

The Education and Training Inspectorate

A Summary Evaluation Report of

The Big Deal

Programme

January 2011

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1. CONTEXT

1.1 The Big Deal was the first major joint initiative between the statutory and voluntary youth sectors with the aim of embedding the key principles of voluntary/statutory partnerships and collective action as a model for future working across the youth sector. The main objective of The Big Deal was to 'encourage children and young people to become involved together in activities that enhance their personal and social development, and to give them the skills, knowledge and opportunities to make informed choices about their lives and demonstrate their positive contribution to family and community life'. A key rationale of the Young People's Fund was to provide 'a unique opportunity to advance the position of children and young people in Northern Ireland' and 'the foundation to embed a new participative approach to the work of the children and young person's sector delivery and to enable the Department of Education and other Government departments to integrate the outcomes into future business plans and related funding cycles'. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has completed three annual inspection reports of the Big Lottery Young People's Fund Award Partner Programme in Northern Ireland, The Big Deal. (see Appendix 1)

1.2 This final summary inspection report highlights the main strengths and areas for improvement in: leadership and management; quality of provision; and achievements and standards. The evaluation focuses on two key areas:

- (a) the effectiveness of The Big Deal in promoting the greater involvement of young people in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of the programme and projects; and
- (b) the impact of The Big Deal in developing the meaningful participation of young people and how the lessons learned from the programme will be sustained. A major focus of this final evaluation has been on the extent to which the leadership and management of The Big Deal has assessed the long-term impacts of the programme and how they have planned the exit strategy from the programme.

1.3 Youthnet acted as the lead award partner working on behalf of the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF)¹. A steering group has had the overall responsibility for setting and maintaining the strategic direction and oversight for the programme on behalf of the YSLF. The main organisations represented at the steering group included Youthnet, PlayBoard, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF), representatives from the Education and Library Board (ELB) Youth Service, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, and a representative from the Department of Education who had observer status. (Appendix 2: Management, delivery and support structures) A member of the Inspectorate also attended the meetings of the steering group in the role of observer.

¹ The Youth Service Liaison Forum comprises all the major youth service agencies, both voluntary and statutory. It is chaired by the Department of Education and the secretariat is provided by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. The aim of the YSLF is "To assist the Department of Education in formulating and implementing youth service policy proposals and strengthen the effectiveness of the provision of services to young people through improved coherence between the major stakeholders".

1.4 In the first two years of The Big Deal, members of the inspection team carried out visits to projects, met with young people involved in the projects and discussed the level of their participation in decision-making. The inspection team held meetings with key staff and managers in all of the main elements of the programme. Evidence gathered through area-based and individual organisation inspections, where appropriate, has also informed the inspection reports provided to the steering group at the end of each year.

1.5 The programme changed significantly over the past three years, to include: the extension of the Play Quest programme from July 2009 to December 2009; the awarding of a further £500,000 to the small grants programme resulting in the extension of the programme until December 2010; and the new appointments to some key positions within The Big Deal, including the programme manager and hub manager in 2008.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 Youthnet has managed and administered the programme effectively. It developed the programme well as it progressed.

2.2 Over 70,000 young people were direct beneficiaries of The Big Deal programmes. The majority of the participants experienced good outcomes, including an improved understanding and a greater awareness of how to make better informed choices in their lives. The young people developed a range of skills, such as leading and managing programmes and empowering other young people to get involved.

2.3 The Play Quest model increased the effective participation of younger participants in a variety of appropriate settings, such as pre-school settings, primary schools and community-based projects. The programme had a direct effect on the understanding of the value of play and increased participation in the settings in which the staff from Play Quest worked. Their participation in The Big Deal has had a positive influence on PlayBoard's policy and practice for play and leisure for children under 10; the Play Quest model has been appropriately subsumed into the work of PlayBoard.

2.4 The Big Deal staff² have made a good contribution to the further development of the meaningful participation of young people across the youth sector. The overall quality of provision in The Big Deal projects observed ranged from good to outstanding.

