

**Education and Training Inspectorate**

**An Evaluation of the  
Quality of Educational  
Provision in Nursery Units  
in Primary Schools**

**2007-2009**

**May 2010**

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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 There is a growing body of research, at international level, which emphasises the importance of early years. The right interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may, otherwise, reduce children's longer term chances of success.

1.2 In September 1998, the Department of Education (DE) launched the Pre-School Expansion Programme (PSEP) which was an important step in making appropriate provision available for children before they started school. Through this programme, funding was allocated for the first time to new providers from the voluntary and private sectors. The providers are now drawn from the statutory nursery sector (nursery schools and nursery units within primary schools) and the voluntary/private sector. (Table 1)

**Table 1: Pre-School Enrolments**

	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
<b>Numbers of Children in Voluntary and Private</b>	5939	5633	6327	6535	6825
<b>Nursery School Children</b>					
Full-time	3800	3796	3838	4005	3997
Part-time	2321	2379	2215	1850	1872
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6121</b>	<b>6175</b>	<b>6053</b>	<b>5855</b>	<b>5869</b>
<b>Nursery Units in Primary Schools</b>					
Full-time	3916	3978	4073	4146	4338
Part-time	3979	4071	4032	3950	3873
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7895</b>	<b>8049</b>	<b>8105</b>	<b>8096</b>	<b>8211</b>
<b>Reception Classes</b>	<b>883</b>	<b>754</b>	<b>658</b>	<b>632</b>	<b>612</b>

1.3 Primary schools may make provision for children under compulsory school age in reception classes or in groups within composite classes containing older children. Children in reception classes must have reached the age of four years before they can be admitted.

1.4 There are differences in the funding arrangements and management structures across the pre-school sector. These arrangements can have a direct impact on the quality of the provision that a centre can provide. It is important to note that only those playgroups in the voluntary and private sectors that are part of the DE PSEP receive funding for children attending their pre-school setting.

1.5 The differences across the pre-school sector are as follows:

- playgroups within the voluntary sector receive a percentage of their funding through the DE PSEP and are managed by an independent management committee which is generally made up of parents and members of the local community;
- playgroups within a private day care facility receive a percentage of their funding through the DE PSEP and are managed by the proprietor/owner of the centre;

- nursery schools are funded entirely by the DE; they are managed by their own Board of Governors (BoG), with the nursery Principal having responsibility for the school and its Local Management of Schools (LMS) budget;
- nursery units are generally located within the grounds of a primary school and come under the management of the primary school's BoG; the Principal of the primary school has responsibility for the provision within the nursery unit and the LMS budget allocation; the teacher-in-charge of the nursery unit has responsibility for the day-to day-work of the unit; the funding for the nursery unit is included within the primary school budget. Nursery units serve the entire community and are not solely for the children whose parents intend them to attend the primary school.

1.6 Prior to 1998 and the launch of PSEP, there were just over 11,000 children (45% of the age group) in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland (NI), attending nursery schools, nursery units in primary schools or reception provision in primary schools. As a result of the PSEP, in 2008-9, that figure had risen to 21,291, which means that almost 97% of all 3 to 4 year olds now attend some form of pre-school provision funded by the DE.

1.7 All providers, regardless of whether they are from the voluntary or statutory sectors are visited and inspected on a regular basis by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate).

**1.8 This report focuses on the quality of pre-school provision in one particular aspect of the overall pre-school sector, that of the nursery units within primary schools.**

