

Review of

Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland



Question Booklet



Department of
Education

www.deni.gov.uk

AN ROINN
Oideachais

MÁNNYSTRIE O
Lear



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Department of Education
JUNE 2004

Name:

Address:

E-mail Address:
(if any)

Organisation you are replying on behalf of (if any):

Your position within that organisation:

The questions in this booklet relate to the review of pre-school education in Northern Ireland being carried out by the Department of Education between June and October 2004. They should be read in conjunction with either the full review document, *Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland*, or the shorter document summarising the main issues in the review, *Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland - Summary of Main Issues*.

INTRODUCTION

DE values all children equally and believes that they have a right to funded pre-school education if their parents wish it. The Department believes that pre-school education provides a firm foundation for a child's future educational career.

The available research and evidence from the Education and Training Inspectorate show the following.

- Full-time provision is no better than part-time in educational terms and the duration of pre-school experience (ie, the number of terms attended) is more important than the length of a session.
- The size of the pre-school age group is continuing to decline. As a result, children under 3 years old are entering nursery schools and classes in increasing numbers. Many of these children are not at a stage of development where they can benefit from the experiences provided by statutory nursery schools and classes.
- Pre-school education is especially beneficial for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Reception provision is less beneficial than other types of pre-school education.
- Provision for children with special educational needs provision can be improved.

These findings suggest that we need to:

- have a clearly understood policy on providing full-time places;
- raise the admission age to nursery schools and units; and
- ensure that those who benefit most from pre-school education continue to have access to it.

Moving towards these objectives will enable us to look at other improvements to current arrangements. Such improvements might include a standard age for the funding of pre-school education across all sectors and the possibility of alternative educational/childcare uses for surplus school accommodation. They, and others, are dealt with in the consultation questions that follow.

Questions 1-6 are about important issues which affect parents and children as well as pre-school settings and early years staff.

Questions 7-11 are about organisational and support issues. The issues behind them are discussed in the full Review, but not in the Summary of Main Issues. Question 12 asks for views on the wider context in which pre-school education is provided, and in particular about ideas on the further integration of services. Questions 13 and 14 are about equality and rural proofing. Question 15 allows you to raise any issues not covered in the other questions. Finally, there is an opportunity to rank the issues underlying the questions in order of priority.

Full-Time and Part-Time Places

Q1 (a) If, as research evidence shows, there is no educational justification for full-time education in nursery schools and units, can retention of any full-time provision be justified?

Yes go to Q1 (b)

No go to Q1 (c)

Q1 (b) Under what circumstances should it be retained?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q1 (c) Do you have views on how any change should be handled? Should it, for example, be phased out over a period? Should other forms of provision be made for the children affected (bearing in mind that 2/3 of all free places re currently part-time)?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Admission Age

There are 1,900 children under the age of 3 among the 14,000 children in nursery schools and classes. Nurseries are not the most appropriate settings for such young children as they cannot fully benefit from the experiences provided. A change to the admission age in nursery schools and units would allow us to consider making the age at which children may have funded places the same in all types of pre-school centre.

Q2 (a) Do you think the admission age to nursery schools and units should be raised?

Yes go to Q2 (b)

No go to Q2 (c)

Q2 (b) Which of the following suggestions do you think should be adopted as the new admission age?

i) to admit only children in their immediate pre-school year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 2 months). This will make the age at which free school places are available the same as that currently in operation in the voluntary and private sector.

