

INVESTING IN EARLY LEARNING

FOREWORD - BY TONY WORTHINGTON MP

Minister for Education and Health and Social Services (April 1998)

A new era for young children in Northern Ireland will commence on 1 September 1998. On that date, some 2,200 children will benefit from this Government's commitment to the expansion of pre-school education. This represents an increase in funded pre-school education places of 20% in a single year.

This is just the first phase of the Government's investment in early learning - we are committed in the long term to providing a year of quality pre-school education for every child in Northern Ireland. This document, which has been prepared following consultations with a wide cross-section of those involved in early years education and childcare in the Province, sets out how we will work towards that goal.

The roots of educational underachievement can develop in the early years. The Government is convinced of the value of early intervention to contribute to children's educational and emotional development. The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme aims to tackle the existing shortfall in provision as quickly as possible in a way which is planned at the local level, and targeted in the initial stages on those children who need it most. There will be a clear emphasis within the Programme on ensuring that the learning experiences enjoyed by children are of high quality and provide a firm foundation for future success in their education and throughout their lives.

This expansion programme recognises that these experiences can be offered in a range of settings. I hope that providers of pre-school education in all sectors - statutory, private, voluntary and community - will take full opportunity to share their experience and exchange best practice in working with young children and their parents. The Programme provides a basis for constructive and enduring partnership in pre-school education provision and, as part of the

Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, it can point the way to the development of integrated early years services throughout the Province.

I recognise that this expansion programme will present many challenges for providers and all those concerned in the drawing up and implementation of the Pre-School Education Development Plans. I believe that the new structures we have put in place - involving the establishment of Pre-School Education Advisory Groups in each Education and Library Board area - provide the right mix of interests and expertise to address these challenges. I have been very encouraged by the constructive way in which Advisory Groups have approached their task to date. I wish them every success in the future, for the fruits of their work will, in a very real sense, be felt by generations to come.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION EXPANSION PROGRAMME - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Value of Pre-School Education

2.1 Good quality pre-school education has important benefits for children, families, communities and society and the economy as a whole. Children who experience good pre-school education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, are better prepared for school and learn more quickly. In addition, parents have greater opportunity to work, or to undertake study or training.

Aims of the Expansion Programme

2.2 The medium-term aim of the expansion programme is to secure an additional 6-7,000 pre-school education places, phased according to the availability of resources and targeted in the first instance on children from socially disadvantaged circumstances and the oldest pre-school 4 year olds (those with July or August birthdays). The longer term aim is to provide a full year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it.

Nature of Places

2.3 All additional places secured under the programme will be part-time (normally 5 sessions per week, each lasting at least two and a half hours) and provided on a full year basis (normally secured for 38 weeks over the school year, from September to June).

2.4 Three and four year olds in their final pre-school year will be eligible for places. Priority will be given in the first instance to those in the target group ie children from socially disadvantaged circumstances and the oldest 4 year olds. However, it will not be possible to guarantee a place for individual children in these target groups.

2.5 Additional places will be secured in the statutory, private and voluntary sectors and may be provided in the following settings: grant-aided nursery schools and classes, independent schools, playgroups and day nurseries registered with Health and Social Services Trusts. Places secured under the programme in all settings will be funded at a flat rate of £1,100 per annum in 1998/99.

Quality

2.6 Ensuring that the additional funded places provide good quality pre-school education is a central aim of the expansion programme. Providers wishing to be included in Pre-School Education Development Plans (Plans) will have to meet specified quality assurance requirements and be open to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

Partnership

2.7 One of the Government's guiding principles for early years services is that pre-school education places should be planned in a way which involves genuine partnership across the full range of providers. This will mean extending the traditional partnership for securing pre-school education provision to embrace the education and care sectors and to include voluntary and private providers.

2.8 This new partnership, amongst a wide range of providers, can offer many benefits. The integration of a range of early years services can add richness to children's experience and enable a wide range of child and parent needs to be met. It can encourage the exchange of skills, approaches and expertise between professionals of different backgrounds. Collaboration over provision can also be highly cost-effective, by promoting maximum use of facilities, or making more publicly-supported places available without requiring capital investment.

2.9 As the pre-school expansion programme has a specific educational focus, Education and Library Boards (ELBs) are being given statutory responsibility for securing its implementation in collaboration and co-operation with other statutory, private and voluntary providers. This partnership will be developed through Pre-School Education Advisory Groups, established early in 1998 to take forward the planning of the expansion programme, which have close links to the existing Area Early Years Committees.

