**Upstart Scotland AGM, 23/6/19**

**Report from the Chair**

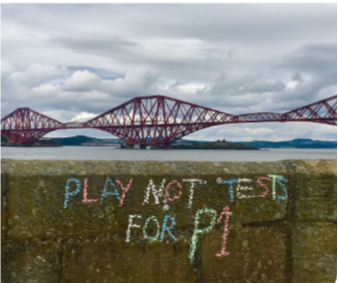
When I reported at last year’s AGM on plans for Upstart’s ‘Play Not Tests for P1’ campaign, we had no idea how busy it would keep us for the next twelve months. The issue has now become a political hot potato and the controversy is likely to continue for some time. Upstart will inevitably be drawn into the fray to some extent but we’re determined this year to focus on our core aim of a kindergarten stage for Scotland’s 3- to 7-year-olds.

**Play Not Tests**

After the AGM, we contacted other organisations concerned about the P1 tests, resulting in a ‘Play Not Tests coalition’ of the EIS, Children in Scotland, Play Scotland, Connect (Scotland’s main parent-teacher organisation) and the ACE-Aware Scotland movement. We were joined by the Children’s Parliament, Starcatchers (the early years creative arts organisation) and the Give Them Time campaign about school referral.

While many other organisations expressed concern, they were reluctant to add their names because the situation was becoming increasingly political. By August 15th, when Upstart released news to the press of our Play Not Tests video and parental opt-out postcards, all Scotland’s opposition parties were expressing interest in the P1 tests debate and, over the summer, they all came out against the Scottish government.

Meanwhile, Upstart was keeping the topic on the boil with a chalking campaign, inspired by the Suffragettes, who used to chalk ‘Votes for Women’ on walls and pavements. We’re very grateful to the many supporters who have sent us photos of their chalkings from all parts of the country and hope to have a small display at the AGM.



In September, the Conservatives put [a motion in Parliament to scrap the P1 tests](https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16889660.scottish-government-loses-vote-on-p1-assessments/), which was passed by 63 votes to 61. However, John Swinney decided to disregard the vote and set up an ‘independent review’ (with a pretty restricted remit) to decide on the question. The Parliamentary Education and Skills Committee also decided to hold a review of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) as a whole.

This effectively kicked the question into the long grass for several months and kept Upstart very busy preparing submissions, giving evidence and trying to find out what was going on behind the scenes (in April, I wrote [a blog](https://www.upstart.scot/the-view-from-the-long-grass/) summing up all the machinations). The review was published on 11-6-19 and, as expected, decided the tests should remain. Upstart and other coalition partners published replies and the enraged reaction of the opposition parties suggests that this debate is not yet over.

A new Scottish online debating site called Spraph chose the P1 test as their pilot project and this is continuing at time of writing. Please log on at [www.spraph.com](http://www.spraph.com) and add arguments/vote against the tests before it closes on 24-6-19.

**Child development and children’s rights**

For me, one outcome of the year’s Play Not Tests activities has been the realisation that the Scottish populace – including most of its politicians – has practically no understanding of early child development. As a nation, we have a shamefully punitive attitude to children (viz the controversies over a ‘smacking’ ban and the age of criminal responsibility) which probably explains our rather ACE-heavy history. One of the reasons *Curriculum for Excellence* has been so poorly implemented is the emphasis on control within the educational establishment.

We hoped, through launching Upstart Scotland, to encourage wider understanding of developmental factors in the early years. Having discovered how deep cultural attitudes run, I fear this will take a very long time. People who work with young children ‘get it’ but others don’t. It therefore makes sense to focus in the coming year on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Scottish government hopes to embed within our legislative structure. Culture change in the UK usually requires a change in the law.

For this reason, we have invited Cathy McCulloch of the Children’s Parliament to speak at this year’s AGM and, as the ACEs movement continues to gather strength, we’re also grateful that Simon Henderson has agreed to speak about ‘Awesome Childhood Experiences’.

In November, a special edition of the Scottish Educational Review on the subject of play is due to include an article by me on the Upstart campaign, pointing to the 2005 General Comment 7 on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This General Comment covers the particular needs of children during early childhood (0-8 years). Perhaps if we can help the Scottish government to recognise relationship-focused, play-based learning for the under-sevens as a human right, more of them will see the developmental light.

**Nursery news**

At last year’s AGM we heard from several Upstart supporters who were worried about the roll-out of services for the 1140 hours nursery expansion in 2020. Shortly afterwards, a pressure group called ‘2020 Together’ was set up and Upstart has since supported its work to achieve equal treatment for settings across the sector. However, there is still great concern about the viability of doubling nursery provision in such a short time frame (including adequate training of staff) and about huge variations in practice across local authorities.

This seems likely to be an area in which Upstart will be involved during the coming year and we’d be grateful to hear from supporters who can offer us help/expertise.