Yes

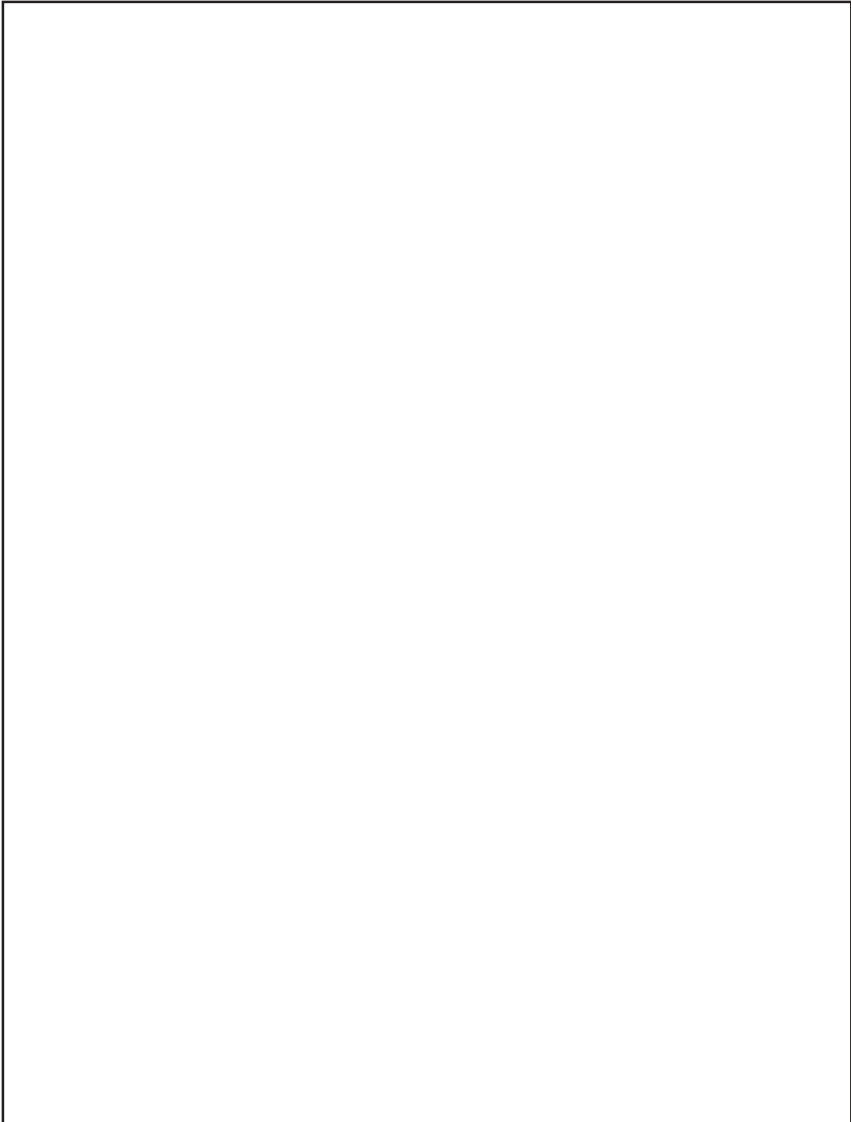
No

ii) to set the age at 3 years. In this case, the Department will consider funding places from this age in the voluntary and private sector also.

Yes

No

Q2 (c) Do you have any other suggestions or comments on raising the admission age?



continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Admissions Priorities

There are enough places for children in their pre-school year whose parents wish them. Socially disadvantaged children – for whom pre-school education is particularly beneficial – and older children (those with July and August birthdays) currently have priority in admission to pre-school.

Q3 (a) A child from socially disadvantaged circumstances is defined as "... a child whose parent is in receipt of income support or income-based job-seeker's allowance". Is the definition still suitable?

Yes

No go to Q3 (b)

Q3 (b) How might it be changed?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q3 (c) Should children with July and August birthdays continue to receive priority in admission?


Yes

No

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Under disability legislation being introduced, children with SEN or disabilities will have the same rights of access to pre-school education as other children. The Department recognises that at present this is not always the case.

Q4 What arrangements need to be made to ensure that children with SEN can be fully catered for in statutory and voluntary/private settings?



continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Reception Classes and Groups

Reception provision is less beneficial for children than the education offered in nursery classes and voluntary/private settings, but the Department currently has no legal power to prevent a school from offering a reception class or group.

Q5 (a) Should the Department take powers to prevent a school offering reception places? (If it does so, it will ensure that alternative places are available in nurseries or voluntary/private settings in the areas affected.)

Yes *go to Q5 (b)*

No

Q5 (b) Should reception classes or groups be allowed to continue where they are the only form of pre-school provision in an area?

