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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Summary of Main Issues

Department of Education
JUNE 2004

INTRODUCTION

1. The Department of Education is consulting parents, practitioners and the general public about the future of pre-school education. This booklet summarises the main issues which will be of interest to parents and the public. The full review document, *Review of Pre-School in Northern Ireland*, which deals with all the issues involved, is available from the Department - see contact details at paragraph 25. A Question Booklet is enclosed with this Summary.

The Value of Pre-School Education

2. Pre-school education has many benefits for young children in terms of both their education and their social development. Research shows that, when compared with children who have not had pre-school education, children with pre-school experience are better prepared for primary school. They have better skills for learning and communicating, are more sociable and confident and have better concentration and more independence.

Background: The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

3. In the 1997/98 school year there were funded places for 45% of children in their pre-school year in 160 nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools,

and in reception places in primary schools. Since then the Government has made the increase of free pre-school places a priority. In Northern Ireland a target was set of providing a year of free pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. Surveys showed that parental demand was likely to be around 90%. By the 2003/04 school year places were available for 95% of children in their pre-school year.

4. This increase has been achieved through the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme, which is the Department of Education's contribution to the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, Children First, published in 1999. The Expansion Programme has provided additional pre-school places in 100 new nursery schools and units and in 375 voluntary/private settings. The European Union, the Belfast Regeneration Office and the Londonderry Regeneration Initiative have provided a further 30 nurseries. The locations of the new nursery schools and units were planned by a Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG) in each education and library board area. The PEAGs are partnerships between all the pre-school interests statutory, voluntary/private, integrated education, Irish-medium education, health and social services - in their areas. The PEAGs also selected the voluntary/private settings which are offering free places.

Time for Review and Consultation

5. Since the Programme has now achieved its target for providing places, the time is right to review the arrangements for pre-school education. This consultation asks for views on:
 - (a) some important issues affecting parents and children;
 - (b) the wider context in which pre-school education is provided, taking into account developments outside Northern Ireland; and
 - (c) detailed structural issues for schools and playgroups which have arisen in the course of the expansion of provision.

This summary booklet is concerned only with (a) and (b) above. The more detailed issues in (c) are dealt with in the full review document.

ISSUES AFFECTING PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Full-Time and Part-Time Provision in Nursery Schools and Classes

6. Nursery schools and classes offer full-time or part-time places, or a mixture of both. (Voluntary/private settings

are funded by the Department to offer only part-time places.)

7. Two issues arise from this:

- (a) There is a common perception that full-time provision is better than part-time. The longer hours and free meal offered by full-time provision may be beneficial for socially disadvantaged children. Research shows, however, that the benefits of pre-school education do not depend on length of time spent in the class each day. Instead, they increase in line with the number of months and/or years children spend in nurseries or playgroups, although children under 3 may not benefit from attending nursery schools or classes. In educational terms, therefore, full-time provision is no better than part-time.

- (b) About 55% of nursery places are full-time and 45% part-time. Whether a school has full-time places depends largely on when it was built and how it was funded. The result is an inconsistent pattern of provision. There is a need to develop a policy which will give a clearly understood rationale for whether places should be full-time or part-time.

8. This consultation asks for views on when full-time places should be available in nurseries.

The Admissions Age In Nursery Schools And Classes in Primary Schools

9. The age of admission to nursery schools and classes in primary schools is currently 2 years. There are 1,900 children under 3 in nursery places, all of whom are entitled to a free place, and who will have 2, or perhaps 3, years of pre-school experience rather than one. It is widely agreed, however, that nursery schools and classes are not suitable settings for children of such a young age, as the children are not at a stage of development where they can benefit from the experiences provided.
10. In voluntary/private settings children can be admitted from the age of 3 years onwards, although children are only entitled to receive a funded place from the age of 3 years 2 months (the lowest age of the immediate pre-school year). A change to the admissions age in nursery schools and classes would allow the Department to consider making the age at which funded places are available the same in voluntary/private settings and nursery schools and classes. This would entitle all children to the benefit of the same length of time in free pre-school education.

11. In this context, the Department is seeking views on raising the admissions age in nursery schools and classes. Two suggestions for change are put forward:
 - (a) only to admit children in their immediate pre-school year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 2 months). This will make the age at which children are entitled to free places the same in nursery schools and classes and voluntary/private settings.
 - (b) to set the age of admission at 3 years. In this case, the Department will consider funding places from this age in the voluntary/private settings also.

