

NI playgroup to close due to falling numbers of immigrant children

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Body

A decline in the numbers of **immigrant children** has contributed to the closure of a Portadown nursery, it has been claimed.

Richmount Playgroup, based in Scotch St, on the outskirts of town is due to close shortly after Halloween due to declining numbers.

The playgroup, which is registered for 24 **children**, does not have enough **children** attending to keep it financially viable.

At its peak, it was full to capacity and in 2017/18 received an excellent inspection report from the Education and Training Inspectorate.

However, Joe Garvey, Playgroup Secretary, said they have been unable to fill the all the 13 funded places at the school.

He revealed that over the past two years the playschool was an innovator in the Sharing from the Start and Getting Ready to Learn projects.

Founded in 2012 the Playgroup's Committee campaigned vigorously for funded places for **children** in their preschool year. It was successful and this year alone it was allocated 13 funded places but was only able to fill four of them.

At the beginning of September this year some 13 **children** were due to start but this dwindled down to the equivalent of just over eight **child** places per day.

Mr Garvey revealed that last year Richmount Rural Community Association and the Playgroup commissioned a £5,000 study on childcare needs in the area, but the public response was poor.

It is understood the four **children** who have funded places can be offered alternative places in other facilities by the Education Authority.

Mr Garvey, who is one of the founder members of the playgroup committee said: "It is very regrettable that we had to make the decision to close the Playgroup. This was not an easy decision bearing in mind that the parents and staff have been so supportive in trying to keep it open and it is unfortunate that the **children** will be disrupted just after they have settled in. However, we had to face the financial reality that we could not keep going with such a relatively small number of **children**.

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"At a time when we hear of a lack of preschool educational places it is incongruous that we have nine funded places unfilled."

Mr Garvey added: "There is a combination of factors and we may not know them all but: We have a falling birth rate combined with a major decline in immigrants to the area with children. Also, many of the immigrant families are moving elsewhere due the uncertainty of their status on the outcome of Brexit.

"In addition, despite Scotch St being a rapidly developing village, most parents work in neighbouring towns where they have childminding facilities and it can be more convenient for them to send their children to preschool education at these locations.

"This was why we commissioned the Childcare Analysis to establish if there was a need for all day childcare/education in the Scotch Street area but there was little interest.

"Finally, I would like to thank all the parents who have supported the playgroup, the wonderful children we have had through our doors and our two dedicated staff who have done so much to provide the children with a quality and caring service. I would also extend thanks to our committee of volunteers who founded the playgroup and who physically built the bespoke playgroup building and managed to steer it to one of the high achieving playgroups. I would also like to mention those elected representatives who in recent times have supported us."

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