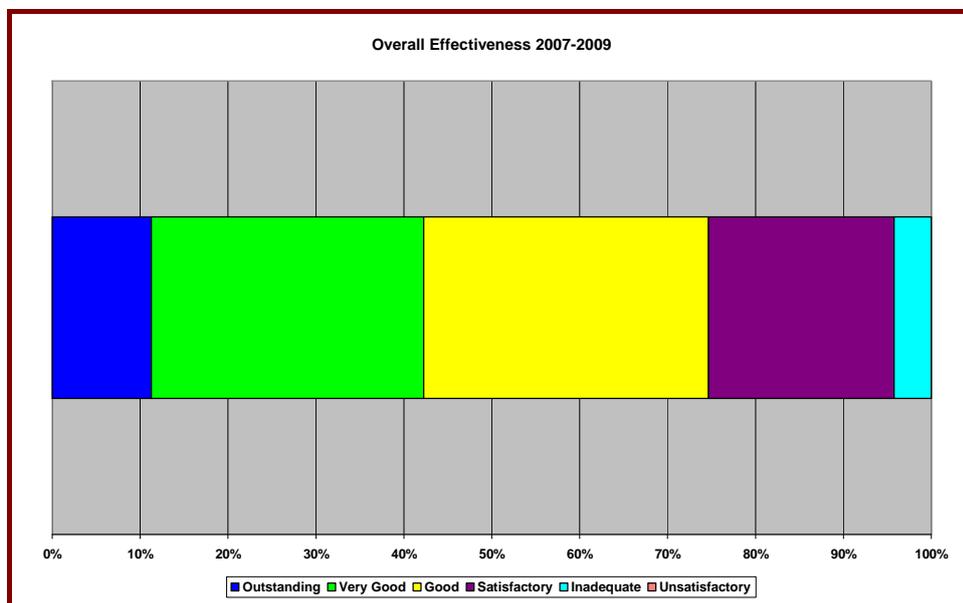
## 2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 There are currently 209 nursery units within primary schools or preparatory departments in NI. Over the past five years, the number of children enrolled in nursery units has remained relatively steady at around 38% of all enrolments in the pre-school sector.

2.2 The findings from inspections during 2007-09, show that the quality of the overall effectiveness in the nursery units was as follows:

Outstanding	12%
Very good	31%
Good	31%
Satisfactory	21%
Inadequate	5%

**Figure 1: Overall Effectiveness of Nursery Units**



2.3 Almost three-quarters of the nursery units inspected (74%) provided, for the children who attended them, good or better experiences that are crucial to their future learning and well-being. Such provision:

- met the children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs;
- provided a curriculum that was broad and balanced and allowed the children to make choices;
- offered activities which motivated, challenged and stimulated the children;
- ensured the development of the children's language and learning through skilful adult interaction; and
- ensured that where the children progressed into the year one class, there was a smooth transition and the curriculum provided built on the children's pre-school experiences and achievements.

2.4 In the best practice, the staff used their astute observations of the children's progress to inform future planning and to ensure that the provision met the differing needs and interests of all of the children. The planning was sufficiently detailed to guide the staff in their day-to-day work with the children and was evaluated on a regular basis.

2.5 The main strengths of these nursery units included:

- a positive ethos where the children learn in a supportive and caring environment;
- the good quality of the staff's interaction and involvement with the children;
- the bright and stimulating playrooms where good use was made of the children's own work, and natural and authentic items to create an attractive learning environment;
- the good opportunities provided for the children to choose freely from a wide range of appropriate resources to extend their play and to develop their levels of attention and concentration;
- the good working relationships between the staff and the children and evidence of good team spirit among the staff;
- the good opportunities to promote the children's language and communication in a variety of situations;
- the high levels of motivation and the good levels of autonomy and independence demonstrated by the children;
- the staff's high expectations for what the children can achieve;
- the promotion of equality and diversity;
- the good quality of special educational needs provision;
- the effective links established with the parents, the primary school and other agencies; and
- the detailed and comprehensive methods of planning and assessment.

2.6 The most effective practice in leadership and management of the nursery units was characterised by the acceptance of the nursery unit as an integral part of the primary school and, as such, it featured in the school development plan (SDP), whole-school events, key policies and relevant documentation. Close liaison between the staff in the nursery unit and those in the foundation stage (FS) generally helped to ensure, for those children moving into year 1 in the primary school, a smoother transition with continuity and progression in their learning and experiences.

2.7 In nearly all of the nursery units (93%), the staff implemented appropriate procedures for child protection that reflected the guidance issued from DE. In a minority of nursery units, there was no named teacher (or joint, deputy-designated teacher) with responsibility for reporting on child protection matters. In a few nursery units, the procedures for the intimate care of young children and other policies relating to child protection had not been fully shared with the parents.

2.8 The findings from inspections during 2007-09 showed that most of the children in nursery units experienced a good, positive pre-school education.