2.5 The Big Deal small grants programme involved young people successfully in making informed financial decisions. They adjudicated applications for grants from groups of other young people and participated actively in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of their own programmes. There were a substantial number of young people who were indirect beneficiaries as a result of the small grants programmes and activities organised by peers who had made the original application.

2.6 An impact study of The Big Deal programme was commissioned by the steering group in March 2010 with the findings due in the autumn of 2010. It is intended that the findings of the study will allow the lessons learned from the initiative to inform future youth policy. The impact study was not completed at the point of writing this report in December 2010.

² 'The Big Deal staff' is a generic term for those who worked in The Strategic Programme (0–10 PlayBoard); (11-25 NIYF) and The Small Grants Programme (Youthnet)

3. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

3.1 KEY STRENGTHS

- The effective day-to-day management of The Big Deal and, in particular, of the small grants programme by Youthnet.
- The effective management of the Play Quest programme by PlayBoard, and the embedding and sustaining of the ethos of participation within the younger age group.
- The progressive development of, and improvements to, The Big Deal programme based on feedback from various consultations and on the areas for improvement identified in the ETI reports.

3.2 AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- The need for the more strategic involvement of young people in the overall management structures of The Big Deal in the final two years of the programme.

3.3 Youthnet used the considerable existing managerial experience of its staff to carry out the effective day-to-day and financial management of The Big Deal. The reports for the quarterly contract meetings with The Big Lottery, based on the agreed targets and milestones in the original application, were well prepared and thorough.

3.4 The Big Deal has demonstrated year-on-year improvement in the three main elements of the programme, namely: the strategic programme; the small grants programme; and the Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF)³. Following the initial ETI report to the steering group, Youthnet made appropriate changes to the management structures of The Big Deal. There were improvements in the supervision of, and the support structures for, The Big Deal programme manager and the leader of the 'Participation Hub', based in the NIYF. Over the course of the programme a key change from a regional youth forum to more localised area networks facilitated the greater involvement of more young people in the decision-making of the CYPF.

3.5 The programme manager of The Big Deal, based in and supported effectively by Youthnet, worked successfully to bring about the productive collaboration of the three main elements of the programme. The staff teams within The Big Deal agreed a consistent set of monitoring and reporting systems, which they implemented successfully. There was also general improvement in the self-evaluation processes.

3.6 The closer liaison with area youth officers from the ELBs enhanced the participation of children and young people in most of the local areas. The formal link between The Big Deal and the ELB officers' group was not sustained in the final year of the programme; positive links with ELB area officers and other key youth work staff did continue through direct contact on specific programmes. For example, the organisational change programmes informed and promoted the greater participation of children and young people in decision-making through the positive working relationships developed between the participation workers and ELB staff.

³ The main purpose of the Children and Young People's Forum was to ensure that young people were at the centre of the decision-making process of Big Deal; as part of the steering group and as members of the small grants award panels.

3.7 The Big Deal policy and research worker carried out research into participative structures, which confirmed that working with, and challenging, adults involved in the management of youth services has, to date, been more effective through the local area-based youth networks, and through the active engagement of young people in processes, such as the awarding of small grants. This research informed the very good information contained in The Big Deal publication 'Guidance for Effective Youth Councils'.

3.8 The influence of children and young people in the management functions of The Big Deal steering group was minimal. The steering group spent significant time and effort to involve children and young people in the formal strategic management structures in the first two years. It was not possible to sustain their involvement throughout the life of The Big Deal. The active participation of children and young people in strategic decision-making in the youth sector remains an area for further development, which the steering group proposes to address through the impact study it commissioned in April 2010.

3.9 A major success of The Big Deal has been the effective management and strategic determination to allow children and young people to make real and informed decisions on the spending of over £1.5m as part of the small grants programme. The programme manager and grants officer worked very effectively to develop a sound infra-structure for applications from children and young people, and for the assessment and monitoring of the small grant applications by young people.