There have been two interesting innovations on the nursery front:

* Edinburgh has been developing forest nurseries which, by offering children a half-day entirely outdoors and the other half in an indoor setting, is more economically viable for the LA than providing extra buildings for the 2020 expansion. Kate and I attended an Early Education visit to/talk about the development of these nurseries and were very impressed.
* Several outdoor nurseries – including Big Bird in South Lanarkshire and Muddy Boots in Aberdeenshire – are now offering care/education for children up to seven years of age, on a flexi-schooling basis.

Upstart is particularly interested in ensuring that care/education 3-7 involves plenty of opportunities for children to be outdoors in natural surroundings and these developments may offer a possible way ahead for introducing a kindergarten stage. First of all, of course, we have to convince the Scottish public (including its politicians) that play-based pedagogy should not stop, or even taper off, at the ridiculously early age of five.

**Supporting primary teachers in delivering play-based practice**

There’s been steadily increasing interest around Scotland in developing a play-based approach in P1, sometimes into P2. This is encouraged by Education Scotland (although we can’t see how they reconcile it with their commitment to literacy/numeracy testing of this age group) and many local authorities. At present the interpretation of a ‘play-based approach’ is very varied – ranging from high-quality EY pedagogy to traditional ‘worksheet’ activities, punctuated with occasional play. It is, however, a welcome shift and Upstart Scotland is proud to have been instrumental in encouraging and supporting it.

Kate Johnston and Hilary Long have now been providing much-valued support to teachers and practitioners interested in principled play-based pedagogy for several years. Over 2018-19, they have organised a great many meetings in schools and other events, as well as running two very popular Upstart Facebook pages: ‘Play in P1/2’, run by Kate (5,354 members), and Hilary’s ‘3-7 Outdoor Play’ (2,416 members). Hilary launched an Outdoor Play Roadshow in March, which she an Kate took to Fife a month later. Kate and I also went off on a highly-enjoyable, week-long Upstart Roadshow, covering Argyle, Fort William, the Moray Firth and Aberdeenshire.

The Upstart Board of Trustees is extremely grateful to everyone who has helped with these activities, as well as keeping Upstart’s messages circulating on social media. We’re also grateful to Anna Ephgrave, who kindly reprised her popular training day for us in September, and Chris Orr, who in March organised the first – very successful – Upstart/KEYU Conference at Edinburgh’s Storytelling Centre (Keep Early Years Unique is our sister organisation in England).



We’re currently organising a training day by Kym Scott in Falkirk (August) and will be participating in a KEYU/Upstart Conference in Newcastle (November). There’s also the possibility of an exciting Upstart conference in Edinburgh in November so keep an eye on our social media for an announcement!

We hope to put on more of these events because, as well as helping to spread the word about principled EY practice, they also bring in some much-needed funding for the campaign.

**Administration and funding**

We were sorry to lose our part-time administrative assistant – Kate Pass – in December when her family returned to Australia. However, in March we welcomed Jennifer Gall into the post and look forward to working with her in the future.

So far, applications for funding from the Big Lottery and several charitable organisations have been unsuccessful – probably because most funding sources are for one-off, short-term projects. We have therefore continued to rely on regular donations from supporters, supplemented by collections at meetings and profits from training courses and conferences. We’re very grateful to Trustees, who pay all their own expenses for attending Board meetings and other Upstart business, there is obviously a limit to the time the campaign can exist on goodwill.

We’re therefore also extremely grateful to our regular donors, whose generosity helps us cover the many administrative costs of the campaign and hope more supporters will feel able to pledge an annual or monthly donation to help us continue with our work.

**Other activities**

So much pours into the Upstart email inbox that it’s difficult to keep tabs on it but, since the last AGM we have:

* held four Board Meetings
* provided speakers for dozens of meetings/conferences – not just our own but events held by other organisations, such as local authorities, political groups, and Holyrood Conferences
* attended scores of other meetings, to ensure an Upstart presence, make contacts with like-minded organisations and keep ourselves up-to-date
* been involved with Scotland’s ACE-Aware movement, which is very supportive of our aims, as are we of theirs (this now includes an ‘occasional series’ of blogs around the ACEs agenda)
* met with politicians and representatives of organisations/charities, such as nurseries, teacher education, children’s rights and the EIS
* continued to publish our monthly Newsletters (thanks to the GDPR regulations, this lost half its subscribers last spring but over the year with have more than doubled them again and subscriptions now stand at 1450
* to grow our following on Twitter (6500+ followers), Upstart’s main Facebook page (9000+ followers), specialised ‘Play’ and local network Facebook pages.

The Upstart campaign has therefore continued to gain support and attention. Although it’s sad that the Scottish government has not yet seen the light, we’re delighted at the interest expressed by politicians of other political parties … and that the EIS voted at its AGM on 8-6-19 for a statutory play-based kindergarten stage (thanks to Kate Johnston for her work over the years towards this).

We look forward to welcoming Members and supporters to the 2019 AGM where we will discuss the next stages of the Upstart Scotland campaign.

**Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland**

**June, 2019**