2.9 Just over one-fifth of the nursery units (21%) provided satisfactory experiences for the children in their care. The barriers to this practice becoming good or better included some or all of the following:

- poor organisation of the daily timetable and routines, which did not provide suitable periods of free play or opportunities for the children to develop aspects of their learning;
- activities that were overly directed by the adults;
- ineffective use of space to enable the children to explore freely the range of resources and to extend their play;
- limited resources;
- inappropriate methods of planning which did not identify clearly the role of the adult, and ensure a progressively challenging programme throughout the year;
- an inconsistent approach to observation, assessment and record-keeping that did not make best use of the information to meet the differing needs of all of the children; and
- lack of recognition for the nursery unit as an integral part of the primary school, and the absence of any reference to it in the school's development plan (SDP).

2.10 Of the remaining 5% of nursery units inspected, the overall provision was found to be inadequate. The experiences on offer to the children were of a very poor quality and included a number of significant short-comings. This less effective practice was often characterised by some or all of the following:

- the opportunities for language development and learning were limited;
- the quality of the planning was poor and did not support the staff in their work with the children;
- there were poorly developed links with the primary school and management was weak; and
- there were limited resources to extend the children's play and learning.

2.11 These nursery units require significant external support to help improve the children's achievements and the standards of their work.

## 2.12 THE WAY FORWARD FOR ALL INVOLVED IN THE WORK OF A NURSERY UNIT

- The Principal of the primary school, along with the senior management team (SMT), need to have an overview of the continuum of learning and how children develop from pre-school through to the end of key stage (KS) 2 to be able to evaluate the strengths and short-comings of the nursery unit's provision.
- The Principal, along with the BoG, should take responsibility for the effective and efficient use of all resources available, including human resources, to support the delivery of high quality provision and good outcomes for all children.
- The nursery unit staff need to work together to plan, and effectively provide, a broad and balanced curricular programme which ensures sufficient challenge and progression for all children across the year.
- All nursery unit staff, supported by the school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), should be involved in the early identification of children experiencing barriers to learning and the provision of appropriate support.
- The SMT needs to monitor closely and evaluate regularly the quality of the work within the nursery unit to ensure the delivery of the highest possible standard of provision and that this level is sustained.
- The BoG needs to ensure that regular opportunities are provided for the staff in the nursery unit and the FS to attend joint training and development sessions, particularly in relation to the pre-school curriculum, special educational needs (SEN), planning, assessment and self-evaluation.
- All of those involved in the work of the nursery unit need to develop a culture of self-evaluation leading to improvement; the nursery unit should feature strongly within the school development, and action planning processes.
- The links between the nursery unit and the year 1 teacher(s) should make more effective use of the assessment information in order to build on the children's previous experiences, and to ensure a smooth transition between the stages.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

3.1 During the school years 2007-2009, the Inspectorate carried out just over 70 inspection visits to nursery units. This report collates the findings from those inspections and summarises the current quality of provision in nursery units.

3.2 The units involved were representative of single and double nursery units and covered all of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and management types.

3.3 During the inspections, the inspectors observed the organised sessions, held discussions with the school Principal and the teacher-in-charge of the nursery unit, and inspected the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection. The inspectors also scrutinised the teachers' planning, assessment and observation records, the SDP and any other relevant documentation, provided by the units.

3.4 The report reflects fully the evidence from all of the inspection activity in nursery units during the period 2007-2009 and the findings are reported under the following three main headings:

- Achievements and Standards;
- Quality of Provision for Learning; and
- Leadership and Management.

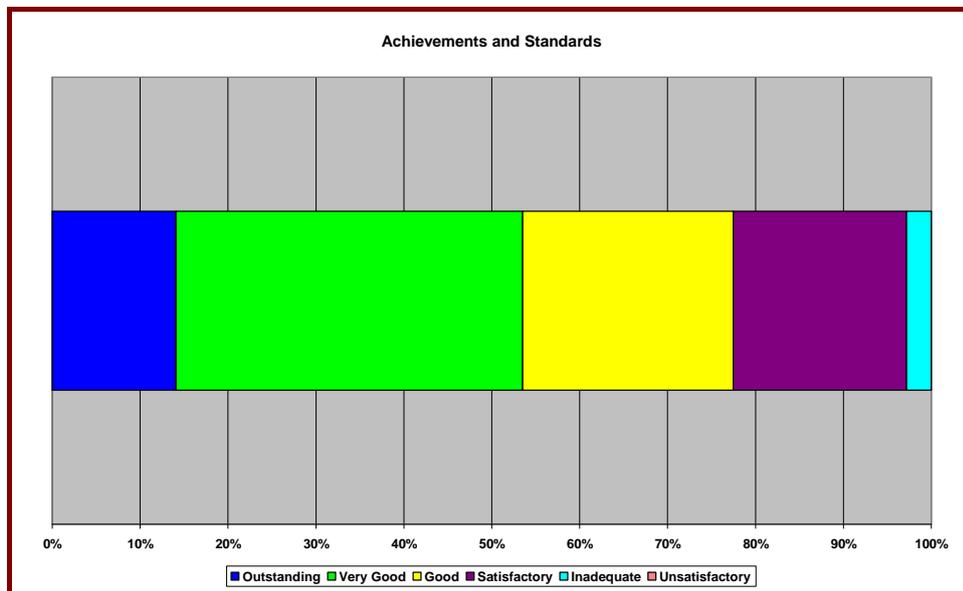
#### 4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

