

**OUTCOMES FROM THE  
REVIEW OF  
PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION  
IN  
NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Department of Education  
April 2006**

## **Ministerial Foreword**

I have a clear vision about the aim of early years services: I want to see every child have the best possible start in life.

I am also clear about government's role in achieving this vision for children; we must be about delivering coherent and family friendly support that:

- promotes the physical and social development of children;
- ensures children can make the best start at school; and
- enables parents to choose employment, training or study.

The value of investing in the earliest years of a child's life is well recognised. We have excellent research evidence looking specifically at Northern Ireland; the Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Project. This shows that children who have a high-quality pre-school experience are better prepared for primary school and learn more quickly. However, the advantages are not confined to learning alone. EPPNI also shows that children who have attended pre-school are more sociable, confident and independent than those who have not. Pre-school helps support children on the first step of the road as learners and citizens, better able to join in the learning community that school represents.

This Review was started because we recognised that much had been achieved in pre-school, but more was left to do. We needed to evaluate, consolidate, and improve this important phase of children's education. In short, we had to listen. We had set ourselves a challenging target; to provide a year of high-quality pre-school education for all children in their immediate pre-school year, whose parents wished it. Through the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme this target has been achieved and surpassed, in a partnership between the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

We listened to representatives of these providers. We listened to those that provide a voice for children. Parents. The Commissioner for Children and Young People. The Children's Minister. And we will continue to listen.

We will continue to listen, as it is clear that we need to do more. Public services are changing in Northern Ireland, and they must be fine-tuned to best serve our youngest children. We are working towards goals over three time-scales that will underpin our commitment to giving every child the best start in life.

First, there are the decisions that we have already started to implement. The Review of Public Administration has mapped a new way forward in health and education, which both impact greatly on families. To focus on families we have begun to integrate early years support, and will be moving Sure Start and other early years activities into the Department of Education. To focus on children, the new delivery arrangements from the Review of Public Administration will provide support for the pre-school sector; young learners will be best served by continuity and coherence from pre-school, into primary and beyond. The Children and Young People Funding Package will address social, health and educational differences among our young people. A major part of this commitment is for early years provision, which will enhance services for children aged 0-4 and their families. The cohesive approach supported by the Children and Young People Funding Package represents a new milestone in our commitment to deliver to children, young people and their families.

Second, are the decisions that must be actioned now. These will ensure that the learning and development settings available for children are those most suitable for their age.

Third, are outstanding questions on which we need to identify a way forward, working with experts in pre-school provision. These will address the issues of choice for parents, and high-quality provision for children regardless of setting. So we need to do more thinking.

- Facilities and accommodation - is the infrastructure right?
- Staffing ratios - looking at the needs in the different sectors to make sure we do the best for children whatever their pre-school setting.
- Support for children with Special Educational Needs - making sure that early identification is made possible and the right support given.
- Levels of funding - how best do we meet the needs of the different sectors given the task of quality provision we set them?
- Support and training for pre-school providers - how do we continue to make sure that we equip our pre-school providers to the high level needed to undertake this important job effectively?
- Levels of qualifications among pre-school providers - our commitment to quality pre-school provision needs quality learning amongst those that provide it.

This Review owes an immense debt of thanks to the many organisations and individuals who responded. Their contribution has enabled us to make clear decisions on what we can do now, and to identify where we need to consult further. The backdrop against which we work will continue to change, but we must always make the best possible use of public resources. I am confident that this Review will help us to meet our challenges in an informed way. Our goal remains to support our children's ability to fulfill their potential from the earliest point on their education journey.

# **REVIEW OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

## **ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES AND DECISIONS FOLLOWING CONSULTATION**

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## **Part 1. INTRODUCTION**

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

Although pre-school education is a non-compulsory phase, its benefits cannot be overstated. Government-funded research in Northern Ireland has shown that children who attend high-quality pre-school settings are better prepared for primary school and learn more quickly than those who do not. It also shows that children who have attended pre-school are more sociable, confident and independent than their peers who have not.

The target for expanding pre-school education in Northern Ireland was to provide a pre-school education place for every child in its immediate pre-school year whose parents wish it. Surveys have shown that only about 90% of parents wish their child to attend pre-school before starting primary school. Through the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, this target has been achieved and surpassed – in the 2004/2005 school year sufficient places were available for over 92% of children in their immediate pre-school year and throughout Northern Ireland children are receiving appropriate, high-quality education in nursery schools and classes, playgroups and private day nurseries that all follow common curriculum guidelines.

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

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

Despite all that the Expansion Programme had accomplished, its implementation had revealed a number of structural and operational issues where improvements should be possible. Since the beginning of the Programme there have also been many developments in early years provision across the United Kingdom. Recently these have also included moves towards greater integration of formal education, childcare, and early years services in Northern Ireland.

In June 2004, the then Minister with responsibility for Education, Barry Gardiner MP, considered it a suitable time to reflect on how pre-school provision had developed during the 6 years of the Expansion Programme and to capture what had been learned. The review was seen as an opportunity to look to the future to see how the delivery of pre-school education might be improved for the benefit of all those involved. The focus was on how best to meet the needs of young children.

The consultation sought views on issues relevant to the organisation and delivery of pre-school education in Northern Ireland.

1.2 The Consultation Document was launched on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004 with the consultation period ending in mid October 2004.

1.3 A Summary of the Main Issues together with a Question Booklet was enclosed with each document to facilitate responses.

1.4 This paper summarises and analyses responses to the consultation on the Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland, and records decisions and actions the department proposes to take.

1.5 This Review of Pre-School Education also takes account of what is happening elsewhere including developments in the rest of the UK, particularly the key issue of moving towards greater integration of formal

education, childcare, and early years services. It is important that we adopt the appropriate policies in Northern Ireland to support “whole child” early years development. This will involve continuing to ensure that policies are:

- focused on children and their families, rather than departmental structures;
- harmonised;
- supported by effective interfaces between Departments; and
- delivered in a high-quality and cost effective manner.

## 2. Response Rates

2.1 A total of 7,023 responses were received.

2.2 The analysis of responses received has been sub-divided into four categories. This is to ensure we give due weight to the differing opinions of our main target groups. The categories chosen are as follows:-

- statutory schools – 532 responses;
- voluntary playgroups – 185 responses;
- parents and public – 392 responses; and
- organisations e.g. education partners – 73 responses.

This totals 1,182 responses. This figure does not include duplicate multiple copies received. To include these figures, brings the total to 7,023.

2.3 In these circumstances, the statistical results tables throughout the document are presented as follows:-

- Results based on 1,182 responses are presented in full in each statistical result table.
- Results based on 7,023 responses are presented in full in each table in ***bold and italics***.

## Part 2. ISSUES AND SHORT TERM ACTIONS

This section contains details of the issues we are able to address in the short term as a result of the Review and wider developments in early years services.

### FULL- TIME AND PART- TIME PLACES

**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?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	Yes	No	No Answer
Schools	92.7%/ <b>99.4%</b>	5.1%/ <b>0.42%</b>	2.2%/ <b>0.18%</b>
Playgroups	47%	48.6%	4.4%
Parents & Public	92.1%	3.8%	4.1%
Organisations	53.4%	9.6%	37%
Overall	82.9%/ <b>97.1%</b>	11.8%/ <b>2%</b>	5.3%/ <b>0.9%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	94.8%/ <b>99.6%</b>
Playgroups	49.2%
Parents and Public	96%
Organisations	84.8%
Overall	87.6%/ <b>98%</b>

The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 defines full-time pre-school education as at least 4 hours and 30 minutes each school day, and part-time as less than this, but at least 2 hours and 30 minutes each school day. Currently only statutory nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools are allowed to admit full-time pupils. Voluntary/private sector playgroups are funded under the Expansion Programme to offer only part-time provision.

The majority of respondents (87.6%/98%) across all sectors believe full-time provision should remain. Responses from parents and the public (96%) to retain full-time provision were particularly strong.

At every stage of the Effectiveness of Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Study, the possibility that there would be differences associated with full-time versus part-time attendance at pre-school was examined. For most comparisons there were no differences between children who had full-time or part-time pre-school. The few differences that were found were largely for aspects of social development; some favoured the full-time group and some did not. Overall there was a slight balance of benefits favouring the full-time group, but this was a very small overall benefit compared to the part-time group.

A key finding from the research was that children got the same educational benefits from either full-time or part-time provision. This means that the arguments for full-time have to be looked at within a social context – for the family and the economy. The policy decision to pursue full-time/longer provision in England has arisen out of the social inclusion agenda – to move children out of poverty.

The recently announced moves towards greater integration of formal education, childcare and early years services in Northern Ireland is targeted at both children and their parents. This will help parents, particularly those in areas of deprivation, to access work or training, and in light of these broader developments it would be prudent to maintain the existing pattern of provision.

## **Decision**

It has been decided to retain the existing pattern of full-time provision at this time. Other options to support parents who wish to access work or training will be considered as part of the recently announced moves towards greater integration of formal education, childcare and early years services in Northern Ireland, supported by the Children and Young People Funding Package.

