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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Review of
Pre-School Education
in Northern Ireland

Department of Education
JUNE 2004

FOREWORD BY BARRY GARDINER MP

Minister with responsibility for Education



In 1998, the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme was launched in Northern Ireland. Recognising the benefits of pre-school both for the individual and society as a whole, the Government set a challenging target of providing a year of quality pre-school education for all children in their pre-school year, thus providing a good foundation for their future learning.

Although pre-school education is a non-compulsory phase, its benefits cannot be overstated. Government-funded research in Northern Ireland has shown that, when compared with children who have no pre-school experience, children who attend pre-school before commencing compulsory education are better prepared for primary school and learn more quickly. It also shows that children who have attended pre-school are more sociable, confident and independent than their peers who have not.

The target for expanding pre-school education in Northern Ireland was to provide a pre-school education place for every child in its immediate pre-school year whose parents wish it. Surveys have shown that only about 90% of parents wish their child to attend pre-school before starting primary school. Through the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, this target has been achieved and surpassed – in the 2003/2004 school year sufficient places were available for 95% of children in their immediate pre-school year and throughout Northern Ireland children are receiving appropriate quality education in nursery schools and classes, playgroups and day nurseries that all follow common curriculum guidelines.

In delivering its targets, the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme has created a partnership in the provision of pre-school education between the statutory schools sector and the voluntary and private sectors, through the establishment of the local Pre-School Education Advisory Groups that represent all sectors. The Programme has also provided children with a foundation prior to entering compulsory education, and many parents with the

opportunity to avail of employment and training opportunities during the time their children are attending pre-school.

Despite all that the Expansion Programme has accomplished, its implementation has revealed a number of structural and operational issues where improvements should be possible. Since the commencement of the Programme there have also been many developments in the rest of the United Kingdom that have not been implemented in Northern Ireland, particularly moves towards greater integration of formal education and childcare services.

I consider it is now a suitable time to reflect on how pre-school provision has developed over the past 6 years of the Expansion Programme and what has been learned. This review is an opportunity to look to the future to see how the delivery of pre-school education might be improved for the benefit of all those involved. Our focus must be on how best to meet the needs of young children.

The consultation seeks your views on issues relevant to the organisation and delivery of pre-school education in Northern Ireland and this is your opportunity to influence the future development of pre-school education.

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PART 1

INTRODUCTION

Review of Pre-school Education

1. In 1998 the Departments of Education and Health and Social Services published the policy document *Investing in Early Learning*, which launched the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. The Programme formed part of *Children First*, the overall childcare strategy for Northern Ireland, and, with the exception of a small number of statutory nurseries still to be built, is now complete. It has established enough new places to provide a year of funded pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it, and in doing so has created a new, albeit non-compulsory, phase of early years education. The time is therefore right both to look back at what has been done to date and forward to how the pre-school phase should be developed in the future. A review is therefore being undertaken, with the following terms of reference:-
 - **To examine and evaluate current provision of pre-school education in Northern Ireland following the completion of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.**
 - **To identify options for the consolidation and further development of the pre-school phase.**
 - **To consult fully with relevant interest groups.**
 - **To make recommendations, where necessary, based on the findings of the review.**
2. This paper addresses the first two requirements of the review. Its circulation will meet the third, and the Department's consideration of the results of that consultation will set the parameters of future pre-school policy in Northern Ireland. The review is especially timely in that the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY), the group of officials from the Departments of Education (DE), Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSS&PS) and Employment and Learning (DEL)

which oversees the implementation of the *Children First* childcare strategy (see para 8 below), is currently carrying out a review of that strategy which will take developments outside Northern Ireland into account. The two reviews will complement each other, and take appropriate account of the Northern Ireland Strategy for Children and Young People being developed by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

Benefits of Pre-school Education

3. As *Investing in Early Learning* stated, research shows that good quality pre-school education has important benefits for individuals, families, communities, society and the economy. For the Department of Education, the main focus of concern is the pre-school child. Children who experience good pre-school education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, are better prepared for school, learn more quickly and have fewer emotional or behavioural difficulties in later life. The purpose of pre-school education is therefore to provide children with the best possible start to their compulsory education.
4. The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) research, commissioned by the Department, suggests that generally at the start of primary school, children with pre-school experience - whether within a nursery school or class, a voluntary/private playgroup or nursery, or in reception provision - achieve better verbal, non-verbal and general cognitive skills when compared with children who have not experienced any form of pre-school education. Similarly, children with pre-school experience are more sociable, confident and empathetic and have more independence and concentration in comparison with children who are kept at home.
5. International research has also considered the benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and how these flow to children. Good ECEC (which includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content) prepares children for later life. Children who are well cared for early in life grow up to have more success in school, and ultimately to be more productive in the labour market. In addition, it is widely recognised that other advantages to good quality publicly provided childcare are that it

provides a better quality family life and necessary opportunities for childhood development.

6. The EPPNI research also shows that any pre-school education is usually better than no pre-school education. However, when considering the types of pre-school experience the child may have, and more particularly, the quality of the pre-school experience, international research has also shown that it is the precise structure, delivery and programme design of the Early Childhood Education and Care that matters. The benefits to children rise with the quality of pre-school provision, apparently without obvious limit. Generally, however, costs also rise as the quality level of ECEC services rises.
7. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) *Starting Strong*, which reviews the range of policy approaches to ECEC adopted by different countries, states that 'policy makers have recognised that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families'. The report listed eight key elements of policy that are likely to promote equitable access to quality ECEC. Some examples of these elements are: a systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation; a strong and equal partnership between the childcare and education systems; a universal approach to access; substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure; a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance; and appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision.

History of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

8. In 1997 the UK Government made the provision of 'a pre-school place for every 4 year old whose parents wished it' an early priority. Having achieved that in England and Wales, the Government's target - now met- is to make the same provision for 3 year olds. In Northern Ireland (where, due to the different age for starting compulsory education, the pre-school year group consists mainly of children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 2 months), it was decided to implement this commitment through a programme of expanding the availability of funded pre-school places, with the long-term aim of providing a year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. The

Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, the vehicle by which free pre-school provision has been increased, was part of the wider Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy "*Children First*" (DENI, DHSS, T&EA, 1999). The aims of *Children First* are to:

- raise the quality of childcare;
 - make childcare more affordable; and
 - improve access to childcare, including pre-school education.
9. It should be noted that *Children First's* use of the term "childcare" incorporates pre-school education. Good pre-school education should be a component of childcare, just as good childcare should be a component of pre-school education.
 10. The original target of the Expansion Programme was to create over 9,000 new high quality funded places by 2002, which, with existing provision, would have created places for 85% of children in their immediate pre-school year. This target was replaced in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government by the Expansion Programme's longer-term aim of providing a full year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wished it.
 11. Evidence from the Universal Household Survey in Northern Ireland has indicated that no more than 90% of parents would seek a funded place for their children, and this has largely been confirmed in practice. In 2003/04 funded pre-school places are available for 95% of children in their immediate pre-school year. It should be noted that, because of the number of 2 year olds in statutory nursery schools and units, the actual take-up of children in their immediate pre-school year is around 85%.
 12. The Department has provided new funded places in the statutory sector (in new nursery schools and in new nursery units at primary schools), and - for the first time - in playgroups and nurseries in the voluntary/private sector. The Programme aimed to provide half of the new places in each of the sectors and thereby to establish a new partnership between them, and between the education and childcare systems.
 13. The expansion of funded places was planned by a Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG) in each Education and Library Board area.

They have been the main implementers of the Expansion Programme and to them belongs the credit for what has been achieved at local level. The PEAGs are partnerships between all the pre-school interests - statutory, voluntary/private, education and health - and are chaired and supported administratively by their Boards. They have reciprocal membership with their area Childcare Partnerships. In the first years of the Programme, they determined the location and management type of new statutory schools and units, and selected the voluntary/private sector playgroups to which places were to be allocated. These proposed developments were published in annual plans approved by the Department. As the expansion process has been almost completed, the PEAGs' current role is to review provision annually and to allocate places to playgroups.

The Consultation

14. The implementation of the Programme and the recent steep decline in the size of the pre-school cohort have raised issues which will be discussed in the body of this review. They include the pre-school admissions age; the removal of reception provision; the pattern of full-time and part-time provision; issues common to the statutory and voluntary/private sectors; and the extent to which developments elsewhere, particularly developments in integrated cross-agency provision in England, should be incorporated into Northern Ireland structures.
15. In considering the issues, the review will not stray beyond what is realistic in terms of structural and resource constraints. This is not to say that it is set only in the context of current constraints - little purpose would be served by such an exercise - but where the financial implications of a proposal rule it out from the outset, the review will make that clear.
16. Any changes to current arrangements in Northern Ireland will be made in a UK context. Developments, particularly in England, are summarised in Part 3 of this review. The development of integrated services will be considered as part of the review of *Children First*.