Implications for Existing Grant-aided Pre-School Education Provision

2.10 The arrangements in this paper are designed primarily to apply to the new pre-school education places secured under the expansion programme. Existing grant-aided nursery schools and classes will continue to be funded under the normal Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements. From September 1999, all grant-aided nursery schools and classes will be required to give preference, through admissions criteria, to children in the target group. In addition, the pattern of attendance in grant-aided nursery schools and classes will be reviewed to ensure that optimum use is made of available places, consistent with the needs of children and their parents. All grant-aided nursery provision will be inspected only by the ETI.

2.11 Existing reception classes and reception groups in primary schools will continue to be funded under LMS as at present. However, as resources permit, it is the intention to replace reception provision with suitable alternative provision so that all children below compulsory school age in school settings

will be in planned pre-school provision which meets specified standards. As a first step, the Department proposes that no new reception provision in primary schools (ie provision in schools where a reception class or group does not exist in the 1998/99 school year) will be funded from September 1999.

Integrated and Irish-Medium Nursery Provision.

2.12 Under existing arrangements, integrated and Irish-medium pre-school providers are registered as playgroups with the Health and Social Services Trusts for the purposes of the Children (NI) Order 1995. A number of such providers have received funding under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. Both integrated and Irish-medium pre-school providers will be eligible for inclusion in the Pre-School Education Development Plans under this expansion programme.

2.13 Currently there are no integrated or Irish-medium nursery schools approved for formal grant-aided status. In light of the planned expansion of pre-school education places, the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 will, subject to Parliamentary approval, repeal those provisions of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 prohibiting integrated nursery schools from acquiring grant-maintained or controlled integrated status. Any integrated or Irish-medium pre-school provider who decides to apply for grant-maintained nursery status in the context of the expansion programme will be required to pursue this through the statutory development proposal procedures. A development proposal for a new nursery school in any school sector will only attract grant-aid if it is included in the Pre-School Education Development Plan for the relevant ELB area, and is able to meet the normal accommodation standards and staffing requirements for grant-maintained nursery provision.

Timing

2.14 2,200 additional places will be secured across Northern Ireland from September 1998. The numbers of places in each Board area in 1998/99 will be:

Belfast Education and Library Board - 300

North Eastern Education and Library Board - 520

South Eastern Education and Library Board - 400

Southern Education and Library Board - 425

Western Education and Library Board - 530

The number and phasing of additional places in subsequent years will depend on the resources available following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

THE POLICY CONTEXT

The Value of Pre-School Education

3.1 Provided in a safe and caring environment, good quality pre-school education helps all children towards a better start in their educational careers and life. Research has shown that children who have experienced good quality pre-school education are better prepared for school, make swifter progress in learning, and are less likely in later stages to develop behavioural or emotional problems. Pre-school education builds on the role of parents as the prime educators of their children. It is, however, of particular benefit to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where opportunities for learning may be restricted; and also to those with special needs.

3.2 Pre-school education, particularly when complemented by daycare services, also enables parents to enter employment, undertake training or study, or to care for other dependants. Certain forms of pre-school provision, notably community playgroups, offer parents the chance to develop a range of personal and work-related skills. There are, therefore, potential benefits from pre-school education for children, families, local communities and for society and the economy as a whole.

Current Education Provision for Pre-School Children

3.3 Pre-school education provision is currently available in a variety of settings. They include nursery schools, nursery classes, reception classes and reception groups in primary schools, voluntary and private day nurseries and playgroups.

3.4 In October 1997, there were 11,100 pre-school children in the statutory education sector. Of these, 8,500 were catered for by 91 nursery schools and 69 nursery classes attached to primary schools. In addition there were some 2,600 children in 400 reception classes and reception groups in primary schools. There is also substantial provision in the voluntary and private sectors, with almost 16,000 places available in playgroup settings and over 3,000 places available in day nurseries. Existing Planning Structures

3.5 Following the publication jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services in 1994 of a Policy on Early Years Provision for Northern Ireland, Area Early Years Committees (AEYCs) were established in each of the four Health and Social Services Board areas in 1995 to facilitate improved co-operation and planning of a range of early years services for children aged 0-12.

Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy

3.6 The present Government is developing a National Childcare Strategy to give all young children and their parents access to an integrated range of high quality education and childcare provision which is flexible in meeting their diverse needs. The expansion of pre-school education is a key element in the Strategy. Other elements will include National Lottery funding for after school clubs and daycare; and an integrated approach to early years services, in partnership between the education and care sectors, and between statutory, voluntary and private service providers. A Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy will be developed, setting out how the National Strategy is to be implemented in Northern Ireland.

Integration of Pre-School Education and Daycare

3.7 One aim of the National Childcare Strategy will be to integrate early education within an extended network of early years services for parents and children. Under such a system, the pre-school education element would remain free and parents who could afford to pay towards childcare services would be expected to do so.