## ADMISSION AGE

**Do you think the admission age to nursery schools and units should be raised?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	76.9%/ <b>98%</b>	17.7%/ <b>1.5%</b>	5.4%/ <b>0.5%</b>
Playgroups	93%	4.3%	2.7%
Parents and Public	61.5%	28.3%	10.2%
Organisations	63%	4%	33%
Overall	73.4%/ <b>95.5%</b>	18.3%/ <b>3.1%</b>	8.3%/ <b>1.4%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	81.3%/ <b>98.5%</b>
Playgroups	95.6%
Parents and Public	68.5%
Organisations	93.9%
Overall	80.1%/ <b>96.9%</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.**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	52.3%/ <b>4.4%</b>	8.1%/ <b>0.7%</b>	39.6%/ <b>94.9%</b>
Playgroups	33.5%	26.5%	40%
Parents and Public	53.3%	5.4%	41.3%
Organisations	31.5%	9.6%	58.9%
Overall	48.4%/ <b>8.14%</b>	10.2%/ <b>1.71%</b>	41.4%/ <b>90.15%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	86.6%/ <i>however 94.9% provided no response</i>
Playgroups	55.9%
Parents and Public	90.9%
Organisations	76.7%
Overall	82.7%/ <i>however 90.2% provided no response</i>

(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.

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	Yes	No	No Answer
Schools	23.1%/ <b>1.9%</b>	21.2%/ <b>1.8%</b>	55.7%/ <b>96.3%</b>
Playgroups	75.1%	13.5%	11.4%
Parents and Public	18.1%	16.1%	65.8%
Organisations	27.4%	13.7%	58.9%
Overall	29.9%/ <b>5%</b>	17.8%/ <b>3%</b>	52.3%/ <b>92%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	52.1%/ <i>however <b>96.3%</b> provided no response</i>
Playgroups	84.8%
Parents and Public	53%
Organisations	66.7%
Overall	62.6%/ <i>however <b>92%</b> provided no response</i>

There is widespread agreement, amongst all respondents and interested parties, that many two year-olds are not at a stage of development where they can benefit from the experiences provided by nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools.

The majority of respondents favoured admitting only children in their immediate pre-school year (3 years 2 months to 4 years 2 months). This would equalise the age at which free school places are currently available across all providers.

Equalising the position now will help ensure children are in an environment appropriate to their age and will underpin the recently announced moves towards greater integration of formal education, childcare and early years services in Northern Ireland.

### **Decision**

That we raise the admissions age to 3 years and 2 months.

## **ADMISSIONS PRIORITIES**

**Should children with July and August birthdays continue to receive priority in admission?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	34.2%/ <b>2.9%</b>	60.5%/ <b>96.7%</b>	5.3%/ <b>0.4%</b>
Playgroups	26.5%	70.8%	2.7%
Parents and Public	20.6%	65.1%	14.3%
Organisations	27.4%	41.1%	31.5%
Overall	28.1%/ <b>4.7%</b>	62.4%/ <b>93.7%</b>	9.5%/ <b>1.6%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	36.1%/ <b>2.9%</b> <b>No: 97.1%</b>
Playgroups	27.2%
Parents and Public	24.1%
Organisations	40%
Overall	31%/ <b>4.8%</b> <b>No: 95.2%</b>

In Northern Ireland children who have attained the age of 4 on or before 1<sup>st</sup> July start primary school at the beginning of the following September. This has meant that children with fourth birthdays between 2nd July and 31st August, who failed to gain a pre-school place, would not have any educational experience until after their fifth birthday, when they began compulsory primary school. This was the reason for including these children in the initial target group for the pre-school education expansion programme.

The Department no longer considers that there is a need for children born between 2<sup>nd</sup> July and 31<sup>st</sup> August to receive priority in admission as the current criteria can work against younger children. For example, a child born on 1<sup>st</sup> July may not get a place in a pre-school setting in its final pre-school year, because older children are given priority. This could lead to a situation where, on starting compulsory primary education, a child born on 1<sup>st</sup> July (aged 4 years and two months) will not have had the opportunity to access pre-school education, whilst a child born on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, and starting school at the same time (aged 5 years and two months) will have had at least one year's pre-school education.

### **Decision**

Children with July and August birthdays should no longer receive priority in admission and legislation will be brought forward to effect this.

**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?**

**Responses (1,182/7,023)**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	33.3%/ <b>2.8%</b>	61.1%/ <b>96.8%</b>	5.6%/ <b>0.4%</b>
Playgroups	20%	80%	0%
Parents and Public	20.9%	67.1%	12%
Organisations	23.3%	46.6%	30.1%
Overall	26.5%/ <b>4.5%</b>	65.1%/ <b>94.1%</b>	8.4%/ <b>1.4%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	35.3%/ <b>2.8%</b> <b>No: 97.2%</b>
Playgroups	20%
Parents and Public	23.8%
Organisations	33.3%
Overall	28.9%/ <b>4.5%</b> <b>No: 95.5%</b>

The Department accepts that there is a need to review the definition of social disadvantage. It needs to be updated where possible to reflect changes in the benefit system, especially relating to low paid working parents and to take account of sharing a definition across government. The Department will undertake further examination of this area.

**Decision**

We do not change the current arrangements with regard to social disadvantage at this stage. The Department will investigate what other proxy

indicators could be used, including any changes which have been made to the benefit system, to allow it to update its definition as necessary.

## RECEPTION CLASSES AND GROUPS

**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.)**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	78.6%/ <b>98.2%</b>	16.1%/ <b>1.35%</b>	5.3%/ <b>0.45%</b>
Playgroups	95.2%	4.3%	0.5%
Parents and Public	75%	12.5%	12.5%
Organisations	57.5%	19.2%	23.3%
Overall	78.7%/ <b>96.4%</b>	13.3%/ <b>2.2%</b>	8%/ <b>1.4%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	82.9%/ <b>98.6%</b>
Playgroups	95.6%
Parents and Public	85.7%
Organisations	75%
Overall	85.6%/ <b>97.7%</b>

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

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	56.2%/ <b>4.7%</b>	36.7%/ <b>94.7%</b>	7.1%/ <b>0.6%</b>
Playgroups	24.3%	73%	2.7%
Parents and Public	31.4%	52.8%	15.8%
Organisations	49.3%	27.4%	23.3%
Overall	42.6%/ <b>7.2%</b>	47.1%/ <b>91.1%</b>	10.3%/ <b>1.7%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	60.5%/ <b>4.7%</b> <b>No: 95.3%</b>
Playgroups	25%
Parents and Public	37.3%
Organisations	64.3%
Overall	47.5%/ <b>7.3%</b> <b>No: 92.7%</b>

The result of the consultation strongly (85.6%/**97.7%**) favours the Department taking powers to prevent a school offering reception places. However, 47.5%/**7.3%** of respondents also indicated that reception provision should be allowed to continue if no other provision is available in an area.

The document, “Investing in Early Learning – Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland (1998)”, stated an intention to replace reception classes with suitable alternative provision, so all children below compulsory school age in school settings would be in planned pre-school provision which meets specified standards. As a first step, no new reception provision in primary

schools (i.e. provision in schools where a reception class or group did not exist in the 1998/99 school year) has been funded from September 1999.

The ETI report entitled “Pre-School Education – The Quality of Educational Provision for Reception Children in Primary Schools 2004”, in reply to the question, “what was the overall quality of the educational and pastoral provision made for reception children”, indicated that in most of the schools (80%) the educational provision for reception children was less than satisfactory.

For many children, reception provision represents less than a full year’s pre-school education, causing a lack of continuity. Moving children on their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday from pre-school settings to reception has a negative impact on the voluntary/private sector, particularly their ability to plan financially and to manage staffing levels.

The recently announced expansion of childcare and early years services in Northern Ireland will increase the availability of age-appropriate provision for pre-school children.

### **Decision**

The Department will bring forward legislation to prevent a school offering reception places.

### **Part 3: ISSUES AND MEDIUM TERM ACTIONS**

**What arrangements need to be made to ensure that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) can be fully catered for in statutory and voluntary/private settings?** (NB only comments were sought for this issue)

This consultation exercise, and subsequent discussions, have identified a number of key issues, including:-

- the different levels of funding and support for SEN provided to the statutory, voluntary and private sectors; and
- the difficult nature of the work needed to support pre-school SEN children, in initial identification, liaising with parents, and supporting them through the statementing process.

There have been many developments since the close of the consultation exercise. The implementation of the Special Education Needs and Disability Order (NI) from 1 September 2005 addresses some of the issues raised. Schools are now required to improve physical accessibility, access to the curriculum, and access to information in alternative formats. They also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure pupils with disabilities are not put at a substantial disadvantage compared to others.

The new arrangements being implemented as a result of the Review of Public Administration will help ensure greater consistency of support for children with SEN across Northern Ireland. In addition, the recently announced Children and Young People Funding Package contains provision for children with special needs and disabilities. This includes the establishment of multi-disciplinary teams who will be able to provide support to schools and other settings within the extended schools and early years arrangements.

Work will continue in the Department, in partnership with others, on SEN provision in the pre-school sector. Areas under consideration include training,

potential procedural and legislative changes, enhanced multi-agency working, and improved consistency in provision.

### **Decision**

SEN provision will continue to be kept under review as the new support arrangements are implemented.

## STAFF:CHILD RATIOS

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

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	Yes	No	No Answer
Schools	45%/ <b>3.8%</b>	52.6%/ <b>96%</b>	2.4%/ <b>0.2%</b>
Playgroups	2.7%	96.8%	0.5%
Parents and Public	41.8%	46.2%	12%
Organisations	4%	63%	33%
Overall	34.8%/ <b>5.9%</b>	58%/ <b>92.9%</b>	7.2%/ <b>1.2%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	46.1%/ <b>3.8%</b> <b>No: 96.2%</b>
Playgroups	2.7%
Parents and Public	47.5%
Organisations	6.1%
Overall	37.5%/ <b>5.9%</b> <b>No: 94.1%</b>

## **Decision**

The vast majority of consultees believed the current staff:child ratio could be improved. This will be considered during implementation of the more integrated arrangements in support of early years that have recently been announced.