Consultation Questions

17. Consultation questions to help prompt consideration of the issues are inserted in Part 5 of this review and also in a separate Question and Answer booklet. We are seeking respondents' views both on the operational and structural issues which have arisen during the implementation of the Expansion Programme which affect the whole pre-school phase and also on the future strategic direction of pre-school education generally. Part 3 summarises developments in integrated services, chiefly in England, and Part 4 reviews the structural and organisational issues which have arisen. Between them, they should help make respondents aware of the background to the consultation questions.

18. In answering the questions on aspects of pre-school education, respondents may find it useful to consider what were or are its strengths and weaknesses in the area in question: and how its performance in that area might be improved. The questions are not intended to be an exhaustive list of all the issues relevant to the review. If you wish to comment on an issue about which no question has been asked, please do so in the space provided in the Question and Answer booklet.

PART 2

THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION EXPANSION PROGRAMME - IMPLEMENTATION TO DATE

Introduction

19. This part of the review describes the main features of the Expansion Programme as it has developed since 1998. It is laid out in four sections. Section 1 deals with the scale of expansion; Section 2 with features which apply to both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors (called "cross-sectoral" features); Sections 3 and 4 with features which apply only to the statutory and voluntary/private sectors respectively.

NOTE - Readers who are familiar with the existing context and structures of the Programme may pass over some or all of this Part and proceed to Part 3.

Section 1 - Expansion of Funded Places

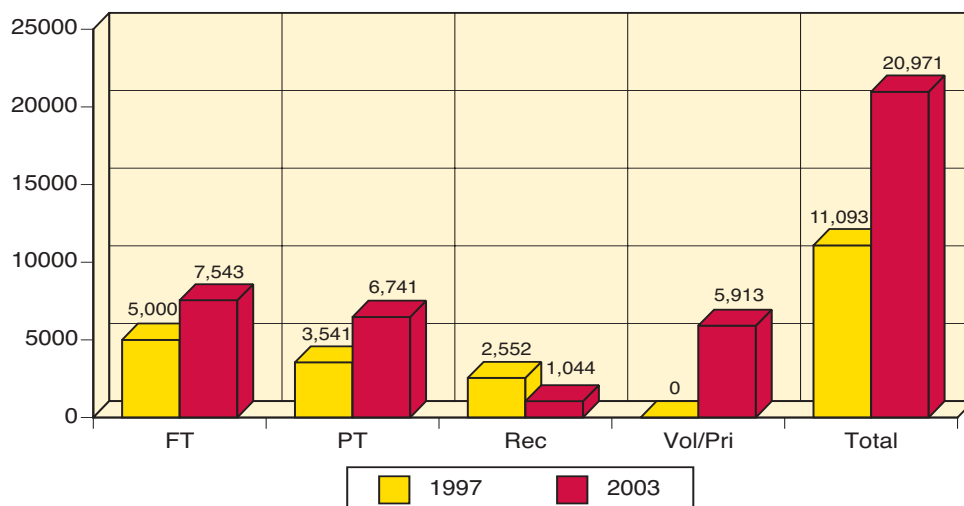
20. Before 1998, funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland was provided solely by the statutory sector in a combination of nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools. These nursery settings provided pre-school education primarily to children in their immediate pre-school year, although exceptionally children as young as 2 years were accepted where an insufficient number of older children had applied to fill all the places available. Prior to the introduction of open enrolment arrangements in the pre-school sector, the admission of 2 year olds was restricted to nursery schools only, and to a maximum of 5 such children within a class of 25 children. The admission of these young children was generally phased over the year, and in most instances the children were approaching the age of three when they began attending a nursery school. Reception places were available at some primary schools to children in their immediate pre-school year who had reached their 4th birthday. At that time organised childcare was the

preserve of voluntary/private playgroups and day nurseries, which did not receive any funding from the Department.

21. Legislation made in the context of the Expansion Programme provided for the establishment of integrated and Irish-medium statutory nursery settings for the first time. The most fundamental result of the Programme was, however, the establishment of a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private pre-school sectors through the Departmental funding of places in voluntary/private sector playgroups and nurseries. The new places created were split on a roughly equal basis between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors.
22. The October 1997 school census showed that 11,093 children received funded pre-school education in some 350 nursery classes. Of these, 8,541 children were in nursery schools and units and 2,552 in reception provision at primary schools. At this stage, there were no funded places in the voluntary/private sector. In the October 2003 school census there were 14,014 children in some 550 classes in nursery schools and units, an increase of 5,473 children over 1997. Reception classes took in 1,044 children, a decrease of 1,508 since 1997. In 2003 there were also 5,913 children in their immediate pre-school year in funded places in some 375 voluntary/private playgroups. See Table 1 below.
23. This represents a considerable increase, not only in access to places - provision levels have increased from 45% in 1997 to 95% in 2003 - but also in the choice of provider type available to parents.
24. Table 1 below shows the distribution of pre-school enrolments at the school censuses in 1997 and 2003.

Table 1

Pre-school Provision October 1997 and October 2003



25. At the beginning of the Expansion Programme it was recognised that the expansion of the statutory sector could adversely affect the voluntary/private sector through existing playgroups and day nurseries being displaced by the establishment of new nursery schools or units nearby. A commitment was therefore given by the Department and the PEAGs that every effort would be made to avoid such displacement. Where possible this commitment has been honoured and steps taken to ensure that displacement does not take place.

Section 2 - Cross-Sectoral Features

The Pre-school Curriculum

26. All pre-school settings, both statutory and voluntary/private, follow the "*Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education*" (CCEA, 1997). The document contains guidance on aspects of effective delivery of pre-school education in the early years setting such as good practice in organisation, planning for progression, and involving parents. There is also specific advice on the following curricular topics: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Physical Development; Creative/Aesthetic Development; Language Development; Early Mathematical Experiences; Early Experiences in Science and Technology; and Knowledge and Appreciation of the Environment.
27. The Guidance is consistent with the Northern Ireland Nursery Guidelines and is designed to provide for a smooth transition to the Key Stage 1 curriculum in primary school. Although the Guidance is not compulsory (unlike the curriculum at Key Stages 1-4), all nursery schools and units follow it, and it is a requirement of the Expansion Programme that voluntary/private sector settings should do so also.
28. As part of its review of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, CCEA is developing a new "foundation stage" curriculum for children in their pre-school year and in Year 1 and Year 2. This proposes a less formal and more play-based approach than the current Key Stage 1 curriculum, to link the early years of primary school with the pre-school year, thus easing the transition from pre-school to primary school. CCEA is currently revising the *Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education* to reflect the foundation stage proposals. The revised version will involve assessment of children by pre-school settings. The proposals include procedures for the gathering and sharing of information about children's

progress in learning across the foundation stage. The foundation stage proposals are subject to further evaluation of pilots and subsequently to approval by the Minister.

29. The nature of a curriculum which will explicitly link pre-school and primary school raised the question of whether the pre-school year should be made compulsory. The Department has decided, however, that this option will not be considered.

Inspection

30. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has traditionally inspected nursery schools and units as part of its function of inspecting all schools. When the voluntary/private sector became partners with the statutory sector in the Expansion Programme, the ETI's remit was extended to cover the settings which were receiving Programme places. All settings coming into the Programme, whether newly built statutory schools and units or voluntary/private settings, are inspected as soon as possible, generally within a year of their joining. Thereafter, inspections take place approximately every 5 years. Arrangements exist for handling cases where the provision is unsatisfactory. The inspection reports are available from the school or setting, or the Department, and are also available from the DE website.
31. The result of this extension of the ETI's remit is that voluntary/private settings in the Programme are now subject to two inspection regimes - the ETI inspect across Northern Ireland for educational purposes and the 11 Health and Social Services Trusts inspect within their areas for registration purposes.

Indicators of Quality

32. The inspection criteria used by the ETI when inspecting pre-school settings are set out in *Evaluating Pre-school Education* (ETI, 2000). Inspectors assess the quality of education offered under three headings:
 - the ethos of the setting, which should promote the all-round development of the children;

- the quality of the educational provision and the children's responses, which includes planning, the organisation of play and the staff's interaction with the children; and
 - management arrangements, which includes leadership, organisation and teamwork, staff development and links with parents.
33. The ETI has compiled an overview of the inspections of some 300 voluntary/private settings during the first 3 years of the Expansion Programme in its report *Begin with Quality* (ETI, 2002). The report found that the overall quality of provision had improved steadily over the 3 years, and over 70% of the settings were providing pre-school education of a satisfactory, good or very good quality. These findings correspond broadly with those in the statutory sector. Most progress was observed in the planning and assessment methods, session organisation and methods of reporting to parents. Least was observed in improving support for special educational needs, provision for physical development, links with primary schools and the quality of resources.
34. An evaluation of the whole pre-school sector, including statutory nursery and voluntary/private provision, is contained in the *Chief Inspector's Report 1999 – 2002* (ETI, 2003). The findings are similar to those in *Begin with Quality*, with standards overall being slightly higher in statutory nursery provision than in the voluntary/private pre-school settings.
35. *Children First* contained a commitment that the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), the ETI and the Health and Social Services Trusts' registration and inspection staff would work together to develop common standards to inform inspection in early education and care settings. These were published as *Standards for Pre-school Settings* (DHSS&PS, 2002). They apply to all pre-school settings regulated by the Trusts, including those subject to two inspection regimes as a result of participation in the Expansion Programme. The document covers issues such as health and safety, child protection, the physical environment and the care and learning environment. Statutory nurseries are not directly affected by the document, though as a summary of good practice they may find it useful as a reference. The Standards Development Task Group, established by DHSS&PS, is currently compiling revised standards for all forms of childcare, including sessional and day care.