4.1 The achievements and standards of the children were consistently good or better in most (78%) of the nursery units (Figure 2).

4.2 In these nursery units, the children are able to:

- demonstrate their developing concentration, purposeful play, independence and social skills;
- communicate and engage confidently with adults and their peers;
- access and explore a range of books independently;
- listen and respond to stories;
- participate in song and rhyme sessions;
- ask questions, observe and discuss their play;
- use appropriate mathematical language, and tackle and resolve simple problems;
- use language to talk about their experiences and to ask relevant questions;
- demonstrate scribbling and early mark-making; and
- recognise that symbols and print have meaning.

**Figure 2: Achievements and Standards**



4.3 In a minority (20%) of the units, the achievements and standards of the children were satisfactory while in a small number (2%) these were graded as inadequate.

4.4 A small number of these nursery units need to develop further aspects of the pre-school curriculum. The areas most frequently identified as in need of greater attention include, the promotion of the children's language, early mathematics, creativity (including music) and energetic physical play.

4.5 This less effective practice was also characterised by:

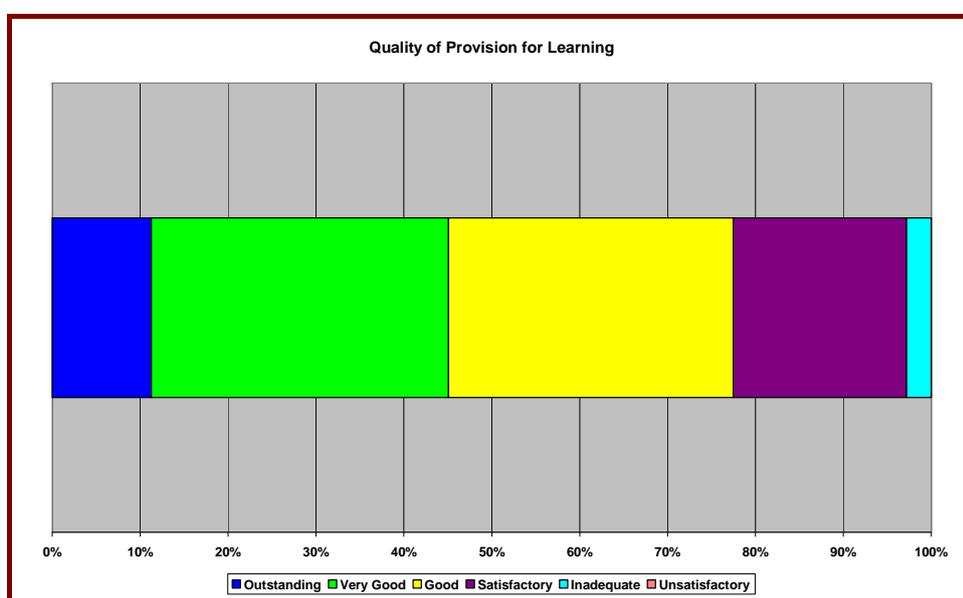
- the staff's poor questioning techniques, which resulted in missed opportunities for the children to extend their thinking and problem-solving;
- a limited range of resources, including books, to support the children's language and learning;
- the inadequate or inappropriate use made of all play areas and resources to provide an appropriate and well-balanced programme with a planned increase in challenge over the year; and
- the limited opportunities to foster the children's own creativity.