## **CURRICULUM ADVISORY AND SUPPORT SERVICES (CASS)**

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.

Should CASS' legislative duties be extended to cover the statutory pre-school sector only?

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	44.2%/ <b>95.3%</b>	13.9%/ <b>1.2%</b>	41.9%/ <b>3.5%</b>
Playgroups	8.65%	48.65%	42.7%
Parents and Public	10.5%	5.6%	83.9%
Organisations	17.8%	21.9%	60.3%
Overall	25.8%/ <b>87.5%</b>	17.1%/ <b>2.9%</b>	57.1%/ <b>9.6%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	76.1%/ <b>98.8%</b>
Playgroups	15.1%
Parents and Public	15.1%
Organisations	44.8%
Overall	60.2%/ <b>96.8%</b>

**Should CASS' legislative duties be extended to cover all pre-school sectors?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	32.5%/ <b>2.7%</b>	19.5%/ <b>1.6%</b>	48%/ <b>95.7%</b>
Playgroups	61.1%	14.6%	24.3%
Parents and Public	12.5%	7.1%	80.4%
Organisations	39.7%	12.3%	48%
Overall	30.8%/ <b>5.2%</b>	14.2%/ <b>2.4%</b>	55%/ <b>92.4%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	62.5%/ <i>however <b>95.7%</b> provided no answer</i>
Playgroups	80.7%
Parents and Public	63.6%
Organisations	76.3%
Overall	68.4%/ <i>however <b>92.4%</b> provided no answer</i>

There is clearly an issue about providing appropriate support and training to all pre-school settings. Since the close of the consultation phase of this review, decisions have been taken on the support arrangements for the education sector as part of the Review of Public Administration, and on integrating early years services. This means that this issue is now best considered more widely than the legislative remit of CASS.

### **Decision**

Integrated early years services will require appropriate support and training opportunities regardless of setting, taking account of the new arrangements put in place by the Review of Public Administration and through the Children and Young People Funding Package. These issues will be considered during implementation of the more integrated support for early years that have recently been announced.

## **EARLY YEARS SPECIALIST SUPPORT**

**How can we ensure that playgroups receive sufficient Early Years Specialist support?** (NB only comments were sought for this issue)

### **Decision**

This is an element of the wider issue about providing appropriate support and training to all pre-school settings, mentioned above, and will be considered during implementation of the more integrated arrangements in support of early years that have recently been announced.

**INTRODUCTION OF NEW STATUTORY AND VOLUNTARY/PRIVATE  
SECTOR PROVIDERS**

**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? How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	47.4%/ <b>95.6%</b>	22.9%/ <b>1.9%</b>	29.7%/ <b>2.5%</b>
Playgroups	18.4%	69.7%	11.9%
Parents and Public	14.8%	5.6%	79.6%
Organisations	50.7%	13.7%	35.6%
Overall	32.2%/ <b>88.6%</b>	23.9%/ <b>4%</b>	43.8%/ <b>7.4%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	67.4%/ <b>98%</b>
Playgroups	20.9%
Parents and Public	72.5%
Organisations	78.7%
Overall	57.4%/ <b>95.6%</b>

It is clearly important for children to have access to provision in a suitable environment in all early years settings. Policy developments that have occurred since the consultation closed mean this question is also best considered in a wider context.

The declining number of children in Northern Ireland poses challenges and opportunities, as we consider how to make best use of public resources, including the schools' estate, while providing modern learning environments. The integration of early years services will expand the range of locations that must be considered.

### **Decision**

The wider issue about children having access to high-quality provision in a suitable environment in all early years settings will be considered further, taking account of:

- the more integrated arrangements in support of early years that have recently been announced; and
- the strategic development and use of the schools' estate.

Meanwhile, the current arrangements, based on a policy of non-sectoral provision, will remain. It is therefore unlikely that there will be new building in the statutory sector other than:-

- Units at replacement primary schools (i.e. existing units whose parent schools are being rebuilt) where they are necessary to meet demand in their areas;
- Replacement nursery schools that have reached the end of their useful life but which are still required to maintain pre-school provision levels in their area;
- New schools/units where amalgamations and rationalisations of primary schools offer the potential for (needed) centralised nursery provision; and
- New schools/units in areas where demographic change has resulted in a need to provide more pre-school places and where it is decided that statutory rather than voluntary/private provision is required.

**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? How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	14.8%/ <b>1.23%</b>	53.8%/ <b>96.14%</b>	31.4%/ <b>2.62%</b>
Playgroups	37.8%	53%	9.2%
Parents and Public	7.7%	10.96%	81.34%
Organisations	43.84%	16.44%	39.72%
Overall	17.9%/ <b>3%</b>	37.1%/ <b>89.4%</b>	45%/ <b>7.6%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	21.6%/ <b>1.3%</b> <b>No: 98.7%</b>
Playgroups	41.7%
Parents and Public	41.1%
Organisations	72.7%
Overall	32.5%/ <b>3.3%</b> <b>No: 96.7%</b>

### **Decision**

This will also be considered, like the question above on nursery schools and units, as part of the wider issue about children having access to high-quality provision in a suitable environment in all early years settings.

Meanwhile, the Department will continue to monitor requests for new playgroups to be admitted to the Programme, other than replacements, in close consultation with its education partners.

## **VIABILITY OF VOLUNTARY/PRIVATE PLAYGROUPS**

**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?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	33.8%/ <b>94.5%</b>	32.4%/ <b>2.7%</b>	33.8%/ <b>2.8%</b>
Playgroups	89.2%	6.5%	4.3%
Parents and Public	11.2%	7.9%	80.9%
Organisations	63%	4%	33%
Overall	36.8%/ <b>89.4%</b>	18.4%/ <b>3.1%</b>	44.8%/ <b>7.5%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

### **Yes:**

Schools	51.1%/ <b>97.2%</b>
Playgroups	93.2%
Parents and Public	58.7%
Organisations	93.9%
Overall	66.6%/ <b>96.6%</b>

### **Decision**

Funding levels for different sectors forms part of the wider issue about children having access to provision in a suitable environment in all early years settings. This issue will be considered as detailed above.

## **THE WIDER CONTEXT**

**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.)**

Policy on, and support for, early years provision in Northern Ireland has continued to develop substantially since this question was posed. These ongoing developments have been informed by the answers given to this question, and include:-

- the additional financial support that has been provided through the Children and Young People Funding package;
- the moves towards greater integration of formal education, childcare and early years services in Northern Ireland; and
- the outcome of the Review of Public Administration.

As these significant structural changes are implemented, we will seek the views of partners to ensure we adopt the appropriate policies in Northern Ireland with regards to “whole child” early years development. These policies must be harmonised, with effective interfaces between Departments, to ensure the best possible use of financial resources available in support of giving every child in Northern Ireland the best possible start in life.

## EQUALITY

**Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have any adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	35.2%/ <b>94.6%</b>	32.5%/ <b>2.7%</b>	32.3%/ <b>2.7%</b>
Playgroups	18.4%	73.5%	18.4%
Parents and Public	7.7%	14.5%	77.8%
Organisations	39.7%	20.6%	39.7%
Overall	22.1%/ <b>86.9%</b>	32.2%/ <b>5.4%</b>	45.7%/ <b>7.7%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

### **Yes:**

Schools	51.9%/ <b>97.2%</b>
Playgroups	9.9%
Parents and Public	34.5%
Organisations	65.9%
Overall	40.7%/ <b>94.1%</b>

A draft Equality Impact Assessment for the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme considered four out of the nine categories outlined in Section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Only these four were deemed to be applicable to children of pre-school age. They are: religion, race, gender and disability.

From the most recent available figures (October 2005) for **persons of different religious belief** it is fair to say that overall, the equality for pre-school in relation to religion is well balanced. 49% of children are Roman

Catholic, 36% are Protestant, 1% other Christian and 14% returned “religion unknown”.

With regard to persons of **different racial group**, the 2005 figures show in pre-school ‘persons of other ethnic heritage’ represent 2%. In the comparator, 2001 Population Census, this group has a 1.3% representation. Therefore, the pre-school figures represent this section of the population slightly more.

For **men and women generally**, the 2005 pre-school figures show there were 50.6% boys and 49.4% girls; in comparison to the Population Census of 2 year olds in 2001, where there were 51.1% boys and 48.9% girls. The differences in these figures are minimal. This shows that there are no inequalities between the number of boys and girls in the pre-school population, as compared with the general population.

When assessing **persons with a disability and persons without**, the best statistics available were those of Special Educational Needs identified within the education system. These figures show that in 2005, 3 year olds in pre-school with a statement, or in stages 1 to 4 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (CoP), made up 7.8% of the pre-school population. The comparator figures (2001 Population Census) reveal that the percentage of children with SEN, or in the process, as 4.4%. This is an encouraging result as it seems that children with SEN are slightly better represented in pre-school than in the general population.

Overall, these conclusions show no inequalities in the categories relevant to pre-school children, and there is no action required as a result.

A formal policy screening exercise has taken place to ensure that there are no adverse equality impacts.