Admissions Arrangements

36. The *Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998* introduced open enrolment procedures into statutory pre-school settings. Parents were able to apply to a number of providers (statutory and/or voluntary/private) for a place for their child. Providers then made an offer of a place based on the number of funded places they had available. As a result of these multiple application arrangements, some parents received a number of offers of a pre-school place, while others received none. It was not until after the parents who had received multiple offers decided which place they were accepting that places could be reallocated.
37. In an effort to overcome this problem, the *Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003* amended the 1998 Order to provide that from the 2004/05 school year parents would be required to express in order of preference the nursery school or class in which they wish pre-school education to be provided for their child. This is similar to the existing system for primary schools. Although the legislation applies only to the statutory sector, the new procedure could not operate without including the voluntary/private sector, and so the arrangements were extended administratively to incorporate it. The first run of the new system has been completed, and the Education and Library Boards and the Department are assessing the outcome.
38. In the event of places being oversubscribed, the *Pre-School Education in Schools (Admissions Criteria) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999* give priority to socially disadvantaged children who, as research shows, are most likely to benefit from the pre-school experience, and to the oldest children in the pre-school year (those with July and August birthdays), who would otherwise enter primary school with no pre-school experience.

Funding of Pre-school Phase by Department of Education

39. Funding to **statutory sector** providers is made through the Local Management of Schools (LMS) mechanism, by which schools receive funding for their running costs. Schools' LMS budgets are based on the number of children registered on the annual schools' census date in October. Reception children in primary schools are funded on the same basis. Nursery schools receive funding in their own right as

free-standing schools. Budgets attributable to nursery (and reception) children are not allocated separately from the budgets of the parent primary schools; in these schools, the management group makes decisions on the allocation of funding to individual classes.

40. **Voluntary/private sector** providers who participate in the Expansion Programme receive an allocation of funded places from their area PEAG. Each place attracts inflation-proofed per capita funding - in the 2003/04 school year the rate is £1,265 per child, and this will increase to £1,300 in the 2004/05 school year. Payments are made by the area Education and Library Board in 10 monthly instalments from September to June inclusive.

Allocation of Places

41. Places are allocated to **voluntary/private sector** providers by the area PEAG on the basis of identified need within an area or electoral ward cluster, and reflect both the number of children requiring places and the level of existing provision in the statutory sector in the area. The number of places allocated to a particular setting may not necessarily align with the number of applications for places that the setting has received from parents; but it will reflect factors such as coverage across the whole Board area and the number of places funded by the Department of Education.
42. PEAGs will only allocate places to voluntary/private settings that are registered with their Area Health and Social Services Trust and meet the required Programme standards on the date specified by the PEAG. Places will not be allocated to settings that do not achieve the standards set by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), or do not meet the quality requirements of the Expansion Programme (see Section 4 of this Part).
43. The standard class size in **the statutory sector** is 26 children. The capacity of nursery schools and units is determined by pattern of attendance (full- or part-time) and space available. At maximum capacity, a "single unit" with one classroom can offer one full-time or 2 part-time sessions (26 or 52 children). A double unit - with 2 classrooms - can offer 2 full-time or 4 part-time sessions (52 or 104 children), or 1 full-time and 2 part-time (78 children). A few nursery

schools contain 3 classrooms and can offer part-time places to a maximum of 156 children.

44. Apart from recommending in their Development Plans the initial numbers and pattern of enrolment for which Expansion Programme schools and units were to be built, and advising the Department on requests for changes to existing patterns of enrolment, PEAGs have no role in setting numbers in statutory settings - that is the function of the Department, which determines the part-time and full-time enrolments in nurseries under the *Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998*.

Section 3 - Features Affecting the Statutory Sector

Provision by Management Type

45. Although there is no statutory obligation on the Department (or the other statutory education agencies) to provide pre-school education, the controlled and Catholic maintained statutory sectors have a long-established practice of establishing nursery schools and units. Since 1998 these have been joined by statutory units at integrated and Irish-medium primary schools. The voluntary/private sector has no formal equivalent range of management types, though in practice many individual groups are cross-community, some are Irish-medium and others are affiliated to Catholic churches and schools. Most groups within the Programme are affiliated to NIPPA – the Early Years Organisation, which provides a regional structure of information and training for parents and providers.
46. Although the Expansion Programme has funded new statutory nurseries and units of all management types, the non-compulsory nature of pre-school education means that the Department has no duty to meet parental wishes in terms of school management type. Nor has it a duty to provide pre-school education in statutory rather than voluntary/private settings. It does, however, have statutory duties to encourage and facilitate integrated and Irish-medium education under the *Education Reform (NI) Order 1989* and the *Education (NI) Order 1998* respectively, and these duties extend to pre-school education in nursery schools and units. It also has a duty under the *European Convention on Human Rights* to "... respect the right of parents to ensure that [education and teaching] is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions". That duty is cited in UK domestic law in the *Human Rights*

Act 1998, but the Act contains the reservation that the principle is accepted by the UK "... only so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training, and the avoidance of unreasonable expenditure".

47. In this context, and bearing in mind that all nursery schools and units are required by law to be open to all children, as are voluntary/private sector settings, the Programme has been designed by the Department and PEAGs to give parents the widest possible choice of settings. The extent of the choice available will vary depending largely on the population for an area. Large cities and towns will offer all or most of the available types of statutory provision as well as voluntary/private settings; at the other extreme, isolated rural areas may have only one setting. In most areas there is at least a choice between a statutory and a voluntary/private setting.
48. There are currently nursery units at 13 of the 32 integrated primary schools. Statutory nursery units have been established at 3 of the 28 schools offering Irish-medium primary provision, and most of the Irish-medium playgroups are in receipt of funded places, thus recognising that Irish speakers have needs that cannot be met in any other type of setting. The Department has also recognised the needs of two other groups - Irish travellers and children of armed services families. As a result of their nomadic lifestyle, traveller parents may have difficulty completing application forms for pre-school places and traveller children may not attend on a regular basis. In order to cater for as many children as possible, the Programme requirement that groups must have a minimum of 8 children is waived. The same waiver applies to the playgroups catering for service children whose families move with their units.
49. The continuing development of integrated education and Irish-medium pre-school settings has implications for the future structure of the pre-school phase in that the Expansion Programme has already provided places for 95% of the pre-school year cohort. The situation is not unique to the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, however, and one of the consultation questions asks what might be done about expanding pre-school capacity.

Section 4 - Features Affecting the Voluntary/ Private Sector

50. Apart from the requirement to implement the CCEA Curricular Guidance (see paras 26-29 above), the Expansion Programme has placed a number of requirements on voluntary/private pre-school settings to ensure that children have a good quality pre-school experience. These include the following.

Group Size

51. The minimum group size is 8 children in their immediate pre-school year. This ensures both that children can learn and play as part of a group of reasonable size, and that the benefits of the curriculum, which is designed to promote social and emotional development, are fully realised. Groups which cannot meet this requirement at the beginning of the school year have their funded places withdrawn (though service families and Irish travellers have the benefit of special arrangements - see para 48 above). PEAGs tend to be flexible in-year, however, so that if a group loses one or two children, perhaps to a reception class, it will be retained in the Programme in order to avoid creating under-provision in the area in which it is situated.

Staff:Child Ratios

52. Voluntary/Private settings are required by childcare legislation to maintain a minimum staff:child ratio of 1:8. The statutory sector has a minimum ratio of 1:13, although in practice it is often higher.

Staff Qualifications

53. *Investing in Early Learning* set minimum qualification levels for the staff in a voluntary/private pre-school setting in the Expansion Programme. EPPNI research has found that staff qualifications in pre-school are associated with better quality care and better outcomes for children. These findings are supported by Effective Pre-school Provision in England (EPPE) work. At least half the staff in a setting must hold a relevant qualification in education or childcare at the following levels:
- NVQ Level 3 or equivalent - at least 1 member of staff per setting;
 - NVQ Level 2 or equivalent - all other qualified staff.