Yes

No

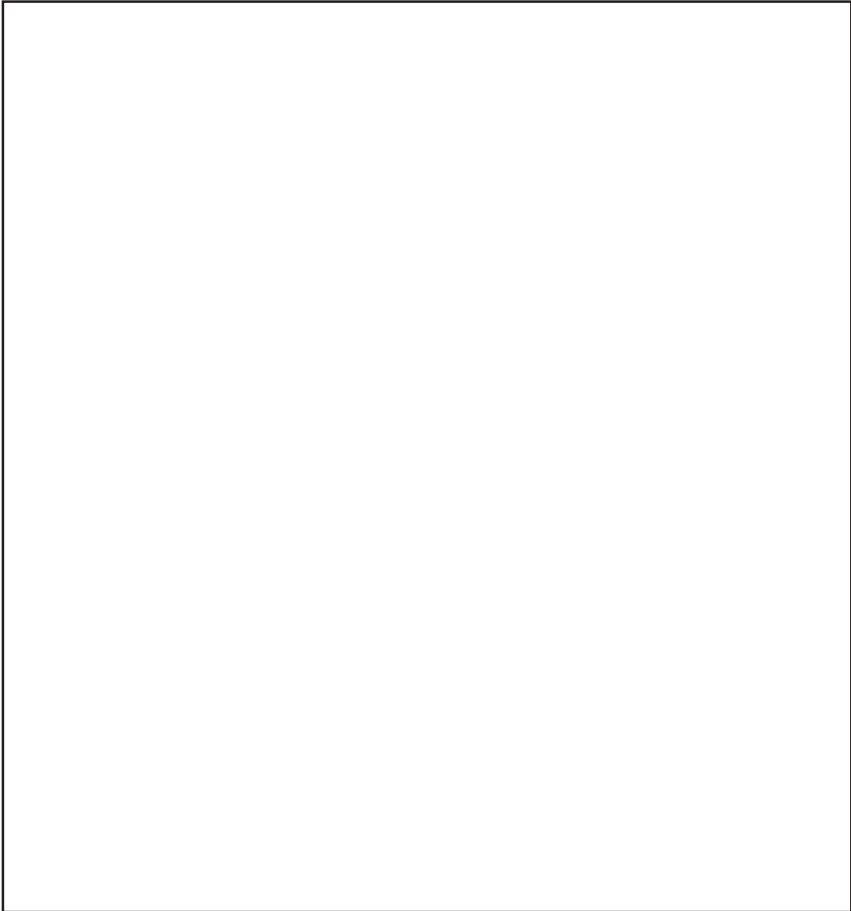
Staff:Child Ratio

Q6 (a) Is the current staff:child ratio in nurseries (a minimum of 1:13) adequate?

Yes

No *go to Q6 (b)*

Q6 (b) How could the ratio be changed? You may wish to consider such factors as: Is there scope for more parental or voluntary involvement in helping with classes? Does every nursery class in a nursery school have to have a qualified teacher (and would the quality of education provided be affected if it did not)? Could there be a different combination of early years staff?



continue on a separate sheet if necessary

NOTE

Questions 7-11 are about organisational and support issues and as such are likely to be of more interest to professionals and practitioners than to parents and the public. The background to them is contained in the full review document. Those who do not wish to answer these questions should go to Question 12.

- Q7 (a) Currently the Boards' Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) have no legislative obligation to the pre-school phase, but provide some support on a voluntary basis. What form of additional support for pre-school settings would be most appropriate and effective?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q7 (b) Should CASS' legislative duties be extended to cover:

i) the statutory pre-school sector only?

Yes

No

ii) all pre-school sectors?

Yes

No

Q8 How can we ensure that playgroups receive sufficient Early Years Specialist support?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Introduction of New Statutory and Voluntary/Private Sector Providers

At present, there is an adequate number of places for children in their immediate pre-school year in existing statutory nursery schools and classes and funded voluntary/private settings.

Q9 (a) The Department will always consider replacing a nursery unit if its parent school is replaced. Should arrangements be made to allow for additional statutory nursery schools or units apart from replacements to be established?

Yes go to Q9 (b)

No

Q9 (b) How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Q10 (a) Pre-school Education Advisory Groups will continue to replace voluntary/private settings which drop out of the Pre-school Expansion Programme. Should new playgroups be admitted to the Programme other than as replacements?

Yes go to Q10 (b)

No

Q10 (b) How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Viability of Voluntary/Private Playgroups

Q11 (a) Funding is provided to the voluntary/private sector on a 'per child' basis. Some playgroups with smaller numbers of funded places may find that it is difficult to remain financially viable. Should the current funding arrangements for the voluntary/private sector be changed?