DEVELOPMENT PLANS

4.1 The expansion of pre-school education places will follow the Government's strategic principles for early years services (set out in the Appendix). A key element is that the development of pre-school education should be planned to meet local needs. In Northern Ireland each Education and Library Board (Board) will have responsibility for securing additional pre-school places for its area.

4.2 Each Board will secure additional places through the implementation of a Pre-School Education Development Plan (Plan). These Plans will be drawn up by Pre-School Education Advisory Groups established under arrangements set out in Guidance on the Constitution of Pre-School Education Advisory Groups, published jointly by the Department of Education (DENI) and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) in December 1997.

4.3 Each Board has now established a Pre-School Education Advisory Group to draw up the Plan for its area, comprising no more than 13 members, as follows:

- 6 members from the education services, comprising:
 - 2 representatives of the Board;
 - 2 representatives of the Catholic Maintained sector;
 - 1 representative of the NI Council for Integrated Education; and

- 1 representative of Irish-medium pre-school education interests;
- 3 from the voluntary and private pre-school care sectors;
- 1 from the Health and Social Services Boards;
- 2 from Community Health and Social Services Trusts; and Chairperson (appointed by the Board).

4.4 This structure is designed to ensure that all main relevant interests are represented while at the same time each Advisory Group is sufficiently focused to ensure that it is an effective working body. The Guidance issued to Boards stresses the need for Advisory Groups in their work to reflect the principles of co-operation, partnership and integration of services and to proceed as far as possible by agreement rather than majority voting.

Links with Area Early Years Committees (AEYCs) and Children's Services Plans

4.5 The existing Area Early Years Committees (AEYCs) will continue to facilitate improved co-operation and planning of early years services for all children aged 0-12. Area Children and Young People's Committees will also be established to promote greater co-ordination in the delivery of effective services for children and young people "in need". This co-ordinated approach will be reflected in Children's Services Plans, which will provide a corporate framework of services by the range of partners providing for children "in need".

4.6 The pre-school education expansion programme is an education initiative on which Education and Library Boards are best placed to lead. The membership of the Advisory Groups is, however, representative of both education and care interests and overlaps with that of the AEYCs. This should ensure co-ordination and complementarity with the work of AEYCs in relation to the 0-12 age group. The Advisory Groups will ensure that the AEYCs have the opportunity to comment on the Plans before they are finalised for submission to the local Education and Library Board. It is also envisaged that

the Pre-School Education Development Plans will be taken into account in the Children's Services Plans drawn up by the Area Children and Young People's Committees, on which Education and Library Boards will be represented.

4.7 Where possible, the Plan for provision of new pre-school education places should contribute to the integration of early education and daycare. The Government has made clear that its long-term goal is to integrate early education within a supportive framework of "early years services" for parents and children. Education, daycare and health services for young children, and services for their parents, should be more fully co-ordinated, accessible and wherever possible provided close together. However, the development of integrated early years services will take time. It carries major implications not only for the location of services, but also for the way Departments, Education and Library Boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Health and Social Services Boards and Health and Social Services Trusts manage their responsibilities.

4.8 Early Excellence Centres are expected to exemplify how early education and childcare can be combined with a number of other services designed to support families - parenting skills, family learning, adult basic skills - and to disseminate and stimulate good practice by other providers. Subject to the availability of resources, the Government will wish to consider bringing forward proposals in due course through the Area Early Years Committees relating to the development of Early Excellence Centres in Northern Ireland.

Consultation

4.9 In undertaking their work, Advisory Groups should consult as widely as possible. It is recognised that the timetable for 1998 may constrain the scope of Advisory Groups' consultations in developing the Interim Plans which will be prepared for 1998/99. Nevertheless, good consultation will help to ensure that Plans will deliver, as far as is possible, the early years education services that parents require and children need.

4.10 The work of drawing up Plans will gain credibility if it is undertaken in a manner which is open and acknowledges the roles, responsibilities and contributions of all pre-school education providers. The timetable for the preparation of Plans should be publicised, along with the dates on which they are to be considered by Boards and relevant committees. Any statistical information made available to Advisory Groups should also be made available on request to members of the public.

4.11 When the Advisory Group has drawn up the Plan, it will be submitted to the Board for adoption. If any adjustments are made by the Board, they should be considered by the Advisory Group before the plan is sent to DENI for formal approval. Before approving the plan, DENI will ensure that it conforms to the minimum requirements set out in this document, has proper regard to the views of the Advisory Group and is affordable within the resources available to the Board.