As with staffing ratios, failure to meet the staff qualification requirements can lead to a group's expulsion from the Programme.

Early Years Specialists (EYSs)

54. The requirement for, and role of, the EYS is unique to Northern Ireland. In line with the Department's emphasis on improving educational outcomes for all pupils throughout all phases of education, pre-school settings are expected to continue to improve the quality of their provision. Qualified teachers provide appropriate input in statutory schools and units. Support from a qualified teacher or EYS is regarded as the most effective way to ensure this emphasis on continuous improvement in voluntary/private sector playgroups. Such a specialist will be able to support settings in: planning curricular activities; assessing children's progress; assisting in the development of a self-improvement programme and action planning; and preparing children for the transition to compulsory education.

Qualifications for EYSs

55. Qualification and experience requirements are specified for EYSs in *The Role of the Qualified Teacher or Early Years Specialist* (DE, 2003). The following are eligible to provide support and guidance:
- a qualified teacher who has taught for 2 of the last 5 years either a nursery, reception, Year 1 or Year 2 class in a grant-aided school;
 - a qualified teacher who has taught pre-school age children in the voluntary/private sector for 2 of the last 5 years; or
 - a qualified early years specialist (degree level or equivalent) who is experienced and currently engaged in providing recognised training and curriculum support for staff who work with pre-school age children.
56. The following qualifications have been recognised by the Department of Education as suitable for EYSs who are not qualified teachers:
- NVQ level 4 in Early Years Care and Education (with specified units);
 - BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies (Stranmillis College);

- Diploma in Early Childhood Studies (Stranmillis College);
- HND in Early Childhood Studies; and
- BA Ed (Hons) [Early Years Specialist] (University College, Worcester).

- 57 In addition to holding an approved qualification, EYSs should have at least 2 years prior experience in a leadership role in a pre-school setting, and also the necessary organisational skills. They should spend at least 5 hours over each month, involving at least 2 visits to a setting, in direct contact with the children during play sessions. This involvement may include teaching, observing or working alongside the staff. The support provided must meet the needs of the staff and the children.
58. Settings are expected to pay for EYS support from their PEAG funding. Some settings, particularly smaller ones, may find it difficult to do this. NIPPA employs 39 Early Years Specialists based in all areas of Northern Ireland to provide support and resources on an ongoing basis to the groups in the voluntary/private sector who receive funded places under the Pre-School Expansion Programme. The support and resources are provided for a minimum of five hours per month, with both direct site-based visits to the groups and area-based Cluster Support Groups. The support and resources provided by NIPPA Early Years Specialists are funded partly by 10 of the 11 Health and Social Services Trusts, partly by NIPPA, and partly by a contribution made by the groups from their PEAG funding. This contribution is calculated on a sliding scale based on the number of funded places, from £478 per annum for groups with 10 or fewer places to £959 per annum for those with 21 or more places. NIPPA provides this service to 90% of the voluntary/private sector groups currently in the Expansion Programme.
59. The question of the adequacy of support generally for voluntary/private settings (and statutory units) is considered in Part 4 of this review – Structural and Organisational Issues.

PART 3

INTEGRATION OF EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Introduction

60. Since the introduction of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme in 1998, there has been an increased recognition, both within the educational sector and among parents, of the importance of pre-school education to the development of a child. The Programme has, by providing a year's funded education for every child in their immediate pre-school year whose parents wish it, laid the foundation for future improvement in both educational attainment and commitment. The question now is: what do we build on this foundation?
61. By providing almost 21,000 places in the current school year, the Expansion Programme has created a new educational phase incorporating the statutory and voluntary/private sector. This phase has a curriculum taught across both sectors, and common inspection standards. Structurally, the two sectors retain their own staff qualifications and staff:child ratios, registration procedures and funding arrangements, and this is unlikely to change in the short term. Nonetheless, other countries have developed new approaches to pre-school services and the description of developments in England and Scotland which follows shows some of the options which might be considered for Northern Ireland.

England

62. Traditionally, early years services have been delivered separately by a range of professionals working in distinct education, care and health services. In England (and some other countries such as Sweden), it was felt that the distinction between care and education for young children was not clear-cut and the needs of families would be best met by providing services that were more integrated in their approach to early childhood education and care.

63. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England has become the lead department in developing arrangements for children and families that will provide services which are built around children's needs rather than professional structures. The DfES paper *Building on Success* notes that 'all the evidence shows that joined-up services deliver both better outcomes for children and better value for the public purse'.
64. The DfES paper *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* has strongly endorsed the workforce reform measures proposed in *Every Child Matters* to develop a more coherent, stable and flexible children's workforce. To that end, in England a Children's Workforce Unit has been established to develop a pay and workforce strategy.

Sure Start

65. All early years provision within the English system has been badged as *Sure Start*. Sure Start programmes were introduced to enable families in disadvantaged areas to have access to services, opportunities and practical help for their children from birth onwards through a range of education, parent support and health services, including enhanced childcare, play and early learning opportunities. Sure Start programmes are delivered by local partnerships and staff working together across the care, health and education sectors, and have a strong parental and community involvement.
66. Sure Start services include:
 - Children's Centres;
 - Children's Information Service;
 - Early Excellence Centres;
 - Extended Schools;
 - Health and family support;
 - Neighbourhood Nurseries;
 - Out of School services;

- Childminding and Home Childcarers;
- Sure Start local programmes (including Sure Start Northern Ireland, see note below); and
- Maintained Nursery Schools (in an English context - ie, grant-aided schools).

Some of these services that are most relevant to pre-school education are described further below.

Note: *Sure Start Northern Ireland* is a DHSS&PS programme to enhance early years provision for children under 4, with the aim of working with parents and children in areas of social disadvantage to promote their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. It involves a range of services including early education and play, childcare, healthcare and family support. At present, some 19,000 children under the age of four and their families have access to the services provided. Sure Start NI has little contact with the education sector, though a project being developed in BELB is looking at ways of how childcare and education agencies can work together.

67. The **Early Excellence Centres** programme develops models of good practice in integrating services for young children and families. They offer high quality practice in one-stop-shop integrated education and day care for young children, and services and opportunities for parents, carers, families and the wider community, both directly and in co-operation with other providers.
68. **Neighbourhood Nurseries** aim to support families in the most disadvantaged areas of England and tackle the lack of childcare that often prevents people from working. The initiative seeks to be responsive to local needs and preferences and aims to provide high quality childcare places at the same time as being an integral part of neighbourhood regeneration programmes. Neighbourhood Nurseries work closely with other local provision to offer a wider range of innovative services, including family learning. Many Neighbourhood Nurseries will also offer a wide range of family support and health services for children and families as children's centres.

69. The expectation is that the newest initiative, **Children's Centres**, will be developed from Sure Start local programmes, new and planned Neighbourhood Nurseries, and Early Excellence Centres. However the Sure Start Unit in DfES also wishes to encourage development from other existing local provision in the maintained school sector (in the English context – grant-aided in Northern Ireland terms), and the voluntary/private sector.
70. This integrated approach offered by children's centres aims to:
- provide holistic support for children's development;
 - provide support to families with young children; and
 - facilitate the return to work of those parents who are currently unemployed.
71. Children's Centres will provide the following services to children under 5 and their families in disadvantaged communities:
- early education integrated with full day care, including early identification of and provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities;
 - parental outreach;
 - family support, including support for parents with special needs;
 - health services;
 - a base for childminders, and a service hub within the community for parents and providers of childcare services;
 - effective links with Jobcentre Plus, local training providers and further and higher education institutions;
 - effective links with Children's Information Services;
 - Neighbourhood Nurseries;
 - Out-of-School Clubs and Extended Schools; and
 - management and workforce training.

Children's Centres are targeted to reach at least 650,000 pre-school children in the 20% most disadvantaged wards in England by March 2006.

72. **Wrap Around Care** is an initiative under which integrated care is provided before and/or after an early years education place.

Examples include:

- children taken by the provider of a breakfast club to an early education place in a nursery school, or collected from a nursery school by the after school provider and taken to an after school club;
- children receiving early education within an approved childminder network are cared for by the childminder before and/or after that early education; and
- children attending a morning playgroup for their early education stay on in the afternoon to be cared for by a day care provider.

An early education place is defined as a free place for parents that want one, offering not less than five 2½ hour sessions per week for 33 weeks in the year. At the moment there are 5 pilot projects across England to assess the impact of Wrap Around Care.

73. **Extended Schools** have two main approaches in England:

- extending the services schools offer to their pupils; and
- increasing the role of the community in the school, and the school in the community.

The most notable extended services relevant to this Northern Ireland review provided within the extended schools context are: Early Years Provision (crèche facilities, toddlers groups, and wraparound services), and Family/Parent Provision (for example parenting classes).