## 5. THE QUALITY OF THE PROVISION FOR LEARNING

5.1 The overall quality of the provision for learning is good or better in three-quarters (75%) of the nursery units. These settings ensure that continued attention is given to providing an appropriate learning environment that includes:

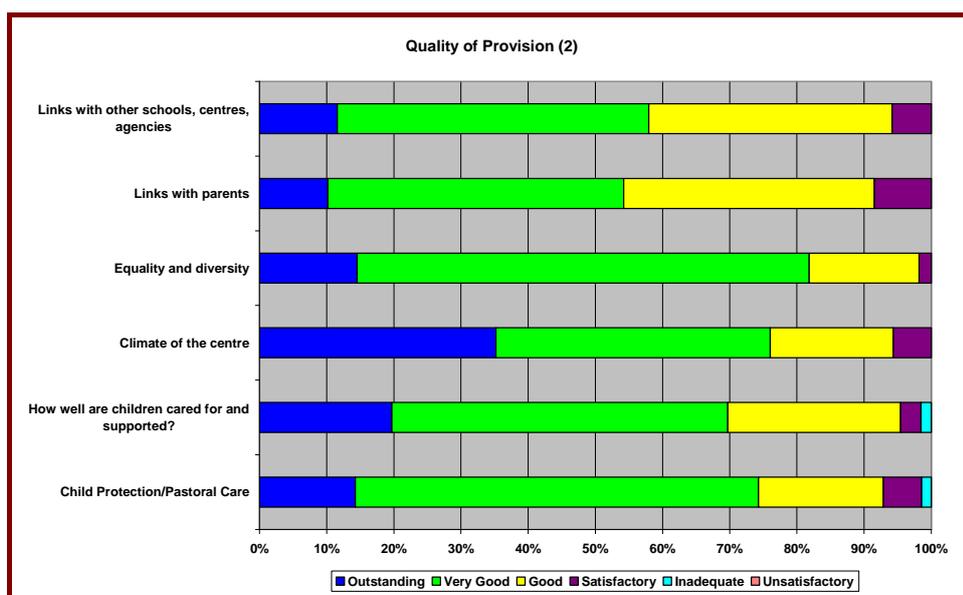
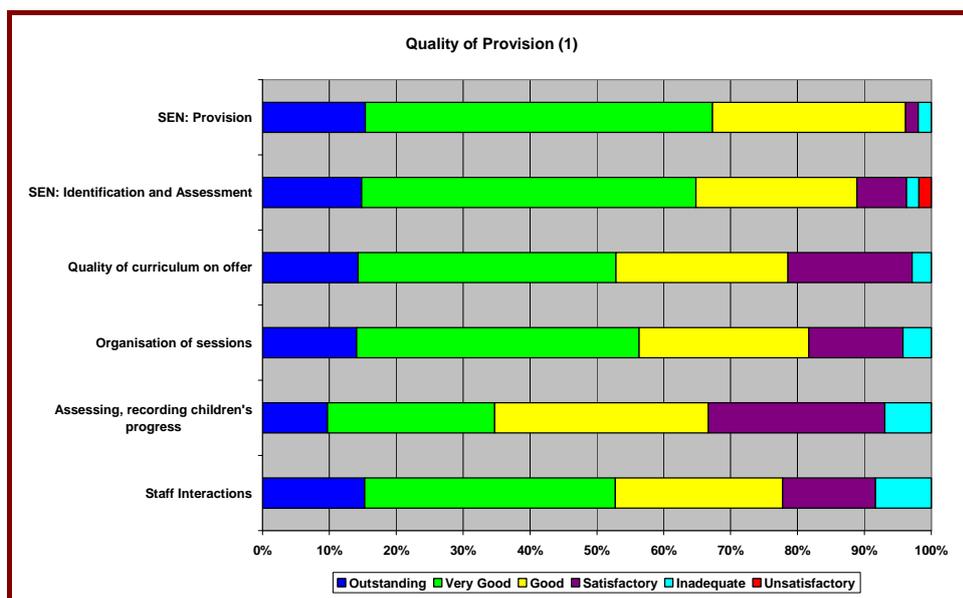
- thoughtfully presented play areas;
- good use of all the available space to promote learning;
- an appropriate range of resources to ensure interest challenge and progression in the children’s learning;
- good opportunities to develop the children’s independence, social and problem-solving skills;
- regular assessment of the children’s progress and its subsequent use to inform planning;
- appropriate displays of the children’s own work that both celebrate achievement and are used for further learning;
- a well-resourced and challenging outdoor play area; and
- judicious interventions by the staff to invite oral responses from the children and to extend their thinking.