Coverage of Plans

4.12 The Plan for each year must include:

- an assessment of need;
- how the specified number of additional part-time pre-school education places will be secured from September, subject to affordability, targeted in the first instance on pre-school children from socially deprived circumstances and 4 year olds with July/August birthdays;
- a list of specific settings in which additional provision will be secured and the number of places to be funded in each; how provision will be extended over time, as resources become available, to create the full target number of additional places;
- how special educational needs will be identified and met;
- how provision will be made for rural areas; arrangements for admission; the funding of providers; a strategy for maintaining and improving the quality of pre-school education provision; a clear

demonstration of a full and effective approach to partnership and co-operation across sectors;

- how the plan contributes to improved integration of early years services; and
- details of the membership and operation of the Advisory Group.
- Assessment of Need

4.13 As a first step, each Advisory Group will be expected to draw up an assessment of need. This will examine the distribution of the target group within the Board area against the availability of existing grant-aided pre-school provision and set out, in priority order, the location and number of additional places to be secured in order to provide for the target group. Highest priority should be given to areas of greatest deprivation and, within this, to areas with the largest shortfall in provision for the target group.

4.14 In identifying areas of deprivation, objective measures should be used. The primary indicator of need should be the shortfall in pre-school provision for the target group in each local government ward, as identified by DENI based on the Primary 1 population, the level of eligibility for free school meals (FSM) and the extent of existing grant-aided provision. Other sources of information may be used as secondary indicators, to interpret and confirm the conclusions reached using the FSM material. These include mapping exercises based on the Robson index of social deprivation, undertaken by Area Early Years Committees in connection with the EU Childhood Fund or to meet the requirements of the Children Order, indicators of educational underachievement, and the local knowledge of Advisory Group members.

Duration and Phasing of Plans

4.15 The medium term objective is to provide for an additional 6-7,000 places across the Province. The pace of the expansion programme will depend on the resources available in each year. In the first instance, to ensure that provision is available from September 1998, Advisory Groups have been

asked to submit an Interim Plan by mid-May 1998 showing how they will secure the number of places in their respective areas determined by the Department as affordable in 1998/99. Plans for 1999/2000 will be required to be submitted by January 1999.

4.16 DENI, taking account of available resources and using a methodology which takes account of the distribution of the target group and existing (or planned) levels of grant-aided pre-school provision across Boards, will determine the number of additional places to be secured in each Board area in each year. The numbers of places to be secured in each Board area from September 1998 will be:

- Belfast Education and Library Board – 300
- North Eastern Education and Library Board – 520
- South-Eastern Education and Library Board - 400
- Southern Education and Library Board - 425
- Western Education and Library Board - 530

Targeting

4.17 Until resources are available for universal provision for children in their final pre-school year, it is important that pre-school education provision, both new and existing, is targeted on those who can benefit most. Arrangements are therefore being put in place to ensure that best use is made of existing provision and that, in the first instance, places are targeted on children from socially deprived circumstances and 4 year olds with July or August birthdays (see section 9). This does not mean that other pre-school children will be excluded from access to pre-school places. Rather, the objective is to ensure that, where the demand for places is greater than available provision, children in the target group will be given priority under admissions arrangements.

4.18 In addition, the following measures are being taken to ensure that new pre-school education places are targeted to meet greatest need:

- The Department of Education will distribute available resources between Boards taking account of the shortfall of existing grant-aided provision relative to the assessed need for pre-school education within the target group.
- Advisory Groups and Boards in drawing up Plans will ensure as far as possible that, in securing places, priority will be given to the most socially deprived areas and, within these, to areas with the greatest shortfall in provision for the target group.
- Individual providers will be required to allocate places to children on the basis of admissions criteria which give preference to those from socially deprived circumstances (defined as those with one or both parents in receipt of Income-based Jobseekers' Allowance or Income Support) and those 4 year olds with July or August birthdays.

4.19 There is considerable integration of Catholic and Protestant children in settings in the voluntary and private pre-school sectors. The existing grant-aided nursery provision, ie nursery schools and classes, has been developed within the Catholic Maintained and Controlled school sectors, although the actual pattern of attendance also shows considerable integration. In expanding pre-school education provision, it is likely that this pattern of sectoral provision will continue to be appropriate in some areas to reflect local needs and circumstances. However, Advisory Groups should examine the scope for developing provision on neutral sites and/or through partnership in order to secure places which can be attended by children from all religious backgrounds.

Special Educational Needs

4.20 Plans must ensure that appropriate provision will be available for children with special educational needs and that all providers will be able, with support where necessary, to identify and meet those needs, taking account of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs. To assist in this process, DENI will make guidance available on the

application of the Code of Practice to pre-school providers outside the statutory nursery sector.