Additionally, open/specialist facilities, community provision, additional schooling provision, and other agency provision (health, youth, social services) can be accessed through the extended schools initiative.

74. Initial findings have shown that there has been a positive impact on pupil attainment, attendance and behaviour, whilst the school's role and value

to the community is enhanced. The multi-agency input was effective in meeting family and pupil needs.

Scotland

75. In Scotland, a similar initiative, **New Community Schools**, has been launched in which there is integrated provision of school education, informal as well as formal education, social work and health education and promotion services. Again there was found to be an increased capacity to meet pupils' needs and improve their attitudes.
76. Scotland has recently made changes to the laws that apply to the qualifications for teachers of nursery classes. As a result, it is no longer necessary for a teacher to be in charge of each class.

Northern Ireland

77. Many of the developments described above have resulted in greater integration of childcare and education services. Northern Ireland has made some progress towards collaborative working between the education and childcare services in the context of the *Children First* strategy, but we have not mirrored developments in the rest of the UK. This review is about educational services, as the Department of Education does not have any responsibility for childcare. Nevertheless, the changes in GB have affected both education and childcare, and this review would fail in its purpose if it did not allow respondents the opportunity to put forward their views on how more integrated services - whether in the form of greater collaboration between existing services, or through the creation of new forms of early years provision - might be developed.
78. As noted above (para 2), the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY) is currently reviewing *Children First* and in the course of that review initiatives such as those introduced in other parts of the United Kingdom will be considered. The *Children First* review does not yet have a date for public consultation. This pre-school review is an opportunity to put forward views on early years provision which can subsequently be fed into the *Children First* review. Proposals for integrated services will, however, have to be considered in the context of the latter's findings and implementation will have to await its outcome.

PART 4

STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

Introduction

79. As the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme has progressed, a number of structural and organisational issues have arisen. Some originate from a rapid decline in the pre-school population. This has, for example, caused a considerable increase in the enrolment of 2 year olds in statutory settings and threatens the viability of some nursery classes. Schools are responding by asking to move from part-time to full-time provision, though the EPPNI research indicates that number of hours per day is less important than duration in months of pre-school experience. The policy of reducing reception provision is affecting more and more schools, and the issues arising from that are also considered. Where the voluntary/private sector is concerned, viability is becoming more of an issue as numbers decline. This Part also deals with an issue which has become more important as pre-school provision has expanded - how children with Special Educational Needs are to be catered for in the pre-school phase. There are also short information items on the revision of the curriculum and on inspection arrangements.
80. The questions which arise from all these issues are contained in the separate questions booklet.

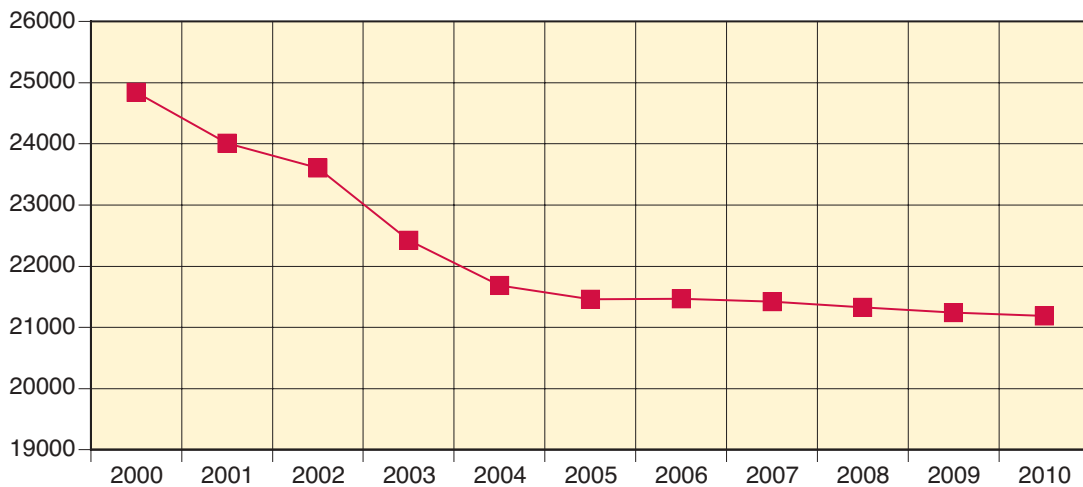
Demographic Decline

81. The decline in the population of pre-school children has been significant in recent years. Until 2001/02 the size of the pre-school cohort was usually between 24,000 and 25,000 children. In 2002/03 it fell to under 23,500, and is expected to continue declining until at least 2010, when it will have reduced to around 21,000. The current birth rate, at 1.8 children per female, is down from 2.5 per female 20 years ago and is the lowest ever seen in Northern Ireland. A stable population requires a 2.1 per female birth rate. (*Source: Department of Employment and Learning, December 2003*). Pre-school provision in Belfast is already at

or above 100% due to the reducing population and its changed distribution across the city. If the number of places is kept at its current level, provision across Northern Ireland will approach that level as the population falls. This is not sustainable in the context of the 90% level of parental demand.

Table 2

Number of Children in Pre-school Year, 2002-2010



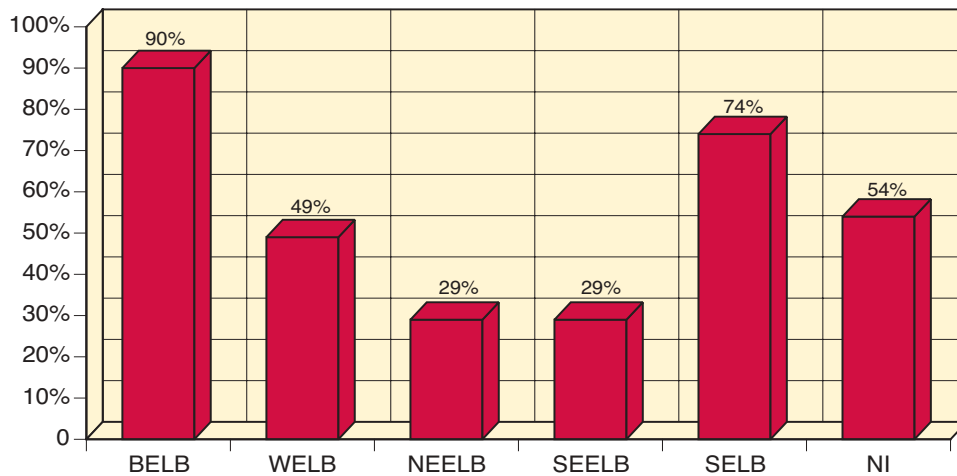
82. Many nursery schools and units - mostly though not exclusively in Belfast and the larger towns in north Down and south Antrim - have found it difficult to fill their places with children in their immediate pre-school year. In many cases these schools are in areas where the population has fallen. PEAGs have reported that many playgroups have also had difficulty filling their allocated places. Even with the lower group sizes in voluntary/private settings (minimum of 8 children, compared to 26 in statutory settings), these playgroups find it difficult to meet their minimum group size number. The effect of the decline in numbers will be exacerbated by any raising of the admission age from 2 years (see paras 92-96 below).
83. The decline in the size of the pre-school cohort presents both a threat and an opportunity. The threat is that of reduced parental choice, as declining numbers may make some schools and playgroups unviable and they may have to close or be rationalised. The pre-school phase is a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private providers and it follows from that that all sectors should bear their share of the effects of the declining numbers. No sector should, therefore, expect either that

it will be shielded from, or, conversely, that it will be forced to bear the brunt of, the reductions in numbers of places which will be necessary in the coming years.

84. The opportunity presented by the downturn is that there is likely to be a surplus of statutory accommodation. The accommodation will be in areas where there are, by definition, fewer children; but there is scope to envision different uses for it (subject to finance and any necessary amendments to legislation) and this may be particularly useful in inner city areas of deprivation.

Pattern of Enrolment (Part-Time and Full-Time Provision) in Nursery Schools and Classes

85. Nursery schools and units offer funded full-time or part-time provision, or a mixture of both. Voluntary/private sector playgroups are funded under the Expansion Programme to offer only part-time provision, but many offer services outside this (referred to as “wraparound” care) which are paid for by parents. Part-time provision in the statutory sector is defined by legislation as being between 2½ and 4½ hours' duration per day: full-time provision is of at least 4½ hours' duration. In all settings 2½ hours is the norm for part-time provision, although many voluntary/private providers offer 3 hours.
86. The varied pattern of part-time and full-time provision in the statutory sector arises from the sector's history. The pre-Programme controlled and maintained schools tended to contain mixed enrolments, often 26 full-time and 52 part-time. The EU, Belfast Regeneration Office and Londonderry Regeneration Initiative schemes, being concentrated on socially disadvantaged areas, tended to be full-time. The Expansion Programme schemes were funded for part-time places only, but PEAGs were allowed to fund full-time places from resources released by the conversion of reception provision to nursery provision (though only Southern and Western Board PEAGs did so). At the 2003 School Census, there were some 14,000 pupils enrolled in nursery schools and units. In Northern Ireland overall, 54% of them were in full-time places, but the percentage of full-time enrolments varied from Board to Board as Table 3 shows.