**Figure 3: Quality of Provision for Learning**



5.2 In those nursery units, where the quality of provision was outstanding (11%), excellent opportunities were provided for the children to interact and engage with the staff and their peers to help develop their language and learning. Good opportunities were also regularly provided to promote early mathematical ideas and the children’s creativity and imagination, both indoors and outdoors. The most effective practice was also characterised by the ability of the nursery unit staff to provide appropriate recognition and celebration of the efforts and achievements of all the children at various times and in a variety of ways.

**Figure 4: Quality of Provision Indicators**



5.3 In the small number of units where the provision was found to be inadequate there was insufficient emphasis, by the management, on ensuring that the children’s experiences within the nursery unit were regarded as an integral part of their education. The nursery unit did not feature prominently enough within the SDP and resources were often insufficient.

5.4 The main areas where further action is needed include:

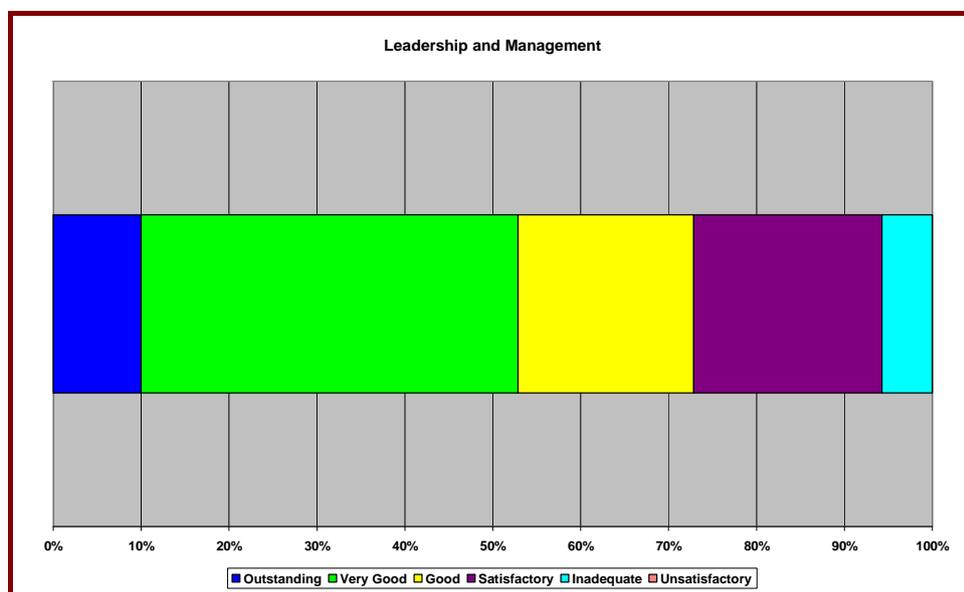
- the need to ensure a clear link between the monitoring, recording and evaluation of the children’s progress and the planning of an appropriate programme;
- the breadth of the curricular programme to ensure sufficient challenge and progression for all of the children in all of the activities;

- the need for a stronger process of self-evaluation in order to identify accurately the strengths in the provision and any areas that require attention;
- an improved school development planning process, which includes fully the work of the nursery unit, and the associated action plans;
- better curricular links with the rest of the primary school; and
- the availability of training and development opportunities for all the staff.

## 6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 In almost all (94%) of the nursery units the quality of the leadership and management provided by the Principal of the primary school was satisfactory or better (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Leadership and Management**