3.10 At an organisational and strategic level, the Play Quest programme has had a significant impact on the work of PlayBoard. The organisation has managed to retain the staff and methodologies of the Play Quest programme which has developed and embedded further a sound model of participatory practice for the younger age group.

3.11 Youthnet provided progress updates to the YSLF and to The Big Lottery on behalf of the steering group. The Big Deal steering group did not meet formally between September 2008 and April 2009. While there were some key management and personnel issues in the Inspectorate's report in year three, the action plan submitted by the steering group did not adequately reflect how the leadership and management of The Big Deal planned to address the key issue of an exit strategy, which would embed the lessons learned from the programme into the work of the youth sector. In particular, the action plan did not demonstrate how the investment of money over the five-year period to provide good experiences in decision-making for children and young people, would build the capacity of the organisations involved in The Big Deal to sustain the meaningful participation of children and young people.

3.12 Over the life of The Big Deal, the steering group commissioned separate evaluations for the main elements of the programme. The 'Health Check' seminar in June 2007 provided a constructive evaluation involving all of the programmes. Recent independent evaluations of the work of the CYPF and of the small grants programme have provided useful comments and recommendations for the specific programme areas. The Play Quest evaluation provided good feedback for PlayBoard and led to the sustaining of much of the play work methodologies. Such evaluations and the feedback from a range of other sources including, importantly, from the children and young people themselves, should inform the YSLF, through the steering group of The Big Deal, about the future priorities on the development of participation. The exit strategies, and the potential to sustain the successful elements of the programme, needed to be addressed at an earlier stage.

4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

4.1 KEY STRENGTHS

- The large numbers of children and young people who benefitted from participatory activities across the three different age bands: 0-10 years; 11-16 years and 17-25 years.
- The good outcomes for almost all of the children and young people involved in The Big Deal programmes, including a greater awareness of the importance of active participation, and the development of the skills to participate.
- The significant increase in interest from children and young people in the small grants programme and their effective involvement in decision-making processes which affected their peers.
- The enthusiastic response by the children involved in the Play Quest activities, that were well matched to their needs and interests, and the development of their participation.

4.2 According to the figures supplied by Youthnet, over 70,000 children and young people have benefitted directly from the three key programmes of The Big Deal. These figures exceed by almost 10% the targets agreed with The Big Lottery. (Appendix 3) Across each of the age-specific programmes, the numbers of children and young people involved have increased year-on-year. As part of the small grants programme, £1.5m was spent on 723 projects benefitting over 36,000 children and young people.

4.3 In almost all of the strategic programme sessions observed, the children and young people responded enthusiastically to the programmes provided by the play rangers, participation workers and in the activities provided by the CYPF. The activities were well matched to the needs and interests of the different age groups; in the majority of the sessions observed, the children and young people learned to express their wishes and feelings in a safe environment and they reported fewer differences of opinion. Almost all of the young people observed in the 11-25 programmes demonstrated a clear understanding of the importance of active participation in their centre, in their communities and in their own lives, through high levels of engagement in the relevant strategic programmes.

4.4 By the end of 2009, over 120 children and young people had participated in 62 small grants panel meetings, across nine different geographical areas, including rural areas. The learning from making financial decisions enhanced the children and young people's levels of maturity and responsibility. Almost all of the children and young people involved in the small grants panels received the necessary training to help them to make a fair and balanced decision on the applications. The key skills of listening and respecting opinions were developed well in almost all of the panel meetings observed.

4.5 It was clear from the observations made that the post-primary sector would benefit from the lessons learned in The Big Deal, which could provide good direction to the development of the greater participation of pupils in aspects of their school life; further links with the formal sector should be explored.

5. QUALITY OF PROVISION

5.1 KEY STRENGTHS

- The very good quality of the implementation of the programmes by The Big Deal staff.
- The good quality of the training resources developed, including the effective guidance for youth councils.
- The development of local area networks that provided good opportunities for children and young people to participate in decision-making processes.