4.21 In drawing up Plans, Advisory Groups and Boards should give particular consideration, taking account of affordability and practicality, to:

- a. how providers in the private and voluntary sectors can be helped to take account of the Code of Practice; and
- b. what arrangements can be made to ensure appropriate support is given to those children with special educational needs.

Provision in Rural Areas

4.22 Plans will need to pay particular regard to the needs of rural areas, where existing levels of grant-aided nursery provision tend to be lowest and the response has been to make extensive use of reception classes and reception groups in primary schools. Plans will be expected to include arrangements for the replacement of reception places over time and as resources allow with alternative provision which meets the requirements of the scheme (see section 9). Advisory Groups and Boards will wish, therefore, to consider a range of options in rural areas, including: making maximum use of existing private and voluntary places; establishing new grant-aided nurseries or playgroups which feed pupils into a number of neighbouring primary schools; making use of vacant accommodation in schools for nursery classes or playgroups; and converting reception classes to nursery classes.

Training and Curriculum Support

4.23 A key issue to be addressed in the context of the expansion programme and in the development of a Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy is the variation in the levels of training undertaken and qualifications held by workers across the different types of pre-school centre. A Regional Training and Development Strategy for Pre-School Education and Childcare will therefore be an important element of raising standards. This strategy will be taken forward by the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY), on which

DENI, DHSS and the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) are represented.

4.24 The strategy will focus on assessing the training needs of pre-school workers in the voluntary and private sectors and setting out how they can be met, and will identify equivalences for the wide range of existing pre-school education and care qualifications.

The strategy will also seek to ensure that quality is maintained and improved in the statutory nursery sector.

4.25 The strategy will be developed in consultation with Pre-School Education Advisory Groups, AEYCs and other interested bodies, and will aim to ensure that pre-school workers will be able to pursue training and development through a variety of routes and with a range of training providers.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR SECURING NEW PLACES

Identifying Providers

5.1 New pre-school education places can be secured in any of the following types of centre:-

- grant-aided nursery schools, units or classes;
- independent schools which are registered under Article 38 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986;
- playgroups registered with HSS Trusts; and
- day nurseries and day care centres registered with HSS Trusts.

5.2 Within their Plans, Advisory Groups will be required to identify the priority areas where additional places are to be secured and to specify the providers and the number of places each will provide. Places must normally be secured for at least 38 weeks over the school year (September to June) and provide 5 sessions per week, each lasting at least two and a half hours. This is designed to ensure a continuity of educational experience for children and to

help parents by providing places which coincide with established patterns of provision for children in the compulsory education sector. However, where a provider in the voluntary or private sectors meets all the specified quality standards but has practical difficulties in meeting this requirement, they may be included in a Plan provided sessions are offered on at least 4 days each week for at least 48 weeks and there is a clear commitment to move to the normal pattern of operation within a reasonable period.

5.3 The Advisory Group will invite providers outside the grant-aided education sector, located in the priority areas, to apply for inclusion in the Plan by completing and returning a Basic Information Form (included in an Information Pack for Providers, produced by DENI and DHSS, and distributed by Boards), along with a copy of their registration certificate and most recent inspection report from the relevant Health and Social Services Trust (where available). Copies of both documents should be included with the final Plan which is sent to DENI for approval, to inform the arrangements for inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

CONDITIONS OF GRANT - STANDARDS OF PROVISION FOR NEW PLACES

6.1 All pre-school education centres will be expected to meet minimum quality standards in order to receive funding through Pre-School Education Development Plans. Providers in the grant-aided education sector will be required to conform to the standards set out in the relevant Education Regulations and DENI Circulars. Other providers must meet the standards set out in the Children (NI) Order Regulations and be registered by the relevant HSS Trust. In addition all centres will be expected to meet certain conditions for inclusion in Plans. These are outlined below.

Curriculum

6.2 All providers will be required to offer a curriculum which follows the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education, published by the NI Council for

the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in August 1997. The Guidance is designed to support and promote good quality educational provision in the year prior to compulsory education in all types of setting; such provision will promote successfully the progress in learning described in the document.

Group Size and Composition

6.3 Providers must cater for the specific needs of children in the year prior to entering compulsory education; these children must be regarded as a discrete group. While they may play and learn as part of a larger group of younger children, they must not be part of a group which includes children of compulsory school age. The focus of the education being provided must be wholly on the needs of children below compulsory school age.

6.4 The curriculum for pre-school children is designed to promote their personal, social and emotional development. To facilitate and assist this development, it is important that children should learn and play as part of a group of reasonable size. All providers will therefore be required to ensure that there are at least 8 children in their immediate pre-school year (whether in a funded place or not) in each group in the centre. A maximum group size of 26 children per group will apply in all centres.