## **RURAL PROOFING**

**Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have adverse implications for rural dwellers?**

Responses (1,182/7,023)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Schools	47.9%/ <b>95.6%</b>	17.5%/ <b>1.5%</b>	34.6%/ <b>2.9%</b>
Playgroups	23.2%	54.1%	22.7%
Parents and Public	16.6%	8.7%	74.7%
Organisations	58.9%	2.7%	38.4%
Overall	34.3%/ <b>88.9%</b>	19.4%/ <b>3.3%</b>	46.3%/ <b>7.8%</b>

Based on numbers who provided a response:-

**Yes:**

Schools	73.3%/ <b>98.5%</b>
Playgroups	30.1%
Parents and Public	65.7%
Organisations	95.6%
Overall	63.9%/ <b>96.5%</b>

There is a potential adverse impact on rural dwellers if reception classes are closed and the admissions age in statutory nurseries is raised to 3 years and 2 months, without suitable alternative provision being available.

### **Decision**

Our priority remains age-appropriate, high-quality provision for all children in Northern Ireland. The greater integration of formal education, childcare and early years services, and the additional resources from the Children and

Young People Funding Package, provide an opportunity to address need, urban and rural, as an integral part of policy agenda.

## **PART 4: ANNEX – RESPONSES FROM PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PARTNERS**

### **FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME PLACES**

**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?**

BELB and BELB PEAG

- Yes

NEELB

- Yes. The conclusion of the EPPNI study in stating full-time no better than part-time educationally is not straightforward.
- The definition of 'educational justification' must be broad enough to encompass and value children's holistic development.
- Enrolment figures suggest that parental choice would support this view.

SEELB

- Yes. For quality of provision, all places for children in their immediate pre-school year should be full-time.

SEELB PEAG

- Yes. All pre-school places should be full-time for young children.

WELB and WELB PEAG

- Yes. Parents clearly recognise that young children should not be moving through various settings as part of a normal day. Full-time education is one of the solutions to this problem.

## CCMS

- Yes. Education deals with the social, emotional and intellectual development of the whole child, best achieved in a full-time context.

## NICIE

- Yes. Believes provision for all pre-school children should be 4.5 hours duration for all social backgrounds.

## CCEA

- Yes. Full-time provides more continuity over a sustained period enabling the provision of high quality educational experiences.

## **Under what circumstances should full-time provision be retained?**

### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- Full-time should be the priority if we believe in investing in our young children as in other countries (e.g. New Zealand, Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland, Czech Republic).
- If funding is an issue, an option is to provide full-time places in clearly identified socially disadvantaged areas and in rural areas because of transport difficulties.

### **NEELB**

- There should be an increase in full-time provision phased in over a realistic period and possibly co-ordinated by the PEAGs.
- If it is not possible to offer full-time places to all children, priority should be given to children of socially disadvantaged background and flexibility should be retained to cater for the needs of local communities and parents.

### **SEELB**

- The Board advocates an increase to a 4.5 hour day.
- Full-time provision could be phased in over time and would emphasise education and care, joint funding and the integration of education, health and care services.
- Part-time works against the development of high quality experiences.
- Part-time places are least popular with parents. It is recognised that it is best for children to remain in one place rather than to move through various settings. A full-time place would address this issue.

### **SEELB PEAG**

- Part-time works against development of high quality experiences for young children.

## SELB

- Because of the additional benefits of full-time e.g. personal and social development, rest time, observation/assessment time, matches parents employment requirements, free school meals for socially disadvantaged children and part-time is not suitable for parents.

## WELB and WELB PEAG

- Full-time should be considered in the context of education, care, lifelong learning and wrap around provision.
- Full-time has also health and social benefits.
- In relation to teaching in the medium of the Irish language, full-time provision is essential to promote language acquisition.

## CCMS

- Full-time provision should be looked at in the context of learning and care, free school meals for socially disadvantaged children and consistent adult contact.
- A move to full-time provision is a logical development in the context of development of wraparound provision.

## NICIE

- In favour of retention and expansion of full-time places initially in areas of social need and rurality.

## NIPPA

- Full-time should only be considered in the context of an integrated approach to education and care.

## CCEA

- Many children gain from social and personal skills development through the provision of lunch, especially children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

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

#### BELB and BELB PEAG

- Funding for the development of early years centres should be made available in Northern Ireland to allow nursery schools to use their buildings to provide extended early years services.

#### NEELB

- Changes (increase in full time) phased in over a realistic period.
- During phasing in, priority should still be given to socially disadvantaged children.
- Creative use of nursery schools buildings and staff e.g. informal paid crèche facility for children of working parents.

#### SEELB

- Change to all full-time should proceed, firstly, for socially disadvantaged children.
- Full-time could be phased in over time and emphasise education and care, joint funding and integration of education, health and care services.

#### SEELB PEAG

- Recommends full-time provision within areas of social disadvantage.

#### SELB

- A broader perspective on the contribution of early years education to a child's development is required.
- There should be early equalisation of attendance patterns, if necessary through the provision of additional financial resources.

- Teachers often claim a better provision can be made through full-time attendance.

#### SELB PEAG

- Any change should be implemented as expeditiously and realistically as possible.
- Readjustments of provision will be difficult in the short term.
- Availability of spare capacity could facilitate innovative developments within area of education/ care for pre-school children.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Full-time phased in over time with shift of emphasis from education to education and care.
- Necessary to consider joint funding from health and education and integrate services.

#### CCMS

- Focus should be on 'full time provision', not just full time 'educational' provision to prevent children spending their day in a number of settings and to accommodate working parents.
- Full time provision could be phased in across education and care.
- Look at joint funding and integration through targeted co-operation of relevant government departments.

#### NICIE

- If full time does not become universal then it could be phased out over 1-2 years.
- Should be replaced by part time provision for immediate pre-school year children in the mornings and 2 year olds (pre-pre-school year) in the afternoons.
- There could be phased entry as children reach their 3rd birthday.

## NIPPA

- Full-time provision as it currently exists should be phased out to allow for creative approach to new arrangements.
- Establish integrated services to meet needs of communities, families and children.
- If there is no overall strategy around full-time then it should be phased out altogether.

## CCEA

- The increase in full-time provision would need to be phased in over a realistic period of time.

## C na G

- Co-ordinated (wrap around) programme of care and education is more appropriate.
- This is particularly suited to language acquisition in an immersion setting.
- Interest in children's centres where parental involvement in education and care of child is encouraged - also creates sense of belonging and community.

## **ADMISSION AGE**

### **Do you have any other suggestions or comments on raising the admissions age?**

#### BELB and BELB PEAG

- Raising the admission age will have enormous impact in Belfast with redundancies and schools reducing to single units. This will leave spare capacity and create financial instability.
- Spare capacity should be used for other services.

#### NEELB

- NEELB recommends that the admission age be raised to ensure 2 year olds remain in home settings with their primary caregiver rather than attending an institution at this critically young age.
- Many early year practitioners and advisory staff recommend option I (3 years 2 months) – this would both target funding at this discrete group and negate the practical difficulties caused by rolling admissions and the disruption of the settling in process.
- A rolling admission will also cause inequity as younger children will have has access to less pre-school education before commencing statutory schooling.
- However the majority of NEELB PEAG members prefer option II as evidence suggests there are more benefits to children who have more terms in pre-school education.
- Although concerns over implications of phased intake led to the suggestion that only children who reached their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday before 31<sup>st</sup> of December should be admitted.
- There is also anxiety about the possible impact of changes in admission age on settings' intake and numbers.

## SEELB

- Option II that the admission age to pre-school be set at age 3 for all is preferred and it is proposed a cut off date for 3 year olds, such as 31<sup>st</sup> October should be identified.
- Long term 2 years of pre-school education for all children should be explored where alternative forms of quality provision in their penultimate pre-school year would be resourced.
- There are concerns that decisions may be taken which will have repercussions for the economic viability of some nursery settings at a time when these schools could provide extended services.

## SEELB PEAG

- Given that 2 years of pre-school education for all children may not be an economically viable option, option II is preferred – that the admission age to pre-school be set at age 3 for all settings.
- This arrangement would help counteract the difficulties in a demographic downturn.

## SELB

- Consideration should be given to setting the admission age at 3 by 31<sup>st</sup> August.
- Removal of underage children could result in nursery schools and units encountering difficulties filling places.

## SELB PEAG

- The SELB PEAG recognise the difficulties associated within introducing a rolling intake during the whole calendar year. However it is considered that these difficulties can be overcome.
- In addition the school census arrangements may have to be renewed to accommodate the admission of children during the year.

## WELB and WELB PEAG

- It was not the aim of the PSEEP to admit very young children into nursery provision. Younger children should be in separate settings with a relevant curriculum and appropriate adult support.
- If admission age was to be set at 3 years, a cut off date should be set for 3 year olds (e.g. 3 by end October).

## CCMS

- CCMS is of the view that nursery education is best suited to children in the year immediately prior to statutory education.
- Raising of lower age limit to 3 years 2 months would bring nursery provision more closely in line with playgroup provision in terms of age.
- This would allow centres with part time provision to convert to full time – increased full time would help in the development of wraparound provision.

## NICIE

- Prefer option II – EPPNI research indicates children benefit from more terms in pre-school education and if full time provision is not to be provided universally, any money saved from reduction in full time should be directed to providing children with pre-school experience from their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

## NIPPA

- There is no argument for children younger than 3 attending pre-school.
- In fact current research shows higher levels of group care before the age of 3 are associated with higher levels of anti- social behaviour in children.
- It is important that this review takes the opportunity to establish an admission age that is consistently applied across all sectors.