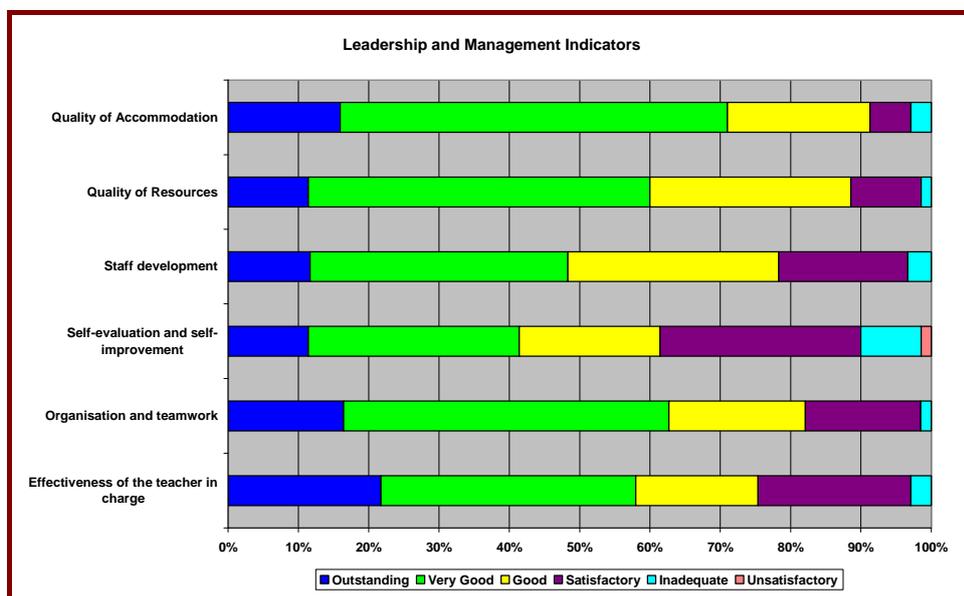
6.2 In 70% of the nursery units considered consistently good or better, the main strengths in leadership and management were identified as the following:

- the Principal of the primary school, along with other senior staff, had a clear overview of the continuum of learning and understood how children develop from pre-school through to the end of KS2;
- the Principal had a clear vision for the future development of the nursery unit and included it as an integral part of the school;
- the Principal had established robust arrangements for the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the provision and the children's achievements within the nursery unit and was very aware of the progress being made by individual children across all areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- the teacher-in-charge of the nursery unit provided effective leadership and was a good role model for the staff;
- there was close liaison between the staff in the nursery unit and those in the FS, to help ensure a smooth transition and progression in the children's learning experiences;
- a good start had been made in developing a culture of reflection and self-evaluation leading to improvement;
- appropriate opportunities were provided for ongoing professional development for all of the staff within the nursery unit;

- the quality of the accommodation was good with adequate space to provide a broad and balanced programme for play; and
- there was continuing investment in a range of good quality resources, for indoor and outdoor play, to promote interest, challenge and progression in the children’s learning.

6.3 In a small number (6%) of the units, the quality of the leadership and management was inadequate. In these nursery units there tended to be poor communication and poor links between the primary school and the nursery unit; there was also a lack of opportunities for ongoing professional staff development and a lack of investment in resources, with consequent low staff morale.

**Figure 6: Leadership and Management Indicators**



6.4 While the table of indicators above (Figure 6) shows many strengths in the leadership and management of nursery units, it is also clear that more needs to be done by the staff within the nursery units in key areas such as self-evaluation and staff development.

6.5 The main areas for improvement in leadership and management include the need to:

- ensure that all children are making appropriate progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- develop further the process of self-evaluation within the nursery unit in order to identify the strengths and areas for improvement within the overall provision;
- strengthen the presence of the work of the nursery unit within the primary school’s development planning process;
- improve the quality of the action planning to help focus the work of the nursery unit on realistic targets for improvement;

- provide more opportunities for staff training and development, particularly in relation to the pre-school curriculum, SEN, planning, assessment and self-evaluation; and
- ensure that there is a regularly up-dated wide range of resources to enhance the children's play activities and support their progression across the pre-school curriculum.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

7.1 Since the introduction of the Pre-school Expansion Programme (1998) much has been done to improve the quality of provision across the entire pre-school sector. This report is intended to help those working in nursery units to benchmark their practice more clearly against the best in the sector, and thereby to help ensure that our children get the best possible start to their education.

7.2 The outcomes of inspection across the sector indicate clearly that the quality of provision, and the standards achieved by the children are, in the main good or very good.

7.3 While this report highlights the many strengths within the nursery units, more improvements are required in the areas identified in this report. It will be important for the sector to monitor, evaluate and improve practice in order to ensure that the quality of the pre-school education provided for our youngest children is of the highest possible standard.

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