Staffing

6.5 Specific staffing requirements exist in current Northern Ireland legislation and regulations in respect of centres which will be eligible for inclusion in Pre-School Education Development Plans. Grant-aided providers in the statutory education sector will be required to comply with all relevant education legislation, regulations and DENI Circulars. New regulations will be introduced to change the permissible adult:child ratio in nursery classes from 2:25 to 2:26, bringing Northern Ireland into line with England. These requirements will apply to both existing and new grant-aided nursery schools and classes. All other providers outside the statutory education sector will continue to be subject to the Children (NI) Order 1995 and relevant guidance, in addition to the requirements of the expansion programme.

6.6 The following staffing regimes will apply in centres where new places are secured:- Grant-aided nursery classes:- an adult:child ratio of 2:26. For each class of 26 children, staff should comprise a qualified teacher and a qualified nursery assistant. All other settings:- an adult:child ratio of 1:8. At least half the staff must hold a relevant qualification in education or childcare. Where only some of the places in a centre are funded through a Plan, the above requirements apply to those groups of children in which funded places are secured.

6.7 For the purposes of the pre-school education expansion programme, relevant qualifications in education or childcare must be at the following levels:- NVQ level 3 or equivalent - at least one member of staff per centre; NVQ level 2 or equivalent - all other qualified staff. Pre-school education centres will be expected, as part of the process of improving the quality of their provision, to work towards ensuring that all staff have relevant qualifications.

6.8 Qualifications and continued staff development and training are crucial to sustaining good quality educational provision. A wide range of qualifications exist which are acceptable for posts in the education and childcare sectors. Appropriate qualifications for work in early years services are currently under review. DENI will issue guidance on suitable qualifications for pre-school education in consultation with the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years and the Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years. Involvement of Qualified Teacher/Early Years Specialist

6.9 A key aim of the pre-school expansion initiative is not only to provide high quality places from the outset but to continue to raise standards in all settings over time. Staff directly involved with the children on a day-to-day basis will have a variety of skills and qualifications.

6.10 Nursery schools and classes are, of course, already required to employ a qualified teacher for each class. To reflect the educational focus of this

initiative and the importance of securing quality educational outcomes, other providers will be required to arrange support from a qualified teacher or other suitably qualified early years specialist in helping to raise standards and prepare children for school. There is no intention to impose the same philosophy on all providers or to exclude particular types of centres from inclusion in the Plans. There are many examples of good practice in the voluntary and private sectors and the aim is to build on rather than replace this.

6.11 The nature of the involvement of the early years specialist should be designed to ensure that the advice and guidance offered is appropriate to the needs of pre-school centres. Such support can be provided either by a qualified teacher or by an early years specialist qualified to first degree level or equivalent, who must:- have taught for 2 of the last 5 years either a nursery, reception, Year 1 or Year 2 class in a grant-aided school, or pre-school age children in the voluntary or private sector; or have taught pre-school, Year 1 or Year 2 children for at least 2 years and be currently engaged in providing recognised training and curriculum support for staff who work with pre-school age children.

6.12 The early years specialist should be involved in supporting a centre in:- planning curricular activities; assessing children's progress; developing a self-improvement programme and action planning; and in particular, preparing children for the transition to compulsory education.

6.13 In addition, as part of this role, the specialist should spend at least five hours over each month (equivalent to two sessions), involving at least two visits to the centre, in direct contact with the children in a way which enhances the quality of their educational experience. This may involve teaching, observing or working alongside a centre leader who is qualified to NVQ level 3.

6.14 The Government recognises that it may be difficult for all centres which might be eligible for inclusion in Plans to have such an arrangement in place

for September 1998. Therefore, providers will be required to secure the involvement of a qualified teacher or early years specialist no later than September 1999, but will be encouraged to do so earlier if possible.

6.15 Arrangements for securing the involvement of the qualified specialist will be a matter for each centre but may include the following:- involvement in the management of the centre; employment as leader in a playgroup/day nursery or a cluster of playgroups/day nurseries; through an umbrella organisation providing support; through a network between providers and schools, perhaps involving joint staff development or exchanges of staff; or through a partnership, for example, between a playgroup/day nursery and a local primary or nursery school.

Accommodation

6.16 Grant-aided pre-school education provision in the statutory sector will be required to meet the DENI standards in respect of accommodation for nursery and primary school provision. Building standards to be used under the expansion programme will be the revised version used for nursery provision made under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. These standards may be reviewed further in light of experience.

6.17 All other centres will be required to conform to the standards set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995 Regulations and Guidance on 'Family Support, Child Minding and Day Care'.