## CCEA

- Admission at 3 years 2 months allows funding to be targeted at the children in their immediate pre-school year ensuring equality for all.
- However some children benefit from having more than one full year in pre-school education as EPPNI research indicates.

## C na G

- Option II is preferable both educationally and linguistically for the Irish medium sector – but it is imperative this level of provision is extended to the voluntary/private sector.
- In context of Irish medium pre-school education – CnaG recommends it should be available to children for 2 years.

## **ADMISSIONS PRIORITIES**

**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? How might it be changed?**

### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- Possibility that working families tax credit could be included.
- As indications are that there are sufficient places the admissions criteria is no longer required.
- The only criteria should be that a child is the correct age for pre-school provision.

### **NEELB**

- Low income working families should also be included using family tax credit criteria.
- There is a need to factor in the issue of rurality as a criterion.

### **SEELB and SEELB PEAG**

- The socially disadvantaged criterion should be retained.

### **SELB**

- Both admissions priorities should be removed because of the availability of enough pre-school places for children for whom places are required.
- This would result in more equity of treatment.

### **SELB PEAG**

- The definition of social disadvantage should be extended to cover instances where the parent is in full time education / training or on a ‘new deal’ scheme.

- However, as there are now enough places available to meet demand it is no longer essential to have priority in admissions to pre-school education.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- The social disadvantage criterion should not be in use now that target provision has been achieved. It is no longer necessary.
- It is considered divisive and discriminatory against working parents, although it might be appropriate where there are not enough places or where there is a range of provision (i.e. part time and full time provision).

#### CCMS

- The criteria only come into play when settings are oversubscribed therefore the falling birth rate should reduce the significance of having to apply criteria.
- However, in keeping with TSN and the obvious need to guarantee a place for July/August birthdays, there is no need to change existing criteria.

#### NICIE

- Definition of social disadvantage is still suitable but should be broadened to include 'parents in receipt of working tax credit', children with an identified SEN and 'English as a foreign language'.

#### NIPPA

- If the target of a funded place for every child has been met, it makes no sense to continue with priority admission criteria such as social disadvantage.

#### CCEA

- Family tax credit might be used as a criterion.
- All children in their immediate pre-school year should have equal access to gaining a pre-school place.

- If priority has to be given it might best be targeted at youngest children who, because of fixed starting age, may always be age disadvantaged throughout their schooling.

C na G

- A more reliable system should be used to include working parents on low income for example free school meals entitlement or parents in receipt of working tax credits.

**Should children with July and August birthdays continue to receive priority in admission?**

**BELB**

- As indications are that there is sufficient places the admissions criteria is no longer required.

**NEELB**

- July / August birthdays should not be an admissions priority.
- All children in their immediate pre-school year should have equal access to gaining and pre-school place.
- Children with May/June birthdays – the youngest - are actually most likely to require SEN support early in their educational career, therefore are most likely to benefit from a high quality pre-school experience.

**SEELB and SEELB PEAG**

- Supports the removal of the July/August birthday priority because there are now enough places for children in their pre-school year.

**SELB**

- Both admissions priorities should be removed because of the availability of enough pre-school places for children for whom places are required.

**SELB PEAG**

- As there are now enough places available to meet demand it is no longer essential to have priority in admissions to pre-school education.

**WELB and WELB PEAG**

- There is no longer any requirement for this priority criteria.

**CCMS**

- In keeping with the obvious need to guarantee a place for July/August birthdays, there is no need to change existing criteria.

## **RECEPTION CLASSES AND GROUPS**

**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.)**

### NEELB

- Given the 2004 ETI reception report NEELB would reinforce the ETI recommendation for legislative change to be introduced to ensure that reception provision ends in areas where alternative pre-school provision is available.

### SEELB and SEELB PEAG

- It is noted that reception provision for children in composite classes may not be ideal.
- Recommends that the issue of reception being offered where there is alternative good quality provision should be addressed.

### SELB

- SELB agrees power needs to be held by some central body to prevent reception where there is pre-school provision in the area.
- The Department should take powers to prevent reception taking account of wishes of schools' Boards of Governors.
- Address the problems in rural areas in accessing pre-school places.
- Home to school transport facilities should be extended to home to pre-school settings.

### WELB and WELB PEAG

- The Board considers "taking powers" is a strong phrase and not in the spirit of the LMS for schools.

## CCMS

- In terms of rural proofing, reception classes will continue to play a limited role.
- Reception classes should be the exception rather than the norm.
- DE should continue to have the authority to zero rate pupils after consulting the employing authority.

## NIPPA

- Given the ETI reception report there are no circumstances where the retention of reception provision could be supported.

## CCEA

- The introduction of an enriched approach to the foundation stage will mean that the experience offered in reception classes will be more in line with nursery provision. When such a situation comes about, CCEA believes that no such legislation change would be necessary.

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

BELB and BELB PEAG

- Reception provision should be allowed to continue with the proviso that children are getting experiences in an appropriate environment and staffing ratio.

NEELB

- Reception should not be allowed to continue where it is the only form of provision, rather the resources should be utilised to establish a setting which could provide a more appropriate pre-school experience in the locality.

SEELB and SEELB PEAG

- Where there is no alternative (e.g. rural settings) the quality of this reception provision should be monitored and additional resources provided to improve adult child ratios and quality of play.

SELB PEAG

- Alternative models should be explored - for example that proposed in the cross border childcare project, particularly the clustering of rural schools with an independent subsidised pre-school education provider.

WELB and WELB PEAG

- Yes. Reception provision should only be available in exceptional circumstances, for example where no other appropriate pre-school provision is available.

## NICIE

- In light of the negative ETI report, funding should be provided to allow the development of cross community playgroups to replace reception to deal with the very rural areas.

## CCEA

- A setting which could provide a more appropriate pre-school experience should be established.

## **CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

**What arrangements need to be made to ensure that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) can be fully catered for in statutory and voluntary/private settings?**

### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- The fact that pre-school education is not statutory (compulsory) provision means it is seen not to have the same 'rights' as other statutory provision.
- This leads to inadequate support for children and teachers.
- The role and responsibilities for DE and DHSS&PS need to be clearly identified, and statutory legal responsibility, and the ensuing financial implications, accepted for children with SEN in pre-school.

### **NEELB**

- There are obvious inequities and differences in access to support, not only between sectors, but also within their geographical areas.
- Structures must be established to ensure equal and consistent access to SEN support services from Education and Library Boards and Health and Social Services Boards.
- There is an obvious need for an inter-agency approach providing better integration of services.
- Capital investment is also required to enable disability access in all settings.
- The ELBs are well placed to co-ordinate and secure SEN support from within the range of education, health and social service professionals.

### **SEELB and SEELB PEAG**

- There are many inequities within current funding and support arrangements.
- There is a need for expansion of appropriate services and support and consistency of access across the pre-school sector.

- Should build on the excellent foundations established through strategic health and education partnerships which has resulted in a sharing of information through working groups dealing with issues such as parenting, early years, looked after children and SEN.
- The Board is well placed to co-ordinate and secure this support for children with SEN – allocations should reflect this additional duty of care.

## SELB

- Settings should be able to cater fully for the child, including ensuring the child is progressed, assessed, and moved on to the correct compulsory school age setting.
- Staff may require specialist training or the child may require certain setting access facilities.
- A fundamental underlying principle should be that there is consistency of support for children with SEN.
- Consideration should be given to the establishment of pre-school education specialist centres for children with SEN.
- There needs to be a formal pre-school policy for children with SEN which incorporates the requirements to assist a parent in appreciating the extent of a child's needs and the network of arrangements available within the compulsory education sector.

## SELB PEAG

- It is important that children's special educational needs are catered for appropriately.
- All settings should have similar opportunities to access specialist advisory support and the necessary additional auxiliary support and services.
- A strategic approach should be adopted to the provision of training and support for all settings.
- The importance of early intervention should be recognised, and appropriate adequate funding and provision made available.

- As a first step there should be similar levels of funding per places between settings.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Equality of provision, consistency of approach and appropriate support for children with SEN must be provided across all sectors for all children.
- Agreement on a single definition of SEN across all sectors is required to ensure consistency of approach.
- The PEAG model offers an ideal opportunity to identify and co-ordinate such a process.
- Clarification on:
  - definition of a child with SEN
  - rights of the non statutory sector in relation to accessing training and support for children with SEN
  - roles of DHSS&PS and DE in terms of training, support and resources.

#### CCMS

- Early intervention is highly desirable.
- Equal provision, appropriate support and a consistency of access for all children should be provided across all sectors - the same as the support offered in statutory education.
- Early intervention may eliminate some developmental problems and reduce the long term financial burden on the system.
- A common approach is helpful in developing an integration of services.

#### NICIE

- Greater funding within all sectors to support special needs.
- Greater access to early assessments.
- Support mechanisms for parents.
- Closer liaison between the schools, medical and social services, educational psychologists, speech and language etc than currently exists.

- Specialist support could be based on one site in a geographical area.

#### NIPPA

- It is very important that consistent and appropriate support structures for children with SEN are implemented across all sectors.
- This support should include training, resources, access to assessment services and direct assistance to providers in addressing the particular needs of children and families.
- There is a need for joint solutions that encourage a multidisciplinary approach to children with SEN.

#### CCEA

- Early identification and intervention is essential.
- Structures must be established to ensure equality and consistency between the statutory and voluntary sectors and different geographical areas.
- The creation of an interagency approach would provide better integration of services.