Table 3**Full-time places as a percentage of statutory places in each Board and within Northern Ireland (2003 Census)**

87. Pupils in nursery schools and units are funded under the five Education and Library Boards' Local Management of Schools (LMS) Schemes of Management. Nursery classes in grant maintained integrated primary schools are funded directly by the Department. The majority of funding (at least 75%) is distributed to schools using Age-Weighted Pupil Units (AWPUs). This is a method for assigning a value to each pupil. The remainder - which covers items such as redundancy/retirement and school meals - is allocated by the Boards as necessary. For the 2004/05 school year, AWPUs for full-time pupils across the 5 Boards and the GMI sector vary as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Type of Setting	AWPU
Nursery Schools – Full-time	£2,077 - £2,360
Nursery Units – Full-time	£1,894 - £2,180
Nursery Schools – Part-time	£1,279 - £1,499
Nursery Units – Part-time	£1,199 - £1,393
<i>Voluntary/Private Places (Part-time only)</i>	<i>£1,300 (flat rate allocation - not AWPU)</i>

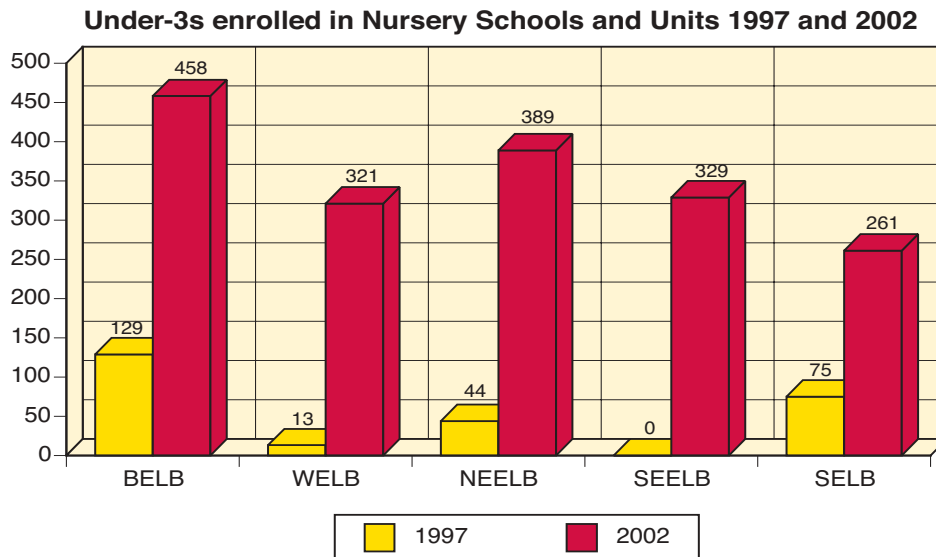
88. The EPPNI research indicates clearly that the benefits of pre-school education do not depend on length of session - ie, in educational terms, full-time provision is not better than part-time provision. The research does indicate, however, that the benefits increase in line with the length of time in pre-school education. This suggests that there would be a greater benefit conferred by, for example, extending pre-school education to all 3 year olds than by moving to full-time provision for the immediate pre-school year group.
89. The Department accepts that the longer hours and free meal offered by full-time provision may be beneficial for disadvantaged children for social reasons. At present, most statutory places in socially disadvantaged areas are already full-time. The costs of moving to full-time provision in the statutory sector would be in excess of £10 million annually in recurrent costs, and a further £7.5 million at least would be required to move to full-time provision in the voluntary/private sector. Considerable capital costs would also be involved. Such a move could not be justified in educational terms.
90. A number of schools have made requests to move from part-time to full-time provision. Each request has been treated on its merits, but the Department has not approved any change which would lead to a school's funding being increased (eg, where a school asks to move from 26 part-time to 26 full-time places).
91. There is little or no consistency in the current pattern of part-time and full-time provision in the statutory sector, and the EPPNI research suggests that full-time provision is of no greater value in educational terms than part-time. The questions therefore ask for views on the future of full-time provision, so that a rational and clearly understood policy on it can be established.

Admissions Age and Funded Places Age in Pre-school Settings

92. The issue of the declining size of the pre-school cohort is inextricably linked with the increasing numbers of very young children who are being admitted to nursery schools and units. Statutory nurseries are the only type of setting open to children of the age of 2 - in voluntary/private settings, a child must normally be 3 years old before he/she can enter a playgroup, though children who have attained 2 years 9 months may be

admitted in exceptional circumstances. In the 2003 School Census there were some 1,900 children under 3 (14% of all children in the statutory pre-school sector) being educated by the Programme at a cost of over £2 million per annum.

Table 5



93. With the numbers of 2 year olds in pre-school education rising, the impact of their numbers on the funded pre-school system is a major issue. It is not new, however, - it was first raised in the report of a Focus Group convened by the Department on *Open Enrolment Arrangements in the Nursery Sector* (DE, 1999). The Group, which consisted of representatives of Boards, CCMS, Northern Ireland Teachers Council and nursery schools, recommended that the admissions age be raised. The Department accepted that recommendation, and intended to bring forward amending legislation in the Assembly, but the suspension of the Assembly and the undesirability of dealing with 2 year olds in isolation from the rest of pre-school policy has led to its being taken forward as part of this review.
94. The arguments against retaining 2 year olds in statutory nurseries are as follows:
- Many 2 year olds are not at a stage of development where they can benefit from the experiences provided by nursery schools and classes; and the teacher's role may become that of childminder.

- There may be health and safety risks in placing such young children in groups of 26 with a staff/child ratio of 1:13.
 - The presence of 2 year olds in a nursery class can have an adverse effect on the quality of the educational experiences provided for the older children (3 and 4 year olds).
95. If all 2 year olds were removed from nurseries without any other change, the foreseeable impacts would be:
- the increased competition between the voluntary/private and statutory sectors for 3 and 4 year old children;
 - the possible closure of nursery schools/units which depend on 2 year old children for their existence (especially in Belfast, where 16% of nursery places are filled by 2 year olds); and
 - the potential displacement of voluntary/private playgroups.
96. If the admission age were raised, however, consideration could be given to moving to a standard age at which places would be funded across all sectors. The questions ask for views on the following suggestions for a new admissions age:
- To admit only children in their immediate pre-school year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 2 months). This would equalise the age at which free school places are available at that currently in operation in the voluntary/private sector.
 - To set the age at 3 years. In this case, the Department would consider funding places from this age in the voluntary/private sector also.

Admissions Priorities for Socially Disadvantaged and Older Children

97. The *Pre-School Education in Schools (Admissions Criteria) Regulations (NI) 1999* placed a duty on providers to give priority when allocating places to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who research has shown are most likely to derive benefit from pre-school education, and to the oldest children in their immediate pre-school year (those with July and August birthdays), who might otherwise enter

primary school without pre-school experience. During the phased increase in the number of pre-school places available under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, the PEAGs targeted provision at the start of the Programme on areas of social disadvantage. The EU and BRO/LRI schemes also targeted disadvantage, and such areas are now well provided with pre-school places.

98. While continuing to give priority to these two groups of children when provision is at a level of 95% has been questioned, we wish to ensure that socially disadvantaged and older children continue to receive the benefits of pre-school education. We are, however, willing to consider suggestions for different means of achieving this, such as, for example, applying proximity restrictions to help ensure that children are not prevented from taking up places at their local schools or playgroups by other children with either of the two statutory priorities travelling from outside the area. The questions ask for views.

Inclusive Environment

99. The Department's policy on provision by management type is summarised above in paras 45-49, and it will continue to operate this policy in order to ensure effective coverage of provision and value for money. Where the need for additional provision is clearly identified, the Department will seek the advice of the area PEAG with a view to providing the most appropriate form of delivery and management type.
100. We recognise that the management type of a statutory setting or the ethos of a playgroup will not be acceptable to some of the parents in its vicinity. It is incumbent on every setting, therefore, especially where it is the sole provider in an area, to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. The Western Board has established a number of community nursery units whose governmental arrangements – involving the establishment of a board of governors for the unit drawing people from the parent school and other schools in the area - might serve as a model for statutory providers which are not themselves integrated schools.
101. In most areas of Northern Ireland, however, parents have a choice of setting, even if only between a voluntary/private and a statutory setting. The Department remains committed to ensuring that, where practicable and affordable, a choice of setting remains available to parents. Rural

isolation may affect choice and is covered in the Rural Proofing section of Part 5 of this review.