6.18 Furniture and equipment must comply with the relevant health and safety regulations. All providers must endeavour to ensure that they are appropriate to the age group and are sufficient to support the implementation of the pre-school curriculum. Information for Parents

6.19 Providers will be expected to make a range of information available to parents. This can be arranged in a number of ways:-

- i. Information to be published by Boards: admissions policy curriculum on offer staffing policy including numbers, qualifications and training dates and hours of opening Special Educational Needs policy and provision
- ii. Provided to all parents of children in a setting: curriculum on offer reports on children's progress health and safety arrangements discipline policy complaints procedure
- iii. Provided on request: copy of last inspection report details of premises and equipment equal opportunities policy

QUALITY ASSURANCE

7.1 The quality assurance arrangements will be designed to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision funded under the expansion programme and to contribute to the promotion of higher standards across all pre-school education settings. The programme of pre-school education inspection will be organised and managed by DENI's Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), in collaboration with HSS Trusts' Registration and Inspection Officers (RIOs).

7.2 All voluntary and private sector providers seeking inclusion in Plans must first be registered with HSS Trusts in the normal way, in accordance with the requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. All voluntary and private sector providers included in the Plans will also be inspected by the ETI in the first year of inclusion in a Plan; for the first tranche of providers, these inspections will be carried out during the 1998/99 school year. Following their initial inspection, all funded providers will be subject to a regular cycle of inspection by the ETI. In addition, providers registered with the Trusts will continue to have annual inspections under the Children (NI) Order 1995 arrangements.

7.3 In order to ensure the most effective use of time and resources in the planning of the inspection programme for voluntary and private sector providers, the ETI will work closely with HSS colleagues. Prior to inspection, each new provider included in a Plan will be required to complete a Profile of Education Provision (PEP), comprising self-evaluation and development

materials. The ETI will use information contained in providers' most recent HSS Trust inspection reports, together with PEPs, in drawing up and prioritising the inspection programme.

7.4 Reports by HSS Trust RIOs in respect of voluntary and private providers will where possible be made available to parents on request. A report of the findings of each inspection conducted by the ETI will be discussed with the provider and, in normal circumstances, will be published within 8 weeks from the date of the inspection. Any centre where the educational provision is found to be unsatisfactory will normally be given a period of time to improve standards. The period given will depend on the nature of the issues identified but in any event will not exceed 6 months. Where re-inspection indicates that inadequate progress has been made, the provider, DENI and the Board will be informed that the quality of educational provision in the centre does not meet the quality standards for the Programme. Boards will be required to exclude any unsatisfactory provision from future Plans until the necessary improvements have been made.

7.5 Removal from a Plan will not prevent a provider from continuing to operate without funding from the Board as long as they continue to comply with the registration requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995.

ADMINISTRATION & FUNDING ISSUES

Administration

8.1 The Department of Education has lead responsibility for policy on the pre-school education expansion programme, in close liaison with the Department of Health and Social Services. DENI also has responsibility for the funding arrangements and for initial publicity and general awareness raising about the programme, both in relation to providers and parents.

8.2 Education and Library Boards have responsibility for developing and arranging for the implementation of Pre-School Education Development Plans

and providing administrative support to Advisory Groups. This involves: establishing an Advisory Group for their area in accordance with DENI guidelines; securing and arranging on behalf of their Advisory Group the implementation of a Plan for their area; obtaining information on behalf of their Advisory Group about existing provision; issuing information to parents explaining the operation of the Plan for their area, listing funded providers and setting out procedures for enrolment in pre-school education; arranging for the issue of information packs to providers as required by their Advisory Group; providing advice to parents and providers; grant payments to voluntary and private providers in the Plan; monitoring and auditing arrangements. The Boards' responsibility for the funding of additional places secured in settings outside the controlled schools sector will not impinge on the managerial and employment responsibilities and rights of those providers.

8.3 Providers will be required to supply financial and statistical information to Boards and DENI for monitoring purposes.

Recurrent Funding

8.4 DENI will determine the number of places to be secured by each Board for each financial year. Boards will be responsible for funding all additional places secured within their Plan. All additional places - whether in nursery schools or the voluntary or private sectors - will be funded at a flat rate which will be reviewed each year. In 1998/99 the rate will be £1,100 per place for all new places. The funding required to secure additional provision under the expansion programme will be provided to the Education and Library Boards as earmarked expenditure and will be monitored against additional places provided. The allocation of additional resources to fund new places in nursery schools and classes will be dealt with under LMS arrangements. The funding of places in the voluntary and private sectors will be by direct grant, payable by the Board in instalments each year. Capital Funding for New Nursery Provision

8.5 Statutory development proposals will continue to be required for new grant-aided nursery provision in the statutory education sector. Such proposals will be considered by DENI against a range of criteria in accordance with existing procedures. Approval of a development proposal for new grant-aided nursery provision will only become effective if the proposal is included in a Pre-School Education Development Plan and the necessary resources are available.