#### C na G

- An interdepartmental approach is needed.
- Greater awareness of particular needs of the child in an Irish medium pre-school is essential.
- A lack of understanding about immersion education has led to the misconception that a lack of competence in target language can be equated with special educational needs.
- It is essential that relevant professionals are aware that immersion education is not the cause of certain educational needs.

## **STAFF:CHILD RATIOS**

**Is the current staff:child ratio in nurseries (a minimum of 1:13) adequate? How could the staff ratio be changed?**

BELB and BELB PEAG

- Recommendations are a ratio of 1:7 to 1:9.
- The birth rate decline may provide the opportunity to reduce class sizes to 20 (as in Scotland).
- However, the AWPU would have to increase to ensure financial sustainability – this could be achieved by using the savings from the removal of 2 year olds and reception.

Other options:

- 1 staff with teaching qualifications and 3 assistants.
  - 1 qualified teacher and 3 assistants, in a double unit 1 teacher and 5 assistants.
  - 1:8 ratio reduce double units to 48.
  - Additional funding would be required to cover extra staff costs.
- This standard / level of quality should also apply to voluntary/ private sector i.e. create one pre-school sector with same level of qualifications and staffing ratios.

NEELB

- NEELB was undecided in its response as to whether the current 1:13 ratio is adequate.
- A significant number of teachers expressed the view that 1:13 was adequate but did not facilitate best practise, particularly with the increasing number of 2 year olds and children with SEN.
- Others commented that the ratio 1: 8 in the voluntary sector is much more realistic and appropriate when considering the task of caring for and education of 2-5 year olds.

- Both EPPNI and Headstart research emphasise the presence of a qualified teacher with high quality pre-school provision, which produces results in the long term.
- However, given the high cost of having qualified teachers in every pre-school setting, and the relatively small pool of experienced and qualified teachers, it may be that not every class in a setting would need a qualified teacher.
- But every setting - statutory, voluntary and private - should have a teacher that manages the setting.
- Ratios might be improved by deploying a different combination of early years staff.
- Each pre-school setting could have a team of early years professionals with a range of experience and qualifications – a skills mix.
- It is essential that professional development is regarded as a priority in all settings and the Department should allocate earmarked funding to enable training and professional development for the early workers in all sectors.

#### SEELB

- Statutory sector ratios should be improved from 1:13 to 1:8, therefore ensuring consistency across the pre-school sector.
- SEELB concurs with the EPPNI finding regarding quality of education and quality of teacher and believes a qualified teacher in every classroom must be maintained.
- The ongoing professional development of practitioners in the pre-school sector should have priority in the review given the impact of teachers on children's development and learning.

#### SEELB PEAG

- SEELB PEAG would recommend that staff:child ratios in statutory nursery settings be improved from 1:13 to 1:8, therefore ensuring consistency across the whole pre-school sector.
- This review provides an opportunity to reconsider the role of the qualified

teacher in the nursery sector.

- It is important to note that the EPPNI research refers to the positive impact on provision where the senior person has a teaching qualification.
- PEAG would wish to support the ongoing professional development of Early Years Specialists, many of whom have a range of qualifications beyond NVQ Level 3.
- Some PEAG members would argue that while each school or unit ought to have a qualified teacher present, not every class might need one.
- PEAG accepts that ratios might be improved by deploying a different combination of early years staff.

#### SELB

- Staff:child ratio should be similar between all pre-school settings.
- An emphasis should be placed on providing a total quality service – focus should be on raising the qualifications for playgroup leaders to qualified teacher equivalency.
- A trained teacher should ideally be available to every setting, as one of the strengths of statutory settings is that a teacher is involved.
- A staff: child ratio of 1: 8 would be reasonable but an improved ratio would be required for specialist centres catering for children with exceptional SEN.
- There should be minimal parental or voluntary involvement. There would be concern about a parent interacting with another child.
- In addition it is considered that too many adults in a class could be detrimental to a learning environment.

#### SELB PEAG

- Ideally there should be consistency in staffing levels and funding between settings.
- An adult: child ration of 1:10 would appear to be a reasonable compromise.
- The ETI report that the standard of provision in funded voluntary/ private playgroups is similar to that in statutory settings, suggests that a teacher

could be more efficiently and effectively deployed, perhaps by moving to a more co-ordinating and advisory role across a number of classes.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Ratios do make a difference.
- Children's co-operation is influenced by the number of adults who understand, and can engage with them.
- The ratios in Irish medium settings need to reflect the additional aim of language acquisition.
- The present anomalies could be addressed by either reducing the class size in the statutory sector e.g. to class/ratio 1:10, or having a consistent approach to staff: child ratio across all sectors.
- Perhaps it is time to review the relevant qualifications within the early years sector and look at the qualifications adults need to ensure high quality pre-school education.
- There is also a need to ensure that staff within all sectors, receive relevant initial training and continuous professional development. From such a review it might be possible to strike a balance between a mix of staff qualifications and staff:child ratios.

#### CCMS

- Given the decline in demographics and in order to enhance provision (particularly for children with SEN), the number of children in a group could be reduced.
- 1:10 would be more appropriate, although this will have significant financial considerations.
- This ratio should be consistent across the voluntary and statutory sectors. This should be achieved without diminution of the qualifications and skills in the setting.
- There should be a qualified teacher in every class. The skills of lesson planning, assessment of individuals and plotting their progress requires a professional teacher.

## NICIE

- 1:8 is a more ideal ratio and should be phased in.
- Both EPPNI and EPPE research indicates the link between quality outcomes for children and qualification levels of staff.
- Students and parental/ voluntary involvement should always be supernumerary.

## NIPPA

- 1:13 is too high.
- NIPPA would argue for a minimum of 1:8 either by reducing the number of children in a setting or increasing the number of adults.
- DE should consider the cost of reducing the size of settings in terms of numbers of children – 24 children with 3 staff is ideal.
- It is not appropriate to use parental to voluntary involvement as a method of increasing the number of adults in a setting - this form of assistance should always be viewed as an added benefit and not count towards the adult: child ratio.
- A workforce strategy is needed to underpin the PSEEP, which acknowledges the opportunities to examine skills mix solutions with clear roles and responsibilities and appropriate terms and conditions for staff.
- There is no need for a qualified teacher in every setting but a good team of adults who are well qualified and well supported to provide consistent good practice. They should also be required to engage in a process of continuous professional development.

## CCEA

- While the 1:13 ratio may be 'adequate' because of the high level of training and expertise of staff, it certainly does not reflect best practise with regard to the education of early years children.
- This inclusion of parents and volunteers is common practice but cannot be included as part of the staff: child ratio.
- The EPPNI research notes that the simple biggest influence on the quality of provision is the presence of the qualified teacher.

## C na G

- The inequality of provision between statutory and voluntary sectors is unsustainable.
- The ratio for the statutory sector should be brought into line with the voluntary sector.
- A nursery class could function effectively without a qualified teacher, as long as training opportunities were made available for other staff.
- A strong case can be made for a small change in the ratio for Irish medium pre-school settings. This would assist in the exposure and contact that a child would require with Irish before they start the Immersion Programme at primary level.

## **CURRICULUM ADVISORY AND SUPPORT SERVICES (CASS)**

### BELB and BELB PEAG

- Legislation needs to be changed to enable CASS to fulfil a legislative obligation to offer advice and support for all of the pre-school sector, including funded settings in voluntary and community sectors.
- There would be staffing implications were this is to happen.

### NEELB

- Ongoing professional development is essential to ensure quality of provision.
- There is a need for a comprehensive workforce strategy to be designed.
- Legislative changes extended for CASS duties to encompass the entire pre-school phase.
- Funding should be made available to extend the early years teams within CASS.

### SEELB

- Ongoing professional development is essential to ensure the highest quality of provision.
- Having separate support structures for statutory and voluntary providers can lead to lack of consistency in quality of advice and training provided.
- The existing informal networks among advisory staff need to be strengthened and formalised to ensure consistency and cohesion.
- A professional development strategy could be established for all pre-school practitioners to ensure access to, and consistency of, quality of training.
- SEELB would suggest the legislative duties of CASS be extended to cover the pre-school phase in statutory, voluntary and private settings. This would ensure there was continuity and progression throughout the

foundation stage of revised curriculum and that pre-school support would be part of the regional educational support strategy.

#### SEELB PEAG

- Resource restraints mean neither the statutory nor voluntary settings receive as much support as they need.
- Additional earmarked funding for pre-school support to CASS and NIPPA.
- Extend legislative duties for CASS to whole pre-school sector.
- Additional earmarked funding allocated for staff development in SEN.
- Funding for training and development channelled through area Childcare Partnerships.
- Creation of one regional agency for early years support.

#### SELB

- Extension of legislative obligation of CASS to include the pre-school phase – with corresponding increase of funding to facilitate the appointment of the necessary additional staff.
- Good CASS support should help to form strategic link between pre-school and Primary 1.

#### SELB PEAG

- CASS should be available to all settings.
- Ideally the funding for support to both sectors should be from one source and staff in all sectors should have equitable access to training available.
- The SELB PEAG considers that CASS is not adequately resourced to provide the level of support required by the statutory nursery sector.
- The level of funding available needs to be significantly increased to facilitate an increase to the necessary level of support provided.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Short to medium term CASS could extend services to all providers.

- Medium to long term - there is a need to legislate for the establishment of a 0-6 regional, integrated health and education service with an integrated approach and multidisciplinary dimension.
- Its key aim being to provide training, support and a development framework for all early years settings.

