ultimate aim for the whole project that *Children arrive at school ready to engage* (see *4.0 Project Outcomes*).

5.3.1 Selection of local strategies and activities

The community partnership groups in each project site, in partnership with the CCCH project team will decide on strategies and activities to be implemented locally that are:

- Informed by the local demographics, existing community assets and key stakeholder consultation findings (see *5.2 Gathering contextual information to inform the local action plan)*
- Logically linked to the project goals and objectives
- Based on research evidence
- Without funding from other sources (assistance will be provided to seek such funding)
- easily replicable
- low-cost

So that the positive findings may be shared and replicated in non-project communities.

Examples of strategies and activities, for each of the project goals and their corresponding objectives are provided in Appendix 1, 2 and 3.

5.3.2 Development of a local workplan

Once the local action plan has been developed, a shared partnership group workplan will be developed. For each activity to be implemented the workplan will outline:

- The strategy under which it falls
- What the activity is
- Tasks - What needs to be done to implement this activity?
- 'By whom' - Who is responsible for each task?
- Resources required to complete each task

- Timeline - When does the task need to be achieved?
- Indicators/Deliverables – How will we know when the activity has been completed?
- Progress to date – report on achievement

Using a workplan to map out the operational details of each project activity in the action plan, will allow the partnership group clearly identify the resources required to complete each activity and allow locally realistic timelines and responsibility allocations to be defined. It is a document that will provide the guidance needed to ensure that each project activity is carried out. The nature of a workplan is that it will continually evolve and need to be updated, as such is it will reviewed and updated by the project partnership groups in each site as required. See Appendix 4 for a copy of the workplan proforma to be used for the project.

5.4 Review of local action plans

It is anticipated that the local action plans developed for each project site will be formally re-visited at least annual by the local project partnership group in each site, to allow for the opportunity to re-shape the local strategies and activities where required. The re-visiting the of local action plans in each site is considered important as:

- It will enable local successes to be built upon, and allow for the incremental expansion of the projects local reach and impact.
- It will enable the local action plans to have the capacity to respond to any change in local needs and demographics in each project site.
- It will enable the local action plans to have the capacity to respond to the formative external evaluation findings.
- Allow for the local partnership groups in each site to build learning's from other project sites into their action plan.

5.4.1 Conduct consultations with key stakeholders

In order capture any changing views of the key stakeholder groups throughout the life of the project it is anticipated that a consultations process will be undertaken in each site at given intervals throughout the six year lifespan of the project. Each local partnership group will reflect on all relevant consultation findings each time they formally revisit their local action plan.

5.4.2 Reflection on external evaluation findings as they become available

The independent evaluation that will be conducted throughout the project follows an action research model to assess both processes and outcomes. Findings from the external evaluation will be available on a biennial basis (every two years). These finding will be feed back to each sites partnership groups, so that they may inform future action plan developments.

6. References

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Appendix 1 - Example Outcome Statement for Goal 1

Goal 1: Children and families make a smooth transition between early years services and school

OBJECTIVES *	• To increase the understanding of children and their parents about the move to school • To increase the mutual understanding of how both the early years services and schools contribute to children's long-term outcomes
POSSIBLE STRATEGIES	• Strengthen active networks between schools and early years services • Run professional development around the important role that each service plays • Implement comprehensive transition program for children and their families

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES	• Time release of teachers
	    o To allow teachers to visit and talk to children and parents in early years settings
	    o To allow teachers to visit the families/homes of all incoming (prep) students, including those who haven't attended early years services
	
	• Time release of teachers and early years staff to allow them to meet together and attend PD forums
	
	• Excursion for children in early years services to schools
	
	• External group runs seminars or forums on the importance of the early years and supports the establishment of a school and early years network

* In framing objectives, the questions to ask are: What specifically needs to be done to achieve the broad outcomes that have been identified? What specific steps need to be taken to achieve the outcomes?

Objectives need to be measurable, achievable and realistic. To ensure this, they should be worded as *To increase* …, *To decrease* …, or *To establish.…* Terms such as *strengthen* and *enhance* are to be avoided as these are not easy to measure.

Appendix 2: Example Outcome Statement for Goal 2

Goal 2: Early years services and schools actively connect with families

OBJECTIVES*	• To increase the number of activities for parents in the school
	• To increase the number of parents who report that they feel welcome and comfortable in their child's early years service and school
	• To increase the number of parents involved in their child's school, including 'hard-to-reach' families
POSSIBLE STRATEGIES	• Strengthen active networks between schools and early years services
	• Create welcoming family-friendly school environments
	• Create opportunities for families to participate in schools
POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES	• Run playgroups in schools
	• Offer opportunities for parents to participate in classroom activities
	• Invite and promote participation of all parents, including follow up with those who do not usually participate
	• Implement and publicise an 'open door' policy
	• Create a physically welcoming school environment (for example, set up a parent room, have welcome signs in a number of languages)
	• Create a culture of welcoming behaviour in school staff

* In framing objectives, the questions to ask are: What specifically needs to be done to achieve the broad outcomes that have been identified? What specific steps need to be taken to achieve the outcomes?

Objectives need to be measurable, achievable and realistic. To ensure this, they should be worded as *To increase* …, *To decrease* …, or *To establish*…. Terms such as *strengthen* and *enhance* are to be avoided as these are not easy to measure.

Appendix 3: Example Outcome Statement for Goal 3

Goal 3: Schools are responsive to the individual learning needs of all children

OBJECTIVES*	• To increase the connections that schools have with early years services to discuss the children's learning needs prior to entering school • To increase the responsiveness of schools to the diverse needs of students
POSSIBLE STRATEGIES	• Strengthen active networks between schools and early years services • School staff build links with other specialist support services • Schools develop a process of information sharing with families and services in order to be ready to address the needs of incoming students
POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES	• Hold regular network meetings between schools and early years services staff • Implement flexible teaching strategies that are responsive to the diverse needs of children • School staff visit early years services to find out about children's learning needs

* In framing objectives, the questions to ask are: What specifically needs to be done to achieve the broad outcomes that have been identified? What specific steps need to be taken to achieve the outcomes?

Objectives need to be measurable, achievable and realistic. To ensure this, they should be worded as *To increase* …, *To decrease* …, or *To establish*…. Terms such as *strengthen* and *enhance* are to be avoided as these are not easy to measure.

Appendix 4 – Workplan Proforma

GOAL:

Objective:

Strategy:

Methodology What is the activity – what tasks does it involve?	Accountability Who is responsible for?	Resources required What resources are required to enable this to happen?	Timeline When will it be completed?	Indicator / Deliverable How will we know when it has been completed?	Status of achievement Is the task achieved? (ie. completed, ongoing, etc)
Activity 'x' –					
Activity 'x' –					