8.6 Capital funding for new grant-aided nursery provision will be determined and allocated by DENI in accordance with assessed priorities and in light of the available resources within the expansion programme.

8.7 In the case of proposals from providers in the Catholic maintained, Grant-maintained Integrated and Irish-medium education sectors which are included in approved Plans, the detailed planning, implementation and capital funding of any new accommodation will be taken forward between the relevant school authorities and DENI.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXISTING GRANT-AIDED PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION

9.1 Existing grant-aided pre-school provision will continue to be administered and funded, through LMS, under current arrangements. Nursery schools, nursery classes, reception classes and reception groups will remain subject to inspection by the ETI only.

Admissions Criteria

9.2 Subject to Parliamentary approval, the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 will give DENI new legislative powers to require existing nursery schools and classes to apply admissions criteria to ensure that pre-school provision in the statutory sector is also targeted at the children with the greatest need. This requirement will come into effect from the 1999/2000 school year.

Pattern of Attendance at Nursery Provision

9.3 Many existing nursery schools offer both full-time and part-time places; some make full-time provision only. This pattern of provision can mean that in some areas optimum use is not made of available places.

9.4 Also subject to Parliamentary approval, the 1998 Order will give DENI power to set enrolment numbers for nursery schools and classes. This will enable decisions to be taken about changes in patterns of attendance. Full time provision is of particular benefit to children with special needs and those from disadvantaged circumstances. Where full-time provision is already provided for these reasons it should continue to be made available. Boards and CCMS will be asked to review patterns of attendance in existing provision, taking account of the needs of children, including special educational needs, and make recommendations to the Department on what action, if any, should be taken.

Reception Classes and Groups

9.5 Many primary schools enrol children who have reached their fourth birthday, but are below compulsory school age, in reception classes or groups. Schools do not currently require approval to establish reception provision and all reception pupils attract funding under LMS arrangements. Pupils in reception groups are taught in composite classes with pupils of compulsory school age and most groups are small. Half of the 320 reception groups in schools in 1996/97 comprised 3 pupils or less.

9.6 While some reception provision, particularly in stand-alone reception classes, is of a good standard, the quality of provision across the sector is uneven. It is important that all pre-school provision meets the minimum quality standards being set for new providers. DENI would wish to allow time either for schools with reception pupils to meet the necessary standards (through the creation of a nursery class or playgroup), or for Advisory Groups and

Boards to secure alternative provision within their Plan. This is particularly important for rural areas where population is dispersed.

9.7 From September 1999, therefore, it is proposed that no new reception provision (ie at schools where it did not exist in 1998/99) will be funded under LMS arrangements. Existing reception provision will continue to be funded but, as resources allow, Boards and Advisory Groups will be expected to make provision in Plans for replacing all reception groups and classes with provision which meets the quality standards of the expansion programme. Resources released through the discontinuation of reception places will be re-deployed to fund alternative places within the relevant Board's Plan.

INTEGRATED & IRISH-MEDIUM NURSERY PROVISION

10.1 Under current legislation, nursery schools are ineligible to apply for integrated status. Existing integrated nursery schools are registered with HSS Trusts as playgroups and none receive statutory grant-aid although a number have received funding under the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The Education (NI) Order 1998 will repeal those provisions of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 prohibiting nursery schools from seeking grant-maintained or controlled integrated status.

10.2 Irish-medium nursery schools are also registered with HSS Trusts as playgroups and none receive statutory grant-aid, although a number have also been funded under the EU Peace Package. Irish-medium nursery schools will be eligible to apply for grant-aided status within the pre-school education expansion programme.

10.3 In accordance with established procedures, statutory development proposals will be required for any new grant-aided nursery proposals in the Integrated and Irish-medium sectors and will be considered in the normal way against the same criteria which apply to other nursery schools, including viability, feasibility, accommodation needs and affordability. In addition, development proposals for new nursery provision in all sectors will not be

approved unless the planned provision is included in a Board's Pre-School Education Development Plan.

TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

11.1 The timetable for the preparation and submission of pre -school education development plans is:

Date	Activity
Mid May 1998	Interim plans submitted to DENI
End May 1998	Boards advised of approval/rejection of plans.
1 June 1998	Plans come into force
1 September 1998	Target date for securing of places in plans
January 1999	Plans for 1999/2000 submitted to Deni