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

102. *Investing in Early Learning* intended that all providers would be able, with support where necessary, to identify and meet the special educational needs of children and take account of the *Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs*. It also stated that, in drawing up their Development Plans, PEAGs should give particular consideration to how providers in the voluntary/private sectors could be helped to take account of the Code of Practice and what arrangements could be made to ensure appropriate support is given to children with special educational needs.
103. It must be acknowledged that SEN is an area where issues remain to be addressed. One of the Department's policy priorities in relation to provision for children with Special Educational Needs is ensuring that their needs are identified and supported at the earliest possible stage. One of the main issues to be addressed in taking forward this priority is the need to ensure as far as possible that there is consistency of access to the appropriate services and support across all pre-school sectors.
104. Voluntary/private sector settings do not fall within the Education and Library Boards' duties of support under current legislation. Boards have a discretionary power to support children in such settings, where appropriate in conjunction with the Health and Social Services Trusts, and this power has been exercised in relation to a few individual cases. While there are many examples of good practice in terms of cross-sectoral working, the current system can also place barriers in the way of ensuring consistency of access to diagnosis or support for children with SEN across all pre-school sectors.
105. In the statutory sector, too, there is a range of pressures on provision, and it is also important that a focus is placed on ensuring consistency in the approaches taken to placing and supporting children with SEN. Through the normal admissions processes a few nurseries have very high levels of children with a range of special educational needs and in areas of social disadvantage in particular a high proportion of pre-school children with SEN require specialist Board services.

106. Policy development needs to address the key issues of improvements in identification, early intervention and provision, empowerment of families to support their child and clear and effective routes to assessment, diagnosis and intervention. This implies in particular:
- improved consistency in access to specialist diagnosis and support for all children in DE funded pre-school places;
 - the provision of guidance and training for staff, especially in voluntary/private settings; and
 - improving joined-up services from 0-4 years.
107. The Department is working with the Education and Library Boards' Regional Strategy Group for Special Educational Needs (RSG) to address these issues and a working group with representation from DE, the Boards, the Education and Training Inspectorate, statutory health agencies and the voluntary/private sector is examining how best to:
- identify and consider current issues for the pre-school sector relating to SEN, in particular the levels of support given to these children and the linkages between statutory and voluntary/private providers and agencies; and
 - draw up recommendations which address them and help to achieve the objectives of *Investing in Early Learning*.
108. An analysis by the working group of current provision and recommendations to address existing weaknesses is being drawn up and once finalised this will be put to the RSG for consideration. It is likely that the recommendations will be wide-ranging, covering long-term legislative change and improved cross-agency working, amongst others.
109. Additional funds have also been earmarked for the education and library boards in 2004/05 for specific measures to improve SEN provision in the pre-school sector, which include the employment of additional Educational Psychologists and pre-school advisers and the provision of SEN-specific training to pre-school staff. This will supplement the £500,000 made available for pre-school training in autism in 2003/04.
110. The SEN Code of Practice is due shortly to be revised to take account of the draft Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Order.

Included in this will be guidance for the pre-school sector in line with that currently contained within the Revised Code of Practice for England and Wales.

111. In summary, actions to improve provision for children with SEN should be designed to ensure that the needs of young children are supported from as early a stage as possible and are in keeping with the over-arching objective of creating an inclusion-friendly early years environment for children with a diversity of needs within a continuum of provision.

Reduction of Reception Provision in Primary Schools

112. Over 200 primary schools admit children who have reached their 4th birthday but are below compulsory school age. Such children go into reception classes, which approach a nursery class in size and are taught separately from the rest of the children, or reception groups, which are taught along with P1 (and sometimes also P2) children. Most of these groups are small, half comprising 3 pupils or fewer at census date. *Investing in Early Learning* stated that reception provision would be progressively replaced by statutory or voluntary/private provision which meets the standards of the Programme. While some reception provision, particularly in stand-alone classes, is of a good standard, the quality of provision across the sector is uneven. There are major difficulties for teachers of composite classes containing reception age children in providing appropriate educational experiences for the pre-school children and, at the same time, meeting the needs of children of compulsory school age. For many children, reception provision represents less than a full year's pre-school education.
113. The Programme has already had a dramatic effect in that reception numbers have dropped from 2,575 in the 1997 census to 1,050 in 2003 - a 60% decline. It should be noted, however, that reception numbers are those at the date of the school census in October - they rise over the course of the year as children reach their 4th birthdays and enter reception classes and groups, though no further official count of them is made.
114. The only means available to the Department to remove reception places which are identified by PEAGs as having been replaced by other provision has been "zero-rating". This means not counting any reception

pupils on a school's roll at census date when calculating the school's LMS entitlement (see para. 39) for the following year.

115. Up to the 2003/04 school year, the Department has approved PEAG recommendations to zero-rate schools with reception groups which have received new nursery units under the Programme - some 50 schools. For 2004/05 and future years, a set of objective criteria which enables all PEAGs to assess, on a common and transparent basis, which reception groups have been replaced by new funded provision, has been agreed with the key stakeholders, the Boards and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.
116. One of the persistent concerns of the voluntary/private sector has been that children leave playgroups for reception classes or groups during the year. For larger playgroups, the effect may be financial only. For smaller groups, however, the transfer of one or two children might mean not just a financial loss but also the difference between achieving the group size minimum of 8 pupils and not achieving it.
117. The Department's power to zero-rate may be of little effect when a small number of children are involved and the school can afford to maintain the group without undue financial hardship. In such circumstances, the Department is unable to prevent the school from running reception provision, even though the school is using LMS funds allocated for children other than the reception group. The questions ask whether the Department should take legislative powers to prevent a school or schools from operating reception groups or classes. The ETI have carried out an evaluation of reception provision and the findings will be made available later this year.

Staff:Child Ratios

118. Voluntary/private settings are required by childcare legislation to maintain a minimum staff:child ratio of 1:8. The statutory sector has a ratio of 1:13, and this difference in the level of supervision has given rise to concerns about the lack of consistency between the sectors. Most practitioners would consider that a greater rather than lesser level of supervision is to be preferred, particularly when very young children are involved, as is increasingly the case in the statutory sector. There would be a considerable cost implication in, for example, bringing the statutory staff:child ratio into line with that of the voluntary/private sector (there

are some 550 nursery classes in statutory units: an extra classroom assistant in each could cost in the region of £4.5 million p.a.). The questions ask for views on these ratios.

Availability of Support and Training in the Statutory and Voluntary/Private Sectors

119. The Boards' Curriculum and Advisory Support Services (CASS) have a duty to provide support and training to primary and secondary phase teachers. That duty does not, however, extend to the pre-school phase, either in the statutory sector (pre-school being a non-compulsory phase) or in the voluntary/private sector, to which CASSs have no obligations at all. Nonetheless, individual CASS services do provide some support to both statutory and voluntary/private settings on a voluntary basis, although the level of that support is not consistent across Boards. In addition, the ETI has prepared DVDs to enable all types of pre-school setting to evaluate their own provision. NIPPA employs over 39 Early Years Specialists across Northern Ireland and provides that service to almost 90% of the voluntary/private sector groups in the Programme.
120. The needs of the pre-school phase relate chiefly to support and training, both for day-to-day issues and for specialist matters such as Special Educational Needs. The introduction of the Foundation Stage of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum will, if approved, lead to more training needs for both statutory and voluntary/private sector staff. The Department acknowledges that many voluntary/private settings, particularly smaller ones, find it difficult to meet their requirements under the Programme, such as the need to employ Early Years Specialists. It also recognises that resource restraints mean that even statutory settings may not receive as much CASS assistance as they need and Boards might wish to provide. In these circumstances, the Department will consider means by which additional assistance can be provided, and the questions ask for views on this.

The Irish-Medium Sector

121. Irish-medium education is unique in the Northern Ireland context as the only educational sector that is not fully interchangeable with other sectors. Whereas children being educated in English can transfer between sectors at any time during their educational experience, and indeed from an Irish-medium school to an English speaking school, the

reverse is not the case without the necessary level of Irish. For the majority of children attending Irish-medium pre-school settings, Irish is neither their first language nor that of their parents. The provision of appropriate pre-school facilities is therefore of considerable importance to the development and long-term sustainability of the Irish-medium sector.

122. Since funded places at Irish-medium pre-school settings are a relatively recent development, the numbers of children involved and their geographical distribution makes it difficult for the sector to achieve, except in Belfast and Londonderry, the 26 children necessary to establish statutory nursery provision. Irish-medium pre-school settings have their origins in the voluntary/private sector where the staff:child ratio is 1:8. The sector's view is that the staff:child ratio in the statutory sector of 1:13 is too low in the context of immersion education, which it considers necessary in Irish-medium settings. The number of children required for a statutory nursery is, however, based on the costs of supporting not just the running costs of the unit, but also the teacher and classroom assistant required to meet the staff:child ratio. An increase in the staff:child ratio for pre-school children in the Irish-medium sector alone would increase the unit cost of provision in this sector and raise questions of equity between sectors.
123. The Department recognises that geographical distribution, particularly in rural areas, may also prove difficult for the Irish-medium sector in meeting the minimum 8 children in their immediate pre-school year necessary for a playgroup to receive PEAG funding. It also recognises that, because Irish-medium pre-school provision serves a larger catchment area than English-medium provision, achieving the necessary minimum numbers may require children to travel greater distances than the normal for children attending non-Irish-medium pre-school settings.