Yes go to Q11 (b)

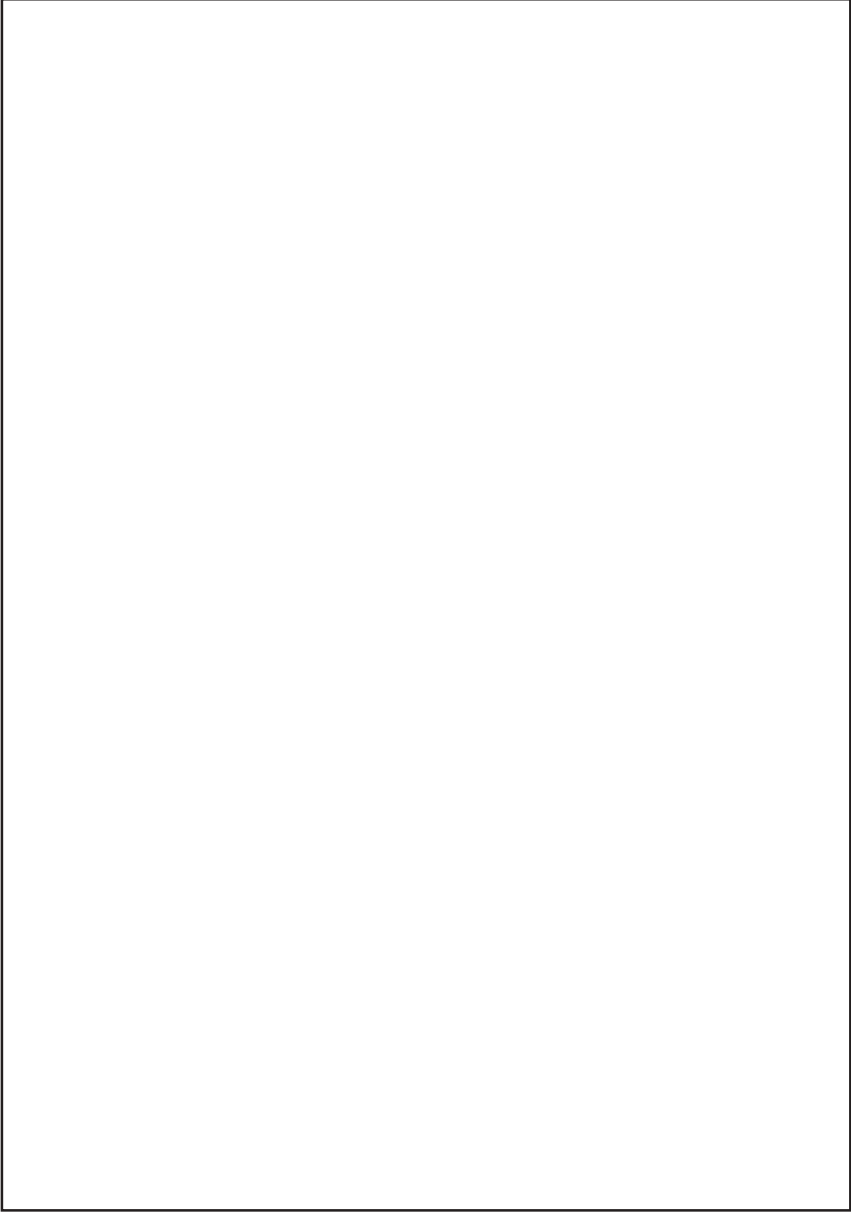
No

Q11 (b) What changes should be made?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

The Wider Context

Q12 Bearing in mind developments outside Northern Ireland, what changes (if any) would you wish to see made to the overall arrangements for pre-school provision in Northern Ireland? (You should accept that changes may not be implemented in the short-term if they involve childcare as well as education. Such changes will be considered in the context of the review of the Children First childcare strategy.)



continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Equality

Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between certain 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.

Q13 (a) Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have any adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories?

Yes go to Q13 (b)

No

Q13 (b) What are they?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Rural proofing

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.

Q14 (a) Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have adverse implications for rural dwellers?

Yes go to Q14 (b)

No

Q14 (b) What are they?

continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Other Issues

Q15 Are there any other issues you would like to comment on? If so, please use the box below.



continue on a separate sheet if necessary

Priority Order

There are financial and staffing implications in many of the above questions. You are therefore asked to number, in order of priority, the areas in which you would wish to see changes made, either for their own sake or to allow for the developments you wish to see in pre-school provision. You may list as many or as few as you wish.

Full-Time and Part-Time Places	
Admission Age	
Reception Classes and Groups	
Admissions Priorities	
Children with Special Educational Needs	
Staff:Child Ratios	
Support and Training Arrangements	
Introduction of New statutory and Voluntary Sector	
Providers	
Funding of Playgroups	
Other (please specify)	

Please return the completed booklet to:

Department of Education
School Policy and Planning Branch
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
BANGOR
Co Down
BT19 7PR