You may also wish to put forward other suggestions.

Admissions Priorities

12. When children are being admitted to pre-school education, legislation gives priority to those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds - defined as children whose parents are in receipt of income support or income-based job-seeker's allowance. This recognises the benefits that pre-school education brings such children, and forms part of the Department's policy of targeting social need. Priority is also given to older children - those with July and August birthdays - who otherwise might enter primary school without having had any pre-school experience.

13. The Department wishes to ensure that socially disadvantaged children and older children continue to receive the benefits of pre-school education. It recognises, however, that the priority given to them has caused concern among many parents whose applications for places have been affected by it. The consultation asks, therefore, if the way priority is given to them needs to be changed. For example, other factors, such as restricting the priority to pre-school settings in the local area, could be added to the current definition.

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

14. SEN is an area where issues remain to be addressed, and the consultation seeks views on how children with special educational needs could be better provided for. Policy development needs to address the key issues of improvements in identification, early intervention and provision, empowerment of families to support their children, and clear and effective routes to assessment, diagnosis and intervention.

Reception Classes and Groups

15. Experience shows that reception provision is less beneficial when compared with other forms of pre-school provision. One of the reasons for this is that pre-school children are often taught with P1 children, an

arrangement which is inappropriate for both groups of children. Also, perhaps as many as half of children in reception provision do not have a full year's pre-school experience, as the child cannot start this type of provision until after their 4th birthday. One of the aims of the Expansion Programme has therefore been to reduce the number of children in reception classes and groups.

16. The Department has no power to prevent schools from offering reception places, though we are ceasing to fund reception places in areas where there is alternative quality provision. The consultation asks whether the Department should take legal powers to prevent a school from offering reception provision.

Staffing

17. Staffing requirements in voluntary/private settings involve a staff:child ratio of 1:8. In nursery schools and classes, the figure is 2:26 (1:13) - one teacher and one classroom assistant per class. In practice, however, thanks to the presence of parents and other helpers, it is usually higher. This review gives an opportunity to consider the lower ratio in the nurseries, and whether it might be raised. The questions ask for views on this.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

18. The Expansion Programme has laid the foundation for future improvement in educational attainment and commitment. The question now is: how do we build on this foundation?

19. Elsewhere in the UK, and particularly in England, integrated approaches to early years provision have been developed. Traditionally, early years services have been delivered separately by a range of professionals working in distinct education, care and health services. The distinction between care and education for young children is not clear-cut, however, and in England the needs of families are being met by providing more integrated services. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in England has become the lead department in developing seamless services for children and families which are built around children's needs rather than professional structures. DfES says that "all the evidence shows that joined-up services deliver both better outcomes for children and better value for the public purse".

20. In England, this more integrated approach is being delivered under the banner of SureStart, which has a range of services that aim to provide a more integrated framework for education, health and childcare services which have a strong parental and community involvement.

21. Northern Ireland has made some progress towards collaborative working between the education and childcare services in the context of the Children First childcare strategy, but developments in the rest of the UK have not been mirrored here. Work to review Children First has just commenced and moves to more integrated early years arrangements will be considered as part of it.
22. The Department of Education does not have responsibility for matters outside education, so this review cannot directly affect childcare issues - they remain the responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. This consultation is, however, an opportunity to put forward views on the integration of services which can in due course feed into the review of Children First.

ORGANISATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL ISSUES

23. These issues are likely to be of more direct relevance to professionals, such as administrators and classroom and playgroup staff, than to parents. Nonetheless, views are welcome from all, and discussion of these issues, and related questions, can be found in the full review document. The issues are: additional support for pre-school staff and settings; the practicability of admitting more voluntary/private settings to the Expansion Programme and of building more nursery

schools and classes; and the viability of small voluntary/private settings.

The Question Booklet

24. The enclosed question booklet provides an opportunity for you to tell us your thoughts on the issues discussed. Please return the completed booklet to:

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

Contact Details

25. The full review is available from the same address, or by telephoning 028 9127 9607, or by e-mailing preschoolreview@deni.gov.uk. All the review documents are available from the Department's website: www.deni.gov.uk. All are published in English: please contact the Department about other languages or formats.