#### CCMS

- CASS responsibilities should be extended to all funded providers.
- This would ensure an increased uniform standard of provision and would facilitate the dialogue between pre-school and primary settings.

#### NICIE

- CASS should take on responsibility for the whole pre-school phase including support for enriched curriculum; SEN; best practice dissemination.

#### NIPPA

- Establishment of a regional support service that brings together the expertise and experience currently available within CASS and NIPPA.
- The key role should be to develop and maintain good quality consistent practice in pre-school settings.
- Do not believe that extending CASS is the way to do this.
- A different approach on the particular needs of the sector as it exists under the expansion programme.
- A new support service should be established that can address the curriculum needs of the sector.

#### CCEA

- There is a need to provide a comprehensive strategy which will address the issues in both sectors.

#### C na G

- CASS should have legislative obligation to provide support for all pre-school settings.
- Children should not be disadvantaged by attending non-statutory provision.
- Investment and additional support is needed for Irish – medium CASS provision for curriculum planning and linguistic good practice.

## **EARLY YEARS SPECIALIST SUPPORT**

### **How can we ensure that playgroups receive sufficient Early Years Specialist (EYS) support?**

Most of the comments from respondents have been included at Question 7.

Additional comments include:

#### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- If there is consistency across the pre-school sectors regarding qualifications of staff, and the responsibility for advice and support is determined, this will no longer be an issue.

#### **SELB**

- Support to playgroups must be centrally funded and available to all playgroups in receipt of funded pre-school education places.
- There should be joint training initiatives and a co-ordination of standards across sectors.

#### **SELB PEAG**

- Ensure there is sufficient funding to provide an adequate level of early years specialists/support to meet the demand.

#### **CCMS**

- If the proper support structures were in place i.e. training, support and development framework this would not be an issue, as all settings would receive sufficient support.
- Governance and management issues are as important as training.

#### **NICIE**

- Provide joint training with NIPPA and CASS for playgroups to ensure they can avail of appropriate levels and types of support without concerns for sustainability.

## NIPPA

- The model of Early Years Specialist support is unique to Northern Ireland – it is cost effective with high impact outcomes and should be resourced as part of the PSEEP to provide support services to the pre-school sector throughout the region and across all types of provision.

## C na G

- It should be recognised that NIPPA cannot provide appropriate Early Years Specialists to Irish-medium settings.
- Recognition should be given to the service provided by Altram – it provides both early years specialists and linguistic support – a need unique to Irish-medium education.
- This service needs to become core funded so that Altram can extend their coverage of the sector, especially to rural areas

## **INTRODUCTION OF NEW STATUTORY AND VOLUNTARY/PRIVATE PROVIDERS**

### BELB and BELB PEAG

- Should be looking at long-term sustainability of places.
- The PEAG should be responsible for assessment of need / current provision in the area.

### NEELB

- Supports current replacement policy.

### SEELB

- Board agrees with exception for new units. In addition there are some areas of the board where additional units or schools could meet shortfall in provision.

### SEELB PEAG

- Agrees with exceptions for new nursery units.
- Special consideration should be given for parental preference for a particular type of provision.

### SELB

- The population density in rural areas is such that neither a statutory nursery nor a playgroup is financially viable.
- Within such areas consideration could be given to provision of subsidised nursery annex attached to local PS to cater for a small number of children.
- There should be a balance of provision to provide an element of choice.

### SELB PEAG

- Where an unmet demand exists and there are no voluntary/ private sector providers within an immediate area.

- Consideration needs to be given to rationalisation of provision, in particular where the number of children enrolled is insufficient to ensure long-term viability.
- Consideration should also be given to the provision of a subsidy for groups in rural areas where difficulties are encountered in realising viable enrolments.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Agrees with the current criteria for new provision.

#### CCMS

- Each case for additional provision should be considered on its merits.
- Places may be provided where there is under provision or where there is parental demand for a particular type of provision such as catholic education.

#### NICIE

- Current system does not seem to have been applied fairly and consistently to the integrated education sector.
- It is vital that new schools have an equal opportunity to develop pre-school provision.
- It should be possible to include a nursery unit in a new PS proposal and have it commented on by PEAG and ELB, rather than having PEAG approval first.
- There needs to be a mechanism whereby new groups and nursery units can enter the system. Closing it will prevent further development.
- Where a parent school is being replaced or a new school established then the community should be audited to discover its wishes.

#### NIPPA

- Supports current replacement policy – the existing criteria is appropriate.

- It is important the PEAG's continue to play a central role in assessing need on an ongoing basis, as with the introduction of new voluntary/private providers.

#### CCEA

- Current policy is acceptable for replacements alongside the additional establishment of new provision within Irish-medium and integrated education sectors.
- Due to decline in pre-school population, it is unlikely additional schools/units will be required apart from replacements.
- The Department should undertake a strategic review of provision and rationalise in accordance with population predictions with priority accorded to TSN areas.

#### C na G

- Depends on the needs of the particular community.
- Irish-medium pre-school provision is a necessary continuity of immersion education provision and fosters a sense of belonging to a linguistic community.
- It is also desirable that a neighbouring Bunscoil provides leadership and direction to a Naiscoil.

**Pre-School Education Advisory Groups will continue to replace voluntary/private settings which drop out of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. Should new playgroups be admitted to the Programme other than as replacements? How could this be achieved without resulting in over-provision of places?**

#### BELB and BELB PEAG

- If nursery numbers are to be either 20 or 24 per unit, this is the number required in the playgroup sector so they can become funded and staffed similarly, with the aim of having one pre-school sector with equity in all aspects.
- First priority should be the development and long-term sustainability of existing groups.
- The need for new playgroups should be examined and analysed by PEAG and a decision taken in consultation with DE.

#### NEELB

- New playgroups should be admitted where demographic trends impact on existing provision, such as in an area where reception provision has been stopped or where personnel or quality of provision in a setting change.

#### SEELB

- The admission of new voluntary/ private providers into the programme, where these are not replacing other groups, can only be recommended through the transfer of surplus places from the other PEAG's.

#### SEELB PEAG

- Admission of new voluntary / private groups, where these are not replacing groups that leave, can only be accommodated through the transfer of surplus places from other PEAG's, or by recouping resources saved through closure of statutory provision.

## SELB

- Consideration could be given to rationalisation in provision (e.g. 3 groups of 8 places into 1 group of 24).
- Consideration could be given to the operation of a 3-year cycle under which providers are invited through public advertisements to make provision within an area every 3 years.

## SELB PEAG

- Consideration could be given to re-advertising for funded providers to service an area every five years and considering all applications received on an equitable transparent basis.
- This would provide the facility to replace an existing funded provider by a non-funded provider who may provide a better service.

## WELB and WELB PEAG

- New playgroups should be admitted as replacements if appropriate.
- There is a need for clear, objective criteria that can be applied in a consistent manner.

## CCMS

- It is sensible that arrangements should be made to allow additional voluntary/ private providers to be admitted to the programme.
- Each case should be considered on its merits but should not challenge the viability of statutory provision.

## NICIE

- A number of criteria can be applied to new groups entering the programme to prevent major amounts of over provision.
- Groups, which serve a cross community group of parents, should be included.
- Groups, which are created to replace reception, should also be given priority, especially in rural areas.

## CCEA

- New playgroups should be admitted to the programme where voluntary/private settings drop out.

## C na G

- The Irish medium sector should be seen as a growth area and given due consideration.

## **VIABILITY OF VOLUNTARY/PRIVATE PLAYGROUPS**

**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? What changes should be made?**

### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- If there are moves towards one, equitable pre-school sector i.e. same size of classes, ratios, staffing, and qualifications – there will be the same funding arrangements.

### **NEELB**

- The current funding arrangements should be changed in terms of equality.
- Some element of core funding should be made available for all voluntary settings to ensure they are sustainable, high quality physical environments.
- Flexibility should be afforded in dealing with groups with smaller numbers where they are the only provider in an area e.g. in areas of rural isolation.
- It would be beneficial to introduce a funding formula to enable such smaller groups to be sustained.

### **SEELB**

- The difficulties faced by providers claiming fewer than 18 places per year are recognised – they might be eased if training and support costs could be met elsewhere.
- The need for more flexible funding and clustering mechanisms should be explored.

## SEELB PEAG

- PEAG recognises the need for more flexible funding mechanisms and would support the idea of differential rates of per capita funding in the same way as small schools can access curriculum reserve funding.

## SELB

- There should be equity of funding between settings and sectors.
- Consideration should be given to including a subsidy to be applied to statutory, voluntary and private sectors to secure provision for a small number of children in rural areas.

## SELB PEAG

- There should be equity of funding between settings and sectors.

## WELB and WELB PEAG

- A differential rate per capita is an option that should be explored further, especially in rural areas.
- For such groups that offer an invaluable service viability may be problematic.

## CCMS

- CCMS would seek equity between voluntary and statutory sector provision as far as possible.
- Playgroups require more reliable and secure funding. If groups were guaranteed 50% of core funding for each place for the year at the census date, it would allow them better opportunities to plan.
- This would also give support for smaller playgroups in isolated/ rural area equivalent to the small school support factor.

## NICIE

- There should be flexibility for groups that did not reach the 8 required number of places, especially in rural areas.

- There may be ways of allocating the money for a term at a set level and then sorting out the over/ under payment in the following term.
- This would prevent groups having to go into debt early in the year.
- The funding differential between LMS and PEAG should be removed.