5.2 Overall the quality of the learning experiences in the majority of the practice observed ranged from satisfactory to very good. In the best practice, the staff had planned well, using good participation models that were flexible and tailored to suit the needs of the particular age group.

5.3 Over 100 organisations, including pre-school settings, community groups and after-schools programmes, benefitted from the very good work of the play rangers attached to the Play Quest programme. The play rangers supported the children well in communicating their views through the use of age-appropriate strategies. Play Quest brought together successfully the key elements of building participation through play. The flexible and co-operative co-working approach allowed this younger age group to enjoy better informal and formal play time in school playgrounds and other settings, and in making changes to the provision of services by organisations, families and communities.

5.4 The 11-25 programme, including the 'Making it Happen' and 'Organisational Change' programmes, has provided over 600 young people and 44 different groups with the skills and confidence to make changes to the services provided for them in their own local projects and communities. The good design and development of the 'Making It Happen' programme ensured that young people were well trained and prepared to make changes in their own centres and communities. Many of the programmes gave young people from disadvantaged communities the necessary social skills and confidence to challenge and work with adults at a local level in a non-confrontational manner.

5.5 Almost all of the organisations contacted, reported their satisfaction with the quality of the work of The Big Deal staff. During one visit, young people and staff from a voluntary youth centre spoke highly of the support and encouragement given by the participation workers as part of the organisational change programme.

5.6 In a minority of the sessions observed, the planning needed to take greater account of the roles and responsibilities of all staff, including staff from outside The Big Deal, so that potential duplication of services was avoided. Through the good support and management of the programme managers, however, much of the potential duplication was replaced by increased co-operation and complementarity with youth workers from the statutory and voluntary sectors.

5.7 The local area networks brought together appropriately other elements of The Big Deal programme, including the work of the participation workers and of the small grants panel. Almost all of the young people observed during the small grants panel sessions contributed well to the discussions and took mature and considered decisions under the good facilitation of the small grants manager.

5.8 As a follow-up to the 2008 audit of participative structures, The Big Deal staff launched the manual 'Guidance for Effective Youth Councils'. This document provides very good information about making youth councils work more effectively. The research worker and other Big Deal staff worked with over 12 other youth organisations, including the Participation Network, to develop the manual. The dissemination of good practice events planned for the end of the programme will help towards ensuring that the good quality resources and methodologies are shared.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Most of the individual programmes and provision observed ranged from good to outstanding. Young people benefitted significantly from their involvement in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of programmes.

6.2 However, the areas for development in the strategic management of the composite Big Deal Programme have meant that, at the time of this final summary report, there was not enough evidence to demonstrate how the future impact of The Big Deal will be measured and the key elements sustained as the new youth sector policy developments emerge.

6.3 Overall the quality of The Big Deal Programme is good.

THE BIG DEAL

The Big Deal is a £4 million programme resourced through the Big Lottery Fund under its Northern Ireland Young People's Fund. This fund seeks to promote the involvement of children and young people in decision-making about issues which may be of particular concern to their age group.

The Big Deal is a youth sector partnership and brings together many of the key stakeholders involved in the development, delivery and management of children's and youth services in Northern Ireland, including:

- Youthnet (award partner and manager of the Small Grants Programme);
- Play Board (delivery partner Play Quest programme);
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum (delivery partner programmes for young people) supported by the Education and Library Boards; and
- The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (strategy and co-ordination partner).