Future Development of Capacity in the Pre-school Phase (Introduction of New Statutory and Voluntary/Private Settings into the Programme)

124. The Expansion Programme has established a network of statutory and voluntary/private sector provision across Northern Ireland which will serve to provide most or all of the pre-school education required for the foreseeable future. This section discusses further building in the

statutory sector and expansion of participation by the voluntary/private sector.

125. The establishment of sufficient places to meet parental wishes, coupled with the projected downturn in the number of pre-school children seeking places, and the Department's policy of non-sectoral provision, means that it is unlikely that there will be new building in the statutory sector other than:
- units at replacement primary schools (i.e., existing units whose parent schools are being rebuilt) where they are necessary to maintain numbers in their areas;
 - replacement nursery schools that have reached the end of their useful life but which are still required to maintain pre-school provision levels in their area;
 - new schools/units where amalgamations and rationalisations of primary schools offer the potential for (needed) centralised nursery provision; and
 - new schools/units in areas where demographic change has resulted in a need to provide more pre-school places and where it is decided that statutory rather than voluntary/private provision is required.
126. Long-term sustainability will continue to be a determining factor in any decision to build new statutory provision. All future building of statutory facilities will form part of the normal capital building arrangements.
127. Some schools allow playgroups which are funded under the Expansion Programme to use their premises, and this arrangement may be threatened by any replacement of the host school. Where the playgroup is large enough, and self-sustaining enough, to convert to a nursery unit, that option will be considered (assuming that finance is available and that there is agreement among all the parties). Where the playgroup has no other accommodation, and it is too small to convert, PEAGs will consider how the under-provision caused by its closure can be dealt with.
128. Under existing arrangements, it is difficult for voluntary/private providers outside the Expansion Programme to obtain access to PEAG places and hence funding. In practice, the only way for new groups to enter the

Programme is where they replace groups which leave it, either through closure or failure to meet the quality requirements. There is therefore very limited movement into and out of the Programme. The result is that groups in the Programme have a permanence within it similar to statutory schools and units. On the one hand, this is one of the Programme's great strengths - it provides a stable core of providers and an increasing quality standard as staff qualification levels increase. On the other hand, it creates a set of groups which have little prospect of ever joining the Programme.

129. Parents may therefore have to seek funded places for their children in settings which they would not otherwise choose. Such a situation is, however, the inevitable result of the structure of the Expansion Programme. Groups currently outside the Programme cannot be introduced on any scale without either a corresponding displacement of existing Programme groups or the reduction of places to existing groups, with the concomitant threat to their continuing viability. The questions ask whether expansion of capacity within the Expansion Programme is possible, and, if so, how it might be achieved.

Viability of Voluntary/Private Sector Groups

130. In 1998 *Investing in Early Learning* set a minimum allocation by PEAGs of 5 funded places per playgroup. Subsequent guidance to PEAGs suggested that that should be raised to 10 where possible. With some 6,100 places divided among 375 playgroups, the average allocation per playgroup is currently 16 places per group. Work undertaken by NIPPA indicates that the viability threshold for playgroups dependent on Expansion Programme allocations is 18 places. The declining pre-school population and the possibility of raising the admission age combine to prevent any large-scale increase in voluntary/private sector places. Reallocation from large providers to small is also ruled out since funding is attached to places rather than settings. Unless the Department either begins to core-fund settings or apply differential rates to different sizes of setting within the voluntary/private sector, it is difficult to see how the situation can be changed. Core funding is not an option: differential rates of per capita funding might, however, be considered further, and the questions ask for views on this.
131. The Department will continue to ensure that where possible the building of new statutory settings will not displace existing good quality

voluntary/private provision. Where the need to reduce provision in an area occurs, advice will be taken from the local PEAG on whether the need to cut provision is permanent or short-term in nature and the most appropriate manner of resolving the issue.

Future Role of the PEAGs

132. The following functions are currently under the remit of the PEAGs:
- keeping provision under review;
 - allocating and reallocating places in the voluntary/private sector (though the need for reallocations should decline with the introduction of the single application form);
 - advising the Department on requests for new nursery units (on the basis of local needs and in the context of overall provision in the area or ward cluster);
 - assessing reception retention and reduction; and
 - ensuring as far as possible that provision is available in isolated rural areas.
133. Although the Expansion phase of the Programme is coming to an end, these functions will continue to require attention. They are all matters in which the PEAGs are experienced and this suggests that the PEAGs should be retained to deal with them.
134. At present PEAGs within the five Board areas do not use a common approach to the identification of the number of places required within an area. The Department will consider identifying best practice and producing guidelines to aid the allocation process in the light of experience to date and the results of a new admissions process.
135. In relation to matters outside their Expansion Programme remit, PEAGs are advisory bodies only and have no executive functions in respect of the statutory pre-school sector. They are not, therefore, suitable bodies to handle any rationalisations which may become necessary due to falling numbers.

Revised NI Curriculum

136. The proposed curricular changes will see a designed compatibility between the pre-school and early primary years experiences (Year 1 and Year 2). As pre-school education is not compulsory, the new curriculum will also be non-compulsory in the pre-school phase. It may, however, have implications for the voluntary/private sector settings in the increasing emphasis on outdoor play. Training in the new arrangements will be required, and such training will have to be available in the voluntary/private sector.
137. The curriculum proposals will also have implications for assessment arrangements in pre-school provision and for the transfer of information between pre-school settings and primary schools. The aim is to ensure that in future the level and quality of liaison will ensure that information on the children's progress in learning is shared, and that there is co-operation in developing the curriculum, so that there can be continuity and progression in the children's educational and pastoral experiences when they transfer to Year 1.
138. The design of the Year 1 curriculum must also provide for those children who are not following the pre-school curriculum, either because they are in non-funded playgroups, or not in pre-school education at all. CCEA will be asked to ensure that such children are taken into account in the design of the Year 1 curriculum.

Inspection Regimes

139. Currently the voluntary/private sector is inspected both by the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Health and Social Services Trusts. Work has begun to explore the possibilities of a more integrated approach to inspection and regulation and this will be pursued in the context of the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years' review of *Children First*.

PART 5

EQUALITY AND RURAL PROOFING

Equality Proofing

140. Section 75(1) of the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain different individuals and groups, namely:
- between persons of different religious belief;
 - between persons of different political opinion;
 - between persons of different racial group;
 - between persons of different age;
 - between persons of different marital status;
 - between persons of different sexual orientation;
 - between men and women generally;
 - between persons with a disability and persons without; and
 - between persons with dependents and persons without.
141. The legislation requires public authorities to conduct an equality impact assessment where a policy is likely to have a significant impact on equality of opportunity. In the context of the pre-school phase, the purpose of the assessment will be to investigate whether there are any inequalities among the groups listed in section 75 in accessing funded places. Although section 75 lists 9 categories, the Department considers that only 4 of them - religion, race, gender and disability – are relevant to pre-school children. When the outcomes of this policy review are announced in 2005, an equality impact assessment will form part of the documentation. Preliminary work indicates, however, that there are no adverse impacts within the current arrangements.

142. Since this document is seeking views on how to develop the pre-school sector, a full impact assessment cannot yet be completed. The questions ask whether any of the potential changes discussed in the review will have adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories.

Rural Proofing

143. Rural proofing is a process which ensures that all policies are examined carefully and objectively to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere, because of the particular characteristics of rural areas: and, where necessary, it asks what policy adjustments might be made to reflect rural needs and in particular to ensure that as far as is possible public services are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community.

144. The *Cross-Border Rural Childcare Project*, partly funded by the Department, set out to identify and address childcare needs in rural communities on both sides of the border 'in response to the increase in female employment participation rates in rural areas and the particular difficulties faced by families with children in those areas accessing quality childcare'. These difficulties tend to centre on the lack of choice of childcare.

145. The report pointed out that there is no single, or simple, solution to the rural childcare problem. It did, however, highlight several issues to take into consideration when addressing the wider rural childcare/education issue. These included:

- the demand for a range of childcare services that offer parents choices in rural areas;
- the need to develop multi-functional services in order to make best use of the limited buildings and resources available, and to overcome the problems of small numbers of children; and
- the ability to access transport (which determines whether rural children can access services).

146. As was the case for Equality proofing, the questions ask whether any of the potential changes discussed in the review will have adverse implications for rural dwellers.



Further copies of this document can be obtained from:

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