#### NIPPA

- It is important that smaller groups are sustained as a key element of community based provision that is flexible and accessible to children and families.
- The funding arrangements need to be structured in a way that recognises an element of fixed cost regardless of the number of children in the setting.
- Could either establish differential rules per capita that address the issues of smaller number, or part fund the setting directly and top up the fund on a per capita basis for all provision.
- Early years support should be funded directly to release groups from their current burdens.

#### CCEA

- Current funding arrangements should be standardised for voluntary / private sector to ensure equality.
- An element of core funding should be made available to ensure these settings provide sustainable, high quality, physical environments.
- In areas of rural isolation funding should be made available to sustain the provision.

#### C na G

- The additional needs of Irish medium provision must be acknowledged and factored into funding for Irish medium pre-schools for groups with smaller numbers. A grant could be paid, supplemented by a PEAG payment for each child.

- Top up capital payments should be made regularly to all providers to refresh equipment and resources.

## **THE WIDER CONTEXT**

**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.)**

### **BELB and BELB PEAG**

- Developments in the rest of the UK and across the world have seen childcare and education become integrated services.
- Northern Ireland needs to look at the development of early years centres, integrated early years service provision in local communities.
- Changes needed include: funding; structures (a children services department responsible for integrated services); workforce reform/strategy; review and amendment of regulations and legislation.

### **NEELB**

- Policy should be changed to enable clarity of focus and meaningful and genuine integration of provision for children in the early years by creating a new department, which is solely responsible for the 0-6 age group.
- This Department or agency should be lead by DE but incorporate DHSSPS, ELBs, PEAGs, CASS, NIPPA, Childcare Partnerships and other associated organisations. This discrete Department should be responsible for the co-ordination of care and education services, ensuring equity and consistency of provision.

## SEELB and SEELB PEAG

- This review provides an opportunity to develop educational, health and care provision for our youngest children. Legislation and policy initiatives must be based on a clearly defined and universally accepted set of principals and values, which underpins all early years practice.
- Establishment of a lead government department with responsibility for all services for children between the ages of 0-6.
- Long term, a 2-year continuum of pre-school experience should be explored.
- A workforce strategy would provide training for all practitioners – to meet the learning needs of all children and raise the status of early years professionals.
- SEELB is committed to working in partnership with other agencies and providers to provide on site wraparound care and full service or extended community schools.
- This early years strategy will be part of the overall inclusive full service strategy for children and young adults, their families and their communities. It will link to the proposals for post primary education, the revised curriculum, the health agenda and life long learning.

## SELB

- Early childhood education and care services should be more integrated in their approach to best meet the needs of young children and their families.
- A service built around children's needs rather than professional structures would be appropriate, such as children centres, early excellence centres and extended use of school buildings.
- Pilots of models to extend the use of statutory schools and units would be welcomed.

## SELB PEAG

- The PEAG would welcome the development of children's centres in Northern Ireland, which would focus on providing for the education, care and health needs of children.

## WELB and WELB PEAG

- Key aims should include: An integrated approach between health and education, and collaboration and co-ordination of services.
- The PEAGs and CCP's are good models already established upon which to build on to bring together care and education.

## CCMS

- Progress can be made with a greater collaboration between services including an integrated approach between health and education, which would allow better co-operation of services between agencies.

## NICIE

- Would like to see support given to schools that come up with innovative approaches to the integration of education, childcare and children's services, which take into account the needs of varying areas, geographically and socially.
- A co-ordinated approach by the Departments responsible for funding and ultimately one Department dealing with education, care and health needs of young children.

## NIPPA

### Short term:

- Raising of admission age to 3 years.
- Immediate action on remaining reception provision.
- Implementation of support structures for children with SEN.
- A regional approach for the pre-school sector as a whole.
- A workforce review for the pre-school sector.

- New funding arrangements for the voluntary sector, particularly targeting at groups with smaller numbers.
- The review should also consider the role of the PSEEP in the context of an overall integrated strategy for education and care for children 0-6 years.

#### CCEA

- It would be beneficial to have a Department or Agency dedicated to provision of joined up education, health and social care services, particularly in TSN areas.

#### C na G

- A more integrated approach to childcare with emphasis on wraparound comprising play, care and education for 0-6 years olds.
- The special characteristics and requirements of Irish medium pre-school education should be recognised in context of training needs of staff, awareness raising for professionals involved, language acquisition and immersion of education (with preferably 2 years of quality pre-school education/care).

## **EQUALITY**

**Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have any adverse implications for any of the section 75 categories? What are they?**

### BELB and BELB PEAG

- It is difficult for most settings to provide adequately for pre-school age children who have physical disabilities and children with English as a second language.

### NEELB

- Issue of equality of access for those with a disability – physical access should be ensured for all settings.

### SEELB

- The definition of socially disadvantage may be unfair to some families who do not meet the criteria but still have particular needs.

### SELB

- Difference in support provided across the sectors for children with SEN.

### SELB PEAG

- In small communities, viability is an issue when a group is provided by the majority community of the area that will not be attended by the local minority community.

### WELB and WELB PEAG

- SEN – some SEN children find full-time participation exhausting, however staff recommending a part-time place sometimes encounter parental disagreement under the suggestion it is discriminatory.

- Ethnic minorities – need a consistency of approach across the sector.
- Person with dependents – equality of opportunity for parents to access the workplace.
- Single parents
- Discrimination against working parents by using socially disadvantaged criteria for admissions.

#### CCMS

- Developments will have implications for children with SEN.
- The system must have flexibility to respond to the needs of ethnic minorities.

#### NICIE

- The part time / full time issue could have equality implications. The current allocation system is unfair.
- If nothing is done about part time/ full time then parents within the integrated sector (which is only allowed to provide part time) may decide to take a case about their lack of access to full time funded places, similarly parents in playgroups may do the same.

#### CCEA

- All children should have physical access to the pre-school setting they attend.

## **RURAL PROOFING**

**Do, or might, any of the proposals contained in the review have adverse implications for rural dwellers? What are they?**

### BELB and BELB PEAG

- Will the phasing out of reception provision not have implications for pre-school provision in some rural areas?

### NEELB

- Legislative change to reception provision may have implications for rural dwellers where the proximity of alternative pre-school provision requires transporting a young child some distance.

### SEELB

- Issue of reception provision – accessibility and transport issues.
- Viability of voluntary/ private providers due to small numbers.

### SELB

- Difficulties in achieving minimum enrolment numbers and financial viability.
- Consideration should be given to providing a rural subsidy in some cases.
- Transport is problematic also – clarification is needed on the maximum distance allowed for a child to travel to pre-school.
- As far as realistically possible, children in rural area should have a choice of provision.

### SELB PEAG

- As transport is a difficulty in rural areas, particularly for those on low income, consideration should be given to extending school transport facilities to children in pre-school settings.

- For playgroups in rural areas with viability difficulties, consideration should be given to the provision of a subsidy per place for rural settings.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Viability of voluntary and private groups with small numbers.
- Continuation of reception provision.
- Accessibility/transport issues.

#### CCMS

- In rural areas where there is difficulty accessing suitable pre-school settings, it is important provision is available that meets the needs and wishes of parents as far as possible.
- For this reason, CCMS is prepared to contemplate reception in exceptional circumstances.
- There should be imaginative responses to rural isolation so that children, regardless of location, could have the opportunity to benefit from pre-school education.

#### NICIE

- Reception can only be removed if alternative provision is made e.g. in small funded cross community playgroups.
- Funding is needed to start these up.

#### CCEA

- All children should have access to a pre-school setting within reasonable travelling distance of their home.

#### C na G

- Issue of transport being available in rural areas for children whose parents choose Irish medium education – they often travel greater distances.

- Additional support should be made available for parents to transport their children to Irish medium schools.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

### **Are there any other issues you would like to comment on?**

#### BELB and BELB PEAG

- A clear, long term vision is required for the pre-school sector.
- Provision should become unified and equitable. A children's service department should be established.
- Needs to be public information regarding the value of early years and the developmental needs of young children.
- Change in admission cut off dates should be from 1 January until 31 December rather than 2 July until 1 July.
- Entry to Primary School would follow this model.

#### NEELB

- If the needs of children are at the centre of this review, more funding should be channelled into pre-school education and care.
- Government investment in high quality early years education has positive results in terms of educational benefits and other benefits to society.

#### SEELB

- The role of the PEAG could be widened to develop multi-agency work and an integrated children's service approach.

#### SELB

- The pre-school education sector should not be a childminding service.
- The skills of nursery teachers should be recognised and utilised across sectors.
- An early years degree should be the minimum qualification requirement for playgroup leaders and the degree programme should include a teaching element.
- Statutory nursery schools should become centres of excellence.

- Nursery schools should be permitted to charge for supplementary provision, as is the practice in the playgroup sector.

#### WELB and WELB PEAG

- Reception – should be retained in exceptional circumstances where no other suitable pre-school provision exists. It should not be phased out completely.
- Irish medium – Issue of recruitment of suitably qualified staff to facilitate language acquisition. Early and sufficient exposure to Irish within pre-school setting is very important.
- SEN – Increased resources and support are required for SEN
- Unmet need – A detailed analysis of unmet need within the Early years sector should be undertaken as there appears to be many gaps.

#### NICIE

- No matter what decisions are made in response to this review, it is vital that the holistic interests of all children are paramount in the decision-making and there is equality of treatment for all providers – statutory, voluntary and private.

#### CCEA

- High quality early years education aligned to health and social care should become a major government priority.