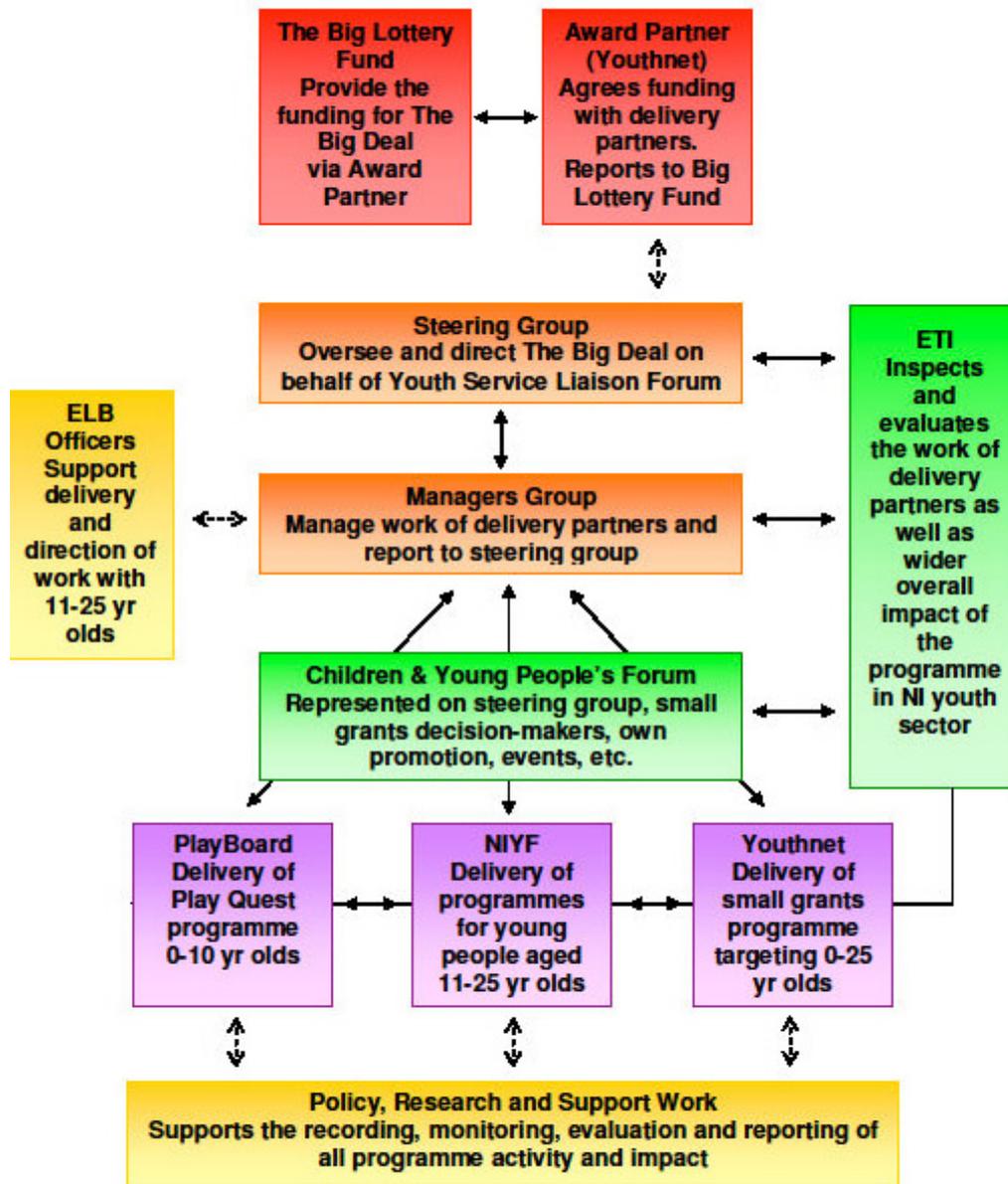
The aim of The Big Deal is to encourage children and young people to become involved together in activities that enhance their personal and social development, and to give them the skills, knowledge and opportunities to make informed choices about their lives and demonstrate their positive contribution to family and community life.

Working across three age bands, 0-10, 11-16 and 17-25 years, The Big Deal programme has a number of elements which are each designed to bring about the greater participation of children and young people in decision-making.

MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE (DIAGRAM)

The Big Deal

Management, delivery and support structures



KEY CODE



Awarding funds from
 The National Lottery

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 www.thebigdealni.com

APPENDIX 3

The statistics below are provided by Youthnet based on the numerical targets set at the beginning of the programme and include actual totals up to the period ending 30 June 2010.

Milestones achieved to date					
Participation of children and young people					
Target	28,434	Actual	48,705	Variance	+20,271
Strengthened/supported participation structures					
Target	60	Actual	122	Variance	+62
Capacity of organisations to involve C&YP in governance					
Target	166	Actual	232	Variance	+66
Notes: Revised figure takes account of previously excluded Play Quest statistics					
Creation of an inclusive Children & Young People's Forum					
Target	90	Actual	201	Variance	+111
Notes: Update not available due to long term sick leave by CYPF Co-ordinator					
The dissemination of effective practice events					
Target	20	Actual	25	Variance	+5

2007-2009 INSPECTION REPORTS – KEY FINDINGS

2007 Inspection Report

- Relationships at all levels are providing a sound basis for the personal and social development of young people.
- In the observed session of the CYPF, the staff took into account the needs of young people and had realistic expectations in terms of behaviour and acquisition of skills.
- The training sessions that were observed were well-planned; the young people worked collaboratively and with a sense of purpose.
- The samples of written programmes examined are clearly laid out and incorporate the priorities of the Big Deal programme.
- There are ranges of approaches used to interest and motivate the young people and, in some of the sessions observed, the workers have had to be flexible to meet the needs of the particular group they are working with.
- The workers observed in all of the programmes are committed and dedicated to addressing the needs of the young people.
- All of the workers and play rangers observed are motivated and have expressed a commitment to further develop leadership and team-working skills.
- Young people are involved in the evaluation of the programmes. The evaluation methodology used for the CYPF was adapted to suit younger children and those young people with additional needs.

Areas for Development

- There is a need to review the leadership and management structures at all levels including the role of the programme manager and the supervision and support structures for the Hub manager and Hub staff.
- There is a need to improve the communication systems between the three defined age specific elements of the Big Deal to ensure greater consistency in the recording and collation of information against the main targets of the programme.
- There is a need to develop a system of self-evaluation that is agreed and understood by all of the Big Deal partners and ensure how outcomes of assessment and evaluation will influence subsequent planning and provision.
- There is a need to improve the Marketing and Public Relations of the Big Deal Programme.

Conclusion

The organisation has strengths in many aspects of its provision. The inspection has identified a few areas for improvement in important areas which need to be addressed to meet effectively the needs of all the learners. The Education and Training Inspectorate will continue to monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

2008 Inspection Report

The findings of the Inspectorate confirm that The Big Deal programme has made good progress in addressing the areas for improvement outlined in the first year report.

There remain some important areas for development including:

- the need to ensure that The Big Deal programme informs the strategic direction for the role of participation in the youth sector and in work with young people generally;
- the need to improve further the assessment of how the various programmes add value and increase the participation of children and young people; and
- the need to review the role and function of the CYPF.

2009 Inspection Report

The monitoring inspection visits confirm that the quality of outcomes and participation by young people is good; they also confirm that the quality of provision across the various programmes is good. The inspection visits have, however, identified shortcomings in the strategic leadership and management of The Big Deal programme and in particular the following areas need to be addressed:

- ensuring there is clearly directed planning of exit strategies for the current participants of the ongoing programmes;
- identification and dissemination of the outcomes of the various programmes as a lasting legacy beyond The Big Deal; and
- ensuring the building of the capacity among The Big Deal staff and other youth work staff to develop and sustain skills which will increase meaningful participative structures across the youth sector.

The Inspectorate recommends that the processes for self-evaluation are developed more strongly as a means to bring about improvement. The Big Deal action plan needs to be adjusted in light of the inspection findings and submitted within six weeks of receipt of this report.

The Inspectorate will continue to monitor The Big Deal programme during 2009/2010 and produce a final report in 2010.

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